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Youth program offers a serving of confidence through tennis, tutoring



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Jane Phillips/The New Mexican
 Photo: Andres Aragon, 11, of Nava Elementary School embraces Eleanor Brenner, founder of First Serve New Mexico tennis and tutoring program, Thursday at College of Santa Fe's Shellabarger Tennis Center. Andres, along with Claudia Enriquez, was awarded a \$1,000 scholarship for succeeding with grades and tennis. [Read the story.](#)

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Ana Maria Trujillo | The New Mexican
 9/3/2009

Plump clouds in the sky started to cover the hot September sun Thursday afternoon, but students of the First Serve New Mexico program didn't miss a beat as they warmed up for their few hours of tennis.

In addition to kicking off the new season for the tennis instruction and tutoring program, which is in its seventh year, the afternoon was a special occasion: to honor two of the program's more than 100 students, who both received scholarships from the First Serve National program.

Claudia Enriquez, 13, and Andres Aragon, 11, both received \$1,000 college scholarships because of their stellar report cards last spring — both had straight A's — and their game on the tennis court.

Claudia, who attends De Vargas Middle School, said she was "really excited" to get the scholarship. "It will probably help me get into a good college."

She has been involved with the program for only a year, but said she's grown to love First Serve.

"They help you improve your grades and your tennis skills," Claudia said. "I think it's a lot of fun."

Andres, a student at Nava Elementary School, has dreams of becoming a professional tennis player, and he's sure his \$1,000 scholarship will go toward his education at the University of California, Los

Angeles, where he hopes to one day play tennis.

"My dream is just to be a tennis player," Andres said. "That's all I want to be."

Andres said he likes the program because it keeps him active. "It really helps you. It gets you exercising and you can ask your friends to play with you. The tutoring program is really good because you're able to finish your homework."

Eleanor Brenner, First Serve New Mexico founder, came to the program because she wanted to fulfill a promise to her father — who had immigrated to the United States from Russia — to give back to this country. Researching how best to do that, she found First Serve and thought it was perfect.

"Tennis gives kids an enormous ability to get scholarships for college and to form a core group of people with the same likes," she said.

Brenner and her husband, Richard Brenner, gave some of their own money, secured some foundation money and private donations, and got the ball rolling eight years ago.

"We get no money from the state, which is a little sad, so everything is done by foundations and individuals," Eleanor Brenner said. "We are the pre-eminent after-school program in the state. We are changing the whole bar of excellence for what we expect kids to accomplish."

The students meet four days a week from 3:15 to 5 p.m. Two days a week they have tennis instruction, and the other two days they have tutoring.

Richard Brenner said it costs approximately \$1,800 to put each child through the program, which is for students of elementary-school through high-school age.

Chris Slakey, the First Serve coordinator for De Vargas Middle School, said each school site has a coordinator who ensures the students are going to both tennis instruction and tutoring, and also keeps records of the students' progress.

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First Serve New Mexico recently started a program called "Sponsor a Child," which encourages community members to donate \$1,800 to help a student with the whole year or \$900 to help with half the year.

While the returning students are getting back into the groove of things, the First Serve New Mexico founders are launching their fall recruitment efforts at five of the six schools they serve: Nava Elementary School, De Vargas Middle School, Capshaw Middle School, Monte del Sol Charter School, and Pojoaque Valley Intermediate School. Pizza and information parties for the school will be held starting next Tuesday through Sept. 17. (At Santa Fe High School, the program is open only to students with ongoing involvement from pre-high-school years.)

Richard Brenner, who also serves as First Serve treasurer, said there are various benefits for students who participate in the program.

"It's very rewarding because the children really have become very sociable," he said. "We've had kids who were so shy they couldn't talk. They stood in the corner. Now those same kids are out in front playing tennis and having fun."

"We think anybody — with the proper training, proper care and proper involvement — can become a star," Eleanor Brenner said. But while the program has surpassed her dreams, she has even more goals she'd like to see it accomplish.

"My dream is to ultimately see every school in Pojoaque and Santa Fe become part of First Serve New Mexico, and to have our own home, meaning a building with tennis courts," Eleanor Brenner said. "And if possible, to go into other cities. And the only way that can be accomplished is through unbelievable dedication on the part of the people who run the program and who work in the program. It will not happen otherwise."

Contact Ana Maria Trujillo at 986-3084 or atrujillo@sfnewmexican.com.

IF YOU GO

What: First Serve New Mexico Recruitment Pizza Party schedule

When: 6 p.m. all days

Where: Capshaw Middle School, Sept. 8; Pojoaque Valley Intermediate School, Sept. 9; De Vargas Middle School, Sept. 14; Monte del Sol Charter School, Sept. 16; Nava Elementary School, Sept. 17

Sponsoring a child: Send donations to First Serve, 123 Tano Norte, Santa Fe, NM, 87506. For more information, call 780-0713.

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