

Two tennis teachers use courts to teach kids about self-esteem

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Two tennis players — one born in Australia and the other in Vietnam — are using the courts at Gaines Park as a classroom to help local youths build self-esteem.

And for playing a little tennis, too.

"Some of these kids are dealing with some heavy-duty stuff," Henry Guignet said. "We give them an oasis to get away from everything. You can't really dream until you see what's out there."

Guignet, 46, an Australian with blue eyes and breezy voice, has taught tennis in Massachusetts, Hawaii, Texas and many affluent parts of Florida since leaving Sydney in 1988.

He's been working about 10 years for First Serve of the Palm Beaches (www.firstservepalmbeaches.org), a nonprofit organization that uses tennis to promote positive values and education. The group raises its annual \$100,000 budget through private donations, said President Paul Van der Grift, a West Palm Beach resident.

A widower since 2003, Guignet said the students who attend the free lessons enjoy the friendships as

much as the tennis.

"A boy told me the other day he brought his grades up from D's to B's. He was so proud," Guignet said, tossing a "hi mate" to the students as they pass. "I talk to them in between games about school, their friends and families. They enjoy having an adult around who is not on their back all the time."

About two years ago, Guignet began working with Chi Ly, head coach of Palm Beach Atlantic University's men's and women's tennis teams. Ly was looking for a tennis program that would meet the university's community service requirement for students.

"We had worked in soup kitchens and done some free clinics. This is just right because it gives us a place where we can work with these children on a regular basis," said Ly, a West Palm Beach resident.

PBA tennis players are required to volunteer at least two hours a week giving lessons at Gaines Park. About 50 children who live near Gaines Park attend the clinics, which First Serve sponsors five days a week.

Ly, 40, left his home in Vietnam in 1979 and went to Maryland. He speaks

Vietnamese, French, Chinese and English. He earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics from Messiah College near Harrisburg, Pa., and then taught tennis at Alma College in upper Michigan. He was hired at PBA in 2006.

He and his wife Michelle adopted a 5-year-old daughter from China named Angel, and are adopting another daughter from China, Ly's parents' homeland. They plan to name her Gabrielle.

"We'll have two angels," he said, smiling proudly.

Guignet and Ly agree that coming from different cultures gives them a valuable perspective to share.

"I see boundless opportunities in this country," said Guignet, who lives in Boynton Beach. "Some of these children wake up in a bad neighborhood. They go to a poor school. They think everything is second-rate. They don't see the potential. We try to teach them that if they work hard enough, anything can happen."

The classes also have opened the eyes of his PBA tennis players, Ly said. Many of the eight men and eight women on his teams grew up taking private tennis lessons.

"I want them to be



CARL KILLSGAARD/Staff Photographer

Chi Ly (left) and Henry Guignet give free tennis clinics in Gaines Park to neighborhood kids.

better tennis players. But I want them to be better persons, too," said Ly.

Ly and Guignet are coaches, as well as mentors, for the children, said Van der Grift. Ly values character as much as ability, and stresses that to the players, Van der Grift said, and Guignet has turned down better-paying jobs to work with children.

When the children are not on the courts, they

sit on the wooden picnic tables and talk with Ly, Guignet and the PBA students. Even on the court, the teachers often will take a child aside for a few words. It's clear by their expressions that tennis isn't always the topic.

"Teaching them to play tennis is only part of why we're out here," said Ly. "Getting these kids to open up and talk is what it's all about."

The free tennis clinics at Gaines Park are 3-5 p.m. Monday-Thursday and 8:30 a.m.-11 a.m. Saturdays, for Gaines Park neighborhood children. For information, call (561) 379-5353 or visit firstservepalmbeaches.org.

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