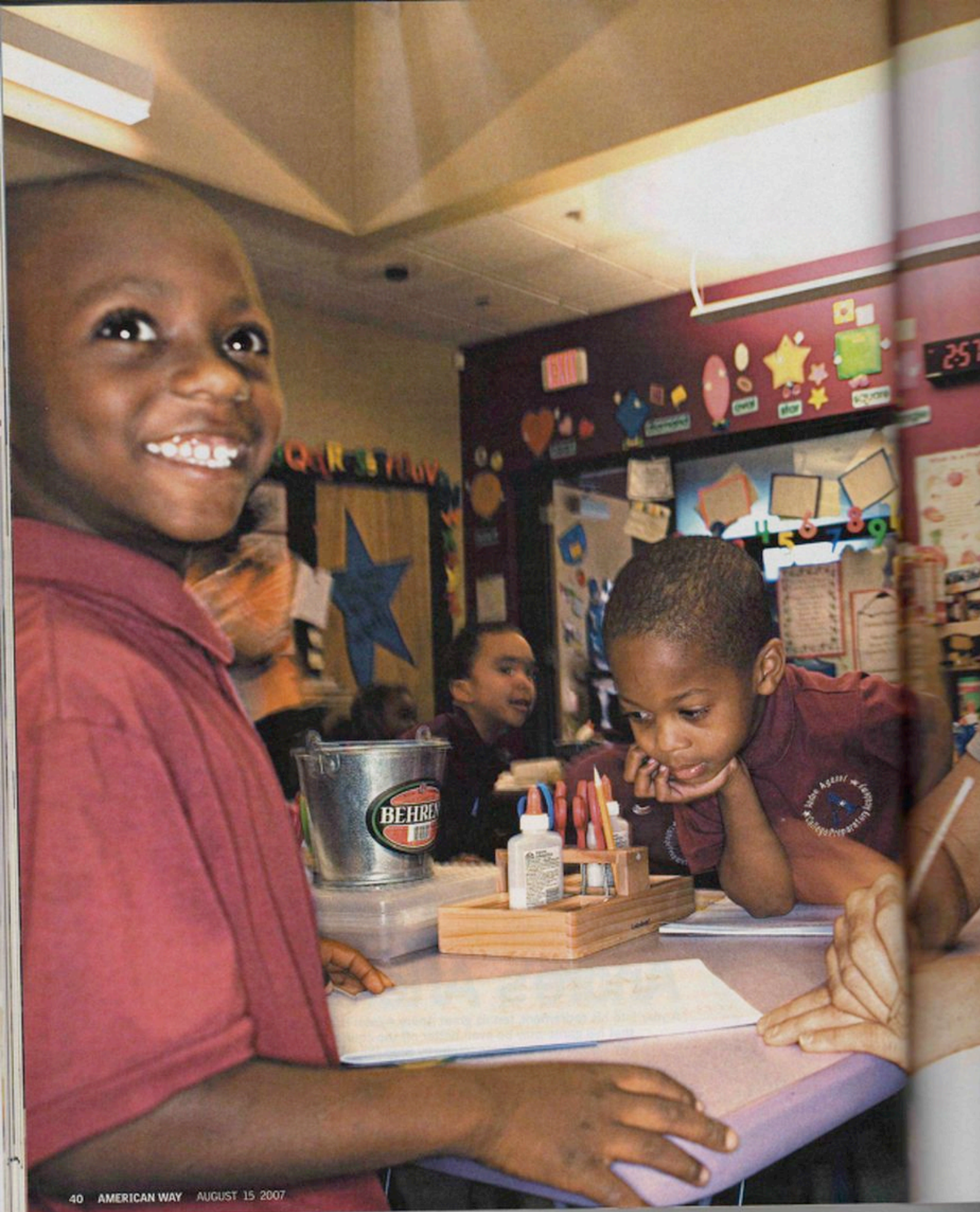




Andre's Afterlife

A year into his retirement, tennis great Andre Agassi is proving that his game may be even better off the court.
By Joseph Guinto. Photographs by Brad Hines.

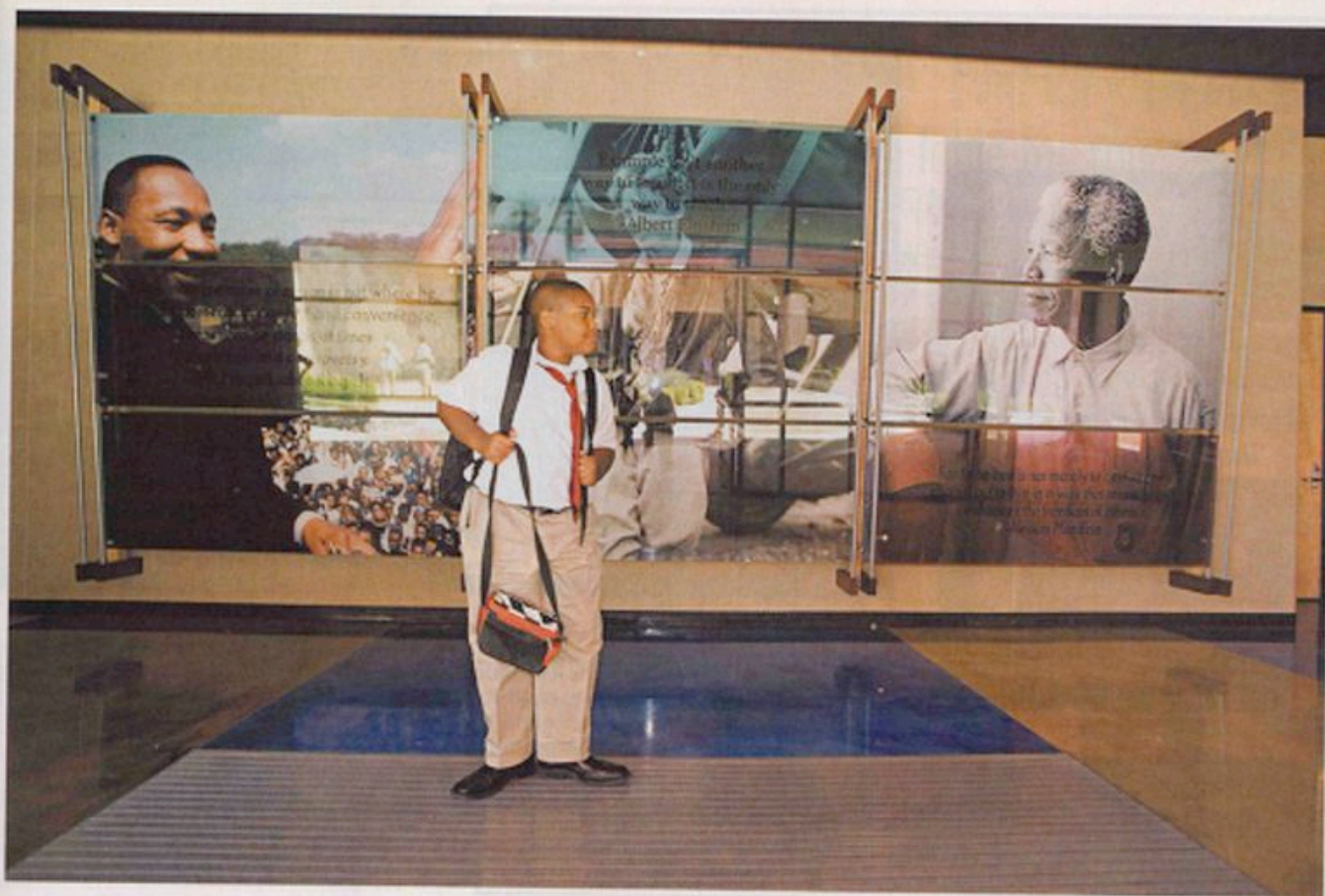




Andre Agassi is standing there bare-chested, and everyone is looking but pretending not to. Agassi, though, clearly doesn't notice that they're noticing but acting as if they're not. Why should he? This is not the first time he's been *sans chemise* in front of people. Back during his more hirsute days (before he shaved both head and chest) he regularly flung his sweaty shirts into the crowd at the end of matches. He was also famously shirtless in one of those famously unfortunate Canon commercials — the ones with the irritating "Image is everything" slogan.

At the moment, there are only a dozen people, um, not looking at Agassi. They're all here, in Las Vegas, inside the Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy, to take his picture for the cover of the very magazine you are holding in your hands. As Agassi swaps out his own powder blue T-shirt for a white John Varvatos tee that he'll wear in the pictures, someone finally admits to seeing what we're all seeing. "Andre," says Rob Powers, the communications director for the Andre Agassi Charitable Foundation, a group *USA Today* has called the "gold standard" for celebrity-run charities, "every time I see you, you look more bulked up."

"Bulked up" is a good way to put it. "Huge" would work too. Agassi, at 37 and just a year into tennis retirement, is the textbook example of fit, tan, and rested. The last time most of us saw him, a year ago, he was none of those things. He was literally hobbling toward the end of his 21-year career, suffering from an irritated sciatic nerve during



the 2006 U.S. Open. He won two matches, including a classic five-setter against Marcos Baghdatis that ended in the middle of the night. But the pain was too much, and Agassi lost in the next round to a walking trivia-question answer named Benjamin Becker.

Even so, he says the 2006 U.S. Open ranks as the most treasured moment of his career. That is no small statement. After all, Agassi is a guy who won eight Grand Slam tournaments, and he's one of only five players who've won each of the four major titles. All this and an Olympic gold medal. The great Pete Sampras didn't manage that, and so far, neither has the potentially greater Roger Federer. Yet to Agassi, despite his third-round exit, last year's U.S. Open was better than kissing the French Open trophy at Roland Garros. "That was the best tournament," Agassi says. He's speaking deliberately, still sounding overcome by the experience. "That last tournament was everything to me. That moment out there in New York was worth every... single... day for 21 years."

Those 21 years are over, though, and he's let them go. He doesn't miss the game. Even though the game was at the center of

his life for much of his life — ever since his dad hung tennis balls over his crib — he doesn't miss it. Agassi turned pro when he was 16; came of age on Centre Court when he won Wimbledon; and then, after sinking from No. 1 to No. 141 in the world, remarkably and respectably came back and won the French Open and four more majors. All of that, he says, was just a prelude to what he is now and will be for the next 21-plus years. And what, exactly, is that? He can't say. "I'm just a person with a passion," Agassi explains, looking resplendent in an all-white ensemble of a Varvatos T-shirt and his own cotton pants. "I have a passion to do something that leaves a mark, that affects people in the right way. I don't know what you call that."

Whatever you do call it, you most certainly don't call it "tennis player."

"As far as I'm concerned, tennis has only been a vehicle for me to do what we've done here," Agassi says, pointing out the window to the \$40 million five-acre campus of Agassi Prep, which has been built in the middle of one of Vegas's poorest neighborhoods. "The achievements I've had in tennis are not even in the same stratosphere as what we're doing here."

YOU KNOW THAT FUNNY, birdlike walk Agassi would do on the baseline before serving? Remember those little steps, that forward lean? It's not just a tennis thing — he actually walks that walk. He walks that walk as he strolls between buildings at Agassi Prep in the 108-degree, dry Vegas heat. He walks that walk as he passes a class of kids going in the other direction. He punches fists with them. They smile — giggle, even. But none of them seem all that excited to see the tennis legend, whose name is on the front of their school in big silver letters. Maybe they're used to him by now. School officials say Agassi visits about three dozen times a year, mostly to show potential donors around the campus.

Agassi is the head fund-raiser for the

Andre Agassi's New Game

WHAT: Grand Slam for Children

WHERE: MGM Grand Garden Arena, Las Vegas

WHEN: October 6, 2007

WHO: Jerry Seinfeld does stand-up. Carlos Santana plays music. Other special guests do other special things.

CONTACT: (702) 227-5700, www.agassifoundation.org/grand_slam.html, or info@agassi.net

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CELEBRATED WEEKEND



Andre Agassi's New York

The last time most of us saw you in New York, you were bidding the U.S. Open fans a tearful goodbye. What's it like now when you go back? The last time I was in New York — those are some of the greatest memories of my life. And I feel a lot of love when I'm in New York, absolutely. And I come prepared to give it a lot of love, too, because that city really deserves it. They've earned that.

When you visited New York to play in all those U.S. Open tournaments, were you able to get away from the court at all? Well, for years, going to New York was something I had to do professionally. So I never got to enjoy New York as fully as I wanted to. But whenever I got the chance to sneak little pieces of it, I would.

Surely you were able to sneak a little prematch meal or two during all those U.S. Opens. Do you have a favorite New York restaurant? Oh yeah. Eating was a big part of preparation. And there's nearly no place in the world that provides that as effectively as New York. I always loved going to Campagnola Restaurant. It's right at 74th Street and First Avenue.

It sounds like one of those old-school, only-in-New York Italian places. Yeah, absolutely. It feels like my home away from home. If you go there, ask for Frankie D.

What about hotels? You must have sought out a few good places to get some rest before the tournaments. We definitely bounced around with hotels over the years. The last couple of years, we actually rented a house because we had the kids. But I've stayed at the Lowell many times. I love the Lowell. And you can never really go wrong with the Four Seasons there.

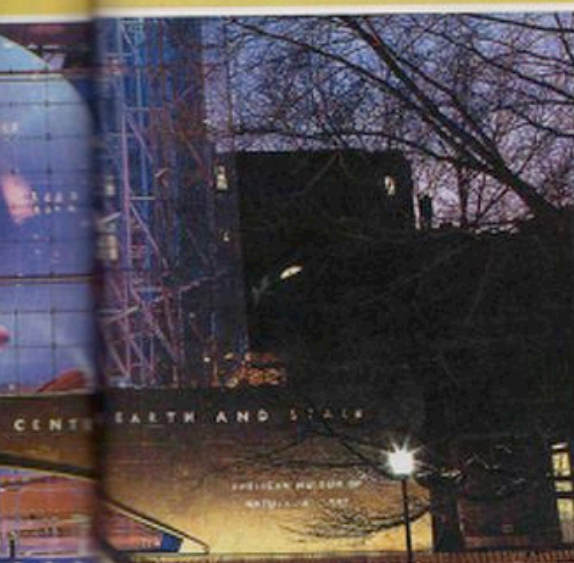
Are there any attractions you like to visit, outside the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center in Flushing, Queens? There are so many. But in New York, there's nothing quite as nice as walking around the streets. Central Park was a big attraction for us. That park can teach you a lot about life. We've spent a lot of time there just to people-watch. Or sometimes we've gone just to horse around with the kids. Also, the Museum of Natural History is fantastic. I think my son knows that place now inside and out. He absolutely loves it.

And how about shopping? Do you have any favorite places? Shopping is something I haven't spent a lot of time doing. When you're in New York, shopping, by definition, requires a lot of walking around, but usually

Andre Agassi Charitable Foundation. Among other things, that means he presides over the blowout Grand Slam for Children gala; the public is invited, A-list stars perform, and millions of dollars are raised (see "Andre Agassi's New Game," page 43). To date, the foundation has raised \$60 million for various causes, including the Boys & Girls Clubs in Las Vegas. The vast majority of the money goes to help underprivileged kids. Agassi ensures that by paying the ad-

ministrative costs from his own pocket.

Though others benefit from the foundation, the school is the main recipient of its largesse. Agassi believes that is the most focused way to spend the donations, the most direct way to help kids. Agassi Prep itself is helped by local and state governments. Since it is a charter school, the governments fund it at the same rate they fund other schools in Nevada. The Agassi foundation covers the gap between that amount and



I'm there preparing and resting for the Open. But the shopping is obviously awesome there. So when I have gotten out, I've spent a lot of time down in the SoHo area, going to the John Varvatos shop. John is a pretty special guy.

You're from Las Vegas and still make your home there. How does New York compare? Las Vegas and New York are both can-do cities. They both have cultures and undercurrents of believing. "If I can dream it, I can do it." I mean, Las Vegas has been built in the middle of a desert. We think anything is possible here. New York is the same way. Plus, friends in New York are friends for a lifetime, and the same goes here — even in business. Las Vegas is one of the few places where business is still done on a handshake.

Okay, so we need a prediction. Who do you think is going to take the men's title at this year's U.S. Open? Do you think Nadal might finally beat Federer off the clay? Oh, that's hard to believe. Don't get me wrong: Nadal is an amazing athlete, and to watch his domination on clay — it's been one of the greatest accomplishments in sports. I assure you of that, as far as difficulty goes. But Fed does not leave a lot for the pickings on any other surface. He's proven that. He's a bigger favorite than we've ever seen before. I'm certainly not going out on a limb to pick him, but I wouldn't bet against him.

the national per-pupil average.

It's complicated. And, actually, Agassi explains it better. He is encyclopedic when it comes to the details of the school and his foundation. "Nevada is 49th in the U.S. for per-pupil allocation," Agassi says. "The state is funded at about \$5,400 per student. The national average is about \$8,500. So the foundation gets the funding here up to the national average." That's important because if the school is successful, it will prove that

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you don't have to spend *that* much more to give public school kids an exemplary education. "Keeping our funding at the national average removes all the excuses for anyone to not do something like this," Agassi says.

Still, Agassi Prep has had its share of administrative problems — keeping enough teachers on staff among them — since opening in 2001 with a limited enrollment and just a few grades up and running. But momentum now seems on the school's side. Campus construction will be completed this fall and ready for grades K-11, and in August 2008, Agassi Prep will welcome a full K-12 enrollment of 650 students. The first graduating class will continue on to college in 2009, thanks to the focus on funding college scholarships. Even if just a handful of 2009 grads were to proceed to college on scholarships — that's the objective of exemplary education — it would be an astonishing achievement, given that Agassi Prep's gleaming, modern warren of multi-colored buildings is located in a neighborhood that, while not physically far from the glitz of the Strip, is a world removed from

the casinos' riches. Most of the students come from within a two-mile radius of the school; 70 percent come from one-parent homes. Were it not for Agassi Prep, most of these kids would have no shot at higher education.

That's something Agassi can relate to. He left regular school at age 13 to go to a famed tennis academy, and at age 16, he left the academy to turn pro. Maybe that's why he's so motivated by the potential the school has. Certainly that's why he doesn't mess around with lesson planning. "I dropped out of school in the eighth grade and got my degree through correspondence," Agassi says, smiling. "So you don't want me anywhere near the curriculum. I'd have no idea what I was doing."

He knows exactly what he's doing with Agassi Prep, though. He wants to build a model that can work all over Nevada and all over the country. That's why the school's funding is capped at the national average — to prove that every state can do something like this. This is what Agassi's talking about when he says his tennis career isn't in

the same stratosphere as Agassi Prep; he's talking about the potential. You think describing him as "Andre Agassi, eight-time Grand Slam winner" is impressive? Try "Andre Agassi, man who helped reinvent the American educational system." Now *that's* a legacy.

"But," Agassi cautions, "we have to be successful here first. We've got to go through the trial and errors of K-12 and of graduating kids and sending them to great scholarships. If we can do that, then we'll discuss with our state how we can get our statewide funding up to the national average and how can we duplicate this. I've met a lot of people who would personally fund something like this on a national level if they knew it was going to work. So that's our goal — to make it work."

SO MAYBE YOU'RE WONDERING about his back. No, it doesn't hurt anymore. The bulging disks and sciatica that nearly kept him from that final moment on center court at the U.S. Open are gone now. "If I had known it would feel like this, I might have

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CELEBRATED WEEKEND

retired a long time ago," Agassi says, smiling, the corners of his eyes crinkling infectiously. He pauses for a moment and then retracts the statement: "No, that's not true. My career in its entirety is sort of what gives me the peace now. But it does feel great to live without the drama of tennis and yet to still have a lot of outlets to express myself and to achieve goals. It feels like I get all the benefits and none of the costs."

With \$31 million in career earnings, three times that — maybe more — in career endorsement earnings, plus monies from a variety of smart business dealings (to name just one, Agassi was a member of the group that bought, refurbished, and, within a year, resold Vegas's famed Golden Nugget casino for a reported \$150 million profit), a man could do a lot for himself. But Agassi has no plans to just sit on his windfall. In addition to the charity work, he and his wife, tennis champ Stefanie Graf (no one who knows her calls her Steffi) are actively involved in a medley of businesses — resorts, restaurants, fitness clubs, furniture design, fragrances. (Sure, why not?) These are not investments that have been made passively. As with the foundation and Agassi Prep, Agassi doesn't just drop his money off in a bag somewhere and head for the golf course. "Everything we're doing in business now is something that grabs me," he says. "That's why I'm involved. I've said no to a thousand things over the years. For me, saying yes isn't easy, because once I do, I know what that means for me. That means really caring about it in a significant way."

His business partners agree. They say the Agassi you saw on the court in his most formidable years — the guy who carefully measured his opponents, broke down their strategy, and then methodically took them apart with his own grinding game — is the same guy you end up doing business with. Except he hits stuff far less frequently. "When Andre commits to something, he really gets involved," says his friend and business partner Michael Mina, a celebrated chef. He and Agassi own Seablue and Nob-hill in Vegas's MGM Grand, as well as six other restaurants and five more that are under construction in places everywhere from Detroit to Mexico City. "Andre gets really interested in the kind of minute details that most other people of his caliber don't care about."

He Said...

Here are the spots that score points with Andre Agassi when he's in New York.

LODGING

Four Seasons Hotel New York, very expensive, (212) 758-5700, www.fourseasons.com/newyork
The Lowell, very expensive, (212) 838-1400, www.lowellhotel.com

DINING

Campagnola Restaurant, expensive, (212) 861-1102

SHOPPING

John Varvatos, SoHo, (212) 965-0700, www.johnvarvatos.com

ATTRACTIONS

American Museum of Natural History, (212) 769-5100, www.amnh.org
Central Park, www.centralparknyc.org

To evidence how Agassi's thirst for details extends even outside the conference room, Mina recounts the time he personally taught Agassi how to make a versatile base for soups. "He and Stefanie eat a lot of vegetable soups," Mina says, proving that people do call her Stefanie. "So as I taught him the base, he wanted to know, every step of the way, the exact — *exact* — details. Not just the measurements of the recipe but everything down to exactly how many minutes you had to blend the soup."

So that's funny. And, sure, the ways Agassi does business and learns to make soup do parallel the way he played tennis — more or less. But soup, and especially business, is not a game; tennis is. Tennis is fun. It's a winner down the line. A service break. Game. Set. Match. Championship. And the crowd goes wild! Business is boring. Can you imagine Rafael Nadal grunting over the design of a settee?

Well, imagine this: One of Agassi's many business partners, Mike Kreiss, president of Kreiss, a San Diego-based high-end furniture maker, swears he's seen Agassi do something similar. "Andre is very animated when he likes something," says Kreiss, who has worked with Agassi and Graf to develop AGK, the Agassi Graf Collection by Kreiss. "When we decide on something, he's very gung ho. He'll put his fist up in the air and say, 'Come on!' He's an irresistible force."

CANON MIGHT WANT TO TRY THIS slogan: "Irresistibility is everything." No? Well, Kreiss is still right. Andre Agassi is an ir-

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& Ke

Grill 225
CHARLESTON,
Proprietor: Nick
Executive Chef: I

McKendrick
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Rick

Metropolit
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Proprietor: Joe M

Gene & G
CHICAGO, IL
Proprietors: Tony

Rainwater
SAN DIEGO, CA
Proprietors: Lau

St. Elmo S
INDIANAPOLIS
Proprietors: Stev

Ill Forks
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Austin, TX
Proprietors: Cur

Pierpont's
KANSAS CITY
Proprietor: Rod

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Visi

resistible force. He proved to be that with tennis fans, winning them back after those rebellious early days, when he mouthed off more than he won. He has changed since then too. Obviously. And not as obviously. For instance, as a rebellious teen, he once (allegedly) wore lipstick during a match. Yet for the photo shoot at Agassi Prep, when asked, "Do you normally wear foundation

during these shoots?" Agassi stared, his rye-whiskey-colored eyes wider than usual, and whispered, "I don't even know what that is." Ah, how soon we forget.

Still, when it comes to his charity work, irresistibility is everything. This guy is not just cutting some checks and donning a tux once a year. He's living this stuff. Life after tennis, he says, is a "canvas to impact people

in a much more profound way for a much longer period of time than just two hours on the tennis court." And there's already plenty of paint on that canvas. Agassi can see it everywhere he goes in Las Vegas. Take a couple of years ago, when he was having Easter brunch at a restaurant there with his family, his whole family, including Graf, the kids — Jaden (five years old) and Jaz (three years old) — and various others, for a total of 16 people. In the middle of that crowd, a restaurant worker managed to approach Agassi. "He had been in gangs," Agassi says. "But one day, he went to the Boys & Girls Clubs, which we support here, and he said the opportunities there got him off the streets, changed his life. He's now been working for several years and has a family on the way. He said he would be dead if it weren't for the Boys & Girls Clubs."

"There are many stories of lives that are affected, and many you don't even know. That's the fun part, the ripple effect. It's not even a ripple effect — it's like a tsunami. It starts small, and it ends huge. You change a child's life now, and how they affect the world, well, that's undiscovered. So you just wait with anticipation."

If you're Andre Agassi, while you're waiting, you and your pals Lance Armstrong and Mia Hamm, along with some other very successful names in sports, found Athletes for Hope (www.athletesforhope.org), an organization aimed at helping the rich and famous and strong and fast connect with the best charities. "I started my foundation because I got tired of giving my time and money only to see that the money never made it to where it was intended to go," Agassi says. "What we want to do is to help other athletes avoid those problems. They've got only a limited amount of time in a career as it is. They need to be focused."

Are you seeing it yet? His school may go. His foundation may help create other foundations. It'll create a tsunami of change. And one day, as Agassi envisions it, kids won't be looking up to athletes because they're rich or because they wear neon shirts and cool sneakers. No, he sees it like this: "Just imagine a child one day dreaming not of being in a commercial but of changing a life. That would be something." **EW**

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Washington, D.C.-based freelance writer JOSEPH GUINTO interviewed Homer Simpson for the April 1, 2007, issue of *American Way*.

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