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A Veteran's Call to Serve Again: Angel Force Brings Safety and Leadership to Local Schools

BY MICHELLE RUSCHMAN

One of the most important missions we have as a nation is to ensure that our children, teachers, administrators, and the support staff in our schools can focus on education without the distraction of feeling unsafe. Retired veteran Joshua Yirkovsky was inspired to start his private protection company, Angel Force Protection, and his nonprofit organization, Angel Force Foundation, when he saw firsthand what can happen when a school day is halted to deal with an intruder.

"In 2024, I was in the car lane waiting to pick up my kids from a private Christian school. I looked up to see a vagrant pulling on the doors, insisting to be let in, thinking it was the church. He was agitated and using foul language, and I could see the students and teachers through the door, clearly scared, trying to handle it on their own. With my sons being in there, I knew we needed a solution. That was the seed for Angel Force Pro-



tection and Angel Force Foundation."

The business and the foundation are two sides of the same coin. The business employs military veterans to become Angel Guards, primarily for schools. The other focuses on providing children, their families, and educators with resources that are "dedicated to advancing school safety through proactive education and comprehensive initiatives." This includes programs like Future Leaders Academy and safety seminars. They also

conduct fundraisers so schools have the resources to utilize the instruction and protective services they need to equip their students and staff.

"Schools don't have to use our services, but we do want them to have the option of having safety personnel on-site without worrying about where the backing is coming from."

As a retired 21-year member of the U.S. Navy, Joshua recognized that veterans may leave the career, but the military training, the desire to protect, and the passion to serve

are still part of their spirit. It's why they're so suited to protect the vulnerable.

"Our veterans need a sense of purpose. We served our country, and many of us are asking, 'Now what?' We have unique skills and the ability to adapt and overcome in the most adverse situations. We've been trained to be proactive and to see what bad guys look like with smiles on their faces. Being an Angel Guard can be the next chapter. I make sure each applicant is properly vetted, and they go through an extensive physical, emotional, and mental screening to make sure we're putting the right vet at the right school. When they get in there, something amazing happens. They become someone the kids can rely on, and they become part of that school family. Having an Angel Guard in place frees SROs to be part of the community again, which continues to add another layer of protection for

ANGEL FORCE

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A Hometown Holiday!



The holidays have arrived across Niceville, Bluewater Bay and throughout the Bay area, bringing twinkling lights, hometown parades, Christmas concerts, festive markets and family traditions old and new. Here's your guide to the season's can't-miss events!

HOLIDAY

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Community

ANGEL FORCE

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the village we're all a part of."

Not only is Joshua looking to secure the institutions that educate our children, but he wants the students who attend to have the skills to be effective citizens. Future Leaders Academy is his way of serving families, even after the child's school day is over. The lessons are age-appropriate, starting at the age of 7.

Junior Captains (Ages



7-9): Young leaders take part in fun, hands-on exercises like group discussions, decision-making games, and interactive lead-



ership challenges. The goal is to instill foundational habits of responsibility and expression.

Rising Stars (Ages 10-

12): Participants explore leadership through goal-setting activities, debates, and group projects. They'll learn to manage conflict, collaborate effectively, and lead small teams.

Teen Trailblazers (Ages 13-15): Teens take on leadership roles, practice public speaking, and develop strategic thinking in team-based projects. Ideal for teens preparing for leadership in school and community roles.

Young Visionaries (Ages 16-18): This advanced group

dives into case studies, community service projects, and mentorship experiences to refine leadership identity and prepare for future academic and career goals.

If you're interested in learning more about hiring Angel Force Protection or supporting Angel Force Foundation, go to www.angelfp.com and www.angelforcefoundation.org. Joshua Yirkovsky can also be reached by emailing info@angelfp.com or calling 904-436-3883.

HOLIDAY

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Dec. 1-Jan. 6

Geek Lights on the Corner

Shows every 30 minutes: 6-9:30 p.m. (Sun-Thu) & 6-10:30 p.m. (Fri, Sat & holiday eves)

Bluewater Blvd. & Antiqua Way, Bluewater Bay

Thousands of synchronized lights, towering displays and a custom soundtrack make this tech-savvy light show a must-see. Park, tune your radio to 101.3 FM and watch the 30-minute show dance across the house, mega-tree and arches. This season supports the Junior League of the Emerald Coast's Child Clothing Project, which outfits hundreds of local students with new clothes and supplies. Admission is free; donation boxes and QR codes on-site accept gifts for the charity. The show is powered by the technical and creative wizardry of Jeff Werner—the "Northwest Florida Geek"—and his "Spouse Peripheral," Wendy Werner. Jeff

writes the weekly tech Q&A column It's Geek to Me, featured online at ItsGeekToMe.co, on Niceville.com, and in publications nationwide. Facebook.com/GeekLightsOnTheCorner

Tuesday, Dec. 2

Multi-Chamber Young Professionals Ugly Sweater Holiday Party

5-6:30 p.m. | 3rd Planet Brewing, Niceville

Area Young Professionals from multiple chambers are invited to mingle in their ugliest holiday sweaters for networking, one drink and light bites. Prizes, laughs and new connections guaranteed. Tickets are \$10 and include one drink ticket and small bites; register at business.waltonareachamber.com.

Dec. 5

Parents' Night Out with Niceville High School Cheer

6-9 p.m. • Niceville High School
Enjoy a well-deserved night out while the kids have a great time with the Niceville High



School Cheerleaders! Children will enjoy snacks, games, crafts, and plenty of spirited fun.

Cost: \$40 per child

Registration: Space is limited — scan the QR code to reserve your spot.

Dec. 5-7

Troop 553B's Very Merry Christmas Village & Tree Sale

Troop 553B — 212 N. Partin Dr., Niceville

Kick off the season with a festive weekend at Troop 553B's Very Merry Christmas Village! Enjoy Christmas tree sales, cookie decorating, face painting, games, visits with Santa, and plenty of cheerful photo ops for the whole family.

Fresh-cut Fraser Fir trees support Scout Eagle Projects, camping adventures, and high-adventure programs. Come early—last year's trees sold out by Saturday!

Hours:

Fri, Dec 5: 4-8 p.m.

Sat, Dec 6: 9 a.m.-6 p.m.

Sun, Dec 7: 12-3 p.m. (if needed)

Saturday, Dec. 6

Niceville-Valparaiso 2025 Christmas Parade

10 a.m. | Downtown Niceville-Valparaiso

The Niceville-Valparaiso Rotary Club brings back one of the community's favorite traditions on Saturday, Dec. 6, with the 2025 Christmas Parade step-

ping off at 10 a.m. This year's theme, "Unite for the Holidays," invites families, businesses, schools, churches and civic groups to celebrate with festive floats, music, marching units and performances.

The route begins at Palm Blvd. and John Sims Pkwy., travels west on John Sims, turns north onto Partin Dr., passes Children's Park and ends near Ruckel Middle School, where judging will take place. Arrive early for the best viewing spots.

Parade-goers are invited to bring a new, unwrapped toy for the Toys for Tots drive, with drop-off points near the front of the route. Entries will be judged in several categories, with trophies and special honors including Grand Marshal and President's Choice.

To participate with a float, vehicle or marching group, access registration forms, rules and instructions at:

<https://nicevillevalparaiso-rotary.org> (see Christmas Parade under Documents).

Visit the Rotary Club's website or follow on social media for updates.

Dec. 6-Jan. 6 Nightly

9th Annual Troon Goon Christmas Lightshow

6-9:30 p.m. | 1074 Troon Dr. E., Niceville (Bluewater Bay)

One of Bluewater Bay's most beloved holiday traditions returns! The Troon Goon Christmas Lightshow is a high-tech,

fully choreographed residential display featuring tens of thousands of animated pixel lights synchronized to both classic and modern Christmas music. Shows run every half hour, and visitors can tune in from their cars at 101.3 FM for the full musical experience.

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Where Hope Grows:

A Story of Love, Legacy and Local Families

By MARANDA SHAYE SMITH

Imagine just entering parenthood, facing the challenge of balancing a new baby with mounting bills and little support. Whether a pregnancy comes as a surprise or right on time, stepping into that moment can feel overwhelming. Questions, fears and practical needs often rise quickly—especially for those navigating the journey without a strong support system.

When life takes an unexpected turn, Lauren’s Legacy Pregnancy Center, right here in our area, stands ready to walk beside those facing uncertainty. Serving women and families across Walton and Okaloosa counties, the center provides free, confidential services including pregnancy testing, ultrasounds, parenting programs, counseling and assistance connecting with community resources.

What began as a tribute of love and remembrance has grown into a cornerstone of compassion and care—meeting physical, emo-

tional and spiritual needs at every step. Executive Director Stacey Reed describes it best, “This is a safe place for women to discuss their options and feel supported. Every story matters here.”

Rooted in Love and Legacy

Lauren’s Legacy was founded in memory of a young woman whose life continues to touch others through her family’s vision of turning loss into purpose. Lauren was known for her compassionate heart and steadfast faith, someone who naturally reached out to help others in need. After her passing, her family turned their grief into purpose, creating a place that would carry on her spirit of love and service.

Lauren’s Legacy now stands as a reflection of who she was, offering hope and support to women and families facing some of life’s most difficult moments, and that legacy lives on through every client who walks through the doors and every child whose



life begins with love and support.

Impact That Matters

The past year has been one of remarkable growth and impact for Lauren’s Legacy. From January through September 2025, the center served 110 clients, provided 545 appointments, administered 75 pregnancy tests and 68 ultrasounds, and supported local families through 420 parenting classes. Each number represents a person—someone who found hope, encouragement and prac-

tical help when they needed it most.

A Night to Remember: Legacy Night 2025

In August, Lauren’s Legacy hosted its first-ever Legacy Night, a celebration of life, community and hope. The evening raised an incredible \$217,000, thanks to the generosity of local sponsors, donors and volunteers who share the center’s mission.

These funds will help the organization expand its reach,



broaden its services, welcome more families, and continue meeting growing community needs.

Real Life Impact

Lauren’s Legacy exists to meet people right where they are, offering steady, compassionate help when it’s needed most. Access to free pregnancy tests, a no-cost ultrasound, one-on-one education about their options, and a

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An Attitude of Gratitude In Okaloosa County

BY CAROLYN NEWCOMER
KETCHEL

The approaching season of Thanksgiving is a good time to examine our blessings and focus on gratitude for what Okaloosa County has to offer.

We are truly fortunate to call such a beautiful place home. Our southern beaches are among the most breathtaking in the world, offering pristine white sands and crystal-clear waters that invite both relaxation and adventure. Along the Okaloosa County coastline, residents and visitors alike can enjoy stunning vistas, peaceful walks and countless opportunities for exercise and leisure. In the northern part of our county, the meandering Shoal and Yellow Rivers provide a haven for boating, fishing, kayaking, hiking and hunting. It's no wonder so many people choose to live here — drawn by the natural beauty and outdoor lifestyle that make this area so special.

Between these divergent landscapes lies the economic drivers of our community — Eglin Air Force Base, Hurlburt Field, Duke Field, 7th Special Forces Group and Camp Rudder. We appreciate our active-duty and retired military personnel who bring a wealth of experience, leadership

and dedication that strengthen every aspect of our region.

Our beautiful panhandle, in addition to the great outdoors, offers cultural events at The Mattie Kelly Arts Center (MKAC), home to the Northwest Florida State College (NWFSC) Department of Humanities, Fine and Performing Arts. This wonderful venue hosts a wide array of events and productions throughout the year. From student-led performances to professional Broadway tours, there's always something inspiring to experience at MKAC. The Center is also home to the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, under the direction of the talented Todd Craven.

NWFSC began as a small community college, and has grown into a true powerhouse within the Florida college system. Today, the college offers an impressive range of programs — from the arts to welding — including a Bachelor of Science in Nursing. Students enjoy a vibrant campus experience, complete with newly constructed on-campus housing and award-winning baseball and basketball teams that bring excitement and pride to the community.

Okaloosa County is home to



four active and engaged Chambers of Commerce — Fort Walton Beach, Destin, Crestview and Niceville-Valparaiso. Each of these chambers plays a vital role in strengthening our community, supporting local businesses and fostering economic growth. Our nine municipalities also collaborate closely with their local and neighboring Chambers, building partnerships that benefit the entire region. Through shared

advocacy, coordinated initiatives and community events, they bring our communities closer together and enhance the quality of life for residents and visitors alike.

Regardless of faith background, everyone can find a beautiful and dedicated house of worship here in Okaloosa County. These diverse faith communities work hand in hand on many projects that strengthen our love for one another and deepen our shared devotion to our community. One such effort is the Lazarus Memorial Event, an annual service organized by an ecumenical group of pastors to honor those in our community who have passed away during the year without family or friends to attend to their final needs. Traditionally held on November 2 at Beal Memorial Cemetery, this year's ceremony took place on November 3, since November 2 fell on a Sunday.

Finally, let's talk about county services. We are fortunate to have a strong and well-run sheriff's office, led by Sheriff Eric Aden. His department — and the dedicated men and women who serve and protect our citizens — deserve our deepest gratitude.

Working alongside the sheriff's office is the Okaloosa County Public Safety Department, directed by Patrick Maddox. This department includes Emergency Medical Services (EMS)

and beach safety lifeguards, all of whom are always ready and prepared to respond. Whether handling a medical emergency or managing a weather-related event, Chief Maddox and his team remain vigilant and proactive in keeping Okaloosa County safe. And behind the scenes, our dispatchers, who remain calm under any circumstance, ensure that help is always on the way. Together, they truly have our backs.

Across Okaloosa County, our many fire districts are highly focused and well-trained, working tirelessly to ensure the safety of our nearly 200,000 residents. From Almarante in the north to Okaloosa Island in the south, we can always count on our dedicated firefighters to respond swiftly and professionally whenever they're needed.

Our multi-airport system includes Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport (VPS), Destin Executive Airport and Bob Sikes Airport. It is the fastest-growing airport system in the United States — and may be the only debt-free airport system. The leadership provided by Airports Director Tracy Stage is truly unparalleled in Florida, guiding a system that continues to expand while maintaining exceptional financial stewardship and service.

At times, life can be challenging. Far too many people in our community experience food insecurity, and your generosity can make a real difference in their lives. When our citizens face a crisis, the philanthropic organizations in Okaloosa County — including the Jaycees, Lions Club, Rotary Clubs, Kiwanis Club, The United Way and numerous food pantries — are there to provide much-needed support. If you have been blessed with abundance, especially during this holiday season, please remember our local food pantries.

It is an honor service as your County Commissioner, and I wish everyone a blessed Thanksgiving.

Carolyn Ketchel is Okaloosa County Commissioner, District 2; Vice-Chairman 2024-2025. CKetchel@myokaloosa.com; 850-651-7105.



St. Jude's Episcopal Church

200 North Partin Drive, Niceville, FL 32578

December Special Events Free & Open to the Public

GINGERBREAD HOUSE COMPETITION

Early Entries December 7th 9:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.

Final Entries December 13th 10:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.

Early Voting December 14th 9:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

Final Voting December 21st 9:00 a.m.-10:00 a.m.

CHILDREN & YOUTH CHRISTMAS PAGEANT

December 14th at 10:30 a.m.

LESSONS & CAROLS

December 21st 8:00 a.m. & 10:30 a.m.

CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICES

December 24th at 5:00 p.m. & 11:00 p.m.

*Music Will Be Presented by the Choir (5:00 p.m.) • Special Guest Soloist (5:00 p.m. & 11:00 p.m.)
11 p.m. "Midnight" Service will be by Candlelight*



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PH11 LOT 35 ON TARRAGON RUN
\$130,000 | 0.23 acre
Listed by Jodie Snell 850.621.6535



PH7A LOT 134 ON GAZELLE COURT
\$239,000 | 0.56 acre
Listed by Kelly Shephard 850.543.7353

 Community
HOLIDAY*continued from page 2*

Guests can even vote online for their favorite song versions throughout the season, making each night a little different. The show is free to view, family-friendly and perfect for a drive-by outing or an evening stroll through the neighborhood.

More details: troongoon-christmas.com

Monday, Dec. 8**Niceville High School Chorus Holiday Concert**

7 p.m. | Mattie Kelly Arts Center, Niceville

Ring in the season as all seven Niceville choirs perform, along with a guest instrumentalist on handbell and students from Ruckel Middle School. Tickets are \$10 through Dec. 1, \$15 after Dec. 1. 850.226.4643

Friday & Saturday, Dec. 12-13**A Very Niceville Christmas Returns!**

5-8 p.m. | Niceville Municipal Complex

A Very Niceville Christmas is back—and bigger than ever! The Niceville Municipal Complex transforms into a bustling winter wonderland Friday and Saturday, Dec. 12-13, from 5-8 p.m. each evening for the 2nd annual celebration of all things merry and bright. Families can

enjoy two magical nights filled with hayrides, pony rides, food trucks, craft vendors, festive music, hot cocoa, photo ops, Christmas story times, a Letters to Santa station, a cake walk, and plenty of surprises along the way. Kids will love Friday's Holiday Movie in the Children's Park, while Saturday brings the beloved tradition of Santa in the Park. Whether you're coming for the cocoa, the crafts, or the Christmas cheer, you won't want to miss a moment of this hometown holiday tradition.

Holiday craft vendors, musicians and school ensembles can apply to participate by emailing pio@nicevillefl.gov.

Dec. 12-14**Live Nativity – Celebrate the True Meaning of Christmas**

6:30-8:30 p.m. | 571 Valparaiso Pkwy.

Experience the wonder of the Christmas story brought to life! This beloved Live Nativity features live actors, adorable animals, and a joyful hayride that tells the story of Jesus' birth in a way the whole family will remember.

Enjoy complimentary hot chocolate and cookies before or after your ride, then stop by the kids' craft tent or spend time visiting with the event's sweetest stars—the bunnies! It's a heartwarming tradition that brings



the true meaning of Christmas into focus.

Bring your family, neighbors and friends for an unforgettable evening of community and celebration. You won't want to miss it!

Dec. 13**Wreaths Across America Remembrance Ceremony**

11 a.m. | Heritage Gardens Funeral Home & Cemetery — 2201 Partin Dr. N., Niceville

Join the community at Heritage Gardens for a heartfelt Remembrance Ceremony and Placement of the Wreaths honoring the brave men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom. You can sponsor a remembrance wreath, volunteer or simply stand in support with family and friends. The ceremony starts at 11 a.m. Wreath placement will immediately follow. Your participation helps ensure that as many fallen heroes as possible are remembered with honor and gratitude.

10th Annual Niceville Ugly Sweater Run/Walk 5K

8-11 a.m. | Hurricane Grill & Wings (Bluewater Bay)

Break out your worst (or best!) tacky, holiday sweater and join Niceville High School Track & Field for the 10th Annual Ugly Sweater Run/Walk 5K, benefiting the NHS Track & Field Facilities Fund. The 5K begins at 8 a.m., starting and finishing at Hurricane Grill & Wings in Bluewater Bay, and is open to all ages. A 1-mile Fun Run for kids 12 and under kicks off at 8:30 a.m. Enjoy festive fun, music, and plenty of holiday spirit throughout the morning.

Registration: NHSuglysweater.com. More info: NHSeagle-track.com

Yule of Yesteryear

10 a.m.-4 p.m. | Heritage Museum of NWFL | Perrine Park, 115 Westview Ave., Val'p

Step back in time for a festive day of old-fashioned holiday fun. Enjoy craft vendors, children's crafts, a bake sale, school choirs and special activities with the Valparaiso Garden Club and the Walton Guard. Don't miss a visit from the Grinch, greeting guests from noon to 2 p.m. Free community event; more information at heritagemuseum.org or 850-678-2615.

Saturday, Dec. 20**Victorian Christmas Tea**

1-3 p.m. | Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, 115 Westview Ave., Valparaiso

Slow down for an elegant

afternoon tea complete with Victorian-style décor, light bites and holiday treats. Perfect for girlfriends, mothers and daughters or anyone who loves classic Christmas tradition. Tickets are \$20 for members and \$25 for non-members; RSVP by Dec. 17 at heritagemuseum.org or 850-678-2615.

Bluewater Bay Christmas Golf Cart Parade

5 p.m. | The Blue Tee, 2000 Bluewater Blvd., Niceville
blue-tee.com

Deck your cart out for a festive parade through Bluewater Bay benefiting Sharing & Caring, followed by a cheery after-party. Prize for best decorated cart. Entry cost is a non-perishable food item. To register, stop by the Blue Tee or message the Facebook event page.

Saturday, Dec. 21**Christmas Boat Parade & Decorating Contest**

5:30 p.m. | Bluewater Bay Marina, Niceville

Hosted by the Niceville Valparaiso Rotary Club, this festive annual tradition invites boaters to light up the bay with dazzling holiday displays. Spectators can gather along the waterfront to enjoy the procession as it departs from Emerald Coast Marine at 5:30 p.m. and cruises through the marina.

Details: 850-897-2821

Featuring Santa on the Emerald Coast...

Come to our holiday party!

Sun, Dec 7th, 2-5 PM

Make any donation for Sharing & Caring and take your own picture with Santa! Professional photographer also available

Refreshments and easy parking!

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Happenings Around the Bay

2025
DECEMBER EVENTS

02	Lunch N Learn: How To Use a Retirement Account for Real Estate 11:30 am Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce FWB	07	Sinfonia Gulf Coast's Toast n' Jam: Broadway Holiday the "Calla-way" 10:30 am Hotel Effie Sandestin Miramar Beach	20	Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class 10 am Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport Valparaiso		
	Festival of Trees 4 pm Grand Boulevard at Sandestin Miramar Beach		Scout Christmas Village & Tree Sale 12 pm Niceville Police Station Niceville		Pop Up Market: Margot Handmade 11 am Artful Things Niceville		
	Multi-Chamber Young Professionals Holiday Party 5 pm 3rd Planet Brewing Niceville		Photos with The "Mean & Green One" & Holiday Toy Drive 12 pm The Crab Trap Okaloosa Island		Victorian Christmas Tea 1-3 pm Heritage Museum of NWFL Valparaiso		
	Grand Opening & Christmas Party 6 pm Emerald Coast Title Services FWB		Bluegrass Jam 12 pm 3rd Planet Brewing Co. Niceville		Paint a Christmas Tree or Gnome 3:30 pm Artful Things Niceville		
03	Chess Night 6 pm LJ Schooners Restaurant Niceville		Pictures with Santa 2 pm Artful Things Niceville		Bluewater Bay Christmas Golf Cart Parade 5 pm The Blue Tee Niceville		
	Christmas Wreath Workshop 6 pm Katie's House of Flowers & Gifts Niceville		Women's Climbing Circle 5 pm Rock Out Climbing Gym Destin		Santa Paddle Parade & Christmas Boat Parade Noon & 5:30 pm Bluewater Bay Marina at LJ Schooners		
04	Justice on the Block 10 am Valparaiso Library Valparaiso	08	Niceville High School Chorus Holiday Concert 7 pm Mattie Kelly Arts Center Niceville	21	Christmas Boat Parade/Decorating Contest 5:30 pm Bluewater Bay Marina Niceville		
	Helen's Puzzle Swap 10 am Niceville Library Niceville		09		Craft & Chat 11 am Niceville Library Niceville	22-23	Holiday Horse-Drawn Carriage Rides 4 pm Grand Boulevard Miramar Beach
	Christmas Wreath Workshop 6 pm Katie's House of Flowers & Gifts Niceville						
05	Scout Christmas Village & Tree Sale 4 pm Niceville Police Station Niceville	11	Helen's Puzzle Swap 10 am Niceville Library Niceville		New Year's Eve Fireworks 8 pm The Boardwalk Okaloosa Island		
	Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee 7 am Christian Life Center at FBC FWB		12		A Very Niceville Christmas 5-8 pm Niceville Municipal Complex Niceville	ONGOINGEVENTS	
	Live Music: Lips Manly 6 pm 3rd Planet Brewing Co. Niceville						Oils and Acrylics with Rosalyn O'Grady 10 am Tues Artful Things Niceville
	Holiday Pops featuring Irish Group SOLAS: A Celtic Christmas 7 pm Mattie Kelly Arts Center Niceville						Watercolor Techniques with Theresia McInnis 1 pm Tues Artful Things Niceville
	Full Moon Restorative Experience 7 pm Yoga by You Studio Niceville						13
06	Scout Christmas Village & Tree Sale 9 am Niceville Police Station Niceville	15	Calligraphy: The Illuminated Letter 10:30 am Artful Things Niceville	Watercolor Basics (Adults) with Elia Saxer 10 am Thurs Artful Things Niceville			
	Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class 10 am Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport Valparaiso			Watercolor Basics (Youth) with Elia Saxer 3:30 pm Thurs Artful Things Niceville			
	Niceville-Valparaiso Community Christmas Parade 10 am John Sims Parkway & Partin Drive Niceville			One Stroke Painting (Lvl 2) with Sheila Mahony 10:30 am Fri Artful Things Niceville			
	Watercolor Workshop with Sharon 10:30 am Artful Things Niceville			One Stroke Painting (Lvl 1) with Sheila Mahony 2 pm Fri Artful Things Niceville			
	Holiday Open House & Shop-About 12 pm Grand Boulevard at Sandestin Miramar Beach			17	Paint a Christmas Tree or Gnome 3:30 pm Artful Things Niceville	Yoga at Turkey Creek 9 am Sat Turkey Creek Nature Trail Niceville	
Photos with The "Mean & Green One" & Holiday Toy Drive 12 pm The Crab Trap Okaloosa Island	Brunch on the Bayou 9 am Sun LJ Schooners Restaurant Niceville						
Eden Gardens Christmas Candlelight Luminaries 5-8 pm Eden Gardens State Park Point Washington		FARMERSMARKETS					
Seaside Holiday Pops Concert featuring Sinfonia Gulf Coast 5 pm Central Square Santa Rosa Beach			Niceville Community Saturdays 9 am - 1 pm Twin Cities Pavilion Niceville				
Artist Trading Card Club 5 pm Artful Things Niceville			Grand Boulevard Saturdays 9 am - 1 pm Grand Boulevard Miramar Beach				
A Story Book Christmas Holiday Parade & Tree Lighting Festival 5:15 pm City Hall Freeport			18-23	Coastal White Christmas Events in Grand Park 4 pm Grand Boulevard Miramar Beach	Geek Lights on the Corner Dec. 1–Jan. 6 Bluewater Blvd. & Antiqua Way		
					Tron Goon Christmas Light Show Dec. 6–Jan. 6 Nightly 1074 Tron Dr. E Niceville		

ONGOINGEVENTS

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 Pub | Niceville

Watercolor Basics (Adults) with Elia Saxer
10 am | Thurs | Artful Things | Niceville

Watercolor Basics (Youth) with Elia Saxer
3:30 pm | Thurs | Artful Things | Niceville

One Stroke Painting (Lvl 2) with Sheila Mahony
10:30 am | Fri | Artful Things | Niceville

One Stroke Painting (Lvl 1) with Sheila Mahony
2 pm | Fri | Artful Things | Niceville

Yoga at Turkey Creek
9 am | Sat | Turkey Creek Nature Trail | Niceville

Brunch on the Bayou
9 am | Sun | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville

FARMERSMARKETS

Niceville Community
Saturdays | 9 am - 1 pm
Twin Cities Pavilion | Niceville

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

Geek Lights on the Corner
Dec. 1–Jan. 6 | Bluewater Blvd. & Antiqua Way

Troon Goon Christmas Light Show
Dec. 6–Jan. 6 Nightly | 1074 Troon Dr. E | Niceville



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Bay Buzz

A Double Dose of Fundraising for the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida



BY BARBARA PALMGREN

On Saturday, November 1, 2025, trustees divided them-



selves between two fundraising events to support operations at the museum. This local treasure houses artifacts and displays exhibits that celebrate our heritage. Receiving no federal or state dollars, the local governments provide approximately \$15,000 that needs to be boosted through membership, business and individual donations, admissions and fund-raising.

The first event on Saturday was the first Decades on Display Car Show. The museum welcomed unique cars to the museum and Perrine Park in

Valparaiso to show workmanship and artistry of car design to the public. The event, organized by museum staff assistant, Cloey Coates, was scheduled from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Rolling in and parking for a day of bragging rights and showmanship, car owners waited patiently for trophies awarded in various categories at the end of the day. The public had opportunities to not only view but to vote for their favorites. Early registrants received swag bags and a tee shirt. The museum was open free to the public during the event as well as having a sidewalk and bake sale on site.

The second event on Saturday was Eggs on the Beach at Seascape Towne Center in Miramar Beach. Competing with 26 other teams, the museum's barbecue partner, The Pallet

Bar and Grill, brought their "A" game in a cooking competition that featured using the famous Big Green Egg grills. As in the car show, the public voted for their favorites after tasting samples during a three-hour period. Awards at the end of the event included a first-place win in the Taster's Choice Category for the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida courtesy of the delicious rib samples prepared by Tom O'Donnell and staff at the Pallet Bar and Grill.

At the booth for the event, trustees Barbara Palmgren, Ken Walsh and Mike Weaver, dressed as Uncle Sams and the Statue of Liberty, distributed new rack cards to advertise the celebration of the new exhibit for the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence that begins in early January, 2026. This year long exhibit will be held in the Exhibit Hall of the museum.



"These funds help our moms and littles thrive," the organization shared. "We couldn't have done this without Debbie's fun, positive, go-getter attitude and the incredible generosity of Randy Wise Homes."

CALM continues to serve families in crisis by providing safe housing, parenting support, essential resources, and a pathway to stability. Thanks to community partners like Randy Wise Homes, their mission shines brighter than ever.

Worthy Impact 100 Grant Recipients Receive Awards

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

The Impact 100 Annual Meeting was called to order after a lovely hour of "meet and greet" at the Holiday Inn on Okaloosa Island in Fort Walton Beach. After approval of the meeting agenda and necessary reports, two finalists from non-profit organizations gave five-minute speeches asking for the membership to vote for their non-profit to receive a check of \$100,000 to fund a specific project for that organization.

Impact 100 is an independent non-profit global organization with chapters in the United States. Impact 100 Northwest Florida is one of those chapters. This group of women who each donate financially also may serve on committees to prepare non-profits to write and submit grant proposals. After a year of this work, ten finalists in five categories were presented at the annual meeting for the final vote. Each organization received a check for \$100,000 for their project.

Congratulations to these finalists!

Arts & Culture: Arts and Design Society

Education: Westwood Ranch

Environment, Recreation & Preservation: Healing Footsteps

Family: The Pearl Project

Health & Wellness: Elder Services

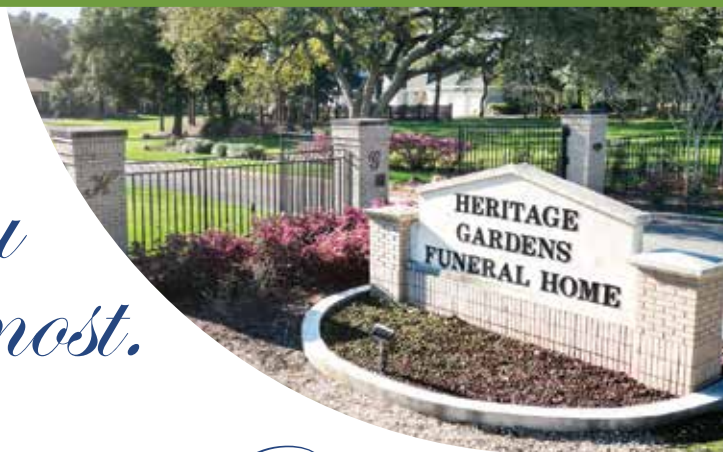
Randy Wise Homes Gives CALM a Transformative Fall Makeover

Compassionate hearts and skilled hands came together this fall as Randy Wise Homes delivered an extraordinary gift to CALM, the nonprofit providing transitional housing and support for local moms and their littles. What began as a simple act of service turned into a complete exterior makeover of the CALM House—all donated at no cost, including labor, materials, and project coordination.

The renovation was led by Debbie, whose vision and dedication carried the project from idea to completion. She selected the perfect new exterior color, recruited contractors willing to donate their time and expertise, and oversaw the work to ensure the home looked fresh, welcoming, and dignified for the families who live there.

But the generosity didn't stop at the front door. After the makeover, Randy Wise Homes emptied one of their model-home storage units and donated furnishings, décor, and accessories to CALM's Furniture Resale Store. The items sold so quickly and successfully that they brought in more than \$11,000 to directly support the moms and children in CALM's care.

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Simplifying Medicare Advantage v. Supplement Choices



BY GREG DURETTE, FLORIDA HEALTH CONNECTOR

This is the time of year when you should review your Medicare options and make important decisions about your coverage for 2026.

Right now, we are in the Annual Election Period (AEP) for all Medicare beneficiaries. It is often referred to as the Annual Open Enrollment Period. This annual event runs from October 15th through December 7th.

Because this period allows ALL Medicare eligible folks to make switches and changes to their plans, it is the most heavily advertised time of the year...not like I have to tell you that! Folks on Original Medicare (Parts A&B), Supplements (MediGap), Stand Alone Prescription Plans (Part D) and Advantage Plans have a chance to pretty much do anything they want with their coverage mix. The hard part comes with sorting it all out.

One of the things I often talk about with Medicare beneficiaries around this time of year is to make sure you don't get so overwhelmed by all the information out there that you run out of time to take action. It can sometimes become "paralysis by analysis" syndrome. Remember, the AEP ends on December 7th!

Figuring out which coverage options are best for you can be confusing at any age. But, understanding healthcare options for those 65 and older can be even more difficult.

I suggest considering these three things when shopping for Medicare Advantage/Supplement plans:

- **Choice:** When it comes to Medicare, one size does not fit all – what works for your neighbor (or doctor/provider!) might not work best for you. Take the time to learn and understand the benefits and costs of each

plan so you can feel confident in your decision and your health care coverage. Remember, you are getting the best for you, not your doctor or other provider.

- **Care:** Care starts with a strong relationship with your primary care provider. If your plan has a network, make sure you're comfortable with the doctors and hospitals in that network. Check to see if your plan will coordinate your care with the rest of your providers—in and out of state.

- **Experience:** Medicare can be complex and confusing. It's important to find a seasoned agent/broker that works for you and supports you throughout your health care journey with plan benefits and resources that can help you live more and worry less about out of pocket costs.

Since Medicare Advantage Plans are offered by private companies, one excellent feature is they have more freedom and motivation to include extra benefits such as vision, hearing, gym memberships, dental, over-the-counter pharmacy items and more.

However, it is important to note that, not only do Medicare Advantage plans vary by state, but are different right down to each individual county in each state. Supplements are universal regardless of state/county, but often times cost more premium per month and do not cover prescriptions, requiring additional premium costs to pick up that coverage (Part D).

Your sibling in North Dakota is not going to have the same insurance company/coverage options you would in your Florida county. Try not to get trapped into believing the terms Supplement and Advantage are the same. It is critical to know your specific differences before making a choice that works for you.

This is why it is vitally important to work with a local agent that knows the area and understands the benefits landscape as it applies to you. A famous actor or retired athlete on TV touting a toll-free number from who knows where will likely not.

Based in Niceville, Greg Durette is a qualified, licensed agent with Flori-

da Health Connector providing Medicare throughout the state of Florida.

He has been in the insurance industry for over 42 years and can be reached at

his office number of 850-842-2400 or mobile at 978-509-2941.

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 Community

HOPE GROWS
continued from page 3

full suite of parenting classes are available free and confidential. When they complete the classes, they receive essential baby items such as car seats, diapers, strollers and clothes—giving them a real boost as they start this chapter.

All services are completely free and confidential, including pregnancy testing, ultrasounds, parenting classes and referrals for housing, medical and community resources. Anyone in need can call 850-880-6287 or visit the website to connect with someone who cares and schedule a confidential appointment.

How to Get Involved

Lauren’s Legacy is a faith-based organization and operates entirely through the generosity of donors, volunteers and community partners. Whether through giving, volunteering or spreading awareness, every act of support helps this mission grow.

To learn more, visit Laurens-Legacy.net or call (850) 880-6287 to find out how you can help.



Together, we can continue to build a community where life is cherished and hope is shared.
16019 Hwy 331 Business,
Suite 10, Freeport, 32439

Veterans Tribute & Remembrance Day Ceremony

The Veterans Tribute Tower Committee hosted a heartfelt Veterans Day Ceremony and Remembrance Day Recognition on Tuesday, Nov. 11, 2025, at Beal Memorial Cemetery. The ceremony began at 11 a.m. and featured keynote speaker Brigadier General Mark A. Massaro, Commander of the 96th Test Wing at Eglin Air Force Base.

Continuing a special international tradition, members of the historic 80 Squadron—including Commanding Officer, British Royal Navy Commander Chris Wilcox, and military families from Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom’s F-35 Program stationed at Eglin—joined local veterans and guests for the tribute. Cadets from Fort Walton Beach High School’s



Air Force JROTC also participated in the ceremony.

Guests honored those who served by placing small bouquets in a Community Wreath of Remembrance, symbolizing unity and gratitude for all who have defended freedom.

Event organizer Tom Rice expressed gratitude for the international participation, noting that in the U.K., Canada, and Australia, the week is celebrated as a commemoration of the end of the Great War—World War I—making the shared ceremony especially meaningful.

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Mathmas Magic: Holiday-Themed Math Activities for Festive Learning

The holiday season is upon us, and at Mathnasium, we believe in turning every moment into an opportunity for learning and fun. This December, let's infuse the spirit of Mathmas into your child's education with a range of festive and engaging

math activities. Discover how holiday-themed math can make learning both enjoyable and educational for young minds.

1. Santa's Workshop Geometry: Deck the Halls with Shapes: Transform your living room into Santa's Workshop of Geometry! Use festive decorations like wreaths, ornaments, and gift boxes to introduce and explore various shapes. Ask your child to identify circles, squares, triangles, and rectangles. Bonus points for creating a holiday-themed shape scavenger hunt!

2. The Twelve Days Of Mathmas: A Countdown To Numeracy: Countdown to the big day with a mathematical twist! Create a "Twelve Days of Mathmas" calendar where each day introduces a new mathematical concept. From addition and subtraction on Day 1 to more complex concepts like multiplication and division as you approach Day 12, this countdown keeps learning exciting.

3. Gingerbread Fraction Fun: Divide And Decorate: Gingerbread houses are a classic holiday activity, but why not add



a math spin? Use candy decorations to explore fractions. How much of the roof is covered in gumdrops? What fraction of the windows are made of candy canes? It's a tasty way to understand and visualize fractions!

4. Holiday Measurement Madness: Trim The Tree With Math: Turn tree-trimming into a measurement extravaganza! From measuring the height of the tree to determining the length of tinsel needed, involve your child in real-world measurements. Discuss units like centimetres and inches and let them take charge of the holiday decorating measurements.

5. The Stocking Stuffer

Challenge: Budgeting Basics: Teach financial literacy through the Stocking Stuffer Challenge. Provide your child with a "budget" and let them choose items for the family stockings within that budget. This hands-on activity introduces budgeting, addition, and subtraction skills in a practical and festive way.

6. Holiday Word Problem Hunt: The Quest For Numerical Solutions: Create a holiday word problem scavenger hunt. Craft festive math-related word problems and hide them around the house. As your child solves each problem, they can unveil a holiday-themed surprise or treat. It's a delightful way to reinforce problem-solving skills.

7. Snowflake Symmetry: A Frosty Lesson In Symmetrical Designs: Embrace the beauty of snowflakes with a lesson in symmetry. Fold and cut paper to create unique snowflake designs while discussing the concept of symmetry. This hands-on activity enhances spatial awareness and introduces the idea of balance in mathematics.

Unwrapping the Gift Of Mathmas Joy: This Mathmas season, let the magic of learning sparkle with these holiday-themed math activities. Mathnasium wishes you and your family a joyous holiday filled with laughter, love, and the delightful sound of math skills being unwrapped and explored. Happy Mathmas!

Note: These activities can be adapted for various age groups, ensuring that the holiday spirit of learning reaches every child in the family.

Mathnasium of Niceville is located at 1538 E. John Sims Parkway, in the Publix Shopping Center.

We serve students from Niceville, Bluewater Bay, Shalimar, Valparaiso and Fort Walton Beach. Local schools include Niceville High School, Bluewater Bay Elementary School, Plew Elementary School, Ruckel Middle School and Rocky Bayou Christian School.

Mathnasium of Niceville | 1538 E. John Sims Parkway | 850-987-MATH (6284).

Angel Tree Partnership Brings Holiday Joy to Local Students

In the true spirit of the season, Superintendent Marcus Chambers and Sheriff Eric Aden have announced a collaboration between the Okaloosa County School District and the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office for this year's Angel Tree Program, which brings holiday cheer to students in need.

At the start of the school year, school staff and SROs identified students and created wish lists for community members to sponsor or donate toward.

"This partnership is about more than just presents; it's about showing our children that they are seen, valued, and cared for," Chambers said. "Every year, I am deeply moved by the generosity of our community, staff, and volunteers who come together to bring joy to children who need it most. Knowing that we can make a holiday brighter for even one child is truly inspiring. Through this partnership, we have the op-



portunity to touch even more families and create memories these students will treasure forever."

Sheriff Aden added, "The program has been a cherished way to restore hope, dignity, and bring joy to children in our community. We're honored to work with the school district to make Christmas special for children who deserve every bit of joy this season. Together, we can make this holiday season brighter, one child at a time."

To sponsor a child or make a donation, visit ocsostarcharity.com/angel-tree. For more information, contact Catherine Card at catherine.card@okaloosaschools.com or Katie Tingle at ktingle@sheriff-okaloosa.org.

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Wildlife in Fall

BY HELEN PETRE

Welcome to fall! It is time for us humans to break out the blankets and jackets, but what do our wild animals do to prepare? Fortunately, they have everything they need to stay warm. In fall, most animals start eating a lot. They need to add a layer of fat to keep them warm and provide energy to sustain them through the winter when there is little food.

The Florida black bear, *Ursus americanus floridanus*

The Florida black bear is the only bear in Florida. There are about 4,000 in all of Florida, but only about 120 in the western Panhandle, mostly on Eglin land. They prefer dense undergrowth in scrub oak ecosystems, swamps, and flatwoods. One was seen in Grayton Beach State Park recently, and it was not small. Should we be worried about large, dangerous animals while walking in the woods or on the beach? Probably not. As with all wildlife you encounter in their habitats, give them room and do not try to interact with them. If you are hiking in an area that is bear habitat, make noise. If the bear hears you, he will most likely move away from you.

Bears mate in the summer, but the eggs do not implant until November, and then, only if the female has gained enough weight. The cubs are born in January as tiny, helpless things weighing less than a pound. Females feed and protect them dened in the saw palmetto understory until spring.

Males are much larger than females, weighing about 350 pounds, while females weigh in around 200 pounds. Bears that eat garbage, pet and wildlife food are much larger because those foods are higher in calories than the normal diet of mostly plants and insects. Bears eat bees, wasps, and other insects, soft mast consisting of saw palmetto and holly berries, and hard mast, a variety of acorns and hickory nuts.

In fall, bears are eating about 20,000 calories a day in order to prepare for the winter when there is less food, and females are dened with offspring. That is as much as a normal person should eat in ten days, or the caloric count of about eight pizzas. In fall, bears feed for about 18 hours a day, so the chance of seeing a bear is rather good in fall.

It is illegal to feed bears in Florida. Considering they are trying to gain weight in fall, if a

bear finds your garbage, he will happily eat it. This is not good, for many reasons. Human garbage and dog food is not very nutritious for bears. Bears that are accustomed to eating your garbage and dog food lose their fear of humans and become aggressive if you do not have food for them. To prevent bears from wanting to be in your yard, keep garbage in the garage or lock your containers. Take in pet and bird feeders. Bears are usually solitary and quiet animals, but if they smell your tasty buffet, they will come to get it.

White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)

Deer are actually more dangerous than bears, not because they attack people, but because they tend to run out on the road right in front of moving vehicles. Deer feed along the edge of the highway, especially in fall, when they, like bears, are trying to fatten up. Males are about 115 pounds and have antlers, and females are about 90 pounds. White-tailed deer are edge species, choosing to browse low growing vegetation along an edge where they can see predators. This makes the side of highways and yards that back to woods, or the edge of fields, great places to see deer. When

they are alarmed, they lift their white tails, stamp their feet, and snort.

Deer are crepuscular, active at dawn and dusk, like mosquitos, making driving during those times a bit tricky. Deer often follow each other, so if one deer crosses the road, be prepared for the next.

If you come across a silent, bedded fawn, while walking in high grass or woods, please leave it alone. Does teach their fawns to sit silently, not move, and wait for their return. If humans intervene and try to help the fawn, it usually does not end well.

Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)

Even if you do not get out into the forest and see bears, you will see squirrels, busily collecting their favorite foods, acorns and hickory nuts, getting ready for the winter. The Eastern Gray Squirrel is our backyard squirrel, and has adapted to feeding from bird feeders, if available. These are our friends,



as their habit of burying nuts leads to forest regeneration. If you are quiet, you can hear them chattering to each other as they search, bury and eat mast.

As we enjoy the cooler weather and fall colors, this is a good time to go out and walk in the woods or along the dunes at one of our parks. Our animal friends are busy preparing for winter, eating lots of calories and putting on an extra layer of fat to keep them warm in the coming cold. This is a great time to explore nature and learn how animals prepare for the lean season to come. Remember to give them space and let them show you how their world works.



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Where Gratitude Meets the Gridiron



BY SCOTT MILLER

It seems appropriate to think of the things I am most thankful for as we gear up for the holidays. And there are many that come to mind. Yes, there are quite a few things that trump football and cause a thankful heart to beat within, especially time spent with family and close friends. But, since this is our beloved football section, let's talk gridiron.

The College Football Playoff kicks off its first round in December 2025, with games on Friday, December 19, followed by three more on Saturday, December 20. The quarterfinal round continues on Wednesday, December 31.

Seems like every year there's a new bowl game added to the mix — and why not? These kids deserve it and football fans love it. It'll be interesting to see how the expanded playoff system shakes out and who gets crowned national champion this year. Where will you be watching?

Here along the Emerald Coast, we're fortunate to have some of the best sports bars and restaurants around, ready and waiting to welcome us. They serve up great food, cold drinks, and make every game feel like

a championship. So grab your crew, claim your spot and get in on the action — I hope to see you there!

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.

(850) 837-1913
116 Harbor Blvd.
ajsgdestin.com

FUBAR Pizza Bar

Looking for a sports bar to call home? Welcome to FUBAR pizza bar nestled on Okaloosa Island. Locally owned and family friendly, Fubar is known for its almost-famous pizza and wings and carries all sports games and live entertainment, along with impeccable service. You can enjoy all that while enjoying the waterfront view.

FUBAR has plenty of games for the kids along with pool tables, corn hole, dart boards and



more. When out on the water all day, come dock your boat on one of FUBAR'S boat slips and enjoy the incredible view. Feel free to bring along your furry friends to join you on the patio.

Need the perfect space to host your Christmas or New Year's party or event? FUBAR is equipped with numerous private sections with the option of having a private bar as well. The outside deck can hold up to 300 people comfortably and can be sectioned off to fit your needs. In addition to the pizza and wings, FUBAR can customize a menu from Italian food to Prime Rib and everything in between. Open 7 days from 11 a.m.-2 a.m.

(850) 226-7084
114 Amberjack Dr.,
Okaloosa Island
fubarfwb.com

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.

Wednesday, Dec. 4: Prime Rib Dinner Special!

Dec. 13: Christmas Party with Chris Saylor 6-10 p.m.

Dec. 20: Santa Paddle Parade — 12 p.m.

Dec. 20: Christmas Boat Pa-

rade 5:30 p.m.

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

Wednesday Nights: Prime Rib Dinner Special, 5-9 p.m.

Thursdays: Taco & Margarita Thursday; Open Mic/Karaoke

Saturdays: Steak Night, 5-9 p.m.

Sundays: Bingo 2-4 p.m.

See ad for live entertainment each weekend. Dine-in, pick-up, to-go.

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

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

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2025 College Football Game Day Highlights

Week 14

Friday 11/28

Mississippi @ Miss St. 11 a.m.

ABC

Georgia @ Ga Tech 2:30 p.m.

ABC

Indiana @ Purdue 6:30 p.m. NBC

Texas A&M @ Texas 6:30 ABC

Saturday 11/29

Alabama @ Auburn 6:30 p.m.

ABC

Florida St. @ Florida (TBA) ESPN

LSU @ Oklahoma 2:30 p.m.

ESPN

Vanderbilt @ Tennessee 2:30 p.m.

ESPN

Missouri @ Arkansas 2:30p.m.

SECN

Notre Dame @ Stanford 9:30 p.m.

ESPN

Miami @ Pittsburgh (TBA)

Va Tech @ Virginia (TBA)

Clemson @ S. Carolina 11 a.m.

SECN

Kentucky @ Louisville 11 a.m.

ACCN

N. Carolina @ NC St. 6:30 p.m.

ACCN

Penn St. @ Rutgers 2:30 p.m.

BTN

Oregon @ Washington (TBA)

UCLA @ USC (TBA)

Ohio St. @ Michigan 11 a.m. FOX

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Dec. 2 – Pottery Snowman or Tree. Join Potter Laurel Siwicki for an evening of hand building (5:30–8 p.m.). \$48.15

Homeschool Art Lab – Tuesdays. 10 a.m.–2 p.m. Explore art mediums & STEM projects. (2 spots available!) Starts Dec. 2 \$160.50 per month.

Dec. 3–17 – Daytime Pottery (3-Week Series). Join Laurel for a three-week pottery journey (shortened for Christmas). Starts Dec. 3. \$144.45

Dec. 3 – Extra-Large Nativity Painting. Paint a beautiful, oversized Nativity statement piece with Donna (5:30–8:30 p.m.). \$139.10

Dec. 4 – Homeschool Art Lab Thursdays. 10 a.m.–2 p.m. Explore art mediums & STEM projects. (2 spots available!) Starts Dec. 4. \$160.50 per month.

Dec. 5 – PRIVATE: CC Christmas Cookies. Join Baker Mery to decorate a Christmas-themed cookie tray

with CC friends. \$32.10

Dec. 5 – PRIVATE EVENT: Christin (6–7:30 p.m.) Create with our Creative Elves and visit with Santa! \$21.40

Dec. 9 – Pottery Ornaments (Make 5). Create five hand-built pottery ornaments with Laurel (5:30–8 p.m.). \$48.15

Dec. 12 – Open Studio Glass Art. Join JoJo to create a beautiful glass art piece. \$48.15

Dec. 13 – Family Glass Art Open Studio. Family-friendly glass art session with JoJo. \$26.75

Dec. 13 – Permanent Jewelry. Artist Sherrie Venghaus brings her permanent jewelry collection to CREATE! \$53.50

Dec. 16 – Evening Bangle Bracelets. Make copper and brass bangles with Sherrie. \$69.55

Dec. 18 – Come to the Table (Military Dinner). Active-duty military, veterans, and spouses — enjoy dinner at

JoJo's. \$5

Dec. 19 – Nativity Painting. Paint a Nativity scene with Donna (10 a.m.–1 p.m.). \$69.55

Dec. 19 – Glass Art Open Studio. Create a medium glass art piece with JoJo. \$37.45

Dec. 20 – Christmas Cookies with Baker Mery. Decorate a festive Christmas cookie tray at CREATE! \$32.10

Dec. 20 – Open Studio: Leather & Pearls. Craft a special handmade gift using leather and pearls. \$26.75

View the remaining schedule and book your spot at bigorangehousedesigns.com.

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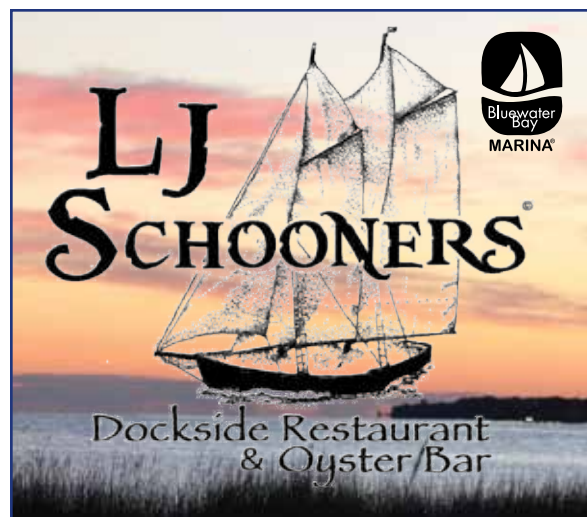
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Santa Paddle Parade Dec. 20

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12 PM Group Photo | 12:10 Start

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Bluewater Bay Marina Christmas Boat Parade Dec. 20

Join the 14th Annual Bluewater Bay Christmas Boat Parade!

Call 850-897-2821 to register or visit bluewaterbaymarina.com

Skipper's Meeting 4pm / Staging 5pm

Parade 5:30pm

Watch for our Christmas Pop-up Events!

More Upcoming Fun:

Wednesdays: Kids Eat Free 5-9pm

Saturday: Steak Night 5-9pm

Sunday: Brunch 9am-1pm

Dec. 3: Chess Night 6pm

Dec. 3: Prime Rib Night 5-9pm, Wine Tasting 5-7pm

Dec. 6: S'mores Night 5-7pm

Dec. 13: Christmas Party & DJ Chris Saylor 6-10pm, Ugly Sweater Contest 9pm

Dec. 17: The Traveling Painter 5:30pm

Dec. 17: Prime Rib Night 5-9pm, Basil Hayden's Bourbon Tasting 5-7pm

Dec. 19: S'mores Night 5-7pm

Dec. 21: Brunch 9am-1pm, Santa 10am-1pm

Dec. 31: Oyster Bar Open 3pm-1am, New Years Eve Dinner

Specials 5-10pm (Reservations Suggested 850-897-6400), Party with DJ Diamond Dan 9pm-1am

Oyster Bar Hours: Mon.-Tues. Closed, Wed.-Thurs. 3pm to 9pm, Fri.-Sat. 11am to midnight, Sun. 12pm to 9pm
Restaurant Hours: Mon.-Tues. Closed, Weds.-Sat. 11am to 9pm, Sun. 9am to 4pm, Sunday Brunch 9am to 1pm



Reeling in Success: Get Hook'd Academy Celebrates October Graduates

Families in our area found a standout opportunity recently when Get Hook'd Academy, a youth fishing program, led by L4K Charters and Capt. Rob Hansill and hosted by LJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant & Oyster Bar and Bluewater Bay Marina, welcomed young anglers. Under the leadership of Mate/Charter Captain Rob Hansill—a Marine Corps veteran—the academy welcomed students ages 7 to 12 for a four-week course of instruction and hands-on angling experience in October.

Each student was outfitted

with a full kit of gear (including a Penn rod & reel, cast net, braided line, terminal tackle, hard and soft baits and essential tools) and engaged in instruction that covered: boating and dock safety, stewardship and conservation of local waters, rigging live bait, choosing lures, in-shore fishing tactics, maintenance of equipment, and sportsmanship. The program emphasized that hobbies such as fishing built confidence, community and a sense of belonging at an early age. Get Hook'd Academy operated as a nonprofit school whose motto was “Get HooK'd on

fishing — Get HooK'd on life.”

The setting itself underscored the value of the experience: Bluewater Bay Marina offered the students a working waterfront with slip-access, a fuel dock and ship-store services, anchored by the popular LJ Schooners restaurant.

The session concluded on October 27, 2025 with a tournament and awards ceremony for graduates of the academy, which celebrated the students' milestones and the year's accomplishments.

“Biggest Fish” Winners:
1st Place, Parker Dionne;



2nd Place, Liam Davey; 3rd Place, Finn Carter

“Most Fish” Winners:
1st Place, Isabelle Stralka; 2nd Place, Ezra Barrow; 3rd Place, Ethan Hillyer

The academy expects to offer new dates for the 2026 season—families are encouraged to watch for upcoming announcements to secure a spot early.

Holiday Spirit on the Water: Santa Paddle Parade & Bluewater Bay Marina Christmas Boat Parade

The holidays at Bluewater Bay Marina bring two of the most festive waterfront traditions of the season, each offering a fun and uniquely coastal way to celebrate.

First up is the Santa Paddle Parade, where paddlers fill Rocky Bayou dressed head-to-toe in Santa suits—yes, full suit required! For just \$10 or 10 canned goods, participants can



join the fun while supporting Sharing & Caring Niceville. A group photo takes place at 12

sea of Santas gliding across the Bay for a great cause.

Later that evening, the lights come on for the 14th Annual Bluewater Bay Marina Christmas Boat Parade. Boaters of all kinds deck their vessels in dazzling holiday lights and cruise through the marina in a beloved local tradition. Registration is available by calling 850-897-2821 or visiting bluewaterbay-marina.com. A skipper's meet-

ing begins at 4 p.m., staging at 5 p.m., and the parade rolls out at 5:30 p.m. Festivities continue dockside with a DJ from 6–10 p.m.

Both events invite locals and visitors to soak up the season with waterfront cheer—right outside LJ Schooners, where you can grab dinner, drinks or brunch and enjoy some of the best holiday views in Niceville.

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Derrick Brooks to Headline 2026 ASA Banquet

Get ready for an inspiring evening of recognition, community and athletic excellence as the All Sports Association (ASA) hosts its 2026 Annual Awards Banquet on Friday, February 20, 2026.

While the exact location and ticket details are still “to be announced,” the banquet promises to bring together athletes, community leaders, coaches and sponsors in Northwest Florida for an evening to remember.

A Star-Studded Keynote

This year’s keynote speaker is NFL Hall of Famer Derrick Brooks — Super-Bowl champion, defensive powerhouse and committed community leader. With 11 Pro Bowl selections, nine All-Pro honors and induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2014, Brooks brings not only elite athletic credibility, but a passion for service and character.

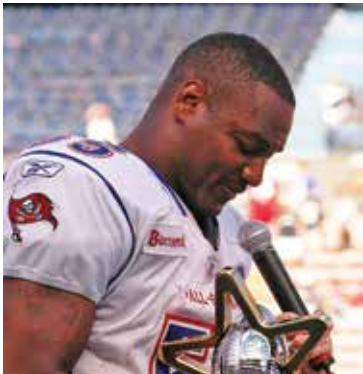
Guests can expect a formal awards dinner celebrating the top athletes, coaches and civic partners of 2025–2026, with honors presented to individuals

who excelled not only on the field, but also in the classroom and the community. Brooks’ keynote address will offer powerful insights on leadership, perseverance and success in sports and in life. Attendees will enjoy opportunities to network with local sports programs, sponsors and youth volunteers and also receive updates on upcoming ASA initiatives and the distribution of funds that support youth-focused sports and service organizations across the region.

The Mission of All Sports Association

The All Sports Association was founded in 1970 under the leadership of Colonel Al Byrne, with the first banquet held at the Holiday Inn on Okaloosa Island. From those modest beginnings, ASA’s membership of volunteers has grown to raise funds and provide time-based service to support youth sports and community programs across the Emerald Coast.

Funded primarily through the awards banquet and an annual golf tournament, the orga-



nization channels its proceeds to local non-profits including the Boys & Girls Club of the Emerald Coast, Special Olympics Florida-Okaloosa, the Eleanor J. Johnson Youth Center and Okaloosa Walton FCA.

On and Off the Field – The ASA Standard

At the heart of the ASA’s recognition program lies a simple yet powerful standard: the athletes honored must excel not only in their sport but also in their academics and community involvement. Through the banquet and associated awards, ASA underscores the belief that true excellence includes charac-

ter, responsibility and service. Recipients are those who maintain strong grades, are active in their schools and volunteer in the community — reflecting ASA’s full mission to boost youth, sport and citizenship alike.

A Legacy of Keynote Speakers

Over the years, ASA’s banquet has hosted renowned keynote speakers who bring experience, inspiration and perspective to the local stage among them Herschel Walker, Bo Jackson, Tim Tebow, Nick Saban, Urban Meyer, Chad Hennings and several others. From professional athletes to community champions, these voices have helped elevate the banquet beyond mere awards to a moment of collective motivation and connection.

Why It Matters Locally

For athletes, coaches, volunteers and sponsors in our region, the ASA banquet is more than a gala—it’s a celebration of the values we prize: teamwork, dedication, citizenship and com-

munity investment. It brings together high school and youth sports programs, local businesses, civic leaders and families under one roof to honor triumphs and galvanize support for what’s next.

With Derrick Brooks as this year’s keynote, the event carries added prestige and excitement—offering both young athletes and the wider community a chance to hear from someone who not only mastered football, but leveraged his platform for impact.

How to Participate

Those interested in sponsorships, table reservations or event participation can visit the ASA website: www.allsportsassociation.com.

Look for the “2026 All Sports Association Awards Banquet” page for updates and registration information coming soon.

Join on February 20, 2026, as we celebrate champions in sport, service and character — and help invest in the bright future of youth athletics right here in the Emerald Coast.



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CLINICIANS

Social Media Feels Your Hot Flashes

BY DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

Social media has a way of knowing when a woman has matured. As a woman enters her 40's, her social media accounts are flooded with advertisements touting magical

remedies promising to make life bearable again. Night sweats? Solution. Hot flashes? Solution. Mental Fog? Weight Gain? Decreased libido? Solution. Solution. Solution. And, if you're struggling, you'll click every link offering a way out. Before you know it, your bathroom counter is overflowing with wellness products and supplements. Just keeping track of it all becomes a daily challenge. Unfortunately, these products rarely treat the root of the problem—changing hormones. This is exactly what we do at the Hormone Restoration Center.

Hormone levels in women are constantly changing. Even women in their 20's and 30's can exhibit early signs of estrogen loss, and they often don't recognize the symptoms. Acne, irregular menstruation, fatigue and mood swings are just a few. As women approach perimenopause and menopause, their symptoms are dismissed as "normal." Detailed hormone panels are rarely ordered by primary care doctors or OB-GYNs, and in reality, doctors receive very little training on hormones or menopause in medical school. Some report as little as one hour of formal instruction. At The Hormone Restoration



Center, our mission is to provide the highest quality medical service with a level of personalized care not available anywhere else. Our highly skilled providers have extensive training in bioidentical hormone therapy and tailor treatments to each patient's individual needs. Bioidentical hormone therapy offers significant benefits for women, particularly those experiencing menopause or hormonal disruption. It effectively alleviates common menopausal symptoms, enhances overall quality of life, and helps prevent long-term health complications.

Hormone therapy is highly effective in reducing menopause symptoms like hot flashes, night sweats, vaginal dryness, mood swings, irritability, and the dreaded "brain fog." These symptoms severely disrupt your daily life. Hormone therapy restores comfort quickly, often within weeks of starting treatment. Hormone therapy alleviates vaginal dryness and pain during intercourse, thereby improving sexual health. Hormone therapy also improves pelvic floor strength, thereby reducing leakage. Hormones are vital for maintaining bone density; hormone therapy reverses osteoporosis and decreases your risk for fractures. This contribution to bone health reduces long-term disability associated with osteoporosis and increases mobility in later years.

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Making Time for You: Why the Holidays Can Be the Perfect Season for Cosmetic Surgery



BY DR. CLARK,
BLUEWATER PLASTIC SURGERY

The holidays are filled with shopping, travel, and family gatherings. But, for many people along the Emerald Coast, this season also presents a unique opportunity: the chance to finally schedule a surgical procedure they've been considering. While it may seem counterintuitive to think about cosmetic surgery during the busiest time of year,



December often provides the ideal window for both recovery and renewal. For many of our patients at Bluewater Plastic Surgery, this season becomes the perfect moment to invest in themselves—something we see often as patients appreciate both the flexibility the holidays allow and the attentive, expert care we offer throughout recovery.

Built-In Recovery Time

Most cosmetic surgeries require at least a few days of rest and limited activity. The holiday season often includes built-in vacation days, office closures and school breaks. This natural downtime makes it easier to schedule procedures like breast augmentation, liposuction, tummy tucks or facelifts without missing significant work or family obligations. Many patients

find it comforting to recover while surrounded by supportive loved ones at home.

Starting the New Year with Confidence

January is naturally a season of fresh starts. For patients who undergo procedures in December, the new year often begins with renewed energy and confidence. Whether it's restoring body contours with liposuction, rejuvenating facial features with a facelift, or reclaiming pre-pregnancy shape with a mommy makeover, surgical solutions can provide dramatic, long-lasting results that align with new year goals.

Combining Procedures for Comprehensive Results

The holiday season is also a time when patients consider combining procedures. For example, pairing a tummy tuck with breast surgery in a mommy makeover can provide more balanced, transformative results while limiting recovery to a single period. Similarly, combining facial surgery with non-surgical treatments like injectables or medical-grade skincare can help maximize and maintain results.

Privacy and Discretion

Another benefit we value at Bluewater Plastic Surgery is discretion. With many friends and colleagues traveling or celebrating, it's easier to step back for a short period without raising questions. Many patients appreciate the opportunity to move forward discreetly during the season, knowing that holiday schedules naturally provide privacy. By the time normal routines resume in January, swelling and bruising have often subsided, leaving only the refreshed results. Choosing a board-certified plastic surgeon is essential in ensuring these procedures are performed safely, discreetly, and with exceptional outcomes, especially during a busy season.

To schedule a private consultation and explore your options, contact Bluewater Plastic Sur-

gery today. As a board-certified plastic surgeon, my practice is dedicated exclusively to cosmetic surgery, and I have performed thousands of procedures over the last 25 years. My surgical fo-

cus includes the face, breast, and body, allowing me to tailor procedures to each patient's goals with precision and experience. My highest priorities are patient safety and superior results. With

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Wellness



BY STEPHENIE CRAIG,
JOURNEY BRAVELY

Do you ever find yourself feeling nervous because you don't know what to say in conversation? Maybe you fear you will say the wrong thing, you don't have anything interesting to say, or you don't know how to keep a conversation going. Maybe you have anxiety because you fear everyone is looking at you and waiting for you to say something stupid. Maybe you worry that someone

will ask you a question you don't know how or don't want to answer.

Social situations can feel intimidating and stressful if you don't have practiced conversation skills. You might assume people are looking for highly intellectual conversation, expert advice, or experienced problem solving. These assumptions can leave you feeling inadequate and anxious. In reality, people mostly want to feel seen and understood. And, surprisingly, you can be excellent at seeing and understanding people without needing all of the answers.

So, how do you approach conversations in ways that feel meaningful and authentic to yourself and others?



8 Ways to Create and Sustain Meaningful Conversation

Remember most people enjoy talking about themselves. Inviting others to talk about their life experience often gets conversation started including questions like: What gets you really excited about your work? What fun plans do you have coming up? What do you love about your favorite hobby? Tell me about how school has been going.

Identify an area of passion and ask follow up questions. What do you love about aviation? What is your favorite plane? What museums have you visited? What got you started learning golf? Where is your favorite golf course?

Follow up, follow up, follow up questions. Often when we ask a question, the other person answers and then we let the conversation drop. Instead, try asking additional questions about something they said. What trips do you have coming up? We are going to Disney World in a couple of months. What parks are you going to? What are you most looking forward to about Disney? What made you decide to go on the trip?

Ask open ended questions. Instead of asking a yes or no question, try asking questions that begin with words like what or how. What do you hope will happen in your work meeting? How will you feel if you get the award? How will you handle it if you aren't invited to the party? What would feel supportive to you right now?

Reflect back what you heard including some emotion. It sounds like you studied really hard for that exam and it sounds like you are disappointed with the grade you received.

Validate. Validating is simply letting the other person know their feelings and experience are valid. All people have feelings and their experience is valid even if you don't agree. It sounds like your feelings were hurt when you were left out of the friend gathering. Being left out feels really hard and hurtful. I can see how you would be feeling upset.

Avoid advice giving unless asked directly and it seems helpful. Most people don't take advice from others even when they ask for it. Then, when you give advice and the other person does not take the advice, it introduces awkward dynamics into the relationship. When others ask for advice, try saying, "I'm really not sure what you should do. What are you thinking about doing?" This helps the other person process their own ideas which they are more likely to use.

Engage boundaries directly. As others ask you questions in conversation, answer as you feel comfortable. If someone asks you a question you'd rather not answer, feel free to say so directly and kindly. I'm not comfortable talking about my complicated relationship with my parents, however, I really appreciate you taking an interest in my life. Then continue the conversation in another direction if you wish to stay engaged.

These conversation tools apply to friendships, family members, new and old relationships. Try practicing some as you enter into the holiday season with parties and gatherings. Remember, people most deeply want to feel seen and understood more than they want you to prove you have something important to say. As always, be patient and gracious with yourself as you learn and try new skills until you feel confident in them. Connect with us for counseling and coaching support along your journey at Journeybravely.com.



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The Hidden Weight of Caring: Supporting Vulnerable Loved Ones Without Losing Yourself



BY MELANIE YOST, LCSW

Being a caretaker for a loved one who is mentally ill, disabled, or elderly is one of the most profound expressions of love and loyalty — and one of the hardest. Few roles require more emotional strength, patience, and resilience. Caregiving rarely begins all at once; it starts with a few errands or appointments and slowly expands until your own needs, dreams, and identity begin to slip quietly into the background.

According to the National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP’s 2020 Caregiving in the U.S. Report, more than 53 million Americans provide unpaid care to an adult or child

with special needs. Nearly one in five caregivers report being in “poor or fair” health, and over 40% experience high emotional stress. These numbers reveal a difficult truth: caregiving can be deeply meaningful — but also profoundly depleting. Without support, the toll on a caregiver’s mental, emotional, and physical health can be life-altering.

Many caregivers describe feeling like they’re living two lives at once: the visible one, where they appear to be functioning well, and the hidden one, where exhaustion, fear, and guilt silently build. Chronic caregiver stress has been linked to anxiety, depression, sleep disruption, high blood pressure, and even compromised immune function. Research published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that caregivers under chronic stress face a 63% higher mortality risk than non-caregivers of the same age. Love should never cost you your health — but too often, caregiving pushes people dan-

gerously close to burnout.

There is also a deep emotional loneliness that many caregivers carry privately. Watching someone you love struggle — with memory loss, mobility limitations, chronic pain, or mental illness — can break your heart a little each day. You may grieve the version of your loved one you remember while still fiercely loving who they are now. That ongoing strain can lead to compassion fatigue, where your ability to feel empathy and joy becomes depleted simply because you have given so much of yourself for so long.

And then there is the guilt. Guilt for feeling tired, for needing a break, or for the resentment that follows too many sleepless nights or unappreciated tasks. Guilt for wanting your own life back. But the truth is this: self-care is not selfish — it is survival. Just as every airline safety briefing reminds us, you must secure your own oxygen mask first before assisting someone else. If you cannot breathe,

you cannot help anyone. Caregivers must protect their own well-being in order to continue providing compassionate, effective care.

As we enter the holiday season, these truths become even more urgent. This time of year brings additional responsibilities, emotional triggers, family expectations, financial pressures, and a pace of life that can overwhelm even the strongest caregiver. It is a season when caregiver stress peaks — and when getting support can prevent a silent struggle from becoming a crisis.

If the responsibility of caregiving is starting to affect your mental health OR you are seeking effective, innovative therapies for a loved one struggling with depression, anxiety, PTSD, chronic pain, traumatic



brain injury, dementia, or neurodegenerative issues related to stroke or Parkinson’s, call Be Well Solutions for a free consultation.

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Melanie Yost, LCSW is the co-owner of Be Well Solutions and Complete Ketamine Solutions in Destin and can be reached at 850-786-2051 to schedule a complimentary confidential consultation.

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BY KELLY STALNAKER,
BAYWIND MEDICAL

Are you a Type 1 or Type 2 diabetic who's tired of constant fingersticks? It may be time to consider a continuous glucose monitor, or CGM for short.

A CGM automatically tracks your blood sugar levels 24/7 with fewer fingersticks. Instead of using lancets, a tiny sensor is placed just under the skin and held in place with a small adhesive patch. There may be brief discomfort during insertion, but once in place, testing is com-

pletely painless, and readings appear instantly on your reader or smartphone.

This small wearable device can be life-changing. By giving you quick, convenient access to real-time blood sugar data, a CGM helps you make better food, activity, and medication decisions throughout the day. Over time, you can spot trends and learn how different meals or activities affect your glucose levels. Many models even alert you when levels are dangerously high or low, helping you stay



mean higher out-of-pocket costs for you.

As one of the few local DME providers in the area, Baywind Medical is proud to offer CGMs to Medicare and Tricare patients. We make it easy to get started, simply have a chat with your doctor about whether a CGM might be right for you, then ask to have your prescription sent to Baywind Medical. After we confirm eligibility, we'll ship the equipment directly to your front door. Plus, you'll have access to friendly, knowledgeable representatives in person or by phone, five days a week. As a family-owned business right here in your community, we are committed to the health and wellbeing of our neighbors.

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If you're a Medicare patient who uses a CGM, or is thinking about making the switch to one, please note that there have been some recent changes in how these devices are covered. In the past, CGMs were classified as a pharmacy benefit, meaning patients could pick them up directly from a pharmacy. Today they are classified as Durable Medical Equipment (DME), so supplies must be dispensed

through a DME provider like Baywind Medical (formerly J&B Medical). Continuing to use the pharmacy for your CGMs may

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Stay Strong This Season: How Strength Training Keeps You Healthy Through the Holidays



BY KASSIA GARFIELD,
MAXSTRENGTH FITNESS

The holidays are right around the corner—a season filled with family gatherings, big meals, and plenty of reasons to slow down. But while it might seem like the perfect time to put exercise on hold, this festive stretch may be the best time to start (or restart) a strength training routine. Not only can lifting weights or doing resistance exercises help balance out the extra holiday treats, but science shows it can also give your immune system and overall health a real boost—especially as we age.

The Gift of Strength for Your Immune System

When we think of staying healthy during cold and flu sea-

son, most of us picture vitamins, rest, or hot tea. But studies have found that consistent strength training can enhance immune function, helping the body fight off illness. Resistance exercise supports healthy circulation, reduces inflammation, and improves the body's ability to regulate blood sugar—all factors that keep your immune defenses strong. Moderate workouts also help reduce stress hormones, which, when high, can weaken your immunity over time.

In short, lifting weights doesn't just build muscles—it builds resilience. And that's something we could all use more of this time of year.

Why Strength Matters More as We Age

For older adults, strength training is one of the most powerful tools for maintaining independence and vitality. As we age, muscle mass naturally declines, a process called sarcopenia. Without intervention, this loss leads to decreased mobility, higher fall risk, slower recovery from illness, and overall lower quality of life.

But here's the hopeful news: muscle loss isn't inevita-



ble. Strength training—even starting later in life—can reverse much of that decline. For grandparents or older family members, this means having the energy and stability to keep up with grandkids during the holidays, whether that's playing on the floor, decorating the house, or joining in on winter beach walks.

It's also worth noting that as we get older, recovery from the hustle and bustle of family gatherings—late nights, travel, rich food—can take longer. Having stronger muscles and better overall fitness can help the body bounce back faster, keeping you energized throughout the season instead of worn out.

Start Now, Skip the January Rush

Every January, gyms fill up with resolution-makers. But by then, many people are already playing catch-up after a few months of inactivity and indulgence. Starting now—before the holiday chaos really ramps up—gives you a head start. You'll enter the new year feel-

ing stronger, more energetic, and confident in your routine.

Best of all, starting small counts. Two to three strength workouts a week—whether at a local gym, with a personal trainer, or even using bodyweight exercises at home—can make a huge difference. Squats, push-ups, resistance bands, and light dumbbells are all simple ways to get started.

A Holiday Tradition Worth Keeping

This season, while you're

baking cookies, wrapping gifts, and spending time with family, remember to give yourself one more gift: the gift of strength. It's something that benefits every generation—from the youngest to the oldest—and helps ensure many more joyful holidays together.

So, before the new year's rush begins, pick up those weights, roll out that mat, or take that first step into your local gym. Your future self—and your immune system—will thank you.

If you are looking for a place to start, MaxStrength Fitness of Niceville does all one on one strength training, specific to clients age, ability and goals. If you feel like you do not know where to start, start with us! Kassia Garfield, the owner, is a physical therapist who understands healing, keeping people safe and the benefits of strength training. Come on down and give us a chance!

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Vets Helping Vets & First Responders: What Does ‘Giving Back’ Look Like For You?

BY MARTA ROSE-THORPE

For years, Jimmy Thorpe had felt the urge to give back. A U.S. Army Veteran who served during the Gulf War, Jimmy had always held the highest regard for the men and women who serve our country and keep us safe. This group also includes First Responders – the men and women who keep our communities safe.

In 2014, he created the tagline “Vets Helping Vets” – later elevated to “Vets Helping Vets & First Responders” – and decided to start giving what he had to give: AC units. Jimmy owns A Superior Mechanical, a local business which he launched in 2002. “We are honored to give thanks to the men and women who put their lives on the line every day for the citizens of our community,” he says.

In the beginning, Jimmy and his team decided to give away eight AC units per year. Veterans and First Responders were encouraged to apply online at ASuperiorMechanical.com; the Giveaway was open to all who have served in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard,







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installation, per year. “I feel that giving back to Veterans and First Responders is like taking the time to help my father,” says Jimmy, whose father served in the U.S. Marines. “It’s something that comes second nature; it’s instinctive and something that’s driven in me.”

The next Veterans & First Responders Appreciation Lunch takes place on Tuesday, April 21, 2026,

and all First Responders, including EMT/Medics, Police, Sheriffs and Fire Fighters. American Legion Post 392 in Panama City met and voted on all submissions each quarter, selecting one Veteran in need and one First Responder in need to be awarded the units.

In 2015, the Giveaway began taking the form of a quarterly appreciation lunch at Harley-Davidson of Panama City Beach. The first event hosted around 40 guests and several local businesses co-sponsored. The next lunch brought in a few more guests and sponsors, and the Vet Center and other veteran-related organizations joined in. As the word-of-mouth continued, the guest list grew. By 2017, the event had moved to Texas Roadhouse PCB and grew through the years to host around 380+ guests each time. In 2019, Pastor David Butler of Faith Assembly Church in Miramar Beach (AKA “The Rock & Roll Church”) invited Jimmy to host a quarterly appreciation lunch there, to reach Veterans and First Responders in the Walton and Okaloosa areas. This lunch took place quarterly, for five years, during which Jimmy gave away 12 AC units, including

from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Niceville Community Center, 204 Partin Drive North, Niceville, FL 32578. The event will include a hot lunch catered by Swiftly Catered, a brief welcome from the sponsors and supporters, and the AC Giveaway. This event is supported and sponsored by the Niceville Community Center, Niceville High School (who will present the colors), United Community Bank, Blanken Management, and Beachworx CoWorking Spaces. Walton and Okaloosa County businesses are encouraged to sponsor; for details, contact Marta Thorpe at (850) 814-3822. To register to win an AC unit, visit ASuperiorMechanical.com and go to ABOUT US > HVAC GIVEAWAY.

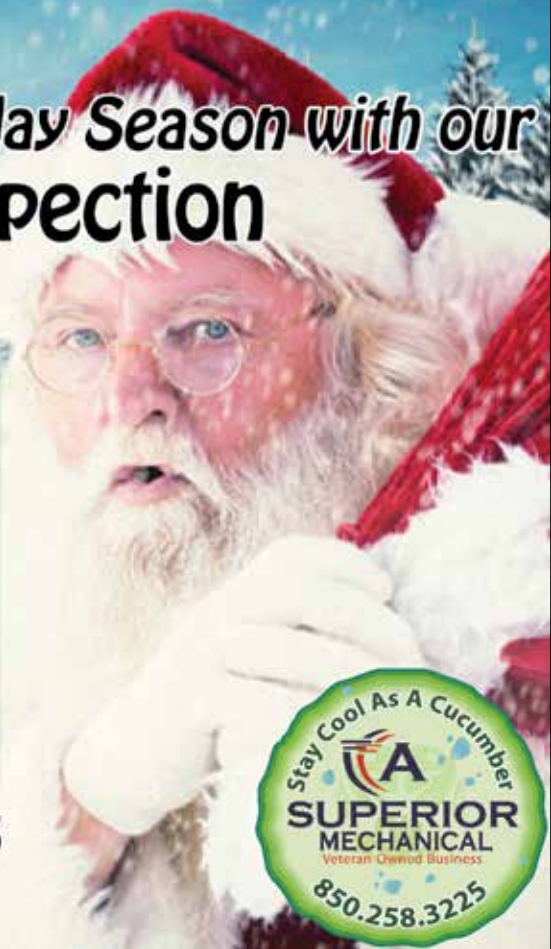
Thorpe says he hopes his AC giveaways serve as an example to the community of how others can give back. “Let us be your template,” he shares. “For a long time, I felt the desire to somehow give back, and after talking with my wife about what this would look like, we realized we should give back what we have to give: AC systems. Any business – any person – can do the same and find their own way to give back.”

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Santa Begins To Feel His Age

BY KENNETH BOOKS, LOCAL
NICEVILLE RESIDENT AND
AUTHOR

The Plan

It was late November and at the beginning of the workday, Santa called all his elves to a meeting.

"I've decided to promote one of you to assistant Santa," he said. At first, there was complete silence as the elves digested what they were being told. Then, pandemonium broke out as half the elves condemned the idea as ridiculous and the other half volunteered for the job.

Santa had always encouraged his elves to speak their minds, and this they did with passion. But when he held up his hand for quiet, all the noise halted instantly.

"I see many of you want the job," he said. "The only fair way I can think of, and the only way to avoid hard feelings, is for me to put the names of all the interested elves in my hat and draw one at random."

The elves who wanted the promotion wrote their names on expired Christmas cards and nervously passed them to Santa, who filled his red fur hat until it bulged. Then he called in Rudolph, who had been polishing his nose in the barn, to draw one name from among the thousands. Santa unfolded the card, looked at the name and did his best not to look shocked.

"It's Snark," he said, his voice catching in his throat. "I'll start training Snark to be assistant Santa tomorrow. 'And someday,'" he added, his face turning white, "he'll take my place and be Santa Claus himself."

It was a long walk back to his house for Santa. He came in and told Mrs. Claus what he had done. She tsk-tsked disapprovingly.

"I don't know what gets into you," she said. "First it was the hula hoop, then the pet rock and then those hideous Cabbage Patch Kids. Well, what's done is done. Who won the drawing?"

Santa looked at his long-suffering wife and smiled sickly.

"Snark," he said, his voice little more than a gasp.

"Snark!" Mrs. Claus said, her face reddening half in anger and half in amusement. "Why he's the worst elf we have!"

Training begins

The next day, Santa dragged himself out of bed, struggling to awaken. After thousands of years of toy-making, elf-hiring and the most strenuous delivery schedule in the world, he was beginning to feel his age. He stretched, listening as his bones cracked and creaked, and looked in the mirror to trace the small wrinkles in his face. He wasn't sure, but he thought there may be a few more than last year. At least, his hair and beard maintained their youthful snow-white sheen. He was as strong as ever, too. That was a good thing – it takes plenty of muscle to carry enough toys in a sack to satisfy all the boys and girls in the world.

"I'm not getting any younger, that's for sure," Santa said to himself, chuckling with a soft "ho-ho-ho." He was shaken from his thoughts by the mind-clearing aroma of bacon and eggs.

Mrs. Claus, as usual, had risen early to make sure Santa started his day with a hearty breakfast.

As Santa ate his breakfast with customary gusto, he noticed Mrs. Claus looking at him oddly.

"What's wrong, Mama?" he asked, using his pet name for the woman who had stood by his side for century after century.

"I should ask you the same thing," she said. "Something's on your mind. I can always tell."

Santa sighed, his usually huge appetite stilled. "I could never fool you, could I, Mama?" he said. "The truth is, I've been feeling as if I'm getting old."

"Old!" Mrs. Claus said. "Pish and Tosh! 'Why, you're the youngest 2,000-year-old man I've ever seen!'"

"True enough," Santa said. "I realize I'm in the prime of life. But how can I be sure I'll last another 2,000 years?"

He pushed aside his half-eaten bacon and eggs and paced slowly around and around his house, thinking so hard it brought sweat to his brow, even in the 40-below-zero North Pole weather.

"The worst elf in the whole North Pole," he said to himself. "He can't even make a simple doll! He always gets a leg where an arm should be or something."

"You've got to tell him it has



to be someone else," Mrs. Claus said.

"I can't do that," Santa said. "I gave my word. Snark is the new assistant Santa Claus."

The next day, the first thing Santa did after he arrived at his workshop was look for Snark. But Snark was nowhere to be found.

"Where is that elf?" Santa said to himself, a little impatiently. "You'd think this time, for once, he'd be on time."

Santa looked all over the workshop. No Snark. Then he went outside. Still no Snark. Finally, he looked in the barn. There he found Snark caught in Blitzen's reins, trying with no success at all to free himself.

"Help me, Santa," Snark

yelled, panicking. I can't seem to figure this out!"

Santa came over, gave the reins a simple flip, and released the elf. He thought about scolding Snark, then sighed and realized it would probably do no good. Why get worked up about something that nobody – apparently even Snark – could help?

Snark was on his best and most careful behavior as he followed Santa back to the workshop. In fact, on the way, he stepped in a reindeer feed bucket only once and even managed not to knock over any of the work tables inside the workshop.

Santa was about as impressed as he could be with an elf the likes of Snark.

"OK, Snark. Let's start with

the simple stuff," Santa said, leading the elf to a table where a huge computer sat and grabbing him before he could catch his foot in the printer cable and send all the components to the floor. "One of our most important functions will be to monitor all the boys and girls in the world to see if they've been naughty or nice. I use this computer to input information sent to me from parents, teachers and all the observant pets and reindeer all over the earth."

"So that's a computer," Snark said. "How does it work? Magic?"

"Never mind, Santa said. "It works and that's all we need to know about it right now. Here, let me show you how easy it is."

Santa punched a button and the screen came alive with reports from the United States, Africa, Asia, Europe and all the continents on the globe.

"Now, see here," he said, cuffing the elf's shoulder lightly to catch his wandering attention. "Here's a little boy named Hassan in the Middle East. He helped his neighbor harvest some olives without even being asked. He was nice." Santa held down the control button and pushed the "1." The boy's name

Continued on page 30

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BY PASTOR DOUG "DOC" STAUFFER

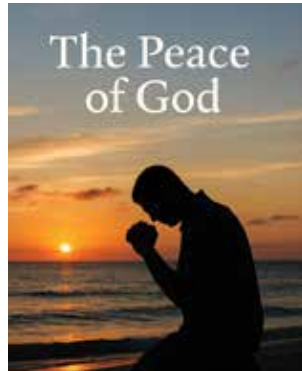
One of the greatest truths that can transform your life is understanding how God enters the details of your story—especially when the burden of regret still weighs heavily on your heart. I have found more comfort in this truth than in almost anything else, because it

reminds me that God continues to work even when I feel I have failed.

The apostle Paul wrote extensively about prayer, but perhaps never more powerfully than in *Philippians 4:6-7*: “Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

The world cannot give you peace, although it offers many ways to cope. But true peace—the kind that steadies your

A Pastor's Pondering: When the Weight Hasn't Yet Been Lifted



heart when everything feels like it's falling apart—comes only from God. His peace doesn't mean ignoring life's pressures or pretending pain isn't there. It means that through prayer, you gain the strength to walk through the storm even when the winds seem too strong.

Sometimes anxiety follows good intentions that go awry. You made a decision that felt right at the moment, but it ultimately turned out to be misguided. *Proverbs 14:12* warns, “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.” When outcomes spiral beyond our control, pressure mounts, failure appears near, and the heart feels heavy. King David understood this when he cried, “For mine iniquities are gone over mine head: as an heavy burden they are too

heavy for me.” (*Psalms 38:4*)

Anxiety is natural—but surrender is a supernatural act. It's not easy to “turn it over to the Lord.” Often, we feel compelled to fix what only He can heal. Yet *1 Peter 5:7* reminds us to “cast all your care upon him; for he careth for you.” The word cast means to throw with force—fling it from your hands to His feet.

The devil will try to remind you of your failures, whispering, “You've ruined everything.” But the Holy Ghost gently reminds those who are listening, “You're forgiven.” Forgiveness doesn't excuse our mistakes—it anchors our hope beyond them.

Peace comes after prayer. We desire peace first, but God says, “Pray first.” His peace guards our hearts like a soldier on duty. And thanksgiving—even amid ongoing pain—shifts our view from panic to praise. “Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me,” says *Psalms 50:23*, “and to him that ordereth his conversation aright will I shew the salvation of God.”

Consider King Hezekiah. Surrounded by the Assyrian army, his earlier choices had failed him. Yet when he received the enemy's threats, he “spread it before the LORD” (*2 Kings 19:14*) and prayed. That night, God sent an angel who destroyed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. Hezekiah couldn't fix his mistake—but peace came when he surrendered it to the one who

can help us most.

Or think of Hannah in *1 Samuel* chapter 1. Childless and heartbroken, she poured out her soul before the Lord. “So the woman went her way, and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad.” She had not experienced the answer to prayer but did receive peace.

And Paul, tossed by a storm in *Acts* chapter 27, declared, “Be of good cheer... for I believe God.” His peace didn't come from calm seas but from trusting the One who commands them.

You may not be able to undo a decision or control what has collapsed, but you can commit the rubble to God. The same Lord who saw your mistake sees your heart—and He's not finished with you yet.

“Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee.” (*Isaiah 26:3*)

That perfect peace doesn't always mean the weight is gone—it means you have recognized that you are not carrying it alone. God's peace steadies your heart while His hand rebuilds what was broken. So, while you wait for the burden to lift, remember: the presence of the storm does not mean the absence of your Saviour. Trust Him through the pressure, and in His time, you'll find that the weight has become His—and the peace has become yours.

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Sean of the South: Christmas Cheer



BY SEAN DIETRICH

I was 15 years old. I walked into the rural library. My father was freshly dead. I was a middle-school dropout. We were poor. It was Christmastime.

The small, public library was decorated for the holiday season. There was plastic holiday crapola everywhere. It was cold outside. I had no winter coat.

I stepped into the library with a blast of sleet and rain. I was wearing a T-shirt. My hair was soaked.

“Where’s your coat?” said the librarian.

“I don’t have one.”

“You don’t have a coat!? It’s 30 degrees outside!”

Shrug.

The librarian’s name was Miss Terry. She was old enough to predate the Roosevelt administration. Her hair was cotton white. Her shoes were Reeboks. Her embroidered sweatshirt read: “Dear Santa, I can explain.”

The library was a converted residential house. And I was a regular here.

“You can’t go around without a coat,” Miss Terry said. “You’ll freeze.”



Shrug Number Two.

I wandered to the fiction section. Fiction was all I was interested in. I read fiction each morning, afternoon, and night. It was escapism, I see that now. And I was a classic escapist. But then, there were very few happy things in my life. Who wouldn’t want to escape?

That day, I checked out two Louis L’Amour books, a few Dick Francis novels. When I brought my selection up to the counter, Miss Terry just looked at me with warm eyes.

“I have a book I want you to read,” she said.

“You do?”

She placed a leather-bound book atop my stack of books. Written by Lucy Maud Montgomery.

“I think you’ll appreciate this one.”

“It looks like a girl book.”

“Try to keep an open mind.”

I took the books home, I read them the way I always read books. Ferociously. But when I read the Lucy Maud Montgomery book, time stood still. And

my heart moved sideways in my chest. I had never read a book with more tenderness.

When I returned to the library a week later, Miss Terry asked how I liked the book. I told her it was maybe the best book I ever read.

I returned my books, and checked out more. This time, she placed another book atop my stack. This one was written by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

I took the books home. I read them in a frenzy, just like before. But Laura Ingalls Wilder was immediately my favorite.

I brought the books back to the library.

“How did you like the book I gave you?” she asked.

“I read it twice.”

She smiled.

Then it happened. After Miss Terry accepted my stack of books, in return, she gave me a gift-wrapped box. The box was

wrapped in glittery red paper, with a green ribbon.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“It’s for you,” she said.

“Is it another book?”

“Just open it.

I tore the paper. There was a coat inside. Warm and fluffy. I cried when I put it on.

“We can’t have you catching a cold and getting sick,” she said. “There are too many books left for you to read. You might even write one of your

own someday.”

I wiped my face. “One day I’m going to grow up and write a book,” I told her. “And when I do, I’m going to write something about you, and how you gave me this coat.”

She smiled and straightened the collar of my jacket. “You won’t even remember me when you’re all grown up.”

Well.

I showed her.

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Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida Celebrates the Vale of History Exhibit

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

After the Annual November meeting for the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, members participated in a ribbon cutting for the Vale of History Wall exhibit. This completed an unusual year of ribbon cuttings for the local history museum that houses artifacts for all of Northwest Florida.

Barbara Palmgren, Exhibits Chair, made the snip of the scissors to officially acknowledge official displays on the wall and in nearby display cases. Visitors can view Freida Spence's portrait of her grandparents who developed a sawmill along the shores of Boggy Bayou and then look down to the opposite end of the wall to the large portrait of Addie Lewis, renowned educator. Addie's portrait was once hanging at Lewis Middle School and donated by renamed Lewis School for this permanent exhibit.

In fact, several home town heroes on the wall had schools named in their honor. James Plew and Lula Edge join Addie on the wall. Centered between them is Walt Ruckel, a major real estate developer for the area. Ruckel Middle School is named in his honor. Other lead-



ers such as Raymonde Byrne Williams also greet visitors from the exhibit.

James Plew developed Valparaiso as a city after John Perrine was first obtained an official charter in 1921 to create the city of Valparaiso. John Perrine, who had a park named in his honor across from the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, has not been forgotten thanks to his great-granddaughter, Windy Horton, from Lebanon, Tennessee. Barbara and Marie Hallion had met Windy when she visited the area several years ago. Barbara put her in contact with Jene McCracken, Collections Chair, and the two began corre-

sponding about the project. Jene was sent multiple photos from Windy's grandmother's trunk. We thank Marion Ruckel Skaliky, an inspirational Ruckel family member as well as others who gave their family treasures to the Vale of History. We thank Jerry Spence and Freida Spence for their donations as well.

Special thanks go to Arthur Edgar, museum manager, for his vision to begin this exhibit. He was helped with hours of work and planning by Jene and Bill McCracken and Debra Edgar. This project began in the spring of last year.

The entire year has truly been a celebration of new ex-

hibits at the museum. The rail gun exhibit, the Vietnam Refugee Camp Exhibit and the grand opening of the 1400 sq ft addition has been more than what was foreseen several years ago. A plaque honoring the Impact 100 grant of \$100,000 and those who contributed the additional funds to build the new room now hangs on a wall in the addition.

Next year, the exhibit hall will display an exhibit to honor the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Under the guidance of curator Dr.

Marie Hallion, volunteers will give their time and talent to the events leading up to this day that changed our world forever.

With volunteers ready to participate, this promises to be a memorable 2026! As visitors tour the museum and this new exhibit, they will pass by the other exhibits that have taken their place this year and years before. As they near the history of the birth of our nation guests pass the Vale of History Exhibit that now takes its place in history at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida.

New Exhibit Spotlight: "The Vale of History" at the Heritage Museum

BY JENE' MCCrackEN

A new display at the Heritage Museum entitled "The Vale of History" honors some of the influential people who were pivotal in the founding of Valparaiso.

The display is comprised of several portraits and photographs of people who helped shape Valparaiso through their entrepreneurial, civic, educational, political and cultural efforts.

Among those featured are Addie Lewis, Lula Edge, Jessie "Granny" Edge, Mr. and Mrs. Perrine, Mr. and Mrs. Plew, Mr. and Mrs. Walt Ruckel Sr., Mr. C.W. Ruckel, Raymond Plew, Byrne Williams and several members of the Spence family.

Two glass cases also house treasured heritage items from early Valparaiso residents. The Museum extends its appreciation to Marion Ruckel, fourth-generation direct descendant of James Plew, and to the Spence family for sharing prized artifacts. Additional thanks go to Mrs. Windy Horton, great-great-granddaughter of John Perrine—who named the city of Valparaiso—for donating several never-before-seen photographs.

The Museum also wishes to thank Principal Chatman and Media Specialist, Betha-



ny Colman (Addie Lewis Elementary) for generously donating two portraits of Addie Lewis as well as Principal Melissa Kearly (Edge Elementary) for donating portraits of Lula Edge and Jessie Edge.

The Vale of History display was conceived by Museum Manager and Exhibit Coordinator, Mr. Arthur Edgar who has over 30 years of museum management and exhibit experience. Among those volunteers who helped Mr. Edgar bring his concept to fruition are Carole Barlow, Ashlyn Burns, Cloey Coates, Deb Edgar, Jene' McCracken (Trustee Collections) and Mike Weaver (Trustee).

The Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, located on Westview Avenue in Valparaiso, is open Tuesday-Saturday, 10:30 a.m.-4 p.m.

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Beats That Heal: Army Veteran and EDM Producer Kayden Michaels

BY CHRISTOPHER MANSON

In 2021, after a decade of soldiering, local resident Kayden Michaels found his life and military career turned upside down by a vehicle accident. Now the Army veteran crafts EDM (Electronic Dance Music) from his home studio in Laurel Hill.

He creates tracks like “Magnetized,” one of his latest, to “process trauma and inspire everyone in our Panhandle community.” Michaels describes that one as “melodic garage music with soaring synths and raw emotion.” In other words, perfect for the Emerald Coast’s beach vibe.

“This genre is a bit tricky,” says Michaels. Before he joined the Army as a combat engineer, he played with bands. So why EDM? “It’s the only music that’s given me peace.” When he first got his ears around Paul Van Dyk’s seminal album *Seven Ways* – a gift from his sister – Michaels realized he had found



Kayden Michaels doing all the good in his Laurel Hill studio.



his musical calling. “I knew I could never leave this music. It connected more than any other. It gave me goosebumps, and goosebumps is why I do it.”

German Van Dyk is “one of the most iconic EDM producers in the world, as big as you can

get,” Michaels says of his greatest influence. “He had to smuggle his sounds when the wall was up. He puts everything he has into every second of his songs, and that’s what I wanted to do.”

At 25, Michaels was attending school and performing in

small clubs around Brevard County. His military service helped fund his passion for EDM, and in 2015, he was picked up by “blended genre” label Alien Records. “I produce different forms for them.” He’s built a fan base with his productions and participated in lots of “remix contests” in the past year.

Michaels’ independent work has landed on SoundCloud, a platform he calls “very easy and streamlined. For up-and-coming artists, it’s easy to get your music out there.” And he’s not dealing with music biz middlemen while collecting a “decent” amount of royalties from his music.

He currently creates out of a 200-square-foot room that he’s been piecing together for the short time he’s lived in the area. “I just got a digital audio workstation where I make all my beats, rhythms and chord progressions.” Michaels continues to fine tune his drumming

skills, and hopes to learn violin next. “It’s such a beautiful instrument.”

He’s a classic rock addict, too. “My mom was heavily into the Beatles and Elvis, and she’d always be dancing in the kitchen. I don’t think I ever went through a day where there wasn’t music.” The 40-year-old is a fan of music spanning the 1930s through the 1960s and is not ashamed to name Ella Fitzgerald as his all-time favorite singer. “Her and Doris Day.”

The artist is currently on the lookout for a live environment where he can share his music. “I see a lot of stuff happening with the EDM scene in Pensacola and Panama City,” says Michaels. “I haven’t seen it in Fort Walton Beach and Destin, but I’m told it’s there. I’m looking forward to getting out there.”

Discover more – lots more – at kaydenmichaels.com. Michaels is also on Instagram, Facebook, SoundCloud, Spotify and YouTube.



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Arts & Music

SANTA

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disappeared from the screen.

"You killed him! Snark shrieked, starting to cry.

"Quiet!" Santa said, raising his voice for the first time that year. "I just moved his name to the 'Nice' file. Here, let me show you."

Santa pressed the "F1" key and a list of hundreds of thousands of youngsters appeared on the screen. He scrolled down and there was Hassan's name.

"Did you see how I did all that?" Santa asked, doubting Snark had any idea what was going on.

"Of course, I did," the elf replied. "I'm not stupid, you know."

Santa bit his tongue to keep from saying something he may regret later. "OK," he said. "Let's see you do it."

Snark looked at the computer screen and said, "Look — here's a little girl named Lucy who fed a stray dog, then found him a home. I'll just put her in the 'Nice' file."

He reached over pushed the control button and hit "F2."

"No!" Santa yelled, reaching just a little bit too slowly for the keyboard. His face sagged as the screen went blank.

"You've erased the entire data base!" he said with horror. "Now I — I mean you — have to punch in all the names of all the boys and girls in the world all over the world all over again."

The Reindeer Revolt

As Christmas approached, Santa got more and more uneasy. One evening, he was sit-

ting in his living room watching his favorite TV show, "Reindeer Review," on North Pole Box Office, fidgeting and tapping his fingers until Mrs. Claus had had enough.

"Will you sit still?" she asked. "For days now, you've been so jumpy I swear if I came up behind you and said 'Boo,' you'd go through the roof!"

"I'm sorry, Mama," Santa said. "It's Snark. I've been working with him for weeks and he has yet to do something — anything! — right. The elf is a walking disaster area. He can't walk by anything without knocking it down. He can't touch anything without breaking it. You show him something over and over and over and he just can't seem to grasp it. I feel sorry for all the boys and girls in the world if he ever becomes Santa Claus. And I'm frightened — truly frightened — about his first Christmas Eve trip with me in four days!"

Mrs. Claus got up, walked to Santa and started massaging his shoulders. As she continued, he began to relax a little bit for the first time in weeks.

"I was afraid of this the first time I heard Snark was to be assistant Santa," she said, gently. "Maybe you'd better just tell him he doesn't have what it takes. It'd be an act of kindness, really. Otherwise, he'll have to live with the knowledge that he failed as Santa Claus. That would ruin his life."

"I wish I could just replace him, Mama," Santa said, patting her hand on his shoulder. "But I just can't do that to him. He's so proud that he'll be Santa someday. I overheard him talking to some of the other elves the other day. He said he

just hopes he can be half as good a Santa as I've always been. He couldn't bear the shame if I demoted him."

A knock on the front door interrupted the Clauses' conversation. Mrs. Claus opened the door and there stood Rudolph.

"Come in, Rudolph," said. "May I get you some eggnog or a bale of hay?"

"No thanks, Mama," Rudolph said. (Everyone on the North Pole called Mrs. Claus "Mama.")

"I'm coming as a representative of all the reindeer. We just had a meeting and, well, we don't want to make our rounds this year with Snark on the sleigh."

Santa stood up and peered down at his most famous reindeer. "Look, Rudolph, I know Snark is a little different..." he started.

"A little different? Rudolph burst out. "He's a nut! We've known him for 2,000 years and he still can't remember our names. Every time you ask him to feed us, we end up with something weird in our feed buckets. One time, he put a bag of marbles in my bowl! The elf just doesn't think! Or maybe he can't think. Anyway, we all agreed we can't go up this year with him riding behind us."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear this," Santa said. "I guess I could replace all of you with dogs or horses or hippos or something. But where will you go to live then?"

Rudolph backed up as if he were face-to-face with a hunter.



"But Santa," he said. "We don't want to quit!"

"Well, if you let me down on my hardest night of the year, I won't have any choice," Santa said gently.

"I'll get back to you," Rudolph said, and galloped back to the barn.

Needless to say, the reindeer decided to fly no matter who was on the sleigh. But Santa was still worried.

The Big Night with Snark

The day before Christmas, Santa was still concerned, but there was too much work to do to dwell on it. He had to make sure the reindeer were well-rested and well-fed, get the sleigh loaded and make any last-minute corrections to his naughty or nice list.

Snark, of course, was no help at all. He slammed the door of the barn, waking all the reindeer two hours early. He spilled the reindeer feed on his way into the barn. He tossed a bag of toys onto the sleigh too hard, knocking the whole thing onto its side. And he erased the computer data base for the seventh time. Before his annual trip, Santa made it his practice to eat a hearty meal to build up his strength for the long night ahead. He had to be powerful to coax his reindeer to fly fast enough to stay with the changing time zones. Otherwise, some children might wind up getting their presents Christmas afternoon and that would never do.

This time, though, Santa had trouble enjoying his meal. Mrs. Claus bustled about, as always, bringing him pot roast and meat loaf and roasted turkey and homemade bread and

cherry pie, all the while casting subtle glances at Santa. Finally, she could hold her tongue no longer.

"Santa, you have to tell Snark he can't go," she said. "The whole North Pole is in an uproar. The reindeer are terrified. The elves have started a pool to see how many mistakes Snark makes. And you're a nervous wreck!"

"It'll work out, Mama," Santa said, unconvincingly. "It'll have to."

Santa Claus finished his dinner, wiped his mouth, brushed his teeth and kissed Mrs. Claus goodbye. She wondered how long it would be before she saw him again.

On his way to the sleigh, Santa stopped and scratched each reindeer behind his ears, as he always did on Christmas Eve (and plenty of other times, too). This time, though he gave each one a little pep talk.

"It'll be all right, Donder," he said. "Don't worry about a thing, Dasher." "This will be just fine, Cupid."

Finally, he could delay no longer. Santa climbed into the sleigh and Snark scurried in on the other side, falling out only once in the process. The elves looked grim. The reindeer looked alarmed.

"On Dasher, on Dancer, on Prancer and Vixen," Santa called and the sleigh rose two inches off the ground.

Santa's customary cry was broken by a blood-curling scream. He looked to his right and there was Snark, cowering on the floor of the sleigh and

Continued on next page



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Directed by Nathanael Fisher, the show features choreography by Emily Bainbridge and Vincent Pellegrino, music direction by Martha Wingfield, and design work by Rebeca Lake,

Taylor Walker, Gavin Young and Cailey Mize, with additional production support from Ora Wolfgram, Carl Hendin and Bella Fisher. The cast includes Evelyn

Brooks and Lanier Hooper as Annie; Adam Du Plessis as Warbucks; Darla Briganti as Miss Hannigan; Rachel Morse as Grace Farrell; Gavin Parmley as Rooster; and Martha Wingfield as Lily St. Regis, along with a talented ensemble and a large cast of Orphans. Bruce Collier

portrays President Franklin D. Roosevelt, with Kingston Mixson as Child Actor Supervisor. Performances take place at ECTC, 560 Grand Boulevard, Suite 200, with tickets priced \$30–\$65. ECTC’s 2025–2026 season is supported by Grand Boulevard Town Center, St. Joe

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SANTA

continued from previous page

trembling from head to toe. “Take us down, Santa,” Snark hollered. “Take us down, please!” The sleigh landed with a thump and Snark leaped off, landing face-first in the snow. It was several minutes before he could speak. “I’m sorry, Santa,” he said, his eyes filling with tears. “I didn’t realize I’d be so afraid to fly! I guess I can’t be assistant Santa after all.” He looked crestfallen for his loss and embarrassed for bailing

out at the last minute. “I didn’t mean to let you down, Santa,” he almost whispered. Santa’s worries had passed, as had those of the elves, the reindeer and even Mrs. Claus. “Ho, ho, ho!” he laughed roundly. “Let me down! Why, Snark, you didn’t let me down! In fact, right now, I can’t think of an elf I’m more grateful to than you!” With that, Santa jumped back into his sleigh and called his reindeer to action. As they rose into the air, he waved jauntily and said, as he always did, “And a merry Christmas to all and to all a good night!”

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