

[Articles](#) ➔ [2011](#) ➔ [May](#) ➔ [27th](#) ➔ [PAL launches young professionals group](#)

PAL launches young professionals group

05/27/2011

by Joe Wilhelm Jr.
Staff Writer

The Police Athletic League of Jacksonville launched the Young PAL Professionals at a reception at Suite in the St. Johns Town Center Wednesday.

The organization is seeking to recruit young professionals ages 21-45 to join an organization with a mission to "instill positive values, character and leadership skills by providing safe activities for the youth of Jacksonville."

A number of PAL board members were on hand to welcome young professionals and provide some information on the organization's programs.

"We would like to get more young professionals involved in the different PAL programs and this event was developed to stimulate that," said Lt. Derrick Mitchell of the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office, who is the executive director of PAL of Jacksonville. "It's a great cause that has a tremendous impact on the community."

PAL began locally in the 1960s and was later incorporated as a 501c3 youth agency to serve Jacksonville in 1972. Its purpose is to provide athletic, educational and mentoring programs that help deter crime, provide physical exercise and boost self-esteem. PAL opened its first facility in 1974 on McDuff Avenue, purchased the 33rd Street location in 1988, and opened its building in the Ed Austin Regional Park in 2001.

In the fall of 2002, PAL started an after school youth leadership program at the Eastside community center and in 2004, PAL partnered with the Sheriff's Office and the City to make considerable capital and program improvements to Mallison Park.

Athletic programs include basketball, boxing, cheerleading, football, karate, lacrosse, soccer and track and field. After school educational programs help children receive mentoring, FCAT preparation, homework assistance, team building and life-skills training.

The Public Defender's Office has teamed up with PAL to host a summer camp and it will host 40 participants this summer.

"We are working with the youth today so they don't turn into our clients of tomorrow," said Matt Shirk, Public Defender for the Fourth Judicial Circuit. "Our goal is to have no clients."

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Public Defender Matt Shirk with Assistant Public Defender Michelle Barki.

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