



2025 A Year in Reflection

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A new year full of progress, growth and newsworthy moments lies ahead for Jacksonville. But before we look ahead, here is a look back at the top stories and meaningful moments that shaped and impacted our Resident communities in 2025.

Moments That Brought Us Together

2025 was a year packed with anniversaries and milestones across San Marco, which celebrated its centennial last year. The festivities culminated in October with a Centennial Soirée at the historic Swisher Estate on River Road, where more than 250 partygoers were transported back to the early 1900s during the once-in-a-century celebration.

“On behalf of the San Marco Preservation Society, I want to share what a joy it has been to help lead the way in commemorating 100 years of shared history,” said SMPS Executive Director Sheri Webber. “It is our sincere hope that San Marco’s residents, supporters, visitors and businesses have felt loved and appreciated in 2025.”



James Garrett Edwards and his father, James Edwards, one of the original two owners of Cliff's Barber Shop.

Down the road, Granada residents also celebrated a centennial of their own throughout the year with a park cleanup, a neighborhood run and summer socials. Also in Miramar, the Point La Vista Civic Association celebrated its subdivision's 60th anniversary with a sunset cocktail party. And at the corner of San Jose and University, Cliff's Barber Shop turned 50 in April. The shop is still operated by one of its original owners, San Jose resident James Edwards.

Meanwhile, Southside Methodist Church celebrated its 75th anniversary with campus improvements, and the San Marco Library also marked 75 years with a special time capsule sealing event in November that drew more than 400 visitors.



Resident Community News Group joins San Marco history as it contributes to the San Marco Library time capsule.

“The most memorable and enchanting piece of it all was the photos and collection of time capsule items,” reflected Library Supervisor Ryan Merkel. “In those items, everyone seemed to reflect that there’s something worth cherishing and celebrating in all the many micro, tiny positive changes we make towards each other, over time, that make the world a little more hopeful.”

It was also a year of bittersweet final gatherings. In April, Julia Landon College Preparatory School welcomed back members of the Landon High School Alumni Association, which gifted an electronic message board to the school as its final official act. With the last class graduating in 1965 and the

alumni association’s board members approaching their 90s, it was a final show of support and gratitude for the school that shaped them during their formative years.

On a similar note, the Robert E. Lee class of 1954 also gathered for its final official reunion in March, with about two dozen alumni of the original graduating class of 372 in attendance. Former classmates shared fond memories and stories at the 70th anniversary event, held a few months later than initially planned due to Hurricane Helene.

In April, Riverside Avondale Preservation held its 51st annual Home Tour, featuring 12 historic homes and perfect weather. That was followed in May by the fifth annual Yarden tour – both drew lots of visitors from around town.

Progress and Preservation

From historic steeples to creek beds and pedestrian-friendly streets, 2025 was a year of transformation across Jacksonville’s historic neighborhoods – a year when preservation met progress in ways both practical and poetic.

In Five Points, the former Sun-Ray Cinema building reopened as a live music venue called FIVE, managed by Marathon Live. The venue hosted its first shows in May, welcoming BoyWithUke and Kameron Marlowe.

But that wasn’t the only historic movie theater that found new life in 2025. The former San Marco Theater reopened as Electric Dough Pizza Co., a craft-casual restaurant led by Chef Tom Gray. With its original film projector still on display and a marquee that nods to its cinematic past, the space now serves Roman-style pizzas and cocktails.



The Electric Dough Pizza Co. team celebrated the restaurant’s grand opening in the transformed San Marco Theatre space.

“Seeing the building come to life, filled with families gathering, friends connecting, San Marco neighbors and visitors from afar, is so rewarding,” said Gray.

The restoration of one of San Marco’s tallest structures also turned heads this year. Aspire Church’s steeple underwent a significant renovation in February as part of the church’s broader Bridge Initiative. The project marked the beginning of a multi-phase campaign to ensure the 86-year-old facility remains a beacon for future generations.



Aspire Church San Marco’s steeple underwent a restoration addressing leaks and other issues

Meanwhile, the Park Street Road Diet in Brooklyn was completed in July, converting four lanes into two and adding wider sidewalks and pedestrian-friendly features. The \$11 million project, years in the making, was celebrated with a ribbon-cutting ceremony and remarks from city officials and neighborhood advocates.



City and community stakeholders join Mayor Donna Deegan at the ribbon cutting marking the completion of the Park Street Road Diet.

Protecting and revitalizing the city’s waterways was a central theme last year. The Willowbranch Creek Stabilization Project made progress, with city engineers and Riverside Avondale Preservation hosting public meetings to share updates. The plan includes replacing the cement bulkhead with a Geobag Stabilized Slope to improve water quality, reduce flooding, and restore the creek’s natural flow.



The Willowbranch Creek Stabilization project advanced as engineers plan updates to the park waterway.

Students from the Episcopal School of Jacksonville joined the effort to enhance local waterways by building artificial oyster habitats – known as POSH structures – at Christopher Creek, designed to support oyster populations and improve water quality. That same spirit of stewardship was on display in July as volunteers with St. Johns Riverkeeper removed tires, Styrofoam, and other debris from the Northbank near McCoys Creek, reinforcing the message that Jacksonville’s waterways are not just scenic backdrops but also vital natural resources.

Also on the river, there was cause for celebration at St. Johns River Park in April as the pirate ship playground opened to the public with a ribbon cutting and Easter Eggstravaganza event. That was followed later in the year by two more long-awaited ribbon cuttings at RiversEdge Park and Riverfront Plaza.

People and Purpose

2025 was also a year defined by compassion, creativity and community leadership. Volunteers, nonprofits and everyday citizens stepped up to serve Jacksonville’s most pressing needs and to celebrate the institutions that make the city stronger.

It was a massive year for the Jacksonville Symphony, which received a record-breaking \$15 million anonymous donation – the largest in its 75-year history – followed by a \$3 million gift from the Terry Family Foundation. These contributions will help expand the Symphony’s reach and deepen its impact, supporting new works and musicians.

“This monumental support empowers us to elevate our performances, commission bold new works and expand access so that symphonic music enriches every corner of Jacksonville,” said Jacksonville Symphony President and CEO Steven B. Libman.

The First Coast Heart Ball also broke records last year, drawing nearly 600 attendees and raising \$1.5 million at its March gala. The event introduced a new “Four Chambers” segment, spotlighting

volunteers whose work embodies the American Heart Association's pillars of equitable health, knowledge, discovery and advocacy.

In Springfield, Rethreaded marked its 14th anniversary with an evening of shopping and giving, raising \$80,000 to support survivors of human trafficking. Founder Kristin Keen reminded guests that healing is possible when communities choose to live with purpose.

Downtown, the historic St. John's Cathedral launched a wellbeing initiative to address growing needs in the community, offering free wellness resources to the public, including cancer, caregiver, and divorce support groups, meditation and walking groups and one-on-one coaching.

"There's no barrier to take part in our services we provide – we meet people where they are," said Dr. Paige H. Hakimian, who sits on the church's Center for Wellbeing Leadership Board.

And in San Jose, 17-year-old twins Joshua and Jackson Bork organized a charity golf tournament to benefit Wolfson Children's Hospital, where they spent nearly 100 days in the NICU as premature infants. Their younger sister Jordan joined the effort, helping coordinate sponsors and participants for the inaugural event.

***By Fabrizio Gowdy
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