

From Lithuania to UF Club Tennis: The Story of an International Gator

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“Playing Tennis is my universal language and how I could feel connected to home even miles away. ”

That is how Lithuanian and Cuban tennis player Elietta Said described what tennis means to her.

[“International students comprise 7.6% of the student body population at UFIC” according to College Factual.](#) International students make up an important part of UF and Elietta Said is the perfect example of how these students are assets to our campus.

Said began playing tennis as young as three years old and played in her first tournament at six. Growing up in the small town of Panevezys, Said's tennis career couldn't be nourished due to a lack of resources in the sport in her hometown.

This was the start of her newest journey. Her parents moved their family to Orlando, Florida, when she was 5. Soon, she began to compete and train against kids her age, many of whom she still plays with to this day. Because of that, she values the tennis community she has been surrounded by since her big move.

Currently the 19-year-old sophomore holds several titles as a member of the UF Club tennis A Team, the most competitive division at the club level. She started at the 2024 Fall Invitational tournament where the Gators won first place. Said has found a sense of community and purpose as a Gator, through tennis and beyond.

Similarly, an international gator, Ana Bonilla moved from Guatemala to Gainesville this fall. She was walking into unknown territory with endless opportunities at her fingertips. Speaking to Bonilla, it's clear that she has grown as a student and a person in these short few months of being a Gator.

"The transition to UF was very easy....," she said. "It has challenged me to get out of my comfort zone, but I have learned a lot through it."

Bonilla and Said are not alone in this journey. [According to Boundless, "International student enrollment in the U.S. reached 1.58 million in 2024, a 5.3% increase from 2023."](#) The presence of international students transforms the culture of college campuses across the United States. Not only do they boost the community aspects of campuses, but international students are responsible for boosting the United States economy through their tuition as well. Many college campuses across the U.S. are thriving with the international influence of their students and have become a positive atmosphere for students and athletes alike.

The University of Florida club tennis A Team is a prime example. Said's home away from home is this team. She has been surrounded by the same fellow athletes growing up and stepped into a whole new world here in Gainesville. Yet, she has been driven by her team and felt the support in an unparalleled manner.

This high-stakes sport tests this community and makes their bond that much stronger. After the 2024 Fall Invitational win, "This gave us a bid for Nationals, and it was when I had never trained

harder in my life,” Said said. The Nationals tournament was held in Atlanta, Georgia, spanning six days of nonstop tennis.

Said has continued to compete in various tournaments such as the Gator Classic and she has even made it to the Gold bracket in her Sectionals tournament. All this to say, the support she feels from her fellow teammates fuels her and pushes her to be her best.

There is a community for every international student here at the University of Florida awaiting them. The choice to take such risks so young in life can be so rewarding for international students here at the University of Florida. Ana Bonilla, for example, has been in Gainesville for roughly two months and she has been pursuing opportunities “out of her comfort zone.” She says that this has all been worth it “It has challenged [her] ... but [she] learned a lot through it. Overall, it has been a good experience.”

Said and Bonilla may have different journeys but one thing remains the same: the University of Florida is their home away from home. A place where the challenge and the risk is worth it tenfold. A place where international students can thrive amongst their peers and find their purpose on campus.

[Take a look at Elietta Said's journey here at UF after travelling 5,223 miles away from home by clicking on this video.](#)

References

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