

Leslie Lamont Bryant

February 1, 1943 (Muskegon, MI)

November 24, 2024 (Chicago, IL)

L. Lamont Bryant brought tennis to South Side kids, including the first Black woman to win an NCAA title MIKE DUDEK, CHICAGO SUN-TIMES, JAN 4, 2025



When **Leslie Lamont Bryant** took his young daughter, Keva, to tennis tournaments in the early '90s it was a lonely world for the only Black girl on the courts.

Mr. Bryant decided to do something about it, and in 1992 created Love To Serve, a nonprofit organization on the South Side that aimed to bring tennis and much more into the lives of young people who signed up or, perhaps, just wandered by one of his programs at a public court and wanted to see how a racquet felt.

He found players, many from underserved communities. He found financial support from parents, community leaders and tennis companies. He coached the kids, and rode to tournaments in a chartered bus full of young Black athletes. When they exited the bus in matching uniforms, they ignored the occasional snickers of their white peers.

“We didn’t really care. We were proud. He made us proud,” said Autumn Wollenzien.

“I can draw a direct line to where I am now back to when I met him when I was 8,” said Wollenzien, who is head coach of the women’s tennis program at Texas A&M University-Kingsville.

“I think more than anything he wanted to instill a sense of pride in us and just being unafraid of going out there and being Black in a world that’s not made for little Black girls or boys to play in,” Wollenzien said. “I’m not saying he spoke about race in that way, but you definitely felt like he was giving us tools to survive in this world and skills that showed us that we belonged if you present yourself well.”

Mr. Bryant formed Love To Serve shortly before retiring as a Chicago Public Schools physical education teacher. He picked up the game as an adult and took lessons, but was largely self-taught.

He taught his tennis students how to coach others and turned them loose as instructors at dozens of South Side schools and parks after he won over Chicago Public Schools officials on the merits of the game and his program.

Chicago attorney Violet Clark sent her daughter to Love To Serve after first trying out an expensive tennis club on the North Side.

“She hated the expensive club. She loved Lamont’s program, primarily because there were other little Black kids playing and having fun ... I could pay a lot of money for tennis that didn’t connect with my kids, or I could go to this nonprofit on the South Side, and they would play beside someone who might be on public assistance, but when you got to Love to Serve none of that mattered,” said Clark.

Clark previously served as head of the Love To Serve board and is currently on the national board of the United States Tennis Association. All three of her daughters were coached by Mr. Bryant, including Gabrielle Clark, whose Division III championship with Emory University made her the first African American woman to win an NCAA tennis title at any level.

Tayo Bailey-Duvall was 11 in 1995 when she randomly came across Love To Serve at Jesse Owens Park.

“I told Mr. Bryant I was interested in playing. My mom was a single mom with four children, and Mr. Bryant became sort of a father figure ... That day set the course of my life. I was not far from gangs and running the streets, but when I chose to play tennis, it just changed everything.”

Bailey-Duvall graduated from Morgan Park High School and earned a tennis scholarship to Butler University. She is now Head Coach for the women’s program at Middle Tennessee State University. When she got married in 2018, her father was late to the wedding, so she asked Mr. Bryant to walk her down the aisle. As they were walking, he reminded her to smile. Mr. Bryant may have been the old-school gruff sort of coach who preached discipline about all things – “If you’re on time, you’re 15 minutes late!” – but he also had a soft side.

Mr. Bryant was born Feb. 1, 1943, in Muskegon, Michigan, and grew up in Rockford, where he played football for West High School. He graduated with the

Class of 1961. He studied physical education at the University of Sioux Falls, where he also played football. He earned a master's degree in urban education from Governors State University. Mr. Bryant died November 24, 2024 from traumatic brain disease at his home near 87th Street and Kedzie Avenue. He was 81.

Today, Love to Serve is run by Mr. Bryant's wife, Lori James, and provides services to hundreds of young tennis players in Chicago.

"We'd go to the U.S. Open every year since 2000, and we'd only watch the top-ranked players unless there was a player on one of the smaller courts who was Black. And as time grew, there were more Black players, and he was proud of that," she said.

In addition to his wife, Mr. Bryant is survived by his daughter, Keva Bryant; his son, Jon Hall-Bryant; his stepson, Amir James; and his stepdaughter, Imani James; and seven grandchildren.

A celebration of life is planned for Jan. 11 at 11:11 a.m. at the Salvation Army Kroc Center Chicago, 1250 W. 119th St.



Reference:

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