

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Vermont Nonprofit Breaks Ground at National Tennis Center in Havana, Cuba

Kids on the Ball (KOTB), in a three-way agreement with the Cuban American Friendship Society (CAFS), and Hinding Tennis Courts, break ground at the National Tennis Center next week to rebuild 10 courts over a two-week time frame. The shipping containers arrived in Havana and Steve Hinding and his crew of 16 will be on site this week to make Jake Agna's vision a reality. The construction includes new fences, net posts, nets and new court surfaces built to withstand the Cuban sun and heat.

About one year ago, in an historic decision, the US Department of Commerce issued a license to CAFS to undertake construction in Cuba. Senator Leahy's office was instrumental in granting the permission to carry out this project. This will be the first bricks and mortar project to take place in Cuba since the Eisenhower Administration.

Agna founded KOTB in 2000 in partnership with King Street Center, which serves the community through its educational,

recreational and social programs. KOTB has been recognized locally, regionally, nationally and internationally for the citizenship skills it teaches American and immigrant youth through the sport of tennis. “We’ve got kids who have had every opportunity and kids with no opportunities at all, kids born right in this city and kids from third world nations all hitting the ball,” describes Agna, who remembers growing up in Ohio with his siblings and his parents, all types of kids in and out of the house. “Inclusion was a given,” recalls Agna.

In 2015, after watching a documentary on Cuba, the island and its people intrigued Agna, and he grew determined to build a bridge of friendship between American and Cuban tennis players. Agna has travelled to Havana many times to meet with officials from the National Tennis Federation, the Ministry of Sports and the Jose Marti Center to make this project happen. “When we saw the courts and the building at the National Tennis Center we were stunned. Courts were crumbling, nets held up by chairs, tennis balls were threadbare, and racquets needed stringing. The bathrooms and locker rooms are crumbling and in disrepair from a lack of funding. Water poured through the ceiling when it rained,” said Agna.

To know Jake Agna is to love him, so it is no surprise that this project has drawn the attention of professional tennis players, athletes, celebrities, educators, philanthropists and the media.

Ken Solomon, chairman and CEO of the Tennis Channel, and a member of President Obama’s Committee on the Arts and

Humanities, has taken a strong interest in Agna's venture and he is committed to bringing scale to the project. He will begin to chronicle KOTB's story on the nationwide channel.

Big Questions, a regional Emmy award-winning documentary production company led by Pat Werhane, began shooting footage last year both in Cuba and in Burlington. They describe this project as "restoring friendships that have been lost for generations." Stay tuned for their powerful documentary that will highlight the humanitarian focus of Agna and his mission.

Along with a group of tennis enthusiasts and community-minded friends, Agna will travel again to Havana in early December to see the project come to completion. Each time Agna makes a trip to Havana his bags are packed with new tennis balls, hoppers, stringers, racquets and shoes.

While Agna continues to raise funds to cover the estimated \$1.5M cost for the much-needed renovation of the building and facilities at the National Tennis Center, he and his board of directors have set their sights closer to home. Vermont has been a safe haven for refugees from many countries, most recently from Syria. As Agna continues helping thousands of under-served, at-risk youth through tennis and mentoring in Burlington, he plans to bring his KOTB program to Rutland, Vermont, where many Syrian refugees are making new homes. "The goal is inclusion and integration for everyone," states Agna who looks forward to hitting the ball and teaching life lessons through tennis with anyone who shows up at the

courts. “We hope to bring Kids on the Ball to any city in America interested in working together to benefit all youth. We want everyone to come on out to the courts and hit some balls,” states Agna.

KOTB Mission Statement:

Creating opportunities for kids to learn about themselves and each other through tennis.

For more information or to donate to the project visit:

<http://www.Kidsontheball.com>

Please note any donation is tax-deductible as Kids on the Ball is a non-profit, 501 (c) (3) organization.