

## Building stronger families

Almost everyone knows that the YMCA is a non-profit organization that builds strong families by promoting exercise, youth sports, camps, swimming lessons and childcare. But if you haven't taken a close look at the Y lately, you just might be surprised at the breadth of its community outreach.

Besides health and fitness, the Y offers services that include adaptive sports, rehabilitation for the disabled, reading programs, leadership forums, teen development, arts and humanities enrichment, activities for older adults and much more.

The YMCAs of Florida's First Coast span five counties, carrying out their mission to build healthy spirits, minds and bodies. As part of this effort to positively impact the lives of those who live in the community, the Winston Family YMCA branch in Ponte Vedra, has been chosen to benefit from The MPS Group Championships for the second consecutive year.

The tournament charity dollars will go directly to provide financial assistance scholarships to families in need. The money will also fund various programs such as PrYme Time, which provides childcare before and after school, and to expand the successful Go Green swimming initiative piloted last year.

According to Nikos Westmoreland, director of communications for the YMCA of Florida's First Coast, the tournament donation helps the Y and its programs stay accessible to everyone.

"It doesn't matter what you look like, your age or where you come from. If the Y can provide something

to enhance your quality of life or make you safer, that's what we want to do," Westmoreland said. "We don't want to turn anyone away because they can't pay."

Westmoreland said the Y provided financial assistance for programs and memberships to more than 19,000 families across the First Coast last year. The funding amounted to more than \$3 million, and looking at current economic indicators, Westmoreland anticipates an even bigger need this summer.

"There is definitely a need ... perhaps more than ever," Westmoreland said. "The Y gave away more dollars than they ever had last year. In these uncertain economic times, people are seeing the need because it's all around them, and more people are responding. But we want to make all services available to everyone regardless of their ability to pay."

Closer to home, the children of St. Johns County will reap more benefits as tournament funds go to support the Go Green swimming initiative. The program offers structured swim lessons to campers who don't know how to swim — non-swimmers who would need to wear personal flotation devices (PFDs) and stay confined to the shallow end of the pool.

"With Go Green swim camp, we're taking the low-ability swimmer, teaching and enabling that child to swim without the assistance of a PFD," Westmoreland said. "It's recreational, but there's a big safety component, too. We're always around water, and it's important to know how to swim. It's potentially a lifesaving skill we're giving these kids."



Special

As part of the YMCA's swimming initiative, kids learn how to swim without personal flotation devices.

Go Green gets its name from the different colored bands the kids wear as they advance through the levels of swimming. Red signifies a non-swimmer, gold indicates medium ability, and the coveted green band symbolizes a safe swimmer. Last summer, 1,042 youngsters, ages 7 to 15, moved through the program, and 472 progressed at least one swimming level.

"All the kids were working toward green," Westmoreland said. "When you see their faces when they become a green-band swimmer, they're so proud you can't put a price on it."

The Winston Family YMCA is grateful for its partnership with The MPS Group Championships. According to Westmoreland, it's going to take more "solid partnerships and unique collaborations" of this nature to meet the needs that exist in the community.

