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Giving Issue

Squash Academy offers 'launching pad' for kids toward bigger goals

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Squash has a reputation as a sport for the wealthy and privileged.

But a nonprofit group in Over-the-Rhine is using it as a means to help inner-city children starting in grade school to become better students, better citizens and, yes, to become better and sometimes nationally competitive squash players.

"It really is a launching pad to get out in the world and have numerous opportunities," Cincinnati Squash Academy Executive Director Leah Zipperstein told me. "The point being, how can we help students figure out the larger pathways they want to carve out in life. It's about how you can be a strong, independent adult and have all the skills."

Local real estate investor and developer Peg Wyant launched Cincinnati Squash Academy in 2014. Her husband, venture capitalist Jack Wyant, and four children have all played competitive squash. All four kids played in college, and Tim is executive director of the Squash and Education Alliance, the national organization over the 20-plus similar groups around the country.

Given that background, Peg Wyant bought the Emanuel Center building on Race Street in Over-the-Rhine in 2012 with the goal of turning it into a youth program centered on squash.

Cincinnati Squash Academy works with anywhere from 14 to 40 kids at one time, providing programming from 3-6 p.m. It serves 40 now with plans to expand to 50. Kids split their time daily between the squash courts upstairs and the classroom downstairs.

"It's meant to be an inch wide and a mile deep," Zipperstein said. "We don't work with as many kids as a very big program, but that's intentional because we want to have a deeper impact."

If kids are struggling with schoolwork, academy staffers or volunteers will work closely with them, talk to their parents and



CORRIE SCHAFFELD | CBC

Cincinnati Squash Academy in Over-the-Rhine helps inner-city children master skills they can use to succeed both on and off the court. Above are Leah Zipperstein, executive director, and Vir Seth, program director.

find ways to help.

Despite the name, the organization's mission isn't just to teach kids squash. The real aim, Zipperstein says, is to

help kids achieve their goals, whether that's to get into college or be successful in other ways after they finish high school.

The academy recruits initially inner-city grade schools. But kids fan out as they advance in school. The academy has several students who now attend Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy and Seven Hills School. The program's kids have received financial aid from schools totaling nearly \$1 million over the years, Zipperstein said.

The first cohort of kids from 2014, when the academy started, have now entered college.

"College can be a goal, and we can help with that," Vir Seth, the academy's program director, said.

Aside from the schoolwork, the academy teaches kids about squash. They start from the beginning.

"Many don't know what squash is and we've never had a student who had already played squash," Seth said.

But squash, played on indoor courts similar to racquetball, comes with its own life lessons. The sport's principles include honesty, integrity and good sportsmanship.

Some of the kids become really good players too. The middle school girls team won the Squash and Education Alliance's national championship in Philadelphia in April. In June the Cincinnati Squash Academy had its first SEA individual national champion. Its kids have won titles at tournaments run by U.S. Squash, the sport's national governing body.

Kids travel to places they likely couldn't otherwise, such as New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Detroit and Chicago. A recent tournament was at the prestigious Kent School in Connecticut.

The academy is clear about what it expects from them. They must show up at least three times a week and make a strong effort with school and squash. If they have bad grades, academy staffers will put them on intervention plans.

"If they show that level of commitment and enthusiasm, we will throw a lot of opportunities at them," Zipperstein said.

The academy is financed by grants and donations from board members and others, along with its annual fundraiser, the CSA Cup. It started as a squash tournament but shifted to pickleball during the pandemic.

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