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# BAY Life

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Postal Customer Local

## Bargain Box Blessings

BY MICHELLE RUSCHMAN

For those who grew up in Niceville, The Bargain Box is known as one of the main thrift stores in town. Amanda Parish, the current ministry director, recalls how it all began.

“Six women started this ministry in 1957. It started as a fundraiser to furnish the parsonage but once that was accomplished, they saw it was so successful that they just kept going. They were originally in a tiny house in Valparaiso. They went from there to a storefront on Bayshore Drive in Niceville, then eventually to a brick house where the Crosspoint Pumpkin Patch used to be. The Bargain Box eventually raised enough money in 2002 to build the first part of the building we’re in now.”

Amanda has experienced every part of what The Bargain Box has to offer. Over the years, she has been a shopper and a volunteer, and in 2016, she became the first ministry director to be hired since the store opened in 1957. She has seen firsthand the exponential good that it does daily, espe-



cially when families are struggling to pay for shelter and food.

“Our mission statement sums up our goal: To provide affordable goods to the community and raise money to support missions and ministries.”

For Amanda and her team of employees and volunteers,

however, it’s more than a store. After seeing the impact of 2020, and how it kept people apart, they are even more focused on building community through their work. “We see that part of our ministry is to provide a place where people feel safe and can have some fellowship. We’re available if someone needs to talk.

Some people are grieving or feel lonely and The Bargain Box is a comfortable place where they can see familiar faces, have meaningful conversations and serve. Even shoppers aren’t just shopping. They’re giving back with ev-

**BARGAIN BOX**  
*continued on page 2*

## How to Navigate the 30a Songwriter’s Festival January 16-20

CONTRIBUTED BY  
30A SONGWRITERS FEST

People, new ticket buyers in particular, are asking for advice on how to best navigate the 30a Songwriter’s Festival as well as tips on who to go see. So, let’s take a swing at this:

### DAY ONE - FRIDAY

**1 - Are you type A with boundless energy?** Go to the box office early Friday long before the 4 p.m. official start of the event. Stock up on t-shirts, a warm hoodie and a commemorative hat. Tighten your wristband on your arm and you are good to enter all venues for the entire weekend. Head to a kick-off party at AJ’s (Josh Joplin Band, the Stews) or the big stage at the Lyceum (the dBs, Chuck Prophet, special guest TBD). Enjoy the crowd of

**30A SONGWRITER**  
*continued on page 2*



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Award Winning Local’s Menu

 Community

**BARGAIN BOX**

*continued from page 1*

ery purchase and helping someone else in need.

People come to our store and tell us how much they love that we help our community. It's important to us to meet local needs. What many don't know is that as our community shops, 100% of the sales contribute to local and international aid through the Bargain Box's do-



nations to nonprofit and ministerial efforts."

Local missions, organizations and programs helped include Crossroads, Children in Crisis, Freedom House, Grace Rides, Soul Care, our local schools, Fresh Start, The Pearl Project,

CALM House, and Youth Village. International efforts can be seen through Africa Advent, where Crosspoint partners with the church in and around the Congo to build churches, provide training and bikes to Congolese pastors, as well as Bibles in their native language. In addition, The Bargain Box helped to provide a roof for an orphanage in Guatemala and a well was built in South America. The first mission of the Bargain Box

is to make shopping affordable for everyone. But, through its team, donations, volunteers and shoppers, its legacy will be that they are making a global impact through local effort.

The Bargain Box is located on 107 Partin Dr. S. in Niceville and is open Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. – 1 p.m., and Saturday, 9 a.m. - Noon. Donations of gently used household goods and clothing are accepted, as they are able, during business

hours. For large donations or furniture, special arrangements can be made by calling 850-678-4411, ext. 189. If you want more information about volunteering or have a 501c3 non-profit organization and would like to be considered for support, contact Amanda directly by emailing [aparish@crosspointchurch.com](mailto:aparish@crosspointchurch.com).



**30A SONGWRITER**

*continued from page 1*

like-minded patrons as excited as you to be off and running. By early evening when most venues open, you will already have seen a couple of very original songwriters who happen to have kick ass bands.

Next, I suggest you jump on Hwy. 98 and head to the east end of 30A and work your way back west. Choose acoustic solo acts or artists in the round at Rosemary Town Hall (Chris Stills, Langhorne Slim, Abe Partridge) or the Pearl (Emerson Hart, Kelley Willis) and nearby LaCo (Darrell Scott, Ruthie Foster). Shoot down to Old Florida Fish House and catch an act on the porch or main stage (the Pink Stones, John Driskell Hopkins, the Krickets). Keep on the move - Seaside/WaterColor, which

are side by side present five more performance options no matter what time you arrive, e.g. Bud & Alley's (Josh Rouse, Garrison Starr), Pickles (Robbie Hecht, Eliot Bronson), the REP Theatre (Ellis Paul, Bradley Cole Smith), Fish Out of Water (Liv Taylor, Kim Richey, Mary Gauthier) or the Watercolor Lake House (second ASCAP Nashville songwriter's set of the evening). As it is getting late, check out Drive the Coast (Bee Taylor, Gurufish, Shawn Mullins) for more original bands.

**2 - Perhaps you are a laid-back couple that wants to find a comfortable place and kick back for the evening, have a cocktail, grab a bite to eat, have another cocktail and see whoever is playing at the venue over the course of the evening. Easily done. Consider Caliza at Alys Beach (Hayes**



Carll, Secret Sisters) or the Big Chill (Jeffrey Steele, Black Opry Revue). Or head to the bridge at Hwy. 331 and hang all night at The Bay Restaurant (Jill Sobule, Charlie Mars) and North Beach Social (Chuck Cannon, Florence Dore). The venues are across the street from each other.

**3 - No matter what your personality type, study the app ahead of time AND create your own schedule.**

Double book your time slots so as you navigate the night and weekend, you have well thought out first and second choices in each area you go to. If you decide to call an audible, you have your playbook on your phone app! Let me give you an example. If you get to the Watercolor Lake House on Friday night at 8:30 p.m. and it is already at capacity, view your back up on your custom schedule OR look at the app time line for who is playing currently at all venues across the board in real time! Note: There are six sets over three days of the very popular ASCAP Lake House shows. You have many opportunities to see one.

**4 - Pace yourself.** Don't try to see all your favorites on night one. You have three more days of music, drinks and food.

We're just scratching the surface here to give you an idea of the wealth of talent spread out before you beginning on Friday late afternoon!

For those new to the scene, the 30A Songwriters Festival celebrates its 16th year in 2025 with six headline performances at the 6,000 capacity main stage

at Grand Boulevard's Town Center in Miramar Beach together with over 250 artists performing over the four-day weekend in 30+ indoor venues ranging in capacities from 75 to 800. All of the listening rooms are located along the 30A resort corridor on the Gulf of Mexico in WaterColor, Grayton Beach, Seaside, Alys Beach, Seacrest, Rosemary Beach and Blue Mountain in Northwest Florida.

Past Festival performers include iconic artists Jackson

*Continued on page 6*



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# Jerry Williams: The American Dream & the Very Human Experience

BY KELLY MURPHY-REDD

Jerry Williams retired as the highly respected and successful President/CEO of Eglin Federal Credit Union (EFCU) and moved back into his newly remodeled home four weeks prior to this interview. He and his wife, Jean, feel like they have a new home. It even has that “new house smell.” They love their Poquito Bayou neighborhood, knowing their neighbors, and walking their rescue dogs. Jerry and Jean have been married 21 years.

Jerry was born in Crestview. His dad was a farm boy from Baker and his mother a city girl from Bloomington, Ind. Jerry’s Army vet dad and his mother met in Indiana. They married and moved to Baker. It turned out “Green Acres” was not the place to be, for her, and they moved to Fort Walton Beach when Jerry was age six.

After attending local elementary and high schools, he attended OWJC and UWF, earning a

degree in mathematics. His dad was an air conditioning mechanic on Eglin AFB and Jerry credits learning his blue-collar work ethic and trouble-shooting skills from him. He credits his people skills to his mother. A real mix of the two people.

After he graduated high school, his mom and dad took a contract labor job to clean the EFCU building on Eglin AFB at night. While attending OWJC, Jerry cleaned the Hurlburt location at night to pay for school.

He went on to be engineer support for Pratt & Whitney Aircraft in West Palm Beach. In Jerry’s words, he was a geek who applied mathematical formulas to the engineer’s work. He was then offered a job at a small defense contractor developing the AMRAAM missile seeker at Eglin, AFB.

Bill Webster, president of a small company in Fort Walton Beach, lured Jerry away from the defense industry. They moved to Memphis where Bill



started a company developing software for credit unions. EFCU was their largest client. Bill eventually sold his company and moved back to Fort Walton

Beach. While Jerry was in Memphis, Jim Appleton, president of EFCU, called and offered him the position of Vice President of Data Processing. He moved

back to Fort Walton Beach in 1994.

He held various IT positions over 20 years. During this time, he met his wife Jean who was Bill Webster’s sister. She was working at Bank of America.

Thinking about the future and the idea he may be considered for president one day, he decided it was time to “quit being a nerd” and get out of the computer room. Jerry joined co-worker Sherry Harlow at FWB Chamber events. He talks glowingly about chairing the Military Affairs Committee, being an Honorary Commander at Hurlburt Field, and being an Eglin 33rd Fighter Wing Civic leader. These associations gave him deep appreciation and knowledge about military bases in our community and opened many doors.

In 2014, he was made president of EFCU. He was invited to numerous events and felt he

*Continued on next page*



*It's Time to Ring in the New Year!*

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 Community

# Register for Spring Term Now at Emerald Coast Technical College's South Campus in Watersound

Emerald Coast Technical College's new South campus located at the Magnet Innovation Center – Watersound continues to grow and expand. The Watersound campus is in the middle of its second full year, currently offering two programs, with a third program beginning the first of the year. The Spring term begins January 9 and enrollment is now open for courses at ECTC-Watersound as well as programs offered at the main campus.

One exciting part is that for a limited time, programs at the Watersound campus, the programs are offered tuition free. The tuition portion of the

program is being covered by the Triumph Grant, and other grants are also being used to cover any additional costs to students. This means you could obtain an industry certification for free or at least with very little cost!!

One of the programs available is Applied Information Technology (A.I.T.), where students receive the CompTIA A+ certification. The A+ Certification is a technology industry standard and is in high demand with I.T. business owners who are looking for prospective employees. The A.I.T. program instructor, Dave Duvall, has had great success with the pro-



gram with a 100% completion rate, with all the currently enrolled students on track to be

certified this spring. All students who have previously obtained the A+ certification through the program have been employed in the local I.T. business community or are continuing their education at the E.C.T.C. main campus.

The Watersound Campus of E.C.T.C. also offers a Patient Care Technician program, and in January will be offering a Practical Nursing program, with other programs in the works to open in the future. All programs are open to adult learn-

ers ages 16 and up and are also available for dual enrollment to students from our district high schools. More information is available at ectc.edu or you can contact I.T. Instructor Dave Duvall directly at (850) 557-2804 or glen.duvall@walton.k12.fl.us

ECTC - Watersound is located at 133 S. Watersound Parkway on the campus of the Magnet Innovation Center – right across Hwy. 98 from the Watersound Town Center. Don't miss out on the fantastic opportunity, enrollment for the Spring term, which begins Jan 9 is now open with several schedule options available.

## JERRY WILLIAMS

*continued from previous page*

was invited because of the person he was, not the position he held. He retired after 30 years of service to EFCU. Jerry knows there will less invitations coming his way. Still passionate about being involved in the community, he told his co-worker Neko Stubblefield, he still makes a great "+1."

When asked how he creat-

ed the enthusiastic culture at EFCU, as demonstrated by the large turnout of employees at events and their contagious excitement, Jerry says the more involved he was, the more involved his employees were. Leading by example, he told the team he would "be at the front of the band leading the charge." He also worked to make sure there were resources to support community involvement. EFCU eventually joined at the highest

membership levels at all chambers with his board's support.

He and Jean enjoyed traveling to conferences and being involved in the community. They discovered they enjoyed bike riding together. They recently completed a six-day, 171-mile ride along the shores of Lake Michigan.

Retirement holds challenges for Jerry and Jean. He has been diagnosed with Genetic Ataxia, a general term for diminished

motor skills. There are 75-100 variations, but it basically means a faulty protein is causing the cerebellum to die. He has Spinocerebellar ataxia type 6 (SCA6). The blessing about this variation is, it is late onset and slow progression.

The symptoms start with awkwardness and progress to fumbling and falling. Walking on uneven terrain or stairs is very difficult. His progression will involve using a cane, a walker and then a wheel chair. Talking and eating will be affected. He and Jean have remodeled their home to be accessible, no matter what happens.

Jerry wasn't born with a quitter gene. If he falls down, he gets up. He will minimize the effect and maximize what he can do. In the past, he's been scuba diving and sky diving. At

57 he competed in an Ironman triathlon. He can't run now, but can still bike and swim. He uses a recumbent mountain bike and magnetic shoes and pedals. There is a Multiple Sclerosis medication that is showing some promise and there will be decisions about whether he should try it or worry about side effects. He's not done yet and is inspired by wounded warrior friends facing greater challenges than he faces.

Jerry says he will keep moving forward and keep giving back. It is what it is, and it will become what it will become. He doesn't want sympathy, but instead seeks awareness and understanding. He's not ignoring his diagnosis, but charging ahead. He considers himself blessed.

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Community



30A SONGWRITER

continued from page 2

Browne, Lyle Lovette, Brandi Carlile, Brian Wilson, Emmylou Harris, Elvis Costello, Indigo Girls, Graham Nash, Chris

& Rich Robinson (the Black Crowes), Mavis Staples, Jason Isbell, the Bangles, John Prine, Rickie Lee Jones, Jenny Lewis, Rosanne Cash and Steve Earle. The Festival has supported emerging artists over the

past decade such as the War & Treaty, Morgan Wade, Ruthie Foster, Madison Cunningham, Amythyst Kiah and Paul Thorn.

Since its inception in 2010, it has become the largest and most prestigious songwriter's festival



in the southeast benefiting the Cultural Arts Alliance (CAA) of Walton County and has won many national accolades with sell-out crowds every year. The event is co-produced by Russell Carter Artist Management and the CAA. Purchase Day or Weekend Pass tickets at 30asongwritersfestival.com.

As the creative core of Walton County for 30 years, the Cultural Arts Alliance provides

accessible opportunities for all forms of art, every variety of maker, all levels of learners and art lovers. 100% of the Festival's net proceeds support the not-for-profit organization's mission to advance the Arts in Walton County through leadership, advocacy, funding, programs and education. Learn more and become a member at CulturalArtsAlliance.com.

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A Taste of Mardi Gras, this year's Food and Wine Tasting Festival supporting the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra's youth programs, will feature a jazz combo, tastes of 40 different wines, local craft beers and samples of cuisine from area restaurants, such as Aegean Greek Restaurant, Cafe Bienville, Magnolia Grill, Peppers Mexican Cantina, Papa's Smokehouse, PB&J Bistro & Cafe and several others.

Scheduled for Sunday, Feb. 16, 2025, from 1-4 p.m. in the Raider Central of Northwest Florida State College in

Niceville, the event will also include a silent auction containing a variety of items such as gift cards, art, jewelry and gift baskets.

Sponsored by the Northwest Florida Symphony Guild, the event raises funds to support the Symphony's youth programs, such as the Fifth-Grade concerts and the annual John Leatherwood Concerto Competition.

Tickets are \$65 and can be purchased by calling the Mattie Kelly box office at 850-729-6000 or online at www.MattieKellyArtsCenter.org.

# Happenings Around the Bay

2025  
EVENTS

## JANUARY

- 01** | Bloody Mary Golf Tournament  
9 am | Eglin AFB Golf Course | Niceville
- 03** | Greater FWB Chamber Annual Installation and Awards Breakfast  
7 am | Christian Life Center at FBC | FWB
- 04** | Cars & Coffee  
7 am | JoJo's Coffee and Goodness | Niceville
- 05** | 2025 Dream Big Intention Setting Workshop  
2 pm | Yoga By You Studio | Niceville  
Women's Climbing Circle  
5 pm | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin
- 07** | Menopause 2: The Musical  
7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville
- 08** | Prime Rib Night  
5 pm | LJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant | Niceville
- 09** | Family History Help  
1 pm | Niceville Public Library | Niceville
- 11** | 9th Annual Prohibition Repeal Wine Dinner at Paradis  
6:30 pm | Paradis | Rosemary Beach
- 14** | City Council Meeting  
6 pm | Niceville Council Chambers | Niceville
- 16** | Puzzle Swap  
10 am | Niceville Public Library | Niceville
- 16-20** | 30A Songwriters Festival  
Various Times & Locations
- 17** | Bette, Babs, and Beyond  
7:30 pm | Destin-FWB Convention Center | Okaloosa Island
- 16** | Prime Rib Night  
5 pm | LJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant | Niceville

**27** | Facebook Class  
12 pm | Niceville Senior Center | Niceville

**30** | Crescendo! Kick Off Lunch  
11 am | Bijoux | Miramar Beach



### 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
- Yoga at Turkey Creek  
9 am | Sat | Turkey Creek Nature Trail | Niceville
- Brunch on the Bayou  
9 am | Sun | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville

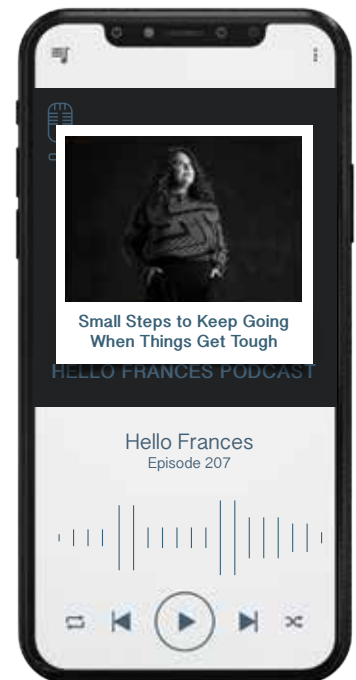


*Frances*  
FRANCES ROY

### Hello Frances.

Hello Frances is a podcast for curious creatives and nano entrepreneurs who seek knowledge, purpose, and community produced by the creative team at Frances Roy Agency. A lineup of guests, friends, and mentors candidly share their diverse wisdom and experience. This refreshing podcast is an easy addition to your playlist of favorites.

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*Frances*  
FRANCES ROY

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Community

# Choosing the Right Service for Post-Hospital Care

BY TERESA HALVERSON, BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT/COMMUNITY RELATIONS DIRECTOR

When transitioning from hospital to a rehabilitation facility, it is critical for families to know what to look for in post-hospital care to ensure their loved ones receive the best support possible. Choosing the right service for your care is crucial. One of the most important factors is to consider personalized care. Depending on the needs of you or your loved one, be sure to ask questions about specialized programs. Below are some examples of what to look for:



- Stroke Recovery Program: Is there a Certified Stroke Therapist on staff?
- Wound Care – Vaporox wound Treatment – Certified Physical Therapist
- Parkinson’s Rehab: Does the facility offer a dedicated Parkinson’s Therapeutic program (“Big and Loud” Certified Staff?)

- Respiratory Program/Pulmonary Program: OmniFlow Breathing system offered?
- Cardiac recovery
- Dementia/Cognitive Rehab
- Balance/Fall Prevention Programs
- FEES’ Swallowing Evaluations
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# What Are You Doing December 31, 1937?

By JENÉ EVANS McCracken

Society members, dedicated locals and golf enthusiasts would have been planning their holiday festivities around the Valparaiso Country Club and The Valparaiso Inn.

The Inn, as it was commonly known was built along the blue waters of North Bayshore Drive a hundred years ago in 1924 by James E. Plew. The three-story Spanish stucco structure was patterned after Chicago's famous Edgewater Beach Hotel. It had four wings and 56 guest rooms angled to catch the breeze and provide a panoramic view of Boggy Bayou and Choctawhatchee Bay.

The New Year's Eve menu



The Valparaiso Inn, from the Heritage Museum collection, 1937.

Photo by Clifford C. Brabham Studio in Valparaiso. Clifford Brabham was a prominent photographer for many years in Valparaiso.

was delicious, extensive and priced at \$1.25. Well, the year is 1937!

The Inn was listed as being "Open All Year" and boasting Fire Protection with a sprinkler system, modern rooms, swimming, beach and two tennis courts. The nearby Valparaiso Country Club claimed beautiful grass, greens and tees, 6,350 yards and five water holes with fees of \$1 per day.

In June 1941, the Officers Club of Eglin Field made arrangements to take over the Inn as the "O Club."

Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle and many of the "Tokyo Raiders" were housed at the Inn while

## ANNOUNCEMENT

The Valparaiso Country Club and The Valparaiso Inn will feature attractions for the New Year Week-End. Unavoidable circumstances forced The Inn to cancel the dance for Friday night. There will be Open House and entertainment to see the Old Year out and the New Year in, to which the public is cordially invited. Boat trips and fishing parties have been arranged for the week-end. Mr. Sidney Danjean, Pro of the Country Club, is offering special amusements for both men and women golfers on Saturday and Sunday.

An actual advertisement in the Okaloosa News-Journal, Crestview, FL, December 31, 1937.

they trained at Eglin Field in March 1942.

The Inn was sold by the Plew family in 1950. It continued to operate as a hotel until 1957 when it was converted into an apartment complex.

On March 2, 1977, a fire severely damaged the Inn and it

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**The Valparaiso Inn**

New Year's Eve hotel menu circa 1937.

remained vacant until fire completely destroyed it on October 25, 1980.



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 Community

# Women United Empowers Local Teens with Mental Health Tools and Support

On November 16, United Way Emerald Coast's Women United hosted a transformative EmpowHER Seminar at the Boys and Girls Club of South Walton. Presented by Eglin Federal Credit Union, the event provided local teens with essential mental health resources, empowering educational tools, and a supportive community to foster self-confidence and resilience.

Designed to address the growing need for mental health sup-

port across Okaloosa and Walton counties, the seminar featured interactive workshops facilitated by dedicated partner organizations, each volunteering time and expertise to support young attendees. These workshops offered a safe space for teens to connect, share, and gain practical mental health resources.

Emerald Coast Science Center led a session where girls screen-printed their own t-shirts, encouraging creativity and

self-expression. Pure & Couture Salon brought stylists to host a braid bar, offering students the opportunity to leave with boosted confidence and a renewed sense of self. Additionally, a yoga session taught attendees relaxation techniques and mindfulness practices to help manage stress.

"Eglin Federal Credit Union is proud to partner with United Way Emerald Coast to present this sold-out event, which pro-



Women United Member encourages attendee.

vides a positive environment for local teens," said SVP Membership and Community Development Neko Stubblefield. "Our goal is to uplift the communities in which we live and work. We see tremendous value in providing tools and resources to empower teens in Walton County."

Attendee surveys revealed that 76.5% of participants experienced increased confidence and self-esteem, highlighting the impact of the EmpowHER Seminar in fostering mental wellness and community for teens in Walton County.

This spring, in celebration of International Women's Day, Women United will host its an-

nual "Brunch & Bubbly" fundraiser on March 8 at Home2 Suites by Hilton, presented by Eglin Federal Credit Union. This event, open to all community members, promises an inspiring gathering with proceeds supporting Women United's mission.

### About Women United

Women United is a philanthropic initiative within United Way Emerald Coast, dedicated to improving access to mental health resources, education, and support for women and girls in Okaloosa and Walton Counties. To learn more about their initiatives or join their efforts, visit [www.united-way.org/womenunited](http://www.united-way.org/womenunited).

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# Surf Brigade: Empowering Veterans Through Surf Therapy

By KEVIN LALIBERTE, SURF BRIGADE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

In the heart of Santa Rosa Beach, a transformative initiative is making waves for military veterans. Surf Brigade, a non-profit organization founded by veterans for veterans, harnesses the healing powers of the ocean and the camaraderie of surfing to address the unique challenges faced by those who have served. With a dedicated 5-week evidence-based surf therapy program, Surf Brigade is helping veterans redefine their purpose, write their narratives,

participants with others who understand their journey. This community aspect is crucial for ongoing support and camaraderie.

## Surf Therapy: A Unique Healing Approach

At the core of Surf Brigade's program is the weekly surf therapy session. Participants receive instruction from professional surf coaches on the picturesque beaches of the Gulf Coast. The act of surfing not only provides physical benefits but also offers a unique therapeutic experience.



and build a supportive community along the stunning Emerald Coast.

## The Program: More Than Just Surfing

Surf Brigade's program is not solely about riding the waves; it encompasses a holistic approach to mental health and well-being. Each week, veterans participate in group discussions facilitated by licensed professional counselors, focusing on three critical challenges:

**Defining Your Purpose:** Transitioning from military to civilian life can leave veterans feeling adrift. Through guided conversations, participants explore their passions and values, helping them reconnect with their sense of purpose.

**Writing Your Narrative:** Every veteran has a unique story, often filled with experiences that can be difficult to articulate. The program encourages veterans to share their journeys, fostering self-reflection and personal growth while reinforcing the importance of their experiences.

**Finding Your Community:** Isolation is a common struggle for many veterans. Surf Brigade aims to cultivate a sense of belonging by connecting

The ocean's rhythm and the exhilaration of riding waves help veterans release pent-up stress and anxiety.

Research supports the therapeutic benefits of surf therapy, linking it to improved mental health outcomes. The combination of physical activity, exposure to nature, and the thrill of learning a new skill contributes to a sense of accomplishment and boosts self-esteem. For many veterans, the ocean becomes a place of healing and reflection, where they can leave behind the weight of their service.

## A Community Built on Shared Experiences

One of the most powerful aspects of Surf Brigade is its emphasis on building a community among participants. Graduating from the program means not only gaining a new sense of purpose and confidence but also forming lasting friendships with fellow veterans. Surfing together fosters a sense of belonging and shared experience, creating a network of support that extends beyond the program itself.

Surf Brigade is committed to making this life-changing experience accessible to all veterans. There is no cost to participate,

and no prior surf experience is required. All necessary equipment is provided, ensuring that anyone can join in and benefit from the program.

## Join the Movement

Surf Brigade is more than just a surf therapy program;

it's a lifeline for veterans seeking connection and purpose. By blending the therapeutic qualities of surfing with meaningful dialogue, the organization empowers veterans to embrace their stories, redefine their paths, and foster a sense of community that lasts a lifetime.

For more information about Surf Brigade and how to get involved, visit [surfbrigade.com](http://surfbrigade.com). Whether you're a veteran looking for support or someone wanting to contribute to this noble cause, Surf Brigade welcomes you to ride the wave of healing together.



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## Bay Buzz

### 30A BBQ Fest Breaks Record for The Sonder Project!

The fifth edition of the 30A BBQ Festival, presented by 360 Blue, raised a record-breaking \$103,228 for The Sonder Project.

The sold-out, annual event in November at Grand Boulevard at Sandestin®, featured 14 regional and local restaurants and catering companies, each competing for the title of “Best BBQ” chosen by the 800 guests in attendance. Participants included 3 Sons BBQ, Back Beach Barbecue, Camp Creek Inn, Cinders and Salt, Dickey’s Barbecue Pit, Evie Mae’s Barbecue, Harry T’s, Local Smoke at The Big Chill, Marrow Private Chefs, The Perfect Pig, Sons of Amvets Post 29, Swiftly Catered, Uncle KU’s BarbeKU,

and Vin’tij Food and Wine.

#### Winners:

1st Place People’s Choice Award: Evie Mae’s Pit BBQ

2nd Place People’s Choice Award: Uncle KU’s BarbeKU

3rd Place People’s Choice Award: Vin’tij Food and Wine

Judge’s Choice Award: 3 Sons Bar-B-Q

“It was great to see the different styles and flair of each participant,” said Chad Zibelman, CEO of The Sonder Project. “We had everything from pulled pork and brisket, to smoked s’mores and sliders. It was a melting pot of the best barbecue around and we’re so grateful to each of our vendors for donating their time and food to be a part of this year’s festival. They are all winners in our book!”



Now entering its 15th year, the SwampWriter Music Festival, happening January 16–20, 2025, captures the spirit of “Old School 30A,” offering an accessible and authentic experience for music lovers. More than a dozen musicians perform on the iconic stage at Stinky’s Bait Shack, a venue that blends the charm of a dive bar with the soul of a music hall.

Jim and his team at Red Fish Taco also host an intimate listening room for the 30a Songwriter’s Fest to support the CAA’s mission of fostering artistic expression along Florida’s Emerald Coast.

### Chef Jim Richard Honored as Hwy. 331 Person of the Year

As the inaugural Hwy. 331 Person of the Year, Chef Jim Richard has redefined what it means to be a leader by blending culinary artistry with a passion for fostering cultural connections.

The visionary behind Stinky’s Fish Camp, Stinky’s Bait Shack and Red Fish Taco, Jim has built a thriving ecosystem where chefs, fishermen, and musicians converge to celebrate the vibrant tapestry of Walton County life.

For more than a decade, Stinky’s has hosted its renowned spring and fall fishing tournaments, which draw anglers of all skill levels for camaraderie and connection. These tournaments also raise funds for the South Walton Artificial Reef Association (SWARA), an organization Jim helped found. SWARA’s mission is to build and maintain artificial reefs along Walton County’s coastline, fostering marine habitats and enhancing recreational opportunities.

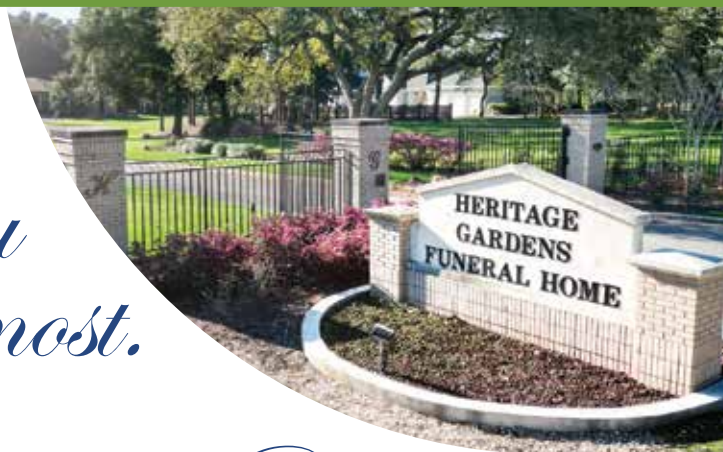
Among Jim’s many contributions to the community, the annual SwampWriter Music Festival at Stinky’s Bait Shack is held every January over Martin Luther King Jr. Weekend. It’s a five-day, free festival—a saltwater-soaked celebration of local and regional musical talent.

### We have whales in the Gulf of Mexico?



Yes! From sperm whales and killer whales to Rice’s whales—one of the most endangered whales on earth—these magnificent creatures play a vital role in the Gulf’s ecosystem. Sponsored by the Choctawhatchee Audubon Society, join Christian Wagley, coastal organizer for Healthy Gulf, to learn about the fascinating story of the Rice’s whale, its critical habitat and its connection to open ocean birds and fish. The program will be held Jan. 2025 in Room 800 on the 2nd floor of the Chandler Center (NW door of 519 Helms St.) at Crosspoint Church Niceville. Socializing begins at 6:30 p.m.— program starts at 7 p.m. Admission is free; event is open to the public.

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*Continued on next page*

# The Housing Revolution Starts Now

## Meet Visionary Bekah Manley

BY CHRISTOPHER MANSON

Bekah Manley is a holistic realtor, meaning that she looks well beyond the structure of a house. “I take the physical, spiritual and emotional into consideration,” she explains. “I go a little deeper than most realtors when it comes to finding an environment in which a person will best thrive. To me, a house is more than a structure. It’s a sanctuary for your soul.”

Bekah has called the Emerald Coast her home since 2017. After graduating from Auburn University (Manley majored in psychology, which she says she uses every day in her work), she visited her mother who had recently moved to the area. “And me being a broke, confused college student, it was either go back to my hometown or go to the beach,” she says. “I decided to go to the beach.”

The Northwest Alabama native has been engaged to Destin Mayor Bobby Wagner for more than a year now, and I jokingly ask if she has any influence over the city government. “No,” she laughs. “But we have been able to use both our jobs to create a



positive impact on the community.”

Bekah and Mayor Wagner worked together shooting videos in Gulf County after Hurricane Michael, letting the rest of the world know that the area was rebuilding. She obtained her real estate license in 2021, and one of the first things Bekah did was ask her brokers:

“Why do we keep building the same thing over and over

again and expecting different results?”

Bekah sought out contractors and architects with a passion for revolutionizing the building environment “from the ground up” as well as utilizing political connections to “challenge and change the building standards for the state of Florida.”

For the past three years, Bekah and business partner Joseph Beeman have been building THEIA Develop-

ment to create sustainable, resilient and affordable houses using advanced technology like 3D printing. “Due to recent hurri-

canes, people’s eyes have been opened” to new things, she says. “You don’t have to be an expert to know if something isn’t working. I believe we can change the standards. The ‘Oh, we’ve always done it this way’ isn’t working anymore.”

Bekah says traditional building methods are outdated. “Insurance rates are not going to budge until we have better products for them to cover.”

She is also working to connect with industry people interested in green initiatives. “I know they exist,” says Bekah. “I’m just trying to bring different experts – appraisers, lenders, builders, engineers – out of the woodwork who care about sustainable futuristic building practices.”

Bekah and her team are looking to launch the new housing

initiatives here in the Panhandle, with a focus on areas affected by hurricanes. And then, spreading throughout the state and beyond.

“The next step for me is to build a physical product for people to touch and feel,” she says, “so they can see the whole process and open their minds about how to build in the future.”

“It’s not that scary. The big obstacle is that a lot of people fear change and things they don’t understand. Sometimes people tend to be a little closed-minded when it comes to (housing).” Bekah is working to create a dialogue and educate the community.

“It should be clear, in light of recent events, why I’m looking to change things. And have been.”

### BAY BUZZ

*continued from previous page*

#### Okaloosa County School Superintendent, Marcus Chambers, Makes Generous ECCAC Donation

Demonstrating his commitment to being a good steward for the community, Marcus Chambers, Okaloosa County School Superintendent, recently donated \$25,000 from his unused campaign funds to the Emerald Coast Children’s Advocacy Center (ECCAC). The donation will greatly benefit

ECCAC’s vital programs, such as the Safety Matters prevention program which teaches children in local schools how to recognize and respond to unsafe situations.

Chambers shared with the ECCAC staff, “Investing in the ECCAC is an investment in our community’s future. Their transformative mission is to heal and support traumatized children, restore lost innocence, and instill hope. Together, we can make a profound difference, ensuring every child feels seen, heard, and understood.”





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 Community



By JULIE A. MARTIN

When you live in a community governed by a Homeowners Association (HOA), you might feel like your options for homeowner's insurance are limited.

However, working with an independent insurance agent can help you find the right coverage that meets both your needs and the requirements of your HOA. For instance, some town-

homes are covered by a COA, Condo Association, and the Association assumes responsibility for the exterior walls and the roof of the buildings, so that the unit owners only require coverage for the inside of the dwellings, from the drywall in, as well as their personal property, liability, mold coverage, etc.

Homeowners Associations generally require their unit-owners to purchase insurance coverage that includes coverage for the exterior walls and the roof, in addition to coverage for liability and even flood insurance on that townhome.

An independent insurance agent is not tied to any specific insurance company. So, they can provide you with a range of options and help you choose the one that best suits your situation. They have the knowledge and experience to navigate the complex world of insurance policies and can help you understand the various types of coverage available. This is especially important when dealing with an HOA, which may have specific requirements for the insurance coverage you need.

An independent insurance agent can help you find the right policy that meets these requirements, while also ensuring that you have the appropriate level of coverage for your individual needs.

Furthermore, an independent insurance agent can help you identify potential gaps in your coverage that you may not have considered. For instance, if you have valuable jewelry or art, you may need additional coverage beyond the standard policy. An independent insurance agent can help you identify these gaps and recommend coverage options that meet your needs.

In the case of Jewelry or fine arts and other related types of valuable personal property, the property itself is more likely to be lost through theft or mysterious disappearance than any other type of peril. There are 12 categories of personal property that require appraisals for full coverage in the event of theft, breakage, or mysterious disappearance.

Carriers require a current



appraisal, usually within the last 36 months, along with a picture of the item or set, and a full description. Additionally, they may require the type of location of the item such as in your home or in a bank vault, and rate at least partially based on the location given.

Working with an independent insurance agent also provides the added benefit of having a personal relationship with your agent. You can build a relationship of trust and confidence with your agent, who can provide ongoing support and guidance throughout the life of your policy. They can help you navigate the claims process and make sure that you receive the coverage you need when you need it most.

Finally, working with an independent insurance agent can save you time and money. They can help you compare policies from different insurance companies and find the best coverage at the most competitive price. They can also help you identify discounts and other cost-saving opportunities that you may not be aware of.

In conclusion, when you live in an HOA-governed community, it is important to work with an independent insurance agent to find the right homeowner's insurance policy that meets both your needs and the requirements of your HOA.

An independent insurance agent can provide you with a range of options, help you identify potential gaps in your coverage, build a personal relationship with you, and save you time and money. Don't leave the protection of your home and personal belongings to chance — work with an independent insurance agent to ensure that you have the right coverage for your needs.

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# What Does it Mean to "Age-In" to Medicare?



BY GREG DURETTE, FLORIDA HEALTH CONNECTOR

As many times as I have said the term "age-in" to folks when discussing Medicare, it has never failed to elicit a visceral response like, "What do you mean with this age-in thing?!" or "I don't feel aged-in!"

The fact of the matter is, aging-in means you are turning 65 soon, and it is a good thing. There are many we all know that didn't make it to that milestone. Bravo for making it and cheers for many more.

With Annual Enrollment Period now officially ended (even though there is a little known Special Enrollment Period for certain local counties which extends the period until 3/31/2025!), we are now in the middle of the Open Enrollment Period which runs from January 1 – March 31 of every year for pre-dominantly for Advantage Plan members (you can re-read my article from last month for more information about the ins and outs of that). But, that does not change the fact many people have birthdays all year long and are actually aging-in during this time as well. Confusing but, it can be made sense of with a little guidance.

What generally happens is, folks get confused between what they see on TV with all the pitches about "time running out" and, what they can actually do during the aging-in period. So, let me attempt to de-mystify it a little bit here.

There is a period of time when a person ages-in and becomes eligible for Medicare. Typically, this period of time is three months before the month in which they turn 65 and three months after the month in which they turn 65. Do the math and you will see this is a

seven-month period of time around your birthday. There are a few other exceptions to this eligibility period. But, those will have to be saved for another article or very long-winded phone call for the braver among us!

The first order of business is to obtain your Part A and B (if desired or needed) through Social Security. Without adding a litany of boring details as to qualifications for each, suffice it to say Part A is typically \$0 premium for most folks and Part B for 2024 will typically cost \$185.00 per month. The Part B premium is means tested and can get a little complicated (and expensive)—certainly more complicated than can be described in this article. Again, suffice it to say, some could pay much more or much less, depending on your Modified Adjusted Gross Income from two years prior unless you apply for a break based on current income. There is a form for that.

If you wish to avoid LIFE-LONG penalties, you will have to have Part B and Part D (prescription coverage) in place at the time of first becoming eligible. As a reminder, eligibilities are one of those things unique to each person's circumstances so, it is important to know how these things apply to you.

If you choose to obtain a Supplement, commonly called a "Medi-Gap" policy, you will need to also obtain a separate Part D prescription plan as Supplement plans DO NOT IN-

CLUDE such. If you choose to obtain an Advantage plan, the Part D prescription coverage is typically INCLUDED.

As you can see this can, and usually is, a very confusing time for most folks used to having traditional insurance for their whole lives. Suddenly, you are thrust into this new system when everybody and their cousin is calling and/or mailing you every single day with their "better option."

Your best option is the one that best suits you. Maybe it is a great price. Maybe it is a great network of providers. Maybe it is just the peace of mind in knowing you have someone you can rely upon for information when you need it.

If there is only one take away you can have from this article, it would be to work with someone that can help you navigate the local landscape and help you completely understand this

otherwise very confusing time in life.

Happy New Year!

*Greg Durette is a qualified, licensed agent with Florida Health Connector providing Medicare insurance throughout the State and is based in Niceville. He has been in the insurance industry for nearly 42 years and can be reached at his office at 850-842-2400 or his mobile at 978-509-2941.*



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 Education

# Triumph Gulf Coast Approves \$9.5 Million Grant Proposal to Move to Term Sheet Negotiations for Transformative Seaside School™ Expansion

The Seaside School™ announces the unanimous approval of a \$9.5 million grant proposal from Triumph Gulf Coast to move to term sheet negotiations for a grant award that will be a transformative investment. The grant will revolutionize the school's ability to prepare students for college and career success. The Triumph Gulf Coast Board's action moves the proposal forward from economic review to term sheet review with two further board actions to come before awarding the grant. This funding will support staffing, equipment and professional development as part of the school's \$40 million capital campaign in partnership with Northwest Florida State College (NWFS) to expand the South Walton campus.

The expanded campus will offer secondary and postsecondary courses and certifications, advising, testing, study space



and a complete schedule for an Associate in Arts degree in Fall 2025. In addition, the Associate Degree program in Business

Administration will begin in Fall 2026. This transformational initiative provides high school students with a unique opportunity

to earn a college degree alongside their high school diploma.

The grant will also fuel innovative programming to address workforce demands and prepare students for thriving careers in high-demand industries. Certifications in cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, entrepreneurship, and drone technology will position Seaside School™ graduates as highly skilled professionals ready to excel in rapidly evolving job markets.

"Our goal is to equip young adults with the skills and confidence to pursue any calling or career they choose," said Dr. Tom Miller, Executive Director of The Seaside School™. "This grant, combined with our groundbreaking campus expansion, ensures that students in our local communities are not only prepared, but also empowered to shape the future."

The enhanced programming and overall expansion address

critical local workforce challenges by eliminating the lengthy commute for dual enrollment and traditional college students from South Walton to Niceville, tripling the number of college graduates annually in Walton County, and creating a pipeline of highly skilled, job-ready professionals for high-wage, high-demand industries. By reducing lateral entry gaps in the local workforce and saving Seaside High School graduates over \$50,000 in college tuition costs, The Seaside School™ is not only preparing students for future success but also strengthening Walton County's economy by cultivating talent that remains and thrives within the community.

"This partnership represents a transformative opportunity for Walton County," said Triumph Gulf Coast board mem-

*Continued on next page*

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# CAA Invests In Walton County Teachers

The Cultural Arts Alliance of Walton County (CAA) recently announced its Art for All grants totaling \$9,500 were awarded to Walton County teachers to support arts education and creative projects for more than 900 K-12 students. In decades of fostering creativity, the CAA has awarded more than \$855,000.

CAA awarded 14 teacher grants benefiting nine area schools, including Abadie Academy, Bay School, Freeport Elementary, Freeport Learning



Center, Freeport Middle School, Seaside Neighborhood School,

South Walton Academy, South Walton High School and The WISE Magnet School. The purpose of the teacher mini-grant is to enhance the visual, literary and performing arts experience of all Walton County school-age children K-12 in public schools, private 501c (3) schools, and home schools through funding for special enhancement activities established by a teacher.

“The CAA was founded on giving, and we are committed

to making a deeper impact each year by funding arts education initiatives,” said CAA President and CEO Jennifer Steele. “By investing in arts education, we’re enhancing classroom experiences and empowering young minds to think critically, express themselves, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. These programs reaffirm our commitment to cultivating a vibrant, arts-infused Walton County where everyone experiences the power of the Arts.”

Applications for teachers, students, artists and arts organizations can be found and completed online at [CulturalArtsAlliance.com/artist-resources](http://CulturalArtsAlliance.com/artist-resources). The next deadline for submissions is May 15, 2025.

For more information about the CAA and the Art for All program, call 850-622-5970 or visit [CulturalArtsAlliance.com](http://CulturalArtsAlliance.com).



## Celebrating a New Cafetorium!

Okaloosa County School District (OCSD) recently hosted a ribbon-cutting at Ruckel Middle School in Niceville for its new Cafetorium building. Cafetoriums are buildings that combine cafeterias and auditoriums, providing versatile spaces for various school activities.

Ruckel Middle School’s Cafetorium includes a new STEM room that will double as classroom space and a venue for teacher trainings. The Cafetorium is significantly larger than the original cafeteria, which



will soon be renovated into a new band room. The current

band room will become the new chorus room, enhancing the



well-established music program.

This project would not have been possible without the half-cent sales tax. “We are deeply grateful to the voters of Okaloosa County for making these projects possible,” said

OCSD Superintendent Marcus Chambers. “Your support is transforming our schools and enriching our students’ educational experiences. Thank you for helping us build a brighter future for our students!”

### TRIUMPH

*continued from previous page*

ber Reynolds Henderson. “By equipping students with advanced skills and higher education opportunities, we’re building a foundation for long-term

success for both students and our region.”

Dr. Cristie Kedroski, Interim President of NWFSC, added, “We are proud to work alongside The Seaside School™ to serve students in South Walton and surrounding communities

by offering a complete Associate’s degree program within a short drive from their homes. This collaboration reflects a shared commitment to preparing students for the workforce while giving them the tools to succeed academically. The Col-

lege is committed to enhancing postsecondary education opportunities that meet the needs of Walton County families.”

The new campus will open in Fall 2025 and will serve as a hub of opportunity for students and the local community alike.

The Seaside School™ is seeking students, passionate educators, and strategic partners to help shape the future of education and drive the economic growth of our region. Visit [SeasideSchools.net](http://SeasideSchools.net) to learn more.

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Lifestyle



BY STACY SARIKANON, STUNNING SPACES—DECORATING DEN INTERIORS

Ever have a problem hanging pictures or arranging them on your walls? Here are some tips on arranging your artwork with an aesthetic eye.

Hang pictures at eye level.

In a living room, pictures

should be hung so that people sitting in the room can view them while seated. A large picture hung above the sofa should generally be 4-8 inches from the top of the sofa and often looks best when displayed alone because it serves as the room's focal point.

Effective picture groupings.

Smaller pictures become more effective when grouped together as opposed to being scattered all over the wall. Balance and spacing are important when arranging artwork. Pieces should be of similar visual weight as nearby furniture. A rule of

Picture Perfect!



thumb is that the space between

two pictures should be less than the width of a single picture.

Hang artwork right - the first time!

If you're apprehensive about hammering nails into your walls, cut pieces of paper into the size of your pictures to use as templates. You can even mark the placement of the hooks using this technique. Then arrange them by using painters' tape to tape them on the wall until you

are happy with the results. Once you are satisfied, mark where the hooks will go with a pencil, going right through the paper, and proceed to hang your artwork.

The type of artwork you use will depend on your personal preferences and your budget. It can be simple prints, needlework, limited edition prints or original art. Of course, the more valuable the piece, the more important its place should be.

Save the Date for Taste of the Race

Get ready for an unforgettable evening the Seaside School™ kicks off its annual Half Marathon + 5K Race Weekend with one of 30A's most eagerly awaited events—Taste of the Race, presented by Publix and headlined by The Velcro Pygmies, the high-energy rock band known for bringing 80s hair band flair to fan favorites across rock, dance, and country genres!

Mark your calendar for Fri-

day, February 14, 2025, at the iconic SEASIDE® Lyceum. Experience the culinary talents of the Gulf Coast's top chefs and restaurants as they compete for prestigious awards like People's Choice, Judges' Choice, and Chef's Choice. Enjoy delicious tastings from over a dozen talented chefs, complemented by fine wines, craft cocktails, and local brews, all while soaking in the lively musical entertainment.

There will also be a special performance by the Seaside Neighborhood School™ Performance Band.

Proceeds from Taste of the Race support the Seaside School Foundation™, benefiting programs that enhance academic and extracurricular opportunities for students at Seaside Neighborhood School™ and Seacoast Collegiate High School.



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## Fudpucker's Beachside Bar & Grill

Locally owned and operated since inception in 1982, Fudpucker's restaurant stands out by being dedicated to its owners' 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 elixer 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.

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Destin  
fudpucker.com

## JoJo's Coffee and Goodness

An iconic favorite of locals, owner and operator of JoJo's Coffee and Goodness Angela "JoJo" Stevenson invites you to enter her cafe and relaxed coffee shop atmosphere for a daily dose of "goodness." Stop in for mouth-watering cinnamon rolls; scones: cranberry orange, chocolate caramel and cheddar thyme; strawberry coffee cake; cranberry orange muffins; red velvet cookies; brownies with

espresso ganache or caramelitas. Try a breakfast special with a piece of quiche or kolache-hash brown 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 know your best coffee and mouth-watering edibles are waiting for you at Jojo's in this new year!

(850) 737-6194  
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## LJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant

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

Dec. 31: New Year's Eve Party with Diamond Dan DJ

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

Sat., Jan. 25, Gumbo Tasting! 4-6 p.m.

Wednesdays: Kids Eat Free (with adult entrée purchase, 1 child per adult)



Thursdays: Open Mic/Karaoke 6-10 p.m.

College Playoff Games: Game Day Specials!

Jan. 8: Prime Rib Night 5-9 p.m. & Wine Tasting 5-7 p.m., Chess Night 6 p.m.

Jan. 10: National Oyster Rockefeller Day — Specials

Jan. 11: 16th Anniversary Celebration — Food Samples, Prize Giveaways 6-9 p.m., Ronny Dean Garrett 6-10 p.m.

Jan. 22: Prime Rib Night 5-9 p.m. & Cocktail Tasting 5-7 p.m., Traveling Painter 5:30 p.m.

Jan. 25: Jody Lucas 6-9 p.m.  
Oyster bar hours: Mon-Thurs 3-10 p.m.; Fri-Sat 11 a.m.-mid-night; Sun Noon-9 p.m.

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

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

## Landshark's Pizza

Hungry? Thirsty? Maybe a little of both? Come in and visit Landshark's Pizza. Owners Brian and Sue Hassmann have created a Niceville locals' favorite pizza pub and bar that serves can't-beat, handmade-dough pizza and wings with the craziest selection of wing sauces and rubs you'll find—plus many other scrumptious eats for folks of all ages. There's plenty of seating for everyone and TVs galore, plus fun and games all week long. Sports fans from all over come and watch all your favorite teams on countless region-

al and national sports networks. Now it pays to show up a little early to get your favorite seat and to save a buck on all beer and wine from 3-6 p.m. Tuesday - Friday. Having teamed up with Props Brewery to serve

the coldest brews this side of the Bay along with the vast selection of bourbon and craft beer, it's no secret why the locals love Landshark's Pizza Company. Cheers! Order online, too, or DoorDash. Hours: Sunday 11 a.m. - 7 p.m.; Monday Closed; Tuesday - Thursday 11 a.m. - 9 p.m.; Friday - Saturday 11 a.m. - 10 p.m.

(850) 424-6743  
1128 E. John Sims Pkwy.  
Niceville  
Landsharkspizza.com

## VKI Japanese Steakhouse & Sushi Bar

VKI Japanese Steakhouse & Sushi Bar offers authentic and delicious tasting Japanese cuisine for dine-in or take-out. Located in Santa Rosa Beach, VKI is known for its hibachi and sushi using high quality fresh ingredients. To view a menu or order online, visit [www.vkijapanesefl.com](http://www.vkijapanesefl.com). Hours 11 a.m. - 10 p.m. Closed Monday.

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## A Local Favorite: VUE on 30a Offers Impeccable Fine Dining with a Majestic "Vue"

BY LORI LEATH SMITH

I had dined here before. But, this was different. Fresh. Exhilarating yet peaceful. Familiar yet new at the same time. Already well-known for its upscale ambiance, inventive menu and uninterrupted view of the emerald green waters, Vue on 30A is a favorite for locals and visitors alike seeking a memorable culinary escape surrounded by its magical view.

From the moment we walked through its front door, we were greeted by the vast, sparkling expanse of the Gulf, stretching



out just beyond the windows. And while the sight alone is invigorating, the ambiance manages to remain serene, blending

excitement with tranquility.

We sat indoors in front of the expansive windows that allowed us the breathtaking backdrop of the waves meeting the shore—it never gets old, and absolutely enhanced our dining

experience.

With two new chefs at the helm, Executive Chef Christopher Mayhue and Sous Chef

Dalbert Hughes, the Vue's revised menu embraces a farm-to-table philosophy, sourcing ingredients from local providers that highlight our region's rich, fresh flavors. However, it also includes items and ingredients influenced by the chefs' own heritages and favorites for a diverse menu that reflects both the region's southern roots as well as international influences that create a blend of American, French and Italian cuisine.

Throughout our casual lunch, every detail felt thoughtfully curated. I found some tried and true staples combined with unique ingredients you wouldn't normally think to combine. Throughout our meal, I just kept thinking, somehow, these chefs know how to take American favorites, make them their own and even better.

To get started, we enjoyed signature appetizers and local favorites: House Smoked Tuna Dip (did I say wow?) and Seared Tuna Tabasco. (Seared tuna is something I order a lot and this was beyond amazing.)

For the main course, I had one of Chef Mayhue's favorites—NOLA Style BBQ Shrimp, his Cajun-inspired dish with a Gulf Coast flare, served with melt-in-your-mouth garlic cheddar biscuits. It did indeed remind me of New Orleans, but with Chef Mayhue's magical twist!

For those who are more into "southern comfort" foods, we also tried the "Niceville Hot" Chicken Sandwich, a quite tantalizing modern update.

Another must-try starter is the Ahi Tuna Nachos—the

crispy wontons provided a unique twist on the classic nacho concept, and were topped with sushi-grade tuna, avocado and a tangy wasabi cream. The Blue Crab Bisque was smooth and flavorful exemplifying the kitchen's attention to seafood craftsmanship. And the filet mignon was impressive, melting in my mouth it was so tender!

It seems each dish tells a story of the local landscape with drops of the chefs' personalities enhancing the flavor of every bite, while tailored to complement the natural beauty that surrounds the Vue on 30A.

Even the dessert menu provides memorable options such as one of my favorites, the classic Key Lime Pie, each bite tangy and sweet.

Of course, there is an impressive drink menu, from craft cocktails to a well-curated wine list. Signature cocktails, such as the Sunset Margarita or the Seaside Mule, pair wonderfully with the coastal cuisine. For wine enthusiasts, the wine list spans regions and varieties, featuring everything from crisp whites ideal for seafood pairings to full-bodied reds for heartier fare.

And don't worry; the wait-staff is well-versed in the menu and wine pairings.

Stepping into Vue on 30a felt like revisiting an old friend who's picked up just the right touch of intrigue. Familiar and approachable, yet renewed, this tantalizing sensory experience left me enchanted all over again...one that still lingers. Visit [vueon30a.net](http://vueon30a.net).

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Jan. 11: 16th Anniversary Celebration — Food Samples — Prize Giveaways 6-9pm, Ronny Dean Garrett 6-10pm  
Jan. 22: Prime Rib Night 5-9pm & Cocktail Tasting 5-7pm, Traveling Painter 5:30pm  
Jan. 25: Jody Lucas 6-9pm  
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**Restaurant Hours:** Mon.-Tues. Closed, Weds.-Sat. 11am to 9pm, Sun. 9am to 1pm, Sunday Brunch 9am to 1pm

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BY SCOTT MILLER

I'll bet you never expected we would have a 12-team college football playoff taking place this year without the Crimson Tide involved. Sorry Alabama fans, I know y'all are still letting that sink in. But I'd be remiss not to talk about it. The Nick Saban led Alabama football team has had an unprecedented run this past decade or so—there is no denying that. But, we are walking through a whole new era in college football these days. So, I guess it's really not a big surprise when you think about it.

Conferences are different

now, college kids are getting paid now, this thing we call the transfer portal is really shaking things up now and on and on we go...

It sure has made for an interesting season this year. So fans, get ready for the big finale. It's time for Bowl Games and Playoff Games all mixed up together and coming soon to a big screen TV near you.

Where will you be watching? We're in for a wild ride. Find your favorite sports bar, grab a seat and don't miss a minute of the action.

Here are some of my favorite places to go on game day. I hope to see you there, too!

**AJ's Seafood & Oyster Bar**

Since 1984, AJ's Seafood and Oyster Bar has been serving cold Gulf Coast oysters and cool libations. What began as a popular local hang out known for fresh oysters and cold beer



has grown into one of the most iconic "hot spots" on the Destin Harbor. From its humble beginning shucking oysters off the deck behind a small trailer on the Destin Harbor, it has grown to four locations along our Emerald Coast, serving fresh seafood, live music and exciting water activities in the Destin area. Attention all die hard football fans, AJ's boasts the one and only Jumbotron on the Destin Harbor. AJ's serves up delicious daily specials, mouth-watering drinks plus entertaining live music all month. Don't miss any of the action just come on down to AJ's Seafood and Oyster Bar all season long...

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lavishly garnished with a colorful array of toppings, savory sauces, and exquisite cheeses that capture the essence of the region it represents..and goes great while watching your favorite team on the area's largest indoor LED 14x7 ft. TV or on one of the other 13 TV's available! Game day menu also includes a delightful array of seafood selections, including Grouper, Shrimp baskets and sandwiches. Wash it all down with game-day specials including Ultra and Bud Light Bucket Specials! And you can watch all college and Sunday Ticket NFL games, too! Are you an Auburn fan? Come watch the Auburn Basketball Team, currently ranked #2 in the nation. Gulf Coast Burger is the Official AUBURN TIGERS Watch Party Headquarters! War Eagle! Hours: Mon-Sun 11 a.m. - 8 p.m.

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**2024/25 College Football Bowl Games**

**Friday 12/20**

Playoff Game 1st Round Indiana vs. Notre Dame ABC/ESPN 7 p.m.

**Saturday 12/21**

Playoff Game 1st Round SMU vs. Penn St. TNT 11 a.m.

Playoff Game 1st Round Clemson vs. Texas TNT 3 p.m.

Playoff Game 1st Round Tenn. vs. Ohio St. ABC/ESPN 7 p.m.

**Monday 12/23**

Myrtle Beach Bowl ESPN 10 a.m.

Idaho Potato Bowl Fresno St. vs. NIU ESPN 1:30 p.m.

**Tuesday 12/24**

Hawaii Bowl S. Florida vs. San Jose St. ESPN 7 p.m.

**Thursday 12/26**

Game Above Sports Bowl Pitt vs. Toledo ESPN 1 p.m.

Rate Bowl Rutgers vs. Kansas St. ESPN 4:30 p.m.

68 Ventures Bowl Ark. St. vs. Bowling Green ESPN 8 p.m.

**Friday 12/27**

Armed Forces Bowl Oklahoma vs. Navy ESPN TBD

Birmingham Bowl Ga. Tech vs. Vandy ESPN TBD

Holiday Bowl Syracuse vs. Wash. St. FOX 7 p.m.

Las Vegas Bowl USC vs. Texas A&M ESPN 9:30 p.m.

**Saturday 12/28**

Fenway Bowl U. Conn vs. N. Carolina ESPN 10 a.m.

Pinstripe Bowl Boston College vs. Nebraska ABC 11 a.m.

New Mexico Bowl La. Lafayette vs. TCU ESPN 1:15 p.m.

Pop-Tarts Bowl Iowa St. vs. Miami ABC 2:30 p.m.

Arizona Bowl Miami OH vs. Colorado St. CW 3:30 p.m.

Military Bowl E. Carolina vs. NC St. ESPN 4:45 p.m.

Alamo Bowl BYU vs. Colorado ABC 6:30 p.m.

Independence Bowl La. Tech vs. Army ESPN 8:15 p.m.

**Monday 12/30**

Music City Bowl Iowa vs. Mizzou ESPN 1:30 p.m.

**Tuesday 12/31**

ReliaQuest Bowl Alabama vs. Michigan ESPN 11 a.m.

Sun Bowl Louisville vs. Washington CBS 1 p.m.

Citrus Bowl S. Carolina vs. Illinois ABC 2 p.m.

Texas Bowl Baylor vs. LSU ESPN 2:30 p.m.

Fiesta Bowl/Playoff Game Quarterfinal TBD vs. Boise St. ESPN 6:30 p.m.

**Wednesday 1/1**

Peach Bowl / Playoff Game Quarterfinal TBD vs. Ariz. St. ESPN 12 p.m.

Rose Bowl / Playoff Game Quarterfinal TBD vs. Oregon ESPN 4 p.m.

Sugar Bowl / Playoff Game Quarterfinal TBD vs. UGA ESPN 7:45 p.m.

**Thursday 1/2**

Gator Bowl Duke vs. Ole Miss ESPN 6:30 p.m.

**Friday 1/3**

First Responder Bowl N. Texas vs. Texas St. ESPN 3 p.m.

Duke's Mayo Bowl Minnesota vs. Vir. Tech ESPN 6:30 p.m.

**Saturday 1/4**

Bahamas Bowl Buffalo vs. Liberty ESPN/ESPN2 10 a.m.

**Thursday 1/9**

Orange Bowl/Playoff Game Semifinal TBD ESPN 6:30 p.m.

**Friday 1/10**

Cotton Bowl/Playoff Game Semifinal TBD ESPN 6:30 p.m.

**Monday 1/20**

National Championship Game TBD ESPN 6:30 p.m.



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 Off the Hook

# CAA and South Walton Artificial Reef Association Reveal Designs Selected For 7th Underwater Museum of Art Installation

The Cultural Arts Alliance of Walton County (CAA) and South Walton Artificial Reef Association (SWARA) are proud to reveal the five sculpture designs chosen by jury for permanent exhibition in the seventh installation of the Underwater Museum of Art (UMA).

The 2025 installation will include the following sculptures: Seahorse by Jessica Bradsher (Greenville, NC), Concretion by William Braithwaite (United Kingdom), The Neptunian Oak by Nathan Hoffman (Highlandville, MO), Happy Hour by Sarah Wilkinson (United Kingdom), and Hometown by Mandy Yourk (Panama City, FL).

Named in 2018 by TIME Magazine as one of 100 "World's Greatest Places," and recipient of the 2023 CODA Award for Collaboration of the Year, the UMA is the cornerstone of the CAA's Art In Public



Spaces Program and augments SWARA's mission of creating marine habitat and expanding fishery populations while providing enhanced creative, cultural, economic and educational opportunities for the benefit, education and enjoyment of residents, students and visitors in South Walton.

UMA sculptures are deployed with SWARA's existing

USACOA and FDEP permitted artificial reef projects that includes nine nearshore reefs located within one nautical mile of the shore in approximately 58 feet of water. The 2025 installation will join the 47 sculptures previously deployed on a one-acre permit patch of seabed off Grayton Beach State Park, further expanding the nation's first permanent underwater museum.

Deployment of the 2025 UMA sculptures is slated for Summer.

Project and sculpture sponsorships are available. Please contact Gabby Callaway at gabby@culturalartsalliance.com for details.

The Underwater Museum of Art is the first permanent underwater sculpture garden in

the U.S. Located in the Gulf of Mexico, off of Walton County, Florida. The museum lies at a depth of 58-feet and at a distance of .93-miles from the shore of Grayton Beach State Park. Each year, a juried selection of sculptural works, drawn from artists throughout the world, is installed in the underwater garden.

The sculptures quickly attract a wide variety of marine life and, over time, metamorphize into a living reef. This eco-tourism attraction not only entices art lovers and divers from around the country and around the globe, it provides a much-needed habitat for local marine life and fisheries as well as providing marine scientists, wildlife management professionals, ecologists, and students, with an opportunity to study marine life and measure the impact of artificial reef systems on the Gulf ecosystem.

mane and tail as they appear to flow with the ocean waters.

CONCRETION is a concrete and steel sculpture by artist William Braithwaite. Concretion will add an interesting architectural intervention in the Gulf, asking a question about the relationship of art, architecture and the natural world.

Readers may recognize Missouri-based artist Nathan Hoffman from his 2024 UMA sculpture

Poseidon's Throne. For the 2025 installation, Hoffman will create THE NEPTUNIAN OAK, a conduit for life and movement although being a representation of a dead and lifeless tree at its first landing on the ocean floor.

HAPPY HOUR by UK based artist Sarah Wilkinson is based on a margarita cocktail glass and provides the visiting divers with time to enjoy an oversized cocktail while diving the underwater museum site.

HOMETOWN by Panama City artist Mandy Yourick uses simple shapes to explore the multiple meanings of home. The inspiration for this sculpture is the site itself. The Gulf waters, specifically off the shore of Grayton Beach, which are home to Yourick. This is where she first learned to swim in open water and where she spent many years making memories with friends on the shore. As the sixth generation of her family to be born and raised in the Florida Panhandle, she has deep connections to the area and is committed to the longevity of its biodiversity. Yourick hopes this playful sculpture becomes a hometown for generations of marine life to come.



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# Next Generation Aircrew Protection Team Conducts AC-130J Vapor Purge Testing

CONTRIBUTED BY HURLBURT PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The Next Generation Aircrew Protection team performed innovative vapor purge testing on an AC-130J Ghost Rider gunship at Hurlburt Field from June 24 to December 6, 2024.

The NGAP team's mission is to evaluate how well standard aircraft systems protect aircrews from chemical vapor attacks, identify when it's safe to remove Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear gear; and determine how quickly aircraft can purge harmful chemical vapors. "With the evolving and ever-changing war environment, testing how quickly vapor can be purged from an aircraft, and how protective non-CBRN equipment can be is a key asset to every element of the Department of Defense," said Justin Sperling, an NGAP test engineer "This includes our special operators."

The NGAP team worked with the gunship aircrew to study the chemical environment inside the aircraft during a simu-



lated chemical vapor attack and measure the time it takes for the aircraft to purge the hazardous chemicals while flying.

NGAP has primarily tested fighter and bomber aircraft but the AC-130J marked a new direction, leading the way for future testing on mobility aircraft. "Air Force Special Operations Command is known for being the first to jump at innovative tactics, and working with the

NGAP team was no exception," noted Lt. Michael Rossi, Lead Joint CBRN Aircrew Protection Engineer at the Air Force CBRN Defense Systems Branch. "This directly contributes to development of next-generation

equipment and feeds into new concepts of legacy equipment."

The test begins with a pre-flight spray, followed by the installation of sensors and NGAP team members inside the aircraft to monitor the simulant vapor levels. Once a target concentration is reached the aircraft takes off and sensors continue



collecting data as the simulant is purged during flight.

After the test, the data is published in a report uploaded to the Defense Technical Information Center where it informs the development of CBRN protective gear and aircrew guidelines across the Department of Defense. "Without this information, we would have to rely on older assumptions that aren't representative of what the

threat is today," Rossi stated. "This information is helpful to AFSOC because it helps accurately plan for their CBRN op-

erations."

Understanding how quickly Airmen can safely remove chemical protective gear during a chemical attack reduces the burden on both the equipment and the aircrew, allowing them to focus on the mission, explained Sperling. "Seeing what wide-reaching effects a test like this has is the most rewarding part for me," Rossi explained. "This is going to make our aircrew more effective in flight while maintaining their safety."

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# Emerald Coast Classic Champions!

BY MIKE MAHON

## Alabama-Bay Bracket Title

Alabama used a balanced scoring attack and pressure defense to stop Clemson, 73-39, in the championship of the Bay Bracket in the inaugural Emerald Coast Classic women's basketball tournament in November.

Graduate guard Zaay Green, named the outstanding performer of the tournament, collected a game-high 17 points, six assists and two steals to lead the charge by the Crimson Tide.

She was joined on the all-tournament team by teammate Aaliyah Nye, a second-team all-SEC performer last year, who scored 14 points while dishing out four assists.

Guad Sarah Ashlee Barker, a preseason first team All-SEC selection, tallied 15 points while collecting a season-high five steals. Alabama sophomore forward Essence Cody, who also scored 15 points, grabbed a game-high nine rebounds.

Barker, held to just two points



in the first half on 1 of 8 shooting, exploded for 13 points in the second half. Alabama forced Clemson into 18 turnovers, while dominating the paint, outscoring Clemson, 42-20.

Alabama head coach Kelly

Curry praised local officials who hosted this inaugural tournament. "I've played in a lot of beach atmospheres and they have all been wonderful experiences," stated Curry. "But, I just feel like, number one, the qual-

ity of our host with Northwest Florida and the facility here is second to none. The ability to be right on the beach, is just a beautiful setting."

Can lightning strike twice for the Crimson Tide? The Alabama men played in the 2023 Emerald Coast Classic and then advanced to the 2024 NCAA Final Four.

Other members of the Bay Bracket All-Tournament team were Loyal McQueen, Clemson; Mia Moore, Clemson; and Maddie Walsh, UAB.

## Creighton-Beach Bracket Title

Morgan Maly and Lauren Jensen combined for 49 points, including 12 three-point baskets, igniting Creighton to an 86-59 victory past Syracuse in the championship of the Beach Bracket in the inaugural Emerald Coast Classic women's basketball tournament in November.

"We executed and the ball went in," said Creighton coach Jim Flanery. "Sometimes you might execute, but the ball

doesn't go in. When you shoot the ball as well as we did early, you kind of demoralize the opponent.

Creighton finished with 28 assists on 31 baskets, shooting 53.4 percent (31-58) from the floor. The Bluejays made 15 three-point baskets.

Maly, a senior forward, tallied 28 points, going a perfect 6-for-6 beyond the three-point arc.

Jensen scored 21 points, making all five of her three-point shots in the first half. It marked Jensen's 26th career 20-plus scoring game and Maly's 23rd career 20-plus scoring game.

Jensen was named the most outstanding player in the Beach Bracket and joined on the all-tournament team with Maly. Other members of the Beach Bracket All-Tournament team were Kyra Wood, Syracuse; Georgia Woolley, Syracuse; and Grace Slaughter, Missouri. Freshman reserve forward Keira Scott led Syracuse with 11 points. The Orange shot 35.1 percent (20-57) from the floor, while committing 18 turnovers.

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# It's Almost time for the 23rd Annual Seaside School™ Half Marathon + 5K!

Race registration presented by South Walton is now open for the SEASIDE SCHOOL™ Half Marathon + 5K Race Weekend held February 13-16, 2025 in beautiful Seaside, FL benefiting the Seaside School Foundation™

The Seaside School™ Half Marathon + 5K Race Weekend, presented by the Lauderdale Family of Frankie's Bike Shop and hosted by Seaside®, is returning for its 23rd running from February 13-16, 2025, in Seaside! Registration, presented by South Walton, is still open, inviting runners from around the world to participate in this iconic event.

The race weekend is more than just a run; it's a celebration of community, excellence, and a commitment to education. All proceeds directly benefit the Seaside School Foundation™, which supports the Seaside School™ – one of Florida's oldest and top-performing public charter schools. Since its inception, the race has become a paramount fundraiser for the Foundation, with 100% of proceeds going toward enriching the educational experiences of students at Seaside Neighborhood School™ and Seacoast Collegiate High School.

"The Seaside School™ Half Marathon + 5K is a cornerstone of our fundraising efforts, and the support we receive from participants, sponsors and the community is invaluable," said Teresa Horton, Executive Director of the Seaside School Foundation™. "This event not only raises crucial funds, but also brings together a diverse group of individuals who share a passion for education and community, making a lasting impact on the future of our students."

"It's not just about the race itself—runners and their families fill Seaside's Central Square, enjoying our shops and restaurants throughout the entire weekend," said Kevin Boyle, General Manager, Seaside Community Development Corporation. "What makes it even more special is that every race registration, ticket sold and silent auction item won raises funds for vital programs at the charter school, making a direct impact

on the students' education. Personally, after nearly 16 years of being a part of this incredible weekend, it's inspiring to see how it continues to be a milestone event for our community."

Race weekend kicks off on Friday, February 14th from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., with the highly anticipated Taste of the Race.

The excitement continues on Saturday, February 15th, with the Race Expo from 12-4 p.m. at Seaside Neighborhood School™, where runners can pick up their race packets and explore offerings from sponsors and vendors. Locals' Packet Pickup is Thursday, February 13th, from 3:30-7:30 p.m. at Seacoast Collegiate High School.

The main events take place on Sunday, February 16th, with the Half Marathon starting at 7 a.m. and the 5K at 7:30 a.m. along the iconic Scenic Highway 30A, offering breathtaking views of the Coastal Dune Lakes and picturesque communities. The race is US-ATF certified and serves as a qualifier for both the NYC and Chicago Marathons, making it a must-do for serious runners. The weekend concludes with an after-race party featuring entertainment, local food and beverages, and an awards ceremony to celebrate the participants' achievements.

"The philanthropic funds raised from this event are instrumental in supporting our mission to foster the success of every student, both academically and personally," said Dr. Tom Miller, Executive Director of the Seaside School™. "Through the dedication of our community and the impact of this race, we are able to provide our students with a personalized learning approach to prepare them for college and beyond."

The Seaside School™ Half Marathon has earned numerous accolades, including being ranked the #4 Flattest Half Marathon in the U.S. by USA Today Sports and recognized as one of the Best Seaside Road Races in the U.S. by Outside-Online.com. As one of the largest events on 30A, the race



draws over 12,000 attendees annually, making it a signature event in Northwest Florida.

The success of race weekend would not be possible without the dedication of over 500 volunteers, including students, teachers and parents from the Seaside School. "Their hard work and dedication make this event possible, and we are truly thankful for their commitment to our school and our mission," said Kim Mixson, Principal of Seaside Neighborhood School™.

Registration for the Seaside

School™ Half Marathon + 5K includes an exclusive gift from the Swag + Merch Sponsor, The Seaside Style™, a commemorative race medal and t-shirt with artwork from renowned local

artist, Billie Gaffrey, and much more. Special discounts are available for military personnel, first responders and educators. [RunSeasideFL.com](http://RunSeasideFL.com).

# What Version of You Will You Be?



By STEPHENIE CRAIG,  
JOURNEY BRAVELY

It's easier to be loving and

kind when you agree and have things in common with others. But, what happens when you're sitting around the table and someone shares an opinion wildly different than yours? Or, what happens when someone you don't really know expresses ideas counterintuitive to your beliefs or values? What happens when someone is rude and critical of your thoughts and beliefs? What version of yourself shows up in that moment?



Culture currently encourages polarized thought and cutting people out of your life when you disagree. News and social media feed the narrative of each person having freedom to do and say what they want regardless of how it impacts others. And, legally, in most cases you do have that freedom. However, it might be wise to take a moment to reflect on who you want to be regarding your long-term character goals.

When you get to the end of life, how do you want to have shown up in the world? Do you want to be known for what you were against or what you were for? Do you want to be known for being right or for having healthy relationships? Do you want to be known for making people feel

small or lifting people up?

So, in a world with so many conflicting perspectives, how do you become a loving, mature version of yourself?

## 8 Ways to Engage Your Loving, Mature Version of Self

**Investigate value origins.** Values originate from sources including family of origin, national origin, faith background, generational influences, trauma background, racial background, ethnic background, media influences, political background, life experience, and many others. Reflect on the tapestry of your own values background. Remember the above variables have many expressions that have shaped another's values.

**Consider different does not equal less.** When surrounded by others who hold similar views to your own, you can assume people with different views/values/attitudes are less righteous, less intelligent, less moral, less patriotic, less religious, have less inherent worth, and are generally less than you.

Viewing others as less leads to self-righteous posture that repels connection and relationship.

**Consider you don't have the corner on values definitions.** Values such as integrity, kindness, decency, morality, and freedom have various expressions. While it is important that values have some commonly agreed upon definitions, it can be helpful to remember defining values incredibly specifically assumes you are right and most everyone else is wrong.

**Hold fast to your values while making space for others.** Defining and living by your values is a healthy pursuit. And, remember that others are walking through the same process with different value backgrounds. You can be clear about what you believe while respecting the humanity of those with different views.

**Disagree with curiosity rather than judgment.** Knowing what you believe and living your life in open alignment with your values is good.

*Continued on page 30*



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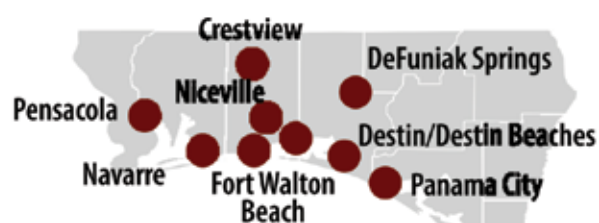


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 Wellness

# Is Sleep Apnea Keeping You Awake?

BY KELLY STALNAKER

Sleep apnea is a potentially dangerous sleep disorder in which breathing repeatedly starts and stops all night long. There are two common types of sleep apnea: obstructive and central. With obstructive, the muscles in the back of the throat relax too much, causing an obstruction and blocking the airway. Central, on the other hand, happens when the brain fails to control the muscles that are used to take in air. Symptoms of sleep apnea include loud or abnormal snoring, daytime sleepiness, irritability, depression and waking up tired even after a full night's sleep.

Sleep apnea is a common disorder around the world, affecting nearly 20% of the population. And according to the National Sleep Foundation, it has been reported that roughly 85% of individuals with sleep apnea do not even know they have it. This is an alarming statistic as there are numerous possible complications if it is left untreated, such as hypertension, heart disease, heart failure, stroke, cognitive/memory issues and more. Fortunately, getting a sleep apnea diagnosis is not difficult. After a thorough discussion and examination with your doctor, he or she will recommend



a sleep study. Sleep studies can be done in a lab, or even in the comfort of your own bed!

Treatment options for sleep apnea have improved over the last several years and are now more comfortable and accessible. Lifestyle changes, such as getting regular activity, limiting caffeine and alcohol, quitting smoking, and losing weight, can help treat obstructive sleep apnea. But, if further interven-

tion is required, oral devices and surgical implants are now available. And the more commonly used CPAP machine has also evolved significantly. Considered the “gold standard” of sleep apnea treatment, a CPAP machine is designed to regulate breathing during sleep. It uses a system of tubing and a facemask to gently blow air and open up your airway while you sleep. CPAP machines are now

much smaller, about the size of a tissue box. And much quieter, too. Your spouse could possibly still hear the machine, but it will likely be quieter than the alternative—snoring! Hundreds of facemasks are now available for the CPAP machines, increasing patient comfort and ease of use.

If you think you might be suffering from sleep apnea, do not delay in getting treatment! Talk with your doctor right away. And, if you're prescribed a CPAP machine, stop by and see us at J&B Medical to get the process started. Even if your doctor sends your prescription to another company, we can still help you as you have the final say

in your healthcare. There are so many benefits to having a local provider; we handle everything in-house, from acquiring the necessary medical documentation to billing and preparing orders. And, best of all, we are available here in the office or by phone every Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m., and we're currently accepting new Medicare and Tricare patients! The benefits of CPAP treatment on your quality of life are immeasurable as it is hard to determine the true value of a good night's sleep. You'll have more energy, focus, stamina and overall better health once your sleep apnea is well controlled.



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# Healing in Harmony: Acupuncture's Role in Modern Medicine



BY DR. KAREN DEVORE

In the story of the tortoise and the hare, there's a lesson we often overlook—the power of steady, patient progress over quick, short-lived victories. True wellness, much like the journey of the tortoise, is about a measured approach. Acupuncture, which has been practiced for thousands of years, aligns with this principle, offering a way to support the body's natural healing processes through slow, purposeful adjustments. It's a reminder that lasting health isn't achieved overnight, but cultivat-

ed over time.

Acupuncture, in its traditional form, works by targeting specific energy pathways, or meridians, within the body. These meridians are thought to carry "chi," or vital energy, and when they become blocked or disrupted, physical symptoms often arise. The careful placement of needles along these pathways reestablishes flow, reducing inflammation and pain, and promoting harmony within the body. In this way, acupuncture doesn't just address surface symptoms but fosters an inner balance that can profoundly support the body's resilience and overall health.

While traditional acupuncture is widely known, the field has evolved to include specialized techniques like Neuro-Acupuncture. Neuro-Acupuncture focuses on conditions that affect the central nervous system, such as stroke recovery, nerve pain, and various neurological disorders and diseases. By blending traditional acupuncture meth-

ods with insights from neurology, Neuro-Acupuncture can help restore functionality in ways that complement conventional treatments. Having studied this technique extensively across the globe and in some of China's most prestigious hospitals, Dr. Lisa Forsythe, Tortoise Clinic's Acupuncture Physician, witnessed its transformative potential. This type of acupuncture integrates Eastern philosophy with Western medical understanding, offering patients an evidence-based approach to address complex neurological challenges.

Today, acupuncture is recognized as a valuable therapeutic modality across some of the world's top institutions, including Johns Hopkins and Sloan Kettering, where it's used alongside conventional treatment protocols. Studies have demonstrated its safety and effectiveness, particularly for pain management, stress reduction, and immune support. For patients dealing with chronic conditions

or those recovering from illness or injury, acupuncture offers a natural, non-invasive way to aid in the body's recovery process and enhance the effects of traditional medical treatments.

At the Tortoise Clinic, we take a holistic approach, recognizing that true health lies in addressing the root causes of imbalance. Alongside acupuncture, we offer an extensive dispensary with customized Chinese medicine herbal formulas and medical grade supplements to further support the body's natural defenses. These herbal therapies work in tandem with acupuncture, nourishing the body from within and offering additional support to systems under stress.

Acupuncture isn't a quick fix; it's a commitment to a path of healing. Each session builds on the previous one, gradual-



ly promoting equilibrium and resilience in the body. Like the tortoise's journey, acupuncture's effects unfold gradually, each treatment moving us closer to a balanced, sustainable state of well-being.

I invite those who are curious to explore this path and learn more about what acupuncture has to offer. In a world often focused on fast solutions, acupuncture offers an opportunity to step back and engage with our health in a meaningful, enduring way—one that prioritizes the journey as much as the destination.

## WELLNESS IS A MARATHON, *not a sprint.*

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 Wellness



# Out with the Old and In with the New

2026? Or 2030?

“The decisions we make today are an investment into our tomorrows.”

May I suggest that we start with an attitude of gratitude?

I am grateful to live here on the Emerald Coast, a place of beautiful beaches, delicious restaurants and a vibrant growing community.

I am grateful for my family, my faithful best friend and husband David, my beautiful talented daughter Jennica, and our son-in-love John, for my dear friends that are there through the thick and thin in situations in life.

I am grateful for our comfortable heated and air-conditioned home on a quiet road with good neighbors, our friendly dogs and my feathered friends, my hens.

BY DR. JESSICA MONTELEONE, PT PhD

It hardly seems possible that another year has come and gone. This is a time that many may make plans to adjust current calendars to embark for a more excellent next year... for better use of time, investing in relationships with God and others, our minds and our bodies to perform at peek at what we do. So, where do we want to be in



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I am grateful for rewarding employment where I can invest in the lives of others that they may have a more pain free and vibrant life, to help keep them at home rather than being confined to an institution.

I am grateful for my relationship with Jesus Christ and a church home at Vision Church where sound doctrine and the love of Christ pours through the lives of those who preach, teach, activate and attend there.

I am grateful for this strong body and keen mind used to impart to myself and others.

I am grateful that I have discipline to write out a daily calendar and stick to it to make the most of my days.

I am grateful for my positive personality and the ability to show kindness and love to myself and others that are placed in my path.

I am grateful for this new administration that desires to make

America healthy again.

What will I change for this New Year? Probably, not much. I am living today as an investment into tomorrow. Do you need changes in your life? Start with an attitude of gratitude, then make time for the important things in life.

Have a happy healthy 2025 and let us know how we can help to make the most out of your today—living each and every day for the health of it.

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## WHAT VERSION

*continued from page 27*

When interacting with someone who holds conflicting ideas, try suspending judgment and asking curious questions about how they developed their perspective. Openness to others' life experiences often results in growth for the listener and we all have room to grow.

**Focus more on your character than on the conflicting values.** Acknowledge the conflict of values while asking yourself what character you want to exhibit toward other humans. Allow your character goals to lead as you engage conflicting values rather than allowing the values conflict to lead your character.

**Engage boundaries before ending relationship.** If

values conversations get heated or disrespectful, try suggesting avoidance of the topic to preserve the relationship or refuse to participate in conversations that feel hostile. Ending relationships can be necessary at times when boundaries are continuously disrespected, however, working through boundaries communication first helps preserve relationship in many cases.

**View people with differ-**

**ent values as a challenge to grow rather than as villains.** When we define others as villains, we give energy to feeling resentful and disempowered. When we define others as a challenge to grow, we give energy to expanding our emotional and behavioral capacities both in immediate interactions with those who challenge us and beyond into many other areas of life.

Remember to give yourself and others compassion and patience as you evaluate and grow in showing up as a loving, mature version of yourself in the world. The discomfort of growth most often results in widespread positive life change over time. Connect with us as [Journeybravely.com](http://Journeybravely.com) for counseling and coaching support along your journey.

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# The Correlation Between Dementia and Exercise: A Path to Better Brain Health



By KASSIA GARFIELD, OWNER, MAXSTRENGTH FITNESS, NICEVILLE

The more that modern medicine continues to advance, there is a strong link between a lack of exercise and the risk of dementia. Dementia, a general term for a decline in cognitive ability severe enough to interfere with daily life, affects millions of people worldwide. Alzheimer's disease is the most common form. But, as most people know, dementia varies amongst people. While there is no cure for dementia, research has consistently shown that certain lifestyle choices can help reduce the risk



or delay its onset. One of the most promising interventions is regular physical exercise.

### How Exercise Affects the Brain

Exercise has a variety of physical benefits, such as improving cardiovascular health, managing weight, strengthening muscles and reducing injury. Exercise is not just for the body, but also the brain. When you exercise, blood flow to the brain increases, delivering more oxygen and nutrients, which can help support healthy brain function. More specifically, physical activity promotes the growth of new brain cells in the area critical for memory and learning.

### Exercise and Dementia Risk

A study published in The

Lancet found that physical inactivity is a major modifiable risk factor for dementia. The key here is "modifiable," which means controllable. Not genetic, but LIFESTYLE changes. The study indicated that engaging in regular exercise could potentially reduce the risk of developing dementia by up to 30%. In comparison, the bottom 10% of exercisers, or sedentary people, have almost double the risk of dementia onset.

Research also suggests that exercise can protect brain cells from damage and reduce the formation of plaques, a hallmark of Alzheimer's disease. There are other factors that can help reduce the risk of dementia, like decreased inflammation in the body and improving vascular health, both achieved by exercise.

### Exercise as a Treatment for Dementia

Exercise's benefits also carry over to improving the quality of life for individuals already living with the condition. For those with mild cognitive impairment or early-stage dementia, exercise can slow the progression of cognitive decline. Regular physical activity has been shown to im-

prove mood, reduce anxiety and depression, and enhance physical function. Strength training specifically can improve a sense of independence and well-being in those affected.

A study conducted by researchers at the University of British Columbia found that individuals with Alzheimer's disease who participated in regular aerobic exercise showed significant improvements in memory and overall cognitive function compared to those who did not exercise. These findings underscore the potential of exercise not only as a preventative measure, but also as a therapeutic intervention for people with dementia.

### The Types of Exercise Most Beneficial for Brain Health

While all forms of exercise offer benefits, some are particularly well-suited for promoting brain health. Strength training exercises, such as weightlifting or resistance band workouts, have also been shown to be effective for maintaining cognitive function by enhancing brain plasticity and supporting overall brain structure.

Additionally, aerobic exercise

and activities that engage both the body and the mind, like yoga and tai chi, are beneficial for dementia prevention and management. These practices combine physical movement with mental focus and have been shown to improve balance, flexibility, and mood, while also reducing stress—factors that contribute to brain health.

### Conclusion

The link between dementia and exercise is clear: regular physical activity plays a crucial role in both preventing cognitive decline and improving the lives of those affected by dementia. By increasing blood flow to the brain, encouraging neurogenesis, and reducing inflammation, exercise supports brain health in numerous ways. For individuals looking to reduce their dementia risk or manage symptoms, incorporating exercise into daily routines can be one of the most effective and accessible strategies for promoting long-term cognitive well-being. If you need help getting into a good exercise routine, MaxStrength Fitness of Niceville can help! We provide all one-on-one personal strength training. Give us a call! **850-373-4450**.



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 Wellness

# Health Rants



BY KAY LEAMAN, HEALTH ARCHITECT, HEALTHYDAY HEALTHYLIFE

Hello to fall, holidays, family, friends and events. I hope yours are fun, memorable and healthy.

The word health is a condition of being sound in body, mind and spirit. It is also a condition in which someone or something is thriving or doing well. With that in mind, what does healthy mean to you?

Here are some questions I thought of to ask: Is my family healthy? Are my relationships healthy? Is my home healthy? Is my work environment healthy? Are my pets healthy? Is my daily schedule healthy? Are my choices healthy? Is my town, city, county, state or nation healthy?

I'm not one for resolutions and overwhelm doesn't suit me either. However, I do ponder the fact that having a safe and healthy environment is up to

me. We choose to say yes or no, choose to participate or not, choose to make a difference. We choose our level of healthy every day.

How can we make our family and relationships healthier? Some thoughts that come to mind is working on the attitude we convey when we speak, especially if we are irritated, tired or disagree with a current task or situation. Take time to listen, support, agree to disagree or stay silent until we can speak with sincerity. Take time to have fun together, hang out to connect and listen to each other, go on new adventures, etc. There is so much we can 'do.' The most important thing is our commitment to be a part of the solution. Sometimes, when we are dealing with difficult people, our only choice is to love them anyway. This stuff isn't easy, but it is worth it. We'll also never be perfect; so, don't forget to add some grace for ourselves and others while we journey through this amazing life.

Having a healthy home is dependent on what's in our home. If you have man-made fiber rugs, curtains, bedding, etc., consider replacing them gradually with natural fibers (wool, jute, cotton, silk, hemp, linen). Exchange cleaning products to

healthier options: vinegar, baking soda, borax, plant-based soaps, etc. are great alternatives. Open windows as often as you can to allow the gases from these man-made fabrics to escape. Furniture and vinyl flooring have chemicals as well. Decreasing the toxic load of what's in our homes can make a big difference. This also includes clothing, cosmetics, lotions, potions, candles, etc.

We love our pets! They love us unconditionally and no one can wag their tale and offer us the joy they show when we come home after being gone. Moving from 'dead food' to 'live food' can make a huge difference. I have a vegan friend who cooks for her dogs. When she has their blood tested, it shows that they have a strong immunity system and do not need ANY vaccines. That being said, improving what we feed them can improve their lives (This goes for us, too!).

I have been working on a healthy schedule for a while now. Scheduling "me" time (to read, exercise, pamper, meditate, pray, etc.) has proven to be difficult. So, because the stress in my life has caused a



few health issues, my choices of how and what I schedule needs to change. I am so grateful for a healthy family life that keeps me grounded and allows me to make the changes necessary for a healthier 2025 and beyond.

This past year has had an extraordinary amount of goings on, positive and negative. Americans come from every nation, culture and color. We are a melting pot with all different beliefs, experiences, and thoughts. The one thing that binds us together is our desire for freedom. America is the greatest success experiment of all time. People who flee oppression come

here for a chance to be free. My family tree shows we came from Germany. I have a letter my grandpa kept from a family member in Germany talking about the devastation of Hitler's rein. It was their strength and decision to survive that brought them through. This takes hope and courage.

I guess the health of this nation is at the forefront of my thoughts these days. We, as Americans, have a part to play in the health of this nation. If everyone does their part where they're planted, change will happen. We don't have to always agree in order to lock arms and stand for what we cherish most, our right to be free in mind, body and spirit.

I am grateful every day for being able to live here, for the friends I've made, the leaders who lead us and the possibilities for tomorrow. I hope you have a fun and memorable holiday season filled with surprises and hope. Embrace the challenges this season brings and laugh more; it reduces stress.

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# Eglin Federal Credit Union Infuses \$1.9 Million Into the Community Through Local Nonprofits

Eglin Federal Credit Union has donated \$1.9 million into the community through local nonprofits. Monetary donations were made to the Air Force Enlisted Village, Children in Crisis, Emerald Coast Fitness Foundation, Fisher House of the Emerald Coast, Fresh Start for Children and Families, Habitat for Humanity of Okaloosa County, Habitat for Humanity of Walton County, Okaloosa Public Schools Foundation, the Southeastern Credit Union Foundation and the United Way Emerald Coast.



Eglin Federal Credit Union infuses \$1.9 million into the community through local nonprofits.

“Eglin Federal Credit Union is very excited to be able to make this investment in our community,” said President/CEO of Eglin Federal Credit Union Cathie Staton. “Our Charitable Donation Account performed well, allowing us to make such a significant contribution. The intention of the distribution is to satisfy needs within our community that align with Eglin FCU’s Mission, Vision and Values, while making a positive impact on the communities where our members live, work, worship or attend school.”

Projects the donation will help fund:

**1. Air Force Enlisted Village** – benefits our nation’s heroes and defenders

A contribution toward the design of Victory Village, a blended military senior living community in Shalimar, near Eglin AFB and Hurlburt Field, comprised of wounded warriors and their caregivers, the surviving spouses of retired enlisted Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Airmen, and Guardians, and retired enlisted couples

**2. Children in Crisis** – impacts lives of vulnerable children and families

The creation of a thrift store and transit vehicles

**3. Emerald Coast Fitness Foundation** – provides facilities and programs for youth, teens, the disabled, and seniors in our area who use pools for life safety skills, exercise, competition and rehabilitation

Capital improvements  
Kids Water Safety Campaign

**4. Fisher House of the Emerald Coast** – provides

military families with a home away from home at Eglin AFB, keeping them together during treatment of serious illness or therapy

Capital improvements  
**5. Fresh Start for Children and Families** – helps homeless families with children obtain self-sufficiency

A storage facility next door to their office building at 10 Bobolink St.

**6. Habitat for Humanity of Okaloosa County** – helps provide affordable housing by bringing people together to build homes, communities and hope in Okaloosa County

The construction and completion of two homes in Crestview.

**7. Habitat for Humanity of Walton County** – helps

provide affordable housing by bringing people together to build homes, communities and hope in Walton County

Contribution toward the completion of Hope Village Neighborhood, the first Habitat for Humanity neighborhood in DeFuniak Springs, Walton County

A Restore of Walton County Delivery Truck

**8. Okaloosa Public Schools Foundation** – ensures those students who are motivated and able to go to college have the financial resources to do so

Take Stock in Children scholarship program – college scholarships and mentoring

**9. The Southeastern Credit Union Foundation** – helps further the impact of Di-

saster Relief Funds for necessities like food, water, shelter, and more, providing support for immediate and long-term recovery

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**10. United Way Emerald Coast** – helps further the efforts for serving and supporting Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed individuals (ALICE)

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# New Year's Resolutions: A Journey of Renewal for 2025



BY PASTOR DOUG STAUFFER

On December 31, the clock strikes midnight, and one second later, we step into 2025. Many hearts will be full of hope, eyes fixed on the horizon. Like every new year, the coming year brings a fresh slate, a chance to start again, grow and live more purposefully. But how often do our New Year's resolutions fade as quickly as they are made? This year, let's aim higher. What if our resolutions were not just about temporary change, but were rooted in eternal truth?

## God's Vision for Renewal

The Bible reminds us that change is not just possible—God promises change. “Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Cor-

inthians 5:17). In Christ, the old—our mistakes, regrets and failures—are swept away, and we are made new! This divine renewal serves as the best foundation for our goals.

When we lean on God, the Bible reminds us that transformation is attainable. “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Philippians 4:13) isn't just a cliché; it's a declaration. This year, let's anchor our resolutions in God's strength, not our own or that of others.

## Resolutions That Matter Most

Here are five key areas where I believe we can align our aspirations with God's purpose:

**Spiritual Growth:** Why not deepen your connection with the Creator this year? Resolve to pray daily, immerse yourself in scripture, and seek opportunities to serve others. The intimacy you will build with God will transform your life and all those within your sphere of influence.

**Physical Health:** The Believer's body serves as a temple of God (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Caring for it serves as an act of worship. Set realistic goals for movement, rest, and nourishment—honoring God through

stewarding His gift of health.

**Mental and Emotional Well-being:** “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life” (Proverbs 4:23). Guard your mind and heart by meditating on God's word, finding support for struggles, and seeking peace that surpasses understanding.

**Relationships:** Our faith thrives in community relationships. This year, let's resolve to forgive more freely, love more deeply, and invest time in relationships that reflect Christ's love.

**Financial Stewardship:** Proverbs 3:9-10 calls us to “Honour the Lord with thy substance.” Create a budget that prioritizes generosity, responsibility and faith. Your giving could fundamentally impact lives.

## Practical Steps for a Meaningful Year

- Start each day with a devotional or scripture memory challenge.

- Begin a “Gratitude Journal” that reminds you of God's daily provisions and blessings.

Schedule time to reconnect with loved ones or mentor someone in faith.

- Commit to eating better, moving more and resting well.



- Track your finances and pray over your spending choices; not just some spending, but all of it.

## A Year of Purpose & Hope

Let's approach 2025 not with fleeting ambition, but with a deep resolve to glorify God in every aspect of our lives. Meaningful change starts with Him—He's the author of transformation, the source of our strength and the reason for hope.

So, as you pen your resolutions, pray over them. Dream big. Trust God for the journey ahead. This could be the year when you step into the abundant life He's prepared for you.

## The Greatest Resolution

Let your greatest resolution be to seek God with all your heart. When you do, God promises that everything else falls into place. “But seek ye first the king-

dom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” (Matthew 6:33)

Think of the calendar as representing the pages of your life. January 1, 2025, marks a new opportunity to focus on faith, hope and renewal. Start or continue an unforgettable journey with God at your helm. All of us probably remember the license plates, “God is my co-pilot.” Change your perspective from God is your co-pilot to God is your pilot!

This renewed perspective shifts the focus from us being in control (with God merely assisting) to God controlling entirely as we surrender to Him. When God pilots your life, you recognize His authority, trust His perfect wisdom and depend on His guidance and timing. Let go of the steering wheel and let God chart your course and direct your ways. **Happy New Year!**




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# Sean of the South: New Year



BY SEAN DIETRICH

The misperception about New Year's is that it's supposed to be a happy occasion. Sort of like Christmas. Or a birthday party.

But it's not Christmas. New Year's represents the end of something. And goodbyes are not joyous.

New Year's is also a beginning. Beginnings are not entirely happy affairs, either. Beginnings are frightening. You have no idea what you're in for. Could be good. Could be bad.

This year your wife could win the lottery. And when you get home, she might scream, "We won the lottery, honey! Pack your bags!"

"What?" you might reply. "Should I pack for the beach or the mountains?"

"I don't care!" she might answer. "Just pack your bags and get out of my house!"

Sometimes the worst news you can get is good news.

In many ways, last year was a rough one. Six of my close

friends died. I was a pallbearer twice. That wasn't happy.

But last year was also a year I accumulated new friends.

It all started when I adopted a blind dog. Which I wrote about in this column. Which led to me getting invited to schools for the blind.

I spoke at the Helen Keller Art Show. There, I met Henrietta, who has blindness due to a mitochondrial disease. She has practically grown up in hospitals. One of the happiest people I know. "I'm not fearless," Henrietta said. "I'm brave. There's a difference."

I learned how to use a white cane in the hallways of the Calhoun School for the Deaf and Blind. Whereupon a little blind girl traced my face with her little hands and sang "You Are So Beautiful."

I visited Alabama Institute for the Blind and Deaf, where a little boy felt my face, and said,

"Will you hug me so I know what you feel like?"

I met a cheerful 17-year-old girl named Morgan. We were at the Service Dogs Alabama training facility.

Morgan has paralysis on the left side of her body, frequent seizures, diabetes. She has low vision, and is blind in one eye. Today, she is a freshman at UAB.

Totally independent, thanks to Clarabelle, the black Lab who has saved her life on more than one occasion.

I'll never forget when Morgan squeezed my hand and said, "You have a choice to be happy or sad. And each moment you must consciously make that choice."

I inherited a blind goddaughter named Becca.

I met a kid named Owen, who came to one of my shows. He underwent brain surgery that separates the left from the right hemisphere. He hugged me and said, "You're shorter than I thought."

I met a young woman who is blind, who was a national Braille reading champion. She held my hands and in a happy voice, said, "You're officially one of us now."

In only one year, I was sort of welcomed into the Blind and Deaf community. I have no idea

how this happened. Or why. And I don't know what it means.

But I know one thing. And this one thing was told to me by a young man who could not see, hear, or speak. Our conversation was translated by a tactile sign language interpreter.

He said to me, "When I first went blind, I told my mom that this is not the end, Mom. This is just the beginning of an adventure."

And I can't think of better words to begin the new year.



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Arts & Music

# Emerald Coast Music Alliance Foundation Announces 9th Annual Music Festival with Renowned Lineup

## Celebrated Musicians | Free Concerts | January 12-19

Northwest Florida will come alive with the sounds of classical music this January as the Emerald Coast Music Alliance Foundation (ECMAF) hosts its 9th Annual Music Festival from January 12-19, 2024. This year's festival promises an unforgettable celebration of music, featuring performances by internationally acclaimed artists led by Musical Director Alon Goldstein, a celebrated Carnegie Hall pianist.



Joining Goldstein is an impressive lineup of virtuoso musicians, including:

- NeoArt Piano Duo
- Medehlan Duo (piano & violin)
- Amit Peled and the Peabody Cello Gang of Johns Hopkins Music Conservatory
- Eleni Katz on bassoon
- Matt Fitzsimmons, a trombonist with the U.S. Navy Band

Throughout the festival, EC-

MAF musicians will complete 50-60 performances, engaging audiences through interactive dialogue and hands-on experiences with their instruments. The performances will take place in local schools, senior centers, and organizations serving disadvantaged or disabled individuals, making classical music accessible to a broad range of communities.

In addition to these commu-



nity performances, the ECMAF will present two free public concerts, open to all:

- January 16:** Fort Walton Beach Civic Center, 6 p.m. sponsored by AnchorsGordon Law
- January 17:** Crosspoint

Church, Niceville, 6 p.m. sponsored by Bayou Mechanical and Judy & Carey Huff

Seating is limited, and free tickets will be available for reservation through the ECMAF website beginning in January. "The Emerald Coast Music



Alliance Foundation is passionate about preserving and sharing the beauty of classical music," said an ECMAF spokesperson. "By engaging directly with audiences, especially in underserved communities, we create moments of inspiration and deeper connections through music."

The ECMAF is a 501c3 organization funded by generous donations of organizations and individuals. Learn more about supporting our mission at <https://www.emeraldcoastmusic.org/supportthemission.html>

For more information or to reserve tickets, visit <https://emeraldcoastmusic.org>.



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# Writing Off into the Sunset: Destin Word Weavers Brings Authors Together

Everyone loves a story, especially a tale they can cry about, bleed with, or laugh at. Anyone who can tell such a story will have their face carved onto the mountain of immortality. Just ask Ernest Hemingway, William Shakespeare, or Theodor Seuss Geisel (author of the Dr. Seuss books). Do you dream of writing stories that will live in people's hearts?

Literature is human. Fiction or non-fiction, humor or tragedy, prose or poetry: we all want to communicate. Did you know there are local friends helping each other write well?

Groups of Christian writers work together on the craft of writing called "Word Weavers." One such group is here on the Emerald Coast. Meeting monthly in Niceville, the Destin Word Weavers meet to listen to one another's works and give

positive critiques and encouragement.

The members range from amateurs to published authors and publishers, all from various walks of life. The genres they represent include non-fiction, mystery, humor, memoir, devotional, biographical, fiction and poetry. With mutual respect and finely tuned skills, they edit, correct, and inspire one another.

Most of the members are Christians who attend various churches including Catholic, Protestant, Charismatic, and non-denominational.

Alice Murray currently leads the Destin Word Weavers Chapter. She is an author of an annotated Agatha Christie book and she's had several jokes published in Reader's Digest. Numerous magazines have published her articles. The group meets on the second Saturday morning of

each month at 9:30 a.m. in the Crosspoint Church, Bluewater Bay Campus, 214 Partin Drive S, Niceville, Florida, 32578. The next meeting is on December 14th.

All kinds of people participate in the Destin Word Weavers group. Freeport resident Paul Renfroe has written a theological series, while Dave Holland has published a series of devotionals based on the Gospel of Luke. Susan Neal writes books fostering good health and maturity while she also leads the Christian Indie Publishing Association (CIPA.Podia.com). Jud Stone, our chaplain, writes histories of great Christians who are little known.

You can join our hearty band of writers, poets, Bible commentators, and historians. Whether it's a legacy for your family or the next blockbuster,



Word Weavers members who recently received various writing awards at the Blue Lake Writers Conference.

you are welcome in the Destin Word Weavers! We convene the second Saturday morning of each month at 9:30 in the Crosspoint Church, Bluewater Bay Campus, 214 Partin Drive S, Niceville.

You can learn more about the Word Weavers at <https://>

[word-weavers.com/](https://word-weavers.com/). For more information, please call Dave Holland at 970-691-9017 or email at [davidvholland54@gmail.com](mailto:davidvholland54@gmail.com).

Word Weavers members who recently received various writing awards at the Blue Lake Writers Conference.

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Arts & Music

# Virtuoso Voices Scholarship Fundraiser Feb. 22

By LISA CYR

The Choctaw Bay Music Club of Niceville is excited to invite you to the Virtuoso Voices 21st Annual Scholarship Fundraiser Brunch on Saturday, February 22nd at Crosspoint United Methodist Church, 214 Partin Dr. South, Niceville, in the Fellowship Hall beginning at 11:30 a.m.

Virtuoso Voices Scholarship Fundraiser along with the Jan Miller Studio Artists of the Pensacola Opera will present an engaging theatrical show by their talented artists in residency with professional singing and acting for most all ages to enjoy. The money raised is for the worthy cause of supporting our upcoming musically talented youth in their endeavors to develop into fine musicians for generations to come.

Virtuoso Voices is fun filled

with attention grabbing singing, drama, laughter, live music, comedy and emotion, to lift your heart and spirit. The artists in residence share the story line behind each song to actively engage the listener before they perform. Last year, \$10,000 was awarded to deserving students for college, high school senior awards and summer music camp scholarships.

This years' theme centers around the show "Pagliacci." Pagliacci (the main character) tells the story of Canio, a jealous actor leading a traveling theater troupe, who discovers his wife Nedda is having an affair with a man named Silvio and, in a fit of rage, murders them both on stage during a performance, blurring the lines between his real life and the play he is acting in. The title translates to "Clowns" in Italian, highlight-



ing the tragic irony of a clown's personal life being so painful.

A fun raffle will be held during the first part of the event and winners are announced/presented towards the end. Lo-

cal businesses and private donors contribute a variety of raffle items such as gift cards, wine, fine chocolates, artwork, interior decor, personal services and event tickets. Raffle tickets are (1

for \$1, 7 for \$5, 15 for \$10) and will be for sale (cash or personal check) during the luncheon.

Please join us at Virtuoso Voices for an exceptional experience of theatre, singing, food, and fun that's designed for all ages to enjoy as we support our local young aspiring musicians.

Tickets are \$40 for adults and \$25 for students and may be reserved/purchased by calling or texting Karen or Phillip LeGrand at 850.527.4200 or 850.855.0068. Tickets may also be purchased online at EventBrite <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/virtuoso-voices-brunch-scholarship-fundraiser-tickets-1112614492899?aff=oddtcreator>. For more information, visit the club's website under the events tab at [www.ChoctawBay-MusicClub.org](http://www.ChoctawBay-MusicClub.org)



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## Niceville's Hidden Gem: Artful Things Niceville!

By SHARE NORVILLE, ARTFUL THINGS NICEVILLE OWNER

Have you driven through Niceville and noticed the sign for Artful Things Niceville gallery, and have not found the time to stop in for a visit? Well, here is your invitation to take that time, come in and see our locally curated fine art, custom framing options and name brand art supplies.

Our management, staff and volunteers are local artists, ar-

tisans and published authors. While this is a labor of love for the art community, our main goal is to provide inspiration to our surrounding community, as well as exposure and opportunity to create. Artful Things Niceville currently boasts 60+ participating vendors and consigners. Most weekdays, you can visit with gallery member artists who are creating in their studio space.

*Continued on next page*

**EC TC**  
emerald coast theatre company

More Info and Tickets:  
[www.emeraldcoasttheatre.org](http://www.emeraldcoasttheatre.org)

**ARTFUL THINGS**

*continued from previous page*

We offer small and individual classes in various mediums that are taught by accomplished artists. Whether your interest is piqued by contemporary trends or wanting to understand a traditional modality, please talk with us. We will do our very best to put you in touch with a teacher either here at the gallery or in the community.

I purchased Artful Things Niceville in 2019. I took what the previous owners had started and embroidered it by adding additional classes, artists, expanding the art supply and creating the community hub.

In November, the gallery held a Small Business Saturday sale and in December an Open House Saturday that in-



cluded artist giveaways, deeply discounted art supplies, artist discounts, light refreshments and as usual, a specific local non-profit benefitted from sales.

Weekly, sometimes multiple times a week, people stop in who have newly discovered us and are surprised at how large an inventory we carry. We invite you to visit our website, [www.ArtfulThingsNiceville.com](http://www.ArtfulThingsNiceville.com)

where you can also sign up for our monthly newsletter. Hard copies are always available in store.

Yes, we are tooting our own horn and proudly sharing with you that the Valparaiso - Niceville Chamber of Commerce recently called us "Niceville's hidden gem!"

Business hours are Tuesday through Friday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Appointments are available upon request. Find us on Facebook and Instagram as Artful Things Niceville.

See YOU at the gallery!  
1087 John Sims Parkway East, Niceville  
850-729-2600  
[NicevilleArt@gmail.com](mailto:NicevilleArt@gmail.com)

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