

Kindness Wins: How This Tennis Star's Early Philanthropy Focuses on Fostering Empathy

Ade Adeniji | October 03, 2023



TENNIS STAR MADISON KEYS

Just a few weeks ago at Arthur Ashe Stadium during the U.S. Open, American tennis star Madison Keys seemed to be firing on all cylinders. She played a dominating first set versus world No. 2 Aryna Sabalenka, winning 6-0 and looking destined for Championship Saturday. The tides turned and Keys fell in the semifinal round (her American compatriot Coco Gauff avenged her in the finals), but the tournament was a mere glimpse of Keys' incredible talent and potential. Currently ranked 11th in the world, Keys, 28, is among a new generation of American tennis stars, many of whom are people of color, building on the legacy that the Williams sisters, and even earlier Ashe, charted out.

Her success has paid off financially, too. The Illinois-born player has taken home around \$2.4 million this year, and racked up more than \$17 million in prize money over the years, per the Women's Tennis Association. Keys is another example of the kind of money being made in sports these days, across the **NBA**, **NFL** and **MLB** and other leagues. And some of these growing fortunes are being directed, in part, toward philanthropy.

Keys, for example, launched in 2020 **Kindness Wins**, which is dedicated to "making the world a kinder place by providing young people access to sports, education," and finding ways to promote kindness. I recently spoke with Keys to find out more about her nonprofit, why her

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early philanthropy has focused on youth and fostering empathy, and how she wants to use her platform down the line.

Activating her platform

In 2016, Keys made her debut in the top 10 of the WTA rankings at 21. Keys says she started thinking about philanthropy more seriously around that time, too. "I remember just being on the road, playing a lot. I was doing really well. But I kind of just felt like I had a lot of these people who cared about what I was saying, what I was doing, [and] what I was interested in," Keys told me. "And it felt like I wasn't doing enough with the platform that I created through tennis."

That platform includes 500,000 followers between Instagram and Twitter combined, and a voice within the tennis world that commands attention. Keys is another example of a star athlete who leverages both their personal wealth and their public platform to support important work.

She decided to meet with her agent and discussed her interest in starting her own foundation. But Keys quickly realized that wasn't the easiest thing to do. So instead, her agent reached out to Kate Whitfield, founder of FearlesslyGIRL in Canada, which aims to empower young women and foster kindness and empathy. Keys and Whitfield immediately found common ground. Keys herself has spoken out about the social media bullying she and other athletes have faced, and fellow American tennis star Sloane Stephens called Keys her "social media therapist."

"FearlesslyGIRL seemed like the most seamless partnership. It felt really natural. And it was great for the years that we were able to do it," Keys said. She is particularly proud of the nonprofit's massive antibullying assembly at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois in the fall of 2017. The school is in her hometown, where her father, now an attorney, played basketball. The assembly was livestreamed to over 7,000 people across 22 states.

"There was a really good turnout at Augustana. And I was definitely more nervous for it than any tennis match," she said, laughing.

And after Keys spoke at the rally, mothers and aunts came up to her expressing an interest in doing something for young boys, too. That's when Keys started about turning FearlesslyGIRL into something even bigger.

Branching out and doing more

Keys went on to launch Kindness Wins in 2020. Because of how powerfully tennis has impacted her, she wanted the sport to be a major component in the charity she started. In order to get the foundation off the ground, she enlisted her mother Christine Keys, a former attorney, to serve as president. Christine came to the foundation with little philanthropic experience, but did serve on boards like Gilda's Club. "[Madison] just said one day, 'Look, I know we can't fix everything, but I gotta do something,'" Christine said.

The early work of Kindness Wins has focused on renovating tennis courts so that youth from all backgrounds can access the sport. The foundation hosts an annual social media fundraiser called #KindnessWinsDay. In 2022, the event raised around \$20,000 and the 2023 event was held on September 14. Kindness Wins also partnered with South Carolina Recreation Department and USTA South Carolina to renovate the tennis courts at JV Morris Tennis Center. At the grand reopening earlier this year, Kindness Wins and USTA South Carolina hosted a youth tennis clinic, getting support from other local organizations, including Lowcountry Youth Tennis Association and Third Serve Foundation.

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Kindness Wins also hopes to highlight other leaders and organizations in the community doing good work. Through its Medals of Kindness, the foundation has honored changemakers like Emma Higuchi, COO of Second Serve, and a founder of SERVE Escondido, a free, after-school tennis program serving underprivileged, minority youth in the City of Escondido. Kindness Wins also awarded a grant to Second Serve. Other medal awardees have included Jake Nestor, a nurse at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center in the bone marrow transplant unit; Leah Stoddard, who works with those with different abilities; and retired tennis star [James Blake](#), who has engaged in long-running work to improve early cancer detection.

Christine Keys says the WTA Foundation has been an especially helpful ally, along with USTA, and Keys' sponsors, Nike and Wilson. The foundation engages in fundraising online, in person, and through word of mouth. She adds that the Keys family also contributes to Kindness Wins.

Revamping a court and looking ahead

In August, Marine Corps veteran Aaron Williams of New Jersey became one of Kindness Wins' newest Medal of Kindness awardees. He's the founder of [Asbury Park Tennis Initiative](#), which brings together tennis, education and mentoring to underprivileged youth in Asbury Park, New Jersey. Asbury Park was the only Jersey Shore town at the time without tennis courts. Williams, who splits running the nonprofit with his full-time job working in veterans outreach, wanted to solve that.

Williams' tennis story began when he was seven and took to the courts with his brother, teaching themselves the sport. "The only the only reason we got into the sport is because my mom's boyfriend at the time was really into sports. And there was a tennis court right across the street from where he lived. So we kept bugging him. He finally walked us across the street gave us two of his old rackets and a couple of balls," Williams said.

The New Jersey native eventually went on to play tennis in college. But it wasn't lost on him that he was one of a handful of kids of color in these spaces when he was coming up, mentioning that his high school team dealt with taunts and bullying. But that made Williams even more determined to succeed and then give back by teaching tennis to kids like him.

Kindness Wins recently funded a day trip so that 30 Asbury Park Tennis youth could attend the U.S. Open Arthur Ashe Kids' Day in late August. "We had an opportunity to watch Madison Keys practice. And it was just unreal. She got to meet all the kids. Her dedication to the community and advocacy towards tennis is unreal... It's not just about winning. It's about helping," Williams said.

Madison and Christine Keys resolve to continue chipping away at their ambitious mission by finding more leaders like Aaron Williams. "It really just shows you don't need to have like \$10 million to highlight amazing people and still do really good work," Keys said. Among her athlete peers, she mentioned her friend Sloane Stephens as also completely dedicated to getting more kids on tennis courts because of how much the sport did for her.

With a behind-the-scenes perspective, Christine Keys speaks to how intense the schedule of athletes can be, not just during the active season, but in the off-season, too — adding that Keys has only about a six-week break before going to Australia, the Middle East and California in the first three months of the year. So a 24/7 commitment just isn't possible. But Christine is proud that her daughter is finding time to dedicate to philanthropy and use her platform as she's able. "When they have the opportunity, they understand that people will listen to them," Christine said.

Madison Keys added that she's committed to continuing the work she's doing through Kindness Wins, and even on a larger scale down the line. "Things take time. So I really think it's just continuing to do a lot of the day-to-day things and get nominations of people who are doing great things in their community, and continuing to shine a light on that," Keys said. "You know, we're just doing whatever we can to try to make the world better."

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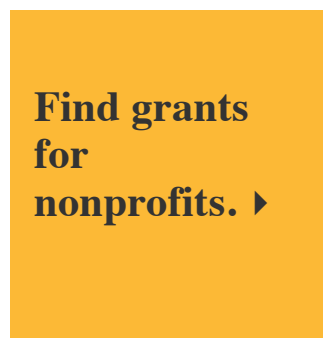
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