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"You Only Get to Be Captain Once." Meet Bowlegs Captain Kent Tinsley

By CHRISTOPHER MANSON

On Saturday, June 13, the closely-guarded identity of the incoming Captain Billy—the 71st—was revealed at the annual Billy Bowlegs Coronation Pageant held at the Mattie Kelly Arts Center in Niceville. The free public event announced Kent Tinsley as Captain Billy 71, along with his Queen, First Mate and Mistress, Honor Guard consisting of 10 couples, and the theme for Bowlegs 2027.

Keeping the new Captain Billy's identity under wraps involves months of planning before the Coronation Pageant. Tinsley was made aware of the honor last November after the seven previous captains came together and narrowed the candidates down to three. The final decision was made by Rique Gwin, Captain Billy 70. "I was honored to pick Kent, knowing him for many years to be a quality, good man," says Gwin. "I also respect his longtime ties to the community and rich



Incoming Captain Billy Kent Tinsley and wife Mary

heritage in the Krewe."

Tinsley, a lifelong Fort Walton Beach resident, is the son

of an Air Force veteran—and past Captain Billy (36). "It's a unique perspective, having

had my family involved for so many years," he says. "My dad passed in April, but I was able to share the excitement about being Captain Billy 71." The Fort Walton Beach High School graduate and University of West Florida alum will be using his father's Captain's medallion and sword as a tribute.

Tinsley calls wife Mary his "right hand lady, the driving force behind me and my family." She and Tinsley married 20 years ago and joined the Krewe shortly after. Mary is very involved in the community, notably as president of Impact 100.

The 2027 Billy Bowlegs Festival is set for the weekend after Mother's Day, beginning on Thursday and wrapping up with the Monday evening parade. "It's a busy year, but you plan for it," Tinsley says. Fortunately, his "real" job has afforded him the flexibility to

CAPTAIN BILLY

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SOF Missions Celebrates 10 Years of Impact at Diamond Gala



Shield of Faith (SOF) Missions will celebrate a decade of serving our nation's warriors at its 10th Annual Emerald Coast Gala—The Diamond Gala—on **Aug. 29, 2026**, at the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center.

SOF MISSIONS

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Community

SOF MISSIONS

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Marking 10 years of unwavering commitment to active-duty service members, veterans and first responders, this milestone event promises to be the organization's most memorable gala yet.

SOF Missions is dedicated to combating the devastating epidemic of suicide among our warriors by providing comprehensive care that addresses psychological, physical, social and spiritual well-being. Through its Be Resilient Clinics and Warrior Retreats held locally at EXOS at Andrews Institute, the organization has provided more than \$10.7 million in support to more than 4,000 warriors nationwide. These programs de-



liver personalized, coordinated care at no cost to participants, ensuring those in need receive the support necessary to heal and thrive.

The Diamond Gala will be an evening of inspiration, celebration and purpose. Guests

will experience an unforgettable evening featuring dinner and dessert service, a distinguished guest speaker, performances by First Dance Ballroom Studio and the Bow Tied Music Quartet, dancing, silent auction experiences, and powerful stories



highlighting the impact made possible through community support over the past decade.

Proceeds from the gala directly support SOF Missions' warrior care programs, helping ensure that financial barriers never prevent a warrior from receiving life-changing assistance.

The 10th Annual Diamond Gala is more than a celebration of the past—it is an investment in the future.

A moment to honor how

far we've come.

A moment to stand beside those we serve.

And a moment to invest boldly in the future of warrior care.

Whether you are a longtime supporter or new to the SOF Missions community, you are invited to join us for an evening of elegance, a decade of impact and a legacy in the making. Sponsorship opportunities are also available for individuals and businesses looking to make an even greater difference in the lives of our nation's heroes.

Tickets: \$150 per person

Includes dinner, dessert and one complimentary drink.

To purchase tickets or learn more about sponsorship opportunities, **visit www.sofmissions.org/gala.**

CAPTAIN BILLY

continued from page 1

travel throughout the upcoming year.

The Krewe is a private organization which consists of up to 170 members. In order to join, hopefuls are required to be sponsored by a current member. Tinsley spends a good part of his week managing the inner workings of the organization.

"It's well worth the effort. You only get to be Captain once!"

Come October, he and his fellow krewe members will attend various festivals in Panama City, Apalachicola, and beyond. When asked if he ever gets any rest, he says, "Whenever I can find time! What's the old saying? 'I'll sleep when I'm dead.'"

Tinsley says his duties as Captain Billy really began six to seven months before he offi-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KREWE OF BOWLEGS AND DARRIS HARTMAN PHOTOGRAPHY

cially took over. "There's a lot of planning leading up to the official start of the year, and now it's time to execute. I've been looking forward to this for a long time."

Captain Billy's Queen is Tade Wolfe, a local speech pathologist. "She and her husband Scott have been in the Krewe for years. We're great friends and work well together," says Tinsley. Local business owners Jason and Nicole Floyd have been tapped as First Mate and Mistress. "They got into the Krewe five years ago, and our relationship has grown in that

time. It was an easy pick."

The theme for Bowlegs 71 is "Whiskey In, Wisdom Out." Tinsley admits that a good bit of thought went into that. "We all enjoy getting together and enjoying a good glass of bourbon. And just maybe we spread a little wisdom throughout the year, too."

He adds: "It's really about spreading the good news about Fort Walton Beach to other communities."

The Billy Bowlegs Pirate Festival originated in 1954. Over the years, the Krewe has swash buckled its way into the hearts

of locals and visitors with its devotion to service and civic mindedness. And, of course, fun. Learn more at kreweofbowlegs.com.



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A New Heart, A New Beginning: Community Celebrates Miracle for 8-Year-Old Sadie Long

By TRISH LeCLERE

Less than 3 months ago, eight-year-old Sadie was enjoying a normal sunny Spring day at Van R. Butler Elementary School when she fainted. Life changed in an instant.

Sadie was rushed for emergency medical care. What began with a trip to Panama City quickly escalated to Sacred Heart Pensacola before she was airlifted to a pediatric cardiac center in Orlando.

There, doctors delivered devastating news. Sadie had been diagnosed with a rare genetic heart condition that can cause dangerous heart rhythm disturbances and progressive heart failure. To protect her from sudden cardiac arrest, surgeons implanted an internal defibrillator. While the device could save her life in an emergency, it was not a permanent solution.

Eventually, it became clear that Sadie's only hope was a heart transplant. Arrangements were made for Sadie to meet



with the transplant team at UF Shands in Gainesville. What followed were many tests and monitoring to determine if she was a candidate for the transplant list. She was. Due to the seriousness of her heart failure, she was placed on the list as a priority transplant, Status 1A.

No one knows when the perfect heart will arrive. So, Sadie was confined to the hospital to wait. Her environment had to be sterile, so that she would be



healthy when the day came.

Sadie's mother, Rose, never left her daughter's bedside. While she lived in hospital rooms hundreds of miles from home, Sadie's sister remained in Walton County surrounded by family, friends, classmates, and a community eager to help shoulder the burden.

Those who know Rose describe her as one of the kindest people they've ever met—a devoted mother whose deep faith

and quiet strength have carried her family through unimaginable circumstances.

Then came the morning that changed everything. It was sister Harper's 10th birthday. While she was celebrating here in Santa Rosa Beach, Rose was sitting beside Sadie's hospital bed, still dressed in sweatpants and a T-shirt, gently waking her daughter for morning medication when there was a knock at the hospital room door.

Expecting a nurse, she instead found three of Sadie's cardiologists. One of them looked at her and asked, "Have you heard the news?" Then came the words every transplant family longs to hear. "We've accepted a heart on her behalf."

After the doctors left, mother and daughter sat together absorbing what they had just heard. "I looked at her and said, 'They found your heart,'" Rose wrote. The two cried tears of joy before calling the people they loved most to share the

life-changing news.

Yet even in one of the happiest moments of her life, Rose's thoughts turned to another mother. "My heart soared for the possibility that tomorrow Sadie will go through surgery and have her angel heart," she wrote. "But I won't lie—the mother in me grieves with the mother on the other side of this. I'm very aware that in order for this miracle to come to us, someone else had to make the choice to have their child be an organ donor. My heart stays with that family."

Her words are a poignant reminder that every transplant carries two stories—one of heartbreaking loss and another of extraordinary hope. Though understandably nervous, Sadie faced surgery with remarkable courage. "I'm nervous because it's surgery," she told her mother. "But, I'm also very excited and ready to have my new heart."

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 Community


When the Gut Speaks First: **Understanding the Back-to-School Stomachache**

By DR. KAREN DEVORE

The first week of school has arrived. The backpacks are packed, the lunches are made, and after one last search for a missing shoe, everyone heads out the door. Then, just as

you're reaching for the car keys, your child quietly says, "My stomach hurts."

For many parents and caregivers, this scene is as much a part of the back-to-school season as shopping for school sup-



plies and navigating busy car lines.

The child who seemed perfectly healthy all summer suddenly doesn't want breakfast, complains of a stomachache before school, or makes repeated trips to the bathroom. Naturally, families wonder: Are they getting sick?

Sometimes they are. But sometimes, the stomach is simply the first place the body speaks.

The brain and digestive system are in constant communication through what scientists call the gut-brain axis. When children experience change, whether it's a new teacher, new classmates, academic expectations, a disrupted routine, or the excitement and uncertainty that naturally come with a new school year, the digestive system may respond before children have the words to describe what they're feeling.

Sometimes, the gut speaks first. That can look like stomachaches, nausea, constipation, diarrhea, changes in appetite, or even changes in bowel habits. The question isn't whether these symptoms are real; it's why they're happening.

One of the most helpful things parents and caregivers can do is look for patterns rather than focusing on a single episode.

Does the stomachache happen only before school? Does it improve later in the day? Does it appear before a test, after a difficult interaction with friends, or on Sunday evenings before the week begins?

Patterns like these may suggest the nervous system is play-

ing a role, but they don't rule out an underlying medical condition. Pain that wakes a child from sleep, is accompanied by fever, persistent vomiting, blood in the stool, unexplained weight loss, poor growth, or continues regardless of the situation deserves prompt medical evaluation.

Rather than asking only, "Where does it hurt?" it can also be helpful to ask: "When does it happen?" "What was happening just beforehand?" "Has anything changed recently?"

Sometimes those questions provide clues that the symptom alone cannot.

Today's children navigate full schedules, academic expectations, extracurricular activities, changing friendships, and a constant stream of information. While these experiences are a normal part of growing up, they can place greater demands on a developing nervous system. For some children, those demands may show up in the digestive tract long before they have the words to explain what they're experiencing.

What Can Parents and Caregivers Do?

If a child says, "My stomach hurts," and otherwise appears well, the first response doesn't always have to be finding the medicine cabinet. Instead, create a few minutes of calm.

Turn off the television or music. Set aside phones and other screens. Sit together quietly. Offer a reassuring hug, hold their hand, or simply be present. Children often take emotional cues

Continued on page 29



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Events Around the Bay

Taste of England

Aug. 1 | 6-9 p.m. | Horse Power Pavilion | 4657 U.S. Highway 20 W., Freeport

Enjoy an evening of British-inspired food, music and fun featuring Hamilton's Bistro, Kate the Great British American and Fred's Fish & Chips.

Summerfest at the Biophilia Center

Aug. 1 | 9 a.m.-2 p.m. |

E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center | Freeport

Enjoy a day of family-friendly fun featuring animal encounters, food trucks, games, raffles, water activities, a bounce house and more. Proceeds benefit the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center.

UNDERWATER: The Living Sea Experience

Aug. 5 | 7:30-8:30 p.m. | Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park | Fort Walton Beach

Experience an immersive after-hours yoga session inside Gulfarium's Living Sea Aquarium. Surrounded by marine life, guests will enjoy a slow-flow yoga practice followed by a spectacular view of The Boardwalk's Okaloosa Island fireworks display.

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Ages 12 and older.

go.gulfarium.com/underwater



Wednesday Night Concert Series

Wednesdays | 7-9 p.m. | The Village of Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach

Sit back, relax and enjoy live entertainment featuring local and regional talent on the Events Plaza Stage.

Aug. 5: Boukou Groove

Aug. 12: Sevenply

Aug. 19: One False Move

Aug. 26: Almost Famous

Pilates with Dolphins

Aug. 8 | 7:30 a.m. | Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park | Fort Walton Beach

Start your morning with a one-of-a-kind fitness experience overlooking Gulfarium's Dolphin Oasis. Led by certified instructor Desiree, this all-levels Pilates class allows participants to strengthen, stretch and recharge while Atlantic bottlenose dolphins swim nearby.

Ages 12 and older.

go.gulfarium.com/pilates

PAWS Brunch Fundraiser: Stars, Stripes & Second Chances

Aug. 9 | 11 a.m.-2 p.m. | The Alice | Destin

Support the Panhandle Animal Welfare Society during an elevated brunch benefiting local shelter animals. Guests are encouraged to wear patriotic red, white and blue while enjoying brunch, a silent auction and more. Sponsorship opportunities are available.

paws-shelter.org

For sponsorship information: mollys@paws-shelter.org

Scallywag Sundays

Sundays through Aug. 9 | 7 & 8 p.m. | The Village of Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach

Join Captain Davy for pirate adventures and interactive magic shows.

Movie Mondays

Mondays through Aug. 10 | 8 p.m. | The Village of

Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach

Bring a blanket or lawn chair and enjoy a family-friendly movie on the Events Plaza Lawn.

Boomin' Tuesdays

Tuesdays through Aug. 11 | Dance Party: 7:15 p.m. | Fireworks: 9:15 p.m. | The Village of Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach

Enjoy music with DJ Mike Whitty before fireworks light up the lagoon.

Thursdaze Lights Show

Thursdays through Aug. 13 | 9 p.m. | The Village of Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach

Experience a unique aerial light display combining technology and coastal charm.

The Great Bay Scallop Search

Aug. 17 | 10 a.m. | Choctawhatchee Bay

Join Destin-Fort Walton Beach Natural Resources, Florida Sea Grant and Luther's Pontoon Rentals for a citizen science event monitoring scallop populations in Choctawhatchee Bay. Participants will survey designated areas and collect valuable environmental data.

Registration required.

Bubbly Baytowne

Aug. 20 | 5 p.m. | The Village of Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach

Who's ready to sip and shop through The Village streets? Join us for an evening of complimentary champagne, sparkling wine and shopping. Check in at the stage beginning at 5 p.m. to receive a complimentary Baytowne Wharf glass and a map of participating merchants.

Free admission. Ages 21 and older only.

Roman Street in Concert

Aug. 23 | 3 p.m. | Christ the King Episcopal Church | 480 N. County Highway 393, Santa Rosa Beach

Acclaimed guitar duo brothers Noah and Josh Thompson blend classical, gypsy jazz, Latin, contemporary jazz and nuevo flamenco influences in a captivating live performance that

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.



~ Presents ~

PEARLS & PROSECCO Handbag Bingo

THE ALICE | DESTIN
Saturday August 8 | 2:00 PM

An elevated afternoon of bingo, bubbly,
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THE GROUND UP PROJECT INC.

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Includes light bites, 2 drink tickets, and 10 bingo cards (1 per round).

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HAPPENINGS AROUND THE BAY

AUGUST 2026 EVENTS

- 01**
15th Annual Pinfish Grand Nationals
9 am | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville
- Summerfest at the Biophilia Center**
9 am | E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center | Freeport
- Concealed Carry Weapons Class**
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
- Discover Science Saturday**
10 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB
- Red, White, and Blue Ice Cream Social**
12 pm | Heritage Museum | Valparaiso
- Funky Lampshades Live Music**
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville
- 02**
Puppies & Pilates with Aly Gray
10 am | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport
- Women's Climbing Circle**
5 pm | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin
- 03**
Justice on the Block: Free Legal Help
12:30 pm | Niceville Library | Niceville
- 04**
Niceville Young Professionals
11:30 am | Niceville Chamber | Niceville
- 05**
UNDERWATER: The Living Sea Experience
7:30 pm | Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park | FWB
- 06**
Thursday Throwdown - Season 11
6 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville
- 07**
Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee
7 am | First Baptist Church of FWB | FWB
- Brendon Preece Live Music**
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville
- 08**
Pearls & Prosecco
2 pm | The Alice | Destin
- Pilates with Dolphins**
7:30 am | Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park | FWB

- 11**
Chess Night
6 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville
- 12**
Second Wednesday Breakfast
7:15 am | Niceville Community Center | Niceville
- Burgers & Bingo Night**
6 pm | Wharf 850 | Niceville
- 13**
Nothing But Networking at Knife's Edge Cafe at Bob Hope Village
11:30 am | Bob Hope Village | Shalimar
- Thursday Throwdown - Season 11**
6 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville
- 14**
History Sandwiched-In
Heritage Museum | Valparaiso
- Alston Weeks Live Music**
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville
- 15**
Grand Opening Spires (formerly Artful Things)
12 pm | Niceville
- Concealed Carry Weapons Class**
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
- USCG Boating Safety Class**
9 am | Emerald Coast Marine | Niceville
- Casino Night**
6 pm | LJ Schooner's Restaurant | Niceville
- 17**
Fiberarts Circle
5 pm | Valparaiso Library | Valparaiso
- 18**
Lunch N Learn: RNR Property Solutions; "How To Get Mailbox Money In Real Estate"
11:30 am | The Chamber Conference Room | FWB
- The Traveling Painter at LJ Schooners**
5:30 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville
- 20**
Elvis '56: The 70th Anniversary
7:30 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville
- Thursday Throwdown - Season 11**
6 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville

- 21**
Kyle Lamonica Live Music
6 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville
- 22**
Kellen Erskine
7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville
- 23**
Roman Street in Concert
3 pm | Christ the King Episcopal Church | SRB
- 27**
Thursday Throwdown - Season 11
6 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville
- 28**
Wine & Fries: Golden Hour for Good
6 pm The Alice | Destin
- 29**
Sacred Harp Musical Conversation
1 pm | Christ the King Episcopal Church | SRB
- 30**
Summer Sunset Shrimp Boils at LJ Schooners
4 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | 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
- Puzzle Swap @ the Library**
10 am | Thurs | Niceville Library | 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

EVENTS

continued from page 6

kicks off the fall concert series.

Free and open to the public.
christthekingfl.org

Wine & Fries: Golden Hour for Good

Aug. 28 | 6-9 p.m. | The Alice | Destin



Ronald McDonald House Charities of Northwest Florida's signature fundraiser returns with waterfront views, wine, local brews, McDonald's famous French fries, live entertainment

and auctions. Proceeds help families stay close to children receiving medical treatment. \$115
givebutter.com/c/wine-and-fries

Sacred Harp Musical Conversation

Aug. 29 | 1 p.m. | Christ the King Episcopal Church | 480 N. County Highway 393, Santa Rosa Beach

Learn about the history and development of Sacred Harp music, a traditional American art form, during a presentation by Joanna Ellis. Guests will also enjoy a practical introduction to shape-note singing led by Kristin Wendland.

Free and open to the public.
christthekingfl.org

Emerald Coast Community Singers: Celebration of American Music

Sept. 13 | 3 p.m. | Christ the King Episcopal Church | 480 N. County Highway 393, Santa Rosa Beach

Celebrate America's musical heritage while commemorating the 25th anniversary of 9/11 and the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. The concert will feature works by Samuel Barber, Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, William Dawson and Duke Ellington, along with traditional American and patriotic songs. Audience participation is encouraged.

Free and open to the public.
christthekingfl.org



Fore Her Golf Outing

Sept. 25 | Check-in: 8 a.m. | Announcements: 8:45 a.m. | Tee-off: 9 a.m. | The Links Golf Club at Sandestin

Support local breast cancer

patients during Fore Her's annual golf tournament featuring contests, prizes, refreshments and the organization's popular "Dress Like a Lady" hole.
foreher.org

Harbor Nights at HarborWalk Village

Thursdays | 6-9 p.m. | HarborWalk Village | Destin Harbor

Spend Thursday evenings on the Destin Harbor with live music, DJs, glow stilt walkers, lawn games, fire spinners and a fireworks show over the water.

Free admission (parking fees apply).
harborwalkvillage.com

NWFSC Earns Prestigious State Award

By BARBARA PALMGREN

On a hot summer day, Dr. Marie Hallion, Chair of the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, and I visited Northwest Florida State College President Mel Ponder in his office on campus to thank the college for its support as a community partner.

Also joining us was Kevin Brown, Associate Vice President of Government Relations and Special Projects.

As we sat around the conference table, I noticed the famous replica of the symbol that represents the college: the "Mighty Mitchell." Northwest Florida State College is proud to be the home of the Raiders and Raider Stadium. The four of us share an appreciation for history, and our conversation included stories from Dr. Hallion's time serving on the White House staff under three presidents.

But the focus that day was the model of the legendary B-25 twin-engine medium bomber used by the Doolittle Raiders in their historic April 18, 1942 surprise attack on mainland Japan. Named in honor of General Billy Mitchell, the B-25 was selected because it could take off from an aircraft carrier while carrying a bomb load over the required distance to its target.

President Ponder proudly shared exciting news from the state of Florida: NWFSC had been named the Com-



missioner's Choice Winner of the Florida Department of Education's Statewide Welding & Fabrication Challenge celebrating America's 250th anniversary.

The honor was earned among institutions throughout the Florida College System. The project required more than 2,000 hours of design, fabrication, welding and finishing work by students and faculty from the Welding Technology Program and Art Department. The statewide recognition highlights their exceptional craftsmanship while showcasing the strength of the college's workforce education programs. The historic aircraft can be viewed outside Building 320 on the Niceville campus.

Yes, the Mighty Mitchell had done it again. It scored for our country on its 250th anniversary. It scored for a college in the Florida Panhandle. And it scored for the students and faculty who built it as a lasting tribute.

Yes, mighty indeed!

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Why Probate Issues Are Often About People, Not Paperwork

BY KIMBERLY COLE

Legal documents matter, but they rarely tell the full story. Probate challenges are often rooted in family dynamics, history, and expectations rather than the paperwork itself. While wills, trusts, deeds, and beneficiary designations establish the legal framework for what happens after someone dies, the actual difficulties families encounter are frequently driven by relationships, emotions, and perceptions that have developed over many years.

This reality often surprises families. They assume that if a loved one had a valid will and an organized estate plan, the administration process will be straightforward. Sometimes that is true. More often, how-

ever, probate reveals tensions that were already present beneath the surface. The legal documents may determine who receives certain assets, but they cannot resolve decades of family history.

Every family has its own story. Some families communicate openly and navigate difficult circumstances together. Others carry unresolved disagreements, strained relationships, or longstanding perceptions of favoritism. These dynamics do not disappear when someone dies. In many cases, they become more pronounced. Probate simply becomes the setting in which those underlying issues emerge.

A common example occurs when siblings have different perceptions of their relationship with a parent. One child may have provided years of caregiving and feel entitled to greater consideration. Another may have lived farther away but remained emotionally close. A third may feel overlooked or ex-



cluded. Even when a will clearly outlines the distribution plan, beneficiaries often interpret those decisions through the lens of their personal experiences. As a result, disagreements that appear to be about money are frequently rooted in something much deeper.

This is one reason documents alone cannot prevent disputes. Estate planning documents are designed to communicate legal intentions, but they cannot explain every decision or address every emotional concern. A will can state who receives a particular asset. It cannot eliminate hurt feelings if someone expected a different outcome. A trust can establish detailed instructions. It cannot repair years of

family conflict or resolve misunderstandings that existed long before the trust was created.

Many people believe that a perfectly drafted estate plan guarantees family harmony. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. The best documents in the world cannot control how individuals interpret events or process emotions. They can reduce uncertainty and provide clarity, but they cannot eliminate the human element.

Grief often intensifies these challenges. The death of a loved one is one of life's most significant emotional experiences, and grief affects everyone differently. Some people become withdrawn. Others become impatient, suspicious, or highly emotional. Decisions that might have seemed reasonable under ordinary circumstances can feel deeply personal during a period of loss.

Even routine probate delays can become sources of frustration. Beneficiaries may wonder

why distributions have not occurred. Family members may become concerned about decisions being made by the personal representative. Questions that would normally be handled through a simple conversation can take on greater significance because everyone is navigating loss at the same time.

Grief can also create urgency. Family members often want resolution because they believe closing the estate will help them move forward. When the probate process takes longer than expected, frustration can build. Delays that are entirely normal under Florida law may be viewed as unnecessary obstacles. In these moments, emotions can begin driving reactions more than facts.

This is why communication is often just as important as legal documentation during estate administration. Families do not necessarily need constant up-

Continued on page 33

Planning for Peace Starts Here

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At Cole Law Firm, we help individuals and families navigate estate planning, probate, and trust matters with clarity, compassion and practical guidance. Whether you're planning ahead or managing affairs after the loss of a loved one, our goal is to reduce stress, protect your legacy, and help you move forward with confidence.

Good legal planning isn't about fear—it's about peace of mind.



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Bay Buzz

The Rotary Club of Mid-Bay Bridge (Choctawhatchee Bay) Installs Valerie Holmes as its 34th President

Mid-Bay held its installation dinner at the Rocky Bayou Country Club June 24, 2026. The ceremonies included Mid-Bay's tradition of "Passing the President's Gavel" where Mid-Bay Past Presidents starting with 1st President Bert Melnick "passed the gavel" to Rotary Year 2026-2027 and 34th President Valerie Holmes.

District 6940 Area Governor (Area 4) Samma Brannon administered the President's Pledge to President Valerie.

During the installation dinner, Mid-Bay's 2025-2026 President John Sallman recognized Rotarian Art Jean as Mid-Bay's Rotarian of the Year; Rotarian



President Valerie Holmes and First Gentleman Harry Holmes

Tom Sanders as recipient of the President's Award, and Rotarian Jim Wells as recipient of the Service Above Self Award.

President John presented his Mid-Bay Board Member/Officers and Directors with cutting boards with Rotary logo inscribed on them in remembrance of how fellow Rotarians



First President Bert Melnick and Thirty Fourth President Valerie Holmes

cooked for Mid-Bay's Annual Pork Butt Roast for Polio Plus. The club presented John a summary book of his presidency which included Mid-Bay highlights, meeting bulletins, and photos of Mid-Bay Rotarians and the traditional gavel plaque.

Guests included District Gov-



First Gentleman Harry Holmes with Daughter and Grand Daughters

ernor Andre Boyd, Past District Governor Jan Pooley, and Mid-Bay Rotarian and Past District Governor Dave Rauch. Crestview Rotary President Phil Berezo also attended. Very special guests included President Valerie's and First Gentleman Harry's daughter Kira Vasquez and granddaughters Hailey, Hannah and Isabella. Satellite Club Founder Dave Underwood represented the Freeport Satellite Club.

Niceville Republican Women Federated presented 2 Scholarships in 2026:

2026 graduates Layla Hughes of Niceville High School and Katerina Price of Baker High School each received scholarships from Niceville Republican Women Federated (NRWF). They met members at the June meeting and read their essays on "Why I Am a Republican". Layla will be attending Lindsey Wilson University and Katerina will be attending the University of West Florida. NRWF meets the first Monday of the month at Blue Tee Restaurant in BWB at 5:15pm (Social) and 6:00pm (Dinner). For more information about NRWF please contact President Michele Shuler at nicevillerepublicanwf@gmail.com or 253 709-0106 (L-R: Lana Wood, NRWF President Michele Shuler, Jane Stevens, Katerina Price, Layla Hughes, Diana Gilbert, and Lourdes Adams)

Okaloosa County CORE Network Recognized for Substance Abuse Efforts with \$200,000

The Florida Department of Children and Families recently announced that Okaloosa County was one of 10 counties



Niceville Republican Women Federated

to receive a one-time performance incentive of \$200,000 for exceptional efforts in the Coordinated Opioid Recovery (CORE) Network.

CORE Network success requires a collaborative effort from healthcare providers, behavioral health organizations, emergency medical services, hospitals, law enforcement, peer specialists, recovery community organizations, and other community stakeholders.

"Okaloosa County Community Paramedics, along with our community partners, have achieved incredible results with their efforts," said Okaloosa County Board Chairman Trey Goodwin. "This recognition is well-deserved and will go toward improving the lives of many other people in our community who suffer from addiction."

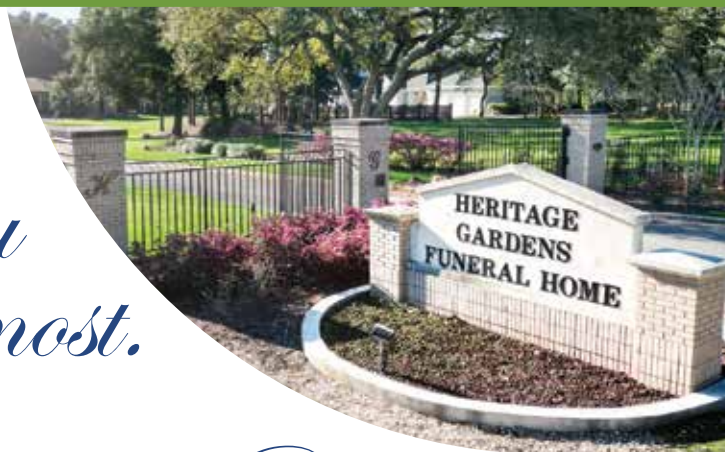
The funds will be used to continue expansion, enhancement, and sustainability of the network's infrastructure, partnerships, and coordinated system of care.

Okaloosa County, in partnership with the Florida Department of Health in Okaloosa County, announced the formation of the CORE Network in 2024 using funds from opioid settlements. Since that time, the CORE Network in Okaloosa County helped expand detoxification services 24/7 at Bridgeway Center Inc., the formation of the Community Paramedicine Program and the Post Overdose Support Team (POST).

These efforts have saved lives and helped individuals in Okaloosa County battling addiction. Successes include (Since July 2024):

- 15,823 doses of NARCAN distributed.
- 53% down in fatal overdoses.
- 729 of contacts made by POST following overdose, with 224 enrolled in a treatment program.

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BY TERESA HALVERSON, DIR.
OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT &
COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Caring for an aging loved one is one of life's greatest acts of love. It can also be one of the most challenging. Many families struggle with knowing when occasional help is no longer enough and when professional care could improve their loved one's safety, health, and quality of life.

Recognizing the signs early can prevent unnecessary hospitalizations, reduce caregiver stress, and help seniors maintain the highest possible level of independence. Many families wonder if they're doing enough to help an aging loved one. Recognizing the signs early can make all the difference in preventing falls, avoiding hospitalizations, and improving quality of life.

What are some signs that your loved one may need more support?

Frequent Falls:

One fall can change everything. If your loved one has fallen, is unsteady on their feet, or avoids walking because they are afraid of falling, it may be time for professional assessment and rehabilitation services. Look for these signs:

- Falling more often
- Holding onto furniture while walking
- Afraid of falling
- Becoming less active because of poor balance

Physical therapy and rehabilitation can help improve strength, balance, and confidence. The Manor at Blue Water Bay offers in-patient and out-patient therapy.

Increased Hospital and/or Emergency Room Visits:

Repeated hospitalizations or emergency room visits often indicate that additional nursing care, medication management, and rehabilitation are needed to promote recovery and prevent

future complications.

Difficulty Managing Medications:

Missing doses, taking medications incorrectly, or forgetting prescriptions can lead to serious health issues. Skilled nursing professionals can help ensure medications are taken safely and correctly. Did you know that medication mistakes are one of the leading causes of hospital visits among older adults? Warning signs may include:

- Missed doses
- Taking medications at the wrong time
- Confusion about prescriptions
- Running out of medications

Professional nursing support can help keep medications safe and effective.

Declining Mobility:

If getting out of bed, walking, climbing stairs, or performing everyday tasks has become difficult, physical and occupational therapy may help restore strength and independence.

Changes in Memory or Judgment:

Signs that Memory May Be Changing

Forgetting appointments, becoming confused, wandering, or making unsafe decisions may indicate the need for additional supervision and support. Things to look for include:

- Frequently repeating the same questions or stories.
- Forgetting recent conversations or appointments.
- Misplacing items and being unable to retrace steps.
- Difficulty remembering names of familiar people or places.
- Losing track of dates, seasons, or time.
- Getting confused in familiar locations. Experiencing difficulties in daily living activities.
- Needing increasing reminders for everyday tasks.
- Difficulty following recipes, instructions, or conversations.

Signs That Judgment May Be Changing

- Poor financial decisions or giving away large amounts of money.

- Falling for scams or telemarketing calls.
- Wearing inappropriate clothing for the weather.
- Neglecting personal hygiene or grooming.
- Forgetting to take medications or taking them incorrectly.
- Leaving the stove on or forgetting food is cooking.
- Driving unsafely or getting lost while driving.
- Making impulsive or risky

decisions that are out of character

These changes often happen gradually. Receiving extra support can help seniors remain safe while maintaining their dignity and independence.

Caregiver Burnout:

Now, let's talk about caregiver burnout. Family caregivers often put their own health

last. Feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, anxious, or unable to keep up with caregiving responsibilities is a sign that additional support may benefit both you and your loved one.

Seeking Help is a Sign of Strength:

Many families worry that asking for help means they are

Continued on page 29

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Community Improvements in Okaloosa County

BY CAROLYN NEWCOMER KETCHEL

We are blessed to call Northwest Florida home. Even though we live and work in Okaloosa County, we often do not realize how quickly our county is growing. We now have more than 220,000 residents and will continue to grow with many planned infrastructure projects.

To keep pace with that growth and continue improving the many amenities throughout Okaloosa County, a number of projects are coming to fruition in various parts of the county through your Okaloosa County government.

The property on the south end of the Shalimar Bridge became available several years ago. Located across from Eglin Federal Credit Union, old-timers may remember it as Carmichael's Surf Side 7, "The Academy of Cultured Anatomy." Okaloosa County purchased the property using tourism development dollars and plans to create a fisherman's park featuring parking, restrooms, a bait shop and boat docks.

On the north end of the Shalimar Bridge sits what is colloquially known as the Dowd property, which became available after

the passing of longtime County Attorney John Dowd. The county, in conjunction with the Town of Shalimar, has entered into both a purchase agreement and an interlocal agreement. Shalimar is utilizing tourism development dollars, and funding is included in the approved state budget pending the governor's approval. The property is expected to close in October, after which design work will begin.

The intent is to create a passive park with swings, picnic tables and grills. Swimming and fishing will be prohibited. The entrance from Highway 85 at the Shalimar Bridge will be closed in favor of a safer entrance from Clifford Street.

Eglin Parkway is beginning to see paving improvements by the Florida Department of Transportation. The section from Richburg and 12th Avenue to the Shalimar Bridge will be completed first.

Our new south-end Ag Extension Building is now open on Lewis Turner Boulevard near the south-end courthouse annex. Turn into the courthouse parking lot and then right to access Ag Extension parking. Please stop by to learn about the various classes offered. If you

would like to become a Master Gardener, now is the time to sign up for the yearlong coursework.

Construction is underway on the Cinco Bayou Boat Parking project, a project funded through tourism development dollars. This partnership with the Town of Cinco Bayou will double boat parking and add bathrooms to a very busy ramp. Improvements also include fencing, landscaping, lighting and security cameras. A second phase, currently in design, will improve the boat ramps and replace the dockage, making it more modern, functional and boater-friendly.

The former BBVA Compass Bank building at the foot of Cinco Bayou Bridge now houses our Tourism Development staff and was purchased using tourism development dollars.

The Rigdon Center, locally known as the old fairgrounds, is undergoing a major renovation and expansion. The county is adding more than 3,000 square feet across two primary event venues with state-of-the-art technology throughout. The upgraded facility will include new restrooms, two catering kitchens and a concession stand. Additional improvements scheduled later this year include enhanced

entryways, a covered walkway, a screen wall and landscaping.

The county is also working with the City of Fort Walton Beach on a land exchange involving property near the former downtown hospital site. This exchange will create a larger, continuous parcel for a major pickleball complex, expanding recreational opportunities for residents and visitors.

Brooks Bridge, named in honor of Thomas Brooks, one of the founding fathers of Fort Walton Beach, is making steady progress. Designed as a simplified suspension bridge, it will replace the existing bridge that has served the community for 75 years.

The new bridge will feature three lanes in each direction separated by a 10-foot median, along with 12-foot-wide multi-use paths on both sides for cyclists and pedestrians. The east-bound bike path will connect to the existing photoluminescent path along Highway 98 on the Gulf side.

Construction is expected to be completed in 2029, providing improved traffic flow, enhanced safety and expanded recreational access for residents and visitors alike.

The Southwest Crestview Bypass opened to motorists on May 1, 2026. Completed in phases, this remarkable project was a joint effort among Okaloosa County, the Florida Department of Transportation, Triumph Gulf Coast and the City of Crestview. The long-awaited bypass has already begun improv-



ing traffic flow in and around Crestview.

The Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport (VPS) is now the largest airport in the Panhandle, serving more passengers than Pensacola and Panama City. With more than 50 direct flights nationwide, VPS is a major economic driver for our county. We are proud of its impact on our economy and community.

Veterans Day on Nov. 11, 2026, will be a memorable America250! event recognizing our 250-year history while honoring the service and sacrifice of our veterans. Please join us for a special morning featuring an inspiring guest speaker, a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Women Veterans Park expansion, and the dedication of four new statues and several beautiful benches generously contributed by community organizations. Mark your calendar for 8:30 a.m. Nov. 11, 2026, inside the Convention Center. This is a celebration you will not want to miss.

It is an honor and a privilege to serve as your commissioner.

Carolyn Ketchel is Okaloosa County Commissioner, District 2. She can be reached at CKetchel@myokaloosa.com or 850-651-7105.

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The Rain Was Never the Story

How our Emerald Coast Wedding Became a Celebration of Family, Friendship, Faith and Community

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

Upstairs in the bridal suite at The Alice in Destin, I stood at a large square window watching what looked like my wedding plans being carried away. Massive floral arrangements were being moved from the cross to beneath a tent we had rented that very morning. A last-minute decision. A rain decision.

For a year, I had envisioned walking down the aisle toward a large wooden cross overlooking the water. The spot was perfect. The view was perfect. Everything had been planned around that moment. But on May 1, 2026, the rain was relentless.

However, a few minutes before the ceremony, as I watched from above, the florals were being moved again—this time back toward the cross. I remember standing there in complete bewilderment. What was happening? Hadn't we already decided the ceremony would have to take place under the tent?

Somebody—I honestly can't remember who because I was so nervous—came running upstairs and exclaimed, "Lori! You're getting married at the cross!" I stared at them. "What?" They explained there appeared to be a brief break in the weather. Fifteen or twenty minutes. Maybe. And according to the radar, it would happen right at 5 p.m.—our ceremony time.

I couldn't believe it. For days, I had been praying for one thing: that somehow we could be mar-



ried at the cross. And suddenly, there it was. The answer.

The sun never came out. But the rain stopped. For those precious moments, the skies opened just enough.

Our guests stood instead of sitting, because the ceremony chairs had already been moved beneath the reception tent. Yet, somehow that made the ceremony even more intimate.

Afterward, our officiating pastor, Dr. Doug Stauffer, smiled and said, "I think everyone should have a wedding ceremony standing."

Maybe he was right. There was something beautiful about everyone gathering close, fully present, completely engaged in the moment. And, we were married exactly where we had hoped to be married.

The rain returned later. But by then, everyone was safely beneath the tent, laughing, celebrating and sharing a night we'll never forget.



Looking back, I realize something important. The rain was never the story. The people were. And what follows is my attempt to thank many of them.

When the Weather Has Other Plans

As a publisher, I write about weddings, businesses, events and celebrations all the time. But, when it's your own wedding, everything changes. You suddenly discover there are a thousand decisions you never knew existed.

My first wedding happened when I was 23. Back then, weddings were simpler. You booked a church. You had a reception in the fellowship hall. Your friends decorated your car with shaving cream and "Just Married" painted on the windows. And off you went.

Fast forward nearly four decades and wedding planning feels like coordinating a small city. Thank goodness I had Rob-

in Wright, owner of Serenade Weddings & Events, holding my hand through it all. Her creativity, vision and ability to keep everything on track were invaluable.

If there's one piece of advice I would give any bride, regardless of age, budget or venue, it's this: Hire a wedding planner. Immediately. Trust me, there are details you don't know exist until they go wrong.

Robin became guide, counselor, creative director, logistics manager and sometimes therapist. After our first meeting, she created an entire presentation based on the vision I had shared. Sea glass blue. Butter yellow. Sage green. White. Pearls. Organic textures. Coastal elegance.

A little refined. A little whimsical. A little "under the sea." It became the roadmap for everything that followed.

And when the rain came? Robin pivoted flawlessly. What could have been chaos became



calm. What could have been disappointment became beauty.

The Venue That Made It All Possible

Long before The Alice officially opened, Scott and I toured the property with General Manager Kristin Sullivan.

Construction was still underway. Landscaping was still being installed. But even then, we could see what it would become.

Nestled along the water in Destin with views toward Crab Island, The Alice felt unlike anything else on the Emerald Coast. The grounds are stunning. Palm trees. Walking paths. Beautiful cottages. Water views. Sunsets that seem almost unreal. It felt like home.

And now, after experiencing it firsthand, I can tell you the team—Kristin, Kelly and Diane—is every bit as impressive as the venue itself.

Continued on next page

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WEDDING

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When the weather threatened everything we'd planned, they never panicked. They simply moved to Plan B. Then Plan C. Then back to Plan A. They handled every challenge with professionalism, grace and genuine care. Our friend Will Estell perhaps said it best:

"That was an absolutely beautiful ceremony and reception in celebration of Lori and Scott Miller. Even despite the weather, Kristin and her staff made it spectacular.

"In all my days in the wedding magazine business, I never attended a wedding that was handled that well despite the weather obstacle that was thrown into the mix. The Alice knocked it out of the park."

I couldn't agree more.

Website: thealicedestin.com



Sea Glass, Pearls and Oyster Shells

Once the colors were chosen, the fun began.



The Alice.

The oyster shells, pearls, sea glass colors and organic coastal details tied everything together, creating what many guests later jokingly called our "Under the Sea" wedding.

The Song That Told Our Story

Most couples choose a song. We had one written.

Our dear friend Bekah Wagner sat down with Scott and me and spent hours learning about our relationship. How we met. What we loved about one another. What made us laugh. What made us strong.

Weeks later, she delivered something neither of us expected: a song called *Southern Gentlemen Have Nothing on You*, now available on Spotify under artist Bekah Lauren. The title makes me laugh, because Scott is a Philly boy and I'm originally an Alabama girl (War Eagle!), but somehow Bekah perfectly captured our relationship and love story in a song we'll treasure forever.

She also wrote a custom song for my daughter Savannah and her husband, Brandon, *Fireman and a Southern Girl*, also available on Spotify. Apparently, writing songs for the women in our family has become one of Bekah's hidden talents!

It became our first dance. Our final private dance. And perhaps one of the most meaningful gifts we have ever received. To this day, when life gets hectic, we'll play it in the car and instantly remember what matters most.

The Dress I Never Would Have Chosen

Like many brides, I spent months looking online. And like many brides, I found absolutely nothing.

Eventually, I visited Simply Elegant Bridal in Fort Walton Beach. Amber greeted us and began pulling dresses. I tried on several. One seemed to be winning.

Continued on next page

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WEDDING

continued from previous page

Then Amber held up another dress. Honestly? I wasn't impressed. Not on the hanger. Not even a little. But she insisted. I tried it on. And immediately everyone in the room started smiling.

That was the dress. The one I never would have chosen. The one that somehow felt like it had been waiting for me all along. And on my wedding day, I felt like royalty in it! It was ME!

Amber, Bob and the entire Simply Elegant team were incredible. Scott's suit came from them as well.

Website: sebridals.com

Flowers That Brought the Vision to Life

If you've ever seen Kristin Lockhart's work at Couture Florals & Events, you already know she is an artist. From our first conversations, Kristin understood exactly what I was hoping to create. Working within my budget, she designed a floral plan that felt elegant, organic and uniquely us.

White calla lilies. White and green hydrangeas. Lush moss.



Flowing amaranthus. Pearls woven throughout. Every floral element felt intentional, sophisticated and perfectly suited to our sea glass-inspired theme.

One of my favorite details was that no two tables were exactly alike. Robin and Kristin worked together to bring our design boards to life, creating stunning tablescapes featuring driftwood, pearls, florals and cascading amaranthus. Each table had its own unique look while still tying beautifully into the overall sea glass-inspired theme.

My bouquet was one of my favorite details of the entire wedding. Kristin created a stunning

arrangement of white calla lilies wrapped in strands of pearls that felt both timeless and distinctive. It was elegant, coastal and unlike anything I had seen before.

When the rain forced everyone to pivot throughout the day, Kristin and her team adjusted seamlessly, ensuring every floral element remained beautiful no matter where it needed to be moved.

Website: couturefloralsdesign.com

A Feast Worth Celebrating

When it came to food, Chef Ernie from Café Nola delivered exactly what we hoped for. Guests enjoyed mini muffulet-tas, mini NOLA po-boys, seafood gumbo shooters and Cajun chicken shooters before moving into a buffet featuring grilled chicken, prime rib, penne Alfredo, garlic mashed potatoes, vegetables and fresh bread.



Throughout the evening, guests repeatedly told us how much they loved the food. Chef Ernie brought a little New Orleans flair to Destin and created a menu that appealed to everyone. His staff was professional, attentive and helped make the reception flow seamlessly.

Website: cafenola.net

Sweet Details

Rachel Vondell of Lady Ray's transformed an idea floating around in my head into reality. Our cake featured oyster shell inspiration, pearls and approximately 1,400 pieces of delicate rice paper that gave it

texture and movement. Stunning! It looked like it belonged beneath the sea.

Adding to its uniqueness, Rachel designed the cake in one of 2026's emerging wedding trends—a sophisticated rectangular cake rather than the traditional stacked design. It perfectly complemented our elegant, organic coastal theme.

Even better, it tasted incredible. Half chocolate. Half vanilla. A perfect compromise between bride and groom.

Lady Ray's also created beautiful coordinating cupcakes, as well as sea glass blue and ivory, pearl-wrapped, French macarons that echoed our wedding colors and added another elegant touch to the dessert display.

Website: ladyrays.com

Meanwhile, Cindy Smith-Wojdac of CiCi's Cookies & Treats welcomed our guests with beautifully curated gift boxes waiting in their cottages, making them feel welcomed and appreciated.

Later, Cindy created a dessert display that quickly became a guest favorite. One of the most memorable touches was her sea glass and butter candies, each uniquely designed as though they had washed ashore from the Gulf itself. Guests were invited to take home small mesh bags filled with the candies as a

Continued on next page

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WEDDING

continued from previous page

sweet reminder of the evening.

The display also featured an assortment of beautifully decorated treats, including chocolate-covered goodies, cookies and other handcrafted sweets that perfectly complemented our wedding colors and coastal theme. Guests returned to that table throughout the evening.

Website: <https://bakesy.shop/b/cicis-cookies-and-treats>

Facebook: *CiCi's Cookies & Treats*

Capturing the Memories

One of the greatest gifts of the day was having my daughter, Savannah VonLanken, a professional wedding photographer, photograph her mother's wedding. Yet, I also wanted her to enjoy it. To be present. To celebrate. To dance. To laugh. To be my daughter that day.

That's where Hayleigh stepped in. Together, Savannah and Hayleigh beautifully documented every moment. Rainy skies. Happy tears. Unexpected laughter. Family. Friends. Love.

The photographs throughout these pages tell the story far better than I ever could.

Savvy Leigh Photography: savvyleighphoto.com

Hayleigh Photography: hayleightphoto.com

A Little Pampering; a Lot of Laughter

A few weeks before the wedding, Krisy Whitely Anderson at Beverly Hills Day Spa convinced me to try a facial and chemical peel. I wish I had done it years ago. My skin looked amazing. In fact, now that I've experienced



it, I'm hooked.

The day before the wedding, my daughter, Shaye, hosted a spa gathering with Krisy for bridesmaids and family that became our version of a bachelorette celebration. We enjoyed facials, massages, laughter, champagne and precious time together.

Website: beverlyhillspaspa.com

Adrienne Brackett of Pure & Couture and Pure Collective salons helped restore fullness and length to my hair with hand-tied extensions that I absolutely love. Let's just say hair in your 60s isn't quite the same as it was in your 20s. Adrienne worked her magic and now I'm hooked! My hair hasn't looked this great in years!

Websites: pureandcouture.com; purecollectivesalon.com

On wedding day, family member Linsey Robinson styled



mine and the wedding party's hair beautifully despite the humidity and rain, while Baylee Elliott somehow managed to make us feel beautiful and camera-ready all day long.

Find Linsey at *Destin Blowout Bar* (@hairby_linseyrobinson) and Baylee at @mua_by_bayleelizabeth

Lights, Music and Memories

Music has always been important to Scott and me. That's why I immediately knew Zoran Subotich would be part of our day. A longtime friend and fellow radio veteran, Zoran handled every musical moment perfectly. I created a custom playlist and he brought it to life in a way that felt personal, joyful and uniquely us. He really just let us be us.

Website: zoranentertainment.net; celebrationsbythesea.com

Ryan Alan Linguiti sang and played the guitar live for our ceremony and cocktail hour. Then he surprised me with something unforgettable—a custom audio tribute featuring voices of family members, lifelong friends and loved ones who could not attend. There wasn't a dry eye around. You can find Ryan around town

singing at Tailfins or The Edge, both at the Harbor.

Instagram: @ryanlinguiti; Facebook: @ryanalanmusic

As evening fell, Destin/30A Lighting transformed the property. Palm trees wrapped in twinkling lights shimmered through the rain. The reflections danced off the wet pathways and the see-through tent's water droplets, creating a glow that somehow made everything feel even more magical.

Website: destinoutdoorlighting.com

And thanks to Matthew Kuka's photo booth and 360 experience, guests left us with hilarious videos, keepsakes and memories we'll treasure forever. Before long, guests of all ages were grabbing props, striking poses and laughing their heads off. The fun, interactive atmosphere brought people together and captured some of the most candid moments of the evening.

The Finishing Touches

Frill Seekers helped bring so many of our personal details to life. From embroidered sea glass bridesmaid bags to custom cups, napkins and my favorite koozie that read, "It's Miller Time," every detail reflected our personality and wedding theme. They also created a special memorial sign honoring my nephew, whom we lost far too soon. Having his memory represented in such a meaningful way touched our hearts deeply.

Website: frillseekersgifts.com

We also relied on Destin Event Rentals for many of the elements that brought our vision to life—ghost chairs and tables to chandeliers, lighting and the beautiful, transparent reception tent. As evening fell—and the rain—the transparent tent over the reception tables became part of the magic. Reflections from the water shimmered across the clear canopy while the wrapped

palm trees glowed outside it, creating a twinkling atmosphere more beautiful than anything we could have planned.

Thanks to the rain, a last-minute tent for the dance floor from Big Day Rentals became one of the most important details. Their quick response gave us one less thing to worry about and helped keep the party going long after the ceremony ended.

destineventrentals.com; thebigdayrentals.com

The People Beside Us

Standing with us that day were our children, grandchildren, family and closest friends.

Austin, who walked me down the aisle. Nick, the best man. Michaela. Savannah. Shaye. My sister Lisa. Flower girl Lauren. Josiah. Jax. Cas.

As beautiful as the venue was...as amazing as the flowers were...as wonderful as the food, music, cake and decorations were...they were the real reason the day mattered.

More Than a Wedding Day

Our wedding celebration extended beyond May 1. We gathered with family and friends for a rehearsal dinner at AJ's on the Harbor the night before and capped off the weekend with a post-wedding cruise aboard Tailfins Tikis around the Destin harbor and Crab Island. Sharing some of our favorite Destin experiences with the people we love, from near and far, made an unforgettable weekend even more special.

tailfinstikis.com, ajsd Destin.com

Looking back now, I don't remember the weather. I remember the way Scott adoringly looked at me—the way every woman hopes to be seen at least once in her life. I remember Austin's arm in mine. I remember hearing our song. I remember our children and grandchildren. I remember family and friends dancing beneath the tent while rain tapped softly overhead. I remember feeling loved. I remember feeling grateful. And I remember standing beneath that cross, exactly where I had hoped to stand, realizing that sometimes God doesn't remove the storm. He simply creates a break in the rain at exactly the right moment.

The rain was never the story. Love was.

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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Where Floral Dreams Become Art

How a Sister's Bridal Shower Bloomed Into Couture Florals & Events

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

I knew Kristin Lockhart was talented long before I sat down to interview her.

I knew it the moment I walked into my wedding reception at The Alice in Destin and saw months of planning transformed into something even more beautiful than I had imagined. As a recent Couture Florals & Events bride, I had experienced the finished product firsthand. What I hadn't yet discovered was the story behind it.

That story begins long before weddings, floral installations and luxury events. Creativity has been part of Kristin's life for as long as she can remember. Long before she was designing celebrations along the Emerald Coast, she spent hours scrapbooking, turning simple photo albums into keepsakes filled with ribbon, embellishments and artistic details.

That creative spirit found a new outlet in 2012 when she designed an Alice in Wonderland-themed bridal shower for her sister. What began as a labor of love would eventually become the spark that launched **Couture Florals & Events**, now one of the area's premier wedding and event design companies.

At the time, Kristin had little experience with floral design beyond creating a few silk arrangements for family members. But for her sister's shower, she envisioned something extraordinary. The space was transformed into a whimsical tea party complete with moss-covered displays, trees, stacked teacups, tree stumps, squirrel accents and even a custom tea kettle cake. "When people walked in, they were amazed," Kristin recalled. "Throughout the event, so many people told me I had a natural talent and creative eye for this type of work."

More importantly, the experience awakened what would become her passion. "That truly sparked something in me," she said.

Kristin began exploring floral design more seriously, eventually working professionally with fresh florals while managing a floral department. As her skills and confidence grew, so did her

vision. In 2016, she launched Couture Florals & Events with a desire to create meaningful, elevated celebrations tailored to each client.

Today, what started as a shoe-string startup has grown into a thriving business trusted by couples, wedding planners and event professionals throughout Northwest Florida. For Kristin, however, the attraction was never simply flowers. "I completely fell in love with the artistry, creativity and emotion behind transforming spaces and bringing people's visions to life," she said.

That blend of artistry and organization continues to shape her work today. While many people imagine floral design as a profession spent arranging beautiful blooms, Kristin says the reality is far more demanding. "People often think this job is just playing with flowers all day, but there is so much more that goes into what we do," she said. "Behind the beauty is an incredible amount of planning, logistics, problem-solving, physical labor, setup, execution and cleanup."

Over the years, she has learned to intentionally separate creative time from business time, allowing her to remain fully pres-



ent when designing for clients. Even so, she believes artistry extends far beyond the flowers themselves, viewing each proposal as the first step in helping couples visualize the wedding or event of their dreams.

Like many entrepreneurs, Kristin faced uncertainty in the early years. One of the most difficult seasons came during the COVID-19 pandemic when weddings and events were postponed, rescheduled or canceled. "It was extremely difficult navigating the uncertainty while trying to protect and sustain a newer business at the time," she said. Still, she remained committed to the business she believed in. "There is always risk

involved with entrepreneurship, but I truly believed in what I was building and continued pushing forward." Those challenges ultimately strengthened both Kristin and her company, teaching resilience, adaptability and the importance of relationships.

Today, **Couture Florals & Events** is known for designs that feel deeply personal rather than simply decorative. "I believe florals should feel emotionally connected to the people and the celebration," Kristin said. "My goal is always to create an atmosphere that feels intentional, immersive and reflective of each client's unique story and style."

That process begins long before a flower is selected. When meeting with a couple for the first time, Kristin focuses on far more than color palettes and Pinterest boards. "I pay attention to their connection — how they interact, communicate and naturally vibe together," she said. "You can truly feel the love they have for each other, and that often becomes the inspiration behind the overall design."

She believes unforgettable weddings are created through thoughtful layers of candlelight, texture, place settings and carefully curated design elements

that create a complete guest experience. "The small, intentional details and, of course, the couple themselves, are what separate a beautiful wedding from a memorable one," she said. "The love, energy and connection a couple shares are what truly set the tone."

"I especially love when couples fully trust us in the process and allow us the artistic and creative freedom to bring their vision to life in a meaningful and elevated way."

As she described her design process, I found myself thinking back to my own wedding day. Months of planning suddenly became reality the moment I stepped into our reception space. The florals did more than decorate the room — they helped tell mine and Scott's story.

What impressed me most was Kristin's ability to take fragments of ideas and transform them into a cohesive vision. Calla lilies, moss, driftwood and flowing amaranthus came together in ways I never would have imagined, creating a design that felt sophisticated, personal and completely authentic to us. It wasn't simply beautiful. It felt like us.

Continued on page 34



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 Education

Education News

Project SEARCH Program Earns Statewide and Global Recognition

The Okaloosa County School District (OCSD) is proud to announce that its Project SEARCH program at the Hilton Garden Inn Fort Walton Beach has received the Florida Project SEARCH Excellent Outcome Award for achieving

outstanding employment outcomes for its 2024-2025 cohort.

Presented during the Florida Project SEARCH Annual Conference, the Excellent Outcome Award recognizes Project SEARCH sites that achieve employment outcomes between 77% and 99% for graduating participants. Florida currently has 45 active Project SEARCH



(L to R: Bev Wilson/OCSD Instructor, Carly Detlefsen/Program Specialist, Project SEARCH, Lisa Bloodworth/Sr. Director of Transition and Support Services, Global Connections to Employment, Mei Lanie Billow/Employment Transition Specialist, Global Connections to Employment, and Vladly Fierro/Employment Transition Specialist, Global Connections to Employment)

sites across 38 cities, and the Hilton Garden Inn Fort Walton Beach program was one of only five sites statewide to receive this prestigious recognition.

The achievement also earned international distinction. Project SEARCH has approximately 800 sites worldwide, and the Hilton Garden Inn Fort Walton Beach program was one of only 166 selected to receive an Excellent Outcome Award, placing it among the top 21% of Project SEARCH sites globally.

Project SEARCH is a nationally recognized high school transition program that prepares young adults with disabilities for competitive, integrated employment through workplace immersion, career exploration and hands-on job training. Designed for students ages 18-21 who have completed their high school credits and deferred their diplomas, the program com-

bines classroom instruction with real-world work experiences through partnerships with local businesses.

The partnership between the Okaloosa County School District and Innisfree Hotels has become a model for preparing students for meaningful employment while demonstrating the value of inclusive workforce opportunities.

"This statewide and global recognition highlights the outstanding work taking place through our Project SEARCH partnership," said Superintendent Marcus Chambers. "Our students continue to demonstrate what is possible when they are provided with meaningful opportunities, exceptional support, and dedicated community partners. We are incredibly grateful to Innisfree Hotels for investing in our students and helping them develop the skills needed for lifelong success. This accomplishment is a reflection of the commitment and collaboration of everyone involved."

The recognition follows another successful year for OCSD's Project SEARCH program, which celebrated five graduates in May after completing a year of intensive workplace training and career development. Looking ahead, 10 interns are enrolled for the upcoming school year, continuing the program's mission of preparing young adults with disabilities for successful, competitive employment and greater independence.



NWFSC Expands Money-Back Guarantee to Six High-Demand Workforce Programs

Northwest Florida State College is expanding its Money-Back Guarantee Program, reinforcing its commitment to preparing students for careers that lead directly to employment.

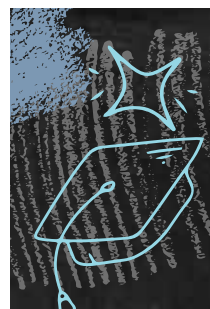
Beginning July 1, NWFSC will offer a tuition money-back guarantee in six high-demand workforce programs, doubling the number of eligible programs from three. The College has added Physical Therapist Assistant (A.S.), Medical Laboratory Technology (A.S.) and Early Childhood Education (A.S.) to the existing guarantee for Nursing (A.S.), Radiography (A.S.) and Paramedic (C.C.C.).

The program guarantees eligible graduates a full refund of tuition if they are unable to secure employment in their field within six months of graduation, provided they meet all academic, attendance, job-search and regulatory requirements established by the College and the State of Florida.

"This expansion reflects our confidence in the quality of our academic programs and, more importantly, in the success of our students," said Northwest Florida State College President Mel Ponder. "These six programs prepare graduates for some of our region's most essential careers, and their outcomes consistently demonstrate the value of a Northwest Florida State College education."

NWFSC's healthcare programs continue to earn recognition for excellence. Earlier this year, the College's School of Nursing achieved a 100% first-quarter NCLEX-RN pass rate, reflecting the program's commitment to preparing graduates for successful careers in nursing.

The newly added programs



Back-to-school savings start now: Smart ways to get ahead

It may still be summer, but back-to-school season will be here before you know it. Getting a head start now can help you avoid last-minute stress and keep more money in your pocket.

Start with a simple plan

Take a few minutes to list what you'll actually need this school year. From supplies and clothes to tech and activity fees, having a list helps you stay focused and avoid impulse buys.

Shop early (and plan for tax-free savings)

You don't have to buy everything at once, and spreading purchases out over the summer can ease the financial pressure. The Back-to-School Sales Tax Holiday runs July 20 through Aug. 20. This gives you a full month to shop for qualifying items like clothing, school supplies and certain electronics tax-free. Visit: bit.ly/florida-back-to-school for more details.

Take inventory at home

Before you shop, check what you already have. You might be surprised how many supplies like backpacks, binders and calculators can be reused or refreshed instead of replaced.

Set a budget and stick to it

Decide how much you want to spend overall and break it down by category. Giving every dollar a purpose helps you stay in control and avoid overspending as the season picks up.

Use your tools to stay on track

Mobile banking, alerts and budgeting tools can make it easy to monitor spending as you go. A quick spending check-in can help you stay within your budget and adjust if needed.

Consider applying for an Eglin FCU Mastercard®

With rates as low as 7.9% APR, no annual fee, no balance transfer fee, no cash advance fee and no international transaction fee, stress less and be ready to tap and go! Learn more at eglinfcu.org/Mastercard.

Getting ahead of back-to-school shopping isn't just about saving money – it's about creating a smoother, more stress-free start to the school year. **Start early, spend smart and get ready to make the most of those tax-free savings!**



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The hiring of a lawyer is an important decision that should not be based solely upon advertisements. Before you decide, ask us to send you free written information about our qualifications and experience.

Continued on page 20

7 Reasons to Seek Math Help as Soon as School Starts

Students often need more individual attention than their school can provide.

It's a widely known fact that strong math skills are vital for success in high school, college, and beyond. Unfortunately, this hard truth causes an undue amount of anxiety and stress in kids who have not yet been taught math in a way that makes sense to them. And, quite often, there are no clear signs that they're struggling. So when is the best time to get math help for your child? As soon as the school year begins (if not sooner!). Here are seven good reasons why:

1. Sometimes individual instruction is necessary to get a good grasp on math.

The only way to do well in math throughout high school and beyond is to truly understand the concepts. While some students are able to get by in the early years through memorization, this won't work as the material becomes more advanced. A qualified, caring instructor can give students the individual attention they need to develop a deep understanding of math and ultimately become high achievers.

2. Any gaps need to be addressed right away.

Many students have learning gaps in their math foundation that prevent them from reaching their potential. Because math

concepts build on each other, these gaps need to be addressed and remedied before students take on new material in order to keep from falling further behind as the school year progresses. This is where a math-learning program with a structured approach backed by a proven curriculum will be most effective.

3. Some math knowledge is generally lost over the summer.

Speaking of learning gaps, have you heard of the "summer slide?" On average, children lose 2-3 months of math skills during the summer months if they aren't involved in a summer math program. This means they may be starting the school year a little behind where they left off. Getting them the math help they need right away will reinforce concepts they're encountering early in the year and introduce them to new ones, so they're on the right track for a successful school year.

4. Confidence in math leads to confidence in other subjects.

When students are able to solve math problems, they feel a tremendous sense of pride and accomplishment. A good instructor will help a child challenge and exercise their own mind. As comprehension increases, the child's enthusiasm for math grows and they develop confidence, not only in math



but in all of their classes. This can be life-changing for a child, so why not get them on the right path now?

5. Just doing okay means they could be doing better.

Sometimes it isn't obvious that your child could use math help. You may even have accepted that they're just "average" math students. But all students are capable of being good at math if they're given the right kind of individual instruction. When they start believing this themselves, there's no reason why they can't be high achievers.

6. If math class is too easy, it's time for more advanced concepts.

Students who already excel in math have a wonderful opportunity to expand their skills beyond what they're learning in the classroom. By mastering complex concepts, they can reach higher math levels and unlock their true potential. The right kind of supplemental math help will show them all the

doors that being good at math can open.

7. Now is the time to prepare for standardized tests.

Students who are looking ahead to college shouldn't wait until the last minute to get test-prep help. To get the best results on standardized tests, students need to truly understand the math, not cheat themselves by relying on test-taking strategies. The sooner they can get targeted math help for these tests, the more prepared they'll be.

Mathnasium students get results.

As you weigh the different options for supplemental math help, consider enrolling your child in a math-learning program with a history of setting children on the right path toward academic success. The curriculum and methodology at Mathnasium Learning Centers has been proven through the achievements of over a million students.

Mathnasium's proprietary teaching method — the Mathnasium Method™ — has been transforming the way children learn and appreciate math since 2002. It does more than just raise their grades and scores — it teaches them to think crit-

ically, solve problems, and work independently — skills that go beyond the classroom and last a lifetime. Students are assessed individually and given a customized learning plan detailing the specific type of math help they need. Attentive, highly trained math tutors will teach your child face-to-face at the pace that's right for them. And both in-center and online tutoring in math is available. Whether they're struggling at math, wanting to jump ahead, needing to be challenged, or looking for test-prep help, your child will get the individual attention they need to achieve great things.

No matter where you decide to turn for math tutoring, the key is not to wait. Get them started right away, so they can enjoy the school year ahead with confidence and a positive outlook.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aug. 1: 15th Annual Pinfish Tournament.

Aug. 15: Casino Night Fundraiser Benefitting A Bed 4 Me • Casino Games, 6-9 p.m. • Ronny Dean Garrett, 6-10 p.m. • 10% of Food Sales Donated to A Bed 4 Me • Top Winners Use Tokens for Gift Baskets • Prize

for Best Casino Costume • Visit bluewaterbaymarina.com for More Details.

Aug. 30: Jimmy Buffett Day • Shrimp Boil, 4-7 p.m. • Jimmy Buffett Tribute Band, 4-8 p.m.

Sept. 13: Cardboard Boat Race, 4 p.m.

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

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

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

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pumpkin breads, apple cider muffins, chocolate chip cookie bars, or brownies with espresso ganache. Gluten free bakery items available. Coffee roasted every week in-house. Try a breakfast special with quiche or kolache alongside hashbrown casserole and cup of coffee. Breakfast burritos are rolled and ready to grab and go- choose from bacon, birria, chorizo or veggie served with house made cilantro lime or chipotle sauces. Espresso, latte, cappuccino, cold brew or nitro made to order. Breakfast and lunch sandwich specials and a full evening catering menu if you are looking to host an event or party. Come for the coffee, stay for the goodness!

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EDUCATION NEWS

continued from page 18

also demonstrate exceptional student success and workforce outcomes. The Physical Therapist Assistant program has achieved a 100% employment rate among licensed graduates over its past three graduating cohorts. The Medical Laboratory Technology program has maintained 100% employment placement for graduates seeking jobs in the field or continuing their education while posting ASCP certification pass rates ranging from 80% to 100%, including multiple years at or near 100%. Meanwhile, the Early

Childhood Education program helps address one of Northwest Florida's most pressing workforce needs, with nearly 2,000 annual job openings for early childhood professionals across the region.

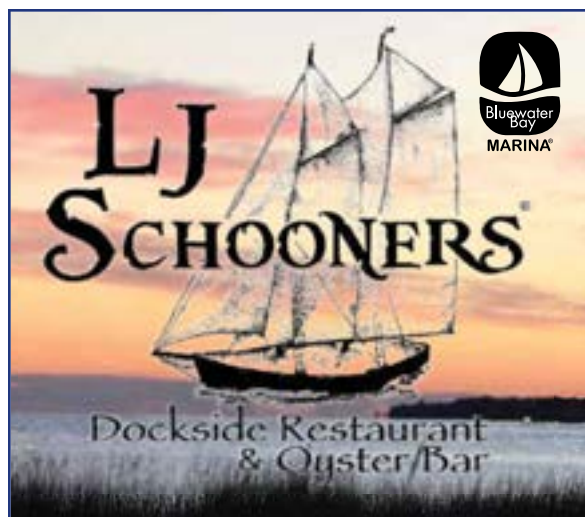
The original Money-Back Guarantee Program, introduced in 2024 for Nursing, Radiography and Paramedic, has proven highly successful. Since its launch, no tuition refund has been given, underscoring the College's strong record of graduate employment and the continued demand for its workforce graduates.

Established by the Florida Legislature, the Money-Back

Guarantee Program is designed to help students pursue high-demand careers with added confidence in their educational investment while supporting Florida's workforce needs.

"Our mission is to prepare students for meaningful careers that strengthen our communities and meet the workforce needs of our region," Ponder said.

For more information about the Money-Back Guarantee Program and eligible programs, visit NWFC.edu or contact NWFC Admissions at 850-502-2895.



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Casino Games 6-9pm • Ronny Dean Garrett 6-10pm
10% Food Sales Donated To A Bed 4 Me • Top Winners Use Tokens for Gift Baskets
Prize for Best Casino Costume • Visit bluewaterbaymarina.com for More Details



Kids Eat Free Wednesdays

5-9pm • Kids eat free from kid's menu • 10 and under with purchase of one adult entree • One child per adult

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, Lunch 2 pm

More Events and Live Entertainment

Aug. 1: 15th Annual Pinfish Tournament
Sept. 13: Card Board Boat Race 4pm
Sunday Brunch 9am-1pm

Aug. 1: Parker & Ivoree Willingham 6-10pm
Aug. 8: Below Alabama 6-10pm

Aug. 15: Casino Night Benefitting a Bed 4 Me
6pm, Ronny Dean Garrett 6-10pm

Aug. 22: John Gault Dance Band & Tacky Tourist
Party 6-10pm

Aug. 28: Jody Lucas 6-9pm

Aug. 29: Tailgate Party 5pm

Aug. 30: Jimmy Buffet Day, Shrimp Boil 4-7pm,
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From Seacrest Beach to the White House: Lulu’s Story Changes America

By Lori Leath Miller

Two years ago, our community witnessed something that few who were there will ever forget.

On June 7, 2024, what began as a beautiful summer afternoon at Seacrest Beach turned into one of the most extraordinary stories of courage, faith and humanity our area has ever experienced. (See July 2024 issue of MyDestinLife.com for original article: <https://destin.lifemediagrp.com/the-miracle-at-seacrest-beach-america-responds/>)

A shark attacked 15-year-old Lulu Gribbin as she swam in the Gulf. Within moments, complete strangers rushed into the water. A beach attendant, vacationing families, physicians, nurses, an EMT, a former lifeguard and countless others worked together to save her life before South Walton Fire District crews, Walton County Sheriff’s deputies and emergency medical personnel arrived.

When we first shared Rick

Karle’s powerful story, “The Miracle at Seacrest Beach: America Responds,” we weren’t simply reporting on a tragedy. We were celebrating the remarkable people God placed on that beach that day. As one physician later reflected, “When we come together, great things can happen.”

Now, that miracle has led to something even bigger.

Recently, President Donald Trump signed Lulu’s Law, federal legislation that will allow shark attacks to become eligible for Wireless Emergency Alerts—the same emergency notification system used for Amber Alerts and severe weather. The goal is simple: if a confirmed shark attack occurs, emergency officials can quickly notify people nearby before another family unknowingly enters the water.

The legislation, sponsored by U.S. Alabama Sen. Katie Britt, is named for Lulu, who was one of three people bitten during a string of shark attacks along the Florida Panhandle that day.

Lulu lost her left hand and part of her right leg in the attack and has spent the time since advocating for better safety measures to help protect others.

The idea grew from a heart-breaking reality. About 90 minutes before Lulu was attacked off Seacrest Beach, another swimmer had been bitten just a few miles away. Had beachgoers throughout the area known about that first attack, Lulu’s family has often said, the outcome might have been very different.

Today, Lulu has become much more than a survivor. She has become an advocate, sharing her story across the country and encouraging lawmakers to improve beach safety.

In addition to helping inspire Lulu’s Law at both the state and federal levels, she and her family established the Lulu Strong Foundation, which works to improve the accessibility, performance and affordability of advanced prosthetics, virtual reality therapy and other



PHOTO: LULU STRONG (INSTAGRAM)

life-changing technologies for individuals with limb differences.

Her resilience has drawn national attention. In 2025, Southern Living named Lulu its “Southerner of the Year,” recognizing not only her advocacy efforts, but also the remarkable way she has embraced life after the attack. Today, she is an accomplished adaptive golfer and water skier who continues to inspire others while still enjoying life as a teenager.

While Florida has not created its own statewide shark alert system, the new federal law directs the Federal Communications Commission to establish

rules allowing state and local emergency officials to use Wireless Emergency Alerts after confirmed shark attacks.

For those of us along the Emerald Coast, this legislation is deeply personal.

We remember the helicopters overhead. We remember praying for Lulu and the other victims. We remember the countless heroes who stepped forward without hesitation. And we remember a frightened teenage girl who whispered just one sentence after surgery: “I made it.”

Today, because of her courage and determination, Lulu’s story is helping protect beachgoers not only here on the Emerald Coast, but across America’s coastlines.

Publisher’s Note: We believed then that God was working through ordinary people to save Lulu’s life. Today, her story continues to save lives in a different way—by changing how America responds when every second counts.

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SS United States Nears Final Voyage as World's Largest Artificial Reef

After more than 50 years of retirement and several unsuccessful attempts at restoration, America's fastest ocean liner is preparing for one final record-breaking voyage—not across the Atlantic, but beneath the Gulf waters off Destin-Fort Walton Beach.

The historic SS United States is one step closer to beginning that next chapter. Okaloosa County officials recently announced that environmental remediation of the legendary vessel is complete. The ship remains docked in Mobile, Alabama, awaiting final approvals from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Environmental Protection Agency before deployment as the world's largest artificial reef.

For many local residents, the announcement marks another milestone in a project they have followed closely since Okaloosa County purchased the ship in 2024. What began as an ambitious vision to preserve an American icon has become one of the most unique environmental and tourism projects in the nation.

Launched in 1952, the SS United States carried four U.S. presidents, Hollywood celeb-

rities, military personnel and countless travelers during her years at sea. More than seven decades later, she still holds the trans-Atlantic speed record, a title no passenger ship has ever surpassed.

Rather than allowing the vessel to be scrapped, Okaloosa County chose a different path.

The Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners approved the purchase on Oct. 1, 2024. After nearly 30 years docked in Philadelphia, the ship departed on Feb. 19, 2025, arriving in Mobile on March 3, 2025, where extensive environmental remediation began. That work was completed in May 2026, bringing the project significantly closer to deployment.

The approximately \$13 million effort is funded through tourism development revenues and partner contributions. Funding covers the ship's purchase, towing, environmental preparation, deployment and support for a future land-based museum dedicated to preserving its history.

Partners include Visit Pensacola, the Coastal Conservation Association, Yamaha Rightwaters, the Fish & Wildlife Foun-

dation of Florida, Force Blue, NAUI Worldwide, the Explorers Club and Diver's Alert Network. Scientists from Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution will conduct long-term research documenting how an entirely new reef ecosystem develops on the vessel from day one.

Once deployed, the SS United States will become the crown jewel of one of the nation's most successful artificial reef programs. Since the 1970s, Okaloosa County has deployed 48 large vessels and developed nearly 600 artificial reefs in Gulf waters.

County officials expect the ship to generate significant tourism benefits as divers from around the world travel to experience the historic vessel. The project is also expected to support local hotels, restaurants, charter operators, retailers and other businesses throughout the region.

Equally important are the environmental benefits. Prepared under strict federal and state standards, the vessel will create vital habitat for marine life, including grouper, snapper, tuna, mahi-mahi, marlin, sea turtles and countless other species that



SS United States Update (Photos taken May 2026)

support a healthy Gulf ecosystem.

For those concerned about preserving history, county leaders emphasize that the project does exactly that. Rather than disappearing into a scrapyard, the SS United States will continue telling her story beneath the Gulf as a thriving artificial reef while a future museum shares her remarkable legacy with visitors from around the world.

For a ship that once connected continents, her final voyage

will connect history, conservation and tourism in a way few projects ever have. Soon, the world's fastest ocean liner will begin her slowest journey—settling beneath the Gulf and becoming home to thousands of marine creatures while inspiring future generations of divers, anglers, scientists and visitors.

For updates on the project, visit destinfwb.com/explore/eco-tourism/ssus.

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Summer Freshwater Fishing on the Panhandle



By HELEN PETRE

Florida is the fishing capital of the world, and the panhandle offers an incredible diversity of fishing experiences. Our emerald green, clear water, and white sand beaches provide a productive surf fishing experience, and our fresh and brackish water offer land and kayak fishing. Then, of course there is offshore redfish, which is the life experience we all dream about.

Thankfully, though, you do not need a boat to surf fish or freshwater fish. Surf fishing for pompano is fun in spring, but as beaches get crowded and hot, freshwater fishing offers an alternative that requires little more than a pole and bait and is cooler and quieter.

One of a child's most memorable experiences is often that first fish catch. It is an experience that can lead to a lifetime of conservation and sportsmanship and teach skill, independence, achievement and respect for nature. Kids who learn to fish, and adults who learn skills, are self-confident and dependable. Now is a great time for a family fishing experience.

What Will You Catch?

Largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*)

Largemouth bass is the most popular gamefish in North America, and Florida's freshwater fish. Bass is everyone's favorite warm water fish. Bass are really fun to catch because they put up a good fight. Largemouth bass spawn in spring, and are easier to catch then, but summer is still a good time to catch them in lakes, rivers, and ponds. They prefer vegetated

shorelines and live for ten years in the wild.

Bass are carnivores. In the wild, they eat fish, mollusks, and insects. The best live bait is a golden shiner hooked through the lips with a large hook (2 to #5). Use a medium rod with 14-to-20-pound test line. If using artificial bait, plastic worms work well.

Adult bass are apex predators, but young are prey for herons, larger bass, and catfish.

Catch bass in the Choctawhatchee River, accessible from Ebro, and the backwater lakes that surround the river, or fish in Holmes Creek, a spring fed tributary of the river. Bass are plentiful in the Yellow River, which flows southwest from Alabama.

Bluegill (*Lepomis macrochirus*)

Besides bass, the Panhandle is an exciting place to fish for sunfish, bluegill (or bream, or brim) are the most common summer sunfish. They are fun to catch and great to eat. These are panfish with vertical stripes. Bluegill live in rivers, streams, springs, and lakes. They spawn in summer, building nests in shallow water on sandy bottoms. Nests are in groups of about 35; a collection of shallow, scooped out areas all together in one area. The male makes the nest, invites the female to lay her eggs, and fertilizes them. Then the father to be guards the eggs until they hatch, in a week or so.

Bluegill eat mostly insects, but worms are the most successful bait. Use a small #6 hook with a split shot sinker about six inches up the line.

Another Panfish: Redear Sunfish

Redear sunfish are popular sportfish, sometimes called shellcrackers. They look like bluegill, but are slightly larger, and have a distinctive red mark on the gill cover. At home in

warm water of lakes, streams, and ponds, redear sunfish live in the vegetated areas near logs, often in groups. In warm weather, they sometimes congregate around lily pads.

Redear favorite foods are snails, clams, and mussels, hence the name shellcracker. Redear crush the shell, eat the meat, and spit out the shell fragments.

Males make nests in groups, in somewhat deeper water than bluegill, lure in females, and induce them to lay eggs by making a popping sound. The female produces thousands of eggs, and then moves on to find another male, while the male fertilizes and fans the eggs to remove sediment and provide oxygen for a week until hatch. First year growth is about five inches. After that, fish grow about an inch a year.

Redear are caught most of-

ten on worms, small shrimp, or jig heads, with small hooks (6 to #10). Use small spinning rods with two-to-four-pound test. Redear are good fighting, good eating fish.

Warmouth (*L. gulosus*)

Warmouth are like other panfish, but they have a red eye and a large mouth. There are dark lines radiating from the eye that look like war paint, hence the name. Warmouth swim in swampy, still, darker water than other sunfish. They spawn all summer building solitary nests next to submerged objects. Warmouth eat crayfish, insects, and fish, mostly in the morn-



Male redear sunfish guarding eggs. Wikipedia.

ing. They are ambush predators, hiding in vegetation and then aggressively attacking prey. They appear to sleep at night.

The same baits and lures work for warmouth as for other sunfish, just in muddy waters.

Channel Catfish (*Ictalurus punctatus*)

Catfish are hard pulling fish

Continued on page 25

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Multi-County Collaboration to Add 224-Foot Vessel to Artificial Reef System

BY NICK TOMECEK, OKALOOSA COUNTY PIO

The Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners recently approved an agreement between the county and the Panama City Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB) on June 16, 2026, to expand the Gulf's artificial reef system with the deployment of the 224-foot Henry Alex vessel to create the Sposit Reef, the newest addition to a growing network of large-vessel artificial reefs in the region.

The partnership builds on a successful history of collaboration between Okaloosa County's tourism department, Destin-Fort Walton Beach, and the Panama City Beach CVB, including the deployment of the 239-foot Deep Stim III in 2023.

"The marine life that benefits from these artificial reefs does

not see borders," said Okaloosa County Board Chairman Trey Goodwin. "We are pleased to be working again with our neighbors in Panama City Beach on this effort as a showing of how the power of partnerships can create something worthy for our residents, visitors and the environment."

The \$450,000 cost to purchase, prepare and transport the vessel will be shared equally between Okaloosa County and the Panama City Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau, with each organization contributing \$225,000.

"This project is another example of how strong partnerships can create lasting benefits for our Gulf," said Erin Graham, coastal resources manager for the Panama City Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau. "By working alongside Okaloosa

County and CCA Florida, we are expanding critical habitat for marine life while creating new opportunities for anglers and divers to experience the incredible resources our waters have to offer."

The Coastal Conservation Association (CCA) Florida, a longtime partner in marine conservation and artificial reef development, will provide an additional \$60,000 to cover towing and deployment expenses. Beyond supporting numerous artificial reef deployments, CCA has partnered with the county on invasive lionfish removal efforts, habitat restoration projects, redfish release initiatives and the ongoing SS United States artificial reef project.

All funding for this project is provided through tourism development tax revenue and partner contributions. The Sposit Reef

was named by CCA in memory of the late Rebecca Sposit, human resources director at the CCA national office.

"Rebecca Sposit did so much for marine conservation through her role at CCA, in ways the public could never see," said Pat Murray, CCA's national president and CEO. "She was a beloved part of CCA, and this reef is a lasting testament to her impact on the organization and the marine environment."

"The Sposit Reef deployment serves as a lasting tribute to Rebecca's life and legacy while reflecting our ongoing commitment to the conservation and enhancement of Florida's marine resources and coastal ecosystems. We are grateful for the opportunity to work alongside our partners on initiatives that strengthen marine biodiversity, expand critical habitat for fish

and other marine species, and support economically important local industries, including recreational fishing and diving," said Brian Gorski, executive director of CCA Florida.

The proposed deployment site is located at 30° 05.831'N, 86° 17.749'W, in approximately 120 feet of water, 22 nautical miles from the Destin East Pass and 28 nautical miles from the Panama City Pass. The official reef name will be the Sposit Reef. Deployment is expected in fall 2026.

Okaloosa County has deployed 48 large vessels in the Gulf since the 1970s. Those vessels are part of nearly 600 existing artificial reefs in Gulf waters. Explore 3D imaging of the county's large-vessel reefs at <https://www.destinfb.com/explore/eco-tourism/artificial-reefs/3d-models/>.



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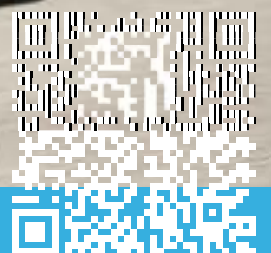
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FISHING

continued from page 23

that live deeper in lakes and are active after sunset. Chicken and beef liver, and worms are good baits because catfish smell to find food in the dark lake bottoms. Catfish have taste buds all over their bodies to help them locate food, but they do not eat decaying materials or detritus. They eat crayfish and mollusks.

Males become darker, with dark lips, and a swollen head, while females become lighter during the summer spawning season.

Adults are 20 inches long. Meat is white, crisp, tender, and tasty. Catfish are for eating. Fish on the bottom with a sturdy #2 to #4 hook, and a heavy split shot sinker. FWC stocks catfish in Juniper Lake, Walton County.

Where to Fish?

Sunfish are in any year-round rivers, streams, backwaters, and ponds, with larger fish in larger water bodies. The Yellow and Choctawhatchee Rivers are sure



Warmouth. Wikipedia.

to please. Fish where tributaries enter the larger rivers, especially Holmes Creek, a spring fed tributary of the Choctawhatchee. Sunfish love cover. Anywhere around logs, stumps, vegetation, or stuff in the water is where they are.

Juniper Lake, in Walton County, is periodically stocked with catfish and bass. bream,

and crappie. Bass may be a bit farther out in colder water in summer, and catfish are on the bottom.

Simon Horaist, owner of Dixie's Yards and More in DeFuniak Springs (pictured left), caught this four and half pound largemouth on Juniper Lake in May.

Florida summers are hot, but

the fish still bite. Opportunities for freshwater fishing abound. This is the perfect time for family fun, but teaching children to fish is more than fun. It is an education in patience, skill, and achievement. You are making memories, but you are also developing an appreciation for nature and encouraging responsibility for protection of the en-

vironment. Family fishing produces self-confident, persistent, capable, analytical people. Go outside and enjoy the Florida Panhandle.

Helen Petre is a retired biologist. Any ideas or suggestions for articles about nature, wild things, and science, please email: petrehelen@gmail.com.

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When the Kids Go Back to School, Will Your Dog Stay Home, Too?

By JONATHAN & BRITTANY
YOUNKER

If you're a parent, there's a good chance you've already started the back-to-school countdown. New backpacks? Check. School supplies? Check. Freshly sharpened pencils? Check.

But has anyone checked on the dog?

For the last few months, your kids have been your dog's full-time entertainment committee. They've been tossing tennis balls, sneaking treats, opening the back door every five minutes, and serving as unpaid "in-home pet sitters."

Then the month of August hits.

The house gets quiet. The school bus pulls away. Your dog looks out the window thinking, "Wait... where did my people go?"

Cue the escape plan.

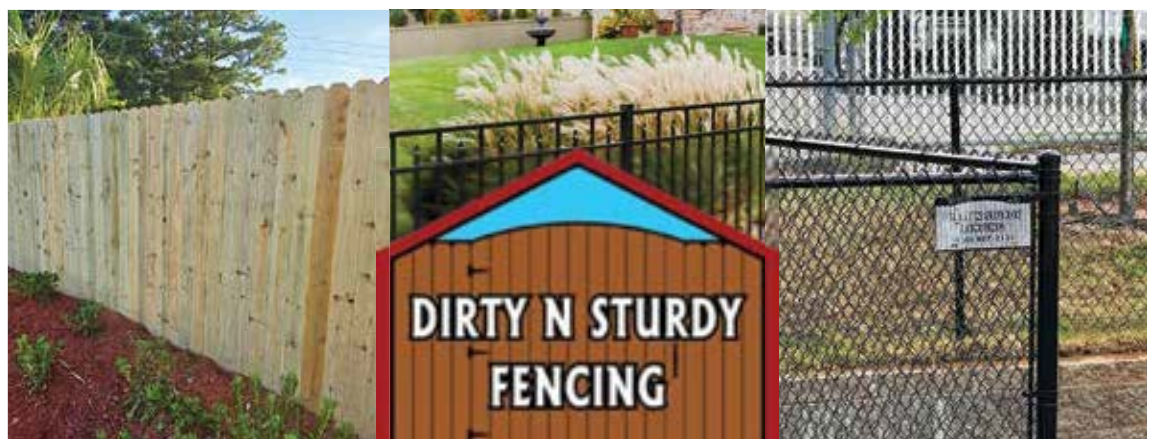
It's amazing how quickly a bored dog can discover that loose picket, weak gate latch, or little hole under the fence you've been meaning to fix "one of these weekends." Before you know it, they're introducing themselves to the

neighbors or taking themselves on an unsupervised walk through the neighborhood.

Back-to-school season is actually one of the best times to give your fence a little attention. Walk the fence line, check for loose boards, sagging gates, and gaps underneath. Better yet, let Dirty N Sturdy Fencing do the heavy lifting. Whether it's a quick repair, a complete replacement, or ongoing maintenance through our Fence Maintenance Plan, we'll help make sure your backyard stays a safe place for everyone—especially your four-legged family members.

From our family to yours, we hope this school year is filled with great teachers, new friendships, and a little extra peace and quiet... unless, of course, your dog has other plans.

Here's to happy kids, relieved parents, and pets that stay exactly where they're supposed to be. At Dirty N Sturdy Fencing, we're helping keep families together—one fence at a time.



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Six Rescued Horses Find Hope and Healing at Alaqua Animal Refuge

Six horses are getting a second chance thanks to the team at Alaqua Animal Refuge, where they are now receiving specialized care, nourishment and rehabilitation after being

surrendered during a recent investigation in Holmes County.

For years, Life Media has shared stories of Alaqua's extraordinary work rescuing, rehabilitating and advocating for

animals throughout Northwest Florida. This latest rescue is another example of the Refuge's unwavering commitment to providing hope and healing when animals need it most.



ranching history and are recognized today as Florida's official heritage horse. Only a limited number remain, making Traveler not only a survivor of cruelty, but also a living piece of Florida's history.

While Traveler represents an important piece of Florida history, Hood emphasized that every horse in the rescue is equally deserving of care and compassion.

The rescue highlights the vital role Alaqua continues to play throughout Northwest Florida, responding to

animals in crisis and providing lifesaving intervention when needed. From disaster response and cruelty investigations to rehabilitation and adoption efforts, Alaqua remains a beacon of hope for animals across the region.

The road to recovery for these six horses will be long, requiring ongoing veterinary treatment, specialized nutrition, medications, hoof care and daily rehabilitation.

Cases like this are among the most challenging and expensive rescues Alaqua undertakes. While the legal system determines accountability, the immediate responsibility for providing lifesaving care falls to organizations like Alaqua and the community that stands beside them. "In recent months, our team has responded to an unprecedented number of cruelty cases," Hood said. "Each time we say yes, we do so because these animals have nowhere else to turn. But, every rescue stretches our resources further."

She continued, "We never want cost to be the reason we can't help an animal in desperate need. The generosity of our community has made these rescues possible, and today we're asking for that support once again. Without continued donations, it becomes increasingly difficult to say yes to the next call for help. These horses deserve every chance to recover, and together, we can give them that chance."

Donations made to support this rescue will help provide



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Continued on page 28



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 Fruc-

tose 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, popsicles, 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

The Wonder of Labels



in the EU and listed as known carcinogens. Canada Chemical 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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 Wellness


BY KASSIA GARFIELD,
MAXSTRENGTH FITNESS

When people think about building muscle and improving their health, they usually focus on exercise and nutrition. While both are incredibly important, there is a third factor that is often overlooked: sleep. In many ways, sleep is the body's secret weapon for recovery, muscle growth, and overall health. You don't get stronger during your workout—you get stronger when your body recovers afterward, and much of that recovery happens while you sleep.

Sleep is an active biological process during which the body repairs tissues, regulates hormones, consolidates memories, and restores energy stores. During deep sleep, the body releases large amounts of growth hormone, one of the primary hormones responsible for tissue repair and muscle recovery. This hormone helps rebuild muscle fibers that were challenged during exercise and supports the

recovery of tendons, ligaments, and other connective tissues.

Sleep is also critical for muscle protein synthesis, the process by which the body repairs and builds new muscle tissue. Resistance training creates microscopic damage within muscle fibers. While this sounds negative, it is actually the stimulus that tells the body to adapt and become stronger. However, without adequate sleep, the body cannot fully complete the repair process, limiting strength gains and muscle growth.

The effects of poor sleep extend beyond recovery. Even a few nights of inadequate sleep can negatively impact hormones that regulate hunger and metabolism. Sleep deprivation increases levels of ghrelin, the hormone that stimulates appetite, while decreasing leptin, the hormone that signals fullness. This can lead to increased cravings, overeating, and difficulty maintaining a healthy body composition.

Lack of sleep also increases cortisol, the body's primary stress hormone. Chronically elevated cortisol can interfere with recovery, impair muscle growth, increase fat storage, and contribute to feelings of fatigue and decreased motivation. In contrast, consistently getting seven



to nine hours of quality sleep helps create an internal environment that supports muscle gain, fat loss, and overall wellness.

Interestingly, the relationship between exercise and sleep works both ways. Just as sleep improves exercise performance and recovery, physical activity improves sleep quality. Regular movement helps regulate the body's internal clock, known as the circadian rhythm, making it easier to fall asleep and stay asleep. Exercise also helps reduce stress and anxiety, two common barriers to restful sleep.

Resistance training may be especially beneficial. Studies have shown that strength training can improve sleep quality,

increase the amount of deep sleep, and reduce the time it takes to fall asleep. Challenging the muscles during the day creates a physiological demand for recovery, encouraging the body to enter deeper, more restorative stages of sleep at night.

The combination of resistance training and quality sleep creates a powerful cycle. Better workouts improve sleep, and better sleep improves recovery, strength, energy, and performance. Together, they produce results that neither can achieve alone.

If exercise is the stimulus for change, sleep is the time when that change actually occurs. For anyone looking to build mus-

cle, improve recovery, manage weight, or simply feel better, prioritizing sleep may be one of the most effective health decisions they can make.

While sleep, nutrition, and recovery are all essential components of health, they ultimately serve a common purpose: supporting the body's ability to build and maintain muscle. Research continues to show that muscle mass and strength are among the strongest predictors of long-term health, independence, resilience, and longevity. Stronger individuals recover better from illness, surgery, and injury, maintain mobility later in life, and have lower risks of disability and chronic disease. Sleep may be the recovery superpower, but muscle is the long-term investment. The better we support recovery, the better we can preserve and build the strength that helps us not only live longer, but live better.

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HORSES

continued from page 26

emergency veterinary care, specialized nutritional rehabilitation, medications and diagnostics, farrier services, hay, feed, and daily care, long-term rehabilitation for all six horses.

As Bay Life readers know from many previous stories, Alaqua's mission extends far beyond rescue. The organization serves as a nationally recognized leader in animal welfare, education and advocacy, touching thousands of lives each year

while creating brighter futures for animals in need.

Donate through Alaqua Animal Refuge's Holmes County Horse Rescue Fund: <https://secure.qgiv.com/for/holmes-countyhorsecruelty>, online at www.alaqua.org, by calling the Refuge directly, or by mailing a contribution to Alaqua Animal Refuge, 155 Dugas Way, Freeport, FL 32439. Every gift, regardless of size, helps ensure Alaqua can continue responding when animals have nowhere else to go.



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SADIE LONG

continued from page 3

On July 13, surgeons successfully transplanted Sadie's new heart. While the surgery marked a life-changing milestone, it was also the beginning of a long road to recovery. The months ahead will include rehabilitation, medications to prevent rejection, countless follow-up appointments, and ongoing medical care.

Throughout every step of this journey, Sadie's family has been embraced by an outpouring of love from neighbors, classmates,

teachers, Community Church of Santa Rosa Beach, and people across Walton and Okaloosa Counties. Prayer chains have stretched throughout the community, reminding them they are not walking this road alone.

For many, Sadie's story has become a powerful testament to faith, perseverance, modern medicine, and the extraordinary gift of organ donation.

Today, because one family made the courageous decision to give the gift of life during their darkest hour, another little girl has been given the chance to grow up.



As Sadie begins this new chapter with a new heart, her family asks for continued prayers—not only for her healing, but also for the anonymous donor family whose unimaginable loss made this miracle possible.

Some stories remind us how fragile life can be. Others remind us how precious it is. Sadie's story is both.

To receive updates on Sadie's recovery or make a donation to support her family during this journey, visit: SupportNow: <https://www.supportnow.org/long-family>.

THE GUT SPEAKS

continued from page 4

from the adults around them, and a calm presence can be incredibly grounding.

Encourage slow breathing. A simple technique such as box breathing can help calm the nervous system: inhale through the nose for four seconds, hold for four, exhale gently for four, and pause for four before repeating. Younger children may enjoy imagining they're smelling a flower on the inhale and slowly blowing out birthday candles on the exhale.

Offer a few small sips of water and allow the moment to slow down.

These simple steps aren't

meant to replace medical care. They create an opportunity to observe whether symptoms begin to settle while helping children reconnect with their bodies.

If stomachaches have happened around previous school years, don't wait until the first difficult morning to talk about them. A relaxed conversation a few days before school starts can go a long way.

Ask open-ended questions: "What are you most excited about this year?" "Is there anything you're a little nervous about?" "I remember your tummy bothering you before school last year. How are you feeling about going back?"

Sometimes children don't

know exactly what's bothering them until they're given a safe space to think about it. If this has been a recurring pattern, consider letting your child's teacher or school staff know ahead of time. A little extra reassurance or simply having another trusted adult aware of the situation can make the transition easier.

Supporting the whole child also means supporting healthy daily habits. Consistent sleep, balanced meals with protein and fiber, regular movement, outdoor play, hydration, and opportunities for meaningful conversation all help children adapt more effectively to change.

Not every stomachache is related to the nervous system, and

it's important not to assume it is. If stomachaches become frequent, interfere with school or daily life, or are accompanied by concerning symptoms, reach out to your child's pediatrician. They know your child's medical history and can help determine whether additional evaluation or treatment is needed.

Perhaps the most important takeaway is this: Symptoms are information.

Rather than asking only, "How do we make this go away?" it can be equally valuable to ask, "What might this symptom be trying to tell us?"

Sometimes the answer lies in the digestive system. Sometimes it's the nervous system adapting

to change. Often, it's a combination of several factors.

As another school year begins, remember that children don't always have the words to explain what's happening inside. Sometimes the gut speaks first.

When families respond with curiosity instead of assumptions, they become better equipped to recognize when a child simply needs reassurance, when they may need a little extra support, and when it's time to partner with their pediatrician. Because every symptom has a story, and sometimes, listening is the first step toward understanding it.

MORE CARE

continued from page 11

giving up. Seeking additional care is an act of compassion. Professional skilled nursing and rehabilitation services work alongside families to provide expert medical care, therapy, and support while helping loved ones recover, regain independence, and live as safely as possible. Watch for these signs:

- Feeling constantly tired, even after sleeping
- Increased anxiety, stress, or depression
- Irritability or mood swings
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Changes in appetite or sleep patterns
- Feeling isolated or withdraw-

- ing from family and friends
- Losing interest in hobbies or activities once enjoyed
- Frequent headaches, body aches, or illness
- Feeling guilty, resentful, or hopeless
- Neglecting your own health appointments or medications

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Taking care of yourself is essential—not selfish.

If you're beginning to wonder whether your loved one needs more care, trust your instincts. Having a conversation early can make all the difference. Our team is here to answer your questions, discuss available options, and help you determine the level of care that's right for your family.

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- Do you think you show too much or too little of your teeth when you smile?
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Your Best Medicine Might Be a Good Night's Sleep

Why the most powerful recovery tool isn't another supplement—it's something your body was designed to do every night.

BY DR. JENNIFER M. TRENDT

We spend nearly one-third of our lives asleep, yet many of us treat sleep as if it's optional. We stay up a little later, wake up a little earlier, and assume we'll simply catch up over the weekend.

Unfortunately, our brains don't work that way. Sleep isn't simply the absence of being awake. It's one of the busiest times of the day for your brain and body.

While you're sleeping, your immune system strengthens, damaged tissues begin repairing, memories are organized, hormones are regulated, and your brain performs one of its most remarkable jobs: house-keeping.

During deep sleep, a network known as the glymphatic system becomes far more active, helping clear metabolic waste that accumulates throughout the day. Scientists now believe this nightly "cleaning cycle" may play an important role in long-term brain health.

When we consistently cut sleep short, we pay a price. Research has shown that inadequate sleep slows reaction time, impairs decision-making, increases pain sensitivity, weakens immune function, and delays recovery from both exercise and injury. If you're an athlete, sleep may be the most effective—and least expensive—performance enhancer available. If you're simply trying to stay healthy,



think clearly, or keep up with your family, the same principle applies: your body heals best when it sleeps well.

The good news is that improving sleep often begins long before bedtime.

One of the most powerful ways to reset your body's internal clock is to step outside shortly after waking. Spending 10 to 20 minutes in natural morning sunlight, ideally within the first hour of your day, helps synchronize your circadian rhythm—

the biological clock that tells your brain when to be alert and when it's time to sleep. Combine that with regular movement, limiting caffeine later in the day, reducing evening screen exposure, and maintaining a consistent bedtime, and you've given your brain the signals it needs to produce deeper, more restorative sleep.

So, where does chiropractic fit into the picture? Every moment of every day, your brain depends on information coming from your body. One of the goals of chiropractic care is to restore healthy spinal movement and reduce unnecessary stress on the nervous system, allowing the brain and body to commu-

nicate as efficiently as possible.

While chiropractic is not a treatment for insomnia, many patients tell me they sleep more deeply after an adjustment. This makes sense. A nervous system that isn't constantly responding to physical stress is often better able to shift from "fight-or-flight" into the restorative state where healing happens.

A healthier life doesn't begin with another gadget, another energy drink, or another productivity hack. It begins by giving your brain the opportunity to do what it was brilliantly designed to do every single night.

Sleep well. Heal well. Live well.



MIRAMAR BEACH
AUDIOLOGY ASSOCIATES



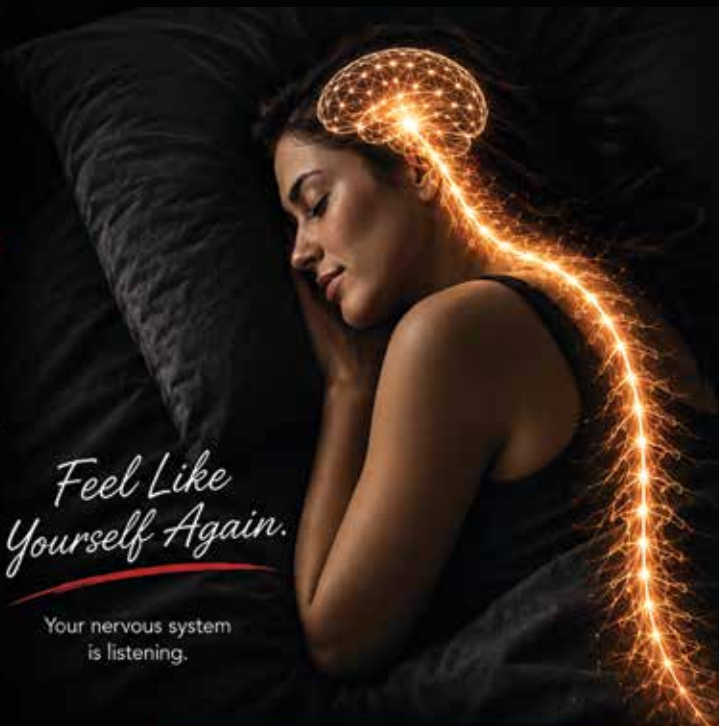
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BY STEPHENIE CRAIG, JOURNEY BRAVELY

When was the last time you remember experiencing such fun and glee that your face hurt from smiling and your body was overwhelmed with joy? Do you remember being a kid pushed super high on the swing, getting a delicious, cold popsicle from the ice cream truck or riding a bike fast with the wind in your face? Little children who have not yet been taught to be measured and self-conscious say, “Weeeeeeee!” when they have deeply joyful experiences. “Weeeeeeee!” is another way to say “I love life,” “This is amazing,” “I was made to live in this moment.”

Somewhere along the way of growing up and adulthood, you can begin to lose both the pursuit and the childlike fascination with joy. You can lose the “Weeeeeeee!” in life and days can run into weeks tending to responsibilities and forgetting that life was also made for joy regardless of your age. Loss of joy and over-focusing on the hard, uncomfortable experiences in life can leave you feeling emotionally numb, depressed, exhausted, lacking purpose and generally grumpy. Adult life is best lived in a state of balance between taking care of business and consistent, intentional pursuit of “Weeeeeeee!” moments.

You might view joy as an extra, unnecessary, low priority in life. However, it’s hard to stay motivated and emotionally checked in if life is primarily full of bills, stress, obligations, annoying people, exhausting experiences and unengaging tasks. Your body was designed to also experience a sense of passion, fun, purpose, creativity, light-heartedness, laughter, connection and feeling lit up from the inside out.

So, you know you need more joy and “Weeeeeeee!” moments in life, but how can you make it happen?

6 Ways to Chase the “Weeeeeeee!” Moments

1. Remember and learn from earlier versions of yourself. Think about what used to spark joy and light you up as a kid. Maybe it was singing, dancing, art, reading, bike riding, rides at the fair, catching bugs, fishing, running fast, splashing, rolling in the grass, playing with your pet or building. Remember times of laughing, silliness and being un-self-conscious and notice what you were doing at the time.

2. Notice your body sensations. Think about where you felt the joy and the “Weeeeeeee!” in your body in childhood. Maybe your face hurt from laughing, your chest felt warm and full, your limbs felt light and floaty or you felt energetic.

3. Connect the past with the present. Try noticing when your body feels the joy sensations now. Maybe being in the ocean, riding in a boat, riding your bike, seeing dolphins, being in nature, creative pursuits or some other current experience gives you a “Weeeeeeee!” feeling if you pay closer attention.

4. Return to past experiences of joy. Try bringing childhood joyful activities into your adult life. Write a story, pick up painting, make a fun



cake, read a book you have loved, make a handmade card, roll down a hill with your kids, catch a big fish, watch the squirrels, build Lego, tie-dye a shirt or ride a roller coaster.

5. Track your joy. Try keeping a list in your notes app of “Weeeeeeee!” activities. Then try planning intentional time in your calendar each week for those activities. Start with once a week for 15 to 30 minutes and work your way up to more amounts of time that work into your life.

6. Reflect. Over time, reflect on how life feels different as you look for and intentionally incorporate more “Weeeeeeee!” moments into your life. Use re-

mindings in your phone and on sticky notes for a few months

to keep you on track with your practice of joy until it becomes a habit.

If you are a person who experienced a difficult childhood, it may be hard to find historical times of joy to guide you. That’s okay. You aren’t alone. You can start noticing now what makes you want to say, “Weeeeeeee!” and intentionally pursue those activities while you cultivate a practice of joy for the first time. Have fun as you chase the “Weeeeeeee!” in your day-to-day life. Connect with us along your journey for coaching and counseling at Journeybravely.com.



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A Pastor's Ponderings: Before You Pack the Backpack



BY PASTOR "DOC" DOUG STAUFFER

August brings the annual migration of parents and children into crowded store aisles in search of school supplies. Somewhere, a teacher has requested seventeen glue sticks, four folders in colors that apparently do not exist, and a box of tissues large enough to handle every runny nose in Okaloosa, Walton and Santa Rosa counties.

Parents carefully purchase pencils, notebooks, lunch boxes, school clothes, and backpacks that may cost more than the first car they purchased. Everything is labeled, organized, and ready. At least it is ready until the second day of school, when one child has already lost a water bottle, broken three pencils, and forgotten where the homework folder goes.

We spend considerable time preparing what our children will

carry into the classroom. However, we should also consider what they will carry in their hearts into the classroom.

Before you pack the backpack, pack some prayer.

Pray with your children before they leave home. Let them hear you ask God to protect them, guide them, help them make wise choices, and give them strength to do what is right. A child may forget where he put his lunch money, but he should never forget that someone at home is praying for him.

Before you pack the backpack, give them confidence.

Children need to know that their worth is NOT determined by their grades, athletic ability, popularity, clothing, or number of friends. There will always be someone who runs faster, reads better, dresses differently, or seems to receive more attention. Teach your children to work hard without measuring their value by someone else's accomplishments or appearance.

Before you pack the backpack, include kindness.

Schools are filled with children who are carrying burdens no one can see. Some are lonely. Some are frightened. Some come from troubled homes. Some may eat lunch alone while pretending it does not bother them when it



really hurts.

Teach your child to notice the student who is overlooked. Encourage him to invite someone to sit nearby, offer a kind word, or defend a classmate who is being mistreated. Kindness does not require money, popularity, or exceptional ability. It only requires someone willing to care.

Ephesians 4:32 And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.

Before you pack the backpack, add courage.

Our children will face pres-

sure to follow the crowd, laugh at what is wrong, remain silent when someone is mistreated, and accept ideas simply because everyone else appears to accept them. They need courage to stand alone when necessary.

Courage does not mean being rude, argumentative, or disrespectful. Biblical courage is the strength to remain kind while refusing to compromise what is right.

Joshua 1:9 Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.

Finally, before you pack the backpack, teach them the difference between right and wrong.

Children need more than in-

formation. They need wisdom. A student may learn mathematics, science, history, and technology, yet still be unprepared for life if he has never learned honesty, responsibility, self-control, respect, and a true reverence for God Almighty.

Schools have an important responsibility, but parents must never surrender their God-given role to anyone. The home should be the most influential classroom. It may sound cliché but children learn more

from what they see than what we tell them.

They notice how we speak when we are frustrated. They watch how we treat people who obviously unable to reciprocate. They observe whether our faith is merely something we put on full display on Sunday or something we live every day.

Soon, children throughout our community will walk into classrooms carrying backpacks filled with supplies. Let us make sure they are also carrying prayer, confidence, kindness, courage, and a clear understanding of right and wrong.

And parents, you may also want to pack an extra pencil. By lunchtime, the first one will probably be missing, broken or given away.



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Sean of the South: Ball Games



BY SEAN DIETRICH

I remember going to a ball game with my old man. I remember the smells. Stale beer, human sweat, and the odor of unnaturally pink hotdogs that turned your bowels into stone.

I remember before the game, things got very quiet. All 30-odd thousand people rose. The throngs of stadium chairs creaking sounded like the world was splitting.

Everyone's dad put down his non-evangelical beverage, SLOWLY, careful not to spill. Thousands of American grandpas removed lit cigars and balanced them, with surgical-like care, onto armrests.

The anthem was played.

Back in those days, the anthem was handled differently than it is today. Back then, guest artists did not take the mound, wearing asymmetric haircuts and crotch-revealing trousers. Neither did singers demonstrate 10 minutes of vocal gymnastics until their anthem performance resembled a febrile seizure.

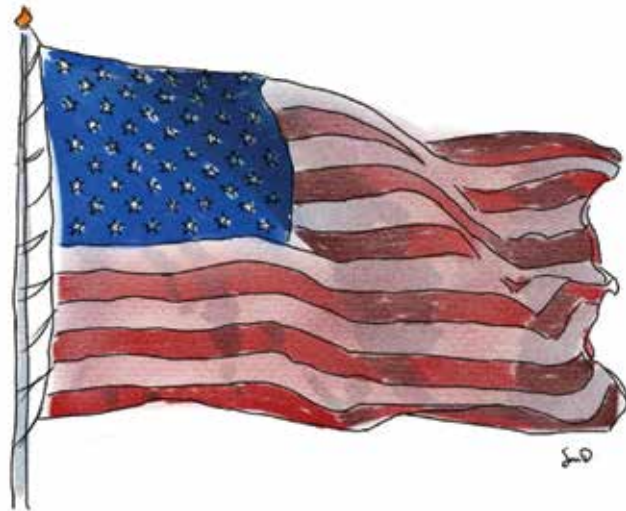
No. Back then the organ played. And everybody sang.

We used to be a nation of singers. Remember that? Singing was just normal for us. Our childhood classrooms had upright console pianos, and our teachers knew how to play them. Mrs. Moore would bang out "My Country 'Tis of Thee" before each class. Mrs. Smith played "This Land is Your Land" every Friday after the Pledge.

Well, that was a long time ago.

Recently, I attended a modern baseball game. It was a very different experience. My wife and I ordered \$34 nachos from a kiosk, and the cashier asked whether I wanted to leave a 25-percent tip. Beers were \$18 apiece.

During the game, a huge LED timer runs between pitches



so TV producers can fit in more commercials on broadcasts. The bases are now bigger, the distance between bases is now shorter. They're changing our game.

But none of that bothered me. Not really. A Major League park is what it is. Get over it. At a ball game, you get what you get, and you don't pitch a fit.

What I was most interested in, truthfully, was the anthem. I was curious about it. I wondered: Do people still sing together the way they did 40 years ago?

After all, our world is nothing like it was. Our current world, for example, is almost devoid of classroom pianos. In 1938 the

New York Times reported that 5.8 million pianos were sold in America each year. Whereas last year we barely sold 30,000.

So anyway, the moment of truth arrived. The announcer asked everyone to rise for the anthem.

People stood. Chairs creaked. Dads placed beers beneath seats. People who were vaping expelled a final blast and hid their devices from security.

Everyone looked at the flag. The music began.

And...

Everyone knew the words. Everyone sang. The stadium sounded like it was going to crumble beneath the volume of mass singing.

The boy next to me held his hat over his heart, singing so loudly the vein in his head showed. The old man beside the boy was singing even louder.

But when the song finished, the people were not. In fact, the crowd was only just getting warmed up. They kept cheering. For whole minutes, they cheered.

Fists pumped into the air. People were hugging. A flag

waved on the mega-tron screen. The sound of unified voices was engulfing. Fighter jets flew overhead. Fireworks. People were amazingly, wholeheartedly, demonstratively together. Even if only for a few seconds in time.

And in that beautiful moment of oneness, that moment of palpable joy, do you know something?

Nobody seemed to care about Cracker Barrel's sign.

PROBATE ISSUES

continued from page 9

dates, but they do benefit from understanding what is happening and why. Clear communication helps manage expectations and reduces the likelihood that uncertainty will be filled with assumptions. When people understand the process, they are often less likely to assume the worst.

Ultimately, some of the most challenging probate matters have very little to do with legal documents. The paperwork may be perfectly valid and legally sufficient. The real challenge is helping people navigate loss, expectations, and relationships during a difficult season of life.

Probate is often described as a legal process, and it certainly is. But it is also a human pro-

cess. Behind every court filing, asset inventory, and distribution is a family adjusting to the loss of someone important. Understanding that reality helps explain why probate is not always about what the documents say. More often, it is about the people left behind and the relationships they carry with them.

When families recognize this truth, they are often better equipped to approach probate with patience, perspective, and grace. And while legal documents remain important, it is frequently those human qualities—not the paperwork—that determine whether the process becomes a source of conflict or an opportunity for peace.

For more information, schedule a consultation today at 850-610-0185.



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By MARTA ROSE-THORPE,
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A Superior Mechanical is a 24-year-old Veteran-owned business, now serving Bay, Walton and Okaloosa Counties. For the first 23 years we focused on Air Conditioning, keeping our customers Cool as a Cucumber! Now as you know, in our current economic climate, many service companies are getting bought out by larger corporations; we've been made our fair share of offers. Companies have a choice: to either sell out or expand, and we decided to expand. I sometimes call us One of the Last Local Mom & Pops.

Late last year, we started adding services: Plumbing and Electrical. We started expanding our reach, and we now serve Destin, Niceville, Fort Walton Beach... and we continue to head west.

We wanted to be our customer's One-Stop Service Shop. So, when we really started thinking about Whole Home Systems, two more things kept coming up: Clean Air and Clean Water. Last year, we entered the world of IAQ, also known as Indoor Air Quality. This is particularly important for family members with allergies or asthma. We can come to your home or business and add Air Scrubbers, which remove pollutants in the air and reduce allergens and irritants. These activated carbon filters also help neutralize odors from pets, cooking and smoke. We started to realize all the interest in IAQ, which led us to diving into the Pure Water space two months ago. So now we offer Water Purification Solutions such as Reverse Osmosis, which uses a semi-permeable membrane to

remove impurities and contaminants from the water. Reverse Osmosis is commonly used for drinking water, desalination, water treatment in industrial processes, and F&B production.

What is the importance of Water Purification? First, Health, because its removing harmful pathogens and contaminants. We use a water softening process to remove hard chemicals from the water, namely calcium and magnesium; this also improves taste and odor of water. Hard water can lead to scale build-up which leads to problems with plumbing and problems with your appliances including dishwasher and washing machine. Softening the water feels silkier on the skin, is better for skin and hair, and you can actually use less soap, shampoo and laundry detergent.



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For more information, feel free to call me at (850) 814-3822.

FLORAL DREAMS

continued from page 17

While trends continue to evolve, Kristin remains drawn to timeless elegance paired with natural texture and movement. Yet some of her greatest inspiration comes from the Emerald Coast itself. "What excites me most creatively about designing for clients in Destin is the atmosphere and natural beauty of our

area," she said. "The emerald water, sugar-white sand and relaxed, yet elevated, atmosphere create a backdrop that is hard to replicate anywhere else."

Perhaps the most rewarding part of her work comes when a couple sees the finished design for the first time. "When a bride genuinely gasps, becomes emotional or gives a heartfelt reaction to what I created for her, it makes every long hour

and stressful moment completely worth it," Kristin said. "I truly live for those moments."

As **Couture Florals & Events** continues to grow, Kristin hopes to keep challenging herself creatively through larger installations, new design opportunities and unforgettable events. Recognition may come, but it has never been the goal.

When asked what she hopes couples remember long after the

flowers have faded, her answer is simple. "I want them to remember the experience," she said. "If they look back on their wedding day and remember feeling completely taken care of and genuinely wowed by the end result, then I know we've done our job well."

Having recently entrusted my own wedding to **Couture Florals & Events**, I left our interview with an even greater

appreciation for what happens behind the scenes. The flowers were stunning. The designs were memorable. But what stayed with me most was exactly what Kristin hopes every client remembers: the feeling.

Long after the bouquets have faded and the candles have been extinguished, the memories remain. For Kristin, flowers are the medium, but creating lasting memories is the true art.

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Quieter Hurricane Forecast Is No Free Pass: Bit-Wizards Urges Business Readiness

By JEFF ANDREJCIAK

While the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicts a below-normal 2026 Atlantic hurricane season, Bit-Wizards cautions businesses that “below-normal” does not mean “low impact.”

NOAA’s outlook calls for an 8–14 named storm season with 3–6 hurricanes and 1–3 major hurricanes, but the agency also stresses that any season can produce a damaging landfalling storm.

The recent devastation from Tropical Storm Arthur illustrates the risk. The storm drove an estimated \$4 billion to \$6 billion in total economic losses across the Gulf Coast, disrupting power, connectivity, supply chains, and workforce availability. For businesses, even short outages can cost thousands of dollars per hour, interrupt local and digital operations, and weaken customer trust.

During Arthur, rainfall topped 31 inches in some areas, while localized infrastructure failures showed that a tropical storm—not only a major hurricane—can cripple unprepared commercial operations. Businesses across the Gulf Coast should use the quieter seasonal outlook as a prompt to review hurricane plans, disaster recovery procedures, and continuity strategies now. “Forecasts are useful, but they can also create a false sense of security,” said Brian Schlechter, Director of IT at Bit-Wizards. “It only takes one storm to knock critical systems offline. The best time to validate backups, test remote access, and confirm recovery procedures is before the first warning cone shows up.”

NOAA leaders have emphasized that seasonal forecasts are not landfall predictions and that significant impacts can occur in years with lower overall activity. Conditions can still support rapid intensification, and a single storm can expose weak points in infrastructure, staffing, and technology. For many organizations, the largest losses come after the wind and rain, when employees cannot access the systems needed to serve customers, process payments, manage payroll, or fulfill orders.

Arthur put that strain on regional small and midsize businesses. While major cellular networks largely stayed online, localized flooding submerged ground-level server racks and utility pole collapses severed last-mile fiber connections. Companies without redundant, cloud-based configurations faced immediate hardware replacement costs ranging from \$5,000 to more than \$50,000, along with halted credit card processing and digital order fulfillment.

A Business Continuity and Disaster Recovery plan is an important first step, but executing it under pressure requires preparation and expertise. Bit-Wizards recommends that organizations work with an IT partner before storms threaten to reduce single points of failure and confirm that recovery plans function in real conditions.

That starts with eliminating on-premise vulnerabilities. Arthur showed that companies relying entirely on local, ground-level hardware risk permanent data loss or expensive emergency recovery when server rooms flood. Cloud backup and virtualization strategies help keep data safe, dry, and accessible from anywhere. Businesses should also establish last-mile redundancy so a single severed broadband line does not stop operations. Automatic failover options, such as cellular backup routers or satellite data links, can keep point-of-sale systems and cloud platforms running even when local infrastructure goes down.

Organizations should define and test recovery objectives before severe weather arrives. A backup has limited value if it cannot be restored quickly, so proactive restore testing helps confirm whether a business can return online in minutes or hours rather than days. Companies should also enable secure remote work in advance by configuring remote-access protocols, cloud-based communication tools, and device safety guidelines so teams can keep working if an office or storefront becomes inaccessible.

To help organizations get started, Bit-Wizards offers a

downloadable planning guide, available here: BCDR Planning Guide (PDF).

Bit-Wizards has supported organizations through disasters and business disruptions since 2000. The company’s Managed IT Services are designed to help businesses prepare for hurricanes, unexpected outages, device failures, ransomware attacks and other incidents that

can lead to data loss or downtime. “Whether it’s major storm damage or a ransomware attack, the outcome often depends on the same fundamentals, backups, documentation, tested recovery steps, and a team that can respond quickly,” Schlechter said.

Experts recommend that businesses have a documented disaster recovery plan, reliable

data backups and clearly defined procedures in place before hurricane season arrives. While storms often bring these concerns into focus, the same preparation can help organizations recover from a variety of disruptions throughout the year.

For more information, visit <https://bitwizards.com/contact>.

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Museum Series



By BARBARA PALMGREN

Sharing West Florida's Role in America's 250th Anniversary

We hear plenty about the original 13 colonies and the famous names of the American Revolution. We hear much less about West Florida—until now.

On June 30, more than 80 people gathered at the Historic Trust in Pensacola to hear author Mike Bunn discuss his book *Fourteenth Colony: The Forgotten Story of the Gulf South during America's Revolutionary Era*. Despite a rainy evening, guests traveled from across the region, including Okaloosa

County, to attend.

Bunn explained how West Florida remained loyal to Britain during the Revolution. Acquired from Spain in 1763, West and East Florida were among Britain's newest colonies and lacked the long-standing grievances that fueled rebellion in the original colonies. Though invited to the Second Continental Congress, West Florida did not participate.

One of the most fascinating parts of the presentation was viewing original maps showing settlements, trade routes and the challenges of building communities in this region. Deer-hide trading with Native American tribes was a major economic driver in the colony.

The enthusiastic applause at the end made it clear that attendees appreciated learning about this often-overlooked chapter of local history. As residents of the former West Florida, we truly are connected to an important part of America's story.

Revolutionary Learning at Summer Camp



This year's Heritage Museum summer camps celebrated America's 250th birthday with Revolutionary War-themed activities that brought history to life.

During the July 6-10 camp for grades K-5, students dressed in colonial clothing, marched in military drills, made drums and sang songs such as "Yankee Doodle." The experience helped campers imagine life as children during the Revolutionary War.

The July 13-17 Amazing Adventures Camp for grades 3-7 featured art, music, animals, science and history. Campers created art projects with Genevieve Smith, played music with dulcimer performer Ellen Sheppard, met a variety of animals and reptiles, and explored science experiments led by Dr. John Fay.

The week concluded with a hands-on history lesson led by Dr. Marie Hallion inside the museum's Celebrate America



250! The Revolution exhibit. Campers followed maps, learned about Paul Revere's ride, Lexington and Concord, the Boston Tea Party and the original 13 colonies, while also discovering the role of East and West Florida in America's story.

Special thanks go to Deb Edgar and her volunteers for week one and to Dr. Marie Hallion and Connie Wolfe for organizing week two. Their dedication created memorable experiences for local students.

A Community Celebrates America's 250th Birthday

On July 4, Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida visitors enjoyed free admission, lectures, reenactments and vendors throughout the day. At 1 p.m., a ribbon-cutting ceremony officially celebrated the museum's Celebrate America 250! The Revolution exhibit.

Valparaiso Mayor Dan Henkel presided over the ceremony, joined by Okaloosa County School Board member Parker Destin. Both had previously portrayed signers of the Declaration of Independence during a June gala in Fort Walton Beach—Henkel as Benjamin Harrison and Destin as George Washington.

Sons of the American Revolution Visit Heritage Museum

The Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida welcomed members of the Sons of the American Revolution (SAR) during its special America 250 celebration events in early July.

SAR and DAR members are lineage organizations dedicated to preserving history and pro-

Continued on page 38

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Emerald Coast Theatre Company Announces Fall 2026 Education Classes



BY NATHANAEL FISHER

Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC) is gearing up for another season of exceptional educational theatre programming with its **Fall 2026 Youth and Adult Education Classes, running Aug. 8 through Nov. 22.** This semester's lineup spans nearly every age and interest, from five-year-olds taking their first bow in Mini Players to seasoned performers refining their craft in Teen Company and adults finding (or rediscovering) their love of the stage in Senior Drama Club. With classes at ECTC's Grand Bou-

levard campus, its second space on Grand Boulevard (formerly Orvis), the Florida Chautauqua Theatre in DeFuniak Springs, and the Riverwalk Community Clubhouse in Freeport, ECTC continues to expand its reach across the Emerald Coast. Payment plans and scholarships are available for families who need them, and registration is open!

This fall also marks an exciting chapter for ECTC's education program, with two new directors stepping into leadership roles: **Adam Day Howard**, MFA, as education director and **Mallory McGill** as education and outreach coordinator. Together, they bring decades of combined experience in professional theatre, music direction and arts education to a program that already reaches hundreds of students each year.

Mallory McGill was raised in Destin and is thrilled to give back to her hometown community as she shares the transformative power of theatre with the next generation. Before joining ECTC, McGill taught theatre at Destin High School, where her students consistently earned Superior ratings and Critics' Choice Awards at the Florida District and State Thespian Festivals, and where she

was honored with the school's prestigious Golden Shark Teacher Award for her dedication to students and the broader school community.

McGill's résumé extends well beyond the Panhandle. She spent more than 15 years teaching and actor coaching in Los Angeles at Lesly Kahn & Co, one of the nation's premier acting studios. She trained hundreds of actors ranging in age from 6 to 65, and many of her students have gone on to appear on HBO, ABC, NBC, Disney, Nickelodeon and in national Broadway tours. As a working actress, director, filmmaker and writer, her own credits include *The Lincoln Lawyer*, *Stupid Questions*, *The Suite Life: On Deck*, *90210*, *General Hospital*, and stage productions of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Biloxi Blues* and *Misalliance*. She later discovered a passion for writing original stories, and her most recent screenplay was recognized by the Austin Film Festival and Reboot Studios. McGill holds a Bachelor of Science from Vanderbilt University, where she studied Acting/Directing, Communication Studies and Human & Organizational Development. She believes the best rehearsal rooms are built



on curiosity, kindness, collaboration and the courage to take creative risks, a philosophy that shapes everything from ECTC's youngest Mini Players classes to its competitive troupes.

Adam Day Howard steps into the role of education director following a distinguished career in higher education and professional musical theatre. Most recently, he served as Lecturer of Musical Theatre at Youngstown State University's Dana School of Music and University Theatre, where he taught vocal pedagogy, acting for musical theatre, music direction and playwriting, and directed all mainstage musicals. He also directed the university's Voices of YSU University Chorus from 2022 to 2024 and created YSU's minor in Musical Theatre Music Direction in 2024. Before Youngstown State, Howard held faculty positions at Texas Tech University, Centre College, the

Institute of the Arts Barcelona and Kent State University, teaching musical theatre performance, vocal studio, acting and the history and literature of musical theatre.

Howard's creative work spans regional theatre, Off-Broadway and international festivals. He produced and music directed *Here There Be Dragons* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2024, having previously music directed its Off-Broadway run at Players Theatre in Manhattan in 2022. As a composer and writer, he created several original Texas pantomimes for Stages Repertory Theatre in Houston, including "Hansel and Gretel -or- Out of the Woods and Into the Fire." His original music for Tennessee Williams' *Kirche, Kuche, Kinder* was reviewed in *The New York Times*. Howard holds a Doctor of Education

Continued on next page

Spires Grand Opening

Join the fun on August 15 from noon to 3 p.m. as Artful Things Niceville celebrates its grand opening as Spires!

"While our name is changing," says new owners Sarah and Joshua Clifton, "the heart of our business remains the same. Spires will continue to serve the community as a fine art gallery, art instruction and supply provider, and custom frame shop."

Enjoy light refreshments, activities for all ages, and demonstrations and showcases featuring Spires' talented in-house instructors. More details are coming soon!

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ECTC CLASSES

continued from previous page

from Ohio University (expected 2026), a Master of Performance with Honors from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, and a BA in Theatre Studies from Kent State University. He is the only American certified in the Vocal Process Methodology developed by Gillyanne Kayes, and he holds memberships in Actors Equity Association (UK), the National Alliance for Musical Theatre and the Dramatists Guild.

The **ECTC Education fall lineup** begins with Mini Play-

ers for kindergarten through first grade, where students explore songs, dance and basic theatrical vocabulary through a Trolls-themed class, culminating in a showcase on Nov. 4. Young dancers can also join First Steps Ballet/Tap, taught by Emily Bainbridge, or the Ballet/Jazz Combo, taught by Chelsea Rager. Little Players (grades 2-3) step up to a full production class experience with Trolls JR, while Big Players in grades 4-5 take on more complex choreography in their own Trolls JR production with technique class options like Group Vocal Techniques and Broadway Dance Styles.

Teens have no shortage of options this fall, from Legally Blonde JR for grades 6-12, complete with an Aug. 7 audition workshop and November performances, to specialized Masterclasses in Acting for Musical Theatre, Playwriting and Acting and Improv, all taught by Howard and McGill. Dancers can pursue Broadway Dance Styles or the monthly Leaps, Turns & Tricks Skills Lab, and competitive performers have two tracks: the JTF Performance Troupe (grades 2-12), which travels to the Junior Theatre Festival in Atlanta in January, and the Junior Thespian Competition Troupe

(grades 6-8), which competes regionally in October and at the state level in February. Students in grades 9-12 can also join Teen Company Fall, a semester-long training program that culminates in a One Act performance at the Florida Theatre Conference in November and includes mentorship toward collegiate auditions, scholarship opportunities and portfolio building.

ECTC's reach extends beyond its home campus through satellite classes at the Florida Chautauqua Theatre in DeFuniak Springs and the Riverwalk Community Clubhouse in Freeport, where K-12 students can

participate in Trolls JR. The Homeschool program offers Voice and Movement, Acting and Improv, and a hands-on Sewing and Costume Design course for students ages 9 to 18, while adults can join Beginner/Intermediate Tap, Intermediate/Advanced Tap or the Senior Drama Club for performers 55 and up.

Registration details, scholarships and payment plans are available through ECTC's website, and families with questions about specific classes are encouraged to reach out to education@emeraldcoast-theatre.org or call 850-684-0323. See you at the theatre!

MUSEUM NEWS

continued from page 36

moting patriotism. Membership is open to those who can document direct descent from a Revolutionary War patriot.

The museum's celebration included a colonial tea on July 2, a July 3 program on the role of women during the Revolutionary War and a community celebration and ribbon-cutting on July 4.

SAR members visited during the July 3 History Sandwiched In program and also toured the museum's Celebrate America 250! The Revolution exhibit, which explores the people, places and events leading to the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Among those participating was Graham W. Fountain, chair of the Okaloosa County America 250 Commission and president of the Emerald Coast SAR chapter. He joined fellow members Don Pardue, Dana Cawthon, Niceville Mayor Dan Henkel and Les Matheson in commemorating this historic anniversary.

Visitors are encouraged to tour the exhibit, sign the museum's commemorative document and become part of this important year in American history. The museum is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at 115 Westview Ave., Valparaiso.

History Museum of Northwest Florida August Events

Red, White, and Blue Ice Cream Social
Saturday, August 1 | Noon-2:00 p.m.

Celebrate summer with a festive Red, White, and Blue Ice Cream Social! Admission is \$25 per person or \$20 for museum members.

Register by calling the museum at (850) 678-2615 by July 30.

History Sandwiched-In: "Women in War Today"
Friday, August 14

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ries. Dr. Chiccarelli will present "Women in War Today," exploring how women have become an integral part of today's

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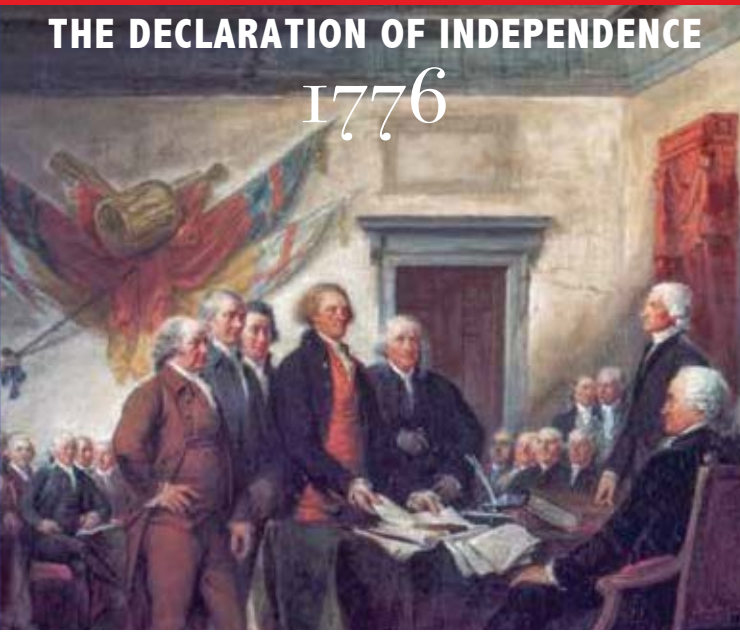


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NHS Senior Julia Milz Named Distinguished Young Woman of Okaloosa County for 2027

BY CATHERINE CARD

The Okaloosa County School District proudly congratulates Julia Milz, a senior at Niceville High School, on being named Distinguished Young Woman of Okaloosa County for 2027 during the annual scholarship competition held July 18 at the Fort Walton Beach Civic Auditorium. Milz earned the prestigious title after competing alongside seven outstanding high school seniors from across Okaloosa County. Participants were evaluated in five categories: Scholastics (25%), Interview (25%), Talent (20%), Fitness (15%), and Self-Expression (15%). As the 2027 Distinguished Young Woman of Okaloosa County, Julia received \$3,500 in scholarships. She will represent Okaloosa County throughout the coming year at community events and the Distinguished Young Women of Florida State Finals in January 2027. “Being named the Distinguished Young Woman of Okaloosa County is



an incredible honor that speaks to Julia’s character and promise,” said Amy Meyer, principal of Niceville High School. “I am extremely proud to have her as a part of our school family. I look forward to watching her continue to excel during her senior year at Niceville High School and beyond.”

The Distinguished Young

Women program recognizes young women who exemplify academic excellence, leadership, and character while promoting its national outreach message, “Be Your Best Self,” which encourages young people to Be Healthy, Be Involved, Be Studious, Be Ambitious, and Be Responsible. Superintendent Marcus Chambers stated, “Julia’s selection as Distinguished Young Woman of Okaloosa County reflects not only her academic excellence and leadership, but also the countless hours of hard work and dedication she has invested in becoming the exceptional young woman she is today. We are honored to celebrate her accomplishments and know she will represent Niceville High School, the Okaloosa County School District, and our community with pride throughout the coming year.”

The 70th Distinguished Young Women National Finals will be held June 24–26, 2027, in Mobile, Alabama, where state representatives from across

the nation will compete for the title of America’s Distinguished Young Woman for 2027. The Okaloosa County School District congratulates Julia on this outstanding achievement and wishes her continued success as she represents Niceville High School, Okaloosa Coun-

ty, and the State of Florida. For more information about Distinguished Young Women, contact Ashley Horn, National Headquarters Marketing and Communications Director, at 251-438-3621 or Ashley@DistinguishedYW.org, or visit www.DistinguishedYW.org.

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MATTIEKELLYARTSCENTER.ORG
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Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra
NFSO TODD CRAVEN, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR/CONDUCTOR

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40 YEARS

From FATE to FREEDOM

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SONGS OF FREEDOM

**Opening Classics:
Fire and Fate**

OCTOBER 17, 2026
7:00 PM

**An America 250 Celebration:
Voices of Freedom**

NOVEMBER 14, 2026
7:00 PM

**Holiday Pops:
A Candlelight Christmas**

DECEMBER 4, 2026
7:00 PM

**The Lion King:
Film with Live Orchestra**

JANUARY 23, 2027
7:00 PM

**Stars of Tomorrow:
Rising Voices**

FEBRUARY 20, 2027
7:00 PM

**Final Classics
Puccini: La Bohème**

APRIL 17, 2027
7:00 PM

GUEST ARTISTS













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