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Thanks to Dog-Harmony, More Tails Are Wagging in Niceville

BY CHRISTIE SOLOMON

Where the therapy dogs' wagging tails go, you'll find Niceville students learning empathy toward animals and each other, and patients are healing faster with smiles. Dog-Harmony, a 501(c)(3) affiliate of Intermountain Therapy Animals (ITA), evaluates and manages therapy dog teams in Bay, Walton, and Okaloosa counties in Northwest Florida.

Dog-Harmony currently coordinates 12 volunteer therapy dog teams that serve public and nonprofit organizations in the Niceville area through animal-assisted interactions, including the R.E.A.D.ing Paws program. Partners include Bluewater Elementary School, James E. Plew Elementary School, Addie R. Lewis School (Valparaiso), Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center, Niceville Public Library, and HCA Florida Twin Cities Hospital.

Dog-Harmony is dedicated to reducing the shelter dog



population through ongoing, community-focused, humane education and therapy dog programs that enrich the human-animal bond.

What is Humane Education?

"Humane education [is] designed to cultivate compassion for humans, animals, and/or the environment." The Animal Legal Defense Fund states that the field "exists to foster creative and

critical thinking skills within people, which enable them to make benevolent choices and enhance respect for the natural world and its inhabitants."

Access to humane education programming for children is critical as they begin developing empathy skills and humane attitudes.

The Role of Therapy Dogs in Humane Education

Therapy dog teams, con-

sisting of an evaluated therapy dog and handler, support Dog-Harmony's humane education and responsible dog care programs for children and families, helping them practice what they learn. At the end of November, 4,250 children in Okaloosa and Walton counties had attended Dog-Harmony's humane education programs in 2025.

DOG HARMONY

continued on page 2



Closing the Digital Divide, Opening Doors to Opportunity

Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast Deliver Technology, Mentorship — and a Call to Community Support

For families across Niceville, Bluewater Bay and Valparaiso, access to opportunity increasingly depends on access to technology — and recently, hundreds of area children took a major step forward.

The Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast marked a significant milestone with the distribution of 250 refurbished laptops to club members and families across Escambia, Okaloosa and Walton counties.

BOYS & GIRLS CLUB

continued on page 6



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 **Community**
DOG HARMONY
continued from page 1

Studies have shown that humane education programs improve children's empathy toward animals and, in turn, each other.

A study of 257 students, aged 10 to 17, who participated in The Marine Humane Society's after-school humane education programs between the Fall of 2014 and the Spring of 2018, revealed that the students' evaluation scores improved for both

treatment of animals and empathy (attitudes towards other people) after completing the eight-week program.

A 2021 study of 110 third-grade students in Hong Kong found that class-based, animal-assisted humane education increased cognitive competence and empathy and reduced hyperactivity among participants. The researchers also identified three central qualitative themes from the study: "enhancement of self-control, promotion of humane attitude, and improve-

ment of reading skills."

Published in 2023, the results of an academic-year-long study of 605 first-grade students in six schools across four cities in eastern China revealed that the animal and nature content of the country's humane education program, "Caring for Life," increased the students' affective and cognitive empathy scores. Affective empathy, associated with altruistic and prosocial behaviors in children, is the ability to share others' emotions, whereas cognitive empathy is

the ability to understand them.

R.E.A.D.ing Paws Program

In addition to empathy, therapy dogs can also encourage a love of reading. Dog-Harmony is an affiliate of ITA's R.E.A.D.ing Paws (Reading Education Assistance Dogs) program, an initiative designed to help children build confidence and improve their literacy skills with the help of trained therapy dogs and their handlers. Evaluated therapy dog teams interested in participating in this program are required to take the R.E.A.D.ing Paws workshop and undergo (human) background checks before being put into service.

The Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI) states, "Children have reported liking the animal and enjoying reading to them, increasing their motivation to read... Pets are not judgmental, they do not laugh [or] criticize, and allow children to read at their own pace. Dogs can reduce the stress reactions of children performing a stressful task."

In the Twin Cities area, Dog-Harmony currently manages 3 R.E.A.D.ing Paws therapy dog teams that visit Bluewater Bay Elementary School, Addie R. Lewis School, James E. Plew Elementary School, and Niceville Public Library.

Therapy Dogs in Health Settings

In addition to social and emotional learning and literacy benefits for children in schools, interactions with therapy dogs can actively reduce stress and anxiety in medical and at-risk youth advocacy settings. Therapy dogs can improve human mental and physiological health through acceptance, physical comfort, mental stimulation, socialization, and entertainment through animal-assisted interactions.

According to HABRI, animal-assisted interactions have been shown to positively "influence levels of blood pressure, heart rate, [and] hormones correlated with well-being, including cortisol, oxytocin, β -endorphin, prolactin, phenylacetic acid and dopamine."

Ways to Get Involved

Dog-Harmony founder, Nancy Bown, a Certified Professional Dog Trainer-Knowledge Assessed (CPDT-KA), knows

that the continued growth of the organization's therapy dog program relies on volunteers and the generosity of corporate sponsors and individual donors.

"We are always looking for new volunteers to make this program successful," says Bown. "We need both new therapy dog teams and team support volunteers without dogs."

Compassionate support volunteers help coordinate therapy dog visits in hospitals and support Dog-Harmony teams in the community. This support volunteer role provides an opportunity to shadow current therapy dog teams and offers insights into a potential future team role paired with an evaluated therapy dog.

To learn more about Dog-Harmony, request a therapy dog visit, or become a volunteer, please visit www.dog-harmony.org.



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Comedy Legend Yakov Smirnoff Brings Heart, Humor and Hope to Town

TV and film star and comedy legend Yakov Smirnoff is coming to town to perform his most up-close and personal shows ever. From his first appearance on The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson to his most recent return with Jimmy Fallon, Yakov's career has truly stood the test of time.

A beloved regular on the hit TV comedy Night Court, Smirnoff has also appeared in films alongside Tom Hanks, Meryl Streep, Robin Williams, Jack Nicholson and Richard Pryor. He is set to join Mark Wahlberg in a brand-new feature film scheduled for worldwide release in late 2026.

Yakov's incredible journey began in 1977 when he left his homeland in the former Soviet Union to pursue the American dream. His charming, insightful perspective as a newcomer

to America quickly resonated with audiences, propelling him to the top of the comedy world and leading to success on both the big screen and television. His PBS television special Happily Ever After was named "Best Special" in both 2016 and 2017, and he has had the rare honor of performing for four U.S. presidents.

More than just jokes, Yakov Smirnoff's comedy is a journey of heart, humor and hope. His storytelling blends innocence with wisdom, absurdity with insight, and laughter with humanity, appealing to families, couples and anyone seeking clean, timeless comedy with genuine meaning.

Yakov will perform on Feb. 6, 7 and 8, with 4 and 7 p.m. showtimes at The Palms of Destin Resort. The venue features an intimate showroom

with excellent table seating, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, and plentiful free parking. The Palms is also home to a year-round house show produced by Hollywood-based entertainment producer Bart Rockett, featuring never-before-seen magic, illusions and hilarious comedy ventriloquism. While written for adults, the show is family-friendly and regularly enjoyed by children as well.

Tickets for Yakov Smirnoff's performances, as well as other shows at The Palms, are available at MagicDestin.com. Scroll down on the home page to find Yakov's link or explore additional performances. Reservations may also be made by emailing the box office at MagicTicketAgent@gmail.com.

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 Community


Training for the Long Run: A Smarter Way to Think About Your Health

BY DR. KAREN DEVORE,
TORTOISE CLINIC

If you've ever laced up your shoes for a long walk, a run, or even just committed to showing up for yourself day after day, you already understand something

fundamental about health: real progress takes time.

In my work, I see it constantly—people who are frustrated, exhausted, and overwhelmed because they've tried everything. The detox teas. The extreme



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cleanses. The 30-day challenges promising a brand-new body and life by next month. And when those promises inevitably fall short, they blame themselves.

Here's the truth I want you to hear clearly: your body is not the problem. The problem is the belief that wellness should be fast, dramatic, and immediate.

Health doesn't work that way. It never has.

The Myth of the Quick Fix

We live in a culture that celebrates instant results. Faster internet. Overnight shipping. Before-and-after photos that suggest transformation can, and should, happen in weeks. It's no wonder people feel discouraged when their own bodies don't keep up with those expectations.

But your body is not a machine you can reboot. It is a living, adaptive system shaped by years of stress, habits, hormones, sleep patterns, relationships, injuries, and emotions. Expecting it to "snap back" after a few weeks of effort is not just unrealistic, it's unfair.

Fads and trends often work briefly because they shock the system. They rely on restrictions, extremes, or novelty. And while they may produce short-term changes, they rarely create lasting health. Once the trend ends, as it always does, the symptoms return, sometimes louder than before.

Why Slow and Steady Actually Works

When I say wellness is a mar-

athon, I don't mean it has to be miserable or exhausting. Quite the opposite. Sustainable health is built through consistent, manageable choices that your body can integrate over time.

Think about how trust is built in a relationship. It's not created by grand gestures alone. It's built through reliability. Showing up. Listening. Responding with care. Your body works the same way.

When you nourish yourself regularly, move in ways that feel supportive, address stress gently, and prioritize sleep, your nervous system begins to relax. Hormones rebalance. Digestion improves. Pain softens. Energy returns, not all at once, but gradually, reliably.

This is not flashy progress. It's quiet. And it's powerful.

Real Life Doesn't Happen in Perfect Conditions

One of the biggest reasons people abandon their wellness efforts is because they believe they've "fallen off the wagon." Life happens—a busy week, a sick child, a stressful deadline, a holiday meal—and suddenly it feels like everything is ruined.

But a marathon isn't lost because you slow down for water. Or because you stumble. Or because one mile feels harder than the last. You keep going.

Health is not about perfection. It's about resilience and return—coming back to yourself again and again without punishment or shame.

Continued on page 24

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 Community

BOYS & GIRLS CLUB

continued from page 1

The two-day initiative was led in partnership with Derrick Brooks Charities, AT&T, and Compudopt, we're closing a gap we all saw so clearly during COVID and opening doors for families across the Emerald Coast."

Eligible households also qualified for up to one year of AT&T Fiber internet at no cost through a philanthropic program administered by Compudopt, helping ensure students not only receive devices but can fully use them for schoolwork, research and safe online learning.

"Tonight, you could see what opportunity looks like on a child's face," said Shervin Rassa, CEO of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast. "For many of our club kids, this is the first laptop that's truly theirs — not one borrowed from a school, library or relative. From the earliest grades through high school, a device at home is now essen-



Boys & Girls Club facilities serving Okaloosa County families.

That mission was highlighted in 2024 during the grand reopening of the Jacobe Turner Teen Center in Fort Walton Beach, a space many families rely on for after-school programming, mentorship and enrich-

ment opportunities for teens.

The center honors the legacy of Jacobe Turner, a longtime club member and the organization's 2019 Youth of the Year who tragically lost his life in 2020. His name now represents a renewed commitment to serving teens at a pivotal stage of life.

Inside the upgraded facility, youth participate in programs such as Passport to Manhood, Smart Girls, robotics, and career readiness — gaining skills that range from teamwork and leadership to budgeting, interviewing and public speaking. Conversations with students reveal confidence, maturity and optimism about their futures.

"I am a firm believer that our magic ingredient is the informal mentorship young people get from dynamic and caring adults," Rassa said. "That's what makes our clubs more than just a place to go after school — it's where young people discover who they can become."

The renovation and modernization of the teen center were made possible through generous support from Florida Power & Light and the All Sports Association, Inc., allowing the organization to better serve teens from Niceville, Valparaiso and surrounding communities.

A Fundraiser with Flavor and Purpose

Sustaining and expanding

these programs requires ongoing community support, and one of the most anticipated annual, fundraising events of the year is happening soon.

The 7th Annual Shrimp & Grits Festival will take place Saturday, Feb. 28, 2026, from 4 to 7:30 p.m. at the Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Village. The event brings together local restaurants, live entertainment and community supporters for an evening benefiting Boys & Girls Club programs throughout the region — including those serving Okaloosa County families.

Attendees will enjoy unlimited shrimp and grits tastings as area chefs compete for the title of Best Shrimp & Grits on the Emerald Coast, along with craft beverages and live music. This year's festival will feature a performance by rising country artist Erin Kinsey, adding a new level of excitement to the event.

"Every year, the Shrimp & Grits Festival grows in impact," Rassa said. "This year's move to the Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Village and the addition of Erin Kinsey mark an exciting new chapter. Every ticket purchased directly supports the futures of the thousands of club kids we serve across the region."

General admission tickets are \$100, with VIP tickets available for \$175, including early entry, exclusive culinary experiences, access to a private lounge and premium concert seating. Proceeds support Boys & Girls Club programs in Pensacola, Crestview, South Walton, DeFuniak Springs, Destin and Fort Walton Beach.



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When Temperatures Drop, Compassion Rises: How Cold Night Saves Lives



By SHERRY JONES OLNEY

Winter temperatures have a way of slipping quietly into dangerous territory. While most of the community sleeps—homes warm, blankets pulled close—a life-saving effort is already taking shape.

Cold does not arrive suddenly. It settles in slowly, numbing fingers, stealing warmth one hour at a time. Turning long nights into something dangerous. For individuals living outside, a single winter evening can mean far more than discomfort. It can mean survival.

That reality is why Cold Night exists.

A Decision That Saves Lives

Before sunrise, Donna Morgan, Director of Homeless Services and Housing at One Hopeful Place, stands inside the Cold Night shelter, surveying rows of neatly prepared bunks. The beds are empty for now—blankets folded, the room quiet—but she knows what they represent. By nightfall, each one could hold someone who would otherwise be facing freezing temperatures with nowhere to go.

Morgan is the person who activates Cold Night on behalf of One Hopeful Place. She monitors weather conditions closely and makes the call when temperatures fall into life-threatening territory. “These are life-safety decisions,” Morgan said. “Cold Night requires experience, constant vigilance, and coordination across multiple partners. When temperatures drop, our focus is immediate and unwavering—making sure every person who needs shelter has a safe, warm place to go.”

Cold Night is a seasonal emergency shelter operation of One Hopeful Place, activated when overnight temperatures

are projected to fall below 40 degrees. When triggered, it opens 48 additional emergency shelter beds, supplementing the 50 beds for men and 17 beds for women already on campus.

Preparing the Shelter

Behind the scenes, the work of Cold Night begins hours earlier. Weather forecasts are monitored as early as 3:00 a.m., and by 9:00 a.m., if Cold Night is confirmed, a coordinated response is set in motion.

Notifications are sent through the Cold Night system and social media. Transportation routes and pickup locations are confirmed. Community partners—including Bridgeway Center—work together to ensure continuity of care and safe transport for those seeking shelter.

By early afternoon, the One Hopeful Place campus begins to change.

Heat is turned on inside the Cold Night building. Tables are repositioned. Supplies are staged. Every movement is deliberate—because when temperatures drop, details matter.

Arrival and Welcome

As participants begin arriving, they are signed in, assigned a bunk, and offered the opportunity to shower. During this time, One Hopeful Place residents help serve hot coffee—one of the most requested comforts on cold nights. Hands that were numb from the cold slowly begin to warm around paper cups.

Transportation plays a vital role. Buses run from Shell Avenue, with additional assistance from community partners to ensure no one is left behind as daylight fades.

Dignity at the Table

As evening settles in, a line forms for dinner. Men stand quietly, some holding backpacks that contain everything they own. Others wait with empty hands, shoulders hunched—not from shame, but from exhaustion and the cold that has followed them all day.

Before the meal is served, grace is said. For a brief moment, the room grows still. Gratitude is spoken. Dignity is

honored. Then dinner is served.

After Dinner: Rest and Refuge

Liz Qualiana, Shelter Coordinator at One Hopeful Place, witnesses these moments night after night. In an interview for this article, she described the immediate shift she sees once guests are inside. “You can see the relief almost immediately,” Qualiana said. “Cold Night isn’t just about a bed or a meal. It’s about dignity. It’s about making sure people feel safe, seen, and respected.”

After dinner, guests move into the Cold Night shelter and settle into their bunks. Staff remain on site throughout the night, ensuring safety, supervision, and support. Clean socks, warm bedding, and a secure environment

offer something many participants haven’t experienced in a long time:

Peace. One participant described it simply: “One Hopeful Place gave me a night of peace. That may not sound like much, but when you’ve been living outside, it means everything.”

The Morning After

Morning arrives gently. Breakfast bags—prepared the night before—are placed at the end of each bed. Juice, fruit, a muffin, and a snack provide nourishment before the day begins again.

Transportation returns participants to Shell Avenue, where staff and volunteers take time to



listen, offer encouragement, and connect individuals with additional resources.

Continued on page 20

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 Community

Events Around the Bay

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.

Nick's Seafood Annual Bonfire Feb. 7

They'll be firing up the biggest bonfire in the county and



throwing the kind of party only Nick's can get away with starting at 5 p.m. DJ Viper opens and closes, and the Velcro Pygmies are rolling in to crank the night into full rock-and-roll mode. There will be food service inside of the restaurant, an ATM, and a cash bar located on premises. Additional parking will be located west of the restaurant. Expect big fire, loud music, cold drinks, and a lot of good-natured coastal debauchery on the

bay. Bring your crew. Bring your stories. Leave the quiet nights at home.

Camellia Festival at Eden Gardens State Park Feb. 7

Choctawhatchee Audubon will host educational stations during the annual Camellia Festival on Saturday, Feb. 7, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Eden Gardens State Park in Santa Rosa Beach. Festivalgoers can explore the historic gardens while learning about native birds, habitats and conservation efforts. For more information about Choctawhatchee Audubon programs and events, visit choctawhatcheeaudubon.org.

Baytowne Annual Mardi Gras Parade Feb. 15

Mardi Gras is bigger and better than ever at The Village of Baytowne Wharf! The Village streets will be filled with unique and colorful floats, golf carts, vehicles and costumed dogs along with their humans. Mardi Gras music will fill the air as parade participants and four-pawed friends shower parade-goers with a barrage of beads, moon pies and other trinkets. Visit baytownewharf.com.

Mardi Gras 5K Fun Run & Walk Feb. 14 | 9 a.m.

Christ Our Redeemer Church and Perfectly Yours Travel Co. invite the community to the 3rd Annual Mardi Gras 5K Fun Run & Walk, featuring a flat, fast course, Children's Fun Run and a festive post-race celebration. New this year, a Valentine-themed Festival & Partner Challenge encourages participants to team up with a spouse, friend or neighbor for a fun, faith-filled morning. Enjoy live music, food trucks, games, raffles and Mardi Gras-inspired costumes. Strollers are welcome. The 5K begins at 9 a.m., the festival follows around 9:15 a.m., and the Children's Fun Run starts at 10 a.m. Proceeds benefit the Christ Our Redeemer Building Community Fund.

Info & registration: corcatholic.org/5k

Complimentary Tropical Re-Union Wedding Vow Renewals Feb. 14 | 1-3 p.m.

Celebrate Valentine's Day with a romantic vow renewal at LuLu's Destin during its annual Tropical Re-Union Wedding Vow Renewal. The complimentary ceremony, officiated

Continued on page 10

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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.

Happenings Around the Bay

 2026
 EVENTS

FEBRUARY

01

Mardi Gras Food & Wine Festival
 1-4 pm | Raider Center, Bldg. 400 | NWFSC

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

02

Justice on the Block: Free Legal Help
 12:30 pm | Niceville Library | Niceville

Art at the Library
 4 pm | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

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

03

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

04

Chess Night
 6 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville

Chronic Pain & How to Fight It (Kassia Garfield)
 6 pm | Salt & Story Bookstore | Niceville | FREE

05

Justice on the Block
 10 am | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

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

Anime Club
 3 pm | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

06

Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee
 7 am | Christian Life Center at FBC | FWB

Tech Time
 10 am | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

Community Concert by EC Music Alliance
 6 pm | Crosspoint Church | Niceville

Live Music: Duchess
 6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

The NY Rockabilly Rockets
 7:30 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville

07

Cupid's Market
 9 am | Katie's House of Flowers | Niceville

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

Cookbook Club #2 Winter Meeting
 11 am | Niceville Library | Niceville

Annual Bonfire
 5 pm | Nick's Seafood | Freeport

Sinfonia Gulf Coast's Classical Connections
 7:30 pm | Destin High School | Destin

10
Craft & Chat
 11 am | Niceville Library | Niceville

11

Niceville Valparaiso Chamber 2nd Wednesday Breakfast
 7:15 am | Niceville Community Center | Niceville

12

Art at the Library
 10 am | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

The Choir of Man
 7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville

13

Coloring & Coffee
 11 am | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

Guess How Much I Love You Movie Showing
 4 pm | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

Valentine's Day Sunset Dinner Cruise
 5 pm | Baytowne Marina | Miramar Beach

14

Love Local - Sip & Shop
 10 am | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

3rd Annual Mardi Gras 5K Run/Walk & Festival
 8 am | Christ Our Redeemer Catholic Church | Niceville

Tropical Reunion Wedding Vow Renewals
 1-3 pm | Lulu's | Destin at foot of Mid Bay Bridge

Valentine's Day Sunset Dinner Cruise (Adults Only)
 5 pm | Baytowne Marina | Miramar Beach

15

Sinfonia Gulf Coast's Toast 'n Jam: Sincerely, Sondheim with Nicholas Rodriguez
 10:30 am | Hotel Effie Sandestin | Miramar Beach

Mardi Gras Parade

2 pm | Village of Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach

Valentine's Day Sunset Dinner Cruise
 5 pm | Baytowne Marina | Miramar Beach

16

Creating Decadent Desserts with Chef Warren Caterson
 4:30 pm | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

17

Click Clack Moo
 9:45 & 11:30 am | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | NWFSC

Baytowne Beads & Bingo Bash
 5 pm | Village of Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach

18

The Traveling Painter
 5:30 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant & | Niceville

19

Crafty Corner
 11 am | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

Greater FWB Chamber Business After Hours
 5:30 pm | The Venue | FWB

20

NextGen United Adult Field Day
 12:15 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

All-Sports Association Annual Awards Banquet
 5:30 pm | Destin-FWB Convention Center

20-21

37th Annual Sandestin Gumbo Festival
 12 pm | Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach

21

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

Joyfully Free The Stars of Tomorrow
 7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville

24

Writers Group
 5:30 pm | Niceville Library | Niceville

25

One Stroke Painting (Bgnr - Kids) with Sheila Mahony
 5:30 pm | Niceville Library | Niceville

26

Art at the Library
 10 am | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

28

7th Annual Shrimp & Grits Festival
 4 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin

4th Annual My Chemical Cocktail
 6 pm | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

The Ultimate Elvis Concert
 7:30 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | 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 (Adv) with Sheila Mahony
 10:30 am | Fri | Artful Things | Niceville

One Stroke Painting (Bgnr) 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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 Community
EVENTS*continued from page 8*

by a wedding professional, begins at 2 p.m. on LuLu's sandy beach.

Couples will enjoy champagne toasts, wedding cake, flowers for the "brides," reunion certificates, and prize awards for the longest- and shortest-married couples and most festive attire. Pre-registration is encouraged online through Feb. 9, with day-of registration available beginning at 11 a.m.

Info & pre-register: lulusfunfoodmusic.com

Location: Destin, at the foot of the Mid-Bay Bridge. Phone: (850) 710-5858.

IDIDAHIKE 2026 Feb. 14

Spend Valentine's Day outdoors during IDIDAHIKE, hosted by the Choctawhatchee Chapter of the Florida Trail Association. The annual event features guided hikes of varying lengths through the scenic Nokuse Land Conservancy, part of the Florida Wildlife Corri-

dor and home to sections of the Florida National Scenic Trail.

Designed for families, casual walkers and experienced hikers alike, IDIDAHIKE combines outdoor adventure, conservation education and community connection in one of Northwest Florida's most treasured natural settings. Info & registration: ididahike.org

An Outsider's Guide to the Florida Panhandle Feb. 24

UF/IFAS Extension invites

residents to a free, four-part educational series, An Outsider's Guide to the Florida Panhandle, designed to help participants learn about local climate, plants, lawns and landscapes. The series will be held Feb. 24 and March 3, 10 and 17 at Padgett Park, 810 J.D. Miller Road in Santa Rosa Beach. Each session is offered twice in one day, from 10 a.m. to noon or 2 to 4 p.m.

Topics include understanding the Panhandle's climate and native plants, lawn care basics, landscape installation and maintenance, and pest and disease control. There is no cost to attend. For more information or to register, call 850-892-8172.

Decade of Difference at CALM March 5

Join Crisis Aid for Littles and Moms (CALM) as the nonprofit celebrates 10 years of serving local littles and moms through vital community support programs. The special evening recognizes a decade of impact while raising funds to continue CALM's mission of meeting families in crisis with compassion and care.

Guests are invited to attend or sponsor the event, with all

proceeds directly benefiting CALM's ongoing outreach and services.

Info & registration: crisisaidforlittlesandmoms.org

ECCAC Gala & Golf Weekend March 7-8

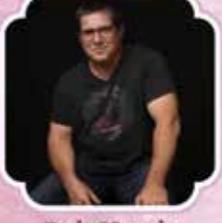
The Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center will host its 28th annual signature Gala & Golf Weekend on March 7-8, bringing the community together to support children in need. The Gala takes place Saturday, March 7, at 5:30 p.m. at the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa and includes dinner, music, a wine pull and live auction led by DawnMarie Kotsonis, "The Gavel Girl," with former ECCAC client Isabella Rose as the featured speaker. The weekend continues Sunday, March 8, with a noon shotgun-start Golf Tournament at Kelly Plantation Golf Club. Proceeds benefit ECCAC's mission to provide free services to child victims of abuse. Gala and golf reservations are available at eccac.org. For details, contact Kate McDougall at 530-341-0802 or kate@eccac.org.



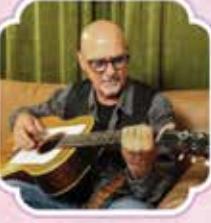
Jerrod Niemann



Jason Michael Carroll



Rob Hatch



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Jessie G



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Bay Buzz

Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida: Year-End Highlights & Volunteer Call

The Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida closed out the year with several festive and meaningful milestones, celebrating volunteers, community partners and plans for an ambitious year ahead.

Looking ahead, the museum will host a Volunteer Recruitment Information Meeting and Social on Saturday, Feb. 7, from 10 to 11:30 a.m. in the Veterans Room at the museum, located at 115 Westview Ave. in Valparaiso, across from Perrine Park. The public is invited to learn about volunteer opportunities ranging from education support and hospitality to collections care, displays, office assistance, genealogy, writing and special events.

Speakers will include Arthur Edgar; volunteers Deb Edgar, Ken Walsh, Jené McCracken and Connie Wolfe; and newsletter editor Carole Barlow. The



During the holiday season, the museum hosted a successful Christmas Bake Sale as part of Yule of Yesteryear. Volunteer "elves" Paula Pride and Debbie Moon led the effort, with heartfelt thanks extended to community members who donated baked goods, as well as The Donut Shop, Publix and Winn-Dixie for their support.



The museum also honored Connie Wolfe as its 2025 Volunteer of the Year. A retired elementary school teacher, Wolfe serves extensively in hospitality and education and is the museum's primary educator for school visits. She is especially known for teaching children about Florida archaeology and hands-on activities such as pinch-pot making.

The recognition was a well-deserved tribute to a gracious and dedicated volunteer.



are also available. Seating is limited.

Robins & Morton Celebrates Ribbon Cutting of Okaloosa Gas District Headquarters

Robins & Morton celebrated the ribbon cutting of the new

Okaloosa Gas District headquarters on Jan. 14 in Valparaiso. The new campus includes a four-story, 152,000-square-foot office building, an 18,400-square-foot operations center, a 7,200-square-foot vehicle maintenance building, and a 23,540-square-foot warehouse,

allowing the district to consolidate team members into a centralized, community-focused location.

Designed to serve both employees and residents, the facilities feature indoor and outdoor

Continued on next page



 **Community**
BAY BUZZ

continued from page 11

spaces for community events, along with kitchen and catering areas. Robins & Morton served as general contractor, with DAG Architects as architect.

**Quilts of Valor Honors
Mid-Bay Rotarian Jess
Parnell**

Mid-Bay Rotarian Jess Parnell was presented with a Quilt of Valor during a Jan. 10 ceremony at the Air Force Armament Museum, hosted by the Flying Needles Quilt Guild of Niceville/Valparaiso. Quilts of Valor are handmade quilts awarded to service members and veterans touched by war as a tangible expression of gratitude for their service and sacrifice.

Parnell served more than 28 years in the U.S. military, including 22 years in the U.S. Navy as a Naval Flight Officer with more than 3,000 flight hours in the F-14, and six years in the U.S. Coast Guard as a Radioman 2nd Class. He was joined by family, friends and fellow Mid-Bay Rotarians for the presentation. Learn more at the Quilts of Valor Foundation or the Flying Needles Quilt Guild.

P.E.O. Chapter DH Gives Back at the Holidays

Members of P.E.O. Chapter DH, Fort Walton Beach, collect-



ed \$1,000 in donations at their December meeting in Bluewater Bay to help provide Christmas gifts for children served by Children in Crisis. Chapter DH is one of 193 P.E.O. chapters across Florida and includes members from Niceville, Bluewater Bay, Destin, Crestview and Baker. P.E.O. is a philanthropic organization dedicated to motivating, educating and celebrating women through scholarships, grants, awards and educational loans.

In 2025, the chapter sponsored Meridian Sobel of Niceville High School, who was awarded the prestigious P.E.O. STAR Scholarship at the national level. Chapter DH also awards

the annual Chapter DH, FL Memorial Scholarship, which was presented in May to Kadyn Elder of Baker School.

Applications for the 2027 Chapter DH, FL Memorial Scholarship will be available through local high school guidance offices next fall. For more information, visit www.peointernational.org.

Caption: Pictured, left to right: Sarah Traver, Children in Crisis Director of Operations and Programs; Karla Kelly, Jill Hoglund and Joyce Brand, P.E.O. Chapter DH; Pam DeStafney, Children in Crisis Program Manager.


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



BY GREG DURETTE, YOUR FLORIDA HEALTH CONNECTOR

As many times as I've used the term "age-in" when discussing Medicare, it never fails to spark a visceral reaction — usually something like, "What do you mean by this age-in thing?" or "I don't feel aged in!"

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

With Annual Enrollment Period now officially ended (even though there is a little-known Special Enrollment Period for certain local counties which extends the period until 4/30/2026!), we are now in the

middle of the Open Enrollment Period which runs from January 1 – March 31 of every year pre-dominantly for Advantage Plan members. (You can re-read my article from last month for more information about the ins and outs of that.) But, that does not change the fact many people have birthdays all year long and are actually aging-in during this time as well. Confusing—but, it can be made sense of with a little guidance.

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

There is a period of time when a person ages-in and becomes eligible for Medicare. Typically, this period of time is three months before the month in which they turn 65 and three months after the month in which they turn 65. Do the math and you will see this is a seven-month period of time around your birthday. There are a few other exceptions to this eligibility period, but, those will

have to be saved for another article or very long-winded phone call for the braver among us!

The first order of business is to obtain your Part A and B (if desired or needed) through Social Security. Without adding a litany of boring details as to qualifications for each, suffice it to say Part A is typically \$0 premium for most folks and Part B for 2026 will typically cost \$202.90 per month. The Part B premium is means tested and can get a little complicated (and expensive)—certainly more complicated than can be described in this article. Again, suffice it to say, some could pay much more or much less, depending on your Modified Adjusted Gross Income from two years prior, unless you apply for a break based on current income. There is a form for that.

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



apply to you.

If you choose to obtain a Supplement, commonly called a "Medi-Gap" policy, you will need to also obtain a separate Part D prescription plan as Supplement plans DO NOT INCLUDE such. If you choose to obtain an Advantage plan, the Part D prescription coverage is typically INCLUDED.

As you can see this can, and usually is, a very confusing time for most folks used to having traditional insurance for their whole lives. Suddenly, you are

thrust into this new system when everybody and their cousin is calling and/or mailing you every single day with their "better option."

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

If there is only one take away from this article, it would be to work with someone that can help you navigate the local landscape and help you completely understand this otherwise very confusing time in life.

Happy New Year!

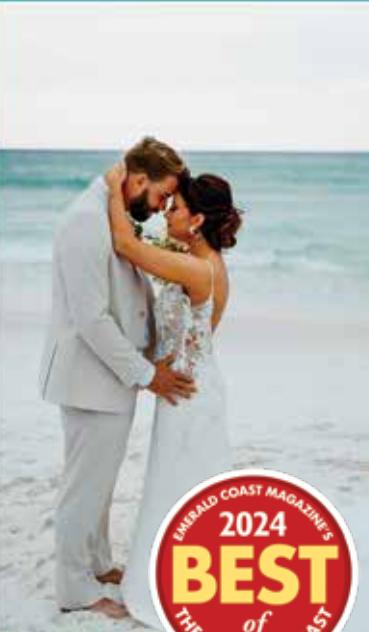
Greg Durette is a qualified, licensed agent with Florida Health Connector based in Niceville providing Medicare insurance throughout the state. He has been in the insurance industry for nearly 42 years and can be reached at his office at 850-842-2400 or his mobile at 978-509-2941.

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 Environment

Master Gardner Al Cook Helps Bluebirds Thrive

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

The “Bluebird of Happiness” symbolizes joy, hope and good fortune, an idea shared in folktale and song. While not currently endangered, though they were once in decline due to habitat loss and invasive competitors, they still face threats;

so, continued habitat support is critical.

The most effective solution involves installing specially designed nest boxes. And that's exactly what one U.S. Air Force retiree, Al Cook, did in 2022. Combining his hobby of carpentry and gardening, he began

building birdhouses to address the housing shortage these birds faced. Al started with six birdhouses in his own backyard and then built and gave away 10 to surrounding neighbors. After one year, in his yard, he viewed 12 baby bluebirds. Keeping in contact with those who have



used his birdhouses over the past several years, Al documents over 100 new fledglings which, as adults, are flying around in Okaloosa and Walton Counties.

I met with Al and Valparaiso Garden Club president, Kat Spieker, to see these birdhouses. Lovingly crafted, each has a side door, so one can look in at the eggs and birds. When Al wants to visit and check on a bird, he gently knocks on the side of the birdhouse first. It's always polite to knock before entering.

Kat has two of his birdhouses in her yard and enjoys seeing bluebirds whose fledglings often hide in nearby azalea bushes to avoid predators. Both she and Al are master gardeners in their respective counties and Al is also a member of the Valparaiso Garden Club. Kat lives in Valparaiso and Al resides in Freeport.

Al donates his birdhouses. His dedication to bluebird conservation by gifting and educating others about bluebirds, is his way of staying active and contributing to the environment and the community. Once a birdhouse is installed, Al continues to check on these special homes. He put birdhouses in cemeteries, four local UF extension display gardens, farms and places where there is an abundance of insects. For these places, Al returned twice a month to be sure no “varmints” decided to invade the space. It's easy to check inside the birdhouse with that special side door and latch.

Al told me that there are expensive houses that have Wi-Fi with cameras inside the bird-



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house, so you can see eggs and watch fledglings being fed. One determined mother shoved a large caterpillar all the way down her young one's neck. Some of these units have solar panels and thermometers to provide the perfect temperature. If it's too hot, small holes can be drilled in the side of the house. There are holes in the bottom of birdhouses to allow for adequate ventilation.

Kat added that the bluebirds in her backyard love it when the grass is mowed, so they can more easily “shop around” for food. Bluebirds have excellent eyesight and can see potential meals 50 yards away.

The photo take for the interview was in the pollinator garden of the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida. This garden is the result of dedicated work by the Valparaiso Garden Club that meets the second Wednesday, May through September. All garden lovers are invited to attend meetings.

Listening to these two master gardeners swap stories of the joy that these birds brought to their lives made me realize that our local area is in debt for the gift they continue to give—not only the community, but all the new bluebirds that now continue to spread happiness and joy.

A New Year with 5 Aspects of Math Wellness

A new year has begun and with it, an opportunity to start fresh. Mathnasium in Niceville has a few suggestions focused on building and strengthening the emotional, social, physical, mental and financial aspects of a math learner that can help you and your child navigate the next 365 days for overall “math wellness” and success.

1. Emotional

How is your child feeling about their grade-level math so far?

Math presents parents with the opportunity to build emotional-learning skills for their children, including identifying and managing their emotions, recognizing sources of stress, coping with challenges, maintaining positive motivation and perseverance, and developing self-awareness. Growing children require emotional guidance, and you can help your child manage their emotions when math seems too difficult, too boring or even too easy. If anxiety has been a normal part of your child’s math discussions, consider how you can change that this year. Inspiring or even maintaining a love of math will mean incorporating a healthy mix of challenges.

Consider some of these strategies:

1. If math has often been hard and challenging, help your child identify one good thing about their math experience so far. With every challenge, there is growth.

2. Incorporate a “feelings chart” or “feelings thermometer” into your child’s math work.

3. Allow your child to sit with their emotions and to reach out for support.

4. Relieve stress through physical activities, including physical math walks (more information below).

5. Reframe negative thoughts about math by making a pros and cons list of the facts.

6. Inspire self-compassion by helping your child acknowledge when they have worked hard, tried their best, and been brave.

7. Register your child for a math competition.

Remember that strong emotional-learning skills will lead to successful academic performance in all subject areas and will build a healthy member of society.

2. Social

Incorporate more “math talk” into your child’s life. Math understanding deepens when we share our learnings and “families are perfectly situated to talk about quantity, counting and shapes anywhere children and families are — at home, in the park, or in the grocery store.” Encourage your child to speak to someone else about the math they have learned, be it through a math lesson or informal sharing around the dinner table. Your child can take this a step further and challenge themselves to help someone who has a math question.

If your child is already attending sessions at Mathnasium, have them invite a friend to the next Math Night or game night. Math games are collaborative opportunities to practice fundamental number concepts, strategy and logic.

3. Physical

Exploring math through physical exercise can provide another opportunity to share learnings. Consider taking your child on weekly math walks to discover the mathematics that exist in everything around us: in the park, the neighborhood, the mall, the library and more! Customize your math walks to be spontaneous trips, or planned

events that include trail maps and guide points where mathematical problems are presented such as:

1. Investigating floor patterns.
2. Exploring the shapes of street signs.
3. Studying bus schedules.
4. Estimating the height of a tree.
5. Counting the number of windows on a building.



4. Mental

The foundation of math is number sense. This ability cannot be replaced by calculators or computers — it requires exercising “math muscles.” Encourage your child to solve math problems in their head, without writing them down. Have them start with simple computations and work their way up to complex problems. Your child’s confidence will grow when they realize they can not only solve math problems all in their head, but also do so a lot more efficiently and quickly than relying on traditional algorithms. Here’s a few suggestions:

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ensure a strong foundation in financial math. We recommend that young children work with real money in today’s age filled with credit cards and digital transactions. Feeling money and observing the physical movement between dealings can help young children recognize the impact of purchases and sales on their savings.

For example, share receipts. Take a moment during shopping trips to speak to the amount paid for the items bought is an effective way to introduce money and instill a useful habit.

Conclusion

Whether you start implementing all of these suggestions — or perhaps just decide to tackle one resolution at a time together, remember it is perseverance that we want to master.

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 Pkwy. | 850-987-MATH (6284)

5. Financial

Financial literacy is an essential skill for children and adults. Consider getting your child started with a piggy bank. This task is filled with skills such as counting money, financial planning and goal setting. For older children, consider building a budget.

It is not uncommon to feel reluctance when discussing financial topics with your child.

Mathnasium’s curriculum introduces currency early on to



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Best Places to Watch Your Favorite Teams



BY SCOTT MILLER

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

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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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Continued on page 18

FOOTBALL IS BACK!

AJ's Seafood & Oyster Bar
AJ's Oyster Shanty
AJ's On the Bayou
AJ's Grayton Beach



**WATCH
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DRINK**

NHS Senior Harper Campbell Awarded Prestigious Taylor Haugen Trophy



(pictured (center): Harper Campbell, joined by Principal Charlie Marello, Assistant Superintendent John Spolski, Brian and Kathy Haugen, and members of the Niceville High School Cheerleaders and Dance Team.

Niceville High School (NHS) Senior, Harper Campbell, was named the 2026 recipient of the Taylor Haugen Trophy, one of the most prestigious honors awarded to a student-athlete in the region.

The Taylor Haugen Trophy is presented annually in memory of Taylor Reid Haugen, a former NHS standout, and recognizes a senior athlete who exemplifies excellence across five pillars: academics, athletics, leadership, community service, and faith. The recipient is awarded a bronze eagle trophy, a \$1,000 scholarship, and a \$1,000 donation to their school's athletic department.

"Harper embodies the values and spirit of this distinguished award," stated Superintendent Marcus Chambers. A standout football player at Niceville High School, Harper excelled as both a linebacker and safety, demonstrating leadership and commitment on and off the field. He will

continue his athletic and academic journey at Samford University.

"Harper is a person of extremely high character and a natural leader of others," stated Charlie Marello, Principal of Niceville High School. "I've been the principal at Niceville High for 10 years, and if I had a personal Hall of Fame of outstanding Eagles during my tenure, Harper Campbell would absolutely be in it." Harper will be formally recognized as the Taylor Haugen Trophy recipient at the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) Breakfast on February 6 at Northwest Florida State College. The Okaloosa County School District, Niceville High School and the Eagle community congratulate Harper Campbell on this well-deserved honor. His dedication to excellence, character and service reflects the very best of Okaloosa County Schools.

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ing menu if you are looking to host an event or party. Come for the coffee, stay for the goodness!

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BEST PLACES

continued from page 16

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Feb. 13: Mardi Gras Party, Chris Saylor 6-10 p.m.

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Oyster Bar Hours: Mon.-Tues. Closed, Wed.-Thurs. 3-10pm, Fri.-Sat. 11am-midnight, Sun. 11am-9pm

Restaurant Hours: Mon.-Tues. Closed, Weds.-Sat. 11am-9pm, Sun. 9am-4pm - Brunch 9am-1pm

Sundays: Brunch 9am-1pm

Wednesdays: Kids Eat Free 5-9pm

Thursdays: Taco/Margarita Night 3-9pm, Open Mic/Karaoke 6-10pm

Saturdays: Steak Night 5-9pm

Feb. 4: Chess Night 6pm, Prime Rib Night 5-9pm, Cocktail Tasting 5-7pm

Feb. 7: Kent Stephens 6-10pm

Feb. 13: Mardi Gras Party, Chris Saylor 6-10pm

Feb. 14: Valentine's Dinner Special Reservations 850-897-6400, Nathan & Brooke 6-10pm

Feb. 18: Traveling Painter 5:30pm

Feb. 18: Prime Rib Night 5-9pm, Cocktail Tasting 5-7pm

Feb. 21: Jody Lucas 6-9pm

Feb. 22: Velveteen 6-10pm



From Ocean Icon to Gulf Giant

SS United States Moves Closer to Becoming the World's Largest Artificial Reef

A legend of the sea is preparing for its next great voyage—this time beneath the waves of the Gulf.

In January, representatives from Coastal Conservation Association Florida, Visit Destin-Fort Walton Beach and Okaloosa County took part in an exclusive inspection of the iconic SS United States, marking a major milestone in the ship's transformation into what will become the world's largest artificial reef.

The legendary 990-foot ocean liner—once the fastest passenger ship to ever cross the Atlantic—is currently docked in Mobile, Ala., where crews are completing extensive cleaning and preparation work to ensure the vessel is environmentally safe for deployment. When the work is finished, the SS United States will be placed in the Gulf approximately 22 nautical miles southwest of the Destin East Pass and 32 nautical miles southeast of the Pensacola Pass, creating a monumental new underwater habitat off the Emerald Coast.

For conservationists, anglers, divers and history lovers alike, the project represents something truly unprecedented.

CCA Florida has committed \$500,000 toward the effort, helping transform the historic vessel into a thriving marine ecosystem that will benefit fish populations and fisheries access for generations. Once deployed this spring, the SS United States will officially hold the title of the largest artificial reef in the world.

A Regional Vision with Global Impact

Momentum for the project accelerated in November, when the Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners unanimously approved agreements formalizing a regional partnership with Visit Pensacola and CCA Florida. The collaboration brings a combined \$2 million investment into the project, including a \$1.5 million contribution from Visit Pensacola and CCA Florida's historic \$500,000 donation—the largest single contribution in the organization's 40-year history.

"I applaud the energy that went into creating these partnerships," said Okaloosa County Board Chairman Paul Mix-



on. "This collaboration will foster amazing adventures for generations of visitors and create a tourism economy that will benefit the state and the entire Northwest Florida region."

Beyond deployment costs, a portion of the funding will support a multi-year marketing campaign positioning the SS United States as a premier, world-class diving destination—further elevating Northwest Florida's reputation on the global marine tourism map.

"Visit Pensacola is thrilled to partner with Okaloosa County on this historic initiative. With the addition of the SS United States and Pensacola already home to the USS Oriskany, Northwest Florida is becoming one of the world's most extraordinary destinations for divers and marine exploration," said Visit Pensacola President and CEO Darien Schaefer.

Conservation, Tourism and Stewardship

At its core, the SS United States project is about more than scale—it is about stewardship.

"The transformation of the SS United States into the world's largest artificial reef creates a rare opportunity to elevate our entire region on the global stage," said Brian Gorski, executive director of CCA Florida. "Together, we're bringing unmatched environmental value to the Gulf while creating new tourism and economic opportunities that will benefit our destinations for generations."

Gorski noted that the partnership builds on CCA Florida's long-standing collaboration with Okaloosa County on artificial reef projects and redfish stock enhancement, demonstrating how public agencies and non-profit organizations can work together to strengthen marine ecosystems.

"This project is particularly meaningful," he said, "as it represents the largest single dona-

tion in CCA Florida's 40-year history. It is truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to contribute to the creation of the world's largest artificial reef."

What Comes Next

The SS United States remains in the inspection and remedia-

tion phase in Mobile following months of preparation to meet strict environmental standards. Deployment is scheduled for early this year, weather and final approvals permitting.

Once submerged, the massive structure will quickly begin attracting marine life, creating new habitat, expanding fishing opportunities and offering divers a once-in-a-generation experi-

ence—an underwater monument where American maritime history meets Gulf Coast conservation.

For Northwest Florida, the sinking of the SS United States won't mark an ending, but a bold new beginning—one that anchors the region's future in sustainability, adventure and global distinction.



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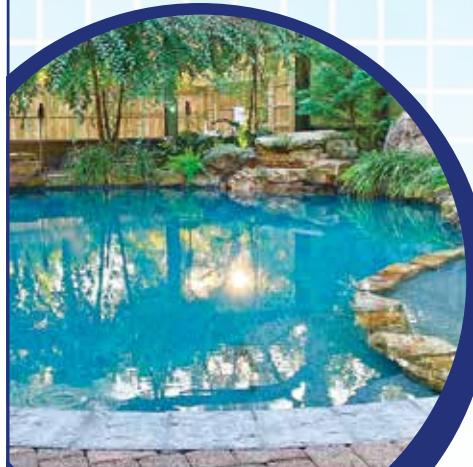
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Golf Series: First Tee Winter Ball Tournament Inspires Young Golfers

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

On a cold, really cold and 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 fundraising 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, 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:

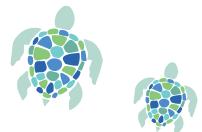
Girls 5-11: Charlie Miller from Santa Rosa Beach

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.



COLD NIGHT

continued from page 7

When the System Is Tested

Last winter, during a severe cold spell many now refer to as "Snowmageddon," Cold Night was activated for seven consecutive nights.

Roads were impassable. Power outages left homes without heat. Some who arrived were not chronically homeless—but

individuals and families who suddenly had nowhere warm to go.

For staff and volunteers, those seven nights required relentless effort. Beds were cleaned and reset day after day. Meals were prepared and served without pause. Exhaustion set in—but the doors never closed.

Each night, the shelter remained open. Each night, beds were filled.

And each night, everyone who came through the doors was fed, warm, and safe.

The Broader Impact

Cold Night is part of a broader continuum of care at One Hopeful Place. Since 2020, the organization has sheltered 607 individuals, helped 204 people transition into permanent housing, and ensured 53 veterans found safety and support.

drops and the need is greatest. Their stories—the ones behind the meals, the coffee, the prayers, and the long nights—will be shared next.

Because when winter tightens its grip, compassion does not retreat. It rises.



Compassion That Rises

Yet Cold Night is not powered by systems alone. It is sustained by people—those who show up when the temperature

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Golf Series: Our "Blue Bayou" at Bluewater Bay Golf Course



BY BARBARA PALMGREN

Linda Ronstadt once echoed these lines in her signature hit, "Blue Bayou."

*I'm going back someday
Come what may to Blue Bayou
Where the folks are fun
And the world is mine on Blue Bayou
Where those fishing boats with their
sails afloat
If I could only see
That familiar sunrise through sleepy
eyes
How happy I'd be.*

Only a few shrimp boats now

are seen on Choctawhatchee Bay as the sun rises to greet those fortunate enough to live in this paradise. That familiar sunrise? It's still very much alive — its colors often best appreciated from the Marsh course on hole No. 4 or the Bay course on hole No. 6, especially by those early-morning golfers lucky enough to be there.

But sleepy eyes? Not if you want to be sure the ball sails straight down the fairway — or if you need clear vision to determine the correct putting angle and speed so that little white ball drops into the hole.

Where the folks are fun? Yes. Like the swallows that return to Capistrano, the snowbirds are back, golf clubs in hand and dreams of low scores dancing in their heads, along with a bit of braggin' among friends about eagles, birdies and pars.

Nestled among homes in the Bluewater Bay community, golfers enjoy a course layout that is challenging, yet fair. Tee times



can be booked through GolfNow or by calling the pro shop. With scenic views that often distract in the best possible way, the course can now be enjoyed by golfers of all skill levels. With overseeded greens and tee boxes and reasonable fees, the beautiful course is ready for winter play — an accomplishment made possible by the dedication of Golf Course Superintendent Alfredo Francisco and his staff.

General Manager Stephan Kleemeyer has worked tirelessly over the past year to ensure growth and continued success for the club. Adding to that suc-

cess is the bonus of a full-service restaurant, the Blue Tee, where golfers and residents alike can enjoy breakfast, lunch or dinner from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. It may be chilly in February, but a warm lunch and accompanying beverage make for the perfect setting to share stories of that approach shot to the green that resulted in a birdie on the hole.

Membership remains the heart and soul of any golf course, and new member rates encourage golfers to join. Golf carts are included in the rate. While public play is important, membership provides the con-

tinued revenue needed to support and sustain the club.

So, yes, the world is ours — and being happy? The only time you can't play golf is when heavy rains, or perish the thought, snow soak or cover the fairways and greens.

Yes, our Blue Bayou warmly welcomes snowbirds and golfers alike to this hidden jewel of the Panhandle that is Bluewater Bay Golf Course.

To book or for more information, call (850) 897-3241, email golf@preservebwb.com or visit bwbresort.com.



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Derrick Brooks to Headline 2026 All Sports Association Banquet

Get ready for an inspiring evening of recognition, community and athletic excellence as the All Sports Association (ASA) hosts its 2026 Annual Awards Banquet on Friday, February 20, 5:30 p.m. at the Destin / Fort Walton Beach Convention Center. The banquet promises to bring together athletes, community leaders, coaches and sponsors in Northwest Florida for an evening to remember.

A Star-Studded Keynote

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

You can expect a formal awards dinner celebrating the top athletes, coaches and civic partners of 2025–2026, with honors presented to individuals who excelled not only on the field, but also in the classroom and the community. Brooks' keynote address will offer powerful



insights on leadership, perseverance and success in sports and in life. In addition, you'll enjoy opportunities to network with local sports programs, sponsors and youth volunteers and also receive updates on upcoming ASA initiatives and the distribution of funds that support youth-focused sports and service organizations throughout the region.

The ASA Mission

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

Funded primarily through the awards banquet and an annual golf tournament, the organization channels its proceeds to local non-profits including the Boys & Girls Club of the Emerald Coast, Special Olympics Florida-Okaloosa, the Eleanor J. Johnson Youth Center and Okaloosa Walton FCA.

At the heart of the ASA's recognition program lies a simple, yet powerful, standard: the athletes honored must excel not only in their sport but also in their academics and community involvement. Through the

banquet and associated awards, ASA underscores the belief that true excellence includes character, responsibility and service.

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

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

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

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

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

Want to Help?

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

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

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Not a Fad Workout: How Heavy Resistance Training Is Helping Aging Adults Worldwide



BY KASSIA GARFIELD,
MAXSTRENGTH FITNESS

For decades, resistance training was treated as optional — something reserved for athletes, bodybuilders, or the young. As people aged, the common advice was to “take it easy,” lift light weights, and focus on walking or stretching. Today, science is flipping that script. Heavy resistance training is not a fitness trend or a risky experiment; it is one of the most effective, evidence-based strategies we have to support healthy aging worldwide.

Aging is accompanied by predictable declines in muscle mass, strength and bone density. This process, known as sarcopenia and osteoporosis, begins as early as our 30s and accelerates with each passing decade. By age 70, many adults have lost up to 30–40% of their muscle mass if no intervention is made. The consequences are profound: increased fall risk, fractures, metabolic disease and loss of independence. Yet, experts like Dr. Peter Attia emphasize that while sarcopenia is unavoidable, how much muscle we lose — and how fast we lose it — is largely determined by our activity choices.

The Evidence for Heavy Lifting

Heavy resistance training directly targets the mechanisms behind age-related decline. Unlike light exercise, lifting heavier loads recruits fast-twitch (Type II) muscle fibers — the fibers most vulnerable to aging and

disuse. Peter Attia frequently highlights that these fibers are critical, not just for strength, but for power, balance and preventing falls later in life. When they are trained, they respond — even in older adults. This helps target our central nervous system, which increases muscle recruitment, coordination and response to movement.

Long-term studies strongly support this. The LISA study followed adults in their early 70s and found that those who completed just one year of heavy resistance training preserved leg strength four years later. Meanwhile, those who performed moderate training or remained inactive continued to decline. This suggests that heavy training doesn’t just produce short-term gains — it creates lasting protective effects.

Similarly, the LIFTMOR trial challenged long-held fears around lifting heavy with low bone density. Older adults, including post-menopausal women with osteopenia, safely performed high-intensity resistance and impact training. The result: significant improvements in bone mineral density at the spine and hip, along with gains

in functional strength. These findings directly counter the idea that aging bodies are too fragile for heavy loads.

It's Never Too Late to Start

Perhaps the most empowering message from this body of research is that it is never too late to begin. Muscle tissue remains remarkably adaptable across the lifespan. Studies show adults in their 60s, 70s and even 80s can build strength and muscle when exposed to proper resistance training. Aging does not eliminate our ability to adapt — inactivity does.

Sarcopenia will happen to everyone. That part is non-negotiable. But the rate at which muscle is lost and the degree of weakness we experience are modifiable. Every strength-training session acts as a signal to the body: this muscle is needed — keep it. Without that signal, the body efficiently sheds tissue it perceives as unnecessary. In this sense, muscle loss is not just something that happens to us — it is something we actively influence through daily decisions. Our body responds to stimulus and grows and maintains tissue in accor-

dance to need. So, if there is less need, the body will not continue to use energy to maintain tissue that is not being used.

Beyond Muscles: Longevity and Independence

Heavy resistance training extends benefits well beyond muscle size. Increased lean mass improves insulin sensitivity, supports metabolic health and lowers the risk of type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Strength training has also been linked to improved cognitive function and brain health, likely due to enhanced neuromuscular coordination and blood flow.

Most importantly, strength preserves independence. The ability to stand up from the floor, carry groceries, climb stairs, or recover from a stumble determines whether aging is lived with confidence or constraint. Strength is not cosmetic — it is functional, protective and deeply tied to quality of life.

A New Narrative for Aging

Heavy resistance training is not a fad workout. It is a corner-

Continued on page 25



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 Wellness


By DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

Sitting on opposite ends of the couch wondering if they were still in love. Same house, same couch, same bed, same routine, but where is the love, the fun, the passion? It seems like years since they've been intimate.

She doesn't seem interested anymore. He's tried so many times he just doesn't ask anymore. She always seems angry about this or that. Complaining about things that shouldn't even matter; but, apparently they matter a lot. Complaining

about not sleeping or waking up all night and always being tired. Is she just tired of him? It's like there's no way to make her happy anymore.

He doesn't seem interested anymore. When was the last time he came on to me? I can't even remember the last date we went on. We never spend time together. He's always asleep on the couch and we never talk anymore. If I still love him, why don't I have any desire? I thought marriage was supposed to get easier.

Does this sound familiar? It should. It's the story we hear from patients all the time. No libido, never feeling rested, just surviving each day so you can get home and crash, the weight gain, the irritability. And why is everyone getting so annoying?

It's amazing what hormones are responsible for. Everyone



seems to think testosterone = mean and muscles and estrogen = emotional overload. That's so far from the truth. It's hard to describe, but I might say, testosterone = fearless desire to engage in life, and estrogen = the emotional awareness to enjoy every moment.

Forget the health benefits of hormones today, and there are tons. Let's talk about how it changes your life.

Imagine peacefully drifting off to sleep and waking after eight hours feeling fresh and

rested. Not even an ounce of tired. None. I'm talking ready to hop out of bed with a list of tasks to accomplish and looking forward to accomplishing every single one. You can't wait to get out of bed excited for the day. Sounds impossible.

Imagine actually taking the steps toward a goal instead of just having some hazy snippets of a daydream where you don't really know what you want, where you would go or what you would do, because it seems like you will never get there anyway.

Imagine your spouse approaching you with that look in his eye and you smile, because you've been waiting for him all day.

That's just a taste of what hormones do. I used to feel like you. I got treated 12 years ago. It changed my life. I felt alive. I slept. I was happy. I wasn't

afraid of life. So, I quit my job and left over 20 years of traditional medicine. Why? So, I could help you feel better, too.

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SMARTER WAY

continued from page 4

The Body Responds to Patience

I've watched patients experience profound change not because they did more, but because they did less—less forcing, less self-criticism, less urgency. They learned to listen instead

of override. To adjust instead of quit. To trust that small improvements compound over time.

And they do.

A little better sleep leads to better energy. Better energy leads to gentler movement. Gentler movement supports hormone balance. Hormone balance improves mood and fo-

cus. Suddenly, the person who felt stuck begins to feel capable again.

That's how marathons are won. Not by sprinting at the start, but by pacing wisely.

Redefining Success

What if success wasn't measured by how fast you change, but by how well you sustain?

What if progress meant fewer crashes, quicker recovery, and a deeper sense of connection to your body?

Wellness is not a finish line you cross. It's a relationship you build.

So, if you're feeling discouraged, tired of trends, or tempted by the next "miracle" solution,

pause. Take a breath. Ask yourself not what will fix you fastest, but what will support you longest.

Your body is in this for the long haul. And when you meet it with patience, consistency, and care, it will carry you farther than any shortcut ever could.

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A Kinder Start to the New Year, Shared with Our Dogs

BY LAURIE HOOD

Every January, I find myself thinking less about big resolutions and more about how I want the year to feel. Calmer. More connected. More intentional. And almost always, the answers lead me right back to the animals.



At Alaqua, we see every day how closely human well-being and animal well-being are tied together. Dogs need movement, fresh air, routine, and connection. Turns out, we do too.

One of the healthiest habits I have ever built is simply walking. Walking with a dog gives you no excuse not to go. They are ready. They are patient (well, my dog Archie may not always be). And they remind you that the point is not speed or distance, but showing up.

Some of my favorite moments at Alaqua happen on the trails. Early mornings, quiet afternoons, volunteers walking dogs who arrive scared and leave a little lighter. You can feel the shift in the dog and in the person holding the leash.

Spending time outdoors does something we cannot replicate indoors. It slows the nervous system. It gives perspective. Dogs experience the world through scent and sound, and when we let them lead for a moment, we slow down, too. That pause matters more than we realize.

Volunteering is another place where wellness and purpose intersect. Many of our volunteer roles involve movement and being outside, whether it is walking dogs, helping with enrichment, or simply being present. Giving your time to animals in need

can ground you. It reminds you why kindness matters.

This year, we are especially excited to offer guided hikes where you can bring your dog and walk the land with us. These hikes are not about fitness goals or keeping pace. They are about connection. To your dog. To nature. To a community that believes caring for animals makes the world better for everyone.

Dogs also teach us how to be present. Sitting beside them. Breathing. Stretching. Letting go of the phone for a few minutes. They do not need us to be perfect. They just need us to be there.

As the year begins, I hope we can all be a little gentler with ourselves. Build routines that support us rather than pressure us. Get outside more. Walk together. Volunteer when we can. Let our dogs remind us what matters.

Health does not have to be complicated. Sometimes it starts with a leash, a trail, and the decision to step outside.

Laurie Hood is the founder of Alaqua Animal Refuge and believes that caring for animals and caring for ourselves are deeply connected.

NOT A FAD

continued from page 23

stone of healthy aging backed by decades of research and reinforced by modern longevity science. While we cannot stop aging, we can decide how we age. By choosing to lift heavy — safely, progressively, and consistently — aging adults around the world are rewriting what strength, independence, and vitality look like in later life. If you are looking to get started, try MaxStrength Fitness of Niceville, we only do one-on-one strength training for the busy professional and active aging

adult. In just 20 minutes, twice a week, we can help you get started to reverse the loss of muscle mass, give us a call at 850-373-4450!

Join Kassie Garfield, licensed physical therapist and owner of MaxStrength fitness of Niceville, for “Chronic Pain and How to Fight It,” a comprehensive talk on the physiology of chronic pain and how to take steps to break the cycle. Salt and Story bookstore, Wednesday, February 4 at 6 p.m. Free and open to the public.



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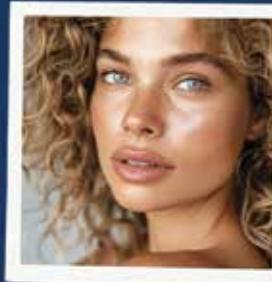
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 Wellness


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?



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Journey Bravely: Increase Your Life Experience and Impact in 2026

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 understand 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 lev-



el. 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 five 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").

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BY SEAN DIETRICH

It was a Wednesday. I know this because on Wednesdays the Baptist church had family suppers.

And although I wasn't exactly a faithful Sunday churchgoer, I was a devout mid-week supper-eater.

That night, I stood in line behind a girl, holding my plate. She was funny. She had so much personality she hummed like a neon light.

Later, I sat beside her during service. That week, there was an out-of-town preacher. The kind with big hair, sweat rags, and nice shoes. He invited people to walk the aisle to get born again.

My pal, Craig—who lost his religion every football season—recommitted for his thirtieth time. He said he felt something in the air that night.

I did too.

When service let out, the girl wasn't ready to go home. Neither was I. So, I suggested we drive. She liked the idea—though I'll never know why.

I pointed my vehicle east, we headed for nowhere, traveling as slow as my engine would run. The miles of pines made her more chatty. She propped her feet on my dashboard and let the words roll.

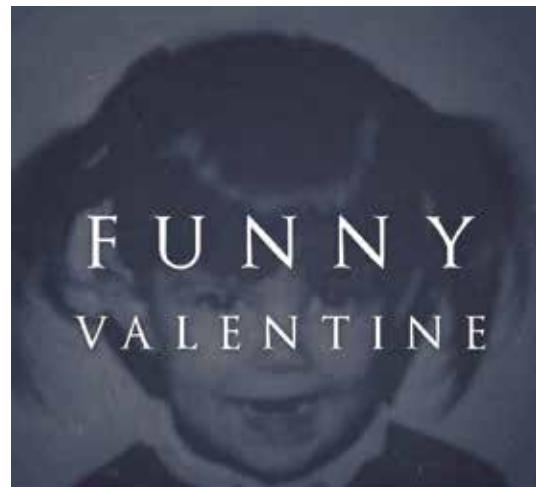
She talked about things. About how she saw the world, about her favorite kind of mustard, about religion, and the proper way to eat fried chicken.

I gave one-syllable responses because I didn't want to interrupt. She had a voice that sounded like Escambia County in June.

By the time we landed in Port Saint Joe, her one-sided conversation had faded to a stop. I looked at her. She was sleeping.

So, I pulled into a gas station and got lukewarm coffee.

On the ride back, I thought long and hard. Not just about the sleeping girl, but about how I'd gotten a late start in life. And about how my childhood was a pitiful one.



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Sean of the South: Funny Valentine

So pathetic, in fact, it embarrassed me to talk about—kind of like I'm doing now.

When my father died, he left a shadow on me, one I didn't think would ever lift.

But that night, something did lift. I was someone else. I was the

me I'd always known I should've been. Not the quiet young man who was too serious for baseball.

This girl. She'd done it to me without even trying. And even if I never saw her again, I was grateful for her.

When I arrived at her house, it was three in the morning. I walked her to the door. I hugged

her and whispered, "Maybe I'll see you again, sometime."

She said, "What'n the hell's maybe? 'Course we'll see each other, dummy."

Every good thing in my life can be traced back to that night—the evening I became who I am. With her I have ev-

erything. Without her I'm a blind man.

That was the Wednesday I got born again.



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 Musing


A Pastor's Ponderings: The Military's Moral Battle and the Chaplaincy at 250

BY PASTOR DOUG STAUFFER

Since the founding of the United States, military power has encompassed more than troops, weaponry or tactics. The founders

believed that without virtue, armies would fail—and that faith was the foundation of virtue. For that reason, chaplains were not treated as optional morale offi-



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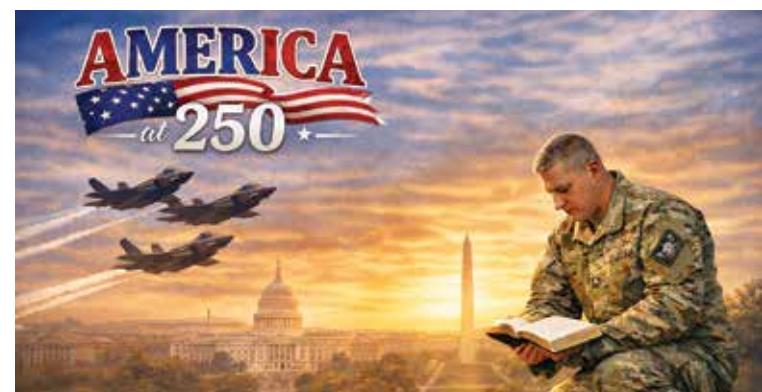
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cers or psychological aides, but as guardians of conscience, discipline and spiritual endurance.

During the Revolutionary War, the Continental Army formally appointed chaplains to preach, pray and encourage the troops. General George Washington ordered regular divine services, assigned chaplains to brigades and expected officers to attend public worship. Washington understood that soldiers unmoored from moral restraint, would eventually lose cohesion, courage and honor. Congress echoed this belief by proclaiming national days of prayer, fasting and thanksgiving, openly acknowledging that victory ultimately comes from Almighty God—not merely from military calculation.

That founding conviction stands in stark contrast to the military culture of recent years. While the armed forces must remain apolitical, they cannot afford to be morally indifferent. In recent years, immorality—sexual misconduct, abuse of authority, ethical compromise—has ended countless military careers and undermined unit readiness. Even with the most advanced technology in the world, a fighting force can still cripple itself from within when discipline and virtue erode.

The redefinition of chaplaincy by past administrations reflected this tension. Increasingly, chaplains were pressured to serve primarily as general counselors, therapeutic listeners or emotional support specialists—often stripped of their theological anchor. While mental health care is essential, the chaplain's unique role has always been spiritual leadership grounded in faith. When faith is reduced to feelings and conscience is replaced by compliance, moral clarity suffers.

Predictably, whenever spiritu-

al leadership becomes visible—especially in official settings, such as prayer—critics raise alarms about coercion or impropriety. Yet the Founders did not believe faith threatened liberty. They believed it restrained power. Washington warned that armies without virtue become instruments of tyranny rather than guardians of freedom.

The question is not whether soldiers of diverse beliefs deserve care—they do. The question is whether chaplaincy should be stripped of its spiritual core to satisfy modern secular sensibilities. History suggests otherwise. Moral relativism does not strengthen armies; it weakens them. Discipline does not flourish where virtue is optional.

This concern extended beyond Washington. During his presidency, John Adams called the nation to fasting and repentance, urging Americans to “call to remembrance our own sins, and implore the forgiveness of Heaven.” Adams understood what modern America often forgets: political and institutional crises often reflect deeper spiritual decay.

As America approaches her 250th year, the military's challenge is not merely to remain lethal—but to remain just. We must fight effectively, yes. But we must also ensure we are not undermined by immorality that undermines readiness, corrodes trust and dishonors service.

The God who heard the prayers of the Continental Army has not changed. His arm is not shortened. He still calls nations—and institutions—to humility, repentance and righteousness. The question is not whether God remains faithful. The question is whether we will return to the moral foundations that once made our armed forces strong.



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A Brilliant Debut for a Milestone Season

Acclaimed pianist Ying Li takes the stage as Sinfonia Gulf Coast celebrates 20 years of redefining the symphony experience

By ZANDRA WOLFGRAM

As Sinfonia Gulf Coast celebrates its 20th anniversary season, each concert offers an opportunity to reflect on the artistry, ambition and sense of discovery that have defined the orchestra for two decades. On Saturday, Feb. 7, that spirit takes center stage with Classical Connections featuring Ying Li, piano—an evening that brings together timeless masterworks and one of today's most compelling young pianists.

Making her Sinfonia Gulf Coast debut, Ying Li is an artist on a remarkable ascent. Winner of the 2021 Young Concert Artists Susan Wadsworth International Auditions, Li has quickly earned international recognition for performances that combine technical brilliance with expressive depth. She has appeared as a soloist with major orchestras across the United States and Europe, including The Philadelphia Orchestra, Minnesota Orchestra, Kansas City Symphony and Orlando Philharmonic, and has been praised for her abili-

ty to bring clarity, warmth and emotional insight to the music she performs.

At the heart of the program is Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23 in A major, K. 488, one of the composer's most beloved works. Graceful, luminous and deeply expressive, the concerto showcases Mozart's gift for melody while allowing the pianist to shine as both soloist and collaborator. The work's radiant outer movements frame a slow movement of striking intimacy—music that invites listeners into a moment of reflection and quiet beauty.

The program also includes Ludwig van Beethoven's Symphony No. 1 in C major, Op. 21, a piece that marks the composer's confident arrival as a symphonist. While rooted in classical tradition, the symphony hints at the bold originality that would soon reshape the musical landscape. Together, these works create a program that bridges elegance and innovation—perfectly aligned with the spirit of Sinfonia's Classical

Connections series.

Led by Music Director Demetrius Fuller, the Sinfonia Gulf Coast orchestra brings these masterworks to life at Destin High School at 7:30 p.m. The evening is not only a celebration of great music, but also a reflection of Sinfonia's mission over the past 20 years: to entertain, educate and inspire through exceptional live performances.

Ticket purchases do more than support the concert experience itself. Proceeds from Sinfonia Gulf Coast performances help fund the organization's expansive music education and outreach initiatives, which reach more than 250,000 children across Northwest Florida through programs such as Sinfonia Guest Artists in the Schools, youth orchestras, after-school strings instruction and partnerships with Carnegie Hall's Weill Institute of Music.

Whether you are a long-time classical music lover or attending your first symphony concert, Classical Connections



featuring Ying Li, piano offers a welcoming and meaningful way to experience the power of live orchestral music. With tickets priced at just \$35, this concert is an exceptional opportunity to be part of Sinfonia Gulf Coast's

milestone season while directly supporting music education in our community.

Tickets are available now at SinfoniaGulfCoast.org or by calling the box office at (850) 460-8800.



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Crescendo! 2026 Brings Pink Martini to the Stage with Sinfonia Gulf Coast

Crescendo! 2026 is set to strike a bold new chord as Pink Martini joins forces with Sinfonia Gulf Coast for a one-of-a-kind live orchestral performance — a first in the history of the beloved annual fundraiser.

The Crescendo! Signature Main Event takes place Sunday, March 1, at 3 p.m. in the Magnolia Ballroom at Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort. The afternoon promises a milestone moment for the region's arts

scene, marking both the first time Sinfonia Gulf Coast has performed live at Crescendo! and what is believed to be the first full professional orchestra ever staged in the Magnolia Ballroom.

Internationally acclaimed and delightfully genre-defying, Pink Martini has spent more than 30 years captivating audiences around the world. Often described as a “little orchestra,” the ensemble blends classical, jazz, Latin, and vintage pop into concerts that feel equal parts elegant and exuberant. Performing in more than 25 languages, Pink Martini’s shows are joyful, theatrical celebrations that invite audiences of all ages to join the party.

— perfectly captures the bold, celebratory spirit of our 20th anniversary while directly supporting the education and outreach programs at the heart of our mission.”

Tickets are on sale now. Crescendo! Main Event tickets are \$250 per person and include the reception, lunch, wine, gratuity, and live entertainment. Tables seating 10 are available by reservation.

Proceeds from Crescendo! benefit Sinfonia Gulf Coast's extensive music education and community engagement initiatives across Northwest Florida, including musicians and guest artists in schools, free orchestra



concerts, student transportation, the Sinfonia Youth Orchestra, Link Up concerts in partnership with Carnegie Hall, Paint the Music (with Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation), Arts in Medicine with Sacred Heart Hospital, and more.

Those looking to take their support a step further are invited to become “Treble Makers,” an honorary committee celebrating Sinfonia’s mission. For a \$650 contribution, Treble Makers receive one ticket to the Crescendo! Kick Off Lunch and Main Event, recognition in the event program, reserved seating at closed-to-the-public Link Up student performances on March 11, 2026, at the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center, invitations to private events, a special Treble Maker gift, and additional benefits.

For Crescendo! sponsorship inquiries, contact Klara Mikolai at kmikolai@sinfoniagulfcoast.org. Volunteer opportunities are also available; those interested may contact Beth Clavier at (850) 460-8800 or bclavier@sinfoniagulfcoast.org.

Tickets, sponsorships, and additional details are available at SinfoniaGulfCoast.org or by calling the box office at (850) 460-8800.

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ECTC Presents "Everlasting Love"

A Valentine's Day Musical Revue Fundraiser

Love takes center stage this Valentine's season as Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC) presents Everlasting Love, a special Valentine's Day musical revue fundraiser celebrating romance, connection, and timeless love songs on February 14th at 7 p.m. This intimate evening of music and storytelling will feature beloved performers Teresa Lombardi, Taylor Walker, Skylar Smith, and Jackie Rose.

Everlasting Love invites audiences to experience an unforgettable night filled with iconic love songs from stage and screen that span generations. Designed as both a celebration of love and a fundraiser supporting ECTC's mission, the revue offers a perfect Valentine's date night with a meaningful cause at its heart.

"Everlasting Love celebrates shared dreams and the meaningful relationships that grow when people come together," said Nathanael Fisher, Producing Artistic Director of Emerald Coast Theatre Company. "This evening is about connection, possibility, and supporting the future of theatre here on our Emerald Coast."

Everlasting Love will be held at Emerald Coast Theatre Com-

pany, located at 560 Grand Boulevard, Suite 200, Miramar Beach, FL. Tickets are \$150 each and are sold in pairs. Each pair

of tickets includes a bottle of wine along with a sweet or savory charcuterie. Proceeds from the event directly support ECTC's

youth educational programming and community outreach initiatives.

To make a tax-deductible do-

nation, become a VIP or sponsor, or learn more, call (850) 684-0323 or visit emeraldcoasttheatre.org.

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