



APRIL 2026  
VOL. 7, NO. 7

# BAY Life

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## From Death to Life: Stephanie McMinn's BeGenerous Ministry Brings Hope to Local Women

By MICHELLE RUSCHMAN

Stephanie McMinn, founder of BeGenerous, has been providing resources and coming alongside women and their families since 2010. It all began with simply providing diapers to single mothers, but since then, her organization has grown into a source of hope for the women of Okaloosa, Walton, and Bay counties. "I was 16 when I had my first child, so I know what it's like to be a young mother with limited resources. There were food pantries and clothes closets, but there was no diaper bank. One day, I called the health department trying to see where I could help, and the case worker shared with me that while she watched a client dress her baby, she noticed that the baby was dressed without a diaper. When she pointed out that it was missing, the mom told her she hadn't forgotten. She hadn't put it on because they couldn't afford



to have the baby in a diaper while they were at home. From that story, I started going into these homes and seeing how much the mothers were struggling when the home had an absent father, or the dad was in prison. There was poverty, drugs, and sexual exploitation. Once I saw this happening in my own backyard, it wasn't something I could unsee, and

I knew I had to do something about it."

BeGenerous now includes "The Yellow House" and "Pearl House," which offer refuge, healing, and transformation through a 24-month residential recovery program. The women come from the most desperate situations, including domestic abuse, sex trafficking, incarceration, and,

especially close to Stephanie's heart, addiction. In many situations, BeGenerous has been the bridge from death to life.

Sometimes, though, it's when you're battling darkness for others that you can be in the greatest fight of your own. Less than a year after starting BeGenerous, while Stephanie was helping so many families find their fresh start, Stephanie's husband was in the midst of recovery while their sons were in the grip of addiction themselves. Today, Stephanie can say that her oldest son has recovered from addiction and is helping her in her massive efforts, but in 2021, the family got devastating news. "My baby boy, Gage, was 22 years old when he overdosed on fentanyl and passed away. Here I am, doing work in the community, and my kids know what I

**BEGENEROUS**  
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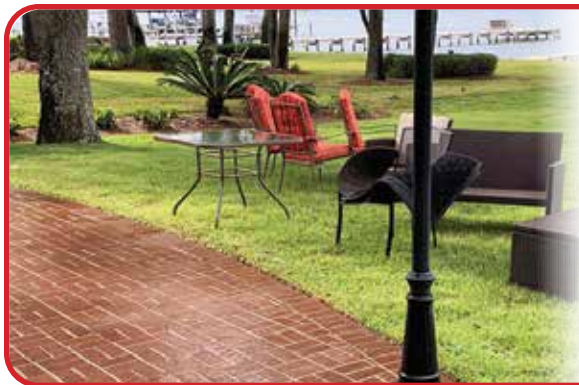
## The Hope of Easter

By GUEARY CLENDENING

I have spoken at many funerals, offering hope and comfort to grieving relatives and friends. Yet the reality cannot be denied—there will be an empty place at the table tomorrow and in the days ahead. The absence of a loved one leaves a hole in our hearts that words often cannot fill, and sometimes the pain feels unbearable.

Years ago, just a few days after my wife passed away, I visited her grave. I found myself in tears, my emotions completely frayed. No one was around, and I began to pray aloud, pouring out my heart and my sorrow to God.

**EASTER**  
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Community

EASTER

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Suddenly, as I prayed, a bird in a nearby tree began to sing. Whether others might believe this or not, I felt deeply that this moment was sent by God, a quiet reminder that He is always near, even in our darkest hours.

When I stopped praying and looked up into the tree, the bird fell silent, and moments later, it flew away. I left the cemetery uplifted in spirit, feeling a sense of peace that I had not experienced in days.

In the Bible, First Thessalonians 4:13-14 speaks of hope. It acknowledges our sorrow when someone close passes, but it reminds us that we should not grieve as people without hope. If we believe that Jesus Christ, God's Son, died for our sins and rose again to intercede for us before His Father in heaven, then we have hope in God's promise: Christ is coming again, bringing with Him all who have trusted in Him.

Verses 16 and 17 continue: "For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a



shout, with the trumpet of God, and the dead shall rise first. Then we who are alive at that time shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall ever be with the Lord."

This is the hope of Easter, promised by God—a hope that comforts our hearts, strengthens our faith, and reminds us that life does not end with death.

As John 3:16 reminds us: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in

Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

This is God's Word for anyone willing to open their heart and receive Christ. Through Him, we experience forgiveness for the past, healing for our pain, and the beginning of a new, eternal life filled with joy and purpose.

Embrace the hope of Easter that God has for you, and let it transform your heart and your life.

Happy Easter!

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**BAY Life**

Published Monthly  
Mailed FREE to the communities of  
Bluewater Bay & Hammock Bay

P.O. Box 1424  
Santa Rosa Beach, FL 32459

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# Bowlegs 70 Brings a Swarm of Swashbuckling Pirates to Fort Walton Beach

By CHRISTOPHER MANSON

Rique Gwin, a/k/a Captain Billy Bowlegs LXX, is ready for the annual Billy Bowlegs Pirate Festival happening May 14-16 at the Fort Walton Beach Landing Park; but that's not all he's been up to this year.

Gwin's role as Captain Billy goes beyond the festival. Being "Captain Billy" includes promoting tourism in the area, "advertising how wonderful Fort Walton Beach is," he elaborates. Gwin and his Krewes travel from Bradenton on up to Minnesota, visiting lots of regional pirate festivals. Gwin anticipates around a hundred or so out-of-towners coming to the Emerald Coast in May, a mighty boost for the local economy.

Earlier this year, Gwin – as Billy, in full costume – visited Liza Jackson Preparatory School where he read pirate-themed stories to students and handed out beads. Gwin and his "Air Raiders Krewes" will team up with other Krewes in Tallahassee later this year, complete with

parade float, to entertain special needs children.

Gwin was announced as this year's Captain Billy at a coronation pageant held last June at Niceville's Mattie Kelly Arts Center. The identities of Billy's Queen (Debbie Fisher), First Mate and First Mistress, and Honor Guard were also revealed. Gwin's involvement with the Krewes dates back 15 years.

This year's festival includes fireworks and live entertainment – the latter in partnership with the City of Fort Walton Beach's much-loved Concerts on the Landing series – along with lots of vendors. The "skirmish" happens Friday night, after which, Gwin says, laughing, "I'll end up in handcuffs."

Spoiler alert: Captain Billy will be back at the festival site Saturday night to officially storm the city of Fort Walton Beach.

The festival is free to attend and attracted roughly 1,000 visitors last year. Gwin says the event was moved back to May



Bowlegs Court: Queen Debbie Fisher, Rique Gwin, First Mistress Mollie Grindland, First Mate Mark Grindland, Kelly Gwin, and J. Mark Fisher

from June after Covid, and thanks to that change, "crowds have started to grow again."

The Billy Bowlegs Parade, set for Monday, May 18, along Eglin Parkway, is a popular Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce event that Gwin and his Krewes support and happily participate in.

Prior to Billy Bowlegs Festival 2026, a Downtown Fort Walton

Beach pub crawl is scheduled for Friday, May 8. Ben Merrell and Soundside Bar are hosting.

On Thursday, May 14, the Little Pirates Scavenger Hunt will be held on the Landing. Gwin encourages Bay Life readers to listen to the local Cumulus radio stations and visit the Billy Bowlegs Pirate Festival Facebook page starting in April to unearth "clues" concerning the

Bowlegs coin hunt. The grand prize winner will be announced at the festival Saturday evening.

Gwin wishes to recognize Felicity Plastic Surgery, this year's presenting sponsor, whose event-worthy tagline is "Pursue YOUR happiness." Learn more at [felicityplasticsurgery.com](http://felicityplasticsurgery.com). The festival benefits the Wil-

*Continued on page 5*

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Community

# The 5 Keys to Longevity



By DR. KAREN DEVORE,  
TORTOISE CLINIC

We live in a culture that glorifies speed — fast food, fast results, fast fixes. But true longevity doesn't come from rushing. It comes from consistency, balance, and tending to the body with intention over time.

Longevity isn't simply about

adding years to your life. It's about adding life to your years. Through an integrative and holistic approach to medicine, we focus on optimizing how you feel today while protecting your health for decades to come. Here are the five keys I believe are foundational to living longer and living well.



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By identifying and addressing root causes through anti-inflammatory nutrition, targeted supplementation, acupuncture, stress management, and lifestyle modifications, we can reduce the internal "fire" that accelerates aging and instead create an environment where the body can repair and regenerate.

### 2. Support Metabolic Health

Your metabolism is far more than calorie-burning. It's the foundation of energy, hormone balance, blood sugar stability, and long-term vitality.

Insulin resistance, blood sugar spikes, poor sleep, and chronic stress all impair metabolic function and accelerate aging. Supporting metabolic health through whole-food nutrition, strength training, adequate protein intake, sleep optimization, and strategic supplementation helps maintain muscle mass, protect brain function, and reduce risk for chronic disease.

Longevity isn't about restrictive dieting. It's about nourishing your body in a way that sup-

ports resilience and strength at every stage of life.

### 3. Balance Hormones Thoughtfully

Hormones regulate nearly every system in the body from mood and metabolism to bone density and cardiovascular health. As we age, shifts in estrogen, progesterone, testosterone, thyroid hormones, and cortisol can significantly impact how we feel.

An integrative approach to hormone health looks at the full picture. We assess lifestyle, stress patterns, nutrient status, gut health, and detoxification pathways before determining whether bioidentical hormone therapy or targeted nutritional support is appropriate.

Balanced hormones can improve sleep, mental clarity, libido, energy, and muscle preservation, which are all essential components of aging well.

### 4. Prioritize Nervous System Regulation

You cannot out-supplement chronic stress. The nervous system plays a powerful role in longevity. Persistent sympathetic ("fight or flight") activation increases inflammation, impairs digestion, disrupts hormones, and accelerates cellular aging.

Practices that activate the parasympathetic ("rest and repair") system such as acupuncture, breathwork, meditation, time in nature, meaningful social connection, and restorative

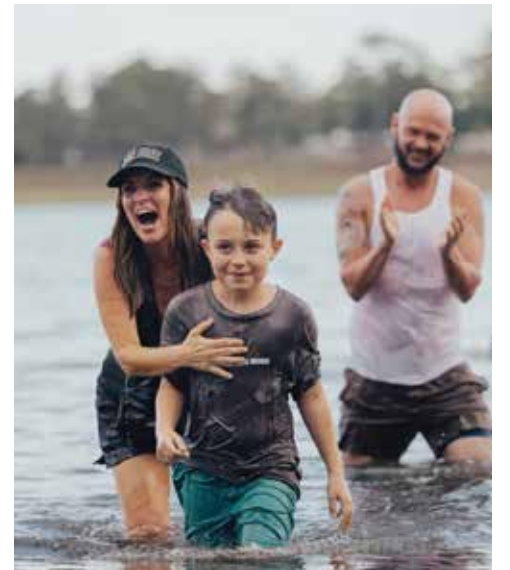
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### BEGENEROUS

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do, but addiction doesn't respect anyone."

To honor Gage, Stephanie started an outreach called "EnGAGE: From Death to Life," an event that focuses on victory. Along with the concert featuring artists, ASAP Preach and Adrion Butler, attendees will hear messages of hope, learn about community resources, shop with local vendors, and local food trucks will be on-site. Last year, a concert-goer asked to be baptized. That will continue this year with the hopes that it will become an annual tradition. "During one intermission, a guy came up and said, 'I want Mama Steph to baptize me. I want to lay this down and leave it behind.' I just dove right into that water with



him, and the next thing you know, there's a line of kids waiting to be baptized. We got to close that night, soaking wet, and we knew we had to make this a part of every year from now on."

Coming to EnGAGE means throwing your expectations to the wind and letting the Holy Spirit move. That's when you know it's going to be fun!

EnGAGE will be held on April

25th at 1140 Circle Dr, Defuniak Springs Lakeyard. If you are a vendor, food truck, or non-profit resource who would like to be part of this dynamic event, you can email [info@begenerousinc.org](mailto:info@begenerousinc.org)

*Michelle Ruschman is a local artist, speaker, and writer. She can be reached at [michelleruschman@gmail.com](mailto:michelleruschman@gmail.com) or [michelleruschman.com](http://michelleruschman.com).*

### BOWLEGS

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Queen of Bowlegs Debbie Fisher and Captain Billy Rique Gwin



William Augustus Bowles Historical Foundation, a 501(c)(3) organization that promotes a love for local history.

Vendor applications are available on the Billy Bowlegs Pirate Festival Facebook page.

"The city is really supportive," adds Gwin, noting that all of the construction around the Landing is expected to be completed in time for the big event. "Last year was a little challenging with all the traffic barricades."

Discover more at [kreweof-bowlegs.com](http://kreweof-bowlegs.com).

#### The Bowlegs 70 Krewe

**Captain Billy LXX** – Rique Gwin

**Captain's Co-pilot** – Kelly Gwin

**Queen of Bowlegs** – Debbie Fisher

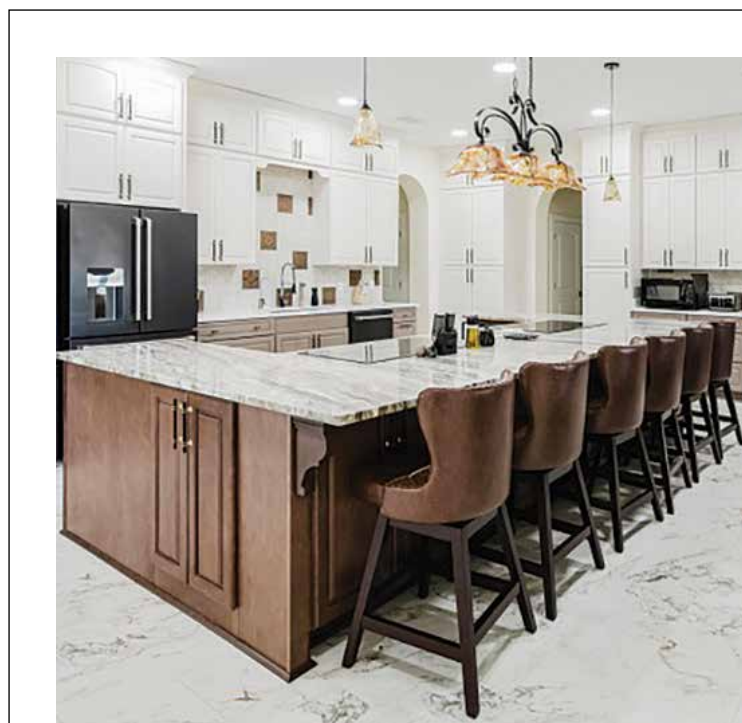


**Queen's Navigator** – J. Mark Fisher

**First Mate** – Mark Grindland

**First Mistress** – Mollie Grindland

**The Honor Guard** – Schuyler and Taylor Black, Michael and Erin Goodosn, Joe and Morgan Zwickel, Scott Flint and Nancy Kline, Mike and Kelly Bedsole, Tyler and Casey Murray, Chris and Heather Thomas, William Goolsby and Elizabeth Sager, John and Keri Holguin, Matthew and Katie Jaquet.



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# Events Around the Bay

## Doggie Eggstravaganza at Grand Boulevard | April 3

Dog Harmony presents the 11th annual Doggie EGGstravaganza, the annual canine social where dogs hunt for eggs filled with yummy treats from 5:30-

7:30 p.m. at Grand Boulevard at Sandestin. Guests will enjoy delicious food, family-friendly games, great prizes, and music. For a \$20 donation in advance (or \$25 on the day of the event), humans and their leashed ca-

nine companions will receive a souvenir bag to sniff out 1,000 colorful eggs filled with delicious dog treats. With two designated hunting areas for dogs over and under 35 pounds, every furry friend has a chance to join in on



the fun. Visit dog-harmony.org to learn more, volunteer, donate or adopt.

**Fly Into Spring Kite Festival Soars Over Okaloosa Island**  
Saturday-Sunday, April 4-5 | 10 a.m.-4 p.m. | Okaloosa Island Boardwalk, Fort Walton Beach

Celebrate National Kite

Month as Kitty Hawk Kites presents the annual Fly Into Spring Kite Festival at the Okaloosa Island Boardwalk.

Watch massive 30- to 100-foot kites fill the sky and enjoy professional stunt kite performances set to music. Families are invited to join the fun with free kite-making for kids, hands-

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# Summit

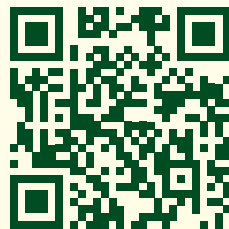
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## Second Annual Summit on the Circle Returns to Lake DeFuniak April 23-26

Summit on the Circle returns to DeFuniak Springs for its second annual weekend gathering April 23 through 26, celebrating history, culture, music and Southern hospitality along the scenic shores of Lake DeFuniak.

Hosted in and around the Lake DeFuniak Historic District, the 2026 Summit centers on the theme "Stories That Shape Us," inviting participants to explore the many ways stories are shared, preserved and experienced across cultures and generations.

Building on the success of the inaugural Summit in 2025, this year's event will feature a thoughtfully curated mix of conversations, live performances, culinary experiences and opportunities to connect in both formal and relaxed settings. Programming will celebrate storytelling through music, art, food, architecture and personal narratives, offering attendees a rich and immersive cultural experience.

"Summit on the Circle is about honoring the stories that connect us to place, to history, and to one another," said Rob Overton, executive director for UWF Historic Trust. "From spoken word

and music to shared meals and cross-cultural conversations, this weekend creates space for meaningful connection while celebrating the unique character of DeFuniak Springs."

Throughout the weekend, guests will enjoy signature experiences including a beer and wine reception, evening concert entertainment and a Sunday ice cream social by the lake. Additional programming will highlight diverse voices and perspectives, creating opportunities for attendees to engage with storytelling in multiple formats while enjoying the beauty and hospitality of the Circle.

Designed for history enthusiasts, arts and culture supporters, music lovers and those seeking a distinctive spring getaway, Summit on the Circle offers a welcoming and memorable experience rooted in community and place.

Additional details, including the full 2026 Summit program and ticket information, will be announced in the coming weeks.

For more information about Summit on the Circle, visit [historicpensacola.org/summit](http://historicpensacola.org/summit).

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# NFSO Presents Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 2, the Awe-inspiring "Resurrection"

On April 18, the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra — the region's premier professional orchestra — transforms the stage of the Mattie Kelly Arts Center into a space of breathtaking scale and sound. More than 200 musicians and singers will gather for Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 2, the awe-inspiring "Resurrection" Symphony, in what promises to be one of the most powerful artistic events of the season.

Mahler's Second is not merely a symphony; it is an emotional and spiritual journey. It begins in darkness and uncertainty, wrestling with life's deepest questions, and rises steadily toward a radiant conclusion that proclaims renewal and hope. In its final movement, a full chorus and vocal soloists join the orchestra in a breathtaking affirmation of life after struggle — a moment that has moved audiences for more than a century.

This extraordinary performance unites the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra with the Northwest Florida Symphony Chorale, the Choral Society of Pensacola, and Niceville High School Opus One. The sheer scale of the collaboration — more than 200 performers filling the stage — creates a sound both intimate and immense, surrounding the audience in a shared experience of uncommon magnitude.

Works of this scope are rarely presented in our region. Months of preparation and exceptional artistic forces are required to bring it to life. When the final chorus rises from a whisper to a thunderous declaration, the effect is overwhelming — not only heard, but deeply felt.

Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony will be performed on Saturday, April 18 at 7 p.m. at the Mattie Kelly Arts Center. Tickets are available at [MattieKellyArtsCenter.org](http://MattieKellyArtsCenter.org) or by calling 850-729-6000.

**Ann Toomey, Soprano**

American soprano Ann Toomey is enjoying a significant international career, praised for her rich voice and dramatic presence. She has performed major operatic roles including *Madama Butterfly* and *Tosca* with



Lyric Opera of Kansas City and Florentine Opera, and made a celebrated European debut in *Suor Angelica* at the Berlin Philharmonie under Kirill Petrenko. She has also appeared with the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Gustavo Dudamel and sung Mahler's Symphony No. 8 with the Nashville Symphony, among other acclaimed engagements. A former member of the Ryan Opera Center at Lyric Opera of Chicago, she was a national semifinalist in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions.

**Zoie Reams, Mezzo-Soprano**

Mezzo-soprano Zoie Reams has garnered recognition for her "velvety" tone and versatile artistry. A graduate of the Houston Grand Opera Butler Studio, she



appears regularly at Lyric Opera of Chicago in roles from *La traviata* to contemporary works, and has sung the title role in *Carmen* at Canadian Opera Company and Oregon's Piedmont Opera. She made her Met-

ropolitan Opera debut in *Porgy and Bess* and appears in major concert engagements including Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Handel's *Messiah* at Washington National Cathedral.

Reams' season also includes appearances with Cincinnati Opera, Minnesota Opera, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Gustavo Dudamel.

Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra  
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 Community

**EVENTS**

*continued from page 6*

on activities and opportunities to fly their own kites.

This colorful, high-flying event offers a perfect way to welcome spring along the Emerald Coast.

**LuLu's Easter Egg Dash**  
**April 5 | 12–2 p.m. (Dash at 1 p.m.) | LuLu's Destin, 4607 Legendary Marina Drive, Destin**

Get ready to run—this isn't your typical Easter egg hunt! LuLu's annual Easter Egg Dash brings high-energy fun to the beach with thousands of colorful eggs (5,000–6,000!) hidden in the sand. At 1 p.m. sharp, children ages 1–14 will race into designated dash zones for a fast-paced, unforgettable scramble.

From noon to 1 p.m., families can enjoy photos with the Easter Bunny before the big dash begins. Organizers encourage guests to bring their own baskets, though bags will be available. Note: For children ages 3 and older, parents are not permitted inside the dash zones once the rope drops.

Keep an eye out for special golden eggs hidden among the thousands—lucky finders may win prizes like free kids meals or smoothies, arcade and ropes course passes, toys, and more.

While the kids dash, adults

can join the fun with mimosa and Bloody Mary specials, plus LuLu's full menu of favorites. Live music will be featured throughout the day, with performances in both the afternoon and evening.

Come early, grab a bite, and get ready—because at LuLu's, Easter is where the fun (and the kiddos) runs free!

**Sock Hop Returns with Retro Fun for the Whole Family**

**Saturday, April 18 | 5–7 p.m. | Crosspoint, Niceville Campus**

The Pearl Project invites the community to step back in time for its Fourth Annual Family Sock Hop — an evening filled with music, dancing and classic family fun.

Guests can enjoy live music, vintage cars, games and a lively dance floor, along with dinner, floats and plenty of entertainment for all ages. With a nostalgic 1950s vibe and a welcoming, family-friendly atmosphere, the event promises something for everyone.

Whether you come ready to dance or simply enjoy the sights and sounds, this beloved annual event continues to grow as a community favorite.

Purchase tickets by scanning the QR code or visiting [ThePearlProject.org](http://ThePearlProject.org).



**South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival | April 23–26 | Grand Boulevard**

Tickets are on sale now for the South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival, returning April 23–26 to Grand Boulevard with more than 600 wines, beers and spirits to sample across four days of tastings, live entertainment and culinary experiences.

The weekend kicks off Thursday with Winemakers and Shakers at Wine World in Destin, followed by Friday's VIP Wine Tasting (4–6 p.m.) featuring rare selections and expert pours, plus Bitters, Brews & Bartenders (5:30–8 p.m.) showcasing craft cocktails, lite bites and a lively mixology competition. The Grand Tasting takes place Saturday (3–6 p.m.) and Sunday (1–4 p.m.), highlighting world-class wineries — including the

Willamette Valley Vintners Association — alongside chef-driven pairings in Wine World's Culinary Village.

Guests can purchase featured wines on site, with proceeds benefiting Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation and children in need across Northwest Florida. Pre-sale tickets are available now at [sowalwine.com](http://sowalwine.com); prices increase April 1.

**Destin Charity Wine Auction Turns 21 and Goes Wild for Kids | April 24–25**

The 21st Annual Destin Charity Wine Auction presented by the Jumonville Family benefits children in need across

Northwest Florida through Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation's (DCWAF) 16 partner children's charities. In 2025, the foundation donated \$3.1 million following one of its most successful auctions to date.

The 2026 auction will feature an impressive lineup of celebrity chefs and internationally renowned vintners. Held in conjunction with the South Walton Beaches Wine and Food Festival, the auction also takes place at Grand Boulevard the same weekend. The festival showcases hundreds of premium wines, spirits and culinary offerings, with proceeds benefiting DCWAF. Full details are available at [dcwaf.org](http://dcwaf.org).

**Saturday in the Park Brings Family Fun to Valparaiso**

**Saturday, April 25 | 10 a.m.–4 p.m. (5K begins at 8 a.m.) | Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, 115 Westview Ave., Valparaiso**

The Heritage Museum Association's annual "Saturday in the Park" returns with a full day of family-friendly fun, be-

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**APRIL 3**  
**THE #1 TRIBUTE TO ABBA**

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**St. Jude's Episcopal Church**  
 200 N. Partin Dr., Niceville

**Palm Sunday, March 29th**  
 8:00 a.m. Blessing of the Palms, Procession and Holy Eucharist II  
 10:00 a.m. Easter Garden, Egg Dyeing & Easter Story in Parish Hall  
*(Bring 3 Boiled Eggs Per Child)*  
 10:30 a.m. Blessing of the Palms, Procession and Holy Eucharist II with Choir

**Wednesday in Holy Week, April 1st**  
 11:00 a.m. Eucharist in Chapel

**Maundy Thursday, April 2nd**  
 6:00 p.m. Maundy Thursday Service: Holy Eucharist II with Stripping of the Altar

**Good Friday, April 3rd**  
 12:00 p.m. Seven Last Words Service & Communion from Reserve Sacrament  
 6:00 p.m. Stations of the Cross in Sanctuary

**Holy Saturday, April 4th**  
 10:00 a.m. Cleaning & Decorating of the Church

**Easter Sunday, April 5th**  
 6:30 a.m. Sunrise Holy Eucharist II (Outside - Weather Permitting)  
 8:00 a.m. Holy Eucharist II with Nursery Care  
 10:30 a.m. Holy Eucharist II with Choir & Nursery Care  
 11:45 a.m. Easter Egg Hunt



# APRIL

**01**  
Kids One Stroke Painting with Sheila Mahony  
4 pm | Artful Things | Niceville  
Spring Design Class  
5:30 pm | Katie's House of Flowers & Gifts | Niceville

**02**  
Justice on the Block: Free Legal Help  
10 am | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso  
Greens & Dreams Golf Tournament  
12:30 pm | Rocky Bayou Country Club | Niceville  
Bands on the Boulevard: Spring Music Series  
6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

**03**  
Tech Time  
10 am | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso  
11th Annual Doggie Eggstravaganza  
5:30 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach  
Live Music: Brendon Preece  
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville  
ALMOST ABBA  
7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville

**04**  
Run for Joy benefiting the Ronald McDonald House  
8:30 am | Church on Bayshore | Niceville  
Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class  
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso  
Artist Trading Card Club  
5 pm | Artful Things | Niceville

**05**  
Bluegrass Jam  
12 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville  
Women's Climbing Circle  
5 pm | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin  
Easter Sunset Dinner Cruise  
5:45 pm | SOLARIS Yacht | Sandestin

**06**  
Justice on the Block: Free Legal Help  
12:30 pm | Niceville Library | Niceville  
Art at the Library  
4 pm | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

**07**  
Niceville Young Professionals Meeting  
11:30 am | Niceville Valparaiso Chamber | Niceville  
Beginners Drawing (Youth) with Elia Saxer  
4 pm | Artful Things | Niceville  
Sunset Dinner & Fireworks Cruise  
6:30 pm | SOLARIS Yacht | Sandestin

**08**  
Niceville Valparaiso Chamber Second  
Wednesday Breakfast  
7:15 am | Niceville Community Center | Niceville  
Kids One Stroke Painting with Sheila Mahony  
4 pm | Artful Things | Niceville

**09**  
Jin Shin Jyutsu  
9 am | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport  
Greater FWB Chamber Nothing But Networking  
11:30 am | UWF Emerald Coast | FWB  
Anime Club  
3 pm | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso  
Concerts in the Village: Smash Mouth  
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin  
Bands on the Boulevard: Spring Music Series  
6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

**10**  
Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee  
7 am | Christian Life Center at FBC | FWB  
Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus! The Musical  
9:45 & 11:30 am | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville  
Live Music: Alston Weeks  
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

**11**  
2026 Earth Day Beach Cleanup  
8 am | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island  
Art in Bloom with Kathy Schumacher Art  
10 am | The Shop at Baldwin Turf | Niceville  
City of Niceville's Big Truck Day  
10 am | Parking Lot of Softball Complex | Niceville  
Live Music: One False Move  
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

**13**  
'Earth' - a Disney Nature Documentary  
3:30 pm | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso  
"Only Murders in the Library" A Podcast Club  
5 pm | Niceville Library | Niceville

**14**  
Craft & Chat  
11 am | Niceville Library | Niceville  
Beginners Drawing (Youth) with Elia Saxer  
4 pm | Artful Things | Niceville  
The Traveling Painter  
5:30 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville  
Chess Night  
6 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville

**15**  
Zen Illustration (Live Model or Still Life) with Loren Boyer  
1 pm | Artful Things | Niceville  
Kids One Stroke Painting with Sheila Mahony  
4 pm | Artful Things | Niceville

**16**  
Crafty Corner  
11 am | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso  
Bands on the Boulevard: Spring Music Series  
6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach  
Concerts in the Village: Black Jacket Symphony  
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin

**17**  
Live Music: The Aces Band  
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

**18**  
Safety First Run4Health 5k Run and Walk  
8 am | The Golf Club at Bluewater Bay | Niceville  
Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class  
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso  
5th Annual Community Fire Truck Pull Fundraiser  
10 am | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville  
Pop-Up: Big Wave Photographer Patrick McFeeley  
11 am | Artful Things | Niceville  
Cookbook Club #1 Spring Meeting  
11 am | Niceville Library | Niceville  
4th Annual Pearl Project Sock Hop  
5 pm | Crosspoint Church | Niceville  
Live Music: Hunter & Tony  
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville  
MAHLER Symphony No. 2 Resurrection  
7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville

**20**  
GSSF Indoor League Match  
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso  
FiberArts Circle  
5 pm | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

**21**  
Beginners Drawing (Youth) with Elia Saxer  
4 pm | Artful Things | Niceville  
Veterans & First Responders Appreciation Lunch  
11:30 am | Niceville Community Center | Niceville

**22**  
Kids One Stroke Painting with Sheila Mahony  
4 pm | Artful Things | Niceville

**23**  
Helen's Puzzle Swap  
10 am | Niceville Library | Niceville

**23 CONT.**  
Greater FWB Chamber 80th Anniversary Celebration  
6 pm | Gulfarium | Okaloosa Island  
Concerts in the Village: Yacht Rock Schooner  
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin

**23-25**  
21st Annual Destin Charity Wine Auction Weekend  
Various Times & Venues

**23-26**  
South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival  
Various Times | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

**24**  
Coloring & Coffee  
11 am | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso  
Live Music: Ivoree and Parker  
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

**25**  
Lu-Lu's Pop-Up Market  
11 am | Artful Things | Niceville  
Live Music: The Cosmic Trio Band  
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

**26**  
Sunset Shrimp Boil  
4 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville

**28**  
Beginners Drawing (Youth) with Elia Saxer  
4 pm | Artful Things | Niceville  
Writers Group  
5:30 pm | Niceville Library | Niceville

**29**  
Kids One Stroke Painting with Sheila Mahony  
4 pm | Artful Things | Niceville  
Intermediate Bonsai Workshop with Zen Den Bonsai  
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

**30**  
Concerts in the Village: Rumours ATL  
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin

## 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

# Bay Buzz

## ECCAC Golf & Gala Exceeds Expectations, Supports Healing for Local Children

The Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center's (ECCAC) 28th annual Golf & Gala, presented by Peggy and Jerry Swanson, raised funds that exceeded expectations, furthering the organization's mission to restore childhoods impacted by abuse.

The Gala, held at the Hilton

Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa, featured dinner, live and silent auctions, and a powerful testimony from 22-year-old Isabella Rose, who received ECCAC services at age 6 and is now thriving. Nationally recognized auctioneer Dawn Marie Kotsonis, known as the "Gavel Girl," led an energetic live auction.

ECCAC CEO Julie Porterfield expressed gratitude to all involved. "From our guests and

sponsors to our Board of Directors, volunteers, and staff, we are incredibly thankful. Together, we are making a meaningful difference in the lives of children and families," she said.

The prestigious Zeke Bratkowski Award was presented to Steve and Lynn Dugas and the Dugas Family Foundation for their longstanding support of ECCAC.

The weekend concluded with a successful golf tournament at



ETA Chapter of Delta Kappa Gamma

Kelly Plantation, where 140 players competed after weather cleared just in time.

ECCAC operates child-friendly centers in Okaloosa and Walton counties, providing coordinated services and no-cost mental health therapy for children and families affected by abuse and neglect.

panded connectivity, which not only benefits travelers but also strengthens the local economy. With VPS located just outside Niceville, the new routes are expected to increase visitor traffic to the area, supporting local restaurants, shops, and businesses throughout the community.

The timing is especially ideal as spring and summer travel ramp up along the Emerald Coast. Visitors from the Northeast can now reach Niceville and surrounding areas more easily, whether they're heading to nearby beaches, exploring local parks, or attending community events.

For residents, the convenience goes both ways. JetBlue's broader network opens the door to seamless connections beyond New York and Boston, including destinations across the U.S., Caribbean, and Europe. Competitive introductory fares have also made these routes an attractive option for those planning family trips or quick getaways.

Overall, JetBlue's new service is more than just an added flight—it's a meaningful upgrade in accessibility for Niceville, enhancing both travel convenience and the city's continued growth as a gateway to the Emerald Coast.

## Patriotic gathering highlights new Celebrate America 250! exhibit and local history

The ETA Chapter of Delta Kappa Gamma conducted its quarterly meeting in the Exhibit Hall at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida in late February. With tables decorated in a patriotic theme, members gathered alongside the new Celebrate America 250! exhibit, which honors the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

A short tour of the museum followed, including the pollinator garden and exhibits spanning from prehistoric times to the turpentine and fishing industries.

## JetBlue Takes Off from VPS, Bringing Nonstop Travel Within Reach for Niceville Residents

JetBlue's arrival at Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport (VPS) is welcome news for Niceville residents, bringing convenient new nonstop travel options just minutes from home.

The airline launched service March 5, 2026, with direct flights to New York's JFK and Boston Logan—two major Northeast hubs that are popular for both business and leisure travel. For Niceville locals, the addition means easier access to key destinations without the hassle of layovers or long drives to larger airports.

City leaders and residents alike are celebrating the ex-

## Gulfarium's Romeo Makes History as Oldest Manatee Ever

A familiar face at the Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park is making waves far beyond our area.

Romeo, a beloved resident manatee at our own Gulfarium, has officially been named the oldest manatee ever recorded by Guinness World Records at an estimated 71 years old — and possibly even older.

Known affectionately as a

*Continued on next page*

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# Mid-Bay Rotary Partners with City of Niceville to Renovate Turkey Creek Restrooms

Mid-Bay Rotary partnered with the City of Niceville to renovate the restrooms at the Turkey Creek Nature Trail, one of the city's most popular outdoor destinations. The restroom building, located adjacent to the park pavilion at the trail's entryway, now reflects the community's continued investment in maintaining and enhancing this beloved space.

Mid-Bay Rotarian Wayne Cheatum led the grant project, coordinating closely with city officials and organizing club members to repaint both restrooms. The total cost of the renovation was approximately \$17,000, with Rotary contributing \$10,400 — including \$4,400 from Mid-Bay Rotary and \$6,000 from District 6940. "Projects like this are what Rotary is all about — service above self and investing in the places that matter most to our community," Cheatum said. "Turkey Creek is a special place, and we're honored to contribute to



its continued care."

Mid-Bay Rotary has already been recognized on the City of Niceville's Facebook page for its generous contribution, and the club is now acknowledged with a Rotary logo displayed on the renovated facility. "We're proud to partner with the City of Niceville on a project that enhances one of our community's most loved outdoor spaces," a Mid-Bay Rotary representative said. "Turkey Creek is a place

where families gather, memories are made and nature is appreciated — and it's important to us to help keep it beautiful and welcoming for everyone."

The Turkey Creek Nature Trail continues to be a favorite for both residents and visitors.



Before



The pavilion offers an ideal setting for group gatherings, while nearby swimming areas provide a refreshing way for families to cool off. Along the boardwalk, peaceful spots invite visitors to relax and take in the natural beauty, with trail markers highlighting local vegetation. Outdoor enthusiasts of all ages can also enjoy canoeing, kayaking and tubing along the creek.



After

## BAY BUZZ

*continued from previous page*

gentle giant, Romeo's story spans decades. Originally discovered in the Miami area in 1957 as a young manatee, he has lived under human care ever since, serving as an ambassador

life now surpasses the previous record-holder, Snooty, who lived to 69.

Beyond the record, Romeo represents something deeper — a living reminder of the importance of protecting Florida's iconic marine life. Manatees continue to face threats from



for education and conservation. Today, he calls the Gulfarium home, where you can visit him in Manatee Cove alongside his companions.

What makes Romeo's milestone even more remarkable is that manatees typically live just 30 to 40 years, making his longevity truly extraordinary. His

boat strikes, habitat loss and environmental challenges, making conservation efforts more critical than ever.

For locals and visitors alike, Romeo's recognition is a point of pride for our community — and a heartwarming reason to celebrate one of the Gulfarium's most cherished residents.

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 Community

# Easter Services Around the Bay

**Okaloosa's Easter Sunrise Celebration on the Beach**  
**April 5 | 6 a.m. | John C. Beasley Park, Okaloosa Island**

One of the Emerald Coast's most meaningful Easter traditions returns as worshippers gather before dawn for the annual Easter Sunrise Service at John C. Beasley Park on Okaloosa Island. Now in its 50th year, the longest-running Easter sunrise beach service in Okaloosa County continues to bring together residents and visitors



alike to celebrate the resurrection of Christ as the sun rises

over the Gulf.

Set against the beautiful backdrop of the Santa Rosa Sound and the sugar-white sands of Okaloosa Island, this interdenominational gathering has long drawn large crowds, with past attendance exceeding 1,500 people. Sunrise services have been a Christian tradition since 1732, symbolizing the discovery of the empty tomb on Easter morning.

Immanuel Anglican Church of Destin will serve as the new host of this beloved community tradition. The service will take place Sunday, April 5, from 6 to 7 a.m. at John C. Beasley Park, 1550 Miracle Strip Parkway SE in Fort Walton Beach.

The ecumenical service will feature live worship music and a message from the Rev. Rob Cornelison, rector of Immanuel Anglican Church. Local churches from across Fort Walton Beach and Destin often participate, with additional Easter celebrations held later that morning throughout the community.

Attendees are encouraged to arrive early and bring blankets or beach chairs, as April mornings along the water can still be cool.

For more information, visit

[iacdestin.org](http://iacdestin.org), email [immanuel@iacdestin.org](mailto:immanuel@iacdestin.org) or call 850-837-6324.

**St. Jude's Episcopal Church**

**200 N. Partin Drive, Niceville**

**April 5 | 6:30 a.m. Sunrise Holy Eucharist II (Outside Weather Permitting)**

8 a.m. Holy Eucharist II with nursery care

10:30 a.m. Holy Eucharist II with choir & nursery care

11:45 a.m. Easter Egg Hunt

For more information or to confirm Easter-specific service details, visit [stjudes.us](http://stjudes.us) or call 850-678-7013.

**Faith Independent Baptist Church - Niceville**

**April 5 | 10 a.m., 11 a.m. & 6 p.m.**

Faith Independent Baptist Church invites the community to celebrate Easter Sunday with a full day of traditional worship services. The morning begins with Sunday School at 10 a.m., followed by a morning worship service at 11 a.m., and an evening service at 6 p.m.

For more information, call 850-678-4387 or visit [faith-niceville.com](http://faith-niceville.com).

**Crosspoint Church - Bluewater Bay Campus**

**April 5 | 8 a.m., 9:30 a.m. & 11 a.m.**

The morning services will focus on the message of the resurrection, concluding a spring sermon series through the book of 1 John.

Guests attending the 8 a.m. service can enjoy breakfast beforehand, while children's programming will be available

during the 9:30 and 11 a.m. services for younger attendees.

For more information, visit [crosspoint.church](http://crosspoint.church) or call 850-678-4411.

**Church on Bayshore**  
**622 Bayshore Drive, Niceville**

**April 5 | 8 a.m., 9:25 a.m., 9:30 a.m. & 11 a.m.**

Church on Bayshore will offer multiple Easter Sunday worship opportunities, including a traditional service at 8 a.m. and contemporary services at 9:25, 9:30 and 11 a.m. Services are designed to provide a welcoming, family-friendly atmosphere with options for both classic and modern worship styles.

For more information, visit [churchonbayshore.org](http://churchonbayshore.org) or call 850-678-4621.

**Crosspoint Church - Niceville Campus**

**April 5**

8 a.m. | Traditional Worship Service | Sanctuary

8:02 a.m. | Contemporary Worship Service | Community Life Center

9:30 a.m. | Contemporary Worship Service | Sanctuary

9:32 a.m. | Contemporary Worship Service | Community Life Center

11 a.m. | Traditional Worship Service | Sanctuary

11:02 a.m. | Contemporary Worship Service | Community Life Center

Childcare is available for PreK and under for the 8 a.m. services. Kids programming is available for 4th grade and younger at the 9:30 and 11 a.m. services. All Sunday Middle

*Continued on page 18*



# The First 30 Days After a Death: What Matters Most (and What Can Wait)

BY KIMBERLY COLE

The first 30 days after a loved one's death are often a blur. There are immediate responsibilities, family emotions, and practical decisions that feel urgent, even when they are not. In Florida, understanding what truly requires prompt attention (and what can safely wait) can prevent unnecessary stress and costly mistakes.

## What Matters Most in the First 30 Days

**1. Securing Property and Important Documents:** One of the most important early steps is securing the decedent's home, vehicles, and personal property. Change locks if necessary, safeguard valuables, and ensure insurance policies remain active. Gather key documents such as the original will, any trust documents, life insurance policies, deeds, and recent financial statements. In Florida, the original

will must ultimately be filed with the clerk of court in the county where the decedent resided, so locating it quickly is important.

**2. Ordering Certified Death Certificates:** Multiple certified death certificates, both the long and the short forms, will be needed to notify financial institutions, transfer assets, and file claims. It is almost always easier to order more than you think you will need at the outset.

**3. Determining Whether Probate Is Required:** Not every asset passes through probate in Florida. Joint accounts with rights of survivorship, beneficiary-designated accounts, and properly funded trusts may transfer outside of court. However, assets titled solely in the decedent's name typically require probate. Early legal guidance can clarify whether a formal administration, summary administration, or no probate at all is appropriate.

**4. Identifying Immediate Financial Obligations:** Certain expenses cannot wait - fu-

neral costs, mortgage payments, property taxes, and insurance premiums among them. It is important not to begin paying other debts too quickly. Florida has a structured creditor process, and paying claims out of order can create personal liability for a personal representative.

## What Can Wait (Even If It Feels Urgent)

**1. Immediate Distribution to Beneficiaries:** Beneficiaries often expect distributions right away. In reality, Florida probate requires notice to creditors and a defined claims period before assets are distributed. Rushing distributions too early can create legal complications if a creditor later emerges.

**2. Selling Real Estate Too Quickly:** While maintaining property is critical, selling it within the first few weeks is rarely required unless there is a pressing financial reason. In many cases, court approval or proper estate authority must be established before a sale can occur.

**3. Resolving Every Family Disagreement:** The early weeks are emotionally charged. Not every disagreement needs to be solved immediately. Once probate is opened and legal authority is clear, many conflicts naturally settle as structure replaces uncertainty.

**4. Closing Every Account Immediately:** Some accounts should remain open temporarily to collect refunds, final income, or reimbursements. Prematurely closing accounts can complicate record-keeping and tax reporting.

## The Emotional Reality of the First Month

Grief significantly affects judgment. Families are exhausted, overwhelmed, and often operating on limited information. In Florida probate, the first 30 days are about stabilization, not completion. The goal is to secure assets, gather information, and establish authority.

Many families later say their biggest mistake was feeling pres-

sured to "get everything done" immediately. Probate is a process measured in months, not weeks. The first month sets the foundation, but it is not the finish line.

## A Practical Framework for the First 30 Days

If you remember nothing else, focus on three priorities:

- Protect the assets.
- Preserve important documents.
- Get clear legal guidance before taking major action.

Everything else can be approached methodically and thoughtfully.

The early days after a death are heavy enough without adding unnecessary legal stress. My role is to help families understand what truly requires immediate action, what can safely wait, and how to move forward with clarity instead of urgency. With the right guidance, the first 30 days can feel manageable, even during one of life's most difficult transitions.

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 Community

# Celebrate 10 Years of Hope

April 8 | 11 a.m. | Pierce Family Children's Advocacy Center | DeFuniak Springs

BY KAY PHELAN

The Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center (ECCAC) is pleased to announce their upcoming event to celebrate the opening of their

second location in 2016, the Pierce Family Advocacy Center (PFAC) in Walton County. In its first 10 years, this Center alone has seen and helped over 3,000 children in Walton County ex-

periencing abuse, abandonment and neglect.

The public and area businesses are invited to attend the event on April 8, from 11am -1pm at the Pierce Family Advocacy Center, 336 College Avenue, DeFuniak Springs, FL. Their keynote speakers will be ECCAC CEO, Julie Porterfield, and Jim and Tammy Pierce, whom PFAC is named after in honor of their generous dona-

tion that made ECCAC's Walton County center possible. The celebration of "10 Years of Hope in Walton County" will conclude with light refreshments and tours of the facility.



Ten years ago, on April 8th, Tammy and Jim Pierce cut the ribbon to open the doors to Walton County's Pierce Family Advocacy Center, the second center for ECCAC.

## A Walk Down Magnolia Lane" Returns April 8 to Benefit Embrace Florida Kids

Celebrate the world's greatest golf tournament while supporting a meaningful cause at "A Walk Down Magnolia Lane," presented by Shoreline Title. Now in its third year, the golf-themed soirée will take place Wednesday, April 8 at 5 p.m. at the WaterColor LakeHouse in Santa Rosa Beach, benefiting Embrace Florida Kids, a nonprofit dedicated to serving vulnerable children and families across Northwest Florida.

Guests will enjoy tournament-inspired cuisine and cocktails, live music, a silent auction, and a variety of golf activities including a simulator, putting contest, closest-to-the-pin, long-drive challenge and a hole-in-one competi-

tion. The evening begins with a cocktail hour at 5 p.m., followed by a Live Calcutta at 7 p.m., where participants can compete for prizes valued at more than \$25,000, including luxury getaway packages to destinations such as The Breakers in Palm Beach, Old Edwards Inn in Highlands, North Carolina, and The Grand Hotel in Fairhope, Alabama.

Tickets are \$150 and available at [walkdownmagnolialane.org/florida](http://walkdownmagnolialane.org/florida).

Sponsorship opportunities remain available and include event badges and promotional recognition. Learn more at [walkdownmagnolialane.org/florida](http://walkdownmagnolialane.org/florida) or visit [EmbraceFLKids.org](http://EmbraceFLKids.org).



As well, April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month, an important landmark for ECCAC with their mission to provide a safe, child-friendly environment to give therapy and services for child victims of abuse and neglect. They also administer many educational prevention safety programs from children to teens in area schools. To create awareness, a special Child Abuse Prevention proclamation will be read by Walton County Sheriff's Office.

The Pierces commented, "We are incredibly honored that the Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center carries our name as it serves abused children in our community. For 10 years, ECCAC has provided hope, healing, and a voice to those who need it most. We are proud to celebrate this milestone and grateful to everyone who makes this mission possible."

Though ECCAC doesn't house children in their two centers in Okaloosa and Walton County, they provide advocacy services and therapy to children and families at no cost. Their Centers house representatives from the Florida Department of Children and Families, Child Protection Teams, State Attorney's Office, Local Law Enforcement Agencies.

For further information about the PFAC event, please call Julie Porterfield at 850-974-8668, or email [julie@eccac.org](mailto:julie@eccac.org). For further information about ECCAC, visit [www.eccac.org](http://www.eccac.org). If abuse is suspected, report it by calling the anonymous Florida Abuse Hotline at 1-800-96-ABUSE.



## 2026-2027 Academic Year Auditions | Registration Open!

**Incoming 3rd Grade Student Auditions:**  
April 25- 10am to 2pm  
April 26 - 2:30pm to 4:30pm

**Incoming 4th Grade Student Auditions:**  
April 25 - 2:30 pm to 4pm

**Incoming 5th Grade Student Auditions:**  
April 28-30 - By Appointment Only



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*All Grades Must Complete the Online Registration by April 23.*

# Ingoglia Brings Action and Accountability

BY DOUG “DOC” STAUFFER

When Florida’s Chief Financial Officer Blaise Ingoglia arrived at the Okaloosa County Sheriff’s Office, he did not do so quietly. In his trademark, no-nonsense style, he came prepared to deliver results—and to remind everyone why Florida continues to lead the nation in both immigration enforcement and fiscal accountability.

Standing with sheriffs from Okaloosa, Santa Rosa, Escambia, and Franklin counties, Ingoglia announced nearly \$1.4 million in reimbursements to support local law enforcement agencies involved in immigration enforcement efforts. But this was more than just a funding announcement; it was a clear statement of priorities.

Ingoglia has quickly established himself as more than a financial watchdog. He is an advocate for law enforcement, a defender of taxpayers, and a leader unafraid to confront

tough issues head-on. His visit to Okaloosa County reflected all three qualities.

In an era when many states struggle to balance public safety with political pressures, Florida has taken a different approach. Under Governor Ron DeSantis’s leadership, and with strong Cabinet partners like Ingoglia, the state has embraced cooperation with federal authorities through programs like the 287(g) partnership with ICE. The result is a system where local deputies are equipped, trained, and supported to remove criminal illegal aliens from our communities.

What stood out most during the event was not just the funding, but also the unity. Sheriffs from across the Panhandle spoke with a single voice: this partnership matters, and the support from the state is having a real impact locally.

Okaloosa County Sheriff Eric Aden stressed that these re-



sources enhance deputies’ ability to arrest and detain individuals who threaten public safety. Santa Rosa County Sheriff Bob Johnson underscored how vital it is for deputies to have the necessary equipment and resources to perform their duties safely. Escambia County Sheriff Chip Simmons and Franklin County Sheriff A.J. “Tony” Smith expressed similar views, all highlighting a coordinated effort that is yielding tangible results.

This is what leadership looks

like—state and local officials working together, not just in theory, but in action.

Ingoglia’s message was clear: Florida will not wait on Washington to address the illegal immigration crisis. Instead, the state is taking decisive action, supporting law enforcement,

and making sure those who break the law are held accountable.

At the same time, Ingoglia continues to advocate for efforts to eliminate fraud, waste, and abuse in government spending. His work—often compared to the federal DOGE-style reforms—focuses on making sure every taxpayer dollar is used effectively. That dedication to fiscal discipline is as important as the state’s commitment to public safety.

It is rare to see both priori-

ties—law enforcement support and financial stewardship—executed so effectively simultaneously. Yet that is exactly what Floridians are witnessing.

For those of us here in Okaloosa County, the visit was both encouraging and educational. Encouraging because it showed that our local agencies have strong support from the highest levels of state government. Educational because it demonstrated what can happen when leadership is focused, decisive, and grounded in principles.

Blaise Ingoglia didn’t come to make headlines—though he definitely did. He came to accomplish things.

And in doing so, he reinforced a simple but powerful truth: when leaders are willing to stand firm, support those on the front lines, and protect the taxpayers who fund everything, communities like ours become stronger, safer, and better prepared for future challenges.



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## Education News

### Niceville High junior Emma Michel named Sunshine State Scholar, earns statewide STEM scholarship



Niceville High School junior Emma Michel has been recognized as one of Florida's top STEM students, earning selection as a 2026 Sunshine State Scholar and one of just 10 students statewide to receive a prestigious STEM scholarship.

Emma represented Okaloosa County at the Sunshine State Scholars Conference in Orlando, hosted by the Florida Department of Education, where top 11th-grade students in science, technology, engineering and mathematics are honored for academic excellence and leadership. Earlier this year, she was named a district representative for the Okaloosa County School District alongside Fort Walton Beach High School student Penelope Gordon.

Each Florida school district

nominates outstanding STEM students for the program, which also introduces participants to higher education and career opportunities. Following the conference, Emma advanced through a competitive statewide process — including six additional essays — to earn a one-year scholarship from the Florida Prepaid College Foundation and the Florida Education Foundation. “Emma represents the very best of Okaloosa County students,” said Superintendent Marcus Chambers. “Her academic dedication, passion for STEM and commitment to excellence truly set her apart.”

Niceville High School Principal Charlie Mareello said Emma exemplifies the strength of the Eagle community. “We are so proud of Emma for receiving this state-level recognition,” Mareello said. “She is enrolled in five Advanced Placement courses, carries a 4.57 GPA and is a standout member of the NHS swim team. She is one exceptional Eagle.”

Through the program, Emma engaged with university representatives, colleges and industry leaders while exploring future STEM pathways — an achievement that reflects both her determination and the district's commitment to academic excellence.

### UWF receives \$555K NIH grant to launch NeuroNauts Scholars Program

The University of West Florida has been awarded a five-year, \$555,000 National Institutes of Health R25 Research Education Grant to launch the NeuroNauts Scholars Program, an intensive summer research experience for local high school students.

Funded by the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, the program will select cohorts of eight juniors and seniors from Escambia and Santa Rosa counties for an eight-week immersive experience in neuroscience research. Areas of study include Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease, cognitive psychology, computational neuroscience, stroke health disparities and neurodevelopmental disorders. “Programs like NeuroNauts represent exactly the kind of innovative initiative that advances both our research mission and our commitment to the people of Northwest Florida,” said UWF Provost Dr. Jaromy Kuhl. “Introducing high school students to real scientific research ... is how we build the next generation of scientists and strengthen the pipeline into STEM careers for our region.”

Led by Dr. Rodney Gutt-

mann, professor and interim chair of the Department of Biology, and Dr. Allison Schwartz, director of UWF's Office of Undergraduate Research, the program pairs each student with a faculty mentor and embeds them in active research labs across multiple disciplines. “These students are not watching demonstrations,” Guttmann said. “They are working side by side with faculty on real research questions ... gaining exposure many don't encounter until graduate school.”

Faculty mentors bring expertise ranging from Alzheimer's biomarkers and Parkinson's neuroprotection to EEG studies, computational brain modeling and stroke risk disparities. The program also includes a clinical perspective from a physician and guidance from a nationally recognized undergraduate research leader.

Students will be paid, helping remove financial barriers to participation. In addition to lab work, the program includes seminars on research ethics, scientific communication and career development, culminating

in a research symposium.

The inaugural session runs June 1 through July 24, 2026. The application deadline is April 1.

For more information, visit [bit.ly/NeuroNautsProgram](http://bit.ly/NeuroNautsProgram) or contact Emily Harris at [eharris@uwf.edu](mailto:eharris@uwf.edu) or 850-474-2751.

### Okaloosa Students Excel at 2026 East Panhandle Regional Science and Engineering Fair

Students from Okaloosa and Walton counties showcased their creativity, curiosity, and critical thinking at the 2026 East Panhandle Regional Science and Engineering Fair. The projects were presented on February 11 at the Northwest Florida Fairgrounds, with the Awards Ceremony held February 17 at Beachside Community Church.

Professional scientists and engineers served as judges, conducting personal interviews with each student. These discussions provided feedback, guidance, and exposure to role models in science and engineering, help-

*Continued on next page*

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# 5 Tips For End-Of-Year Success

As the school year winds down, kids (and parents!) often feel the excitement of summer break and the anticipation of a well-earned rest. However, before jumping into summer fun, it's important to help kids finish the year strong—especially in math.

With a few focused steps and tips, parents can help their children avoid math struggles, stay on track, build confidence, and start the next school year with a solid foundation in math.

## Tip #1: Identify Signs of Struggle in Math

Frustration during homework, a drop in test scores, and avoidant behavior are all signs of a student struggling with math.

Spotting these signs early gives you time to address any gaps in understanding, helping them feel ready for a strong finish to the school year.

## Tip #2: Make a Plan for Success

If your child needs extra support, now is a great time to create a plan to help them succeed. Start by talking to their teacher, who can provide insights and strategies for improvement.

You might also explore tutoring options, like Mathnasium,



which offers personalized learning plans to K-12 students to strengthen skills and build confidence.

## Tip #3: Productive Study Habits

Establishing a consistent and effective study routine can relieve stress and help kids make the most of their study time. Here are a few ideas:

- Dedicate a quiet space and regular time
- Break down big tasks into smaller goals
- Limit distractions and take short breaks every 20-30 minutes

## Tip #4: Encourage a Positive Mindset and Celebrate Small Wins

Building confidence in math goes beyond mastering the material—it's also about fostering a positive mindset.

Celebrating small wins, like solving a tough problem or improving a test score, helps kids feel capable, motivated, and more willing to take on challenges.

## Tip #5: Focus on Growth

It's not just about grades—it's about building confidence and a love for learning. Supporting your child now helps create a strong foundation, making fu-

ture math challenges easier to tackle.

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 Ele-

mentary School, Ruckel Middle School and Rocky Bayou Christian School.

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

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## See the Difference This Summer

Some kids need to catch up. Others are ready to race ahead. Mathnasium's summer programs bring the fun and the fundamentals to help kids learn new skills, tackle advanced concepts, and improve their problem-solving.

**Pre-enroll today and get \$100 OFF!\***

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1538 John Sims Pkwy E., Niceville, FL 32578

**MATHNASIUM**

\*Offer valid through 04/30/2026 at this location only. 6-month enrollment required.

## EDUCATION NEWS

*continued from previous page*

ing students communicate their work using real-world scientific language and methodology. “The quality and innovation of these projects highlight the next generation of scientists and engineers,” said Superintendent Marcus Chambers.

Awards recognized outstanding projects across multiple categories, with first-place winners required to meet specific point thresholds. State Finalists were selected based on overall scores, ensuring top performers had the opportunity to advance.

Congratulations to all award winners for their creativity, dedication, and outstanding achievements! For a full list of winners, special awards, and photos from the event, visit <https://www.okaloosaschools.com/o/ocsd/page/2026-science-fair-awards>.

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## AJ's Seafood & Oyster Bar

Since 1984, AJ's Seafood and Oyster Bar has been serving cold Gulf Coast oysters and cool libations. What began as a popular local hang out known for fresh oysters and cold beer has grown into one of the most iconic "hot spots" on the Destin Harbor. From its humble beginning shucking oysters off the deck behind a small trailer on the Destin Harbor, it has grown to four locations along our Emerald Coast, serving fresh seafood, live music and exciting water activities in the Destin area. Attention all die

hard football fans, AJ's boasts the one and only Jumbotron on the Destin Harbor. AJ's serves up delicious daily specials, mouth-watering drinks plus entertaining live music all month. Don't miss any of the action just come on down to AJ's Seafood and Oyster Bar all season long.

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

## LJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant

Suds, Songs, Sunsets and Sports! Welcome to LJ Schoo-



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

served over cheese grits.

Sundays: Brunch, 9 a.m. - 1 p.m.

Tuesdays: Taco & Margarita Night, 3-9 p.m.

Wednesdays: Kids Eat Free, 5-9 p.m.

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

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

**April 26:** Sunday Shrimp Boil is Back! Shrimp Boil 4-7 p.m.; Live Music 4-8 p.m.

**April 4:** 10% of food sales will be donated to the Niceville Fireworks Fund.

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

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

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

(850) 897-6400  
bluewaterbaymarina.com/schooners  
290 Yacht Club Dr., Unit 200,  
Niceville in Bluewater Bay

## JoJo's Coffee and Goodness

An iconic favorite of locals, owner and operator of JoJo's Coffee and Goodness Angela "JoJo" Stevenson invites you to enter her cafe and relaxed coffee shop atmosphere for a daily dose of "goodness." Stop in for mouth-watering cinnamon rolls, scones, coffee cake, banana and pumpkin breads, apple cider muffins, chocolate chip cookie bars, or brownies with espresso ganache. Gluten free bakery items available. Coffee roasted every week in-house. Try a breakfast special with quiche or kolache alongside hashbrown casserole and cup of coffee. Breakfast burritos are rolled and ready to grab and go-choose from bacon, birria, chorizo or veggie served with house made cilantro lime or chipotle sauces. Espresso, latte, cappuccino, cold brew or nitro made to order. Breakfast and lunch sandwich specials and a full evening catering menu if you are looking to host an event or party. Come for the coffee, stay for the goodness!

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## EASTER SERVICES

continued from page 12

School, High School, and Life Groups are canceled.

### Manna Church - West Florida (Niceville)

April 5 | 8 a.m., 9:30 a.m. & 11 a.m.

Manna Church will host three Easter worship experiences designed for individuals and families alike. The services offer a welcoming, modern atmosphere focused on celebrating the hope of Easter.

### Rocky Bayou Baptist Church - Niceville

Good Friday, April 3 | 6 p.m.

Easter Sunday, April 5 | 10:15 a.m.

### Niceville Church of Christ

April 5 | 9 a.m. & 5 p.m. (Typical Sunday Times)

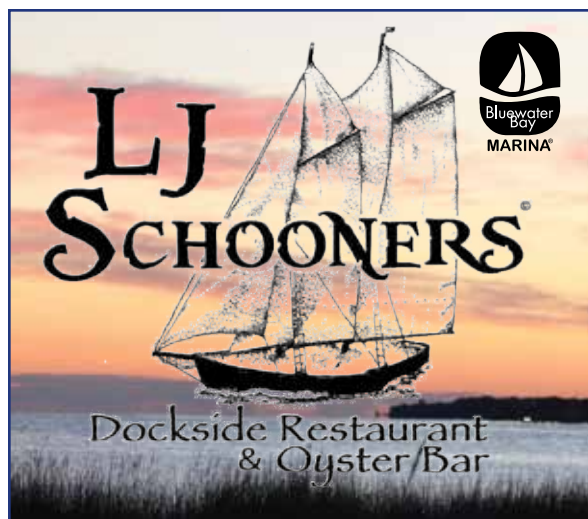
### St. Paul Lutheran Church - Niceville

April 5 | 8:30 a.m. & 10:30 a.m. (Typical Sunday Times)

### Holy Name of Jesus Catholic Church - Niceville

Easter Weekend Masses | Times Vary

Holy Name of Jesus Catholic Church will celebrate Easter with special Masses throughout Holy Week and Easter Sunday. Parishioners and visitors are encouraged to check the church website for the full Easter schedule and liturgical services.



## Sunset Shrimp Boil

Shrimp Boil - 4-7pm  
Live Music - 4-8pm

Shrimp • Sausage • Corn on the Cob  
Potatoes • Bread - \$18 per plate

March 29 • April 26 • May 31 • June 28 • July 26  
July 26 • August 30 • September 27 • October 25

Shrimp provided by Byrd's Seafood Market

**Saturday, April 4: 10% of food sales will be donated to the Niceville Fireworks Fund**



### More Fun

- Margarita Monday - Tini Tuesday
- Wednesday - Kid's Eat Free & Sailboat Race 6pm
- Every Thursday - Throw Down 6pm & Open Mic/Karaoke
- Sunday - Brunch 9am
- April 3 - Parker Willingham 6-10pm
- April 4 - Rhythm Express 6-10pm
- April 5 - Easter Sunday Brunch 9am-1pm
- April 10 - Chrome Reverse 6-10pm
- April 11 - SouthSiders 6-10pm
- April 14 - Chess Night 6pm
- April 17 - Steel Rooster 6-10pm
- April 18 - Dive Clean Up 10am & Rockers 4 Life 6-10pm
- April 21 - The Traveling Painter 5:30pm
- April 24 - Jody Lucas 6-9pm
- April 25 - Beach Dogz 6-10pm
- April 26 - Shrimp Boil 4-7pm & Coconut Radio 4-8pm

**Oyster Bar Hours:** Mon.-Thurs. 3pm-10pm, Fri.-Sat. 11am to midnight, Sun. 10am to 9pm

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

290 Yacht Club Dr., Niceville • Bluewater Bay • (850) 897-6400 • Visit [www.bluewaterbaymarina.com](http://www.bluewaterbaymarina.com) for more events!

# CARE on the Coast TurtleFest Returns April 18!

BY MARY FOMBY, GULFARIUM

## A Coastal Festival for Sea Turtle Conservation

Get ready for one of the most exciting days of the year at the Gulfarium — CARE on the Coast TurtleFest, happening April 18! This lively, all-inclusive coastal celebration brings together music, food, art, animal experiences, and conservation for a festival the whole family will love.

Proudly presented by Valparaiso Coca-Cola, TurtleFest raises critical funds for the Gulfarium CARE Center, which rescues and rehabilitates endangered sea turtles along the Emerald Coast. Every ticket purchased helps support the lifesaving care the CARE Center team provides to injured and stranded turtles



throughout the year.

## Music, Food, and Festival Fun All Day Long

From the moment you arrive, guests will enjoy multiple live musicians and bands performing throughout the park, and kids will especially love the pirate band!

Your all-inclusive ticket means you can explore the park while enjoying all-you-care-to-enjoy food and drinks from amazing local restaurants and vendors

stationed throughout the Gulfarium. Between performances, guests can wander the park, discover new flavors, and enjoy the festive energy around every corner.

Adding to the creative spirit of the day, local artist Kelly Pierre will be painting live during the event, giving guests the chance to watch a work of art come to life in real time.

## Entertainment Around Every Corner

TurtleFest will have surprises waiting throughout the park. Stilt walkers and roaming entertainers will keep the energy high, while families can visit the Kids Zone for crafts, games, and conservation-themed activities.

Guests will also have opportunities to enjoy animal meet-and-greets with penguins and other Gulfarium residents, making TurtleFest a truly one-of-a-kind experience that blends wildlife, education, and celebration.

## VIP Experiences with a View

For an upgraded festival experience, VIP tickets include access to a private area overlooking Dolphin Oasis, complete with exclusive seating, a private bar, and premium food options. It's

the perfect place to relax, enjoy the music, and take in the beautiful coastal setting while supporting sea turtle conservation.

## Save with Presale Tickets

TurtleFest is one of the CARE Center's most anticipated events of the year — and the best time to purchase tickets is now. Pre-sale pricing is available for a limited time, along with discounted event T-shirt and commemorative cup add-ons.

Join us on April 18 for a day filled with music, food, wildlife, and community — all in support of protecting endangered sea turtles along the Emerald Coast.

Purchase your tickets now at [go.gulfarium.com/turtlefest](http://go.gulfarium.com/turtlefest) and be part of the celebration!

# 39 Years of the Sandestin Wine Festival!

Thursday, April 16 –  
Sunday, April 19

## Grand Wine Tastings Friday the 17th, 5-8 p.m. and Saturday the 18th, 1-4 p.m. | The Village of Baytowne Wharf

The 39th year of being THE BEST, the Annual Sandestin Wine Festival, voted “Best Event” by Visit South Walton and known as the “Kentucky Derby of Wine Festivals,” will run Thursday, April 16, through Sunday, April 19 at The Village of Baytowne Wharf at Sandestin.

A pioneer among Emerald

Coast festivals, the Sandestin Wine Festival has been drawing like-minded wine-enthusiasts looking to discover more about the culture and vibe of the Northwest Florida Gulf Coast with a fun filled, come-as-you-are ambiance for almost four decades! Whether you're a wine aficionado or a grape novice looking to learn more, there's something for everyone with 100's of featured wines!

Topping area polls as a must-experience event, this beloved festival offers FOUR full days of unique events including wine dinners with celebrity chefs,

wine brunch, live music, interactive experiences, culinary tents, and of course wine tastings.

On Friday, 5-8 p.m. and Saturday 1-4 p.m., the main events shine with 100's of featured wines and gourmet bites! Enjoy two days of discovery with hundreds of domestic and international wines represented from premier vineyards throughout the globe! Speak with vintner representatives in a rare, intimate setting to learn more about your favorites. Tastings are complemented by gourmet experiences from featured chefs along the Emerald Coast with tents offer-

ing delectable bite-sized appetizers perfect for pairing. Local and regional music also set the vibe for fun days of discovery. Rain or Shine, there will be wine! Tickets on sale now! For more informa-

tion and tickets, visit [SandestinWineFestival.com](http://SandestinWineFestival.com).



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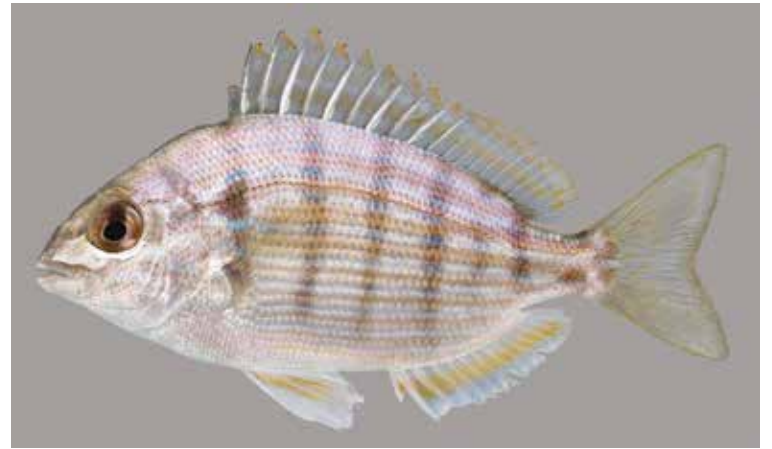
# Fish in our Waters



By HELEN PETRE

Have you ever wondered what was swimming around at the beach, in the bays, and the dune lakes? Even if you don't see them, there are living things in the water all around you. What are those little fish swimming around your legs? Most

are juveniles, searching for protection in shallow, coastal water and sea grass. The most common are pinfish, but many juveniles seek protection in shallow coastal water, and feed in bays or the shallow dune lakes. Here are a few. You can catch them



Pinfish photo courtesy UFL Rock O'Connor



Pinfish photo courtesy UFL

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in dip nets if you are quiet and quick.

**Pinfish**

Pinfish have sharp spines on the dorsal fin, providing the common name. They are prey for pelicans, gulls, turtles, dolphins and herons, so their life span is short. When he was seven E.O Wilson lost vision in his right eye when a pinfish he caught jumped and struck him in the eye.

**Silverside**

Silversides are abundant year-round hiding in grass beds from their larger predators.

**Pipefish**

Pipefish are slow swimmers but blend in with the sea grasses for protection. They are related to seahorses, which are also found in our grass beds. The males of both pipefish and sea horses carry the eggs in pouches, while the females swim unburdened.

**Needlefish**

Needlefish look like pipefish

but there are major differences. Needle fish have teeth, are predators, and swim at the surface of the water.

**Striped Mullet**

Any time you see a fish jump out of the water, you can bet it is a mullet. Mullet are important commercial and recreational fish found year-round in our waters. You can see them jumping while standing on the beach, but they are bottom feeders, most common in grass beds eating algae. According to locals, mullet fries with beans and grits are a panhandle staple. The striped mullet, or black mullet, is most often food, but we also have white mullets.

There are many other fish you can find in our waters, sea grass beds, and dune lakes. Finding fish makes for a good day. Enjoy the waters.

*Helen Petre is a retired USDA biologist and college biology professor. She spends her time volunteering, teaching, and writing science articles to share her interests with future generations.*

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# 57th Annual All Sports Banquet

## The best food. The best company. The best cause.

BY DOUG "DOC" STAUFFER

More than 1,200 people filled the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center for the 57th Annual All Sports Association Awards Banquet—an evening that has become a signature event across Okaloosa and the surrounding counties.

If you love sports and need a shot in the arm for America's future...

If you love reconnecting with old friends and making new ones...

If you enjoy watching one of the greatest live auctions anywhere on the Emerald Coast...

All Sports Banquet is the place to be.

From business leaders and coaches to educators, elected officials, former pros, and rising stars, it truly was a "Who's Who" of our region—all gathered for one purpose: celebrating athletic excellence and strengthening youth opportunities through sports.



### Honoring a Legacy of Service

One of the most meaningful moments of the night was the presentation of the 2026 Colonel Al Byrne Award to Taylor Grigsby of the Okaloosa County Tax Collector's Office. The award recognizes individuals who uplift local youth through athletic support, mentorship, and strong community values. Taylor's dedication reflects the enduring legacy of Colonel Byrne and his lifelong commitment to young people.

### Celebrating the Region's Best

Since 1970, the All Sports Association has brought together the finest athletes in Northwest Florida. Each February, the banquet honors the area's top high school, collegiate, amateur, professional, and Special Olympic athletes.

PHOTOS BY DOUG STAUFFER

### A Hall of Fame Message

NFL Hall of Famer Derrick Brooks served as the keynote speaker, delivering a powerful message on leadership, perseverance, discipline, and service.

His words resonated deeply, perfectly capturing the spirit of the evening—success on the field means little without character off it.

The Association extended

sincere thanks to Brooks for not only sharing his journey, but for continuing to invest in communities and young athletes long after his playing days.

*Continued on next page*

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# Good Fences, Great Neighbors — and a Few Laughs Along the Way

By JON & BRITTANY YOUNKER

In neighborhoods everywhere, one thing still rings true: good fences make good neighbors. At Dirty N Sturdy Fencing, we've found that statement to be surprisingly accurate — and sometimes pretty entertaining, too.

A well-built fence does more than mark property lines. It creates privacy for backyard barbecues, keeps pets safely contained, and adds a clean, finished look to any home. It also removes that awkward moment when you're not quite sure where your yard ends and your neighbor's begins. Simply put, a quality fence makes life easier for everyone.

Recently, our crew completed a fence installation for a homeowner looking to add pri-



vacy and security. The finished product was sharp, sturdy, and built to stand up to the elements. As the team packed up, a neighbor wandered over, took a look, and admired the craftsmanship before heading back home.

A few minutes later, his wife

walked over with a smile and a simple question: "Since you're already here, when can you come back and do ours, too?"

We'll take that kind of compliment any day.

Moments like that remind us why we love what we do. A

great fence doesn't just improve one property — it can inspire the whole street. Before long, one backyard project turns into a neighborhood upgrade.

And let's be honest — sometimes privacy is the whole point. Whether you're enjoying a qui-

et evening outside, blocking the view of the neighbor's trampoline Olympics, or simply wanting a little more personal space, a good fence makes all the difference. On the flip side, maybe you're just trying to block out that neighbor who enjoys their freedom a little too much. Either way, we're here to help.

At Dirty N Sturdy Fencing, our focus is simple: build strong fences, treat customers right, and leave every yard better than we found it. If the neighbors start calling afterward, well, that's just proof the job was done right.

Because when a fence is built the Dirty N Sturdy way, everyone on the block notices — and sometimes, the neighbors want one, too.

## ALL SPORTS

*continued from page 21*

### This year's honorees included:

- Wuerffel Trophy: Michael Taaffe (University of Texas)
- Professional Award: Alex Ward (Las Vegas Raiders)
- Male Collegiate Award: Jayce Brown (LSU)

- Female Collegiate Award: Gracie Grant (Dallas Baptist University)
- Taylor Haugen Trophy: Harper Campbell (Niceville High School)
- Amateur Award: Coleman Borthwick (South Walton High School)
- Male Scholastic Award: Deacon Avery (Niceville High School)

- School)
- Female Scholastic Award: Izzy Douglas (Fort Walton Beach High School)
- Special Olympian Award: Ethan McCormick (Navarre High School graduate)

The Taylor Haugen Trophy, established in 2009 in memory of Taylor Reid Haugen, contin-

ues to remind our community of the motto that defines the award: Don't Quit. Never Give Up.

### More Than a Banquet

The All Sports Association is made up of dues-paying volunteers whose mission is simple but powerful: raise funds for local youth-oriented nonprofit organizations with an emphasis on sports programs.

Through the annual banquet and summer golf tournament, the Association supports:

- Boys & Girls Club of the Emerald Coast
- Special Olympics Florida — Okaloosa

- Eleanor J. Johnson Youth Center

- Okaloosa Walton FCA

For more than five decades, this event has proven that athletics is about more than trophies. It is about character, discipline, teamwork, and opportunity.

The All Sports Association believers extend a heartfelt thanks to every attendee, sponsor, volunteer, and supporter. This night would not be possible without those who believe in the power of sports to transform lives beyond the field. And judging by the crowd of 1,200 strong—Northwest Florida still believes.



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# Golf Series: Green Grass, Green Tees, Great Golf at Bluewater Bay Golf Course Await this Spring!



By BARBARA PALMGREN

Back in the folk-rock era of the 60's, a hit song had folks humming and smiling. It focused on wandering on to "where the grass is greener still."

*"Green, green, it's green they say,  
On the far side of the hill.  
Green, green, I'm goin' away,  
To where the grass is greener still."*

Today, travelers who wander down to our paradise, see soft white sands, green golf courses, emerald green and blue waters and enjoy air-conditioned comfort of tourist stores and restaurants in every part of the Florida Panhandle.

One such place to stop for both golf and a welcoming bar and restaurant after a golf round, is the Golf Club at Bluewater Bay in Niceville. The Blue Tee restaurant inside the clubhouse offers breakfast, lunch and dinner.

A few days ago, as a golf reporter and one who pretends she is a golfer, I spent time with the person I think is the key to success for any golf course.

That person is the golf course superintendent. Maligned in the movie Caddyshack, Bill Murray was the hopeless man who spent time chasing a gopher in a war he was never going to win. Unlike Bill, Alfredo Riveras, employee of Elite Golf, the management company for the course, is not chasing gophers or other critters. He's stockpiling oak. Lots of oak. Oak trees that once drained precious water from the fairways. And he's winning the battle. If anyone still uses a wood burning fireplace, you may want to contact Alfredo for logs that can be used for your home!

Why is this important? Between the tee box where a golfer hits his or her drive and the green

where putts determine the score for the hole, lies the long stretch of fairway. The fairway must be green. Not brown. Not grey. But green. Getting water to this stretch of land is critical. Large trees with roots expanding into the fairway won't work. A mature oak tree can consume over 40 gallons of water a day during growing season.

And we have a longer growing season in the south. A much longer growing season. This competition for water between turfgrass and tree roots can only end in dry spots on the fairways and golfers who won't play the course.

Alfredo Riveras was a trusted assistant superintendent working many years in the Dallas area for Elite Golf. Elite Golf selected Alfredo for this new position in Bluewater Bay and Alfredo was the perfect choice to be head course superintendent. Greens that were once brown are now green. Alfredo showed me before and after photos. But, I had to know for myself. I walked on these new greens and was amazed. Alfredo knew how to use the right fertilizer, sand, aeration and water to produce what golfers want above all else: perfect greens. Art Jean, one of 330 owners of Preserve Bluewater



Bay, the organization who raised funds to save the course two years ago, is proud of Alfredo's hard work and results. Art had a "I told you so" grin on his face while I took photos of the green.

Alfredo's crew begins work at 6 a.m. mowing fairways, greens, raking sand traps and preparing for morning golfers. They then tackle other tasks: tree trimming, re-edging greens, maintaining equipment and mowing the rough. Equipment is owned by the course and maintained by



a mechanic in the maintenance crew. Golf carts for golfers are leased.

Elite Golf analyzed the course before agreeing to manage the business. In addition to the above improvements for greens and fairways, they wanted greens expanded to the original size of the course designed by Jerry Pate. Elite Golf also wanted certain tee boxes lengthened. Why? Eighteen-hole golf courses should all be a minimum of 6,000 yards for a semi-professional golfer. All the

18-hole courses in our area understand this requirement and offer a series of tee boxes to attract all levels of golfers.

So, keep humming that old familiar tune, knowing now, at Bluewater Bay...

*"Green, green, it's green they say,  
On the far side of the hill.  
Green, green, we're hitting our drives,  
To where the grass is greener still."*



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# A Community Loss with Special Recognition – Danton Barto

By BARBARA PALMGREN

A phone call came one night at our home. It was my son's best friend from Niceville High School. I was also his civics teacher and a fan of all the sports he played at Ruckel Junior High and Niceville High School. His voice was low and clear. I would have known it anywhere. It was Mickey Barto.

Mickey now lives in St. Petersburg, and I see him when I visit family in the area. He always comes to holiday parties, and I play golf with him as he harasses my sons and grandsons while they place bets on every hole.

Mickey asked if he could stay with my husband and me for a few days. He had been invited to attend a luncheon to honor his younger brother, Danton, who

died due to complications from COVID-19 in 2021. Danton was only 50 years old.

I was absolutely thrilled to see him, and my husband, who is the chef in our household, immediately began preparing menus for dinner. Any chance to spoil one of our extended family members is always an opportunity we never miss.

Mickey asked if I would attend the luncheon with him. We walked together into the Emerald Coast Convention Center, where he was surrounded by old friends and his sister, Sara. There were two honorees that day inducted into the All Sports Association 2026 Hall of Fame. Danton was one, and so was Coach John Hicks, also from Niceville. I knew and admired Coach Hicks when I worked at

Niceville High as a guidance counselor and International Baccalaureate coordinator. His record of success from 1999 to 2019 is remarkable. This was Niceville's moment to be treasured, for sure.

Emcee Bernard Johnson of Florida Power & Light introduced people who knew and worked with Danton throughout his career. They spoke of his achievements in the many sports he played, with football being his first love — his record tackles, his professional football career, his coaching, and his compassion for others. His football jersey, No. 59, was retired by the Memphis State Tigers. His football jersey, No. 44, was retired by Niceville High. And now, this honor from the 57th Annual All Sports Association.



Someone came up to me and said they heard Mickey was as good an athlete as his brother. I smiled. I didn't want to take anything away from Danton's special day. Yes, Mickey earned numerous athletic awards at Ruckel and Niceville, playing on the state championship football team in 1988. To say the two brothers grew up learning, loving, and sharing their talents in the sporting world would be an understatement. The difference was that Danton carried his abilities beyond high school into college and professional sports. Danton had a passion for the game that could not be matched.

Danton attended Memphis State, where he was a four-year letterman and two-time Butkus Award nominee. He holds the school record for career total tackles (473). He won the All Sports Male Collegiate Award in 1994. After college, Danton played five years of professional football in the CFL and AFL.

He then coached for 10 years as head coach of the Memphis Xplorers, leading the team to its first league championship. Taylor Morton, Rams senior personnel executive, spoke of Barto's work as an NFL scout. Taylor talked about Danton's toughness as a football player and his love of the game.

I watched Mickey listen to the stories, holding back tears. How do you measure the worth of a brother? There is no way. But Danton's memory will not be forgotten in the county where he was loved. Danton will forever be enshrined on the Wall of Honor at the conference center, thanks to the All Sports Association.

With one last look at his brother's photo on that wall, we walked from the luncheon. It was time to change from suit and tie to golf shirt and shorts and play a round with his extended family at Shalimar Pointe Golf Course.

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BY MELANIE YOST,  
BE WELL SOLUTIONS

# When Antidepressants Don't Work: The Inflammation Connection

If you've tried multiple antidepressants without finding lasting relief, please know you're not alone—and it's not a personal failure. The answer may lie not in finding the "right" medication, but in understanding that your depression may involve biological mechanisms that serotonin-focused treatments simply weren't designed to address. Emerging research points to neuroinflammation as a central driver of treatment-resistant depression, and this discovery is changing the way compassionate clinicians approach care.

## How Brain Inflammation Drives Depression

Neuroinflammation refers to inflammatory processes within

the central nervous system. Research consistently shows that people with treatment-resistant depression have elevated levels of pro-inflammatory markers including IL-6, IL-1 $\beta$ , TNF- $\alpha$ , and C-reactive protein. These inflammatory cytokines quietly disrupt normal brain function through several interconnected pathways.

They activate an enzyme called IDO, which diverts tryptophan away from serotonin production—meaning even when a medication blocks serotonin reuptake, your brain may not have enough raw material to maintain healthy levels. Inflammation also chronically activates microglia, the brain's immune cells, which then damage synaptic connections and impair your brain's ability to grow and adapt. This helps explain why so many people with treatment-resistant depression also struggle with brain fog, concentration, and mental flexibility—symptoms that rarely budge with standard antidepressants. On top of that,

chronic inflammation dysregulates your stress response system, elevating cortisol in ways that further damage neurons and keep the cycle going.

## Why Traditional Antidepressants Often Fall Short

SSRIs and SNRIs were built around the idea that depression equals low serotonin or norepinephrine. For many people, they help. But when inflammation is driving your depression, these medications address only part of the picture. The inflammatory cascade keeps disrupting neurotransmitter production and damaging neural connections regardless of what the medication is doing.

This explains something we hear often: "I felt a little better, but never quite right." That partial response isn't a sign that treatment can't work—it's a clue that something deeper needs attention.

## Could Inflammation Be Part of Your Story?

Some signs that inflammation may be contributing to your depression include: partial response to multiple antidepressants; significant fatigue, body aches, or pain sensitivity; conditions like autoimmune disorders or metabolic syndrome; elevated inflammatory markers on bloodwork; and persistent brain fog or cognitive difficulties.

## A More Complete Approach to Healing

At Be Well Solutions of Destin, we believe you deserve care that addresses the full picture. Our Brain Restore Program combines evidence-based modalities—including Ketamine Therapy, mild Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy, Low Level Laser Therapy, Neurofeedback, and targeted brain health supplements—to address neuroinflammation and support lasting recovery.

Ketamine, for example, doesn't just work on gluta-

mate—research shows it also meaningfully reduces inflammatory cytokines in brain regions associated with depression, which may explain why it helps when so many other treatments haven't.

"We often find that clients who haven't responded to conventional treatment are carrying an inflammatory burden that traditional psychiatry doesn't address. Understanding that changes everything about how we approach care."

— Melanie Yost, LCSW, Co-owner, Be Well Solutions

You don't have to keep trying the same approaches and hoping for different results. We warmly welcome patients from Destin, Fort Walton Beach, Panama City Beach, and throughout the Florida Panhandle.

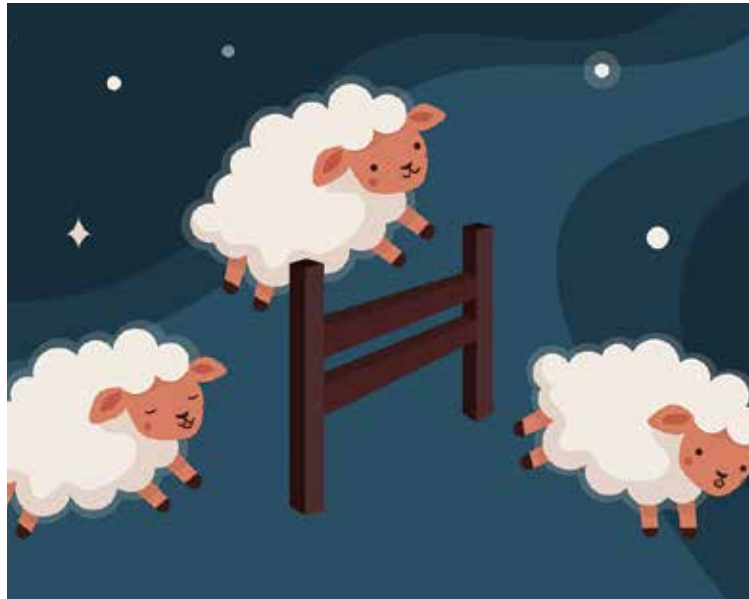
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when estrogen and testosterone are where they should be, sleep is just better. These hormones help your body make melatonin - the hormone that tells your brain it's time for bed. They support GABA - the calming brain chemical that relaxes you at night.

They also keep serotonin steady, improving mood and sleep quality. They help lower cortisol so you're not wide awake at 3 a.m. Finally, they stabilize body temperature so night sweats don't keep kicking the covers off. When hormones are low, people often describe their sleep as "fragile"—light, restless, and easy to interrupt, with lots of tossing, turning, and clock-watching.

**How hormone therapy helps:**

Hormone therapy in the form of pellets helps, because it delivers hormones in a slow, steady way. No daily creams. No spikes and crashes. Just consistent support that eliminates hot flashes and night sweats, helps you stay asleep and wake up rested and excited to start your day. Progesterone has a naturally calming effect that helps quiet a racing mind at bedtime. As hormones rebalance, everything else just works. Melatonin

and serotonin can do their jobs again, and cortisol settles down. The result? Better nights—and better days. When you're sleeping well, your mood, focus, and energy improve, which makes it easier to wind down the next night.

**What people usually notice:**

Most patients feel the benefits within the first few weeks and reliable improvement by week six as hormone levels stabilize. Hormone pellet therapy eliminates hot flashes, night sweats, and hormonal swings. If sleep still isn't right after treatment,

then other issues like sleep apnea, restless legs, iron deficiency and other concerns often reveal themselves.

**What a hormone consultation and follow up looks like:**


Patients can expect a thorough baseline evaluation before starting therapy, including blood testing of sex hormones and key metabolic markers along with a comprehensive symptom review. The insertion procedure itself is brief, performed in the office and involves minimal downtime.

We don't set it and forget it—follow-up is integral to safe, effective care. After insertion we check labs to make sure your levels are optimal. Dosing is adjusted based on lab results and symptom relief. Our team stays in touch between visits for any questions you may have, or needed tweaks in treatment. Routine reviews ensure your plan evolves with your needs so you get steady relief without surprises.

**A simple, practical plan:**

We combine hormone therapy with lifestyle guidance, including supplements, so changes stick. So, if you're tired of counting sheep, call The Hormone Restoration Center. We listen, run the right tests, and build a personalized plan aimed at getting you sleeping through the night again – and so much more! Call (850) 837-1271 to schedule a consultation.





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# Spring is Season of Renewal, Healing and Fresh Starts

## How Short-Term Rehab Helps Seniors Return Home Safely

BY TERESA HALVERSON, DIR. OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT/ COMMUNITY RELATIONS, THE MANOR AT BLUE WATER BAY

Spring is a great time to focus on renewal, recovery, and independence. For seniors, the season naturally encourages gentle movement, fresh air, and mental rejuvenation, all of which are important for recovery after surgery, illness, or a fall.

Recovering after a hospital stay can be challenging for anyone, especially seniors. Short-term rehabilitation, also known as post-acute rehab, provides the support and therapy seniors need to regain independence and return home safely.

### What is Short-Term Rehab?

Short-Term rehab is a focused, time-limited program that normally takes place in a skilled nursing and rehab facility. The goals of short-term rehab are to restore strength, mobility, and daily living activities so that seniors can safely manage and return home.

### Short-term rehab includes:

- **Physical Therapy** to rebuild strength and improve balance
- **Occupational Therapy** to practice daily activities of living (cooking, dressing, bathing, etc.)
- **Speech Therapy** for swallowing, communication, or cognitive changes
- **Nursing care** and monitoring to ensure proper medication management and prevent complications

### Why Short-Term Rehab Matters

After an acute care stay in a hospital, seniors may face:

- Weakness or reduced mobility
- Risk of falls or injury
- Difficulty managing medications or chronic conditions
- Decreased confidence in performing everyday tasks

Short-Term rehab addresses these challenges with structured therapy, skilled supervision, and personalized care.



### Ways Rehab Helps Seniors Return Home Safely

**Restoring Strength and Balance:** Physical Therapists create individualized programs to increase muscle strength and balance, reducing fall risk.

**Relearning Activities of Daily Living (ADLs):** Occu-

pational Therapists help seniors practice essential tasks ( those task we normally take for granted)- cooking, dressing, and bathing. These skills help seniors live independently in the community while staying safe.

**Monitoring Health and Medications:** Nursing staff

track vital signs, manage medications, and what for signs and symptoms of potential complications, preventing rehospitalization.

**Discharge Planning:** Dedicated rehab teams plan for a smooth transition back home including home safety modifications, medical equipment, caregiver training, and referrals to Out-Patient Rehab, Home Health, and Caregiver agencies.

**Boosting Confidence:** Short-term rehab encourages seniors to regain confidence in their abilities, supporting emotional and well-being alongside physical recovery.

### Signs Short-Term Rehab May Be Needed

- Difficulty waking or standing without assistance
- Trouble completing everyday tasks independently

- Weakness or fatigue that prevents one from living at home safely
- Need for continued therapy after surgery or hospitalization

### Choosing the Right Rehab Facility (look for a facility that offers)

- Experienced therapists and skilled nursing staff
- Personalized, goal-oriented rehab programs
- A safe and supportive environment
- Strong communications with families and healthcare providers

### Specialized therapies and oversight include:

**Cardiac Recovery Program:** Gradually increase stamina for longer walking distances or standing periods; pro-

*Continued on page 31*



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# The Art of Healthy Unproductivity

BY STEPHENIE CRAIG,  
JOURNEY BRAVELY

Healthy unproductivity is an art and a practice worth learning. Are you a person who has fun and rests without any guilt or internal drive to return quickly to productivity? If so, well done and others can learn from you. Or, are you a person who feels pressure to be productive, to work, to tend to your to-do list all of your waking hours? Maybe you're a person who says work must come first and be complete before you can enjoy yourself and relax. Perhaps you believe that unproductivity is useless and lazy. Life gives you all sorts of messages about productivity vs. unproductivity that can be very hard to sort.

American culture transmits clear values about productivity. Get up earlier, fit more into a day, work harder, earn more, save more, buy more, buy bigger...all in the name of achieving success and the American Dream. The family you come from may also have transmitted some values regarding productivity. Work before play, the early bird gets the worm, only lazy people rest, always moving, never sitting, slowing down will get you left behind. Your personal goals can also be strong drivers that do not permit unproductivity.

While having a good work ethic is admirable and important, it can be overdone. Personal growth matters, and at the same time, your brain and body need breaks from the stimulation of productivity. Living in over-productivity can result in hypervigilance in your physical body that often leads to anxiety, depression, excessive tension, chronic pain, other health issues, and relationship problems. Balance between productivity and unproductivity is actually a worthy goal. You don't always need another growth-oriented book, Instagram account, or podcast.

Sometimes what you need is consistent time to intentionally put away productivity and embrace fun and rest. Your body was made to need both productive work and unproductive activities meant to spark enjoyment.

So, how do you slow down and pursue some healthy unproductive time?

## 7 Ways to Practice Healthy Unproductivity

**1. Evaluate your current balance of productivity vs. unproductivity.** Do you have trouble resting or being still? Do you turn fun activities into something productive? Are you ruled by a to-do list? How often do you



engage in intentional unproductive fun or rest?

**2. Go deeper.** Reflect on what is driving your over-productivity. What current or historical messages make you feel behind or guilty when you rest or are unproductive? What did your parents and other family members teach you about productivity and rest/fun? What are you afraid will happen if you stop producing? How might your sense of value as a person be connected with your productivity? What spiritual messages might be influencing your views of rest/fun?

**3. Give yourself permission to engage in healthy unproductivity.** Remind yourself that life is best lived with a balance of productivity and fun/rest. Your mental and physical health need some unproductivity. Rest/fun are not lazy but healthy and kind for yourself.

You will be more productive in your work time when you take unproductive rest time.

**4. Explore unproductive activities.** Remember the whole point is that it is not productive. Remember what has been fun or restful to you before. Read an unproductive book, use creativity for the sake of fun, play with your pet, lay in a hammock, take a nap, dance to music you love, bake for the joy of it, color, do puzzles, watch a funny show, take a long bath, sit in nature, take a stroll, soak up some sun. Find your version of unproductive fun and rest.

**5. Plan.** Create intentional and consistent space in your schedule for healthy unproduc-

tivity. Mark your calendar. Keep things you need for your fun pursuits handy so participating in activities is accessible. Create restful space where you can enjoy rest and fun regularly.

**6. Practice.** Pick an unproductive activity and spend an hour engaging in it. It's okay if it is uncomfortable at first. Gently remind yourself that some unproductivity is good for your mind, body, and soul. Let yourself get immersed. Your tasks will still be there later.

**7. Repeat.** Mark time off in your calendar once a week when you will not schedule other things. Use that time for healthy unproductivity and through repetition, your brain will begin to embrace your new habit.

Taking time for restorative unproductivity is very likely to bring energy and enthusiasm back into your productive life pursuits. Be gracious and consistent with yourself as you explore healthy unproductivity as a life practice. Connect with us along your journey for counseling and coaching at Journeybravely.com.

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# Sarcopenia: The Silent Muscle Loss That Comes With Age — and Why Walking Is Not Enough



BY KASSIA GARFIELD, OWNER, MAXSTRENGTH FITNESS

As people age, wrinkles and gray hair are expected. What often goes unnoticed, however, is a quieter change happening beneath the surface: the gradual loss of muscle mass, known medically as sarcopenia. This age-related condition affects millions of adults worldwide and plays a major role in declining strength, balance problems, and loss of independence later in life. Kassia Garfield, Owner of MaxStrength Fitness of Niceville, often talks about how quickly the changes happen. Garfield says, “I always feel like the bad guy, telling people walking isn’t enough. We have to add stress to the body, and “overload.” This is when we do more

than normal, so the body adapts to new stress. This doesn’t happen with walking.”

Sarcopenia typically begins earlier than many realize. Research shows that adults start losing muscle mass as early as their 30s, with the rate of decline accelerating after age 60 to be 10% a decade. By the time someone reaches their 70s or 80s, significant muscle loss can make everyday activities—such as climbing stairs, carrying groceries, or getting up from a chair—far more difficult. In your 80s, not losing muscle is a win. But anyone who puts the time into heavy resistance training can build muscle, at ANY AGE!

Muscle loss is not simply cosmetic. Skeletal muscle is essential for mobility, posture, and joint protection. It also plays a key role in metabolism, helping regulate blood sugar and maintain healthy body weight. As muscle mass decreases, the risk of falls, fractures, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease increases. Many research studies show that increase in muscle mass has long term effects on longevity, but also speeds recovery from surgery or cancer.



Several factors contribute to sarcopenia. Hormonal changes that occur with aging reduce the body’s ability to build and maintain muscle. Nerve signals that activate muscle fibers weaken over time. Chronic inflammation and inadequate protein intake also play a role. But perhaps the most influential factor is lifestyle—particularly physical inactivity. For some people it is a lack of knowledge (this is when you need to seek out some help!).

A comparison of muscle mass across the lifespan shows a stark contrast between people who remain physically active and those who do not. Individuals who engage in regular strength training tend to maintain a much higher percentage of their muscle mass

well into older age. While some decline is inevitable, the slope is far gentler. In contrast, people who avoid resistance exercise often experience a steep drop in muscle mass after midlife, leading to greater weakness and functional limitations.

The good news is that sarcopenia is not inevitable. Studies consistently show that resistance training—such as lifting weights, using resistance bands, or performing bodyweight exercises—can slow, stop, and even partially reverse muscle loss at almost any age. Older adults who begin strength training see improvements in muscle size, strength, balance, and confidence, sometimes within just a few months. As a physical therapist Garfield says, “Please just do something! It’s not going to get easier later, a little bit can go a long way. Some studies show even one year of intense training can increase muscle mass for four years after!”

Nutrition also plays a crit-

ical role. Adequate protein intake provides the building blocks muscles need to repair and grow. Experts recommend spreading protein intake evenly throughout the day, with particular emphasis on meals following exercise.

Perhaps most importantly, it is never too late to start. While muscle loss accelerates with age, the body remains remarkably adaptable. Even people in their 70s, 80s, and beyond can gain strength with the right training and guidance.

As awareness of sarcopenia grows, health professionals increasingly emphasize strength training as a cornerstone of healthy aging. The message is simple but powerful: while everyone loses some muscle over time, we have a say in how much we lose and how fast it happens. Staying active today can mean greater independence, mobility, and quality of life tomorrow.

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# How Are Your Quercetin Levels?



BY KAY LEAMAN,  
HEALTH ARCHITECT

This little gem belongs to a group of plant compounds called flavonoids. It is found in fruits such as grapes, blueberries, strawberries, cherries, apples, grapefruit, cranberries, raspberries and blackberries; vegetables including onions, peppers and

broccoli; and beverages like coffee, green tea and red wine.

Quercetin is one of the most abundant antioxidants, and its role is to fight free radical damage. Free radicals can damage our cells, which in turn can promote inflammation. Hippocrates is often quoted as saying, "All disease begins in the gut," and this is closely linked to inflammation.

In an eight-week study, 50 women with rheumatoid arthritis took 500 mg of quercetin daily. They experienced significantly reduced early morning stiffness, morning pain and after-activity pain. Quercetin has also been found to help protect against degenerative brain disorders such as Alzheimer's disease and dementia.

Quercetin offers cardiovascu-



lar benefits as well. It may help lower blood pressure and reduce cholesterol levels by improving endothelial function. This makes it a promising candidate for sup-

porting heart health and helping prevent cardiovascular disease.

In addition, studies have found that quercetin exhibits anti-cancer properties by inhibit-

ing cell proliferation and inducing apoptosis — a type of programmed cell death in which a cell destroys itself when it threatens the survival of its host.

Many studies continue to explore the benefits of this powerful flavonoid. Research has shown:

- Neuroprotective properties
- Inhibition of tumor growth
- Liver protection
- Prevention support for macular degeneration and cataracts
- Quercetin has also demonstrated anti:
- Bacterial activity
- Viral activity
- Obesity-related effects
- Diabetic complications
- Hypertensive conditions
- Allergic responses
- Asthmatic responses

This is not an exhaustive list of its benefits, but they are certainly worth noting. Look up foods and herbs that contain quercetin and begin incorporating them into your diet. Check your multivitamin to see whether it contains this antioxidant and in what quantity. A common supplemental target is 500 mg daily.

Quercetin is also available in supplement form; Solaray is one brand often recommended.

Disclaimer: If you are currently taking medication for any of the conditions mentioned above, consult your physician and perform your due diligence regarding potential interactions before beginning supplementation.

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**5 KEYS**

*continued from page 4*

sleep, allow the body to heal.

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**5. Invest in Preventative, Personalized Care**

Longevity is proactive, not reactive. Rather than waiting for lab values to reach “abnormal,” integrative medicine focuses on optimal ranges and early intervention. Advanced lab testing, nutrient analysis, gut health assessments, and comprehensive evaluations allow us to personalize care based on your unique biochemistry.

No two patients age the same way and they shouldn't be treated the same way. Preventative care might include optimizing vitamin D levels, improving gut microbiome diversity, support-

ing detoxification pathways, addressing subtle thyroid dysfunction, or implementing strength and mobility strategies before decline begins.

Small, consistent interventions compound over time, much like investing in your retirement account. The earlier you begin, the greater the return.

**Longevity is a Lifestyle**

True longevity isn't found in a single supplement, procedure, or bio hack. It's built through daily choices that support inflammation control, metabolic resilience, hormonal balance, nervous system regulation, and personalized prevention.

**Aging is inevitable. Decline is not.**

When we work with the body, honoring its signals, supporting its systems, and addressing root causes, we create the conditions not just to live longer, but to live stronger. Because wellness, like life itself, is not a sprint. It's a marathon and it's worth pacing yourself well.

**SPRING**

*continued from page 27*

mote circulation to aid healing and prevent blood clots; incorporate low-impact cardiovascular exercises if appropriate.

**Stroke Recovery Program:** Improve coordination and motor control on the affected side; regain gain and posture to prevent falls; strengthen cognitive-motor skills for dual tasks like walking and talking.

**Orthopedic Rehab Program** (hip replacements/fractures, knee and spinal)

**Pulmonary Rehab for respiratory conditions:** Breathing exercises to strengthen lungs; low impact cardiovascular activities (walking, cycling, light resistance training).

**Balance and Fall Prevention:** Exercises for static and dynamic balance; teach strategies to recover from loss of balance; introduce safe home modifications for reduced fall risk.

**Post-Surgical/Wound Monitoring and Care:** Tailored exercise programs for joint replacement, fracture repair, or abdominal surgeries; Regular assessment for redness, swelling, drainage, or unusual odors. Pain control strategies include prescribed medications, ice/heat

packs, or elevation. Encouraging safe movement to prevent stiffness without compromising wound healing.

**The Bottom Line**

Short-term rehab is a bridge between hospital and home. With structured therapy, professional supervision under the direction of physicians, and personalized support, seniors can recover safely, reduce the risk of complications, and enjoy everyday life again.

At The Manor at Blue Water Bay, our rehab teams focus on helping seniors recover safely, regain independence, and return home confidently utilizing an integrated approach. Our multidisciplinary team includes specialized physicians, physiatrists, nurses, therapists, dietitians, and social workers.

This emphasizes the medical expertise and personalized care seniors receive at The Manor at Blue Water Bay, reassuring families that recovery is both safe and effective. For a tour and additional information, please contact us at 850-897-5592; email [wecare@manoratbwb.com](mailto:wecare@manoratbwb.com).

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 Museums

# A Gift to the Heritage Museum of NW Florida – Value Beyond Cryptocurrency!

By BARBARA PALMGREN

Before there were computers, before payments were made over the internet, before there was a single national currency that could be used in every state and around the world, there was colonial currency.

That currency will soon be available for viewing in 2026 in the Celebrate America 250! American Revolution exhibit at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida.

When word began to surface about the upcoming exhibit in Valparaiso, Dr. Tom McKnight and his wife, Sue, looked at one another and knew this would

be a gift that could not be measured. They had intended to donate the collection to the museum in their will, but realized they wanted to share this treasure in time for the 250th anniversary of our nation. They removed the collection from their home and presented it to the museum so that countless visitors can appreciate the beginnings of paper money in America. Tom and Sue also know their children and grandchildren will be able to see it each time they visit.

The McKnights, who live in Bluewater Bay, have deep roots in the community. Dr. McKnight practiced family and preventive



medicine locally, with a private practice and work at both Eglin and Hurlburt medical centers. He now serves as a physician at the Eglin VA hospital.

Married more than 51 years, Tom recalled surprising Sue with the purchase of this historic collection representing currency from all 13 British colonies prior to independence. While visiting Mount Vernon's gift shop, he discovered the rare set. After a sleepless night weighing the de-



cision, he returned the next day to make the purchase. Sue was delighted when the collection arrived.

Speaking as a trustee for the museum, we are equally thrilled. During the interview, many fascinating details emerged. Benjamin Franklin received permission from England to issue currency to the colonies and printed notes for Pennsylvania. To deter counterfeiting, printers used unique leaf patterns that were nearly impossible to replicate.


Colonial currency was often

used to pay debts, and once used, a hole was punched in the note so it could not circulate again. Following the Revolution, Alexander Hamilton is credited with establishing a unified national currency, helping stabilize the economy and facilitate trade.

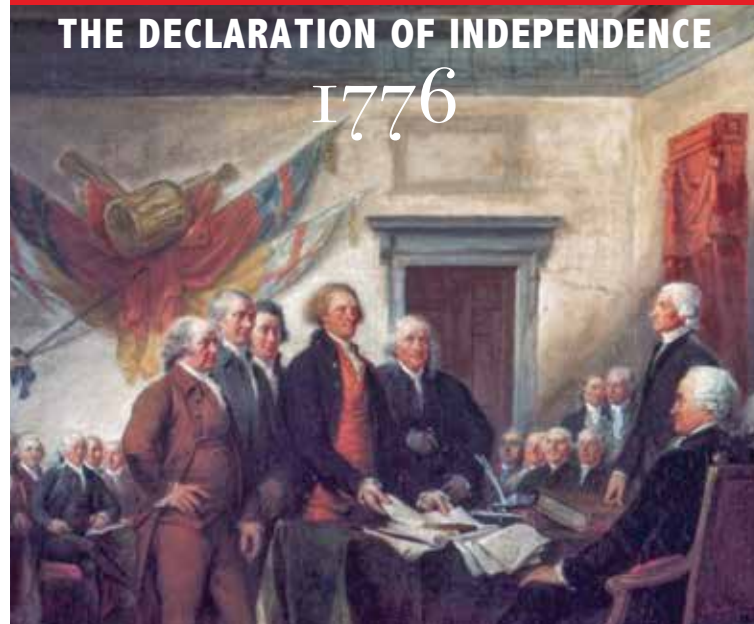
Within the collection, notes from Massachusetts and New Hampshire bear these punched holes. Each piece is signed by a prominent colonist, including signers of the Declaration of Independence, and at the center is an image depicting its signing.

And so, it has come full circle — from colonial currency to independence, from Mount Vernon to Northwest Florida, and now into the hands of a grateful community.

Thank you, Tom and Sue. Words are not enough to express gratitude for this remarkable gift that will be shared for generations to come.



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## Museum News

COMPILED BY JENE EVANS  
McCRACKEN AND ARTHUR  
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### History Sandwiched In Returns in April

The Heritage Museum Association will host two "History Sandwiched In" programs on Friday, April 17, at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, 115 Westview Ave., Valparaiso.

At 10 a.m., Karl Eschmann will present on the Battles of Lexington and Concord, known as "the shot heard round the world." The program is geared toward students in fourth grade and up. Admission is \$7 per student; parents and chaperones are free. Space is limited; call 850-678-2615 to reserve a spot.



At noon, Dr. Bob Kane will present Part II of his program on the Doolittle Raid of April 18, 1942. A retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, Kane has extensively researched the mission and shares an engaging, in-depth look at Eglin Air Force Base's role in the operation. Guests are encouraged to bring a sack lunch. Both programs are free unless otherwise noted.

### Student Poster Contest Celebrates America 250

The Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida is sponsoring a student poster contest in celebration of America's semiquincentennial. The contest is open to students in Okaloosa County public, private and home schools.

Two divisions are offered: middle school (grades 6-8) and high school (grades 9-12). First-place winners in each division will receive \$100; second place will receive \$50.

Posters should illustrate a phrase or idea from the Declaration of Independence that represents America today. Entries must be between 11-by-17 inches and 22-by-28 inches. Artwork must be hand-created; digital submissions and foam board are not accepted.

Entries are due by Friday, May 1, at the museum.

### Spirit of '76 Book Club Launches

The Spirit of '76 Book Club invites the community to explore America's founding documents

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Continued on page 36

# Spring Starts at The Shop: Fresh Finds, Florals & Outdoor Living Inspiration in Niceville

BY LORI LEATH SMITH

There's something about spring along the Emerald Coast that invites us outside — longer days, warmer breezes and that unmistakable urge to refresh the spaces we love most. I find myself walking my yard, noticing what needs a refresh and dreaming up simple ways to make my outdoor space feel more beautiful and welcoming.

At The Shop at Baldwin Turf in Niceville, that inspiration is already in full bloom.

Located on John Sims Parkway, The Shop has quickly become a go-to destination for those looking to elevate their outdoor spaces with style and ease. From thoughtfully curated patio furniture to beautiful planters and coastal-inspired décor, it's a place where function meets beauty — where spring truly begins.

"It's officially planting season, and this is one of our favorite times of year," said owner Jenny. "People are ready to get outside again, refresh their spaces and create something they can enjoy every day. That's exactly what we're here to help with."

## Where Outdoor Living Comes Together

The Shop isn't your typical garden store — it's a curated outdoor living experience designed specifically for life on the Emerald Coast. Whether you're updating a front porch, styling a backyard patio or searching for the perfect gift, every piece is thoughtfully selected with intention. "We really focus on helping people create spaces they love coming home to," Jenny said. "It doesn't have to be overwhelming. Sometimes it's as simple as a new planter, a fresh plant or a cozy seating area that changes everything."

Their planter collection alone is worth the visit, featuring a wide variety of shapes, sizes, colors and textures that can instantly transform a space. Paired with the right greenery, even a small update can make a big impact.

## Why Spring Planting Matters

Spring is more than just a



beautiful season — it's the ideal time to plant and refresh your outdoor spaces.

According to Jenny, planting now gives your greenery the best chance to thrive through the warmer months ahead. "Spring planting allows your plants to establish strong roots before the intense summer heat sets in," she explained. "It's the perfect window to set yourself up for success."

Not sure where to start? The team at The Shop offers guidance every step of the way — from selecting the right plants to designing custom container arrangements. "We love helping people who feel like they don't have a green thumb," Jenny said with a smile. "We'll walk you through it, help you choose the right pieces and even handle the planting for you. We make it easy."

## Simple Ways to Refresh Your Outdoor Space

If you're looking to give your space a seasonal update, Jenny suggests starting with a few easy, high-impact changes:

**Layer with planters:** Mix different sizes and textures to create visual interest.

**Add comfortable seating:** A well-placed chair or small set can turn any corner into a retreat.

**Keep it cohesive:** Choose

a color palette that complements your home and coastal surroundings.

**Think functional beauty:** Pieces should be both stylish and livable — especially for everyday use. "Outdoor spaces should feel like an extension of your home," Jenny said. "It's about creating a place where you want to sit, relax and spend time with the people you love."

## A Local Favorite for a Reason

With its inviting atmosphere and personalized service, The Shop has become a favorite among Niceville and Bluewater Bay residents looking for something a little different — something elevated, yet approachable.

From custom container design and installation to delivery and styling support, the experience is intentionally seamless. "We design, we plant, we deliver — and we truly enjoy helping our customers bring their vision to life," Jenny said. "That's what makes it so special."

## Plan Your Visit

The Shop at Baldwin Turf is located at 739 John Sims Parkway in Niceville and is open Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Whether you're ready for a

full outdoor refresh or simply looking for a little inspiration, it's the perfect time to stop in and see what everyone is talking about. "Come get spring ready

with us," Jenny said. "We've got everything you need to grow, style and enjoy your space this season."

Celebrate the season in style at The Shop at Baldwin Turf's Art in Bloom event with **local artist Kathy Schumacher on Saturday, April 11.** Guests are invited to enjoy a relaxed day of sipping, shopping and discovering fresh inspiration for outdoor living.

Explore The Shop's curated collection of elevated patio furniture, beautiful planters and quality garden décor — perfect for refreshing your porch, patio or backyard just in time for spring. The event will highlight an exclusive Mother's Day mini collection by local artist Kathy Schumacher, offering cherished & unique gifts for the holiday ahead.

Whether you're looking to



update your outdoor space, find the perfect planter or simply enjoy a fun day out in Niceville, this spring event is not to be missed.

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Musing



# A Pastor's Ponderings: The Resurrection - The Foundation of Hope for Every Generation

BY PASTOR DOUG "DOC" STAUFFER

The empty tomb is more than a moment in history – it is the living foundation of hope for every generation.

Every spring, the world seems to come alive again. Trees grow new leaves, flowers start to bloom, and the sunshine warms us, reminding us that winter does not last forever. Creation itself seems to whisper a gentle reminder that life follows death and that hope follows despair. For Christians, this season has a much deeper significance. It points us to the most important

event in human history—the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The resurrection is more than just a religious tradition or seasonal celebration; it is the heart of the Christian faith. Without it, Christianity would be indistinguishable from any religion. The Apostle Paul made this point clear when he wrote:

*“And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith*

*is also vain” (1 Corinthians 15:14).*

Everything about the Christian message (the gospel) hinges on that empty tomb in Israel. Yet, the resurrection cannot be separated from the cross that came before it. On the cross, Jesus Christ willingly shed His precious blood for our sins, bearing the judgment every sinner deserves. The Scripture declares, *“For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Corinthians 5:21).*

On that cross, the sinless Son of God became our substitute, taking our sins upon Himself and offering His righteousness in place of our sins to all who believe. The resurrection then stands as God’s declaration that the sacrifice was accepted, that the debt of sin was paid, and that eternal life is now available through the risen Savior, Jesus Christ.

When Christ was crucified, His followers were devastated. Their hopes seemed shattered, and their future uncertain. But early on that Sunday morning, something happened that forever changed history. The stone was rolled away—not to let Jesus out, but so we could see that the grave was empty—and the risen Savior appeared to His disciples as living proof of the victory. Sin and death had been defeated once and for all!

The resurrection was more than a moment of encouragement for the first believers—it became the enduring hope for every generation.

Because Christ lives, death does not have the final word for believers. Because Christ lives, forgiveness is real, and salvation is freely offered. Because Christ lives, those who trust in Him have a secure future for eternity. The Apostle Peter described it this way:

*“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3).*

Notice the phrase—a lively



hope. The resurrection gives believers a living and lasting hope that no circumstance in this world can destroy. Every generation desperately needs that hope. Every individual needs that hope.

We live in a time of uncertainty as world events change rapidly. Nations struggle, cultures shift, and many people feel as though the ground beneath them is shaking. Yet the message of the empty tomb reminds us that the most important foundation has never moved. Jesus Christ is alive.

The resurrection assures us that God still rules over history and that His promises remain sure. It reminds us that light ultimately triumphs over darkness, truth over deception, and life over death.

For believers, the resurrection is not simply something we remember once a year—it is something we live every day. It shapes how we face difficulty, how we treat others, and how we look toward the future.

And perhaps most importantly, it reminds us that the gospel message must be passed from one generation to the next. The hope found in Christ was never meant to stop in any generation. It is a truth that must be shared with our children, our neighbors, and the generations yet to come.

Two thousand years ago, the angel at the empty tomb spoke words that still echo through history:

*“He is not here: for he is risen, as he said” (Matthew 28:6).*

Because the tomb is empty, hope is alive—and it will remain the foundation of hope for every generation until Christ returns.

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# Sean of the South: Dispatches Del Camino

BY SEAN DIETRICH

“We have no rooms,” the innkeeper says over the phone.

“None?” I say.

“We are full.”

My wife and I are sitting on the ancient steps of la Iglesia de Santiago. The Church of Saint James. We are dusty and sweaty, and one of us smells like a giant armpit. (Moi.)

The stone doorway arch above us features carvings of angels and demons which date back to Roman times. Eight angels surround Christ, who is looking straight at me as though He is saying, “No room’ at the inn?—Now where have I heard THAT before?”

“Please,” I say to the innkeeper. “My wife and I are exhausted, there are no rooms anywhere.”

“I said no room.” And the woman hangs up.

It is late siesta in Spain. No traffic on the highways. No pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago. Streets are vacant. Most pilgrims have already found lodging for the evening and are already getting their complimentary massages.

At least that’s what I imagine. Because we have been hunting for a room all day, and there are no vacancies for another 20 miles. It is Holy Week, and the Camino is packed with hikers. Finding a room is like trying to locate a porta john at a bluegrass festival.

All day we have been seeing pilgrims turned away from hostels. Some, we learn, have been



forced to sleep outside on doorsteps.

I am still staring at the call-ended screen. “She hung up on me,” I say in mock disbelief.

So, I take a moment. I need to get my head together. I need to figure out what we should do. Otherwise we’re sleeping on church steps tonight.

I wander into the church while Jamie sits on the steps watching our backpacks. I cross myself. I take a pew.

Tomorrow is Good Friday. And I am looking at a sculpture of Christ on a cross.

My entire evangelical childhood featured imagery of the crucifixion. We sang cute little Sunday school songs about it. We wore tiny crucifixes around our necks. We had paintings portraying the crucifixion. Jesus always had great abs.

But right now, in light of Good Friday, I’m thinking about what it truly means to truly die



by crucifixion.

First, you’re stripped nude. You are not a fitness model. You are a 30-something male who eats a lot of bread and drinks wine with every meal. And it shows in your midsection.

Then, a crowd watches as a group of 18-year-old soldiers with egos to prove kick the proverbial excrement out of you. Next, they place you on timbers. They mutilate your hands with nails. Romans didn’t always use just one nail per hand.

Then, you just hang there.

It’s gross. It’s raw. There are no orchestras playing an overture. No cinematic key lighting. Your cross stands erected on Main Street. Your basic human reflex is to shield your nudity.

But you can’t.

The boy-soldiers beneath your cross are screwing around, engaging in locker room banter, shooting craps, seeing which one will win your shoes.

You can’t breathe. Your lips are turning blue. Your arms are numb, devoid of circulation. Your serratus muscles and shoulders are

torn from struggling against your own body weight.

The worst part is, almost none of your friends are here. Few are brave enough to attend your last hours. Doesn’t anyone care? Isn’t anyone going to say goodbye? Aren’t you important in anyone’s life?

Meantime, there are four other guys crucified alongside you. Hollywood films, and various evangelical bumper stickers will depict only three crosses on this fateful Friday. But in reality, there are five crosses, and you’re just one of them.

In other words, you are not given special treatment. No sacred ceremony. Charleston Heston does not attend your death scene. You are just another state

inmate on the roadside. No big deal.

Most people who are crucified will hang for entire days before finally dying. Crucified persons do not receive burial, either. Usually, Romans let birds pick their skeletons clean. In simple terms, you are trash.

And you know what hurts most? It’s that people did this to you. Not wild animals. Not an act of nature. Fellow human beings.

Because the harsh truth is, people are not always nice. People hate. People start wars. People hurt each other, and often for no reason. They posture, they compete, they gossip. They invent rules and dogmas so they might force others unto their will.

And in this moment of nude agony, you see all these failings of human nature beneath you. You watch it all, with human eyes. And you forgive them. For we are fools who know not what we do.

I cross myself and exit the chapel.

My wife is sitting on the steps with our bags. We still have no rooms. We are low on food. We are in a foreign country, and we have a long way left to walk. But I think, perhaps, I’ve just remembered why I’m walking.



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 Arts & Music

## La Vie en Rouge Raises \$75,000 for ECTC Education Programs

Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC) celebrated a vibrant evening of entertainment, cuisine and community at its annual La Vie en Rouge

### NFB Académie Opens Auditions for 2026–27

Audition registration is now open for the Northwest Florida Ballet (NFB) Académie 26/27 academic year! Auditions for incoming third-grade students will be held on April 25 from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. and on April 26 from 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., and for incoming fourth graders on April 25 from 2:30 p.m. to 4 p.m. Auditions for incoming fifth-grade students will be held from April 28 to 30 during the regular fourth-grade Ballet class. Appointment reservations are required and must be made by April 23 at 2 p.m.

Celebrating more than 20 years of excellence, the NFB Académie is a free, integrated arts and academic program for third through eighth-grade boys and girls who demonstrate the potential to excel in dance. The NFB Académie is a nationally acclaimed program recognized as an A+ school since its inception. Register or learn more at [NFBallet.org/Auditions](http://NFBallet.org/Auditions)

gala, raising more than \$75,000 to support children's education programming across the Emerald Coast.

Held at ECTC in Grand Boulevard and presented by Blue Water Oral Surgery Center, the Paris-inspired event brought together supporters, chefs, artists and community leaders. Guests enjoyed specialty cocktails, gourmet tastings from a dozen local restaurants and live entertainment, along with a silent auction featuring experiences such as 30A staycations and a chance to perform in Mystic Pizza. "La Vie en Rouge is such a magical night for our theatre and our community," said Nathanael Fisher, Producing Artistic Director of Emerald Coast Theatre Company. "It's an ex-



perience unlike any other—our professional performers singing just steps away from an aerialist soaring overhead, while Allison Wickey creates a live painting before your eyes. At the same time, our incredible restaurant

sponsors are handcrafting sushi and mixing cocktails right in front of guests. The generosity we witnessed throughout the evening will support our educational programs, performance opportunities for young artists, outreach initiatives, along with continuing to bring the best performers, teachers, and equipment through the doors of ECTC."

Attendees enjoyed performances throughout the evening while sampling cuisine from local favorites including Swiftly Catered, AJA 30A, Cantina Laredo, Grimaldi's Pizzeria, Kilwin's, Wine World, Ovide, Vin'tij, Beignets & Brew, Fleming's, P.F. Chang's, Fish On Seafood House, Charcuterie by Shelli and Let's Say Graze 30A.

The silent auction played a key role in raising funds to expand youth theatre programs, scholarships, camps and outreach.

"La Vie en Rouge continues to grow each year thanks to the incredible support of our community," said Anna Fisher, Co-Founder and Executive Director of Emerald Coast Theatre Company. "The funds raised will help ensure that students and families throughout our region have access to meaningful arts education and professional theatre experiences."

Proceeds will support ECTC's year-round educational programming, including after-school classes, summer camps, workshops and outreach initiatives.

### MUSEUM NEWS

*continued from page 32*

through guided discussion. Meetings are scheduled for May 14 and Oct. 15 at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida. Under the direction of Museum Manager Arthur Edgar, the space has been updated with improved layout, new display panels, and expanded inventory. Gift shop manager Deb Edgar has added heritage-themed toys, books and educational materials, including resources tied to America's 250th anniversary.

Participants must be at least 16 years old. To join, email [250Heritage@proton.me](mailto:250Heritage@proton.me). The first meeting will be held Thursday, May 14, at 7 p.m., with light refreshments provided.

### Gift Shop and Florida Map Room Get a Refresh

Visitors are invited to explore the newly reorganized gift shop at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida. Under the direction of Museum Manager Arthur Edgar, the space has been updated with improved layout, new display panels, and expanded inventory. Gift shop manager Deb Edgar has added heritage-themed toys, books and educational materials, including resources tied to America's 250th anniversary.

The refresh also led to updates in the adjacent Florida Map Room, where a new exhibit case now features items such as a vintage radio from Valparaiso



pioneer Addie Lewis, artifacts from the Eglin railroad, milk bottles from the former Spence dairy, and historic photos of the Valparaiso Inn. Visitors are encouraged to relax in the seating



area and watch a short video on Northwest Florida history.

*The museum is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. 115 Westview Ave., Valparaiso*

ECTC emerald coast theatre company

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# Musical Echoes Returns: A Festival Where Ancient Sounds Meet the Emerald Coast

BY LORI LEATH SMITH

Each spring, something remarkable happens along the shores of the Santa Rosa Sound. The gentle notes of the Native American flute drift through the air, dancers move in colorful regalia and locals and visitors gather to celebrate one of the Emerald Coast's most unique cultural traditions.

From April 24–26, 2026, the Musical Echoes Native American Flute Festival will celebrate its 25th anniversary, inviting the community to experience three unforgettable days of music, art and heritage at 139 Miracle Strip Parkway SE in Fort Walton Beach. Set against the stunning backdrop of the Santa Rosa Sound, the festival is free and open to the public.

Since becoming part of the fabric of Fort Walton Beach in 2001, Musical Echoes has grown into one of the premier Native American flute and art festivals in the nation, honoring the rich traditions, storytelling



and artistry of Native American culture.

You can expect a vibrant weekend filled with live performances, flute concerts, cultural dancing, art displays, storytelling and interactive exhibits. The hauntingly beautiful sound of the Native flute—an instru-



ment long used for storytelling, ceremony and reflection—creates a peaceful atmosphere that perfectly complements our Fort Walton Beach environment.

**This year's festival features several acclaimed performers:**

**Shelley Morningsong**, a Northern Cheyenne singer-songwriter and 2019 Native American Music Awards Artist of the Year, brings her powerful

alto voice and heartfelt songwriting to the stage. With seven albums and multiple Native American Music Awards to her name, Morningsong blends contemporary Native music with blues influences reminiscent of artists like Buffy Sainte-Marie and Bonnie Raitt.

Joining her is **Fabian Fontenelle**, a Zuni/Omaha performer and descendant of the famed Omaha Chief Big Elk. Fontenelle captivates audiences with powerful dance performances, traditional storytelling and sacred songs performed in the Native Zuni language. His vibrant regalia and rhythmic drumming bring ancient traditions to life in a mesmerizing cultural experience.

Also performing is **Gareth Laffely**, an award-winning Mi'kmaq/Cree composer whose Native flute compositions have been featured on NPR's Hearts of Space and networks including Discovery Channel, PBS and A&E. Laffely is the

youngest composer ever to reach No. 2 on the Billboard New Age chart and has collaborated with George Lucas' Skywalker Symphony.

Beyond the stage, the festival also highlights Native-inspired artistry and craftsmanship. Visitors can explore arts and crafts vendors, cultural exhibits and artist demonstrations, while artisans compete in both the Arts Competition and the Flute Makers Competition, showcasing handcrafted pieces that blend music, tradition and visual art.

The event is supported by the local community and volunteers. Those interested in helping can assist with activities such as the information booth, raffle sales, silent auction support or festival photography. Volunteers who contribute at least four hours receive a free festival T-shirt, and high school students can earn community service hours.

*Continued on next page*



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**Arts & Music**

# ECMAF to Host World-Renowned American Brass Quintet for Free Concerts and Student Master Class

By DEBBIE CARLONI

The Emerald Coast Music Alliance Foundation (ECMAF) proudly announces that the internationally acclaimed American Brass Quintet (ABQ) will visit the Emerald Coast April 15–18, 2026. During their stay, the ensemble will present free public performances and lead a master class for area high school students at no cost.

The American Brass Quintet is widely recognized as one of the premier chamber music ensembles of our time, celebrated for its peerless leadership in the brass world. Described as “the most distinguished” of brass quintets by American Record



Guide, ABQ has built its stellar reputation through celebrated performances, genre-defining commissioned works, and a steadfast commitment to educating generations of musicians.

A recipient of Chamber Music America’s highest honor, the Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award for significant and lasting contributions to the field, the group boasts a rich history that includes performances across five continents, more than 60 recordings, and the premieres of over 150 contemporary brass works. Since its founding in 1960, commissions from esteemed composers have significantly shaped contemporary chamber music and the modern brass quintet repertoire. The New York Times has hailed ABQ as the “premier brass ensemble.”

ABQ will perform a free pub-

lic concert at Crosspoint Church in Niceville on April 16 at 6 p.m. Seating is limited and may be reserved through Eventbrite.

The student master class will be held April 18 from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Crestview High School and is open to high school students interested in band and brass instruments. Students can obtain additional information through their school’s band leadership. A performance for students, teachers, parents, and the public will follow the master class.

For more information, visit [emeraldcoastmusic.org](http://emeraldcoastmusic.org) or email [bob@emeraldcoastmusic.org](mailto:bob@emeraldcoastmusic.org).

## MUSICAL ECHOES

*continued from page 37*

As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, Musical Echoes relies on sponsorships and donations to continue offering this unique cultural event to the public

each year. Contributions of any size—including memorial or honorarium gifts—help sustain the festival’s mission of celebrating Native American music, art and heritage.

Many locals will tell you Musical Echoes is more than a fes-

tival—it’s an immersive cultural experience that leaves a lasting impression long after the final flute note fades.

Whether you come for the music, the art or simply the peaceful atmosphere by the water, one thing is certain: once

you hear the echoes, you’ll want to return year after year.

**Musical Echoes Native American Flute Festival**  
**April 24–26, 2026**

The Landing | 139 Brooks St. FWB

Info: [info@musicalechoes.org](mailto:info@musicalechoes.org)

Volunteers: [volunteers@musicalechoes.org](mailto:volunteers@musicalechoes.org)

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**EVENTS**

*continued from page 8*

ginning with an 8 a.m. 5K run along Boggy and Tom’s Bayous. Registration is \$30 through April 15 and \$35 after.

Festivities kick off at 10 a.m. with Eglin Air Force Base’s Honor Guard, followed by a lively lineup including craft vendors, historical demonstrations, the Walton Guard, USA 250 activities, children’s crafts, the Valparaiso Garden Club, bake sale, food and live music. Local band 20 West performs from 1–3 p.m., and admission to the museum is free.

For vendor information or 5K registration, call 850-678-2615 or email [Manager@heritage-museum.org](mailto:Manager@heritage-museum.org).

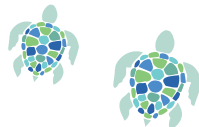
**Dancing with the Emerald Coast Stars**

**Saturday, May 2 | 6 p.m. | Hotel Effie Sandestin**

Seaside School will debut its newest signature fundraiser, “Dancing with the Emerald Coast Stars,” presented in partnership with Fred Astaire Dance Studios Fort Walton Beach. Inspired by the hit TV show Dancing with the Stars, the ballroom-style competition pairs

local leaders with professional dancers for an evening of glamour, entertainment and friendly rivalry—all supporting the Seacoast Collegiate High School Expansion Project. The 2026 Emerald Coast Stars include Dr. Lindsey Hoppe of 30A Smiles, Whitney Cooley of Scenic Sotheby’s International Realty and Southern Sand, Destin Mayor Bobby Wagner, and Drew Ward, principal of Seacoast Collegiate High School. Each will perform alongside a professional dancer from Fred Astaire Dance Studios. The evening begins with a cocktail hour and champagne toast, followed by a plated dinner, dance competition, awards ceremony and VIP after-party. Guests—and supporters watching from home—can vote for their favorite dancer for \$10 per vote.

Tickets: \$350 individual | \$500 couples. Sponsorships and tickets are available at [SeasideSchools.net](http://SeasideSchools.net). For sponsorship information, contact Callie Cox at [coxc@seasideschools.net](mailto:coxc@seasideschools.net).



**FORE! The Love of Animals Golf Tournament | May 9 | The Links Golf Club at Sandestin**

Tee up for a great cause at Alaqua Animal Refuge’s 5th Annual FORE! The Love of Animals Golf Tournament, presented by Sandestin Investments, on Saturday, May 9, at The Links Golf Club at Sand-

estin (165 Sandestin Blvd. N., Miramar Beach). This signature fundraiser brings golfers and animal advocates together for 18 holes of scramble-format play with a shotgun start, on-course contests, raffles, awards and a “Pups & Pours” after party. Registration includes a cart, boxed lunch and two drink tickets. Fast Fetch Pricing offers teams of

four for \$750 through March 9 (\$850 regular; \$250 individual players). Proceeds support Alaqua Animal Refuge’s rescue, veterinary care, rehabilitation and adoption programs across the Southeast. Registration deadline is May 4. Details and sign-up: [app.eventcaddy.com/events/2026-fore-the-love-of-animals](http://app.eventcaddy.com/events/2026-fore-the-love-of-animals).

**Veterans Appreciation Lunch April 21**

The Walton and Okaloosa communities are coming together to give recognition and thanks to our first responders, veterans, and active military. **ASuperiorMechanical** will hold its inaugural Veterans and First Responders Appreciation Lunch at the Niceville Community Center, 204 Partin Drive North, Niceville, FL 32578 on Tuesday, April 21, 2026, from 11:30 AM to 1:00 pm. Please save the date!

During the event, A Superior Mechanical will donate a new AC system complete with installation to one First Responder or Veteran in need. This giveaway is open to all who have served in the Army,

Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and all first responders including EMT/Medics, Police, Sheriffs and Fire Fighters. Register to win at [ASuperiorMechanical.com](http://ASuperiorMechanical.com) and go to ABOUT US > HVAC GIVEAWAY.

Local businesses are invited and encouraged to donate door prizes and giveaways. Thorpe says he hopes this giveaway serves as an example of how others can give back. “We wanted to somehow give back to others and simply decided to give back what we have: AC systems.”

The event includes a delicious hot lunch catered by Swiftly Catered, a brief wel-

come from the sponsors and supporters, and the AC Giveaway. This event is supported and sponsored by the City of Niceville and Niceville Community Center, Niceville High School (who will present the colors), Rocky Bayou Christian School (who will sing the National Anthem), United Community Bank, NHance Cabinet Makeovers, Blanken Management, and Beachworx CoWorking Spaces. Damien from Coastal Wildlife is our event’s MC-Host. Walton and Okaloosa County businesses are encouraged to sponsor; for more information contact Marta Thorpe at (850) 814-3822.

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PRICE: \$100,000 - \$149,000

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