

# Serving Up Success

## A's & Aces New Orleans

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Tennis *ten.nis /tenes/* noun. A game played on a rectangular court by two players or two pairs of players equipped with racquets, in which a ball is driven back and forth over a low net that divides the court in half.

The definition sounds simple to those unfamiliar with the game but to tennis players, the underlying complexity of the seemingly straightforward concept is comical. What it neglects to mention are the multitude of factors that may prohibit the player from getting that small yellow ball back and forth over the net. Mental obstacles, weather, partner communication, technique, you name it and most tennis aficionados will admit they've encountered all those challenges and more every time they step on the court ... yet they keep going back for more. Why? The answer is as simple as the definition: Tennis is fun!

In 2008, when faced with the grim state of our post-Katrina city, two former Tulane tennis players and coaches decided to channel their love of the game to tackle issues of violence, illiteracy, poverty and obesity facing New Orleans' youth. David Schumacher, a New Orleans native and retired lawyer, and Anna Monhartova, a Ph.D. and Tulane Hall of Fame player from the Czech Republic, wanted to provide New Orleans children with academic assistance, life skills and tennis. "Sports, like art and music, is a common denominator," says Schumacher. "We use tennis as the hook to get the kids involved and stay committed." Schumacher admits he may have not realized it initially, but says A's & Aces was based on a growing globally recognized method called "Sports Based Youth Development." This ideology supports the theory that academic support is crucial to a child's success but the sport is equally integral in providing valuable social, physical, health and life-skills lessons.

What began with a handful of volunteers and children has exploded to empowering about 1,000 underprivileged students annually with a full-time staff of five, part-time staff up to 35 and more than 100 volunteers. The program utilizes three interrelated features: a proven academic curricula, tennis and life skills activities – to link what's done in the classroom and on the courts. A's & Aces values its partnerships with Dillard University, Tulane University and NORDC (New Orleans Recreation Development Commission). Each provides facilities and/or volunteers to support the programs offered to students in kindergarten through fourth grade during school; and, also the older student-athletes in after school, summer seven-week programs, Saturday clinics, holiday camps and five annual USTA Junior Sanctioned tournaments. "David and Anna's ability to balance academics and sportsmanship, enriching children by giving them pride in their achievements, is so admirable," says board member Jane Cross.

Academic enthusiasm, in addition to athletic accomplishments, abound with 40 A's & Aces players now United States Tennis

Association (USTA) ranked Louisiana Juniors. Local and national accolades have also been plentiful. In 2013, the USTA selected the program as the National Junior Tennis & Learning (NJTL) Chapter of the Year from a group of more than 600 chapters. Unlike most large NJTL chapters, A's & Aces doesn't have a permanent hub, but does have the long-term goal to secure a permanent facility to reach more children and provide sustainability to the organization. Most play because they love the game, but the birth and continued success of A's & Aces is what happened when two people used their passion for tennis and turned it into something so much more.

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## Just the Facts

A's & Aces' gala "**A Simply Smashing Night**" is Thursday, November 17, 5:30-8 p.m. at the St. Charles Avenue home of Frances and Calvin Fayard. For information and tickets, visit [AsAndAces.org](http://AsAndAces.org)

**A's & Aces: 1036 Arabella St., 487-1147, [AsAndAces.org](http://AsAndAces.org)**