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Andre Agassi takes a swing for education

Tennis great's charter school prepares underprivileged kids for college



Denis Truscell

Andre Agassi and students from Andre Agassi College Preparatory after a classroom visit.

By Giacinta Pace

NBC News

updated 1 hour, 39 minutes ago

Cause Celeb highlights a celebrity's work on behalf of a specific cause. This week, we speak with tennis great Andre Agassi about his foundation, the Andre Agassi Foundation.

Founded in 1994, the foundation strives to improve education in Nevada, especially for underprivileged youth. An important cornerstone of the foundation is the Andre Agassi College Preparation Academy, founded in 2001 to help students prepare for higher education and careers through character enhancement, motivation and self-discipline. The academy started by serving students grades 3-5 and has since expanded to a K-12 charter school. The first senior class graduated in June.

Each year, the foundation hosts the Grand Slam for Children fundraiser. This year, the 14th Grand Slam for Children is on Sept. 26 at Wynn Las Vegas, with entertainers such as Tim McGraw and Brian McKnight attending. Proceeds go toward improving the education of children.

Agassi turned pro in 1986 and became one of the greatest players in tennis history. He won eight Grand Slam singles tournaments as well as an Olympic gold medal in men's singles. After a 20-year career, Agassi retired in 2006. He has continued to be involved in his charitable works, especially with the Andre Agassi Foundation, as

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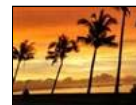


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well as charitable tournaments.

Q: Can you tell us about the Andre Agassi Foundation?

Agassi: Started my foundation about 17 years ago. It was focused on children. I helped them in a number of ways. Thinking I was being focused, I threw after-school programs through [Childhaven](#), which is a shelter for abused, neglected children, clothing over 6000 children a year. I came to believe pretty quickly that I was chasing my tail sticking Band-Aids on real issues, and the only way to make systemic change was to educate and give the tools. That's what lead me to education. So my foundation is now focused primarily on education issues, and attempting to affect not just my school, which we're doing, but [one of the] largest [school district\[s\]](#) in America, which is Clark County in the state of Nevada.

Q: Can you tell us about your role within the foundation?

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Agassi: I've raised north of \$80 million over the last 13 years for the funding of my school, which is a K-12 college preparatory. It's a charter school, which is a part state-funded, part private-funded [public school](#).

Q: Do you have a specific title/role within the foundation?

Agassi: No, I wouldn't say it's a specific role. I mean it's my foundation, and I'm the visionary and founder of it all. I just kind of have to wear a lot of hats.

Q: Why did you decide to start the foundation?

Agassi: I decided to start the foundation primarily because I thought it was toward the end of my career. At 23, I said, OK, well maybe I have a handful of years left, and I could utilize some relationships. I mean giving back was always something I was going to do; the timing of it was what I was trying to focus on. In hindsight, it was at the beginning of my career. I mean at 23, I ended up playing 13 years. But if you ask me why I care, it's hard for me to answer that.

Q: Was there something specific that catalyzed your desire to start the foundation?

Agassi: I've always shown a certain level of responsibility when it comes to giving somebody opportunities that you've been fortunate enough to have. What I focused on, and when I chose to take it on, were the decisions to make. That happened when I was 23 years old.

Q: How is your foundation different from the foundations of other sports figures?

Agassi: Well, I can't speak to [that] necessarily. I know a lot of the work the other athletes are doing, from Tony Hawk to Mia Hamm, to David Robinson, to Lance [Armstrong], to so many people, but I don't

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know how it would specifically differ as it relates to the foundation overall.

My focus has been my charter school, which I've put in the most economically challenged area of Las Vegas, because my goal was to give resources, to give a level of accountability with those resources, and provide more opportunities for the children that society is quickest to write off. We treat it like a laboratory. This summer, June 12, we had our entire first senior class graduate, and every one of them headed to college.



Denise Truscell

Andre Agassi exchanges high-fives with parent-teacher Ken Ruffin after the first graduation ceremony for the Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy on June 12.

Q: Why did you decide to choose Las Vegas?

Agassi: I was born and raised here.

Q: Tell me about the all-star lineup for the [2009 Grand Slam for Children?](#)

Agassi: We have Tim McGraw, Brian McKnight, [Lionel Richie](#), Chris Daughtry, Dane Cook and a few more that are on their way. It's a big fundraiser that we do on Sept. 26. We raise millions of dollars, and it's a fun night of entertainment. You're hearing the best 20 minutes of all these artists, and it's just the night goes by in a hurry, and you kind of wish for more. Well, a city of entertainment ... this is a night of entertainment.

Q: Have you had one moving experience that stands out above others while working with the organization?

Agassi: I take a walk into the halls of the school one day, and a young seventh-grader pulled me aside, and asked to speak a few words, and told me about how his father was killed, and how he lost all direction and motivation in life. Then, he was put into this school, and how it's changed him, how it's given him something that he can focus on and work toward, so he can get out of his environment. It's also given him a family in many ways, and he just wanted to say thank you. That left a real mark on me.

Q: Besides giving money, what else can people do to help?

Agassi: Depending on what you're focused on, time is as valuable, if not more, in some cases than resources. I think giving your time to organizations that do the work, that roll up their sleeves as it relates to education. I think for people to start prioritizing who they vote for locally, and nationally, as it relates to educational issues, because it's a real crisis. We're falling further and further behind.

Economically speaking, we will fail if we don't invest. If you think education is expensive, try no education, and watch how expensive it becomes for us. I think legislatively, start a movement that can affect all our public schools on a grassroots level. That always starts with your representatives in your area.

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