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## On the Right Track

### After-School Academic Tutoring and Tennis Lessons Are a Winning Combination for Children in the Bear Trax Program

By **KATIE DOWD**  
DAILY CAL STAFF WRITER  
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Category: Sports

Ray Wyrick knows a thing or two about moving.

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"I lived in San Francisco when I was two, and then we moved to Oakland," he says. "After that, we moved to Louisiana and then moved back to California. Then to Texas. Then back to California."

He says "yeah" and nothing more when asked if moving was hard. There's nothing more to say. You can't be sorry about things like that once they're said and done. Things are going pretty well for Ray now, anyway. He's a senior at Berkeley High, and he likes it except for the fights that break out between students. ("There are a lot of fights. Hecka ghetto stuff happening. People using their cell phones and Sidekicks to take pictures of it. Click it and record it. YouTube. Fire alarm be ringing almost every day last year.")

Ray has an elegance about him. He's built lean and has slender fingers and telling eyes. Kids love Ray. They clamor for his attention and he bestows big smiles on them. Ray is poised on the cusp of adulthood, months away from graduating high school, but still with one (or maybe both) of his feet firmly planted in childhood. And that's good. The opportunity to be a kid is sometimes lost in people like Ray. You can still see the child in him when he smiles.

You can see it when he plays tennis.

Cynthia Price and Coach Thomas White don't want excuses.

"Look her in the eyes when you shake her hand," Price says.

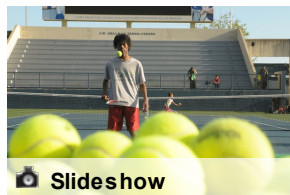
"You finished your homework?" White asks.

"Life skills. That's the biggest thing," Price says. "And



SKYLER REID/STAFF

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once they've caught on and you don't have to remind them of things, that's the most rewarding thing."

Price, along with the site director White, is currently a paid staff member with Bear Trax, a five-day-a-week after-school tennis and tutoring program hosted by Cal. Last year, it served 49 different elementary, middle and high school students like Ray who come from families that wouldn't normally be able to afford tennis lessons or private tutoring.

Price has been working as the academic and life skills adviser for Bay Area youth tennis programs for 17 years, so she's heard a lot of excuses. "I'm afraid" isn't an option for her. Neither is "I was busy." Price knows about both—she went back to school when her daughter was nine.

While her daughter played tennis, Price sat in her car and did schoolwork. The site director of her daughter's tennis program approached her and asked if she'd be interested in tutoring the kids during their homework time. She accepted.

Price and White developed a method of tracking the students' progress; students are ranked not only on tournament wins and tennis skills, but on good report cards. "Life skills" are also a crucial part of the curriculum. They spend half an hour per day teaching things like introducing yourself to a stranger, dealing with stress and balancing school and sports.

All Bear Trax participants, many of whom come from inner-city schools, sign a contract before they begin the program, pledging to come at least two days a week, work hard and respect everyone and everything. That doesn't always come naturally.



"There was one girl, and she was a handful. She even hit me on the head with a racket," says Tiffany Wong, a Cal student who volunteers to tutor for Bear Trax. "One day, she just broke down and we didn't know why. After practice, me and another girl talked with her for a long a time, just sat with her. She really opened up and started to become friends with the other kids.

"She used to act out because the other kids didn't want to talk to her because she was mean. After she opened up, we got the other kids to interact with her. She was a lot happier."

What makes Bear Trax work is its tangibility. The students see their tennis skills improve, they bring home better report cards, they make more friends. And if they need

proof, there's Wesley Augustine, a sophomore at Berkeley High. He doesn't come as often now because he's on his high school tennis team, but everyone knows him. Wesley is the top-ranked boys' tennis player in the First Serve National Student Athlete competition. He won a \$5,000 scholarship presented by Andre Agassi, and Arthur Ashe's aunt came by to give him an autographed racket.

"We've got the carrot-tennis. If you don't do your work in the classroom you're not going to play," Price says while watching the kids play five-on-five on court one. Nick, a grade schooler with tousled brown hair and big, mischievous eyes, looks up from his worksheet and groans. Price laughs and nods knowingly. "He was socializing and talking in the classroom, so he's got a lot of work to finish up. You've got to get that done."

Peter Wright's office is located under the cement benches of Hellman Tennis Complex. The benches form the ceiling of the room. You'd never ask if it's earthquake safe, because it's the type of structure that you just assume isn't.

Someday, the Cal men's tennis coach hopes to have a new office. The plans for a new building have been approved by the university. In the plans are, obviously, offices for the tennis programs. But a big part of Wright's vision involves Bear Trax, the program he helped bring to Cal.

About five years ago, Wright first started sending his players to schools in Oakland to tutor inner city students in tennis.

"They'd come back almost always with the same story which was, 'Coach, that was the scariest place I've ever been in my entire life. I was scared for my life.' And I said, 'Oh my goodness. How did it go?' And they said it was so rewarding," Wright says. "We felt like we really had a great effect on the kids, had a wonderful time there. I always asked, 'Well, would you do it again?' Every single one of them said, 'Yeah. In a heartbeat.'"

Wright knew he wanted to do more. With help from Youth Tennis Advantage, he brought a branch to

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Berkeley to give young aspiring tennis players a stable place to play and learn. They were set up with a classroom in Haas Pavilion, but the only available space was the team meeting room so during basketball season when the team needs it, sometimes the Bear Trax kids are homeless. Regardless, they're always given time to use the courts at Hellman Tennis Complex. Sometimes the men's tennis team finishes early just so Bear Trax can use the court. It's the least they can do, Wright says, until, someday, he gets them their own room in the new tennis complex.

"Every time you're with the kids, it's almost selfish," he says. "You get this wonderful feeling of doing something special."

Eight-year-old Azaria Hayes likes playing in tournaments. Last week, she won the eight-and-under division of the Lafayette Tennis Club Spring Junior Challenger, and she took home a trophy.

"I have them on the fireplace," she says. "Pictures of me, and it has my trophies."

She's only been with the program a few months, but things have already changed for Azaria.

"Azaria has become more independent and self-confident for sure," her father Steve says. "She's her own person. She's very confident on the courts as well as in the classroom."

It's like that for so many Bear Trax kids. Zaquan can now muster the courage to interview a stranger, something he would never have done before. First-grader Amira does her homework more efficiently so she has more time to play tennis. Then, of course, there's Ray.

Last year, when he first arrived at Bear Trax, he had no plans of going to college. Ray has since passed the high school exit exam and will attend Berkeley City College this fall. In a few years, he'll try to transfer to a CSU. He isn't keen on admitting it, but he's a role model for the younger ones. Recently, he was made a junior instructor by Coach White and Price. He puts away the equipment at the end of the day and helps some of the younger kids. Bear Trax only extends to students under 20 years old, but if he stays on as a junior instructor, they can keep him. Everyone wants Ray around a little bit longer.

"He's growing as a leader. That's really rewarding, watching him grow and develop," Price says. "He's a good kid, and I'm just sorry he had to go through so much to find us. But I'm glad he's here."

So is he.

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