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PHOTO BY CARI HACHMANN/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Kids make a whole lot of noise during an organized rally at the Police Activities League's annual summer camp at Marshall High School in southeast Portland.

Pumped for PAL Camp

Kids, families bond with police volunteers

BY CARI HACHMANN
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Every morning at 8:30 a.m. busloads of kids aged 8 to 14 arrive from all corners of Portland's eastside to Marshall High School, this year's location for the Police Activities League's annual summer camp.

PAL is a non-profit that works to build partnerships between youth, police and the community through recreational, athletic, and educational programs.

Every summer, for a low cost, over 35 local police officers, city officials, and volunteers coach hundreds of campers in a week's worth of sports activities.

"This is just a wonderful environment for our officers and kids to connect, and for us to be a service to the kids, their families, and the community," said Portland Police Chief

Mike Reese

Earlier this month, director of PAL Jay Williams and his team of yellow-shirted staff welcomed a bleacher full of 200 plus campers inside the Marshall gym. Each kid had the choice of one of 14 different sports, from archery, boxing, basketball and fishing, to soccer, baseball, cheerleading and dance.

The point of a morning rally? To make a whole lot of noise and get the kids pumped for another police-instructed day of activity. Hip hop music blasts over the speakers as PAL staff rile up the crowd, tossing blow-up Blazer boppers into the hands of screaming campers.

The loudest kid gets a prize, they say, but in reality, few campers go home empty-handed. Out of cardboard boxes, fly t-shirts, baseball mitts, Nike shoes, tennis rackets,

key chains, and foam koozies. The level of excitement continues to rise as PAL's staff performs daily demonstrations.

Adrenaline-ready, casually dressed police officers and staff leaders guide campers to the fields or whichever activity-appropriate room. Many of the officers and staff leaders are summer camp veterans.

Hank Hays, a school resource officer in the Portland Police Youth Service Division has coached archery at PAL camps for the past seven years.

"Archery has always been the first to fill up at PAL," he said. "It excites me to see the kids so excited about archery. It's a 13,000 year-old sport that teaches kids self-discipline, self-confidence, and healthy competition."

Sportsmanship also was the topic for visiting lecturer, Portland State University Football Coach Eric Jackson, who addressed the

crowd and took questions from kids.

Lance Waddy, 27, is a PAL staff member who has helped coach co-ed basketball at summer camps for the past 10 years. He sees the benefits for the camp's young participants.

"The best thing for me is the skills that you get to help them build," he said. "Whatever sport you feel you want to get better at, you get one week to focus on that sport and your weaknesses."

Campers get about three solid hours of activity in before a brown bag lunch is served at noon by PAL staff members. After lunch, kids play until 2 p.m. before heading back home on buses at 2:30 p.m.

PAL camp gets financial help from the Portland Police Bureau and Portland Public Schools.

As a first time camper, Reed Chesnek, 10, a student at north Portland's Beach Elementary, was awarded a medal in the PAL camp's closing ceremony for her outstanding participation in soccer.

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