When Air Force veteran Chris first joined ThanksUSA’s adaptive tennis clinic, Coach Brenda Gilmore had to teach him how to grip a racquet. In just over 10 months, Chris is now volleying, serving, and drilling with his fellow Veterans on the court. After a debilitating motorcycle accident in 2010, doctors weren’t sure if Chris would ever walk again, let alone hold his own on a tennis court!

Chris says, “When I come to tennis, I hang out with my friends and I feel good.”

When Tennis Thanks the Troops and JTCC first envisioned Tennis Corps, we wanted to bring Veterans and Junior Players together on and off the court. Chris and his partner Mackenzie, a high school senior, are a great example of this. She says, “Working with Chris, I have come to learn the importance of appreciating the little things. Each week I find that it is these little things, such as him remembering my name or all the lines on the court, that make all the difference.”
Before her military service, Army Veteran Blanca played tennis professionally in her home country of Puerto Rico. Although her military service would take her away from tennis for many years, Tennis Corps has brought the game back into her life.

Blanca said, “At the beginning of the war, I got injured so I came back. I met Coach Brenda and came back to the game, and I love it!”

Blanca is a hard-hitter on and off the court. She doesn’t let her physical injuries get in the way of her passion for tennis. Her drive and tenacity are apparent to all who play with her. One junior player shared, “I love playing with Blanca! She hits hard and doesn’t quit.”

Blanca drives almost two hours, one way, to participate in Tennis Corps at JTCC in College Park, Maryland.

“These kids remind me of how I used to play when I was young. They make me smile.”
Marine Corps veteran Henry joined the ThanksUSA Veterans Adaptive Tennis Clinic in 2016 and it didn’t take him long to develop a love for the game. Before he could afford a new one, Henry mended an old tennis racquet so that he could practice between clinics.

“I think what inspired me to want to do it more, is the fact that my kids and grandkids laugh at me, wondering why the old man wants to play tennis!”

Henry’s infectious laugh can be heard often on the court at Tennis Corps — his positivity makes him a favorite among the veterans and junior players alike.

But life hasn’t always been easy for Henry; he credits tennis as a way for him to overcome some of the emotional wounds that remain from his service in Vietnam. “It helps relieve a lot of the stressful thoughts I have in my mind from the deals I’ve been through in my life.”
You don’t have to be on the tennis court to know that Army Veteran Sharon is playing — her irresistible laugh and encouraging words echo throughout the Tennis Corps clinic. Each week, Sharon relieves the stress and anxiety she lives with daily by volleying with friends, pushing her physical limits, and hitting the ball HARD!

“Tennis,” she says, “is another way I can express myself because of my disabilities. It’s my way of getting some of the agony, stress and anxiety out without having to express it other ways.”

Sharon has a powerful connection with the junior players because she leads with her heart and is encouraging and welcoming to everyone. Her example has allowed these traits to be mirrored back to the Veterans of Tennis Corps.

In Sharon’s words, “A lot of people in society find us a little stand-offish, like we were different because of our disabilities, but these kids, they embrace us.”
As a child, Jimmy was brought to the United States as a refugee from Uganda. “When I got to America, I know my life began. I wanted to give back to America so I joined the Marine Corps.”

Jimmy served three tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. He was severely injured in his final tour and endured years of rehabilitation. Jimmy now has a young son of his own and is striving to teach him the lessons he has learned about the importance of family, freedom and service.

Tennis Corps helps Jimmy stay physically fit and mentally strong and reminds him that lost things have a way of becoming found again.

“I played tennis in high school — that was in the 90s. After high school, I dropped my racquet, and I just found it last year. I’m getting back to tennis, and it’s getting me back on my feet.”
Now a retired Chief Informations Systems Technician, Shaun faithfully served the United States Navy for 20 years. He completed three deployments and supported missions such as Operation Enduring Freedom, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita Relief, Unified Protector, and Odyssey Dawn.

In his spare time, he enjoys playing tennis, especially with his wife Janice and two boys Bryce and Brody. He taught his wife to play, and they have enjoyed playing in leagues and tournaments together, as well as sharing their passion for tennis with their children.

As a family, they recently participated in the Community Tennis Festivals at JTCC in College Park, Maryland. Shaun also participates in Tennis Corps, an adaptive tennis clinic aimed toward military Veterans.

“Tennis Corps has helped me to stay fit and mentally resilient. It also gave me the opportunity to share my experiences and mentor my fellow Veterans and the students at JTCC.”
Veteran Dilette (Dee) spent 22 years in the military as a Critical Care Nurse. Near the end of her career, she was diagnosed with a rare illness that left her paralyzed for two years. After years of in-patient rehab and outpatient therapy, she doesn’t let it slow her down.

“I just keep trying to live life to the fullest, and tennis has become a part of my life now.”

Dee is a leader on and off the court. She brings the group together by remembering birthdays and celebrating milestones. She is an example to the junior champs who have been influenced by her perseverance and optimism.

In Dee’s words, “Coming to tennis is a joy!”
Growing up, Kenneth Best, or “Best” as his friends call him, was taught to work hard and shoot for the stars. “My mom used to say, ‘Your name is Best, so be the Best!’” And that’s exactly what motivated him to enlist in the Army during the height of the Viet Nam War.

Serving in the 101st Airborne Division, Best fought in the Tet Offensive, service which awarded him a Purple Heart, a Bronze Star and three Air Commendation Medals.

Best embraces Tennis Corps as a means of physical, emotional, and social rehabilitation. He especially loves motivating the junior players with words of encouragement and stories of his military service.

“I see service members who have lost limbs and they’re climbing mountains and running marathons. If they can do that, we can do anything!”
U.S. Navy Veteran Charles grew to love tennis during his high school years. “My cousin taught me the game, and I got to where I could beat him, so he found other players that I could compete with,” he shared. “I was really good back then.” It wasn’t long after high school that Charles enlisted in the Navy as a radioman. That was during the height of the Viet Nam War.

Tennis Corps has given Charles the opportunity to dust off his tennis racquet and to rekindle his love for the game. Charles said, “I enjoy coming out and playing with the junior champs because they remind me of myself at that age.”

Charles credits his time in the Navy for giving him focus, accountability, and resilience — qualities that the junior athletes look up to.

“I know you’re going to get better each and every day,” Charles tells the junior players. “Keep working hard and you’ll make your dreams come true.”
Military service is a big part of Navy Veteran Carol’s family. Carol served in the U.S. Navy for more than 20 years in aircraft maintenance, recruiting and communications. Her husband is retired Navy as well, and her son is an engineer who works at the Naval Air Station Patuxent River.

Throughout her time in service, Carol moved 14 times and endured several deployments. Now, she stays active by participating in ThanksUSA Veterans Tennis programs and especially enjoys the relationships formed with other Veterans.

“I appreciate the accepting, caring group of friends. We laugh a lot and have so many fun times!”
Tennis Corps instructor Brenda Gilmore was severely injured in a hit-and-run accident at 27 years old. “It was a struggle,” she said. “People did not accept folks with disabilities readily. Playing tennis brought acceptance for me. I learned how to do something that able-bodied people could do, and I did it even better.”

Brenda is currently President and CEO of Prince George’s Tennis & Education Foundation in Maryland, providing opportunities for young people to excel academically, athletically and socially through tennis.

She has been involved in ThanksUSA’s Tennis Corps from the very beginning. The success of the program as well as the improvement within the Veteran players are truly a testament to her coaching skills.

“It’s been quite rewarding for me to see not only the progress of the participants but to see how they enjoy each other’s company as much as they do learning to play tennis. I think this is truly one of the highlights of their week!”
Gwen “Breezy” has been playing and coaching tennis for most of her adult life. She is an avid supporter of sports and a lifelong athlete. Breezy brings a spirit of encouragement, enthusiasm and swag to Tennis Corps. She connects with the Veterans and Junior Champs in a remarkable way and — just as her nickname suggests — she breezes life and laughter into the group.

When asked how tennis became a part of her life, Breezy says, “I actually didn’t choose tennis, I think tennis chose me. I played all other sports in college basketball, baseball, golf — I did everything but play tennis. When I moved from Connecticut to DC, my friends asked about giving me a going away gift: I said ‘What about a tennis racquet?’”

“That’s when my love of tennis began. But tennis chose me, and I chose Tennis Corps.”