

Community Connections: James Walson Shares How First Tee – Central Florida Teaches Kids Valuable Skills for On and Off the Course

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James E. Walson

James (“Jamie”) Walson, a shareholder and real estate attorney at Lowndes, currently serves on the First Tee – Central Florida Board of Directors. In recognition of National Golf Month, Jamie discusses how First Tee – Central Florida is developing local youth through the game of golf.

When did you first get involved with First Tee – Central Florida?

Although I was familiar with the name “First Tee,” it wasn’t until I met the Executive Director for First Tee – Central Florida in a golf league a few years back that I got to know the organization. He and I shared a very pleasant conversation about the organization, and I then invited him to speak to our attorneys so that we could all learn more about First Tee and its impact on the lives of local kids. His presentation was passionate and introduced us all to the true mission of First Tee – youth development through golf. Introducing kids to the game of golf is only one part of our program. The real goal is to develop great people through the values inherent in the game of golf: honesty, integrity, sportsmanship, and confidence. Years after that first meeting, I am proud to serve as a board member of the organization.

What attracted you to this organization in particular?

As a father of three boys and an avid golfer, it was a natural fit. Through my involvement, I’ve learned that First Tee is so much more than just teaching golf. Yes, the First Tee introduces the game of golf to kids (some of whom may not have had the opportunity to do so otherwise), but it more importantly teaches them valuable life lessons and leadership skills.

How have you benefited from your involvement?

Seeing firsthand how First Tee students apply what they've learned and achieve success both on and off the course is the greatest reward. I've had the honor and pleasure of watching First Tee students be the first to attend college in their family or take advantage of the unique leadership opportunities offered through the program. I've also benefited personally from meeting and working with the many wonderful individuals who serve alongside me on the board of directors.

What are some of the most important activities/work that First Tee – Central Florida does?

This year, First Tee – Central Florida will positively affect about 750 kids in our Golf and Life Skills Experience Program, 2500 kids in our community program and over 100,000 kids in our school program. The most impactful programming is the Golf and Life Skills Experience Program, which is offered at nine different locations in the region. Classes meet a minimum of once per week. While students come for the golf, the substance is really in the program's focus on the Nine Core Values of Honesty, Integrity, Sportsmanship, Respect, Confidence, Responsibility, Perseverance, Courtesy, and Judgment. These programs give First Tee the opportunity to work with students year-round and year after year. The amazing children who graduate from First Tee are change-makers in the community. I am particularly proud that the programming is available to any student, regardless of financial resources.

What do you hope that First Tee – Central Florida will achieve in the near future?

The demand for our programming is overwhelming, and we need to be smart about that growth. We are actively hiring and training coaches and resisting the temptation to stretch student-to-coach ratios so that we can continue to provide students with an engaging experience and individualized attention. My hope is that First Tee will be recognized as the preeminent youth development organization in Central Florida and will be widely found throughout the region so that even more children can benefit from the program.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about the First Tee – Central Florida [a specific program or event, or anything else]?

Although there are amazing programs throughout the year, one special event is the Dan Rich Family Fun Day. This is a relaxing day for families of any skill level to play golf in a scramble format and simply enjoy being together outside.

Do you have any additional message to share?

It is rare when you get the opportunity to merge your passion for a game with your passion for the community, and First Tee – Central Florida does just that. I would encourage individuals (golfers and non-golfers, alike!) and companies to donate, volunteer, and simply get involved. For more information, visit www.firstteecfl.org.