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Questions & Answers with Betsy McNeil

Questions and answers with Betsy McNeil, Executive Director of Norwalk/Stamford Grassroots Tennis & Education.

What is the new name of the combined organization?

Officially it's Norwalk/Stamford Grassroots Tennis & Education. Our branding will focus on Grassroots Tennis & Education serving Stamford and Norwalk. We will continue to use "Grassroots" as a shortened name.

When will this merger be effective?

November 6, 2019

How many children does the organization expect to serve and what is the age range?

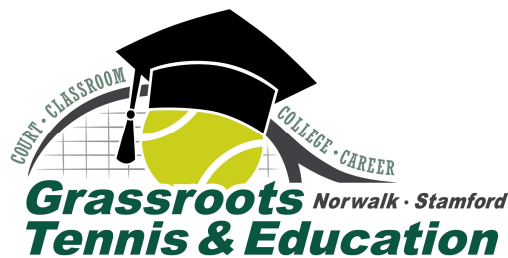
The age range is 5-18 years old. We anticipate serving a consistent core group of 200-250 kids in the upcoming year.

What are the primary objectives of the new organization?

Our mission is to build strength of character and a foundation for success through tennis and education. Our primary goal is to ensure our kids graduate from high school prepared and with a plan for next steps. We provide programming both on and off the court that supports the whole child – meeting their physical, academic, and social-emotional needs. We achieve this with a relationships-first, youth development approach where we meet each child where they are and work in partnership with them to support their efforts to achieve their goals.

Why was this merger necessary?

This merger is an opportunity to provide better and stronger support and services for our kids and communities. Instead of competing for resources and duplicating services, we felt it was better to work together for the benefit of our kids. Together we can expand our footprint in southern Fairfield County, identify operational efficiencies, and better leverage our resources and support for the greater good.



Why is this merger beneficial for both communities?

We believe we are better and stronger together. We are already working to achieve the same mission and goals - working together allows us to identify and leverage efficiencies, and to be bolder, stronger and more impactful. Both communities will benefit from the expanded financial and human capital resources, and the opportunities each community provides in exposure and connection with each other.

Where will the programs take place?

Stamford's primary location is Cummings Park for 6-7 months out of the year (spring, summer, fall). During the winter, Stamford and Norwalk children will be together for indoor tennis at various indoor clubs in the area. We will also continue serving kids from the Boys & Girls Club in Stamford during the winter months. In addition, the Stamford kids will have the opportunity to play at the Norwalk courts as well. Norwalk's facility remains at 11 Ingalls Avenue in South Norwalk. This is where the organization offices are, as well as the youth center for off court programming, and the new William Rippe Tennis Center (outdoor courts).

What elements will now be offered to Stamford youth that were not available previously?

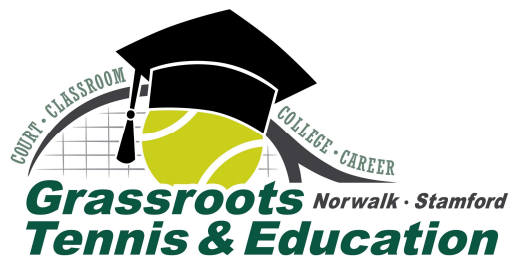
With the new organization we will be able to utilize our current resources, and continue to build, eventually providing additional, and more comprehensive, off-court and on-court support and opportunities for our Stamford kids.

Specifically, the immediate opportunities provided to Stamford kids include:

- Starting this fall and winter, we are providing additional court time to more Stamford kids
- This winter the Stamford kids will be introduced to more coaches and volunteers on court, and will experience programming in a youth development-focused environment, grouped by age and gender.
- The Stamford young girls will be able to participate in our Monday Girls Club (for U10-U12) where they will have tennis on-court as well as participate in off-court programming and activities focused on their unique needs, in a safe and supportive environment.
- The Stamford middle and high school students will be able to participate in Friday Teen Night (5:30-9:30 p.m.)— which includes off-court programming (academic, leadership and social-emotional), team dinner, Junior Coach training and then tennis practice.

For young players and families who are already associated with the programs, will they notice anything new?

For the most part, everything will run the same for our Norwalk kids and families – just with more kids. For the Stamford children and families, it will most likely feel a little different, but the goal during the transition is to maintain what they had before while increasing and expanding support where possible.



Will there be a crossover and integration, so that children from each of the communities can interact with each other?

Yes! On Fridays in September and October, a group of Stamford children came to play tennis on the new William Rippe Tennis Center courts in Norwalk. Our winter tennis schedule is completely mixed with Stamford and Norwalk kids as they will be grouped by gender and age. Moving forward we want to provide opportunities to engage, connect and interact together, but to also be cognizant of the different needs and assets of each group, and make sure we are building support that fits the unique communities.

From an organizational standpoint, what will the new organization look like?

In the short term, it will be a combined team dedicated to serving both communities. For tennis we currently have a staff lead for Stamford, who also works with our Norwalk kids. Our Norwalk education staff will support both Stamford and Norwalk, while anticipating eventually having an education staff lead for Stamford as well. We remain a tight, lean staff who operate as a true team, working together to support all of the children in both communities.

How were staff and boards merged?

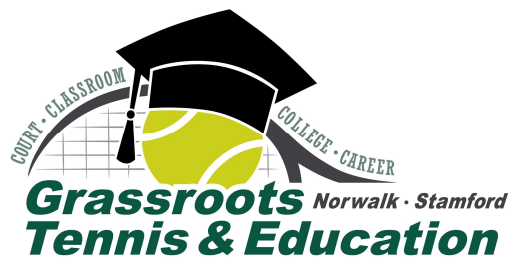
The new organization will primarily be using our core staff for the initial transition, and will assess what additional staffing is needed as we move forward. The new organization has a board seat designated for someone from the SYTA Executive Committee – we have already voted that person onto the NGTE Board. Once the merger is official, the NGTE BOD will become the new organization's BOD. In addition, we have created a temporary (1 year) Stamford Advisory Board/Committee made up of the SYTA Executive Committee to communicate regularly with the Executive Director to touch base on operational items during the transition.

What excites the Norwalk Grassroots team about working with the people in Stamford?

We are excited to leverage each other's strengths and experiences to ensure we are continuously improving for our kids, families and communities. The children in Stamford are energized, engaged and passionate about tennis and the organization. The Stamford community has a wealth of organizations and stakeholders working hard to support kids from cradle to career. Grassroots is thrilled to have the opportunity to work in partnership with Stamford kids, families and stakeholders to ensure all our kids have the opportunities, resources and support to build a foundation for their own success.

What has developed in the transition so far?

We have been running Stamford programming since September, focusing on building relationships. It has been fantastic so far – the Stamford kids and parents are highly engaged, including coming to Norwalk on Fridays after school for tennis.



What has been the feedback from parents and kids?

The feedback from Stamford families has been extremely positive – both from their visible engagement in the programming as well as many have verbally shared with us how excited they are about the opportunities this provides their kids.

What do you expect the next 12 months to be like?

Exciting and challenging. The first 12 months will still be challenging as we work through the transition. Absorbing operations of a second site and additional participants will put a strain on all operations, and take time to integrate and settle into procedures for the expanded organization. But with the integration of programming already occurring, it allows us to experience in real time the positive benefits of taking this step forward for our kids and families, and to learn and adjust as we go.

Do you have any final thoughts?

We are at a critical and exciting juncture for our organization – as we transition into this new organization, we will embark on a strategic planning process in the coming year to take a look at where we've been, where we are, where we want to go and how we are going to get there. We are eager to step back and take a good look at who we are and how we can deepen and expand our impact in service and support of the increasing number of kids coming to our program.

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The mission of Norwalk/Stamford Grassroots Tennis & Education is to build strength of character and a foundation for success through tennis and education. Our goal is to ensure each of our children is on a path towards success on the court, in the classroom and in life. Our programming was developed based on our theory of change: Engage underserved children in Norwalk and Stamford through tennis, offer a safe and welcoming family environment, and provide them comprehensive support to meet their academic, physical and social-emotional needs. This helps build a foundation that enables them to graduate high school prepared for college and/or a career, putting them on a path toward greater opportunity for success.