

Jim Neal Spreads His Love of Tennis & Life

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PHOTOGRAPHY



Jim Neal lives life day by day, enjoying things as they come. He grew up in Annapolis, Maryland near the naval academy, where he would often go crabbing. To this day, he still loves the peaceful nature of the base, often choosing to stay on base when he can travel. He says people are different there. Everyone is very respectful, early to arrive – you feel safe, like you don't even need to lock your car. It's an atmosphere that he always enjoys.

Growing up, he also loved playing all kinds of sports and generally just enjoyed the sunshine of the south. He also had a passion for art. Working on mosaics were his favorite, but he worked with plaster and watercolor as well. Going to an all African American school in the 1960s, he had a little room in his schedule for downtime. He played a lot of basketball for a release, but he also loved the art building and the teacher, and the art students were allowed to work on their projects during their downtime in the day. "If you weren't in trouble, you had a lot of freedom from the teachers. It was fun!" he says. He would spend hours in the art studio, usually entrenched in his mosaics for 4-5 hours at a time.

He eventually joined the army in 1966, starting with school in California before he was initially stationed in Georgia for training before being sent to Vietnam for the first time. After making it home, he was stationed in Texas, but then was called for Vietnam again, this time to a different area of the country. He survived once again and came home with a totally new outlook on life. "It's called the Vietnam Syndrome," he says. "I switch around and go from one thing to another. I work at it, enjoy it and then move on to what I want next. I just love life!"

With this new outlook, he was always up for trying something new. He traveled a bit here and there. One of his trips included a ski trip to the Capital Region, where he ended up snowed in for a while. He enjoyed his time here and applied to some jobs in the area just for fun. One thing led to another, and he eventually took a job at GE in 1971 and moved to the area for good.

He often played rugby with a friend, but wanted to try something new, so he borrowed a tennis racket and went to Riverside Park in the Stockade area of Schenectady and gave it a shot. He instantly knew it was something he wanted to do, so he continued to teach himself how to play by practicing on his own on the court and watching a lot of games and other people; he even went to the US Open. As a very visual person, he learned best by watching, so he would go back after a game and work out what he saw on the court. It kept evolving from there.

He started teaching tennis by helping out at LaSalle Institute in Troy to get their program up and running. He was teaching kids from all over the region at the time, and they kept asking him to coach, but it just wasn't something he wanted to do. The kids kept asking, and when they heard there was an opening in Niskayuna, they told him they weren't going to play unless he tried for it. So he made a deal with them – if they would play, he would apply. He started coaching the girls' varsity team at Niskayuna. Since there was no boys J.V. team at the time, he added that in as well, then eventually switched to coaching the boys' varsity team after their coach left. He has now been at the school 28 years and counting.

Never one to sit still, that's not all Jim does, though. He also works at Sportime in Niskayuna; teaches at the Women's Tennis Association, as well as the Schenectady County and Rensselaerville Community tennis associations; teaches private tennis lessons on the side; is an instructor at various camps and programs throughout the Capital Region; and has also taught workshops for the United States Tennis Association (USTA) on how to teach. If that wasn't enough, he also volunteers for the City of Schenectady Park, maintaining the tennis courts and helping to setup and run the USTA league that includes seven major tournaments across 17 courts during the summer. Starting in July, over 200-300 people come to the area from all over the state and northern New Jersey each year for these tournaments to see who will win and move on to the next round in either California or Arizona.

Jim loves what he does and doesn't even consider it "going to work" each day. "It's not a job," he says. "I enjoy the people so it's not really a job. It's my choice to do this." In fact, the more challenges he faces, the more he likes it.

He works with people with physical challenges as well, after learning the best way to teach the sport while working with a friend that doesn't have legs. "He was a racer, so I taught him how to play tennis and he taught me how to move fast in a wheelchair," says Jim. Putting himself in a wheelchair, Jim would spend hours on the court with friends, playing until he figured out the best way to make it work. Now he has a whole other language to use while teaching, and in a way, he finds it more rewarding to teach those with challenges than the "normal" stand-up lessons. He has even brought some of these techniques into his high school coaching sessions and has found that they help make his players even stronger.



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He is currently in the height of the high school tennis season and is busy five days a week with the boys' team until June. The girls' season starts in August. In between, he'll enjoy the tournaments at the park, and when he's not on a court, he'll be out on the golf course or spending time with his four kids. His daughter is now a veterinarian in Connecticut. His son graduated with a degree in Environmental Science and now lives in Arcadia, California where he enjoys spending time rehabbing old buildings. His other two children are still currently in the Niskayuna School District.

Jim also likes to visit other areas, parks and tennis courts to not only get new ideas for what they could do better, but to better appreciate what they already have. He once went to visit friends in Australia for four weeks and toured around playing sports and, of course, checking out the tennis courts. While they had some things that were nice, Jim felt their courts just didn't stand up next to Schenectady. He said they weren't situated as well, set so far back into the park that you couldn't just walk up to them, you had to drive. Plus, they were mixed medium courts and were used for sports other than tennis as well, so the nets were roll-aways. He says it's great to take the time to evaluate. "When going to new cities and seeing what the public parks are like, it gives me new ideas and helps me get a deeper appreciation for what we have. Schenectady Tennis Courts

are so nice! We have 17 courts right in the park, which take up two blocks of Union Street. It's quiet – we don't have the noise like in the city or at other places."

Jim truly enjoys every day he wakes up. "I try to surround myself with nice people and just live every day!" He says the best way to learn tennis is to think of it as "practicing falling" as a baby. A toddler will fall and get back up and keep working at it in order to get stronger. They need to practice that falling in order to be successful at walking. He says tennis is the same way. "Put time into it, listen, try, maybe change, give and take, put the work and time in. Start with a good foundation." He loves teaching beginners and especially kids because he's there for that foundation, and then he gets to see them grow up and do great things. Now, he's even teaching the kids of his "kids." Many have gone on to be doctors and lawyers and other things as well. He loves getting to see where all his students start on the tennis courts and where they are at now. He truly appreciates how far each has come. "It's really nice," he says.

He gives back to the community whenever he can and is often found helping out multiple organizations in the area in his spare time. He hopes that his own outlook on life will help others as well too – "Enjoy every day," he says. "Make sure you let the person know you like them before you leave them. Sometimes we take things for granted. Surround yourself with nice people. Always leave with a smile. And, have fun!" ●

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