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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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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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1. Reduce Inflammation at the Root

Chronic inflammation is one of the most significant drivers of aging and disease. It's linked to heart disease, diabetes, autoimmune conditions, cognitive decline, and chronic pain.

In integrative health, we don't just suppress symptoms. We ask why inflammation is present. Is it driven by diet? Stress? Gut imbalance? Environmental toxins? Hormonal shifts?

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-

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

ports resilience and strength at every stage of life.

Continued on page 25

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Community

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.

Michelle Ruschman is a local artist, speaker, and writer. She can be reached at michelleruschman@gmail.com or michelleruschman.com.

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 soiree 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 competition. 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.

Sponsorship opportunities remain available and include event badges and promotional recognition. Learn more at walkdownmagnolialane.org/florida or visit Embrace-FLKids.org.



Let's celebrate the world's greatest golf tournament and support Florida panhandle children in need.

WaterColor LakeHouse | Santa Rosa Beach, FL
Cocktails at 5 PM | Activities at 6 PM

04 | 08 | 26

Golf Simulator | Putting Contest | Closest to the Pin | Long Drive Competition
Hole-In-One Prize | Silent Auction | Live Calcutta

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APRIL 3

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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

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 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.

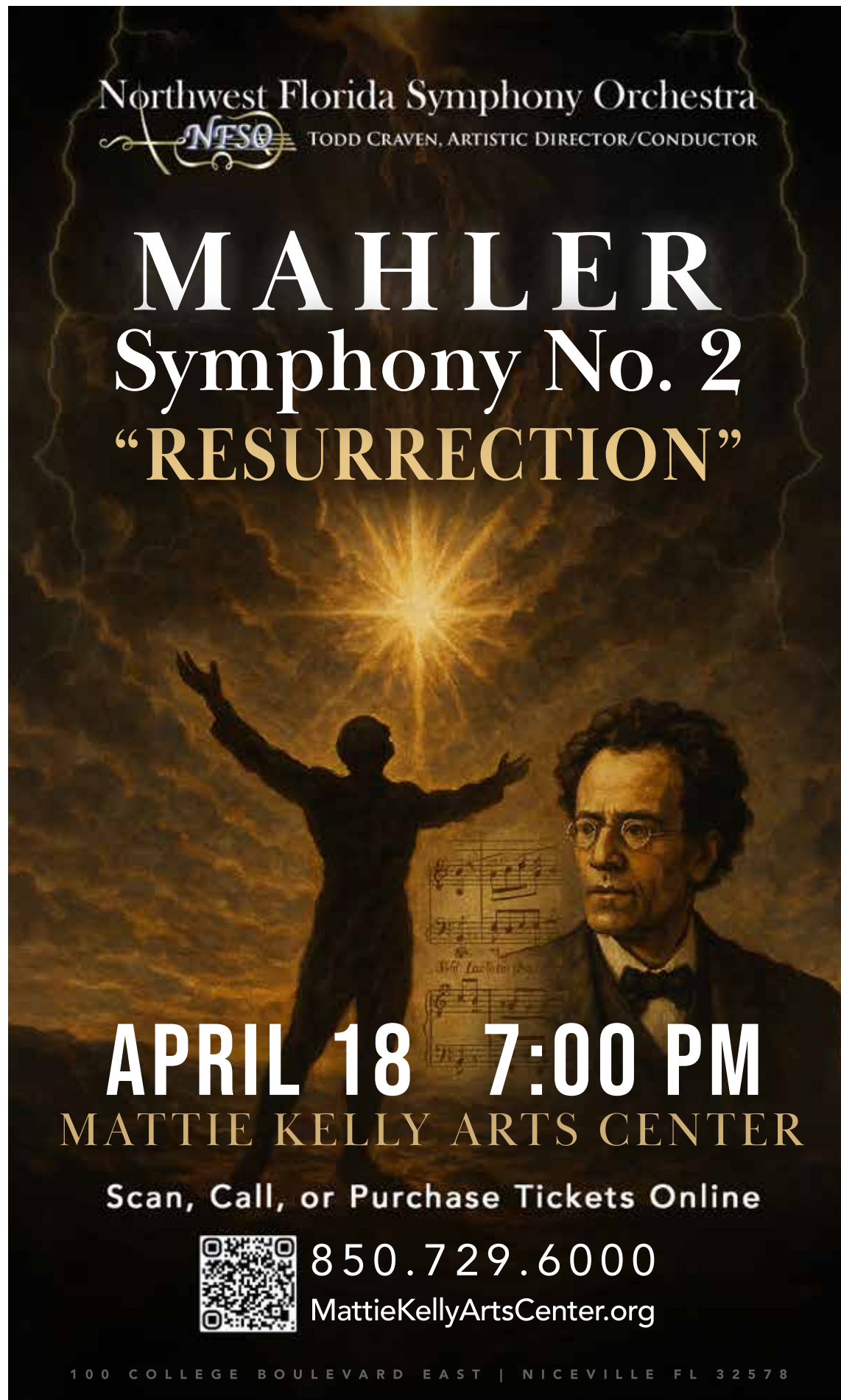
Reams' season also includes appearances with Cincinnati Opera, Minnesota Opera, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Gustavo Dudamel.

Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra
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MAHLER

Symphony No. 2

"RESURRECTION"



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 Community

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 canine 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.

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. Fam-



ilies are invited to join the fun with free kite-making for kids, hands-on activities and opportunities to fly their own kites.

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, LuLu's foodie favorites and live music..

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. Enjoy live music, vintage cars, games and a lively dance floor, along with dinner, floats and plenty of entertainment for all ages. With a nostal-

gic 1950s vibe and a welcoming, family-friendly atmosphere, the event promises something for everyone. Purchase tickets by scanning the QR code or visiting ThePearlProject.org.

Veterans & First Responders Appreciation Lunch | April 21 | Niceville Community Center

A Superior Mechanical will host its inaugural Veterans and First Responders Appreciation Lunch on Tuesday, April 21, from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Niceville Community Center (204 Partin Drive N., Niceville). The community-focused event honors local veterans, active military and first responders with a catered hot lunch from Swiftly Catered, special presentations and an AC system giveaway to one deserving service member or first responder in need. Eligible participants include members of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, EMT/Medics, Police, Sheriffs and Firefighters. Register for the HVAC giveaway at ASuperiorMechanical.com under ABOUT US > HVAC GIVEAWAY. Business partners are welcome to contribute door prizes. For details: Marta Thorpe at (850) 814-3822.

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

South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival returns 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

Continued on page 13








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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



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, Escam-

bia, 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

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.

support from the state is having a real impact locally.

Okaloosa County Sheriff Eric Aden stressed that these resources 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.

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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 priorities—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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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 Krewe 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 Krewe" 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 Krewe 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 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 Eg-



lin Parkway, is a popular Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce event that Gwin and his Krewe 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. The festival benefits the 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.



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



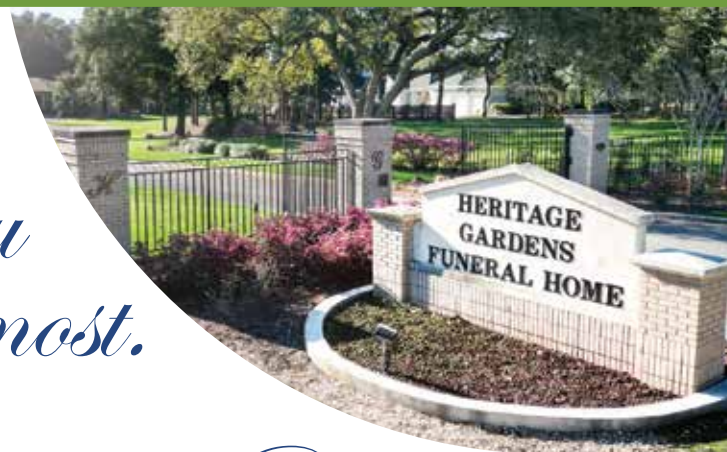
Bowlegs Court: Queen Debbie Fisher, Rique Gwin, First Mistress Mollie Grindland, First Mate Mark Grindland, Kelly Gwin, and J. Mark Fisher

First Mistress – Mollie Grindland

The Honor Guard – Schuyler and Taylor Black, Michael and Erin Goodson, 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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Bay Buzz



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 expanded 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.

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 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, serv-



ing as an ambassador 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 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 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.

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

Continued on next page

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BAY BUZZ

continued from previous page

are made and nature is appreciated — and it’s important to us to help keep it beautiful and welcoming for everyone.”

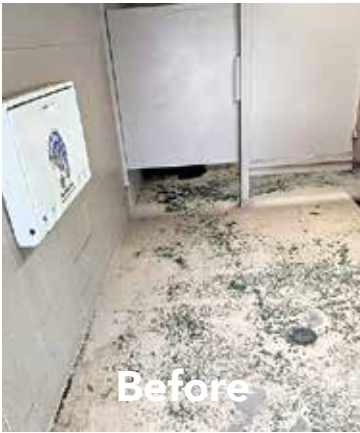
The Turkey Creek Nature Trail continues to be a favorite for both residents and visitors. The pavilion offers an ideal setting for group gatherings, while nearby swimming areas provide a refreshing way for families to



cool off. Along the boardwalk, peaceful spots invite visitors to relax and take in the natural beauty, with trail markers high-



lighting local vegetation. Outdoor enthusiasts of all ages can also enjoy canoeing, kayaking and tubing along the creek.



EVENTS

continued from page 8

alongside chef-driven pairings in Wine World’s Culinary Village. Purchase featured wines on site. Proceeds benefit DCWAF and NWFL children in need. Tickets: sowalwine.com.

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 Muse-

um 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, beginning 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.

FORE! The Love of Animals Golf Tournament | May 9 | The Links Golf Club at Sandestin, Miramar Beach

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 Sandestin (165 Sandestin Blvd. N., Miramar Beach). Here, golfers

and animal advocates come 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. (\$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.

Gate To Gate Memorial Run/Walk Marks 40th Anniversary | May 16 | Eglin East Gate Sports Complex, Eglin AFB

Honor service and sacrifice during the 40th Anniversary Gate To Gate Memorial Run/

Walk on Saturday, May 16, at the Eglin East Gate Sports Complex. Held on Armed Forces Day, the historic 4.4-mile race returns to its traditional gate-to-gate course, inviting runners and walkers to pay tribute to America’s fallen heroes while celebrating the spirit of community and military heritage. Opening ceremonies begin at 6:45 a.m., with the race starting at 7 a.m. Participants may register individually or as four-person teams, and are encouraged to dedicate their journey in memory of loved ones or military heroes. Online registration is available at tinyurl.com/40th-GateToGate, with more details at eglin96fss.com/gatetogate. Registration is limited to 1,500 participants, and only 1,000 commemorative medals will be awarded.





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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."

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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.

The Shop at Baldwin Turf, 739 John Sims Parkway, Niceville

Free to attend | Open to the public

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 future 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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almost-famous pizza and wings and carries all sports games and live entertainment, along with impeccable service. You can enjoy all that while enjoying the waterfront view.

FUBAR has plenty of games for the kids along with pool tables, corn hole, dart boards and more. When out on the water all day, come dock your boat on one of FUBAR'S boat slips and enjoy the incredible view. Feel free to bring along your furry friends to join you on the patio.

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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.

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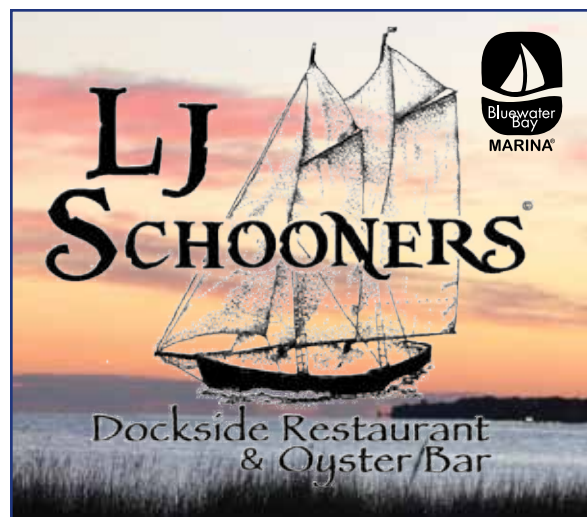
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April 5 - Easter Sunday Brunch 9am-1pm

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

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 Off the Hook

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 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.



Pinfish photo courtesy UFL Rock O'Connor

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.

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 Valparaíso 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 ex-

clusive 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. Presale 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 and be part of the celebration!

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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: cele-



brating athletic excellence and strengthening youth opportunities through sports.

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.

Honoring a Legacy of Service

One of the most meaningful moments of the night was the



PHOTOS BY DOUG STAUFFER

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.



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Golf Series: Green Grass, Green Tees, Great Golf at Bluewater Bay Golf Couse 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.

Alredo 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. Alredo 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...

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On the far side of the hill.
Green, green, we're hitting our
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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 trea-



sured, 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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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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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 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 25



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 Wellness



BY DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

You turn over for the third time, looking over at the clock. 2:13 a.m. Your heartbeat matches second hand as a thin layer of sweat cools on your skin. You turn to the window, pulling the covers back, then lie awake for an hour replaying the day—emails, errands, the list that never ends and the sleep won't come. Nights like this are the new norm – a few hours of rest followed by morning fog, and the slow erosion of patience and energy. It feels like stress, but lately it's been more—hot flashes, night sweats, and a restlessness that started when the seasons and hormones shifted.

Sound familiar? Bioidentical hormone pellets are the straightforward and lasting solution you need. At The Hormone Restoration Center we use bioidentical hormone pellets to optimize hormone levels—so nights stop sabotaging your days.

For thousands of patients,

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

Stop Counting Sheep



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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THE 5 KEYS

continued from page 4

sleep, allow the body to heal. Neuro-acupuncture and integrative therapies are especially powerful for supporting neurological resilience, reducing chronic pain, and optimizing brain health as we age. A regulated nervous system is one of the most underestimated keys to long-term vitality.

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, supporting 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 23

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@manoratlwb.com.

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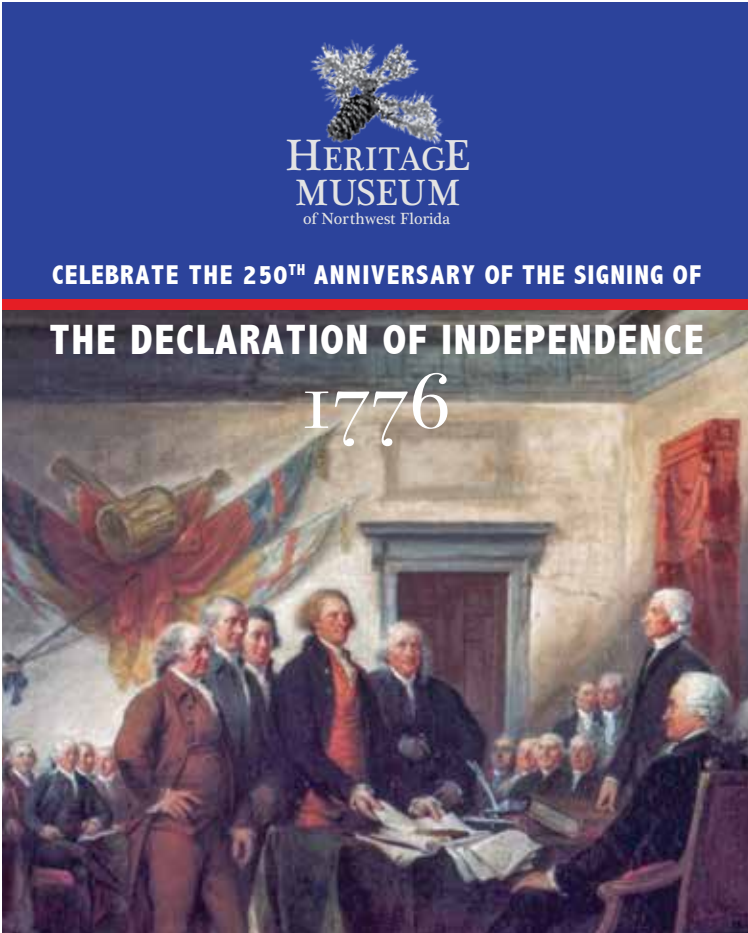
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BY BARBARA PALMGREN

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 decision, 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. Ben-

jamin 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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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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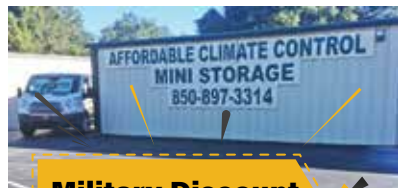
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 Musing


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 Chris-

tian 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.

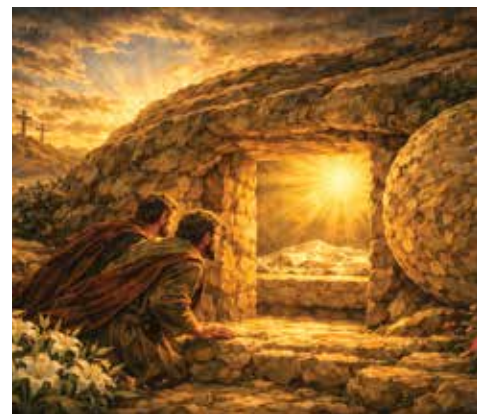
When Christ was crucified, His followers were devastated. Their hopes seemed shattered, and their future uncertain. But early on that Sunday morning, something happened that forever changed history. The stone was rolled away—not to let Jesus out, but so we could see that the grave was empty—and the risen 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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Romans 10:17 So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

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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 or email bob@emeraldcoastmusic.org.

MUSICAL ECHOES

continued from page 29

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

Volunteers: volunteers@musicalechoes.org

Free admission • Family friendly • Cultural exhibits • Live performances



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Museum News

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.

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

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For More Information call 850-678-2615

115 Westview Ave, Valparaiso, FL 32580

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

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