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Postal Customer Local

Saving Lives at Both Ends of the Leash

BY HEATHER BENNETT EYE

The Emerald Coast is home to numerous military bases and we are proud of the service members who call our community home. We deeply appreciate these brave men and women who have chosen a path of service and sacrifice. As we express our gratitude for their dedication, let's not forget the challenges many veterans face.

Statistics reveal that 11-20% of veterans who served in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom suffer from PTSD, and around 12% of Gulf War veterans are affected by the same condition. Mental health issues extend beyond PTSD with nearly 30% of veterans reporting symptoms of depression and anxiety. Tragically, these challenges contribute to a high rate of suicide among veterans with 22 veterans taking their own lives each day.

Healing Paws for Warriors, Inc. is a veteran-founded, veteran-led 501(c)(3) in Fort Walton Beach that works to bring awareness to veteran suicide and reduce these statistics by



rescuing and training service dogs to pair with combat veterans faced with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury) and MST (Military Sexual Trauma) along Northwest Florida from Panama City to Pensacola. Through reducing the number of dogs in shelters and empowering veterans, Healing Paws for Warriors is working to "help save lives at both ends of the leash."

Trainer Lisa Russell finds dogs from local shelters that

have the potential to make great service dogs. The dogs undergo 12 weeks of training. This training includes learning to pick up items like credit cards and keys, and the ability to stabilize someone who needs to stand. Once the dogs are trained, veterans are paired with a dog and the two of them, as a team, undergo 8-10 weeks of training at their own pace. "It takes some time," said volunteer and Interim Executive Director Dennis Krebs. "They

have to get used to each other, they have to know each other, and how they act and react." Sometimes initial pairings don't work, and they'll find the veteran another dog. "The big key for us is we're trying to set veterans up for success."

Studies have shown that veterans with service dogs reported a 22% higher reduction in PTSD symptoms compared to those without,

SAVING LIVES
continued on page 3

The Miracle at Seacrest Beach

America Responds

BY RICK KARLE

It was June 8th, and the 15-year-old looked up at her parents following surgery.

A day earlier she had been rushed to Ascension Sacred Heart Hospital in Pensacola.

It was the day after the shark attack.

"I made it," the teenager whispered.

America saved a life on June 7th, 2024.


In fact, America saved the lives of three good folks who simply sought a fun day at the beach.

Lulu Gribbin, McRay Faust and Elisabeth Foley (who lost her hand in a separate attack four miles away) are alive today because of our neighbors who stepped up.

Hardworking, kind people who deserve a shout out—the same people who took part in "The Miracle At Seacrest Beach."


"I haven't stopped thinking about

MIRACLE
continued on page 6




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SAVING LIVES

continued from page 1

and 82% of veterans reported a decrease in suicidal thoughts after getting a service dog. Some have reported improved sleep patterns, increased social interactions, and shown significant improvements in quality of life.

The service dog program through Healing Paws for Warriors, Inc. is completely free to veterans who qualify. Veterans can apply directly on their website. There are basic criteria that applicants must meet, but those who qualify won't be turned away. If a dog cannot be found immediately, they will keep looking for a perfect match. Additionally, if a dog paired with a previous graduate terms out of their service abilities, the veteran will be invited back to train with a new dog and the old dog can become a comfort/emotional support animal.

If you've ever been interested in fostering a dog, this would

be a great opportunity for you to honor veterans. "The great thing about our foster program is we provide the food, the crate, dog toys, and a 24/7 connection in case there's a problem with the dog, so the trainer can be notified," said Dennis. "If we have the right amount of fosters, for the amount of dogs we have, that saves us money from having to pay for kenneling them, so it can go back into the program."

Dogs usually need a foster home from one to three months, and everything they need is provided. If the foster needs to go on vacation or a weekend off, they will go to another foster home while they are away. While the fosters are not responsible for training the dog, it is recommended that they continue with basic commands and reinforce positive behaviors.

Another way you can help Healing Paws for Warriors, Inc. is through volunteering. "We have so many events, and we need volunteers all the time,"

said Dennis. Outreach in the community is typically military-oriented, such as hosting events at the American Legion. Volunteers are needed to hand out brochures and merchandise and discuss the application process.

Graduation for this round of veterans and service dogs was on June 22 at the Air Force Armament Museum. Volunteers are always needed to assist with the coordination of graduates and guests and photography of the ceremony. Graduations are open to the public.

Healing Paws for Warriors, Inc. is also reaching out to other organizations such as One Hopeful Place, a local homeless shelter, in order to pay it forward. "The community has been so supportive of us," stated Dennis. "We all need to support each other. It's a great community that we live in and we can do so much by pooling our resources together. We're starting to reach out to other organiza-



tions to assist them."

If you are interested in the application process, fostering, volunteering or donating, please visit the Healing Paws for War-

riors, Inc. website at <https://www.healingpawsforwarriors.org>.

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 Community

Fireworks and the 4th of July

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Join AJ's on the Bayou July 3rd for the Stars & Stripes CELEBRATION!

The whole family is invited to enjoy bounce houses, stilt walkers, face painting and live music—Jones & Co. at Noon, then Black Eyed Blonde

from 6 – 10 p.m. Fireworks begin at 9 p.m! 200 Eglin Parkway N.E. in Fort Walton Beach.

Star-Spangled Food Truck Festival & Fireworks

Get your 4th of July on early at Destin Commons for the Star-Spangled Food Truck Festival & Fireworks July 3rd at 5 p.m. With more than 25 food trucks ranging from BBQ, gourmet pizzas, grill cheese, Thai and more, there will be something for everyone. Enjoy live music, dancing and fireworks at 9 p.m.

JULY 4th
Boggy Bayou Fireworks Light Up the Bayou!

Light Up the Bayou in Niceville as Boggy Bayou fireworks begin at approximately 8:45 p.m. Fireworks are launched from a custom-made platform in the middle of Boggy Bayou and are visible from the shores of Niceville and Valparaiso. See the map for some of the best public vantage points. More info? lightupthebayou.com.

City of Destin July 4th Fireworks Celebration

The Annual Independence Day Fireworks Show is set off



Star at the Destin Harbor at 8:15 p.m.

Fort Walton Beach Landing July 4th Fireworks

The Fort Walton Beach 4th of July Fireworks show will take place on Thursday, July 4th 2024 at 8:45 p.m. In downtown Fort Walton Beach. They are set off from a barge over the Santa Rosa Sound.

Sandestin Hilton

The Sandestin Hilton July 4th fireworks are set off right on the beach directly in front of the hotel July 4th at 9 p.m.

Seaside (30a) July 4th Fireworks

The Seaside 4th of July Fireworks show will take place on Thursday, July 4th, at 8:30 p.m.

Alys Beach on 30a

The Alys Beach 4th of July fireworks show will take place on Thursday, July 4th at 9 p.m.

Enjoy Fireworks this summer at The Boardwalk on Okaloosa Island each Wednesday at 9 p.m., and over the Destin Harbor directly behind HarborWalk Village every Thursday night throughout the summer at 9 p.m.

from the West Jetties Beach at the Destin Harbor and Harborwalk Village and can be seen over the East Pass beginning at 9 p.m. on July 4th. If inclement weather, the fireworks show will take place on July 5th at 9 p.m.

Red, White & Baytowne

Beginning at 7 p.m. at The Village of Baytowne Wharf at Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort, enjoy balloon sculpting, kids' crafts, face painting and LIVE music on the Events Plaza Stage from Below Alabama followed by the special 4th of July Fireworks display at 9:15 p.m.

Fireworks Cruise

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Go Vote in the Okaloosa Primary August 20, 2024

The nine contested offices up for election (incumbent listed):

Federal:
U.S. House of Representatives, District 1 (Matt Gaetz)

County Offices:
Sheriff (Eric Aden)
Board of County Commissioners, District 1, 3, & 5 (1—Paul Mixon)
School Board, District 2

Municipal:
Crestview City Council, Group 1
Mary Esther City Council
Destin City Council (Destin, Hebert, King, Schmidt)

Party Offices:
Republican State Committeewoman (Sherri Cox)
Republican State Committeeman

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(pictured with Teddy Roosevelt during the Billy Bowlegs Parade)

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 Community
MIRACLE*continued from page 1*

it,” Matt Lidle told me days ago.

Matt made good on his promise to chat with me after I called him.

“I wanted to speak to Lulu and her parents first,” Matt said.

The Memphis resident who was on a beach vacation with his wife, Rachel, and his son, Harrison, can’t get the scene out of his mind.

Sterling Duncan works at Seacrest Beach, Fla. Sterling is a Jackson, Tenn., native who on June 7th was at his job working the beach chairs at La Dolce Vita Beach Rentals. “The incident is weighing heavy on me, but I am so appreciative of how many people stepped up,” said Sterling.

I could sense that it’s going to take a while for Sterling to erase the memory of helping get Lulu out of the ocean.

“We had just arrived at Seacrest Beach,” Cole Booker of Brandon, Miss., told me. “My wife and I were just getting settled on our vacation, and I heard the screams. I ran to the ocean.”

Stephen and Kathy Beene share time between Seacrest Beach and Baton Rouge, La.

June 7th was going to be another relaxing day at the beach. It would be anything but.

Cathy Dougherty is an ER nurse from Louisville, Ky.

Cathy and her husband, Joe Sparks, were on vacation, their beach chairs held together by a ratchet strap Joe had purchased before their trip south. Remember the ratchet strap.

“My family members were enjoying the water,” Dr. Ryan Forbess told me from Orange Beach Family Medicine.

Dr. Forbess and his good



PHOTO COURTESY ANN BLAIR GRIBBIN

Dr. Ryan Forbess and Lulu Gribbin

friend—Dr. Moh Ali—and their families, vacation together every year in the Seacrest Beach area.

Right place, right time.

The doctors were enjoying boogie boarding with their kids on June 7th; little did the doctors know how much they would be relied on.

“It had to be a God thing putting all those people at the place they were needed,” Shari Woody, an employee at Orange Beach Family Medicine told me.

There were laughs and giggles from the young teenagers as they frolicked in the surf. It was last Friday afternoon, and the mother-daughter beach trip was in full swing. The good friends from the Mountain Brook, Ala., area were near the sand bar, diving for sand dollars.

That’s when the shark attacked.

“I heard people yell, ‘Shark!’,” Matt Lidle told me.

“I turned and ran into the water toward the girl’s screams and I saw a sea of blood,” Matt told me. Stephen Beene had just pulled the girl away from the shark.

“I was the man who pulled Lulu from the shark,” Beene

texted me. “Hand me the girl,” Lidle said to Beene, as they both tended to Lulu. “We need to get her to shore!”

Matt cradled Lulu Gribbin and ran through the water as fast as his lungs would allow. “She was conscious—she was looking up at me,” said Matt. “I was very concerned, because she had stopped bleeding,” he whispered.

Cole Booker had reached Matt and Lulu just as Matt was tiring. “Help me carry her,” Matt yelled to Cole. “Matt was getting tired. I wanted to grab the girl by the legs,” Cole told me, his voice softening. “I grabbed her by the waist instead,” Cole said.

Lulu’s mother Ann Blair and other moms were hundreds of yards away, strolling on the beach. They ran to the girls that were brought to the beach by Matt, Sterling, Cole and others. (McCray Faust suffered a deep gash on a lower extremity.)

“I saw the wounds on Lulu’s leg and started to scream,” Ann Blair Gribbin wrote on Caring Bridge about seeing her daughter. “The wound on Lulu’s leg, or all that was left of her leg,

was something out of a movie. I finally made it back to her and held her hand and she saw me, and I told her I was there. Her eyes were open,” Ann Blair wrote.

America went to work saving Lulu, and America had some help from above, as several of the beachgoers just happened to work in the medical field. “It was amazing,” Dr. Forbess told me. “So many of the people who gathered around Lulu knew medicine.”

Dr. Forbess and Dr. Ali huddled over Lulu.

An EMT who was visiting the beach made tourniquets.

An ER nurse from Louisville was on vacation and assisted Drs. Forbess and Ali.

An anesthesiologist told the doctors that she was available to help.

Cathy Dougherty put her ER nurse experience to good use. Cathy held up Lulu’s head, placing two fingers on Lulu’s ca-

rotid artery and her other hand on Lulu’s chest. She was ready to perform CPR if Lulu stopped breathing.

Cathy’s husband, Joe, is a former lifeguard. Joe threw his ratchet strap to the doctors as he watched his wife hold Lulu’s head. It was the same ratchet strap that was purchased on a whim. It was the strap that would be used as a tourniquet on Lulu’s leg.

The beach patrol was soon on the scene. Experts from the South Walton Fire District and the Walton County Sheriff’s Office arrived within minutes—still, it was touch and go.

“She was going in and out of consciousness,” Dr. Forbess said. “Luckily, Dr. Ali is an expert in radiology. He knew exactly where to apply pressure to the femoral artery. It was all about ABC: Artery, Blood, Circulation,” he told me.

Continued on page 8

June 7: The Facts

South Walton Fire District (SWFD) and Walton County Sheriff’s Office (WCSO) responded to two shark related incidents, just four miles apart, Friday afternoon, June 7. Two people were critically injured and one other person suffered minor injuries.

The first incident originated around 1:20 p.m. when multiple 911 callers reported an approximately 45-year-old woman was bitten by a shark as she was swimming past the first sandbar near WaterSound Beach. Bystanders began rendering care to the woman before SWFD lifeguards and WCSO deputies arrived on-scene.

Once they arrived on-scene, they found the woman sustained critical injuries on her hip and lower left arm. They initiated treatment, then SWFD firefighters continued care and transported the patient to Walton Air Rescue.

The patient was airlifted to the trauma facility at HCA Florida Fort Walton-Destin Hospital to receive further treatment for her injuries, which, later resulted in the amputation of the lower portion of her arm.

About an hour and a half later, a second incident took

place near Seacrest Beach at approximately 2:55 p.m., four miles east of the first incident. It involved two female patients who were approximately 15 years old. According to bystanders, the individuals were in waist deep water with a group of friends when the incident occurred.

When lifeguards and deputies arrived on-scene, they found one of the females had significant injuries to the upper leg and one hand. The other female had minor injuries on one foot. The patient with significant injuries was treated on-scene, then transported by SWFD firefighters to Okaloosa MedFlight. She was then airlifted to the trauma facility at Ascension Sacred Heart of Pensacola for further treatment. SWFD also transported the second patient to the hospital.

Following the incidents, beach flags were changed to double red to indicate the water was closed for swimming that day out of an abundance of caution.

These are the first reported shark attacks in Walton County within the last five years. The last fatal attack was in 2005.

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Congratulations Bluewater Bay Community!

By BARBARA PALMGREN

I have followed this journey of dedication to the 150 acres of greenspace in this unique community throughout the past year, attending community meetings and listening to comments from hundreds of people—all with the same voice. The greenspace must be saved for future generations.

Congratulations to both the leadership and members of Preserve Bluewater Bay, Inc. (PBWB), a non-profit IRS 501(c)(3). You have purchased 150 acres for \$2.3 Million, on May 31, 2024, to be set aside for recreation. This land is embedded in Bluewater Bay and is commonly referred to as the Bay/Marsh Golf Course and the old Lake Golf Course Holes 1, 2, 3 and 9.

The leadership started with a meeting of 17 concerned BWB residents after being notified of the golf course closure and the intent of Bluewater Development Venture, LLC (BBDV) to develop the land. PBWB began its purchase efforts with a community meeting. That meeting



resulted in 60 residents putting up \$5,000 a piece to lease the property and provide seed money, and five volunteers willing to form a corporation to enter into a two-year Lease-to-Purchase Agreement, March 1, 2022, with BBDV. PBWB, Inc., had only one primary goal: “Purchase the land for BWB Resident Recreation.” Contrary to public opinion, it was not about keeping the golf course open.

So, what happens next? During this whole process, the Board of Directors, sometimes referred to as the “FAB – 5,” kept the golf course open and raised the money to purchase the land. From here on, the land will be community owned and managed. To meet the goal of community involvement, the PBWB Board is in the process of revising its current By-Laws and Operating Agreements.

The Board is currently looking for community volunteers to serve in a variety of capacities. Please contact David Rauch, President of PBB Inc. at 850-865-0897 to be part of this exciting journey for the Bluewater Bay community.

The leadership has asked that many people have to be thanked—All of the Initial Donors, Capital Campaign Pledge Donors, Sliver Buyers, Cam-

paign Volunteers, Golf Course Members, and the Homeowners and Property Owners Association Gold Card Communities who never faltered and worked hard to accomplish this goal.

It has been said many times before, “It takes a village to raise a child.” In this case it took an army of volunteers and benefactors. CONGRATULATIONS, BLUEWATER BAY! YOU DID IT!



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Community

MIRACLE

continued from page 6

Lulu was rushed to Ascension Sacred Heart Pensacola, where talented doctors and nurses took over lifesaving procedures.

Lulu Gribbin lost her left hand. She later had her right leg amputated between the knee and the hip.

But a community came together and helped save a life, and Lulu's mother, Ann Blair, is grateful, writing on Caring Bridge:

"I am eternally grateful for the 3 surgeons and all the nursing staff and doctors here who saved Lulu. I am grateful for the doctors and nurses on the beach that day. I am grateful for the EMT's on the beach and the crew in the air. I am grateful for the individuals who pulled her out of the water."

Stephen Beene, the first person to reach Lulu as the shark attacked is thankful that Lulu is doing well. "My family's thoughts and prayers continue to be with Lulu and her family. She is a special girl and one tough cookie," he texted.

Matt Lidle is back in Memphis, and still can't seem to get Lulu off his mind. "I have spoken with Lulu and the family and they seem to be doing as good as can be," he told me.

Matt is another person who is amazed at how America pitched

in. "I'm just a sales guy," said the man who helped carry Lulu out of the water. "To stand back and watch the experts save a life after we brought her to shore was amazing."

Sterling Duncan is back to work at Seacrest Beach sorting out beach chairs. He says he appreciates everyone who came to the aid of Lulu. "God has some amazing things planned for that girl," he said.

Louisville's Cathy Dougherty and her husband, Joe, have finished up their beach vacation. Both are feeling blessed that they were able to help in some way. They sure are glad that Joe bought that ratchet strap.

Dr. Forbess remains busy seeing patients at Orange Beach Family Medicine. "I think the lesson here is to have faith in humanity," he told me. "When we come together, great things can happen."

And Cole Booker and his wife Jasmine? They are back home in Mississippi, glorifying God for putting the right people in the right place. "I'm a big Jesus guy," Cole told me. "It was all Jesus," he added.

Lulu has had numerous surgeries, and she is now being fitted for prosthetics at an undisclosed hospital. Her mother Ann Blair tells me when the time is right, the story of her amazing, strong, fierce and beautiful daughter will be told.

Until Lulu's story is written, Ann Blair writes on Caring Bridge:

"Lulu is worried about not fitting in and people making fun of her. I need prayers for everyone to be understanding and to show her grace. I also need prayers for Lulu to know that her hand and her leg do not define who she is."

June 7th, 2024, brought an unimaginable, frightening scene. But, thanks to a wonderful community, America came together and saved a life.

While Lulu Gribbin faces a long road ahead, she's forging on. She is amazing and strong and fierce and beautiful, and she's smiling more often these days.

Because Lulu has made it. Thanks to "The Miracle at Seacrest Beach."

Birmingham's Rick Karle is a 43-year TV news veteran and a 25-time Emmy winner. His "good news" stories can be found on Facebook at Rick Karle Good News. You can email Rick your story ideas at RickKarleGoodNews@gmail.com

From the Publisher

As have many of you, Bay Life has been following the accounts of the recent, rare shark attacks that happened in our area June 7. We are all saddened to hear of these tragic events regarding all three victims.



PHOTO COURTESY CARINGBRIDGE Lulu Gribbin



PHOTO COURTESY ANN BLAIR GRIBBIN Lulu Gribbin and twin sister Ellie



PHOTO COURTESY SHARI WOODY Dr. Ryan Forbess



PHOTO COURTESY SHARI WOODY Dr. Moh Ali



PHOTO COURTESY COLE BOOKER Cole Booker



PHOTO COURTESY STERLING DUNCAN Sterling Duncan



PHOTO COURTESY MATT LIDLE Matt Lidle



PHOTO COURTESY AMY DOUGHERTY HIRBY Cathy Dougherty



PHOTO COURTESY JANE BEENE Stephen Beene

However, we are grateful for the heroes (ordinary people accomplishing extraordinary feats) in the water and on the beach that day, as well as the Walton Co. Sheriff's Office, South Walton Fire District, EMT's, doctors, nurses, flight crews, hospital staff and many others. We want to recognize you and thank you! We know God was there; and was working through these brave men and women to save lives. Thank you also, Rick Karle, for telling this story so eloquently and allowing us to print it.

Lulu is progressing miraculously each day; you can follow her progress through her mom, Ann Blair Gribbin, on Caring-Bridge.org. Search Lulu Gribbin.

To help support Lulu, you can contribute to the Caring For Lulu fund at Oakworth Capital Bank through Zelle, Caringforlulu@gmail.com. Or mail a check made out to Rich-

ard Littrell and Stephen Faust FBO Lulu Gribbin; Oakworth Capital Bank. Attn: Richard Littrell FBO Lulu Gribbin, 850 Shades Creek Pkwy., Suite 200, Birmingham, AL 35209. Cards can be sent to Lulu Strong, P.O. Box 660257, Birmingham, AL 35266-0257.

You can support Elizabeth Foley through GiveSendGo.com, "Supporting Elizabeth Foley & The Foley Family."

~ Lori Leath Smith



Psalm 25:4
Show me the right path O Lord;
point out the road for me to follow

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NWFSC Selects Dr. Cristie Kedroski to Serve as Interim President

Northwest Florida State College (NWFSC) has selected Dr. Cristie Kedroski as Interim President effective July 6, 2024. Dr. Kedroski's selection by the Board of Trustees was unanimous, reflecting the confidence and trust placed in her ability to lead with integrity, vision and a deep understanding of the college's mission.

Dr. Kedroski brings with her more than 20 years of community, economic and higher education experience. Her background demonstrates significant achievements in academic administration, student services, grant management and community outreach. Dr. Kedroski has been instrumental in developing innovative academic programs and spearheading initiatives that enhanced student retention and graduation rates as well as overseeing enrollment management strategies that have led the college to seven consecutive semesters of increased enrollment.

"I am honored to be selected as the Interim President of Northwest Florida State College," stated Dr. Cristie Kedroski. "I look forward to working closely with our dedicated faculty, staff, and community partners to continue our mission of providing exceptional educational opportunities and fostering a supportive and innovative learning environment for all students."

As Interim President, Dr. Kedroski will focus on maintaining the high quality of educational and student support services the college provides to all of its students and stewarding the college's strategic initiatives.

"I extend our congratulations to Dr. Cristie Kedroski on her selection as Interim President of Northwest Florida State College," said Lori Kelley, Chair of the Board of Trustees. "Dr. Kedroski's experience and dedication to this institution make her the ideal candidate to guide the college during this transitional period. The Board had thorough deliberations, ensuring we chose an interim president who embodies the college's values."

"My congratulations to Dr. Cristie Kedroski on her selection as Interim President of North-



west Florida State College," remarked Dr. Devin Stephenson, current President of Northwest Florida State College and President-elect of Florida Polytechnic University. "Her unwavering commitment to the mission and vision of NWFSC combined with her leadership skills, makes her a great choice for this interim role. I look forward to observing the continued innovation and advancement of the institution under Dr. Kedroski's leadership."

The Board of Trustees extends its heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Devin Stephenson and looks forward to selecting a permanent president to continue the remarkable growth and achievements he has laid the groundwork for throughout his years of service to the college.

For more information about Northwest Florida State College, visit www.nwfsc.edu or contact the Office of Strategic Communications at stratcomm@nwfsc.edu.

NWFSC Dedicates the Congressman Robert L. F. Sikes Museum

Northwest Florida State College (NWFSC) recently dedicated the Congressman Robert L. F. Sikes Museum on its Crestview campus, honoring the legacy of the late Representative Robert L. F. Sikes. The ceremony, marked by the presence of distinguished guests and community leaders, showcased the museum's rich displays that chronicle the congressman's significant contributions to both the local community and the nation.

"Monday, we celebrated the



The museum, located at NWFSC's Crestview campus, features interactive exhibits, personal memorabilia of the congressman, and a detailed account of his advocacy for military and educational advance-

ments in the region. Open to the public, the museum aims to foster a deeper understanding of regional history and the pivotal figures who have shaped it.

For more information on the Congressman Robert L. F. Sikes

Museum in Crestview, Florida, please contact J. Wren Supak, Director and Curator for the Mattie Kelly Arts Center Galleries, at supakj@nwfsc.edu.

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Bay Buzz Events



Niceville Valparaiso Chamber July Business After Hours featuring LJ Schooners and Bay Life!

Join the Bay Life staff and LJ Schooners for a fun after hours business gathering, Tuesday, July 16 at 5 p.m. at LJ Schooners in Bluewater Bay. The Cham-

ber Business After Hours are a great networking opportunity. Members and guests are always welcome and there is no cost to attend. Bring a door prize to giveaway to promote your business! We look forward to seeing you there!

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 Mat-

tielkellytickets.com or by calling 850-706-5206.

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.

Support the WCSO Back-to-School Splash Bash Through Amazon Registry or PayPal Donation

The Walton County Sheriff's Office's annual Back-to-School Splash Bash is sending students back to school with a splash!

The Back-to-School Splash Bash is an annual event that provides backpacks and supplies to hundreds of families in need before students head back to the classroom.

This year, the event will be held at Wee Care Park in DeFuniak Springs on Saturday, July 27 from 11 a.m. - 2 p.m.

Walton County Sheriff's Office is asking for the community to come together to purchase supplies and backpacks for students either through Amazon Registry or PayPal donation.

Scan a QR code to donate:



No student should go without as they begin a new school year. We appreciate all donations, big or small!

2024 Okaloosa County Candidate Forum

The Niceville-Valparaiso Chamber is partnering with the Emerald Coast Association of Realtors, Crestview and Destin Chamber to hold a 2024 Candidate Forum, Tuesday, July 9th, at 5 p.m. in the Niceville High School Auditorium, 800 John Sims Parkway. Candidates for School Board and County Commission all plan to participate.

The 13th Annual Bluewater Bay Marina Pinfish Grand Nationals

will be held on Saturday, August 3, 2024, 10 a.m. at the Bluewater Bay Marina Complex. There will be an Anglers meeting at 9:45 a.m. before the tournament. Awards will be given for 1st, 2nd and 3rd places and also the Abram Sitzer Big Fish Award. Goody bags will be given to all registered teams. Junior Fisherman receives Tournament Shirt. Noah Detention Construction, Costa Enterprises McDonalds,

Continued on page 12

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Happenings Around the Bay

2024 EVENTS

JULY

- 01** | **Chess Night**
6 pm | LJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant | Niceville
- 02** | **Niceville Young Professionals Luncheon**
11:30 am | Niceville Valparaiso Chamber | Niceville
Movies on the Beach: Strange World
8 pm | AI's Beach Club & Burger Bar | FWB
- 03** | **Summer Drawing with Chris McLoone**
3 pm | Artful Things | Niceville
Fireworks Show
9 pm | The Boardwalk on Okaloosa Island | FWB
- 04** | **Eglin Golf Course Flag Tournament**
7:30 am | Eglin AFB Golf Course | Niceville
Fourth of July Parade
4 pm | Freeport
Fourth of July Fireworks Show
8:30 pm | Freeport Regional Sports Complex | Freeport
Fourth of July Pops! with Sinfonia Gulf Coast
7 pm | Seaside Amphitheater | Seaside
- 05** | **One-Strike Basics (Level 2) with Sheila Mahony**
10 am | Artful Things | Niceville
Live Music: Sarah-Nade Band
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville
- 06** | **Concealed Carry Weapons Class**
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
Pinewood Derby Car Race
11 am | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville
Live Music: The L.A. Strangers
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville
- 07** | **Live Music: Bluegrass Jam**
12 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville
Live Music: Tim Nowell
1 pm | AI's Beach Club & Burger Bar | FWB
Women's Climbing Circle
5 pm | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin
- 09** | **The 2024 Candidate Forum**
5 pm | Niceville High School Auditorium | Niceville
Movies on the Beach: Super Mario Bros
8 pm | AI's Beach Club & Burger Bar | FWB
- 10** | **Niceville-Valparaiso Chamber Second Wednesday Breakfast**
7:15 am | Niceville Community Center | Niceville
- 11** | **Greater FWB Chamber Nothing But Networking**
11:30 am | The Place on Beal | FWB
The Great American SOULbook
7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville

- 12** | **Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee**
7 am | Christian Life Center at FBC | FWB
One-Strike Basics (Level 2) with Sheila Mahony
10 am | Artful Things | Niceville
Live Music: Rust and Gold (Neil Young Tribute Band)
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville
- 13** | **Handmade Journals Pop Up with Susan Ramsey**
11 am | Artful Things | Niceville
Classic Car Club
11 am | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville
- 16** | **Home Defense Fundamentals**
5:30 pm | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

Movies on the Beach: Aladdin
8 pm | AI's Beach Club & Burger Bar | FWB
Niceville-Val'p Chamber Business After Hours with Bay Life
5 pm | LJ Schooners | Bluewater Bay Niceville
- 17** | **Summer Drawing with Chris McLoone**
3 pm | Artful Things | Niceville
- 18** | **Kids' Arts & Crafts with Marla Armstrong**
10:30 am | Artful Things | Niceville
Greater FWB Chamber Business After Hours
5:30 pm | Big Gus Tractor & Equipment | Mary Esther
- 19** | **One-Strike Basics (Level 2) with Sheila Mahony**
10 am | Artful Things | Niceville
Kids Camp with Sheila Mahony
2 pm | Artful Things | Niceville
Live Music: Josh Davis
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville
Tom Papa Good Stuff Tour
7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville
- 20** | **Concealed Carry Weapons Class**
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

- 20** CONT. | **Linocut and Stamp Carving with Chris McLoone**
1 pm | Artful Things | Niceville
- 23** | **Movies on the Beach: The Lego Movie**
8 pm | AI's Beach Club & Burger Bar | FWB
- 24** | **Kids' Arts & Crafts with Marla Armstrong**
10:30 am | Artful Things | Niceville
Summer Drawing with Chris McLoone
3 pm | Artful Things | Niceville
- 25** | **Kids' Arts & Crafts with Marla Armstrong**
10:30 am | Artful Things | Niceville
- 26** | **One-Strike Basics (Level 2) with Sheila Mahony**
10 am | Artful Things | Niceville
Kids Camp with Sheila Mahony
2 pm | Artful Things | Niceville
- 28** | **Sunset Shrimp Boil**
4 pm | LJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant | Niceville
- 30** | **Movies on the Beach: Paws of Fury: The Legend of Hank**
8 pm | AI's Beach Club & Burger Bar | FWB
- 31** | **Summer Drawing with Chris McLoone**
3 pm | Artful Things | 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

Fireworks Show
9 pm | Wed | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island

Trivia Night
6 pm | Thurs | Strange Colt Brewery | Niceville

Broadway on the Boulevard
7:30 pm | Thurs | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

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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NWFSC and FAMU Announce Articulation Agreement for Pharmacy Students

By DOUG STAUFFER

The best way to know what is happening in Okaloosa County is to follow our state representative as he travels. His vision and know-how enable him to get things done. Representative Patt Maney's legislative accomplishments are amazing, and here is another. His visit to FAMU for a tour triggered his interest in exploring how to utilize underused buildings better.

Northwest Florida State College (NWFSC) and Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU) have signed a groundbreaking articulation agreement to streamline edu-

cational pathways for aspiring pharmacy students. This collaboration celebrated at the Durell Peaden FAMU College of Pharmacy campus in Crestview, offers a structured route for NWFSC students to transition seamlessly into FAMU's Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD) program.

Representative Patt Maney's vision and commitment have been pivotal in realizing this initiative, enhancing access to quality education, and addressing the critical need for skilled pharmacists in our communities. "It's important for leaders to have visions, but it's more im-



PHOTO CREDIT: GETTHECOAST.COM

portant to have people who can make those visions a reality," said Rep. Maney. This partnership facilitates academic excellence and solves housing challenges,

providing students with comprehensive support from start to finish. This is a 2+4 education program—2 years at NWFSC followed by a 4-year pharmacy program in Crestview. NWFSC will ensure that the appropriate content and prerequisites for the university will be offered.

NWFSC President Dr. Devin Stephenson and FAMU President Dr. Larry Robinson highlighted the transformative impact this agreement will have on healthcare across Florida. It will ensure students receive the necessary foundational education to thrive in the pharmacy profession. Importantly, the

students will save thousands of dollars in education and housing costs. This is a significant relief for many, as the six years of education can now happen in Okaloosa County, making it more accessible and affordable.

Nancy Peaden expressed her appreciation for Representative Maney's hard work and the collaboration between the two colleges. "It's just wonderful—wonderful for the community, for the students, and for them to be able to have housing nearby," she remarked. When asked what her late husband would have said if he could see the event, Peaden replied, "Praise God."

EVENTS

continued from page 10

Peoples National Bank, Gulf Shore Air, Ship's Chandler, L4K Charters, West Marine and Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance are sponsoring and supporting the tournament along with Bluewater Bay Marina, LJ

Schooners Dockside Restaurant & Oyster Bar and Bluewater High & Dry. Early registration is encouraged to secure t-shirt for Junior Fisherman. Early packet pick-up is Friday, August 2, from 6 – 8 p.m. at LJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant lobby. Rules: Timed tournament, fishing inside Ward Cove (BWB

Marina) ONLY, two-person teams (Angler #1: 16+ yrs., Angler #2: 15 yrs & under), fishing pole use only. Teams provide their own fishing equipment and aggregate weight of 10 fish will determine the winner. Early registration—\$25.00. Late Registration (August 2-3)—\$30.00. For more information and for a

registration form, call Bluewater Bay Marina at (850) 897-2821 or visit www.bluewaterbaymarina.com.

L.J. Schooners to host Casino Night for CALM, a fundraiser with winners, prizes and gift baskets, Saturday, August 17, 6-10 p.m. Dress in

your best Casino attire to support CALM and win prizes. All proceeds from casino-themed games and 10% of food sales will help CALM provide child-care while moms are in class and electricity during these hot months.



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A Niceville Legacy: Jerry Colquitt

BY LORI SMITH

Jerry Lamar Colquitt passed away peacefully in June at age 77, transitioning to eternal life. And though Jerry might not physically be on this earth anymore, he left behind a profound legacy of love, faith, dedication and service.

Many locals knew him as head baseball coach and an assistant football coach of Niceville High School (NHS). "Anyone and everyone that went through NHS from 1979-2000 generally knew him well," said his son, Jason Colquitt. For nearly 30 years at Niceville High School, he passionately served, promoted and cared for his Eagle students and families. Even after retirement, he remained a steadfast supporter of his beloved Eagles, earning him the affectionate title of "Coach" throughout the Niceville community.

Jerry was born in Brantley, Ala., but moved to Niceville in 1979. "We lived in the 27th



house built in Bluewater Bay which, at the time, the people in Niceville thought we were crazy for building so far out," said Jason. "That house has been home for my mom and dad for more than 40 years."

Jerry's legacy includes mil-

itary service which began in 1967 with two tours in Vietnam. As a purple heart recipient and lifelong patriot, he devoted himself to serving his country. It was after his military service that Jerry graduated from Troy State University and embarked on a fulfilling career in teaching and coaching.

But his profound love for his nation continued as he spent his later years supporting fellow soldiers, airmen and their families. "My dad was retired Army," said Jason. "So, he frequented Eglin AFB, Hurlburt Field and Duke Field and could be found at the BX, restaurants, gas stations or other areas handing out handwritten notes (over 5,000) to service men and women, encouraging them during the Middle East conflicts."

A celebration of Jerry's life was held on Friday, June 14, 2024, at Church on Bayshore in Niceville. Due to Jerry's strong devotion to the Niceville Eagles,

coupled with his profound patriotism and loyal service to our nation, attendees wore Niceville Eagles or patriotic attire to his Celebration of Life service.

Jerry's devotion extended to the Christian family of believers at his church that he joined in 1979. The prayers and love from his Sunday School family, church congregation and pastors helped sustain him through years of health issues. His unwavering faith in Jesus Christ as his Savior ushered him from the pain of a diseased life to an eternal pain-free life in Heaven. His warmth and generosity endeared him to many, and his memory will forever be cherished by those who were fortunate enough to have known him.

The family requests any donations be made in his memory to Tunnel to Towers Foundation at (t2t.org) or Gideon's International (<https://gideons.org>).

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- February 1, 2025: **The Addams Family** 7 P.M.
- October 12, 2024: **HALLOWEEN SPOOKTACULAR** 2 P.M. & 7 P.M.
- December 6, 2024: **Holiday Pops** CHRISTMAS ON BROADWAY 7 P.M.
- February 22, 2025: **Roaring 20s** The Stars of Tomorrow 7 P.M.
- April 12, 2025: **ODE to JOY** 7 P.M.

 Community

Property Insurance Questions and Answers



By JULIE A. MARTIN, LICENSED AGENT AT ABORA INSURANCE GROUP LLC

Dear readers, storm season is again upon us, and with the first breath of stormy winds comes confusion when it comes to our insurance options. Why are the rates so high? Why are my premiums higher than my neighbor's when we have the same size house? Why am I being non-renewed for not providing flood insurance when I am not in a flood zone?

All good questions, and we have some answers. First to the

question of flood insurance. Citizens and Peoples Trust both enacted rules in accordance with the State of Florida that require flood insurance for properties in flood zones, whether or not your property has a mortgage requiring you to carry it. In addition, Citizens is in the midst of a four-year plan to get all of their policyholders to carry flood insurance on their homes regardless of flood zone.

Currently, owners of homes with dwelling coverage 600K are required to carry flood insurance on their properties re-



your neighbor has Hip Roof and opening protection credit, and you do not, there will be a marked difference in the way his home is rated versus the way your home is rated.

regardless of flood zone in order to maintain a property policy with Citizens Property Corp., the state backed insurer.

Next year, owners of homes with 500K and up will be required to carry flood insurance regardless of zone. By 2027, all homes insured with Citizens will be required to carry flood insurance in order to maintain property insurance with Citizens.

For the readers who are curious to know why two houses on the same block, with the same square footage, and quality of interior and exterior features would be insured for different amounts, and even have drastically different premiums, there are over 300 different rating factors that determine the pricing structure of a home.

Wind mitigation features are key here. Let's suppose that although both homes were built in 2004, and both have been re roofed with permits, if your neighbor has a Hip shaped roof, which is a roof that slopes on all four sides like a pyramid, and you both have Roof Deck Attachment C, and Clips, and you both have A1 Opening protection, that Hip Roof shape credit could generate an additional 15% premium discount to his home insurance premium. If

Also, comparison of properties needs to consider are the type of property insurance form both homes are covered under. Maybe your neighbor rents his home out to a long-term tenant, and so his policy would be DP3, which does not require a high level of personal property contents; whereas, your owner occupied HO3 policy requires at least 25% of the dwelling in contents coverage, as is standard under Florida home insurance package policies.

There are eight new carriers in Florida that have recently become authorized to transact new business for property insurance in the state of Florida, within the last few months, which include Orion 180 Select Insurance, Orange Insurance Exchange, Mainsail Insurance and Tailrow Insurance, to name a few. It will take time for the Florida property insurance industry to spread the risk around more evenly in the next year or so for the rates to come down. But, eight new carriers means that there will soon be some relief, even if it might take a year or more for us to see it.

Stay tuned, dear readers. More good news might be just around the corner, but let's be prepared for an active storm season.

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Niceville Celebrates First Responders with Summer Kick-Off Event

By DOUG STAUFFER

The NICE in the NICEville community again shone brightly to honor and celebrate its first responders at the annual First Responders Summer Kick-Off event held at the Mullet Festival Grounds. This new tradition, now technically in its second year, has grown significantly and serves as a testament to the strong bond between the community and its first responders, a bond continually nurtured and strengthened by the residents' active participation.

The highlight of the summer kick-off was the return of the much-anticipated water balloon battle inaugurated at the "Battle at Lincoln Park" in June 2022, when a group of local children challenged the police. What started as a small event has since become a celebration staple, drawing participants of all ages to engage in friendly competition with the Niceville Fire and Police Departments.

This year's event featured an array of attractions, including bounce houses, water slides, food trucks, a dunk tank, and more. Attendees eagerly watched as enthusiastic participants dunked City Manager David Deitch, Police Captain Michael Whitfield, and other



officers. The most hazardous spot for those wishing to stay dry was undoubtedly near the police officers, prime targets for water guns and balloon attacks.

The origins of this beloved tradition trace back to an incident involving Officer Bronson, who chose to support a group of pre-teen children selling lemonade without a license. Instead of issuing citations, Bronson handed them a \$100 bill, an act of generosity that quickly went viral on social media. Inspired by this gesture, the children challenged the police to a water balloon fight, leading to the first "Battle of Lincoln Park." The event saw the Chief and ten officers face off against the "lemonade kids" and other park visitors in a spirited and memorable clash.

In addition to the summer kick-off, Niceville has recently hosted several other community events. On April 20th, residents enjoyed Big Truck Day, featuring vehicles and equipment from Eglin Air Force Base EOD, Waste Management, Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Niceville Police Department, Niceville Fire Department, and Niceville Public Works.

Another notable event was the Mock DUI Demonstration at Niceville High School on April 12th. This impactful demonstration, organized ahead of prom night, involved theatre students reenacting a crash scenario, followed by field sobriety tests and an "arrest." This event aimed to educate ju-

niors and seniors on the dangers of drunk driving and promote safe prom activities.

On May 3rd, the impactful "Growing Community Relations" initiative saw volunteers from the Niceville Police Department, led by Lt. Kearnes, dedicating their morning to assisting a local family with their yard work. The City of Niceville Public Works team played a crucial role by providing equipment and additional support to clear debris, a gesture greatly appreciated by the community. Imagine the difference this kind of kindness would make if it spread throughout the community.

The Niceville first responders' commitment to community engagement extends beyond

these events. From helping stranded motorists to celebrating birthdays with drive-bys, the Niceville Police and Fire Departments continually find innovative ways to connect with and support their community.

As the summer unfolds, Niceville looks forward to more opportunities to celebrate and appreciate the dedication of its first responders. These events provide fun and entertainment and reinforce the strong sense of community that defines Niceville. Let's all do our part to keep the NICE in NICEville.

For more information and to relive the excitement of the Battle at Lincoln Park, search "The Battle of Lincoln Park" on YouTube.



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 Community

Florida Heritage Site Unveiling at Lula J. Edge Elementary School

BY DOUG STAUFFER

Lula J. Edge Elementary School recently celebrated unveiling its Florida Heritage Site marker in a momentous event for the Niceville community. This recognition comes as the

school, an integral part of the community's educational history, prepares to celebrate its 100th anniversary in the fall of 2025. Many past students attended the event, along with other dignitaries. Some Tiger

Chorus singers sacrificed summer holiday plans to serenade the crowd. A special thanks go to Niceville Historian Elisa Mitchiner and Councilwoman Cathy Alley for their hard work and dedication.

The Early Beginnings:

The school's history dates back to 1914 when B.P. and Amy C. Edge sold a parcel of land to the Board of Public Instruction of Walton County for \$350. This land, located at the old Boggy



Post Office area on Boggy Bayou, marked the beginning of a significant educational institution. The School Attendance Law, passed in 1919, mandated attendance for children aged 7 to 16, paving the way for establishing a structured educational system.

Transition from Niceville High School: The current site of Lula J. Edge Elementary School originally housed Niceville High School. In February 1923, a petition led to a \$20,000 bond issue for constructing a new school building. The land was purchased from George Nathey for one dollar, and J.A. Wilkerson was awarded a \$10,500 contract to build the school. The new Niceville High School opened its doors on September 21, 1925.

Trials and Tribulations: The journey was not without extreme challenges. In December 1926, the high school building was completely destroyed by fire during the holiday season. Another bond issue and insurance money funded the construction of a new building, which opened in September 1928.

Tragedy struck again in July 1936 when a hurricane demolished the high school. Despite being heavily bonded, the school operated from an old dance hall on Howell Hill. The Okaloosa County Board of Public Instruction sought aid from Congress, leading to the construction of a modern school building by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). This new building provided for



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Continued on next page

Designing a Forever House



BY STACY SARIKANON,
STUNNING SPACES—DECORATING
DEN INTERIORS

According to the AARP, 90 percent of adults over the age of 65 want to stay in their current home and community as they age. However, people of all ages are re-evaluating features of their home and considering changes. One of the most important considerations is deciding how long one desires to stay in the home.

Another consideration is the stages of life the home must accommodate. Will there be strollers rolling? Remote cars roaming? Craftwork or homework, or even schooling being done? Working from home? Multi-generations involved? Is aging-in-place a goal?

The term “Forever House” has become popular in recent years. An Internet search on that term will produce a host of results, including the term being discussed on some real estate agencies’ websites.

Having a Forever House can make sense in many ways at

many of life’s stages: Young parents. Hosting grandparents with walkers. Entertaining grandchildren. Being prepared for a medical emergency, so your home is a sanctuary, not your enemy.

Design Tips for a Forever House

Let’s start with doors. A front door that is 42-inches wide can accommodate a power wheelchair and sure make it easier to roll in that stroller. For inside doors, 36-inches is a good minimum for width. Sliding or pocket doors can be an advantage through all stages, using lever handles instead of doorknobs for an easier grip.

Smooth floors are better. Try wood or tile with few changes in texture or interruptions. Avoid carpet that will be too thick for rolling on. Also, use area rugs wisely. Think about all stages of life when planning traffic patterns.

Create at least one accessible bathroom with a wide-enough entry and roll-in or walk-in shower. If you use 3/4-inch-thick plywood behind sheetrock or tile walls, this will enable you to place grab bars anywhere, not just on studs.

Re-think the height of certain things. Outlets, for example, could be easier to access for more people if they are 22-inches off the floor rather than the normal 12-inches (depending on your local building



code). Lower windows or grand ones can make those outdoor views and light more accessible through a variety of life’s stages.

Don’t forget the motion advantage. Motorized shades are

not only convenient and easy to use, they eliminate cords that can be a hazard for toddlers. Motion chairs are not your grandfather’s huge recliner anymore. They come in all sizes with added features like cup holders, more position options and lifts to help one stand up.

If You Have an Open Plan

While open-plan interiors have long been popular, some families desire/require more

private ancillary spaces. One answer is the use of stand-alone room dividers like screens or double-sided bookcases to create a bit of privacy.

Overall, the goal is to make your home adaptable to lifestyle changes. Doing ample research or working with a knowledgeable design professional can help you have more confidence in any changes you make, and make them more lasting, more functional and more enjoyable.



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EDGE ELEMENTARY

continued from previous page

the community’s needs, thanks to the efforts of Miss Lula J. Edge and other officials.

Modern Developments: Over the years, the school evolved, undergoing numerous renovations and expansions to accommodate the growing student population. Today, Lula J. Edge Elementary School stands as a testament to resilience and dedication to education. The school was recognized as an A+ school and a 2022-2023 School of Excellence by the Florida Department of Education, reflecting its continued commitment to academic excellence.

Celebrating 100 Years: As Lula J. Edge Elementary School approaches its centennial celebration, the community

reflects on its rich history and the remarkable journey from its humble beginnings to its current status as a beacon of education. The Florida Heritage Site marker serves as a reminder of the school’s enduring legacy and the countless lives it has touched over the past century.

Conclusion: The unveiling of the Florida Heritage Site marker at Lula J. Edge Elementary School recognizes the school’s historical significance and celebrates the community’s spirit and perseverance. As the school looks forward to its 100th anniversary, it continues to honor its past while shaping the future of education in Niceville. Congratulations to one of the many A+ Niceville schools.

Source: *Niceville Florida Online History Center*
www.boggyflorida.com

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Residential and Commercial





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three favorite "F" words: Food, Fun and Family. Featuring live alligators, family entertainment and teen nights, Fudpucker's is the only place in Destin where you can see, feed and even get

your picture taken with a live alligator, shop for "World Famous" t-shirts, write your names on the walls, play arcade games and enjoy quality casual food in an upbeat and family friendly atmosphere. There's even a special kids' menu and a playground with lots of space to play. Stop by Fudpucker's Destin for a relaxing meal, a cold drink and a friendly locals' smile. Fudpucker's is not just a restaurant, it's not just a bar, and it's certainly not just a "tourist" place - it's a one-of-a-kind entertainment experience, and one that can be enjoyed by kids and families of all ages. Special: World Famous Fudpucker Punch - \$8 'til 4 p.m. every day: Father Fud's special cure-all elixir and legendary medicinal concoction made with a combination of orange and pineapple juices, four types of rum and a splash of Grenadine - \$8 'til 4 p.m. every day.

chocolate caramel and cheddar thyme; strawberry coffee cake; cranberry orange muffins; red velvet cookies; brownies with espresso ganache or caramelitas. Try a breakfast special with a piece of quiche or kolache-hashbrown casserole. Breakfast burritos are rolled and ready daily! Choose from andouille, bacon, chorizo or veggie. Or tantalize your taste buds with a made-to-order breakfast sandwich on croissants or bagel with two eggs and cheese and then choose if you want to add Jojo's homemade smoked jalapeño beef bologna, bacon, house smoked barbecue or ham. Cinnamon rolls and 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!

for Lazy Jack), a cherished four-legged icon on Bluewater Bay Marina docks, the open-air oyster bar and restaurant offers a magnificent view of the water, marina and unparalleled sunset any time of year. There are, of course, oysters and a delicious varied menu with dinner specials such as blackened mahi and grilled shrimp with hollandaise, served over cheese grits.

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.

Shrimp Boil! July 28, 4-7 p.m. Live Music from Gilleran's Island 4-8 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 closed. Wed-Sat, 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Sun, 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

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LJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant

Suds, Songs and Sunsets! Welcome to LJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant at the Bluewater Bay Marina Complex. Named after "LJ Schooner" (the LJ is



Sunset Shrimp Boil

4-7PM:

July 28, Aug. 25, Sept. 29, Oct. 27

July 28 Live Music: Gilleran's Island

Shrimp, Sausage, Corn on the Cob, Potatoes, Bread (Market price per plate)
Featuring Shrimp from Byrd's Seafood Market,
440 John Sims Pkwy., Niceville

Wednesday Sailboat Races 6pm
Thursday Karaoke/Open Mic 6-10pm
Thursday Thrown Down SUP Race 6pm
Sunday Brunch 9am-1pm



More Fun

- July 5: Below Alabama 6-10pm
- July 6: Catalyst 6-10pm
- July 7: Jewelle Rose 4-8pm
- July 12: Parker & Ivoree Willingham 6-10pm
- July 13: Jared Herzog 6-10pm
- July 16: Business After Hours with Bay Life 5pm
- July 19: Radio Star 6-10pm
- July 20: LUAU / Tacky Tourist Party & 55 South 6-10pm
- July 23: The Traveling Painter 5:30pm
- July 26: Jody Lucas 6-9pm
- July 27: Niceville Valparaiso Rotary Club SUP Poker Run 10am, One False Move 6-10pm
- July 28: Shrimp Boil 4-7pm, Gilleran's Island 4-8pm

Oyster Bar Hours: Monday-Thursday 3pm-10pm • Friday-Saturday 11am to midnight • Sunday 9am to 9pm
Restaurant Hours: Monday-Tuesday Closed • Wednesday-Saturday 11am to 9pm • Sunday 9am to 9pm • Sunday Brunch 9am to 1pm

It's Back! Bring HOPE Dragon Boat Race and Festival for Suicide Prevention

If you've never attended or participated in a Dragon Boat Race – THIS IS YOUR CHANCE! In last year's inaugural event, nine teams of 21 people raced for the win in the Bring HOPE Dragon Boat Race held at The Gulf Restaurant on Okaloosa Island. The City of Fort Walton Beach took the Mayor's Cup race and a group from Hurlburt Field took the Commander's Cup race. Teams from companies like Eglin Federal Credit Union (already registered as one of this year's big sponsors), Bridgeway and the Fort Walton Elks Lodge #1795 laughed and cheered their way through the day having fun and working for the mission of SAVING LIVES.

This year's race is slated for Saturday, September 7th, and will be back at The Gulf. Festivities begin at 9 a.m. starting with the parade of costumes and the dotting of the dragon's eye to kick off the races. The races should conclude around 3 p.m. followed by a celebration party, complete with live music, food



and drinks. Check out photos from last year's race, sign up to become a sponsor or register a team by visiting <https://Bring-HopeNow.com>. With a limit of 20 teams this year, spots are filling up fast. The deadline for entry is the end of July. But, don't wait!

In 2019, two thought leaders came together to solve a quickly growing problem: Okaloosa County and more-so, Northwest Florida, having one of the fastest growing and highest youth suicide rates in the state. Together with a great team and a whole lot of community support, they began solving that concern. David Triana, founder of United for a Good Cause, Inc (U4aGC) and entrepreneur Peggy Brockman agreed that although it was



not the mission of U4aGC, it was a problem big enough that something should be done. They secured the URL BringHopeNow.com with the thought they might one day need to separate into two organizations in order to grow forward. With that, they began bringing HOPE to the community through a national peer-to-peer suicide prevention program designed for schools.

After achieving their original goal of making sure every school in the Okaloosa School District had a paid for program, they exceeded that goal by making sure other school districts also had free access to the program and helped schools in two other districts get up and running.

Bring Hope Now, Inc. (BHN) became an official 501c3 charitable foundation in the fall of 2023 after accomplishing its original mission with U4aGC of raising and funding over a half million dollars for school programs. It established the Bring HOPE Dragon Boat Race & Festival in September of 2023 to serve as an annual fundraiser for suicide prevention. In February of 2024, U4aGC and BHN officially separated so Bring HOPE Now could begin working on the next phase of its mission of saving lives – focusing on ensuring every family with a child who needs long-term mental health treatment can receive

that locally and that every military base could have a peer program to help stop the rise in active-duty suicides. They will also team up with other non-profits to create postvention teams for family and group support in the unfortunate event of a suicide, completing its mission of prevention, intervention and postvention. It will continue to support area schools with needed supplies and special funding for their HOPE programs and will help provide QPR Gatekeeper Training to as many groups, businesses and organizations as possible, so more people come to know the warning signs of suicide and how to have the right conversation with people they are concerned about.

Suicide prevention, intervention and postvention is a community responsibility. Together we can save lives! Join us as we continue to Bring HOPE Now to our communities!! For more information, contact Peggy Brockman, BringHopeNow22@gmail.com.

E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center Wednesday Summer Camps Are Underway!

Every Wednesday now through July 31st, the Biophilia Center in Freeport is hosting a summer camp with a variety of crafts and activities related to each week's theme for children ages 5-12.

The Biophilia Center is now open to the public every Thursday and Friday in July! You don't want to miss out on the fun including animal encounters, Birds of Prey shows, food trucks and more! Visit eowilsoncenter.org or call (850) 835-1824 for more information on summer camps and more!

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 **Outdoors**

Bears In Unexpected Places And What You Should Do

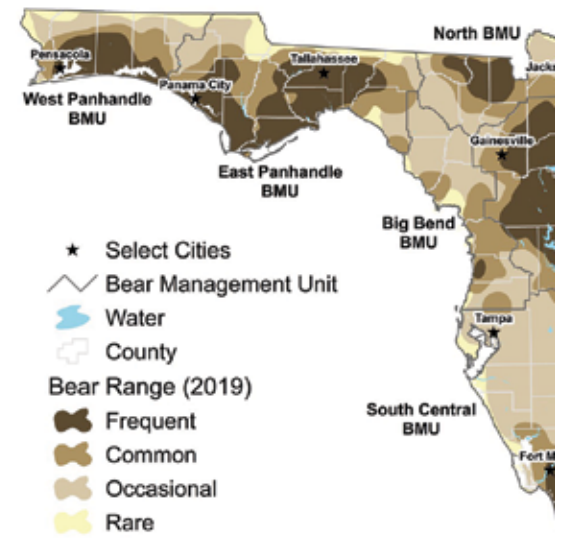
The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) is sharing the annual reminder that juvenile black bears might be seen in unexpected areas as they leave their mothers' home ranges in search of new locations of their own to settle down. Spring also marks a general increase in activity for bears after limited movements in winter.

"Juvenile or yearling bears – between the ages of 1½ -2½ – start dispersing in spring and summer each year," said the FWC's Bear Management Program Coordinator, Mike Orlando. "The best thing people can do if they see a bear in an unexpected area is to give them plenty of space and to never approach or feed them and they will typically move along on their own."

During this time of year, black bear sightings increase in

suburban and urban areas, including in cities such as Tampa, Orlando, Jacksonville and others around the state. Seeing a bear in a neighborhood is not necessarily cause for alarm. However, it is important that people secure food attractants so that bears do not linger in the area. Generally, if a bear is not able to find food and is given space, it will move on. Feeding bears can make them lose their natural fear of people. It is also illegal in Florida to intentionally feed bears or leave out food or garbage that will attract bears.

Black bears are not generally aggressive, but like any wild animal, if they feel threatened, can become defensive. Dogs have been involved in over half of the incidents of people being injured by bears in Florida. When walking dogs, keep them close to you – ideally on a non-retractable leash – and



be aware of your surroundings, which is good practice for preventing conflicts with any wildlife. Before letting your dog out at night in your yard, flip lights on and off and bang on the door to give bears and other wildlife a chance to leave the area.

As bears become more active this time of year, they cross more roadways. For your own safety and to avoid hitting bears and other wildlife, remember to slow down when driving, particularly on rural highways at dawn or dusk. Watch for road signs identifying bear crossing areas. Each year in Florida, an average of 300 bears are killed after being hit by vehicles.

If you have bears in your area, follow these additional BearWise® tips to help prevent conflicts with bears:

Secure food and garbage. Store garbage in a sturdy shed or garage and then put it out

on the morning of pickup rather than the night before. If not stored in a secured building, modify your existing garbage can to make it more bear-resistant or use a bear-resistant container. Secure commercial garbage in bear-resistant dumpsters.

Protect gardens, beehives, compost and livestock with electric fencing. Pick ripe fruit from trees and bushes and remove fallen fruit from the ground.

Remove or secure bird and wildlife feeders. If wildlife feeders are left up, only put enough food out for wildlife to finish eating before dark and make feeders bear-resistant.

Never leave pet food outdoors. Feed pets indoors. If feeding pets outdoors, only put food outside for short time periods and bring in leftover food and dishes after each feeding.

Clean, degrease and store

grills after each use. If mobile, store them in a secure shed or garage.

Alert neighbors to bear activity. For bear conflicts, visit MyFWC.com/Contact, and click on "Contact Regional Offices."

If you spot an injured, orphaned or dead bear, feel threatened by a bear or to report someone who is either harming bears or intentionally feeding them, call the FWC's Wildlife Alert Hotline at 888-404-FWCC (3922).

More information is available at MyFWC.com/Bear where you can access the "Guide to Living in Bear Country" brochure. Find additional ways to be BearWise at BearWise.org. Florida is included with 38 other states that support BearWise®, an innovative program that helps people learn ways to responsibly live around bears.

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Local Marine Biologist's Shark Insights and Safety Tips

By JOE MOORE, FOUNDER, 30A SEALIFE DISCOVERY CENTER AND APPLESEED EXPEDITIONS

Hello, my name is Joe Moore. I hold a master's degree in Fishery Science from the University of West Florida and have extensive experience teaching marine biology in Hawaii, the Galapagos, California, and Florida. As the founder of the 30A Sealife Discovery Center and Appleseed Expeditions, as well as a Walton County resident, I'd like to share my perspective on the recent shark attacks along 30A in the Florida Panhandle.

I recently conducted an aerial survey using my paraglider over the region where the incidents occurred to investigate potential threats or anomalies in the ocean waters. Here are my findings:

Factors Contributing to Shark Presence

June Grass Proliferation: I observed extensive June grass along the shoreline. This phenomenon attracts baitfish, sea turtles, and other marine wildlife closer to the shore, cre-

ating a rich feeding ground for predators.

Abundance of Bait Fish: I noted an unusually high number of baitfish near the shore and around artificial reefs. This dense population of prey attracts small sharks, likely blacktip and sandbar sharks, which I identified from the air due to their sleek bodies and pointy snouts.

Early Arrival of Tarpon: Typically, tarpon migrate north in May and June, peaking in August and September. However, this year, they arrived early and in larger numbers, feeding on baitfish near the shore.

Goliath Groupers and Devil Rays: I spotted large goliath groupers under the piers and numerous devil rays feeding on plankton. The presence of these rays indicates a significant amount of plankton in the water, further enriching the food web.

Loggerhead Sea Turtles: I observed many large loggerhead sea turtles offshore. June marks the peak nesting season for these gentle giants. Large



sharks often wait in shallow waters to ambush these turtles, making the waters near shore more susceptible to shark interaction.

Shark Behavior and Human Interaction

The combination of abundant baitfish, plankton, and sea turtles has drawn more sharks, including potentially dangerous bull sharks, closer to shore. The increase in marine activity has also coincided with a peak tourist season, increasing the chances of shark encounters.

Safety Tips for Enjoying the Emerald Coast

To ensure a safe and enjoyable experience at the beach, here are some important precautions:

Swim in Groups: Sharks are less likely to approach groups of people.

Avoid Dawn and Dusk: These are peak feeding times for sharks. Stay out of the water during these times.

Stay Out of Murky Waters: Sharks may bite out of curiosity when visibility is low. Our waters along the Emerald Coast are usually clear, so avoid swimming when the water is churned up.

Avoid Night Swimming: Sharks are more active at night.

Stay Clear of Fishing Areas: Avoid swimming where bait is present in the water, as this attracts sharks.

By following these guidelines, you can greatly reduce the risk of a shark encounter and enjoy

the beauty of our white sandy beaches safely.

Enhancing Marine Science Education

As the founder of the 30A Sealife Discovery Center and Appleseed Expeditions, I am dedicated to educating students about marine science. We offer school marine science trips and school trips focused on studying sharks and other marine life. These programs provide hands-on learning experiences, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of our oceans.

If you are interested in learning more about marine biology, shark behavior and ocean conservation, consider joining one of our educational trips. Together, we can enhance our knowledge and contribute to the preservation of our precious marine ecosystems.

Stay safe, enjoy the beach, and remember to respect the ocean and its inhabitants.

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 Off the Hook

World's Largest Lionfish Tournament Records Record-breaking Largest Lionfish

Divers in the Emerald Coast Open lionfish tournament were able to successfully remove 7,411 invasive lionfish despite rough weather in the Gulf of Mexico during the May 17-19 weekend event. Including the pre-tournament, 11,844 lionfish were removed for the entire event. Lionfish have few predators due to their venomous spines and cause negative impacts to the native ecosystem.

"These divers put in a lot of effort to help our ecosystem against this invasive species," said Okaloosa County Vice Chairman Nathan Boyles. "I congratulate the winners and extend an invitation to all the participants to return next year to Destin-Fort Walton Beach for this worthy endeavor."

The event boasted 147 participants from around the country and at least three international

participants who competed for \$125,000 worth of cash and gear. Winners in this year's contest include the following teams:

1st Place Most Lionfish: VJL Seafood (1,776 lionfish)

1st Place Largest Lionfish: Deep Water Mafia El Gato Negro (18.70 inches **new record**)

1st Place Smallest Lionfish: Lookin' Back (1.89inches)

1st Place Pre-tourna-

ment: Bob Brown (590 lionfish)

Along with the pre-tournament and weigh-ins on Sunday, the tournament included the Lionfish Festival and Restaurant Week. The Lionfish Festival gathered various conservation-oriented vendors along the HarborWalk surrounding the weigh-in area who provided giveaways and lionfish education to families who visited the event.

Restaurant Week celebrated the delicious lionfish featured in cuisine by chefs at local restaurants. This year's winner, La Paz, celebrated their second win in a row.

"I'm extremely proud of how this event has grown over the years," said Destin-Fort Walton Beach Coastal Resource Manager Alex Fogg. "I want to thank all of the sponsors, divers and volunteers who made this annual event possible. They stuck it out in rough weather and still brought home a lot of lionfish."

Save the date: The 2025 Emerald Coast Open will take place May 16-18, 2025. Learn more about the tournament at emeraldcostopen.com.



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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.

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 began June 1 and will continue through July 31. The 42-day fall season is the longest fall season since the beginning of state.

Florida is able to offer this long season due to data driven management of the Red Snapper fishery on the Gulf Coast, which is not allowed by the Federal Government on the East Coast of the state. Consequently, the federal government's expected Atlantic Red Snapper Season will last 0-2 days.

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.

Eagle Springs Golf Course Celebrates 100th Anniversary

Future discussed at recent BCC meeting

The 192-acre Eagle Springs Golf Course in Defuniak Springs is celebrating its 100th Anniversary this year, having opened in 1924. The facility opened as a 9-hole course and the greens were sanded, which was common in the early days of golf. The golf course remained a 9-hole layout until the late 1960s when land was cleared for an additional 9 holes. The 18-hole course was completed in 1996.

Today, the former DeFuniak Springs Country Club includes an 18-hole, par-72 course featuring five sets of tees playing from 4,100 to 6,600 yards. Carved from gently rolling hills and pine forests, the course includes five spring-fed lakes, 23 sand-traps and natural hazards, including towering trees, sandy scrub brush, hardpan and a variety of flowering shrubs.

tennis courts and more. “We’re trying to make it a recreational facility where people can come out and enjoy the family, be outdoors; it’s safe and not expensive,” said Parks and Recreation director Shane Supple. The county has already begun making improvements to the course and plans on renovating the golf club in the coming years.

Supple is the former Park and Rec director for the city of Freeport. Having grown up in Defuniak Springs, Shane was instrumental in the acquisition of the property and the reopening of Eagle Springs Golf Course in 2019.

Although the cost to acquire the property was only \$50,000, the renovation has not been without controversy. Some South Walton residents and commissioners would like to see it closed

The Eagle Restaurant is a wonderful addition with reasonably priced food. Breakfast is served from 8:30-10:30 and Lunch is served from 11 a.m. -close, Wednesday to Monday.

While celebrating its 100th anniversary, it seems Eagle Springs Park and Recreational Facility and Golf Course has a bright future!
Find Eagle Springs Golf and

Recreation Center at 171 Country Club Ln

Defuniak Springs, FL 32435. Reach them by phone at (850) 892-3812 or visit their website, www.eaglespringsgolf.com.



as it’s still losing money. But at a recent BCC meeting held May 14th, the consensus seemed to be that the gap between revenue and expenses was narrowing and the value to the community far outweighed the cost. BCC commissioner Donna Johns believes “it’s wonderful the county owns the property and people I’ve heard from ‘love it.’”

Commissioner Danny Glide-well noted the operating cost per acre was less than other parks in Walton County and was the only park generating substantial revenue. Commissioner William “Boots” McCormick” for his part would like to see a marketing program that includes a full-fledged recreational and parks facility program that just happens to have an 18 hole golf course and includes: pickleball courts, basketball courts, olympic-sized pool and senior center.

Tree-lined, tight fairways lead to small Bermuda grass greens that are not only elevated, but pitched and undulating enough to make the very best of putters a bit nervous. Eagle Springs is also quite affordable, boasting some of the lowest green fees in the area! Truly a hidden gem of a course with beautiful views from every vantage point.

In 2019, Walton County purchased the course and surrounding property. The 190-acre site included an 18-hole golf course, public swimming pool and clubhouse at a cost to the county of only \$50,000. Future expansion plans include fishing docks, walking trails, basketball courts,



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Growing the Game: The Emerald Coast Golf Tour

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

When your goal is to compete in the PGA Tour and win thousands of dollars playing a game you love, where do you start?

It might begin when you are young, competing first at the youth, high school and college level. And then? You navigate professional tours like this one, invest in Q-School in the fall and their qualifying tournaments and vie for the “golden ticket” for a few invitational slots each year to the PGA. If you aren’t one of the top players to earn entry into the PGA, you hope you have acquired enough points to earn entry to the Korn Ferry Tour. This organization is similar to the minor leagues in baseball and players can win money with top players advancing also to the PGA. There are also other rare opportunities to be selected as a member of the PGA or Korn Ferry Tours as well. The goal, however, remains the same. To be one of the top professional golfers in the world!

But, the weekend of June 7-9 at Shalimar Pointe Golf Club, 12 touring professional golfers, dreaming this PGA dream, teed off with amateur golfers who paid an entry fee to be part of a four-person team led by a touring professional in a two day



two-ball tournament. After two days, the touring professional golfers spent a final day to decide who would win the three-day Emerald Coast Golf Tour Tournament.

The Emerald Coast Golf Tour is owned and directed by Geno Celano. Geno organized this tour 30 years ago. Geno was a professional golfer, participating in tours like Korn Ferry. Back then, the names for these tours include Nike, Ben Hogan, etc. Like Korn Ferry, these tours were the entry points into the PGA tour. Gino grew up in Okaloosa County, attending Choctawhatchee High School and playing on the golf team. He also competed for college teams at Florida State and Alabama. Golf was in his DNA and he toured in competitions like this one all over the country, especially in Orlando. But there was nothing available in the Panhandle.



Yes, Geno made the decision to organize the Emerald Coast Golf Tour in our area. Geno put professional golf on the map for us.

Participants in the ECGT tournament in June at Shalimar Pointe Golf Club registered from all over the south: Alabama, Louisiana, Georgia, and Florida. The weather was warm and the course was challenging. Geno made hotel and meal arrangements for the touring professionals as well as planning the tournament itself. Enthusiastic golfers from the tri-county area were invited to register and join a team. Each team was led by one of the touring professionals. For the amateur golfer, the opportunity to play with a touring professional was an opportunity to have the golf experience of a life-time.

After two days, **the first-place winning team with a net score of 262 was the**



team of professional golfer Josh Edgar and amateurs Bart Walker, John Slingerland, and Adam Bogdon. I interviewed Josh Edgar who hails from Australia, lived in Alabama and coaches at Georgia State. His goal is to earn entry to the PGA Tour. I’ll definitely be

rooting for this young man from “down-under” as he pursues his goals.

In addition, **a new course record was set at Shalimar Pointe Golf Course.** Jacob Harper, from Valley, Alabama, shot a score of 66 on the first day of the tournament. The previous low score was 67. His score card will be displayed at the Shalimar Pointe Golf Course, replacing the old winner with a score of 67.

In addition, after three days of competitive play, Jacob Harper won first place with scores over the three days of 66, 67 and 71. Congratulations, Jacob!

Ruckel Middle School Teacher and Golf Coach Qualify for U.S. Senior Open Championship

The Okaloosa County School District is proud to recognize Mr. Jon Olson, who qualified on Thursday, May 30, at the 2024 U.S. Senior Open Championship at Wynlakes Golf & Country Club in Montgomery, Ala. Eighty players competed to advance to the 44th U.S. Senior Open Championship. Jon Olson of Niceville, and Robbie Cotton of Brewton, Ala., each carded four under 68. After a playoff, Olson claimed the final qualifying spot.

“Entering the U.S. Senior Open Championship is a cherished milestone that reflects years of dedication, perseverance, and passion for the game of golf. As a player, teacher at Ruckel Middle School, and coach, this opportunity not only honors my personal journey but also serves as an inspiration to the students and golf enthusiasts. I’m grateful for the support of my family, whose unwavering encouragement has fueled my pursuit of excellence. I look forward to proudly representing them, the Rocky Bayou Country Club members, and my community on this prestigious stage in Newport, Rhode Island,” stated Jon Olson.

Superintendent Marcus Chambers stated, “Mr. Ol-



son’s participation in the U.S. Senior Open Championship is a testament to his skill and dedication to the sport. It’s a moment of pride for Ruckel Middle School and the entire Okaloosa County School District. Congratulations, and best of luck as he competes in this esteemed championship!” “We are incredibly fortunate to have Mr. Olson as part of our Ruckel family,” expressed Joe Jannazo, Ruckel Middle School Principal. “His exceptional skills on the course are only surpassed by his outstanding leadership in the classroom, as a coach, and with staff. We are truly proud to call him a Ruckel Ram and celebrate his achievements!”

The Alabama Golf Association conducts the 2024 U.S. Senior Open Championship Qualifying. For more information, please visit the Alabama Golf Association website.

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37th Annual Gate-to-Gate Memorial Day Run: A Personal Experience

By DOUG STAUFFER

This year marked my first participation in the 37th annual Gate-to-Gate Memorial Day Run/Walk at Eglin Air Force Base—an unforgettable experience. The event started with a surprising twist as a mama bear and her three cubs decided to join us perched in a tree at Unity Park. The unexpected visitors led to a redesign of the area and a 20-minute delay. Still, their presence added a unique charm to the event as over 700 participants gathered to honor our fallen heroes. The sight of the bears captivated everyone, turning an already special day into an extraordinary one.

I had registered for the race months in advance, but fortune smiled when I won a complimentary entry at the Niceville Valparaiso Second Wednesday May breakfast. Sitting with Cole Randall from One Okaloosa, I gave him the free entry, and we met on race day. This camaraderie exemplifies the event's



Councilwoman Cathy Alley

spirit—bringing the community together in remembrance and celebration. It was heartwarming to see familiar faces, and you could sense how meaningful the event was.

Despite planning to run, I had to switch to walking on the day of the race. This change didn't dampen my spirits; I tied for 25th place overall and se-

cured 8th place in my division. Walking is in my future. The competitive yet commemorative nature of the event was evident, especially as three local women from Ft. Walton, Valparaiso and Niceville took the top overall walk times, showcasing the talent and dedication within our community. Among them was real estate agent and Councilwoman Cathy Alley, pictured with her trophy, embodying the spirit of achievement and honor the

event celebrates.

The Gate-to-Gate Memorial Day Run/Walk is more than just a race; it's a poignant tribute to those who have served and sacrificed for our country. Witnessing the collective effort and determination of the participants, from seasoned runners to first-time walkers like me, highlighted the profound respect and gratitude we all share for our military heroes. The atmosphere was filled with unity and purpose as we all moved forward to remember the fallen. Another heartwarming highlight was placing plastic poppy flowers at the All-Wars Memorial. The bears might have stolen the spotlight momentarily, but the

true stars were the participants who came together to honor the legacy of our fallen soldiers.

The event was a powerful reminder of our community's strength and resilience. It was an honor to be a part of such a meaningful tradition. I look forward to participating again next year, carrying the memories of this unique and inspiring experience. The Gate-to-Gate Memorial Day Run/Walk pays tribute to our heroes and strengthens our community's bonds, reminding us of the importance of coming together in support and remembrance. God bless America!

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 Wellness

Change is Me, Change is We



BY STEPHENIE CRAIG

“We are limiting screen time because future research is go-

ing to show negative impacts of screens and social media on developing brains.” Insert eye roll from 3 boys who sometimes wish I wasn’t a therapist. Kids born in 2007, the iPhone release year, are now 17 and old enough for us to begin understanding the impact of smartphones and social media on the brain moving through puberty. In the book *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt explores research emerging since 2016 showing

a drastic (up to 150%) increase in anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts/behavior related specifically to smartphone and social media access before and during puberty.

Most people are seeking dopamine through smartphones and most are struggling to manage phone use well. However, there is a unique detrimental effect of smartphones and social media on those below 16. Parents encourage kids to set

boundaries for themselves but developing brains are not capable of setting boundaries with devices and platforms designed for addiction.

Culture has shifted toward giving kids smartphones earlier as tools to communicate, track location, and to feel safe. The resulting cultural norm isolates kids from significant social interaction when families delay introducing smartphones. No parent wants their child to be excluded, socially isolated, or bullied for being the “only one.” Parents find themselves in a no-win situation of choosing between earlier phone access or their child being left out.

Often when change is needed, the “change is me.” You have the power to make a change for yourself without external input. For example, you can decide your child needs phone boundaries and you can use Screen Time or other software to create time and app boundaries. You have the power to decide the age your children will get smartphones. On some level, managing smartphone exposure for kids is a “change is me” situation for each family.

Other times when change is needed, the “change is we.” You make decisions for individual change and still find yourself within systems challenging the change you’re working to make. For example, you decide not to grant smartphone access until age 14 resulting in social isolation for your child. You can make the decision despite uncomfortable results. However, it could be more effective to take a “change is we” approach,” banding together with other parents to postpone smartphone



access helping reduce social isolation as a group.

Embracing personal empowerment in decision making is important and, in many cases, exactly what you need to make meaningful change. The combination of individual change and collective change is sometimes necessary to create large-scale cultural movement around issues like how phones and social media are impacting the mental health of kids. So, you see the challenge, but how do you start to engage change on a “me” and “we” level?

5 “Me” and “We” Ways to Address Challenges of Smartphones and Social Media for Kids:

1. Educate. Read *The Anxious Generation* by Johnathan Haidt. Listen to recent podcasts featuring the book. Invite other parents to read the book and discuss. Talk with kids about the research and upcoming boundary changes you will be making.

2. Evaluate. Evaluate current values and boundaries around phones/social media in light of research-based recommendations to delay smartphones until 14 and social me-

Continued on page 28





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How About a Walk?

By DR. JESS MONTELEONE, PT MS PhD

Sun is up, and time to finish that morning 8 oz. of water as I slip on some comfortable clothes and supportive walking shoes. It's that hour for my morning brisk walk. As soon as I snatch his leash, my walking partner, Toby, is ready to go. How I love the sound of chirping birds and enjoy the comfort of shaded roads from that morning time of the day. Yup, 6 a.m. is a great time for Toby and me to spend quality time together and better our bodies.

When choosing an exercise

Wear good footwear. Buy your shoes from a credible source that can help you choose the right shoe for your foot. It should bend easily, breathe well, and support your foot well with adequate arch support. Many women need a wide toe box due to bunions and a narrow heel. They make a shoe right for your foot.

Asphalt is a great walking surface, because it is soft; offering additional cushion for your joints. If you choose to walk on our beautiful beaches, make sure that you walk in both directions as the contour of the

is your pooch, remember that it is a new program for him/her as it is for you. Work up gradually for your pace, duration and frequency.

Wait a bit after you eat, unless you are going to stroll to digest food. Some literature states that if you don't do it first thing in the morning, you probably won't do it at all.

Only 1/3 adults receive the recommended amount of physical activity each week. Use wisdom and get permission from your medical doctor before making any major lifestyle change, such as a new exercise program. Be the best version of you! Your choices made today are an investment into your tomorrows... It's all about enjoy-

ment, form, equipment and, of course, results. Why not take a walk?

Dr. Jess is a physical therapist offering holistic medical treatment in your home or office in Freeport and surrounding area. For more information, check out her website at Wholistictherapyathome.com.



program, I like to implement something that is user friendly, enjoyable and cost effective. Many times, doctors will recommend their patients to start a walking program, but they don't inform them how to perform it.

It's hot outside. **So, choose a time in early morning or late afternoon for your exercise.** If that is not possible, find a large centrally heated/cooled building where you can walk on the outside of the aisles inside of the building.

Use good posture. Two walking sticks might be helpful as they allow an upright position and a reciprocal gait (left arm with right leg) which is how the human body has been created to move. The upright posture also helps to use the full expansion of your lungs.

beach edge places a stress on your joints. Better yet, walk in the thick sand found away from the water edge. I like to wear good walking shoes for this surface.

Stay hydrated. Under normal situations, use this formula: Take your weight, divide it by two and that's how many ounces of water your body needs per day. (Yes, you need more in the summer and when working outside.) So, if you weigh 128 lbs., (128/2 = 64 oz. or 1/2 gallon of water is needed per day). Of course the water content in fruits and veggies, such as watermelon and lettuce, help as well.

Remember to **stretch any muscle that you work** to maintain comfort and flexibility in those muscles.

Get a work out buddy. If





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Wellness



BY KAY LEAMAN, HEALTH ARCHITECT, HEALTHYDAY HEALTHYLIFE

Vegetables. We all know we're supposed to be eating more of them. A salad a day or veggies as the main with meat and starch as sides is a new goal for many. The thing we don't think about is how to prepare them to get the greatest amount of nutrients in us.

The amount of nutrients in a vegetable is dependent on the dirt it was grown in and when it was harvested. The other factor is the percent of pesticides,

etc., that it was exposed to. Our body's ability to absorb nutrients also depends on how much we chew before swallowing and the health of our digestive system.

Veggies are broken down and absorbed in different ways. The nutrient quality and quantity differ due to the chemical composition changes that happen when exposed to heat.

Let's break it down...

Minerals such as potassium, calcium and iron are more readily available and absorbed due to the fiber breakdown when the veggie is heated.

Fat soluble nutrients are pushed into our fat and stored for use when needed. A, D, E, and K are some of these and they are less likely to be destroyed by cooking.

Water soluble nutrients such as the B's and C and an-

tiioxidants are absorbed through the cell walls and diffused in the bloodstream. They are more susceptible to heat damage; the higher the heat the more rapidly they degrade.

Raw provides optimal levels of folate (B9) and water-soluble nutrients such as C. These help to protect against oxidative stress (cause of inflammation) and can guard against neurodegenerative diseases, chronic inflammatory disease and some forms of depression. A French expression says 'It's not about how fast you eat but on how well you eat'.

There are several cooking methods (No matter what method you use al-dente or slightly wilted is recommended.):

When cooking on the stove, which usually involves water use a lower heat setting, you'll notice that the water turns the color of the veggie being cooked. This is where those nutrients that left the veggies are so DON'T throw out the water. You can use it in shakes, add to gravies, soups, stocks, baking, etc.

Air frying protects the veggies from the heat source which can result in retaining a higher percentage of nutrients.

Between 50-90% of nutrients



can be retained when steamed.

Steaming can also improve the impact on water soluble vitamins as it limits direct contact with water and heat source.

When **sautéing** your veggies use low heat and olive oil along with your favorite veggies.

Pressure cooking is one of the best choices as the steam can't escape and veggies can retain 90-95% of their nutrients.

Lastly is **roasting**. Stir the veggies with a touch of olive oil and your favorite spices. Place them on a grate over the pan (The more surface area that touches the heat source the more nutrient loss occurs.) on a low setting. Remember to keep

them al-dente.

Veggies that are better when cooked are spinach, asparagus, tomatoes, mushrooms, potatoes, carrots, celery and green beans.

Lastly, eat veggies that are in season and choose a variety. (Change it up.) Examples could be using shredded cabbage and broccoli slaw in your salads instead of lettuce, zucchini in place of cucumbers (My hubby hates cucumbers, so this is a great sub for us and I get to enjoy both.) Be creative and enjoy all this summer offers.

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CHANGE

continued from page 26

dia until 16. Notice daily screen hours. Observe and investigate without shame. Shame is not

necessary for change.

3. Implement. Put values-based boundaries into place using whatever supports needed including Screen Time, boundary software, timers.

4. Collaborate. Collaborate with other parents to reduce social isolation for kids. Make parent pacts and follow through together.

5. Empathize. Change is hard. Let your kids know you see it is hard for them to have new boundaries and listen to their complaints with empathy while still holding your boundaries. Empathize with other parents as you all navigate parenting through hard decisions.

Individual and collective change can be challenging but very possible when you own your part and connect with others. Previously, parents didn't know giving kids smartphone access could be damaging to mental health. New information provides new opportunities to set kids up for better emotional health foundations for life. As you navigate challenges of implementing change along your journey, connect with us at Journeybravely.com for counseling and coaching.

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Helping Older Adults Prepare for Emergency Situations

By KIM WONSICK, J&B MEDICAL, INC.

It's officially hurricane season. Are you prepared? Preparation for a major weather event (or any type of emergency) can look different for each family. For example, preparations in a household with babies or young children will likely look very different than in a household with just a couple of young adults. This applies all the way across the board from households with pets to individuals with special needs and everyone in between. An often overlooked demographic that might need additional consideration is the older adult community. Older adults may have specific needs after a disaster, and without proper planning, those needs could go unmet.

According to FEMA, the best way to start planning is to assess your needs. In this area, hurricanes are a major concern for several months out of the year. So, having access to severe weather forecasts and updates is crucial. Sign up for weather alerts on your phone, or secure a weather radio. Then consider your dietary, medication and mobility needs if you were to be displaced from your home

for an extended period of time. Develop an evacuation plan with a trusted friend or resources within the community, taking into account necessary accommodations for transportation, service animals, and medical equipment.

Once you've assessed your needs, start making the necessary arrangements. This starts with an adequate emergency kit to include the basics such as flashlights, water, batteries, non-perishable foods, etc. in the event you are able to shelter in place during the storm. Also, having your medications or medical devices in a portable container will allow for quick and handy access. Keeping everything close by during the event will prevent you from having to navigate a potentially dark home during a power outage. Also, keep all pertinent documents in one central location that can be quickly accessed in case an emergency evacuation is necessary. This includes (but is not limited to) insurance cards, a will, a power of attorney and a list of emergency phone numbers and contact information for family, friends and your doctors.

Finally, share your detailed plans with a trusted friend, fam-



ily member or neighbor. Also, consider sharing a key to your home with this person and arrange for them to check on you

before, during (if possible) and after the storm. Utilize your support network and community resources to help you navigate through the planning process and the potential aftermath of any emergency situations. For more comprehensive information, visit <https://www.ready.gov/older-adults>.

And to register for a local special needs shelter visit: <https://bit.ly/OCSpNS>

We here at J&B Medical can also lend a hand with your preparations! We have portable outlets that support a CPAP machine for up to 14 hours in between charges. It's perfect to have on hand not only during hurricane season, but all year long as power outages can occur at any time. We also have first aid kits and other items useful in your emergency kits. And last, we have community resource information from the Florida Department of Health and Okaloosa County. Stop by and see how we can help!



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 Business


BY MAURICE STOUSE, FINANCIAL ADVISOR AND BRANCH MANAGER

America and Americans are the most generous on earth. Up until a few years ago, gifts to charities (churches, medical organizations, schools) could be deducted from income at tax filing time. The tax laws changed and many of the tax deductions went down or away with tax reform in 2017. Despite that, Americans continue to donate their hard-earned money and assets to their churches, schools, civic organizations, hospitals and other non-profits. What many folks might not realize is that years ago (over 30 years ago), giving became more convenient and efficient with the innovation or advent of donor advised funds (or DAFs for short). A charitable or nonprofit organization is also known as 501(c)3. Anyone donating to a

cause should always confirm that the organization to which they want to give is registered as such. DAFs are also 501(c)3 organizations.

It is suggested that would be donors do a little research upon considering a gift or donation to a charitable organization. A DAF could help simplify that for them. On their own, granters to charity could turn to several sources available online. There are several known choices such as give.org, charitywatch.org or charitynavigator.org. These sites can give you an assessment as well as commentary, if that is available. They even rate or score the organization. Many charitably inclined individuals could benefit from the additional knowledge that can be obtained. Often the DAF will assist the donor when they want to gift out of their fund and have the research available on an organization of choice available to them before they donate.

So, what are ways to give? The straightest is by cash, check, securities (such as stock) or some

Insights for Investors:

Should You Consider a Donor Advised Fund for Your Charitable Giving?



other asset. Real estate (land or homes or buildings) as well as art and perhaps even businesses. While most people write a check (to their church, for example) or have it auto drafted or even put on a credit card, there are other things/ways for them to consider, which is why we are covering donor advised funds.

Many charitable organizations, and most investment firms, set these up for the ease of giving and the simplicity of administration over time, of their gifts. Donor advised funds are in and of themselves 501(c)3 organizations — public charities. So, once a contribution is made, that is the gift. What is flexible is when the money moves to a church, or school, hospital or other non-profit, from the donor advised fund. That could be done now or in years to come, allowing the gift to potentially grow because it is invested. While the money is in the DAF, it is often invested into mutual funds. The objective and hope are that it grows over time and that can lead to even greater gifts to future charities. The key is to realize that by making the donation now, the gift is made, in this tax year, regardless of when the funds move to a non-profit or charity.

What about the impact on taxes? It is important to reiterate that the tax law changes in 2017 meant that the standard deduction went up substantially, so that a charitable contribution would have to exceed that deduction limit and the tax filer would have to itemize. Nonetheless, it is important to

point out that should someone qualify (gifting exceeds standard deduction of \$14,600 for single filers and \$29,200 for joint filers), they could potentially have a deduction from income: 60% of the value of total cash gifts for the year and 30% of the value of appreciated securities for the year. Some people who have stocks that have appreciated in value contribute that and are not be impacted with the taxable gains. A donor advised fund might also be a useful tool in estate planning as well should someone be looking for ways to lessen the impact of taxes on their estates when they pass on.

To sum it all up, a donor advised fund allows the contributor to advise where grants or gifts go and can appoint a successor donor advisor or a charity of choice to receive any residual at their passing. Most DAFs also use technology to aid the giver; whereas someone could make grants directly from their smart phone while they are on the go.

To learn more, talk to your advisor or go to Raymondjamescharitable.org.

Maurice Stouse is a Financial Advisor and the branch manager of The First Wealth Management/Raymond James. Main office located at The First Bank, 2000 98 Palms Blvd, Destin, FL 32451. Phone 850.654.8124. Raymond James advisors do not offer tax or legal advice. Please see your tax professionals. Email: Maurice.stouse@raymondjames.com.

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It's Electric! ECCO Motors, Your Everything Golf Cart and Low Speed Vehicle Shop

By CHRISTOPHER MANSON

ECCO Motors owner Scott Lightsey spent decades in automotive service, rentals, parts and “you name it.” He moved to Destin from Tallahassee 20 years ago, thinking he was “in the early stages of retirement, but I realized you have to put away a lot more money!”

At age 50, Lightsey fired up his golf cart business, which was not in particularly high demand at the time. “I started off very small,” he says. “A 600-square-foot building in Fort Walton Beach.” In 2005, Lightsey moved his operation to Mountain Drive in Destin and quickly established his customer base.

ECCO Motors opened its Miramar Beach location (on 147 Professional Drive) in order to be closer to its clientele. “I just kept doing the right thing, taking care of customers,” says Lightsey. Along with selling golf carts and Low Speed Vehicles (LSVs), the ECCO team began custom building cars “and that took on a life of its own.”

Lightsey continued to build on a foundation of quality and being service oriented. “The industry has been in a constant state of flux. We started with the three major brands, and now we have a proliferation of new, better-equipped models.”

Last year, another extension opened at the Mountain Drive location. “We’re always innovating and looking for new ways to serve our customers,” says Lightsey. The Mountain Drive location has begun a vehicle storage program based on the boat storage concept. “We take care of the cars while the owners are out of town.”

Today, we’re at the Destin location—on Emerald Coast Parkway, across from Regatta Bay—where Lightsey tells me the common thread for all three locations is serving his customers better than anyone else.

“The key behind all of this is hiring good people that care and see the value in our customer relations.”

Future plans for ECCO Mo-



tors include setting up what Lightsey calls “satellite operations”—smaller stores in areas that are really growing, such as Freeport and Navarre. “It’s a ‘hub and spoke’ concept,” he says. “The main business would remain here, but the smaller stores can take care of customers that don’t want to come to Destin.”

Back in the Tallahassee days, a good friend of Lightsey’s was involved with solar energy. “He had someone custom build him an electric car back in the ‘90s, and I participated in some of the electric car events being put on at the time—multi-day road rallies,

visits to schools to bring electric car awareness. This was before Tesla and all the major manufacturers.”

He was bitten by the electric car concept. “Me and some guys invested in a car that would do about 110 miles per hour, which was unheard of (at the time). It was real impressive that we could build an electric car.” Lightsey investigated the market and discovered that golf carts were the closest things to electric cars.

“There were a few golf cart shops in the area when I started that mostly catered to the golf clientele,” he says. “Not to the degree that I jumped in.”

Back then, golf carts were a novelty form of transportation. You rarely saw them outside of Sandestin and other gated communities. “We were the pioneers who stepped into that space early,” says Lightsey. “A lot of people have gotten into the business since then—not because of us, but because of the demand for these types of vehicles.”

As for the basic appeal of electric vehicles, Lightsey boils it down. “They’re like ‘land boats.’ You have all the freedom—wind in your face, you’re not confined in a car. There’s not a lot of road rage! You feel the temperature, you smell and hear everything. It’s a very economical way to get around.

“The majority of our buyers have two elements to address—their pets and their kids. Those two groups really enjoy the experience.”

ECCO Motors is located in Destin and Miramar Beach. Call 850.837.2600 to learn more, or visit eccomotors.com.

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Walton County Property Appraiser Gary Gregor Announces Reelection Bid

Gary Gregor, a long-time resident of Walton County, is running for reelection to the office of Walton County Property Appraiser. In a public statement he says, "Walton County is one

of the most unique and diverse counties in Florida. With 29 years of experience in the appraisal field, and now a strong four-year record as your Walton County Property Appraiser, I

believe I'm the most qualified to best serve our county during this time of growth and diversity. Most importantly, I will continue to prioritize serving the public and assisting property

owners to address any questions or concerns they may have."

As noted, Gary now has a four-year record to run on.



Goals achieved since being elected:

"First, we brought advanced appraisal technology to Walton County which enabled us to be more efficient and effective than ever before, also equipping us with the tools to provide the best possible customer service and the most

advanced services available to Walton County. These improvements have also enabled us to be more effective in achieving our goal to be in compliance with Florida Statutes and Florida Department of Revenue Guidelines, as required by the Florida Constitution. With the emphasis on providing outstanding customer service for the citizens and property owners of Walton County, we have also implemented online services for the ability to file homestead exemption and tangible personal property returns.

We continue to restructure the office to improve workflow and timelines. We have created a system that consistently stays ahead of schedule and allows for a better appraisal process and additional time for field inspections to meet required mandates by Florida law. In addition, we've increased the outreach efforts and services of the office through the website, social media, and online services.

In a statement to Bay Life Gary stated:

"I believe I am the **best qualified** candidate for this position, having 29 years of experience, approximately 10 of those in a management / supervisory role and the past four years as your Property Appraiser. In this time, the office complied with Florida Statutes, made technology and workflow process improvements while experiencing unprecedented growth in Walton County. I have the most appraisal experience having done

hundreds of USPAP (industry standard) compliant appraisals. I have the most appraisal education having completed over 300 credit hours and 15+ classes related to the appraisal practice. I am the only candidate that is a Certified Florida Appraiser. I am the only candidate that holds a professional appraisal designation in mass appraisal. I look forward to continuing to bring advanced technology and professional appraisal knowledge and practices, along with an emphasis on outstanding customer service to the citizens of Walton County. It would be a tremendous honor to serve another term as your Walton County Property Appraiser. My promise is to continue to comply with all Florida Statutes, produce **honest, fair and equitable assessments** and exceptional customer service for all Walton County property owners.

Gregor has been married to Brianne Gregor for 20 years and together they share two children. His family is actively involved at New Harmony Baptist Church and they enjoy spending their free time outdoors, at the beach, playing softball, hunting, fishing and going on new adventures. They are so happy to call Walton County home and he hopes to continue to share his knowledge and passion by serving as the Walton County Property Appraiser for the next four years.



GARY J. GREGOR WALTON COUNTY PROPERTY APPRAISER

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- See the Annual Average Daily Traffic
- Visit our FAQs page for more information
- Tax Estimator

The Walton County Property Appraiser's office
is dedicated to following Florida Statutes
and strives to provide excellent service
to the public.



A Pastor's Ponderings: Reflecting on True Freedom This Independence Day

BY PASTOR DOUG STAUFFER

Every Independence Day finds patriot hearts swelling with pride and gratitude for our freedoms enjoyed in this great nation. Amidst the fireworks, parades and family gatherings, let us take a moment to reflect on the true essence of freedom as expressed in the Holy Scriptures. The Bible provides timeless wisdom that guides our understanding of liberty and the responsibilities that come with it.

We are reminded in **Galatians 5:1**, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." This verse encapsulates our spiritual freedom in Christ, a freedom that surpasses all earthly liberties. As believers, our greatest independence was won on the cross, liberating us from the bondage of sin and

death.

The conservative voices of our past have often echoed the sentiments of biblical freedom. Patrick Henry, a devout Christian and fervent advocate for American independence, wrote in his will: This is all the Inheritance I can give to my dear family, The religion of Christ can give them one which will make them rich indeed." Henry's declaration underscores the integral role that faith played in the founding of our nation.

In **Psalm 33:12a**, the Psalmist declares, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD." This blessing is not merely a promise but a conditional statement. Our nation's prosperity and continued blessings are contingent upon our recognition of and submission to God's authority.

As we reflect on the foundations of our nation, it is vital to remember the words of another conservative stalwart, President Ronald Reagan, who said, "If we ever forget that we are One Nation Under God, then we will be

a nation gone under." Reagan's warning is not just a cautionary tale, but a call to action for us to maintain our spiritual vigilance. It is our responsibility to ensure that our freedoms are not just anchored in our faith in God, but also nurtured and protected by it.

The Apostle Paul in **2 Corinthians 3:17** states, "Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." True liberty is found where the Spirit of the Lord resides. This Independence Day, let us invite God back into our communities and homes, praying for a revival that will sweep our nation, restoring us to a people under God's guidance and grace.

Our founding fathers envisioned a nation where freedom and faith coexisted harmoniously. John Adams, another key figure in our nation's birth, wrote to the Massachusetts Militia on October 11, 1798: "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." Adams recognized that the sustain-



ability of our freedoms hinges on our collective moral and spiritual integrity. As the nation declines spiritually, so will the effectiveness of our governing principles.

As we again celebrate our nation's independence, let us not forget the source of our ultimate freedom. The Bible and the wisdom of conservative voices from our past remind us that our liberties are both a gift and a responsibility. May we stand firm in our faith, cherish our freedoms and commit to living as a people truly

blessed by the Lord. My prayer: **"Happy Independence Day, and may God bless America! God help us to deserve this happiness and strive for this blessing."**

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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Musing

Sean of the South: I Heart America



BY SEAN DIETRICH

A television is playing in a Birmingham bar. The talking head is shouting politics. Most folks in this joint are below thirty, and aren't even watching TV. They're transfixed with the opiate glows of their smartphones.

The bartender looks thirteen.

He stares at the television screen and says something under his breath. Something sad.

"This country sucks, man."

I know he probably doesn't mean it. He's just upset. But it stings just the same, and I wish he wouldn't say such things.

Still, maybe it's not his fault. I don't know what his story is, I don't know what his beliefs are, but perhaps this boy has missed a few uniquely American blessings in his accumulated years of harrowed wisdom.

Maybe if he could see a few wondrous things in this country he'd change his opinion about us.

Perhaps he's never seen things like big, neon-pink azaleas bright

enough to give you trouble breathing. Those don't suck.

Neither do the Waffle Houses lining the interstates. The shoebox buildings with the canary-yellow tops and the interior globe lights over the faux-wood tables. Nothing sucks about those. I've neither had a bad meal at such an establishment, nor bad service. And no matter which season I visit a Waffle House, it is always cold enough inside to hang meat.

The Everglades at sunrise, no sucking there. The Suwannee River definitely doesn't suck. The fat-bottomed cypress trees, swollen with bayou water. Spanish moss—which, as it turns out, is neither moss, nor Spanish.

My bartender needs to see these things. They would bless his heart.

If you ask me, the boy needs to ride a riverboat on the Mighty Missouri at dusk, watch the shrimp trawlers combing Lake Pontchartrain. Or listen to stories from the roughnecks who raised beef in Ottawa County, Oklahoma. He should meet the roughnecks who farmed the oyster beds of the Apalachicola Bay.

And he needs smoked ribs from Kendall's Barbecue in Georgiana, Alabama. Food that comes out of that tin shack is worth crying over.

He needs to witness Charleston at sunrise. Yellowstone at sundown. He deserves the right to see the outerbanks of The Old North State.

What the kid needs is county fairs, livestock exhibitions, and children with prize-winning show hogs.

A porterhouse in Kansas City. The Copper Art Museum in Clarkdale, Arizona. A hot-air balloon flight over the Appalachians. A ballgame at Fenway. The little horserace they do each year at Churchill Downs.

String bands, playing beneath festival tents. Gospel music with Hammond organs. Music from the bayou played on button accordions by men with white hair. Jazz.

The kid needs to hold a butter-yellow Case XX knife in his hand. And he ought to own at least one Stetson to keep the sun out of his eyes. He needs to taste chicken and dumplings prepared by a woman who has raised seven kids without the support of a husband.

He needs to meet the Walmart greeter named Phillip. The hospice chaplain named Marge. The family therapist named Jason. He deserves to meet the truck drivers, the pipefitters, the songwriters, the storytellers, the novelists, the oil painters, the shipbuilders,



the dentists, the hair stylists, the brewmasters, and the small-town principals named Barbara.

I wish I could take this kid to a Church of God chapel in Senoia, Georgia. Or perhaps a Catholic Mass in Valentine, Nebraska. Or a synagogue in Yonkers. Or the Green Cove Missionary Baptist Church in Damascus, Virginia. Or the Thai temple in Fort Walton Beach, Florida.

I wish I could take him to any church house that backs up to a hayfield. The quintessential American rural congregational house. The kinds of assemblies that pepper this country from Missoula to Uvalde.

And I'd like to carry the kid to an American funeral. Like my grandmother's service. Wherein a string of a million-and-three cars drove with their headlights on. I'd like the boy to attend an honest-to-goodness repast, and eat the food of grieving people.

I'd like him to receive a hug from an elderly Norwegian woman in Minnesota. I'd like him to taste pierogies in Lancaster County. Chilaquiles verdes in Taos. Crab cakes in Baltimore.

I don't care what the suits on television say, kid. Don't believe them. Yes, we have problems in this nation. Yes, we have haters. Yes, we're a gigantic dysfunctional family fit for an episode of Jerry Springer. Yes, we have division.

But we also have pediatric oncologists, Fort Bragg, national park rangers, historic sod cabins, longleaf forests, Pikes Peak and James Brown. The sandstone arches of Moab. The beach bungalows of O'ahu. The 960,000 acres of remaining American prairie. We have nurses, EMTs, special-ed teachers, janitors, meat-packers, cab drivers and bartenders. That's us.

America doesn't suck. Your television does.

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 Year-End ECTC Celebration!

A gathering of theatre students came together recently at Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC) to celebrate the close of their 11th Season, induct Jr. Thespians and commemorate the end of a fruitful season of children's educational theatre. This event allowed ECTC's students and parents to come together with food and fellowship for middle school level Jr. Thespians, as well as their high school aged Teen Company counterparts.

The 2024 Inductees included: Ashlynn Aigret, Campbell Carter, Alice Heller, John Kerrigan, Maggie Kerrigan and Noah Modinger. They were joined by their fellow Jr. Thespians: Lucca Bucalo, Hailey Estrada, Jordyn Fowler, Jenna King, Mackenzie Krout, Clara Petersik, and Preston Smith.

In partnership with the Seaside Neighborhood School, ECTC's Junior Thespian Troupe (No. 89447) is a part of District 10 and a chartered member of the Educational Theatre Association's Junior Thespians. The troupe competes in regional and state competitions and focuses on specialized training, acting techniques and implementing those techniques into performance.

2024 Jr. Thespian inductees:
 Ms. Darla, Noah Modinger, Alice Heller, Maggie Kerrigan, John Kerrigan, Campbell Carter, Lucca Bulaco, Mr. Heath
 2024 Jr. Thespians_Jr. Company_Ed Students:
 Back Row: Ms Darla, Preston Smith, Noah Modinger, Jenna King, Hailey Estrada, Alice Heller, Campbell Carter, Tabitha Sheldon, Mr Heath, Caden Gray, Ben Bathula, Leya



Bathula, Maggie Bingham
 Middle Row: Maggie Kerrigan, Mackenzie Krout, Clara Petersik, Jordyn Fowler, Mercie Taylor, Alex Koehler
 Bottom Row: Zoe Fisher, John Kerrigan, Lucca Bucalo, Teddy Petersik
 2024 Jr. Thespians:
 Ms Darla, Preston Smith, Noah Modinger, Jenna King, Hailey Estrada, Alice Heller, Maggie Kerrigan, Campbell Carter, Mackenzie Krout, Lucca Bucalo, Mr Heath, Clara Petersik, Jordyn Fowler
 Bottom: 2024 Best Thespian - John Kerrigan

ECTC Announces Broadway's Lulu Picart for Musical Theatre Intensive in July

Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC) is proud to announce Broadway's Lulu Picart will serve as Musical Director for the Musical Theatre Intensive: Disney's High School Musical for Teens July 8 - 28, 2024. This three-week camp will stretch students' theatre skills and grow them as performers. Students work on acting, vocals and dance while receiving high quality instruction and direction from ECTC professionals and former Broadway performer Lulu Picart, an acting and cre-



ativity coach. Her work in musicals and on-stage direction includes Norwegian Cruise Lines, Walt Disney World, Orlando Shakespeare Theatre, Universal

Orlando, The Choir of Man. As a performer, Lulu has appeared on Broadway (1776), off-Broadway (Disenchanted!, Lortel nominated), around the world on tour (1776, R+H Cinderella, Madagascar Live!), and at many theaters and theme parks. Lulu is also an adjunct faculty member at Pace University. Follow Lulu - @lulupicart

Students can register for the Musical Theatre Intensive at emeraldcoasttheatre.org/summer-camps.

Savvy Leigh PHOTO

PACKAGES

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Jason Hedden



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More Info and Tickets:
www.emeraldcoasttheatre.org

 Arts & Music

Summer Music Lessons at Studio 237

Studio 237 Music Lessons is offering lessons on piano, keyboards, guitar (acoustic, electric, and bass), ukulele, voice, and violin. During the summer, there is more room for flexibility for the student to choose days and weeks that fit best with their needs. Teachers have provided the studio with their available times and are excited to help people of all ages develop their unique musical passion and skills. We are also open in the summer Monday through Friday.

Unlike our spring and winter

semesters, the summer semester is a more relaxed and carefree time of learning without the added stress of daily school and sports activities. As a result, we have created some idea packages below for you to consider:

The Basics package is for those who desire to attend their lesson once a week (for the weeks of your availability) as a continuation of lessons, an opportunity to try a new instrument, a refresher of previous skills, or even a sort of advanced class such as learning riffs, scales, and

new performance techniques for already accomplished performers. Those who might have an audition coming up for this fall would benefit greatly from a basics or the next package which is a master class.

Master Class is for those early intermediate to advanced players who desire to go to take their performances to the next level. This level may dive a little deeper into topics such as proper technique, theory as it applies to your instrument, practice, stage performance, songwriting, how



to sing and play at the same time, balance, interpretation, understanding and feeling rhythm, developing your voice and/or style, focus, and memorization techniques. Master Class can be taken several times a week or as a weekly lesson concept.

There are instruments that tend to complement each other such as voice lessons along with piano or guitar/ukulele.

Available teachers this summer: (Lessons are paused during the week of July 4.)

Mary Kate Cary: voice and beginner piano lessons.

Don Dirkin Jr.: electric lead guitar and acoustic guitar,

Helmut Dimmel: piano

Linda Chung: violin, viola

Scott Gilmore: (June only) classical or acoustic guitar and ukulele, songwriting for kids.

Gregg Shapiro: bass guitar and beginner guitar.

Call us to reserve your special time. To view our teachers' bios, visit Studio237Music.com/all-teachers-listing. Call (850) 231-3199 or (850) 797-3546 or email Studio237Music@gmail.com.

to sing and play at the same time, balance, interpretation, understanding and feeling rhythm, developing your voice and/or style, focus, and memorization techniques. Master Class can be taken several times a week or as a weekly lesson concept.

A Taste of Music package is for those who would like to take a month's worth of lessons in one week! No instrument, no worries, we have instruments here during the lesson for you to use. Some of our students started this way. Beginners will begin learning how to play an instrument or instruments for several days in an entire week (two or as many as five days). This is a great way to discover your interest and reveal what you may be in for if you desire to continue lessons in the fall semester.

Let us help you shape your package to fit your summertime

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Local Author Pens New Book on Cultivating Friendships

BY MICHELLE RUSCHMAN

When local resident Esme Graff got divorced in 2015, she never imagined it would be the very thing that would launch her into her purpose. Now, less than a decade later, this local author, speaker, podcast host, career woman, mom and woman of faith is encouraging single, divorced mothers to know their value, pursue their passions and fortify one another through community.

As she developed these aspects of herself, Esme realized that what she was learning as a divorced parent could shed some light in the dark places that many other newly divorced moms have to navigate alone. Along with the loss of their spouse, a shift in friendships or a location change can lead to isolation. Esme wants women to know that community and faith are possible.

“If I had 30 seconds to spend with every divorced single mom I would remind them, ‘You are

a child of the Creator, and the enemy is going to regret everything he has done to hurt you. You are strong and courageous. One day it won’t hurt anymore. Let the shame go. Divorce is only part of your story, not your death sentence. You don’t have to be a dad, just be the best mom you can be, and be gracious with yourself.’ “

Esme’s first book, *Here and Now: A Heart That Lives for Jesus*, is a devotional that reminds her readers that challenges can develop new skills and these have a purpose. Through these 28 days of scripture and prayer, the presence and comfort of Jesus are revealed as Esme offers a way to notice His presence during the hardest times.

Even as much as Esme has been sustained by her faith and relationship with Jesus, it was also invaluable for her to develop relationships that brought life to her and her kids. She is especially moved to give back to an organization that was inte-



gral in helping her daughter get the extra support she needed as well.

“One of the things I am super excited about is supporting kids of single moms who may want to take dance classes at Inspire Ballet (located in Valparaiso) with a dance scholarship. The impact these dance teachers had on my child was life-saving. My daughter is an amazing person because the teachers at Inspire Ballet loved her unconditionally.

I want other kids to experience that as well.”

Even with so much support, Esme acknowledges that single moms can still feel overwhelmed. Showing up to work, managing a household, and being a parent so the family can thrive together requires some discipline.

“It has to do with sticking to the boundaries you have to set and I prioritize my activities based on the season I’m in. Sometimes God calls me to concentrate on my family, not ministry or my job. I ask myself, ‘Is this what God wants me to do right now?’ Amazingly, everything works out better when we align our plans, actions, and gifts with God’s timing. It isn’t easy, but it works out better.”

To hear more from Esme and her friends, you can tune into her podcast, *The Esme Graff Podcast*, which comes out with new episodes the first and third week of each month. These can be found on all major platforms

where podcasts can be found, including Apple and Spotify.

Esme is also coming out with a new book, *Friendships: Cultivating Twelve Qualities to be More Like Jesus*, and you’re invited to her book launch at MJ’s Place in Niceville on July 20, 2024, from 2-4 pm.

“It’s all about surrounding yourself with people that are going to influence you with qualities that Jesus had, like compassion. I am not a person who is automatically compassionate toward other people, but I have a friend who models the compassion that Jesus had, and I have learned to soften my heart in areas where I’m tempted to be legalistic. Having key friendships like this can help us deepen our relationship with God and I know that I wouldn’t be the person I am today without the friendships that have held me up and kept me accountable.”

If you’d like to get in touch with Esme, visit www.esmegraff.com.



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 Arts & Music

Artist Applications and Sponsorships Open for Anchored in Freeport Art in Public Spaces Project

By TRACY LOUTHAIN

In partnership with the City of Freeport and Cultural Arts Alliance of Walton County (CAA), a new project aims to place artistically decorated anchors around the city of Freeport. Building upon the City of Freeport's history as a port city, the Anchored in Freeport Art in Public Spaces Project will place concrete anchor casts decorated by local artists throughout the city, creating a sense of place and added beauty. Conducted in partnership with the city of Freeport and the Cultural Arts Alliance of Walton County, the project aims to bring beautification and cultural enrichment to the fast-growing city.

The population of Freeport has increased by 20.38% since

the last census in 2020, and today more than 7,140 residents call Freeport home. Anchored in Freeport Art in Public Spaces project provides an opportunity to unite the growing community, foster collaboration, and strengthen the local economy.

The anchor represents Freeport's heritage as a port city when settlers were attracted to the area's natural harbors as a source of commerce and transportation. Through the project's custom-made, one-of-a-kind anchors constructed locally by Castaways in Freeport, the Anchored in Freeport initiative will celebrate the area's talented artists while creating a welcoming community for visitors and future residents.

Walton County artists or



members of the CAA are invited to apply for participation in this program. Each selected artist will receive a stipend for art supplies and materials and will be featured along with their artwork on the CAA website, the City of Freeport Website, the project's Facebook page, and on the printed map, featuring the artists and locations of all the anchors.

Walton County residents and businesses are invited to sponsor the project. There are three sponsorship levels ranging from \$500 to \$3,000. For more

information on sponsorship or to sign up to participate as an artist, visit the CAA's website at CulturalArtsAlliance.com.

Anchored in Freeport will complement other CAA Art in

Public Spaces Programs (APSP), including the Monarch Art Trail, the public murals project and the Underwater Museum of Art.

Winners of the Kids Tag Art Program

It was a full house at an Okaloosa County School Board meeting in June as Tax Collector Ben Anderson and Sheriff Eric Aden presented certificates to the Award of Distinction winners of the Kids Tag Art Program. Along with Superintendent Marcus Chambers, Anderson and Aden recognized two winners from each participating school.

The Kids Tag Art program has two functions: one as an art contest for the 5th graders, and the other as a fundraiser that gives students a chance to design their own specialty license plate to use as art or on the front of a vehicle. As a fundraiser, those student-created, custom plates can be purchased by family members. Proceeds from school sales stay in that school.

This program is a partnership with the Tax Collector's Office and the School District that started in 2013. In recent years, the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office has become a program sponsor given their Community Partnership with the School District in providing Resource Officers to schools in Okaloosa County for the safety and welfare of all students.

Combining in-school sales and local sponsorships, the Kids Tag Art program earned \$18,124.00 this school year. Tax Collector Ben Anderson points out, "This is non-tax generated revenue and comes at a time when the art curriculum in schools could benefit the most." He continues, "Each school that participated received checks via the Public Education Foundation for \$800.00." Since 2013 the Kids Tag Art program has generated \$155,167 for school arts programs in Okaloosa County.

To be a sponsor, please con-



tact Shari Flowers Bruns at 850-651-7669.

This year's winners are:

- Bluewater:** Claire Paiz, Elayna Feddon
- Bob Sikes:** Karlie Sanchez, Anna Dickelman
- Edge:** Riley Sharpe, Gracelyn Perschke
- Elliott Point:** Dallis Gallagher, Axel Palma
- Kenwood:** Sabine McBride, Parker Sims
- Northwood:** Angelique Guzman, Stephanie Antunez Penaloza
- Plew:** Dasha Medvedeva, Lilyana Wight
- Shalimar:** Jayceon Gainer, Paris McQueen
- Silver Sands:** Jacob Huggins, Charlotte Sullivan
- Southside Primary:** Lailah Garcia
- Walker:** Joseph Avanes, Blake Moyers
- Tax Collector's Choice:** Ava Auter (Bluewater)
- Sheriff's Choice:** Aayla Powell (Bob Sikes)
- Superintendent's Choice:** Macy Phillips (Plew)

CREATE with Big Orange House Designs Calendar

July 2: Art Camp w/ JoJo 9:30-1:30 (recommended ages 6-12) \$50

July 3-24: Daytime 4-week Pottery Class- Hand building with Laurel Ages 10 and up 10am-1pm \$175

July 5: Open Studio Glass Art 10-2 \$25+

July 6: Open Studio Glass Art 10-2 \$25+

July 6: Leather & Pearl Wrap Bracelet 12-2 \$55

July 9: Under the Sea Camp- Under Water Canvas and Sea Cupcakes 9:30-1:30 \$50

July 11: Bug's Life Camp-Cook-

ie Tray and Caterpillar Canvas 9:30-1:30 \$50

July 12: Open Studio Glass Art 10-2 \$25+

July 13: Permanent Jewelry w/ Sherrie 12-2 \$50+

July 16: Art Camp w/ JoJo - Textiles and Weaving 9:30-1:30 \$50

July 17: Sandpiper Canvas with Donna (10-100 year olds welcome!) \$35

July 18: Art Camp with Donna 9:30-11:30 \$50

July 20: Leather and Pearls w/ Sherrie 12-2 \$25+

July 23: "Christmas in July" Art Camp w/ JoJo & Special Guest! 9:30-1:30 \$50

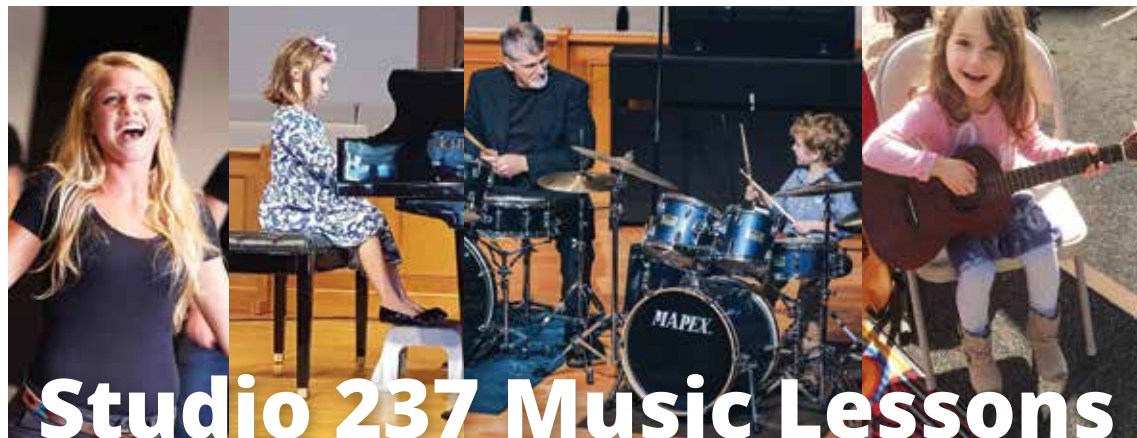
July 25: Art Camp w/ Donna "Funky Fish" 9:30-11:30 \$50

July 26: Cowabunga Camp - Cupcakes and Cow Canvas 9:30-1:30 \$50

July 27: Permanent Jewelry w/ Sherrie 12-2 \$50+

July 30: Art Camp w/ JoJo & Donna 9:30-1:30 \$50

July 31: Art Camp w/ JoJo & Delaney 9:30-1:30 \$50



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Bay Buzz



Niceville Public Library Celebrates 50 Years

The Niceville Public Library is celebrating its 50th anniversary! First opening its doors on June 8, 1974, the library has played an essential role in fostering community, learning and engagement for the residents of Niceville. Sheila Bishop, Niceville Public Library Director, has been with the library for over 40 of those years, "I am so honored to be part of a wonderful team celebrating 50 years of library service to our community with a tradition of exceptional customer service and the unwavering support of our city leadership and devoted library patrons. It truly takes a village. Thank you, Niceville!"



together on Memorial Day for a Ceremony at City Hall Veterans Memorial Park to honor and remember the brave men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice in service to our country.

Niceville Knight is Florida's Knight of The Year

Jim Thennes of Knights of Columbus Council 13527 in Niceville was named Knight of the Year by the 55,000-member Florida State Council on Satur-



day, May 25th in Orlando. The award is presented annually to the Knight who best exemplifies service to the Church, the Council and the Community.

He serves as a Eucharistic Minister, Usher and Acolyte at Mass and routinely brings the Holy Eucharist to shut-ins and those in nursing and assisted living facilities. Using his experience as a contractor, he has performed various construction, maintenance and repair work on the church and rectory properties.

This Knight is actively involved in almost every Council activity including pancake breakfasts, pasta dinners, St. Patrick's Day and Octoberfest celebrations at 3rd Planet

Brewery and working bingo as a caller, floor worker and kitchen worker,

Jim has spent hours helping widows care for their home so that they can remain in them, rather than move to assisted living and routinely spends hours visiting with the elderly and infirm in nursing homes. He has helped install new flooring at a local nursing home and personally fixed the entryway lighting in his local community. He and his wife, Rita, have routinely picked up bread products from Panera on Sunday evenings and brought them to the Pavilion Nursing Home.

This Knight's service, his work on the church and rectory grounds, his visitations to the least among us clearly serve as an example to people of all faiths. For these reasons, Jim Thennes was recognized by the Knights of Columbus throughout the state of Florida as the 2024 Knight of the Year.

Niceville-Valparaiso Rotary supports Heritage Museum of NW Florida

At the June 10 meeting of the Rotary Club, trustees Steve Czonstka and Barbara Palmgren (on right) were pre-



sented a check for \$300 by Rotary President, Larissa Tenzycki and Rotary project leader for Saturday in the Park, Bill Higginbotham (on left.) This was a special contribution for the annual Saturday in the Park free public event held in late April. Dr. Palmgren made a short presentation about the new 1,400 sq. foot room addition to the museum that is now being built. Contributions from the community can be sent for this new exhibit hall by contacting the museum Tuesday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The initial grant for beginning the project was \$100,000 awarded by Impact 100. The cost for the project is \$178,000. So, additional funds are being raised to keep local history alive in Northwest Florida. The museum is located at 115 Westview Ave in old downtown Valparaiso.

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The City of Freeport citizens and Mayor Barley came

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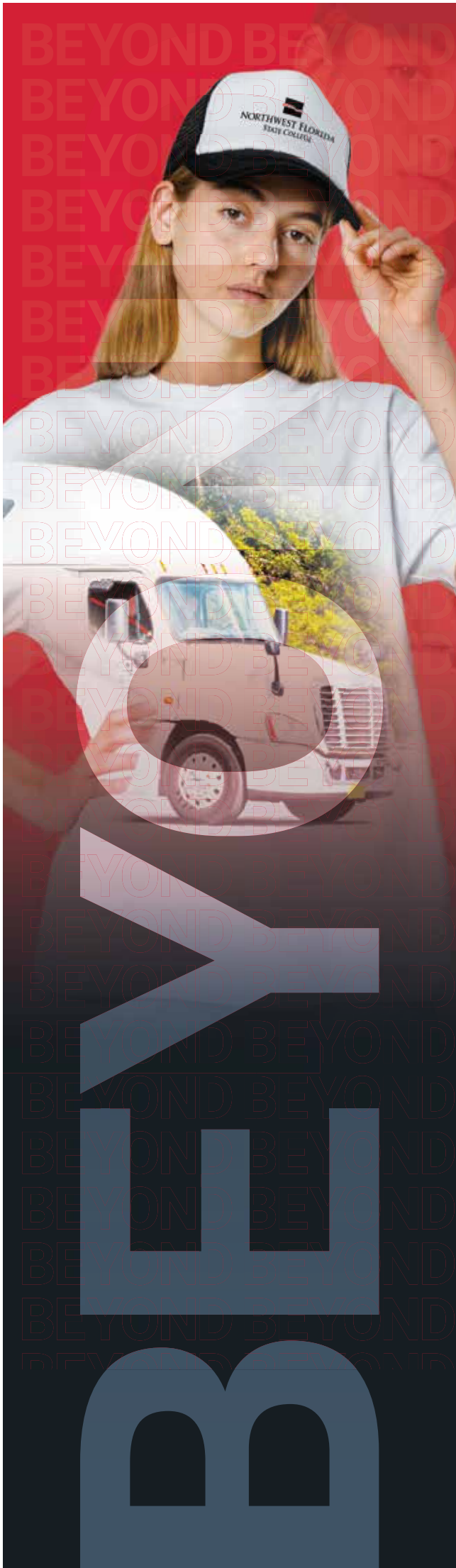
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