

## Tennis program at Pineridge a hit with kids

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The nets are about half the length of regulation nets and a few inches shorter, but they fit the purpose perfectly by fitting into some tight spaces in a parking lot at Pineridge.

Tennis is not a sport children have played in the low-income northwest Gainesville apartment complex, which was in the news last year after some kids set off bottle bombs, fought and vandalized the area.

But thanks to the Gainesville Area Community Tennis Association and its Aces in Motion program, elementary-age children at Pineridge and other low-income communities are learning the sport with portable nets and downsized rackets. And just as importantly, they are getting outside to play and getting a few school lessons on top of it.

And with some supervised fun, it's hoped the children will not be doing things they shouldn't.

"If these kids have something to do, they might not get into trouble," said Geneva Webb, a longtime Pineridge resident who runs the small community center there. "The kids really enjoy this.

"Pineridge is not a bad place to live," she said. "To me it's not where you live but how you live. We want the children to live good."

As Webb spoke, tennis association Executive Director Addison Staples was using tennis balls — foam and larger than real tennis balls — to teach the kids a spelling lesson.

But they soon took opposite sides of the net and began some mini doubles matches, rotating off and on the court after a few points so all of the children got a chance to play.

While many balls were sprayed all over, including some into the shrubs outside Webb's apartment, several of the kids managed to have multi-hit rallies. Among them was Arianna Russell, 10, who had never played before the association began coming.

"I like playing with my friends, and I want to keep playing and get really good at it," Arianna said.

The association got a grant from the U.S. Tennis Association to begin the program at Pineridge, including the purchase of some equipment, said association Vice President Anne Koterba.

It gives similar programs, but on real courts, at the T.B. McPherson Center on Southeast 15th Street.



Brad McClenny/The Gainesville Sun

Addison Staples, executive director of the Aces in Motion program, works with youth as they play tennis in the Pineridge neighborhood in Gainesville Feb. 10, 2015. The program is run by the Gainesville Area Community Tennis Association.

Among the schools and organizations Aces in Motion reaches are Boulware Springs Charter School; the Reichert House; Rawlings, Lake Forest and Idylwild elementary schools; and Howard Bishop and Lincoln middle schools.

A Special Olympics program is being started, Koterba said, adding that the association also had tennis in the city's Summer Heat Wave program — recreational activities for kids when school is out.

In addition to tennis, the kids are taught life skills, the importance of listening to others and conflict resolution.

"We want to give them something productive to do after school. We are interested in their physical well-being, their activity and also providing opportunity to them in tennis," Koterba said. "We've taken them to a University of Florida women's tennis match. About 120 kids went. They got to see the trophy room and facilities, and met the players and got autographs. It provides an opportunity to broaden their experiences a little bit."

Meanwhile, at Pineridge, Webb and others say they hope to get an expanded community center and other facilities using the Southwest Advocacy Group — or SWAG — as a model.

SWAG worked with the Alachua County Commission and other groups and agencies to create a family resource center in Linton Oaks to serve the communities along Southwest 20th Avenue and Tower Road. It also includes a temporary health clinic until a permanent clinic is completed.

Gainesville City Commissioner Yvonne Hinson-Rawls started the process by meeting with agencies such as the Partnership for Strong Families and plans to develop a more expansive resource center at Pineridge, even though the neighborhood is no longer in her district.

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