

Meet the Mayor: Jacksonville, Florida's Alvin Brown

When Alvin Brown took office as mayor of Jacksonville, Florida, in July 2011, he represented a new era of leadership for the River City. As the first African American voted into this office and the first Democrat elected to lead the city in 20 years, Mayor Brown ran on the vision of “taking Jacksonville to the next level,” and as an outdoor recreation enthusiast, parks and recreation was a major component of his plan. Jacksonville boasts the largest urban park system in the United States, providing facilities and services at more than 337 locations on more than 80,000 acres located throughout the city.

Prior to his mayoral term, Mayor Brown's career spanned the public, private and nonprofit sectors. During the Clinton administration, he served as former Vice President Al Gore's senior advisor for Urban Policy, co-chair of the White House Task Force on Livable Communities and vice chair of the White House Community Empowerment Board,

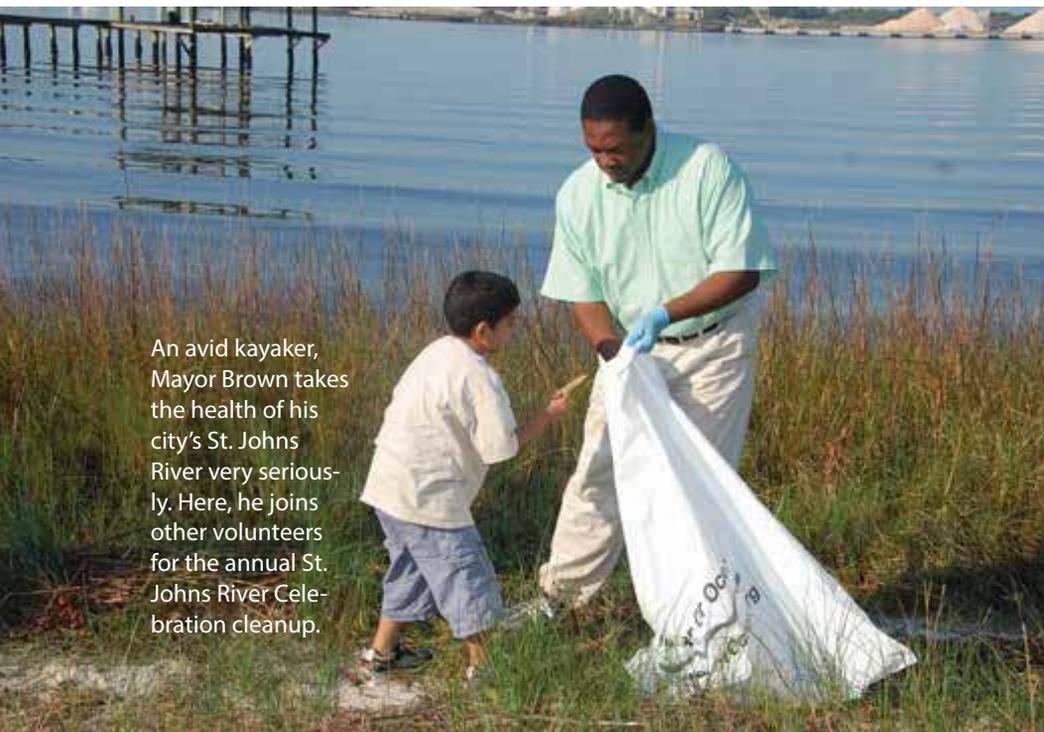
advising both President Clinton and Vice President Gore on a variety of issues related to community revitalization. Later, he served as executive director of the Bush/Clinton Katrina Interfaith Fund, president and CEO of the Willie Gary Classic Foundation and chairman of the board of the National Black MBA Association. Most recently, he

served as the executive in residence at Jacksonville University's Davis School of Business.

In June 2012, Mayor Brown announced his “People + Parks Connection” program, which was designed to get Jacksonville residents out and safely enjoying the city's new and improved parks, trails, kayak launches and swimming venues. He has since launched or led numerous events that illustrate his commitment to health and wellness as well as his belief in parks and recreation as a key contributor to the well-being of his city. Recently, he was also appointed to the National Park Service Advisory Board's Urban Advisory Committee, on which he will advise Department of the Interior leaders on ways to connect communities with opportunities in national parks.

Why do you think outdoor recreation is important to the health of both your city and its individual citizens, and what is your administration doing to promote outdoor recreation opportunities?

I am obviously someone who believes in parks and recreation — it's so important for our community. [Our large park system] offers plenty of opportunities for outdoor recreation for our residents and visitors alike. Jacksonville is home to the St. Johns River, which is considered to be the heart of our city. My goal is to help provide more access points to the river so citizens can get out and enjoy it while boating, kayak-



An avid kayaker, Mayor Brown takes the health of his city's St. Johns River very seriously. Here, he joins other volunteers for the annual St. Johns River Celebration cleanup.

ing, canoeing, paddling, boarding — all the ways people can get out and enjoy the water and Mother Nature. During my tenure, we have designated more than 20 new kayak launch sites on the St. Johns, and we have more in the works. In addition, we recently opened an 840-acre preserve that provides hiking, biking and equestrian trails, as well as access to our waterways.

A number of studies have shown that parks have an impact on economic growth and quality of life. That's one reason why we emphasize parks in Jacksonville, because improving the quality of life for our residents is instrumental in taking Jacksonville to the next level. Parks attract people to a city, and they lead to opportunities to create a healthier lifestyle. A lot of our young residents learn about teamwork while playing in the parks, and they learn about nature and the environment there, [so we want to] empower the next generation of young people who will become adults to really take advantage of our park system.

How has the People + Parks Connection program developed over the past two years?

It has developed very well — it's part of the priority of what I've focused on. For example, under my administration, we have taken a number of steps to make people more aware of these opportunities [highlighted through People + Parks Connection]. In addition to working with our local media, our JaxParks team created an online television program that highlights parks and recreation. The show features are toward parks and [relevant] experts with details about specific park programs. Under my administration, we are also putting

the final touches on our interactive map application, which I am very excited about. It will make it easier for people to access local parks and find the amenities they are seeking.

You recently led the 13th annual Mayor's Walk for Senior Wellness, which helps promote active lifestyles for seniors in Jacksonville. Why is senior wellness a particular focus for you?

My seniors! I love my seniors! Just today, I took a picture with Miss Jackson — she's 93 years old. She was at the senior walk a couple of weeks ago, and she walked a mile and a half with the mayor. This was her third walk with the mayor! I was raised with my mother and grandmother, so my grandmother has a lot to do with who I am today. We know people are living longer lives, and it's important that while people live longer lives, they may be on fixed incomes or have other constraints, so parks become a viable resource for them. They become destinations where for no money they can walk or they can ride a bike. We have Senior Olympics, and actually, next week I have the Mayor's Annual Fish-A-Thon with about 500 seniors at Hanna Park.

I encourage my colleagues to take advantage of their park system and invest in it. I think it's a way of improving the quality of life for their communities, encouraging a healthy lifestyle for young people, engaging and taking care of their seniors in their golden age, and getting them to work out and exercise and enjoy the outdoors. It is something that I truly believe in and am committed to. 🌱

— Interview by Danielle Taylor,
Senior Editor of Parks &
Recreation Magazine

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