



The Andre Agassi  
Charitable Foundation®

# STREET & SMITH'S SportsBusiness JOURNAL

## Showing Heart

**For Agassi, helping kids win in life is bigger than the game**

**Daniel Kaplan**  
STAFF WRITER

In west Las Vegas, an economically depressed enclave eight miles off the bacchanalian strip of casinos and nightclubs, a dusty lot, separated by a brick wall from a 24-hour food store, sits waiting. In less than 10 months, a most unusual and inspirational bridge, three stories above the sun-baked dirt, will stretch atop this neighborhood's first high school.

The bridge will be open a solitary day of the year commencing in 2009, when the first graduates of Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy solemnly walk alone across the span, which will connect the middle and high schools, and write down where they will attend college. Upon college graduation, they are to come back and inscribe that achievement as well.

The dream of tennis legend Andre Agassi, his Vegas charter academy for disadvantaged kids became in 2004 the top-rated public school of the 328 in Clark County. First opened in 2001 with grades three through five, today the school is a nearly fully functioning elementary and middle school.

This year's first ninth-grade classes will move into a \$20 million high school addition in September, completing what will then be a \$36 million campus.

When it comes to athlete charities, Agassi's has been at the forefront for a decade now. On Oct. 1, his 10th annual fundraiser, Grand Slam for Children, which is a major concert and auction, topped \$10 million, and his Andre Agassi Charitable Foundation annually rakes in about \$12 million.



photo by Getty Images

*Tennis legend Andre Agassi addresses a crowd of 8,000 at his Grand Slam for Children event.*

In a decade, the evening gala has served up \$59 million, which has funded the school as well as other local Vegas children's causes.

In recent years, only Tiger Woods' and Lance Armstrong's charities have raised more (see chart). In fact, in 2003 Agassi's charity granted nearly as much money to its causes as the next nine athlete foundations combined.

"Everybody has the same responsibility. Everybody," Agassi said while seated in one of his school's classrooms, responding to a question about why other athletes are not as committed to good works.

"I don't care if you are an athlete or a businessman, everybody has the same responsibility. Some of us have an opportunity to do bigger things and reach more people. But the importance and the responsibility don't change, and I find myself disheartened by a lot of people. Also I find myself inspired by a lot of people."

### The children

Maybe 100 yards from Agassi Prep's front door, three Nation of Islam followers, standing in a thoroughfare median, hand out literature to motorists while soliciting donations to

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fight gang violence. Homes are boarded up nearby, and those that are not couldn't be more different from Vegas' shiny bustle visible in the distance.



*Students draw inspiration from leaders including Winston Churchill, Agassi himself, and Martin Luther King Jr.*

From this environment, the children come to Agassi Prep. Nearly 90 percent are African-American, a demographic afflicted by a high rate of single-parent homes. Many arrive several years behind the learning level that the state demands of their age.

And yet, within a year, most are caught up to what Nevada requires, and soon after, well above. Today, 430 students attend Agassi Prep's nine grades (kindergarten was added this year and second grade will be added next year). The high school started with ninth grade this year, and will add one grade a year to take the current high school class through to graduation in 2009. Another 250 children are on the academy's waiting list, with new entrants determined by lottery.

This year, the school won approval from the state to limit 75 percent of the lottery slots to children who reside within a two-mile radius of the school, after realizing children from at least 38 different ZIP codes were attending the academy.

The school emphasizes respect, trust and inspiration. While Agassi's career and his noted "never give up" philosophy infuse the school, the moving quotes found around the campus are from leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi.

Students, hands folded behind their backs, recite a daily code of respect, wear uniforms and have an eight-hour day, 25 percent longer than other Nevada schools. To instill trust, students don't have lockers, but instead open-faced cubes in which to store their belongings.

In a third-grade classroom, youngsters are asked to tell a visiting tour group what the code means to them. One little girl responds that it means not talking back; another that it signifies not to speak poorly of others.

The facilities are top-notch. Every classroom is equipped with a television, cable and Internet connection. The new kindergarten has a plasma touch-screen with Internet access. The school enjoys 27 pianos in its music classes, and computers mushroom throughout. Even the small painting gallery has originals of a Picasso drawing and a Keith Haring, donated by local art lovers.

Queried on where they want to go to college, the students invariably conjure up names such as Princeton, Harvard, USC and Michigan.



*Julie Murray, the foundation's campaign director, with David Carver, a donor who supports the arts program at the school.*

"If you go and ask a fifth-grader what they want to do, these kids are talking about going to Georgetown and Stanford," said Bill Hornbuckle, Mandalay Bay Resort & Casino's president and an Agassi Foundation board member. "They want to go to college; they want to succeed, where literally three years ago they didn't want to be in school. They not only have the dream, they believe it."

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Ricky Beasley is just such a child. He entered the school when it opened its doors four years ago, and hopes to graduate from the high school and walk across the ceremonial bridge in 2009. A tall, bespectacled boy, he dreams of going to Brown University and becoming a sports agent.

Charming and enthusiastic, Beasley comes from a lower-middle-class home. And like two out of every three students at the school, Beasley's home has only one parent.

"He would do very well at Brown," said Brian Thomas, the high school principal, who nonetheless would like to see Beasley improve his performance. "I don't think it is unrealistic for him to go there."

The school's role in the community cannot be overstated. Last November, the 7.5-acre facility suffered its first incident of vandalism. A local drug addict smashed a window and stole some equipment. When a neighbor discovered what happened, the addict, Thomas recounted, encountered some physical distress.

There never has been another break-in.



*Agassi students reciting the Code of Respect*

## How the money is raised

Everything starts with Agassi, 35, the eight-time Grand Slam champion and recent U.S. Open finalist. Agassi, who says he would postpone retirement if it meant he could raise more money for the children by playing tennis, is involved in nearly every aspect of the school.

"This is no PR deal," said Perry Rogers, Agassi's business manager and a foundation board member.

This summer, Agassi dumped 19-year sponsor Nike in favor of Adidas because the German footwear company was more committed to the charity, Rogers said.

"Nike, they just took a different position, they believed what should happen is Andre, if he wanted to support the foundation, he should give out of his own money," Rogers said. But "it's not about the money, it's about their resources, their people, when they tell you they will not be behind you.

"It's them saying 'count us in, we are your partners,'" he said of Adidas, comparing that company's approach to Nike's.

While contributing to his school is not a quid pro quo to capture an endorsement from Agassi — Head rackets, which sponsors the American, does not work with the Foundation — it is certainly easier doing business with America's top tennis star by backing his passion.

Genworth Financial, the GE insurance spin-off, after being a year into an endorsement deal with Agassi and his wife, Steffi Graf, signed a three-year extension that included a presenting sponsorship of the Grand Slam for Children.

"It certainly would have been a different relationship with no charity," said Laurence "Buzz" Richmond, Genworth's senior vice president of brand marketing. "We care about each others' values ... the byproduct of that is a very solid business relationship."

Like most of the companies and entertainers affiliated with the school, there is a bit of mutual back-scratching.

In December, Agassi and Graf are slated to play an exhibition in Richmond, Va., hosted by Genworth, which is headquartered in that city. Many of the music acts that play Agassi's charity expect the tennis star to help them out with their own causes, said David Foster, the gala's producer.

But it is more than just Agassi that draws the entertainers. The band Earth Wind & Fire, which played the Grand Slam for Children this year, was so moved by its visit to the school that it unexpectedly offered an individual concert to the highest bidder during the auction that preceded the entertainment.

When the auctioneer mentioned that plane travel had to be covered by the winner, an American Airlines executive threw in free tickets. The victorious bid fetched \$230,000. Just like that.

Earth Wind & Fire's reaction is hardly unusual. For many, the school is like holy ground, described in religious terms.

"They are saving lives," said David Carver, a local developer who has donated art to the school, his eyes moistening, after

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a recent tour of the facility. "Once you are here, you can't help but be changed."

Emeril Lagasse, the celebrity chef and Agassi Foundation board member who auctioned off cooking lessons, asked why



*Josh Groban, Robin Williams, Faith Hill and Tim McGraw at the Grand Slam for Children.*

he would still take time to help when his native New Orleans needed so much aid, responded, "When you see the kids, it says it all."

The evening itself is a major happening, even by Vegas standards. This year's entertainment included Celine Dion, the Eagles' Glenn Frey, Usher, Robin Williams and a surprise appearance by Barbra Streisand. The Agassi Foundation has six employees, but the 25 at Agassi Enterprises, the tennis star's commercial arm, also spend an entire week preparing for the event.

This year, roughly 220 tables were sold at prices ranging from \$7,500 to \$75,000. Another 6,000 people bought tickets to sit above the floor of the MGM Arena. And the auction, for experiences ranging from dinner with Williams and his wife to cycling with seven-time Tour de France champion Armstrong, took in \$3 million. Agassi and Rogers contributed another \$2.5 million.

### **Role model school**

One of the intriguing aspects of the Agassi school is why so many out-of-towners contribute. Forty percent of the Grand Slam attendees are not residents of Las Vegas. Two years ago, Chicago native Ty Warner, creator of Beanie Babies, matched the \$6.3 million raised at that year's event.

Warner's spokesman said the executive would not comment on his gift.

For some businessmen, the event has become such an indelible night on the Las Vegas entertainment calendar that giving is a way to meet the city's movers and shakers.

The answer also resides in knowing that there is a school for hard-to-reach kids that works, said Julie Murray, manager of the academy's \$35 million capital campaign, of which \$24 million is secured. Many charter schools around the country are failing, she explained, so people, no matter where they live, are thrilled to find one that functions exceptionally.

In some ways the school is a bold political statement aimed at Nevada legislators. According to the most recent U.S. Census, Nevada spends only \$5,778 per pupil in education, one quarter less than the national average, ranking the state 46th in the country.

The school receives the Nevada public funding per pupil, and the Agassi Foundation makes up the rest to reach the national average of \$7,284. The message: Spend the national average if the state wants to even try to educate its kids.

For the children at Agassi Prep now and in the future, they are safe in the knowledge that the gala Agassi throws every year is inherently no longer necessary. With a \$40 million endowment, the school, other than building costs, has paid for itself in perpetuity. The money raised earlier this month will pay for constructing the high school and a gym.

The big question: In five years, with the construction paid off, what cause will win the money that gushes from the Grand Slam for Children? The Agassi Foundation, which contributes to other local charities, has as its mission disadvantaged youth in Vegas. So Agassi schools will not be popping up around the country.

Rogers is undecided about the next mission, in part because the current one is unfinished. Short term, the results have been wonderful, he said, but longer term, success is linked to how many college graduates the school produces.

So, go to Agassi Prep in a decade, and if hundreds of names are inscribed in the air high above the school, then it succeeded.



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## Athlete Charities

ATHLETE	FOUNDATION REVENUE	GRANTS AND ALLOCATIONS
Lance Armstrong*	\$39,973,324	\$13,686,143
Tiger Woods	\$13,445,513	\$1,519,999
Andre Agassi	\$11,696,069	\$11,044,106
Alonzo Mourning	\$1,778,178	\$715,864
Dikembe Mutombo	\$1,736,001	\$269,502
Derek Jeter	\$1,549,729	\$742,313
Mario Lemieux	\$1,323,897	\$997,190
Doug Flutie	\$960,501	\$457,998
Jeff Gordon	\$901,022	\$573,850
Curt Schilling	\$783,923	\$602,664

Note: For 2003

\*Armstrong's figure is for 2004 since his foundation filed early; in 2003 his charity's revenue was \$9 million, and allocations and grants were \$5 million

Source: Form 990 tax returns

## Andre Agassi Charitable Foundation Financials

YEAR*	REVENUE	GRANTS AND ALLOCATIONS
2003	\$11.7 million	\$11.0 million
2002	\$7.9 million	\$2.3 million
2001	\$5.3 million	\$4.1 million
2000	\$3.3 million	\$1.7 million
1999	\$5.4 million	\$1.4 million
1998	\$3.7 million	\$583,653
1997	\$3.3 million	\$2.0 million
1996	\$2.9 million	\$1.2 million

\*The Foundation Form 990 tax return for 2004 had not been filed as of press time, though it is expected out by the end of this month.

Source: Andre Agassi Charitable Foundation Form 990s