Leading on and off the court

Kilmer Middle School’s Reilly Tran was named to the first-ever USTA junior leadership team

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Kilmer Middle School eighth grader Reilly Tran says that she has always wanted to become either a professional tennis player or a surgeon.

While those two career paths may seem completely unrelated, they point to the character traits - athleticism and empathy - that earned Reilly a spot on the United States Tennis Association’s inaugural Junior Leadership Team.

“Just helping people is the main thing,” Reilly, 14, said to explain her interest in the field of medicine.

For now, though, she is more focused on tennis, which she has played since she was 5 years old and has been a major influence on her personality.

“I think the competitiveness and the people have affected me in a good way,” she said. “It just makes me a better person. Leadership skills and teamwork, those are probably the more important skills that it’s helped with because it will help in life, not just on the court.”

Reilly was one of 29 players overall, and one of 14 girls, named to the USTA Junior Leadership Team on Mar. 22.

The team recognizes junior tennis players who exhibit leadership, sportsmanship and good character on and off the field. Honored players come from across the U.S. and were all nominated by their USTA regional section for their contributions to tennis and the surrounding community.

Dunn Loring resident Reilly Tran competes in the 2016 ASICS Easter Bowl, which featured top junior tennis players from around the country, in Palm Springs, Calif.

A competitive tennis player since she was 7, Reilly cites Yugoslavian player Monica Seles as her favorite player due to their similar playing styles, but it was her family who originally interested her in the sport.

Reilly’s parents, Dan and Carol Tran, met while playing tennis, and they still play as a hobby, though an injury prevented Carol from competing beyond college. Reilly’s older brother plays at a high school level.

Among Reilly’s strongest memories are the endless summer days when she would practice tennis with her mother at the park.

“My parents and my coaches have probably been my biggest influence because they’ve always supported me,” she said.

The word perseverance frequently comes up when Carol Tran talks about her daughter.

Even when she was young, Reilly practiced as much as five hours every day, and she now travels at least once a month to compete in tournaments, many of them held out of state. She puts this number of states that she’s played in at 20.

Though she allows that the hectic schedule can be demanding for the family, Carol Tran says that watching her daughter grow as a player and person has been rewarding, even if the regular travel makes it more difficult for them to stage family tennis matches as she once envisioned when teaching her children how to play.

“It’s been very fun,” Carol said. “We’ve really allowed it to be her journey, not ours. This isn’t something that we’re trying to live through her.”

Reilly’s work has paid off so far. The Dunn Loring resident has been one of the top girls in USTA’s Mid-Atlantic 14-and-under singles rankings and currently ranks at 11 nationally in that age group. She’s also the reigning USTA National Clay Court doubles champion in the girls’ 14 age level.

Just last week, Reilly flew to Palm Springs, Calif., to compete in the 2016 ASICS Easter Bowl, which lasted from Apr. 2 to 10 and served as a showcase for some of the best 18-and-under tennis players in the country.

Reilly competed in the girls 16 category, meaning that she faced many older players. Though she was defeated by Alexa Noel from Summit, N.J., in the round of 64 on the singles side, she and partner Angelica Blake of Boca Raton, Fla., made it to the girls 16 doubles final before losing to Chloe Beck (Watkinsville, Ga.) and Emma Navarro (Charleston, S.C.) on the Southern team.

“I feel that was a really good tournament,” Reilly said of the Easter Bowl. “I had a really good partner, and she was really nice. It was just a great experience.”