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COMING UP ACES

Miami Herald Staff Report

KIDS AT MOORE AND BRYAN PARKS GOT A CHANCE TO HEAR A MOTIVATIONAL SPEECH FROM A TOP TENNIS COACH AND TO MEET OTHER CHILDREN FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY Kids from inner-city Miami found out firsthand recently what it means to scramble to the top of the heap in the tennis world and stay there - from someone who spent his life doing it.

“I wanted to borrow a million dollars to open a world-class tennis academy in Florida and everybody thought I was crazy. But you have to follow your dreams,” said Nick Bollettieri, president of the Bollettieri Tennis Academy.

Bollettieri, who founded his academy in 1978 in Bradenton, spoke to youth from the Ashe-Buchholz Tennis Center at Moore Park in Allapattah and Bryan Park in Little Havana before they hit the courts for training during the NASDAQ-100 Open on Key Biscayne.

Each year, children from the park programs are granted scholarships from Bollettieri's academy for a week of summer tennis camp. Those attending the clinic regularly participate in neighborhood tennis and education park programs sponsored by the Greater Miami Tennis Foundation. Professional tennis instructors hired by Bill Ussery Motors Mercedes, which sponsored the afternoon event, led the clinic.

Bollettieri told the children it was most important that they work hard at whatever they choose to do in life. When he realized that law school was the wrong path, he said, he persisted with his dream and started a tennis camp that grew into “The Toughest Playground in the World,” producing nine students who went on to reach a No. 1 ranking, including Maria Sharapova and Andre Agassi.

Bollettieri, 74, said he's still working hard because that's the way life is.

Meanwhile, more than 60 children from First Serve chapters around the nation converged recently at the Ashe-Buchholz Tennis Center at Moore Park for the inaugural First Serve Tennis and Life Skills Carnival.

For the first time, children from four First Serve national programs had the chance to interact. The elementary and middle school children arrived from as far away as Fort Collins, Colo., and Jacksonville, Fla., and from nearby Fort Lauderdale and Miami. They were split into six groups for different tennis and life skills activities, including tennis, volleyball, "jail" and "wizard's maze," a game that focuses on listening skills.

First Serve supports 20 chapters across the country and is incorporated into the Greater Miami Tennis Foundation's After-School Program at Moore Park. The First Serve Life Skills Curriculum reinforces how to set and achieve personal goals, resist peer pressure, resolve conflicts and prepare for work or higher education.

"It was exciting for me to get kids from all over the country that are going through the same program together in one location," said Robert Flader, director of First Serve's Life Skills Education. "I think the kids also realized how neat it is to meet someone from across the country and have the instant common bond of First Serve."

Subway restaurants provided lunch. Haggai and Ithream Green provided DJ services. Those who helped make the event successful included Bruce Carrington, Greater Miami Tennis Foundation site director; Kim Sands, Moore Park director; and several coaches.

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL LANDSBERG/SPECIAL TO THE MIAMI HERALD TENNIS CLINIC: Young tennis players and their coaches from the Ashe-Buchholz Tennis Center at Moore Park and Bryan Park join for a tennis clinic hosted by Mercedes during the NASDAQ-100 Open in Key Biscayne.

OFFICIAL WELCOME: First Serve President Trey Buchholz greets children from around the United States who attended a tennis carnival at the Ashe-Buchholz Tennis Center at Moore Park.

WORDS OF WISDOM: Noted tennis coach Nick Bollettieri speaks about the hard knocks of life to a group of young tennis players during a kids' tennis clinic at the recent NASDAQ-100 Open in Key Biscayne.