

# In Service

**FORMER PRO KATRINA ADAMS BELIEVES THAT TENNIS BUILDS CHARACTER AND SELF-CONFIDENCE — AND TEACHES LESSONS FOR LIFE.**

*by* Anne Stein

Katrina Adams is rarely speechless — she’s well known for giving motivational talks, often without notes — but on a cool March evening in the Garfield Park Conservatory’s plant-draped Horticulture Hall, the former tennis pro is feeling a bit at a loss for words. She expected a small formal reception to welcome her home to Chicago’s West Side, but instead she’s surrounded by hundreds of friends, tennis players, former coaches and family members gathered for speeches and dinner to salute her latest accomplishment in the sport.

“It is humbling standing here with so many people who have made a difference in my life and had a hand in my becoming the person that I am today,” says Adams, 46, as she looks over the crowd.

“It truly takes a village to succeed, and all of you have supported me, watched over me, played tennis with me and just been friends with me to get me through and over many hurdles, and I thank you all for the impact that you have had on my life.”

Just two months earlier, Adams ’89 was named chairman, president and CEO of the United States Tennis Association, the national governing body of the sport. She is the youngest person, as well as the first African American and first former pro player, to hold the USTA post. Although it’s an unpaid two-year position, the responsibilities are demanding and politically tricky. Her task: to promote and develop the sport in the United States, from amateur through professional levels.



JENNIFER POTTHEISER

Adams is based in New York, where she also runs the Harlem Junior Tennis & Education Program, but Chicago is where her career started and her heart remains. Her parents are retired Chicago Public Schools educators who still live in the house where she grew up, four blocks from Garfield Park. She learned to play the game as a 6-year-old in the park just outside the conservatory where she's being honored, though the courts with fence nets have been replaced by a native Illinois prairie landscape.

The two-time All-American has served in nearly every role possible in tennis. As a player she led the Wildcats to the 1986 Big Ten Championship, captured the 1987 NCAA doubles championship with partner Diane Donnelly Stone '87, then achieved a doubles ranking of 8th and singles ranking of 67th in her 12-year pro career.

After retiring from tennis in 1999, Adams was a national coach for USTA player development. She is a longtime USTA board member, has contributed instructional articles and videos to *Tennis* magazine and *Tennis.com*, is a commentator for the Tennis Channel (her next television gig is the French Open) and is one of 12 women who appear on the CBS Sports Network's women's-only sports show *We Need to Talk*.

"I grew up in a grass-roots program in a public park, played junior competitive tennis, high school and collegiate tennis and played professionally," explains the confident yet friendly Adams, whose global travels representing USTA will leave her precious little time over the next two years to actually play. "I walk the talk. I have the experience at all levels and I understand the needs of our consumers, advisers and our industry. There's no one more qualified than I am at this time to be in this role, to speak with people about the values and benefits of the sport at so many different levels."

Adams' plans include increasing the number of U.S. pro players in the world's top ranks (she recently appointed former pro and top juniors coach Martin Blackman as USTA's general manager of player development to take on that task) and increasing grass-roots participation in the sport, from youngsters to high schoolers to older players who have given up the game.

One of her main initiatives is reaching out to the fast-growing Latino population, an effort she announced soon after taking the USTA post.

"We're creating a strategy to communicate with different cultures to embrace, include and invite them into our sport, as individuals and families," Adams explains. "We've done a remarkable job of building up African American and Asian American participation, and we're building up the LGBT population, so my focus now is reaching out to Latinos, a population that we underserve."

She is also pushing the USTA's 10-and-under tennis program, which allows for shorter courts, smaller racquets and low-compression balls to make the game easier and more fun for kids to play.

"She has a really good handle on the politics of our sport," says former Wildcat and retired tennis pro Todd Martin '92, CEO of the International Tennis Hall of Fame and a director at large on the USTA board.

The USTA is made up of 17 diverse sections led largely by volunteers, says Martin. The world game is governed by the International Tennis Federation, the Women's Tennis Association and the Association for Tennis Professionals. "All three organizations have their own niche and struggle to find ways to work together, as opposed to battling for turf," he explains. "Katrina's got a really good read on how to make things happen, and she's willing to look at out-of-the-box ideas and say, 'Why not?'"

Many view the smart and determined Adams, whose pro career included 20 WTA doubles titles and a fourth-round Wimbledon appearance in singles, as the perfect representative for U.S. tennis.

"She's the living embodiment of what USTA is trying to achieve," says Jon Vegosen '73, '76 JD, former captain of Northwestern's varsity tennis team and a past president of the USTA. "Her mission is not just to develop tennis players but to develop people. And she is the classic success story, going from humble beginnings to the pinnacle of the sport."

### TENNIS PRODIGY

Adams fell in love with tennis early, though no one in her family played. She saw the game on TV as a 6-year-old, watching Arthur Ashe dominate Wimbledon. "She told me that she'd be going to England [to play] one day too," says her mother, Yvonne. "I just smiled. But she was right."

That summer Adams couldn't stand sitting on the sidelines while her two older brothers played in a boys club tennis program in Garfield Park. So the coach, a young medical student named Kim Williams (now chief of cardiology at Rush University Medical Center), gave her a chance to hit the ball.

Afterward Williams phoned Katrina's parents to ask if she could join the program, which was for children ages 9 and up.

She flourished and went on to be coached by Tony Fox, who introduced her to his mentor, Chris Scott. Eventually

Adams was invited to play at suburban and city clubs with other talented junior players, though her first years were mostly spent playing at parks and indoors on basketball courts. "That's how I developed my serve-and-volley game," says Adams. "I wasn't interested in letting the ball bounce too many times because the court was so fast."

Adams went on to Chicago's Whitney Young Magnet High School, capturing the 1983 and '84 Illinois singles championships.

As a 16-year-old high school senior, Adams, an ambitious, long-range planner, had two goals: to become a pro tennis player and, later, a television analyst. With top rankings in tennis and communications, Northwestern was the clear choice.

"There wasn't anything not to like about Katrina," recalls former Northwestern varsity tennis coach Sandy Clifton. "She was incredibly talented, we thought she'd get even better, plus everyone liked her. When one of your best players on the team is like that, it makes the coach's job easier."

Clifton asked tennis legend Billie Jean King to practice with Adams and her doubles partner Diane Donnelly Stone at Chicago's Midtown



MARK STOBBE/GETTY FOR USTA

Tennis Club, and King was impressed. "She always kept coming forward on the court," says King, "and she has carried that approach in her management style as well. Katrina had a plan for each and every match she played, and I know she has a plan for the USTA."

Donnelly Stone says her former Northwestern doubles partner has always been very driven. "We just clicked," she says. "Katrina was strong and aggressive, I was small yet quick and could do more of the angles, the touch shots. Our games complemented each other perfectly."

"She was always the stronger personality," she adds. "She's very confident. When we lost in the semifinals that first year in the NCAA Championships, Katrina said, 'We're going to win the NCAAs next year. We can definitely do this.' Throughout my senior year and her sophomore year, she kept saying, 'When we win.' And I'd always say 'if.' She wasn't trying to be cocky, and we did win."

### PROMOTING THE GAME

Both her USTA job and her work at the Harlem Junior Tennis & Education Program, which serves more than 1,000 children with tutoring, mentoring, life skills and tennis lessons, allow Adams to promote the values and grow the sport she so loves.

"I have a wealth of knowledge as a player and a coach to share, and that's where my passion is," says Adams, who has led HJTTEP for 10 years. "Tennis builds character and self-confidence. It's physical activity for our youth, and so many of them don't go outside and play anymore. You meet people and create friendships for life, and as an adult you can continue to play, whether it's recreationally or competitively."

When she walks into the Harlem armory that houses HJTTEP, kids of all ages — and she knows all their names — are in awe, paying attention to each word she says. "I motivate them to work hard, listen and do their best," Adams explains. "When they're on the court, they can be themselves, so we try to embrace and enhance that."

The reward for Adams is pure satisfaction. "I was one of those children. Someone always reached out and pulled me forward, emotionally, financially or through coaching. People showed they had an interest in me and believed in me. That's what we as adults can provide to kids to let them know they matter."

When she was asked to lead HJTTEP in 2005, the same year she joined USTA's board, the group served fewer than 100 kids on a \$150,000 budget. Today that budget has grown to \$1 million and though the majority of children served are from Harlem, the upper skills classes draw children from across the city. "We're about building champions in tennis and life," says Adams. "We're using tennis as a vehicle for young players to earn college scholarships through academics or athletics."

Adams frequently speaks about the sport she loves and her success in life. "If you don't embrace the path you lead and enjoy the battle and understand that it has a purpose, you can't move forward," says Adams, who credits much of her success to coaches and family who supported her along the way. "My parents sacrificed to provide me with every opportunity to take the path I wanted, and now it's my duty to do the same — to provide guidance and give back."

Anne Stein is an Evanston-based journalist.

### HOLDING COURT

Left, first lady Michelle Obama, third from right, attends a Let's Move! tennis clinic at the 2011 U.S. Open, joined by, from left, Northwestern alumnus Jon Vegosen, then president of the USTA; former tennis pro MaliVai Washington; Hall of Famer and tennis legend Billie Jean King; former tennis pro James Blake; 19-time Grand Slam champion Serena Williams; and Katrina Adams, then vice president of the USTA. Opposite page, Adams trains two high school students in the tournament development group at the Harlem Junior Tennis & Education Program in New York City.