

Petworth pair revive run-down courts

By IAN THOMS
Current Staff Writer

When Aaron Devine and Rachel Sandler sought a place to play tennis on an unseasonably warm New Year's Day, they found the glass-covered, run-down courts at the Raymond Recreation Center in Petworth.

Local advisory neighborhood commissioner Peron Williams stepped into his back yard, which is across an alley from the courts, and saw the pair trying to clear the court by hand. He offered them his broom. "It would have been much easier for them to go somewhere else," Williams said. "But they didn't see a blighted, trashed-out tennis court. And they were willing to take the time to make something happen here."

Ever since that first day seven months ago, said Sandler, Devine has harbored big plans for the courts — plans that, Williams said, "changed this place forever. This place will never be the same. I think tennis will be here from now on."

Working in concert with the local advisory neighborhood commission, Ward 4 Council member Adrian Fenty, the D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation, the Washington Tennis Association and many others, Devine spearheaded an effort to transform the courts and bring tennis back to the Raymond Recreation Center.

On Sunday, Devine saw his vision realized. The courts, now cleared of debris and with a new net

and posts, hosted a Play Tennis Day. More than 50 people attended the action-packed day. Volunteers, many from the neighborhood and the D.C. Jewish Community Center, built a tennis wall in the morning



Courtesy of Rachel Sandler

and painted a mural on it in the afternoon, while members of the Washington Tennis Association held clinics for the kids who now regularly flock to the courts. Later on, a dedication ceremony was held, and after that, members of the Howard University tennis team played an exhibition match.

"This whole experience has been kind of like an archaeological dig. Everything was here: the love of the community and the courts. We just had to dig it up and polish it a bit," Devine said. "Now I just hope this will continue. This isn't new. It's just revived."

The courts will have to survive without Devine and Sandler, howev-

er. They will head home — the 22-year-old Devine to Minnesota, and 23-year-old Sandler to Iowa — the beginning of August. They were in the District as part of an 11-month Avodah, a Jewish Service Corps program, but their work at the tennis court was not part of the program.

According to Denise Skinner, executive director of the Washington Tennis Association, what the pair will leave in Petworth goes beyond the passion for tennis they've instilled in the 20 or so children who have frequented their Monday night clinics.

"Kids used to have P.E. in school to burn off their energy, but not anymore," she said. "If we're not teaching kids to burn up that energy on the court — whether it's football, basketball or tennis — where are they going to burn up that energy? They're going to burn it up in the negative side of our society. Aren't we all tired of that? And if we are, when are we going to step up and make a change?"

The Washington Tennis Association donated rackets and has offered to take over the clinics currently held by Devine and Sandler.

Though the Play Tennis Day went off without a hitch, one week earlier a number of things were still undone. One of the two courts still lacked a net, new posts were needed, and a mural artist had yet to be found.

In terms of equipment, Devine was having trouble persuading the D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation to help. He called com-



Bill Petros/The Current

Volunteers erected a tennis wall and painted a mural on it, while local kids played tennis during Sunday's Play Tennis Day.

missioner Williams, who in turn called Council member Fenty, who returned Williams' call with a promise that the courts would have the net and posts by Wednesday.

The Parks and Recreation workers arrived and installed the net and posts on Tuesday, according to Williams.

Fenty spoke during a brief dedication of the tennis wall Sunday, saying, "I'm just so proud of this community for realizing that these types of things can help."

With the courts in order, Devine turned his attention to locating an artist. He found Carrie Madigan, 23, through the Web site Craigslist.

Madigan said she chose "community togetherness" as the mural's theme after hearing Devine's tale. She called her colorful painting a "fantasy-infused realism cityscape."

Pictured on the wall are two players, as large as the city that surrounds them, hitting a tennis ball over an office building/net. In the grass painted below the scene, the kids placed their paint-soaked hands.

"There's no limit. When people come together and believe, there's no limit to what can be done," Devine said.

"I learned some terrific things about community and how important it is," Sandler said. "Even if you're not from there, you'll be accepted if you make the effort."

Devine's father, Patrick, surprised his son with a visit this week. "I'm enormously proud of all he has accomplished," he said. "The best thing about visiting is meeting all the people he has partnered with and having them tell me how much they've enjoyed working with him."

Sidwell grad's commitment to tennis helps her through difficult injury

By IAN THOMS
Current Staff Writer

With the ever-escalating competition for college recruitment and scholarships comes the demand for athletes to play more and more, which inevitably leads to playing through pain.

Sidwell graduate Sydney Murray has played tennis since she was 9. She finds it difficult to define herself in any way other than as a tennis player.

"At one point, I thought, Is it worth it? I'm destroying my arm and my shoulder. But you know what? At the end of the day, I always would say it was worth it," Murray said in an interview Saturday. "Without tennis, I don't even know what I would do with myself. Sydney is tennis; tennis is Sydney."

But during her senior year at Sidwell, Murray developed lateral epicondylitis, more commonly known as tennis elbow.

Her schedule — three-and-a-half-hour practices five days a week, plus tournaments, plus two seasons of high school tennis every year — led to a case of tennis elbow so bad

that at one point she could not open a water bottle with her right hand.

"I played through so much pain. It's ridiculous. At one point, I couldn't remember the last time when I didn't play in pain," Murray said.

The injury didn't stop Murray from garnering attention this year from top colleges. She was offered positions on most of the Ivy League schools' teams and a full scholarship to play for Rutgers University.

Though she relished the idea of attending a public school after 13 years at the private Sidwell Friends, Murray said she "sacrificed" in favor of the academic promise of an Ivy League school.

"I've always wished I went to a high school that was bigger, with a more urban feel than a little preppy place," Murray said. "As an African-American at any private school, it's tough. There are 115 kids in our grade, and I might give you 10 black kids out of that."

With her choices narrowed to Yale University and Columbia University based on coaches' interest, Murray selected the school that could best give her the atmosphere she was looking for.

"They say that all Ivy Leagues have 8 percent African-Americans. And at Yale, I don't know if I went on the wrong day, but they weren't there," Murray said. "And New York is so diverse. ... With Columbia, there is an urban environment."

Columbia's environment, class sizes and internship opportunities appealed to her. Murray chose Columbia.

Murray credits her coach Rozzell Lightfoot, with whom she trains in Bowie, Md., with preparing her for college. In regard to her school coach, Bill Budke, she said, "No comment."

Murray played tennis throughout high school and in the Junior Mid-Atlantic section of the U.S. Tennis Association. Though she was ranked in the top 100 of all junior players in the country and earned the attention of numerous Ivy League and Division I colleges, Murray never received an athletic award from Sidwell.

Despite the slights she perceived from her school and her injury, Murray earned an opportunity that most athletes only dream of: the chance to play her sport at the next level.



Courtesy of Sydney Murray

Sydney Murray climbed into the top 100 of junior players in the country this year. She plans to attend Columbia University.