

USTA Military Outreach

USTA family remembers 9/11 victims with Pentagon visit to close Advocacy Days

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Shots from the first-ever USTA Advocacy Days from May 9-11 in Washington, D.C. Over 100 USTA staffers and volunteers took to our nation's capital to highlight communities helped through tennis programming around the country.

By Nicholas J. Walz, USTA.com

WASHINGTON D.C. -- Retired Navy Captain Steve Kappes decided to take an optional meeting the morning of Sept. 11, 2001.

Now the president of the San Diego District Tennis Association (SDDTA) in San Diego, Calif., Kappes was situated on the west end of the Pentagon from 2000 to 2002, serving on the staff of the Chief of Naval Operations. Kappes was on the other side of the building when the plane crashed into and through the limestone and cement surrounding his desk, killing 184 American men and women, both in the building and on board American Airlines Flight 77.

The aircraft crashed into the western side of the Pentagon at 9:37 a.m. ET. The impact caved in a portion of the Pentagon and ignited a fire in multiple sections of the building; firefighters spent days trying to fully extinguish the blaze. Amazingly, the damaged sections of the Pentagon were rebuilt in less than a year's time, with occupants moving back into the completed areas on Aug. 15, 2002.

"I survived the attack, but many of my colleagues and shipmates were not so fortunate," said Kappes. "This is my first time back here since I left my assignment 10 years ago, and to see the memorial that's been built since then.

"I'm looking forward to being able to remember my friends who died here that day."

Kappes, alongside USTA Chairman of the Board and President Jon Vegosen, were among the USTA contingent touring the famed U.S. Department of Defense headquarters on Friday, meeting with various military officials and spreading the word about USTA Military Outreach, whose efforts supported more than 100,000 U.S. Armed Forces active-duty members, veterans and their loved ones in its first year in 2011. The tour featured a special visit from Admiral James A. "Sandy" Winnefeld Jr., current vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and avid recreational tennis player.

"Most near and dear to my heart are the programs you provide for wounded warriors," said Winnefeld to the USTA family. "Athletics are such an important way for them to recover from the experiences they've been through."

Winnefeld cited his early days of playing tennis as instrumental in shaping up his views on how the game lifts spirits. As a high school player, he often partnered with and matched against an amputee who played with one arm. He also recently visited and spoke with athletes at the third annual "Warrior Games" in Colorado Springs, Colo., a competition which serves as an introduction to Paralympic sports for injured service members by inspiring recovery, physical fitness, and promoting new opportunities for growth and achievement.

"To watch some of these severely injured people come back from that, going out there and competing and bonding as a team has actually saved some of their lives," continued Winnefeld. "They're setting goals for themselves and then achieving and exceeding those goals. Without these goals, some of these people would have committed suicide. I thank you for being here – I know its good for tennis."

A direct reflection of Winnefeld's kudos, Kappes's SDDTA holds a special distinction in the timeline of the Military Outreach initiative, starting the first tennis therapy program for wounded, ill and injured service members in the U.S. in 2009.

"Ours is a collaboration with Naval Medical Center San Diego, across the street from the Balboa Tennis Club," said Kappes. "Twice a month, the hospital brings their wounded warriors out to the club, where our tennis pros and volunteers run clinics. Therapists rave about the program, and they tell us that they believe it's doing a world of good for these veterans from all of our military branches and from all different areas of the country. We're pleased to know that our two-and-a-half years have provided a model that other tennis organizations are beginning to follow to create these therapy opportunities through tennis."

Today, the America's Heroes Memorial and chapel are located at American Airlines Flight 77's point of impact. The memorial includes a book of photographs and biographies of the victims, along with a ledger where visitors may leave their signatures and condolences, which Kappes is the first to do out of all USTA members on this day. His survival and subsequent dedication to enhancing the lives of soliders and sailors still living is part of how he copes with the events of that fateful day.

The display is comprised of five large black marble panels; one displays the Purple Heart medal awarded to military members killed in the attacks, another shows the medal given to civilians, two back-wall panels are etched with the victims' names and a center panel shows tribute statements.

The permanent outdoor memorial features 184 illuminated benches, arranged according to the victim's ages, starting with Dana Falkenberg, 3, to John Yamnicky Sr., 71, in a landscaped plot. Each bench is engraved with the name of a victim.

"Cosmetically, a lot has changed," said Kappes when asked to compare the look of the building in 2012 to a decade ago. "The building looks newer, fresher, reinvigorated."

The trip to the Pentagon closed what was a successful three-day visit by the USTA to our nation's capital promoting the recent growth and development of American tennis. The campaign began with an address by International Tennis Hall-of-Famer Billie Jean King on the state of the game, leading to closed-door sessions on Capitol Hill with legislators educating elected officials and staff of the important benefits of active lifestyles through tennis.

In all, more than 100 organizational employees and volunteers stumped for the cause and made valuable inroads for the creation of a tennis caucus, the vehicle through which congress and the USTA can work together to make an impact at the national and local levels through the support of various programs.

Vegosen, in expressing thoughts on the experience, highlighted a storied history of American tennis greats who served their country.

"Legends like Stan Smith and Arthur Ashe served in the Army, Tony Trabert served in the Navy," said Vegosen. "These were not only terrific tennis players, but also citizens. I think a lot of their great character came from their experiences in the military."