



Squirrel Hill-based photographer George Lange took portraits of people at the Steel City Squash opening ceremony in September. The young folks here, all SCS students or alums, are (from left) Kamyia Cousar, Da’Nerah Chisholm, Janiyah Johnson, Keyel Beasley, Maurice Davis, and Skyler Jackson. That fellow in the middle is Charlie Stewart, an SCS supporter from the beginning (and a longtime Shady Ave contributor).

GAME ON

This issue of *Shady Ave* features the new facility for Steel City Squash in Larimer. It is, in my editorial judgment, the most important building of 2024, not just in the East End but in all of Pittsburgh.

Why am I making such a bold claim? It’s because I believe Steel City Squash is among the most compelling nonprofit organizations in town. It builds up people and breaks down barriers — social, racial, geographic, psychological — in new and remarkable ways.

Within this sleek new building in Larimer, all kinds of Pittsburghers are coming together for a shared purpose: chasing a little rubber ball around a room and sweating up a storm, silently cursing a partner’s cunning and our own failings, while cheering our minor victories.

Steel City Squash is part of a national network of after-school programs that confound expectations. They teach the challenging racquet sport of squash — a once stereotypically elitist, white, Ivy League pastime played in private clubs by guys named Chip and Trip — to kids from nearly all-Black urban schools. In equal measure, they provide the kids with rigorous tutoring, travel opportunities, and college/career guidance.

At the same time, squash players from across the region can become members and revel in the best courts available between Philadelphia and Chicago. As curiosity grows about this rewarding sport, now more accessible to the public, more people will pick up a racquet. All sorts of folks will mingle and compete together. Over time, lives get blended in the most organic of fashions: by proximity and common interests.

As a bonus, I — a solidly mediocre squash player for almost 30 years, with one touchy knee and a birthdate near Medicare eligibility — will have the opportunity to get pummeled by a new crop of young players. It’s gonna hurt so good.

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A Perfect Match: Steel City Squash Lands in Larimer

A mixed-media mural, *Rooted Momentum*, was created by Alecia Dawn Young in collaboration with other artists and area residents for the Larimer Avenue entrance to Steel City Squash.

SHADY AVE

With the help of many hands, this after-school education program — propelled by a challenging racquet sport — has built a first-class facility that embraces a broad community.

BY JONATHAN CALLARD

STEEL CITY SQUASH

On a mid-September day inside a new building in Pittsburgh's Larimer neighborhood, Jose Fernandez lunges with a racquet to smack a hollow rubber ball against a wall. It bounces toward 11-year-old William Lewis, who swings his own racquet and strikes the ball back to the wall, high and hard. Fernandez is showing him, along with other fourth and fifth graders, the basics of squash. Considered among the world's healthiest sports for its cardio, strength, endurance, and flexibility benefits, squash pits players in a four-walled court with a small ball that moves at lightning speeds. Fernandez explains it's like "tennis in a box."

The sport landed in Larimer through Fernandez's nonprofit employer, Steel City Squash (SCS). The local affiliate of a national initiative, SCS introduces urban kids to this demanding game — while working to boost their academic proficiency.

In early September, SCS officially opened its \$11 million facility on Larimer Avenue. The low-slung structure, designed by the Pittsburgh office of GBBN, reflects the angles of a squash court. The plain exterior is punctuated by the mural *Rooted Momentum*, created by Pittsburgh artist and educa-



SCS students Maurice Davis (left) and Skyler Jackson compete on the glass-walled Simonds Family Championship Court at the new facility.

“Once I had the opportunity to join a team, I liked the feeling of being a part of something,” — Amari Spivey

ON BEYOND PREPPIES

In past generations, squash in the United States was the province of prep schools and private clubs, a stereotypical pastime for white elites. Yet around the globe, the activity was far less exclusive, available on public courts and in many schools.

While the game might remain obscure by national standards, it has become more accessible and popular in recent decades. The 2028 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles will include squash, a first for the sport that will elevate its profile.

When Steel City Squash started operating in 2015, it partnered with the University of Pittsburgh, which generously donated use of its courts and classroom space at Fitzgerald Field House. But several years ago, Pitt indicated that renovation plans would eliminate the courts. The leaders of SCS knew they needed to find another home.

At that same time, Chatham University was looking to expand its squash program, founded in 2018. SCS and Chatham joined forces and began planning for a venue to serve their shared aims: the location for the SCS after-school program (known as Steel City Squash Academy), as well as a place for Chatham’s teams to practice and compete, with its student athletes volunteering as SCS mentors in squash and academics. In addition, the courts would be open to the public via membership.

Enter Larimer, the city neighborhood adjacent to East Liberty, Shadyside, and Highland Park. The area has seen significant development spurred by the growth of Bakery Square and a \$30 million

federal grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The collaboration among SCS, Chatham, and Larimer is a product of many hands and voices.

The first move to create SCS was made a decade ago by Pittsburgh native Talbott Simonds. Wanting to replicate the Squash and Education Alliance projects he saw succeeding in New York and elsewhere, he assisted through his foundation, administered by the Hillman Family Foundations, which also supplied early backing.

For the Larimer facility, a key lift came from Mayor Ed Gainey who, during his years as a state representative, helped secure a Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program grant for SCS, along with state Sen. Lindsey Williams. The city’s Urban Redevelopment Authority played a central role, as did Allegheny County Economic Development. PNC Bank provided aid and financing expertise.

With a strong influx of private funding and foundation support, led by SCS Board Chair David Hillman, the new building took shape.

Larimer institutions celebrate SCS’s arrival as a chance to regenerate the social fabric through resource-sharing. The Kingsley Association, the neighborhood’s community and recreation center for over 100 years, is among the fans. “Once we had a meeting, it was like wildfire,” says Kingsley Senior Operations Director Phillip Williams, recalling his opening conversations with Young and his team. “Send your people to us, and we’ll send our people to you.”

AMARI AND KEYEL

Amari Spivey and Keyel Beasley personify the Steel City Squash experience.

While attending the Hill District school St. Benedict the Moor, they joined Steel City Squash’s first class of participants — Spivey in fifth grade, Beasley in sixth. After being introduced to the sport and hitting some forehand and backhand shots, Spivey said, “I’m going to try this out.”

In 2022, they graduated as part of SCS’s inaugural class. Today, they are students at Chatham University — and players on the school’s varsity squash teams.

Spivey and Beasley are giving back. Beasley works part-time at SCS as a membership associate and coaches private squash clients there. Spivey hopes to continue guiding SCS youth in both homework and squash techniques.



SCS Executive Director Brad Young.

tor Alecia Dawn Young in collaboration with other artists and area residents. With its bright ceramic tiles and vivid paintwork, the mural embodies the organization’s focus on energizing lives and strengthening cultural connections.

Founded in 2014, Steel City Squash launched its first class in 2015. It’s part of the Squash and Education Alliance, a network of 21 programs across the nation and six international partners that combine squash instruction, rigorous academic enrichment, and college and career support.

In the here and now, SCS mentors at-risk youth in forming productive study habits, mastering SAT prep, and getting a good workout by chasing after a little rubber ball. But the goals go further.

“Our mission is to work with these students and to help families and the community prepare them for success after high school, whatever that looks like for each individual,” says Brad Young, executive director of SCS. “Ultimately, I want our program to be a facilitator of intergenerational wealth. Squash is great, but creating these opportunities is what we’re all about.”



Keyel Beasley at the SCS groundbreaking in March 2023.

George Lange



SCS Board Chair David and Lilla Hillman.



Amari Spivey and Keyel Beasley at Chatham University.

Keshona Beasley, the mother of Keyel, is an SCS board member. She believes squash has been an “eye-opener” for her son, shaping him in powerful ways. Over the years, he learned to budget time for squash practice while working a job and keeping up with his studies at Central Catholic. When Pitt’s courts were unavailable during the pandemic, he and Spivey hit balls against the walls of the WQED parking garage and ran agility drills.

Such persistence has served him well. “I learned how to be comfortable being uncomfortable,” he says, and “how to stay focused when all eyes are on you.” In his senior year at SCS, he finished third at squash nationals for his skill level. Beasley is now training to qualify for the 2028 Olympics. His confidence on the court has positively impacted his public speaking, classwork, and relationships.

Growing up, Spivey moved around a lot. SCS became an anchor. “Once I had the opportunity to join a team, I liked the feeling of being a part of something,” she says. Squash motivates her to “keep a positive head.”

‘HELP PEOPLE DO BETTER’

When people enter the SCS building, the first thing they see is the college and career area. That gives way to a wellness room and two large classrooms, where Academic Coordinator Nijah Crystian holds court.

In the other half of the 19,000-square-foot structure, state-of-the-art squash beckons: six standard courts, one doubles court, and a glass-walled “championship court” to showcase premier competitions. The largest squash facility between Philadelphia and Chicago, and one of three in the country to include this many top-end courts, it will be a magnet for regional matches and professional tournaments, attracting national and international players.

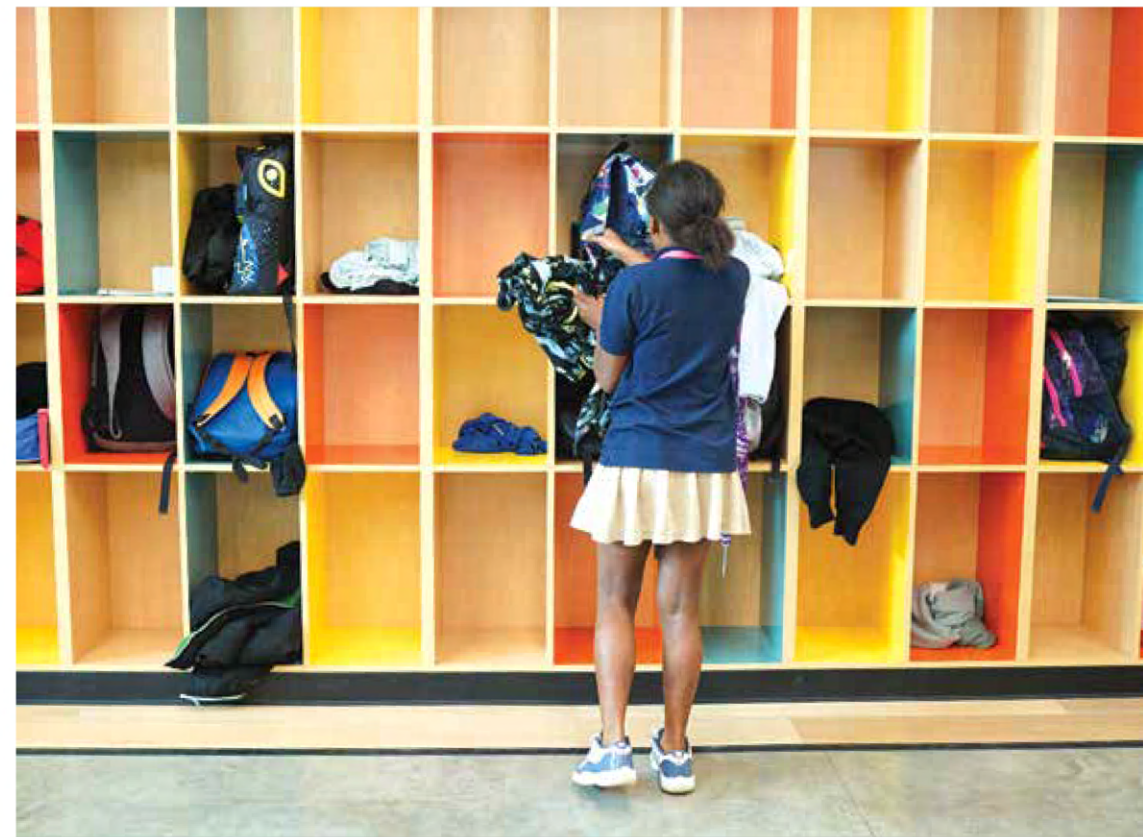
At present, 67 students are enrolled in grades 4 through 12. With the added space, SCS intends to increase academy numbers to 150 students over the next five years. Moreover, it has committed to reserving 50 percent of program capacity for Larimer residents, providing them with coaching, academic tutoring, meals on-site, college and career guidance, and social and emotional support.

Donna Jackson, executive director of the Larimer Consensus Group, pictures the building as a gathering space for all, where community groups can meet for free and businesses can hold leadership training events. “I want to help people to do better,” says Jackson.

Part of forming a vision is seeing the world. Over the past decade, SCS has made sure students have stepped out of their comfort zone to visit dozens of college campuses and cities. The 100 percent graduation, college acceptance, and post-secondary matriculation rates — with more than \$200,000 in renewable college scholarships awarded to Spivey, Beasley, and others — speak to how Steel City Squash transforms lives.

Beasley’s tournament travel gave him a first-hand sense of what was possible. He struck up a friendship with an older Black male squash player who encouraged him on his path to college. He got a taste of university life when he stayed in dormitories over summer trips, networking with other hopefuls to prepare athletically and academically for collegiate squash.

Spivey sharpened her study skills with one-on-



An SCS student at the colorful cubby wall.



Tutoring and study sessions are at the core of Steel City Squash.

one tutoring. She originally considered taking a year off before college, but changed her mind after consulting with SCS staff — and is grateful she did. “Without them, I don’t think I would have gone the college route,” she says.

Young, Fernandez, and all the volunteers, board members, and teammates make up a family, she adds. “They’re going to make sure that you’re all right.”

In addition to his duties as SCS squash quash and program coordinator, Fernandez recently served as assistant squash coach at Chatham — where his brother Chris was head coach through 2023 — so he’s been able to keep tabs on Spivey and Beasley in their next chapter. The university has made itself a home for urban squash graduates, with several players on its rosters from Squash and Education Alliance affiliates.



SCS Squash and Program Coordinator Jose Fernandez with student Da'Nerah Chisholm (right).

The Fernandez brothers are testaments to the value of SEA organizations. New Yorkers raised in the Bronx, they both started in the CitySquash program there and went on to graduate from St. Lawrence University in upstate New York.

CLOSER TOGETHER

Rather than isolating itself, SCS is growing with the needs and gifts of those around it. The squash courts offer several tiers of membership, including income-sensitive and veteran options. Non-members can pay a daily rate. Squash professional Daren Ramsey instructs students as well as members looking to improve their game.

With six schools within a mile — Obama, Dilworth, Urban Academy, Lincoln, Catalyst Academy, and Westinghouse — SCS is engaging



SCS students Skyler Jackson (left) and Maurice Davis on the glass-walled Simonds Family Championship Court.

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Steel City Squash



Future squash champions at the SCS opening ceremony in September.

area youth by recruiting students to the program.

To bolster participation, the Kingsley Association is building a symbiotic exchange with SCS, sharing space and speakers and knowledge to complement programming. Alex Payton, director of operations and technology at Kingsley, sees SCS as another spot where strangers can begin to recognize each other and interact over time, building trust. "We're going to need all kinds of people," he says.

Squash in Larimer? "Expect the unexpected," says Williams, of Kingsley, with a belly laugh.

And that's what Amari Spivey and Keyel Beasley hope for the project: that other kids will give squash a try and seize the opportunity to get more solid footing for their future.

Spivey is majoring in food studies at Chatham and wants to run her own farm where people can learn sustainable food practices. Beasley, a business management major, dreams of opening his own squash enterprise that teaches Black youth not only athletic skills but also life strategies.

Spivey, Beasley, and others view the Larimer venture as a win for all. Squash will not only better the lives of schoolchildren but also invite young and old, Black and white and brown, rich and poor and in between, to meet each other in fresh ways. Young, the executive director, wants to develop social capital for low-income neighborhoods, "and we believe that we can be a conduit to that in a unique way."

Building Steel City Squash, says Beasley, "brings everyone closer together." ^{SA}

Steel City Squash: 624 Larimer Avenue, 412-365-5800, steelcitysquash.org

Jonathan Callard is a writer living in the East End (jonathancallard.com). His article about Clairton High School football, "Go Hard or Go Home," won the Prairie Schooner Creative Nonfiction Contest. He is working on a book about the team and its town.