

INSPIRATION

GOOD NEWS

‘Headed in the right direction’

Jacksonville’s Jewish Community Alliance tops North American peers

Beth Reese Cravey Jacksonville Florida Times-Union | USA TODAY NETWORK

The Jewish Community Alliance in Jacksonville, which provides physical, recreational, educational, social and cultural opportunities for all faiths, outshone its peers in all of North America in a recent survey.

The Tucson-based Jewish Community Centers Association of North America conducted a third-party survey of its membership in 2023. The results showed that the Jacksonville center, which opened in 1988, had the highest customer satisfaction rate and was the friendliest, most engaged and frequently visited.

“The energy ... on campus is palpable,” said Todd Rockoff, association president and chief operations officer. The center’s membership growth is “higher than the trend throughout the country,” he said. “Where many Jewish Community Centers are still working their way back from the drop during the pandemic, the JCA has the highest member retention in the nation.”

The survey results “put a big smile on my face,” CEO Adam Chaskin said. They show “how people feel about us” and confirm the center is “headed in the right direction,” he said.

Among other benchmarks, the center was first in its peer group for average programs per member, at 2.8, and for members using at least three programs, at 54%. About 76% of its members surveyed called the center’s program quality “truly outstanding,” the second highest in the peer group.

Located on San Jose Boulevard, the center has about 215 year-round staff and 2,600 household members, which translates to about 8,000 people, Chaskin said. About 60% are non-Jewish.

Andrea Seebol Smithers has lifelong family ties to the center. Her grandparents were founding members, her parents and their children made regular visits and she, husband Ben and their children are doing the same.

“We go there all the time,” she said. “I wanted to give my kids the same sense of community and belonging that my parents and grandparents gave me.”

Smithers remembers swimming at the center with her grandfather and taking babysitting and CPR courses. As an adult, she favors the gym, yoga classes and sauna and enrolled her children in the center’s preschool.

Meanwhile, the center’s citywide unity push with the First Coast YMCA continues. And the center has raised about \$13.8 million for its \$18 million capital campaign that will fund campus-wide improvements expected to be complete by late 2025, according to Chaskin.

The upgrades include adding pickleball courts, splash park and an outdoor exercise area, as well as

adding classrooms, heating the pool and making “behind-the-scenes” improvements to the center’s theater, he said.

“Every part of the building is being touched,” he said. “We’ve been an integral part of the community for 36 years. We want to make sure we have the facilities to continue to be an integral part of the community.”

The center rose from the 1983 closure of Beauclerc Country Club, which donated \$2 million in assets and about 7 acres for a Jewish community center, according to a 2013 Times-Union report.

Send Good News submissions to bcravey@jacksonville.com, 904-359-4109



The Jewish Community Alliance campus in Jacksonville. PROVIDED BY THE JEWISH COMMUNITY ALLIANCE

Ben Smithers walks daughter Charlotte Smithers to prekindergarten at Jacksonville’s Jewish Community Alliance. PROVIDED BY ANDREA SEEBOL SMITHERS

MORE GOOD NEWS



Ed White High School senior Nico Flowers shows off his 2024 Florida Boys & Girls Clubs Youth of the Year plaque. He later received the same honor for the Southeast U.S. and will compete for the clubs’ national Youth of the Year honor in September. PROVIDED BY BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS OF NORTHEAST FLORIDA

Ed White senior to compete for national Boys & Girls Clubs honor

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Nico Flowers, a graduating senior at Ed White High School and Youth of the Year for Boys & Girls Clubs of Northeast Florida, has won the same honor at the nonprofit’s state and regional levels.

In September he will compete to be named Boys & Girls Clubs of America’s National Youth of the Year in Atlanta.

The honors recognize Nico’s “exceptional leadership, academic excellence and commitment to serving his community,” according to the Jacksonville-based Northeast Florida clubs. “Nico has consistently displayed a passion for making a positive difference in the lives of others.”

Nico, 17, grew up in a household disrupted by domestic violence, alcoholism and, when he was 11, three years of homelessness. He credits his Ed White-based club for giving him hope, freedom and a place he belonged. The club provided “a sense of re-

sponsibility” and community service and a mentor — a local barber who taught him how to cut hair. Entrepreneur Nico now has 15 regular customers of his own.

He plans to attend Florida State University and major in political science.

The club “opened up a new world of personal growth and purpose,” he said, in a May 7 address to the Duval County School Board. “I am not bound by my past.”

Among his other honors are being a National Honor Society member, Mr. Ed White High School and Mr. Senior High for the city of Jacksonville.

Paul Martinez, president and CEO of the area clubs, said Nico is a “true role model for his peers and a valuable asset to our organization. We look forward to cheering him on as he continues his journey.”

The 56 Northeast Florida clubs provide after-school programs for about 5,000 youth in Clay, Duval, St. Johns and Alachua counties.

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