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## **More Than Medals:** Beyond the Finish Line with the Special Olympics

By Heather Bennett Eye

As our regional athletes of Special Olympics Florida gear up for the Summer Games, I want to share with you how the organization is more than just a place for those with intellectual disabilities to train and compete in Olympic-style sports. It's also an organization that fosters leadership growth and provides access to free health care. I'll also share ways you can get involved.

Our Northwest Region consists of Area 1 (Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, Walton, Bay, Washington, and Jackson counties) and Area 2 (Gadsden, Leon, Wakulla, Taylor and Hamilton counties). They'll each have their own Area competitions (Area 2 on March 2nd and Area 1 on March 16) before competing against each other at the Northwest Region Summer Games on April 6 in Defuniak Springs. Prior to that, two athletes from our region, Sara Dunbar and Ashley Harrell, are preparing for a very special trip to Washington,



D.C. On February 5-7, athletes, program leaders, unified partners and family members will gather on Capitol Hill to address members of the House of Representatives and the Senate. This is an annual, national event known as Capitol Hill Day. Athletes will advocate the importance of continued funding for the program, and ending health care disparities and discrimination against people with intellectual disabilities.

Athlete Stacy Barns of Pensacola attended Capitol Hill Day in 2015 and 2016 and recently assisted in prepping the national athletes who will make their way to Washington, D.C. this month. Along with the Chief Health Officer of the Special Olympics, she co-presented via Zoom the health initiatives in Florida and across the globe. "It's something that's really inspiring, not just about Stacey, but many athletes, where they gain these leadership roles and they assume these positions within Special Olympics and their communities and they use it to leverage their voice to become advocates," stated Damien McNeil, Regional Director of the Northwest. "That's one of my favorite things to witness." Advocacy is important

SPECIAL OLYMPICS continued on page 3

## CALM Village Nears Completion!

By MICHELLE RUSCHMAN

In 2013, Terri Steadman and Grace Nuffer were working with a group of young single mothers when they saw a need: To have a safe place these moms could go with their children during a time of crisis. As a result, CALM (Crisis Aid for Littles and Moms) House was born. Eleven vears later, not only has CALM House helped 50 mothers and 70 children, the organization now includes the CALM Furniture Resale Store (in the former VenYou201 building) and they are now answering a new need with CALM Village: Where do single mothers go to find affordable transitional housing? Leanne Schutt, Secretary, and Niceville Public Relations Representative for the Executive Board of Directors, shares what started CALM Village and what is included in these new homes: "The shortage of reasonably priced housing is a significant issue, and (CALM House) residents often struggle to obtain affordable housing through the Department of Housing and Urban Development

> **CALM VILLAGE** continued on page 2







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### 🏇 Community

#### **CALM VILLAGE**

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(HUD) or they are unable to find suitable accommodations in their budget.

Each cottage will be a brandnew house approximately 600 square feet, with two bedrooms, one bathroom, a kitchen/dining room/living room combo, a stackable washer/dryer, and a private front porch. They will also be fully furnished."

For many families, these homes will be a game changer. But, the application process and screening will be rigorous, even more so than CALM House. "To qualify for CALM House and CALM Village, applicants are required to complete an application form. They must also have at least one child under their custody and pass a phone screening and interview process to evaluate their suitability for our programs. Furthermore, prospective applicants must be free from drugs and alcohol."

In addition, applicants must meet these qualifications:

• Be a family (one adult with custody of children no older than 12 and no more than three children)

• Pass a background check completed by CALM

• Must be employed full-time (32 hours/week or more) with at least 60 days of pay stubs as proof

• Must have children in school or childcare

• Must have a driver's license and an insured vehicle

• Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) is already established



ing in

• Must read and accept all CALM Village Rules. (The guidelines and application will be shared on the website soon.)

These homes will be where CALM House graduates can look to as "next steps," but it is not mandatory to be a graduate to apply. If you fit the criteria listed above, you're a potential candidate to become a resident in CALM Village. The rules are no-nonsense and faith-centered. But, for those who qualify and are willing to live out the values that have made the CALM program so successful, those approved will gain a beautiful and safe place to live with their child(ren) for up to a year.

CALM Village, like CALM House, is not meant to be a permanent solution, but a point of transition where single mothers have an opportunity to gather resources until they can launch on their own. With many properties, rent is reaching well over a thousand, even for an apartment. CALM Village is truly a gift in our community with the fee being just \$850 a month. In addition, \$100 of that fee will be set aside in a savings account for the family. The goal is, at the end of their year-long stay in the

CALM Village, mom will have at least \$1200 to begin her next

chapter. As of now, four cottages are nearing completion, but the CALM House Executive Board isn't done dreaming big for the families they serve. "Our immediate goal is to establish the 4 cottages that constitute CALM Village. We will assess their effectiveness before proceeding with the construction of the next three cottages. As an additional consideration, we are working on a playground and exploring the possibility of constructing an educational building."

The CALM group knows their dreams have become tangible as a direct result of the amazing support from the people of Okaloosa County and beyond. Because CALM is an overtly Christian-based organization, it doesn't qualify for government aid. These safe places have only become possible through private donations and sponsorship and the expenses are significant. The biggest need for CALM House to run, and for CALM Village to expand, is to have a budgetable, reliable, monthly income, whatever the amount. Every dollar helps and will be used to maximize every contribution. If you'd like to be part of these life-changing efforts, there are several ways you can contribute time and/or resources.

•. Send donations to: CALM Organization Inc., 201 Redwood Ave., Niceville, FL 32578. Checks can be made payable to CALM Organization Inc. Venmo @CALM-organization (the last four digits of the phone number are 6419).

•. Attend their annual fundraiser, Spring Up For CALM, on March 9th from 5-8 p.m. at 1028 White Point Rd. Tickets are \$75 each or \$550 for a table of 8. Purchase tickets through Venmo (Make note that the funds are for this event and include your email address.) or email Terri Steadman at President@nicevillecalm.com.

•. Visit https://nicevillecalm. com/donate to see the many ways you can contribute to these efforts.

To volunteer as an advocate or with childcare, contact CALM House Director and graduate of CALM House, Carri Jackson, at director@ nicevillecalm.com.

Together, we are making a positive impact for generations to come.



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### The community

### SPECIAL OLYMPICS

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for various reasons. Not only does the Special Olympics provide opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to demonstrate their skills and talents through sports and leadership, but it's also internationally the number one provider for free health screenings for people with intellectual disabilities. "People are going without things that they need. They need those resources," said Damien. This also rings true for those who live along the Emerald Coast. The disparity that affects those with intellectual disabilities happens right there as well.

The Special Olympics provides free optometry, audiology, dental, podiatry and mental health screenings, along with referrals for those who need medical care. They also provide free hearing aides. "It gives life to the mission at work," stated Damien. The free screenings take place at events like the Summer Games, in which Doctors volunteer their time and resources for these screenings. Screenings are available to athletes and non-athletes with intellectual disabilities. At this year's Northwest Region Summer Games, around 600



athletes are expected. With as many athletes, and additional non-athletes, that will be in attendance, healthcare workers are encouraged to reach out if they are interested in volunteering to assist with screenings.

How can you help the Special Olympics? Day-of or long-term volunteers are always needed. You can also sign up to coach or play. Those without intellectual disabilities who have a passion for sports can participate as a Unified Partner. This offers the opportunity to contribute and foster connections between communities. "We want to make sure we are advocates for people with disabilities in any way that might look like," said Damien. Volunteering is a great opportunity to demonstrate that.

If you are a physician or health organization looking to volunteer for health screenings, you can contact Blair Mackie, Health Manager for Areas 1 and 2 at blairmackie@sofl.org or (850) 778-7573. For anything else, please reach out to Damien McNeil at damienmcneil@sofl. org or (407) 402-8604. To learn more about volunteering opportunities, please visit www.specialolympicsflorida.org/northwest and click on Get Involved. If you are interested in attending an event to cheer on our athletes, the summer games are free and open to the public.

## Craft, Learn, Beach, Repeat!

#### By Scott Thomas

As we cozy up indoors during this chilly weather, thoughts of sunny spring days filled with gardening and crafting activities dance in our minds.

Drawing from over 50 years of gardening and crafting expertise, Scott Thomas shares a few gardening tips.

**Tip #1:** When acquiring seeds for your vegetable garden, carefully explore seed catalogs. Opt for cost-effective options by choosing seeds labeled "OP" (open-pollinated) or "Heirloom." These varieties allow you to save seeds for the next season, offering both savings and the promise of better germination and tastier vegetables compared to the basic hybrid seeds.

**Tip #2:** Trim expenses on plant purchases by directly sowing seeds for crops like sweet corn, beans, cilantro, and peas. Many garden centers offer seedling plants that become more budget-friendly and easier to cultivate when planted directly in your garden.

**Tip #3:** In Florida, where the soil resembles beach sand, ensuring good drainage, incorporate compost into the sandy soil during garden bed preparation. This addition is crucial for retaining moisture, fostering healthier plants in Florida's distinctive gardening environment.

Don't miss the opportunity to learn from Scott! He'll be leading the Gardening 101 class at the upcoming **Freshie & Craft Expo taking place March 7-10**, 2024, at The Island Resort. Register to attend on their website: freshieandcraftexpo.com.





### YOUR SUPPORT SAVES LIVES

The Mayor Randall Wise First Responders Foundation Inc. has been established to continue his legacy of public service and community dedication. This charitable 501C3, organization serving Niceville, Florida seeks to assist first responders by providing education, training, counseling, and non-budgeted equipment to help keep them safe as they serve and protect.

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The Mayor Randall Wise First Responder Foundation is a 501-c-3 non-profit organization, EIN 87-4702964

When you need a first responder, you dial 911. Please consider setting up a recurring donation of \$9.11 to support Niceville's first responders. Scan the code to learn more.



### The Community

## **Exciting News! Saving the Green Space Update**

By Barbara Palmgren

Preserve Bluewater Bay, Inc., is making remarkable progress towards finalizing the acquisition of 150 acres of green space in Bluewater Bay that defines this special spot of paradise.

Preserve Bluewater Bay (PBWB), a not-for-profit organization created by community members who want to save 150 acres of green space in Bluewater Bay that defines this special spot of paradise, has set a goal of raising \$2.3 million by April 30, 2024, in order to purchase the land and save it from developers. So far, they've raised just over \$2 million in pledges, and have been granted 501(c)(3) status, meaning that donations can be tax deductible.

I've been asked why I'm pas-



sionate about saving green space from future development, even though I don't live in the community. Ironically, that was a question I was asked more than 11 years ago as a resident of Shalimar Pointe when the course was about to be purchased and turned into 160 homes. Fortunately, at that time, my husband was an officer for Shalimar Pointe Homeowners Association. When he heard that this was a "done deal" at an executive board meeting, he immediately reached out to key people in the community to begin a journey

like the one Bluewater Bay is embarking upon right now. A journey to remove the threat of additional homes, infrastructure, traffic problems and the loss of property values and green space. They say it takes a whole village to raise a child. It took 115 investors to save our

green space and protect the entire community.

Witnessing the loss of the former Magnolia Golf Course, now abandoned and soon to be developed, the lesson has been painfully in front of Bluewater Bay homeowners. Witnessing the closure of the Lakes Course to development was another wake-up call. While attending a meeting of PBWB, I personally witnessed the loss of other golf holes and the driving range across from the clubhouse. When I entered the meeting, I felt the resolve and dedication to see that the carnage cease.

To stop the future development of green space occupied by the remaining golf course, officers and members of PBWB have worked tirelessly over the past months to raise funds.

Less than \$300,000 is needed to make this happen. With your help, we can cross the finish line! Contact David Rauch at 850-865-0897 or visit preservebwb. com to learn more and make a pledge.

So, when I'm asked about why I'm passionate about helping Bluewater Bay save its green space from development, I can answer that I know it can be done. We did it in Shalimar. You can do it in Bluewater Bay. Why? Because stopping further housing development and saving green space will preserve the legacy that is Bluewater Bay for future generations.

Working together, a community can do anything. Let's win this race!

## Learn how to Keep Our Green Spaces *Green* Today! Which Describes You?



We live here for the **wide-open places**, the water, green, and gathering spaces that make Bluewater Bay a sanctuary for all who reside, visit, pass through, and enjoy. This is our community, and this is our opportunity to preserve the magic for ourselves, the wildlife, and the recreational use of the greens for everyone.

We are working together to preserve the openness and nature the 150 acres of green space provides us all. Whether you live next to the green space, drive by it, walk throughout, enjoy fishing inside, pick blackberries along the water, or listen to birds who live here because of thm, our green spaces are an indelible part of Bluewater Bay. You may protect the bears, the bobcats, and the alligators who sometimes travel through as well.

**Preserve and protect the green space today.** Bluewater Bay green spaces are what make Bluewater Bay magical. We **resort** here. We **live** here. We **thrive** here.

**Consider donating to save the green space today.** The deadline of **April 30th** for contributing and securing the space for future recreation is almost here.

www.preservebwb.com (850) 865-0897 Pledge your support today Everyone of you Matters



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### () Community

## Meet Our Hometown Hero Mike Sanders, Junto Tribe Founder

By MICHELLE RUSCHMAN

In a culture that often calls masculinity toxic, Mike Sanders, author of Seek. Adapt. Endure: Following the Way of the Authentic Man, has found a way for men to reclaim and discover the best parts of what they were created to be. He is doing that with a growing group called Junto Tribe. Although Junto Tribe is described as "a non-profit ministry dedicated to helping men realize their full potential in Christ," Mike is quick to point out that this group is not just for Christian men. "Ben Franklin's one of my heroes and he created a club when he was 19 years old called Junto. The goal was for men of action to gather, share their knowledge and experience and, in doing so, elevate the community. In Junto, there was an expectation that members be involved in the process, and we want thinking men. This isn't just a group for you to come and listen to somebody else speak and talk about Jesus. I want to challenge men who will be part of the conversation whether they're men who want clarification about their identity in Christ, or who have questions about what Christianity is all about.

We call ourselves a tribe, because we're all one tribe. We have one creator. We have one God, and he's our head. The idea of the Junto Tribe is we're all included in that tribe, and everybody's welcome."

What makes Mike's background so perfectly suited to this ministry is his exposure to many areas of what would be considered traditional masculinity. When he was getting ready to go to college, he thought he'd go into pre-med or sports medicine. But, his love for exercise would take him in a different direction. "I heard about becoming a strength and conditioning coach, where I could become an expert in kinesiology, physiology and anatomy in the preparation of athletes, where they could train to become stronger, bigger and faster. This gives them more endurance so they can go on the football field, the hockey rink, whatever it is, and win championships. That's what I wanted to do, straight through to my master's degree. I am ridiculously curious and fascinated about what we are capable of doing as humans."

It was this curiosity that led to working with college athletics and helping the University of









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Denver's hockey team win backto-back championships in 2004 and 2005. But just as Mike was being considered as a strength coach for the National Hockey League, he didn't feel the Lord calling him in that direction, so he declined. It was shortly after Mike learned the military wanted to take the concept of training athletes and apply it to the Special Operations community. In that moment, he knew this was his next chapter, and became one of the first civilians hired to train our military elite.

Even with his extensive track record of success, however, Mike's start didn't reflect the feeling of being worthy of that success. "I grew up believing I wasn't smart enough or athletic enough and I had a lot of health problems. It kept me from being active so I wasn't supposed to make it in life. I was going to be a statistic that was pushed off in the corner."

What Mike knew, though, was that he wanted to help people. Junto Tribe was born when Mike was at his lowest point and sought answers for himself.

In 2011, Mike experienced a devastating loss when many of the special ops men he had worked with, lost their lives during an historical mission. "I started thinking about the kids that would grow up without dads. At that moment, I just hit the ground. I remember asking myself, 'Did you do everything you could for them?' I remem-

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## **Representative Patt Maney RCOC MVP**

Representative (GJR)\* Patt Maney, a distinguished Okaloosa County political landscape member, recently achieved a notable accolade. He was honored with the Mike Mitchell MVP Award for "Most Valuable Politician" by the Republican Club of Okaloosa County. The award was presented by Marvin Brigman, President Emeritus, and Doug Stauffer, President, recognizing Representative Maney's significant contributions and leadership within the county. (\*GJR stands for General-Judge-Representative.)

The MVP award pays tribute to Mike Mitchell, fondly remembered as "Mr. Republican." Mitchell played a pivotal role in transforming Okaloosa County from a primarily Democratic stronghold to a deeply Republican area. He served as



the county's longest-standing commissioner, beginning his political journey as an aide to Jerry Melvin, a then-Democratic State Representative. Like many others, Melvin later transitioned to the Republican Party, and the annual RCOC scholarship is named the Jerry Melvin scholarship in his honor. A series

of challenges and triumphs marked Mitchell's political career. When he first ran for office in 1976, he faced skepticism due to

his Republican affiliation and non-Southern roots. However, he overcame these obstacles, winning his initial election to the commission by a narrow margin of 26 votes and maintaining his position until 1994. Mitchell and Melvin passed away in 2020, leaving behind a legacy of dedication and transformation in Okaloosa County politics.

In a heartfelt commendation, Dr. Doug Stauffer, President of the Republican Club of Okaloosa County, extolled the virtues of Representative Patt Maney upon presenting him with the esteemed Mike Mitchell MVP Award for "Most Valuable Politician." Stauffer emphasized the exclusivity and prestige of this award, noting that Representative Maney is only the second State Representative to be honored with it. The award, reflecting high achievement and commitment, has previously been given to a select group of local officials, including three School

Superintendents, three County Commissioners, and five Constitutional Officers.

Stauffer's words highlighted the exceptional nature of Representative Maney's service to the community, underscoring how this honor is a recognition of political stature, personal integrity, and character. He remarked on his deep respect and friendship for Maney, describing him as a "remarkable man of character." This statement underscores Maney's significant impact and influence in Okaloosa County, celebrating his dedication and contributions as a leader and a community member. Stauffer's tribute paints a picture of a politician who is successful in his endeavors and deeply respected and admired for his character and commitment to serving his community.

#### **MIKE SANDERS** *continued from previous page*

ber thinking yes, I did. I prepared them the best I possibly could to help them go in and physically outwork and outlast the enemy. I remember then asking, 'Did you do everything you could for them mentally and spiritually?' I didn't think I had."

It was at that moment, when Mike was trying to understand himself and what more he could do, the roots of Seek. Adapt. Endure. began to take shape. The book would eventually become the curriculum for Junto Tribe.

Many original members have now become leaders of their own groups, meeting at their individually designated times during the school year. Using Mike's book, they discuss what it means to be the men God created them to be-Disciple, Servant, Warrior, Scholar, Explorer, Craftsman and Leader. There is even a group just for juniors and seniors where the young men are mentored through the same curriculum. Members also participate in activities that help them live out examples of what these aspects entail. During the Servant chapter, for example, the Junto Tribe comes together to work on projects for the community. The Explorer training has included a camping trip and the Warrior spirit was explored

on the shooting range and through a game of paintball.

Current lessons finish in May, but Mike says it's never too late to discover what Junto Tribe is about. To find a group, you can email juntotribe@gmail.com. You can also join Junto Tribe at their first Men's Encounter on March 8-10th at Real Life in Marianna, FL. Additional information about this event and





registration can be found at juntotribe.mykajabi.com.

In all that Junto Tribe does, it is executed with the spirit of collaboration, fun, camaraderie, faith, unity, elevation and freedom. As a result, these men are better equipped for their families, work and areas of service. If you are a man who has been looking for a tribe, Junto is ready to receive you.

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## **Dust Off Your Boots! It's Almost Time to Rodeo!**

5th Annual Westonwood Ranch Pro Rodeo | March 22-23 | Freeport Regional Sports Complex

Dust off your boots and get ready to rodeo again this year! The 5th Annual Westonwood Ranch PCA Rodeo returns to the City of Freeport Sports Complex March 22nd -23rd. You don't want to miss some of the nation's top cowgirls and cowboys compete. So, bring the family and friends for a fun-packed weekend!

Contestants will compete in events including Bareback Riding, Calf Roping, Saddle Bronc Riding, Steer Wrestling, Breakaway Roping, Barrel Racing, Team Roping, and Bull Riding. Rodeo gates open at 6 p.m. with a 7:30 p.m. each night. Come early to enjoy live pre-rodeo entertainment at 6:30 by David Gautreau, food vendors, children's inflatable play area and more!

"We are so thankful for the partnership with Walton County Sheriff's Office, the City of Freeport, our 2024 Presenting Sponsor New Life Church and other community sponsors that make it possible to raise funds that help support our programs," said Lindy Wood, Founder of Westonwood Ranch. "So many youth with developmental disabilities miss irreplaceable opportunities to gain critical life skills and job skills needed to lead an independent life. These special individuals want the same thing as we do — to be fully participating members of society",.

The professionally sanctioned rodeo benefits Westonwood Ranch, an organization whose mission and programs serve teens and young adults with Autism and related developmental disorders. Located in Freeport, it provides therapeutic programs designed to fill the transition gap from high school into adulthood by incorporating functional learning opportunities in a therapeutic farm environment. All net proceeds from the event go to support Westonwood Ranch programs.

More than five years ago, Lindy Wood had a dream—a dream of a program geared towards older youth and young adults with autism and special needs. She wanted to be able to offer more for her son, Weston, diagnosed with autism at age 2, and other teens and young adults affected by Autism. So, with a hope to create opportuni-





ties to develop and cultivate independent, life-changing skills, Lindy and her husband, founders of Westonwood Ranch, purchased a 40-acre tract of land in Freeport to begin a farm and, eventually, birth a new local non-profit.

In just a short period of time, Westonwood Ranch has grown into a sustainable, working farm providing life and vocational skills for adolescents and young adults in our area with varying developmental disorders. The farm offers a comprehensive, holistic learning program for full-time students, ages 12 through adult, that focuses on providing functional learning opportunities. Through handson ranch operations, students learn skills in aquaponic farming, animal feeding and care,

kitchen operations, creative art exploration and fitness classes. Young individuals and adults with developmental differences learn to transition into independent living by receiving handson, job skill training leading to employment opportunities.

Tickets for the Rodeo are \$20 for adults and \$15.00 for children 12 years and younger at the gate. Children ages 2 and under are free. There will be no presale of tickets, so spectators are encouraged to arrive early. Westonwood Ranch is seeking additional local business sponsors. For more information about how to support the rodeo and Westonwood Ranch, email admin@westonwood.orgor visit our website at www.westonwood.org.



Proceeds support Westonwood Ranch programs for individuals with developmental disabilities www.westonwood.org



## **OCSO Prepares for 2024 Spring Break**

By MICHELLE NICHOLSON

There's typically a range of emotions when you start talking about Spring Break rolling back around in Okaloosa County; those who welcome the influx and those who don't. It's important to remember our county caters primarily to families who travel here to enjoy the warmer temperatures, crystal clear temperatures and the slew of family friendly activities available.

The majority of high school and college students also show up to have a good time at some of the world's most beautiful beaches while behaving in a safe, respectful and lawful manner.

And then, of course, there are the ones who see Spring Break as an opportunity to binge drink and get rowdy. Each year the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office (OCSO) reminds our Spring Break visitors with that type of partying on their mind that we have a zero tolerance for underage drinking. That's because the goal is to promote safety for citizens and visitors using our public roadways, beaches, parks, neighborhoods and recreation areas. "We have special staffing with extra units assigned to Spring Break patrol seven days a week while it runs, essentially from March 2nd to April 6th" said Sheriff Eric Aden. "The priority for our deputies is public safety, which means making sure everyone follows the rules. We also want to emphasize that beachgoers



Okaloosa County Sheriff Eric Aden

who swim in the Gulf should always pay attention to our beach flag safety system."

The 2023 Spring Break operation started the last week of February 2023 and ended at the end of April 2023. When OCSO enacted the operation and daily patrols, they addressed underage possession of alcohol, narcotics and miscellaneous calls for service. Over the course of the 52 days of the Spring Break operation, the members of the Beach Unit initiated 233 of the 409 total arrests.

There were the usual issues with large house parties, trespassing and fake I.D.s, but tragically a 17-year-old visitor from Kentucky lost his life in an alcohol-related fall from the balcony of a Destin condominium April 4th. "Our deputies are trained to recognize the indicators most common with impaired individuals," said Sheriff Aden. "If we encounter an underage individual with alcohol, he or she will be issued a notice to appear with a court date before a judge. Repeat violations by an underage person would result in an individual's physical arrest."

OCSO deputies will be monitoring beach and vacation rentals for criminal activity, using proactive patrol methods to detect and apprehend anyone involved in criminal activity, and assisting Okaloosa County and Destin lifeguard with the prevention of drowning incidents.

The objectives behind the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office Spring Break zero tolerance mission is to deter underage possession, thereby reducing the potential for property damage, injuries or deaths by impaired individuals. "We plan to conduct patrols with a minimum amount of intrusion and inconvenience to citizens and visitors," added Sheriff Aden. "But we will be vigilant in our efforts to keep everyone safe because ultimately we want everyone to go home with only positive memories from their stay."

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### The community

## Football Great Warrick Dunn Speaks at All-Sports

By Lori Leath Smith

Each year at this time, some of the area's top high school, collegiate, amateur, professional, Special Olympics athletes and individuals who have fostered youth activities are honored during the annual All Sports Association's (ASA) Awards Banquet. The ASA is a Northwest Florida non-profit organization whose primary mission is to help raise money for local youth-oriented non-profit organizations with an emphasis on sports programs. The All Sports Association and its volunteers have raised more than \$2 million in the last 10 years for our local youth and the promotion of youth athletics.

The annual awards banquet is used to identify, then recognize and honor some of the finest athletes from Northwest Florida who are contributing to their sports and their community. The recognized individuals not only excel in their sports, but also are at the top in academics and community involvement. Since 1970, the ASA has brought together the finest athletes in Northwest Florida.

This year's speaker, Warrick



Dunn, joined a growing list of impactful past speakers—Herschel Walker, Tom Glavine, Bo Jackson, Nick Saban, Bobby Bowden, Paul "Bear" Bryant, Tim Tebow and Herm Edwards.

Dunn, a prominent figure in both college and professional football, was elected to the prestigious College Football Hall of Fame's Class of 2024 in January! His road forged by this amazing accomplishment was inspired by his commitment to making a positive impact beyond the field. He began leaving his mark in college football history at Florida State University as a running back from 1993 to 1996. Dunn's speed, agility and playversatile ing style helped Florida secure State's first national championship in 1993. Dunn became the first player in program history to rush for 1,000 yards in three different seasons and left FSU as

the program's career rushing yards record holder, finishing his college career with more than 3,000 rushing yards. Dunn becomes the 11th FSU representative in the College Football Hall of Fame, including Dunn's teammates Charlie Ward (2006) and Derrick Brooks (2016) as well as head coach Bobby Bowden (2006).

Having displayed his dynamic and multi-dimensional athletic ability, Dunn was picked as 12th overall by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the 1997 NFL Draft. Throughout the 12 seasons of his NFL career, Dunn played for

both the Buccaneers and the Atlanta Falcons.

Dunn earned three Pro Bowl selections and surpassed the 10,000 rushing yards milestone during his tenure.

However, Dunn's contributions extended far beyond his accomplishments on the football field. He established the Homes for The Holidays program and the Warrick Dunn Charities, aiming to provide affordable housing to single-parent families. This initiative was deeply personal to Dunn, as he lost his mother, a police officer, during his college years, leaving him to take care of his siblings.

In 2007, he and other greats— Andre Agassi, Muhammad Ali, Jeff Gordon, Mia Hamm, Tony Hawk, Andrea Jaeger, Jackie Joyner-Kersee, Mario Lemieux, Alonzo Mourning and Cal Ripken, Jr.—founded Athletes for Hope. Dunn's charity work reflected his empathy and desire to make a tangible difference in the lives of others.

In recognition of his contributions, Dunn received numerous accolades, including the Walter Payton Man of the Year Award in 2004, highlighting his excellence on and off the field.

Celebrating 55 years this year, the weekend included the awards banquet held at the Emerald Coast Convention Center, and the 2024 Buck Smith FCA Breakfast with this year's guest speaker Isaiah Sanders. Isaiah is the winner of the 2021 Wuerffel Trophy and a United States Air Force Academy and Stanford University graduate.

All-sports weekend activities also included a golf outing and fish fry with guest speaker Colonel (retired) Kurt Buller. Through the efforts of the annual All-Sports banquet and summer golf tournament, and in addition to supporting local high school athletic programs, the association helps fund numerous worthwhile sports organizations and charitable causes. The primary beneficiaries are the Boys & Girls Club of the Emerald Coast, Special Olympics Florida-Okaloosa, Eleanor J. Johnson Youth Center and Okaloosa Walton FCA.

For more information, visit allsports association.org.



2024

**EVENTS** 

Greater FWB Chamber Business After Hours

5:30 pm | Beach Weekend - The Marina | FWB

Crochet Part 2 with Eliza Scalia

10 am | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport

**Choctawhatchee Audubon Field Trip** 

**Bunny Hope Adventure Hike** 

2 pm | Artful Things | Niceville

21

22

23

# Happenings Around the Bay

### MARCH

- 01 | Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee 7 am | Christian Life Center at First Baptist Church | FWB United Way Emerald Coast's Emerging Leaders Field Day 4 pm | Mullet Field | Niceville Night at the Park 5 pm | Freeport Sports Complex | Freeport Sinfonia Gulf Coast's Crescendo! Vintner Dinners 6 pm | Various Venues VINTNER DINNERS CRESCENDO. The Ultimate Elvis 7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville Kiwanis of Niceville-Valparaiso Annual 02 Pancake Breakfast & Silent Auction 8 am | Niceville Community Center | Niceville Niceville Monthly Cruise In 3 pm | Landshark Pizza Company | Niceville The Pearl Project's 2nd Annual Family Sock Hop 4 pm | Community Life Center at Crosspoint | Niceville Live Music: Purple Monkey 6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville
- 03 Sinfonia Gulf Coast's Crescendo! Main Event 11:30 am | Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa



08 ECCAC Gala 6:30 pm | Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa | Miramar Beach

 S SLEW
 Niceville Community

 Saturdays | 9 am - 1 pm

 Palm Plaza | Niceville

DESIGN

Hammock Bay 1st & 3rd Sundays | 8 am Victory Blvd | Freeport

DIGITAL

09 United Way Brunch & Bubbly 10:30 am | The Venue at Beach Weekend | FWB Soiree on the Bay Act III for CVHN 10:30 am | Dugas Family Estate | Santa Rosa Beach Carmina Burana

7:30 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville

10 6th Annual Mac & Cheese Festival 12 pm | Destin Commons | Destin



ECCAC Golf Tournament 12 pm | Kelly Plantation Golf Club | Destin Carmina Burana 2:30 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville

- 12 Oils and Acrylics with Rosalyn O'Grady 10 am | Artful Things | Niceville
- 13 Niceville-Valparaiso Chamber Second Wednesday Breakfast 7:15 am | Niceville Community Center | Niceville Anime & Drawing Basics with Chris McLoone 3:15 pm | Artful Things | Niceville An Evening with Casting Crowns 7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville
- 14 Greater FWB Chamber Nothing But Networking 11:30 am | The Place on Beal | FWB
- 15 Niceville-Valparaiso Rotary Club Annual Golf Tournament 11 am | Bluewater Bay Golf Club | Niceville Live Music: LA Strangers 6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville
- 16 Shamrock Stroll Adventure Hike 10 am | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport Birding the Wright Landfill and Okaloosa Holding Ponds 7:30 am | 1826 Lewis Turner Blvd | FWB
- 20 Kids' Painting with Sheila Mahony 10:30 am | Artful Things | Niceville Crochet Part 1 with Eliza Scalia 2 pm | Artful Things | Niceville
- 21 Origami with Laura Duerrwaechter 2 pm | Artful Things | Niceville

Grand Boulevard m Saturdays | 9 am - 1 pm Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

7:30 am | Birding Conservation Park Bay County | PCB Live Music: Autumn Poultry 6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville Sinfonia Gulf Coast's Classical Connections 7:30 pm | Destin-FWB Convention Center | FWB LASSICA Anime & Drawing Basics with Chris McLoone 27 3:30 pm | Artful Things | Niceville Live Music: Jody Lucas 29 6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville 30 Run for Joy 8:30 am | Church on Bayshore | Niceville Eggstravaganza Spring Festival 9 am | Freeport Sports Complex | Freeport Valparaiso Spring Plant Festival 9 am | Paradise Plants and Palms | Valparaiso **Fisher House Poker Run** 9 am | American Legion Post 221 Niceville **Encaustic Wax with Corina Zalace** 10:30 am | Artful Things | Niceville

> Valparaiso Spring Plant Festival 9 am-1 pm | 695 Valparaiso Pkwy | Valparaiso

### ONGOING EVENTS

Oils and Acrylics with Rosalyn O'Grady 10 am | Tuesdays | Artful Things | Niceville Watercolor Techniques with Theresia McInnis 1 pm | Tuesdays | Artful Things | Niceville Trivia Night 6 pm | Thursdays | Strange Colt Brewery | Niceville Brunch on the Bayou 9 am | Sundays | LJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant & Oyster Bar | Niceville

MARCH 8-10, FRIDAY•SATURDAY•SUNDAY 3-Day Paradise Music Festival! Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center









### The community

## Bay Buzz Events



#### Enjoy the SeaLight Festival at Seascape Resort

A dazzling world of light featuring more than 1,000 handmade Chinese lanterns comes to the Panhandle following roaring success in New York City, Atlanta and Washington D.C. The SeaLight Festival is making its Florida debut following three consecutive years of sell-out runs in New York City, Atlanta and Washington D.C., where it welcomed more than 500,000 guests. On Thursdays - Sundays, now through March 31, Seascape Resort will undergo a breathtaking transformation into an extraordinary world of illumination. This captivating

spectacle features over 1,000 handcrafted Chinese lanterns and lights, guaranteeing an unforgettable experience. Tickets, all ages, start from \$17.99 children and \$25.99 adults. Purchase at sealightfestival.com.

#### Sinfonia Crescendo! March 1 & 3

CRESCENDO! Main Event | Sunday, March 3rd at 11 a.m.

Crescendol: A Cultural & Culinary Extravaganza benefits Sinfonia Gulf Coast and its music education and community engagement initiatives. Taking place March 3, this energy-infused experience will showcase world-class vintners, expert spirit purveyors, amazing auction items, and a special appearance by fashion icon Isaac Mizrahi who will perform his entertaining New York-style cabaret show. This year's theme is Crescendo!: the New Noir. Channel your individual take on black, be it classic, vintage, edgy or embellished with a wisp of white or a pop of color."

Vintner Dinners | Friday, March 1 at 6 p.m.

Carefully curated vintner dinners hosted in elegant homes and venues throughout the Emerald Coast. Go to sinfoniagulfcoast.org for a list of the Vintner Dinner venues.

Purchase Tickets: https://app.arts-people.com/index.php?ticketing=sgc



### Florida Power and Light Economic Symposium

March 5-6 The annual FPL Northwest Florida Economic Symposium will take place on March 5-6 at Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort. An annual signature event, the Symposium focuses on strengthening collaboration throughout Northwest Florida communities and fostering discussions and engagement in community and economic opportunities with challenging, thought-provoking speakers. Register at fplsymposium.com.

Forever Warriors, in collaboration with Step One Automotive Group, announces its involvement in a series of events designed to engage and support military personnel, their families and the broader community.

Upcoming March events include the following:

• United Way Field Day, March 1, Niceville

An opportunity for Forever Warriors volunteers to demonstrate dominance in camaraderie and sportsmanship, fostering a competitive yet friendly environment.

• Lightning CrossFit on Eglin: The Open 2024 Cross-Fit Games Season Launch March 1, 8 & 15, Eglin AFB, FL

Partnering with the Panhandle's oldest CrossFit gym, this event welcomes 50 to 100 participants each Friday to kick off the CrossFit season, emphasizing the connection with the military community.

• Eggstravaganza, March 30, Hurlburt Field, FL

Aiming to support military and military family retention efforts, this family-friendly event is expected to welcome 1,500 attendees.

#### Wear Shades of Pink! Women United Brunch & Bubbly March 9

Join the ladies of Women United for Brunch and Bubbly presented by Florida Power & Light. Sat., March 9, at 10:30 a.m. located at The Venue at Beach Weekend, 109 Brooks St. SE, Fort Walton Beach. Contributions support the work of United Way Emerald Coast and Women United to provide mental health resources, access and education to local women and girls. Tickets available for purchase at united-way.org/womenunited.

#### ECCAC Presents its Signature Gala & Golf Events March 8 & 10

The Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center (EC-CAC) presents its annual signature Gala & Golf events this year March 8 and 10. The Gala features a cocktail hour starting at 5:30 p.m., with dinner at 6:30 p.m. on Friday, March 8, at the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa. Guests will enjoy dinner and live entertainment by the popular Will Thompson Band and DJ Chris Henson; exciting live auction by famed auctioneer Dawn Marie Kotsonis, also known as The Gavel Girl; as well as a featured guest speaker.

The Gala proceeds benefit children by providing services at no cost to help identify, treat and support child victims in abusive situations.

The Golf Tournament, also to benefit ECCAC, will take place on Sunday, March 10, at Kelly Plantation Golf Club with registration and a cookout meal from 10:30 to 11:45 a.m. to be ready for a tournament shot gun start at noon. An Awards Ceremony will follow the tournament.

Tournament cost is \$400, which includes two tickets to the Gala. Gala tickets only are \$250 per couple. Please make reservations on-line at eccac.org. Sponsorships are still available. Contact Lee Curtis at 850-400-3488 or email Lee@eccac.org.

Continued on next page

### 🌸 Community

### BAY BUZZ EVENTS

continued from previous page

#### It's Almost Here! 3-Day Paradise Music Festival March 8-10!

Paradise Promotions presents a three-day, indoor music festival at the Destin-Fort Walton Beach the show will close with the best Beach Boys tribute band on the planet known simply as END-LESS SUMMER. You will be feeling many "GOOD VIBRA-TIONS" as you are dreaming of "SURFIN' USA."

Ticket start at \$35 each night and can be purchased online



Convention Center Friday-Sunday, March 8-10. Seven classic bands will perform, featuring four national, touring tribute bands and three Northwest Florida local bands on the Florida Power and Light Stage. The Friday lineup opens with Jessie Ritter and Jessica Heit, a country duo with Nashville roots and amazing talent. Following is the Paradise Bayou Band playing Classic Rock, Country, Motown and lively dance tunes.

Friday night's headline band – back for a repeat performance from 2023 – is the 7 Bridges Eagles tribute band that will make sure you "TAKE IT EASY."

Rolling Stone magazine proclaimed 7 Bridges the Greatest Eagles tribute on Earth.

The Saturday lineup features two national touring tribute bands beginning with Departure from Atlanta, Ga., advising you to "DON'T STOP BELIEV-IN" with an incredible tribute to a favorite—Journey. Headlining is"STILL STANDING" with a tribute to Elton John. They'll have you chanting, "SATUR-DAY, SATURDAY' over and over again.

Sunday, brings a tribute to the Man, the Myth, The Legend – Mr. Jimmy Buffett. Nashville with recording artist and Destin resident Chuck Lawson and Cheri Salvetti – the duo SHACK 'N UP, will take you down memory lane as you are "WAISTING AWAY AGAIN IN MARGARI-TAVILLE" dressed in your favorite Parrot Head attire. And to keep the beach theme going, from Eventbrite by visiting ParadisePromotionsFL.com. This event is sponsored in part by Life Media, Cox Media, Florida Power and Light, Omni Broadcasting, Fast Signs, T-Mobile and ZooGraphix Online.

#### Mac & Cheese Festival at Destin Commons March 10

Join Bay Life at the Mac & Cheese Festival on Sunday, March 10 from noon - 3 p.m. benefiting the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast. This family-friendly event will feature gourmet, chef-inspired twists on the South's favorite comfort food. For more information and to purchase tickets, visit https://www.eventbrite.com/ e/6th-annual-mac-and-cheese festivaltickets-769177820567. All proceeds from this event will go to the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast, which works in our community to promote and enhance the development of boys and girls by instilling a sense of competence, usefulness, belonging and influence through its programs focused on academic success, good character, citizenship and healthy lifestyles.

Come join the fun at the **St. Puptricks Adoption** event to be held at HorsePower Pavilion, March 16th, 11-3 p.m.

Rescue shelters, vendors and sponsors are participating. Rescue organizations and rescue shelters throughout the Panhandle will be showcasing their adoptable animals and, hopefully, many animals will find their forever homes. There will also be games, jumpy houses, inflatable axe throwing and vendors with merchandise.

#### The Annual Destin Charity Wine Auction Returns April 26-28

Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation (DCWAF) will present the 19th Annual Destin Charity Wine Auction April 26-28. All funds raised at the annual auction benefit children in need in Northwest Florida through the Foundation's 17 partner children's charities. In 2023, DCWAF donated \$3.4 million to charity following one of its most successful auctions to date.

This year's auction will feature an impressive line-up of celebrity chefs and vintners from throughout the world, hosted by philanthropic couples within the local community.

Patrons attending the Destin Charity Wine Auction presented by the Jumonville Family can expect a weekend filled with exclusive wines and excellent food from a variety of celebrity chefs beginning Friday, April 26 with the patron dinner experience. Each dinner features a nationally recognized chef paired with world-class vintners. Confirmed vintners and chefs are listed online at dcwaf.org/auction. More will be announced in the coming months as the auction approaches.

The Destin Charity Wine Auction is the main event of the weekend at 1 p.m. on Saturday, April 27. The Reserve Tasting and Live Auction will be held under an air-conditioned tent at Grand Boulevard Sandestin Town Center and will feature distinctive wines from internationally acclaimed vintners poured and paired with cuisine curated by a selection of the area's top restaurants. The event culminates with a high-energy, live auction boasting rare and distinctive wines, spectacular trips and other incredible oneof-a-kind items.

Hosted in conjunction with the South Walton Beaches Wine and Food Festival in Grand Boulevard Sandestin Town Center the same weekend, the Festival will showcase hundreds of premium wines along with a diverse selection of spirits and culinary creations. Auction attendees also have access to South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival's Grand Tasting on Sunday, April 30 at 1 p.m. For sponsorship: info@dcwaf. org. Patron packages: dcwaf. org/tickets.



## The Urgent Need for Cybersecurity in Small to Medium Businesses: Protecting Your Assets in an Evolving Threat Landscape

In today's digital age, the significance of cybersecurity cannot be emphasized enough. The alarming surge in cyber insurance costs, coupled with the prevalence of ransomware attacks targeting small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs), underscores the critical need for prioritizing cybersecurity measures.

Consider the latest insights from The 13th edition of the NetDiligence® Cyber Claims Study, which revealed that the cost of cyber insurance in the U.S. spiked by a staggering 79% in the second quarter of 2022 alone. Shockingly, ransomware attacks accounted for a whopping 88% of cyber insurance claims among SMBs during the period of 2022-2033. Moreover, the average financial toll of a cyber incident borne by an insurance carrier stood at a staggering \$865,000 for SMBs, highlighting the substantial financial risks at stake.

Despite these alarming statistics, only a mere 14% of SMBs are adequately prepared to confront such cyber threats. While larger corporations typically allocate significant resources to cybersecurity, SMBs often lag behind in implementing robust cybersecurity measures. Many SMBs have yet to develop comprehensive cybersecurity solutions to safeguard their operations, particularly in regions



with stringent data privacy laws and regulations governing the collection and storage of personal identifiable information (PII).

#### Several factors contribute to SMBs neglecting cybersecurity:

Lack of Awareness: Many SMB owners and managers underestimate the importance of cybersecurity or the potential risks they face, erroneously assuming that cybercriminals target only larger enterprises. However, studies reveal that 63% of SMBs have experienced cyberattacks in the past two years, with data breaches costing an average of \$3.31 million per incident.

Overreliance on Managed Service Providers

(MSPs): While MSPs play a crucial role in supporting software and applications, they often lack the expertise required to navigate the complexities of cybersecurity response and insurance coverage. Additionally, they may overlook the diverse legal and regulatory frameworks governing cybersecurity across different states and industries.

**Dependence on Third-Party Applications:** SMBs frequently rely on third-party cloud applications, assuming that these vendors bear sole responsibility for cybersecurity. However, cybersecurity is a shared responsibility, necessitating proactive measures from both the business and its vendors.

**Cost Concerns:** SMBs often view investing in cybersecurity solutions as financially burdensome. However, the costs associated with recovering from a cyberattack far outweigh the initial investment in preventive measures.

**Perceived Complexity:** The intricacies of cybersecurity can appear daunting to SMBs, who may lack the necessary expertise to implement comprehensive cybersecurity solutions effectively.

**Misconceptions about Cyber Insurance Coverage:** SMBs may erroneously believe that their cyber insurance policy provides blanket coverage, failing to grasp the nuances of regulatory compliance and the importance of tailored policies and procedures.

## Addressing these challenges requires proactive measures:

**Education and Awareness:** SMBs must prioritize cybersecurity education and awareness programs to understand the evolving threat landscape and their vulnerabilities.

**Strategic Partnerships:** Collaborating with a company that has expertise in cybersecurity solutions and insurers can help SMBs develop tailored solutions that align with their budget and requirements.

**Compliance and Risk Management:** SMBs must stay abreast of regulatory requirements and implement robust policies and procedures to mitigate risks effectively.

**Integration of Cybersecurity and Insurance:** Integrating cybersecurity solutions with insurance expertise can provide SMBs with comprehensive coverage and peace of mind.

In conclusion, the imperative for small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) to prioritize cybersecurity measures has never been clearer. With cyber insurance costs surging and ransomware attacks on the rise, SMBs face significant financial risks and operational disruptions. Despite the alarming statistics revealing the prevalence of cyber threats, many SMBs remain ill-prepared due to factors such as lack of awareness, reliance on third-party providers, cost concerns, and misconceptions about insurance coverage.

However, by taking proactive steps to educate themselves, forge strategic partnerships, adhere to compliance requirements and integrate cybersecurity with insurance solutions. SMBs can effectively mitigate risks and safeguard their assets in an ever-evolving threat landscape. It is imperative for SMBs to recognize the importance of cybersecurity as a fundamental aspect of their business operations and take decisive action to protect themselves against cyber threats.

At Abora Insurance Group, we specialize in bridging the gap between cybersecurity solutions and insurance policies, offering affordable comprehensive solutions tailored to SMBs' needs. By fostering transparent communication and leveraging our network of insurers and cybersecurity solution providers, we empower SMBs to navigate the complexities of cybersecurity and secure their digital assets effectively. Protect your business today to safeguard against the growing threats of tomorrow.

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By Greg Durette, Florida

The end is near! Hopefully,

not in the mortal sense, but rath-

er the end of the Open Enroll-

ment Period for predominant-

ly Medicare Advantage plan

members in 2024. We will leave

the mortality prognostications

to the crazy guy wearing a sand-

wich board roaming various city

Keep in mind, if you are

"aging-in" this year, you have a

whole different set of deadlines

and circumstances. (See last

you should be checking up on

before the March 31st deadline

rolls around and locks you in

until the next Annual Enroll-

This article will cover what

streets around the country.

month's article.)

HEALTH CONNECTOR

Page 15

## What to Check Before the End of Open Enrollment for Medicare

ment Period (October 15 – December 7).

So, what should you do to make sure this year's coverage selection treats you well and is something you will be happy **with until next year?** 

**First,** you will have hopefully had some time to try out your new coverage. Whether that is a visit to the doctor of your choice or a trip to the pharmacy, you likely have had a chance to use your current coverage. If you are one of those folks that needs neither, bully for you! However, you should still take this time to conduct further research into whether the doctors, hospitals and pharmacies you favor are included in your network at a reasonable cost.

If you find some changes would be required of your intended selections, you have until March 31st to do something about that.

*Note:* If you have already made a change during this Open Enrollment Period, you have used your last bite at the apple for the year. Changes made during this Period are final and cannot be changed unless there is a government declared Special Enrollment Period. (This would take another whole article to get



your head around!) If you have yet to use this last chance opportunity, then you still have that one chance available.

**Second,** have you reviewed the functionality of your plan? What I mean is, are you able to easily use your new insurance card and have the providers accept it without a hassle? Do you find it difficult to know why your neighbor with a PPO has a much easier time finding an in-network doctor or facility (especially when travelling) than you have with an HMO? Has your doctor or medical group suddenly stopped accepting your coverage with little to no explanation?

If so, it is time for you to get busy with the business of taking care of you. If you have read my articles for any length of time, you know I am no fan of the grand promises made by the sports figures and celebrities on television about "potentially available" benefits. They love to use the kicker statement, "You MAY be eligible to receive these benefits." Talk about slick!

The fact of the matter is, the proof is in the pudding. Nobody but you can get you what you need. Do the work. Do the research. Call local, knowledgeable people and get the details that matter to you and ignore those with opinions that might be in their best interests and not your own.

Once you make that final call for the Open Enrollment Period, you can sit back and relax in the comfort of knowing you did the very best for you. Happy 2024!

Greg Durette is an agent with Florida Health Connector based in Niceville providing Medicare throughout the state. He has been licensed in the insurance industry for more than 40 years and can be reached at his office at 850-842-2400, mobile at 978-509-2941 or dedicated and recorded Medicare Line at 850-462-7807.

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### The community



The Choctawhatchee **Bay Chapter, Daughters of** the American Revolution, has honored Okaloosa County UF/IFAS Extension Services Agent Sheila Dunning with the prestigious DAR Conservation Award. The award recognizes volunteers with distinguished conservation efforts which include sustained accomplishments that improve the environment and educate the public on conservation issues while exceeding job expectations. The award was presented by Florida's State Regent, Mrs. Cindy Addison, at the Chapter's February meeting.

#### Rocky Bayou Christian School Rocks Brain Bowl

Mr. James Wagenschutz, Principal of Rocky Bayou Christian Academy, is pleased



have been selected as finalists for the 2024 National Merit Scholarship Program. Christopher Seeling and Scarlett Stevens are among 15,000 Finalists in the nation and as such will continue in the competition for some 7,500 national Merit Scholarships, worth more than \$35 million, that will be offered this spring.

RBCS is very proud of Scarlett and Christopher for their high academic achievements.

For more information about Rocky Bayou Christian School, please visit our website at www. rbcs.org.

#### Roller Selected to Serve on the FCSSGA State Executive Board

Northwest Florida State College (NWFSC) student Lillian Roller has been selected to serve on the Florida College System Student Government Association (FCSSGA) State



Executive Board as the Chair of the Temporary Committee. As the Chair, Roller will lead the planning efforts for the Student Leadership conferences in February and April. These two Florida Conferences host representatives from all 28 Florida College Student Government Associations. In her role, she will report directly to the FCSSGA President and will lead weekly meetings to plan and implement successful conferences.

#### RBCS Junior Classical League Regional Forum Wins

Rocky Bayou Christian Academy's Latin students recently earned both the Ordo Tertius (3rd place) overall trophy and individual ribbons at the Junior Classical League Regional Forum in January at Gulf Breeze High School. Five local high schools from four counties



were in attendance. Individual RBCS winners for the academic testing were Seniors- Michael Mosley, 2nd Adv History of Empire and 3rd Adv Mytholog; Gideon Rossell, 1st Adv. Derivatives; Christopher Seeling 3rd in both Adv Greek Derivatives and Adv Latin Derivatives; Scarlett Stevens 3rd Adv Latin Literature and 2nd in Adv Grammar; Juniors- Oliver McKinney, 2 in the Heptathlon and 3rd in Adv Hellenic History; Jonas Mosley, 3rd Latin Reading Comprehension and 4th in Adv Greek Literature; and Austin Sanders, 3rd in Adv Greek Derivatives and

Up to an hour

No limit on edited photos

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5th in Adv Latin Derivatives; Sophomores- Lela Cawood, 1st in Latin Grammar 2 and 3rd in the Heptathlon; Mckenzie Newsom, 2nd in Latin Grammar 2 and 4th in Heptathlon; Justus Rossell, 4th in Latin Derivatives 2; Colt Stevens, 1st in Latin Grammar 2 and 3rd in Ancient Geography 2; and Elijah Waller, 2nd in the History of the Republic 2 and Everly Willis, 3rd in Latin Derivatives 1; Freshman- Gaige Adkins, 3rd in History of Republic 1; Janessa Laemmel, 2nd in Greek Deriv-

Continued on next page



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AVAILABLE

### **BAY BUZZ**

continued from previous page

atives 1; Camden Miller 3rd in Latin Grammar 1 and 5th in the Pentathlon; Brianna Nutt, 3rd in the Pentathlon and 5th in Mythology 1; and Nolan Weisbruch 2nd in Latin Grammar 1. JCL Sponsor Julie Mosley is very proud of this small-school group for earning wins amongst much larger high schools in this "total points" competition. Pictured are left to right, back to front: Nolan Weisbruch, Colton Wilson, Gaige Adkins, Elijah Waller, Colt Stevens, Camden Miller, Lela Cawood, Everly Willis; Janessa Laemmel, Scarlett Stevens, Mckenzie Newsom, Justus Rossell; Brianna Nutt and Michael Mosley. Not in photo are Oliver Mckinney, Jonas Mosley, Gideon Rossell, Austin Sanders and Christopher Seeling. www.rbcs.org.

#### OCSD Kindergarten & New Student Registration Now Open

It is that time of year! Incoming kindergarteners and students new to the Okaloosa County School District for the 2024-2025 School Year can begin registering for school now. Parents must create a Focus Parent Portal Account to start the process.

The Focus Parent Portal Account will allow parents to: View their student (s) class schedule and grades; View attendance; View discipline; and Communicate with teachers. Create a parent portal account at https:// okaloosa.focusschoolsoftware. com/focus/auth/

To enroll, families must use their child's legal name and a valid address in Okaloosa County to begin. A registration kiosk at the student's enrolling school's front office is available to complete this process. For an overview of the Parent Portal registration process, watch the video at https://www.youtube. com/watch?v=-dTnw4yrsHU.

The online enrollment request will serve as a valid enrollment pending receipt of other documents requiring a parent/ legal guardian signature and proof of residence that must be brought to the school. The child will be linked to the parent's portal account upon completion.

#### DCWAF's 3rd Annual Galentine's Day Fundraiser Raises \$113,000

Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation's (DCWAF) 3rd Annual Galentine's Day Fundraiser raised a record-breaking \$113,000 for young women in need in Northwest Florida—\$20,500 increase over the previous year's event. Hosted on February 3 by DCWAF trustee Candis Wilson and DCWAF board members Tiffany Edwards, Jeanne Dailey and Lane Redding, the event brought

### Upcoming Choctawhatchee Audubon Events

March 7th: Local wildlife photographer George Ross will discuss the birds of New Zealand. New Zealand is best known for its endemic, flightless Kiwi bird species. Kiwi plus other unique birds including the world's heaviest parrot the Kākāpō will be shown and discussed during his talk on this fascinating island nation in the South Pacific. Room 800 on the 2nd floor of the Chandler Center (NW door of 519 Helms St.) at the Crosspoint Church in Niceville. Socializing begins at 6:30 p.m.; program begins at 7 p.m. Admission is free and open to the interested public. Visit choctwhatcheeaudubon.org.

**March 16:** Birding to the Wright Landfill and the Okaloosa Holding Ponds. Leader Malcolm Swan 210.452.4899 (texting encouraged). Meet at 7:30 a.m. at the left side of Roberts Road, 200 feet N. of Helen Back Pizza, 1826 Lewis Turner Blvd. Looking for late ducks, early waders, quick hawks and songbirds. Wear long pants, sturdy closed-toe shoes and hat. Bring a camera and/or binoculars.

**March 23:** Field Trip to Conservation Park with Bay County Audubon, near Panama City Beach. Leader Ron Houser 850:774:9733. Meet at 7:30 a.m. in the Park's Parking lot 1/3 mile beyond the north end of Griffin Blvd., the south end, one mile NW from the intersection of US 98 and Hwy 79. This is an open area so be prepared for little shade and cool, windy conditions. Bring your binoculars and/or camera. influential women in the community together to support one another while raising money for programs designed to empower young girls through the Foundation's 17 partner children's charities. Led by dynamic keynote speaker and founder of Good Grit, Laura Quick, all individuals and businesses affiliated with the production of the event are female owned and operated.

#### **New Airline at VPS**

Avelo Airlines recently announced exclusive nonstop service between the Florida Panhandle's Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport (VPS) and Southern Connecticut's most convenient airport – Tweed-New Haven Airport (HVN the first and only airline offering nonstop service between Florida's Emerald Coast and Southern Connecticut. Avelo will operate this route twice weekly on Thursdays and Sundays, with a special Friday inaugural flight



on May 1. Avelo will operate Boeing Next-Generation 737 aircraft on this route. Introductory low one-way fares between VPS and HVN start at \$79\*. Customers can make reservations at AveloAir.com.

## Niceville Cheerleaders with 5th State Title

Congratulations to the Niceville Cheerleaders who won

their fifth state title in the Florida High School Athletic Association Large Varsity State Championship. The Florida High School Athletic Association (FHSAA) State Championship was held in Lakeland, Florida at the Jenkins Arena. The Eagles Cheerleaders are once again the 5X FHSAA Large Varsity State Champions!



## **Okaloosa County Schools First Semester Highlights**



Superintendent Marcus Chambers

As Superintendent, it fills my heart to see the successes of our students excelling in academics, the arts and athletics. I also see our teachers and administrative staff giving their all to build a positive school culture and prepare our students for college, military and workforce.

Okaloosa County Receives A-Rating from The Florida Department of Education: As you may know, the Okaloosa County School District (OCSD) earned an A-rating for the 2023 school year by the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE)! Okaloosa is one of three districts in Florida to earn an A each year the state has assigned grades since 2014. I could not be more proud of our students, teachers, staff, and administrators for this recognition! In December, FLDOE released the 2023 Baseline School Grades, and the results are highly encouraging in the first year of a more rigorous statewide assessment. The district's percentage of points earned increased from 63% last year to 68% this year.

Student Accomplishments in The Arts and Athletics: Arts and Athletics are the fabric of school districts. Students learn perseverance, teamwork, dedication, grit, success, hard work and even failure. These characteristics culminate a student's journey by giving them the confidence to accomplish their dreams, helping them academically, and developing their mental mindset. Our students have achieved district and state championships on the football field, the volleyball court, cross country, swimming and golf. We have talented student artists who participated in a statewide visual arts competition called "Art in the Capital," and several students were recognized for their impressive work.

Our middle and high school choral programs showcase the exceptional vocal talent of our students who have received straight superiors and participated in Okaloosa's All-County Honor Choir. We have fantastic band programs where our students are earning straight superior ratings at District Music Performance Assessments (MPA) and have opportunities, like the 2024 Rose Bowl Parade, to represent Okaloosa County and show our nation and the world how awesome our music programs are. These programs, teachers and students make us all very proud!

Capital Projects: Due to the Half-Cent Sales Tax Program that Okaloosa County Voters approved in 2020 for our schools, we are making many critical updates to our buildings throughout the entire District. Although not all these completed projects are visible, such as new roofs and heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) replacements, they are all critically important. Last fall, we began highlighting the success of the Half-Cent Sales Tax projects by hosting ribbon cuttings at several Okaloosa County schools.

We've also been working to reduce the number of portables. Classroom addition projects do just that. When we build a much needed Cafetorium (enlarged cafeteria along with other additional space) such as what is under construction at Bob Sikes



property, Jim can assist you in finding tenants, qualifying tenants and lease preparation.

4400 Hwy. 20 E., Suite 314, Bluewater Bay, Niceville (The old Bluewater Bay Post Office) Stop by our office today or call Jane at (850) 830-1976 or Jim at (850) 830-9636

janehr@aol.com | NicevilleHomes.com

Elementary School, Edwins Elementary, Plew Elementary, Shalimar Elementary, Wright Elementary and Ruckel Middle School, we are able to convert the old cafeterias into new classrooms, thus eliminating portables on campus. For information on the Sales Tax program, visit the District's Half-Cent Sales Tax Capital Program website.

New School Construction: We have also put the wheels in motion for the first new school construction since 2007— a new K-8 school in Crestview to serve 1,200 children in the Fall of 2026. A 32-classroom addition is in the plan-and-design phase to open in 2026 and serve grades 3 through 5 at Destin Elementary School. Additionally, the District is considering expansion possibilities and/or new school construction in the Niceville area.

**School Buses:** Okaloosa County is refreshing its school bus fleet at the rate of 15 buses per year. In 2021, the District started our Bus Replacement Program with the arrival of 40 new school buses. We now have 76 new buses and 15 more on the way in 2024, totaling 91 new buses with today's latest safety features in three years' time.

Career Technical Education: The OCSD Career and Technical Education (CTE) program offers 19 courses at the middle and high school level with rigorous career pathways for all facets of the workforce: **Building Trades & Construction** Design Technology, Digital Design, Digital Video Technology, Engineering Pathways, Applied Robotics, Biomedical Sciences, Emergency Medical Responder, Practical Nursing, Culinary Arts, Cosmetology, Applied Cybersecurity, Data Science and Machine Learning, Web Application Development and Programming, Criminal Justice Operations, Dispatcher: Police, Fire, Ambulance, Welding Technology Fundamentals, Advanced Manufacturing Technology, Entrepreneurship, and Automotive Maintenance and Light Repair.

From 2007 through 2022, the District has received over 10 million dollars for CTE education funding. During this timeframe, Okaloosa students have earned 20,426 certifications. Recently, CTE received a grant for \$307, 200 for our Building Trades program. We are grateful to Senator Jay Trumbull and Representative Patt Maney for their support on the legislative funding. Funding is necessary to ensure the longevity of CTE programs to provide hands-on, work-based learning that is relevant to student interests and responsive to the needs of employers and the economy. To learn more about OCSD's CTE program, visit https:// www.mycteworks.com.

**Okaloosa Technical Col**lege - Triumph Grant: We are very excited about the \$7.85 million in funding through a grant by Triumph Gulf Coast to purchase and renovate seven acres in the Okaloosa Industrial Air Park near Bob Sikes Airport in Crestview. The funding will allow the District to establish a north campus of Okaloosa Technical College (OTC) to serve residents and allow access to our programs, such as automotive, manufacturing, cyber security, electronics, and plumbing, in rapidly growing northern Okaloosa County. Currently, Okaloosa Technical College offers dual enrollment programs for high school students. Upon project completion, the north campus will provide dual enrollment opportunities, and our students will have access to new technical college programs. The location of this campus is near the epicenter of future economic growth for the Shoal River Ranch mega site and proximi-

Continued on page 20



## Local Nining, Prinks and Coffee

Spice things up at Absolute Thai Restaurant, serving up an authentic taste of Thailand. Under new ownership since June 2023, owner Dao welcomes you to a mix of Thai elegance and simplicity, first rate and creative food, with experienced and skilled chefs in the kitchen straight from Thailand. The menu features classic Thai dishes, but also some creative specialties that are well worth trying. Blending exotic condiments and diverse spices that will whet any appetite, try the garlic fish, Thai Sweet & Sour or one of the popular Curries. House specialties include Crying Tiger: Thai style grilled steak with chili powder dipping sauce served with vegetables; Teriyaki Salmon: Grilled salmon topped with teriyaki sauce served with steam vegetables; and Sizzling Chiangmai: Mushroom, onion, raisins, pineapple, bell pepper and cashew nut with your choice of meat served in hot pan.

"We are pleased to invite all customers to come and try our food which are all special menu," said Dao. "We flew over 10,000 miles from our country and we are now ready to serve you here!"

Dine in, Pick up or Delivery. Lunch Specials Mon-Fri 11 a.m. - 2:30 p.m.

Order all menu items online from Absolute Thai Cafe (Valparaiso) for takeout. Hours: Mon. – Fri. 11 a.m. - 2:30 p.m., 4 p.m. - 8.30 p.m.; Closed Sat.-Sun.

139 N John Sims Pkwy. Valparaiso, FL 32580 (850) 389-4813

#### Landshark's Pizza

Hungry? Thirsty? Maybe a little of both? Come in and visit Landshark's Pizza. Owners Brian and Sue Hassmann have created the locals' favorite pizza, buffalo wings and sports pub and bar that serves great pizza and awesome wings, plus many other scrumptious eats for folks of all ages. There's plenty of seating for everyone and TVs galore, plus fun and games all week long. Sports fans from all over come and watch all their favorite teams on countless regional and national sports networks. With a fully stocked bar serving up dozens of different bourbons and many different cold beers on draft, it's no secret why the locals love Landshark's Pizza Company.

(850) 424-6743



1128 E JohnSims Pkwy., Niceville landsharkspizza.com

#### JoJo's Coffee and Goodness

Owner and operator Angela "JoJo" Stevenson invites you to enter a cafe and relaxed coffee shop atmosphere for a daily dose of "goodness" this holiday season. Stop in for cinnamon rolls: scones: cranberry orange, chocolate caramel and cheddar thyme; strawberry coffee cake; cranberry orange muffins; red velvet cookies; brownies with espresso ganache or caramelitas. Try a breakfast special with a piece of quiche or kolache-hashbrown casserole. Breakfast burritos are rolled and ready daily. Choose from andouille, bacon, chorizo or veggie. Or tantalize your taste buds with a made-to-order breakfast sandwich on croissants or bagel with two eggs and cheese and then choose if you want to add Jojo's homemade smoked jalapeño beef bologna, bacon, house smoked barbecue or ham. Cinnamon rolls and kaloches still hold the top spot for sell outs. Stop in for featured muffins, coffee cake or pound cake, which go great with maple cinnamon latte or caramel macchiato. And, oh, the freshly roasted coffee. Order ahead and pick up some for the office or breakfast to start your day off right!

Hours 7:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday (850) 737-6194 4652 Hwy. 20 East, Niceville bigorangehousedesigns.com

#### LJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant

Suds, Songs and Sunsets! Welcome to LJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant at the Bluewater Bay Marina Complex. Named after "LJ Schooner" (the LJ is for Lazy Jack), a cherished four-legged icon on Bluewater Bay Marina docks, the open-air oyster bar and restaurant offers a magnificent view of the water, marina and unparalleled sunset any time of year. There are, of course, oysters and a delicious varied menu with dinner specials such as blackened mahi and grilled shrimp with hollandaise, served over cheese grits.

#### This month:

**March 9:** Bluewater Bay Marina's Nautical Flea Market 8 a.m. - Noon!

**March 17:** St. Patrick's Day Free the Piggies! Bluewater Bay Marina's 9th Annual Sock Burning! 5:30 p.m. with live music from Ronny Dean Garrett 4-8 p.m. Come with your socks and shoes on; burn your socks during the fire and leave in flip flops! New socks will be accepted to donate to a local homeless shelter.

**March 30:** Shrimp Boil Sunday 4-7 p.m.

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DOORDASH



**Ovide at Hotel Effie** 

March brings St. Patrick's

Day at Hotel Effie and Ovide!

Get your green on for a lucky St.

Patrick's Day bash at Ara Roof-

top Pool & Lounge, perched atop

the luxurious Hotel Effie Sandes-

tin. The shenanigans begin at 6

p.m. on Saturday, March 16 with

live DJ beats, drink specials and

charming vistas of the Emerald

Coast. Guests can enjoy half-off

Irish Whiskey drinks when they

wear green, and the most festive

has the chance to score a \$100

Brunch with an Irish

Twist at Ovide: Add a touch

of Irish flair to your weekend

bar credit!

Live entertainment each weekend. See ad for lineup. **Sundays:** Brunch 9 a.m. - 1

p.m.

**Wednesdays:** Kids Eat Free 5-9 p.m.

**Thursdays:** Open Mic/Ka-raoke 6-10 p.m.

Dine-in, pick-up, to-go.

Oyster bar hours: Mon-Thurs 11 a.m.-10 p.m.; Fri-Sat 11 a.m.-midnight; Sun 9 a.m.-9 p.m.

Restaurant hours: Mon-Tues closed. Wed-Sat, 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Sun, 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Sunday brunch, 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

(850) 897-6400

bluewaterbaymarina.com/schooners 290 Yacht Club Dr., Unit 200, Niceville in Bluewater Bay

brunch plans with enticing St.

Continued on next page



#### We are open and happy to see you!

Breakfast: Bakery - Quiche - Breakfast Sandwiches Lunch: Chicken Salad - BLTs - Paninis - And MORE Inside & Outside Seating Available 7:30 a.m. - 2 p.m. Tues. - Sat. Worried about getting out? NO CONTACT pick up still available. Looking for event space? Give us a call!



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## Local Nining, Nrinks, Coffee & Entertainment

### LOCAL DINING

continued from previous page

Patrick's Day specials at Ovide, the signature restaurant at Hotel Effie Sandestin offering a refined approach to coastal flavors and upscale design. Toast to good fortune and good company with Green Boody Marys and exclusive Shepherd's Pie offerings created by Executive Chef Juan Bochenski and his team.

Hours: Breakfast 7-11 a.m. Mon-Fri. Lunch Closed. Dinner 5-9 p.m., Sunday-Thursday; 5-10 p.m. on Friday and Saturday. Brunch 7 a.m. - 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

(833) 873-3343 Hoteleffie.com Grand Sandestin Blvd., Miramar Beach

Juan Bochenski is the new executive chef at Hotel Effie. Bochenski helms the kitchen at the hotel's signature restaurant, Ovide, and oversees all aspects of food and beverage operations across the hotel's four restaurant outlets and inroom dining. An elegant, culinary adventure, Ovide brings together classic Gulf Coast flavors and southern culinary traditions fueled by a passion for sustainability and seasonality that gives each bite incredible flavor. To do that, Bochenski works closely with local farmers and vendors to serve farmfresh and sustainable ingredi-



gentina, Bochenski has worked

at luxury resorts across the

There's A New Chef In Town!

ents whenever possible. Born in Buenos Aires, Ar-

globe, including Arcis Golf in Dallas; Baker's Bay Golf & Ocean Club on Great Guana Cay, Abaco, Bahamas; Resorts & Residences by Cuisinart on Anguilla; Jade Mountain and Anse Chastanet resorts on St. Lucia; and Rosewood Hotels & Resorts' Inn of the Anasazi in Santa Fe, New Mexico; among others.

Ovide's new dinner menu is available Friday through Saturday, from 5 - 10 p.m., and Sunday through Thursday, from 5-9 p.m. including choices from the raw oyster bar and delicious desserts.



### 2024-2025 Academic Year Auditions

**Incoming 3rd Grade Student Auditions:** April 20 - 10am to 2pm April 21 - 2:30pm to 4:30pm

**Incoming 4th Grade Student Auditions:** April 20 - 2:30 pm to 4:00pm

> **NFBallet.org/Auditions** All auditions are by appointment only.

### **SCHOOLS**

continued from page 18

ty to Bob Sikes Airport and the Okaloosa Industrial Air Park.

Community **Engage**ment: Last semester, the District staff successfully kicked off two initiatives to provide Thanksgiving meals to families and launch our very first Angel Tree. It was heartwarming to see members of our community, such as Jacob's Titan, Florida Power and Light and Publix, who partnered with us to provide Thanksgiving meals to 119 families. In addition, our District staff and local families sponsored 73 students for our Angel Tree. We look forward to continuing these programs and supporting even more of our families.

Together, we will finish this school year strong!





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### Off the Hook

## Large Research Vessel Deployed for Artificial Reef

By Nick Tomecek, Okaloosa County PIO

The northern Gulf of Mexico has a new addition to its extensive artificial reef system with the deployment of the 239-foot R/V DEEP STIM III. The vessel, deployed on Jan. 30, 2024, joins hundreds of other artificial reefs already deployed off the shores of Northwest Florida and will serve as a haven to support various marine species while simultaneously providing the fishing and diving industry with an additional resource.

The successful deployment of R/V DEEP STIM III was accomplished through a Tri-County partnership between Tourist Development Councils in Destin-Fort Walton Beach, Panama City Beach and Walton County. Emerald Coast Reef Association and South Walton Artificial Reef Association provided funding for additional reef modules that were placed on the deck of the vessel adding to the complexity of the new site. Coastal Conservation Association provided funds for the towing fees necessary for deployment. "This collaborative effort is an example of excellence in Northwest Florida and a guide for future successes," said Okaloosa County Board Chairman Paul Mixon. "We look forward to many more opportunities that will allow our tourism industry to thrive, while also creating a sustainable aquatic ecosystem benefitting marine life, tourists and locals."

The majority of the vessel deck sits at about 100 feet, ideal for an advanced dive experience. In addition to diving, the 65-foot high-relief site will provide an outstanding fishing loca-



tion and habitat for popular spe-

cies like amberjack. The added

reef modules enhance the over-

all habitat and will attract fish-

ing favorites such as grouper

and snapper. "While fishing has

always been at the heart of our

region's history, creating sites

that increase scuba diving op-

portunities is something we look

forward to continue to develop.

Collaborating with neighboring

counties and communities on a

large artificial reef project like

this not only creates essential

habitat off our coast but certain-

ly moves the needle on estab-

lishing our area as a leader in adventure tourism," said Alex

Fogg, Coastal Resource Man-

ager for Destin-Fort Walton

efit a wide range of coastal com-

munities. It is located about 22

NM from the Destin East Pass,

29 NM from St. Andrews Pass

and 16.5 NM south of Walton

County. "This collaborative

effort with Okaloosa and Bay

counties to provide a new ar-

tificial reef serves to illustrate

what great things can be accom-

plished when we work together

for the benefit of our residents

and visitors alike," said Walton

County Commission Chairman

The deployed vessel will ben-

Beach

William McCormick.

While the Tri-County partnership involves three counties, large reef deployments like the DEEP STIM III have the potential to draw in adventure seekers from beyond the borders of our counties and the state of Florida. "The Gulf of Mexico serves as a shared resource among our destinations, and we are thrilled to collaborate with our partners on this artificial reef project, said Visit Panama City Beach President and CEO Dan Rowe. "In addition to benefitting our region's diverse marine life, this joint effort will enhance the spectacular diving opportunities for all residents and visitors in Panama City Beach."

Coordinates: DEEP STIM III artificial reef is located at: 30° 03.035' N, 86° 17.758' W

Destin-Fort Walton Beach Panama City Beach, and Walton County Tourism are destinations that foster ecological stewardship and embrace the fishing and diving opportunities provided in the Gulf of Mexico.



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### Mellness

## **There Are Surprises Behind Oral Health**



By KAY LEAMAN, HEALTHYDAY HEALTHYLIFE

Did you know that there is a consensus emerging that maintaining good oral health can be the underappreciated practice to a longer, healthier life?

Even though having healthy gum tissue and removing the plaque buildup on a daily basis is important, it's the microbiome that needs our attention. Our oral cavity is home to viruses, fungi and 700+ bacteria species. If we let our oral hygiene slip, this bacteria can travel throughout the body causing or exacerbating problems, from cardiovascular disease and cancer to Alzheimer's and arthritis. On the flip side, keeping this

environment in check staves off decline.

Recent studies, DNA sequencing along with more attention being given to a person's oral health when they are dealing with other diseases has led to several connections.

• People with gum disease are as much as 20% more likely to be diagnosed with cancer compared to those with healthy gums. Another recent study revealed oral bacteria in the brain of those with Alzheimer's. In very basic terms our oral bacteria could be hitching a lift inside specific immune cells (white blood cells) and traveling to other parts of the body (brain) and released when the white blood cell breaks apart. These processes cause inflammation and can create a snowball effect as the body can't keep up with the invaders.

• 39 People with IBD (irritable bowel disease) had elective colon surgery and the affected biopsy samples were found to contain much higher levels of oral bacteria compared with nearby healthy colon tissue.

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hearing instrument devices. Discover how our smart

get used to wearing your new hearing aids. Ready to

Niceville Hearing Center is a good place to start. WHY

US? We are a locally owned Independent Hearing

Healthcare Provider (not a national franchise).

• One study tracked 10,000 healthy volunteers over 15 years and showed that participants with gum disease were more than twice as likely to go on to have a stroke as people without this condition. They have studied plaque that has been scraped from carotid arteries and the bacterial DNA revealed bacteria from gum disease. These bacteria are migrating to the arteries and building a home by forming a protective layer preventing antibiotics and the body's natural defenses from attacking them. Once they are established, these bacteria cause atherosclerosis by provoking immune cells to release a chemical that turns LDL cholesterol into a special oxidized form that builds up on artery walls.

Flossing and brushing before bed and brushing in the morning should become a ritual. Don't be in a hurry. Take time to curve the floss around each side of the tooth, bringing the floss below the gum line and back up. Also, remember to brush your gums. It increases circulation and stimulates the tissue. Do not



add pressure when brushing; be gentle. Begin using a tongue scrapper after brushing. I am amazed what actually remains on the tongue between all those little fungiform papilla. GUM brushes can be used after every meal or snack which cleans debris between the teeth. You might also consider an oral probiotic (Contact me for details). And since fluoride is added to water and toothpaste as well as the dentist's office list of therapies ('for our benefit'), let's take a quick look.

Fluoride is a byproduct of the element fluorine. There are three types of fluoride produced (Fluorosilicate, Sodium Fluoride and Hexafluorisilicic Fluoride). Of these, Fluorosilicic acid is the most regularly used additive for our water and it is not pharmaceutically graded. It's a byproduct of the phosphate fertilizer, aluminum, steel and cement industries. The warning labels on these products are marked with hazard signs (corrosive, toxic, health hazard, harmful) and must be handled using great caution. Fluoride is a cumulative toxin and increases with the amount and length of exposure. It also has an insatiable appetite for calcium which can deplete the natural calcium hydroxyapatite that contributes to bone density, thus making our bones more brittle.

As of December 2019, 72 studies have investigated the re-

lationship between fluoride and human intelligence. Over 60 animal studies concluded exposure impairs learning and memory capacity of animals. 62 studies have found that elevated fluoride exposure is associated with reduced IQ and IQ examinations were of 23,773 children (62 studies) and 245 adults (two studies). In October 2022 The Nation-

al Toxicology Program (NTP) published a review draft of fluoride neurotoxicity conclusion: "...Fluoride is presumed to be a cognitive neurodevelopment hazard to humans. This con-

clusion is based on a consistent pattern of findings in human studies across several different populations showing that higher fluoride exposure is associated with decreased IQ or other cognitive impairment in children."

You can repair a cavity, but you can't repair a child's brain.

A few other known health effects are cardio toxicity, neurotoxicity, endocrine dysfunction and hepatotoxicity and nephrotoxicity. Anyone drinking this water is prone to toxic cumulative and highly reactive substance. The younger you are, the worse are its effects.

Consider these questions: Can you guarantee that no toothpaste is swallowed while brushing? What about fluoride treatments? Please take some time and learn more about this in-depth topic which I have only skimmed. It can help you make an informed decision with your next purchase and dental visit.

If you would like a list of the top sources of fluoride in daily life, email succeed.hdhl@gmail. com with Fluoride in the subject line.

Here's to Health! succeed.hdhl@gmail.com



**Grant Williams** HAS, HIS, ACA, Audioprosthologist





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### **Wellness**

## **J&B Medical Offers Accuracy and Ease**

BY KELLY STALNAKER

Are you a Type 1 or Type 2 diabetic patient that is tired of constant finger sticks? Then it might be time to consider a continuous glucose monitor. A continuous glucose monitor (or CGM, for short) is a device that automatically tracks your blood sugar level 24/7, with fewer finger sticks. Instead of lancets, a tiny sensor is inserted under the skin with a sticky patch to help keep it in place. There might be some discomfort during insertion, but once in place, the testing is completely painless. And the monitor delivers readings instantly.

With this wearable sensor,







**Three Years In A Row!** Thank you Destin!

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thehormonerestorationcenter.com



you'll have quick and convenient access to real time blood sugar data to help you make better food, activity and medication decisions in the moment. You can also review how your blood sugar level changes over a few hours or days, or after certain meals, to spot trends. And many sensors now offer the ability to sound an alarm when levels are dangerously high or low. Constant and accurate monitoring can help you keep your blood sugar level in target range to reduce the chances of developing other health problems caused by diabetes. CGM's are so easy to use that they're perfect for patients of all ages. A quick glance at your smartphone or CGM receiver will provide accurate

blood sugar readings day or night. Also, the sensor is waterproof and will hold up to swimming, sweating and all of your active lifestyle demands.

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## The Value of Bouncing Back



BY STEPHENIE CRAIG

Have you ever found yourself wanting to rescue someone you love from hard things? Maybe you keep taking your child the homework they left at home, paying their speeding tickets or paying their rent into adulthood. Maybe you feel like being a good friend or family member means swooping in and preventing people from struggling. Do you ever find yourself avoiding facing your own struggles and feeling someone should rescue you from difficulty if they really love you?

Struggle, disappointment and suffering are hard to walk through no matter your age and stage of life. It's common to feel life should be fair when reality uncomfortably reveals life is often not fair. You can do the "right" things and still aren't guaranteed the outcome you want. When things go sideways in life, it's easy to begin to view vourself or others as victims who need to be rescued. It can feel mean to not soften struggle when you know you have the power to do so.

However, often, struggle, failure and suffering are where life's deepest growth and lessons reside.

The resilience you and others develop when working through and bouncing back from struggle is an essential life skill. When you move through hard things seeking the lessons, you become wiser, more confident and more competent at navigating life's frequent complications. When you let those you love move through hard things with support, but without rescuing them, you are supporting their growth and maturity. Supporting is showing empathy, compassion and validating the person's hardship without trying to fix the situation or alleviate the discomfort. It's being present and encouraging the person in the midst of pain without believing it is your job to make the pain stop. Rescuing is taking ownership of the person's pain and falsely believing it is your job to stop natural pain and consequences that are part of a growth process.

So, how do we help ourselves and those around us build resilience rather than engaging rescuing behavior?

#### 7 Ways to Encourage and **Support Bouncing Back**

Notice and acknowledge when life gets difficult. Notice when you or others experience stress. Watch for stressed behavior, overwhelm, anxiety and depression. Notice behaviors such as isolating, mood



changes, physical tension and irritability. Say to yourself or another, "You seem stressed. What might be causing stress? How can you take care of yourself right now?"

Validate the struggle. Say to yourself or another, "That situation is stressful. I can really see why you would be struggling and feeling overwhelmed."

Notice victim/rescuer stories you are believing. Notice where you might be seeing yourself or another as helpless, needing rescue, lacking ability to take action, or victimized by some outside villain (a person, a circumstance, or a condition). Notice thoughts of wanting to be rescued or thoughts of feeling it is your job to rescue another from a natural consequence or struggle that is likely to produce personal growth.

**Embrace empowerment.** Ask yourself what power you or another has to take action in the

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midst of the difficult situation. Release trying to control people and situations you can't control. Identify and encourage steps of self-control.

**Encourage internalizing** lessons. Notice the lessons emerging from the struggle. Encourage yourself and another to see the lessons, to internalize them, and to incorporate them into future decision making.

Engage support through the process. Spend time with people, call, text, listen to give and receive encouragement when things are hard. Avoid advice giving, problem solving for others, or taking responsibility

for others' pain. Be present and kind rather than trying to fix.

Celebrate learning. Notice and talk about when you or another have moved through difficulty, learned new things, and has developed resilience. Be proud of the work.

Be encouraging and kind as you and others press into building resilience knowing it becomes the reservoir of confidence, competence, problem solving and grit for life's inevitable challenges. Connect with us for coaching and counseling along your journey at Journeybravely.com.



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## **Business, College and Career**

#### NWFSC Nursing Program one of Nation's Best Affordable Institutions

Northwest Florida State College (NWFSC) was named by Forbes Advisor as one of the nation's best affordable institutions in 2024 for RN to BSN Programs. Forbes Advisor evaluated 58 colleges, with NWFSC emerging as one of the top 10 schools providing an opportunity for students to earn the degree in as little as three semesters at a very affordable cost. According to Forbes Advisor, the Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) is quickly becoming the industry standard for entry-level nursing practice, especially in hospitals. BSN graduates earn approximately \$92,000 annually. Additionally, a BSN degree can equip nurses for graduate school and job advancement.

The NWFSC Nursing RN to BSN degree program (Bachelor of Science in Nursing) is designed for licensed registered nurses. This program provides nurses with the knowledge and skills to become nurse managers, case managers, hospital-based educators and more. The program content addresses high-demand nursing specialties. Clinical instruction targets the specific needs of special populations, including community and family healthcare.

For more information, visit NWFSC Nursing RN to BSN or contact Dr. Tanya Beauregard, RN, CNE, Director of Nursing, at beauregt@nwfsc.edu and 850-729-6400.

#### Okaloosa Public Schools Foundation to Host the 4th Annual College and Career Fair

The Okaloosa Public Schools Foundation is thrilled to share news of the upcoming 4th Annual College and Career Fair, scheduled for Tuesday, March 12, at Beachside Community Church, at 200 Racetrack Rd NW, Fort Walton Beach. This year, we're switching things up with a new format designed to provide attending students with abundant information on post-graduation employment opportunities, higher education, and military service. Juniors and Seniors from Choctawhatchee, Fort Walton Beach, and Niceville High Schools can register through the links below!

#### Sessions:

8 a.m. - 10 a.m.: Fort Walton Beach and Niceville Students (Breakfast Provided)

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#### **Residential and Commercial**



11 a.m. - 1 p.m.: Choctawhatchee Students (Lunch Provided)

The OPSF College and Career Fair is not designed to be Drop-In Style this year. Please plan to stay for the entire Session. Attendees will have the chance to win prizes and gift cards! The event is free. Students are responsible for their own transportation. Registration is required.

Niceville's Registration Form: https://docs.google.com/ forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSevwL-7CeZUqJ-9aF914F9pJ6kj2WaI-Ud4CuQ4bTYtztGAjabg/viewform.

Specific event information is available on the Registration forms linked above. Please see your school's point of contact for event permission forms. School Point of Contact:

Choctawhatchee: Front Office Fort Walton Beach: Guidance Office

Niceville: Front Office

For those who wish to participate as a vendor, visit https:// www.eventbrite.com/e/4th-annual-college-and-career-fair-vend o r - r e g i s t r a t i o n - t i c k ets-819021664847?aff=oddtdtcreator. For questions, contact Debbie Tate, tated@okaloosaschools.com or (850) 974-0742.

#### Florida SBDC at UWF Presents "When Banks Say No"

It's tough for small businesses to get funding. In fact, 75-80% of small business loan requests are denied by banks. So, what's a small business owner to do when the bank says no? Find alternative funding sources! "When Banks Say No," presented on March 12 from 9 - 10:15 a.m., provides an overview of alternative funding options for small business owners who need money to start, support or grow their businesses. Takeaways from and Benefits of Attending this webinar include:

1. Hope! A "no" from the bank is not the end of the road. There are many options available for nearly any business situation.

2. Understanding! We'll explain many funding options that banks just don't offer. One might be just what you need!

3. Direction! When you identify one or two loan options that work for you, you can take the steps towards acquiring that money to start or support or grow your business.

Presenter: S. Boyd Karren, Managing Partner, Otro Financial. Fee: \$15. To register, visit sbdc.uwf.edu and open "Training & Events." Sponsored by Cadence Bank and Wells Fargo.

#### Florida SBDC at UWF Presents "Connect to Capital"

This panel discussion is a must-attend for small business owners, aspiring entrepreneurs, and anyone seeking a deeper understanding of the funding options available to drive business growth. Don't miss the opportunity to connect with industry experts, ask questions, and gain the knowledge needed to secure the financial support your business deserves. Join us online for "Connect to Capital" on March 13 from 9:00 - 10:00 a.m. for an engaging conversation on building bridges to opportunities in the world of small business financing. Presenters: Joel Ross, Business Development Officer, Florida First Capital Finance Corporation; Stacey McGilvray, Senior Vice President of Commercial Lending, Hancock Whitney; Cristian Carlee, Assistant Vice President & Commercial Relationship Manager, Trustmark. Fee: \$15. To register, visit sbdc.uwf.edu and open "Training & Events". Sponsored by Cadence Bank and Wells Fargo.

#### FP&L Awards \$200K in Grants to Help 28 Nonprofits

Florida Power & Light (FPL) recently announced it helped support a variety of needs in the community through 28 nonprofits in Walton, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa and Escambia counties with grants totaling \$210,435. NextEra Energy Foundation, a charitable arm of FPL's parent company, awarded the grants to the Northwest Florida nonprofits each quarter through 2023, with the last ones announced in December. The money will support their programs well into 2024. Foundation grants are focused on education, food insecurity, senior citizen support and child advocacy, as well as grants focused on environmental conservation and protection.



## Sean of the South



By SEAN DIETRICH

"Dear Sean, how can we save this country?" the email began.

The writer lives in Hartford, Connecticut. His name is Michael. I have no idea why Michael thinks a hayseed like me is qualified to answer this loaded question. I'm not a smart guy. Blondes tell jokes about me.

Still, I have an idea.

The way to save this country is to eat together. We don't eat together anymore. We don't eat supper at the same table. When did that stop?

A recent study found that only 29 percent of Americans sit to eat supper with family each day. Fifty years ago, the statistic was nearly 99 percent.

On average about 50 percent of millennials admit to cooking their own suppers. Whereas the number was around 80 percent with baby boomers.

Something else. We need to put the Wurlitzer organ back in Major League Baseball.

I don't know if you're aware, but baseball has undergone many changes since we were kids. Even the rules have changed. There is a pitch clock. No more cigar smoke.

But the biggest disappointment was losing the organ. I attended a game recently and all I heard was Lady Gaga blasting overhead.

This is an affront.

In 1941, organist Ray Nelson debuted at Wrigley Field. It was the first time organ music was heard in baseball. He played before 18,678 Cubs fans. He played "When the Midnight Choo-Choo Leaves for T-U-L-S-A."

A half century ago, each American ballpark had an organist. Today, there are only seven.

Another way to save this country is to bring back piano lessons. Five decades ago, 81 percent of American kids took piano lessons. Do you know what the percentage is now? Eight percent.

That's not enough Americans to form a Rotary Club.

I took piano lessons. My teacher was Miss Betty, who smelled like bath powder and Icy Hot. She said if I played "Savior Like a Shepherd Lead Thee" without mistakes, she would give me fudge. I gained nine pounds.

We need dinner on the grounds. Once upon a time, rural churches had outdoor dinners on the lawn. Often around Decoration Day. We did.

Our whole congregation would gather on the grass, eat copious amounts of sugar and cholesterol. Whereupon we would all sing "Bringing in the Sheaves" while receiving insulin injections from our neighbors.

This country needs Lawrence Welk, Roy Clark, and Buck Owens. We need Thomas and Richard Smothers. Bing Crosby. Nat Cole. Satchmo.

Our music sucks. We once had hit tunes like "Geor-



gia," "String of Pearls," and "Hey Good Lookin'." Now we have-these are actual song hit titles-"Me & Ur Ghost," "Knockin' the Boots," and "AB-CDEFU."

More Andy Taylor; less Taylor Swift bashing. More Ray Charles, less Justin Bieber. More Clark Kent, less Beavis and Butthead.

More rope swings on muddy creeks. More young men opening doors for females. More Norman Rockwell. More John Wayne. More Fred McFeely Rogers.

No, I don't know how to save this country. I don't know much ain't a bad place to start. about anything

But I know family dinners



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### Musing

## A Pastor's Ponderings: The Power of Decision Courage, Conviction and Consequences



By Pastor Doug Stauffer

Life's journey is guided by the decisions we make, shaping our path and defining our future. The Bible offers invaluable advice on making wise choices. James 1:5-8 stresses the importance of seeking God's wisdom before making a decision. The book of James also says that God promises to give wisdom generously to those who ask. In the same context, James 4:2 says, "Ye have not, because ye ask not." We have all the tools at our immediate disposal.

The book of James also warns against the peril of wavering indecision, likening it to a ship tossed upon the stormy seas. Double-minded people are unstable in all their ways, highlighting the importance of making decisions with faith and conviction. We need to learn to be decisive and avoid being wishy-washy.

Every decision we make has consequences. The story of Christ's crucifixion illustrates the weight of choices. Pilate, swayed by the clamoring crowd, opted to release Barabbas, a guilty man, instead of Jesus, the innocent Son of God. This decision, driven by fear of others, led to the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ. Herod's choice had profound consequences. Our decisions impact us and those around us. We must heed the warnings of scripture and choose wisely, mindful of the unexpected consequences.

Anne Frank's decision to document her experiences while hiding from the Nazis during the Holocaust has provided a powerful testament to the human spirit and resilience in the face of adversity. Her diary has become one of the most widely read books in the world, inspiring generations to stand against injustices. Because of her wise decision, Anne Frank continues to speak through the written page.

Proverbs provides crucial insights into decision-making, stressing the significance of knowledge, wisdom, and correction. Knowledge lights our path, wisdom guides our steps, and correction fosters our growth. These elements serve as pillars supporting us through both successes and setbacks from every decision we make.

Despite facing opposition from his family, Moses remained steadfast in his commitment to God. Similarly, we may encounter difficult choices that test our allegiance to the Almighty. Like Moses, we must trust in God's guidance, even when doing so requires us to stand alone.

Ruth's journey, marked by unwavering trust and obedience, bears witness to the boundless blessings awaiting those who walk in righteousness. Ruth followed Naomi and embraced her God. Her faithfulness was rewarded



with blessings beyond measure as she became part of the lineage of Christ. We must emulate Ruth's unwavering faith, trusting that God will always lead us on the path of righteousness.

The political landscape, too, offers glimpses of decisive leadership that leave indelible marks upon society. Margaret Thatcher, the "Iron Lady," reshaped the fabric of Britain with her unwavering commitment to conservative principles, leaving a legacy in the annals of history. Her conservative policies, including privatization, deregulation and free-market reforms, reshaped the British economy and society during her tenure from 1979 to 1990.

As we journey through life, let's seek God's wisdom and trust in His guidance. Let our decisions be anchored in faith, knowing God will grant us the necessary wisdom if we only ask. May we draw lessons from scripture and the lives of faithful individuals, making wise choices and walking in the light of God's truth. I pray we will all consider Him as we make our decisions.

Dr. Doug Stauffer is pastor of Faith Independent Baptist Church. He was saved July 6, 1980, in Niceville, while stationed at the 33rd Tactical Fighter Wing at Eglin Air Force Base and has now been in the ministry for over 35 years.

SIN



## CLASSICAL CONNECTIONS feat. Steven Banks

### Saturday, March 23 | 7:30 pm Destin-FWB Convention Center

Recipient of the prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant and Sinfonia Gulf Coast's Young Concert Artist prize, saxophonist Steven Banks pushes boundaries, expanding the instrument's repertoire while showcasing its vast capabilities. Hear this newly commissioned work for saxophone and orchestra by award-winning composer Billy Childs: *Diaspora*, *Motherland* and *If We Must Die* — three compelling pieces inspired by African American poems that chronicle the black American journey from mournful suppression to joyful empowerment. Mussorgsky's riveting *Pictures at an Exhibition* completes this compelling program.



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Arts & Music

## **ECTC Presents Comedy at the Boulevard!**

Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC) and Panama City Comedy are proud to present Comedy at the Boulevard, Saturday, March 9 at 7:30 p.m. Come for an uproarious night of laughs! ECTC presents some of the Southeast's most hilarious comedians! This hysterical event will be hosted by resident funny guy Jason Hedden and features Lace Larrabee and Cyrus Steele.

Lace Larrabee, Co-headliner, is a nationally touring comedian, actress and host whose debut comedy album, White Trash Cinderella, produced by 800 Pound Gorilla Records, sealed the number one spot on the comedy charts. The accompanying YouTube special amassed over 1 million views and counting.

A former southern beauty queen, Lace ditched the pageants, but kept her dominant stage presence, unrivaled timing and trademark sass. As a season 17 semifinalist on America's Got Talent, America loved her charming wit so much, NBC brought her back to roast Simon Cowell alongside Roastmaster General himself, Jeff Ross. Lace turned her appearance on AGT into a Vegas residency as host of America's Got Talent Superstars Live.

For over a decade, Lace has

been honing her self-deprecating humor and hilarious personal anecdotes into a style that is fiercely her own. Lace can captivate a room and garner laughs as big as her personality. From tales of growing up in a trailer to relatable observations on friends, family, and aging, Lace turns life's humiliating moments into an indomitable act of comedy. Lace's candor, perspicacity, and refreshingly real takes on life make comedians want to be her, audiences want to be best friends with her. Offstage, Lace and fellow comedian Katherine Blanford (The Tonight Show) co-host a juicy podcast called Cheaties that delights in the raw messiness of love, life, and mistakes we all make. Each week, this snarky duo interviews guests who divulge their own stories of cheating or being cheated on and how they overcome.

Lace is a regular favorite on Sirius XM and has two upcoming specials dropping in 2024 through OFTV and Rhizome Comedy. Lace's charisma radiates and her writing and delivery are undeniable. Lace has found her voice and is passionate about empowering others to find and use theirs too.

As a dynamic performer, Co-headliner and comedian Cyrus Steele is quickly estab-



lishing himself to be a comedic force through his wit and hilarious celebrity impersonations. He covers everyone from Barack Obama to impressions of Kevin Hart and Donald Trump! Steele appeals to all audiences young and old, with clean comedy and mining humor from his Southern roots, growing up in Savannah, Ga. He has performed at many of the nation's best comedy venues, including the famous Apollo Theater. In 2017, he was a top 5 finalist for HBO's American Black Film Festival and most recently a finalist for Jeanne Robertson's Comedy with Class. In 2019, he was a finalist for Steve Harvey's 2019 'Standup Spotlight'. And more



recently made an appearance on FOX's 'TMZ' and won their 'Wacky Talent Competition'. In November 2021, he dropped his first DryBar comedy special!

Local Jason Hedden is an actor and director that took to stand-up comedy when his wife stopped laughing at his jokes at home. He lives in Panama City where he produces monthly shows with Panama City Comedy. He has been seen at Star-Dome, The Comedy Catch, Stand Up Live, Comedy Bar, Laughing Skull Lounge, Dothan Opera House and dozens of other venues throughout the southeast. Jason has performed at the Pensacola Indie Fringe and Comedy Festival, West End



Comedy Festival, Gulf Coast Comedy Festival, Blue Ridge Comedy Festival and P3 Comedy Fest. He is a frequent opener for Grand Ole Opry member, Henry Cho. Follow him at @jasonheddencomedy or jasonhedden.com.

Comedy at the Boulevard will be staged on the Cabaret Stage in ECTC's main space located on the second floor of 560 Grand Boulevard in Grand Boulevard Town Center in Miramar Beach. Tickets range from \$27 -\$40. There is an additional processing fee for ticket purchases. Purchase tickets online at www. emeraldcoasttheatre.org.

## ECMAF Music Fest Delights Listeners

#### By Deborah Carboni

January 10 - 19. 2024. marked the 8th year that Emerald Coast Music Alliance Foundation (ECMAF) has invited "Carnegie Hall" musicians to perform throughout Okaloosa and Walton counties for its 10day festival-in schools, senior centers, assisted living facilities and organizations that serve the challenged or disabled populations. And every performance is free! "We do it because we love it," exclaimed our Artistic Director Alon Goldstein.

This year's festival has been an amazing success! ECMAF musicians traveled to 13 elementary through high schools; the Northwest Florida Ballet Academy, The Emerald Coast Autism Center, Bob Hope Village, The Mid-Bay Rotary Club, American House at Bluewater Bay, Twelve Oaks, Bee Hive Homes, Fresh Start, Nellies Youth Village and more—over 50 performances in 25 venues.

ECMAF Artistic Director and concert pianist Alon Goldstein invited three incredibly talented musical groups to perform with him. Neo-Art Piano duo wowed audiences as two pianists perform intricately and simultaneously on one piano. The Brass Trio featured a trombonist, a French horn and a U.S. Navy Band trumpeter on leave to us just for this event! Exceptional jazz artists, The Guy Mintus Jazz Trio came all the way from New York to blow us away with their

Continued on page 31



## It's Almost Time for the Wildly Popular Concerts In The Village!

The 10-concert live music series on Thursdays, April 4 to June 6, will feature premier musicians and bands performing everything from classic rock, disco and modern pop to fulllength Grammy Award-winning iconic albums.

Hear the entire Grammy Award-winning Purple Rain album performed live, reminisce with Fleetwood Mac classics, dance to funky disco beats and discover new pop vocalists from The Voice — all in the diverse lineup of the 2024 Concerts presented by Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation, offering something for every music lover.

The area's first live concert series is held each spring on Thursday evenings at the MKAF Dugas Pavilion in Destin. This year's 29th annual family-friendly series will run from April 4 to June 6. The 10-concert live music series will feature premier regional and national musicians and bands performing everything from classic rock, rhythm & blues, and disco to

modern pop.

The series kicks off on Thursday, April 4, 2024, with must-not-miss entertainers Post Modern Jukebox promising an unforgettable trip back in time to celebrate vintage music and pop culture.

The highly anticipated season features a range of local, regional and national musicians and bands including rhythm & blues sensation Wendy Moten from The Voice, full-length rendition of Prince's iconic album Purple Rain by Black Jacket Symphony and the chill sounds of Yacht Rock Revue. Kicking off May are local fan favorites The Mulligans, the Fleetwood Mac tribute band Rumours ATL, party starters Gotta Groove Band, rock god Mitch Malloy and gifted pop/jazz/blues and soul songstress Haley Reinhart. The series caps on Thursday, June 6 with crowd pleasing Adam Ezra Group, sure to fuse rock energy and soul power.

"This is a great lineup of live music performed in a beautiful



venue at an affordable price for a great cause" says MKAF CEO Demetrius Fuller. "When you purchase a concert ticket, you are enabling us to provide the highest quality of arts education and community engagement throughout Okaloosa, Walton and Bay Counties. If you are a MKAF regular, welcome back, if you're not yet a MKAF member, please consider joining. We have a great time and as we like to say, your support keeps the arts FUN-ded."

Gates open at 6 p.m. with concerts beginning at 7 p.m. for this come-as-you-are family-friendly outdoor concert series. Bring a lawn chair, picnic, wine, or purchase food and beverages on-site prepared by featured restaurants and food trucks.

## The 2024 Concerts in the Village schedule is as follows:

Thursday, April 4 | Post Modern Jukebox

- Thursday, April 11 | Wendy Moten
- Thursday, April 18 | Black Jacket Symphony presents Prince's Purple Rain
- Thursday, April 25 | Yacht Rock Revue
- Thursday, May 2 | The Mulligans
- Thursday, May 9| Rumours
- ATL: A Tribute to Fleetwood Mac
- Thursday, May 16 | Gotta Groove Band
- Thursday, May 23 | Mitch Malloy
- Thursday, May 30 | Haley Reinhart
- Thursday, June 6 | Adam Ezra Group

General admission varies per

concert. Prices range from \$20 to \$35 for adults. Discounts offered for active-duty military (must show ID). Purchase tickets in advance of concert day and save \$5 per ticket at the door. Children (12 and under) are free. A limited number of VIP tables (reserved table for eight guests for the entire season) are available for \$2,250. Purchase tickets online at MKAF.org/ events.

MKAF members enjoy early entry and free admission to every concert as well as discounted pricing to other MKAF events. For more information on MKAF membership, visit MKAF.org.

Concert lineup is subject to change. All sales are final; sorry, no refunds. Pets, tables larger than two feet, and drones are not permitted. Children 17 and under must be accompanied by a parent or guardian. To learn more about sponsoring the 2024 MKAF season, call (850) 650-2226. For the latest news and information, visit www.MKAF.org, and follow the Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation Facebook and Instagram pages for dates, information, and inspiring arts and culture-related posts.



### 🏇 Arts & Music

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#### ECMAF

continued from page 29

incredible talents on piano, bass guitar and drums.

In addition to all these performances, two free evening community concerts were offered to the public, one at the Fort Walton Beach Civic Auditorium and one at Crosspoint Church, Niceville. All the musicians performed at these concerts and the audiences gave them standing ovations!

When you give, you often find that you receive more than you gave – and that's the sentiment we keep hearing from our musicians. Children engage with the performers, clapping in time with the rhythm of the music, swaying to the beat, some getting up to spontaneously interpret the music through dance. The artists spend time with the children, showing how their instruments



work, letting them touch keys, valves and strings. It's inspiring to see the curiosity and interest, hearing the children and youth express a desire to pursue learning to play an instrument.

"I feel alive again," is the one



statement that brought tears to our eyes, spoken by an elderly woman in one of the senior living facilities after a performance. These moments and feedback inspire us to expand our vision for 2025 and beyond, returning year after year with new musical talents, more performances and more engagement with the public.

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Grant Williams, HAS, HIS, ACA, Audioprosthologist, Florida & Louisiana State Licensed in Hearing Instrument Sciences I ANSWER MY PHONE 23/6