

# Just say yes

by Chris Nicholson

Akron's Dan Jones keeps kids off drugs and on tennis.

**L**IFE in the projects—where drugs and gangs define the environment—provides more fear than optimism for a child. Few escape to a less turbulent existence; some don't survive. Fortunate kids find a mentor, a beacon who may guide them—whether through sports, education or friendship—to a safer shore, a more secure life. Fortunate kids find a person like Dan Jones.

Jones, 48, grew up in the Elizabeth Park housing project in Akron, Ohio. Elizabeth Park had tennis courts, but Jones only once saw nets between the posts; that's when a local woman tried to teach neighborhood kids the game. She failed, and the netless courts returned to serving as a baseball field by day, a haunt for drug deals and gang fights by night.

Jones joined the army in 1969, finally escaping Elizabeth Park. Two years later, he returned to Akron for college, where in 1975 he quit his 16-year-old drinking and drug habits.

"I was trying to find other things to do because I didn't want to go to bars anymore and just hang out at night," Jones says. That's when an old friend from Elizabeth Park offered to teach Jones tennis, and seven years later Jones was certified as a tennis instructor at the Van Der Meer Tennis University in South Carolina.

But Jones' real calling was still to come. "One day I went to our public courts," Jones says, "and I saw two kids—they had to be 8 or 9 years old—peering through the fence watching us play. I could see in their eyes, they were dreaming of hitting forehands and aces. I thought to myself, Why don't these kids join NJTL? Then I realized the parents in those neighborhoods couldn't spend money on a tennis program, particularly with the other problems they're facing with day-to-day survival."

So in 1989, Jones, with the help of another area tennis player, Ann Marie Barnes, founded "Say Yes to Tennis/No to Drugs," a free program for poor kids in the projects to learn both tennis and drug prevention. "The key is that we made the prevention component


mandatory," says Jones. "If the kids did not come to the prevention education, they were not permitted to play tennis."

Barnes provided the initial funds, but soon the program received grants from the Akron Community Foundation and the Alcohol, Drug and Mental Health Board. With the help of John Meldrum, Minority Participation Coordinator for the USTA Midwest section, the program also received USTA player development and minority participation grants.

"Tennis itself is prevention," says Jones, who spoke on mentoring kids through tennis at the USA Tennis Teachers Conference in New York dur-

ing the US Open. "When kids come to play tennis, they have to learn social skills: to trust one another, to become comfortable with people from different backgrounds and to be proud of who they are." More than 1,000 kids learn those skills from Jones every year.

"Dan Jones is very committed to what he's doing," Meldrum says. "He could have made a lot of money doing other things, but he asked himself, 'Do I want to make a lot of money or do I want to make a difference?'"

Jones decided to make a difference, and to be a beacon for the kids of Elizabeth Park. 



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