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— FIRST AMENDMENT TO THE CONSTITUTION

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COLUMNS

# Detroit youth, law enforcement still connect

As a former board member, I undeniably recognize the importance of the Detroit Police Athletic League (PAL). With so much discussion around our youth and our police officers in Detroit, I thought it time to check back in and see how things are going.



**KAREN DUMAS**

I was expecting an update on programs and plans but got something far more from my conversation with new CEO Fred Hunter and DPD Corporal Marcus Norwood: passion. In a city filled with people who come in and try to learn the community to help it, Hunter and Norwood are Detroit. They know its people, its problems and more importantly, its potential.

Started in 1969, PAL began as Police and Youth in Sports (PAYS), was Think Detroit PAL from 2006-2012 and became Detroit PAL in 2013, a stand-alone

and independent non-profit organization serving Detroit's youth. An intersection of youth, sports and law enforcement, its formal mission is to help youth to find their greatness.

"Everyone can be great," Hunter said. "We're here to present those opportunities."

He's been a part of the organization since 2006, and recently assumed the CEO position, a role he's both grateful for and committed to.

Both native Detroiters, each brings their experiences and expertise to the playbook for PAL. Norwood recalls his family's involvement with law enforcement and PAL, and proudly proclaims himself "A PAL kid since I was 6." His godfather and aunt were police officers, and his dad was a PAL coach.

Many of his friends were involved in or impacted by street activity or violence, giving him valuable insight into both worlds that he now uses in his role as lead youth development officer with PAL.

PAL's home, The Corner Ballpark, is

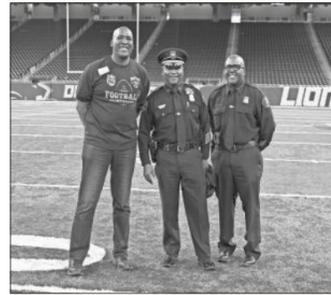
at Michigan and Trumbull avenues at the site of the old Tiger Stadium. But its reach is much bigger — and growing.

With more than 400,000 participants, PAL is now making a difference in Flint and Grand Rapids in partnership with the state, to expand community policing.

They are also leading the way with the Ford Critical Conversations program. Started virtually after the murder of George Floyd, the program is now in-person and allows for candid discussions about varying topics between law enforcement and youth. Cities such as Buffalo, Memphis and Houston are now duplicating the program.

"Providing a safe space to separate fact from fiction is important," said Norwood. "We are not hiding from our imperfections as officers while we actively work to build trust."

Hunter appreciates the great relationship with the community and leadership of DPD Chief James White. "We presently have 3 officers assigned to PAL. We also incorporate other officers



Diane Simpson

PAL CEO Fred Hunter, left, Detroit Police Chief James White and Deputy Chief Franklin Hayes.

as volunteers and support for programs and initiatives," Hunter said.

"PAL officers are part of the Chief's Neighborhood Liaison, which has other strategies for community policing and neighborhood engagement." And it shows.

While far from perfect, the city has not experienced the contentiousness

between the community and officers often seen in other urban areas around the country. Both Hunter and Norwood recognize the importance of connectivity, communication and positive exposure and engagement.

"We can't arrest our way out of our issues," Norwood said.

Hunter added: "While athletics is a core component of what we do, we never overlook or diminish the important or presence of the 'P' in our name."

Like other organizations, PAL took a hit and pivoted during the pandemic and is now looking to expand its reach to young people. Large donors are important, but so are smaller contributors and community-based support.

"We recognize and appreciate all support, but don't take it for granted," Hunter said. "To be our best, we need and reply upon the time talents and treasure of the community."

Karen Dumas is a columnist for The Detroit News and the co-host of "The No BS News Hour." Her column appears on Tuesdays.