

Tennis star now serves ailing kids



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By SUSAN HOGAN/ALBACH / The Dallas Morning News

A van pulled into the driveway of Children's Medical Center of Dallas. Inside was a mother wanting care for her daughter, but worried about the expense.

Arriving at the same time was former tennis star Andrea Jaeger, who leads the Silver Lining Foundation in Aspen, Colo., for children with cancer. Overhearing the woman's troubles, she insisted on picking up the tab.

"That's Andrea," said her assistant, Maja Muric. "Every day she does stuff like this. If you ask, she'll tell you that God put her here to help that family."

This was Mother's Day, and Ms. Jaeger had flown to Dallas with gifts for children on the cancer ward, including copies of her new spiritual memoir, *First Service* (Health Communications, \$21.95).

Ms. Jaeger, 38, grew up in Chicago, turned pro at age 14 and quickly soared to No. 2, scoring victories over Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova. When a shoulder injury ended her career at age 19, she embraced it as a new beginning.

"I felt God saying, 'Now you're going to help kids full-time,' " she said.

She used her \$1.4 million in tennis earnings as seed money for the foundation, begun in 1990. Young cancer patients, in groups of 20, fly to Aspen for a week of support and activities, such as horseback riding and whitewater rafting.

Earlier Sunday, Ms. Jaeger sat down to breakfast at a Dallas hotel and ordered an omelet. ("No bread or coffee please.") The once-shy teen with pigtails and braces is now outgoing and genial.

She's recently given her testimony at televangelist Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral, and other Christian venues. But for most of her life, she hasn't talked publicly about her faith.

Ms. Jaeger said her parents never took her to church. Still, she felt a divine presence and committed herself to God as a child. Only later did she learn about Jesus.

"I didn't have a Bible or a manual on how to communicate with God, but it happened naturally," she wrote in her book.

Fame isolated her from schoolmates, and her youth alienated her from veteran tennis players. She said God became her best friend and she heard his voice guiding her.

"By the time I was shattering tennis records, I was not only walking toward God for my main companionship, I was sprinting," she wrote. "He didn't love me more when I won a match, and he certainly didn't distance himself from me when I lost."

Her faith journey, as recounted in the book, was a revelation to some friends, including supermodel Cindy Crawford.

"I've known her a long time, but didn't know this," Ms. Crawford said in a telephone interview. "I called her after reading the book. I was just so proud of her for being willing to put it out there. She didn't hold anything back."

Ms. Jaeger earned an associate's degree in theology by taking correspondence courses. She visits congregations regularly in hopes of finding a spiritual home and the church fellowship she's never had.

Her learning curve has been steep, she said.

"At some churches there's kneeling or holy water, and at other churches it's completely different," she said. "I'm relying on God's direction."

On the tennis circuit, Ms. Jaeger often surprised hospitalized children with presents. She related to the isolation they felt.

Veteran players were often icy to the young prodigy. And with victory came heartache.

"I worked hard and won games, but then I'd walk into the locker room and see my opponent bawling," Ms. Jaeger said. "I saw what people were doing to win and the price they were paying. It was starting to affect my soul."

Once, she slipped away from a tournament to speak at a school where there had been a rash of teen suicides. She had not sought publicity, but the press captured her visit.

The next day, she received a verbal thrashing from a top player: "What made you do that? You need to stop it! You're making us look bad."

She doesn't name names.

"The book isn't about criticizing people," Ms. Jaeger said. "It's about lifting up what God has done."

For two years, as she was creating the foundation, Ms. Jaeger worked as an airline ticketing agent and used the flying benefits for doing research, fundraising and helping children.

Her foundation's first contributor was fellow tennis star John McEnroe. An Aspen couple donated 10 acres of land. Businessman Ted Forstmann put \$1.7 million toward an 18,000-square-foot facility.

Programs are customized so no child sits on the sidelines.

"They get to abandon being treated like a sick person," said Jennifer Boisture, 31, a Dallas medical student and two-time volunteer. "There, having cancer is normal. The children really bloom."

And share their deepest fears.

"They're afraid to close their eyes at night because they're afraid of never waking up," Ms. Jaeger said. "One might have lost a leg. Another might have lost her hair. Or there's someone who isn't going to get any more treatment because the doctor says nothing will work."

Spirits are sometimes lifted with the help of celebrities, including Andre Agassi, Pete Sampras and David Robinson. Kevin Costner takes children fishing at his nearby ranch. Ms. Crawford, who lost a brother to leukemia, helps children accept how cancer has changed their appearance.

"Andrea does this for all the right reasons and it shines through her actions," Ms. Crawford said. "She is utterly selfless and completely devoted to helping others."

Ms. Jaeger must raise \$2.3 million annually in donations to keep the foundation going. In addition, she underwrites reunions, family retreats, college scholarships, internships and, for children who can't travel, programs that come to them.

Someday she hopes to build a chapel.

"At times, I feel God nudging me to preach," she said and laughed. "It will be interesting in 10 years to see where I am. I have a feeling that I'm not going to be content just sitting in the pews."

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