

# SEATTLE TENNIS & EDUCATION FOUNDATION

## non-profit news

Most people in Seattle know Magnuson Park as a 400-acre playground full of sports fields, tennis courts, and nature trails. But it is also home to more than 800 families who live in the low-income housing in the park. In 2017, Windermere resident, Colin Plank wanted to share his passion for tennis and helping kids who live in Magnuson Park by starting Seattle Tennis and Education Foundation (STEF), whose mission is to help kids thrive using the sport of tennis, mentorship, and educational enrichment.

STEF is a free after-school tennis and enrichment program for under-resourced children that is part of a national network of chapters supported by the United States Tennis Association Foundation. The first chapter was started by tennis champion Arthur Ashe 50 years ago in the Bronx. STEF continues Ashe's legacy by providing youth access to tennis, education, and mentorship.

Colin is the Board President along with Board Members, Geoff Harrison, of Laurelhurst and Amy Quilter, who lives in Green Lake. Tennis has always been a big part of Colin's life as he learned by playing with his father. But tennis equipment, lessons, and court rental fees are a tremendous barrier to participating in the sport, Colin noted. STEF's goal is to create equity and access to the sport of tennis but it is off-court where STEF hopes to have the biggest impact on mentoring the student-athletes.

Colin and Geoff work behind the scenes and they both say that the hero of the organization is Amy Quilter, who serves as a Board Member and STEF's Executive Director. Amy started as a volunteer, but her passion and connection with the kids made her a natural to take over as Executive Director. "Our goal at STEF," she says, "is to be a safe place. A place where kids feel that they have caring adults and team members that are on their side, helping them to be their best selves."

Currently, STEF has 19 elementary-age kids in the program and most of them attend Sand Point Elementary. STEF student-athletes are supported through high school and STEF will work with them to apply to college, trade school, or find employment. STEF plans to keep the student-to-teacher ratio small as research shows that smaller cohorts create the most positive impact on the kids. Additionally, youth sports studies have shown that tennis players get better grades, study more, and have lower suspension and expulsion rates than non-tennis players.



Having lots of coaches/mentors helps to give kids extra attention when necessary. If a student had a bad day at school, a conflict with a teammate, or something they want to talk about, coaches/mentors are able to stop and listen while another coach continues teaching the larger group. Amy has found that "days on the courts that seemed the most difficult actually ended up being really important because that's when we would learn the most about the kids."

After each session, the coaches track stats on every kid, including participation, how well they get along with others, confidence, positivity and their general attitude. They compare these notes as a team and try to figure out the best way forward or what might be missing. For some kids a goal might be to express themselves more; for others, to improve their self-control. Finally, the life skills component includes lessons on positivity, active listening, and setting goals. STEF believes that investing in the youngest years with student-athletes will offer support that bolsters them through middle and high school.

In February 2020, STEF brought the kids and families to the international women's Fed Cup tennis tournament in Everett. Kids got to kick off the tournament with a center court rally in front of the fans and watch US players Serena Williams and Sofia Kenin defeat Team Latvia – and have Dippin' Dots for the first time!

The pandemic has created many challenges at STEF but the organization continues to evolve with the needs of the students and families. When school closed the first week, STEF used its court fee funds to buy pantry staples knowing that many of their students depend on school lunches and most families did not have a budget to stockpile supplies. STEF is continuing to provide food gift cards through the winter as it is critical to helping families with food insecurity.

STEF had to cancel monthly in-person family pizza parties and game nights but they pivoted since the shutdown by delivering pizzas and doing a Zoom Family Feud to kick off remote learning this year. They now host all-outdoor activities and kids do a weekly Zoom where they are encouraged to be curious while always leaving time to socialize and play games.



The newest piece of STEF's educational mission is a lending library and reading incentive program that STEF offers to all of the kids in the Mercy and Solid Ground housing, not just the STEF kids. The kids are given book reports and once they meet reading goals, they can redeem their book reports for prizes. STEF also continues a weekly delivery of learning kits (art supplies, science kits, math and reading games), and small group outdoor lessons.

Lastly, coaches/mentors work with teachers to support and advocate for the children and families, help purchase supplies, walk parents through Schoology and submit assignments. To help kids focus at home, STEF purchased noise-canceling headphones and created folding workstations to help facilitate remote learning.

Amy said though COVID has dramatically altered the way STEF serves children, the silver lining has been strengthening the bonds between coach/mentors and families. "The key through it all is that we are still there and that we will keep working and adapting to meet the needs of the kids."

For more information on STEF, visit [stef4youth.org](http://stef4youth.org). If you are interested in joining the board, donating or volunteering, please feel free to contact Colin at [colin@stef4youth.org](mailto:colin@stef4youth.org).

