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DORCHESTER, ROXBURY, SOUTH BOSTON

Hub officer honored for creating city youth tennis program

Posted by Matt Rocheleau March 7, 2011 03:43 PM

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(Essdras M Suarez/Globe Staff/2010)

Ruby Sanchez, 6, of East Boston and other children get ready to start training at the Tennis Club last summer.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

A South Boston police officer has been honored for creating and leading an inner-city youth tennis program that has grown from serving four young members two years ago to around 1,500 last year and is eyeing plans to expand nationally.

Frank G. Williams Jr., a district C-6 patrolman and Roxbury resident, established the volunteer-run Boston Police Tennis Program in 2009 that expanded last year when a partnership with city police and the [Sportsmen's Tennis Club](#) was formed.

Williams, 48, was awarded the "Eastern Massachusetts Volunteer of the Year" at a ceremony Saturday by the [New England chapter](#) of the [Unites States Tennis Association](#).

"I really didn't expect it," Williams said by phone Monday. "Granted I got the award, I didn't do this by myself ... It wouldn't have been possible if it weren't for a lot of other people," from BPD, the Sportsmen's Club, the USTA,

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The [tennis program he started](#) attempts to recruit at-risk city youth. It is a component of Dorchester tennis club's "Volley Against Violence Initiative," which Williams launched.

Funded by Sportsmen's, [the program](#) is run on a volunteer basis by BPD officers like Williams who shuttle youth to and from their districts to the Dorchester tennis facility. The initiative teaches more than tennis, Williams said. Youth learn life skills, like conflict resolution, while getting healthy exercise.

"It's phenomenal how many kids we've reached. On a Friday night, it's something for them to do, to keep them out of trouble, and they keep coming back. They're never late," he said, adding that the 25 pizzas served at 7:30 p.m. can be another motivator for the consistent attendance of around 100 young members each Friday.

Two city officers at each of Boston's 11 districts are training so that, likely beginning this summer, the program can host smaller subgroups of youth closer at courts to where they live. The district-by-district practice will lead to a city-wide "commissioner's cup" competition at summer's end, Williams said.

He said the number of tennis courts in Boston is unusually high compared to other cities.

"I don't understand why. It doesn't make any sense, especially in some of the lower-income developments they're in. But, they're there and we're going to use them," Williams said.

The South Boston officer, through talks with USTA executives, said he is working on drawing up a model to implement similar programs through urban police departments nationwide.

"These are not privileged kids [in the program]. Police have the ability to reach out to these kids, but the USTA doesn't really have that ability," he said, explaining how, together, city law enforcement and the USTA can "start the program in any city if they have access to a tennis court ... all it takes is an officer with a love for the game and the realization that this can make a difference."

Tennis can appeal to a different crowd, and teach different life lessons, than other sports like basketball, Williams said.

"It's something a lot of these kids don't have access to," he said. "Tennis is fun and something I have a love for. And, the program works."

The Sportsmen's Club nominated Williams, who is a board member there. He was [one of seven awarded](#) as a top 2010 volunteer during Saturday's USTA New England Awards luncheon in Marlborough. One volunteer was selected from five of the six New England states; two were selected from Massachusetts – the other Bay State recipient represented Western Mass.

Williams brought his father – the first person to hand him a tennis racquet when he was around six years old – and 20 city youth from the tennis program with him Saturday.

"It felt really, really good," said Williams, recalling how his accompanying group stood and cheered "Officer Frank" for him before he had them join him onstage during the award presentation. "This [program] is something we want to keep going."

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The ceremony also honored other regional residents with tennis ties in categories such as sportsman ship, coaching and player performance.

The New England USTA chapter has over 33,000 individual members and more than 600 organizational members. It is one of 17 sections that comprise the USTA, the non-profit "governing body of American tennis."

Donations to the Boston Police Tennis Program can be made by dropping off new or used racquets at police headquarters or any local station. Racquets are provided to youth who attend five consecutive sessions. Monetary donations can be made to the [Sportsmen's Club](#), which funds the program along with grant assistance.

E-mail Matt Rocheleau at mjrochele@gmail.com.



(Courtesy: Boston Police)

Officer Frank G. Williams, Jr. founded and leads the Boston Police Tennis Program.



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