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Capital Region Youth
Tennis Foundation

SUMMER 2014
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Executive Director News

Welcome to a different look for our 2014 Spring / Summer Newsletter! Bill Buell, from the Schenectady Gazette wrote an amazing article this Spring to help us celebrate our 18 & Under Team Tennis Team winning the Regional Title, some of our players helping the Schenectady High School Boys' Team to win the Big 10 Championship, and to help kick off our 25th Anniversary Year! We wanted to make sure everyone had the opportunity to read that article, so with permission from Mr. Buell and the Schenectady Gazette, we have reprinted it here for you. We have also included some special articles that we hope you will enjoy. As a departure from my normal "reflections," I will offer a simple overview of the rest of the exciting things we have going on...

Once again this winter, John Nigro graciously took a group of about 50 of our kids and their parents to a Siena Basketball game. Inferno Pizzeria donated a pizza lunch on a Sunday, then we headed out to the game. This has become a tradition that our families really treasure and look forward to every year. We saw an amazing game, and the kids had a great time bonding with one another and getting to know John and his passion for Siena basketball!

For the first time this year, we have asked our alumni to give back to 15-LOVE. I couldn't be more proud to tell you that we received support from so many of our graduates who are now lawyers, physical therapists, CPAs, engineers, army specialists (West Point Grads) and many others! For me, this is the best indicator of our success. If our graduates are willing to send us some of their hard-earned money that could be

buying diapers or paying back student loans, it proves to me that we have made an impact, and for that, I am grateful.

One of my favorite new programs is our Book Giveaway Program, that we coupled with the Little d Award this Spring. Lenore Look won the Little d Award for her book, *Alvin Ho: Allergic to Dead Bodies, Funerals and Other Fatal Circumstances*. She received her award and spoke at Giffen Elementary School (where one of our Book Clubs is located), ran a writer's workshop during lunch for a few students, then attended the Book Giveaway at our office that afternoon and evening. Due to timing issues, we will be giving out the Little d Award twice this year, so we kept this one low-key, but it was an amazing event. Every child who came to our Book Giveaway received a free, signed copy of the book, met Lenore Look, and they were able to fill a bag (or multiple bags) with as many free, used books as they could carry. This event continually brings in over 200 people, who leave grateful for the books. We offer them a pencil, bookmark, art activity, healthy snack and books to help avoid the "summer slide." We will do another Book Giveaway in the fall to help prepare kids for their nightly school year reading assignments. Again, if you know of anyone who is in need of a new home for used children's books, or is willing to help us purchase children's books from First Book for \$.65 each, please put us in touch!

As I hope you can see from this unique version of our Newsletter, 15-LOVE continues to grow, change and adapt to meet the needs of our community and there is no way we could do that without the generosity, ideas and support from all of you. Thank you!

Amber Marino



15-LOVE welcomes back to our board **Jessica Nigro Dailey**. Jessica has returned to 15-LOVE's Board of Directors after taking time off to raise her two beautiful children. Jessica will be a committee member on the Development and Healthy Living & Gardening Committees. We are thrilled to have Jessica back and part of the 15-LOVE family.

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My Marathon Journey

Sugam Langer

Giving kids the advantage. That is what the 15-LOVE Program does. Alas, it is now time for those same advantageous “kids” to reciprocate the opportunities that allowed us to flourish into adults. My name is Sugam Langer and I was blessed to become a part of the 15-LOVE family at the age of eleven. Seventeen years later, I know that the friends I have made, the countless tennis lessons I have participated in, and even the employment opportunities that I have received as an adult, would not have been possible had it not been for my involvement with this amazing program. Therefore, I am here to give back. Give back to an organization that has insurmountably changed my life for the better. As an alumna of the program, I want to start a new trend within our alumni community. We alumni have benefitted so much from the program during our youth years, however, after a certain age, settle into our adult lives, remembering 15-LOVE as a fond memory of our childhood. It is my objective to

inspire our alumni network (and beyond) to bring awareness of our amazing program in the new communities we now call home. The home town tennis courts where we grew up playing tennis may no longer be down the street, however the appreciation and respect for the program that cultivated our growth still very much remains in our hearts.

In November 2013, I was afforded an opportunity to leave my previous position as an attorney at the law firm of Harris Beach, PLLC (an amazing job that I so fortunately received through my connections with 15-LOVE) to move and work at an international corporation in New York City. This year on the one year anniversary of my move, I have committed to running the New York City Marathon. I will be running on the USTA Serves team, and even more importantly, I will be running in honor of the 15-LOVE Program. Therefore, 100% of the money I raise will go directly back to the program that gave me so very much. This is my small way of expressing my most sincere gratitude to the years of staff, Board members, families, friends and countless supporters. 15-LOVE will never be an ordinary program, for how

it changes the lives of its participants is simply extraordinary. Allowing children an opportunity to define themselves through the confines of a tennis court is remarkable, and it is all made possible because of donors like you. I am humbled by how your support has directly shaped my life and therefore this marathon is an effort to assimilate an amazing organization from my youth, by honoring it in my life as an adult.

I ask that you please join me in helping reach my marathon goal of raising over **\$3,000** for the 15-LOVE Program. You can easily join my team by visiting www.crowdrise.com/USTAServesNYC2014/fundraiser/sugamlanger. I ask for your support while I tackle these 26.2 miles. While the miles may not be easy, they are each filled with fond memories of jamborees, off-courts, travel teams, tournaments and endless stories of how teammates turned into family. We 15-LOVE “kids” may have moved on from our years in the program, but let my marathon journey serve as testament, that while we can never repay you for all that you have done, we are still and always will be utterly grateful.

Looking forward to you joining me on my marathon journey. The road to 26.2miles starts with you!

Thank you again,
Sugam Langer

15-LOVE Graduates Congratulations to the Class of 2014!

Albany Academy for Boys

Matthew Benton will be attending Hobart College pursuing a degree in Engineering and English.

Albany High School

Deyja Fredericks will be attending SUNY Oswego pursuing a degree in Elementary Education.

Empire State College

Djuan Blackmore earned his degree in Human Resources and is currently a Human Resource Supervisor at Price Chopper.

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

Clinton Mathai earned his degree in Biology. Clinton will be taking a year to complete medical research at Albany Medical Center and will head to medical school in Fall 2015.

SUNY New Paltz

Andrea Carrillo earned her degree in Graphic Design. Andrea recently accepted a job at Market Share Development, Inc. in Scranton, PA as an email and direct mail marketing manager.



Sugam completing her first marathon in 2013.

Program marks 25 years of tennis, life success

By: Bill Buell – Gazette Reporter

CAPITAL REGION — Tennis fans waiting for the next big American success story need only to look at upstate New York.

The tennis program 15-Love, for inner-city youths, is celebrating its 25th summer in the Capital Region this year. While its mere existence is a testament to its value, there are other tangible and clearly discernible ways to measure its success. No, it probably won't develop the next great Grand Slam champion, but it has produced plenty of tennis players who more often than not go on to college, complete their education and become productive citizens.

"To me, tennis is down on the bottom of the list," said Domingo Montes, a former Albany High player and 15-Love product who is now program director for the Albany-based group. "Our No. 1 goal is to get inner-city kids to make more positive choices and give them better life skills, and we have those success stories. Helping them get a college education is the top priority. Tennis is almost irrelevant."

Of course, if the goal of a college education includes winning on the athletic field somewhere along the way, then the path to success is clearly a bit more fun. At Schenectady High School this spring, the Patriots' boys tennis team produced some real concrete evidence of 15-Love's positive impact by winning its first Big 10 championship since 1996. Along with the cities of Albany, Troy and Rensselaer, Schenectady is one of 15-Love's target areas, and contributing greatly to the Patriots' success this year were three 15-Love members: junior Jon Fields, freshman Curtis Farmer and eighth-grader Mish Semper.

"15-Love is essential to the success of our program because they provide free tennis to everybody," said Schenectady boys coach Justin Hoffman. "It's an unbelievable resource that inner-city kids have available to them. We have three boys who are heavily involved in 15-Love, but if you talk to my team I'm sure almost all of them have taken advantage of one of their free clinics here and there."

Hoffman, a starting forward on Schenectady's state championship basketball team in 1998, also played tennis for the Patriots. The head coach of both the boys and girls tennis teams for nine seasons now, Hoffman was introduced to the game in elementary school at a 15-Love clinic at Central Park back in the early 1990s.

Roots in Ashe

It was just a few years earlier, in June of 1990, that 15-Love was introduced to the Capital Region with a special event at the four tennis courts in Albany's Arbor Hill. Kevin Dowdell, a 1978 Niskayuna graduate and former Section II tennis champion for the Silver Warriors, was at the kickoff event, which was part of the Ashe-Bolletieri Cities (ABC) program.



15-Love instructor Swetha Thiagarajan helps Ethan Ceniza with his grip during a free clinic at Albany's Washington Park last summer.

Aimed at providing free tennis to inner-city youths, the program was the brainchild of former Wimbledon and U.S. Open champion Arthur Ashe and Nick Bolletieri, a Florida-based tennis instructor who helped develop prodigies such as Andre Agassi and Monica Seles.

"To have a small part in a success story like 15-Love is something I'm very proud of," said Dowdell, who graduated from Princeton University in 1982, Wharton Business School in 1985 and by 1990 had become executive director of Safe Passage, a nonprofit created by Ashe in 1988 to oversee the implementation of the ABC program. "I kind of mentioned it to Arthur, with no confidence at all, about maybe doing the program in what was basically my hometown of Albany, and to my surprise he said, 'Let's give it a whirl.'"

Ashe, who had been diagnosed with AIDS in 1988, made trips to the Capital Region in 1990 and '91 to help raise money for 15-Love, the name picked for the Albany-based program. Dowdell had overseen similar programs in Newark, New Jersey, and Kansas City, Missouri, the year before. But while initially successful, those programs eventually dried up following Ashe's death from AIDS-related pneumonia in February of 1993. But 15-Love has remained a vital part of the Capital Region tennis community.

"There are vestiges of what we did in Newark and Kansas City, and other places and teaching pros who started their own program, but 15-Love is the only one, the only authentic program started by Arthur Ashe, that is still going strong," said Dowdell, who is now general manager of the Montgomery TennisPlex just outside Gaithersburg, Maryland. "When Arthur died in 1993 his wife, Jeannie, was inundated with requests from all the charities and groups he had been a part of or had attached his name to. It was overwhelming to her. It was a difficult time, and things changed. Most of these groups just didn't have the sustenance to continue without Arthur being there."

(over)

Albany's 15-Love program, however, which also quickly developed a presence in Schenectady and Troy, continued to thrive.

"We had some challenging years, so it wasn't easy," said Herb Shultz, a Kingston native and Niskayuna resident who was one of the group's founders and continues to serve as president of the Capital Region Youth Tennis Foundation, the legal entity that oversees the 15-Love program. "Arthur came up a couple of times and helped us raise money, but after he died we had to separate ourselves from the national program and become independent. It was difficult, but we're part of a great community here, and we raised enough money to keep things going."

Solid leadership

Dowdell, who is black and grew up the son of a Tuskegee Airman and civil engineer, always knew the value of a good education, and remained on the board of 15-Love for 10 years himself even though he lived in Washington, D.C. Shultz had initially contacted Dowdell in 1989 to inquire about the possibility of the ABC program coming to Albany, and it is Shultz, according to Dowdell, who has been the driving force behind 15-Love's amazing story.

"He is one of the most passionate leaders I have ever come across, and one of the steadiest," Dowdell said of Shultz, who has won awards for his volunteer work from the United States Tennis Association, the Parsons Child and Family Center in Albany and the Capital Region YMCA. "People were skeptical after Arthur died and said they couldn't do it. But this community really embraced what Arthur used to say and what was one of his original concepts. He hated to start something, raise hope by having some kind of event for the kids and then just walk away. He always wanted to follow up, and Herb and his board of directors did that. They created an independent board, raised enough capital to have a meaningful budget, and kept at it."

These days, 15-Love has three full-time employees, including executive director Amber Marino, director of development Katie Genovese and Montes. There are also more than 20 seasonal coaches who typically played the game in high school and college and are often themselves products of the 15-Love program.

Many, like Schenectady's Rachel Fields, participated in one of 15-Love's Excellence Programs, aimed at kids who, while maintaining at least a B average in school, are introduced to tournament play and hope to eventually earn a spot on a college team. A freshman at Union College, Fields played on Hoffman's girls teams for six years, the last three as the Patriots' No. 1 player. She didn't play on Union's team this year in order to concentrate on academics, but she is planning to join the team next season.

"I was in the college prep program and it really helped me decide what I wanted and how important it was to go to college," said Fields, who is the older sister of current Schenectady High player Jon Fields. "I learned how to control my anger on the court and it taught me about the real world. I know how important it is to have a little direction in your life. 15-Love helped a lot."

New facility

Another 15-Love success story, according to Marino, is the new court complex on Michigan Avenue in Schenectady. There were eight brand new courts installed in November of

2012, along with six smaller courts specifically designed for young children.

"The USTA has changed the way we teach tennis to kids 10 and under," said Marino, a 1997 graduate of The College of Saint Rose. "We have smaller courts, larger and slower bouncing balls, and we've found that little kids can have longer rallies and really enjoy it. A regular-sized court is pretty large and intimidating for a young child."

The new courts were also paid for by 15-Love.

"We totally rebuilt the place and we were able to raise all the money ourselves," said Marino. "The city was supportive and a part of the whole process, but actually building the courts was a new experience for me. I felt like a contractor. It's something 15-Love hadn't done before."

The 2014 15-Love summer season begins on June 30. In Schenectady, there will be programs throughout the summer at Central Park, Michigan Avenue, Jerry Burrell Park and Hillhurst Park. For every hour of tennis played, there is another half-hour devoted to academic-related activities.

"We try to be difference-makers. We try to keep these kids off the streets, and our graduates often come back and end up teaching for us," said Marino, whose office is in 15-Love's own building on Washington Avenue in Albany. "We have kids who went on to do amazing things. We have former players who became lawyers and CPAs, and many of them come back and volunteer their time with us during the summer."

'Saved my life'

For Montes, 15-Love did a whole lot more than just give him a profession. Born in Brooklyn, his family moved to Puerto Rico when he was 7, then to Albany when he was 12.

"My story is that 15-Love saved my life," he said. "I was one of six kids with a single mother and I was the second youngest. My older sisters were pregnant by the time they were 17 or 18, I had an older brother in prison, and when I first started going to school in Albany, it was tough."

A pretty good student in Puerto Rico, Montes struggled with the language and with his schoolwork in the U.S. Then, he happened upon a free 15-Love clinic and things began changing.

"I lived across the street from Lincoln Park in Albany and I saw some young kids getting lessons, so I wandered over and ended up never leaving," he said. "By the time I got to high school, things were a little bit better, but it wasn't until they threatened to take tennis away from me that I really hit the books. I needed to have an 80 average in order to play on the school team. That kind of woke me up."

Montes played four seasons of varsity tennis at Albany High and was captain of the team as a senior. He then headed to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, getting a degree in Elementary Education and Spanish. After teaching first grade in Pennsylvania for three years, he returned to Albany five years ago and began working at 15-Love.

"It's extremely satisfying to see kids grow up, reach their potential and feel some fulfillment," said Shultz. "We're thrilled by our success stories, and I guess it really does make us quite unique in that regard."

Meet 15-LOVE's New AmeriCorps VISTA

October 2013, I was 6 months out of college and living in downtown Washington D.C. I was listening in my bed as police whizzed by for the Navy Yards shooting, 12 dead, two blocks away from me, and running away from the capitol when Miriam Carey crashed her car into it and was shot dead on the spot. Helicopters and EMT and police pressed forward so often that their noise became lullabies to me each night.

In May 2013, I was on the concrete steps of MidAmerica Nazarene University in Olathe, KS—Graduation day. A jungle. I held my Diploma inscribed “Bachelor of Arts in Sociology,” looking out with uncertainty, knowing full well that I had to escape the monotony of Kansas, but that days later I would be leaving some of the most loving people in my life for who knew how long.

1 year before, I was in Albany, NY. I had never been. And I was certain I never would again. I was riding backseat with my puff cheeked baby niece Penelope while my sister and brother-in law navigated in front. It was an unplanned stop en route from Canada to New Jersey. We sauntered into the Empire State plaza and began exploring the 80's art deco and late Victorian style architecture. Then, we discovered The Daily Grind roastery, drank coffee and ate sandwiches, and drove to Washington Park, lush and in bloom.

In all honesty, I was a wreck, a fit of fear and a sense of impending doom. My college years were at an end and I had no idea who I was, where I was going or what I was going to do with “a B.A. in Sociology and no job related skills whatsoever.” I still don't know where I will end up. There were other things, too. The murder of a friend, the end of an important relationship, divorce looming over my shoulder, culture shock from spending a semester in Hollywood and moving back to Kansas again, unemployment, loneliness, and misunderstandings. Those words tossed through my head like bricks tossed through a window. Desperation.

It showed on my face. I know because sitting down on a bench in Washington Park near the lines of crabapple trees that sliver the sun, the strangest thing happened to me. Up to my bench walked a man, tall, well built, with hippie length hair, and tat sleeves in view below his cut denim jacket. He stopped and stared and after a long



Ryan Tink with family members.

few seconds said to my face: “Hey, it's going to be ok, man. I promise you, it's going to be ok.”

Then, he walked off into the sunset and I never saw him again. This was the real deal. Some majestic hippie angel who gave me hope when I was low. And it was just plain strange how at the lowest point in my life, the right

thing seemed to come along one day in Albany, NY, of all places. What was even more strange was that one year later, after applying to 20+ different AmeriCorps positions around the nation, I got a call from the AmeriCorps program at Siena College. Then several persistent emails.

I had no idea where Loudonville, NY was. I had no idea where 15-LOVE was, but that's where I was placed. I had no idea that after months and months of praying and not settling and being overwhelmed by vaguely uncertain options, the one job pursuing me and the one job I really wanted, would be smack dab in the heart of Albany, NY, working with a nonprofit that serves 3,800 inner city youth each year. Coincidence doesn't begin to describe it. One year later, and this is my job. On paper, I'm officially an “AmeriCorps Siena Vista Fellow,” but at 15-LOVE, I am the Project Coordinator of Education and Healthy Living.

I'm half of the way through my yearlong service term, and I'm planning out a weekly Healthy Living program. Each week will focus on a different activity for our participants—gardening activities the first week, nutrition/fitness the next week, field trips around the city, and a healthy cooking night saved for last. The point of the program is to give experiences and education of gardening, cooking, and healthy living, to youth in the city who's schools and families might not be able to give. I'm excited about what I'm doing here and excited about the support I've been given. Working in the office with Amber, Katie and Domingo is like working with family, people who laugh when you laugh and who get angry when you get angry. It means a lot to me to be supported by these kinds of people, and if I can work harder or give back in any way, I will.

Working at 15-LOVE this year has been a great experience so far, and I like to think that maybe there's more than one reason I'm here.

Thanks for having me.

Ryan Tink

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FORE LOVE & MONEY

We are beyond thrilled to report that the 22nd Annual Fore Love & Money event was held after the threat of morning storms and having 3 rain outs in 2013. It was a wonderful day of golf, tennis and dinner at Schuyler Meadows Club on Monday, June 9. This year's event raised \$90,000, making it a great success.

We are so incredibly thankful to all of our attendees, donors and sponsors who help make this event a success for the 15-LOVE Program. Monies received from this event continue to go towards the numerous free tennis and educational programs that we offer to 3,800 inner-city youth in Albany, Schenectady, Troy and Rennselaer. As we embark on our 25th Anniversary, we are humbled to provide a safe haven for today's youth at our home at 785 Washington Avenue and watch our participants become healthy, productive citizens who work hard to achieve their own goals.

Special thanks to this year's sponsors who include; Gold: Nigro Companies; Silver: Albany Medical Center, Fenimore Asset Management and Tri-City Rentals/Massry Realty Partners; Bronze: Berkshire Bank, Capital Bank, First Niagara, Kasselmann Electric Co., Inc., Krackeler Scientific Inc., M&T Bank, Picotte Companies, Pilates Principle, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Stuyvesant Plaza, Times Union and Whiteman Osterman & Hanna. Also, we would like to thank our cart sponsor Keeler Motor Car Company and our lunch sponsors John & Margaret Malicki.