

Reprinted from the May 13, 2004 issue by permission of the Daily Herald, Arlington Heights, Illinois.

Andrea Jaeger finds a way to serve off the court

BY PAM DEFIGLIO, Daily Herald Reports
Posted 5/13/2004

Andrea Jaeger, former No. 2 tennis player in the world, bounds into Stevenson High School's cafeteria at lunch hour.

She spots a girl sitting all alone at a large round table.

"Mind if we sit with you?" she asks in a bright tone.

Jaeger, who attended the Lincolnshire school in the early 1980s, strikes up a friendly chat with the lonely girl, who recommends the fries. Jaeger tries them and gives the girl the thumbs up.

Twenty-three years ago, Jaeger was the one ostracized in Stevenson's lunchroom. She had become the world's up-and-coming wunderkind of tennis, and that made her different.

"Kids would throw food at me, and when I walked past my locker, they'd push me in," she recalls.

No one is throwing food anymore; in fact none of the kids recognize her. But an hour earlier, her old teachers offered hugs and greetings when Jaeger arrived to present copies of her new book, "First Service: Following God's Calling and Finding Life's Purpose" (Health Communications, \$21.95) to Stevenson's library.

In it, she writes about both her tennis stardom and something she loves even better- running an Aspen, Colo.- based program that brings kids with cancer in for fun, healing time in the outdoors.

"She epitomizes being a good person," said Bob Taylor, who taught her freshman biology. Jerry Franklin, a former tennis coach, recalled how Jaeger won the state tennis championships her freshman year.

Shortly after that, at age 14, Jaeger turned pro. She spent her high school years traveling the world playing in Wimbledon and other top tournaments and beating adult professionals like Billie Jean King. She celebrated her 16th birthday by winning the French Open.

At 19, with her skills yet to peak, her shoulder popped out during a match, ending her career.

The abrupt fall from fame weighed heavily on her parents, but not on Jaeger. She says the close connection to God she cherished since childhood helped her weather it.

"I've given my life to God and said, 'Use me as you want to,' she says. "And my direction changed."

Even during her tennis days, she had felt drawn to children suffering from cancer, and would visit them in hospitals around the world. After her injury, she felt God leading her to help these sick kids.

Soon, she found herself putting together a nonprofit foundation, along the way calling up former tennis pals like John McEnroe, Pete Sampras and Andre Agassi for support. She used the money to create a center for kids with cancer called the Silver Lining Ranch in Aspen.

Jaeger and her ranch colleagues bring young cancer patients in for a week of white-water rafting, horseback riding, skiing, canoeing and laughter. It's a week away from the hospitals and painful tests.

"It's horrifying the things these kids have to go through," Jaeger says. The ranch has hosted kids with medicine-dispensing ports in their chests, kids missing half a nose, kids with their heads stapled together after having a brain tumor removed and 14-year-olds picking out the clothes they will wear at their funerals.

One dying boy told Jaeger how classmates laughed at him after they learned he had cancer - an experience that hit home for her.

"He said, 'Share with people that you don't have to push someone different away,'" she recalls.

Jaeger and the staff stay in touch with the kids, many of whom die within months or years. Others survive, coming for repeat visits and volunteering as junior counselors.

The kids' joy keeps her motivated to raise money.

"Fundraising's tough, but to watch kids grow, smile and laugh means the world," she says.

After her own money ran out, her celebrity became a powerful tool in contacting Hollywood stars and the rich for donations. She met Paul Newman, Cindy Crawford, Madonna, Bruce Willis, Garth Brooks, Faith Hill, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and others who became sources of support to Jaeger's Silver Lining Foundation.

"I'm not surprised at what God can do," she says.

She started up a second foundation, Little Star, that helps kids recovering from abuse, war and other traumas. She feels compelled to protect children - even the ones who sit alone at lunch.

Back at Stevenson, the lunch period is ending. Jaeger leans toward her new lunch friend and says, "I used to go to school here and I want to send you a copy of this book I just wrote." She takes down the girl's address.

"Watch for it in the mail, OK?" she says.

"OK," the girl replies. She picks up her tray, beaming, and leaves the lunchroom.

<http://www.dailyherald.com/>