

Press Release
April 3, 2016

Vermont Nonprofit to Rebuild Cuban Tennis Center

HAVANA, CUBA- In an historic meeting on March 1, 2016, the Cuban government approved a project to rebuild the tennis courts at the National Tennis Center in Havana, Cuba. The project is the vision of Jake Agna, tennis pro of Burlington, Vermont.

The Memorandum of Understanding is between the Cuban American Friendship Society (CAFS) of Burlington, Vermont, (non-profit, 501 (c)(3) organization), as the licensed exporter, and the National Tennis Federation in Cuba.

The original application, sponsored by CAFS, was designated Humanitarian status by the U.S. Department of Commerce, allowing the project to be sanctioned quickly in December. With both license from the U.S. government and Cuban approval, Agna and his team will embark on the first bricks and mortar project to take place in Cuba since the Eisenhower Administration.

Agna is founder of the Kids on the Ball, an award-winning tennis and mentoring program. After years of helping thousands of under-served, at-risk youth through Kids on the Ball, Agna is committed to do the same in Cuba, despite a US embargo.

"I am thrilled to see this project approved. I am grateful to Jared Carter and his team at CAFS, the Ministry of Sports in Havana, along with Senator Leahy's Office who were instrumental in granting us permission to carry out this project," said Agna.

Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) said: "After 50 years of a failed policy, I am glad to see we are taking steps to not only change our official relations with the Cuban people but also to engage with each other culturally. Sports in particular have the power to bring people together and promote understanding, regardless of the differences that exist between governments. As Marcelle and I have seen on our visits to Cuba, we will find that, as people, we are not all that different. I am glad Vermonters -- and tennis -- will play a role in this process."

"Our effort to build bridges between Cubans and Americans is based on mutual respect. By engaging civically through tennis programming with Cuban youth we can connect people in a way that would otherwise not be possible. In order to build these bridges between people, we must first repair and rebuild these tennis courts to create a safe place for Cuban kids and visitors from the United States to come together through sport," explains Jared Carter, Executive Director of CAFS.

"When we saw the National Tennis Center we were stunned. Courts were crumbling, nets held up by chairs, tennis balls were thread bare, and racquets needed stringing," said Agna.

Generous financial support from the Robert Stiller Family Foundation, The Argosy Foundation, the Serena Fund and other donors make it possible for construction to begin soon. Kids on the Ball-Cuba continues to seek financial support for phases two and three of the project, which include the renovation of the building at the tennis center and an exchange program for players.

Hinding Tennis, based in West Haven, Connecticut, is the leading tennis court construction company in the northeast and is already on board with CAFS and Kids on the Ball-Cuba to get the project underway in rebuilding the courts.

“This is such an important project and we are proud to be a part of it,” said Steve Hinding. “Our team has worked on many grass roots programs and we have seen firsthand how people, especially children, benefit from tennis programs both on and off the courts. The efforts behind this entire project are extraordinary, and we are eager to get started.”

Agna has travelled to Havana several times in the last year to play with kids who are just learning tennis and some incredibly talented players. “These are great kids, with great hearts, pride in their community and love for each other. We have things to share, but also much to learn from them,” said Agna.

Looking ahead, a youth exchange program is being planned to bring players, pros and coaches together from both countries. Agna is excited to introduce these stellar, young Cuban players to colleges and universities in the U.S. The Cuban tennis players offer a high caliber of play, strong educational backgrounds and intense desire to achieve.

“The relationships Jake builds with the Cuban people through tennis and his special mentoring skills will have a lasting impression. We are looking forward to hosting exchange programs in the future that will bring Vermonters and other Americans to Cuba to learn from them and their rich culture,” stated Sandy Baird, Co-founder and Board Member of CAFS.

“We’re changing lives, one ball at a time. Bringing kids together to learn from each other and support each other is my passion. I’m humbled by this opportunity and the incredible support we have received,” said Agna.

The Cuban American Friendship Society (CAFS) was formed in 1981 by a small group of individuals in the United States and Cuba with a shared interest in building bridges. CAFS leads people-to-people and humanitarian trips to Cuba, sponsors speakers from Cuba, work on delegations for trade missions to Cuba, and organize courses and travel opportunities in Cuba.

Kids on the Ball (KOTB) creates opportunities for kids to learn about themselves and others through tennis. Jake Agna founded the award-winning program in 2000 in partnership with King Street Center and the Boys and Girls Club, both serving the community through its educational, recreational and social programs. KOTB is recognized locally, regionally and nationally for the citizenship skills it teaches youth through the sport of tennis.

Please note any [donation is tax-deductible](http://kidsontheball.com/donate/) as Kids on the Ball-Cuba is a non-profit, 501 (c) (3) organization.