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# Tennis program for autistic youth now in Charlotte

By Jennifer Ford

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For Richard Spurling and his wife, Shafali Jeste, of Los Angeles, autism has been a part of their lives for seven years.

But not because of a family member's diagnosis. Rather, Jeste has devoted her professional career as a pediatric neurologist to studying autism.

Jeste's autism research has taken the couple from Boston to their current home in California, where she is studying autism at UCLA. Along the way, Jeste's passion to help those with autism has impacted Richard.

A lifelong, avid tennis player, Spurling wanted to connect his love of tennis with his entrepreneurial dreams and his desire to help those with autism, and ACEing Autism was born. The couple "realized there were hardly any recreation programs for kids with autism."

Nils Weldy, a resident of Charlotte's Merry Oaks and fellow tennis devotee, has known Spurling since 2008 and was eager to help with ACEing Autism. He now serves as the Charlotte chapter program director.

Last fall, Weldy started a pilot program in Charlotte for ACEing Autism, in partnership with Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation's Therapeutic Recreation Department and with volunteer students from Cannon School in Concord. "We had strong interest immediately, said Weldy. "By working with the kids to teach them the basics of tennis, we could see the impacts with the kids and their parents. Some of the parents had experience in tennis, and it reignited their passion for the sport."

- Learn more:

Learn more about the ACEing Autism program at [www.ACEingAutism.org](http://www.ACEingAutism.org).

Deadline for tennis clinic registration is April 9. Alexander Street Tennis Courts is at 739 E. 12th St. in Charlotte and is open to children 4 and older. Parents and volunteers can call 704-441-3221.

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As the Charlotte program director, Weldy is reaching out to corporate sponsors to build partnerships and alliances and to the entire Charlotte community to generate awareness for the program. In March, the Charlotte chapter of ACEing Autism was a recipient of funds raised during this year's Queen City Brewers Festival, which Weldy serves as festival organizer. The festival "attracted participants, volunteers, and businesses that may be able to help support the program," he said.

The Charlotte ACEing Autism program will hold its first tennis clinic on April 12 at the Alexander Street Tennis Courts, a Mecklenburg County Park and Recreation facility in Charlotte.

## Establishing ACEing

While earning his master of business administration degree, Spurling pitched the idea of ACEing Autism – a tennis program for children with autism – to his professor and fellow students. In the fall of 2008, the first ACEing Autism program launched in Boston with five children who were patients of his wife.

As a nonprofit, ACEing Autism relies on donations, sponsors and volunteers. The goal of the program is to help children with autism by teaching them the fundamentals of tennis. Tennis develops hand-eye coordination and motor skills, encourages social skills, offers fitness opportunities, builds self-esteem and, of course, is fun. In addition, the routine of attending the weekly class is important for children with autism; consistent routines help them.

"Research has shown that moving around and crossing the tennis racquet across your body helps with cognitive development and language development," said Spurling. "In addition, turn-taking can be a real struggle with children with autism and they are learning that concept. We are working with UCLA to measure the benefits that the program is having on autistic children."

Through the autism community, word of the program quickly spread, and Spurling began launching the program in other cities across the country through connections he had in several national tennis organizations.

Jennifer Ford is a freelance writer. Have a story idea for Jennifer? Email her at [robandjenford@yahoo.com](mailto:robandjenford@yahoo.com).

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