



JULY 2026
VOL. 7, NO. 10

BAY Life

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Santa Rosa Beach, FL
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America's Big Birthday, Twin Cities Style

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

Most birthdays come and go once a year. This one comes around only once every 250 years.

As communities across the nation prepare to celebrate America's semiquincentennial, the Twin Cities are marking the occasion with history, community gatherings, patriotic traditions, fireworks and a renewed appreciation for the people and principles that shaped our country.

The center of many local America 250 activities is the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida in Valparaiso, where visitors can explore the stories, sacrifices and everyday lives of those who lived through the Revolutionary War era.

The celebration begins at noon July 2 with a Colonial Tea Party at the museum. Presented by local historian Dr. Marie Hallion, the program will explore why tea played such an important role in colonial America and the events surrounding the Boston Tea Party — one of the most famous acts of protest in Amer-



NICEVILLE FIRE DEPT. PHOTO

ican history. Enjoy tea, mini croissant sandwiches, fruit, petits fours and cookies. The cost is \$26. Reserve by June 30 by calling (850) 678-2615.

On July 3 at noon, the museum's popular History Sandwiched-In series continues with a presentation by local historian Deb Edgar, highlighting the often-over-

looked contributions of women during the Revolutionary War. While history books often focus on generals and statesmen, women played critical roles as caregivers, business owners, messengers, suppliers and patriots who sustained the cause of independence on and off the battlefield.



The festivities culminate July 4 with the museum's Celebrate America's 250th! event and the grand opening of its new America 250 exhibit. The free event begins at 11 a.m. with recognition of local student winners in a patriot-

BIG BIRTHDAY
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CrossCountry3:
Helping Veterans
Rediscover Purpose
Through Service

"The transformative effects of building resiliency are life changing." — Bruce Duty

In our community, military service is woven into the fabric of everyday life. From active-duty personnel at Eglin Air Force Base and Hurlburt Field to the thousands of veterans who call the Emerald Coast home, many have dedicated their lives to serving others. Yet, when military service ends, some find themselves searching for a renewed sense of purpose, identity and hope.

That need inspired the creation

CC3
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 Community

CC3

continued from page 1

of CrossCountry3, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping veterans rediscover purpose by empowering them to serve others in the fight against human trafficking.

At its heart, CrossCountry3 exists because many veterans possess unique skills, leadership abilities and a deep desire to continue making a difference. After years of serving their country, some veterans struggle to find a renewed sense of purpose once military service ends. The organization believes every veteran has tremendous value and untapped potential that can continue to positively impact society.

CrossCountry3 was created to help bridge that gap. Rather than focusing solely on the challenges veterans face, the organization emphasizes opportunities for transformational growth. By connecting veterans with meaningful missions that combat human trafficking, CrossCountry3 provides a pathway for them to use their strengths, experiences and commitment to service in ways that directly benefit vulnerable individuals and communities.

A key part of CrossCountry3's impact is the leadership and community engagement of its founder, Bruce Duty. Based locally, the organization serves a region with one of the nation's largest concentrations of military personnel, veterans and military families, including those connected to Eglin Air



Force Base, Hurlburt Field and the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne).

Through years of relationship-building within the military and veteran community, Duty has helped create a mission that reflects the values of service, sacrifice and freedom deeply rooted throughout the Florida Panhandle. By fostering partnerships and encouraging veterans to engage in the fight against human trafficking, CrossCountry3 offers veterans a pathway to continue making a meaningful difference while helping protect some of society's most vulnerable individuals.

The organization's approach



is built upon three core values: **faith, family and freedom.** Whether through workshops, retreats or individual training, CrossCountry3 remains committed to helping veterans build resilience and discover renewed purpose.

Resilience training teaches veterans the importance of a positive self-identity, living with purpose and embracing a horizon of hope through serving the brokenhearted and vulnerable.

Faith serves as the foundation for hope and personal growth. CrossCountry3 encourages veterans to discover a deeper sense of purpose and meaning, helping them understand their lives and experiences continue to have significant value.

Family represents the importance of relationships, connection and community. Veterans often miss the camaraderie and brotherhood they experienced during military service. CrossCountry3 fosters a supportive environment where veterans can build meaningful connections, strengthen families and encourage one another.

Freedom is both a principle and a mission. Veterans have dedicated portions of their lives protecting freedom, and CrossCountry3 extends that commitment by fighting human trafficking, one of the greatest



assaults on human freedom. By engaging veterans in efforts that help protect and advocate for victims, the organization creates opportunities for continued service that align with the values many veterans have upheld throughout their lives.

Ultimately, CrossCountry3 exists because veterans deserve more than gratitude for their service — they deserve opportunities to continue living lives of significance and impact. By providing identity, meaning and hope through a mission-centered approach, the organization helps veterans write a new chapter of service.

In doing so, CrossCountry3 demonstrates that purpose does not end when military service concludes. Instead, it can evolve into a powerful force for good — helping veterans, families and victims of human trafficking move toward a future defined by hope, freedom and human dignity.

At CrossCountry3, building resilience in the face of adversity and experiencing restoration physically, mentally and spiritually remain at the core of the mission.

For more information, visit crosscountry3.com.

Bruce Duty, Maj. (Ret.), U.S. Army, is the founder and president of CrossCountry3. A retired Army chaplain with more than 22 years of active-duty military service, Duty served with the 3rd Infantry Division, 2nd Infantry Division and 10th Mountain Division, including two combat deployments to Iraq.

Prior to becoming an Army chaplain, Duty served nearly nine years as an enlisted service member before earning both a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Divinity degree. He also served as a pastor in Missouri and Florida before answering the call to military chaplaincy during the Iraq War surge in 2007.

Throughout his military career, Duty received numerous honors, including the Bronze Star Medal, Mer-

itorious Service Medal, Meritorious Unit Commendation, Iraqi Campaign Medal and additional military awards and decorations. He is also certified in Master Resilience Training, Pathfinder Resilience Training, ASIST Suicide Intervention Training, Strong Bonds Family Training and several military medical and leadership programs.

Today, Duty uses both his military and civilian experience to help individuals and organizations build resilience, overcome adversity and pursue restoration physically, mentally and spiritually. He remains passionate about faith, family, freedom and helping others discover hope and purpose through service. Duty resides in Niceville.

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

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

Publisher/Executive Editor
Lori Leath Miller
Lori@LifeMediaGrp.com

Director, Advertising Sales
Scott Miller
Scott@LifeMediaGrp.com

Art Director
Kim Harper

Writers
Rachel Coggins
Ellen Fannon
Teresa Halverson
Barbara Palmgren
"Doc" Doug Stauffer

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250 Years of Freedom, One Field of Gratitude

BY “DOC” DOUG STAUFFER
At the Air Force Armament Museum in Valparaiso, the Niceville Exchange Club’s Field of Flags honors the service, sacrifice, and enduring spirit that have preserved American liberty since 1776.

As America prepares to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, few communities are more closely connected to the defense of freedom than Okaloosa County.

Home to Eglin Air Force Base, Hurlburt Field, Duke Field, the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), and thousands of veterans, active-duty service members, and military families, our community understands better than most that freedom has never been free. It has always been bought with sacrifice, defended with courage, and preserved by generations willing to answer the call of duty.

This summer, the Niceville Exchange Club invites the community to pause, reflect, and celebrate at its Salute to America 250 Field of Flags at the Air



Force Armament Museum. Situated on the edge of Eglin Air Force Base at 100 Museum Drive in Valparaiso, the museum is easily accessible just off State Road 85, approximately seven miles north of downtown Fort Walton Beach. The display will be open from June 30 through July 11 and will feature hundreds of American flags flying proudly against the backdrop of one of the nation’s premier military museums. The opening ceremony will be held on July 3, as the community gathers to commemorate the 250th anni-

versary of our nation’s founding and to honor those who have served to preserve the freedoms declared on July 4, 1776.

While Independence Day is often celebrated with fireworks, cookouts, and family gatherings, the Exchange Club hopes this field of flags will remind visitors of the celebration’s deeper meaning.

Every American Flag Tells a Story

It tells the story of patriots who pledged their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to es-

tablish a new nation. It tells the story of soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, Guardians, and Coast Guardsmen who have stood watch in every generation since. It tells the story of first responders, community servants, and ordinary citizens who have helped make America the greatest nation in human history.

The display also builds on a tradition familiar to many residents. For nearly a decade, the Niceville Exchange Club’s Field of Valor displayed more than 380 flags at the Mullet Festival grounds, honoring Florida service members who lost their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. Each sponsored flag included information about a fallen hero, creating a powerful visual reminder of the cost of freedom.

In recent years, the event moved to the Air Force Armament Museum, where its visibility, accessibility, and military significance have allowed even

more visitors to experience the tribute.

That Spirit of Gratitude Continues This Year

As America begins its year-long celebration of 250 years of independence, the Field of Flags serves as a powerful reminder that freedom is not merely a historical achievement. It is a living inheritance passed from one generation to the next.

In what many consider the most veteran-friendly state in America and one of the nation’s most military-supportive communities, the sight of hundreds of American flags waving in the Florida breeze will offer more than a patriotic display.

It will stand as a visible expression of remembrance, gratitude, and hope.

Two hundred and fifty years after our Founders signed the Declaration of Independence, the message remains the same: America endures because Americans continue to serve, sacrifice, and believe in the ideals on which this nation was founded.



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The Top 5 Things Your Doctor Wishes They Could Tell You (Without Hurting Your Feelings)

By Dr. Karen DeVore

If you've ever sat across from a healthcare provider and wondered what they were really thinking, I can assure you it's not judgment. Most of us chose this profession because we gen-

uinely want to help people live healthier, happier lives.

That said, there are a few things many doctors wish we could say more directly. Not because we're frustrated, but because these truths have the pow-

er to change your health more than any prescription, supplement, or procedure ever could.

Here are five things your doctor would probably tell you if they knew it wouldn't hurt your feelings.

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1. Your body is talking to you. Stop waiting until it's screaming.

Many people ignore symptoms for months or even years. Fatigue becomes "normal." Weight gain is blamed on age. Brain fog gets brushed aside. Digestive issues become part of daily life.

The problem is that most chronic health issues don't appear overnight. They often start as whispers before they become alarms.

When your energy changes, your sleep deteriorates, your mood shifts, or your body starts functioning differently, pay attention. These are not inconveniences to ignore. They are valuable pieces of information. The earlier you investigate a problem, the easier it often is to address.

2. You can't out-supplement a lifestyle that isn't working.

I say this as someone who believes supplements can be incredibly helpful when used appropriately. But no supplement



When patients come to me with fatigue, digestive issues, weight struggles, hormone imbalances, headaches, anxiety, or chronic pain, stress is often somewhere in the picture.

We've become so accustomed to being busy, overwhelmed, and constantly connected that many people no longer recognize what chronic stress feels like. They simply assume it's normal. Your body, however, keeps score.

Stress influences inflammation, blood sugar regulation, hormone production, immune function, sleep quality, and even how quickly you age. Managing stress is not selfish. It is a fundamental part of maintaining your health.

4. Aging is inevitable. Feeling terrible is not.

One of the most common statements I hear is, "I guess I'm just getting older."

While aging does bring changes, we often blame age for things that deserve



can consistently overcome poor sleep, chronic stress, a sedentary lifestyle, excessive alcohol consumption, or a diet built primarily around convenience foods.

Many people are searching for the one thing that will fix everything. The reality is that health is usually built through hundreds of small decisions repeated over time. The basics are not exciting, but they work. Sleep. Movement. Nutrition. Stress management. Meaningful relationships. Consistency. Those habits may not come in a bottle, but they are often the most powerful medicine available.

3. Stress is affecting your health more than you realize.

a closer look. Low energy, poor sleep, decreased strength, brain fog, loss of motivation, weight gain, and declining vitality are not things you simply have to accept.

Many of these concerns may be related to nutrition, hormones, inflammation, stress, metabolic health, or other factors that can often be improved. The goal isn't to look 25 forever. The goal is to feel your best at every age.

5. Nobody cares more about your health than you do.

This may be the hardest truth on the list. Your doctor can guide you. We can educate

Continued on page 30

The 250th Anniversary: A Night to Remember

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

There are extraordinary moments in time that we remember.

Most people know where they were when President Kennedy was assassinated. They know where they were on 9/11 when the Twin Towers came down, part of the Pentagon was destroyed and brave Americans forced a plane to crash into the ground rather than strike a target in Washington, D.C. They remember special visits or places in 1976 when we celebrated the Bicentennial of our nation.

And now many will remember this special night: June 12, 2026. The gala at the Rigdon Center in Fort Walton Beach to reenact the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

The celebration was organized by the Okaloosa County America 250 Commission, led by Chair Graham W. Fountain and Vice Chair Mitzi Henley. As a commission member and trustee of the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, I was honored to help plan the event. The museum is also hosting the yearlong exhibit, Celebrate America 250! The Revolution.

The America 250 Commission has scheduled more patriotic events throughout the year. A few of these include a Faith Community Event, a Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra performance at the Mattie Kelly Arts Center, a Heroes and First Responders event honoring our military and first responders



and a Patriots Grand Parade in Crestview.

What amazed me was seeing the majority of several hundred dinner guests clothed in period attire of the era, including your publishers and Walton County residents Scott and Lori Miller. And not just dresses and uniforms, but white wigs of all shapes and sizes. Most of those portraying the signers of the Declaration stood and walked up to the document looking as though they were the actual individuals, ready to sign for liberty despite the costs.

I was seated at a table with Valparaiso Mayor Joe Morgan, who proudly portrayed signer John Hart of New Jersey and walked forward to sign along-

side Parker Destin, who portrayed George Washington, at the table where the historic document awaited signatures. Close by was Scott Miller portraying signer George Clymer of Pennsylvania, and another friend, Niceville Mayor Dan Henkel, portraying Benjamin Harrison V of Virginia.

Friends from other parts of Northwest Florida attended as well, including retired South Walton High School Principal Alexis Tibbetts, a renowned educator in both Okaloosa and Walton counties.

At the podium, emcee Bernard Johnson Jr., External Affairs Manager for Florida Power & Light; Mary Katharine Goddard, portrayed by Honorable

Ginger Madden, State Attorney for Florida's 1st Judicial Circuit; and Reverend George Whitefield, portrayed by Mel Ponder, president of Northwest Florida State College, shared descriptions of the signers, including their professions and the size of their families.

When all 56 signers were seated, the Honorable Patt Maney, Florida House Representative for District 4, invited everyone to rise with champagne glasses in hand and toast the signers and our Declaration

of Independence. A large and beautiful cake was then cut and served, followed by the drone show and cannon salute.

More America 250 events are planned throughout Okaloosa County, offering residents across Northwest Florida opportunities to celebrate our shared history and heritage. Follow the Okaloosa County America 250 Facebook page and visit Life Media publications or GetTheCoast.com/America250 for upcoming events.

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Celebrate America 250!

June 27

Rags to Riches Regatta

Race begins at 11 a.m. | Grayton Beach | Spectators free

This long-running South Walton sailing tradition features teams racing 16-foot Hobie Cats from Grayton Beach to Seagrove. Proceeds benefit the South Walton Artificial Reef Association.

Info: www.ragstorichesregatta.com

JULY 1

Destin Family Independence Day Celebration & Bike Parade

4-7 p.m.; parade at 6 p.m. | Destin Elementary School Track, Destin | Free

Children 16 and younger are invited to decorate their bikes and join the annual parade. The celebration also includes food trucks, face painting, arts and crafts and a waterslide.



JULY 2

Emerald Coast Theatre Company Patriotic Revue

6-8 p.m. | Grand Park at Grand Boulevard, Santa Rosa Beach | Free

Enjoy patriotic music and dance performances celebrating 250 years of American freedom.

Info: www.grandboulevard.com | (850) 837-3099

JULY 3

Star-Spangled Food Truck Festival

5-9:30 p.m.; fireworks at 9 p.m. | Destin Commons | Free admission

More than 25 food trucks, live music, face painting, a photo booth and one of the Emerald Coast's largest fireworks displays highlight this family-friendly celebration.

Info: www.destincommons.com | (850) 337-8700

JULY 3-4

Hotel Effie Rooftop Fourth of July Celebration

Hotel Effie Sandestin, Miramar Beach

Celebrate with rooftop DJs, festive cocktails and panoramic views culminating with Baytowne Wharf fireworks viewing.

Info: www.hoteleffie.com | (850) 351-3000

JULY 4

Grayton Beach Fourth of July Parade

Lineup at 8 a.m.; parade at 8:30 a.m. | The Red Bar, 70 Hotz Ave., Grayton Beach | Free

Decorate your bike, golf cart, scooter or other wheels and join this beloved community parade through historic Grayton Beach. Watermelon and lemonade follow the parade.

Info: www.ajsgrayton.com | (850) 231-4102

Seaside Fourth of July Celebration

Beginning at 9 a.m.; fireworks at 8:30 p.m. | Central Square and Amphitheater, Seaside | Free

A full day of festivities includes a block party, farmers market, children's patriotic bike parade, hot dog eating contest, live entertainment, a Sinfonia Gulf Coast Patriotic Pops Concert and fireworks over the Gulf.

Info: www.seasidefl.com | (850) 225-4436

Celebrate America's 250th!

Beginning at 11 a.m. | Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, 115 Westview Ave., Valparaiso | Free

Celebrate America's 250th birthday with a day of history, living-history demonstrations and the grand opening of the museum's new America 250 exhibit.

Schedule:

11 a.m. — Student Poster and Essay Contest Awards Ceremony

Noon — History Sandwiched-In: Colonial Paper Currency presented by Tom McKnight

1 p.m. — Official Community Ribbon Cutting for the America 250 Exhibit

1:15 p.m. — Life, Liberty and Hard Rations presented by Travis South, including a Revolutionary War firearm demonstration

2 p.m. — Discussion on the Battles of Lexington and Concord with Karl Eschmann

Info: www.heritagemuseum.us | (850) 678-2615

Alys Beach Fourth of July Concert & Fireworks

7-9 p.m.; fireworks at 9 p.m. | Alys Beach Amphitheatre | Free

Enjoy live music by Five Star Funk Lounge and fireworks over the Gulf. Food and beverages available for purchase. Bring blankets or low-back chairs.

Info: www.alysbeach.com | (850) 213-5500

Rosemary Beach Fourth of July Celebration

Barrett Square and Western Green | Free

The day includes a bike decorating contest, parade, family field day, live concert and Gulf-front fireworks at 9 p.m.

Info: www.rosemarybeach.com | (866) 348-8952

Sandestin's Red, White & Baytowne

The Village of Baytowne Wharf, Miramar Beach | Free

Enjoy live music, family activities and a fireworks finale over the lagoon as part of Sandestin's annual Independence Day celebration.

Info: www.sandestin.com | (877) 496-2024

Bingo, Bubbly & a Chance to Win a Designer Handbag

If your idea of a perfect Saturday afternoon includes a little sparkle, a glass of prosecco and the chance to take home a designer handbag, mark your calendar for Pearls & Prosecco Handbag Bingo at The Alice in Destin.

Presented by The Alice and benefitting The Ground Up Project Inc., this elevated twist on traditional bingo combines fashion, fun and philanthropy into one stylish afternoon. Guests will enjoy light bites, drink tickets and 10 rounds of bingo, with designer handbags up for grabs. After all, who

says bingo is just for grandma?

The event takes place Saturday, Aug. 8 at 2 p.m. at The Alice, one of Destin's most beautiful waterfront gathering spaces.

General admission is \$100 and includes light bites, two drink tickets and one bingo card for each round. VIP guests receive all general admission benefits plus an extra drink ticket, raffle tickets, a Grand Finale bingo card, VIP recognition and table service.

Whether you're hoping to win your dream handbag or enjoy an afternoon out with

friends, you'll also be helping support a mission that extends far beyond childhood.

Because autism doesn't end at 18.

The need for support, opportunities and community doesn't end either.

So, gather your friends, don your pearls and enjoy an afternoon of laughter, bubbly, a little friendly competition, lots of memories—and perhaps even a fashionable victory! Pearls & Prosecco Handbag Bingo is shaping up to be one of the season's most stylish events.



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HAPPENINGS AROUND THE BAY

JULY 2026 EVENTS

02

Colonial Tea Party
12 pm | Heritage Museum | Valparaiso

America Salutes presented by Emerald Coast Theater Company
6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

03

History Sandwiched In: Women and Their Impact on the Revolutionary War
12 pm | Heritage Museum | Valparaiso

Star-Spangled Food Truck Festival
5 pm (Fireworks at 9pm) | Destin Commons | Destin

04

HAPPY INDEPENDENCE DAY!

Celebrate America 250 4th of July Celebration
11 am | Heritage Museum | Valparaiso

Light up the Bayou Fireworks Spectacular
3 pm (Fireworks at 8:45pm) | Lions Park | Niceville

06

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

07

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

08

Second Wednesday Breakfast
7:15 am | Niceville Community Center | Niceville

10

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

Country Music - Josh Davis Live
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

11

Beach Clean Up
8 am | The Crab Trap on the Boardwalk | FWB

Cade Pierce Live Music
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

13

Unearth a Story of Space! National Geographic Film
2 pm | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

14

Chess Night
6 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville

15

Family Movie @ the Library: "The Land Before Time"
2 pm | Niceville Library | Niceville

16

Crafty Corner
11 am | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

18

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

Shenanigans Live Music
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

20

Fiberarts Circle
5 pm | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso

21

City of Niceville Shred-A-Thon
10 am | Recreation Complex | Niceville

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

25

Cadillac Willy Live
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

2026 Niceville Sunset Stampede 5k run/walk
7 pm (1 Mile Fun Run/Walk Starts 7pm, 5k run/walk starts 7:30pm) | NWFSC Baseball Parking Lot | Niceville

26

Sunset Shrimp Boil
4 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville

31

Rockers 4 Life Live
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

FARMERS MARKETS

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

Hammock Bay
1st & 3rd Saturdays | 4 - 8 pm
The Windmills | Freeport

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

MONTHLY EVENTS

Music Bingo Night
6 pm | Mon | Bayou Pub | Niceville

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

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

Puzzle Swap @ the Library
10 am | Thurs | Niceville Library | Niceville

One Stroke Painting (Adv) with Sheila Mahony
10:30 am | Fri | Artful Things | Niceville

One Stroke Painting (Bgnr) with Sheila Mahony
2 pm | Fri | Artful Things | Niceville

Yoga at Turkey Creek
9 am | Sat | Turkey Creek Nature Trail | Niceville

Brunch on the Bayou
9 am | Sun | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville



Community

BIG BIRTHDAY

continued from page 1

ic poster and essay contest. At noon, historian Tom McKnight will present a special History Sandwiched-In program on colonial paper currency, offering insight into how early Americans financed a revolution and built a new nation.

At 1 p.m., officiate Niceville Mayor Daniel Henkel and community leaders will gather for a ribbon-cutting ceremony cele-

brating the new exhibit. The afternoon continues at 1:15 p.m. with "Life, Liberty and Hard Rations," presented by Travis Souther in colonial attire, complete with a demonstration of a Revolutionary War-era firearm. At 2 p.m., historian Karl Eschmann will lead a discussion about the Battles of Lexington and Concord, often remembered as the opening military engagements of the American Revolution.

The museum events remind

Magic & Comedy at The Palms Resort Destin!

The popular Magic & Comedy Destin residency is back at The Palms Resort with new enhancements, interactive illusions and family-friendly entertainment.

Headliner Bart Rockett brings a blend of magic, comedy, audience participation and ventriloquism to the intimate showroom experience. A veteran performer who has appeared in more than 90 countries and hosted a na-

tionally syndicated television show, Rockett performs alongside special guest appearances by his children, Kadan and Brooklyn.

Guests can enjoy table seating with food and beverages available from the adjacent Blue Lagoon restaurant.

Shows are held at 7 p.m., with select Sunday matinees at 4 p.m. Seating is limited and advance reservations are recommended.

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CATHY ALLEY PHOTO



CATHY ALLEY PHOTO



us that America's story is not only found in textbooks, but in the lives of ordinary citizens who took extraordinary risks to secure freedoms many of us enjoy today.

At Bluewater Bay Marina, boat owners are invited to participate in a special America 250 Boat Decorating Contest and transform their vessels into floating red, white and blue masterpieces. Boats will be judged in their slips July 3 at 8:30 p.m., with prizes awarded for the most creative, patriotic displays. Watch the decorated boats light up the harbor from Bluewater Bay Marina and Schooners Oyster Bar & Grill. First place includes a \$150 gift card to Byrd's Seafood, with prizes also awarded for second and third place.

Of course, no Independence Day celebration in the Twin Cities would be complete without fireworks. Beginning at 3 p.m. on July 4, Niceville's annual Light Up the Bayou celebration brings food trucks, family activities and community gatherings to Lions Park in Niceville and Lincoln Park in Valparaiso. As evening approaches, thousands gather around Boggy



Bayou while hundreds of boats fill the water in anticipation of the show.

Unlike many municipal celebrations, Light Up the Bayou is funded entirely through community donations. The annual fireworks show receives no tax dollars and is made possible by individual and business donations, the nonprofit Fireworks Trust Fund and volunteers of the Light Up the Bayou Fireworks Committee. At approximately 8:45 p.m., fireworks will launch from a barge positioned in the bayou, creating spectacular reflections across the water and continuing a tradition that generations have come to cherish.

Official public viewing locations include Lions Park, Niceville Landing and Kiwanis Park in Niceville, along with Lincoln Park and Shipyard Point Park in Valparaiso. Portions

of Bayshore Drive and Byrne Street near Lions Park will be closed from 2-11 p.m. July 4 to accommodate the festivities. The Lions Park boat ramp will also close at 10 p.m. July 3 and remain closed through the celebration.

For more information about Heritage Museum events, visit www.heritage-museum.org. Information about Light Up the Bayou, including parking, road closures and donation opportunities, is available at www.lightupthebayou.com. For America 250 Boat Decorating Contest, visit www.bluewaterbaymarina.com or call (850) 897-2821.

From Revolutionary War history and patriotic boat displays to community gatherings and fireworks over Boggy Bayou, this year's Independence Day offers something rare — the chance to celebrate not only another Fourth of July, but a milestone birthday for the United States itself.

After all, 250 years only comes around once.

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JULY 4, 2026

BOGGY BAYOU



BY KIMBERLY COLE

Most probate problems do not begin with bad intentions. They start with small misunderstandings, rushed decisions, or assumptions that later create stress for everyone involved. In the weeks following a death, families are often grieving, overwhelmed, and trying to make important decisions with limited information. During that time, even seemingly minor mistakes can create complications that take months to resolve.

While every estate is different, there are several probate missteps that appear again and again. Fortunately, many of them are preventable.

One of the most common mistakes is assuming that being named in a will immediately

gives someone authority to act. Family members are often surprised to learn that a personal representative's authority generally begins only after being formally appointed by the court. Before that appointment, there may be little that can legally be done on behalf of the estate. Well-intentioned efforts to access accounts, distribute property, or make decisions can create confusion and, in some cases, liability. What seems like taking initiative can actually complicate the administration process.

Another frequent misstep is moving too quickly to distribute assets. Understandably, beneficiaries often want closure and may view distribution as the final step in honoring their loved one's wishes. However, probate exists in part to ensure that debts, expenses, taxes, and creditor claims are properly addressed before assets are distributed. When distributions occur prematurely, the personal representative may later find them-



selves attempting to recover assets if estate obligations emerge. A decision made to reduce stress in the short term can create much greater stress later.

Communication problems are another source of unnecessary conflict. In many estates, disagreements do not arise because anyone is acting improperly. They arise because people feel uninformed. Family members who do not understand what is happening often begin to fill the gaps with assumptions. Delays may be interpreted as inaction. Silence may be viewed as secrecy. Questions left unanswered can breed suspicion. While a personal representa-

tive is not required to provide constant updates, thoughtful communication often prevents minor concerns from becoming major disputes.

A fourth mistake is treating estate property as though ownership has already transferred. It is common for family members to begin dividing personal belongings, removing items from a residence, or making informal agreements about who will receive certain assets. Unfortunately, those actions can create disagreements if other beneficiaries have different recollections or expectations. What starts as a simple effort to help clean out a home can quickly become a source of lasting resentment. Until the estate administration is properly underway, it is usually wise to preserve assets and avoid making assumptions about who will receive what.

Finally, many families un-

derestimate the importance of seeking guidance early. Probate procedures are not intuitive, and information gathered from friends, relatives, or internet searches often applies to a different state or a completely different set of circumstances. By the time a family realizes something has gone wrong, the issue may require additional time, expense, and effort to correct. Early guidance often helps identify potential problems before they become obstacles.

What is striking about these common missteps is that they rarely stem from bad motives. More often, they arise because people are trying to do the right thing during a difficult and emotional period. Grief naturally creates a desire to take action, solve problems, and move forward. Probate, however, is a process that requires patience as much as action. Taking the time to understand responsibilities,

Continued on page 11

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 Community

Ten Years Later: How a Dream, a Turtle and Local Support Started It All

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

Ten years ago, many South Walton residents could still remember when Highway 30A felt more like a scenic backroad than a nationally recognized brand. Growth was already underway, but the area still carried the slower rhythm and small-town familiarity locals cherished. Summers were busy, but the quieter months still belonged to the teachers, fishermen, artists, restaurant owners and entrepreneurs who formed the backbone of the community before much of the country fully discovered it.

Then came 2016.

That was the year newspaper man Dave White arrived from New England carrying a simple, but ambitious, dream: to create a publication devoted entirely to

the people, stories and spirit of South Walton.

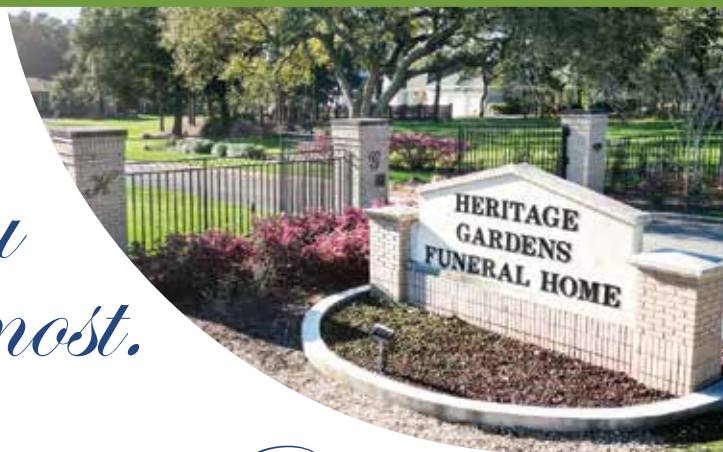
Like so many who now call this area home, Dave's connection to the Emerald Coast actually began years earlier during visits with friends Ray and Lisa Cyr, owners of Studio 237 Music School in Santa Rosa Beach. They introduced him to the charm, beauty and strong sense of community found throughout South Walton. What started as admiration soon became something more — a desire to move here permanently and become part of the community itself. And he did.

Ray helped introduce Dave to local business owners and community leaders while Dave shared the vision for an all-positive publication centered on storytelling, connection and, most



PHOTO CREDIT: SAVVY LEIGH PHOTO
(Left to Right) Paul Willms, Sales; Sarah Stewart; Scott Miller; Lori Leath Miller; Dave White; Lisa and Ray Cyr; Grace Ann Russell, Sales; and Denise David, Sales. Not pictured: Jamie Zimchek, Editor Sowel Life and PCB Life; John Tower, Accounting; Dawna Shackley, Sowel Life Graphic Designer; Kim Harper, Life Media Art Director.

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importantly for local business owners, direct-mail distribution.

But a brand was still needed that truly reflected the local lifestyle. That inspiration came through South Walton resident and the paper's first-year editor Sarah Stewart. She suggested the now-iconic sea-glass blues and greens, a turtle "mascot" and logo, and a tagline that instantly separated locals from tourists: "Locals get it," which, to be clear, they did. And still do.

And just like that, SoWal Life was born.

The concept was simple — deliver the publication directly to mailboxes and fill it with stories locals actually cared about: community happenings, events, arts, local personalities, hometown heroes and positive news. Nationally known author Sean Dietrich came aboard alongside monthly columns such as the now longtime faith-based column, A Pastor's Ponderings. With no established playbook, the small team juggled ad sales, last-minute content submissions, production challenges and tight deadlines while working to prove the concept month after month. The vibe was less "breaking news" and more "Hey, did you hear about this?" As SoWal Life continued gaining momentum and reader support, a second SoWal Life edition was launched to expand the publication's reach to Mira-

mar Beach. The strong response confirmed what Dave White and the team had believed from the beginning: people were hungry for positive, community-focused local media that celebrated the place they called home.

The Next Chapter

What started as one community newspaper soon became something much bigger.

In 2018, publisher Lori Leath Smith became a partner in launching Destin Life, bringing the same all-positive, community-centered concept into the Destin market. The response was immediate and enthusiastic.

The momentum continued with the launch of Bay Life in 2019. Through another business partnership, Lori and Scott Miller introduced the publication to the Bluewater Bay community, followed shortly thereafter by a second Bay Life edition serving Niceville and Valparaiso. Growth continued across the Emerald Coast with the addition of PCB Life in Panama City Beach, FWB Life in Fort Walton Beach and the newest publication, Freeport Life.

As the family of publications expanded, Scott recognized the need for a stronger umbrella brand to unite the growing network. Together, they established Life Media Group, creating a

Continued on next page

TEN YEARS

continued from previous page

cohesive identity for what had become a thriving collection of community-focused media outlets.

Today, Life Media Group encompasses eight all-positive community newspapers, digital platforms and specialty publications serving readers across the Emerald Coast. The organization is supported by a dedicated team of 13 staff members, along with a talented network of writers, photographers, designers, contributors and community partners who help bring each publication to life every month.

While each publication maintains its own unique hometown personality, the mission has remained the same from the beginning: celebrate local people, support local businesses, strengthen community connection and shine a light on the positive stories happening all around us every day.

"Readers have embraced the publications as their own," says Dave. "Many say they read the papers cover-to-cover each month for local events, uplift-



ing stories and hometown happenings often difficult to find elsewhere. Others intentionally support businesses they discover inside the pages."

Life Media direct-mails and distributes more than 87,000 hyper-local copies monthly throughout the Emerald Coast while also reaching thousands more readers digitally through websites, e-newsletters and social media platforms.

More than newspapers, Life Media has always been about connection — and interaction. We love hearing from our readers, receiving story ideas, celebrating accomplishments, spotlighting businesses and learning about the people and organizations making a difference throughout our commu-

nities. Some of our readers and advertising partners have been with us since the very beginning, and for that loyalty and support, we are deeply grateful.

The Next Decade

As Life Media moves into its next decade, the mission remains unchanged: sharing positive stories and celebrating the faith, family, businesses and community spirit that make our area so special.

WE'LL CONTINUE providing a trusted community voice while offering affordable, effective promotion through the powerful combination of direct-mail print and digital marketing.

WE'LL CONTINUE connecting readers through engaging editorial, websites, e-newsletters, social media, events and community involvement throughout the region.

Most importantly, WE'LL CONTINUE believing positive news still matters.

What began with one dream, one turtle and one small newspaper in South Walton has grown into something far greater than anyone imagined 10 years ago.

And we're just getting started.

Cheers to 10 Years!

PROBATE MISSTEPS

continued from page 9

communicate clearly, and follow the proper steps can prevent many of the frustrations families experience.

Looking back, most probate disputes can be traced to a handful of moments when better information could have changed the outcome. A conversation before assets were distributed. A clearer understanding of the personal representative's authority. A decision to pause before removing property from

a home. These are not dramatic mistakes, but they can have significant consequences.

The good news is that most probate stress is not inevitable. While no estate administration is entirely free of challenges, many of the problems families encounter can be avoided through patience, communication, and a willingness to seek guidance before small issues become larger ones. During a time that is already emotionally difficult, those simple steps can make a meaningful difference for everyone involved.

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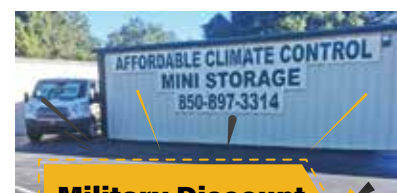
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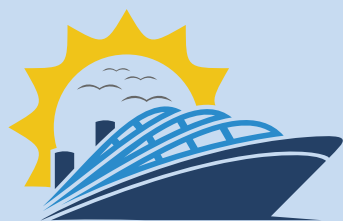
EFCU Celebrates America 250 with Cruise Giveaway

Eglin Federal Credit Union (EFCU) is inviting Northwest Florida residents to celebrate America's 250th birthday with special in-branch festivities and the chance to win a dream vacation.

The celebration begins July 1 and 2, when visitors to any EFCU branch can enjoy complimentary cookies and patriotic-themed giveaways while supplies last.

The festivities continue throughout the summer with the credit union's "Cruise on in for America's 250th Celebration Giveaway." From July 1 through Aug. 31, community members can enter for a chance to win a five-day, four-night cruise vacation for two to Mexico, the Bahamas or the western Caribbean.

A total of 12 winners — one from each EFCU branch — will be selected through a random drawing. Entries must be submitted in person at an Eglin FCU branch, with



a limit of one entry per person per day. Participants must be at least 21 years old to enter. "This is a special opportunity for us to celebrate our country's history while connecting with the communities we serve," said Laura Coale, EFCU senior vice president of marketing and public relations. "We're excited to provide a memorable experience for our members, welcome prospective members into our full-service locations, and give everyone a chance to win an unforgettable vacation."

Complete giveaway rules and entry details are available at local Eglin FCU branches and online. For more information, visit EglinFCU.org.



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Bay Buzz

Niceville High School Retired Educators Celebrate America's 250th

By BARBARA PALMGREN

America's 250th birthday is all about history, reunions, celebrations and, as the saying goes, "Girls Just Want to Have Fun." The ladies pictured here gather each month for lunch, sharing memories and updates about their families and activities.

This month, at The Wharf Restaurant in Niceville, Marie Hallion joined the group to discuss activities surrounding the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida's America 250 exhibit commemorating the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Many have attended Dr. Hallion's popular teas at the museum over the years, and she wanted them to know about a special Colonial Tea planned for July 2. Everyone is familiar with the Boston Tea Party as one of the key events leading to America's decision to become a free nation.

These retired Niceville educators stay busy with travel, family, mentoring, volunteering and more activities than many can imagine. They fondly remember teaching, counseling, working in the media center and sponsoring extracurricular activities at Niceville High



School. Their love for the school remains strong today, and they continue to view it as one of the finest schools in the nation.

Teachers have always been, and will continue to be, a vital part of America's landscape as they inspire young people to pursue greater goals for themselves and for our nation.

Twin City Mayors Honored to Celebrate America's 250th Birthday

By BARBARA PALMGREN

Mayor Joe Morgan, portraying John Hart of New Jersey, and Niceville Mayor Dan Henkel, portraying Benjamin Harrison V of Virginia, signed the Declaration of Independence during the America 250 Gala and Drone Show on June 12. The historic reenactment was organized by the Okaloosa County America 250 Commission as part of a yearlong celebration commemorating the



birth of our nation.

Dressed in colonial attire complete with white wigs, the two leaders looked every bit the part of the patriots who, 250 years ago, risked everything for liberty. Patriotism runs deeply through the service both men provide to their community and country.

Now the community will have an opportunity to become part of history as well. Following the ribbon-cutting ceremony,

visitors will be invited to sign a replica of the Declaration of Independence as a lasting remembrance of this special anniversary.

Mayor Morgan will be out of town on July 4, but Mayor Henkel, portraying Benjamin Harrison V, has agreed to officiate the community ribbon-cutting ceremony at 11 a.m. at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida.

Located at 115 Westview Ave. in Valparaiso, the museum will be open to the public from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Volunteers dressed in colonial attire will lead tours of "Celebrate America 250! The Revolution" in the museum's new exhibit hall. Visitors are also invited to explore the museum, stroll through the pollinator garden and enjoy vendors, music and special activities throughout the day.

Meet Captain Billy 71



Kent Tinsley was unmasked June 13 as Captain Billy Bowlegs LXXI, becoming the newest leader of the Krewe of Bowlegs and continuing a family tradition that spans generations.

One of our area's most closely guarded secrets was revealed June 13 when Kent Tinsley was unmasked as Captain Billy Bowlegs LXXI during the annual Krewe of Bowlegs Coronation Pageant at the Mattie Kelly Arts Center. Tinsley becomes a second-generation Captain Billy, following his father, Herb Tinsley, who served as Captain Billy XXXVI. During the ceremony, Tinsley shared plans to carry his father's sword and wear his father's captain's medallion throughout his reign, honoring a family legacy deeply rooted in the Krewe.

The coronation also introduced the new Queen, First Mate, First Mistress, Honor

Guard and Children of the Court who will accompany Captain Billy through the 2026-27 Bowlegs year. The new captain's theme, "Whiskey In, Wisdom Out," was unveiled as the Krewe officially began preparations for next year's Billy Bowlegs Pirate Festival and a full calendar of community appearances and pirate traditions.

Community Invited to "Stuff the Bus" School Supply Drive



The Okaloosa Public Schools Foundation, in partnership with the Okaloosa County School District and The Salvation Army of Fort Walton Beach, is inviting the community to participate in the annual Stuff the Bus school supply drive on Friday, Aug. 1, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Walmart stores in Crestview, Destin, Fort Walton Beach and Niceville.

Held during Florida's back-to-school tax-free month, the event gives residents an opportunity to help local students by purchasing and donating school supplies while they shop. Donations will help ensure students throughout Okaloosa County have the tools they need to begin the school year ready to learn. "Every notebook, backpack and box of crayons donated helps remove barriers to learning and gives students the confidence to start the school year successfully," said Superintendent Marcus Chambers.

Donation boxes will also be available at participating businesses throughout the county. Additional collection sites will be announced on the district's website and social media channels. Businesses interested in serving as a collection site may contact Debbie Tate at (850) 974-0742 or tated@okaloosa-schools.com.

For the latest event information, collection site locations, and supply donation updates, visit <https://www.okaloosa-schools.com/page/stuff-the-bus> and follow Okaloosa County School District on Facebook.

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Acute Rehabilitation Versus Skilled Nursing Rehabilitation: What’s the Difference?

By TERESA HALVERSON

You Had a Hospital Stay—Now What?

Leaving the hospital is an important milestone, but recovery often continues long after discharge. Whether you’re recovering from surgery, illness, injury, or a medical event, the right rehabilitation program can help you regain strength, restore independence, and return safely to the activities you enjoy. Choosing the right rehabilitation setting can make all the difference in your journey back to health.

While both acute (hospital based) rehabilitation and skilled nursing rehabilitation facilities provide therapy and nursing/medical care, they differ in the intensity of services, patient requirements and expected outcomes.

Skilled Nursing and Rehabilitation facilities are often most appropriate for people who:

- Need continued recovery after hospitalization or surgery
- Require more nursing care such as wound care management, medication administration and management, and/or monitoring of chronic health conditions.
- Benefit from therapy but may not be able to tolerate several hours of intensive therapy each day.
- Need additional time to build strength and confidence prior to returning home.

Common reasons for admission include:

- Joint replacement recovery
- Cardiac or pulmonary conditions
- Infections requiring on-going care
- General weakness after illness
- Fractures or falls
- Deconditioning following an extended hospital stay

What are the key differences between acute hospital-based rehabilitation and skilled nursing rehabilitation?

Key Features: Acute Rehabilitation

- Patients must participate in three hours of therapy per day, five to seven days per week (all disciplines)
- Care is overseen by a reha-

bilitation physician and an interdisciplinary team.

- Patients must be medically stable but able to tolerate intensive therapy.

- Common diagnoses include stroke, spinal cord injury, traumatic brain injury, major orthopedic surgeries, and complex neurological conditions.

- Shorter ???

Key Features: Skilled Nursing Rehabilitation

- Physical, occupational, and speech therapy are provided, typically one to three hours per day, depending on patient needs and abilities.

- 24-hour skilled nursing care.
- Dedicated Medical Director and On-sight Extenders (PA, NP)

- Patients who cannot yet tolerate intensive rehabilitation can still receive therapy while continuing medical recovery.

- Ideal for patients recovering from hospitalization, surgery, illness, or injury who need ongoing nursing support and rehabilitation.

- Average length of stay varies from a few days to several months, depending on progress and goals.

- Daily Clinical Interdisciplinary Team Oversight

- Physician oversight to include Primary Physician, Psychiatry, Cardio, Nephrology and Respiratory therapy.

Skilled Nursing Rehabilitation is Usually Best For:

Patients who need rehabilitation but also require ongoing nursing care, medication management, wound care, IV therapy, or a slower-paced recovery program.

Why Choose Skilled Nursing Rehabilitation Over Acute Rehabilitation?

While acute inpatient rehabilitation is an excellent option for some patients, many individuals achieve better outcomes in a skilled nursing rehabilitation setting because it offers a balance of therapy, nursing care, and recovery time. Acute rehabilitation requires patients to participate in three hours of therapy every day. Many seniors and medically complex patients simply are not ready for that level of intensity.

The right rehabilitation set-

ting depends on a patient’s medical condition, functional abilities, endurance, and recovery goals. While hospital-based rehabilitation offers intensive therapy for those who can tolerate it, skilled nursing rehabilitation provides a valuable bridge between the hospital and home, allowing patients to regain strength, independence, and confidence at a pace that meets their individual needs.

Better Choice for Frail Older Adults

Many seniors recovering from hospitalization need:

- Assistance with daily activities
- Fall prevention
- Nutritional support
- Strength and balance training

- Smooth transition back home with follow-up

The goal of skilled nursing

rehabilitation is not only to improve strength and mobility but also to prepare patients and families for a successful discharge home through:

- Home safety assessments
- Caregiver education
- Equipment recommendations
- Medication teaching

Continued on page 15



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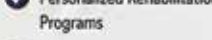


The Manor
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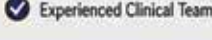
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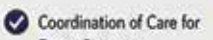
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 Community

What Happens When Steve Doocy Comes to Town?

When the cameras aren't rolling, a conversation about pirates, positive news, grandchildren and why America's stories still start locally

By LORI LEATH MILLER

The first thing I learned about Steve Doocy is that he can carry on a full interview while jumping out of a vehicle, walking into Publix and searching for bottled water.

The second thing I learned is that despite spending decades on national television, the long-time FOX & Friends co-host is exactly what viewers see every morning: warm, approachable,

genuinely curious and surprisingly funny.

I caught up with Doocy shortly after he landed in North-west Florida as part of FOX & Friends' nationwide America 250 tour, which recently brought the popular morning show to Fudpucker's Beachside Bar & Grill in Destin.

Before discussing television, politics or ratings, we found ourselves talking about weath-

er—specifically, what us locals affectionately call the “Destin Bubble.” After I explained our theory that somehow storms seem to part around Destin while sunshine magically appears, Doocy laughed. “That’s great. I love it,” he said. When I mentioned that some locals credit the Gulf’s unique weather patterns for helping create the phenomenon, he quickly connected it to another local





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tradition. “Well, that’s why the pirates came, I guess,” he joked.

As it turns out, Doocy had already been reading up on the Billy Bowlegs Pirate Festival and was preparing to be escorted by pirate ship during his visit to Fort Walton Beach. That could only happen on the Emerald Coast.

While the FOX & Friends team travels extensively, Doocy said Destin stood out as a natural stop for the show’s America 250 tour, which highlights communities, businesses and traditions that helped shape the nation. “As we travel America for America 250, we’re trying to highlight all these amazing towns and amazing places,” Doocy said. “The Panhandle was just one of those places we haven’t been to for a while, and it’s one of those places where people have heard about it, they’ve wanted to visit it, and we thought, ‘We should go there.’”

Part of the appeal was the location itself. “Fudpucker’s is legendary,” he said with a laugh. “You’ve got gators, you’ve got pirates, you’ve got a lot of happy people who need coffee. That’s a pretty good recipe for first thing in the morning.”

It wasn’t his first visit to the area. Long before arriving as a television host, Doocy first visited Destin as a college student making the trek from the University of Kansas in search of a Florida beach vacation. “It was the closest beach in Florida from Kansas,” he said.

Years later, he and his wife returned to explore the area as a potential second-home destination. “We absolutely loved it,” he told me. “We spent a couple of days looking around

and thought it was just very, very nice.”

Like many visitors, he was particularly drawn to the communities along Scenic Highway 30A. During that trip, he even spent time exploring the area with former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who maintained a home in South Walton for many years. Had he purchased property back then, he joked, he probably would have quadrupled his investment by now.

The conversation eventually turned to food — not surprising considering Doocy and his wife, Kathy, have authored several cookbooks together. When asked about memorable local dining experiences, he immediately recalled enjoying smoked fish dip while watching the sunset at Bud & Alley’s in Seaside. “It’s another iconic place,” he said. “Everybody has to go there.”

As our conversation continued, one theme surfaced repeatedly: the power of local stories. Although Doocy works in national media, he believes the stories that resonate most with viewers are often rooted in hometown communities. “When I was a reporter in Washington, D.C., every national story was a local story,” he said.

In today’s media landscape, he argues that local storytelling might be more important than ever. “Every national story starts somewhere locally,” he said. “And thanks to social media and all the different platforms we have now, a local story can become a national story overnight.”

That philosophy is at the

Continued on next page

STEVE DOOCY

continued from previous page

heart of what we do. As publishers of all-positive community newspapers across Northwest Florida, we often hear readers say they appreciate stories that celebrate people, businesses and communities making a difference. It turns out Doocy hears much of the same feedback from FOX & Friends viewers.

"I think people love the segments because they're positive," he said. "There's a lot of news on, and a lot of it is not great news. What I hear when I travel around the country is that people appreciate hearing stories about communities, businesses and people doing good things."

One recent example came after a Route 66 broadcast. Doocy recalled a woman approaching him after the series aired. "She said, 'I just wanted to tell you how much I loved that series,'" he remembered. "'There's just not enough good news out there.'" He paused and smiled while recounting the moment. "That's a good report card."

Those positive stories often create real-world impacts as well. Doocy shared how small businesses featured during FOX & Friends road trips sometimes see visitors arrive from across the country months or even years later. Recalling one Florida restaurant owner in particular, Doocy said one of the most rewarding aspects of the road trips is seeing the lasting impact on small businesses. "People would come in and say, 'I saw you on TV,'" he said.

After more than three decades of commuting into New York television studios, Doocy said life on the road still brings a sense of adventure. "When you're driving into New York every day for 30 years, you know exactly how it's going to go," he said. "Out here, you never know what's going to happen. You're going to meet interesting people, hear some great stories and probably have a few surprises along the way." That unpredictability is part of what keeps the broadcasts fresh.

Doocy said one of the things he looks forward to most when the show travels is the enthusiasm of local viewers. "They're so excited when we first walk in with the cameras rolling," he said. "And the excitement really doesn't diminish."

That enthusiasm was am-

plified by FOX & Friends' nationwide America's 250 RV giveaway, which had generated enormous local interest. "Everybody wants to win it," Doocy said. "I don't blame them. It's a really nice vehicle."

Perhaps nowhere was Doocy's pride more evident than when discussing his son, Peter Doocy, now one of the most recognizable White House correspondents in America. When I asked how it feels watching his son follow in his footsteps, his voice immediately softened. "We're really proud of him," Doocy said. "In the beginning, we never pushed him into this business because it's a complicated industry. But he's worked hard, he's done a great job and it's exciting watching him succeed." At the time of our interview, Peter was traveling internationally with the president. Like any parent, Steve watches closely.

Like any grandparent, he was equally happy discussing his grandchildren. A grandfather for only a few years, he smiled while talking about his young grandchildren and admitted there is nothing quite like the experience.

For all the excitement surrounding national television, RV giveaways and coast-to-coast broadcasts, those moments may have revealed the most about who Steve Doocy really is. By the

end of our conversation, I found myself hoping this wouldn't be Steve Doocy's last visit to the Emerald Coast.

What was scheduled to be a short interview stretched into a much longer conversation about family, food, local communities, television and the stories that connect us. In a profession where interviews can sometimes feel rushed, scripted or transactional, our conversation felt more like catching up with an old friend who happened to have spent the last three decades on national television. It was one of the most enjoyable and genuinely pleasant interviews I've conducted. And I think he had fun, too!

Before ending our conversation, I asked if there was anything he wanted local readers to know. His answer was simple. "Thank you for the wonderful welcome and the great rollout," he said. "We really appreciate it."

By the end of our conversation, Doocy wasn't talking about ratings, television production or celebrity. He was talking about communities. About local businesses. About people gathering together. About stories worth telling. "Every story is local," he said.

And in a place like "our neck of the woods," that's a story worth telling.

REHABILITATION

continued from page 13

- Community resource coordination

The Bottom Line

Acute rehabilitation is ideal for patients who are medically stable and capable of participating in intensive therapy several hours each day. Skilled nursing rehabilitation is often the better choice for patients who need a combination of rehabilitation, skilled nursing care, medical oversight, and a recovery pace tailored to their individual needs.

Acute rehabilitation is ideal for patients who are medically stable and capable of participating in intensive therapy several hours each day. Skilled nursing rehabilitation is often the better choice for patients who need a combination of rehabilitation, skilled nursing care, medical oversight, and a recovery pace tailored to their individual needs.

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 Community

Patriots Point Aims to Create a Lasting Tribute for America 250

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

As communities across the nation celebrate America's 250th anniversary throughout the year, a project taking shape in West Bay is inviting local families, veterans, businesses and community supporters to become part of a permanent tribute to our nation's history.

Known as Patriots Point, the initiative is the nonprofit arm of The Corner PCB, a community-focused development in Panama City Beach that seeks to create a gathering place centered on faith, patriotism, history and civic engagement. At the heart of the project will stand a towering American flag surrounded by a commemorative plaza designed to honor the nation's founding, military service and enduring ideals.

What began as a local pas-



sion project led by Steven Franco, owner of Rodos Realty, and his daughter, Bebe Franco, is quickly evolving into something

much larger. Franco and a team of longtime Beachworx members, Rodos Realty colleagues and respected community leaders—including decorated military veterans Gary Redden and Bill Blanken, real estate partner Greg Ganske, and service providers Jeff Margaretten, Aerial Payne and Dillon Turner—have collaborated on community-focused initiatives for years. Together, they believe Patriots Point has the potential to become a regional destination and a meaningful part of the nation's America 250 celebration. "Patriots Point started as a local project, but the more we developed the vision, the more we realized it represents something much larger," Franco said. "Northwest Florida has one of the strongest military connections anywhere in the country. We want this to be a place where residents and visitors alike can reflect on the freedoms we enjoy and the people who have helped protect them."

That military connection is one reason Franco, Redden and the others believe the project is uniquely positioned to resonate with residents throughout Northwest Florida. In close proximities to West Bay are military installations including Tyndall Air Force Base, Eglin Air Force Base, Hurlburt Field, Naval Air Station Pensacola, Duke Field, Naval Air Station Whiting Field, Naval Support Activity Panama City and additionally Corry Station (Center for Information Warfare Train-

ing), the U.S. Coast Guard Station Panama City and Fort Novosel (formerly known as Fort Rucker) nearby in Alabama. Generations of Air Force, Army, Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard personnel have trained and served throughout the region, making the area one of the nation's most significant military corridors.

As America approaches its semiquincentennial, Patriots Point seeks to create a place where local families, veterans, business owners and community leaders can leave their mark and ensure their stories become part of a larger American story.

One of the most distinctive features of the project is a 1,776-square-foot commemorative walkway that will surround the flag plaza, symbolically honoring the year America declared its independence. The walkway will be constructed using custom engraved brick pavers purchased by supporters.

Each engraved paver can feature a family name, business, veteran tribute, memorial dedication or personal message. The pavers will become a permanent part of Patriots Point, creating a lasting connection between community members and the landmark itself. Project plans call for up to 5,000 engraved pavers, allowing individuals to honor loved ones, celebrate family legacies, recognize military service or showcase local businesses that support the effort. Supporters can also purchase duplicate engraved pavers

as keepsakes.

The vision extends well beyond the paver program, however. Design plans reveal a thoughtfully crafted public space featuring elements that symbolize key aspects of American history and government. Monument columns will represent significant eras of American history, while additional features will honor the nation's military branches, the 50 states and the three branches of government.

For Redden, the project is ultimately about creating something that future generations can experience and appreciate. "As America approaches its 250th anniversary, we have a unique opportunity to create something lasting," Redden said. "Every brick tells a story. It might honor a veteran, recognize a family or celebrate a local business, but together they become part of a larger story about our community and our country."

At a time when communities throughout the country are reflecting on what it means to be American, Patriots Point seeks to create a place where the stories of local residents can be shared and remembered for generations to come. Whether through a family name engraved in brick, a tribute to a veteran or support from local businesses, Franco's team hopes Northwest Florida residents will come together to build a lasting legacy that reflects the patriotism, service and community spirit that have long defined the region. More than a monument, Patriots Point is envisioned as a place where future generations can gather, reflect and remember the people whose service, sacrifice and love of country helped shape the community they call home.

For more information or to purchase an engraved paver, visit thecorneratpatriotspoint.org or scan the QR code.




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12:00 pm HISTORY SANDWICHED-IN "COLONIAL PAPER CURRENCY" PRESENTED BY TOM MCKNIGHT

1:00 pm OFFICIAL RIBBON CUTTING OF THE "AMERICA 250" EXHIBIT. NICEVILLE MAYOR DANIEL HENKEL WILL OFFICIATE

1:15 pm "LIFE, LIBERTY AND HARD RATIONS" PRESENTATION BY TRAVIS SOUTHER, IN COLONIAL ATTIRE, INCLUDING A DEMONSTRATION OF REVOLUTIONARY WAR ERA FIREARMS

2:00 pm BATTLES OF LEXINGTON AND CONCORD. AN INFORMAL DISCUSSION LED BY KARL ESCHMANN

VOLUNTEERS AND DOCENTS, DRESSED IN COLONIAL COSTUMES, WILL LEAD TOURS OF THE MUSEUM EXHIBITS

FOX & Friends Brings National Spotlight to Our Area

BY "DOC" DOUG STAUFFER

Before sunrise touched the emerald waters of the Gulf, excitement had already begun in our area. Long lines wrapped around Fudpucker's Beachside Bar & Grill as people gathered hours before dawn to welcome the nationally televised morning show FOX & Friends and one of its most recognizable personalities, Steve Doocy.

For many in attendance, the event was far more than a television broadcast. It became a celebration of community, patriotism, military pride, and the distinctive spirit that defines the Florida Panhandle.

The May 15 stop in our area was part of the show's "For All America" road trip, celebrating America's upcoming 250th anniversary. Yet, as cameras rolled live, it quickly became clear that the story was not just about a television show coming to town. It was about the energy of the people who arrived long before daylight, simply to be part of something memorable.

The crowd was jubilant from the start. Some arrived before 3 a.m., and by the time the broadcast began, the atmosphere inside and outside was electric. Red, white, and blue clothing filled the venue, while local families, veterans, community leaders, and supporters of the show packed every available space.

One of the highlights of the morning was watching Steve Doocy interact with the crowd. While many television personalities keep their distance once the cameras stop rolling, Doocy seemed to thrive on personal connections. Between live segments, he moved through the crowd, taking selfies, shaking hands, telling jokes, and making everyone feel included.

At one point, Doocy laughed about how many people mistakenly called him "Peter," referencing his son, senior White House correspondent and fellow FOX host Peter Doocy. The audience loved it, and his humor immediately made the event feel personal rather than staged.

Perhaps the biggest crowd-pleasing moment came when Doocy decided to crowd surf through the audience. After a single practice, he confidently launched himself into the cheering crowd, where



people, including myself and Life Media's own Scott Miller, held him above their heads during the live broadcast. The moment perfectly captured the morning's relaxed, fun-loving atmosphere and instantly became one of the event's most talked-about memories.

The 70th-anniversary celebration of Billy Bowlegs also added a distinctly local flavor to the broadcast. Pirates from the Krewe of Bowlegs arrived in full force, bringing their pirate ship, cannons, costumes, and enthusiasm. The pirate-themed entrance to Fudpucker's became one of the show's visual centerpieces and showcased the traditions that make the Emerald Coast unique.

For many locals, seeing our area highlighted on national television sparked a sense of pride. Throughout the morning, people received text messages and calls from friends and family across the country, each saying they had seen our area live on television.

That may have been one of the most meaningful parts of the broadcast. Beyond the entertainment and excitement, the event reminded viewers nationwide that communities like our area still embody something deeply American — patriotism,

hospitality, faith, military appreciation, family values, and genuine friendliness.

The Fort Walton Beach High School Stars Dance Team added excitement and energy to the early-morning broadcast as they lined the entrance to Fudpucker's, waving pom-poms and



cheering on the crowd. Despite the pre-dawn start, their enthusiasm helped create the electric atmosphere that defined the event.

For three hours, our area

became America's front porch, and those present experienced far more than a television show. They experienced a celebration of community that many will not soon forget.

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 Business

Florida Lt. Gov. Jay Collins Brings Message of Leadership, Opportunity to Locals

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

Florida Lt. Gov. Jay Collins visited Beachworx recently for a community conversation with local business owners, elected officials and residents, sharing his personal story, leadership philosophy and views on issues affecting Northwest Florida.

Collins, a former Green Beret, state senator and nonprofit leader, opened with a message rooted in resilience and service. He described being born to a teenage mother, adopted by his grandparents and raised on a family farm that was later lost. "A son never forgets," Collins said, referring to a phrase passed down by his father. "You don't forget where you come from. The roots that create who you are drive you."

Collins served in the Army as a Green Beret, surviving serious injuries that ultimately led to the amputation of his leg. Afterward, he requalified as a Green Beret and continued serving for five more years. He later led a nonprofit that provided millions of meals after disasters, including hurricanes across Florida. "Leadership isn't about talking," he said. "Leadership is about being on the ground

where people need help."

Throughout his remarks, Collins emphasized that government, business and the economy are ultimately about people. He said his priorities have remained consistent from his time in the Florida Senate to his current role as lieutenant governor: safety, the economy, education and opportunity. "It's not about me," he said. "It's about we."

Education and workforce development drew significant attention during the question-and-answer portion. Collins voiced support for school choice while also emphasizing accountability. He said most Florida students will continue to attend public schools and said every educational option receiving public dollars should be held responsible.

He also called for stronger alignment between education and the workforce, particularly through trades, apprenticeships and career pathways in high school. "I don't believe in second-class citizens," Collins said. "We have to equally reward people who go down different paths, whether that is college, trades, entrepreneurship or going straight into a career."

Collins said Florida should better connect commerce, universities, state colleges and high schools to identify workforce needs. He pointed to shortages in trades and agriculture, noting the average age of both tradesmen and farmers is near 58.

Questions also focused on housing affordability, insurance and the challenge of retaining skilled workers in tourism, health care and construction. Collins said the state must pursue short-, mid- and long-term strategies, including veteran transition programs, apprenticeship opportunities and policies that reduce the cost of building and owning homes.

He said permitting and impact fees are adding significant costs to home prices and should be part of the affordability conversation. On insurance, he said Florida has made progress attracting more insurers but still has more work to do, particularly related to fraud, litigation and rebuilding barriers after storms. "We cannot allow the conversation about affordability and the American dream to be about just getting by," Collins said. "I want homeownership to be on the rise."



Growth and development were also part of the discussion. Collins said Florida must manage growth thoughtfully while protecting farmland, water,

beaches and green spaces. "People are going to move here," he said. "The question is how we manage growth while keeping Florida what it is."

Local attendees also asked about small business concerns, agriculture costs, women entrepreneurs, wildlife rescue funding and community projects, including an America 250 initiative called Patriots Point. Collins repeatedly encouraged residents to bring specific facts, maps and details to the table. "Come with details and we can talk problems," he said. "You will have a seat at the table."

For the Panhandle, Collins said the region's military and veteran population is especially important to him. "If you signed your name on the dotted line, the very least we can do is be present, hear you out and help make a difference in your life," he said.

Collins closed by returning to the theme of opportunity, saying his own life is proof that the American dream remains possible. "When people tell you the American dream isn't real, they're wrong," he said. "I've lived it."

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Olympics-Inspired Activities for The Whole Family: 4 Ways to Challenge Kids Both Physically and Mentally

Research indicates that, on average, students forget 2.6 months' worth of math lessons during summer break, a phenomenon known as the "Summer Slide." This decline impacts academic performance, diminishes self-confidence and lowers test scores.

This period of possible learning loss presents a significant challenge, potentially causing students to lag academically by nearly two months compared to their peers. However, parents can proactively help their children maintain and strengthen their academic skills before the new school year begins.

While parents can integrate math into summer activities in numerous ways, hosting a family Olympic Games provides an excellent opportunity to keep math skills sharp while creating cherished memories. Inspired by the spirit of the Olympics, these activities promote physical movement and friendly competition while nurturing perseverance and courage in children as they relish the satisfaction of reaching their goals.

With the biggest sporting competition in the world quickly approaching, outlined below are four ways to integrate math into summer Olympic activities. These activities provide children with exciting ways to combat the Summer Slide and sharpen their math skills.

Sports Day Tournament

Transform your backyard into a sports arena with various thrilling challenges such as long jump, javelin throw using pool noodles, hopscotch competitions, relay races, and more. Engage in friendly competition, keeping score and tallying points for each event to determine the ultimate champion or team.

Long Jump

Measure distances jumped and compare results to determine winners.

Measuring Throwing Distances Using Pool Noodles

Similar to the Javelin Throw, measuring throwing distances with a pool noodle can be a creative and engaging way to track how far an object is thrown.

Races

Challenge each other to races of various lengths or race against the clock to see if each child can improve their time. Do simple sprints, assemble teams and do relay races (use an empty paper towel roll for your baton), place objects on the ground (like pool noodles), pretend they're hurdles and give a longer distance run (maybe around the house or block) a try. The options are endless.

Hopscotch

Create numerical challenges within the hopscotch grid, like adding or multiplying numbers in each square as players jump through.

Diy Math Olympian Torch

For this craft, you'll need paper towel rolls or cardboard tubes, tissue paper, glue, scissors and markers. Decorate the paper towel rolls with Olympic-themed designs using markers. Cut small squares of tissue paper and glue them inside the top of the roll to resemble flames. Create a math challenge where kids solve a series of math problems to earn "flames" (small tissue paper squares) to add to their torches. The winner is the first to complete their torch with all flames.



ner is the first to complete their torch with all flames.

Olympic Ring Toss Game

Create an exciting Olympic-themed ring toss game right in your backyard using 5 paper towel rolls, colored construction paper (blue, black, red, yellow, green), scissors, glue, bean bags or rings (you can make rings using paper plates). Then, cover each cardboard tube with colored paper to represent the Olympic rings (blue, black, red, yellow, green).

Cut the tubes to different heights for variety.

Arrange them in a pyramid shape or in a line in your backyard.

Make rings using paper plates or use bean bags as tossing items.

Assign points to each tube based on difficulty (higher tubes can be worth more points).

Invite players to take turns tossing the rings or bean bags, aiming to land them on the tubes.

Keep score and determine the winner based on the

points earned from successful tosses.

Craft Olympic Medals

Create personalized champion awards by crafting gold medal necklaces using cardboard circles or paper plates embellished with gold paint, glitter, or foil. Measure and cut circles of uniform size for medals, exploring concepts of circumference and diameter. For a fun math game, you can also calculate the required length of string based on the number of medals crafted.

Participating in these activities as a family strengthens bonds and empowers children to combat the Summer Slide and stay sharp as they prepare for the back-to-school season. Through

active engagement, parents can ensure their children feel confident and prepared to tackle new challenges, serving as a valuable resource every step of the way.

At Mathnasium of Niceville, we believe math should be fun, engaging and empowering. Whether you're keeping score in a backyard Olympics or solving everyday challenges together, every math moment is an opportunity to build confidence, strengthen skills and make learning part of the adventure.

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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Author: John Bianchette, Vice President of Education and Training of Mathnasium

Source: <https://www.todaysparent.com/family/activities/olympics-inspired-activities-for-the-whole-family/>.



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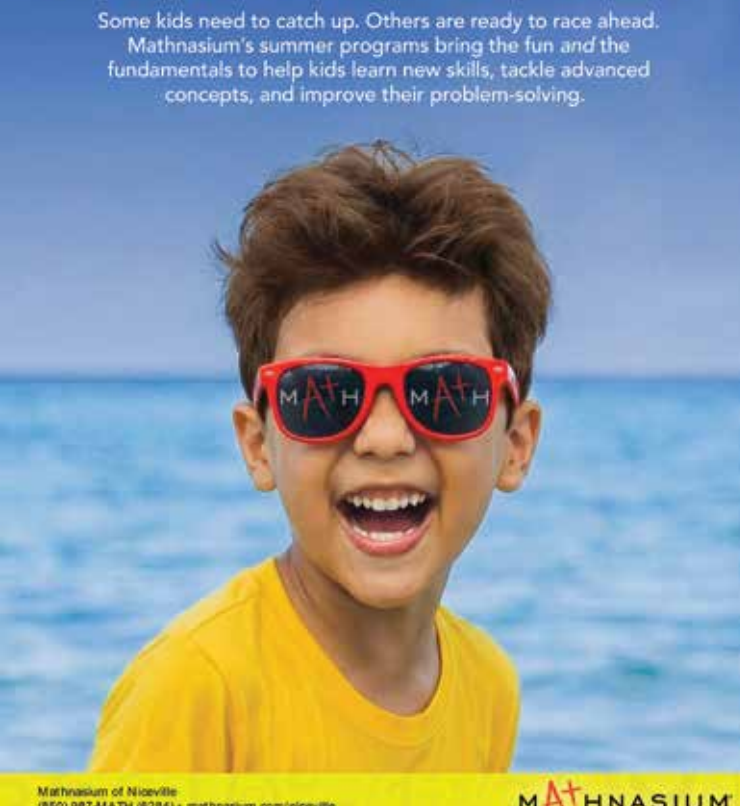
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MATHNASIUM



Hurricane Season Is Here: Let's Get Ready Together

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

Living along the Emerald Coast comes with plenty of perks—beautiful beaches, stunning sunsets and a lifestyle many people dream about. But, those of us who call this area home also know that hurricane season is simply part of life here.

That's why a recent stop in Destin by U.S. Sen. Rick Scott as part of his annual Hurricane Preparedness Tour caught my attention. Joined by U.S. Rep. Jimmy Patronis, local emergency officials and representatives from the American Red Cross, Scott's message was straightforward: Don't wait until a storm is in the Gulf to get prepared.

As someone who lives here, too, I know how easy it is to put hurricane preparations on tomorrow's to-do list. Life gets busy. But every year, we are reminded that it only takes one storm to change everything.

And while no one knows exactly what this season will bring, forecasters are once again predicting an active Atlantic hurricane season. An average Atlantic hurricane season produces 14 named storms, seven hurricanes and three major hurricanes, according to long-term climate averages from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The



2025 season was another active year across the Atlantic Basin and Gulf Coast, continuing a trend of above-average tropical activity and serving as a reminder that coastal communities like ours cannot afford to be complacent.

The 2026 Atlantic hurricane season officially began June 1 and runs through Nov. 30. Early forecasts from NOAA and the National Hurricane Center project between 13 and 19 named storms this year, with six to 10 expected to become hurricanes and three to five potentially reaching major hurricane status at Category 3 strength or higher.

The good news is that preparedness works. The more time we spend getting ready before a storm forms, the more

time we can spend focusing on what matters most when one approaches. "Hurricane Season is almost here, and the time to prepare is today—not tomorrow, not next week," Scott said during the event at Dewey Destin's Seafood Restaurant. "It only takes one storm, and having your disaster plans set and preparedness kits stocked will save lives."

While we all hope for a quiet season, preparedness isn't about fear. It's about peace of mind. And I want that for my family, friends and neighbors. Now is the perfect time to take care of the things you'll be grateful you handled early if a storm threatens our area.

Start with the basics. Do you have enough water, nonperishable food, medications and pet

supplies to last at least a week? Are your flashlights working? Do you know where important documents are stored? Have you checked your batteries, portable chargers and first-aid supplies?

Next, talk with your family. Discuss what evacuation zone you're in, where you would go if an evacuation became necessary, how you would stay in touch and what your plan would be if cell service or power were interrupted. If you have elderly family members, neighbors who may need assistance or loved ones with medical needs, now is the time to make those plans—not when tropical storm watches begin appearing on television.

For those of us living near the water, it's also important to remember that flooding and storm surge often create some of the greatest dangers during hurricanes. Understanding your flood risk and knowing evacu-

ation routes ahead of time can make all the difference.

Another task many people overlook is reviewing insurance coverage. Standard homeowners insurance policies typically do not cover flood damage. A quick conversation with your insurance agent today could save significant headaches later.

Preparation also means looking outside your home. Trim overhanging tree limbs, secure outdoor furniture, inspect generators and check on neighbors who may need a helping hand. One of the things I love most about our community is how people come together before, during and after storms. Taking care of one another is part of what makes Niceville and Valparaiso special.

Another important step is staying informed. Residents are

Continued on next page

Home, Freedom and Family: Protecting What Matters Most

BY BITTANY YOUNKER

July has always been one of our favorite months. Between backyard barbecues, fireworks, family gatherings, celebrating two of our boy's birthdays and celebrating the freedoms we enjoy as Americans, it's a time that reminds us how important home really is.

As a veteran-owned, family-operated business, Independence Day holds special meaning for us. It's a chance to reflect on the sacrifices made by so many and to appreciate the community we've been fortunate enough to serve here on the Emerald Coast.

Over the years, we've helped families create safer spaces for children to play, secure yards for beloved pets, and private backyards where memories are made. While a new fence can transform a property, one thing we often remind homeowners is that even the best fence needs a little care to keep looking its best.

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Fence Maintenance Plan. Florida's sun, humidity, rain, and storms can take a toll on any fence over time. Our maintenance services help protect your investment through cleaning, inspections, repairs, and recommendations that can extend the life of your fence and keep it looking great year-round.

Whether you're hosting a Fourth of July cookout this summer or simply enjoying a quiet evening with family, your fence plays a bigger role than you might think. It provides privacy, security, curb appeal, and a place where life's moments happen.

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

Thursdays: Open Mic/Kara-

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

250 Years of Freedom Celebration with a nightly toast July 1-5!

July 1: Sailboat Race—Boats Encouraged to Decorate

July 2: 6pm SUP Race with Paddle Flag Parade Following

July 3: The Aces, 6pm-10pm, Judging of Boat Decorating Contest 8:30pm

July 4: Paradise Vale 6-10pm

July 5: Ronny Dean Garrett 4-8pm, Costume Contest 9pm, Cook-Out 4-7pm

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

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

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HURRICANE

continued from previous page

encouraged to sign up for emergency notifications through Alert Okaloosa and follow trusted sources such as Okaloosa County Emergency Management, the National Hurricane Center and local governments for timely updates, evacuation information and emergency announcements throughout the season.

Scott also shared an important reminder that emergency responders cannot always reach residents once conditions become dangerous. "If you're

not prepared, there's nothing law enforcement or the fire department can do for you in the middle of the storm," he said. "Everyone needs to take this seriously and prepare now."

The good news is that preparedness works. A few hours spent planning today can help protect your family, reduce stress and make recovery easier if a storm comes our way.

Let's all hope for a quiet hurricane season. But, let's also be ready if it's not.

Helpful Resources

2026 Okaloosa County Hurricane Guide

<https://myokaloosa.com/sites/default/files/Users/piouser/HurricaneGuide2026-small-er.pdf>

Alert Okaloosa Emergency Notifications

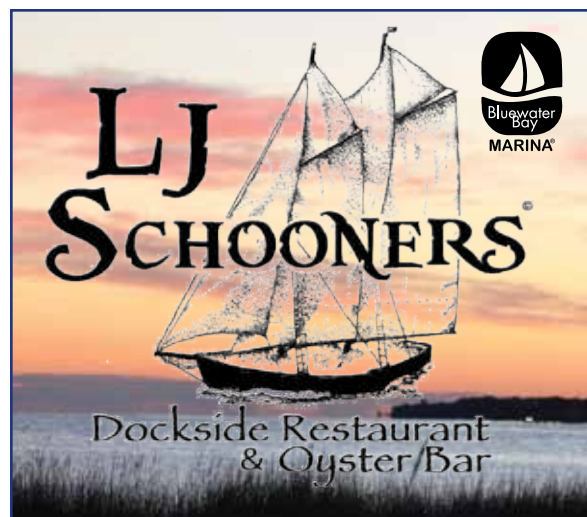
AlertOkaloosa.com

Okaloosa County Updates

<https://www.facebook.com/OkaloosaCounty>

Sen. Rick Scott Hurricane Preparedness Resources

www.rickscott.senate.gov/hurricane-preparedness





250 Years of Freedom Celebration



July 1: Sailboat Race—Boats Encouraged to Decorate

July 2: 6pm SUP Race with Paddle Flag Parade Following

July 3: The Aces, 6pm-10pm, Judging of Boat Decorating Contest 8:30pm

July 4: Paradise Vale 6-10pm

July 5: Ronny Dean Garrett 4-8pm, Costume Contest 9pm, Cook-Out 4-7pm



Nightly 250 Toast



Oyster Bar Hours: Mon.-Thurs. 3pm-10pm, Fri.-Sat. 11am to midnight, Sun. 9am to 9pm w/Brunch 9am-1pm

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

More Fun

- July 3: The Aces 6-10pm
- July 4: Paradise Vale 6-10pm
- July 5: Ronny Dean Garrett 4-8pm
- July 10: SouthSiders 6-10pm
- July 11: DJ Quiet Storm 6-10pm
- July 14: Chess Night 6pm
- July 17: After Math 5 6-10pm
- July 18: Beach Dogz & LUAU 6-10pm
- July 21: The Traveling Painter 5:30pm
- July 24: Parker & Ivoree Willingham 6-10pm
- July 25: Autumn Poultry 6-10pm
- July 26: Jody Lucas 4-8pm & Shrimp Boil 4-7pm

 Off the Hook

'Time Is': Remembering Bruce Cheves

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

The boats returned to the docks at A.J.'s Seafood & Oyster Bar just as they had thousands of times before. Captains tied off lines. Friends gathered along the harbor. Members of the fishing community exchanged hugs, stories, memories and some tried-n-true AJ's barbecue. But this time, something was missing.

For the first time in more than four decades, the familiar voice that had become synonymous with the Destin Fishing Rodeo was not there to greet them.

On May 30, family, friends, anglers and longtime Rodeo supporters gathered at A.J.'s to celebrate the life of Bruce Cheves, the beloved Destin Fishing Rodeo weighmaster who passed away April 30 following a battle with cancer. As the sun began to set over the Destin Harbor and boats set out, the community came together to honor a man whose voice, humor and larger-than-life personality helped define generations of fishing memories.

For many, Bruce wasn't simply the Rodeo's weighmaster. He was the Rodeo.

The evening served not only as a celebration of Bruce's life, but also as a reflection of the deep connections he built throughout our communities. Family



PHOTO KIRK AUSBURN

members expressed gratitude to A.J.'s Seafood & Oyster Bar for its hospitality and support, to the crew of the American Spirit Party Boat for providing a meaningful burial at sea and to Father Mike Hesse for offering heartfelt prayers and words of comfort during the ceremony.

Throughout the evening, friends and family shared stories, laughter and memories that reflected the impact Bruce had on generations of captains, anglers and residents. The gathering

drew a large crowd from across the fishing community, a testament to how deeply Bruce was loved and respected.

For those who attended, the evening felt fitting for a man who spent much of his life bringing people together. In many ways, the celebration reflected the same sense of community that Bruce helped create throughout his decades at the Destin Fishing Rodeo.

The Voice of the Destin Fishing Rodeo

Born Feb. 21, 1951, in Monterey, Ca., Bruce grew up surrounded by coastal waters and developed a lifelong love for fishing and the sea.

That passion eventually brought him to Northwest Florida in 1977. After arriving in Crestview, he found his way to Kelly Docks and immersed himself in the traditions and culture of Destin's fishing fleet.

Guided by local captains and inspired by the words of Capt. Bruce Marler — "If you pay attention, you will learn something every day." — Bruce devoted himself to learning every aspect of the sport, from weather patterns and moon phases to the instincts and knowledge passed down through generations of Gulf fishermen.

In 1984, Bruce began working alongside legendary Rodeo weighmaster Bill Sherman, learning the art and precision of official fish weigh-ins long before digital scales became common. What began as an opportunity to help soon became a calling.

Over the next 42 years, Bruce transformed the role of weighmaster into something uniquely his own. With trademark sayings that became part of local folklore, he entertained crowds while preserving the traditions of one of our area's most cherished events. Generations of anglers can still hear his familiar introduction: "From guppies to Godzilla, caught in a bathtub or a battleship ... bring me a fish and I'll make you famous." And when it came time to officially record a catch, the harbor would fall silent as Bruce delivered the words that became his signature: "Time is!"

Throughout his career, Bruce announced more than 20 world-record catches, including an 8.9-pound pompano, a 39-pound red grouper and a 54-pound kitty mitchell. He also witnessed and announced every Destin Fishing Rodeo record catch since 1984, including a 70.2-pound grouper, a 111.6-pound amberjack and a massive 358.8-pound warsaw grouper.

Yet, statistics and records tell only part of the story. Bruce possessed a rare gift for making every angler feel important, whether they brought in a world-

class catch or a small fish caught by an excited child experiencing the Rodeo for the first time.

More Than a Weighmaster

Bruce was a storyteller, historian, mentor and ambassador for Destin's fishing heritage.

He loved sharing tales from local waters and adventures around the world. He encouraged young anglers, celebrated longtime captains and helped preserve the stories that shaped Destin into the "World's Luckiest Fishing Village."

Every Oct. 16 at 5 p.m., Bruce led a memorial ceremony at the Rodeo weigh-in barge behind A.J.'s to honor captains, anglers and friends who had passed away. The tradition became so meaningful that the City of Destin officially proclaimed Oct. 16 as Bruce Cheves Day in 2010.

His contributions extended far beyond the harbor. Bruce received the University of West Florida Presidential Medal of Honor for his decades of public service, philanthropy and dedication to preserving our area's maritime history.

To countless residents and visitors, however, his greatest contribution was something less tangible. He made people feel welcome. Whether standing behind the scales, swapping stories on the docks or encouraging a young fisherman with a first catch, Bruce embodied the spirit of the fishing community.

While Bruce's voice became familiar to generations of Rodeo participants, those closest to him knew him simply as family and friend. He leaves behind his daughter, Brianna Cheves; sisters Sharon Ralston and Linda Hughes (Bruce Bishop); nephews Franklin Vaughn (Stephanie), Tyler Dunn, Evan Dunn, Zack Dunn (Patricia) and Ian Dunn; niece Cat Grey and great-niece CJ, as well as many dear friends who became family over the years.

A lifetime auxiliary member of Crestview VFW Post 5450, Bruce often said the Destin Fishing Rodeo community was an extension of his family. The hundreds of anglers, captains, volunteers and friends who gathered to celebrate his life would likely have said the same about him.

Continued on page 24

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Red Snapper Season Returns

Red snapper season is finally here, and 2026 is shaping up to be one of the best years in recent memory for Gulf Coast fishermen.

The federal red snapper season for federally permitted charter boats and head boats opened June 1 and will remain open through Oct. 26, giving anglers a 147-day season — the longest federal for-hire season since 2006. The season is 19 days longer than last year's federal season.

Florida's private recreational red snapper season opened May 22 and runs daily through July 31. Additional fishing opportunities begin Sept. 1, with a combination of daily openings, weekends and holiday periods extending through Jan. 4, 2027. Florida's 2026 season spans 140 days, making it the longest Gulf red snapper season since the state assumed management of the fishery.

For many families in our area,

red snapper season is one of the most anticipated times of the year. Destin's charter fleet and private anglers alike look forward to harvesting one of the Gulf's most popular and best-tasting reef fish.

Current regulations for private recreational anglers include a two-fish daily bag limit and a 16-inch minimum size limit in Gulf waters. Anglers should always verify current regulations before heading offshore, as rules can change.

One area that often creates confusion is the difference between state and federal waters. In the Gulf, Florida state waters extend nine nautical miles offshore. Federal waters begin beyond that boundary. Depending on where you fish and what type of vessel you are fishing from, different seasons and regulations might apply.

Private recreational anglers may harvest red snapper in state waters during Florida's season



and in federal waters when federal regulations allow. However, special rules apply when traveling through state waters with fish caught offshore.

State-licensed guide boats that do not carry a federal reef fish permit must follow state regulations and generally cannot harvest federally managed species such as red snapper in federal waters. A federal permit is required. Federally permitted charter boats and head boats operate under a separate set of federal regulations and may only harvest federally regulated species during

federally established seasons.

The differing seasons exist largely because the needs of anglers vary. Charter operators typically prefer long, consecutive seasons that allow visitors to plan vacations and fishing trips well in advance.

Many local, private boat owners, meanwhile, favor weekends and holiday openings that fit their work schedules.

Fortunately, improved data collection and management have helped create longer fishing opportunities for everyone. State officials credit enhanced harvest tracking and Florida's management program for expanding angler access while maintaining conservation goals.

For anglers unsure of current regulations, the Fish Rules app remains one of the easiest tools available. Users can select salt-

water or freshwater fishing, enter their location and instantly view current regulations for most species.

Whether you're heading offshore on a private boat or booking a trip with one of Destin's many charter captains, the 2026 season offers plenty of opportunities to enjoy one of the Gulf's signature fishing experiences.

Know Before You Go

Before heading offshore, anglers should verify current regulations, season dates and size limits, as rules can change throughout the year.

Helpful Resources:

- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission: www.MyFWC.com
- Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council: www.GulfCouncil.org
- NOAA Fisheries: www.Fisheries.NOAA.gov
-

Continued on page 25



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Off the Hook

BRUCE CHEVES

continued from page 22

A Community Reflects

Since news of Bruce's passing spread throughout our communities, tributes have poured in from friends, family members and fellow fishermen whose lives he touched over the decades.

Mary Anne Windes shared a favorite memory from 1998 when her son, Capt. Trey Windes, dressed as Bruce for Halloween. "We shopped for days trying to find the perfect belt and shorts as Trey wouldn't settle for 'close enough,'" Mary Anne recalled. "Bruce was tickled pink. Rest in peace, Bruce! We love you, man!"

Richard Drago found com-

fort in one of Bruce's most famous phrases. "I can imagine God, upon calling him home, said the same words we heard Bruce announce to the Rodeo crowd to mark the catch official: 'Time Is,'" he wrote. "We know you were a big enough catch for heaven's net to scoop you right up, my friend."

R.J. Shelley remembered meeting Bruce shortly after Hurricane Opal in 1995. "I was a snot-nosed kid running around the docks most of my younger years," she wrote. "I listened to countless stories and could listen for hours. Him and Ms. Helen Wren always kept a watchful eye on me."

Longtime friend Jim Roberson reflected on the dedication many never saw behind the



"From guppies to Godzilla, caught in a bathtub or a battleship... bring me a fish and I'll make you famous!"
- Bruce Cheves



tin," Franklin wrote. "He is what made the Rodeo what it is today — a place where anyone can be made famous from guppies to Godzilla. It didn't matter if you brought him a fish; he would weigh it, no questions asked. Destin will not be the same without him."

Marina Point native Zach Vagias remembered Bruce as part of the fabric of the harbor itself. "He wasn't just a weighmaster; he was an entertainer," Zach wrote. "The best decision the Destin Fishing Rodeo ever made was naming Bruce Cheves as their weighmaster. He brought a color and personality it had needed for years."

"Time Is"

The fishing community will undoubtedly continue gathering each October to remember the captains and anglers who have gone before them. This year, however, one more name will be added to that list.

The man who spent decades honoring others will now be remembered alongside them.

And somewhere in the hearts and memories of those standing along the docks, the familiar words that echoed across Destin Harbor for more than 40 years will remain forever: "Time is."

Publisher's Note: Bruce's family has requested any donations be made to the Destin History & Fishing Museum to help establish a permanent tribute by renaming the Rodeo Room the "Bruce Cheves Rodeo Room."

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scenes. "Many don't know of the many days over the many years that he stood in the rain, heat, worked around Hurricane Opal and performed with an unbelievable level of dedication to the Rodeo, the city and the sport he loved so much," Jim wrote. "Too many stories to share here, but I pray his legacy lives on."

Chester Kroeger recalled working with Bruce on a "Legends of Destin" T-shirt years

ago featuring Bruce and the blue marlin he famously caught while traveling alone to Bimini in heavy seas. "Bruce truly is a legend in this community and his legacy will live forever," Chester wrote.

For his nephew, Franklin Vaughn, the loss is both personal and deeply felt throughout the fishing community. "He was not only the weighmaster of the Rodeo, but a true icon of Des-

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Golf Series: Eglin Air Force Base Chiefs Group Supports Those Who Serve!

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

Recent Shalimar Pointe Men's Club Champions TJ Vidinha (2026) and Ray LeBlanc (2025) joined with Bryan Mills to organize a four-person scramble fundraiser for the Eglin Air Force Base Chiefs Group. This annual June tournament is one way this organization can support the military and local community.

This organization is composed of the Chiefs at Eglin who want to be sure that their random acts of kindness for those who live on base and in the community have financial support. Rachael Hemelo, Enlisted Leader for the 692 squadron at Eglin, explained this to me after the shot gun start when golfers headed to their respective holes. Are unforeseen extra hospital care expenses needed? Is there a fire in the home? Is there an accident where short term food or supplies can help? Is there a mentoring project that needs supplies? Does the Armament



Museum need volunteer work done outside and inside? Ask no

more, the Chiefs Group is there to support!

The golf tournament consisted of a scramble format with each of the four-person team hitting a drive and then deciding which drive was the best. Then, each person hit the next shot, made a decision about which shot was the best, and the format continued until the putt went in the hole. Scores should typically be low and in golf, low is good. And, why not? Hitting the best ball and having one of four shots from which to choose,

should make each team feel as they are pro golfers on the tour!

Other fun opportunities also were set up along the 18-hole golf course. There was a longest drive contest, a hole-in-one contest, closest to the Pin and even a "heckle hole" where fans got to scream and heckle golfers on the tee box. Can a golfer perform under that kind of pressure? Chiefs from Eglin have NO problem with pressure!

In between all this fun was the Scotty Cameron Putting Contest of Shalimar Pointe's

Putting Green. No one was able to sink a long, long, putt but there was a winner who came inches from the hole. Who says putting isn't difficult? When the prize is an \$800 putter, it's worth a long, long shot to a tiny, tiny hole.

The first place team, last names only posted only was: Vidinha, Smith, Coley and Nunez with a low score of 51. Congratulations of course to all the golfers who came out on a hot day in June to an unforgettable golf scramble.

SNAPPER
continued from page 23

Fish Rules App: Available free for Apple and Android devices

2026 Gulf Red Snapper Regulations

- Private Recreational Season: May 22-July 31, plus additional fall and holiday openings beginning Sept. 1

- Federal Charter/Headboat Season: June 1-Oct. 26
 - Daily Bag Limit: Two fish per person
 - Minimum Size Limit: 16 inches total length
- For the latest red snapper season dates and regulations, search "Red Snapper" at MyFWC.com.

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Niceville High Adds Veteran Coach Greg Thomas to Football Staff

Niceville High School is adding a familiar and highly respected name to its football program.

The school recently announced the hiring of veteran coach Greg Thomas as the Eagles' new offensive line coach, bringing more than three decades of coaching experience and a championship pedigree to the sidelines.

Thomas has served in multiple head coaching roles throughout his career and was part of four state championship teams in North Carolina. Locally, he



Niceville High School Head Football Coach Adron Robinson, left, welcomes veteran coach Greg Thomas to the Eagles football staff. Thomas will serve as the team's new offensive line coach.

is best known for his successful tenure at Choctawhatchee High School, where he served as head football coach and athletic director for 13 seasons before stepping down in 2020.

Niceville Head Football Coach Adron Robinson said Thomas' experience and leadership will be an immediate asset to the Eagles program. "We are excited to welcome Coach Thomas to the Niceville football family," Robinson said. "His experience, leadership and proven track record of developing student-ath-

letes will be a tremendous asset to our program. Coach Thomas understands what it takes to build successful teams and strong young men, and our players will benefit greatly from his knowledge and mentorship."

Niceville Principal Amy Meyer also praised the addition, noting Thomas' commitment to student development both on and off the field. "Coach Thomas brings experience, knowledge and a passion for developing young people," Meyer said. "He will be a tremendous addition to

our school community. We are excited for the leadership he'll bring to our football program and look forward to the positive impact he will have on our student-athletes."

The addition of Thomas further strengthens a Niceville football program that continues to build on its tradition of excellence. His extensive coaching background, leadership experience and championship success are expected to provide immediate value as the Eagles prepare for the upcoming season.

Mid-Bay Rotary's 27th Annual Charity Golf Tournament Another Huge Success

Mid-Bay Rotary held its 27th Annual Charity Golf Tournament on June 5, 2026. Bluewater Bay Golf Club hosted 19 teams and 76 players. Teams included local golfers as well as

teams from the Mid-Bay and Niceville-Valparaiso Rotary clubs.

First-, second- and third-place awards were supported by the following local golf courses:



Kelly Plantation, Regatta Bay, Emerald Bay, Blackwater, Fort Walton Beach Golf Club, Shalimar Pointe and Bluewater Bay. The putting contest and hole-in-one competitions were hosted by Dave Swanick II, Attorney at Law, and D.M. Rauch, CFP, of Raymond James. Five closest-to-the-pin awards and two longest-drive awards were provided by Mid-Bay Rotary.

Mid-Bay Rotary thanks Rotarian Steve Mixon and his mentor, Rotarian Art Jean, for leading this highly successful event. Players had the opportunity to win \$5,000 in the putting contest and \$10,000 in the hole-in-one challenge. Multiple prizes



were awarded to winners.

Thanks also go to Rotarian and President-Elect Valerie Holmes for putting together 12 gift baskets that were raffled off and to Rotarian Lynn Deyerle, who assembled the gift bags given to each golfer.

Lunch, featuring pulled pork sandwiches, was donated by Papa's Smokehouse. Dinner, featuring wings, was catered by The Blue Tee restaurant. Both meals were served by Mid-Bay Rotarians and Mid-Bay Rotary Partners.

Mid-Bay Rotary also thanks its 49 Platinum, Gold and Silver sponsors, who supported the fundraiser through cash dona-



tions, prize coupons and other in-kind contributions, including food and beverages.

Net proceeds from the tournament, totaling more than \$12,500, will benefit multiple local charitable organizations and programs, including student scholarships, the Rotary Youth Camp and Rotary Youth Leadership Awards.

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Punching Back Against Parkinson's Disease:

The Dynamic Duo Behind Rock Steady Boxing Therapy

By ELLEN FANNON

Optimum Hope. That's what Diane Gordon and her son, Christian McCowen, offer their clients with Parkinson's disease and other neurological disorders.

Taking a huge step of faith, Diane and Christian opened Optimum Hope Gym in Niceville with the goal of making the program accessible to everyone with mobility challenges. Diane, a retired physical therapy assistant with 32 years of experience, and Christian, a physical therapy technician with 10 years of experience, got the idea from Diane's former classmate and friend, Beverly Bell, who opened a similar facility in Tennessee. They saw how the therapy dramatically improved people's quality of life and patterned their gym after hers.

Optimum Hope utilizes the Rock Steady Boxing method, a program specifically designed for people with Parkinson's disease. Rock Steady Boxing is a first-of-its-kind Indianapolis-based nonprofit founded in 2006 to provide effective physical exercise for people with Parkinson's. The organization was founded by former Marion County, Indiana, prosecutor Scott C. Newman, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease at age 40.

The fitness programs, tailored to each individual client, provide noncontact boxing to improve strength, balance, endurance, gait, flexibility, posture and stress relief.

Diane and Christian became certified in Rock Steady Boxing by completing online classes and spending a weekend training in Indianapolis. Although the program is designed for people with Parkinson's disease, it can benefit anyone with a mobility disorder. In addition to clients with Parkinson's, Diane and Christian serve people with multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy and other neurological and muscular disorders.

They work with each client three times a week in one-hour sessions. In addition to physical exercises, Diane and Christian incorporate cognition and voice exercises into the program. To maximize benefits, they contin-



ually vary the routines.

Clients pay \$120 per month for the program, although no one is turned away because of an inability to pay. Diane opened the gym using personal funds and receives no paycheck. Christian, a single father, receives minimal compensation. Currently, the facility operates at a loss while Diane pursues grant opportunities. They also accept tax-deductible donations.

They spread awareness of their ministry by attending Parkinson's support groups, accepting physician referrals, connecting with physical therapists and giving presentations. Word of mouth also continues to play an important role. Recently, they began renting the facility on days it is closed to help offset operating costs.

Diane and Christian begin each day by praying for their clients and asking God to help them show patience, love and kindness. They demonstrate Christ's love through their actions, creating an upbeat and encouraging atmosphere. Laughter plays a prominent role in their work. Inspiring messages fill the walls and whiteboards. When clients are hospitalized, Diane and Christian visit and pray with them.

Displaying and living out her servant's heart comes naturally to Diane. Prior to opening Optimum Hope, she founded and operated Genesis House, a faith-based halfway house for men recovering from alcohol and drug addiction.

Men entering Genesis House were required to obtain employment, attend church and participate in Bible studies. It is impossible to measure the physical, emotional and spiritual impact Genesis House had on the lives of the many men who completed the program during



its 15 years of operation.

After retiring from her 32-year career as a physical therapy assistant because of her husband's battle with cancer, Diane still felt called to help people.

lives of people with mobility disorders, and a new vision was born. The calling became even clearer when Christian became excited about joining the ministry alongside his mother.

God impressed upon her heart that her 15-year season of operating Genesis House had run its course and it was time for a new chapter.

While visiting Beverly in Tennessee, Diane saw firsthand how Rock Steady Boxing positively affected the

Together, Diane and Christian model Christ's example of caring for the sick. They have already witnessed dramatic improvements in the lives of their clients. It is truly heartwarming to see a mother and son working side by side to provide a much-needed service to the community, serving an often-overlooked population and offering renewed hope.

"The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"
— Matthew 25:40 (NIV)

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Wellness



BY KAY LEAMAN, HEALTH ARCHITECT, CERTIFIED NUTRITION ADVISOR, HEALTHYDAY HEALTHYLIFE

Ah, the joy of reading a label; it can truly make us wonder what all the names we can't pronounce are and if they're safe. Learning to use the information contained on a label for our benefit can cut our shopping time and improve our health.

Let's start with the label itself. It is broken up into six categories.

- **Servings** - The label is based on a serving, so knowing how many servings are in the container is important. Here is an example of a popular soda drink: Serving size 12 oz., calories 150, sodium 55, carbohydrates 40, protein 0, servings per container 6. If you plan to consume 24 oz., multiply the above numbers by 2.

Tool Chest: Total carbohydrates divided by 4 = total teaspoons of sugar. In this scenario, you would be consuming 20 tsp.

of sugar. A single serving of a tasty yogurt has 6.25 tsp. of sugar.

- **Calories** - Important if you are watching how many you eat.
- **Carbohydrates** - There are good and bad carbohydrates.

Tool Chest: Focus on carbs from nature and cut back on the carbs from factories.

- **Fats** - Choose olive or avocado oil and cut back on processed oils. Do your due diligence on olive oil, as many of them are mixed with other oils and currently don't need to note it on the label. Also consider using real butter versus fake butter (better known as Vaseline). Natural will always be a better choice.
- **Protein** - Needs to be a quality protein to count toward daily intake.
- **Nutrients** - Tool Chest: The percentage listed is the recommended dietary allowance. This amount is the minimum the body needs to prevent a deficiency disease such as scurvy. It is not the optimal amount the body needs to function at its best.

Now, for some ingredients. Ingredients are listed in order of percentage from most to least. This category is an ongoing struggle due to the lack of strict guidelines. The corn industry has invested millions of dollars in defense of High Fructose

The Wonder of Labels



Corn Syrup. With their help, this ingredient is now disguised under these syrup names as well: corn, maize, glucose, tapioca, fruit, crystalline, isoglucose, dahlia or invert sugar. And there are others.

Sugar has more than 65 different names, and often there are several sugars in a product. Rather than trying to remember them, use the carbohydrate equation above and then determine if you are willing to consume that amount.

Dyes are next on the list. These are chemical substances used to enhance the appearance of foods. They are normally reds, blues and yellows. They can be found in candy, sports drinks,

frosting and baked goods, pop-sicles, condiments, cereal, sauces, preserved fruits, ice cream, packaged soups, snacks and canned peas. I buy my pickles from the international aisle. They are the only ones I've found that don't have yellow dye added.

BHA (butylated hydroxyanisole) and **BHT** (butylated hydroxytoluene) are antioxidants, synthetic preservatives made from petroleum and used in the food and manufacturing industries. They are found in food and cosmetics. They are prohibited in the EU and listed as known carcinogens. Canada Chemi-

cal Management states they are harmful to the environment. They are potential endocrine disruptors. I have found them listed just below the ingredients.

Tool Chest: A great place to start when reading ingredients is to pick a couple of labels of what you need and compare the number of ingredients. The longer list goes back on the shelf. Next, look for dyes and preservatives. After that, look for the hidden names for High Fructose Corn Syrup.

Changing out your "go-to" brands can be daunting, so pick a couple of things each time you go to the store and take some time to find your new healthier brand. I have found healthier options in the international aisle for some products. Many canned goods have sugar, but there are labels that don't.

Every choice we make can affect our health. This journey can be frustrating at times, but it's important to remember that little changes can make a big difference. Be patient and kind to yourself and enjoy the wonder of labels.

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BY KASSIA GARFIELD,
MAXSTRENGTH FITNESS

Cancer treatment has traditionally focused on surgery, chemotherapy, radiation and medications. However, growing research shows that one of the most important predictors of cancer outcomes may be something much simpler: muscle mass and physical strength. Strength is no longer viewed as just a fitness measure. It is increasingly recognized as a marker of resilience, recovery potential and overall health during cancer treatment.

Muscle plays a critical role in how the body responds to stress and illness. During cancer treatment, the body experiences increased inflammation, metabolic demand, fatigue and tissue breakdown. Patients with greater muscle mass often tolerate these physical demands more effectively than those with low muscle mass, a condition known as sarcopenia. In fact,

Strength Matters: Why Muscle May Be One of the Best Predictors of Cancer Outcomes

sarcopenia has become a major concern in oncology because it is associated with higher complication rates, longer hospital stays, reduced treatment tolerance and increased mortality.

One reason muscle is so important is that it serves as the body's reserve system. During illness, the body relies on stored nutrients and protein to maintain immune function, heal tissues and preserve organ function. Individuals with more muscle mass have a larger reserve available to withstand the intense physical stress caused by cancer and its treatments. Patients with very low muscle mass can decline more rapidly because they have fewer resources to support recovery.

Research has shown that cancer patients with greater strength and muscle mass often recover faster after surgery. Procedures such as tumor removal, bowel surgeries, mastectomies and orthopedic cancer surgeries place enormous stress on the body. Stronger patients are more likely to get out of bed earlier, regain mobility faster and participate more effectively in rehabilitation. They also tend



to experience fewer postoperative complications such as infections, pneumonia and falls.

Strength also appears to influence how well patients tolerate chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Many cancer therapies cause fatigue, weakness and muscle wasting. Patients who begin treatment already weak or frail often struggle to complete treatment plans because their bodies cannot tolerate the side effects. On the other hand, patients with better baseline strength and fitness levels are often able to maintain activity levels, recover between treatments

more effectively and preserve independence throughout the process.

Another emerging area of research is the relationship between exercise and cancer risk reduction. Regular resistance training and physical activity are associated with a lower risk of several cancers, including colon, breast and endometrial cancers. Exercise helps regulate hormones, improve insulin sensitivity, reduce chronic inflammation and support immune function, all of which may contribute to reduced cancer risk. While exercise is not a guarantee against cancer, maintaining strength and muscle mass appears to create a healthier internal environment that may reduce risk factors associated with disease development.

The health care community is increasingly embracing the concept of "prehabilitation," which involves improving a patient's strength and conditioning before surgery or cancer treatment begins. Rather than waiting until after treatment to rebuild strength, clinicians now recognize that entering treatment stronger often leads to better outcomes afterward. Even

small improvements in strength and endurance before treatment can make a meaningful difference during recovery.

Importantly, building or maintaining strength during cancer treatment does not require extreme exercise. Programs are typically individualized and may include walking, resistance bands, light weights or supervised strength training. The goal is not athletic performance but preserving muscle, mobility and function during one of the body's most difficult challenges.

Ultimately, muscle mass and strength are becoming recognized as critical components of cancer prevention, treatment tolerance and recovery. Strength is not simply about appearance or fitness; it is a powerful indicator of the body's ability to endure, recover and heal.

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Wellness

Baywind Medical Helps Visitors Stay Comfortable During Their Emerald Coast Stay

Whether welcoming family for a summer vacation or hosting friends for a long weekend, local residents know that travel doesn't always go exactly as planned. Fortunately, Baywind Medical in Niceville is ready to help when visitors discover they've left an important item behind.

One of the most common needs Baywind Medical sees from travelers is replacement CPAP equipment. Whether a machine, mask or accessory was forgotten at home, lost in transit or damaged during travel, the

team can help visitors find solutions to keep their sleep routines on track.

For guests who need a little extra mobility support while exploring the Emerald Coast, Baywind Medical also offers wheelchair rentals. A wheelchair can make it easier to enjoy local attractions, scenic waterfronts and community events without missing out on the fun.

Unexpected injuries can happen on vacation as well. Baywind Medical carries products such as cast covers and walking boots to help visitors stay com-

fortable and active while recovering.

The bottom line? If travel plans take an unexpected turn, Baywind Medical is a trusted local resource dedicated to helping guests stay comfortable and enjoy their time on the Emerald Coast.

Baywind Medical is located at 540 E. John Sims Parkway in Niceville and is open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more information, call (850) 729-2559 or visit baywind-medical.com.





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TOP 5
continued from page 4

you. We can order tests, recommend treatments, and help create a plan. But we cannot make choices for you.

The patients who experience the greatest transformations are not necessarily the ones with the most resources or the perfect genetics. They are the ones who become active participants in their own health. They ask questions. They stay curious. They follow through. They view their health as an investment rather than an expense.

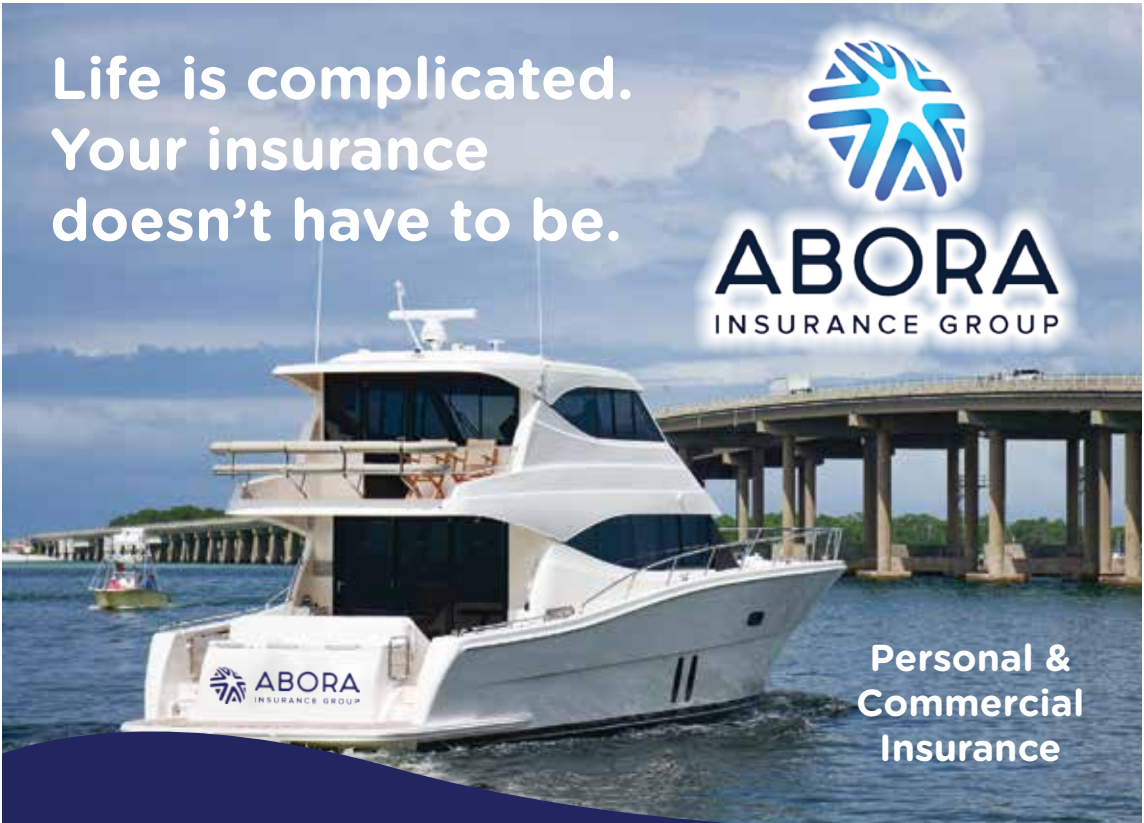
Your healthcare team can walk beside you, but ultimately, you are the most important member of the team.

At the end of the day, these truths are not meant to make anyone feel guilty. They're meant to be empowering. Your body is remarkably resilient. It is constantly adapting, healing, and responding to the choices you make each day. Small improvements, practiced consistently, can create extraordinary changes over time.

And if there's one thing I hope every patient understands, it's this: it's never too late to start listening to your body and giving it the care it deserves.

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What Is Chiropractic?

Understanding the Connection Between Your Spine, Nervous System, and Overall Health

By DR. JENNIFER M. TRENDT,
RESET ROOM

More Than Back Pain

When most people think about chiropractic care, they think about back pain, neck pain, or headaches. While chiropractors certainly help people with these common complaints, chiropractic is about much more than pain relief.

At its core, chiropractic is focused on the nervous system—the master control system of the body.

Every thought, movement, sensation, heartbeat, breath, and healing process is coordinated through communication between the brain and the body. This communication occurs through the nervous system, which is protected by the spine. When that communication is clear and efficient, the body has the greatest opportunity to function, adapt, and heal the way it was designed to.

For more than 125 years, chiropractors have recognized that the relationship between the spine and nervous system plays a critical role in overall health and human performance. While our understanding of neuroscience has advanced significantly, that foundational principle remains the same today.

Your Brain Needs Accurate Information

One of the most important



jobs of the nervous system is gathering information from the body and sending it to the brain. The brain then uses that information to coordinate movement, posture, balance, and countless other functions, including recovery.

The joints of the spine contain thousands of specialized nerve receptors that constantly send information to the brain. When spinal joints lose healthy movement due to physical stress,

repetitive motions, poor posture, injury, or daily wear and tear, the quality of information reaching the brain may be altered.

Think of it like a GPS receiving incomplete data. The system still works, but it may not work as efficiently as it was designed to.

Research suggests that chiropractic adjustments help restore motion to spinal joints and influence the way the brain receives and processes sensory information from the body. In other words, adjustments help improve communication between the brain and body.

Chiropractic and Nervous System Regulation

Today's world places tremendous demands on the nervous system. Physical stress, emotional stress, long hours sitting, technology use, repetitive movement patterns, and previous injuries can all affect how the body adapts to daily life.

One of the goals of chiropractic care is to help restore healthy movement and reduce unnecessary stress within the body so the nervous system can function and adapt more efficiently. While many people initially seek care for pain or tension, they often notice improvements in sleep quality, energy, mobility, recovery, focus, and overall well-being.

Why?

Because when the brain receives better information from the body, it is often better equipped to regulate and coordinate the systems it controls.

More Than Pain Relief

Chiropractic is not simply about helping people feel better. It is about helping people function better.

Just as exercise supports the muscular system and proper nutrition supports the body's internal systems, chiropractic care supports the communication system that coordinates them all. Many people choose regular chiropractic care not because they are in pain, but because they value maintaining optimal function and adaptability.

Health is more than the absence of symptoms. It is the ability of the body to adapt to physical, chemical, and emotional stressors while continuing to function at a high level.

When communication between the brain and body improves, every system has the opportunity to perform more efficiently.

That is why chiropractic care remains one of the most powerful and natural ways to support overall health, resilience, and human potential.

For help, contact Dr. Trendt at (850) 822-3375 or visit theresetroomec.com.



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Wellness



BY STEPHENIE CRAIG

Do you find yourself grumbling about people doing things the wrong way? If they would just do or see things the right way, which just happens to be your way, the world would be a much better place. If slow drivers would drive in the right lane, if your friend would understand your intentions and

know you weren't trying to hurt them, if your family would load the dishwasher correctly, if people would vote the right way, if others would move through the world living the same way as you — the right way — the world would be right.

While it is important to clarify and live by your beliefs, not everyone is going to share your perspective, practices, faith, personality and preferences. In fact, even your closest people might prioritize and live differently than you. You can choose to use energy judging, being frustrated with and trying to control or shame the behavior of others. Or, you can accept there are

many ways to be a person and the only person you can control is yourself.

How people live is based on personality, personal strengths, upbringing, faith background, education, geographic location, social culture, mentoring relationships, personal mistakes and personal experiences. Once layered together, you find many expressions of being human, some of which create discomfort for you. Discomfort is, by nature, challenging and can motivate you to believe the solution is to change others to be more like you and admit you are right. In reality, interacting with people who are different from you is actually one of life's greatest growth tools.

When you encounter differences, you can judge, distance yourself, grumble or you can learn to seek curiosity, understanding, kind communication and acknowledgment of humanity in disagreement. Respecting differences does not mean abandoning your values. Instead, it means acknowledging that both you and the other person can be lovable human beings while expressing values differently. It also means choosing between prioritizing being right or being meaningfully connected to others. I often tell



couples in my office, "You can keep prioritizing being right and eventually split up, or you can loosen your grip on being right and prioritize curiosity about the other person's experience."

So, how do you loosen your grip on being seen as right and pursue understanding and connection while still living by your values?

7 Ways to Love Connection More Than You Love Being Right

1. Explore and clarify your own values. Think about how your values have been shaped, what your values are and what makes your values important to you. Reflect on how it feels when others respect your values versus when others minimize, shame or disrespect them.

2. Notice differences. Notice when you find yourself frustrated, irritated or judging someone who is living differ-

ently from you. Notice any instincts to belittle others or assume negative things about the personhood of those doing things differently.

3. Remember what you can control and what you can't. You have been put in charge of man-

aging your thoughts, feelings, behavior, choices and boundaries. You have not been given any control over others' thoughts, feelings, behavior, choices or boundaries. Try moving toward a deep acceptance of placing your energy where it belongs and letting go of trying to control others.

4. Reach for curiosity over judgment. Try asking genuine, curious questions seeking to understand how others have arrived at different conclusions about how they live. Seek to humbly grow and learn from these conversations rather than assuming you have everything figured out. Wisdom is found in being both a learner and a teacher.

5. Pursue mutual respect. Hold to your own values, which will sometimes mean you disagree. Try speaking openly and kindly about the difference. Also, remember others embrace their values with as much conviction as you do. Respect their humanity as much as you would like them to respect yours in disagreement.

6. Evaluate your intentions. Discern when it's time to speak up about what you believe is right from a place of care, advocacy and love versus the urge to speak from a place of insecurity, self-righteousness or a need to be seen as right.

7. Lean into connection. Remember people need connection with God and others. Remember that God loves each person and does not fear value conflicts. Treat others with the love and patience God extends to you as you imperfectly navigate life.

Be honest and kind with yourself and others as you address patterns around being right and being connected. Learning to prioritize connection over being right can be both relationship- and life-changing. Connect with us along your journey for counseling and coaching at Journey-Bravely.com.



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A Pastor’s Ponderings: Liberty Is a Gift, But Freedom Is a Stewardship

BY “DOC” DOUG STAUFFER

As America celebrates 250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the question before us is not only what kind of nation our fathers left to us, but what kind of nation we will leave to future generations.

That question feels especially meaningful here in Northwest Florida. We live in a community where the word “freedom” is not an abstract concept. It has faces. It has uniforms. It has folded flags. It has empty chairs at family tables. It has parents deployed far from home, children learning resilience earlier than most, veterans carrying memories the rest of us may never fully understand, and families who have sacrificed quietly so the rest of us can live freely.

In Okaloosa County, we do not have to search very far to be reminded that liberty is a gift. From Eglin Air Force Base to Hurlburt Field, from Duke Field to the countless veterans who call this area home, we are surrounded by living reminders that freedom has always required courage, sacrifice, and stewardship.

The 250th Anniversary of America should do more than stir patriotic emotion. It should stir spiritual reflection.

The Declaration of Independence appealed to truths that were higher than government. It spoke of rights given by the Creator, not merely granted by men. That matters. If liberty is only a political arrangement, then it rises and falls with elections, courts, and cultural trends. But if liberty is a gift from God, then freedom carries with it a sacred responsibility.

Freedom was never meant to become selfishness. Liberty was never meant to become lawlessness. Independence from tyranny was never intended to become independence from truth, virtue, morality, or God.

That may be one of the great lessons America needs to remember at 250. A nation can possess freedom and still forget what freedom is for. Freedom is not merely the right to do whatever we want. True freedom gives us the opportunity to do what is right.

The Bible says, “For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.” The Bible reminds us that liberty is not a license to live carelessly. It is an opportunity to serve faithfully.

That kind of freedom begins at home. It is seen when



fathers and mothers teach their children truth. It is seen when churches preach the word of God without apology. It is seen when neighbors help neighbors, when citizens pray for their leaders, when veterans are honored, when the fallen are remembered, when children are taught gratitude, and when communities refuse to forget the blessings God has given.

Here on the panhandle, we have a rare opportunity in 2026. As flags wave, fireworks and drone shows light up the

sky, and patriotic celebrations fill our communities, we can do more than celebrate the past. We can recommit ourselves to the future.

What will we leave the future generations?

Will we leave them a country with more division than devotion? More entitlement than gratitude? More noise than wisdom? Or will we leave them an example of faith, family, courage, service, and moral conviction?

The 56 signers of the Dec-

laration of Independence pledged their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor. They were not perfect men, but they understood that liberty required sacrifice. Now, 250 years later, we must understand that liberty still requires sacrifice. Not all sacrifice happens on a battlefield. Some sacrifice happens in the home, in the church, in the classroom, in public service, in private prayer, and in the daily decision to speak up when it seems easier to remain silent.

America’s 250th Anniversary is more than a birthday. It is a mirror. It asks us who we are, what we value, and what we are willing to preserve.

Liberty is a gift. But freedom is a stewardship.

May God help us to be grateful for what we have received, faithful with what we have been given, and courageous enough to pass it on.





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 Musing


BY SEAN DIETRICH

Sean of the South: 4th of July

March, 1783. The Revolutionary War was not over. The throng of Continental soldiers encamped at headquarters was pissed.

And with good reason. The soldiers were bloody. Battered. They were sick. And worst of all, they were unpaid. Namely, because Congress would not get off its fat aspirations and pay its

own army.

Just who did Congress think it was? These wealthy jerks, sitting in ornate boardrooms, wearing tight pants and powder wigs, making up new laws, refusing to fund their own army.

The soldiers were angry. Angry at the negligence. Angry at bloated government fatcats whose daughters mail-ordered



clothes from Italy, whose sons studied Latin and ceramic pottery, while soldiers couldn't even feed their families.

This was NOT the America the soldiers signed up for. This was B.S.

General Washington's officers began whispering behind his back. They wrote seething letters in secret.

The soldiers had been circulating petitions suggesting large-scale mutiny. An anonymous letter was read aloud in the bunkhouses, barracks, and tents:

"Any further experiments on our patience may have fatal effects... If this then be [our] treatment, while the swords [we] wear are necessary for the defence of America, what have [we] to expect from peace...?"

So the men's minds were made up. They decided on mutiny. Screw this. They were going to abandon the war, let the American people fend for themselves against the British. Then, the army would march on Congress and demand paychecks, with muskets drawn.

Washington caught wind that his officers had planned a secret meeting. This was serious. These were HIS officers. HIS trusted guys. And they were plotting against him.

A meeting was called in New Windsor Cantonment, New York. March 15. A nation's entire future hung in the balance. This is what happened at that meeting:

It was a large hall, entirely made of wood. Voices reverberated off the walls. Lots of grumbling. Fraternal laughter. Meeting was about to begin.

Everyone in the crowd had two things in common. They were angry at Congress. And angry with George Washington.

The gavel banged.

"Meeting will commence," someone shouted.

The crowd fell to a hush.

That's when everyone heard

a horse come charging up outside. Someone looked out the window.

"It's General Washington!" someone shouted.

Washington climbed off his horse. In moments he was hobbling down the aisle, winded and out of breath. His hair was gray. His skin, wrinkled.

Wait a second. THIS was Washington? This looked like an old man.

The great General took the podium and read a nine-page letter in an aged voice. He pleaded with his men, begging for patience. But it was doing no good. His men were snickering bitterly. Arms crossed. Shaking heads. If anyone would've had rotten tomatoes, they would've hurled them at the General.

General Washington's mood was falling. It was over for the Great American Experiment. He folded up his speech and prepared to read another speech to his crowd.

"What a JOKE!" the men were muttering. "Get this guy off the stage."

And that's when it happened.

As the General was unfolding leaflets, he patted his chest pockets. Then he removed a pair of wire spectacles.

The room collectively gasped. It was the first time anyone had seen the great and fearless General wearing eyeglasses.

They had always viewed this man as a giant. A myth. A man's man. But this was no legend in their midst. This was a man humbled.

Washington was visibly embarrassed.

He apologized to his crowd. "Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for, I have grown not only gray, but almost blind in the service of my country."

Nobody spoke for whole minutes. Many soldiers began to weep. And, well, anyway we won the war.

Mr. Nick Azzarita Wins HVAC From A Superior Mechanical

BY MARTA ROSE THORPE

A Superior Mechanical recently held its inaugural Veterans & First Responders Appreciation Lunch in Okaloosa County. "We were blown away by the attendance of Veterans from every branch and local First Responders," shared Jimmy Thorpe, founder of this 24-year-old, veteran-owned business. The HVAC winner, Mr. Nick Azzarita, served 20 years in the US Air Force in the Korean War and in Vietnam. The following 20 years, he served as a math teacher at Niceville High School. "To say this gentleman is humble is an understatement," shared event organizer Marta Thorpe. "There couldn't have been



a nicer human being to win this."

Thank you to event sponsors: Beachworx, Chelco, Blanken Financial Management, NHance Cabinet Makeovers, United Community Bank, One Beach Real Estate specializing in Homes For He-

roes, Randy Wise Homes, Gulf Coast State College VBOC, and Okaloosa Vet Center. Also present at the event was the Chamber Choir from Rocky Bayou Christian School, the Niceville High School ROTC, and a beautiful invocation by Pastor Dave Butler. "Big thanks to Jeff and Christi at the Niceville Community Center," added Marta.

Save the date for the next Appreciation Lunch: Tuesday, October 20, 2026. For information on sponsoring, contact Marta Thorpe at (850) 814-3822. For general information visit us at ASuperiorMechanical.com.

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Courage: A Legacy Passed Down

BY RACHEL COGGINS

A framed picture torn from an October 1975 issue of *National Geographic* hung above my desk. It showed a feisty and courageous woman—Revolutionary War hero Nancy Hart. Her story was told in an article titled “Women of the Revolution: Patriots in Petticoats.”

The image was of a painting that hangs in the Hart County Historical Museum in Hartwell, Georgia, where a county, a lake, a highway, and a park are named in her honor. Dressed in the simple apron and long skirt of the late 1770s, Nancy stands with a determined expression, gripping a rifle while her young daughter, Sukey, stands behind her holding another rifle.

Five Tories forced their way into Nancy Hart’s cabin after killing her neighbor and friend, Colonel John Dooley. Their intention was to do the same to her husband, Benjamin Hart, a lieutenant in the Georgia Patriot militia, and the group of militiamen accompanying him.

Her image challenged me and reminded me that women have always played an important role in defending our nation’s liberty. Years later, while deployed during war, I found myself needing that reminder—and her courage.

I joined the Army Reserves as a chaplain in December 1989. One year later I was called to active duty during Operation Desert Storm. As a young First Lieutenant, there was much to learn. Soon I was sent to Aschaffenburg, Germany, where most of the soldiers from the base had already deployed to the front lines of the war in Iraq, their tanks ready for battle. Left behind were the wives and children of those sent forward, a few support personnel, and a handful of soldiers. It was a formidable time. I understood the fears of the families because I, too, was the wife of a deployed military member.

Organizing assistance for the women was left largely to the commanders’ wives, who sought me out for counsel and spiritual direction. It was a time to be creative and decisive as we navigated unfamiliar territory. Thousands of families had been left behind in a foreign country, and the need for support was great.

Command put me in the men’s dormitory. There was plenty of room since the men were all gone. As I unlocked the creaking front door and stepped into the semi-dark foyer of the two-story building, echoes in the empty building mirrored the loneliness in my heart.

I quickly closed the door and relocked it. Then I walked down the dark hallway to my room and locked that door behind me as well—a clear reminder that I was on my own and needed to be brave.

In the stillness of an early morning walk through darkness and falling snow, I arrived at a beautiful old German church that served as the base chapel. Unlocking the massive carved wooden door, I entered and walked through the sanctuary toward my office in the back.

I would pause to sing praises and enjoy the marvelous reverberation that filled the stone church—an acoustic marvel designed to amplify the beauty of the human voice. Settling into my office, my task was to write words of inspiration and encouragement to those left behind, whose fear was palpable as their husbands faced grave danger.



Drinking out death, Nancy Hart gets the drop on Tories who had raided her Georgia cabin. After killing one with her own musket, she holds the

National Geographic, October 1975



The supplemental training I received included how to conduct death notifications. We were preparing for the possibility of large casualties, and the person to tell a wife that her husband had been killed was an officer accompanied by a chaplain. The possibility weighed heavily on me. “Oh Lord, help me,” I prayed as I leaned back hard in my chair.

That’s when I looked up at Nancy’s picture and pondered the rest of the story.

The Loyalists shot her last turkey and demanded that she cook it for them. Nancy, with a coy demeanor, stoked the fire and pulled out a jug of corn liquor. Gradually, the warm fire, the food, and the drink worked their magic while Nancy served the men. Edging closer, she quietly wrapped her long skirt around the muskets propped beside their chairs and carried them away, hiding them out of reach.

Eventually she was discovered. Nancy grabbed one of the muskets and fired, killing the soldier who rushed toward her and wounding another. Seizing another musket, she held the remaining Loyalists at bay until her husband and his band

of militiamen returned. When they arrived, Benjamin suggested the prisoners be shot. Nancy, as I like to tell the story, replied, “Shootin’s too good for them. Let’s hang ’em!” And they did—in her backyard.

Sitting alone in the quiet church, Nancy challenged me to believe that women are courageous. As I labored under the weight of responsibility, Nancy stood guard, rifle in hand. My task was challenging, but by the grace of God and the incredible legacy passed on to me, I would do it—and I would do it well.

I could not disappoint Nancy Hart. She was more than a hero to me. My research revealed she was my fifth-great-grandmother—and I was not going to let her down.

Rachel Coggins served 25 years as an Army Reserve Chaplain, deploying four times in support of America’s military missions. Her book Gateway to Iraq: A Chaplain’s Story, captures one of those deployments, offering a heartfelt, ground-level look at the courage, struggles, and faith of the men and women she served alongside.

Rachel and her husband now live in Navarre, where they remain active in church, community, and missions. They enjoy gardening, raising chickens, and hosting friends. Rachel writes to help readers encounter faith, history, and hope.



Local, professional photographer specializing in families, weddings, and events. My passion lies in creating lasting memories through photographs, and I cherish the opportunity to be part of such meaningful moments!



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 Arts & Music

Think Blacksmiths Disappeared? Think Again.

Local craftsmen are keeping a centuries-old tradition alive through fire, steel and fellowship

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

Blacksmithing may have been popularized in recent years by television shows such as *Forged in Fire* and *Men at Arms*, but in our state, the tradition has been thriving for more than four decades thanks to the Florida

Artist Blacksmith Association (FABA).

Founded in 1984, FABA has spent the last 41 years teaching the craft, preserving its history and helping establish historical blacksmith shops throughout the state. Its mission is simple:

To teach – To preserve. “Blacksmithing has experienced a renaissance in recent years, but this isn’t new to us,” said David Sandlin of the Far West Panhandle Blacksmiths chapter. “FABA has been teaching the craft and preserving the tradi-

tions of blacksmithing in Florida for more than four decades.”

Today, FABA includes eight chapters across the state, each hosting monthly meetings where blacksmiths of all skill levels gather to share techniques, ideas and stories while working hot iron at the forge.

For local residents, that opportunity is available through the Far West Panhandle Blacksmiths chapter, headquartered at Traditions Workshop, 418 Green Acres Road in Fort Walton Beach. Meetings regularly feature demonstrations, hands-on projects and open forge time, allowing participants to learn new skills or work on personal projects alongside experienced smiths. “Our mission is to teach and preserve the noble art of blacksmithing,” Sandlin said. “We enjoy the open exchange of ideas as we smite hot iron on the anvil.”

First-time visitors are always welcome at no charge. After that, annual family memberships are just \$30 and provide access to FABA events across Florida, discounts on the organization’s annual conference and a digital subscription to *The Clinker Breaker*, FABA’s monthly newsletter featuring blacksmithing news, projects and events from around the state.

One of the highlights of each year is the statewide convention in Gainesville, where blacksmiths gather for three days of demonstrations, classes and fellowship. This year’s event, FABA CON 41, is scheduled for Oct. 16-18 at the Best Western Gateway Grand in Gainesville.

Beyond teaching traditional skills, FABA members actively seek opportunities to introduce the public to blacksmithing through demonstrations at museums, libraries, festivals and community events. “FABA is always looking for opportunities to put the noble craft of the blacksmith before the public eye,” Sandlin said. “Museums, libraries and community venues have proven to be great places to meet people and generate interest in our craft.” The organization also welcomes recommen-



dations from groups interested in hosting a demonstration or “hammer-in” event.

Upcoming Far West Panhandle Blacksmiths Events

June 27 Traditions Workshop, Fort Walton Beach | 9 a.m.-3 p.m.

Members will focus on drawing out heavy steel while working on the chapter’s competition piece for display at the October conference. This year’s project incorporates the themes of motion, balance and inspiration from the cosmos. Open forges will follow the demonstration. Lunch provided; donations appreciated.

July 25 John Butler Family Farm, 4112 Bell Lane, Pace | 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

The focus shifts to the annual gift-exchange project, “Something That Twists or Turns.” Demonstrations will include forging a corkscrew under the shade of the pecan trees. Lunch provided; donations appreciated.

Aug. 22 Traditions Workshop | 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

Members pursuing Journeyman certification will work toward completing required standards in preparation for recognition at the October state conference.

Sept. 12 Traditions Workshop | 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

This special out-of-cycle meeting will focus on completing both the chapter competition project and individual gift-exchange projects before the conference season begins.



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Continued on next page

BLACKSMITHS

continued from previous page

Oct. 10 Traditions Workshop | 9 a.m.-4 p.m.
Members will prepare equipment and pack the trailer in advance of FABA CON 41 in Gainesville.

Oct. 16-18 FABA CON 41 | Best Western Gateway Grand, Gainesville
The statewide convention features three days of demonstrations, classes and educational opportunities for blacksmiths of



all experience levels.

Oct. 31 Traditions Workshop | 9 a.m.-4 p.m.



Members will share techniques, ideas and discoveries gathered at the conference while resetting equipment for upcoming competitions.

Nov. 7 Timber Creek Dis-

tillery, 6451 Lake Ella Road, Crestview | 9 a.m.-4 p.m.
The annual chapter competition returns with a mystery challenge announced closer to the event. Participants will have five hours to create a forged project using either their own steel or material from the chapter's scrap supply. The day traditionally includes pizza from Timber Creek's stone oven, fellowship and plenty of friendly competition.

Winter Schedule: No December meeting is planned due to holiday activities and Renais-

sance fair commitments.
For safety, all participants and visitors under the forge tent are required to wear safety glasses and sturdy closed-toe shoes or boots. Long pants and long-sleeve shirts made from cotton or other natural fibers are strongly recommended.
For more information about membership, events or hosting a demonstration, visit www.blacksmithing.org or contact David Sandlin at david@traditionsworkshop.com or 850-974-1548.

CELEBRATE 250

continued from page 6

SunQuest Cruises Fourth of July Dinner Cruise
6-9:30 p.m. | Baytowne Marina, Miramar Beach | Ticketed event
Celebrate aboard the Solaris yacht with a chef-prepared dinner, live entertainment and fireworks viewing from the water. Reservations required.
Info: www.sunquestcruises.com | (850) 650-2519

at approximately 8:45 p.m. | Lions Park, Niceville | Free
Niceville's annual Independence Day celebration features food trucks, live music and a spectacular fireworks display launched from a floating barge in Boggy Bayou. Fireworks are visible from multiple waterfront locations throughout Niceville and Valparaiso.
Info: www.facebook.com/cityofniceville

Beach Landing, 131 Brooks St. SE, Fort Walton Beach | Free
Celebrate America's 250th birthday with live music by Scratch 2020, food vendors and a fireworks display over Santa Rosa Sound.
Info: www.fwb.org | (850) 833-9500



over the Gulf from one of the Emerald Coast's most popular beachfront destinations.
Info: www.theboardwalkoi.com | (850) 796-1782

Light Up the Bayou Fireworks Spectacular
Beginning at 3 p.m.; fireworks

Fort Walton Beach Fourth of July Celebration
5-9 p.m.; fireworks at approximately 8:45 p.m. | Fort Walton

Party in the Park
5 p.m.; fireworks at approximately 9 p.m. | Twin Hills Park, Crestview | Free
This family-friendly celebration includes food trucks, live music, a bicycle parade, games and a fireworks finale.

The Boardwalk Fourth of July Fireworks
Fireworks at 9 p.m. | The Boardwalk on Okaloosa Island | Free
Enjoy a fireworks display

DeFuniak Springs Fourth of July Celebration
Historic Lake DeFuniak | Free
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Info: www.defuniaksprings.net | (850) 830-1661



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 Arts & Music

ECTC Announces Blockbuster Season 14

September 10, 2026 – May 23, 2027

Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC) has unveiled its highly anticipated Season 14, featuring a lineup of Tony Award-winning musicals, gripping dramas, holiday entertainment and a magical regional premiere. Running Sept. 10, 2026, through May 23, 2027, the season promises unforgettable stories that inspire, entertain and bring audiences together.

Leading the season is the

Tony Award-winning *Come From Away*, the remarkable true story of 7,000 airline passengers stranded in a small Canadian town following the events of Sept. 11. The production celebrates compassion, resilience and the power of community.

Audiences will then buckle up for *The 39 Steps*, Alfred Hitchcock's fast-paced thriller that blends suspense, comedy and nonstop adventure.

For the holidays, ECTC presents *Million Dollar Quartet Christmas*, a festive spin on the popular musical featuring legendary rock 'n' roll icons reunited for a high-energy celebration filled with seasonal favorites and classic hits.

The new year begins with *9 to 5: The Musical*, the hit stage adaptation inspired by the beloved film and featuring music and lyrics by Dolly Parton. The



crowd-pleasing production celebrates ambition, friendship and workplace empowerment. Continuing the season is *Dear Jack, Dear Louise*, a heartfelt play inspired by a true World War II love story that unfolds through letters exchanged across the Atlantic. Closing the season is the regional premiere of Disney's *Frozen*, bringing the beloved modern classic to life on stage in a spectacular production designed to delight audiences of all ages.

Season 14 offers something

for everyone, from first-time theatergoers and families to longtime patrons seeking memorable nights out. ECTC's VIP program enhances the experience with early access to preferred seating, exclusive events, cast meet-and-greets and behind-the-scenes opportunities. "This is one of the most exciting seasons we've ever put on our stage," said Nathanael Fisher, ECTC's Producing Artistic Director. "From the scale of these productions to the stories we're telling, everything about Season 14 is designed to raise the bar for what audiences experience at ECTC."

Performances will be held at ECTC, located at 560 Grand Blvd., Suite 200, Miramar Beach.

For tickets, VIP memberships, sponsorship opportunities, donations or more information, call (850) 684-0323 or visit emeraldcoasttheatre.org. Follow ECTC on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.



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Wednesday, July 1: Pre-school Art Program

For children ages 4-6. Theme: "USA Rocks." Duration: 1 hour, 30 minutes. Cost: \$37.45.

Wednesday, July 1: Middle School "Junk Journaling"

Mixed media studio time with Donna Ammons. Cost: \$37.45.

Thursday, July 2: Summer Art Lab: Flags!

Ages 6-12 will create a flag painting and Fourth of July cake. Cost: \$60.

Tuesday, July 7: Summer Art Lab Day

Pottery and watercolor bears. Cost: \$60.

Thursday, July 9: Summer Art Lab Day

Cat painting and cat toy crafts. Cost: \$60.



Tuesday, July 14: Summer Art Lab Day

"Monster Mash" day, Cost: \$60.

Wednesday, July 15: Pre-school Art Program

For children ages 4-6. Theme: "Luau's & Lemonade." Cost: \$37.45.

Wednesday, July 15: Middle School "Junk Journaling"

Mixed media studio time

with Donna Ammons. Duration: 2 hours. Cost: \$37.45.

Thursday, July 16: Summer Art Lab Day

Ocean painting and glass art making. Cost: \$60.

Tuesday, July 21: Summer Art Lab Day

Scone baking and paper quilling. Cost: \$60.

Thursday, July 23: Come to the Table

Dinner at JoJo's for active-duty military and veterans. Duration: 2 hours. Cost: \$5.

Saturday, July 25: DAR Private Glass Art Event

Studio day creating glass art. Cost: \$26.75.

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