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# BAY Life

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## The 17th Annual 30A Songwriters Festival Brings Top-Notch Talent and Music Lovers from Around the Globe

BY WILL ESTELL

If you consider yourself a fan of great music and the talented songwriters who make the music you love come to life, you definitely want to make plans to attend the 17th Annual 30A Songwriters Festival. Ranked as one of the top three songwriter festivals in the entire country, there are plenty of reasons to make this your first musical event of the new year: over 125 reasons in fact—and that's just the number of artists playing it!

The renowned festival of music and fun celebrates its 17th year, January 16 - 19, 2026, with four days of performances, including two days of headliners on presenting sponsor Grand Boulevard's main stage in beautiful Miramar Beach. The winter weekend of music and fun is celebrated by music lovers around the globe and somehow seems to get better every single year. That's something I can attest to, as



I attended the very first one! With performances at more than 30 venues, spanning over 30 miles of South Walton's beach communities, this year's festival offers something for everyone. Whether you're a fan of Americana, rock, folk, country or jazz, the popular

festival brings some of the best songwriters to ever grace any stage: all converging on our beautiful, NWFL beaches.

This year's lineup is another assortment of phenomenal artists, from Saturday's Grand Boulevard main stage headliners Paul McDonald & The

Mourning Doves, I'm With Her, and 10,000 Maniacs to Sunday's headliners, Nikki Lane, Toad The Wet Sprocket, and the iconic Mavis Sta-

**SONGWRITERS**  
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## The New Year's Evolution:

### How Modern Integrative Medicine Is Redefining Wellness

BY DR. KAREN DEVORE,  
TORTOISE CLINIC

January is a natural invitation to reevaluate how we care for ourselves—not just in terms of resolutions, but in how we want to feel as we move through a new year. More rested. More resilient. More focused. More capable of adapting to life's changes without feeling depleted by them.

It's become quite common for me

**WELLNESS**  
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**SONGWRITERS**

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ples. Additionally, 2026's lineup includes such well known lyrical masters as Abe Partridge, Charlie Starr of Blackberry Smoke, Benji Shanks, Shawn Mullins, Jeffrey Steele, Paul Thorn, David Ryan Harris, Murray Attaway, Dan Navarro, Brian White, Charlie Mars, Jesse Lynn Madera, and a plethora of both first timers and returning 30A SWF favorites.

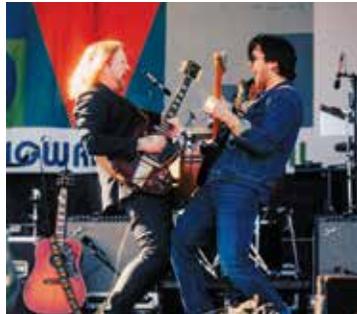
When I asked multi-hitmaker and award-winning songwriter Jeffrey Steele what keeps him coming back to perform year-after-year, he said, "I always look forward to 30A Songwriter's Festival, not only as another opportunity to do what I love: singing and entertaining, but also seeing the fans and many of my writer friends I don't see often. Just catching up and hangin' at the beach."

Another returning favorite, Baton Rouge native CJ Solar tells me, "I've been going to 30A Songwriters Fest on and off since its first year. I drove over from Baton Rouge my senior year of high school to see my hero Jeffrey Steele in person for the first time. Jump ahead and I've been invited to play the ASCAP stage a handful of times over the years and am so excited to be back again as a performer! There's

nothing like starting the year off in my favorite part of Florida, doing my favorite thing: playing songs for people who love them!"

Since its inception in 2010, 30A Songwriter's Festival has grown year after year, and is one of many endeavors made possible by Walton County Cultural Arts Alliance (CAA), a remarkable organization that adds so much to Northwest Florida's coastal community through numerous artistic and philanthropic endeavors. 30A Songwriters Festival is co-produced by Russell Carter Artist Management who has been the driving force behind booking the talent since the festival began in 2010. With 100% of the festival's net profits going toward supporting the CAA's mission to advance the arts in Walton County through education, leadership, advocacy, and the funding of special arts related programs within the community, festival goers are not only having a great time, they are also making a positive difference in the lives of so many that CAA serves.

Festival Co-Producer Russell Carter, President of Russell Carter Artist Management, has good reason to be immensely proud of the festival he helped to create. Carter tells me, "This festival began as a small event and grew quickly into a premier one-of-



a-kind showcase for world-class songwriters. Our goal was to curate a festival that presents the absolute best in touring songwriters and performers. We always want our audiences to experience musicians representing diverse genres of music – jazz, blues, country, folk, Americana and rock, with just two stipulations – they have to write their own music and they have to be really great at it!"

I asked Carter about some of the aspects of the 2026 festival that he's most excited about. He said, "We're excited to add

a new headline show on Friday, January 16th at Seaside Amphitheater, featuring 2026 Grammy Nominee Margo Price with her full band. She will feature songs from her catalog, including the just released deluxe album version of 'Hard Headed Woman.' We pride ourselves on supporting emerging artists on the verge of mainstream success. I highly encourage everyone to take this opportunity to see Nikki Lane and Paul McDonald & The Mourning Doves. Both have opening sets on the mainstage, as well as late night club sets at various 30A area venues, and both have critically acclaimed new albums and that are poised to break big, commercially, sooner than later."

**Grab Your Festival Passes Fast!**

Full weekend passes start at only \$395.00, premium seating VIP passes are just \$1,040, and Premiere VIP passes, with special front row seating at the Grand Boulevard Headliners Stage are only \$1,385. All of these ticket packages come in at quite the bargain considering you have the ability to see and hear so many remarkable songwriters across four days along the idyllic beach communities that have become a favorite vacation destination around the world.

For a full menu of perform-

ers, venues and showtimes, as well as grabbing those limited passes while you still can, visit: 30ASongwritersFestival.com and join us for the festival of music and fun!

*Will Estell is a writer, editor, and multimedia consultant with more than 750 published features across travel, music, real estate, and automotive genres. He has conducted one-on-one interviews with a wide range of notable artists, including Kenny Chesney, Jimmy Buffett, Alan Jackson, Darius Rucker, Lyle Lovett, Amy Grant, Sara Evans, Brian Kelly, Stryx, Eli Young Band, Drake White, and many others.*

*Will Estell is the chief creative officer of Estell Hussey Media and has co-founded 12 magazines from concept to launch, while also serving as editor for numerous additional titles. His newest media venture, HIM Magazine—a lifestyle publication for men—is slated to debut on newsstands nationwide in the third quarter of 2026.*

*Originally from rural Mississippi, Estell is a father of three who now lives in Destin and Navarre Beach with his wife, WEAR ABC 3 news anchor Laura Hussey-Estell. He is a longtime regular contributor to Life Media's family of publications.*

**WELLNESS**

*continued from page 1*

to see more and more patients shifting from simply treating illness to supporting everyday

function and long-term vitality. They want to sleep more deeply, recover more efficiently, think more clearly, move through hormonal transitions with confidence, and understand how food, environment, and genetics



influence their health. This reflects a growing recognition that real wellness is less about chasing symptoms and more about supporting the body's natural ability to regulate and restore.

At the heart of that regulation is communication between the nervous system, hormones, immune function, and metabolism. When these systems communicate clearly, the body adapts with remarkable precision. When that communication becomes disrupted, however,

we start to feel "off," even if we can't pinpoint exactly why.

Integrative medicine aims to restore this clarity. It blends foundational practices such as nutrition, acupuncture, herbal medicine, medical massage, and lifestyle therapeutics with modern clinical tools including IV nutrients, hormone support, advanced testing, targeted supplementation, and, when appropriate, peptides. None of these



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# Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center Celebrates 25 Years of Helping Children Heal

By KAY PHELAN

For a quarter of a century, the Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center (ECCAC) has been dedicated to providing hope, healing and justice to child abuse victims and their families in Florida's Okaloosa and Walton Counties. ECCAC has two centers—the Pierce Family Children's Advocacy Center in DeFuniak Springs and the Julie Sacco Porterfield Children's Advocacy Center in Niceville. ECCAC is an accredited part of the National Children's Advocacy Center non-profit organization. There are 900 Centers across the country, with 28 of them located in Florida.

### How ECCAC Works

The centers don't house children, but instead provide many needed services 24/7 in a child-friendly environment where children can safely tell their stories. Along with ECCAC's staff and volunteers, both of our local centers house a mul-

tidisciplinary team of child protection representatives from the Florida Department of Children and Families, Child Protection Team, State Attorney's Office, local law enforcement and licensed mental health counselors. In ECCAC's 25-year history, over 33,000 children have received more than 200,000 services at no cost.

The single most important hallmark of ECCAC's process is the fact that the impacted child, dealing with the immediate trauma and stress of their situation, can tell their story in one room, just one time. They do not have to repeat it numerous times at different places to different people. In other words, all pertinent parties that can help the child victim are all there at the centers at the same time. Once the child tells their story, action is immediately taken as required for that particular case. It is estimated that for every child ECCAC helps in the two counties, there are two children out there



25th ECCAC Anniversary celebration.



cacy Center became a reality and opened on April 8, 2016. This enabled a major increase in the number of children who can be helped. As well, with prevention being key to making a difference for children, many support programs have been instituted over the years, such as Child Safety Matters, which has advocates who have taught awareness programs to over 17,000 students in both counties. Also, through another grant program, 2 1/2 years ago ECCAC implemented its CARES program, a preventative family-oriented initiative with a myriad of services designed to be the bridge to keeping children

who are not helped due to lack of reporting to authorities.

### The Progress to Help Children Continues

The Niceville center was the

first to open 25 years ago. With Jim and Tammy Pierce's major financial support in 2015, the second center in DeFuniak Springs was made possible The Pierce Family Children's Advo-

*Continued on page 11*



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

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 Community

**WELLNESS**

*continued from page 2*

replace conventional medicine; rather, they deepen and complement it, allowing us to treat both root causes and overall function.

**Evolving Tools for a New Year: Peptides, IV Nutrients & Hormone Support**

Peptides are one of the most

discussed emerging tools in modern integrative care. These naturally occurring amino acid chains act as subtle messengers, helping regulate inflammation, tissue repair, metabolic and hormonal signaling, and connections between the gut, brain, and immune system. Their goal isn't to override the body but rather to support pathways that have been strained by stress, aging, illness, or environmental demands.

Current research explores peptides' role in recovery, immune modulation, inflammation balance, gastrointestinal support, and healthy aging. Within my practice, peptides are chosen with careful consideration of each patient's history, medications, lab results, stress patterns, and goals. They are never used as a quick fix, but as a targeted support within a broader, thoughtful plan.



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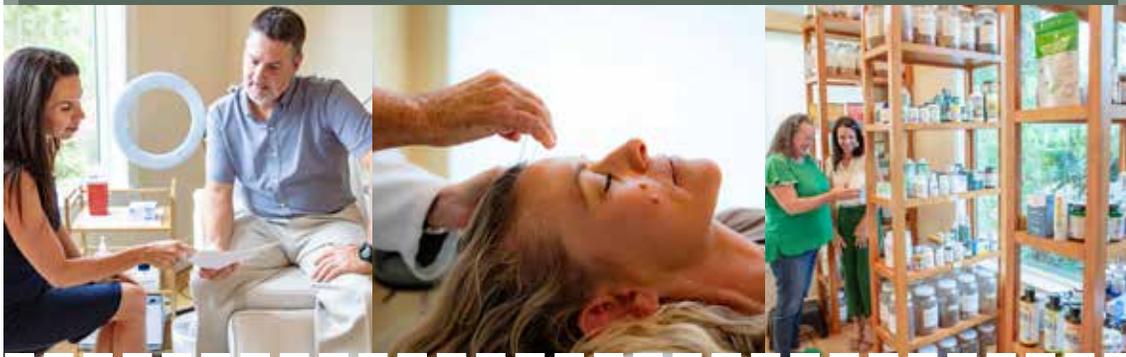
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IV nutrient therapy provides another route for restoring balance. Delivering hydration, vitamins, and minerals directly into the bloodstream can be especially helpful for correcting deficiencies, supporting energy production, or aiding recovery after illness or exertion.

Hormone replacement therapy, when appropriate and medically supervised, can bring relief and stability during transitions such as perimenopause, andropause, or thyroid dysfunction. Balanced hormones can support cognitive clarity, metabolism, sleep, and overall well-being.

These advanced therapies are most effective not on their own, but when combined with a strong foundation.

**The Nervous System: The Center of Regulation**

No matter which therapies we use, everything ultimately returns to the nervous system. Stress, disrupted sleep, past trauma, or chronic inflammation can keep the nervous system in a heightened state, affecting mood, hormones, digestion, immunity, and pain perception.

I always begin with a comprehensive evaluation including history, lifestyle, symptoms, and both conventional and specialty lab testing to understand the patterns at play. From there, treatment may include acupuncture or neuro-acupuncture, medical massage, tailored herbal formulations, nutritional

support, or breath and lifestyle practices aimed at restoring regulation.

When the nervous system is supported, peptides, IV nutrients, and hormone therapy gain a clearer path to work. Without that foundation, progress is often slower or less sustainable.

**A Thoughtful Approach to the Year Ahead**

Optimization is not instantaneous; it unfolds gradually. The smallest physiological shifts such as better sleep, steadier energy, fewer inflammatory flares are often the signs that regulation is returning. They build upon one another, creating resilience in ways that feel both subtle and profound.

For over 30 years, the Tortoise Clinic has brought together Eastern tradition and Western science to support our community's well-being. Our mission remains unchanged to offer thoughtful, individualized care rooted in safety, evidence, and respect for the body's natural intelligence.

As we move into a new year, consider that meaningful transformation doesn't require dramatic reinvention. It begins with understanding your body's needs, supporting its communication pathways, and allowing small shifts to create meaningful change over time because your wellness is a marathon, not a sprint.

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Community

# Grateful for a Year of Giving

BY HEATHER BENNETT EYE

We want to recognize the compassion and tireless work the volunteers and organizers of our local food banks, churches, and nonprofits pour into addressing food insecurity by providing meals for our community. You provide more than meals; you provide dignity, hope, and comfort for families during their hardest moments. Your kindness strengthens our neighborhoods and reminds us that even in challenging times, generosity and care can make a profound difference.

Food insecurity is not a distant issue. It affects families, neighbors, coworkers, and friends in Walton County. It's not always visible and can touch more lives than we realize. It can affect anyone – families working multiple jobs, seniors on fixed incomes, students, single parents, and those facing sudden illnesses, job loss or other hardships. It's a reminder that life can shift unexpectedly.

Caring and Sharing of South Walton fed 1,000 families in October, which was the largest number in their 30 years



of operation. As of the end of October, Emerald Coast Food Rescue had distributed 2.35 million pounds of rescued food, which is a 23% increase compared to that time in 2024. Food for Thought is expecting a 20% increase in requests for support this holiday season, which is 140 more families in addition to the 700 they already serve.

When someone in our com-

munity struggles to access healthy food, it can affect their physical health, mental and emotional health, and overall well-being. Acknowledging that food insecurity exists close to home reminds us that compassion, awareness, and support matter. We are deeply grateful for the hearts of those serving others, and for the positive impact you continue to create.

Thank you for all that you do. By standing together, we can help ensure that no one in our community faces hunger alone.

Please consider reaching out to an organization near you to see how you can serve our community through donating or volunteering.

**Caring and Sharing of South Walton** – 112 Lynn Drive, Santa Rosa Beach, (850) 267-2866: Food distributions are twice a month on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, 9 a.m. – 2 p.m.

**Hearts & Hands Food Pantry by First Baptist Church of DeFuniak Springs** – Tri-County Building at 105 W Main Avenue, DeFuniak Springs, (850) 892-2722: Food distribution is every Friday 9 a.m. – 11 a.m.

**First Methodist Church of DeFuniak Springs** – 88 Circle Drive, DeFuniak Springs, (850) 892-5332: Distributions are on the second and fourth Thursdays of the month, 9 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.

**Food for Thought** – 2132 US-90, DeFuniak Springs, (850) 290-4056: Food distribution to

students on the Free/Reduced Lunch Program are Mondays, 4 p.m. – 6 p.m. at 132 Market Street, Santa Rosa Beach and Tuesdays, 8:30 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. at 2132 US Hwy 90 W DeFuniak Springs.

**Helping Hands (Southwide Baptist)** – 1307 Coy Burgess Loop, DeFuniak Springs, (850) 892-3835: Food distribution is on Mondays, 12 p.m. – 3 p.m., based on when the food truck arrives, and on availability.

**The Matrix COC** – 37 North 9th Street, DeFuniak Springs, (850) 892-1090: Food distributions are weekly, but not on a fixed schedule due to timing and availability of food deliveries. Call (850) 892-1090 Monday – Friday 9 a.m. – 4 p.m. for more information.

**New Life Adventist** – 532 Lakeview Drive, DeFuniak Springs, (850) 892-7777: Food distribution is on Mondays, and registration starts at 4:30 p.m.

**Open Door Food Pantry** – 24388 US 331, Santa Rosa Beach, (850) 685-0684: Food distribution is very Saturday from 9 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.

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THE GROUND UP PROJECT

# Preparing Students for Any Future: Celebrating 30 Years of Excellence at THE SEASIDE SCHOOL™

This year marks 30 years of excellence for The Seaside School, a public charter school system recognized throughout South Walton for academic achievement, strong relationships, and a future-focused approach to education. Serving students in grades 5–12 through Seaside Neighborhood School and Seacoast Collegiate High School, The Seaside School has built a reputation for preparing students not only for college, but for life.

At the foundation of The Seaside School’s success is a deep understanding of how adolescents learn, grow, and develop confidence. Across both campuses, students engage in rigorous academics while developing durable life skills including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, adaptability, leadership, and problem-solving that equip them for any path they choose.

At Seaside Neighborhood School (grades 5–8), students ex-

perience a learning environment intentionally designed for adolescents. Small cohorts, strong teacher-student relationships, and engaging, interdisciplinary instruction help students feel safe, known, and academically confident during these critical years. SNS is known for its focus on literacy, numeracy, inquiry-based learning, and the arts, while also providing leadership and mentorship opportunities that empower students to find their voice.

Community engagement is central to the SNS experience. Through arts programming, mentorship, service leadership, and community-based projects, students learn responsibility, empathy, and civic engagement, developing a strong sense of purpose and belonging while contributing meaningfully to the world around them.

This strong academic and developmental foundation carries seamlessly into Seacoast Collegiate High School (grades 9–12),



where students experience a reimagined high school model that blends traditional student life with advanced academic opportunity. Students participate in athletics, arts, debate, leadership programs, clubs, and school traditions while also accessing dual enrollment and career-aligned pathways.

Ranked in the Top 2% of Florida public schools, Seacoast students benefit from highly qualified, relationship-driven educators, daily tutoring, and personalized academic and college planning. Many graduate, having earned up to 60 tuition-free college credits, often completing an Associate’s Degree before high school graduation, saving

families an average of \$30,000 in college tuition.

Seacoast student voices reflect the impact of this model. Fernanda Leyva shared, “I’m grateful for every single person and opportunity—everyone here is an advocate for me.”

Sullivan Stubley noted, “Seaside prepares me through its accelerated tracks.”

And Kincsó Tischler emphasized the strength of relationships, saying, “The faculty genuinely cares about my well-being, and I have a special relationship with my counselors.”

Seacoast’s impact continues to grow through its expansion at the Northwest Florida State College South Walton Center campus, where the high school now operates within a new, state-of-the-art facility featuring an Innovation Lab, advanced technology and engineering spaces, and collaborative learning environments. Students engage with industry-standard tools while exploring fields such as engi-

neering, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, design, business, healthcare, and the arts—all without leaving South Walton.

As a tuition-free public charter school, enrollment at The Seaside School is completed through an annual lottery. Families interested in Seaside Neighborhood School or Seacoast Collegiate High School are encouraged to apply during the current application window from January 9th to February 13th.

With 30 years of proven results, a strong foundation of trust, and a bold vision for the future, The Seaside School continues to set the standard for innovative, student-centered public education, supporting students from early adolescence through college readiness and beyond.

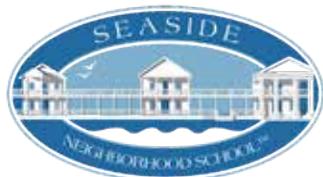
Families must apply before February 13 to be considered in the open lottery. For more information, visit [SeasideSchools.net](http://SeasideSchools.net).

## 30 Years of Excellence

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Scan the QR code or visit [SeasideSchools.net](http://SeasideSchools.net) to learn more and apply. The lottery application is open from January 9th to February 13th.



## Top 5 Reasons to Apply

- 1 **30 Years of Excellence & Proven Academic Results**  
For 30 years, The Seaside School has delivered consistent academic excellence. Ranked in the Top 2% in Florida, our students graduate confident, prepared, and ready for what’s next.
- 2 **Exceptional, Highly Qualified Educators**  
Students learn from experienced, credentialed, relationship-driven educators who know them well, hold high expectations, and support their academic, social, and emotional growth.
- 3 **Personalized Support in a Safe, Close-Knit Community**  
Small cohorts, daily tutoring, individualized academic and college planning, and strong student-adult relationships ensure every student is known, supported, and challenged.
- 4 **Education Beyond Textbooks — Experiences That Build Confidence**  
Students grow through leadership, athletics, arts, and real-world experiences. Programs include AI, STEM, cybersecurity, robotics, Rock Band, Theatre, Debate, service leadership, mentorship, and dozens of clubs and sports—building confidence, resilience, teamwork, and voice.
- 5 **Dual Enrollment, Certifications & Flexible Pathways for the Future**  
Students can earn up to 60 tuition-free college credits through dual enrollment at Northwest Florida State College, often completing an Associate’s Degree and saving families an average of \$30,000. Along the way, students earn industry certifications (AI, cybersecurity, CAD, Fusion 360), the Florida Seal of Biliteracy, and develop durable life skills—critical thinking, adaptability, and problem-solving—preparing them for any path they choose.



Community

# See Las Vegas Entertainment at The Palms of Destin

All your favorite legendary superstars come alive in An Evening with the Stars, starring The Edwards Twins, at The Palms of Destin Resort. Anthony and Eddie Edwards, twin brothers and the country's premier celebrity impersonators, perform all live vocals and utilize the latest Hollywood-grade makeup and prosthetics, along with fashion designed by the stars themselves, to create an end result that truly must be seen to be believed.

A nonstop parade of musical icons, the show has earned national praise. The New York Times said, "They bring such love and attention to recreating celebrities that in many ways it's better than watching the real thing!" The NBC Today show called it "one of the most extraordinary shows we have ever seen." The brothers have also appeared on The Tonight Show, Entertainment Tonight, Ellen, and currently appear in The

Kominsky Method with Michael Douglas and Alan Arkin.

Their show, inspired by the classic variety shows of the 1970s and '80s, features a rotating lineup of stars that changes from show to show. The Edwards Twins are master impersonators in both look and sound, portraying Sonny and Cher, Billy Joel, Elton John, Neil Diamond, Lionel Richie, Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, Lady Gaga, Celine Dion, Rod Stewart, Bette Midler, Barbra Streisand, Andrea Bocelli, Tom Jones and many more.

The showroom at The Palms of Destin Resort offers excellent table seating in an intimate setting that puts audiences up close and personal with the performers. Plentiful free parking, along with a variety of alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages available in the showroom, make for a perfect evening out.

Hollywood-based entertain-



ment producer Bart Rockett also produces a year-round house show featuring never-before-seen magic and illusions paired with hilarious comedy ventriloquism. While written for adults, the show is family-friendly and regularly enjoyed by children. Other guest headliners are brought in throughout the year, including The Edwards Twins

of Las Vegas, who will perform four special shows Jan. 9-12, with 4 and 7 p.m. showtimes. Also coming to the showroom is film and television star and comedy legend Yakov Smirnoff, performing Feb. 6-8 with 4 and 7 p.m. showtimes.

Reservations are required for all shows and may be made online at [MAGICDestin.com](http://MAGICDestin.com), the

main website for the magic and comedy show. To book reservations for The Edwards Twins or Yakov Smirnoff, scroll to the bottom of the homepage to access their individual booking links. Reservations may also be made by emailing the box office at [MagicTicketAgent@gmail.com](mailto:MagicTicketAgent@gmail.com).

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# Happenings Around the Bay

2026  
EVENTS

## JANUARY

**01**

New Year's Day Pelican Plunge  
7 am | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island

**02**

Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's Installation & Awards Breakfast  
7 am | Christian Life Center at FBC | FWB

Full Moon Restorative Experience  
7 pm | Yoga by You Studio | Niceville

Full Moon Restorative Experience  
7 pm | Yoga by You Studio | Niceville

**03**

Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class  
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

Artist Trading Club  
5 pm | Artful Things | Niceville

**04**

Women's Climbing Circle  
5 pm | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin

**05**

"Only Murders in the Library" A Podcast Club  
5 pm | Niceville Library | Niceville

**06**

Niceville Young Professionals Meeting  
11:30 am | Niceville Valparaiso Chamber | Niceville

**08**

Helen's Puzzle Swap  
10 am | Niceville Library | Niceville

Sinfonia Gulf Coast's Simply the Best: Music of Tina Turner  
7:30 pm | Destin FWB Convention Center | FWB

7:30 pm | Destin FWB Convention Center | FWB

**09-12**

Evening with the Stars  
4 & 7 pm | The Palms | Destin

**09**

Glass Art Open Studio  
10 am | Big Orange House Designs | Niceville

**10**

Cookbook Club #1 Winter Meeting  
11 am | Niceville Library | Niceville

Yoga for Grief  
7 pm | Yoga by You Studio | Niceville

**14**

Niceville Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce's Second Wednesday Breakfast  
7:15 am | Niceville Community Center | Niceville

**15**

Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's Business After Hours  
5:30 pm | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

**16**

New Moon Aerial Yoga Nidra  
7 pm | Yoga by You Studio | Niceville

**16-19**

30A Songwriter's Festival  
Various Times & Locations

**17**

Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class  
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

**19**

FiberArts Circle  
5 pm | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

**21**

Zen Illustration with Loren Boyer  
1 pm | Artful Things | Niceville

**22**

2nd Annual Bourbon, Whiskey, & Smoke  
5:30 pm | Bud & Alley's | Santa Rosa Beach

**24**

Biophilia Art Festival  
1 pm | E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center | Freeport

Stand in the Light Featuring Jordan Smith  
7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville

**01/28 - 02/08**

10<sup>th</sup> annual Emerald Coast Music Alliance Festival 2026  
Various Locations

**27**

Writers Group  
5:30 pm | Niceville Library | Niceville

**30**

Full Moon Restorative Experience  
7 pm | Yoga by You Studio | Niceville

**31**

Pink Run 5K and Survivor's Stroll  
8:30 am | Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach

CALM Chili Cook-Off with 3rd Planet  
5 pm | 3<sup>rd</sup> Planet Brewing | Niceville

### ONGOING EVENTS

Oils and Acrylics with Rosalyn O'Grady  
10 am | Tues | Artful Things | Niceville

Watercolor Techniques with Theresia McInnis  
1 pm | Tues | Artful Things | Niceville

Bingo Night  
6 pm | Tues | Bayou 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

### FARMERS MARKETS

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

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

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

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## Events Around the Bay

### Fore Her Pink Run 5K Returns Jan. 31 at Baytowne Wharf

Fore Her's annual Pink Run 5K and Walk returns Saturday, Jan. 31, 2026, at the Village of Baytowne Wharf in Miramar Beach. The timed 5K begins at 8:30 a.m. and benefits Fore Her's mission of providing financial assistance to Emerald Coast breast cancer patients undergoing treatment.

Participants may run or walk the 5K, followed by the Survivors' Stroll, a celebratory walk for breast cancer survivors.

Post-race, an After Party will feature a DJ, photo booth, breakfast bites and prizes.

Early-bird 5K registration is \$50 through Jan. 5 and includes



a free race T-shirt. Registration increases to \$60 after Jan. 6, plus the cost of a race T-shirt. Breast cancer survivors may register for \$45, and the Survivors' Stroll is free. Register at [PinkRunBenefitingForeHer.itsyourrace.com](http://PinkRunBenefitingForeHer.itsyourrace.com).

Packet pickup is Friday, Jan. 30, from 3-5 p.m., and race morning from 7-8 a.m. at Baytowne Wharf's Village Stage. Complimentary parking is available in the lot north of the Village, past Hotel Effie.

For sponsorship information, visit [foreher.org/pinkrun](http://foreher.org/pinkrun) or email [Amy@foreher.org](mailto:Amy@foreher.org).

### Run, Celebrate and Give Back at Christ Our Redeemer's Valentine 5K, Fun Run and Festival

Join Christ Our Redeemer Church on Saturday, Feb. 14, 2026, for its annual 5K, Children's Fun Run and Festival. In honor of St. Valentine, this year's event features an expanded festival and a new partner challenge.

Pair up with a spouse, friend, colleague or neighbor and enjoy a fun, festive and faith-filled morning together. The celebration will include lively music, food trucks, a gift card raffle, and games hosted by Cub Scouts Pack 553, COR ministries, and local families. Mardi Gras-inspired costumes are encouraged.

The course is flat and fast, strollers are welcome and all 5K and partner challenge runners and walkers will receive five complimentary festival tokens and one drink ticket. The 5K Run & Walk begins at 9 a.m., followed by the festival at approximately 9:15 a.m. The Children's Fun Run takes place at 10 a.m.

Register early before Jan. 18 to receive discounted pricing and a T-shirt. Early registration is \$35 for the 5K, while the Partner Challenge is \$65 and includes registration for two participants. Prices increase after Jan. 18. The Children's Fun Run is \$10.

Proceeds benefit the Christ Our Redeemer Building Community Fund. Funds raised support the parish's building efforts, allowing staff and volunteers to continue offering existing programs and introduce new events that serve both the parish and the local community. These programs include feeding the hungry through Thanksgiving food drives and senior meals, Bible studies that share Jesus' love, community gatherings and celebrations, and youth activities that uplift people of all ages and stages of life.

For more information and to register, visit [www.corcatholic.org/5k](http://www.corcatholic.org/5k).

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## A Taste of Mardi Gras: Food, Wine, Craft Beer and More

A Taste of Mardi Gras, this year's Food and Wine Tasting Festival benefiting the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra's youth programs, will feature live jazz, tastings of more than 40 wines, local craft beers, and samples of cuisine from area restaurants. Participating eateries include Aegean Greek Restaurant, Cafe Bienville, Magnolia Grill, Peppers Mexican Cantina, Papa's Smokehouse, Olive Garden, Twisted Grape Wine Bar and several others.

The event is scheduled for Sunday, Feb. 1, 2026, from 1 to 4 p.m. at Raider Central (Building 400) on the campus

of Northwest Florida State College in Niceville. Guests can also browse a silent auction featuring a variety of items, including gift cards, art, pottery, jewelry and themed gift baskets.

Sponsored by the Northwest Florida Symphony Guild, A Taste of Mardi Gras raises funds to support the Symphony's youth initiatives, including the annual John Leatherwood Concerto Competition.

Tickets are \$65 and may be purchased by calling the Mattie Kelly box office at 850-729-6000 or online at [MattieKellyArtsCenter.org](http://MattieKellyArtsCenter.org).

**ECCAC**

*continued from page 3*

in safe and supported homes and out of the judicial child welfare system. CARES stands for Community Awareness, Advocacy, Resources, Education and Support.

**Leadership and the Community Make A Difference**

Julie Sacco Porterfield, ECCAC's CEO has been heading up the organization since the very beginning. Her dedication and diligence have been significantly responsible for ECCAC's success and continuing commitment to help area children.

Porterfield commented, "Twenty-five years ago, we stood on the front porch to open the



ECCAC's child-friendly therapy.

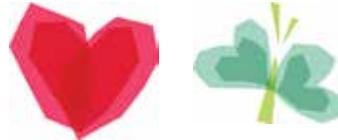
Niceville Center. Our dedicated team members made a promise to our community to protect the most vulnerable in our community. This would not have been possible were it not for our incredible agency partners, our



DeFuniak Springs Center in Walton County.



Niceville Center in Okaloosa County.



Board of Directors, generous donors, dedicated volunteers and our caring community." She further added, "One day we will hang that "Closed for Business" sign – not in defeat, but in tri-

umph, because every child will be living free from abuse, abandonment and neglect. Children deserve absolutely no less. We will continue to build a better, healthier future by ending child abuse, one child at a time."

**How to Help Make a Difference in a Child's Life**

Until that day, the commu-

nity can help by serving on the Board of Directors, volunteering, giving or advocating for the children. For more information, visit [www.eccac.org](http://www.eccac.org), or call 850-400-3488. If abuse is suspected, report it by calling the anonymous Florida Abuse Hotline at 1-800-96-ABUSE.



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 Community

# IDIDAHIKE 2026 Invites Niceville-Area Residents to Fall in Love with Florida's Wild Side

For residents of Niceville, Valparaiso and Choctaw Beach, one of Northwest Florida's most remarkable conservation landscapes is closer than many realize — just a short drive east of home. This Valentine's Day, locals are invited to experience it firsthand during IDIDAHIKE 2026, hosted by the Choctawhatchee Chapter of the Florida Trail Association.

Set for Saturday, Feb. 14, 2026, the annual event brings hikers, families and outdoor enthusiasts together for a day of guided exploration through the Nokuse Land Conservancy, a protected expanse of more than 55,000 acres of longleaf pine forests, wetlands and wildlife habitat stretching across Walton and Okaloosa counties.

For Emerald Coast residents accustomed to bay views and beaches, IDIDAHIKE offers a chance to step inland and discover a quieter, wilder side of Florida — one that plays a vital role in conservation statewide.

## A Regional Treasure With Statewide Importance

Nokuse — a Creek word meaning “bear” — is a cornerstone of the Florida Wildlife Corridor, providing critical habitat for Florida black bears, gopher tortoises and countless other native species. Its preserved landscape protects ecosystems that once covered much of the Southeast and now remain increasingly rare.

Winding through Nokuse is the Florida National Scenic Trail, one of only 11 national scenic trails in the country. Nearly 28 miles of the trail pass through the preserve, maintained by dedicated volunteers from the Florida Trail Association, including members of the Choctawhatchee Chapter who live and work across Okaloosa and Walton counties.

IDIDAHIKE highlights this regional gem with four curated hikes designed to showcase Nokuse's diverse environments — from open pine flatwoods and shaded forest corridors to wet-



lands and elevated boardwalks. Along the way, participants may spot deer, migratory birds and signs of the wildlife that give the preserve its name.

“These hikes help people understand why protecting places like Nokuse matters,” organizers say. “It’s about conservation, stewardship and ensuring future generations can experience Florida the way it once was.”

## Education, Conservation and a Day Well Spent

A highlight of IDIDAHIKE 2026 is access to the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center, operated by the Nokuse Education Foundation. Named for the late renowned biologist and conservationist Ed-

ward O. Wilson, the center serves as a hub for environmental education, scientific research and community engagement.

Open to IDIDAHIKE participants on Saturday afternoon, the Biophilia Center features interactive exhibits, nature-based learning programs and outdoor spaces designed to connect visitors of all ages to the surrounding preserve. For families from Niceville, Valparaiso and Choctaw Beach, it offers a meaningful educational complement to the day's hikes — and an inspiring look at conservation efforts happening right here in Northwest Florida.

## Community, Connection and Valentine's Day on the Trail

While the trail itself is at the heart of the event, IDIDAHIKE is designed as a welcoming community gathering. Educational speakers will share insights into local ecosystems, while food trucks and gathering areas pro-

vide space for hikers to relax, refuel and connect.

With its playful Valentine's Day and “bear” themes, IDIDAHIKE welcomes couples, families, friend groups and solo hikers alike, offering a meaningful way to celebrate the holiday through shared experiences in nature.

## Make It a Weekend Escape

For those looking to extend the experience, overnight camping is available Friday, Feb. 13, and Saturday, Feb. 14, at Pine Log Wildlife Management Area in Bay County near Youngstown, just north of Panama City. A limited number of 40 campsites will be offered, providing a peaceful overnight experience under the stars — all within easy driving distance of the Niceville and Valparaiso area.

For more information, visit [floridatrail.org](http://floridatrail.org). To register for the hike, visit [floridatrail.org/ididahike](http://floridatrail.org/ididahike).

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# Pop Power, Tudor Queens and Teen Talent Take the Stage in SIX: The Musical at Niceville High

Get ready, Niceville — history, harmony and high-energy pop beats are heading to the Niceville High School Auditorium! The talented cast of Niceville High Theatre will perform SIX: The Musical — Teen Edition this January, bringing to life the globally celebrated show that reimagines the six wives of Hen-

## Divorced, Beheaded, Belting Out Pop Hits

In SIX, the six wives of Henry VIII — Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Anna of Cleves, Katherine Howard and Catherine Parr — take center stage not as history footnotes but as powerful vocalists with bold personalities. They

## Show Info & Ticket Buzz

Performances run Jan. 9 and 10, with evening and matinee shows continuing Jan. 23 and 24, including a one-night-only sing-along on Jan. 24 at 7 p.m. VIP tickets include early seating and

popcorn, while general admission offers great seats at a friendly price — perfect for friends, family and anyone ready to cheer on local talent.

Whether you're a theatre lover or just looking for a night of

laughter, music and community pride, SIX: The Musical — Teen Edition at Niceville High is the place to be. Secure your tickets and prepare to feel the beat, because these queens are ready to own the stage!

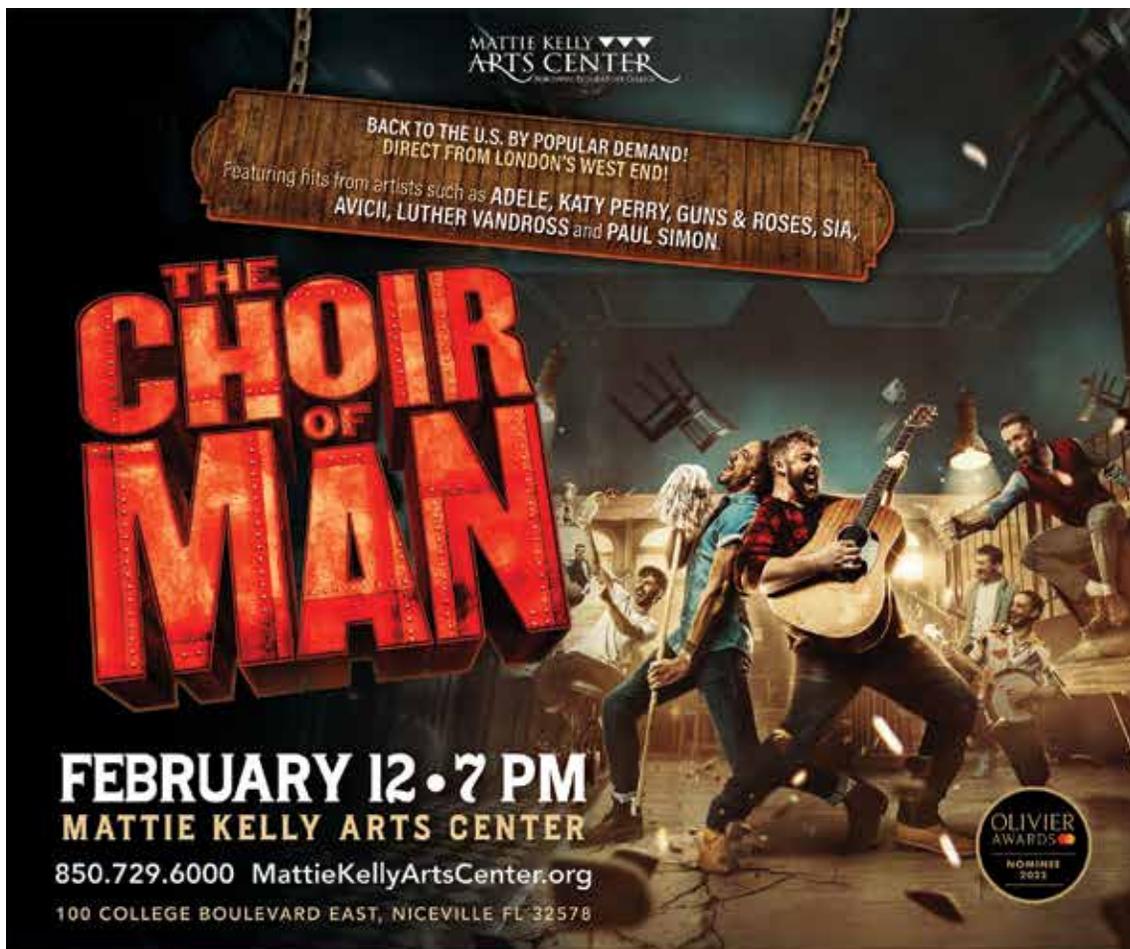


ry VIII as modern pop icons.

First created by Toby Marlow and Lucy Moss and now a worldwide phenomenon on stages from London's West End to Broadway, SIX casts history in a whole new light — think pop concert meets girl group, where each queen tells her own story through catchy songs and fierce moves. In the Teen Edition, the clever concert-style format stays intact while making the show accessible and thrilling for young performers and audiences alike.

kick off the show by introducing themselves and challenging each other in a spirited "which wife had it worst?" competition, all through genre-bending pop songs that celebrate individuality, resilience and camaraderie.

This isn't your typical history class. It's a dynamic musical celebration with dazzling numbers, energetic choreography and fresh, modern flair — all delivered by the rising stars of Niceville High. Fans of pop, theatre and storytelling won't want to miss it.



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# Bay Buzz

## A Holiday Celebration of Gratitude and Community

The Ground Up Project gathered friends, sponsors and supporters for a joyful afternoon of connection and gratitude during its Cocktails & Candy Canes celebration on Dec. 7 at The Resting Tree in Niceville. The festive, free event was created as a heartfelt thank-you to those whose generosity makes the organization's work possible, and it reflected the warmth and community spirit at the heart of The Ground Up Project.

Guests enjoyed light bites, festive cocktails and sweet holiday treats while spending time together in a beautifully decorated space filled with Christmas cheer. Laughter, conversation and smiles filled the room as supporters connected with one another, posed for photos with Santa and shared in the simple



joy of the season. More than a holiday gathering, the event was a reminder of the power of community — and the many lives touched through the continued support of those who believe in The Ground Up Project's mission.

## Weather Cooperates for Yule of Yesteryear and the Niceville Christmas Parade

By BARBARA PALMGREN

With cold and rainy conditions on December 6, 2025, the Niceville Christmas Parade was



windy Sunday in December, young golfers with a parent partner, braved the weather to participate in an annual event at Shalimar Pointe Golf Club. This was the club's 8th year to participate in the First Tee event.

Organizers, Jean Wallace and Donna Rayburn, members of the Shalimar Pointe Ladies Golf Association, spent months fund-raising and preparing for 54 juniors with adult playing partners to play the front nine of the golf course. Other members helped register players and Doris Anderson baked cookies for the entire crowd. Of course, a delicious meal with hamburgers and chips awaited each team when they finished.

The First Tee organization is a youth development organization that enables young golfers to build strength of character as well as learn golf skills. As part of this national organization, First Tee Gulf Coast is located in Pensacola, Florida and hosts events all along the gulf coast. Marty Stanovich, Executive Director, arrived to congratulate all the players and Ty Aulger, Tournament Director, presented awards.

First place winners come from a variety of locations ranging from Freeport to Santa Rosa Beach. Here are the first-place winners:

Girls 5-11: Charlie Miller from Santa Rosa Beach

Boys 5-11: Dillon Bond from Niceville

Girls 12-18: Rayna Perkins from Freeport

Boys 12-18: Luke Pearce from Gulf Breeze

Yes, the family that golfs together stays together...even under cold conditions.

moved to December 13, 2025. Throughout the Panhandle most outdoor holiday celebrations for December 6 did the same!

What this meant for the public was a beautiful day with 75-degree weather to wander and choose among many parades and events.

In Niceville and Valparaiso, the public could cheer parade entrants in the morning and then head to Yule of Yesteryear in Valparaiso. At Yule, the community listened to choir groups sing. Throughout the day, everyone bought treasures from vendors and goodies from a bake sale. In the afternoon the Grinch arrived and went inside to meet children.

Guests enjoyed free admission to the museum and Paradise Garden, where complimentary wassail was served, while the Valparaiso Garden Club hosted its annual plant sale alongside creative items made from recycled, reused and repurposed materials.

## Golf Series: First Tee Winter Ball Tournament Inspires Young Golfers

By BARBARA PALMGREN

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# Why is the Medicare Open Enrollment Period Important to You?



BY GREG DURETTE, YOUR FLORIDA HEALTH CONNECTOR

Now that the Medicare Annual Election Period (AEP) is over (ended December 7th), you can finally take a breather from all those ads, phone calls and mailers—sort of. Come January 1st, you will have a chance to try out your new Medicare Advantage, Supplement and/or Prescription plan.

If you then find the plan you selected during the AEP is not right for you, all is not lost. You will get one more bite at the apple to make changes to your plan.

As with many situations, in order to have a good outcome,

you will first have to ask the right questions. In this case, the questions you should ask yourself are:

- Did you sign up for a new Advantage Plan or a stand-alone Part D prescription drug plan during the last Annual Enrollment Period (AEP)?

- Do you have an existing Advantage Plan or a stand-alone Part D prescription drug plan that renewed with a January 1st effective date?

If the answer to either of these questions is yes, then the Medicare Open Enrollment Period (OEP) is very important to you.

The OEP runs annually from January 1st to March 31st.

During this time, Advantage plan holders are given the option to make certain changes to the plan they selected in the AEP.

### These allowed changes are:

- Cancel your stand-alone Part D prescription drug plan
- Drop your Medicare Advan-

tage Plan and return to Original Medicare (A & B only)

- Enroll in a stand-alone Medicare Part D prescription drug plan
- Elect to change from one Medicare Advantage Plan to another either with the same insurance company or an entirely different one

Let's a look at each option a bit deeper. First, why would someone elect to cancel their stand-alone Part D prescription plan? The principal reason one could have would be it was being replaced by other qualifying coverage. If you cancel without replacing, penalties will accrue and be waiting for you when you do put this coverage back in place at a later date. Plus, those penalties will be with you for what could be the rest of your life!

Second, there are a few rare circumstances when it makes sense for someone to cancel an Advantage plan and return to Original Medicare known as Part A and Part B. Usually this

may have something to do with provider networks which are insufficient for the beneficiary or some other unusual event. Again, this rare circumstance would require you to also remain in or enroll in a stand-alone Part D prescription drug plan in order to avoid accruing the future penalties I just mentioned.

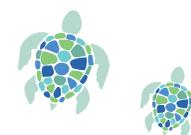
Remember, enrolling in a stand-alone Part D prescription drug plan is a requirement if you do not have qualifying coverage elsewhere and want to avoid those penalties. If you neglected to get that done during the AEP, now is the time to look at this.

Last, some folks have a change of heart once they see the detailed materials of the Advantage plan they enrolled in during the AEP. Perhaps you find your HMO plan does not have the providers you need but, a PPO plan does. Or perhaps, the terms of coverage are better in a plan different from your current plan. Maybe, another plan costs less (or even \$0!).

You don't need any reason to switch plans provided you do so before the OEP expires on March 31st. Just remember, you only get one chance to make this change. Once you do, you will have to keep that plan until the next AEP, which begins on October 15th of every year.

The best options for your particular situation should be thoroughly discussed with your insurance agent/broker to make sure you have all the facts about the choices you may be thinking about and, get all your questions answered.

*Greg Durette is a qualified, licensed agent with Florida Health Connector providing Medicare throughout the State of Florida and is based in Niceville. He has been in the insurance industry for nearly 43 years and can be reached at his office at 850-842-2400 or his mobile at 978-509-2941.*



Savvy Leigh PHOTO

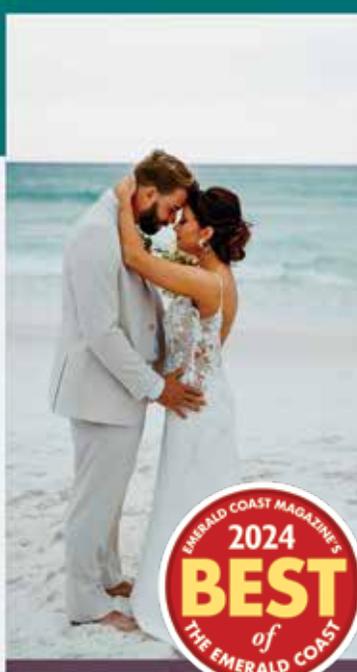
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# Education News

## Ruckel Middle School Dedicates Cafetorium in Honor of Former Principal Dr. Ginny Morgan

Ruckel Middle School officially named its new cafetorium The Dr. Ginny Morgan Cafetorium, honoring the late principal whose decades of leadership left a lasting impact on the school and the Okaloosa County School District. The Okaloosa County School Board unanimously approved the naming in August. Superintendent Marcus Chambers joined district leaders, current and retired staff, students, family and friends to celebrate Dr. Morgan's legacy. Dr. Virginia "Ginny" Henderson Morgan began her career at Ruckel in 1968 as a math teacher, later serving as district math supervisor before returning as principal. She passed away Feb. 15, 2024, at age 76.

Superintendent Marcus Chambers, who was hired by Dr. Morgan in 1998, reflected on her influence. "Dr. Morgan was a principal, but more importantly, she was an educator through and through," Chambers said. "She shaped the careers of countless teachers and leaders, including my own. Her guiding question, 'What is best for students?' continues to echo through the halls of Ruckel and throughout our district." During her tenure,



Dr. Morgan introduced the International Baccalaureate and "Alternatives to Learning," emphasized her "three A's" — Academics, Arts and Athletics — and helped build a culture of high expectations, collaboration and community partnership.

Current Principal Joe Jannazo said, "As we officially dedicate this new facility, we ensure that her name and her impact will remain at the heart of Ruckel Middle School for generations to come. The Dr. Ginny Morgan Cafetorium will stand not only as a building, but as a living reminder of a leader who believed deeply in students, deeply in staff, and deeply in the power of school community." Her husband of 56 years, Dr. David Morgan, attended alongside family members, including granddaughter Lily Morgan, who shared mem-

ories of her grandmother. "My grandma knew what she wanted and wasn't afraid to ask for it. This quality is what I think made her such a great leader and principal, and the ability to effortlessly command a room," Lily Morgan said.

## Engineering Excellence on Display at Niceville High School

Niceville High School students demonstrated innovation, teamwork and problem-solving skills during the school's annual Engineering Challenge Project presentations in November. The event welcomed elected officials, district leaders and community members to view the results of weeks of research, writing and collaboration.

This year's challenge, "The Impact of Rising Sea Levels and



Pictured L to R: Assistant Superintendent John Spolski, Mary Colleen Johnson, Eleanor Ballard, Lana Dorey, Lillian Kifer, Julia Milz, Gabriel Craig, School Board Member Brett Hinely, and Mr. Richard Hernandez)

Storm Surge on Florida," tasked students with analyzing predictive data, evaluating policy needs and proposing infrastructure and mitigation strategies to address growing coastal threats. Guided by Gifted and AICE Global Perspectives teacher Richard Hernandez, students consulted with engineers, reviewed historical storm-surge data and developed practical, cost-effective solutions.

Superintendent Marcus Chambers praised the effort, saying, "The Engineering Challenge at Niceville High School is a shining example of what happens when creativity, curiosity, and critical thinking come together. I continue to be impressed by the professionalism and ingenuity these students display each year. Mr. Hernandez does an incredible job guiding them through complex, real-world topics that prepare them for success in college and beyond."

The annual Engineering Challenge continues to connect classroom learning with

real-world issues while inspiring students to think critically and collaboratively.

## Purple Star Schools of Distinction

The Okaloosa County School District has once again earned Florida Purple Star Schools of Distinction status for all district schools, reaffirming its commitment to supporting military-connected students and families. OCSD is also recognized as a Florida Purple Star District of Distinction, one of only five districts statewide to receive the honor. With one of Florida's largest military-connected student populations, the district continues to focus on academic excellence, stability and social-emotional support.

"With some of the strongest ties to our nation's military installations, including Eglin Air Force Base, Hurlburt Field, and Duke Field, this recognition

*Continued on next page*

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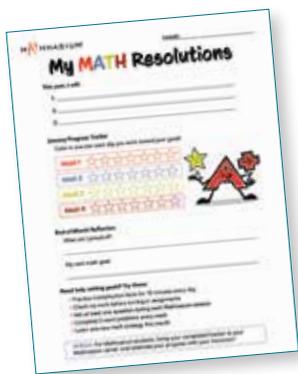
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# Start 2026 Strong With Mathnasium Niceville's Math Resolutions Tracker



ing a January Math Resolutions Tracker to make goal-setting fun, visual and totally doable. It's a simple one-pager where your student can choose three math goals for the new year, track their progress day by day, and reflect on what they've accomplished.

## HOW IT WORKS Step 1: Set three math goals.

Using the "My Math Resolutions" worksheet, think of three goals for this year. These can be as specific or as broad as your child wants. Maybe they want to master their times tables, maybe they want to slow down and double-check their work, or maybe they just want to ask more ques-

tions when they're stuck. The key is making the goals feel personal and achievable.

## Step 2: Track progress every day.

Each day has a box to color in. Your child can fill one in each time they practice, complete a session, or work toward their goals in any way. The visual progress is motivating and satisfying.

## Step 3: Reflect at the end of each month.

January flies by. But, the resolution doesn't end there. Keep tracking through the rest of the year, making time to reflect at the end of each month. What am I

proud of? What's my next goal? It's a chance to celebrate wins (even small ones) and think about what comes next.

## Why Goal-Setting Matters in Math

Math isn't just about getting the right answer. It's about persistence, problem-solving and building habits that carry over into everything else. When students set their own goals—and see tangible progress—they start to believe they're capable of more than they thought.

That's the foundation of math confidence. And confidence changes everything.

Ready to kick off 2026 with intention? Swing by Mathnasi-

um Niceville at the Publix Shopping Center to grab your printed copy. Hang it on the fridge, tuck it into your child's binder or bring it to your next Mathnasium session!

Mathnasium of Niceville serves 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)*

New Year's resolutions don't have to be about eating more vegetables or going to bed on time. This January, help your child set goals that build confidence, consistency, and a genuine love of math.

Mathnasium Niceville is offer-

## EDUCATION

*continued from previous page*

holds special meaning for Okaloosa County," said Superintendent Marcus Chambers. "Our educators, staff, and community partners take great pride in serving military-connected students. We are deeply committed to ensuring that every child who walks through our doors, no matter how many times they move, feels welcomed, supported, and valued. This distinction reflects that commitment and our collective gratitude to those who serve our country."

Signed into law in 2021, the Florida Purple Star Schools of Distinction program honors schools that exceed standards in serving military families. Superintendent Marcus Chambers noted the district began following the initiative during the 2021 legislative session. "Our own Representative Patt Maney was instrumental in bringing the Purple Star program to Florida, and we are thrilled to see our schools recognized for the incredible work they do to support our military children," Chambers said.

This year, Florida Commissioner of Education Anastasios Kamoutsas announced that 451 schools statewide received the Purple Star designation, including renewed and newly recognized schools, along with 16 Florida College System campuses.

## Okaloosa County School District Announces Sunshine State Scholars

The Okaloosa County School District (OCSD) announced its 2025 Sunshine State Scholars in November—Penelope Gordon from Fort Walton Beach High School and Emma Michel from Niceville High School. Adoniah White from Crestview High School has been named the district's alternate scholar. The Sun-



PHOTO: NHS EMMA MICHEL

shine State Scholars Program is an annual initiative that recognizes Florida's top 11th-grade

students pursuing careers in Science, Technology, Engineering, or Mathematics (STEM). Each school district selects its most outstanding STEM scholars to participate in a two-day event in Orlando, where they can network with STEM-focused employers and colleges and be honored for their academic excellence and aspirations in these critical fields.

"Penelope, Emma, and

Adoniah exemplify the talent, determination, and curiosity that drive innovation and discovery," said Superintendent Marcus Chambers. We are incredibly proud of their achievements and can't wait to see the impact they'll make in the future."

For more information about the Sunshine State Scholars program, visit <https://www.fldoe.org/academics/sunscholars/>.

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\*6-month enrollment required. Offer valid for new or returning students only at Mathnasium of this location. Expires 02/15/2026

 Environment

# Our Endangered Animals

By HELEN PETRE

Our home here in the Panhandle is a paradise of animals and plants, perfect weather, dune lakes, pine savannahs, springs and creeks, and miles of beach. Our parks and wildlife management areas are teaming with life. Our highways are full of traffic, tourists, and not much wildlife, other than the occasional deer during the rut. We are building residential and commercial projects faster than our endangered animals can escape.

Here are the names and habitats of some of our endangered species. They share our paradise. They were here first. If you see them, please protect them. The fact that they are endangered means you probably will not see them.

## St. Andrew's Beach Mouse (*Peromyscus Polionotus Peninsularis*)



The St. Andrew's beach mouse is a subspecies of beach mouse (*P. polionotus*). It lives in the dunes in Gulf and Bay Counties. The St. Andrew's Beach Mouse is six inches long with a two-inch white tail. Beach mice eat invertebrates and seeds from dune plants. They are monogamous and sexually mature

at 30 days. Females have four pups after a gestation of 23 days. They are ready to breed again in 24 hours.

With that great breeding record, it seems like they should not be endangered, but they are federally endangered due to beach development, destruction of dunes, and fragmentation of their habitat. Other threats include predation from cats, foxes, coyotes, and racoons.

## Choctawhatchee Beach Mouse (*P. Polionotus Allophrys*)



Another subspecies of beach mouse, the Choctawhatchee Beach Mouse, is also federally endangered. Like all beach mice, they eat seeds and fruit of dune plants and forage at night. The Choctawhatchee Beach Mouse lives in Bay, Walton, and Okaloosa Counties.

## Leatherback Sea Turtle (*Dermochelys Coriacea*)

Leatherback sea turtles are federally endangered. They live 45 years, are seven feet long and weigh 2,000 pounds. They are the largest turtles on Earth, and they have been for 100 million years. Tyrannosaurus rex walked the Earth about 66



million years ago. Leatherbacks have a leathery, bluish, flexible carapace, in contrast to other turtles with hard shells. They can dive 4,200 feet down and stay under water for 85 minutes.

Leatherbacks take the longest migration between breeding and feeding of any turtle species, an average of 3,700 miles. They mate in the ocean. The females come ashore, some right here on our beaches, and lay about 80 eggs. The temperature of the nest determines the sex of the offspring. At 85 degrees F, half are male, half are female. At warmer temperatures they are females, at colder temperatures males. Females return to the beach they were born on to lay eggs. Males spend their entire lives at sea.

One in a thousand hatchlings reaches adulthood. Turtles die when they ingest plastic bags which they mistake for jellyfish. Some dead turtles have been found with as much as 11 pounds of plastic in their stomachs.

## Gulf Moccasinshell (*Medionidus Penicillatus*)

Gulf moccasinshells are two inch long, oval shaped, green-



ish, thin, river mussels. Like all mussels, they filter feed, consuming plankton and detritus, or dead stuff. Since mussels take in whatever is in the water and use the nutrients for food, they take in pesticides and chemicals, which are a significant threat. Gulf moccasinshells are federally endangered. They live in the Ecofina Creek, which is spring fed and empties into Deer Point Lake, north of Panama City. Deer Point Lake is the water supply for Bay County.

Male mussels release sperm into the water, and females take the sperm into their shells, where eggs are fertilized. Like all mussels, the glochidia, or larva, attach to the gills of fish, where they live for a while, until they are mature. Host fish are blackbanded darters, eastern mosquitofish, guppies, and gulf darters.

## Reticulated Flatwoods Salamander (*Ambystoma Bishop*)

Reticulated flatwoods salamanders are burrowing, or mole, salamanders. They live in seasonally wet savannahs, such as longleaf and wiregrass. Adults burrow into the litter.



In October, they lay eggs in ephemeral wetlands with emergent vegetation, a habitat which is pretty rare in October, our dry season. Besides that, emergent vegetation occurs only after summer burns. The eggs hatch only if there is water, and the hatchlings require water for three months. That means October through January. It does not rain much between October and January. That is also the time when the forest service does its winter burns. Things do not look good for this confused salamander.

These are just a few of the most endangered organisms cohabiting with us in our paradise. We cannot make it rain, but there are things we can do to keep our habitat fit for our endangered animals. Please be kind and protect them by reducing use of plastic, recycling, putting trash in trash receptacles, staying on trails, keeping the beach flat, and reducing fertilizer and pesticide use. I am grateful to share my world with these amazing creatures. I hope my grandchildren will be able to enjoy them, too.

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# 25,000 Juvenile Redfish Released into Cinco Bayou to Boost Local Fisheries

In a continued effort to strengthen Northwest Florida's marine ecosystem, Destin-Fort Walton Beach, in partnership with the Coastal Conservation Association (CCA) Florida, released 25,000 juvenile redfish into Cinco Bayou on Tuesday, Dec. 16, 2025.

The release is part of a multi-year collaborative initiative aimed at addressing declining redfish populations throughout regional waterways while enhancing habitat health for one of Florida's most popular inshore sport fish.

"We appreciate this continued partnership with CCA Florida to promote the long-term health of our bays and bayous," said Okaloosa County Board Chairman Paul Mixon. "While redfish are a favorite among local anglers, these stocking efforts also support surrounding habitats and protect numerous species that contribute to a strong, balanced ecosystem."

The juvenile redfish released measured approximately two to four inches in length. Redfish typically take about three years to reach 26 inches and can live up to 40 years. Also known as red drum, spottail bass, red bass or channel bass, the species plays



a vital role in the region's inshore fisheries.

"Returning to Choctawhatchee Bay for a third redfish release is a proud moment for our organization," said Brian Gorski, executive director of CCA Florida. "This release marks another step forward in our commitment to sustaining Florida's marine resources, and we're grateful for our continued partnership with Okaloosa County to make it possible."

A video of the release is avail-

able at <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/8K6mENI1LZg>.

### Redfish Fishing Regulations (Panhandle)

According to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission:

- Season: Open year-round
- Slot limit: 18–27 inches total length
- Daily bag limit: One fish per person per day; four-fish vessel limit

The Coastal Conservation Association was founded in 1977 following severe commercial overfishing along the Texas coast that devastated redfish and speckled trout populations. CCA Florida, established in 1985, is one of 19 state chapters nationwide. A

501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, CCA Florida works to conserve marine resources through habitat restoration, water quality initiatives and fisheries advocacy. The organization represents more than 18,000 members, including recreational anglers and outdoor enthusiasts. Learn more at [ccaflorida.org](http://ccaflorida.org) or follow CCA Florida on Facebook.



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## January on the Line: Winter Fishing In Our Area

January brings some of the coldest water temperatures of the year to the eastern reaches of Choctawhatchee Bay, and with them, some of the most consistent and predictable fishing patterns for anglers in Niceville, Bluewater Bay, Choctaw Beach and Valparaiso. As winter settles in, fish move into deeper, more stable water and often group tightly together, rewarding those willing to slow down and fish methodically. With lighter boat traffic and clear winter water, January offers prime inshore opportunities close to home.

**Flounder** remain available through January, though their numbers thin compared to late fall. Anglers should focus on deeper bay channels, creek mouths, bayou drop-offs and transition areas where sandy bottoms meet shell or mud. Productive areas include Swift Creek, Rocky Bayou, Boggy Bayou and deeper edges of the Intracoastal Waterway, as well as bayou mouths and channel bends near Bluewater Bay. Flounder hug the bottom during cold weather, often burying themselves in the sand while waiting to ambush prey. Slow-moving baits worked tight to the bottom are essential, and patience pays off—flounder frequently strike more than once if they miss the bait.



**Speckled trout** are a top January target and often stack up in deeper water during prolonged cold spells. Around Niceville, Bluewater Bay, Choctaw Beach and Valparaiso, look for trout

holding near deep docks, marina basins, bayou mouths, bridge approaches and channel edges throughout the bay system. Areas around Bluewater Bay Marina and deeper residential docks



can be particularly productive. Live shrimp on a Carolina rig works well when available, while soft-plastic shrimp and paddle tails fished slowly near the bottom are reliable alternatives. Afternoon warming periods often trigger short but productive feeding windows.

**Redfish** remain dependable throughout January, especially around oyster beds, creek mouths and deeper bay edges. During cold snaps, redfish push into deeper holes and channels, then move shallow on sunny afternoons as water temperatures rise. Schools of bull reds may also be encountered in deeper sections of the bay and along channel drop-offs during winter, offering exciting catch-and-release action. Because these fish are part of the spawning population, anglers are encouraged to use circle hooks and practice careful handling to ensure a healthy release.

**Sheepshead** fishing peaks in January as water temperatures continue to drop. These structure-oriented fish congregate around docks, bridge pilings, rock piles and marina structures throughout the bay, including areas near the Mid-Bay Bridge approaches, Bluewater Bay docks and along the Intracoastal Waterway. Their bite is subtle and often difficult to detect, making light tackle and close attention

essential. Fiddler crabs and live shrimp remain the top baits.

**Black drum** also become more active during January and are commonly found schooling around deeper channels, docks and bridge structures. Smaller black drum provide excellent table fare, while larger fish offer steady winter action and are a popular target for anglers fishing from shore, piers or residential docks during the colder months.

### Nearshore and Winter Gulf Notes

When winter weather cooperates, calm January days can open the door for productive nearshore fishing in the Gulf of Mexico. Vermilion snapper, blackfin tuna and other seasonal species may be available depending on conditions, while triggerfish remain catch-and-release only in state waters. Cold fronts often bring exceptionally clear water along the beaches, creating ideal sight-fishing opportunities for bull redfish cruising the shallows on sunny afternoons.

January fishing in our part of the world rewards preparation, patience and a slower approach. With fish holding deeper and feeding less aggressively, anglers who adapt to winter conditions often enjoy some of the most peaceful—and productive—fishing of the year.

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TO READ OUR LATEST ISSUE



# Best Places to Watch Your Favorite Teams



BY SCOTT MILLER

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.  
ajsdestin.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 event in 2026? 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.

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## LJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant

SSuds, Songs, Sunsets and Sports! Welcome to LJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant at the Bluewater Bay Marina Complex. Named after "LJ Schoo-

ner" (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, Jan. 7: Prime Rib Night 5-9 p.m., Wine Tasting 5-7 p.m., Chess Night 6 p.m.

Jan. 24: Gumbo Tasting! 4-6 p.m.

Jan. 10th—17th Anniversary Celebration—Food Samples—Prize Giveaways 6-9 p.m., Jared Herzog & Carbliss Seltzer Tasting 12-2 p.m. & 4-6 p.m.

January 21st—Prime Rib Night 5-9 p.m. & Wine Tasting 5-7 p.m., Traveling Painter 5:30 p.m.

January 24th—Gary Schmitz 6:30-10 p.m.

January 31—National Hot Chocolate Day

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

Oyster bar hours: Mon-Thurs 3-10 p.m.; Fri-Sat 11 a.m.-Midnight; Sun 11 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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## 2025-26 College Football Bowl Game Schedule, Scores, TV

(All Times Central)

### Saturday, Dec. 20

- College Football Playoff First Round
- No. 7 Texas A&M vs. No. 10 Miami (Fla.) — 11 a.m. | ESPN, ABC
- No. 6 Ole Miss vs. No. 20 Tulane — 2:30 p.m. | TNT, HBO Max, truTV
- No. 5 Oregon vs. No. 24 James Madison — 6:30 p.m. | TNT, HBO Max, truTV

### Monday, Dec. 22

Famous Idaho Potato Bowl — Washington State vs. Utah State — 1 p.m. | ESPN

### Tuesday, Dec. 23

- Boca Raton Bowl — Louisville vs. Toledo — 1 p.m. | ESPN
- New Orleans Bowl — Western Kentucky vs. Southern Miss — 4:30 p.m. | ESPN
- Frisco Bowl — UNLV vs. Ohio — 8 p.m. | ESPN

### Wednesday, Dec. 24

Hawaii Bowl — Cal vs. Hawaii — 7 p.m. | ESPN

### Friday, Dec. 26

- GameAbove Sports Bowl — Central Michigan vs. Northwestern — 12 p.m. | ESPN
- Rate Bowl — New Mexico vs. Minnesota — 3:30 p.m. | ESPN
- First Responder Bowl — FIU vs. UTSA — 7 p.m. | ESPN

### Saturday, Dec. 27

- Military Bowl — Pitt vs. East Carolina — 10 a.m. | ESPN
- Pinstripe Bowl — Clemson vs. Penn State — 11 a.m. | ABC
- Fenway Bowl — UConn vs. Army — 1:15 p.m. | ESPN
- Pop-Tarts Bowl — No. 12 BYU vs. No. 22 Georgia Tech — 2:30 p.m. | ABC
- Arizona Bowl — Miami (Ohio) vs. Fresno State — 3:30 p.m. | CW
- New Mexico Bowl — No. 25 North Texas vs. San Diego State — 4:45 p.m. | ESPN
- Gator Bowl — Missouri vs. No. 19 Virginia — 6:30 p.m. | ABC
- Texas Bowl — LSU vs. No. 21 Houston — 8:15 p.m. | ESPN

### Monday, Dec. 29

Birmingham Bowl — Georgia Southern vs. App State — 1 p.m. | ESPN

### Tuesday, Dec. 30

- Independence Bowl — Coastal Carolina vs. Louisiana Tech — 1 p.m. | ESPN
- Music City Bowl — Tennessee vs. Illinois — 4:30 p.m. | ESPN
- Alamo Bowl — No. 16 USC vs. TCU — 8 p.m. | ESPN

### Wednesday, Dec. 31

ReliaQuest Bowl — No. 23 Iowa vs. No. 14 Vanderbilt — 11 a.m. | ESPN

- Sun Bowl — Arizona State vs. Duke — 1 p.m. | CBS
- Citrus Bowl — No. 13 Texas vs. No. 18 Michigan — 2 p.m. | ABC
- Las Vegas Bowl — Nebraska vs. No. 15 Utah — 2:30 p.m. | ESPN
- CFP Quarterfinal (Cotton Bowl) — No. 2 Ohio State vs. Texas A&M/Miami winner — 6:30 p.m. | ESPN

### Thursday, Jan. 1

- CFP Quarterfinals
- Orange Bowl — Texas Tech vs. Oregon/James Madison winner — 11 a.m. | ESPN
- Rose Bowl — Indiana vs. Oklahoma/Alabama winner — 3 p.m. | ESPN
- Sugar Bowl — Georgia vs. Ole Miss/Tulane winner — 7 p.m. | ESPN

### Friday, Jan. 2

- Armed Forces Bowl — Texas State vs. Rice — 12 p.m. | ESPN
- Liberty Bowl — Navy vs. Cincinnati — 3:30 p.m. | ESPN
- Duke's Mayo Bowl — Mississippi State vs. Wake Forest — 7 p.m. | ESPN
- Holiday Bowl — No. 17 Arizona vs. SMU — 7 p.m. | FOX

### Championship Week

**Thursday, Jan. 8**  
CFP Semifinal (Fiesta Bowl) — 6:30 p.m. | ESPN

**Friday, Jan. 9**  
CFP Semifinal (Peach Bowl) — 6:30 p.m. | ESPN

**Monday, Jan. 19**  
College Football Playoff National Championship — 6:30 p.m. | ESPN

### Bowl Game Results (Final)

**Saturday, Dec. 13**  
• Celebration Bowl — South Carolina State 40, Prairie View A&M 38

• LA Bowl — Washington 38, Boise State 10

**Tuesday, Dec. 16**  
• Salute to Veterans Bowl — Jacksonville State 17, Troy 3

**Wednesday, Dec. 17**  
• Cure Bowl — Old Dominion 24, South Florida 10

• 68 Ventures Bowl — Delaware 20, Louisiana 13

**Thursday, Dec. 18**  
• Xbox Bowl — Arkansas State 34, Missouri State 28

**Friday, Dec. 19**  
• Gasparilla Bowl — Memphis ??, NC State ??  
• College Football Playoff First Round — Alabama ??, Oklahoma ??

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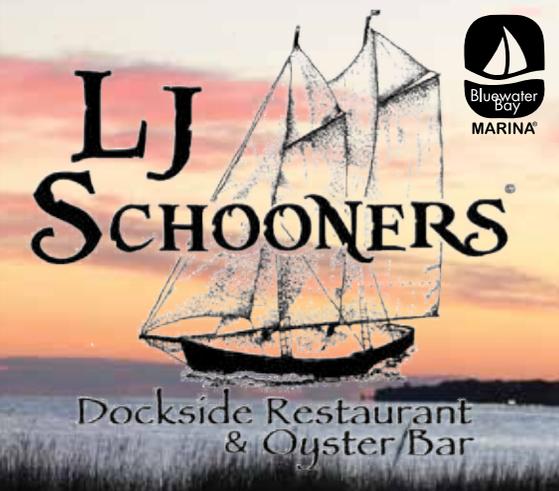
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Jan. 7: Prime Rib Night 5-9pm & Wine Tasting 5-7pm, Chess Night 6pm  
Jan. 10: 17th Anniversary Celebration — Food Samples — Prize Giveaways 6-9pm, Jared Herzog & Carbliss Seltzer Tasting 12-2pm & 4-6pm  
Jan. 21: Prime Rib Night 5-9pm & Wine Tasting 5-7pm, Traveling Painter 5:30pm  
Jan. 24: Gary Schmitz 6:30-10pm  
Jan. 31: National Hot Chocolate Day

Visit our Facebook Page for Event Updates

# Museum Series: A Museum to Honor the 250th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence

By BARBARA PALMGREN

They say it takes a whole village to raise a child. They say that Rome wasn't built in a day. They say that great lessons can be learned from history.

All of the above is true as the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida prepares one of its greatest challenges: how to best honor the 250th anniversary of the birth of our nation. This challenge began over a year ago when museum manager, Arthur Edgar, reminded the hard-working board of trustees that 2026 was going to be a special year for our nation and we should begin thinking about whether we wanted to recognize this once in a lifetime event.

The answer of course was "yes," and trustees decided that we must honor our nation and the historic event that happened 250 years ago.

As Exhibits Chair for the

Board of Trustees, I knew there was one person who could create a museum quality exhibit for our community and visitors—Dr. Marie Hallion, our Museum and Education Chair. Marie is a subject matter expert in American History. After Florida Rep. Patt Maney called in the summer with news of newly available 250th anniversary grant funding, we applied with the help of Parker Destin, a passionate historian, and Susan Page, our Museum Development Chair and skilled grant writer.

Although the grant was ultimately not awarded—most funding went to Central and South Florida—the concept for the exhibit took shape and evolved into a compelling educational experience. On Oct. 1, 2025, members were emailed broad exhibit details and invited to contribute artifacts, historic documents, signage support and



mock-ups highlighting events leading up to the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

With Dr. Hallion developing the panel text, maps and images, the next step was forming an expanded committee to guide the project toward its planned 2026 opening. The committee's makeup—discussed at the annual November membership meeting—included educators, business owners, teachers, media

representatives and members of the museum's board of trustees.

The committee officially convened on Thursday, Dec. 11, 2025, with 20 members reviewing exhibit panels that will soon line the gallery walls. Among the featured artifacts will be a collection of colonial currency recently donated by Tom and Sue McKnight.

A children's-focused subcommittee was also created, chaired

by longtime museum volunteer Connie Wolfe, who brings more than a decade of experience organizing youth programs and summer camps.

Are we special? Parker Destin told us that only two museums in the Panhandle will be hosting a special exhibit for the 250th anniversary next year: The University of West Florida and the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida. He congratulated everyone at the meeting for sharing time and expertise to bring this history treasure forward.

Museum trustees and management will keep the community posted as we are near a target date for the grand opening of *Celebrate America 250! American Revolution* in early 2026. Together, we will celebrate this special year in a history museum in Valparaiso. Together, we will celebrate an event that changed our world forever.

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# 2026 Seaside School™ Race Weekend Returns Feb. 12–15 with Races, Flavor and Community Spirit

One of the Emerald Coast's most anticipated winter traditions is gearing up for another memorable year as the 2026 Seaside School™ Half Marathon + 5K Race Weekend returns Feb. 12–15, 2026. With race registration now officially open, runners, families and supporters are invited to be part of a high-energy weekend where scenic beauty, community connection and a meaningful mission come together along 30A.

More than just a race, Seaside School™ Race Weekend is the school's largest annual fundraiser, with every mile run directly supporting classroom technology, academic programs and teacher initiatives that impact students across Walton County. Each year, the event sells out, drawing participants from across the Southeast who come for the views and stay for the cause.

"This weekend truly captures the spirit of our community," organizers said. "From runners and volunteers to chefs, sponsors and spectators, everyone plays a role in supporting education while celebrating everything that makes Seaside special."



## A Weekend Packed with Events

Festivities begin with early packet pickup at Seacoast Collegiate High School, 109 Greenway Trail in Santa Rosa Beach, from 4 to 7 p.m. Thursday and Friday, Feb. 12–13, and from 8 to 11 a.m. Saturday, Feb. 14. Runners can also enjoy the Race Expo and official packet pickup from noon to 4 p.m. Saturday at Seaside Neighborhood School, 10 Smolian Circle.

Race day arrives Sunday, Feb. 15, with the Half Marathon starting at 7 a.m. CST, followed by the 5K at 7:30 a.m. Participants will wind through Seaside's iconic streets and

along picturesque stretches of 30A, cheered on by spectators and volunteers who help make the event a true community celebration.

Registration is open now, and spots are expected to fill quickly. To register, visit [www.runseasidefl.com](http://www.runseasidefl.com).

## Taste of the Race: A Culinary Kickoff

Race Weekend officially kicks off Friday night with Taste of the Race, one of 30A's most anticipated culinary events. Set for 6 to 9 p.m. Friday, Feb. 13, at the iconic SEASIDE® Lyceum, the 21-and-up, rain-or-shine event brings together top Gulf Coast

chefs and restaurants for an evening of friendly competition and unforgettable flavors.

Guests will enjoy tastings from more than a dozen acclaimed chefs, paired with complimentary fine wine, craft cocktails and local brews, all set to live entertainment and a festive Race Weekend atmosphere. Chefs will compete for People's Choice, Judges' Choice and Chef's Choice awards, making the night as exciting as it is delicious.

Tickets for Taste of the Race are on sale now in limited quantities, with Early Bird pricing available through Dec. 31 and new couples pricing options for

added savings. Tickets can be purchased at [runsignup.com/TicketEvent/TOTR2026/Registrar](http://runsignup.com/TicketEvent/TOTR2026/Registrar).

## Rubiks Groove Brings the Party

Adding to the excitement, nationally acclaimed party band Rubiks Groove will take over Taste of the Race with a high-energy throwback show featuring the biggest hits of the 80s, 90s and 2000s. Known for full-costume characters and nonstop crowd interaction, the band promises to transform the Lyceum into a flashback dance floor and keep the celebration going all night long.

## Opportunities to Support and Sponsor

Businesses and community partners are also invited to get involved by sponsoring Race Weekend. Sponsorship offers meaningful visibility before thousands of runners, families and spectators while directly supporting educational excellence at Seaside School™.

"As our largest fundraiser, Race Weekend fuels innovation in the classroom and supports the teachers who make a difference every day," organizers said. "Sponsors play a vital role in that impact."

With races, music, food and a mission that matters, the 2026 Seaside School™ Race Weekend promises four days of unforgettable moments. Whether you're running, cheering, tasting or sponsoring, this February tradition offers a powerful way to celebrate community while investing in the future.



## The 24th annual running of the SEASIDE SCHOOL HALF MARATHON + 5K

is back on Sunday, February 15, 2026,  
in beautiful Seaside, Florida.

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# Golf Series: The Golf Club at Bluewater Bay Welcomes Golfers as Winter Approaches



BY BARBARA PALMGREN

There are “come back kids” and then there are those special events or times when people fight to be sure a precious institution remains in place for the community and visitors to enjoy.

The story of the fight two years ago to save the Bluewater Bay Golf Course — and the successful effort to raise \$2.5 million to do so — is well known throughout the community. Residents rallied behind the cause, determined to preserve one of Bluewater Bay’s most cherished assets. Today, the Golf Club at

Bluewater is under the guidance of Elite Golf management and is experiencing a true comeback. Saving the course not only protected a beloved local landmark, but also preserved a precious and vital green space for the entire community to enjoy.

Nestled among homes in the Bluewater Bay community, golfers enjoy a course layout that is challenging, but fair. Tee times can be booked with Golf Now or by phoning the pro shop. With scenic views that often distract in a positive way, the course can now be enjoyed by golfers at all levels of play. With overseeded greens and tee boxes as well as reasonable fees, the beautiful course is ready for the winter. This could not have been accomplished without the efforts of Golf Course Superintendent, Alfredo Francisco, and his staff.

Stephan Kleemeyer, general manager, has worked tirelessly over the past year to ensure growth and success for the club. With the added bonus of now



having a full-service restaurant, the Blue Tee, golfers and residents can enjoy breakfast, lunch or dinner from 7 a.m. to 9 pm. It might be chilly in January, but a warm lunch with accompanying beverage should be a perfect way to share stories of how an approach shot to the green resulted in a birdie on the hole! Plans are underway for a welcome snowbird party in January. I sense that

once parties become part of the fabric of this club, membership will enjoy more than watching a tee shot head straight down the fairway.

Membership is the heart and soul of a golf course and new member rates encourage golfers to join. Golf carts are included in the rate. Yes, public play is important, but membership is the key to continued revenue to

support the club.

So, congratulations, Preserve Bluewater Bay, INC. You have protected 150 acres of valuable, green space for community enjoyment and golf club operations. Golfers and the Bluewater Bay community are the beneficiaries of this gift to the Florida Panhandle!



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# Time to Get the Plump Out Aren't You Done Eating Yet?



BY DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

It's almost over! Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years. If you are anything like me, you'll be five pounds heavier with stairs harder than usual. Eating is such a social event and Thanksgiving starts the social smorgasbord. One scoop of everything followed by seconds of the good stuff. A few cookies left on the sheet, a bit of potatoes in the pan, one lonely slice of pie? And work on those left overs just before bed. I can hear Amanda asking, "Aren't you done eating yet?" as I'm bringing some scraps to bed.

Well, once the holidays are over, it's the time to hear it. I love you all, but you're plumping out. It's the time to get life under control and start working

towards the same goal we all have. Eat better, get active, lose weight, feel better. It sounds so easy. Change is hard, but The Hormone Restoration Center can help you achieve your goals.

It's not all about weight loss, but it's a good start. Weight loss has multiple causes, so any solution needs to be customized to you. That is what we do so well. After providing a comprehensive consultation, discussing symptoms and reviewing labs, we give our recommendation and provide a range of options for the best path to success.

Most important, and often forgotten, is hormone optimization. If your estrogen is out of whack or your thyroid is not optimal, you will never lose weight. Unfortunately, traditional medicine does not look at labs properly and that's why you will always hear, "Everything's normal." It's not.

Optimizing hormones can significantly reduce weight. It also routinely improves sleep, mood, libido and energy while eliminating fatigue, brain fog, hair loss and sexual dysfunction.

Proper thyroid function can supercharge weight loss, increase energy levels, as well as



promote healthy hair growth and healthier skin. Plus optimizing thyroid reduces cardiovascular risk. Why would you not?

GLP-1 options like Semaglutide and Tirzepatide provide almost magical results. I have never seen medications that work so well to help lose weight while also reducing chronic diseases.

Sometimes motivation and weight loss are just a micronutrient away. Our practitioners can

tailor supplement recommendations to your needs ensuring you maximize every ounce of effort you put in.

### Myth-Busting: Debunking Common Misconceptions

"Weight loss medications don't require lifestyle changes."

Truth: For us, the easy part is losing the weight. The hard part is keeping it off. Ultimately, no matter what we do to help you

get the weight off, you will be destined to gain the weight back until you develop healthy habits to keep the weight off.

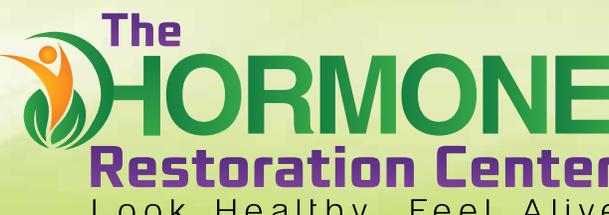
Luckily for you, at The Hormone Restoration Center we can do the heavy lifting for you. We will get you on track and headed in the right direction. Once your weight loss starts, energy increases, and mood improves, the hard stuff just gets easier.

Join our family here at The Hormone Restoration Center; we'll support you every step of the way. Together, we will create a personalized plan that aligns with your goals and helps you embrace a healthier, happier you.

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- Do you think you show too much or too little of your teeth when you smile?
- Would you like to change the way your teeth or gums are shaped?
- Do you have gaps or spaces in between your teeth?

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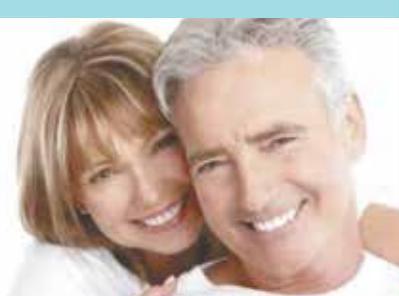


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# New Year, New You: Setting Realistic Aesthetic Goals



BY DR. CLARK, BLUEWATER PLASTIC SURGERY

As the holiday season winds down, many of us begin to reflect on the year behind us and set intentions for the one ahead. While health and wellness resolutions are common in January, more patients are also choosing to include aesthetic goals as part of their personal care and confidence-building journey. At Bluewater Plastic Surgery, we

maintain a youthful appearance in a professional setting or align their outward appearance with the vibrancy they feel inside. When your motivation comes from self-respect rather than comparison or pressure, the experience is far more rewarding.

Setting the right goals is equally important. Success doesn't come from doing everything at once—it comes from choosing steps that fit your lifestyle, health, budget, and timeline. Some patients start with subtle enhancements such as a refreshed skincare regimen or trying Botox for the first time. Others are ready to address a single feature that has bothered them for years or explore a larger transformation. During your consultation, we take time to discuss what's realistic, what options make sense, what timing looks like, and whether surgery

care can support a larger commitment to confidence, wellness, and self-care in the year ahead. At Bluewater Plastic Surgery, we approach every patient's goals with education, safety, discretion, and thoughtful guidance at the forefront.

To schedule a private consul-

tation and explore your options, contact Bluewater Plastic Surgery 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 highest priorities are patient safety and

superior results. With more than 300 five-star reviews, I let my patients' experiences speak for themselves.

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believe in setting realistic, safe, and empowering goals—not for vanity, but for the meaningful impact that feeling good in your own skin can have on every aspect of life.

Whether you're considering a procedure for the first time or looking to refresh your routine, the new year is a wonderful moment to reset, refocus, and approach your aesthetic goals with clarity.

A fresh start begins with reflection. Before making any decisions, it helps to pause and consider why you're seeking a change. Some patients want to feel more confident in their bodies, while others hope to reverse changes from aging, pregnancy, or weight loss. Many want to

or non-invasive treatments are the best fit. From injectables and skin-tightening to procedures like a facelift or tummy tuck, every plan is customized.

Timing itself is a powerful part of the process. If you have an event, milestone, or vacation coming up, we help you work backward to create the right timeline for healing and results. Many people choose the quieter winter months for procedures that require downtime so they can welcome spring and summer feeling refreshed and confident.

You've spent the year caring for others—now may be the perfect time to invest in yourself. Whether it's a subtle boost or a transformative change, aesthetic



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 Wellness

# Journey Bravely: Increase Your Life Experience and Impact in 2026



BY STEPHENIE CRAIG,  
JOURNEY BRAVELY

When did you last experience a big, uncomfortable feeling you did not manage well? Maybe you experienced rejection and felt deeply sad. Maybe someone treated you poorly and you felt intense anger. Perhaps you made a mistake and you felt shame. How did you behave when you experienced the feeling? Were you unkind to yourself? Did you

behave poorly and then blame others? Did you drink or scroll to numb out? Did you break something?

Feelings come and go throughout each day and yet most of us do not have a sense of confidence about managing uncomfortable feelings. In his book, *Dealing with Feeling*, Marc Brackett, PhD, founding director of Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence shares that only 10% of the American population receive any education about how to understand or manage feelings. In my experience meeting with people for 25 years, about 9 out of 10 people entering therapy do not under-

stand how to identify or work through uncomfortable feelings.

Most of us are engaging in avoidance or numbing strategies such as drinking, other substance use, scrolling, shopping, gambling, controlling others, over scheduling, among others to keep from facing uncomfortable feelings. Avoidance produces a cycle of emotional dysregulation that negatively impacts relationships, life performance, and overall health. In short, not knowing how to identify and manage your feelings well is likely reducing your quality of life and your positive impact in the world.

So, if you want to grow in emotional maturity to increase your positive experience and impact in life, what do you do?

### 6 Ways to Learn How to Manage Your Feelings Well

#### Reflect and set intention.

How are you managing feelings? Take notes about how you and others are experiencing your emotional highs and lows. Note if you have been ashamed or received negative feedback regarding your emotional expression.



Create 1-2 goals about how you would like to improve your handling of feelings. "I would like to know how to use 3-4 healthy strategies to manage feelings."

#### Cultivate physical emotional curiosity.

Notice your body's signals about what you are feeling. Notice sensations in your stomach, chest, face, head, and extremities. Notice body temperature, muscle tension, energy level. Notice tears, urge to slam something, exhaustion level. Your physical body gives you signals to help you determine what specific feeling you are experiencing. Listen closely to your body rather than ignoring physical signals.

**Name your feelings.** After collecting physical data, practice matching data to a feeling word. When you notice tight jaw, hot body temperature, and desire to slam something, that might be anger. When you notice tight chest, pit in your stomach, and fast heart rate, that might be anxiety. Try recording your common feelings and list physical sensations that go with each feeling. Continue recording over time until you feel confident your list reflects your emotional experience.

**Evaluate emotional coping tools.** Name/record avoidance/numbing strategies, and record trends of when and how you use them. "I start drinking around 4 and continue until bedtime to take the edge off." "I start scrolling when I'm stressed and bored and am logging 5 hours per day." Begin practicing healthy coping strategies that regulate emotional highs and lows creating space to return to a feeling from a calm state to process its meaning for your life. Try taking a walk, voice or regular journaling, talking to a trusted person, deep breathing exercises, fitness activities, creative pursuits, getting into nature, and nervous system regulation tools (search "vagal toning exercises").

*Continued on page 30*



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# Brain Health in America: A Crisis and a Path Forward



BY MELANIE YOST

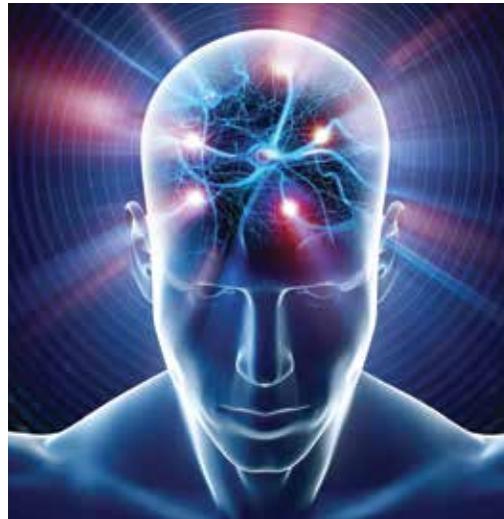
When most people hear the phrase brain health crisis, they immediately think of Alzheimer's disease. Dementia alone is alarming, but it represents only part of a much larger problem. Across all age groups in the U.S., we are witnessing a gradual decline in brain resilience—showing up as struggles with mood, memory, focus, emotional balance and overall quality of life.

Neurodegenerative disorders such as Alzheimer's and other dementias are increasing rapidly. Over 13 million Americans are projected to be affected by 2050, and studies show these disorders grew by 117% between 1990 and

2016. By the time someone receives a dementia diagnosis, the brain has often been under strain for years, sometimes decades, due to chronic stress, inflammation, poor sleep, metabolic challenges, under treated TBI/concussions and unresolved trauma.

At the same time, anxiety, depression, emotional dysregulation and burnout are rising sharply, especially among younger adults. These conditions are often labeled “mental health issues,” but recent research shows they are also brain health issues. Stress and trauma don't just affect how we feel; they change how the brain functions and adapts.

Lifestyle patterns add another layer. Today, many people live with chronic exhaustion, constant stimulation, inadequate sleep, processed foods and social disconnection. Rates of insulin resistance, hypertension and systemic inflammation are climbing, further straining the brain. As a result, more individuals report brain fog, memory lapses, low motivation and mental fatigue at younger ages.



A major blind spot in our healthcare system is the continued separation of brain health from whole-body health. In reality:

- Vascular health is brain health.
- Metabolic health is brain health.
- Emotional regulation is brain health.

Unfortunately, most care begins only after symptoms become severe.

Despite these challenges, there is hope.

Neuroscience now knows that the brain is adaptable and capable of healing at any age. Many aspects of cognitive decline and emotional dysregulation are modifiable. Early identification, targeted interventions and lifestyle support can improve symptoms and

strengthen long-term brain resilience.

Even more encouraging, modern therapeutic tools are helping people restore function and improve daily living. Evidence-backed, non-invasive therapies—such as neurofeedback (to retrain brainwave patterns), low-level laser therapy (to reduce inflammation and boost cellular energy) and hyperbaric oxygen therapy (to promote oxygen-driven healing) are giving individuals a real path forward.

When combined with better sleep, movement, nutrition and stress regulation, these therapies support measurable improvements in clarity, memory, focus and emotional stability.

The truth is simple: Brain decline is not always inevitable. Many symptoms can be slowed and/or improved and some can even be reversed.

At Be Well Solutions, we believe awareness must be paired with action. To support our community, we are offering a FREE advanced Brain Scan—not just a consultation—to help individuals understand how their brain is functioning and what steps can be taken to improve brain health.

If you or a loved one are struggling with brain fog, memory changes, emotional instability or signs of cognitive decline, please reach out. There is hope. Your brain can heal and modern therapies can help you reclaim clarity, resilience and quality of life.

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Wellness

# Healthy Aging Starts with Daily Movement

BY: KELLY STALNAKER, BAYWIND MEDICAL

January often inspires many of us to recommit to fitness after a season of indulgence and celebration. But taking care of our bodies should be a year-round commitment, a long-term investment towards better health. Research consistently shows the value of staying active every day, especially as we grow older. For seniors, regular physical activity delivers a wide range of important benefits: it boosts mood, helps lower blood pressure, supports fine motor skills, and significantly reduces the risk of falls by improving strength and balance. Staying active can also lower the

likelihood of developing chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and dementia.

Beginning a fitness routine may feel daunting, but becoming more active is often easier than it seems. Many effective exercises are completely free and require little to no equipment. Activity can fit into any schedule, and it can be enjoyed solo or with friends. It's one of the most accessible and rewarding forms of self-care. Seniors have plenty of options for staying active, from walking and swimming to gardening or joining social wellness programs (check out your local senior center). For those who prefer to stay indoors, there are

countless ways to keep moving right at home. Online videos offer easy-to-follow workout ideas using everyday household items, making it convenient to stay active anytime and anywhere.

Maintaining good health doesn't have to be complicated; it can start with just a few simple steps. First and foremost, consult your physician prior to beginning any fitness program. Seek guidance from your healthcare professional by openly discussing your plans and goals, to ensure your approach is safe. You may also consider meeting with a personal trainer who can design a strategy that fits your needs. Set realistic goals for yourself,



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increase activity gradually and schedule movement into your week to help you stay consistent. Invite a friend or loved one to join you! It can boost motivation and build accountability.

Living an active lifestyle is beneficial at any age, but it is especially important for seniors. Regular movement can reduce your risk of chronic health conditions, and improve your mood, strength and balance. At Baywind Medical (formerly J&B Medical), we carry a variety of products to support older adults

in reaching their health and wellness goals: resistance bands, pedal exercisers, bamboo socks, walking aids and even recovery tools to help with post-workout muscle soreness. Stop by 540 E. John Sims Pkwy. in Niceville, Monday through Friday from 9-5, to see how we can help you on your fitness journey. As Kenneth Cooper, pioneer of aerobics, once said, "We do not stop moving because we grow old; we grow old because we stop moving."

## 2026

continued from page 28

**Transition from avoidance/numbing to healthy coping.** Begin intentionally replacing numbing strategies with healthy coping tools. With consistency and time, you will find your brain naturally gravitates to what you are doing most often even if it is difficult at first.

**Face life struggles head on.** Once you become skilled noticing, naming, and coping through feelings. Return to the internal or external situation that evoked the feeling in the first place. From a place of calm, try understanding what the feel-

ing was telling you and what meaningful action steps you will take in order to participate in life and relationships from a healthier, intentional place.

**Commit to growing emotional skills** consistently over the next year and check in next January to see how this practice has influenced your life. Access helpful worksheets on the Resources tab at Journeybravely.com including "Comfortable and Uncomfortable Feelings," "Feelings Word List," "Healthy vs. Unhealthy Coping Skills." Connect with us along your journey for coaching and counseling at Journeybravely.com.

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# New Year's Resolutions: A Shift in Priority, Not Just Behavior — Especially for Older Adults Pursuing Strength, Longevity and Independence



BY KASSIA GARFIELD,  
MAXSTRENGTH FITNESS

Every January, millions of people set New Year's resolutions with the hope that this time—finally—everything will change. For older adults pursuing better strength, mobility, and long-term health, resolutions often revolve around exercising more, eating better, or “getting in shape.” But these goals frequently fade by February, not because of a lack of willpower, but because they're approached the wrong way. The truth is this: **lasting change isn't about adopting new behaviors; it's about shift-**

**ing priorities.** And for older adults committed to aging well, reframing resolutions this way can make all the difference.

Behavior change alone can feel like adding another task to an already full plate. Telling yourself, “I need to work out three times a week,” can feel like pressure—another obligation competing with life's demands. But when exercise becomes a priority, not a chore, it moves from something you “have to do” to something you make space for. This distinction matters deeply for strength training, which is one of the most powerful tools older adults have for preserving independence and longevity.

Strength naturally declines with age—typically 3–8% per decade after 30, accelerating after 60 to 10% a decade. But research consistently shows that **heavy resistance training**—training that safely challenges your muscles at a high intensi-

ty—is uniquely effective at slowing, halting, or even reversing muscle and bone loss. Heavy resistance work improves balance, increases bone density, enhances joint stability, and builds the kind of functional strength needed to confidently navigate daily life. This can be the difference between needing assistance with everyday tasks or living independently for years longer. Sadly, cardio, walking, pool exercises and light 2-5lbs weights at home that don't feel challenging anymore, are not enough.

Yet, despite its importance, strength training remains one of the most underutilized health practices among older adults. Not because it's too hard, but because it's not prioritized. Strength training can beat out many medications in effectiveness for pain, blood pressure, osteoporosis and diabetes control, but it takes time, effort and money. People tend to rely on passive treatments like medication, when active and engaged treatments give better results and have zero negative side effects.

Reframing strength training as a priority redefines the “why”

behind the resolution. Instead of exercising to “get fit,” the goal becomes exercising to confidently carry groceries, get up from the floor, travel without mobility concerns, or stay strong enough to play with grandchildren. These are not abstract fitness goals—they are quality-of-life goals. When the priority becomes maintaining independence and longevity, the behaviors that support it—strength training, daily movement, good nutrition—become meaningful, not optional.

This is where programs like **MaxStrength Fitness** make a tremendous difference. MaxStrength specializes in safe, efficient, science-backed heavy resistance training designed specifically to help adults—especially older adults—build maximum strength in minimal time. With expert coaching, controlled environments, and personalized programming, they remove the guesswork and ensure every session contributes directly to the priority of long-term health and independence. It is appointment based, so there is accountability. At MaxStrength Fitness we also call you when you stop coming,

so there is no stopping your goals, we help keep you accountable so there is no falling off in February.

Shifting your perspective also helps reduce the guilt that often accompanies the ups and downs of motivation. Instead of viewing missed workouts as failure, reframing the priority reminds you of the bigger picture: consistency over time matters far more than perfection. Strength training once or twice a week—especially at high, safe intensities—is far more valuable than short-lived bursts of effort.

As the new year begins, consider this shift: don't resolve to “work out more.” *Resolve to make your long-term health and independence a priority.* Let heavy resistance training—and expert support from places like MaxStrength Fitness—serve that priority, not as a resolution to attempt, but as a commitment to what matters most. Give us a call at 850-373-4450 for a free consultation and demo workout.

When priorities change, behaviors follow. And for older adults, that shift can mean not just a better year—but a stronger, healthier future.



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 Business

# Making Waves with Veterans and Service Dogs

BY CHRISTOPHER MANSON

“When I started this company, my goal was to do more than fix plumbing and go home. I wanted to make an impact on the community,” says Tru Plumbing and Gas founder, owner, and CEO Cody Kearns.

“Thanks to the help of our customers, we’ve already supported A Bed 4 Me Foundation and Healing Paws for Warriors with over \$3,000 in donations. Our goal with this charity initiative is to start a movement that ripples throughout the community.” September’s charity partner was Niceville-based CALM, and October’s was the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center.

The Niceville business’ campaign is called Making Waves, and Kearns believes “we can make waves, one drop at a time. And we’re just getting started.”

Recently, as a lead-in to National Service Dog Month, Tru Plumbing and Gas donated \$1,690 to Healing Paws for Warriors to aid in their mission. The Fort Walton Beach 501(c)(3) nonprofit pairs trained rescue dogs with veterans who are living with PTSD, traumatic brain injury, and/or military sexual trauma.

Tru Plumbing and Gas contributed \$10 per completed service call to its nonprofit to defray the cost of rescuing dogs, train-



Healing Paws for Warriors’ Dennis Krebs, Chris Krebs, Sam Hay, Monika Baltazar, and Buddy with Tru Plumbing and Gas owner Cody Kearns at a September check presentation.

ing, veterinary care, and dog food. “Our veterans sacrifice so much. Healing Paws for Warriors gives back to the brave ones who put their lives on the line,” says Kearns.

“I thought it would be a good partnership because they work with veterans and dogs. Everybody loves dogs,” says Tru Plumbing and Gas Marketing Manager Will Miller. “Our goal is to give back to the community and raise awareness for these charities. We select nonprofits we think are doing good work in the community. A Bed 4 Me was kind of a personal thing for the owner, because they help children. We have a couple veterans here in the office that factored into choosing Healing Paws for Warriors.”

Healing Paws for Warriors

provides “Battle Buddies” classes to veterans, consisting of two weeks of academics in a classroom environment followed by four weeks of “public access and familiarity in places like Publix, Kohl’s, local restaurants, the Air Force Armament Museum, et cetera,” says Executive Director Dennis Krebs.

“We also accomplish specialized training in going through TSA at the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport, hospital orientation training at Northwest Florida State College, and going to a movie theater. We take the veterans to places they can experience daily living – to allow them to not just to survive, but to thrive.”

The organization was founded in 2015 by a veteran and a group of supporters that understood the

benefits a service dog could provide to veterans suffering from PTSD, MST, or TBI. “The idea of rescuing dogs and training them to become service dogs was a win-win situation,” says Krebs.

“We save the lives of our veterans and dogs that might otherwise have been euthanized.” Healing Paws for Warriors’ mantras are “Save a Veteran/Rescue a Dog” and “Saving Lives at Both Ends of the Leash.”

Healing Paws for Warriors will continue providing veteran outreach and obtaining applicants for upcoming classes, soliciting for volunteers and fosters, and raising funds to continue supporting the program. “We do not receive any federal or state assistance,” says Krebs, “and all of the training

and equipment we utilize is provided at no cost to the veterans.”

Krebs adds that Tru Plumbing and Gas has “gone above and beyond to support our program, not just by donating, but by helping us solicit potential veteran candidates for our training program. Working with them has been an awesome experience.”

Find out more about Healing Paws for Warriors by calling 850.716.8198, emailing [info@healingpawsforwarriors.org](mailto:info@healingpawsforwarriors.org), or visiting [healingpawsforwarriors.org](http://healingpawsforwarriors.org).

Learn more about Tru Plumbing and Gas at [truplumbingandgas.com](http://truplumbingandgas.com), or call 850.610.3760.

Special thanks to Sam Hay for her contributions to this article.

## Eglin, Community Leaders Honor Military Service



Community members, veterans, and military leaders, including Col. Brian Taylor, 96th Test Wing deputy commander, gathered for the 2025 Wreaths Across America Placement Ceremony at Beal Memorial Cemetery in Fort Walton Beach to honor more than 2,000 veterans laid to rest at this historic site.

Hosted by the Veterans Tribute Tower Committee with support from local, state, and military organizations, the ceremony reflected the

national mission of Wreaths Across America to remember the fallen, honor those who serve, and teach the value of freedom through remembrance and service.

The event featured a Gold Star wreath unveiling, service roll call, musical tributes, and military honors, uniting the community in a shared commitment to pause, reflect, and take time to remember. The 2025 national WAA theme was, “Keep moving forward.”

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# America at 250: Remembering the Hand That Built a Nation

BY PASTOR DOUG STAUFFER

January 2026 marks the beginning of America's 250th anniversary—a milestone few nations reach with freedom intact. This is more than a date on the calendar; it is a moment for national reflection. Before the fireworks,

steps. Washington himself spoke repeatedly of miracles that preserved the cause of liberty, and the nation took shape under the shadow of God's mercy.

But, anniversaries do more than connect us to the past—they challenge us in the present. John Adams warned that our Constitution was meant only for moral and religious people. Liberty needs character. Freedom without virtue turns into license, and license ultimately leads to bondage. As Scripture reminds

As we step into 2026, let this year be more than just a patriotic celebration. Let it be a time of spiritual renewal. Let us pray more fervently, live with greater integrity and witness with bold

courage. Let us demonstrate gratitude in a culture that grumbles and shine as salt and light in a a

The founders gave us a Republic. In this 250th year, may

we, by God's grace, prove ourselves worthy stewards of it—and steer our nation back to the only foundation that cannot be shaken.



speeches and celebrations in July, we begin the year by reflecting on the spiritual foundations that shaped this remarkable Republic and by looking forward to the responsibilities that now rest upon true patriots.

When the founders declared independence, they did so with remarkable clarity about the source of human liberty. Their appeal was not to kings, armies or political theories—it was to Almighty God. The Declaration of Independence bases our rights on the Creator, appeals to the Supreme Judge of the world and concludes with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence. These were not poetic boastings. They were convictions so deeply held that men were willing to lose everything and die for them.

Scripture affirms this truth: *"Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it"* (Psalm 127:1). America's survival—against odds that seemed insurmountable—testifies to a Providential Hand guiding her early

us, *"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty"* (2 Corinthians 3:17). True freedom—personal and national—comes from hearts aligned with God's truth.

As America approaches its 250th year, we stand at a crossroads. Moral confusion obscures truths once seen as obvious. Gratitude has too often been replaced by entitlement, and acknowledging God—so fundamental to our founding—now gets labeled as intrusive. The ancient warning of Deuteronomy echoes through the ages: *"Beware that thou forget not the LORD thy God"* (Deuteronomy 8:11). A nation forgets God only after its people first forget Him!

Yet, this anniversary year brings both caution and hope. God has always used a faithful remnant to shape the course of nations. Revival does not start in capitals; it begins in churches, families and the quiet resolve of believers who choose righteousness. If America is to survive, it will be because God's people remember who He is and bow in reverence.





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Musing

# Road to Redemption Podcast: Eddie Mansfield, Managing Director at Path of Grace

By VICTORIA OSTROSKY

God chooses to use some of the most broken people to accomplish His wonderful agenda of salvation. The Apostle Peter, for example, was tough, brash and confident. And because Jesus knew what Peter needed to learn, He allowed Satan to sift him as wheat. Not to demean him, but to show him that he was nothing without God. Peter would go on to be a charter member of the new ecclesia of God. God orchestrated Peter's first sermon on the Day of Pentecost to save 3000 souls. And the church was born. Peter, now laser-focused, was used mightily by God to bring the good news to, mainly, his Jewish brothers.

The Apostle Paul, formerly Saul the Pharisee, spent his every waking moment hunting down followers of The Way to put them in prison and have them executed. His zeal for the Law took him down the

false path of works until Jesus knocked him off his donkey. He was given a heart of flesh for his heart of stone, then spent the rest of his life hunting for the lost, mainly Gentiles, delivering the good news of the Gospel, and writing most of the New Testament, with many of those letters written while in prison for preaching the Word.

Most of us either know someone personally or know of someone whom God broke completely so He could make them into a vessel fit for His use.

Eddie Mansfield was born and raised in Kentucky in a Christian household with a praying mom (we'll come back to that later). Eddie wasn't really into Christianity, and, as he says, "I veered away from anything that looked like Christianity." Eddie personified the typical teenage rebellious attitude, and, in his case, began drinking and smoking marijuana. "I had



a progressing drug problem. I went to 7 rehabs and moved to different colleges wasting time and partying."

Drug use often accompanies arrests and jail time. Eddie's lifestyle played out the same. By the time he was 38 he "had

a messed up life, in and out of trouble."

When Eddie was finally, completely broken, and ready to listen to God's voice, he was once again in jail. A bunkmate, with whom he used to be friends in the drug world, suggested

they do Bible studies while they served their time. They started in the Gospel of Mark. During Eddie's 7 months in jail, his praying mom began having a recurring dream about her son running a faith-based program for people in recovery. She believed God was doing something in Eddie and had faith that God would change him.

That was the end of 2006. In 2011, Eddie says, "[I] realized my mom was right and started to see the vision she had. The Lord has given me the opportunity to help people like me."

Path of Grace, a faith-based transitional village in Freeport, opened in 2009. This place of healing specializes in helping women achieve lasting sobriety with, among other important things, therapy, both single and group, Bible studies and work assignments. The highly structured program is for 16 – 24 months.

Eddie has something specific to say to the addict: "There's a better life – give God a chance to help you and change you. When you're high, you're in another world and don't realize until you're free for a bit that you're hurting. There's freedom on the other side. Get in a Christ-centered program."

Eddie is currently the Managing Director at Path of Grace, overseeing many women's lives being forever changed by Jesus. "God can take someone so messed up and turn it to good. I'm a firm believer that God has done all this. He's restored the years the locust has eaten."

You can listen to Eddie Mansfield's entire interview and many other incredible stories on the weekly Road to Redemption radio show and podcast at www.rtrdestiny.com.

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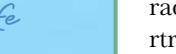












# Sean of the South: It Was Late



BY SEAN DIETRICH

It was late. I pulled into the campus after seven o'clock to attend my last class of the semester. My last college class. Ever. It was a night class.

In America, most self-respecting people my age were finishing supper, settling down to watch "Wheel of Fortune." But I was in school.

I had been attending community college for 11 years. I had been taking a lot of night courses. Which meant that I had perfected the art of eating supper in my truck, on the way to class. I drove with my knees, ate with my hands, and controlled the radio with my big toe.

Supper often consisted of foil-wrapped tamales, purchased from Carmela, a middle-aged Mexican woman who visited our construction jobsites. Carmela traveled in a battered '84 Nissan Maxima that looked like a roving salvage yard.

Every time I'd buy a tamale, Carmela would pat my cheek and say, "Joo are very sweet boy, but joo need a bath, joo smell like goat butt."

So parked my truck. I rushed into class, smelling like the fundamentals of a horned barnyard animal.

Eleven years it had taken me to finish school. Me. A middle-school dropout. My formal education ended in seventh grade, after my father took his own life with a hunting rifle. I simply quit going to school. I was a rural child. It wasn't a big deal. Nobody seemed to care what rural dropouts did.

I got my first job hanging drywall at age 14. I started working in bars, playing music shortly thereafter. I had a lot of jobs. I hung gutter. I worked as an ice-cream-scoop. I was a telemarketer. I was a nobody. I was white trash.

Until I enrolled in community college.

I enrolled as an adult, and my life changed. I became alumni at Okaloosa-Walton Communi-

ty College.

I completed high-school equivalency courses. I finished the collegiate coursework. It took me eleven years. I worked hard. And I count every year I spent at OWCC as a blessing.

I don't care what you've heard, community college is the beating heart of America. Your big, fancy schools are well and good. But show me a community college, and I'll show you the vascular system of this nation.

America is not built on the shoulders of Harvard or Yale graduates. America's internal organs are made up of men and women who know the difference between good and bad tamales.

That night, our classroom consisted of a commercial plumber, an electrician's assistant, a few GIs, and a Hooters waitress who looked as though she had come directly from work. And me, a degenerate bar musician/tile-layer.

Our literature teacher arrived. Soon, we were discussing what was known to our class as "TKAM." "To Kill a Mockingbird." And everyone in our classroom had something to say about TKAM.

Namely, because this book was not just literature to us. It was a taste of home. The book took place in Monroe County, Alabama. We were one-point-five counties away from Monroe County.

We all talked about deeper meanings within the book. We spoke of metaphors and hy-

perboles and allegories and a bunch of other five-dollar words nobody understood except the Hooters waitress. And it was a great night.

And when class was finished, our teacher got this tear-stained look in her eyes and said, "I'm going to miss you all."

She said, "A few of you are going to graduate this year, and I wanted to do something special for you to mark this occasion."

She invited the graduates to the front of the room. We all shyly walked forward. She gave us tiny potted begonias and greeting cards. She kissed our foreheads.

They don't kiss your foreheads at Yale.

The Hooters waitress and I stood shoulder to shoulder. The



Then the professor told the classroom that she believed I would become a writer one day. I wanted to bury my face from embarrassment.

But the old woman touched my cheek and said, "You are so beautiful, Sean. I know God is going to use your past to make a marvelous future." Then she kissed my forehead again.

If there was a dry eye in the classroom it belonged to a needle.

And anyway, this goat butt will forever be a proud community college graduate.

*Publisher's Note: When this story takes place, Northwest Florida State College was known as Okaloosa-Walton Community College (OWCC). While the name has changed, the mission—and the life-changing impact of our local community college—remains the same.*

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 Arts & Music

# Virtuoso Voices Valentine's Day Scholarship Fundraiser February 14, 2026

## Oklahoma! By Rodgers and Hammerstein

The Choctaw Bay Music Club of Niceville is excited to invite you to the Virtuoso Voices Valentine's 22nd Annual Scholarship Fundraiser Lunch on Saturday, February 14, at Crosspoint United Methodist Church, 214 Partin Dr. South, Niceville, in the Fellowship Hall, beginning at 11:30 a.m.

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

Along with a delicious lunch, Virtuoso Voices is fun-filled with attention-grabbing singing, dra-



ma, laughter, live music, comedy, and spirit. The artists in residence share the storyline behind

each song to actively engage the listener before they perform. Last year, about \$10,000 was awarded to deserving students for college, high school senior awards, and summer music camp scholarships.

This year's theme centers around the musical Oklahoma! by Rodgers and Hammerstein. The musical takes place during the days of the American Wild West. It follows the blossoming love story between a farm girl (Laurey) and a charming cowboy (Curly) as they navigate rival suitors and the challenges of frontier life. Two memorable songs from this musical are "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" and "Oklahoma!" The Studio Artists will be singing and acting out songs from this musical and others.

A fun raffle will be held during the first part of the event, and winners are announced and presented toward the end. Local

businesses and private donors contribute a variety of raffle items such as gift cards, wine, fine chocolates, artwork, interior décor, and event tickets. Raffle tickets will be for sale (bring cash or check) during the luncheon.

This is a fun way to celebrate Valentine's Day! Please join us, bring your partner or friend, and make new friends at Virtuoso Voices for an exceptional experience of theatre, singing, food, and fun that's designed for all ages to enjoy as we support our local young aspiring musicians.

Tickets are \$40 for adults and \$25 for students and may be reserved or purchased by calling or texting Phillip LeGrand at 850-527-4200. Tickets may also be purchased online at [www.Eventbrite.com](http://www.Eventbrite.com). For more information, visit the club's website under the events tab at [www.ChoctawBayMusicClub.org](http://www.ChoctawBayMusicClub.org).

## Nourish Alaqua: Caring for the Caregivers

By LAURIE HOOD, FOUNDER

Every day at Alaqua, our staff and volunteers show up for animals in their hardest moments. They care for creatures who arrive frightened, injured or broken in ways most people will never witness. They help them heal, rebuild trust and rediscover joy. This work is powerful, but it can also take a quiet toll.

People who choose animal welfare often carry the weight of what they see long after a shift ends. The same compassion that makes them extraordinary can make them vulnerable to burnout and exhaustion. That's why we created Nourish Alaqua.



Nourish Alaqua is our new wellness initiative designed to care for the people who care

for every animal who comes through our gates. It's built on a simple belief: if we want to give

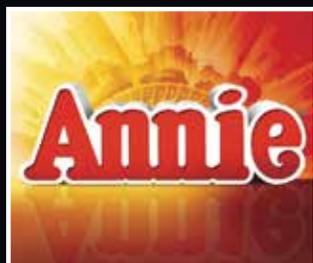
animals the very best chance at healing, we have to make sure our team feels supported and

cared for too.

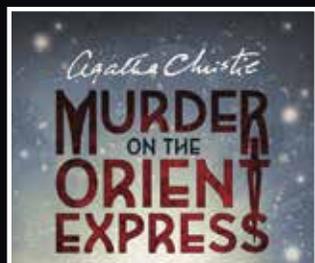
This program focuses on strengthening both emotional and physical well-being. It gives our caregivers space to reset, breathe, and reconnect with each other. It also acknowledges something very real about this work: some days are so packed with urgent care and unexpected needs that staff miss meals without even realizing it. We want to change that.

A big part of Nourish Alaqua will be providing healthy, ready-to-grab meal options on site so our team has what they need to stay nourished throughout the

*Continued on page 39*



Nov. 28 - Dec. 31



Jan. 15 - Feb. 1



Feb. 12 - March 1

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[www.emeraldcoasttheatre.org](http://www.emeraldcoasttheatre.org)

# The Emerald Coast Music Alliance Festival 2026

BY DEBBIE CARLONI

## Our Passion for Music Education

“Music is a more potent instrument than any other for education,” Plato quoted. This belief is at the heart of The Emerald Coast Music Alliance (ECMA). Our mission is to foster a love for classical music and to share its significant educational and health benefits with students, seniors, individuals with developmental challenges, and the broader community of the Emerald Coast.

## Festival 2026: A Week of World-Class Music

We are thrilled to announce our 10th annual Festival 2026, featuring accomplished artists who will perform from January 28th through February 8th at various locations. Performances will take place in Okaloosa-Walton County schools, senior centers, assisted living facilities, and agencies serving special needs populations, among others. Each festival includes 50-60 performances, and there is no cost to

any participating school, agency, or organization.

## Featured Artists

Under the guidance of our artistic director and concert pianist, Alon Goldstein, we have invited an outstanding roster of musicians for Festival 2026:

- The Cerus Saxophone Quartet
- Clarinetist Alexander Fiterstein
- Guitar Duo Ziggy & Miles
- Pianist Regina Tanujaya
- Free Community Concerts

In addition to performances at schools and community agencies, ECMA will present three Free Community Concerts featuring Alon Goldstein and our guest musicians:

- Fort Walton Beach Civic Auditorium on February 5th
- Crosspoint Church Niceville on February 6th
- Chautaugua Theatre Defuniak Springs (date TBA)

## What People Are Saying

ECMA is grateful for the encouragement and support we



## Join Us and Support Our Mission

We can't wait to perform for you this January – February!

Emerald Coast Music Alliance is a 501c3 organization that operates on the generous donations of businesses and individuals. Sponsorship opportunities for individual concerts are also available. To make a donation or for more information on how to become a sponsor, please visit <https://www.emeraldcoastmusic.org/donate.html>.

Please check our website <https://www.emeraldcoastmusic.org> for more information and updates on Free Concert times and how to reserve your seats. Or contact us by Email at [info@emeraldcoastmusic.org](mailto:info@emeraldcoastmusic.org).

receive through testimonials, which reinforce our mission to enrich lives through music.

## Bob Hope Village

We had absolutely amazing performances from Emerald Coast Music Alliance Foundation!!!! They were absolutely amazing and our ballroom was FULL. Thank you for joining us! They are a very talented group of performers and heavily rely on donations.

## Rocky Bayou Christian School

When I think that our students woke up in the piney

woods of the Central Florida Panhandle, came to school this morning, and were able to hear a world-class musician spend an hour and a half demonstrating to them the beauty and passion of great music, I am amazed that such a program exists and that such people exist to make this possible. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts and PLEASE come back!

## Kenwood Elementary School

I am a VE / ESE teacher of 4th and 5th graders.



- ✓ Receive one season pass to Concerts in the Village.
- ✓ Enjoy early admission access to Concerts in the Village.
- ✓ Receive discounts on Festival of the Arts merchandise.
- ✓ Receive membership rates on select MKAF events.

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Arts & Music

# MKAF 30th Anniversary of Concerts in the Village

Celebrate three decades of music under the stars as the Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation (MKAF) marks the 30th anniversary of its beloved Concerts in the Village series. The area's first live outdoor concert series returns Thursday evenings from April 9 through June 11, 2026, at the MKAF Dugas Pavilion in

Destin.

This 10-concert, family-friendly series features premier regional and national artists and top tribute bands performing everything from classic rock, rhythm and blues, and disco to yacht rock and modern pop favorites.

The season opens April 9

with Smash Mouth, followed by Black Jacket Symphony recreating Van Halen's 1984. Other highlights include Yacht Rock Schooner, Rumours ATL (Fleetwood Mac tribute), Brass Transit: The Music of Chicago, The Turnstiles: A Tribute to Billy Joel, Boogie Wonder Band, The Molly Ringwalds, The Return:



A Beatles Tribute performing Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, and a season finale with A1A: The Official Jimmy Buffett Tribute Band.



"We are thrilled to celebrate 30 years of Concerts in the Village with one of our most dynamic and diverse lineups yet," said MKAF CEO Demetrius Fuller. "When you purchase a concert ticket, you are supporting our mission to bring arts education and engagement programs to thousands across Northwest Florida. We invite everyone to join us this season for unforgettable nights of music and community."

Gates open at 6 p.m., with concerts beginning at 7 p.m. Attendees are encouraged to bring lawn chairs and picnics, or enjoy food and beverages available for purchase from featured restaurants and food trucks.

General admission is \$40 per adult (including processing fees), with discounts available for active-duty military with ID. Children 12 and under are free. Tickets are available at [MKAF.org/events](http://MKAF.org/events).

A limited number of VIP tables, seating eight guests for the entire season, are available. For availability or sponsorship information, call (850) 650-2226 or email [info@mkaf.org](mailto:info@mkaf.org).

MKAF members receive early entry, free admission to every concert, and discounts to other MKAF events. Learn more at

[MKAF.org](http://MKAF.org).

Concert lineup is subject to change. All sales are final. Pets, drones, and tables larger than two feet are not permitted. Children 17 and under must be accompanied by a parent or guardian.

### The 2026 Concerts in the Village schedule:

- Thursday, April 9 | Smash Mouth
- Thursday, April 16 | Black Jacket Symphony: The Music of Van Halen
- Thursday, April 23 | Yacht Rock Schooner
- Thursday, April 30 | Rumours ATL
- Thursday, May 7 | Brass Transit: The Musical Legacy of Chicago
- Thursday, May 14 | Turnstile: The Music of Billy Joel
- Thursday, May 21 | Boogie Wonder Band
- Thursday, May 28 | The Molly Ringwalds
- Thursday, June 4 | The Return: A Beatles Tribute
- Thursday, June 11 | A1A: The Official Jimmy Buffett Tribute Band



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# Okaloosa County Announces 2025–2026 Art in the Capitol Winners

The Okaloosa County School District (OCSD) is proud to recognize its talented middle school artists who participated in the 2025–2026 Art in the Capitol Competition, a statewide visual arts contest for students in grades 6–8. This year’s Best in Show winner, Hannah Leitheiser from Liza Jackson Preparatory School (teacher: Ms. Eden Preston), will represent Okaloosa County with her piece at the Florida Capitol in Tallahassee during the 2026 Legislative Session.



**Additional district winners include:**

- 1st Place: Olivia McClain,  
Lewis School – Teacher: Ms. Lindsey Gafford
  - 2nd Place: Ahymn Kim, Ruckel Middle School – Teacher: Ms. Gina Watson
  - 3rd Place: Emma Hilleary,  
Ruckel Middle School – Teacher: Ms. Gina Watson
- Superintendent      Marcus

Chambers commends the students and their teachers for their creativity and dedication: “Our middle school students continue to amaze us with their incredible talent and imagination,” said Superintendent Marcus Chambers.

“We’re so proud of Hannah and all our student artists who represented Okaloosa County in this year’s Art in the Capitol Competition. Their work reflects not only their skill but also the support and inspiration they receive

from our outstanding art teachers.”

The Florida Legislature established the Art in the Capitol Competition to showcase the artistic achievements of middle school students from across the state. Each district’s winning artwork is displayed in the Capitol

during the regular legislative session, providing lawmakers and visitors with an opportunity to appreciate Florida’s young artists.

Congratulations to all participants and their teachers for their exceptional work and commitment to the arts.

## How the Community Can Support Nourish Alaqua

Nourish Alaqua was created to care for the people who care for our animals. If you’re a community member, restaurant, or business looking for a simple, meaningful way to help, here are a few options:



**Provide a healthy meal.**

Local restaurants or chefs can donate an occasional lunch or prepare grab-and-go meals for our staff and volunteers. Even a single meal makes a big impact on days packed with rescue work.

**Sponsor wellness supplies.**

Items like healthy snacks, hydration stations, mindfulness tools, or nature-based wellness materials help keep our team grounded and energized.

**Host a wellness activity.**

Yoga instructors, sound-bath facilitators, therapists, or nature-based practitioners can offer short sessions that help our caregivers recharge.

Every contribution, big or small, helps us care for the hearts and health of the people behind Alaqua’s mission.

**ALAQUA**

*continued from page 36*

day. We’re exploring ways to partner with local restaurants and chefs who may want to support our caregivers by offering an occasional meal. It would be a meaningful way for the community to show appreciation for the people who give so much of

themselves to animals in need.

At its core, Nourish Alaqua is about creating a culture where wellness is woven into daily life. It’s a reminder that healing isn’t only for the animals, it’s for the people standing behind them. When our team feels cared for, they can pour their heart into each rescue with even more strength and clarity.

This is just the beginning. As the program grows, we hope it becomes a model for what caring for caregivers can look like in animal welfare.

Because here at Alaqua, wellness isn’t just for animals. It’s something we want every living being on this property to feel.

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