

## **A series of interviews with Pharrington Douglass and Ken LeCureux of the Urban Racquet Sports Foundation, talking about the Saginaw Garber Courts and their youth programming.**

**Interview by Phil Eich, originally published on Riverfront's Facebook page. Edited for clarity.**

“About 15 years ago, I had recently come back to Saginaw from living and teaching in Florida. I started playing tennis on Wednesday nights or Thursday nights, and that's where I met Ken LeCureux. I was sharing with him that I was interested in doing something for the kids in the inner city because of the gangs and other things going on. I wanted to do something to help out by starting a tennis program for kids.

He said, ‘I'm on board with that.’

The city had a block grant that was available for startups. I had shared with him that I was trying to fill out this block grant to get some money to start the tennis program. He looked at what I was attempting to do and said, ‘Give me that thing.’

We completed the application and turned it in. We ended up being a runner-up for the organization that actually received it. Ken, being his ambitious self, says, ‘we can do this ourselves!’ We started communicating with the United States Tennis Association about forming a Community Tennis Association chapter, and then formed our own 501c3, charitable organization.

We started out at the old Civitan Center with the help of a grant from a local foundation that helped us get some kids' nets, racquets, and balls. We had a couple volunteers helping every Monday night, for probably a year, we'd set up on a gymnasium floor. We were there every week, maybe with the exception of a holiday, from like five to eight at night. Kids would just walk in from the neighborhood and that's how we got started.

The city told us that they would lease the Garber Courts to us for a nominal amount. Since then we maintain and operate the facility. The city doesn't have a recreation department, so we just worked with what we had. There were 12 courts, and we ended up tearing out the six backcourts because they were in unplayable shape.

From there, we started getting assistance and grants from other places and other organizations. We received some funding from Dow that allowed us to repaint the six courts that we had, knowing that it was going to only last 3-4 years. We were able to get 9 years out of it. Eventually, we'd have to have a new plan because the courts expand and contract with the weather each year and break down. Even repainted, crevices would become craters eventually, so we had a dream to completely redo the courts and create a place where we could actually work out with the kids without them having potential injuries.

We spend a fair amount of time after every lesson teaching the kids as much as possible. We were doing Chalk Talks, and that became our focus to get to the hearts of these kids. There were times where we'd have 10 to 15 volunteers and 60 or 70 kids, spread out on

the six courts and coaches from Midland over to help us. After the classes were done, we'd sit the kids down on the courts and focus on character traits, making wise choices, healthy eating, living well, and reading.

That became a major component of our programming. Many of our kids come from single-parent families or they don't have the same advantages as others. Others have parents who are judges or doctors or lawyers. We cut through that cross-section and we speak right to the hearts of the kids. The families are listening. The parents are listening. Tennis is the hook, but the character building is the motivation and the goal. We want to have an impact in the city.

Besides the kids' program, we would actually like to host professional tournaments, eventually. Our goal is a USTA satellite tournament where players come from all over the world. We also want the local schools to be involved and use the facility, like when the new high school school is built.

That's how things started 15 years ago to where we are today as Urban Racquet Sports Foundation, renamed because of our addition of pickleball, and here we are 15 years later.

Tennis and pickleball are what we do, but our goal is to get to the hearts of the kids.”

- Pharrington Douglass, Urban Racquet Sports Foundation

Pictured: Pharrington Douglass, left, Ken LeCureux, right.



“It started with a dream. We knew what we were working with and the courts were in pretty bad shape. Dow Chemical had given us a little stipend to repaint the courts, but that wouldn't last for long, maybe three to four years - we put up with it for almost nine or ten.

In August of 2019, we sat down and said, ‘Okay, it's either now or never.’ We sat down and put budgets together. We had consultants come in and evaluate the existing courts. They told us they were irreparable, that we rip them out, go down three or four feet, and start from scratch. We started putting the architectural stuff together. We brought the city up on our plan and they told us to go for it. It was just that little push we needed. But when we put the budget together it floored us a bit, coming in around \$2 million. Like, how are we going to do this? There's no taxpayer money involved in this, so we needed to fundraise that \$2 million.

We put together an initial campaign and raised almost a million dollars before COVID hit. COVID came along and we lost some momentum. Everything slowed down, you couldn't call people up, you couldn't get a hold of foundations, and understandably, everyone was holding onto money because no one knew what the future would hold.

But in September of 2020, I got a nudge from a significant patron of the city. He and I had lunch and he said, 'You better get going. Start raising money for this now'.

We came up with the idea of approaching businesses for naming rights on each of the courts, for \$50,000 paid over five years. We've had several businesses and individuals sign on, and several other foundations stepped up.

It's been so fulfilling. We have a lot of goals. Another goal we have is to have at least 100 kids every summer out here. It's like stepping-stones, and you build on each little success. When we started out at the Civitan Center, it was like, 'Ok, this is kind of fun.' Then it just built from there. Then we went into the city in the wintertime, and we would go to elementary school and recreation center gymnasiums and teach on the gymnasium floor with portable nets.

At the beginning, we had the idea that we could reach 4,000 kids in the city if we teach the gym teachers in the public school system our programs. We went and got a grant to help 12 gym teachers get set up with balls, rackets, nets, and we did in-service training with them, and the schools put tennis in the physical education curriculum. Then the budget cuts came along and they had to remove physical education programming and we lost a little momentum. But when we lost that momentum, that helped reignite this dream. You don't always know where dreams go. It could be 15 years later when a kid wakes up and says, 'You know, I remember something from when I played tennis.'

- Ken LeCureux, Urban Racquet Sports Foundation



"I think as any coach or parent would desire, we're planting seeds here. So, when those seeds take root, things will happen for the better. The kids are watching and listening all the time, even when we're not expecting it.

There have been kids who've gone off to college. One particular student of ours got a scholarship to go to college to play competitive collegiate tennis. For others, they become engineers, they become physicians, they go off to study. Some come back to say hello or to reach out and help; it's just the glory of seeing these kids grow up and go do amazing things. If they don't grow up to be competitive tennis players, we are still going to enrich their lives in some way.

We've also been able to take the kids to meet with other tennis programs throughout the Midwest. We've gone to Michigan State, Illinois State, Notre Dame, Purdue, and an Ohio State training camp for a weekend. They get to see and meet kids from other areas where they probably wouldn't get to travel to otherwise. We've had kids who were Indian, Asian, Hispanic, or multiracial. The ages vary and sometimes you see kids that are natural athletes and some that are not.

We work with everyone and we don't turn any kids away. The Lord provides. He provides. We have visions and dreams, and they'll come forward."

- Pharrington Douglass, Urban Racquet Sports Foundation



"We started with teaching character traits, but we added another element to reach the kids and expand their horizons with book reading time. We're a NJTL chapter which stands for National Junior Tennis Learning. It was started by Arthur Ashe a long time ago. That means your chapter has to have a reading element in it. The kids will read a chapter of a book we give them, usually biographies of successful people, we ask them questions, and give them a little token when they complete it.

Eventually, our Chalk Talks could expand into potentially other learning events. There's a similar organization near East Lansing that we're looking at, wondering if we could pattern what we do after what they're doing. We could fit maybe 10 or 12 computer stations and could teach kids some computer skills or do after-school learning sessions. Right after some good physical recreation of course. Outside of those, we could expand into other programs and we've thought about how we could let other nonprofits use the facility.

I used to visit friends in Central Park in New York City. I remember going through Central Park and seeing people playing backgammon or playing chess. I've always thought it would be cool to have a couple of stations like that out here around the courts where people can come out and relax, but they're also a part of something, a center of activity. It's patterned after the concept called, Placemaking.

Here we are in the fall and construction of the new courts is a little bit behind schedule, so we decided that we didn't want to have a grand opening in 40-degree weather. That took the pressure off us because we want to make a big splash with this. We decided to push it to Spring. We are planning a special grand opening, and we'll have food trucks and all kinds of things. We'll have some professionals come and have exhibitions planned for pickleball and tennis. We're trying to get a tennis celebrity to join in and help us out in some way or another.

Sometimes you don't always see it, but you know the impact is there. You know that you're having an impact on these young lives."

- Ken LeCureux, Urban Racquet Sports Foundation

"We started out initially with our original tennis only budget at about a million dollars. And that was just the eight tennis courts. Then I started playing pickleball and liked it. I started talking to the community and thought if we can bring in that older demographic, which is usually 50 and up in amongst the youth. With that, we've got the community of older people mingling with the younger people. So, when we added in pickleball, that expanded the scope a little bit, well actually doubled it.



But I also think we are going to be absolutely surprised at the number of kids and young people that want to learn and play pickleball. It's going to be amazing, because it's similar to what we can do with tennis on a short 36-foot court. We call it "quickstart tennis" because the court is smaller, players use short rackets, foam balls, and learn much quicker. Pickleball is similar to that version of tennis, where you're dealing with a small court, but the ball goes through the air slowly with less court to cover. So, there are similarities. We have a tentative understanding with the new combined high school that's coming, that this will be their home court. That will save the public system a lot of money, because they don't have to build additional courts.

"There are a lot of possibilities, that now need to be planned for."

- Ken LeCureux and Pharrington Douglass, Urban Racquet Sports Foundation

