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Grace Rides: A Story of Compassion, Community and Equine Healing

BY DOUG STAUFFER

In the heart of Niceville, a remarkable story unfolded at Grace Rides, a sanctuary where humans share a journey of healing and growth with horses. Founded in 2008 by Sherry Hall and her husband, Steve, Grace Rides has transformed from a modest pilot program at the Oak Heaven Stables equestrian facility in Niceville into a beacon of hope for many, embodying a God-sized vision of love and service.

A Vision Born from Compassion

Grace Rides originated from a desire to intertwine the daily presence of horses with the mission to serve people of all abilities. Inspired by the foundational efforts of the local RACE program ("Riding for Adults and Children with Exceptionalities") and supported by entities like Storybrook Farms and Shangri-La Therapeutic Academy of Riding, Grace Rides took



its first steps toward making a significant impact in the community.

Since 2008, Grace Rides has grown from a pilot program of four riders per week. Last year, devoted volunteers invested almost 6,000 hours into the program and provided nearly 900 rides for program participants. The exponential growth will only continue with community involvement.

The Spiritual Journey

At the core of Grace Rides is a profound spiritual philosophy guided by scriptures like Matthew 25:40 (caring for the least in society) and Philippians 4:13 (Christ making all things possible). These scriptures are not just verses displayed on their website; they are truths that fuel the mission to serve through the healing power of equine-as-

GRACE RIDES
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Lights Out. Stash the Trash. It's Sea Turtle Nesting Season!

BY LORI SMITH
AND RITA L. SHERWOOD

Each year, thousands of sea turtles nest on our beaches. Florida beaches are the No. 1 place for sea turtle nests in North America from May to October. Northwest Florida beaches attract many endangered species including Green, Loggerhead, Leatherback and Kemp's Ridley.

Life Media's own "Theo," the Gulfarium C.A.R.E. Center, Destin-Fort Walton Beach Sea Turtle Patrol and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC) remind locals and visitors to help protect nesting sea turtles by practicing some simple tips.

Clean: We can all do our part to protect the sea turtles by keeping the beach clean. Remove all belongings, including trash, when you leave the beach. Leave no trace! Stash the trash! Obstacles on the beach can prevent sea turtles from nesting as they crawl from the water, across the sand, to lay their eggs. They can also prevent sea turtle hatchlings

SEA TURTLES
continued on page 4

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 Community
GRACE RIDES*continued from page 1*

sisted activities. Sherry Hall, the executive director, asked God to “break my heart to what breaks yours.”

Programs That Transform Lives

Grace Rides offers a variety of programs designed to cater to individuals with special needs, including physical, cognitive and emotional challenges. These programs range from Therapeutic Riding, which teaches riding skills tailored to the needs of the participants, to Horses for Heroes, a dedicated initiative for veterans that focuses on ground handling and relational skills with horses.

The Stable Friends and Equine-Assisted Learning and Enrichment programs provide unmounted experiences promoting emotional, social and cognitive growth through horse interaction.

Abi Copeland is a true example of success. She started as a participant in 2016 (left picture) and transitioned into a volunteer with a special needs child last summer (right picture). She also helps clean out the stalls, and when asked about that, she said, “Someone has to do it—they don’t clean themselves.” Abi wants to continue pursuing volunteer work, because she

loves animals and finds so much joy in giving back.

The People Behind the Mission

The dedication of individuals like Sherry Hall, a PATH Certified Instructor, and Anne Jennete, a Therapeutic Riding Instructor and veteran, highlights the commitment and passion that drive Grace Rides. Their stories of personal growth and the joy of seeing others transform are testimonials of the power and success of this program.

Involvement and Support

Grace Rides thrives because of the community’s support and sponsors’ generosity. Opportunities to get involved include volunteering in various capacities around the farm, sponsoring a horse, or contributing to the operational needs through donations. Each role is crucial in sustaining and expanding the impact of Grace Rides. Would you believe that the program participants span ages 4 to 84 years old?

The Future Vision

With steadfast community support and the dedication of volunteers and donors, Grace Rides is poised for significant expansion. The construction of a 9,000 sq/ft barn in Defuniak Springs serves as a vivid testa-



ment to what collective faith and support can accomplish. Sherry Hall proudly declares, “This is the barn that God built.”

Looking ahead, Grace Rides has outlined a 10-year strategic plan to broaden its scope of services. “Currently, we operate without a required fee structure, relying entirely on donations and volunteer support,” explains Sherry. The future roadmap includes introducing full-service overnight stays to complement existing day camps, enhancing the breadth of therapeutic engagement available to participants.

Moreover, Sherry shares an ambitious vision to construct a large event center featuring a gymnasium and a fully catered kitchen. This facility would host community events such as weddings and family reunions and offer employment opportunities to program participants and volunteers. “We envision

a space that serves our mission and becomes a hub for community gatherings and celebrations,” she adds.

Grace Rides is seeking substantial funding opportunities to realize these goals, including an Impact 100 grant. The organization is also calling for donors to provide matching funds, a critical step towards leveraging larger grants and ensuring the financial sustainability of these expansive projects.

By engaging with Grace Rides, community members, and supporters can play a pivotal role in transforming these aspirations into reality, paving the way for a future where the organization can touch even more lives through its equine-assisted programs.

A Call to Action

Grace Rides invites everyone to join their journey by volunteering, sponsoring, or simply

sharing their story. The experience at Grace Rides isn’t just about riding; it’s about building confidence, fostering relationships, and creating a community where everyone is valued and empowered.

Conclusion

Grace Rides is more than an equestrian program; it is a spiritual journey that intertwines faith, compassion, and the therapeutic power of horses to create profound changes in the lives of participants and volunteers alike. It stands as a testament to what can be achieved when a community comes together to support “the least of these,” embodying the very essence of grace and service.

As Grace Rides continues to write its story, it calls on us to be a part of something bigger than ourselves, to contribute to a legacy of love, healing, and empowerment that will resonate for generations to come. Check them out at www.gracerides.net.



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 Community

SEA TURTLES

continued from page 1

from reaching the water once they emerge from their nests. Dispose of all trash, fill in holes in the sand and put away boats, beach toys and furniture. This also applies to trash in the water, such as abandoned fishing gear, extremely harmful to sea turtles. They can get stuck in deserted traps or wrapped up in a net or fishing line, causing physical injuries to their flippers and softer parts of their body. Sea turtles are air breathers, so getting caught in an old trap will prevent them from making it up to the surface. Never cut your fishing line if you hook a sea turtle and do not target sea turtles while fishing. Leave no trace on the beach or in the water!

Dark: Lights out! Since most of Florida's sea turtles nest at night, it is important to keep our beaches dark. Bright lights can disorient nesting tur-

tles and their hatchlings, leading them away from the ocean and toward potential danger, such as a parking lot. So, avoid using a flashlight or cellphone on the beach at night. If you live along the beach or are visiting, turn out lights or close curtains after dark to ensure nesting turtles' safety as they come ashore, keeping hatchlings oriented when they emerge from their nests. Use turtle safe flashlights or flashlight covers when on the beach at night. You can get one FREE at the Visit Destin-Fort Walton Beach Welcome Center, 1540 Miracle Strip Pkwy SE, Fort Walton Beach.

Flat: We share the beach with sea turtles. A female will return to her beach where she was born to lay her eggs. So, when you leave the beach each day, knock down any sandcastles and fill in any holes. It's incredible to watch a 300-400 lb. Loggerhead sea turtle crawl up the beach which is no easy task,

dig an 18-20-inch hole with only her back flippers, deposit her eggs and then cover them back up with sand and pat it all down (all with only her back flippers). The whole process takes 30 to 60 minutes.

Sometimes they are seen during the day where they encounter many additional hazards and complications. For example, a sea gull's favorite snack is a baby sea turtle. The nest, also, is at risk of predation by animals as well as of high tides during storms, which can wash out and drown nests. Once hatched, they must make it to the water without becoming disoriented by artificial light or killed by predators. Finally, they arrive to their home in the Gulf where they are at risk of sharks, fish, fishing lines, ingesting debris and trash, boats and pollution. For the females who survive and return to shore to nest, it's a great victory. Once she lays her eggs on the beach, the sea



turtle mama never returns.

The most important thing to remember if you see a mama sea turtle on the beach is to be respectful, stay quiet and stay back at least 50 feet. Don't get excited or be loud or take pictures with the flash on your cellphone which can disorient the turtle and stress her out. She is likely to return to the water unable to lay her eggs.

We're so passionate about the sea turtles that we even have a local celebrity named Theo, a lovable, plush turtle with a mission—to help protect and sustain the threatened sea turtle population along our Gulf Coast. "I'm a little turtle on a big mission. I'm here to save my fellow threatened sea turtles," says Theo.

One of Theo's favorite places is our very own Gulfarium on Okaloosa Island known as the Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park, a beacon for coastal conservation where it has been active in marine animal rescue and rehabilitation for many years through the C.A.R.E. Center, the non-profit arm of Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park. Developed in 2015 to facilitate and further its continued coastal conservation efforts, the program has helped to rehabilitate and release hundreds of various species of sea turtles found on the Gulf Coast, from the Loggerhead, Green, Kemp's Ridley, to the Leatherback, back into the wild.

Rehabilitation starts when a sea turtle patient arrives; it is evaluated by animal care and veterinary staff using guidelines from the FWC. These guidelines give staff the necessary information needed to evaluate a method for rehabilitation, recovery and release.

Although every effort is made to release the turtle back to the ocean, occasionally a sea turtle

is deemed non-releasable due to medical or physical limitations, and Gulfarium C.A.R.E. Center becomes the turtle's permanent home with full-time care.

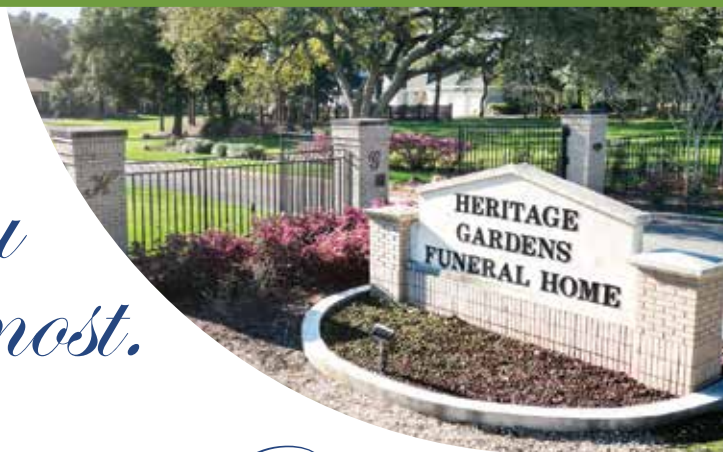
The Center leads the charge in the rescue and rehabilitation of sea turtles along the Emerald Coast, successfully treating over 130 sea turtles in 2023 alone, with the average rehabilitation of each turtle costing over \$20,000.

The C.A.R.E. Center also encourages awareness through public education as well as opportunities for locals to actively participate, such as becoming a volunteer, donating or attending a fund-raising event. You can support by donating at <https://bit.ly/3SOuEwQ>, or through the C.A.R.E. Center's Amazon Wishlist! <https://amzn.to/3WhZZHP?>

Other ways to help sea turtles include reporting those that are sick, injured, entangled or dead to FWC's Wildlife Alert Hotline at 888-404-FWCC (3922). Do not touch the sea turtle, remove it from the beach or attempt to push it back into the water as this can cause the animal to re-strand and die. Instead, monitor from a safe distance. While waiting for authorities to arrive, note its position and monitor its breathing.

Visit Gulfarium.com/volunteer and the C.A.R.E. Center at Facebook.com/gulfariumcare-center. You can also help support the cause at theotheturtle.com. A portion of every Theo purchase, from ball caps and pillows to Christmas ornaments and key chains, goes directly to help support the conservation and rehabilitation of sea turtles. We can all do our part to protect these amazing marine animals; after all, it was certainly their beach first!

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Community

Bay Buzz



2024 Women of Honor

Congratulations to the 2024 Women of Honor, recently recognized at the Women of Honor event held at the University of West Florida (UWF) Emerald Coast Campus. The "Women of Honor" was first established as "Wall of Honor" by the The Okaloosa County Commission on the Status of Women (OC-CSW) in 1997 as an idea of its members who thought it would be a nice way for someone to honor the women in their lives whose works might be unknown to most others. Details about who they are and the impact they had are shared and each woman's name is added to a plaque that hangs on the Wall of Honor at the UWF Emerald Coast campus library along with a letter placed in the Book of Honor near the plaque.

The 2024 Women of Honor are as follows:

Audrey Adams – Assistant

Director for the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Communications Division

Megan Blancho - President of Okaloosa Chapter of Florida Association of Women Lawyers, dedicated to the development of professional relationships among women lawyers

Daquiri Champion – Retired Registered Dietician in Nephrology, Pediatric Nutrition, Counseling and Geriatric Nutrition

Sherry Cronley – Active volunteer with Fort Walton Beach Elk's 1795, formerly a school teacher and now homeschooling her 14 year old grandson

Sheryl "Sherry" Jones - Community & Public Relations Director for One Hopeful Place, Sheryl is responsible for securing funds

Pam Lee - Volunteer with Elks Lodge 1795, Mardi Gras Club, River Rats, Destin Elementary, Corvette Club, Arc of

the Emerald Coast and American Business Women's Association

Kathy Miller - volunteer, teacher and leader for 59 years at First Baptist Church's International English School, longest running in the State of Florida

Amanda Negrón – CEO of Hsu Foundation and serves on the Senior Board of the Snowden-Horne Society, Children of the American Revolution

Elizabeth "Liz" Qualiana - Residential Stability Coordinator Supervisor who works with people to find housing at One Hopeful Place

June Scroggin - an activist volunteering with Republican Women of Okaloosa Federated (RWOF), Fresh Start, 100+ Women Who Care, Sleep in Heavenly Peace (building beds) and more

Melinda Sousa - Founded Visiting You Senior Home Care dedicated to helping seniors find companionship.

Neko Stubblefield – Vice President of Membership & Community Development for Eglin Federal Credit Union, fostering valuable partnerships

Debbie Tate – Community Affairs Office Manager for Okaloosa County Public Schools Foundation



Above: Mid-Bay Rotarians and 96th LRS Volunteers. Rotarians include Wayne Cheatum, John Sallman and his Rotary Partner Ashley, Harold Peek, Art Jean, Dave Swanick and Tom Johnson

Sabina Zunguze - A certified suicide prevention speaker and CEO of the Tatissa Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Social Justice Inc.

Mid-Bay Rotary Completes an Emerald Coast Science Center (ECSC) Outdoor Classroom

The ECSC mission is to inspire and grow a scientifically engaged community. The Mid-Bay Rotary's project was the construction of an outdoor classroom located in an area that will be used for environmental learning. The outdoor classroom consists of a concrete base, a carport cover, and tables and benches. Mid-Bay helped finance the carport cover and Mid-Bay Rotary Club members and the 96th Logistics Readiness Squadron (LRS) volunteers moved nine concrete tables and



Mid-Bay Rotarian Wayne Cheatum presents ECSC Director Diane Fraser a check for the outdoor classroom's canopy.

27 concrete benches to the new outdoor classroom. They also helped string lights for an ECSC fund raiser. The classroom was part of Mid-Bay's and District 6940's Rotary Year 2023-2024 Grants. Mid-Bay Rotarian Wayne Cheatum was Mid-Bay's Lead. The ECSC Center's focal point was the ECSC Director Diane Fraser.

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Happenings Around the Bay

2024 EVENTS

JUNE

- 01** | **Spring Soiree benefiting the Freedom House**
5:30 pm | Niceville Senior Center | Niceville
Emerald Coast Chamber Music Festival Showcase Concert
7 pm | Tyler Recital Hall at NWF State College | Niceville
Billy Bowlegs 5K Run
7:30 am | Fort Walton Beach HS | FWB
Freeport Veterans Memorial Golf Tournament
8 am | Eagle Springs Golf Course | Defuniak Springs
Emerald Coast Pride
9 am | Niceville Community Center | Niceville
- 02** | **Young Artists of the Emerald Coast Chamber Music Festival**
1:30 pm | Tyler Recital Hall at NWF State College | Niceville
Women's Climbing Circle
5 pm | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin
- 03** | **Chess Night**
6 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville
- 03-07** | **Pistol Youth Camp**
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

- 04** | **Niceville Young Professionals Lunch Meeting**
11:30 am | Niceville-Valparaiso Chamber | Niceville
Live Music: Charlie Seagar
4 pm | Al's Beach Club and Burger Bar | FWB
Movies on the Beach: "Luca"
8 pm | Al's Beach Club and Burger Bar | FWB
- 05** | **Growing Green Families Knit/Crochet Night**
6 pm | Growing Green Families | Niceville
- 06** | **A Bed 4 Me Greens & Dreams Golf Tournament**
12:30 pm | Rocky Bayou Country Club | Niceville
Concerts in the Village: Adam Ezra Group
7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin

- 07** | **Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee**
7 am | Christian Life Center at First Baptist Church | FWB

- 07 CONT.** | **Live Music: Chris Curles + Saltwater Revival Band**
5 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville
- 8** | **Alaqua Animal Refuge's 3rd Annual FORE! The Love of Animals Golf Tournament**
8:30 am | Links Golf Club at Sandestin | Miramar Beach

- 10-14** | **Rifle Youth Camp**
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

- 11** | **Movies on the Beach: "Migration"**
8 pm | Al's Beach Club and Burger Bar | FWB
- 12** | **Niceville-Valparaiso Chamber Second Wednesday Breakfast**
7:15 am | Niceville Community Center | Niceville
The Pittman's Magical Variety Show
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville
- 13** | **Greater FWB Chamber Nothing But Networking**
11:30 am | Sura Korean Steakhouse | FWB
- 14** | **Live Music: Purple Monkey**
7 pm | Al's Beach Club and Burger Bar | FWB
- 15** | **Stained Glass Part 2 with Dulvie Scaff**
11 am | Artful Things Niceville | Niceville
- 18** | **Movies on the Beach: "Wonka"**
8 pm | Al's Beach Club and Burger Bar | FWB
- 20** | **Greater FWB Chamber Business After Hours**
5:30 pm | Beachworx FWB | FWB

- 22** | **American Legion 221 Poker Run benefiting A Bed 4 Me Foundation**
9 am | American Legion Post 221 | Niceville
- 29** | **June Jam!**
11 am | Boys & Girls Club of Pensacola | Pensacola
GUP 5K Run!
8 am | Christ our Redeemer Catholic | Niceville
Atlanta Rhythm Section and Orleans
7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville
- 30** | **Sunset Shrimp Boil**
4 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville

ONGOING EVENTS

- Oils and Acrylics with Rosalyn O'Grady**
10 am | Tues | Artful Things | Niceville
- Watercolor Techniques with Theresia McInnis**
1 pm | Tues | Artful Things | Niceville
- Bingo Night**
6 pm | Tues | Bayou Brewing Company | Niceville
- Trivia Night**
6 pm | Thurs | Strange Colt Brewery | Niceville
- Yoga at Turkey Creek**
9 am | Sat | Turkey Creek Nature Trail | Niceville
- Brunch on the Bayou**
9 am | Sun | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville

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Bay Buzz Events



Music, Comedy and Fun at Mattie Kelly Arts Center this Summer!

This summer, the Mattie Kelly Arts Center (MKAC) presents a concert and comedian series you will not want to miss. Start off with an evening of Southern Rock when Atlanta Rhythm Section and Orleans take the stage on June 29 at 7 p.m. Purchase tickets at Mattiekellytickets.com or by calling 850-706-5206.



In July, continue the concert Series with Great American SoulBook, July 11, 7 p.m., which features more than 12 performers on stage performing Motown, R&B and other iconic Soulful favorites that inspired generations.

And finish the series with Tom Papa comedian, Friday, July 19, 7 p.m., who will have you laughing in the aisles. With more than 20 years as a stand-

up comedian, Tom Papa is one of the top comedic voices in the country, finding success as an actor, host, and author, in film, TV, radio and podcasts as well as on the live stage. Purchase July event tickets at mattiekellyartscenter.org or call the box office at 850-729-6000.

Life Media looks forward to seeing you over the summer.

Memorial Day Remembrance

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is hosting a Memorial Day Remembrance, May 25, the Saturday before Memorial Day, at their chapel located at 1100 Palm Blvd. S., in Niceville. The community is

invited to attend. Beginning at 8:15 a.m., there will be a flag raising; at 8:30 a.m., everyone is invited to enjoy a pancake breakfast. Retired Colonel Stephen Snow will be the keynote speaker sharing stories about his time flying multiple presidents on Air Force One. After breakfast, stick around and play Pickle Ball, Corn Hole or let the kids explore the Niceville Fire Engine that will be on site for the young ones to enjoy.

3rd Annual Sip & Splash

**Saturday, June 1
6-9 p.m.**

Join friends and Life Media on Saturday, June 1, from 6-9 p.m. for the third annual Sip & Splash: An Aquatic Affair, presented by Tim Smith Acura, at The Taj Renee Community Aquatic Center, benefitting the Emerald Coast Fitness Foundation (ECFF), a public charity formed to develop physical fitness and water safety among the youth and adults of Okaloosa County. Tickets include unlimited craft cocktails, wine, beer and a multicourse dinner served by your favorite local restaurants including Camille's at Crystal Beach, Carrabba's Italian Grill, Mozey's Mobile Catering and

Cuisine, SunQuest Catering, Sura Korean Steakhouse, and The Beachy Asian, along with live music, a silent auction, photo booth and more!

Tickets and tables are available for \$125 per individual or \$1,000 for a table of 10. Purchase at ecffitnessfoundation.org.

Freeport Veterans Memorial Golf Tournament

June 1 | 8 a.m. | Eagle Springs Golf Course ~ Defuniak Springs

The city of Freeport volunteers invite you to play in the Freeport Veterans Memorial Golf Tournament, June 1st at Eagle Springs Golf Club in Defuniak Springs, to raise funds for the Veterans Memorial Walk. The Golf Tournament raises monies for the continued maintenance and additions to the Veterans Memorial at Casey Park. Angels Among us is the most recent monument to be dedicated Veteran's Day 2024 and will feature a final statue of an angel, welcoming and embracing a service member titled "Angels Among Us," as well as a ground memorial and Space

Continued on page 19



ATLANTA RHYTHM SECTION & Orleans

**MATTIE KELLY ARTS CENTER
June 29th 7:00pm**

WWW.MATTIEKELLYTICKETS.COM

OR CALL 850-706-5206

RESERVED TICKETS \$43 | \$57 | \$68 | \$79



Legendary Hitmakers Atlanta Rhythm Section & Orleans Coming to Mattie Kelley Arts Center

The legendary hit makers Atlanta Rhythm Section and Orleans team up to bring their melodic magic to Mattie Kelly Arts Center June 29th in Niceville.



The two iconic bands dominated the 70's & 80's charts—Atlanta Rhythm Section with top 10 hits "So Into You," "Imaginary Lover," "Doraville," "I'm Not Gonna Let It Bother Me Tonight," "Champagne Jam," "Angel," "Do It Or Die" and "Spooky"—Orleans with the unforgettable radio hits "Still The One," "Dance With Me" and "Love Takes Time."

Their classic songs still resonate with audiences of all

ages thanks to continued airplay on Classic Rock radio, television, film and streaming services. With multiple gold and platinum albums to their credit, both artists continue to be in demand for live shows, as they have been for more than five decades. Purchase tickets (\$43, \$57, \$68 and \$79) at www.mattiekellytickets.com or call 850-706-5206. All tickets are reserved.

thank you



The **Niceville High School Theatre Department** wishes to thank our community for the tremendous outpouring of support you showed for our recent production of Disney's 'Newsies.'

Because of you, we managed to break all attendance and box office records, making **"Newsies" the most successful high school musical ever performed in any Okaloosa County high school.**

We sincerely thank you for supporting the arts at NHS, and hope to see you at next year's shows!

*Follow us on Instagram @ theatre_nhs
or on Facebook @ NicevilleHSTheatre.*



 Community

Meet our Hometown Heroes: Leslie and Tyler Fuller – The Pearl Project

BY MICHELLE RUSCHMAN

Anyone who knows local resident Leslie Fuller knows she was purposed by God to be a mother to children, whether they came into the family by birth or by providence. She and her husband Tyler, a missions pastor, met when they were 15, and after doing several mission trips together, knew that adoption would be part of their story, even when they didn't know what that would look like. "We got married and had two biological children. When our youngest daughter was age 2, we started to ask God to show us what He wanted us to do. During a church service, a story was shared about Jesus calling Peter to walk on the water. Peter was afraid because the waves and the wind were scary. But, God called him to get out of the boat. Our pastor challenged us to get out of the boat, even if we felt nervous about it. If God was calling us, we could trust Him to take care of us. And I knew at that moment that God was calling us to foster care. Within a month, Tyler felt that call as well. We were scared and it felt big, but we were excited to begin!"

Becoming a foster parent would be one of the hardest things the Fullers would ever do and it was one of the best decisions they would make in their marriage. "When you are a foster parent, the goal is always to



care for these children until they can safely reunify with their biological parent. Sometimes it is a matter of days or years and sometimes it turns into a lifetime. There are so many unknowns and that can be hard. Our story turned into one that will last a lifetime. Our family is blessed to have grown by adoption!"

As a mother who had now experienced all the different ways a family can grow, Leslie wanted to be able to share her heart and knowledge with other families who were working on navigating the foster care system, especially with children who had experienced trauma. She is doing that through The Pearl Project as their current Director of Northwest Florida. As the Director, her job is to network and build relationships in the community, fundraise and guide programs in our area. To the organization, the work is critical.

"The Pearl Project's mission is to help vulnerable children discover their value. Children who have experienced trauma have changes in their brains,



bodies, biology, and belief systems that can ultimately lead to confusing behaviors. Because of their early life circumstances, it can be hard for them to learn how to trust the adults in their lives. Caregivers often come to us overwhelmed and at a loss for how to help their children heal. We offer practical tools to empower caregivers to help their children. We also believe these children need to be surrounded by a community that is trauma informed. We are committed to bringing Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) to teachers, case workers, church volunteers, and anyone who works with children. We desire that through healthy connections, vulnerable children will feel safe, know they have a voice, and ultimately, discover that they are precious."

The Pearl Project was founded by Joy and Stephen Zedler. When Leslie met Joy at a camp in Orlando in 2019, they knew

their relationship would grow into a beautiful friendship and partnership. "We have experienced many of the same struggles and share a passion for helping children and families. We honestly feel like God brought us together for this mission. Once the

pandemic hit a year later, Joy was living in Ocala, but we were able to connect and share more resources because we had to rely on the internet. In 2023, we officially launched the Northwest Chapter of the Pearl Project! It has been so fun to look back and see how much we have grown."

Since becoming a foster-turned-adoptive-mom, Leslie has certainly traveled a difficult road. But, she sees the blessings have far outweighed the challenges she faced along the way. "When I look back at our foster care journey, I realize that I am not the same person that I was 10 years ago. I love to think about our foster care journey like the refiner's fire. I have learned that sometimes life is hard and things don't end up looking the way I thought they would, but that's ok. I have learned to have more grace for those around me and myself. I know the depth of God's love and that God is with

me even when things are hard. I look at all six of my children and I can't help but think about what an honor it is to be a part of their story."

For those who are wanting to help through fostering, Leslie has this piece of advice: "I would encourage people to learn about trauma-informed care. Early childhood trauma is something that can affect people throughout their lifetime. Learning about it can help caregivers parent from a place of compassion and understanding. There are so many strategies we can use to help children feel safe and learn to trust. Ultimately, helping them connect with loving and caring adults is going to help the healing begin. I would also encourage them to build community. When you bring children into your home, it can be isolating. It's so important to find people around you who can help."

If you aren't ready to foster, The Pearl Project is also a great organization in which to partner for events, clothing donations and more. Supporting a foster family is also a good place to start. This can mean making a freezer meal, helping with babysitting, meeting physical needs or just listening and praying," said Leslie.

If you are interested in getting involved with The Pearl Project, visit www.thepearlproject.org.

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Saving the Green Space at Bluewater Bay Update

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

It's exciting to report that Preserve Bluewater Bay (PBWB) is edging even closer to its goal of saving 150 acres of green space at Bluewater Bay. Owning the land ensures that Bluewater Bay remains the unique and beautiful community that is celebrated throughout the area.

David Rauch from PBWB updated that the agreed price of \$2.3 million still could use donations to make up a small difference. The officers are in the process of completing surveys for the sliver buyers and collecting pledges.

Within the last several months, the organization received 501C3 eligibility required by the federal government. Organizations that qualify under

the Internal Revenue Code are eligible for federal exemption from payment of corporate income tax. This should encourage a few more appreciated donations, so please visit the website at preservebwb.com to make a pledge.

Yes, you are almost there. Since Preserve Bluewater Bay, Inc., has been granted the non-profit 501C3 status, more residents are making the important decision to help Bluewater Bay. The "Hi Ho Sliver" campaign to extend property lines on the golf course for those who live on the golf course is also still available as a way to become a serious and needed donor.

As a reminder, Preserve Bluewater Bay (PBWB) is a not-for-profit organization created by



community members who want to save 150 acres of green space in Bluewater Bay from developers—a special spot of paradise. The green space will be saved from further housing development and preserved for future generations, because our com-

munity is coming together with donations to sustain the area. To those who have already pledged their commitment, thank you for your proactive support. To the rest of our community, we encourage you take advantage of this collective opportunity

for preservation—we are almost there!

Contact David Rauch at 850-865-0897 or visit "Welcome to Preserve Bluewater Bay | A Community Effort" at preservebwb.com to learn more and make your pledge.

Learn how to Keep Our Green Spaces *Green* Today!

Which Describes You?



Explorer



Walker



Resident



Runner

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 them, 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.

www.preservebwb.com
(850) 865-0897
Pledge your support today
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SAVE GREEN SPACE • STOP CONSTRUCTION

 Community

High Speed Internet Comes to the Panhandle

BY KENNETH BOOKS

Tired of slow Internet? Tired of being bounced in the middle of your session? Live Oak Fiber is laying the lines to overcome those problems.

Halfway complete, some 200,000 customers are expected to sign on to the fiber optic Internet plan, from Valparaiso to Santa Rosa County.

Why here?

“What’s not to like?” said Steve Smith, Live Oak’s chief revenue officer and founder. “The world’s best beaches. A growing population. And we also found the existing providers were absentee landlords. They were not doing a good job maintaining.”

Live Oak is the largest green-field fiber project in the world, with its local headquarters in the former Coldwell Banker building behind Bluewater Bay’s Winn Dixie. So far, the company has investing \$145 million to

build the network. The company has made a commitment to hire locally to ensure the benefits of a local company working for the community it serves, according to a Live Oak press release. So far, it’s hired about 100 locals, primarily in Niceville. These include hires in technical, sales, marketing, customer service, engineering and operations. “That’s a lot, I think, in two years,” Smith said.

Part of its financing comes from a grant from the Florida Broadband Opportunity program. It earned “Best in Destin” honors through VIP Destin Magazine and was named Business of the Year by the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce. One Okaloosa Business Leadership Council recognized the Milken Institute Best Performing Cities report, which cited the company as being the key reason of moving to the area forward from a broad-



band ranking of number 182 to number 23.

It all started in July 2022.

“We had to identify the markets, find office space, renovate when we could and find the coffee cups,” Smith said. Already, between 6,000 and 7,000 customers are on board.

The company started out working with infrared capital partners and created a solar farm and toll road around the Denver airport. Originally, it

received \$150 million from the airport hierarchy “and we’re close to spending that,” Smith said. “We’re in the process of raising \$200-250 million. We’re a platform they like.”

“One out of every three houses in Bluewater Bay and Shalimar are among our customers,” he said.

The service will include 500-megabyte, 2-gigabyte and 5-gigabyte options, with packages ranging from \$55 to \$135 per

month. There are no data caps. “Incumbent providers like to charge for that,” he said.

“This might be one of the largest private infrastructure projects the county has ever seen,” Smith said. “Our goal is to get fiber-reliable activity for every American.”

It’s a big job, but one that seems to resonate with customers.

“We’re trying to offer Internet the way it should be,” Smith said. Feedback is important. We believe our reliable Internet is better and having people who can solve your problems is better. We have a much more resilient structure and unlimited connectivity.”

To learn more about Live Oak Fiber, go to liveoakfiber.com.



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MKAF's Warrior Arts Brings Hope and Resilience to Veterans Throughout Northwest Florida

By WILL ESTELL

If you live among the coastal communities of Northwest Florida, you have likely become aware of the Destin-based Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation (MKAF) and the outreach this wonderful organization does to promote the arts within the growing communities it serves. One such initiative by which the MKAF staff, board and members bring such support and healing is the charitable organization's Warrior Arts Program.

Warrior Arts partners with local, state and national veteran service organizations and military partners to offer creative opportunities that promote mindfulness and resilience for our nation's heroes and their visible and invisible injuries. It is widely recognized that artistic activities can prove to be a great tool for individuals undergoing both mental and physical rehabilitation, those with PTSD and a wide array of other conditions that often affect our veteran community. Everything from improved cognitive function and memory, to increased at-

tention span and even eye/hand coordination has been shown to improve through the performance of visual arts.

Many physicians, scientists and mental health professionals agree that the arts can provide opportunities to process, express and reframe negative past experiences and assist in staying in the present moment. MKAF's Warrior Arts Programs offer the opportunity for individuals in need to experience many aspects of these empowering processes, through simply making art, doing something new and gaining artistic skills. While relaxing and therapeutic, it's also fun.

Mattie Kelly's Warrior Arts Program sets out to accomplish all the above through its curation of multiple specific programs, including everything from the Zentangle drawing method to painting to jewelry making to improv comedy workshops. Additionally, the Warrior Arts Program is actively partnered with veterans centers in the immediate and surrounding counties that MKAF serves, as well as working alongside the EOD



Warrior Foundation, AFSOC Warrior C.A.R.E. Summit, AFSOC Preservation of the Force and Family, AFSOC Peer Supporters, AFSOC Commando Caregivers, Air Force Wounded Warriors and Special Operations Wounded Warriors, and other such organizations that are working toward the common goal of bettering the lives and conditions of our Northwest Florida veterans.

As a MKAF board member, I've had the pleasure of attending some of the outreach events the nonprofit orchestrates, as well as getting to hear about the real change and positive impact

that the Warrior Arts Program helps bring to fruition. I asked MKAF's Director of Education and Community Engagement, Melanie Moore, to tell me in her own words what the Warrior Arts Program means to MKAF and

to her as the staff member responsible for creating Warrior Arts and bringing it to life in our coastal communities. "It is our great honor to give back to our heroes by offering meaningful art experiences that promote resiliency and holistic healing. While it is easy to say 'thank you for your service,' we have taken that a step further to invest in over 100 art programs per year for our area's active duty and veteran military personnel, with an all professional teaching staff, free of charge to MKAF's Warrior Arts participants. This segment of our Northwest Florida population has sacrificed so

much to secure our freedom, so I feel the least we can do, individually and collectively, is to embrace our military community in the best way we know how, through creative opportunities curated especially for them."

I couldn't agree more, but what proves the benefits of Warrior Arts, more than anything, are the words from those who've seen its remarkable impact first hand. As you can see from this small sample of the testimonials MKAF's Warrior Arts Program receives, this is the real catalyst for continuing to offer this help, hope and change.

Testimonials:

In 2004, while piloting a helicopter for the Army, I suffered a devastating crash. After awakening from a coma four days later, I discovered that I had a Traumatic Brain Injury and extensive nerve damage. The majority of my fine motor skills on my right side were limited. I struggled with simple tasks like writing my own name. So, as expected, fly-

Continued on page 30

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Celebrate Women's Veterans Day at Veterans Park

BY CAROLYN NEWCOMER KETCHEL

You are invited to a celebration of Women's Veterans Day on June 12th at 8 a.m. We will gather at the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center for a ceremony honoring our women who have served in the United States Military. Retired Col. Allison Black, USAF (Hurlburt) will be our keynote speaker this year. The ceremony will include a presentation of the Medal of Honor by the Choctawhatchee Bay DAR to be announced at the event. We will then gather at the base of the Margaret Corbin statue at Women Veterans Monuments at Veterans' Park for a wreath-laying ceremony.

The beautiful 20 1/2-acre park features eight life size statues of women who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces from the Revolutionary War to current theatres. These statues have been purchased using the Tourism Development Tax known as the "Bed Tax." This is a one



of kind park in the U.S. with the beauty of the land and the history of women who served our great nation. We expect and hope for an additional eight statues to complete the park.

The park is the home of a heron rookery as well as many turtles, and the Audubon Society has identified more than 240 species of birds that migrate through our area. In addition, each fall the park is on the migratory path of the Monarch butterfly. Recently, the old wooden walkway was replaced with wide sidewalks for ease and safety and to accommodate wheelchair accessibility. Work on the living shoreline along

the Choctawhatchee Bay will be completed later this year.

This park is for patriots and conservationists and reflects people's values on our Emerald Coast. Learn of the heroic deeds of our women veterans as you enjoy a beautiful walk in nature.

Revolutionary War

Margaret Corbin continued loading and firing the cannon during the November 16, 1776, attack on Fort Mifflin after her husband was killed. She was later felled in battle and became the first woman to receive a government pension as a disabled soldier. She is buried at the U. S. Military Academy at West Point, New York.

Civil War

Cathay Williams was born in Missouri to an enslaved mother and a free father in 1844. She disguised herself as a man, assumed the name William Cathay, and enlisted in the Union forces. She was assigned to the 38th U.S. Infantry Regiment

where she served two years before being discovered following a hospitalization for small pox. She later joined an all-black regiment that would eventually become part of the legendary Buffalo Soldiers.

World War I

Lenah Higbee was the first woman to receive the Navy Cross. She eventually became the second superintendent of the Navy Nurse Corps during which time she grew the corps from 160 members to 1,300, formalized Navy nursing uniforms, and designed the Navy nurse insignia. She would eventually have two battleships named for her. She is buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

World War II

Jacqueline Cochran fought her way out of obscurity to become the first woman to break the sound barrier. She was instrumental in creating the WASP program, became the first woman civilian to be awarded the Distinguished Service

Medal and, in 1948, was commissioned a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force Reserve.

Korean War

Jonita Bonham Bovee was a flight nurse with the 801st Air Medical Evacuation Squadron in Tachikaw, Japan, during the Korean War. She logged 245 hours of medical evacuation flights before being severely injured in a plane crash in the Sea of Japan. She assisted in the rescue of 17 survivors before allowing herself to be pulled from the water. She became the first female recipient of the Distinguished Flying Cross for her heroic actions.

Vietnam War

Sharon Lane arrived at the 312th Evacuation Hospital at Chu Lai on April 29, 1969. She worked five days a week in Ward 4 and spent her off duty hours caring for soldiers in the surgical ICU. 1st Lt. Lane was killed

Continued on page 18




**Concerts
in the Village**
mattie kelly arts foundation

June 6 | Adam Ezra Group

Fusing folk intimacy and rock energy with soul power and pop charm, the band first emerged from Boston in the early 2000s and quickly garnered widespread acclaim for their bold, insightful songwriting and interactive, euphoric performances.

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SCAN ME



Military News

Hurlburt Field Reopens Memorial Air Park to the Public

Air Commandos gathered with members of the public to celebrate the grand reopening of the Hurlburt Field Memorial Air Park, April 10, 2024.

For the first time in more than 20 years, Hurlburt Field opened its air park in April to the general public, allowing visitors to come face-to-face with the aircraft and history of Air Force Special Operations Command. "Today's grand opening is really a celebration of what Air Commandos are all about, this park and the people who flew these aircraft ... they have a story to tell," said Col. Patrick Dierig, 1st Special Operations Wing commander. "We want to take the opportunity to open the gates and open that history up to the public, so that we can plant the seeds for future Air Commandos."

The air park not only serves as a place of reflection, but also as an educational venue for future generations. Informational plaques provide insights into the technological advancements



and historic achievements of each aircraft, fostering an appreciation for the contributions of military aviation. "As we view this crown jewel of our history, we see our heritage from two perspectives, our Air Commandos and our iron," said Lt. Gen. Tony Bauernfeind, Air Force Special Operations Command Commander. "While the latter physically looms largest in the air park, the stories of our men and women on the bronze placards speak volumes of the true inspiration and carry the heaviest weight."

Among the aircraft on display is the AC-130H Spectre gunship, emblematic of the specialized capabilities that have

become synonymous with Hurlburt Field's mission. Additionally, visitors can see the MC-130H Combat Talon II, an aircraft integral to special operations.

The Hurlburt Field Memorial Air Park stands as a living testament to the dedication, sacrifice and valor of the men and women who have called Hurlburt Field their home. As visitors wander among the stic aircraft, they are reminded of the enduring spirit of aviation and the profound impact it has had on AFSOC as a whole. "The Hurlburt Field Air Park is not just a reminder of our heritage; It is a living symbol ... a living story of our Air Commandos, bravery, valor and unending spirit of innovation that has and continues to answer our nation's toughest challenges and bring the advantages our joint force teammates need," said Bauernfeind.

The air park serves as a destination for veterans, aviation enthusiasts and families seeking to honor the legacies of those

that came before. For more information on the Hurlburt Field Memorial Air Park, please visit: [Hurlburt Field > Air Park \(af.mil\)](#)

Base Access Procedures Change

The 96th Security Forces Squadron has begun 100 percent identification checks for anyone accessing the Eglin Air Force. Visitors who do not have a DOD issued ID card must obtain a visitor pass. "Our current security and information environment requires us to make this policy change," said Brig. Gen. Jeffrey Geraghty, 96th Test Wing commander. "We're committed to safeguarding Eglin's vital national resources."

Uniformed service members, their dependents (over the age of 16), DOD employees and retirees can sponsor these passes, which can be obtained at the East Gate and West Gate visitor control centers until the new Air Force Armament Museum VCC opens.

Passes are good for up to 60 days. However, if a visitor pass is required for more than 60



days, a commander's approval is needed and can then be issued for up to a year except for retirees. Retirees with visitors will need to renew those passes every 60 days. Passes should be shredded or turned back into the VCC when no longer needed. People can also process REAL IDs into the Defense Biometric Identification System, a networked database system designed to easily verify access authorization of people entering military installations at the VCCs.

Registering a REAL ID in DBIDS will alleviate gate congestion if an ID card holder forgets it at home or in a CAC reader. The REAL ID can also be used by retirees to access the base if they lose their ID or it's expired. Contact the 96th Test Wing Public Affairs Office at 850-882-3931.







36058 Emerald Coast Parkway (Across from Regatta Bay) Destin | 850-837-2600 | EccoMotors.com



NWFMOA Awards \$39,500 in Scholarships to Local JROTC and ROTC Cadets

BY DAVE PARISOT, PRESIDENT OF NWFMOA SCHOLARSHIP FUND, INC.

The Northwest Florida Military Officers Association (NWFMOA) held its 10th annual Scholarship & Awards Luncheon on May 2nd at the Fort Walton Yacht Club. Primary 'guests of honor' were 10 Junior ROTC cadets of six local high schools who were awarded college scholarships and two local ROTC cadets entering their junior and senior years of college. Also honored were seven local JROTC cadets in their junior year of high school who received the MOAA Medal (Military Officers Association of America), and three cadets of the Navarre H.S. Navy JROTC who received appointments to the U. S. Military Academy at West Point.

Ten MOAA Medal scholarships totaling \$31,500 were awarded to local high school JROTC cadets—nine at \$3,000 each and one at \$4,500. Awardees must be a local JROTC cadet, have high academic scores, have demonstrated leadership skills in their high school JROTC and school activities, and show potential for a

future commission in our armed forces, along with community service activities. Scholarship awardees must attend college full-time and enroll in their college ROTC program:

Cadet Angelina Romano of Fort Walton Beach H.S. received the "Lt. Col., USAF, Ret., James 'Jim' and Mrs. Una Heavener Memorial Scholarship" of \$4,500.

Cadet Victoria Beckworth of Baker School received the "Dr. (Lt. Col., USAFR, Ret.), Howard and Mrs. Irene Fisher Scholarship."

Cadet Griffin Woodley of Niceville H.S. received the "Dr. (Lt. Col., USAF, Ret.) Frederick and Mrs. Janet Westfall Scholarship."

Cadet Jason Bollenbach of Choctawhatchee H.S. was awarded the "Colonel Karl, USAF, Ret., and Mrs. Charlotte Eschmann Scholarship."

Cadet Reese Sayer of Navarre H.S. received the "Mrs. Chong (Kim) Parisot Memorial Scholarship."

Cadet Jade Bradley of Fort Walton Beach H.S. was awarded the "Colonel William 'Bill' Byrley, USAF, Ret., Memorial Scholarship."



Cadet Alexander Bollenbach of Choctawhatchee H.S. was awarded the "Colonel Hampton, USAF, Ret., and Mrs. Nancy Kenaston Memorial Scholarship."

Cadet Akadian Campbell of Baker School received the "Major William 'Bill' Van Hoesen, USA, Ret., Memorial Scholarship."

Cadet Francesca Howard

of Choctawhatchee H.S. was awarded the "Colonel Troy Dent, USAF, Ret., Memorial Scholarship."

Cadet Lauren Bage of Choctawhatchee H.S. was awarded the "Colonel Melvin Bryant, USAF, Ret. Memorial Scholarship."

Two scholarships of \$4,000 each were awarded to two local ROTC cadets: Air Force ROTC Cadet Jeffrey Tavarez, a 2021 graduate of Choctawhatchee H.S. and JROTC, who will be a senior at Embry Riddle University with a major in aerospace and occupational safety; and Air Force ROTC Cadet Logan Herron, a 2022 graduate of Navarre H.S. and JROTC and a junior at the University of Florida with a major in astrophysics.

Five previous scholarship awardees were also recognized who are being commissioned as second lieutenants in the U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force this year. Having our previous scholarship awardees receive a military commission is the primary way we measure the success of our scholarship programs. Of the 18 scholarships we paid out since 2015 who have been in college long enough to complete ROTC, 12 awardees (65%) will have been commissioned by the end of 2024. This follows the motto of the NWFMOA Scholarship Fund: "Helping to Build Future Military Officers and Leaders."



Kayla McCarthy, a 2020 graduate of Navarre H.S. and Navy JROTC, was commissioned a 2Lt in the U.S. Air Force on May 8th. She is a 2024 graduate of the University of South Florida and Air Force ROTC and will report to Columbus Air Force Base, Miss., for pilot training.

Anthony Rodas, a 2020 graduate of Crestview H.S. and Army JROTC, was commissioned a 2LT in the U.S. Army on May 3rd. 2LT Rodas is a 2024 graduate of the University of West Florida and its Army ROTC, going into Air Defense Artillery.

Kathrynn Dunn, a 2021 graduate of Crestview H.S. and Army JROTC, was also commissioned a 2LT in the U.S. Army Reserves on May 3rd. 2LT Dunn is a 2024 graduate of the University of West Florida and its Army ROTC, and will attend the Army Military Intelligence training at Fort Huachuca, Ariz., this summer.

Two additional previous JROTC scholarship awardees will be commissioned in the U.S. Army this year. Army ROTC Cadet Sean Ripley of Blinn University, Tex., will be commissioned a second lieutenant via ROTC at Texas A&M University. Ripley is a 2020 graduate of Niceville H.S. and Air Force JROTC. Army ROTC Cadet Naomi Barr Whitlock is a 2022 graduate of Crestview H.S. and Army JROTC. She attends Army ROTC at Marion Military Institute, Ala. She is participating in the Army's early commissioning program and will be commissioned a second lieutenant this summer prior to finishing her final two years of college to get her Bachelor's degree.



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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 kolaches 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. Get what you're craving! Order ahead and pick up some for the office or breakfast to start your day off right!

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Sundays: Brunch 9 a.m. - 1 p.m. buffet style, bottomless Mimosas!

Wednesdays: Bluewater Bay Sailing Club Sailboat Fun Races 6 p.m.

Kids Eat Free 5-9 p.m. Kids 10 and under eat free!

Thursdays: Throwdown SUP Race 6 p.m.; Karaoke/Open Mic 6-10 p.m.

Fridays: Steak Night 5-9 p.m.

Live entertainment each weekend. See ad for lineup.

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

Oyster bar hours: Mon-Thurs 3-10 p.m.; Fri-Sat 11 a.m.-midnight; Sun 9 a.m.-9 p.m.

Restaurant hours: Mon-Tues



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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.

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VETERANS PARK

continued from page 14

on June 8, 1969, when a salvo of 122 mm rockets, fired by the Viet Cong, struck between Wards 4A and 4B. She was the only American nurse killed as a direct result of hostile fire, and was posthumously awarded several medals including the Purple Heart and Bronze Star.

Persian Gulf War

Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester was a vehicle commander with the 617th Military Police Company. Sgt. Hester received the Silver Star for her actions during an enemy ambush by anti-Iraqi fighters in Baghdad on March 20, 2005.

War In Afghanistan

Neesema was born in Afghanistan and immigrated to

the U.S. when her father became a student at University in the United States. She enlisted in the Air Force in 1985, completed her education and was commissioned as an officer in April 2001. On 9-11, she was the only Airman in the Air Force to understand Pashto, the language of the Taliban, and became an Aircrew Linguist in the RC-135 Surveillance and Reconnaissance Aircraft, eventually collecting and disseminating time-critical actionable combat intelligence directly to the U.S. President and SECDEF.

Carolyn Ketchel is Okaloosa County Commissioner, District 2.

She can be reached at CKetchel@myokaloosa.com or 850-651-7105.

Beach Eats: Basil Pesto & Grilled Garlic Chicken

BY CAROLINE COKER
FOR 30AEATS.COM

I call this recipe “The Best Basil Pesto” because it is made from the fresh basil growing in pots on my back porch.

I am a huge fan of pesto. It is so simple to make and healthy when consumed in moderation. It is versatile, you can always adjust the quantities to suit your taste, and improvise with other nuts, cheeses and herbs.

Basil pesto offers flavonoid phytochemicals, nutrients that act like antioxidants that support cell structure and help fight disease-causing free radicals. The olive oil is full of heart-healthy fats, and the garlic also protects your heart by stabilizing blood pressure levels and slows the development of atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries.

This tried-and-true recipe can be dolloped on chilled boiled eggs that are cut in half for a quick summer appetizer, tossed with whole-wheat pasta, used as a sauce on meat (see chicken below), made into a vinaigrette dressing, or spread on a sandwich or Panini.



The Best Basil Pesto

Ingredients
Makes 1 cup

- 1/4 cup pine nuts
- 1/4 cup freshly grated Parmesan or Pecorino cheese
- 3 cloves garlic, peeled
- 1/2 tsp. grated lemon zest
- 1/2 tsp. sea salt
- 1/8 tsp. ground black pepper
- 3 packed cups fresh basil leaves
- 2/3 cup Extra virgin olive oil + more as needed

Preparation

Combine the basil, garlic, and pine nuts in a food processor and pulse until coarsely chopped. Add 1/2 of the oil and process until fully incorporated and smooth. Season with salt and pepper.

Add all of the remaining oil and cheese, and pulse until smooth.

Tip: Keep in a glass jar, tightly sealed for ease of use and freshness, as well as easy clean up.

Tip: If wanting a lighter pesto, try a ratio of about two parts low-sodium organic chicken or vegetable broth to two parts of olive oil. Broth is naturally low in fat and calories.

Garlic Chicken

Ingredients

- 3 plump organic boneless skinless chicken breasts, sliced in half vertically to make 6, then lightly pounded for even cooking
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh basil
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- ground sea salt and ground pepper

Preparation

Season chicken on each side with salt and pepper, fresh basil, minced garlic, and drizzle both sides with olive oil, massaging the meat with your fingers. Put chicken in a gallon size ziplock bag, and refrigerate for an hour. Clean the grate on grill using

vegetable oil on a paper towel, rubbing back and forth. This will keep the chicken from sticking. Turn to medium-high heat.

Remove the chicken from the fridge, lay the chicken onto the grill and close the top. It only takes chicken breasts a few minutes per side over direct medium-high heat to both brown and be cooked through at the same time. After two minutes, flip the chicken and close the top again. Remove from heat

immediately, place on a clean cutting board and let stand for 3-5 minutes before cutting into one-inch pieces. Check the meat by inserting an instant-read thermometer into the middle of the breast. The chicken is done when it hits 160°F, so pull it off early at 150-155°F, as upon the mandatory rest off the grill, the meat temperature will continue to rise by at least 5°F.

Top with basil pesto and serve with your favorite salad.



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EVENTS

continued from page 8

Force marker, to round out the military services. To participate, visit facebook.com/FreeportVeterans to download a registration form, then email rbarley@freeportflorida.gov, mail a check to Mayor Barley, 112 Highway 20, Freeport FL 32439, or turn in to City Hall receptionist. Please make checks payable to TPS/FVM (Town Planter's Society Freeport Veterans Memorial).

Alaqua Animal Refuge 3rd Annual FORE! The Love of Animals Golf Tournament

June 8 | Miramar Beach
Deadline to Register: May 24

Join the 3rd Annual FORE! The Love of Animals Golf Tournament. Set against the stunning backdrop of The Links Golf Club at Sandestin on Saturday, June 8, it's a perfect blend of competitive golfing and heartfelt support for our furry friends, benefiting the refuge and its mission.

Begin at 8:30 a.m. with check-

in, accompanied by a breakfast and a Bloody Mary and Mimosa bar. The golf tournament, starting at 10 a.m., will feature a shotgun start and scramble format, offering a fun challenge for golfers of all levels.

Registration Information:

Teams of 4 (individual players will be paired)

Includes 18 holes with a cart, boxed lunch, and 2 drink tickets

Fee: \$250 per individual, \$850 per team of four



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June 1—DUCHESS 6-10pm

June 16—Father's Day Brunch 9am-1pm

June 22—Beach Party 6-10pm

June 30—Shrimp Boil 4-7pm

Coconut Radio 4-8pm

 Off the Hook

More than 275 Artificial Reefs Recently Deployed off Destin-Fort Walton Beach

Marine life in the Gulf of Mexico now has hundreds of additional underwater habitats thanks to a \$1.26 million artificial reef project funded by the Natural Resource Damage Assessment Fund.

The project included 133 different reef sites and the deployment of 279 total reef structures ranging from 6-25 feet. The project was managed by the Coastal Resources team of Destin-Fort Walton Beach in Okaloosa County's Tourism Development Department. The reefs include some of the deepest modules ever deployed by Destin-Fort Walton Beach with depths ranging from 65-292 feet.

"This is an impressive effort to enhance the habitats for marine life in the Gulf of Mexico

waters," said Okaloosa County Board Chairman Paul Mixon. "This is a great example of how we continue to work to be good stewards of the environment that we depend on for our fishing and tourism industries."

This project also included 3D-printed modules that were deployed in late February and are the first of its kind in the Gulf of Mexico. Overall, the project involved six total deployment days spanning from February to early May and involved contractors Walter Marine and IPrint who performed the construction and deployment work.

The project was 100% grant-funded from the Natural Resource Damage Assessment Fund which is administered by the Florida Fish and Wildlife



Conservation Commission.

"I am extremely proud of the work that was done to complete this extensive project," said Destin-Fort Walton Beach Coastal Resources Manager Alex Fogg. "Our area of the Gulf of Mexico is lacking in natural reef structures for marine life to thrive which is something we are working to change. Not only do artificial reefs create essential habitat for native species here in the Gulf, but they also provide ideal locations for fishermen and divers to visit."

Coordinates for these and other reefs off of Destin-Fort Walton Beach can be found at <https://www.destinfb.com/explore/eco-tourism/artificial-reefs/maps/>

103-Day Gulf Red Snapper Recreational Season for 2024!

Governor Ron DeSantis recently announced the record 103-day 2024 Gulf Red Snapper recreational season, the longest season since the state was delegated management of Gulf red snapper. This season will include both a summer and fall season which includes major holiday weekends such as Father's Day, July 4th and the Thanksgiving holiday. "Under Gov. DeSantis' bold leadership, we are maintaining Florida as the Fishing and Boating Capital of the World with another re-

cord-breaking Gulf recreational red snapper season," said Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Chairman Rodney Barreto. "We are proud to continue providing Floridians and visitors the world-class fishing opportunities we are known for."

"Anglers from all over the country look forward to Gulf recreational red snapper season and the iconic fishing opportunities Florida provides yearly," said Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Ex-

ecutive Director Roger Young. "We want to thank Governor DeSantis, the Legislature, and our recreational anglers for their continued investment in the State Reef Fish Survey, which gives us the data to allow these additional days for snapper fishing in Gulf state and federal waters this season."

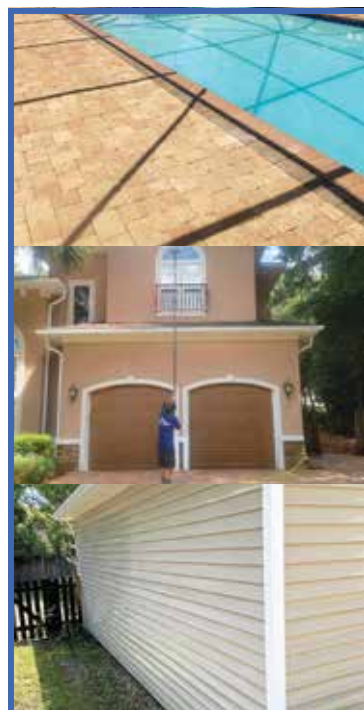
Those fishing from private recreational vessels or charter vessels will be able to participate in the 2024 Gulf red snapper season. The 61-day summer season will begin on June 1 and

continue through July 31. The 42-day fall season is the longest fall season since the beginning of state management. Find the dates at <https://myfwc.com/news/all-news/snapper-424/>.

Florida is able to offer this long season due to data driven management of the Red Snapper fishery on the Gulf Coast (not allowed by the Federal Government on the East Coast.)

Florida will evaluate additional dates to add later in the

season if rainy days impact. If you plan to fish for red snapper in state or federal waters from a private recreational vessel, even if you are exempt from fishing license requirements, you must sign up as a State Reef Fish Angler (annual renewal required) at GoOutdoorsFlorida.com. Find more on recreational snapper regulations at MyFWC.com/Marine.



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Billy Bowlegs 5K Run

The Northwest Florida Track Club, Inc. (NWFTC) is hosting its 50th anniversary of the Billy Bowlegs 5K run to be held on Saturday June 1, 2024. This is our banner event, and we are striving to make this bigger and better than ever before and would like to elicit your help in doing so. Let me first tell you a little about the NWFTC and

why we feel it's important to gain community support.

The Northwest Florida Track is a 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization that endeavors to support our local schools with funds that we raise throughout the year. Our primary revenue raisers are through local racing events that we organize, facilitate, and sponsor. These competitive and

noncompetitive running/walking events encourage a healthy lifestyle while promoting athletics and physical fitness for our local youth and adults.

For the last several years we have donated money to each Okaloosa County and Navarre High School Cross Country/Track program. To date, we have donated more than \$300,000 to

the schools. In the days of dwindling school budgets, these programs are usually the first to feel the cut and we are very proud that as a small group, we have been able to make such a difference. The money that we have donated has been used for such things as new uniforms, running shoes for children who could not afford to buy their own,

and to cover expenses for buses and entry fees for out of town meets that would otherwise have to come from the students and parents. In turn, the kids and parents come out to volunteer and support our events as a way of saying thank you. We cannot tell you how much this makes all the hard work worth it.

Growing the Game:

Okaloosa County Middle Schools Conference Spring Tournament

By BARBARA PALMGREN

This mid-April, conditions were perfect at Shalimar Pointe Golf Club where nine middle schools entered boys and girls golf teams to compete for the prized county trophy—Ruckel, Saint Mary Catholic, Destin,

Liza Jackson, Meigs, Davidson, Shoal River, Pryor and Bruner.

Both the Boys and the Girls overall Conference Team Trophy were won by Ruckel Middle School. In addition to the team trophies, awards were given to the top five finishers.

Congratulations to the following:

Girls top five finishers: First place - T. Sharron (Ruckel); Second place - C. Bridgford (Saint Mary Catholic); Third place - S. Kirland (Ruckel); Fourth place - A. Williams (Pryor) and Fifth place - R. Watkins (Ruckel)

Boys top five finishers: First place - A. Yang (Ruckel); Second place - K. Jeffrey (Ruckel); Third place - H. Hocke (Destin); Fourth place - M. Cooper



(Ruckel); and Fifth place - N. Fosdyk (Destin).

I congratulate all the schools

who support middle school athletics. As a former middle school and high school educator, I know the value of extra-curricular activities for our youth. Many will continue to compete at both the high school and college levels, and we might see a few on the pro golf tours. Anything is possible when given the opportunity to begin learning and applying necessary skills at an early age.

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Continuing A Legacy of Listening and Empathy

BY DOUG STAUFFER

Grant Williams, owner of the Niceville Hearing Center, is a testament to the perseverance, commitment and compassion for those he serves. This establishment is more than just a hearing aid practice—it's a beacon of hope and transformation, symbolizing Grant's unwavering dedication to bettering the lives of those grappling with hearing challenges.



From humble beginnings in the mining town of Matewan, W.Va., to championing gymnastics for the state of Kentucky, every step of Grant's journey has been characterized by overcoming adversity. His formative years, marked by economic hardships, became the very foundation of his tenacity and resilience. As the only one from his family of seven to attend college, Williams remains an inspiration to many, showcasing the limitless potential of human spirit.

His foray into gymnastics paved the way for an unexpected but life-changing encounter with Patrick Yeager, a mentor who guided him towards the path of higher education. Grant's journey is a testament to the serendipity of life and how one meeting can alter the trajectory of one's future.

However, life had its set of twists and turns. After his gymnastics program and his scholarship were defunded, he pivoted his attention to a field that would ultimately become his

life's work—hearing healthcare. Grant's realization that he excelled in patient counseling was transformative. He understood that the cornerstone of effective hearing care was not just technical proficiency but also the art of listening.

Grant's empathy stems from his roots. Growing up in a modest environment, he was instilled with values that emphasized the importance of taking care of oneself and others. This philosophy became the cornerstone of his practice. His innate knack for fitting hearing aids, combined with his genuine concern for his patients, made him a sought-after specialist in the region.

Despite a successful business in Louisiana, life brought Grant to Florida to enjoy a brief stint at retirement. His desire to make a difference was evident as he set up his practice in Niceville. What initially began as a part-time venture quickly transformed into a sanctuary for many, especially veterans and military service members. Grant's commendable initiative of offering follow-up services

to returning vets, at no charge, showcases his unwavering commitment to the community.

In essence, Grant and the Niceville Hearing Center epitomize the confluence of technical expertise and human touch. "It's not just about the hearing aids," says Grant. "It's about the people wearing them." With several decades in the hearing healthcare domain, Grant has perfected the art of 'straight talk,' ensuring that every patient

feels valued, heard and understood.

For those seeking to transform their hearing journey, the Niceville Hearing Center stands as a testament to Grant's legacy—one that underscores the significance of perseverance, empathy and, most importantly, listening. Full disclosure—Grant is my hearing healthcare provider—and why I offer him my personal recommendation.

Publisher's Note: The May 2024 article written by author Douglas L. Beck, AuD, Tinnitus: An Interview with David Baguley, PhD, was originally published as "Clinical Aspects of Tinnitus: An Interview with David Baguley, PhD," in the January 2016 issue of The Hearing Review and can be found at: <https://hearingreview.com/inside-hearing/research/clinical-aspects-tinnitus-interview-david-baguley-phd>.

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 Wellness

Don't Let Mobility Issues Slow You Down



BY KELLY STALNAKER

We are fortunate to live on

the Emerald Coast, surrounded by so much beauty. From Turkey Creek to 30A, there are so many local places to enjoy the outdoors. Unfortunately, many older adults face hurdles getting outside. But, a little fresh air and a change of view can offer many benefits. Aside from diminishing boredom and complacency, people that get outside regularly are less likely to suffer from health issues including chronic pain, insomnia, depression and much more. If decreased mobil-

ity is keeping you inside, there is a wide variety of mobility aids to help get you moving.

A standard wheelchair has large wheels on each side for the user to be able to move themselves independent of a companion. These chairs are available in a variety of sizes for additional accommodation. Transport wheelchairs, also called "companion chairs" are more lightweight and portable than a standard wheelchair as it does not have the large

wheels so the patient cannot move themselves (they must always have a companion). It is a great alternative to a heavier wheelchair, especially if the caregiver has any lifting restrictions. Power wheelchairs and scooters are motorized solutions for independent individuals that lack the upper body strength required to move a standard wheelchair. They can go much longer distances with ease, and offer a variety of features.

A standard walker (with or without wheels) is the most common type of mobility aid. It offers the most stability and is great for individuals that are mobile enough to not need a wheelchair. These walkers are especially useful for patients who are recovering from a hip or leg injury or surgery. Lots of great accessories are available including: baskets, bags, ski glides, tennis balls, and trays to promote independence for the user. Rollators, also known as four wheel walkers with a seat, have become increasingly popular with older adults. They can be used indoors or out for shopping trips, appointments, social events, and much more. Rollators allow seniors to walk for longer distances but there is always the option of taking a rest on the attached seat if fatigued.



Rollators are affordable, convenient, and customizable as they come in a wide variety of styles, colors, and sizes; with tons of accessories.

If you're experiencing only minor issues with balance and stability, a cane might be right for you. Available in single and quad tip, a cane acts as a third leg, keeping you upright and steady. Canes are offered in wood or aluminum in several bright and colorful options. If you're recovering from a lower leg/foot injury or surgery, consider a knee walker. Also called a knee walkabout, it is a comfortable and easy-to-manuever alternative to crutches. Knee walkers are covered by Tricare (with a prescription).

Issues with mobility have become the most common disability older adults face in America. When you or a loved one has lower body weakness, vertigo or instability, it might be time to consider a mobility aid. Stop by and see us at 540 E. John Sims Pkwy. in Niceville for more information.





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Check Your Alignment



BY STEPHENIE CRAIG

Do you ever notice you aren't behaving consistently with the person you want to be? Maybe you want to be honest, but you find yourself lying. Maybe you want to be patient, but you find yourself being irritable with those around you. Maybe you want to be trustworthy, but you find yourself continuing to let yourself and others down.

Day to day life can be overwhelming and distracting from the bigger picture of who you want to be. Often, you might find yourself doing the next thing without creating space to be intentional about your values. When you don't know what you value, you don't know who you want to be. And when you aren't clear about who you want to be, your choices and behavior are likely to take you down destructive paths you did not intend to travel. When your lifestyle is out of alignment with your values and who you want to be, life becomes less fulfilling, less hopeful, less focused and less purposeful. Life lived out of alignment can also bring destructive patterns like addiction, failure to tend to relationships and lack of self-awareness about how your behavior is impacting yourself and others.

So, how do you know if you are out of alignment and what can you do about it?

6 Ways to Check Your Alignment

Refine. Refine what character traits and values are most important to you. Use character

guides like the Biblical fruit of the spirit to clarify who you want to be. "I want to be kind, patient, loving, responsible, thoughtful, adventurous, creative." Use value lists to determine what is most important to you. "I value integrity, faith, family, loyalty, travel, generosity, commitment." Try creating a list of 10 positive character traits and 10 values to provide structure. You can find a printable Strengths List and Values List at journeybravely.com to help you get started.

Remember. Take time weekly to remember your values. Revisit character and values lists. Notice when your behavior is in conflict with who you want to be. "I want to be reliable but I am not following through on commitments leaving others experiencing me as flaky."

Reflect. Notice what is contributing to your alignment struggle. Are you under stress? Do you have unhealthy coping skills that need replacement? Are you surrounding yourself with negative influences and information? Are you engaging in positive things that help you stay grounded such as spiritual practices, self-care, personal growth? Are there boundaries you need to set? "I have trouble saying no to people so I say yes when I know I'm not actually going to follow through. I need to learn how to say no."

Repent. Repent means to turn in the opposite direction once you realize you are off your desired path. Acknowledge to yourself, God, and others you have made mistakes and engaged in behavior that is inconsistent with who you want to be. "Failing to follow through is not how I want to live. It's distancing me from people I care about. I'm sorry I've been making that choice and I want to learn to live differently."

Repair. Take ownership of your unaligned behavior's neg-



ative impact on yourself and others. Make amends. Apologize directly. Receive forgiveness. Communicate adjustments you will make. "I'm sorry I told you I would help you and then I backed out at the last minute. I'm realizing I have a tendency to say yes, because I don't want to hurt people's feelings and then I don't follow through. It will be better for me to say no up front and I'm going to work on improving in this area."

Realign. Determine meaningful action steps to bring your behavior and choices back in line with your values. Seek spiritual, social, and professional support as needed in your process. Begin taking action in the direction of your values and remember your brain naturally rewires through consistent repetition over time. Move forward in grace and growth. "In the spirit of learning to say no and keeping my word, I'm going to listen to a boundaries podcast and I'm going to ask a friend to

check in with me each week on what I'm learning and how I'm applying it."

We all get out of alignment at times. Maturity is developed through the gracious process of noticing when it happens and

walking through your realignment practices. As you walk along your growth journey, connect with us at journeybravely.com for counseling and coaching support.

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- Do you wish your teeth were whiter?
- Do you think you show too much or too little of your teeth when you smile?
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Is Your Insurance Ready for Hurricane Season?

June 1st marks the beginning of the 2024 hurricane season, which could be one of the most active on record. Colorado State University's tropical meteorology project team is forecasting 23 storms, 11 of which will become hurricanes and five of which will reach Category 3 status or stronger, in their first outlook for 2024 recently released. That's because of two main factors: El Niño is expected to become La Niña, which usually enhances storms; and the Atlantic Ocean water is record warm in most areas, which also could enhance storms.

So, it is time to make sure you're ready for the next round of tropical depressions, storms and hurricanes that have potential to affect the Gulf Coast every year.

Do you have what you need when it comes to homeowner's and flood insurance and hurricanes? There are a few things that should be on your radar.

If you have these coverages in place, you'll be better equipped to ride out whatever storm blows through.

First on the list is hurricane/wind coverage. Most home policies (HO3, DP3, HO6, HO4) in Florida include either hurricane, named storm, or wind/hail under a separate deductible. This is preferred since coordination and consistency of coverages is important. Some carriers don't write wind coverage close to the water. So, a stand-alone wind-only policy would be needed. If this is the case, extra care must be taken to avoid any coverage inconsistencies. In previous articles, we've addressed the differences in hurricane, named storm and wind/hail coverage. But suffice it to say, when it comes to wind coverage, the best option is hurricane. Under this coverage scenario, the larger deductible in the policy, usually a percentage

of the Dwelling Limit, applies to declared hurricane activity, while the smaller deductible in the policy would apply to other wind losses and all other perils in the policy. There are several deductible options available that can have a large impact on what would be your out-of-pocket responsibility if you file a claim.

Make sure you know you have sufficient Dwelling Limit (Coverage A) coverage to rebuild your home in the event of a loss. Local and national data indicates that nearly two out of three homes and structures are underinsured.

Another important coverage is Loss of Use that pays for you to live somewhere else while repairs are being done to your temporarily unlivable home. This goes for rental properties

with Loss of Rents coverage as well. Remember, there needs to be direct physical damage to trigger this coverage. Some rental policies don't include Loss of Rents so you will want to read your policy or call your insurance agent so you know for sure.

Another often misunderstood coverage not offered with each carrier, but always recommended, is Law or Ordinance coverage. Most carriers, if they have it available, offer either 10%, 25% or 50% coverage. This percentage is tied to your Dwelling Limit. If you have extensive hurricane damage, like we saw with Hurricane Michael, there may be new building codes you must adhere to in order to rebuild. The additional Law or



Ordinance coverage is crucial to your protection, since your policy is designed to rebuild your home as it was before the damage, with similar materials and quality, and not with more costly materials that could now be required by more stringent construction codes that may have come into play.

Another vital policy to have, especially during hurricane season, is flood insurance. Flood and water damage from a wind event are not necessarily the same thing. This coverage is so vital that we will again devote our next month's article to this topic. Although there are a few carriers who will add flood coverage as an endorsement to a home policy, it is infrequent. For most insureds, your flood policy will be a separate policy written through the NFIP (National Flood Insurance Program), and, unless your lender requires the policy, or you're closing on a new

purchase, there is a standard 30-day waiting period through the NFIP before your flood policy will become effective. Private flood insurance is an alternative. Many of the private markets in the country, and especially in Florida, offer broader coverages than the NFIP and these should be considered as an alternative to maximize your protection.

We hope this helps ease your concerns this hurricane season, in terms of coverage.

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Sean of the South



BY SEAN DIETRICH

The boy holds his fish as high as he can. His father hugs him and kisses his hair. They make a fine picture together.

I'm watching a father and son fish in a state park. They stand shoulder-to-shoulder.

After a few minutes, the boy's rod starts to bend.

He screams, "I GOT ONE DAD!" His voice carries on the water all the way to Birmingham.

And I am a nine-year-old again.

In fact, if I were to shut my eyes right now, I would see my father, shirtless, standing on a sandy teshore, smiling. A beer can by his feet.

"Quit messing with your reel so much," he'd say. "You'll scare fish away if you don't relax."

On one particular day, my father caught three bass and a shellcracker. Mister Unrelaxed had not been so fortunate—I'd caught one Penzoil can and a medium-sized turtle.

But my luck changed. My rod nearly jerked out of my hands. I tugged and cranked.

And it happened. I caught a bass bigger than most residential water heaters. Daddy whooped and hollered.

He let me take a sip of his lukewarm beer. He discussed

how to clean a fish.

He handed me a Buck knife to cut off the head. He made me swear to keep both hands on the handle.

The next thing I remember is a puddle of my own blood. I nearly fainted.

Daddy wasted no time. He tossed my flopping fish into the truck bed. He pressed a wadded T-shirt against my cut hand. We sped to the Emergency room.

I glanced through the back window and saw my fish flopping in the pickup bed.

"Your mama's gonna kill me," said Daddy.

The doctor was an old man. He looked at my hand and said, "What kinda fish you catch, old timer?"

Old timer.

I told him. He smiled, then removed a needle as big as a turkey baster. He jammed it into



my palm and said, "I hope it was worth it."

I screamed. Daddy held me against himself and kissed my hair while the doc stitched me. And for as long my mind stays sharp, I'll never forget the way Daddy smelled.

It's funny, the things you remember about dead people.

For instance, I remember the way Daddy ate his eggs. I remember his long-legged walk—like a heron. I remember how he used to sit in a chair after work,

crying for no apparent reason.

And the night before he took his own life, I remember a blank look on his face.

"Remember that time we went fishing and you cut your hand?" he said.

Do I ever.

The kid and his father want their photo taken. The man asks if I'll do the honors.

He hands me his phone. I tell them both to say, "cheese."

They do.

The boy holds his fish as high as he can. His father hugs him and kisses his hair. They make a fine picture together.

I'm not sad about the way my life turned out. God help me, I'm not. I don't wish for different circumstances. I don't want anything more than what I have.

But if God were taking requests...

I wouldn't mind fishing with Daddy again.

Or a kiss on the hair.

Sean Dietrich is a writer, humorist, novelist, and biscuit connoisseur, known for his commentary and stories on life in the American South.

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A Pastor's Ponderings Happy Father's Day: Standing Firm in Faith as Anchors in the Storm

ADAPTED BY PASTOR DOUG STAUFFER

In the beginning, God established the home with a simple design, as stated in Genesis 2:24:

"Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh." However, the world, the flesh, and the Devil tirelessly work to undermine this divine blueprint, causing some parents to raise their children without a spouse. The deck is

stacked against these homes, no matter the fortitude and bravery of the one-parent household.

Today, nearly one in four children live in father-absent homes. The absence of fathers from children's lives can lead to significant challenges, impacting their emotional, academic,

and behavioral well-being. These factors underscore the indispensable role of fathers in child development and family dynamics. Many resources reflect the impact of a Father's absence from the home.

Fatherless households experience lower self-worth and have more difficulties regulating their emotions.

Fatherless households are more likely to struggle with educational achievement.

Fatherless households experience a higher risk of children engaging in harmful behaviors like substance abuse.

Fatherless households experience a greater risk of poverty, affecting children's quality of life and future financial stability.

Fatherless households are prone to a greater susceptibility to mental health issues and emotional challenges, including stress and anxiety.

Girls in father-absent homes are at a higher risk of teen pregnancy, highlighting the protective role a father can play.

Boys growing up without fathers are more prone to criminal behavior.

There is an observed increase in infant mortality rates in households without father involvement.

In this challenging context, fathers have historically been at the forefront of ensuring the welfare of their families. I want to encourage fathers to engage in their children's lives. Unfortunately, current government funding structures often discourage the traditional family unit by promoting policies that provide increased financial support to single-parent households. This trend undermines the father's vital role and directly impacts the families' spiritual and emotional fabric. It is quite a dilemma.

In these times of unprecedented challenges, the words of Psalm 34:17-18 resonate deeply, reminding us that "The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit." As we navigate the complexities of modern societal structures, it is crucial to reaffirm the importance of a fa-



ther's presence, which is divinely ordained to nurture and protect. Through the reassurance of scripture, we find the strength to confront these systemic challenges and the guidance to restore the father's rightful place in the home.

Jesus Himself extends a comforting invitation in Matthew 11:28: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." This call reaches out to all, but in our context, it includes every father burdened by the weight of economic, social, and spiritual responsibilities. In these trying times, it is vital to remember that we are never alone. Our Heavenly Father offers not only solace but also strength.

As fathers and leaders, you are uniquely positioned to be instruments of God's comfort, reflecting His profound love and mercy within your families and communities. By embracing this divine support, fathers can rise above the pressures imposed by worldly systems, continuing to be the steadfast protectors and nurturers they are called to be.

Let us also thank the mothers whose enduring love and resilience bolster our homes. Fathers and mothers form a partnership essential to God's perfect plan for family and community. We set aside a day for mothers and one for fathers—to honor and reflect on both parents' pivotal roles in nurturing the next generation.

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.





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Gulf Coast Jam 'Kicks Off' Brand New Music Festival with Garth Brooks, Carrie Underwood and Alabama

By PAUL BONNETTE

For over a decade, Gulf Coast Jam, one of the southeast's largest country music festivals has been bringing "Country to the Coast" to Panama City Beach showcasing some of country music's biggest stars. Every year, thousands of visitors and locals alike pack into Frank Brown Park for great vendors, delicious food, and of course, country music. For many years, Gulf Coast Jam was a staple event on Labor Day Weekend with the festival becoming synonymous with college football and the last days of summer. The festival was then moved up earlier in the summer, leaving a gap in Labor Day tourism. In order to bridge the gap, Gulf Coast Jam organizers announced a brand-new country music festival in addition to the current Gulf Coast Jam.

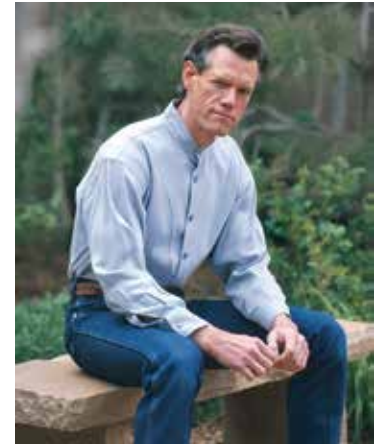
Kick Off Jam will be a 3-day star-studded festival featuring 18 musical acts, running August 30–September 1 at Frank Brown Park. The lineup includes Garth

Brooks, Carrie Underwood, the band Alabama with special guest star Randy Travis, as well as numerous other country music artists such as Pam Tillis, Jamey Johnson, Tyler Farr, Oak Ridge Boys, Lauren Alaina, Randy Houser, and more.

Garth Brooks took to social media to help announce the festival declaring that with availability to only do one outdoor gig per year, he was excited for it to be Panama City Beach. Kick Off Jam will be a country music celebration that celebrates five decades of country music on Panama City Beach.

For Executive Producer Rendy Lovelady, securing Garth Brooks fulfills a mission, years in the making.

"I've been trying to get Garth Brooks for my festivals for years and it's always been 'no.' He's excited. Panama City Beach is where Garth came for summer vacation when he was a kid. That's why he's doing this, he is doing this to celebrate where he



came from and to be a part of it."

For Lovelady, Kick Off Jam promises to be bigger than any-

thing before it.

"I've been doing this for 40 years, and without question, this is the biggest show we've ever put on. We're excited to celebrate five decades of Country music in Panama City Beach!"

Alabama will headline on Friday, August 30 with Carrie Underwood performing on Saturday, August 31. Garth Brooks will take the stage on Sunday, September 1. For more information and tickets visit www.kickoffjampcb.com.

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A New Season Begins with Jersey Boys

Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC) has unveiled the Season 12 lineup of Professional Shows and Theatre for Young Audiences. Kicking off the season in spectacular fashion is the electrifying production of *Jersey Boys*, Sept. 20 to Oct. 13, 2024. This iconic show promises to captivate audiences with its timeless music and compelling storytelling.

2024 Shows:

Jersey Boys, Sept. 20 – Oct. 13

Jersey Boys takes you behind the music of Frankie Valli and The Four Seasons to discover the secret of a 40-year friendship as the foursome work their way from the streets of New Jersey to the heights of stardom. Enjoy chart-topping hits like “Sherry,” “Big Girls Don’t Cry,”

and “Can’t Take My Eyes Off You.” This Tony Award-winning true-life musical phenomenon takes you from the streets of New Jersey to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, a musical that’s just too good to be true.

Baskerville: A Sherlock Holmes Mystery, Oct. 24 – Nov. 3

The play’s afoot in Ken Ludwig’s murderously funny twist on Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. The male Baskerville heirs are being dispatched one by one. To find their ingenious killer, Holmes and Watson must brave the desolate moors before a family curse dooms the next heir. Our intrepid investigators try to escape a dizzying web of clues, silly accents, and disguises, as five actors deftly portray more than

forty characters. Can our heroes discover the truth in time? Join the fun and see how far from elementary the truth can be.

*Field Trip Thursday, Oct 24, 10am

All Is Calm: the Christmas Truce of 1914, Dec. 6 - 22

The *Western Front: Christmas 1914*. Out of the violence of World War I, a silence, then a song. A German soldier steps into No Man’s Land singing “Stille Nacht.” Thus begins an extraordinary night of camaraderie, music, and peace. *All Is Calm: The Christmas Truce of 1914* tells the true story of the first Christmas Eve of World War I, when soldiers across the Western Front laid down their weapons to celebrate Christmas together. Based on the first-

hand accounts of soldiers who lived it, this beautifully staged play with music brings these stories to life with traditional carols and patriotic songs, sung a cappella by a cast of 12, celebrating the unique way that the holiday season can bring us all together.

Stay tuned for 2025 offerings which include **Every Brilliant Thing** Jan. 9-17, **Little Shop Of Horrors** Jan. 24-Feb. 9, **Always A Bridesmaid** Feb. 20-March 2, **Go, Dog. Go!** March 11-March 16, **The Tortoise and the Hare: Fast Friends, Slow Foes** March 27-29 and **Legally Blonde The Musical** May 2-18.

Nathanael Fisher, Producing Artistic Director and co-founder of ECTC says, “This year we go from Frankie Valli to Elle Woods

in a matter of months. Bringing high quality entertainment of many genres to the area is what we love to do! We believe the community will be very pleased with this year’s lineup! There really is something for every audience and we hope to see YOU at the theatre.”

For information about ECTC, including details about upcoming shows and other programs, opportunity for VIP membership, ECTC educational programs and local school field trip opportunities, visit emeraldcoasttheatre.org or call (850) 684-0323. You can also make a tax-deductible donation, volunteer and engage with ECTC on Facebook, Instagram, X (Twitter) and YouTube.

See you at the theatre!

On the Edge with Northwest Florida Ballet!

Join the Northwest Florida Ballet for *On the Edge* at 7:30 p.m. on Jun. 15 at the Mattie Kelly Arts Center. This unique final production of the season features NFB and international guest artists performing a mix of cutting-edge contemporary, neoclassical and classical pieces from guest choreographers and the NFB repertoire.

Box office prices for NFB’s *On the Edge* are \$35 for adults and \$15 for children



12 and under. Visit NFBallet.org/On-The-Edge to learn more or purchase your tickets.

On the Edge is brought to you by Season Signature Sponsors Life Media and NFB’s

Official Sports Medicine & Orthopaedic Provider, NFB-JS Foot & Ankle Surgeon Dr. Sonya Ahmed. NFB is sponsored in part by the State of Florida through the Division of Arts and Culture and the National Endowment for the Arts.

WARRIOR ARTS

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ing a helicopter would be virtually impossible. Fearing I may not regain full use of my dominant hand, I began to teach myself how to write with my left hand. Learning how to hold a pencil was the first step. Eventually I realized if I could teach my left hand how to master those skills, I could re-learn the same skills on my dominant hand. Initially I began learning how to make the letters of the alphabet. Eventually I was able to create letters and form words that I could actually read. From there, I began to draw creative patterns and straight lines, then connect those lines and create images. Soon I developed smoother and neater pencil strokes. Within a few



months I had regained about 80% of my fine motor skills. By the end of the year I had regained full control of my right arm, hand and fingers. Years later I was introduced to Zentangle by a close friend. It was simply a stress-free, no-fault method of creating beautiful patterns. It became clear to me that I wanted to share this helpful healing art with everyone. I decided to become a Certified Zentangle Teacher, and the rest is history.

—CW3 Charles Burkett, Certified Zentangle Instructor



I write to you in great appreciation for the support you showed in the recent PTSD retreat I attended in Destin, Fla. As a 23-year veteran, with 14 combat deployments, adapting back into the civilian world can be difficult and stressful for both the member and family. The art technique that Miss Melanie

Continued on next page



Jason Hedden



Come for an uproarious night of laughs! ECTC presents some of the Southeast’s most hilarious comedians. Hosted by resident funny guy Jason Hedden.

June 28 & July 19

More Info and Tickets:
www.emeraldcoasttheatre.org

WARRIOR ARTS
continued from previous page

Moore introduced has helped me both focus and obtain the inner calmness I need. I brought the art set home your foundation provided and enjoy sharing the meditative process with my 10-year-old daughter. Again, I thank your foundation and especially Miss Melanie for the time and support you showed. We do what we do for great people like you.

—Rob, *Special Operations*

Your programs come at a great time...saving lives...and protecting the livelihood of thousands is just as important as squeezing triggers. If showing a veteran the technique of drawing on a small [paper] tile to relieve their stress and anxiety can prevent a veteran suicide, then that is the most important thing in their life!

—Charles, *Special Operations*

I want to say thank you for your time, in Destin while I was at the Elk Foundation PTSD retreat. I really appreciate you supporting our veteran community and introducing something a little different into our lives. I want you to know that I have continued with the Zentangles and truly enjoy the process. I

have attached a photo of my latest drawing. I hope you like it and I plan to continue.

—Rico, *Special Operations*

This program continues to have a huge positive impact on our veterans and military members. Your passion, vision, artis-

tic talent and resources are the reasons for this. Thanks for continuing to expand the program, adding Charles Burkett for more Zentangle groups and partnering with Estelle Grengs Art for painting classes. I'm a believer that the creative process enhances our lives and helps one heal.

—Janet Paulus, *Veteran Therapist and Air Force Veterans*

To learn more about Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation, along with this and other outreach programs this organization makes possible, visit MKAF.org

Will Estell is a writer, media entrepreneur, and real estate professional with over 600 published features in an array of publications. As chief creative officer of Estell Hussey Media, LLC, and the Editor-In-Chief of Navarre Beach Magazine, during the past 26 years, Will has been instrumental in founding 12 new magazine titles from concept to fruition, as well as serving as editor for others.



On the Edge

NFB NORTHWEST FLORIDA BALLET

June 15 | Mattie Kelly Arts Center
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