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A Natural Treasure in Our Backyard: The E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center

BY LORI LEATH SMITH

For many local residents, it's easy to drive along State Road 20 and not fully realize that just beyond the trees lies one of the most extraordinary environmental education centers in the country.

I had the special opportunity recently to visit the amazing E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center. And, believe me, it isn't just a place to visit — it's a point of pride for our local communities and a powerful example of how our area is helping lead the way in conservation, education and environmental stewardship.

Located in Freeport on the Nokuse Plantation, the center opened in 2009 thanks to the vision of the late M.C. Davis, a Walton County conservationist who believed deeply that people protect what they love. His mission was simple, but profound: give children and families the opportunity to experience nature firsthand, and they will grow up wanting to protect it.



That philosophy is rooted in the concept of "biophilia," a term coined by famed biologist Dr. E.O. Wilson, meaning a natural love for living things. It's a fitting name for a place that has quietly been changing lives in our own backyard for more than 15 years.

Today, the center operates as a nonprofit environmental education facility serving thousands of students each year, many from Walton and Okaloosa counties. Fourth- and seventh-grade students regularly visit for immersive

field experiences that go far beyond a typical field trip. Here, learning happens outside — in the woods, along trails, and through hands-on discovery.

"The E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center lets children and adults explore a unique ecosystem that inspires curiosity and play with the benefit of having a knowledgeable staff available to answer the questions that naturally arise when engaging with nature. Sharing our passion for nature and conservation is our founda-



tion," says Executive Director Nicole Schafer.

For local families, it's especially meaningful knowing that children in our own community have access to this kind of experience. Many students leave with not only new knowledge, but a genuine appreciation for the natural beauty that surrounds us every day.

And that beauty is something special.

BIOPHILIA
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Taking a Bite Out of an Invasive Species

What began as a creative response to an environmental threat has grown into one of the Emerald Coast's most anticipated—and impactful—spring events.

The Emerald Coast Open Lionfish Tournament and Festival returns May 15–17, bringing together divers, chefs, conservationists and families for a weekend that blends competition, cuisine and conservation. Centered around HarborWalk Village, the event is recognized as the largest lionfish tournament in

LIONFISH
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 Community

LIONFISH

continued from page 1

the world—and one that continues to make measurable progress beneath the surface.

Big Impact, Growing Each Year

The numbers tell a powerful story.

During the 2025 tournament, more than 20,000 invasive lionfish were removed from Gulf waters, including 7,180 harvested during the pre-tournament and 13,322 during the two-day competition. Since its inception in 2019, the Emerald Coast Open has now removed over 100,000 lionfish, making a significant dent in one of the region’s most pressing marine challenges.

“This event has brought a lot of awareness to the invasive lionfish species and created a festive atmosphere for the enjoyment of our visitors and residents, while fostering prosperity for our local businesses,” said Okaloosa County Commission Chairman Paul Mixon.

Lionfish, native to the Indo-Pacific, have no natural predators in the Gulf and reproduce rapidly, threatening native fish populations and reef systems. Because they are not easily caught by traditional hook-and-line fishing, divers using spears play a critical role in controlling their numbers.

Competition with a Purpose

Divers from across the country travel to our area to partic-

ipate, forming teams and competing for nearly \$175,000 in cash and gear prizes. Categories include most, largest and smallest lionfish caught.

At the 2025 event, standout teams included:

- Most Lionfish: Deep Water Mafia 1 (2,038)
- Smallest Lionfish: Team Lookin’ Back (2.8 inches)
- Largest Lionfish: Team In the Clouds (17.2 inches)

Behind the scenes, weigh-ins and measurements took place near the harbor, adding to the excitement as teams brought in their hauls and shared stories of early morning dives, deep-water hunts and record-breaking catches.

“While this event continues to flourish, the opposite is happening for this invasive species,” said Natural Resources Chief Alex Fogg. “The public is beginning to realize the impact of the lionfish on our ecosystem and because of the divers and our amazing partners, we are able to make a difference for our environment in Gulf waters.”

From Ocean to Table

Beyond the tournament, the Emerald Coast Open has helped spark a growing culinary trend: lionfish as a sustainable seafood.

Mild, flaky and often compared to snapper or grouper, lionfish is now featured on menus across the area. During the lead-up to the tournament, local restaurants compete in Lionfish Restaurant Week, showcasing creative dishes that highlight the species’ versatility.



In 2025, La Paz took top honors for the third consecutive year—further proof that conservation can be as delicious as it is impactful.

Festival attendees can sample lionfish dishes, watch fillet demonstrations and learn how choosing lionfish supports Gulf ecosystems.

A Win for Tourism and Local Business

The tournament and festival also provide a strong economic boost for Destin and the surrounding area.

Thousands of visitors travel to the Emerald Coast for the event, filling hotels, booking charters and dining at local

restaurants. The combination of competition and festival atmosphere reinforces Destin’s reputation as both a premier fishing destination and a hub for conservation-driven tourism.

A Festival for the Whole Family

While divers compete offshore, the Lionfish Festival brings the celebration onshore.

Held at HarborWalk Village, the family-friendly festival features tastings, educational exhibits, interactive booths, local vendors and activities for all ages. Live music and a lively harbor setting create an inviting atmosphere where visitors can learn, explore and connect.

It’s an event designed to engage everyone—from curious kids to seasoned anglers—while raising awareness about protecting the Gulf.

More Than a Tournament

At its core, the Emerald Coast Open is about people coming together for a shared purpose.

From returning dive teams to first-time participants, the event fosters camaraderie, competition and a commitment to conservation. What started as a localized effort has grown into a signature Destin event with national reach—proving that a community-driven idea can create lasting environmental change.

As the 2026 tournament approaches, one thing is clear: Destin isn’t just hosting a competition—it’s leading a movement.

For more information, registration details or festival updates, visit emeraldcoastopen.com.





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Community



The Menopause Conversation Every Woman Needs (But Rarely Gets)

By DR. KAREN DEVORE, TORTOISE CLINIC

What if I told you there would be a period in your life, one that could last up to 10 years, that would fundamentally shift how your body feels and functions?

Imagine a season marked by persistent fatigue, disrupted sleep, weight gain that no longer responds the way it once did, and emotional shifts that feel unfamiliar. And that you would be expected to carry all of this



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while maintaining a career, supporting a family, and showing up for your community. For many women, this isn't theoretical. It is the reality of perimenopause and menopause.

For years, this transition was rarely discussed openly. That is changing, as it should. Many women are still navigating this blindly without understanding what is happening, what to expect, or what options they have to support themselves.

This is a natural progression, but it is not always easy, and most women are never taught how to navigate it. With the right understanding and guidance, this phase can shift from something reactive and uncertain to something far more stable and intentional.

Here's what I would share with every woman, regardless of where she is in her transition:

Build Your Team

You do not have to navigate this phase alone. When you understand what is happening in your body, your decisions, and your outcomes, improve. Your health deserves the same level of support as every other area of your life.

Build a team that will explore this transition with you—one that listens, collaborates, and in-

dividualizes your care. The right support shifts this experience from reactive to intentional.

Explore Your Options

Menopause is not a uniform experience, and your care should not be either.

Support may include nutrition and lifestyle changes, targeted supplementation, hormone therapy when appropriate, and restorative therapies. The goal is not to push through symptoms. It is to understand them and respond appropriately. If something feels off, it is worth addressing.

Rethink How You Fuel Your Body

Hormonal shifts increase sensitivity to blood sugar fluctuations, driving energy instability, cravings, weight gain, and brain fog.

Focus on stability: prioritize protein and hydration, include healthy fats and limit highly processed carbohydrates. When blood sugar is stable, energy, mood, and metabolic function follow.

Build Strength—Not Just Endurance

Muscle becomes increasingly

Continued on page 25

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Events Around the Bay

Magic & Comedy Destin Returns — Bigger, Bolder and More Interactive Ongoing Shows | The Palms Resort, Destin

It's back — and better than ever. Following a sold-out debut season, the Magic & Comedy Destin residency returns to The Palms Resort with an upgraded, high-energy show featuring up-close illusions, sharp comedy and immersive audience interaction.

Headliner Bart Rockett, a globally recognized performer who has entertained in more than 90 countries and starred in his own nationally syndicated TV show, brings big-stage talent to an intimate coastal setting. His fast-paced performance blends magic, comedy and ventriloquism — with every show offering a unique, interactive experience. Adding to the excitement, Rockett's children, Kadan and Brooklyn, make special guest appearances throughout the season, bringing their own star power from film, television and viral media. Guests can enjoy all table seating with food and drinks delivered directly to their seats, creating a seamless, elevated night out. Arrive early or stay after to dine at the adjacent Blue Lagoon restaurant.



Showtimes include 7 p.m. evening performances and select 4 p.m. Sunday matinees. Seating is limited and shows often sell out, so advance reservations are recommended. Free parking is available.

Tickets & info: MagicDestin.com

Blueberry Festival at Props Brewery May 1-3 | Freeport

Celebrate a berry sweet weekend at Props Brewery in Hammock Bay, May 1-3, with the Blueberry Festival—three days of family-friendly fun, food and local flavor.

Enjoy a petting zoo, shop local vendors and grab a bite

from a variety of food trucks while soaking in the festive atmosphere. It's the perfect outing for families, friends and anyone who loves supporting local.

Friday, May 1: 3-9 p.m. | Saturday, May 2: 2-8 p.m. | Sunday, May 3: noon-6 p.m.

Props Brewery at The Windmills, 1799 Great Hammock Bend, Freeport

Free to attend. Vendors welcome (apply online).

Dancing with the Emerald Coast Stars

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

In partnership with Fred Astaire Dance Studios Fort Walton Beach and inspired by the

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

Tickets: \$350 individual | \$500 couples. Sponsorships and tickets: SeasideSchools.net. To sponsor, contact Callie Cox at coxc@seasideschools.net.

Destin Seltzer Festival Returns to The Market Shops May 2 | 1-4 p.m. | The Market Shops, Miramar Beach

Sip, savor and soak up the sunshine at the Destin Seltzer Festival on Saturday, May 2. This lively afternoon event features unlimited 2-ounce seltzer tastings from national and regional brands, light bites from local restaurants, live music and a fun, coastal atmosphere.

Hosted by Opportunity Place, the festival supports its mission of helping families and individuals transition to stable housing—100% of proceeds benefit the organization's programs.

A limited number of VIP tickets offer access to a private tent with upgraded food offerings and added perks. Sponsorships are available. For details, email opportunityplacefb@gmail.com. Follow along on so-

Continued on page 8

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Footloose

the musical

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BASED ON THE ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY BY DEAN PITCHFORD

MUSIC BY TOM SNOW

LYRICS BY DEAN PITCHFORD

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 Community

EVENTS

continued from page 6

cial media for updates and ticket information.

CCA Emerald Coast Banquet & Auction Returns May 7

May 7 | Shoreline Church, Destin

The 32nd Annual CCA Florida Emerald Coast Chapter Banquet & Auction, presented

by The Ships Chandler, returns Thursday, May 7 from 6–10 p.m. at Shoreline Church in Destin. Known as the “fishing party of the year,” this popular event raises critical funds to protect and enhance Florida’s marine resources.

Guests will enjoy a catered dinner, drinks, an expansive silent auction, exciting raffles and a lively live auction featuring exclusive items, artwork and trips across the state, country and beyond.

CCA has been actively investing in local conservation efforts, including a recent \$500,000 contribution toward the upcoming sinking of the SS United States, one of the organization’s largest project investments to date.

Tickets and sponsorships are available now. Don’t miss this opportunity to celebrate, connect and support the future of our coastal habitats and fisheries.

Tickets & info: Register in advance to reserve your spot



Captain Billy Bowlegs LXX, Rique Gwin, and his Krewe, the festival celebrates local history while boosting tourism and community spirit. Guests can expect vendors, music and the festival’s signature “skirmish” Friday night — with Captain Billy playfully “captured” — before returning Saturday to officially storm the city.

Festivities also include the Little Pirates Scavenger Hunt on Thursday and an ongoing coin hunt leading up to the event, with clues shared on local Cumulus radio stations and the festival’s Facebook page. The celebration continues beyond the weekend with the Billy Bowlegs Parade on Monday, May 18, along Eglin Parkway. A downtown Fort Walton Beach pub crawl is also set for May 8 to kick off the excitement.

The festival is free to attend and benefits the William Augustus Bowles Historical Foundation, supporting local history and heritage.

Info: krewesofbowlegs.com | Follow Billy Bowlegs Pirate Festival on Facebook

Crawfish, Community & a Cause: Destin Rotary’s Annual Bash Returns

May 16 | Towne Centre at Seascape | Food, Music, Auction & Family Fun

Laissez les bons temps rouler! The Rotary Club of Destin’s 14th Annual Cajun Crawfish Bash returns Friday, May 16, from 5:30–9 p.m. at the Towne Centre at Seascape, co-hosted by Mezcal Mexican Grill. This high-energy fundraiser supports the Robert Hafner Scholarship Fund, A Bed 4 Me, Harvest House, Emerald Coast Children’s Advocacy Center and Fisher House of the Emerald Coast—benefiting local students

Niceville High School Presents High-Energy Production of “Footloose”

Niceville High School is proud to announce its upcoming production of the electrifying musical Footloose, set to take the stage in May. Bursting with dynamic choreography by Nicci Fahle, unforgettable music with vocal direction by Madison Gomez and a powerful story about youth, freedom and standing up for what you believe in, this production promises to captivate audiences of all ages.

Based on the iconic 1984 film, Footloose tells the story of Ren McCormack, a teenager from Chicago who moves to a small town where dancing has been banned. Determined to challenge the status quo, Ren inspires his classmates to fight for self-expression and bring joy back to their community. Featuring hit songs like “Holding Out for a Hero,” “Let’s Hear It for the Boy”

and the title track “Footloose,” the musical is a celebration of resilience, friendship and the transformative power of music.

The NHS Theatre cast and crew have been hard at work for months, dedicating countless hours to rehearsals, set design and technical preparation. Under the direction of NHS Theatre Director Ritchie Jackson, the school’s talented performing and technical arts students are bringing energy, creativity and passion to every aspect of the show. “This production showcases the incredible talent and dedication of our students,” said Jackson. “Footloose is not just about dancing — it’s about finding your voice and making a difference. We’re excited to share that message with our community.”

Performances will take

place at Niceville High School’s auditorium on May 1, 2, 8 and 9. Friday shows are at 7 p.m. each night, with 2 p.m. matinee performances on both Saturdays. Tickets can be purchased in advance through gofan.co, subject to availability. General admission tickets are \$15. VIP tickets are \$20 and include early seating, a free small bottle of water and a free bag of popcorn. This show is produced with permission from Concord Theatricals of New York, NY.

Don’t miss this exciting theatrical event that will have you dancing in your seat and cheering for more. For more information, follow NHS Theatre on Instagram @theatre_nhs or visit NHS Theatre’s Facebook page at facebook.com/NicevilleHSTheatre.

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Directed By Holly Harrison Moore

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Fridays & Saturdays
at 7:30pm
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StageCraftersFWB.com

Continued on page 31



HAPPENINGS AROUND THE BAY

MAY 2026 EVENTS

01 - 03

Bugs on the Bayou
7 am | Mullet Festival Grounds | Niceville

01

Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's First Friday Coffee
7 am | First Baptist Church of FWB | FWB

Crafty Creations: May Day Crowns
10 am | Niceville Library | Niceville

Bugs on the Bayou
1 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

Live Music: John McKinney
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

Footloose Opening Night
7 pm | Niceville High School | Niceville

02

14th Annual ONE Run 5K for Autism Awareness
8 am | Emerald Coast Autism Center | Niceville

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

R.E.A.D. - Reading Education Assistance Dogs
10:30 am | Niceville Library | Niceville

Build Your Own Terrarium
10:30 am | Artful Things Niceville | Niceville

Pop-Up: Oils by Holly Oliver Hertig
11 am | Artful Things Niceville | Niceville

Footloose
2 pm | Niceville High School | Niceville

Derby Day Bourbon Tasting
3 pm | American Legion Post 221 | Niceville

Artist Trading Card Club
5 pm | Artful Things Niceville | Niceville

Live Music: Clinch 46
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

02 - 03

38th Annual ArtsQuest Fine Arts Festival
10 am | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

03

Bluegrass Jam
12 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

Sunday Sessions featuring Rescue Me
1 pm | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport



Member Appreciation Day
1 pm | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

Sinfonia Youth Orchestra & After School Beginning Strings in Concert
2 pm | Destin High School | Destin

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

04

Lunch N Learn: Recruiting for Culture
11:30 am | Greater FWB Chamber | FWB

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

Star Wars Day Celebration
4 pm | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

04 Continued

Spring Honors Recital
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville

05

Lunch N Learn: Business Boot Camp
11:30 am | Greater FWB Chamber | FWB

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

06

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

07

Justice on the Block: Free Legal Help
10 am | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

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

Concerts in the Village: Brass Transit
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin



08

Live Music: Melodious Allen and the Funk Heads
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

Footloose
7 pm | Niceville High School | Niceville

09

5th Annual FORE! The Love of Animals Golf Tournament
10 am | The Links Golf Club | Miramar Beach

Create a Bookmark with KGC Creations
10:30 am | Artful Things Niceville | Niceville

Margot Handmade Pop-Up Market
11 am | Artful Things Niceville | Niceville

Footloose
2 pm & 7 pm | Niceville High School | Niceville

Sunday Sessions featuring Rescue Me
1 pm | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport

11

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

12

Craft & Chat
11 am | Niceville Library | Niceville

Chess Night
6 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville

13

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

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

14

Radiance Reset: Mom Edition
10 am | Blissful Beauty Bar Niceville | Niceville

Concerts in the Village: Turnstiles
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin

15

Coloring & Coffee
11 am | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

15 Continued

JAWS Film in Concert by Sinfonia Gulf Coast
7:30 pm | Destin-FWB Convention Center | FWB



16

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

South Walton Boys & Girls Club's Spring Bash
11 am | South Walton Boys & Girls Club | SRB

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

17

Sunday Sessions featuring Rescue Me
1 pm | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport

18

GSSF Indoor League Match
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

FiberArts Circle
5 pm | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

70th Annual Billy Bowlegs Torchlight Parade
7 pm | FWB

19

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

Women's Council of REALTORS' Purse Bingo Night
5:30 pm | Niceville Community Center | Niceville

20

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

21

Crafty Corner
11 am | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

21 Continued

Concerts in the Village: Boogie Wonderband
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin

Bands on the Boulevard: Summer Music Series
6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

22

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

23

Coiled Woven Baskets Pop-Up Market
11 am | Artful Things Niceville | Niceville

24

Sunday Sessions featuring Rescue Me
1 pm | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport

Sinfonia Salutes: Memorial Day Concert and Drone Show
7:30 pm | Alys Beach Amphitheatre | Alys Beach

26

Shred-a-thon
10 am | Recreation Complex Parking Lot | Niceville

Writers Group
5:30 pm | Niceville Library | Niceville

28

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

Concerts in the Village: Molly Ringwalds
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin

Bands on the Boulevard: Summer Music Series
6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

31

Sunday Sessions featuring Rescue Me
1 pm | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport

Sunset Shrimp Boil
4 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville

FARMERS MARKETS

Niceville Community	Hammock Bay	Grand Boulevard
Saturdays 9 am - 1 pm Twin Cities Pavilion Niceville	1st & 3rd Sundays 8 am Victory Blvd Freeport	Saturdays 9 am - 1 pm Grand Boulevard Miramar Beach

MONTHLY EVENTS

Oils and Acrylics with Rosalyn O'Grady 10 am Tues Artful Things Niceville	One Stroke Painting (Adv) with Sheila Mahony 10:30 am Fri Artful Things Niceville
Watercolor Techniques with Theresia McInnis 1 pm Tues Artful Things Niceville	One Stroke Painting (Bgnr) with Sheila Mahony 2 pm Fri Artful Things Niceville
Bingo Night 6 pm Tues Bayou Pub Niceville	Yoga at Turkey Creek 9 am Sat Turkey Creek Nature Trail Niceville
Watercolor Basics (Adults) with Elia Saxer 10 am Thurs Artful Things Niceville	Brunch on the Bayou 9 am Sun LJ Schooners Restaurant Niceville
Watercolor Basics (Youth) with Elia Saxer 3:30 pm Thurs Artful Things Niceville	



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 Community

BIOPHILIA

continued from page 1

The Biophilia Center sits within the longleaf pine ecosystem, one of the most diverse and endangered habitats in North America. Thanks to restoration efforts on the Nokuse Plantation, millions of longleaf pines have been replanted, bringing

this critical ecosystem back to life. It's a quiet but powerful success story happening right here at home.

Visitors to the center can encounter native wildlife, including birds, reptiles, pollinators and the beloved gopher tortoise — a keystone species that plays an important role in the health of the ecosystem. Inside, in-

teractive exhibits and “animal ambassadors” help bring these lessons to life in a way that resonates with all ages.

Beyond its educational programs, the center also supports broader environmental initiatives, hosting researchers, educators and conservation leaders who are working to protect Florida's natural resources. Its



PHOTOS: JEFF TALBERT

sustainable practices — from conservation efforts to environmental programming — reflect the same values it teaches every day.

For those who haven't visited yet, the center is open to the public on select days and through special events and seasonal programs. It's a perfect outing for your family, grandparents (like me) with visiting grandchildren, or anyone looking to reconnect with nature just minutes from home.

Did you know? The Nokuse Plantation surrounding the center spans more than 50,000 acres, making it one of the largest private conservation efforts in the Southeast — and it's right here in Freeport.

In a fast-growing area where so much is changing, the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center stands as something steady and lasting — a reminder of what makes this community so special.

It's not just a destination. It's part of who we are.

Summer Kickoff

Mark your calendar for the public's first “non-event” opportunity to come in for the season —

E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center's Summer Kickoff on May 30 from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. This family-friendly fundraiser will feature live music by Jennifer Alvarado, food trucks, bounce houses, animal chats, raffles, and access to the Reptile Room. Admission is \$15 for ages 13 and up, \$10 for ages 4–12, and free for Bio-members. Guests are encouraged to bring a towel and spare clothes for water activities, and come ready to celebrate the start of summer surrounded by nature.

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Learning at the E. O. Wilson Biophilia Center: **Snakes!**



BY HELEN PETRE

I volunteer at the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center, helping Turtle Bob teach fourth and seventh-graders about snakes and turtles. When the students enter the Turtle Bob room, some are terrified. By the time the class is over, Turtle Bob has convinced even the most uneducated that snakes are our friends. All the snakes the students hold are non-venomous and accustomed to being held. We teach the students that they will encounter snakes in the wild if they go outside.

Most of our snakes in the Panhandle are non-venomous, but a few, like our common cottonmouth, are venomous. Even so, if you wear shoes and keep your hands where you can see them, you will be fine. Venomous snakes do not chase you down or attack you unless you try to kill them, step on them in bare feet, or pick them up. Like bears and bobcats, give them room, do not threaten them, and you will be fine. Any snake will bite if threatened. Any human probably will, too.

Eastern cottonmouth (Agkistrodon piscivorus piscivorus)

The cottonmouth is our most common venomous snake. It

swims well, lives near water, and opens its mouth when threatened. Cottonmouths sometimes shake their tails when threatened, sort of like rattlesnakes. They are just trying to let you know they are there, and they hope you will go away. When cottonmouths are swimming, you can see their entire body on the surface of the water, unlike other water snakes.

Cottonmouths have big heads and skinny necks. They are very thick snakes with very thick tails. They look scary, but unless you step on them in bare feet or try to kill them, they will not bite. Venomous snakes use venom to subdue prey. You are not prey. You are way too big to swallow. Bites are last resorts to make you go away.

Contrary to public opinion, cottonmouths are not aggressive. I almost stepped on one wearing flip flops (which is not a good idea), and the snake just sat there with its mouth open. Yes, I was terrified, but it did not bite. Bites are very uncommon, and although they are not fun, they are very rarely fatal.

Cottonmouths are food for eagles, owls, herons, alligators, kingsnakes, and snapping turtles. They eat fish and frogs. They are important members of an ecosystem that we want to preserve.

Banded watersnake (Nerodia fasciata)

Some snakes look like venomous snakes, and they do that on purpose. The banded watersnake is a common snake that lives near



Turtle Bob and a gray rat snake, or oak snake (Pantherophis spiloides)

water like the cottonmouth, but it is not venomous. The banded water snake hopes you will think it is a cottonmouth and leave it alone. Sometimes that works. The difference is that banded watersnakes have long, pointed heads (not triangular), round eyes, they

do not open their mouths when threatened, and you cannot see their entire body when they swim, only their heads. They, and especially their tails, are much thinner than those of a cottonmouth. They also have dark, vertical lines on their heads that are visible in

the photo below and can be seen from a safe distance.

When a banded watersnake is threatened, it flattens out its head, but don't be fooled. The head looks flat, not blocky like a cottonmouth.

Red rat snake (corn snake, oak snake) (Pantherophis guttatus)

Red and gray rat snakes are also called oak snakes and corn snakes. They look alike except some are red and some are gray, or brownish. Red corn snakes are expert climbers. Some people think they look like copperheads, but copperheads are rare in the Panhandle.

Red and gray rat snakes are constrictors, but have no fear, they are way too small to strangle you. They constrict around a mouse, or other rodent when

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Congratulations to the Rocky Bayou Christian School Graduating Class of 2026!



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Anderson, Abigail



Baltz, Henry



Barrett, Jacob



Belanger, Cole



Bielamowicz, Chase



Brandt, Javon



Branch, Elijah



Broussard, Sophia



Burden, Brianna



Burke, Madelyn



Busby, Sierra



Cawood, Lela



Chang, Eleanor



Clifton, Rosemary



Coffey, James



Crawford, Xavier



Ding, Katherine



Duplechain, Matthew



Ellinger, Gabe



Elston, Lily



Frazee III, Raymond



Gonzalez, Maddox



Heathershaw, Danny



Hess, David Samuel



Hood, Sarah



Huyghue, Josiah



Kaiser, Brenley



Keener, Kayla



Lewis, Abigail



Liu, Irene



Martin, Kenley



Mass, Erika Continanza



Maulden, Savannah



McPherson, Mollee



Meadows, Ava



Miller, Annabelle



Moore, Zea



Nagell, Bryce



Nappier, Amber



Newsom, Mckenzie



Nguyen, Thuy



Noggle, Jack



Nolen, Charity



Novoa Romero, Sarai



Parrish, Aaron



Parrish, Carson



Pluhar, Thomas



Reeves, William



Register, Hartley



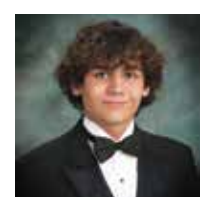
Riches, Phoebe



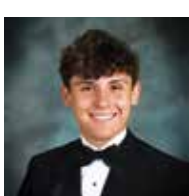
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Saltamachia, Avery



Satterwhite, Sam



Scott, Trand



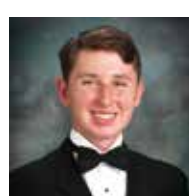
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Snyder, Jack



Starling, Angelina



Stevens, Colt



Stevenson, Lily



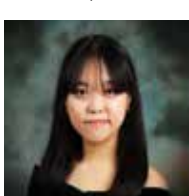
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Stoffel, Lillie



Sutherland, Jayden



Tang, Victoria



Thomason, Tyler



Twine, David



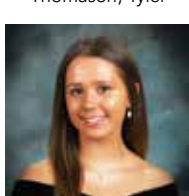
Waller, Elijah



Waller, Jonathan



Wang, Andrew



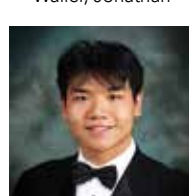
White, Natalie



Willis, Everly



Wilson, Josiah



Zhang, Zion

Congratulations!



Summer Math Learning Keeps Students on Track for Success

Incorporating consistent, enjoyable, and meaningful opportunities for math learning into your family's summer agenda could benefit your kids long after they bid summer break a fond farewell.

The reason: summer learning loss (or the "summer slide"). This refers to the loss of skills all students experience when they don't participate in educational activities over summer vacation. In fact, summer learning loss has been extensively documented in studies dating as far back as 1906! According to researchers at Johns Hopkins University, math proficiency is particularly susceptible to the summer slide, with students losing "about two months of grade level equivalency in mathematical computation skills over the summer months."

Additionally, a study conducted by the RAND Corporation states that summer learning loss is cumulative and can have far-reaching effects on a student's long-term academic success. The good news is that it's possible to stop the summer slide in its tracks and help your kids retain concepts they learned throughout the school year. The RAND Corporation report notes the advantages of



attending summer programs and embracing summer learning opportunities, adding that "Programming needs to be high-quality, and students need to enroll and attend regularly."

The fact is, summer presents valuable and often overlooked chances for kids to dig deep and explore concepts not necessarily covered in school while learning at their own pace. With regular school year pressures on hold, summer could be the season your child discovers how fun learning math can be! To get

the most out of summer math learning, pick a program that...

Ramps up the fun factor... while ensuring that kids make progress. Summer break was made for fun and frolic, so do your child a favor and pick a summer math program that specializes in creative, effective ways to teach math; really makes concepts come alive; and allows your family to balance math learning with non-academic summer pursuits.

Provides individualized instruction in a comfortable, stress free environment. Summer is the time to break free of the constraints and limitations of a traditional classroom environment. Whether your child is far behind, performing at grade level, or in need of an extra challenge, a high-quality math program meets your child where they are and helps them get to where they want to be—with a smile!

Emphasizes regular attendance and goal setting.

Consistent learning over time is key to staving off the summer slide! A solid summer math program will help you and your child pinpoint learning goals and develop a steady plan of action to ensure progress without causing burnout.

Keeps you in the loop.

Program administrators should be enthusiastic communicators eager to provide you with regular updates about your child's progress.

Committing to the right sum-

mer math program can help your child start the next school year on the right foot and gain long lasting confidence and a love of learning along the way. Have a great summer!

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

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See the Difference This Summer

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

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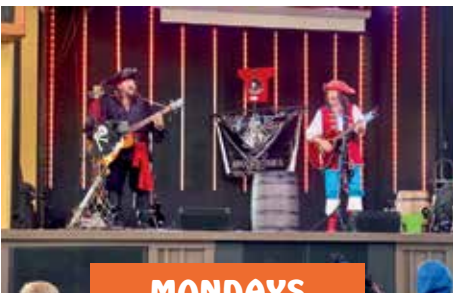
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FREE EVENTS



MONDAYS

PIRATE SHOW

March 16th - August 3rd
Capt. Davy and Kirby Jake & the Crossbones perform a free show from 5-8pm with music, magic & mayhem for mateys of all ages!



TUESDAYS

MOVIES ON THE BEACH

March 10th - August 4th
Grab a beach towel & a spot on the sand for a new featured movie each week at 8pm on the giant inflatable beachfront screen.



WEDNESDAYS

FIREWORKS

May 27th - August 5th
Front row seats to the 9pm fireworks show from the iconic Okaloosa Island pier.

Labor Day Weekend Show:
Sunday, September 6th



THURSDAYS

BEACH LUAU PARTY

May 28th - July 30th
Aloha at Al's from 5:30-8pm with FREE facepainting, balloon animals, and an 8pm island inspired fire & dance performance!

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AJ's Seafood & Oyster Bar

Since 1984, AJ's Seafood and Oyster Bar has been serving cold Gulf Coast oysters and cool libations. What began as a popular local hang out known for fresh oysters and cold beer has grown into one of the most iconic "hot spots" on the Destin Harbor. From its humble beginning shucking oysters off the deck behind a small trailer on the Destin Harbor, it has grown to four locations along our Emerald Coast, serving fresh seafood, live music and exciting water activities in the Destin area. Attention all die hard football fans, AJ's boasts the one and only Jumbotron on the Destin Harbor. AJ's serves up delicious daily specials, mouth-watering drinks plus entertaining live music all month. Don't miss any of the action just come on down to AJ's Seafood and Oyster Bar all season long.

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



FUBAR Pizza Bar

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

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

Need the perfect space to host your event in 2026? FUBAR is equipped with numerous private sections with the option of

having a private bar as well. The outside deck can hold up to 300 people comfortably and can be sectioned off to fit your needs. In addition to the pizza and wings, FUBAR can customize a menu from Italian food to Prime Rib and everything in between. Open 7 days from 11 a.m.-2 a.m.

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

LJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant

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

served over cheese grits.
Sundays: Brunch, 9 a.m. - 1 p.m.
Tuesdays: Taco & Margarita Night, 3-9 p.m.
Wednesdays: Kids Eat Free, 5-9 p.m.
Thursdays: Open Mic/Karaoke, 6-10 p.m.
Saturdays: Steak Night, 5-9 p.m.

May 31: Sunday Shrimp Boil is Back! Shrimp Boil 4-7 p.m.; Live Music 4-8 p.m.

Sunday, May 10: Mother's Day Brunch, 9 a.m. - 2 p.m.

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

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

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

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

JoJo's Coffee and Goodness

An iconic favorite of locals,

owner and operator of JoJo's Coffee and Goodness Angela "JoJo" Stevenson invites you to enter her cafe and relaxed coffee shop atmosphere for a daily dose of "goodness." Stop in for mouth-watering cinnamon rolls, scones, coffee cake, banana and pumpkin breads, apple cider muffins, chocolate chip cookie bars, or brownies with espresso ganache. Gluten free bakery items available. Coffee roasted every week in-house. Try a breakfast special with quiche or kolache alongside hashbrown casserole and cup of coffee. Breakfast burritos are rolled and

ready to grab and go- choose from bacon, birria, chorizo or veggie served with house made cilantro lime or chipotle sauces. Espresso, latte, cappucino, cold brew or nitro made to order. Breakfast and lunch sandwich specials and a full evening catering menu if you are looking to host an event or party. Come for the coffee, stay for the goodness!

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Sunset Shrimp Boil

Sunday, May 31, 4pm-7pm
Parker Willingham 4pm-8pm

Margarita Mondays
Taco Tuesdays
Wednesdays - Kids Eat Free & Sailboat Race 6pm
Thursdays - Paddle Board Race 6pm & Open Mic/Karaoke 6pm
Sunday Buffet Brunch 9am-1pm



..... More Fun

- Friday, May 1: Brianna Steele 6-10pm
- Saturday, May 2: Sick Tigt 6-10pm
- Tuesday, May 5: Cinco de Mayo
- Friday, May 8: Something Fishy 6-10pm
- Saturday, May 9: David Gautreau 6-10pm
- Sunday, May 10: Mothers Day Brunch, 9am-2pm
- Tuesday, May 12: Chess Night 6-9pm
- Friday, May 15: Jody Lucas 6-9pm & Wear Your Life Jacket to Work Day
- Saturday, May 16: Purple Monkey, 6-10pm
- Tuesday, May 19: The Traveling Painter 5:30pm
- Friday, May 22: Rockers 4 Life, 6-10pm
- Saturday, May 23: The Aces 6-10pm
- Friday, May 29: After Math 5 6-10pm
- Saturday, May 30: Paradise Vale 6-10pm

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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- Pensacola**
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- Fort Walton Beach**
• 901 Beal Pkwy NW
• 1285 Eglin Pkwy.
• 290 NE Eglin Pkwy.
- Crestview**
• 297B James Lee Blvd.

- Panama City**
• 1360 West 15th St
- Callaway**
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Destin Boat & Yacht Show Makes Big Debut May 1-3

300+ Boats to be Showcased at Sunset Isle Yacht Club on Okaloosa Island

Okaloosa Island is set to host the newest premier boating and celebration of the 'Coastal Lifestyle' event as the inaugural Destin Boat & Yacht Show, which will mark the final stop of the 2026 Gulf Coast Boat Tour, May 1-3 at Sunset Isle Yacht Club. The region's top dealers and boat manufacturers will showcase over 60 boats in the water and another 250 displayed on the marina property, making this the largest boat show in the Destin market.

Special Events, which is the show operator. "This will be a weekend that celebrates Crab Island, East Pass, Destin Harbor, and all of the amazing on-the-water experiences that define Destin's boating community."

Destin, often referred to as the "World's Luckiest Fishing Village," provides the perfect setting for a show of this caliber, according to Chuck O'Neill of Legendary Marine. "The opportunity to have a boat show

ed lineup of Coastal Lifestyle exhibitors and vendors will showcase the best of Gulf Coast living. Boating accessories, fishing tackle, paddleboarding, kayaking, product demonstrations, seminars, beach furniture, a food barge, beer, and cocktails are all part of the show.

The 2026 Gulf Coast Boat Tour culminates in Destin after highly successful shows in Panama City Beach and also in Orange Beach. Show hours for the 2026 Destin Boat & Yacht Show for Friday, May 1st, and Saturday, May 2nd, will be 10-6, and Sunday, May 3rd, from

10-4. Military members with a valid idea can enter the show for just \$5 any of the three days. To purchase individual day passes to skip the line, as well as up-to-date information on boats, brands, models, dealers, and exhibitors, visit DestinBoatShow.com.



The three-day event will feature a 'Boat For Everyone!' Whether you are an experienced boater looking to upgrade your current boat, looking to purchase your first boat, or just enjoy spending a day on the water admiring beautiful boats, this show is for you. Center consoles, tritoons, bay boats, and luxury yachts alongside the latest in marine technology, accessories, and coastal lifestyle exhibits will all be showcased at the 142-slip Marina at the Sunset Isle Resort and Yacht Club, one of the finest and largest marinas in Northwest Florida.

"Just as we do with our other shows along the Gulf Coast, this is more than just a boat show," said Scott Burt of Wheels Up

in Destin in early May is a very critical opportunity for us and other dealers who are most appreciative to be able to showcase our boats to the Destin-area clientele. We know it's going to be a huge success."

Jason Hatcher of MarineMax says Destin has long needed a show like this. "The opportunity for a boat show in May is something no one has done, and it's going to be a hit, because boat buyers have been asking for an event like this." Hatcher also said the show's location is the perfect venue. "Sunset Isle is a brand new state-of-the-art marina, with huge slips, wide docks, plenty of parking, and getting in and out is easy for everyone."

In addition to boats, a curat-

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Off the Hook

Blessing of the Fleet Returns for 69th Year

May 14 | Destin Harbor

There are few traditions that capture the heart and heritage of our area quite like the annual Blessing of the Fleet—a time-honored celebration where faith, fishing and community come together along the harbor.

Now in its 69th year, the beloved event returns on Ascension Day, Thursday, May 14, 2026, at the docks behind Brotula's Seafood House & Steamer. Rooted in Destin's identity as a historic fishing village, the Blessing of the Fleet remains one of the city's most meaningful and uniquely coastal traditions.

The evening begins at 4 p.m. with a Captains' Praise and Worship Service held under a large tent overlooking the harbor. Around 5 p.m., clergy will process to the docks to begin blessing the vessels—everything from commercial fishing boats to safety and recreational watercraft. Each participating captain receives a signature blue Blessing of the Fleet flag, a symbol proudly flown to signify protection and faith for the year ahead. In 2025 alone, more than 130 vessels took part in the ceremony.

Following the blessings, the community is invited to gather for a Fish Feast beginning



PHOTO CREDIT: IMMANUEL ANGLICAN CHURCH / A.Y.II
Clergy board Captain Tony Davis' Anastasia for the last group blessing of the day. Captain Tony serves as Commodore for the event. His father, Captain William Frank Davis served as Commodore for the Blessing of the Fleet for many years as well.

around 5:15 p.m., with a suggested donation. Sponsored in part by Ariel Seafood and Brotula's, the feast offers a true taste of Destin while bringing neighbors and visitors together in fellowship.

Free parking is available at Brotula's throughout the day, with additional public parking across the street opening at 2 p.m. Event T-shirts will also be available for purchase near the main tent.

While Blessings of the Fleet are celebrated in other coastal

communities around the world, Destin's stands out for its scale, spirit and deep connection to the people who built their lives on the water. First held in 1958, it is considered Destin's second-oldest tradition, following the famed Destin Fishing Rodeo, which began in 1948.

The tradition reflects the enduring faith of the early fishermen who founded this "Little Fishing Village" and continues to honor those who make their living from the Gulf today. Each year, families, captains and

community members gather not only to celebrate the season ahead, but to pray for protection, provision and safe passage on the water.

The Blessing of the Fleet is part of "Destin's Week of Blessings," a series of faith-based, family-friendly events held throughout the week and supported by local churches. Together, these gatherings offer opportunities to serve, connect and uplift the community.

Captains wishing to participate can register their vessels by contacting Immanuel Anglican Church at 850-837-6324 or by emailing immanuel@iacdestin.org with vessel and contact information.

Whether you're a lifelong local, a member of the fishing community, or a visitor looking to experience a truly authentic Emerald Coast tradition, the Blessing of the Fleet offers a meaningful glimpse into the heart of this coastal town—where faith and the sea have always gone hand in hand.

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Where Did the Golf Cart Come From?

The golf cart has come a long way from its humble beginnings as a simple tool designed to move golfers around the course. What began as a practical convenience has evolved into a lifestyle vehicle — especially in coastal communities along the Florida Panhandle, where golf carts are a familiar part of everyday life.

The story of the golf cart dates back to the early 20th century. In the 1930s, early electric carts were developed to transport equipment across golf courses. Not long after, they were adapted to carry golfers, helping players move around large courses more comfortably.

By the 1950s, golf carts began gaining popularity in recreational golf. Early models were simple, often three-wheeled and powered by basic electric batteries. As demand increased, manufacturers improved the design. Four wheels replaced three, steering wheels replaced



tillers and gas-powered models appeared in the 1960s and



1970s, offering greater power and range.

Over time, people realized golf carts could be useful beyond the course. Resorts, retirement communities and large campuses adopted them for short-distance transportation. Their small size, quiet operation

and ease of use made them ideal for quick trips.

Today, golf carts have entered a new era. Modern models feature lithium batteries, advanced suspension, LED lighting, Bluetooth sound systems and luxury seating. Some even include touchscreen displays and back-

up cameras, transforming them into comfortable neighborhood vehicles.

This evolution is especially visible along the Florida Panhandle. In many beach communities, residents use golf carts for quick trips to the beach, local restaurants or neighborhood events. Families often pile into multi-passenger carts to grab ice cream, visit friends or enjoy a sunset ride.

Golf carts offer a unique mix of convenience and fun. They encourage a slower pace, make it easier to connect with neighbors and add a sense of enjoyment to everyday travel. Once just a golf course utility, the golf cart has become a defining part of coastal community life.

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Charlotte Brooks Rides to a National Title and Auburn University

BY DOUGLAS "DOC" STAUFFER

At just 17 years old, local resident Charlotte Brooks has already accomplished what many young athletes only dream of — a national championship title and a collegiate athletic future at one of the nation's premier equestrian programs.

The Okaloosa County native recently captured the coveted Congress Champion title in Youth Hunt Seat Equitation (age 15–18) at the prestigious All-American Quarter Horse Congress — widely recognized



as the largest and most competitive single-breed horse show in the world. For those within the equestrian community, the title alone speaks volumes. For those unfamiliar, imagine winning a national championship on one of the sport's biggest stages, against the very best riders from across the country.

And this fall, she

will continue her journey at Auburn University, joining the nationally respected Auburn Tigers equestrian team.

But Charlotte's story is about far more than trophies.

A Life in the Saddle

Charlotte did not stumble into the sport. She was raised in it. Horses have been part of her life from an early age, and she began competing seriously around age ten. What followed was not overnight success, but years of early mornings, long travel weekends, disciplined training sessions, and quiet perseverance.

Equestrian competition requires a rare blend of physical skill, technical precision, and mental composure. Riders must communicate with a thousand-pound animal through subtle cues, balance, and trust. In Hunt Seat Equitation, judges evaluate the rider's form, control, and effectiveness — not just speed or flash. It is a discipline that rewards poise under pressure.

Charlotte has learned to thrive in that pressure. Winning at the Quarter Horse Congress represents the culmination of years of refinement — hours in the arena, countless practice rounds, and the resilience to improve after setbacks. National titles are not handed out; they are earned stride by stride.

Balancing Excellence

Unlike many student-athletes who compete locally, Charlotte's competition schedule has taken her across the country. To maintain both academic and athletic excellence, she enrolled in Florida Virtual School, which allowed her the flexibility to travel and train while staying on track academically.

That decision reflects maturity beyond her years. It takes discipline to manage studies independently while competing at a national level. Charlotte has demonstrated that excellence in athletics does not require sacrificing academic responsibility. Her ability to balance both speaks to strong family support, personal determination, and a clear sense of purpose.

The Next Chapter: Auburn

Charlotte's next step brings her to Auburn's equestrian program, one of the most respected in collegiate competition. Auburn competes under the umbrella of the National Collegiate Equestrian Association, where varsity riders face elite talent from across the nation.

Auburn has a history of national championships and a culture built around discipline, teamwork, and competitive excellence. Charlotte will now test her skills at the highest collegiate level — representing not only her university, but her hometown of Laurel Hill and Okaloosa County. For a local athlete to step onto that stage is significant. For a national champion to do so is remarkable.

More Than a Title

While the headline reads "national champion," those who know Charlotte would likely describe her differently: dedicated, humble, steady, and focused.

Champions are often defined by what happens in the spotlight. But true character is revealed in the unseen hours — the practice sessions when no one is watching, the moments of disappointment that require perseverance, and the quiet discipline of improvement. Charlotte's journey reminds us that greatness is rarely dramatic. It is built patiently, consistently, and faithfully.

In a world quick to celebrate viral fame and overnight success, her story stands as a refreshing testimony to sustained effort and earned achievement.

A Community to Cheer

As Charlotte prepares to ride for Auburn this fall, Okaloosa County has every reason to celebrate one of its own. Her success is not only personal—it is shared. She carries with her the pride of a small community that values hard work and excellence.

When she enters the arena in Auburn colors, she will do so as a national champion — but also as a local young woman who never forgot where she started. And if her past is any indication, the best rides may still be ahead.



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Exploring Powered Mobility

BY KELLY STALNAKER

Are you or a loved one starting to consider powered mobility? There are a variety of ways to determine when the time is right. These may include unstable balance resulting in frequent falls or “near falls,” debilitating pain during movement, severe fatigue and shortness of breath, or the need for support with progressive medical conditions such as MS or Parkinson’s, among others. Maybe you’ve noticed that your loved one is avoiding social events due to a lack of confidence in their mobility, or that manual mobility aids such as canes or walkers are no longer sufficient. Whatever

those needing permanent, full-time mobility solutions.

A powered scooter is better suited for the occasional user — someone who may not need such robust assistance for daily activities. Powered scooters use handlebars, or a tiller, to steer and can require a bit more coordination and strength. They come in three- or four-wheeled versions but are not always as proficient indoors or on rough terrain, as the turning radius is wider. Powered scooters tend to be lighter and often more portable, breaking down for easier transport.

Regardless of whether you are considering a wheelchair or a scooter, there are several key points to keep in mind. According to Mobility Independence Reviews, five critical factors should guide your decision:

Buy from a reputable source to ensure you have support if the equipment needs service.

Understand the daily range you will need so the battery lasts through your regular activities.

Confirm the equipment will fit in your vehicle when folded or that you have a way to transport it.

Test-drive the equipment to make sure it is comfortable and easy to maneuver.

Consider the terrain you will be navigating, such as gravel, grass or sidewalks, when deciding on tire size.

Other considerations include seat size, top speed and weight capacity.

The right mobility solution can make all the difference, which is why working with a trusted, knowledgeable company is so important. As families

look ahead to upcoming celebrations like Mother’s Day and Father’s Day, it’s worth considering options that offer lasting impact. At Baywind Medical, we provide a range of powered wheelchairs and scooters from

industry leader Golden Technologies and welcome patients to try the equipment firsthand to ensure the best fit.

Now is the perfect time to find that fit, as all of our powered mobility equipment is

15% off. Greater mobility often means greater independence and a better quality of life. Stop by Baywind Medical today at 540 E. John Sims Parkway in Niceville, or call 850-729-2559 for more information.



the reason, the many available options can feel overwhelming. Here are a few tips to help you choose the right powered scooter or wheelchair.

First, it is important to know the difference between a powered wheelchair and a powered scooter. A powered wheelchair is a compact unit that utilizes a joystick for precise movements. It can handle a variety of terrain with ease and is a better choice for indoor use, as it has a tighter turning radius. Power wheelchairs are stable and comfortable, usually offering a captain’s seat with multiple adjustment points for a customized fit. They are typically recommended for

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Strength: The Overlooked Vital Sign of Longevity



BY KASSIA GARFIELD,
MAXSTRENGTH FITNESS

For decades, the conversation around health and longevity has focused heavily on cardiovascular fitness. We've been told to walk more, run more and keep our heart rate up. While cardiovascular health is certainly important, an increasing body of research is pointing to another powerful predictor of long-term health and survival: muscular strength.

Researchers across multiple fields — from gerontology to sports medicine — are finding that simple strength measures can predict not only physical function, but also disease risk, independence and even mortality.

One of the most widely studied markers is grip strength. It might seem surprising that something as simple as squeezing a hand dynamometer could

tell us much about our health, but large-scale research suggests otherwise. In the massive international PURE Study, which followed more than 140,000 people across 17 countries, researchers discovered that grip strength was strongly associated with health outcomes. For every 11-pound decrease in grip strength, participants experienced a 16% increase in all-cause mortality and a 17% increase in cardiovascular death. Grip strength even proved to be a stronger predictor of mortality than systolic blood pressure.

Another key area researchers frequently examine is quadriceps strength. The quadriceps muscles play a central role in many basic functional movements — standing up from a chair, climbing stairs, maintaining balance and walking. Weakness in these muscles is strongly linked to loss of independence, higher fall risk and increased hospitalization rates in older adults.

Quadriceps weakness is also a hallmark of sarcopenia, the progressive decline in muscle mass and strength that occurs with aging. Sarcopenia significantly increases the risk of frailty, disability and reduced quality of life.



What's particularly interesting is that researchers are discovering that strength may be even more important than muscle size. While muscle mass has long been studied as a marker of health, strength appears to correlate more strongly with functional outcomes. In other words, it's not just how much muscle someone has — it's how much force they can produce with it. This is evident on body scans showing high muscle mass percentages, yet some individuals cannot stand up from a chair without using their hands.

This is why modern clinical assessments increasingly use functional strength tests rather than just body composition measurements. Simple assessments such as grip strength, sit-to-stand tests, walking speed and leg press strength are now

commonly used to evaluate aging and physical resilience.

These tests may look different, but they all measure the same underlying quality: the body's ability to produce force.

The reason this matters is because muscle strength naturally declines with age. Most people reach peak strength in their 30s. After that, strength typically declines about 5% per decade through the 40s and 50s. After age 60, that decline can accelerate to 10–15% per decade if no resistance training is performed.

By the time someone reaches their 70s, they may have lost 30–40% of their strength compared to their younger years.

Fortunately, research consistently shows that strength is highly trainable — even later in life. Resistance training can dramatically improve strength, balance, mobility and metabolic health in adults well into their 70s, 80s and beyond.

When people look at studies on longevity, they often focus on the specific markers being measured: grip strength, quadri-

ceps strength, walking speed or chair-rise performance. But the reality is that these are simply different ways of observing the same underlying factor.

The bigger story is not grip strength alone. It's not just quadriceps strength either.

The real marker is strength itself.

When researchers study these different measurements, they are all essentially examining the same fundamental quality: how strong the human body is.

Strength reflects the health of the neuromuscular system, the integrity of muscles and bones, metabolic function and the ability to perform the movements that keep us independent. It influences how we move, how we work and how resilient our bodies are as we age.

In many ways, strength acts as a summary measure of overall physical health.

So, while the headlines might highlight grip strength or leg strength, the broader message is much simpler: maintaining strength throughout life is one of the most powerful things we can do to support long-term health, independence and longevity.

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Golf Series: AJGA Preview Tournament

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

For four days in April, homeowners in Lake Lorraine and Shalimar Pointe watched from their patios as polite, well-dressed and determined young golfers took tee shots, approached greens and sank putts. The 36-hole stroke play tournament officially took place April 11–12, 2026, with a Friday qualifier and Thursday practice round giving these future golf professionals daily opportunities to chase low scores.

The American Junior Golf Association, headquartered in Braselton, Georgia, has pro-

duced notable alumni including Phil Mickelson, Scottie Scheffler, Jordan Spieth and Tiger Woods.

Tournament Director Sophia Thomas, alongside a staff of eight interns and one assistant, coordinated the event with a steady smile and remarkable efficiency. Regional Director Matt Emmi, who oversees Florida operations, also attended and shared insight into the AJGA's point system and awards structure. Inspired by his father, a head golf professional, Em-

Continued on page 25

May is National Stroke Awareness Month

Rebuilding Lives After a Stroke: The Power of Post-Acute Rehabilitation

BY TERESA HALVERSON,
BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT/
COMMUNITY RELATIONS
DIRECTOR

Recovery after a stroke doesn't end when a patient leaves the hospital – in many ways, that's when the real work and recovery begin. Post-Acute stroke rehabilitation is critical because it helps survivors regain lost abilities, adapt to new challenges, and restore as much independence as possible. Through targeted physical, occupational, and speech therapy services, patients can rebound strength, improve coordination and mobility as well as communication skills. Just as importantly, post-acute rehabilitation supports emotional and cognitive healing, helping individuals cope with life changes a stroke can bring. Early and consistent therapy not only improves physical and cognitive recovery, but also helps reduce the risk of complications and hospital readmissions. For many stroke survivors, this phase of care is the bridge between survival and truly living again.

Guidance from the National Stroke Association emphasizes that recovery, after a stroke, is a long-term process that requires active participation from the patient and family/caregivers. One of the most important recommendations is to begin rehabilitation as early as possible and remain consistent with therapy, as early intervention is closely linked to better outcomes. (<https://www.stroke.org>)

Post-acute rehabilitation is not only vital for the patient's recovery, it also has a profound impact on family members and caregivers. For patients, this phase of care provides the structured support needed to regain as much independence as possible, preventing complications from falls, and rebuilds confidence in performing everyday activities. The ultimate goal of post-acute care is to assist the



patient's best possible chances of returning to their prior level of function.

For families, post-acute rehabilitation offers education, guidance, training and peace of mind during what is often an overwhelming time. Caregivers learn how to safely assist with daily tasks, manage medications, and recognize warning signs of any potential complications. This support reduces stress, prevents caregiver burn-out, and fosters a more positive recovery environment at home. Effective post-acute care strengthens outcomes for both the patient and their support system, turning recovery into a shared, supported journey rather than an uncertain path.

Neurologists play a key role in monitoring the type and severity of the stroke, monitoring complications, and managing any underlying conditions. In collaboration with the post-acute clinical team and primary care physicians, neurologists help tailor rehabilitation plans based on the patient's neurological status and recovery potential. Their continued involvement ensures that care remains coordinated, proactive and responsive to any changes, giving patients and families greater confidence and support throughout the recovery journey.

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in-patient post-acute and out-patient rehabilitation services for stroke recovery, delivered by certified therapists specializing in neurological rehabilitation. Our team is dedicated to supporting recovery, independence and improved quality of life.


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DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

You're taking care of all of it — work, home, children or grandchildren, spouses, parents, your boss/clients/students/patients. Mother's Day is for the flowers, but every day you show up — lifting groceries, carrying kids, steadying loved ones — you're asking a lot from your

bones. This Women's Health Week (May 10-16), let's celebrate all women (the nurturers, the bosses, and everyone in between) by protecting those quiet workhorses. At The Hormone Restoration Center, we use bi-identical pellets as our method of hormone therapy — here's how pellets can help keep your bones strong.

Why Pellets — And Why Hormones — Matter

Estrogen slows the breakdown of old bone and supports new bone formation. When estrogen drops around perimenopause and menopause, bone loss can speed up, making fractures

more likely over time. Testosterone and progesterone help too, by supporting muscle and balance so you're less likely to fall. Pellet therapy delivers bi-identical hormones under the skin in a slow, steady stream — avoiding daily highs and lows — and gives consistent support that helps preserve bone.

How Pellet Therapy Helps Bones

By keeping hormone levels steady, pellets can slow or even reverse bone loss for many women, especially when started near the time of menopause. Over time, the benefits of pellet therapy reveal themselves as improved bone density and, importantly, a lower risk of fractures. Pellets often also ease hot flashes and improve sleep and energy — benefits that help with strength and fall prevention.

What The Pellet Process Looks Like

Consultation: We review your health, family fracture history, lifestyle, and order baseline labs.

Placement: A brief in-office procedure places small, sterile pellets under the skin. Minimal downtime and a small dressing afterward.

Steady delivery: Pellets re-



lease hormones continuously for about 3–6 months, depending on dose and metabolism. No daily dosing to remember.

Follow-up: We monitor symptoms and labs, adjust dosing as needed.

What To Expect

You won't "feel" bones strengthening day-to-day, but many patients notice fewer menopausal symptoms, better sleep, and steadier energy within weeks.

Pellets are one tool in a practical plan: individualized HRT

when appropriate, adequate calcium and vitamin D, resistance and balance exercise, fall-proofing your home, and regular bone checks.

You carry everyone else — let's help your skeleton keep up. If bone health is on your mind, call The Hormone Restoration Center. We'll review your history, run the right tests, and build a personalized pellet plan so you can keep lifting, hugging, and showing up for the people who matter most. Call (850) 837-1271 to schedule a consultation.

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MENOPAUSE

continued from page 4

important during this phase of life. Hormonal changes contribute to muscle loss, reduced bone density, and slower metabolic function. Resistance training is one of the most effective ways to counter this.

Build up to strength training 2-4 times per week. This not only preserves muscle, but it places necessary stress on long bones, helping maintain bone

density and reduce the risk and progression of osteoporosis.

Address Sleep Directly

Sleep disruption is common and often one of the most impactful symptoms. Difficulty falling asleep, waking during the night, and non-restorative sleep affect everything from mood to metabolism. Support sleep with a consistent routine, a cool, dark environment, and mindful use of caffeine and alcohol.

For some women, declining

progesterone may contribute to sleep disruption. In those cases, targeted support, including progesterone when clinically appropriate, can help restore more consistent, restful sleep. Quality sleep is a cornerstone of hormonal and cognitive health.

Support Your Nervous System

This transition affects both hormones and the brain. Increased anxiety, irritability, and emotional variability reflect real

neurological shifts. Daily regulation, through movement, time outdoors, breathwork, or meaningful connection, supports resilience and emotional stability.

These are not luxuries. They are essential tools for navigating this phase well.

Menopause is not the end of your vitality. It is a significant

physiological transition that deserves attention and support, not dismissal. These changes are not random. They are signals.

When you understand what your body is doing and respond accordingly, you move through this phase with greater stability, clarity, and long-term health in mind.

AGJA PREVIEW

continued from page 22

mi's enthusiasm for mentoring young players reflects a bright future for the game.

In 2025, Destin-Fort Walton Beach helped bring this prestigious tournament to the Gulf Coast. This year, even without that sponsorship, the AJGA chose to return to Shalimar Pointe — not only for its challenging course, but for the club's exceptional hospitality.

girls (scores 71-73). Yardage played at 6,620 for boys and 5,655 for girls.

The field represented 22 states, including 34 players from Florida, along with competitors from three countries outside the United States.

Awards were presented April 12 to the top finishers:

Girls Division:

First place: Gabrielle Kim, Irvine, California (151)

Second place: Qiaoyi Lyu, Celebration, Florida (153)

Growing the game of golf for the next generation often begins with opportunities like this — and once again, these young athletes brought their "A" game to Okaloosa County.



Members welcomed staff and players like family, opening their homes to house 10 staff members and volunteering throughout the event. From registration and hydration stations to spotting shots across the course, their support was instrumental.

Course manager John Jenkins, along with staff, earned high marks for maintaining excellent course conditions and providing outstanding clubhouse service. The members lounge served as tournament headquarters, ensuring smooth operations. The club's motto, "Where Everyone is Treated Like a Champion," proved true throughout the event.

Of the 78 golfers, ages 12-19, most had already qualified, while Friday's round added six boys (scores 73-76) and three

Third place: Abigail Murphy, Kissimmee, Florida (155)

Boys Division:

First place: Austin Blackburn, Dunwoody, Georgia (145)

Second place: Yigi Wang, Lakewood Ranch, Florida (148)

Third place: Luke Harrigan, Hobe Sound, Florida (148)

A special award went to Nathan Drummond of Westchase, Florida, who shot a 67 over 18 holes.

A personal note of congratulations goes to Mason Dean Hampton of Shalimar Pointe, who at just 12 years old finished in the top 25 among 54 boys. His performance hints at an exciting future in the sport.

With perfect weather throughout the week, the tournament offered an ideal setting for players and families alike.

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 Museums

Museum News



BY BARBARA PALMGREN

250th Celebration Begins!

The Preamble to the Declaration of Independence states:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that



among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

This being a special year to celebrate all year long, each month I will submit articles about key events happening around our county. This entire year, we celebrate the birthday of a document that changed our

nation and the world. Okaloosa County has already begun plans for several large events to honor this historic moment. The 2026 America 250th Commission participants meet twice a month to coordinate events. Two such events are a grand parade in downtown Crestview at 4 p.m. on May 9 and a gala VIP dinner and drone show on June 12 from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. at the Rigdon Center in Fort Walton Beach.

This month, I highlight a special tribute at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida. This local history museum is a special place. Tucked away in old downtown Valparaiso, it houses memorabilia and artifacts from all of Northwest Florida. So as not to forget these artifacts, a display case was moved from another part of the museum to the new exhibit hall. It contains artifacts found on Eglin Air Force Base property from the time of and before the Revolution, including tools and pottery.

The rest of the exhibit is a history lesson come alive for residents and visitors. Events, places and key patriot heroes are showcased on large panels designed by CJ Signs, with words and pictures taking us back to the time before and including the signing of the Declaration of Independence. In addition, a tent, movie and Youth Corner provide more visual and hands-on experiences for visitors.

In March, financial contributors to this exhibit were honored with a reception at the museum. A special thank you to Magnolia Grill and Tom Rice for providing delicious appetizers and desserts for the occasion. Each contributor received a “Betsy Ross” pin and an in-depth presentation of the exhibit by Dr. Marie Hallion, curator of the exhibit. Dr. Hallion is the chair of the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida.

Community Connection



The ETA Chapter of Delta Kappa Gamma recently held its quarterly meeting in the museum’s Exhibit Hall. Surrounded by the new Celebrate America 250! exhibit, members enjoyed a patriotic setting before touring the museum, including the pollinator garden and exhibits spanning from prehistoric times to the region’s early industries.

An Honor Long Overdue to a Veteran Volunteer at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida



With his quiet demeanor and smile, Mike Holt is a friendly face that often greets visitors as he helps with many tasks at the museum. Whenever the manager can’t be present at the museum, Mike provides leadership and care for the museum during that absence. A trusted presence, Mike has smiled and served for over 25 years at this historic treasure in Valparaiso that preserves history for all of Northwest Florida.

On Saturday, March 28, 2026, Mike was awarded a plaque for his dedication and service. Applause rang throughout the room as he humbly accepted this thank you from everyone. His lovely wife, Lou Holt, attended the volunteer luncheon with Mike. Each year, the museum celebrates the work of volunteers who help with school tours, summer camps, “go-to” tasks from management and even sewing colonial hats and other clothing items for display in our newest exhibit, the

Celebrate America 250! The Revolution Exhibit.

Trustees Mike Weaver, Ken Walsh, Barb Palmgren and Marie Hallion, served a delicious lunch catered by Sugar Mill Sweets in Fort Walton Beach. It was their turn to serve those who volunteer in so many ways throughout the year.

Home School Friday

May 8 | 10 a.m.

Homeschool students are invited to a special educational program featuring Travis Souther, UWF librarian, presenting Duty Before Glory: Washington’s Enduring Legacy of Leadership. This engaging discussion explores the life and influence of George Washington.

Cost is \$7 per student. Registration is required by calling 850-678-2615.

History Sandwiched In

May 8 | Noon

Bring a brown bag lunch and enjoy a free presentation by Travis Souther on Duty Before Glory: Washington’s Enduring Legacy of Leadership. This program offers a compelling look at the life and leadership of America’s first president.

Mother’s Day Tea

May 9 | 1–3 p.m.

Celebrate Mother’s Day at the Heritage Museum Association’s annual tea. Guests are invited to dress in Victorian-era attire or come as they are to enjoy an afternoon honoring mothers.


Cost is \$30 per person, \$25 for members. Registration is required.

Outdoor Cooking Demonstration

May 16 | 11 a.m.

Deb Edgar presents Feeding the Frontier Army, an outdoor cooking demonstration highlighting Revolutionary War-era food preparation. Learn what soldiers ate, how meals were prepared and the limited rations provided by the young government. This program will take place outdoors around a cook fire.






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Sean of the South: Enough



BY SEAN DIETRICH

What if I told you that you are enough?

Moreover, what if you woke up this morning and, for the first time ever, you actually felt like enough. What if you loved yourself? And I mean really loved yourself.

Do you love yourself? Let's find out.

Are you a perfectionist? No? Yes? Have you ever asked WHY you're a perfectionist? Have you ever wondered why you strive to be flawless so that nobody will find a reason to judge you?

Or are you a people pleaser? Ever wonder why? How did you become a doormat? Why do you fall all over yourself to ensure everyone will like you? Would showing them the real you be that bad?

Or maybe you're critical. Maybe you nitpick those you love. Heck, maybe you nitpick yourself. Maybe you look in the mirror and think, "I'm so fat and ugly."

Perhaps you see photos of yourself and react with true disgust, thinking, "I'm so old and wrinkled. Look at all this flab underneath my neck, jiggling like Jello salad."

Maybe you don't like your nose. Or your teeth. Or the shape of your booty-mus maximus.

Then again, maybe you dislike yourself in much simpler ways. Maybe you're embarrassed about your bank account. "Omigod. Is this ALL you have in savings? What a loser."

Maybe you don't like where you are in your career. What a freaking disappointment you are. You should've been MUCH further along in your field by now. Instead, you're just a supporting actor in someone else's made-for-TV drama.

Maybe you don't feel smart enough. Maybe you are socially anxious. Maybe you think you're too much of an introvert. You're a classic procrastinator. You feel invisible. You hate your hair. You wish you were prettier. Skinnier. Funnier. Happier.

Either way, your inner critic is always screaming, "You're not enough!" You've tried to shut up this blowhard for years. But it doesn't work. The inner critic just keeps talking smack.

"You're simply not enough," the critic keeps saying.

This is shame you feel. You might not be aware that it's shame, but it is. You don't feel shame because of something you've done. You feel shame over who you are.

You dislike the real you. And thus, you've formed a persona to hide the real you. And hopefully, everyone will like this persona

because, God knows, you work really hard building it. You built this persona because the real you is not worthy. The real you just isn't enough.

But...

What if I told you that you don't have to feel this way anymore? What if I told you that you ARE enough? What if I said that you are so insanely beautiful as a human being, just the way you are in this moment. Moreover, what if I am not prodigiously and majestically full of bovine ordure?

There is a way to never feel ashamed again. You will not find the answer through rituals and creeds, nor through the op-

pression of pious dogmas. You will not find answers in internet videos or poorly written articles on the internet—such as the one you are currently reading.

I have been ashamed of myself for my entire life. Because of childhood trauma, I became the essence of shame itself. But if I have learned one truth in my short life—if you get nothing out of what I've written you today—I hope you understand one thing, because the entirety of reality rests upon it:

The only way to love yourself is to first love your neighbor. And the only way to love your neighbor is to love the One who made them.



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 Musing

A Pastor's Ponderings: When You've Been Wronged



BY PASTOR DOUG STAUFFER

Few things cut as deeply as being wronged. Whether it is betrayal, false accusation or sim-

ple unfair treatment, it touches something personal—our sense of justice, our pride and our desire to be vindicated. From childhood to adulthood, the cry is the same: “That’s not fair.”

And yet, Scripture calls us to respond in a way that rises above what feels natural.

Proverbs 24:17 *Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth.*

Even when justice seems to come to those who have wronged us, God warns against allowing satisfaction to take root in our hearts. Why? Because bit-

terness can quietly replace righteousness, and we begin stepping into a place that belongs to God alone. Jesus raised the standard even higher:

Matthew 5:44 *But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;*

This is not easy—but it is Christlike. It is difficult to remain bitter toward someone for whom you are consistently praying. Prayer shifts our focus from the offense to God’s control and care and begins to soften what



anger has hardened.

There are also times when doing right leads to suffering. Scripture does not ignore this reality:

1 Peter 4:16 *Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.*

There is a difference between suffering for wrongdoing and suffering for doing the right thing. One brings regret; the other brings reward. When we endure wrong for doing right, we have an opportunity to reflect Christ in a powerful way. Perhaps one of the most challenging truths in Scripture is found here:

1 Corinthians 6:7 *...Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?*

In a world that insists on defending every right, God sometimes calls His people to yield—not out of weakness, but out of strength. There are moments when preserving a Christlike

testimony matters more than proving a point, demanding a response marked by grace rather than insistence.

King David modeled this spirit. Though wronged repeatedly by Saul, he refused to retaliate, choosing instead to leave judgment in God’s hands. Even more profoundly, Jesus Himself—reviled, mocked, and crucified—“reviled not again,” but committed all to the Father who judges righteously.

When life presses in, what comes out of us reveals what is within us. The fruit of the Spirit—love, peace, longsuffering, gentleness—does not grow in comfort alone, but often through adversity.

So, when you are wronged, you face a choice: settle the score yourself, or trust God to do it. One leads to continued strife; the other leads to peace. In the end, we rest in this truth: God sees, God knows and God judges righteously.

Savvy Leigh PHOTO

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Local Author Bookshelf:

Doug Stauffer's 25th Book Honors America's 250th Birthday

America is now well into its 250th year — a milestone that invites more than reflection; it calls for renewed appreciation. While much of the public focus remains on July 4, 1776, the true story of America's founding extends far beyond a single date. It is a story forged through years of sacrifice, perseverance and unwavering commitment to the cause of liberty.

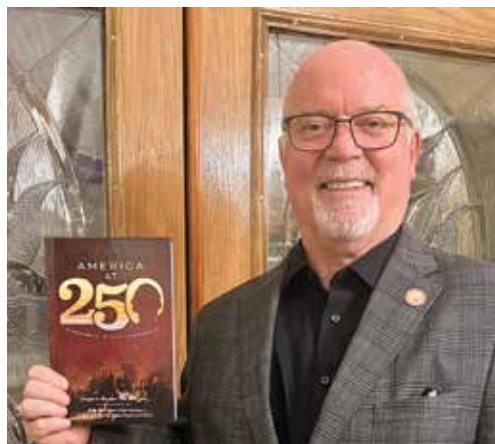
That broader perspective is the focus of *America at 250*, the 25th book by author, historian and local pastor Doug Stauffer. Rather than simply revisiting familiar moments, the book explores what might be called the "founding decade" — from the Declaration of Independence through the hard-fought victory at Yorktown and the peaceful transfer of power that followed. It reminds readers that freedom was not merely declared; it was defended, secured and entrusted to future generations.

In an era marked by division and uncertainty, the book deliv-

ers a clear message: America has never been perfect — but it has always been worth celebrating. The founding generation faced internal disagreements, external threats and overwhelming odds. Yet they remained united around core principles — liberty, self-government and a recognition that freedom requires both responsibility and virtue.

That enduring spirit continues to resonate today. State Rep. Patt Maney, a decorated veteran and public servant, offered his endorsement of the work in the foreword, noting, "This book captures the spirit of a people who refused to give up on freedom, even when the odds were against them." His words highlight a central theme of the book: resilience has always been at the heart of the American story.

History reinforces that the preservation of a nation depends not just on its founding, but on its people. Chuck Harding observed, "It is not the rev-



olution which builds the nation, but the spirit which maintains it." That "spirit" is precisely what is being tested in our own time.

There are forces — both within and beyond America — that seek to divide, discourage and weaken the nation. Cultural tensions and political disagreements often dominate the headlines, creating the impression that unity is out of reach. Yet history tells a different story. Time and again, America has

demonstrated an ability to stand together when it matters most.

"United We Stand" is more than a phrase — it is a reality that even America's adversaries understand. Those who oppose the nation recognize that division is their greatest opportunity. Conversely, unity — rooted not in sameness, but in shared principles — remains America's greatest strength.

America at 250 does not ignore the nation's imperfections. Instead, it places them in proper perspective. The book acknowledges that while America has faced failures, it has also shown a remarkable capacity for correction, growth and renewal. That reality alone provides ample reason to celebrate this historic milestone.

The work also highlights the role of faith and moral conviction during the founding era. From public acknowledgments of divine providence to the emphasis on virtue as essential to self-government, the founders understood that liberty required more than political structure — it required character.

As the nation moves through its 250th-year milestone, the question is not whether there is cause for celebration. There is. The question is whether Americans will take the time to remember what made the nation strong — and what must be preserved for the future.

In the face of voices that seek to divide, the enduring lesson of the founding remains clear: a people committed to principle and united in purpose cannot easily be overcome.

Two hundred and fifty years later, that truth still stands. This book is available on Amazon and at www.BibleDoug.com.



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Arts News

MKAF Seeks Artists for 31st Festival of the Arts



Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation is now accepting artist applications for the 31st annual Festival of the Arts, set for Oct. 24–25, 2026, at the Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Village in Destin.

One of the Southeast’s premier art festivals, the event features more than 100 artists from across the country, along with live music, Cuisine on the Green, a wine and beer garden, children’s art activities and more. This juried show includes a wide range of mediums, from painting and sculpture to photography, fiber, glass and digital art. Artists will compete for \$10,000 in cash awards. A \$30 nonrefundable jury fee applies, with booth fees starting at \$350.

“Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation is a champion for arts and culture and the Festival of the Arts helps to build that creative community. This festival attracts artists from across the country and has become a popular annual fall event with locals and visitors alike,” said Deb Nissley, director of operations for Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation.

Application deadline for artist exhibition and poster art is July 1, 2026. Learn more at mkaf.org.

Student Creativity Takes Center Stage in Poster Contest

The Okaloosa Arts Alliance invites K–12 students across the county to participate in the 17th Annual School Poster Contest. This year’s theme, “What Does Art Mean to You?,” encourages students to explore how creativity shapes their lives. Entries may be submitted through schools or individually and must be received by May 2 at 3 p.m. Drop-off locations include Grow Your Gift Conservatory of Music in Fort Walton Beach and the

Okaloosa Arts Alliance office on Beal Parkway.

The community is invited to a free public reception and showcase May 3 from 1–4 p.m. at Grow Your Gift, featuring student artwork, live music, refreshments and an interactive instrument “petting zoo,” along with the announcement of contest winners and Viewer’s Choice awards.

Details: okaloosaarts.org.

Sinfonia Youth Orchestra Performs Free Spring Concerts May 3

Sinfonia Gulf Coast’s Sinfonia Youth Orchestra will present its Spring Concert on May 3 at Destin High School, with performances at 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. as part of the organization’s 20th anniversary season.

Under new director Dr. Thomas Roggio, the program blends cinematic favorites and classical masterworks, including selections from *How to Train Your Dragon*, *Jurassic Park*, a creative fusion of *The Barber of Seville* and *Jaws*, and Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 5*. “This



program is designed to inspire both our musicians and our audience,” Roggio said. “We’re bringing together music that students love — from cinematic favorites to cornerstone classical repertoire — and challenging them to perform at a high level while connecting emotionally with the audience. It’s about storytelling through music and creating an experience that resonates.”

The free, family-friendly concert will also honor graduating seniors. “Education is the centerpiece of Sinfonia,” said Music & Artistic Director Demetrius Fuller. “The Sinfonia Youth Or-

chestra provides an invaluable opportunity for young musicians to grow artistically and personally. These students represent the future of music in our community, and we invite everyone to come out and support them.”

‘Jaws in Concert’ Brings Film and Live Orchestra Together May 15

Sinfonia Gulf Coast continues its 20th anniversary season with *Jaws in Concert* on May 15 at 7:30 p.m. at the Destin–Fort Walton Beach Convention Center.

Continued on next page



JAWS IN CONCERT

SATURDAY, MAY 15 | 7:30 PM
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Just when you thought it was safe to go back in the concert hall ... experience Academy Award-winning director Steven Spielberg’s classic 1970s adventure thriller like never before. *Jaws in Concert* will keep you on the edge of your seat as Sinfonia Gulf Coast performs composer John Williams’ iconic Academy Award-winning score live, perfectly synced to the film projected in HD on the big screen. Relive the suspense, the terror, and the unforgettable music that forever changed the way we view the ocean.

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ARTS NEWS

continued from previous page

This unique experience pairs the full-length film with a live performance of John Williams' iconic score, performed in sync with the action on screen. "We love presenting these film-in-

concert experiences because they create an entirely new way to experience movies audiences already know and love," said Music & Artistic Director Demetrius Fuller. "Hearing this iconic score performed live alongside the film is powerful, immersive and unforgettable.

It's one of those evenings where you feel every note."

Reflecting on the film's famous theme, composer John Williams said, "It was fun and it seemed to have worked."

Tickets range from \$40-\$69.50 and benefit Sinfonia Gulf Coast's music education



and community programs. Learn more at SinfoniaGulfCoast.org or call (850) 460-8800.

EVENTS

continued from page 8

and families while helping fight hunger and expand opportunity across the community. Guests can enjoy fresh Louisiana crawfish with all the fixings—potatoes, sausage and corn—served up by Destin Rotary volunteers. Not a crawfish fan? No problem. Burgers, hot dogs and chicken will also be grilled fresh on-site. The evening features live music from Black Eyed Blonde, a silent auction, bourbon pull, magic by MagiShaun, a photo booth and face painting for the kids.

Tickets are \$40 for a crawfish plate, \$50 for all-you-can-eat and \$15 for kids' or non-crawfish meals (ages 3 and under free). Each ticket includes one complimentary drink. VIP tables for 10 are available for \$500, with upgrade options for all-you-can-eat.

The event is family-friendly and open to the public. Tickets

are available online. The Towne Centre at Seascape is located at 80 Seascape Drive in Miramar Beach, across from Silver Sands Premium Outlets.

Magic For A Mission Brings Illusion, Family Fun and Fundraising To Niceville May 16 | Niceville Community Center, Niceville

Scouting America, Gulf Coast Council invites the community to an unforgettable evening of entertainment and impact with Magic for a Mission, featuring world-class magician Jeff Sobel. Known for his interactive style and mind-blowing illusions, Sobel delivers a one-of-a-kind experience for audiences of all ages.

Two unique performances are offered:

An Adventure in Magic (Family Show) | 2:30 p.m.

Tickets: Children \$30, Adults \$10. Advance special: Buy a child's ticket and receive one

adult ticket free.

This family-friendly show includes interactive magic, comedy and take-home magic lessons.

Magic for a Mission Evening Experience

Dinner at 6 p.m. | Show at 7:17 p.m. Tickets: \$97 | VIP \$127

Enjoy a plated dinner with wine, a strolling magic social hour and a full stage performance.

Proceeds benefit Scouting America, Gulf Coast Council, supporting programs that build leadership, confidence and character in local youth.

Tickets & info: gulfcost-council.org/magic

Gate To Gate Memorial Run/Walk 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.

Gulf Coast Jam May 28-31 | Frank Brown Park, PCB

One of the country's most popular beach music festivals re-

turns May 28-31 as Gulf Coast Jam brings four days of live country music to Frank Brown Park in Panama City Beach. Headliners Post Malone, Chris Stapleton, Keith Urban and Riley Green lead a lineup of more than 20 artists performing throughout the high-energy Country On The Coast™ weekend.

Fans can enjoy multiple stages, food vendors, bars and interactive fan experiences while soaking in the coastal festival atmosphere that has drawn sellout crowds of more than 30,000 in recent years. Pass options currently available include General Admission, Military, College and First Responder tickets, VIP experiences and lodging packages. Several premium viewing areas have already sold out.

Payment plans are available. Follow festival updates online. Visit GulfCoastJam.com.

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