



TEEN GETS THE LIFE HE NEVER KNEW WAS POSSIBLE AT NJTL OF TRENTON

By Ashley Marshall, USTAFoundation.com



Alfred Kandakai Jr. was born in 2001 in the Liberian capital city of Monrovia during the nation's second civil war. His mother, Yeato, and his siblings moved to the United States when he was 6. Alfred stayed behind with his father, with a plan to join his mom once she became self-sufficient.

Before they could get that chance, Alfred and his father were displaced more than 800 miles east of their hometown, to Buduburam on Ghana's south coast. As a result, Alfred spent five of his formative years in a United Nation-operated refugee camp, which provided safety to tens of thousands of Liberians fleeing their homeland.

Today, that seems like a distant memory to Alfred Jr., the boy whose skills on a tennis court earned him a second chance at a childhood away from conflict – with a mighty assist from a not-for-profit organization helping the talented youngster succeed between the lines as well as in the classroom.

Alfred was introduced to the National Junior Tennis and Learning (NJTL) of Trenton in 2013. A community group dedicated to improving the lives of disadvantaged children, NJTL of Trenton is one of more than 500 USTA Foundation-affiliated organizations that provide tennis, education and life-skills programming to around 225,000 children each year based on the ideals of its founder, tennis legend and humanitarian Arthur Ashe.

"I don't think we've ever had a kid during my tenure from his situation," said Rob Howland, who has been with NJTL of Trenton for 18 years, including the past three as executive director. "Alfred just has a really good spirit about him, and he's really grateful because of where he came from. He's very thankful for what we do for him, whether it's small or big. He's a leader and a lot of the other kids look up to him. Whatever support we're giving him will help him throughout his journey into adulthood."

It was in Ghana that Alfred first picked up a tennis racquet. His father taught tennis at the refugee camp, and Alfred quickly fell in love with the sport. When Alfred returned to Liberia at age 9, his dedication and talent caught the eye of a businessman who owned a hotel where his father taught. The owner paid for Alfred to attend the Sanchez-Casal Tennis Academy, first in Barcelona, Spain, in 2012, and then in Naples, Fla., the following year.

"I was really fortunate to get into the Sanchez-Casal academy," said Alfred, now a 10th grader at Trenton Central High School West, "because the person who sponsored me saw me playing tennis and said he wanted to sponsor me because he could see how serious I was about it."

Alfred permanently joined Yeato and his three younger sisters, Faith, Sajely and Joydely, in 2013. His stepfather (Yeato and Alfred Sr., who remains in Liberia, are separated) introduced him to NJTL of Trenton, and the organization has since helped him with everything from subsidizing tournament fees and equipment to mentoring and assisting with school work.

"It has been really good for me," Alfred said. "They helped me get into USTA tournaments and offered me free lessons and that helps my game a lot. I would tell people to join the NJTL, because it's not only for tennis, but it also helps kids with their education. It's a good program and they help you do a lot of things."

Alfred is currently No. 1 on his high school team and has represented his Middle States team at the 14 and Under USTA Junior Team Tennis Nationals Championships in Cayce, S.C., last December.

NJTL of Trenton's contributions to this growth are immeasurable. Courtesy of an arrangement with Marc Hill and Benton Camper, owners of Nassau Racquet Club, Alfred travels to the club twice per week to supplement his training, with all fees waived. In addition, Alfred is one of the youngsters the NJTL of Trenton sends to career readiness workshops in Skillman, N.J., through a corporate partnership with Bloomberg.



And Alfred is not the only beneficiary. In addition to the programs above, NJTL of Trenton also pairs its student-athletes with Princeton University students to work on college essays and sift through what colleges they should apply to.

"It's about showing these youngsters it doesn't matter where you come from. You have access and the ability to end up wherever you want to be," Howland said. "[NJTL of Trenton] offers something different. It's a holistic approach. It's not just about playing this sport, it's also about having grades at a certain level and meeting certain expectation for community service by giving back."

In addition, NJTL of Trenton student-athletes have access to the Ashe Program, an initiative unique to this organization, which recruits the most talented players in the New Jersey towns of Trenton, Ewing and Hamilton who exhibit the four core values of NJTL of Trenton – acceptance of others, responsible behavior, healthy lifestyle and academic performance. This program offers its participants a structured pathway of academic enrichment, mentoring, college preparation, year-round advanced tennis training, subsidized tournament competition and travel, scholarships, internships and employment opportunities from third grade to college.

Alfred has flourished in his three years at NJTL of Trenton, which receives support from the USTA Foundation. He has played with Jim Courier and Todd Martin in an exhibition and has attended the US Open three consecutive years to watch his idol Novak Djokovic. Alfred hopes to one day play on the same court as his hero.

"It was one of my dreams to go to the US Open and watch the pros," said Alfred. "It was really fun and really inspiring to watch the pros and it gives me confidence to do well. My dream is to become a professional tennis player."

Dreams like this are not uncommon at NJTL programs across the country – dreams enabled by NJTL programs that work to enable at-risk youth to lead physically and emotionally healthy lives and strengthen their community as productive citizens. That takes time, money and a dedicated team of workers – but Howland said it's all worthwhile to make a lasting impact in a youngster's life.

"I worry about money all the time. We're a small nonprofit that has to raise \$1 million a year to fund our program and get everything done," he said. "Every year I wonder how we're going to get to the million mark but thankfully with the support of our dedicated board, staff, the USTA foundation and many other funders, it's not an insurmountable task. When I see Alfred and all the other kids like him, the worry is worthwhile because of the results and impact we have."

"Our 41-year history speaks for itself. We have a track record in the community renovating one tennis facility and about to embark on another. We've had hundreds of kids that have come from difficult circumstances and have finished school and we've helped supply college scholarships so our work speaks for itself. If someone is looking for a worthwhile charity that develops the whole child, I think we're a good fit."

