



## L.A. PARKER: NJTL A LOVE MATCH FOR LIBERIAN-BORN TENNIS STAR KANDAKAI

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People with leading roles for the National Junior Tennis & Learning of Trenton present the organization as a non-profit that provides tennis, education and life skills to youth.

What if that were just a lie? Not a complete fabrication and not even intentional but a point being made here is that the NJTL of Trenton serves as a front for compassion, a movement that allows any child to walk into the organization's West State St. office and claim they want a shot at a better existence.

The NJTL allows children chance to bask in the sunlight of the nationally-recognized refurbished tennis courts after a project turned weeds, hard clay and cracked macadam into a heavenly slice of opportunity at famous Cadwalader Park.

People suffer serious myopia if they look at the NJTL of Trenton and see only tennis. This organization grooms positive self-awareness, confidence and individual potential cultivated under the guise of hitting an overhead smash or drop shot.

"It's a really nice program. I like it. People take care of me here. I never imagined anything like this when I came to Trenton," said Alfred Kandakai, Jr.

Kandakai, a 15-year-old sophomore at Trenton High, another jewel in the success-crusted NJTL crown, recalled an interesting past.

As a young resident in Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia, Kandakai could have been an eventual victim of that country's second civil war.

Or, perhaps, Kandakai could have been eyed as a future child soldier to fight for some guerilla leader like Charles Taylor who in 1999 along with the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy enlisted legions of youthful teen killers who toted AK-47s not tennis racquets.

Kandakai and his father were displaced to Buduburam, Ghana, a dirt-roaded, shack camp home to 12,000 refugees. They lived there for five years.

In 2013, Alfred, Sr. eventually forwarded his son to Trenton to live with his mother, Yeato, and three younger



sisters, Joydely, Sajely, and Faith. And the rest, as frequently said, is history. Except in this case, it's the present and future being glorified in each brilliant moment.

Kandakai, whose father taught tennis in Liberia, arrived in the U.S. with superior tennis skills, talents that earned him a three-week stay at Sanchez-Casal Academy in Naples, Florida before he arrived in New Jersey's state capital.



A visit to Cadwalader Park delivered Kandakai another lifeline.

Kandakai discovered the NJTLT when his stepfather ushered him there to connect with an organization that breeds success.

"Playing tennis was a struggle in Liberia. So, for me to come here, play tennis and go to school, get good education and play against good players is really beneficial for me," Kandakai explained.

His arrival to Trenton ranks as incredibly special but his story with the NJTLT resembles that of many players who found this cradle of love.

For instance, Michelle Gbelama, the NJTLT program director, did not start playing tennis until her high school junior season. The NJTLT helped her find the passion for working and winning as her determination backed by love and support, vaulted her to Drew University stardom.

Gbelama became the first female from Drew to win the NJIAAW as she claimed two MVP awards for the Rangers. Gbelama excelled in the classroom and on the courts as Drew's No. 1 singles player also starred on the Rangers' No. 1 doubles team.

The records extend into many categories but just the fact that she returned home to help others signifies that NJTLT made an indelible mark.

We are seated in her office when a soft tap sounds at Gbelama's door. Kandakai pokes in his head and the conversation turns toward the fact that he will not attend the NJTLT 23rd Annual Gala on Saturday. Gbelama appears slightly perturbed, almost like a big sister.

Her look distances admonishment; it's only a thought that the young man should make every effort to attend. Gbelama instructs Kandakai to inform NJTLT Executive Director Rob Howland about his expected absence from the Hyatt Regency Princeton affair.

Later, a similar scene plays out in Howland's office. Same soft rap and similar smile as Kandakai delivers his news. Howland, inexorably tethered to detail, already knows about a weekend tennis tournament that his current star will compete in.

"I just wanted to say hello and goodbye before I left," Kandakai said. Howland had known the same dreams Kandakai envisions, hoping for collegiate and professional stardom.

Howland wishes Kandakai success and the door closes.

Kandakai's first year in Trenton offered an incredible opportunity as the NJTLT sponsored a bus to the U.S. Open in New York City. Imagine, one day your life attaches to the squalor of a shanty town in Liberia and in that same year, his wide eyes see in person heroes such as Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal.

"I never thought something like that could happen," Kandakai said, his eyes moving upward and slightly back as if memories of that special day remained just under his eyelids. His tell-tale heart that exposed passion.

Like, Gbelama, Kandakai excels in school and on the tennis court. He's one of the top junior players in New Jersey. He hopes to attend college and play professionally. I mean, if you're part of the NJTLT organization then why not play for huge dreams.

In the 1998 film "Fallen", starring Denzel Washington, evil is passed from one person to the next with just a touch.

The NJTLT works with a similar premise but it's philanthropy that transmits from President Albert Stark, to directors Zachary Chester and Judith Stier and onto advisors such as the Hon. David Dinkins and Dan Haggerty.

Organization's never reach such high expectations and then raise the bar without the likes of people such as Amy Smith, Beth Deitchman, Dan Faber, a list of quality sponsors and tennis instructors who share experience, strength and hope.

Kandakai cemented that early premise about this tennis organization.

"Everyone at NJTL looks out for me. They supply tennis racquets, shoes, clothes, bags and they pay for my tournaments and practices," Kandakai praised.

"I never expected this kind of love. And yeah, it makes me feel really good."