

William Derrick Mar

MyImpact Principles Essay

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### Reaching for Virtue: How Rackets Make a More Perfect Union

The sun beats down on the tennis courts in the hot Texas heat as a twelve-year-old girl in a wheelchair makes her first successful forehand. Her smile radiates with a joy that transcends physical limitations. Nearby, a boy with autism who never once looks into anyone's eyes tracks the yellow ball with unwavering focus as a volunteer helps him with his swing. These are the Reach Through Rackets courts, where tennis is more than a sport—it's an instrument of change, of integration, and of honoring America's early virtues.

Reach Through Rackets began with a simple observation: kids with disabilities never got to take tennis lessons like their peers did. This led to a choice: acknowledge the inequality or stick out my hand and pass along the game that had so deeply enriched me. The quality of Responsibility, as the Bill of Rights Institute has defined, is "doing something on good judgment about right or wrong even when it is not popular." It was that feeling of responsibility that brought me to action. Alice Paul, suffragist and women's suffrage activist, demonstrated this trait when she said, "I always feel the movement is a sort of mosaic. Each of us puts in one little stone." My stone would be tennis rackets, opened to those that our society often leaves behind.

The initial challenges had seemed impossible to overcome. Scheduling court time required countless calls to facilities managers. Developing adaptable teaching strategies requires investigation of the specific requirements of every disability. Each stumbling block provided a chance to demonstrate responsibility to the very real children who waited for their turn to play.

One afternoon that we shall never forget, Mark, a ten-year-old boy with cerebral palsy, watched us from the sidelines. His mother explained to us that previous sports programs had turned them away, citing that they did not have enough resources. That afternoon, we switched our approach and welcomed Mark to our courts. The grin that spread across his face when he served the ball successfully wasn't just a personal achievement—it was justice served.

Justice, as a civic virtue, is "upholding what is right and fair. Respecting the rights and dignity of all." Reach Through Rackets demonstrates this virtue by realizing that recreation is not a luxury but an integral component of human dignity. When Jourdon Anderson, a freed slave, wrote to his former master complaining about not receiving compensation for years of free labor, he was asking not only for himself but for the principle that all human beings are entitled to be treated fairly.

Our courts became spaces where justice was served through access. Each adapted racket grip, each altered drill is a triumph for the principle that all children, regardless of what disabilities they were born with, should have equal access to play, competition, and belonging.

The organizing idea of Natural Rights is that human beings have natural rights independently of government power. Such a notion becomes a lived fact in our courts. If a child who has Down syndrome feels the triumph of getting a ball over a net, then they are living rights outside of their body—the right to happiness, growth, and life in relationship.

John Locke, whose ideas influenced America's founding documents, emphasized the natural rights of life, liberty, and property. Each tennis session is a reminder that these rights belong to every citizen, not just those whose bodies fit constrained definitions of "normal." Our program rests upon the consent of participants and their families on the basis of the principle that

only by the consent of the governed can there be legitimate government. Children are not passive receivers of charity but proactive agents of their sporting lives.

Tennis often celebrates individual over team achievements, which occasionally promotes excessive pride bordering on arrogance. But Reach Through Rackets has become an incubator for the civic virtue of Humility—"a recognition that one's ignorance is far greater than one's knowledge. Placing others first in thought, word, and action." My ten years of tennis experience suddenly fell short when faced with the challenge of instructing a child with sensory processing disorder. Traditional coaching methods proved ineffective, requiring me to acknowledge my limitations and seek guidance from special education professionals.

The volunteer coaches, many accustomed to tournament victories, discover similar lessons in humility. They learn to celebrate different kinds of victories—the student with anxiety who participates in a group activity, or the child with limited mobility who develops a unique serving technique.

The impact of Reach Through Rackets extends far beyond tennis courts. Parents observe increased confidence in their kids that is transferred to school settings. Volunteers develop empathy that directs their interactions with communities. Values learned on our courts—justice, responsibility, humility—ripple out, creating a better society.

This ripple effect embodies the ideal that republican government requires a virtuous citizenry. As James Madison penned in Federalist 55, "As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence." Reach Through Rackets instills those qualities—compassion, perseverance, mutual respect—nurturing citizens who can sustain self-governance.

The initiative also demonstrates the Founding Principle of Limited Government through the demonstration of how everyday citizens can meet community needs without state intervention. Even though public institutions have obligations towards disabled citizens, Reach Through Rackets demonstrates civil society's capability for crafting adaptive and close solutions.

As the sun goes down, the courts share their tales of transformation. A volunteer who used to seek community service hours is now fully devoted to the mission of inclusivity. A child once alone now shines, offering high-fives to friends. Parents who accepted watching their children on the sidelines now happily send videos of serves and volleys.

These reforms reflect founding principles and civic virtues in action. In tennis, we see that responsibility extends to others, that justice is creating spaces where all can exist, that humility opens doors to relationships, and natural rights apply to all human beings.

The rackets we extend with become bridges between disability and ability, between community and isolation, between founding ideals and everyday practice. With each swing, we are declaring that the promise of America—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—is for all its people, even those who need a specially adapted grip or a modified court.