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Nonprofit CEO Uday Tambar on the life-changing power of tennis

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Uday Tambar sees his job leading New York Junior Tennis & Learning as the next logical step in a career that has been dedicated to serving low-income children. The nonprofit's mission is to help young people build skills and character through tennis and education. During the pandemic, the organization became increasingly aware of young people's growing need for mental health support. To help connect struggling students with essential mental health services, it partnered with the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College to pair graduate student interns with young people experiencing higher levels of anxiety, depression and stress.

Tambar spoke with *Crain's* about how tennis lessons, coupled with a broader commitment to health and education, can help young people succeed throughout their lives.

POWER MARKS

EMPLOYEES 500 (Nine direct reports)

ON HIS RÉSUMÉ CEO and president of New York Junior Tennis & Learning; vice president of Community Health at Northwell Health; chief of staff and director of youth and children services for New York's deputy mayor for health and human services; executive director of South Asian Youth Action

BORN Scotland

GREW UP India and Queens

RESIDES Forest Hills, Queens

EDUCATION Master of Public Administration degree from Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Cornell University

BREAKING THE MOLD Tambar is the first person of South Asian descent to lead New York Junior Tennis & Learning.

Tell me how tennis lessons can enrich a young person's life.

We focus on creating success for young people through our host of tennis and education programs. Studies have shown that tennis players live almost 10 years longer than people who are sedentary, and that's [a bigger benefit] than for people who play soccer or other sports. So it's not just the physical enrichment; [playing tennis specifically] can actually help you live longer. For us, it's both tennis and education. Tennis obviously fosters physical fitness, but it also teaches great perseverance, what we call stick-to-it-iveness. We combine this with academic support, leadership [and] development life skills training, and that helps young people succeed on and off the court. We believe that in New York City, talent is universal but opportunity is not. And what we try to do is create opportunities for young people in all communities to reach their full potential.

Did you play sports growing up? What did you learn from participating in athletics?

Yes. Throughout high school I played baseball and tennis. And to me, there's obviously the importance of practice, the importance of bouncing back from setbacks. In any sport, a key part of it is, how do you deal with losing? And if you lose, how do you bounce back? You learn to say, "Hey, I'm going to work a little bit harder," and that's a great lesson in life. Often you might apply for a job, you might not get it, or you might want to do something, but you don't get it on your first try. To me, hard work and discipline and camaraderie are [the biggest benefits of athletic participation]. People think of tennis as an individual sport, but you're part of a community, and those are lessons I've taken with me in my personal and work life as well.

What are some things that the young people you work with need that are beyond the scope of your organization to provide?

That is a great question. As organizations we're in communities, and the question often is, What's your lane? What should you be doing and not [be] doing to meet the needs? And what we realized, especially coming out of the pandemic, was that a lot of [young people] were still dealing with the pandemic, and mental health was a big issue. So

to help address that, we partnered with the Hunter School of Social Work to bring mental health services into our schools. We work with them to place graduate social work students in the schools we serve. The demand for this has grown so much that we've actually hired a staff social worker for the first time to help us reach more schools. We started out teaching tennis on the tennis court. And over time you evolve and grow to meet the needs of the community more holistically, because that's what you need to do to make sure that they actually show up to the tennis court and are able to succeed. We've been pushing the boundaries a little bit of what we can do to better meet the communities we serve where they're at.

Your website praises NYJTL's partner corporations for demonstrating corporate social responsibility. What does CSR mean to you?

For us, it's about really being partners. Recently we had a partnership with Barclays Bank where senior executives from Barclays were interested in giving back to the community. And they spent a day at our Cary Leeds Center up in the Bronx in Crotona Park. And we have a new program we launched this year, a scholar athlete program, which is very customized, high-level tennis instruction and academic support. Their volunteers came and worked one-on-one with our students on interviewing skills and career awareness. To me, corporate social responsibility is a way of using the skills or assets of a corporation to help the communities that they're in. Obviously sometimes it's funding and sometimes it's the skills of the employees that can help fill a hole for organizations like ours.

What does power mean to you?

Here at NYJTL and throughout my 25-year career, it's been public service, nonprofits and government. I think of power as amplification. It's about being in a position of power or privilege, and how do you amplify the voice ... the voice of those communities in need ... and help bring them the resources [and] services [that they need] ... to help them be successful. I think if you have the power, the privilege, with that privilege you try to amplify resources that are drawn to the communities in need, the voices of those communities in need. That's the way I've thought of it throughout my career.

How can Americans without money or status gain more power in their daily lives?

To me it's about being active. I think of the work that we do—it's sort of like we're building or trying to lead a movement for social change. And in a movement, there are different roles for different people. But the main thing is people need to raise their hands and say they want to get involved. Some people will write a check and some people will work with us; some will volunteer their time. [For] those that might not have the financial resources, it's more just raising your hand or reaching out and saying, "Look, I want to get involved" and being active citizens, and that's what creates real change. People's proactive nature is what creates that momentum for communities to change. Money is not the only way [to make a difference], so people who don't have those sorts of resources should not feel constrained because there are many other ways [to make a difference]. But I think it's a mindset that you have.

TAKEAWAY FOR BUSINESS PROFESSIONALS

New York Junior Tennis & Learning provides after-school programming in approximately 30 schools and community tennis programming at roughly 40 sites throughout the city in the summer and at additional sites during the school year. The organization has provided 500,000 hours of free community tennis in every City Council district and reaches 85,000 children annually in all five boroughs; 500 staff members mentor more than 14,000 children each year.

How do tennis lessons relate to mental health?

We've been seeing a lot about mental health and tennis. One easy connection is just raising awareness. You have Naomi Osaka and Serena Williams speaking openly [about mental health]. You have a lot of professional tennis players who are talking about mental health. In the tennis space, there's awareness about this and there's a certain vocabulary developing, and that helps when you're dealing with young people—being able to say, "Hey, this is tough, but you can talk about some of these issues." Having said that, I think playing tennis does develop some toughness as well, and the ability not only to do well, but when you don't do well, learning how to pick yourself up—how do you deal with a loss or get the support of a coach? I think the range of emotions that you go through while you play tennis and our staff being there to help you navigate, that is good training for other aspects of life. Because as I say, it's easy to deal with a win. The question is, how do you deal with a loss? And how do you deal with things not going your way? And how do you lean on other people for support? How do you build self-resiliency? All of that happens through committing yourself to something like tennis.

Some of the high-profile athletes who have helped destigmatize mental health struggles in recent years have taken a step back from work obligations to preserve their well-being. What would you tell people who can't afford to slow down but want to stay healthy?

One thing we should just be mindful of when we're talking about the players, is it took a tremendous amount of courage to do what they did, which is to talk openly about mental health, which is becoming more common but is not as common as it should be. But we're also talking about athletes at an extreme, meaning this is a very high level of professional that we're talking about. Most of us aren't in that walk of life. We serve students, so we're not talking about people with jobs dealing with mental health. For young people, it's about balance. We've had people come in and speak to our more intense tennis players in our scholar athlete program about how do you balance intense tennis, intense academics and [have] a life? It's just being mindful that there's tradeoffs at certain moments; you can't do it all. And trying to create that sense of balance is something we try to promote throughout the organization.

How can leaders empower their employees to prioritize mental and physical wellbeing?

It's just to acknowledge the challenging nature of their work. That sort of acknowledgment goes a long way. And then you take certain actions, and it does tie to mental health as well. We raised the wages of all of our staff soon after I got here to make sure no one was making minimum wage. We provided staff bonuses as well, and we did an inverted structure where full-time staff on the front lines got more than senior executives did, meaning that the less you made, the bigger your bonus was, and the more you made, the smaller your bonus was. Those small gestures say to our front-line staff that we acknowledge the work that you're doing. And if they feel valued and respected in their place of work, I think it's a start in terms of trying to create some balance, and that helps improve their emotional and mental well-being.