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One Child, One Book, One Patient Dog: How Dog-Harmony Builds Confident Readers

BY BREANNA BECKER

There is a particular kind of courage required of a child who struggles to read. But what if the one listening never judged you? What if your reading partner simply rested a furry head nearby and listened?

For Nancy Bown, founder of Dog-Harmony, that simple relationship between a child and a dog has been part of a calling decades in the making. "I've always loved to read," Bown said, recalling that nearly 20 years ago she and her therapy dog were already visiting libraries and working with children. "It's so funny in life how things just all come together of what you're meant to do."

Today, Dog-Harmony carries that work into schools and libraries across Northwest Florida through evaluated therapy dog teams, literacy programming and humane education.

The need remains real. According to the Florida Department of Education, 61% of Florida students in grades 3 through 10 scored Level 3 or above in ELA/Reading at the end of the 2025-26 school year. Okaloosa County reached 65%, Walton County 70% and Bay County 61%. Encouraging numbers, but ones that still leave thousands of local children with ground to gain.



Nationally, only 31% of American fourth graders performed at or above NAEP

partment of Education, 61% of Florida students in grades 3 through 10 scored Level 3 or above in ELA/Reading at the end of the 2025-26 school year. Okaloosa County reached 65%, Walton County 70% and Bay County 61%. Encouraging numbers, but ones that still leave thousands of local children with ground to gain.

Proficient in reading in 2024.

Bown believes dogs can help change that story. "I know the good we're doing," she said. "I know we're reducing anxiety. I know that we increased our literacy rate by using those reading education assistance dogs."

In the first six months of 2026, Dog-Harmony's therapy teams provided 994 hours of service across three pillars: Youth Mental Health and Crisis Intervention, Lit-

eracy Advancement and Educational Enrichment, and Adult Wellness and Healthcare Support. Of those hours, 279 were devoted to literacy and educational enrichment in local schools and libraries. Together, those 994 hours represent nearly \$100,000 in community investment.

That breadth matters because Dog-Harmony can be easy to misunderstand.

Yes, there are wagging tails, wet noses and photographs that make people smile. But behind those moments is serious community work.

Evaluated therapy teams walk into schools where children are struggling to find confidence in their own voices. They support youth experiencing anxiety and crisis. They enter healthcare facilities where patients and front-line workers are carrying difficult days. Through literacy and humane education pro-

DOG-HARMONY

continued on page 2



Ham Radio Connects Generations, Builds Community

BY MICHELLE RUSCHMAN

Ham Radio is a hobby that is not only intergenerational for men and women, but can be started with varying ability and interest in amateur radio. DJ Stewart (call sign KI4ZER) is the president of Playground Amateur Radio Club (PARC) and North Okaloosa Amateur Radio Club (NOARC). He has great memories from starting with Ham radio from early childhood.

HAM RADIO

continued on page 2



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Community

HAM RADIO

continued from page 1

“My father and grandfather were both hams in Wisconsin. When we moved to St. Peters, my dad started the St. Peter’s Emergency Operations Center. They had no emergency resources at the time and were dependent on St. Louis, Missouri, which was 35 miles east. Since few resources were allocated to people outside the city, the response times were slow. The center became a very robust program as they helped people during times our community faced tornadoes, fires, floods, and even tremors. Watching my dad help our town through those efforts taught me a lot.

From there, we started working with local governments and local police. Other hams got involved, and that experience led to a love affair with electronic equipment and communications of all types.”

In the early 19th century, the term “Ham” radio distinguished amateurs from professional operators. It stemmed from “ham-fisted,” an old wired-telegraph slang term describing clumsy Morse code operators. It has evolved into a term signifying the fellowship of those interested in a communication style that endures through the digital age.

“Our clubs are where every walk of life comes together - men and women of varying occupations, veterans and civilians, sea-



soned operators and people who are brand new to amateur radio. What we have in common is our desire to understand this hobby. We help each other get to whatever level the individual wants to reach, whether it be in selecting or setting up equipment, figuring out the various signals, or getting ready for the next license.”

To fully experience amateur radio, operators can use a variety of handheld gear or desktop transceivers communicating by voice, Morse code, or digital data. However, acquiring a license is required. Individuals do this by passing a test for a fee, which legally earns the operator privileges to broadcast on the specific frequencies for that class. There are three issued licenses: Technician Class, General Class, and Amateur Extra Class. Each license dictates what frequencies a ham radio operator can legally transmit, and the range of frequencies that can be used. Each test to obtain these licenses becomes more difficult as you learn radio theory and regulations. In the United States, the FCC (Federal Communications Commis-



sion) manages and enforces these rules.

“Based on how much someone wants to get involved, I would encourage people to try different meetings at different clubs. This is an incredibly social hobby, and each club has unique areas of focus, whether it be more technical or community-oriented. Some people come seeking help with electrical projects, others want to get together to prepare for the next license, and others appreciate the sense of camaraderie until they decide to commit to the hobby. You’ll learn something no matter what you come for, and the club members are some of the greatest people I’ve met.”

Not only will you find a new hobby and friends through amateur radio, but you’ll also have an opportunity to serve the community and take part in community events. Club members have served as points of contact at 5K events and other races, escorted parades, and helped supplement communication. Members will also be at these upcoming events:



Saturday, October 10 from 8 am to 12 pm

Trade show: Amateur Radio Club Hamfest at the Crestview Community Center at 1446 Commerce Dr in Crestview

Saturday, November 21 from 8 am to 1 pm

Amateur radio electronics flea market: SwampFest at the roller derby hangar, Hangar 41, at 41 Wyndham Ave SE in Ft Walton Beach

In addition to these events, there are opportunities to practice picking up radio signals using personal equipment well before emergencies occur. During The Fox Hunt, a mini transmitter is hidden in a defined area, and operators work their way to it using their mobile radios. From a local to a nationwide event, Field Day, twice a year in June and January, brings together amateur radio operators throughout the nation to see how many other hams they can find using a variety of frequencies.

To learn more about what Ham radio operators can do, visitors are welcome to club meet-

ings to meet area experts.

PARC meets the 1st and 3rd Thursdays at 17 1st St. in Ft. Walton Beach at 7:30 pm. W4ZBB.Org

NOARC meets the 2nd and 4th Thursdays at 4565 Live Oak Church Rd. in Crestview at 7:00 pm. W4AAZ.Org

You can also email parcfwb@gmail.com with any questions.

For those in Walton County, there is the **Walton County Amateur Radio Club**. The club meets the first Tuesday of every month at the Life Enrichment Senior Center in DeFuniak Springs at 7:00 pm. There is also a monthly club breakfast the Saturday before their club meeting at the Eagle Springs Golf Course at 8:00 am, also in DeFuniak Springs. For additional information, go to wf4x.wordpress.com.

Additional clubs in the area include the Panama City Amateur Radio Club and the Milton Amateur Radio Club.

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

DOG-HARMONY

continued from page 1

grams, children are also learning compassion, empathy and respect.

The dogs may make the work look effortless. It is anything but. **On Oct. 30, Dog-Har-**

mony’s 11th Annual Barktoberfest returns to Grand Park at Grand Boulevard at Sandestin from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. The organization’s primary fundraiser will feature its beloved dog costume contest, music, light bites, libations and a canine-only trick-or-treat celebration.

Barktoberfest matters, but Dog-Harmony’s mission cannot be sustained by one night alone. When the costumes come off, another child still needs encouragement. Another therapy team still walks through the doors of a school, youth program or healthcare facility.

The work continues. So must the support.

Recurring gifts, sponsorships, volunteers and community advocates allow Dog-Harmony to keep showing up where the human-canine bond can do the most good. “When you support

our mission, your generosity does not just stay within our walls, it ripples out across our entire community,” Bown said.

Perhaps nowhere is that ripple easier to imagine than beside a child with a book.

One child. One difficult word. And one patient dog who does not care how long it takes.

Then another word. Another page.

And, little by little, a child who begins to believe, I can do this.

To learn more about Dog-Harmony’s literacy and library programs, Barktoberfest, volunteer opportunities and ways to provide year-round support, visit Dog-Harmony’s website. www.dog-harmony.org

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A Community Honors Its Veterans with More Than a Day of Fishing

Soldiers on the Water Returns Sept. 19

BY LORI MILLER

With deep military roots and generations of veterans living and working nearby, Niceville and Valparaiso have a special connection to the upcoming 13th Annual Soldiers on the Water. On Saturday, Sept. 19, combat-wounded veterans will board local charter boats for a day created entirely in their honor.

The Emerald Coast Association of REALTORS® (ECAR), in partnership with the ECAR Foundation, local charter boat captains, sponsors and volunteers, presents the event at no cost to participating veterans. The day combines world-class fishing with fellowship, recognition and the reassurance that their service and sacrifices have not been forgotten.

Since its beginning in 2013

with 35 military participants, Soldiers on the Water has grown to serve more than 100 combat-wounded veterans. Organizers hope to welcome approximately 125 participants this year.

“Soldiers on the Water is one of the most meaningful traditions our Association has the privilege of hosting,” said representatives of ECAR. “This event is about more than fishing—it’s about showing our appreciation, building connections, and giving combat-wounded veterans an opportunity to enjoy a day surrounded by people who are grateful for their service. We are incredibly thankful to the sponsors, charter captains, and volunteers whose generosity makes this event possible year after year.”

The event will take place be-



hind Brotula’s Seafood House & Steamer at the Destin Fishing Fleet Marina. Veteran check-in and a light breakfast begin at 7 a.m., followed by an 8 a.m. boat departure. Participants will spend the morning fishing the waters surrounding Destin aboard vessels provided by

volunteer charter captains and boat owners.

After the excursion, everyone will return to shore for an afternoon meal, fellowship and an awards presentation recognizing accomplishments such as the day’s biggest catch and most fish caught. The full event is

scheduled from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Soldiers on the Water is dedicated exclusively to combat-wounded veterans. The relaxed outdoor setting gives participants an opportunity to spend time with fellow veterans, form

Continued on page 18

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 Community


BY DR. KAREN DEVORE

Mention acupuncture and most people still think of one thing: pain. Back pain. A stubborn shoulder. Sciatica. Headaches. An injury that just doesn't seem to completely resolve.

And for good reason. Acupuncture can be an extraordinarily useful tool for managing pain, muscle tension and many musculoskeletal complaints. But what often surprises patients is how much further its clinical ap-

plication can extend.

Acupuncture may support patients navigating stress, insomnia, headaches and migraines, digestive issues, fertility, inflammatory conditions and long COVID. With specialized training in neuroacupuncture, its applications can extend to neuropathy, vertigo, Parkinson's disease, stroke rehabilitation, PTSD, autism, ADHD, anxiety and other neurological and neuropsychiatric concerns.

For some patients, acupuncture addresses a specific problem. For others, it becomes part of how they support their health, function and quality of life over time.

Acupuncture Through a Contemporary Lens

Acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine have remarkably long histories of clinical use. What I find particularly interesting today is the convergence of that accumulated clinical tradition with our evolving scientific understanding of the nervous system, pain signaling, physiology and botanical medicine.

Modern research continues to investigate how acupuncture influences nervous-system signaling and pain processing, while pharmacological research examines the bioactive compounds found within medicinal plants.

We don't have to position traditional medicine in opposition to modern healthcare. Instead, we can ask thoughtful questions: What works? How does it work? For whom might it be useful? And where can it fit within a comprehensive health plan?

Acupuncture also doesn't have to be something you try only after everything else has failed. Nor does choosing acupuncture mean stepping away from conventional medicine. It can complement care from a primary care physician, neurologist, physical therapist, OB/GYN, psychiatrist or other specialist.

More than Needles

Acupuncture treatment is highly individualized. Two people with the same complaint may receive different treatment based on their health histories, symptoms and goals.

Care may also extend beyond

needles. Depending on the individual, traditional Chinese medicine can incorporate cupping, fire cupping, gua sha, food-based recommendations or customized Chinese herbal medicine.

Like many therapies, acupuncture is rarely best understood as a "one-and-done" treatment. Some people notice changes quickly, while others experience therapeutic benefit over a series of treatments. Frequency and duration depend on the individual, the complexity and chronicity of the concern, and how that person responds.

That individualized approach matters because the body doesn't organize itself into separate compartments. Sleep affects pain. Stress can affect digestion. Pain influences mood and sleep. Our nervous, hormonal, immune and musculoskeletal systems are deeply interconnected.

That interconnectedness is one reason acupuncture can fit naturally within a broader health plan.

A Specialized Approach to Neurological Care

One of the most fascinating developments within the field is neuroacupuncture.

Neuroacupuncture is not simply traditional acupuncture applied to someone with a neurological diagnosis. It requires advanced specialized education integrating acupuncture techniques with detailed study of neurological anatomy, function and rehabilitation.

This specialized approach may be incorporated into care for people navigating Parkinson's disease, neuropathy, vertigo, stroke recovery and other neurological conditions, as well as PTSD, autism, ADHD, anxiety and complex neuropsychiatric concerns.

Many of these patients already have neurologists, psychiatrists, therapists or rehabilitation specialists involved in their care. The goal is not to replace those relationships. A more useful question is whether adding another appropriate modality may help support function, symptom management and quality of life, particularly when recovery has

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Events Around the Bay

Public Fridays Begin Every Friday beginning Sept. 4, 2026 | 9 a.m.– 2 p.m.

E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center | Freeport

For the first time in its history, the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center will open to the public every Friday year-round. Visitors can explore self-guided trails, meet more than 40 ambassador animals and enjoy hands-on activities.

Admission is \$15 for ages 13 and older and \$10 for ages 4–12. Children 3 and younger are admitted free. Reservations are not required. Visit cowilson-center.org.

History Sandwiched-In Friday, Sept. 4, 2026 | Noon

Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida 115 Westview Ave. | Val- paraiso

The Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida will host Dr. Elvira S. Chiccarelli, USAFR, for a presentation featuring her extensive collection of picture boards depicting the stories of women who served in the military during World War II. Guests are welcome to bring lunch.

Admission is free, but reservations are requested. To RSVP, call 850-678-2615.

L.J. Schooners Cardboard Boat Race

Sunday, Sept. 13, 2026 |
4 p.m.

Bluewater Bay Marina | Niceville

Bluewater Bay Marina will host its 19th Annual Cardboard Boat Race, featuring single-person and two-person team divisions for individuals and businesses. Cash prizes will be awarded to first- and second-place finishers in each division, with additional honors for Best Design and the Titanic Award for Best Sinking. Businesses are encouraged to challenge their competitors to join the fun.

Early registration is \$25 for single-person entries and \$35 for two-person teams. L.J. Schooners will offer a hamburger, chicken sandwich and hot dog cookout from 4–7 p.m. For rules or registration information, call 850-897-2821 or visit bluewaterbaymarina.com.

Emerald Coast Community Singers: Celebration of American Music

Sunday, Sept. 13, 2026 |

3 p.m. Christ the King Episcopal Church

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.

Admission is free. Visit christthekingfl.org.

Burgers, Bourbon & Beer Festival

September 19 | 1-4 pm |
Mattie Kelly Arts Founda-
tion Cultural Village

Savor creative, gourmet burger tastings, premium bourbon, craft beer, vendor showcase and live music at the 6th Annual Burgers, Bourbon & Beer Festival, benefiting the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast. Vote for your favorite burger while supporting programs for local youth.

Tickets: www.zeffy.com/en-US/ticketing/6th-annual-burgers-bourbon-and-beer-festival

Interested in competing or



sponsoring? Contact Crystal Mayes at cmayes@bgcec.com.

Rain or shine. All sales are final. Day-of tickets are subject to availability.

Oktoberfest at 3rd Planet Brewing

Saturday, Sept. 19, 2026 |
Noon–9 p.m.

3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

Celebrate Oktoberfest with German-inspired food, locally brewed beer and live music. Knights of Columbus Council 13527 will serve freshly grilled bratwurst with sauerkraut and German potato salad, as well as hot dogs and soft drinks. More than 20 locally brewed beers will be available on tap, and authentic German music will be performed from 5–8 p.m.

The Council of Catholic Women will offer freshly baked desserts for donations. Proceeds from food sales benefit local charities supported by the Knights of Columbus.

Battle for the Buckle Wednesday–Sunday, Sept. 23–27, 2026

Harbor Docks | Destin

The 2nd Annual Westonwood Ranch Battle for the Buckle brings together anglers, business leaders and community supporters for four days of competitive fishing, camaraderie and giving back. Tournament highlights include a \$10,000 winner-take-all White Marlin prize and \$2,000 prizes for Catch and Release, Heaviest Tuna, Heaviest Wahoo, Heaviest Dolphin and the Junior Angler Youth Division. A \$1,500 Daily White Marlin Jackpot is also available.

Registration takes place Sept. 23, with 10% benefiting Westonwood Ranch. The boat entry fee is \$1,000. Boats should register by Sept. 23.

The tournament supports Westonwood Ranch and its mission to empower teens and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities through life-skills education, workforce development and meaningful employment opportunities.

Register at westonwood.org/battleforthebucklefishingtournament. For additional info: Joe Donovan at 850-572-3695.

Mid-Bay Rotary's 32nd Annual Oktoberfest

Friday–Saturday, Sept.
25–26, 2026

Merchants Walk | Bluewa- ter Bay

The Mid-Bay Rotary Club's 32nd Annual Oktoberfest will feature German food, beer, wine, live entertainment, vendors and family activities. Performers include the Edelweiss German Band, accordionist Walter Kasprzyk, the Emerald Coast Community Band and folk musicians Gary Schmitz, Ken Tate and Jody Lucas. Children can enjoy multiple bounce houses and balloons by Mickey Cameron.

The festival will also feature approximately 30 vendor booths and tours of North Bay Fire District fire trucks with firefighters and pararescue personnel. Bratwurst, sauerkraut, chicken, hot dogs, German pretzels, beer, wine and nonalcoholic beverages will be avail-

HAPPENINGS AROUND THE BAY

- 01
Niceville Young Professionals
11:30 am | Niceville-Valparaiso Chamber | Niceville
- 02
UNDERWATER: The Living Sea Experience
7 pm | Gulfarium | Okaloosa Island
- 04
Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee
7 am | Destin FWB Rigdon Center | FWB
- History Sandwiched In
12 pm | Heritage Museum of NWFL | Valparaiso
- 04, 11, 18, 25
Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee
7 am | Destin FWB Rigdon Center | FWB
- History Sandwiched In
12 pm | Heritage Museum of NWFL | Valparaiso
- 04-06
Perfect Hues: Baytowne Wharf Art Fest!
5 pm | Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach
- 05
Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
- Discover Science Saturday
10 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB
- 06
Women's Climbing Circle
5 pm | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin
- Labor Day Destin Dinner & Fireworks Cruise
6:30 pm | Baytowne Marina | Miramar Beach
- Boardwalk Labor Day Firework Show
9 pm | Boardwalk | Destin
- 07
End of Summer ECISS Shooting Competition
8 am | Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
- 09
Second Wednesday Breakfast
7:15 am | Niceville Community Center | Niceville
- C.A.R.E.ing for Turtles
5 pm | Gulfarium | Okaloosa Island
- Solaris Dinner Cruise
5:30 pm | Baytowne Marina | Miramar Beach
- 10
Greater FWB Chamber Nothing But Networking with Sonny's BBQ
11:30 am | Trinity UMC | FWB

- 10-27
Come From Away
Times Vary | Emerald Coast Theatre Company | Miramar Beach
- 11-12
Emerging Choreographers' Project: Blackbox
7:30 pm | NFB Studios at Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville
- 12
Rotary Sandy Bags Cornhole Tourney!
9 am-2 pm | The Back Porch | Destin
- Cirque Du Canines
7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville
- Bobbin Lace Day
1-4 pm | Heritage Museum of NWFL | Valparaiso
- 13
9th Annual Cardboard Boat Race & Cookout
4 pm | LJ Schooners & Bluewater Bay Marina | Niceville
- Emerald Coast Community Singers: Celebration of American Music
3 pm | Christ the King Episcopal Church | SRB
- 16
UNDERWATER: The Living Sea Experience
7 pm | Gulfarium | Okaloosa Island
- 17
70th Anniversary & Civic Hall of Fame Gala
5:30 pm | Okaloosa Gas District | Valparaiso
- Greater FWB Chamber Business After Hours
5:30 pm | Emerald Coast Healthcare Coalition | FWB
- 19
13th Annual Soldiers on the Water
7 am check-in; 8 am boat departure | Brotula's | Destin
- Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
- Oktoberfest (Knights of Columbus)
12 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville
- Boys and Girls Club of the Emerald Coast's 6th Annual Burgers, Bourbon, and Beer Festival
1 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation Cultural Village | Destin
- Croctoberfest 2026
6 pm | Gulfarium | Okaloosa Island



- 19 Continued
Oktoberfest
11 am | Fort Walton Elks Lodge | FWB
- 23
C.A.R.E.ing for Turtles
5 pm | Gulfarium | Okaloosa Island
- 23-27
Battle for the Buckle (Westonwood Ranch)
Times vary | Harbor Docks | Destin
- 25
Fore Her Golf Outing
8 am check-in; 9 am tee-off | The Links Golf Club at Sandestin | Miramar Beach
- 25-26
Oktoberfest (Mid-Bay Rotary)
Friday 5 - 10 pm | Saturday 11 am - 10 pm | Merchants Walk at Bluewater Bay
- 25-27
Destin Seafood Festival
Times vary | Destin Harbor | Destin
- 26
Mattie Kelly Family Bay Day
10 am | Fred Gannon Rocky Bayou State Park | Niceville
- Emerald Coast Science Center's Day of Play with ACM and Nickelodeon
10:30 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

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

able for purchase.

Proceeds support local charitable programs, including student scholarships, Rotary Youth Camp and Rotary Youth Leadership Awards.

Nighttime Neighbors

Saturday, Oct. 3, 2026 | 4-8 p.m.

E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center | Freeport

Explore the nocturnal side of the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center during Nighttime Neighbors. Hike to the bat house to watch the evening bat flight just after

sunset, learn about nocturnal wildlife and enjoy activity stations along the trail.

Admission is \$15 for adults and \$10 for children. A \$5 Camp Longleaf add-on includes s'mores, cocoa, coffee and a bounce house. Bring a flashlight! Proceeds benefit the nonprofit E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center.

Cabaret at Seagar's: An Evening with New York Voices

Thursday, Oct. 8, 2026 | 5:30 p.m.

Seagar's Prime Steaks & Seafood

Sinfonia Gulf Coast presents an intimate evening with



Grammy Award-winning vocal ensemble New York Voices as part of the group's farewell tour, The Four and Only. Peter Eldridge, Kim Nazarian, Darmon Meader and Lauren Kinhan will celebrate 40 years of vocal jazz with inventive arrangements and seamless harmonies spanning jazz, pop and Brazilian influences.

Tickets are \$375 per person and include valet parking, a sparkling-wine reception, a multicourse dinner with wine, gratuity and the performance. Proceeds benefit Sinfonia Gulf Coast's music education and community engagement programs.

27th Annual Emerald Coast Home & Boat Show

Saturday, Oct. 10, 2026 | 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

Sunday, Oct. 11, 2026 | 10 a.m.-3 p.m.

**Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center
1250 Miracle Strip Pkwy. SE | Fort Walton Beach**

Explore more than 51,000 square feet of exhibits featuring

over 100 indoor vendors, boats, home-improvement products, healthcare services, local businesses and pet-rescue organizations. Visitors can take advantage of special home-show pricing, end-of-season boat discounts and more than \$20,000 in door prizes and giveaways.

Admission is free. Life Media is proud to sponsor this two-day community event. Vendor and sponsor spaces are available. Contact Wes Fell at 850-353-2832 or wesfell@cox.net. Learn more at ParadisePromotionsFL.com.

11th Annual Bloody Mary Festival

Saturday, Oct. 10, 2026 | 11 a.m.-2 p.m.

The Market Shops

Raise a glass to more than a decade of one of the Emerald Coast's favorite fall events. Guests ages 21 and older can enjoy unlimited tastes of creative Bloody Marys prepared by area restaurants, bars and caterers, along with local food samples, live music, champagne, craft beer, seltzers, a cigar bar, SEC football, a photo booth and exclusive shopping.

Attendees can vote for the People's Choice Award, while



local celebrities and food critics select the overall and Best Ac-coutrement winners. Proceeds benefit Habitat for Humanity-Walton County and its work to provide stable, affordable housing for local families.

Purchase tickets at themarketshops.com/bloody-mary-festival.

10th Annual Harvest Wine & Food Festival

Thursday-Sunday, Oct. 15-18, 2026

WaterColor and locations throughout South Walton

Sip, savor and celebrate

Continued on next page

EOD Warrior Foundation Honors 25th Anniversary of 9/11

The EOD Warrior Foundation invites the community to gather Saturday, September 12, 2026, for a day of remembrance, reflection and connection honoring the 25th anniversary of September 11.

The day begins at 8 a.m. with "One Last Sweat for the EOD 137," a memorial workout at the Eglin Air Force Base EOD Training Squadron honoring the 137 fallen EOD warriors.

An evening dinner and panel discussion, "Where Were You on 9/11?" will

follow at The Island Resort's Maui Ballroom. Doors open at 4:30 p.m. Guests will reflect on September 11 and its lasting impact on the EOD community, the military and the nation.

Both events are open to the community. Get registration details by scanning the QR codes.

EOD Student Signups



Registration



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

Director, Advertising Sales
Scott Miller
Scott@LifeMediaGrp.com

Art Director
Kim Harper

Writers
Breanna Becker
Kenneth Books
Will Estell
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EVENTS
continued from page 8

during four unforgettable days of exceptional wine and cuisine at the Harvest Wine & Food Festival, produced by the Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation.



The festivities begin Thursday with intimate Harvest Wine Dinners at restaurants and venues throughout South Walton. Friday’s Harvest After Dark brings elevated wines, unexpected pairings and culinary creations to Cerulean Park. Saturday features the signature Grand Tasting, followed by a spirited Jazz Cocktail Brunch on Sunday.

Proceeds benefit the Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation and its mission to help children in need throughout Northwest Florida. Visit dcwaf.org/harvest-festival for the complete schedule and ticket information.

Destin Songwriter Festival
Saturday–Sunday, Oct. 24–25, 2026
Destin

Music, memories and mission come together during the Destin Songwriter Festival, which continues its partnership with Operation Song for a second consecutive year.

Operation Song pairs veterans, active-duty service members and military families with professional songwriters who transform their stories into songs. This year, the organization aims to write 250 songs with 250 veterans in celebration of America’s 250th birthday.

Ticket purchases, sponsorships and other festival support

help raise awareness and funds for Operation Song and its work to help service members and their families heal, preserve their legacies and share their voices through music.

Purchase tickets or learn more at DestinSongwriterFestival.com.



Dogs, Bands & Beer Festival!

Two legendary classic rock bands. One unforgettable night under the stars.

Join the fun Saturday, October 10, at the beautiful Mattie Kelly Amphitheater for an outdoor concert featuring Atlanta Rhythm Section and Firefall.

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Saturday, October 10
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Headliners Atlanta Rhythm Section and Firefall

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What Do My Property Taxes Pay For?

I write to you today regarding an important ballot issue: exempting homesteads from taxation. Many of you will vote by mail, and others will vote on November 3rd in person. It is important to understand what this vote means for our citizens.

Proposed Amendment

CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

ARTICLE VII, SECTIONS 4, 6, AND 9

ARTICLE XII
SAVE OUR HOMES
FROM EXCESSIVE PROPERTY TAXES.—

Exempting homestead properties from taxation.

Ensuring funding for core services. Requires local governments to use remaining property taxes solely for core public needs, including public safety, education and schools, infrastructure, and natural resources.

If approved, the amendment would take effect on January 1, 2027.

This sounds like a winner and makes a great political sound bite until the results of the vote are considered closely. Make no mistake: the ballot language is misleading as to the reality of what will happen in counties throughout Florida. Let me explain.

Your Okaloosa County Commissioners have spent the summer going over the budget details, as we do each year. FY 2026–2027 will continue with Okaloosa County Commissioners voting to hold the property tax millage rate at 3.8308 mills for the 11th consecutive year.

The countywide millage (3.8308 mills) brings in \$114.7 million. The non-countywide MSTU (0.2880) brings in \$3.8 million. The total is



\$118,699,312 for General Fund expenditures.

Here is the issue: If the Homestead Exemption is approved by the required 60% of voters, **the amendment**

would reduce Okaloosa County's General Fund revenue by approximately \$14.5 million in its first year and about \$24 million in year two; the second-year impact would leave about \$2.5 million to fund a range of county services after core obligations are met.

The General Fund provides services that impact our everyday lives as citizens. These are services that we have come to expect from our county and that will be decreased or eliminated if the homestead exemption passes on the November ballot.

First and foremost, Okaloosa County citizens expect public safety, which means that when you dial 911, we expect a rapid response from our sheriff and EMS. The passage of this measure will force us to consider reducing funding, which most certainly could not continue at the FY 2026 level.

The budget process is confusing to anyone not familiar with it. We have many pots of money, but each one has specific guidelines for spending established by the Florida Legislature or the Federal Government. Why not take the money from another pot of money? After all, we have other sources of funding in the county budget. The answer is that each source of money, by law, cannot be interchanged with money from another area. For instance, Enterprise Funds—which, by definition, means they generate their own source of funding—can be spent only on their respective departments. The Enterprise Funds are Airports, Water and Sewer, and Tourism, and those dollars can

only be used for those departments. For example, we cannot use tourism dollars to build roads or airport money to fund lifeguards. That is why general revenue—those tax dollars from ad valorem taxes—is important to local government. They fund services most citizens believe are a government responsibility.

The Board of County Commissioners will be forced to eliminate or likely reduce important services such as:

- Funding to the Sheriff
- Emergency Management funding
- Funding for School Resource Officers for public schools
- Beach Safety & Beach Park Rangers
- Corrections
- Veterans Services housed in the Administration Building
- Solid Waste
- Mosquito Control (Can you imagine living here without it?)
- Animal Services (We had hoped to bring additional services into the county.)
- Library Cooperative Funding
- Parks
- Roads & Bridges

There is no cavalry coming from the statehouse with extra money. This will be it for local funding, and the services we have enjoyed will be eliminated or greatly reduced in quality.

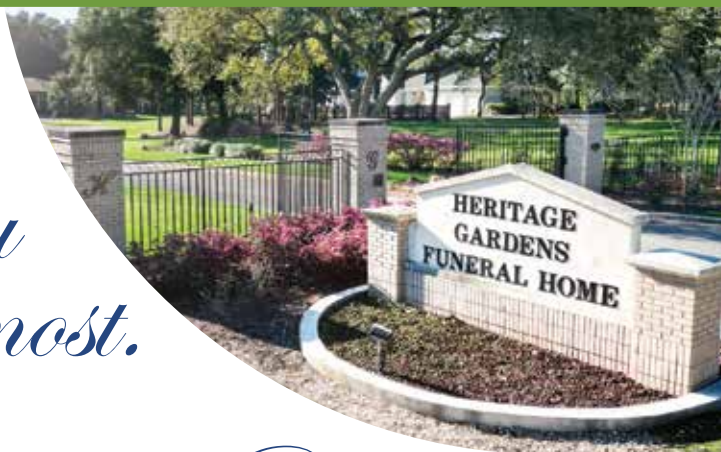
Local government is closest to the voters and answerable to the voters. Let's not let Tallahassee tell us what services we need in Okaloosa. There are 67 counties in Florida. The needs of Miami and Tampa are different than those in the Panhandle. Local government is closest to the people.

As you cast your vote, I encourage you to thoroughly consider the benefits and disadvantages of voting for or against this initiative. Please understand that we must offset the lost revenue somehow, either by a loss of services or an increase in some other tax. Make no mistake: if this initiative passes, there will be significant changes to how local government functions in Okaloosa County.

It is an honor to serve as your County Commissioner.

Carolyn Ketchel, District 2 County Commissioner, 850-651-7105

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By TERESA HALVERSON,
DIRECTOR OF BUSINESS
DEVELOPMENT/COMMUNITY
RELATIONS, THE MANOR AT
BLUE WATER BAY

Healing Goes Beyond
Physical Recovery

When seniors begin rehabilitation after an illness, injury, or hospitalization, the focus is often placed on rebuilding strength, improving mobility, and restoring independence. While these physical improvements are important, rehabilitation also plays a significant role in supporting emotional health.

For many older adults, health challenges can lead to feelings



of frustration, anxiety, loneliness, and a loss of confidence. Rehabilitation provides more than therapeutic exercises and treatment plans. It offers encouragement, structure, social interaction, and renewed hope.

Improving Quality of Life
Through Rehabilitation

The goal of rehabilitation is not simply to treat symptoms. It is to help seniors remain active, independent, and engaged in the activities they enjoy.

With the right combination of therapy, education, and support, older adults can successfully manage chronic health conditions while maintaining their independence and improving their overall quality of life.

At **The Manor at Blue Water Bay**, our rehabilitation team is committed to providing

compassionate, personalized care that helps seniors overcome challenges, achieve their goals, and continue living life to the fullest. At the Manor at Blue Water Bay, our comprehensive inpatient and outpatient rehabilitation programs are designed to help patients regain strength, restore independence, and improve their quality of life through personalized therapy and compassionate care.

Rebuilding Confidence
Through Rehabilitation

Physical, occupational, speech therapy and skilled nursing services help seniors regain abilities that may have been lost following surgery, illness, or injury. Each small achievement, whether walking farther, preparing a meal independently, or improving communication skills, helps restore confidence.

As progress is made, many seniors begin to feel more optimistic about their recovery and more comfortable participating in everyday activities. The goal is to return home stronger and healthier.

The Importance
of Social
Engagement

Rehabilitation programs provide valuable opportunities for social engagement. Through therapy sessions, group activities, educational programs, and interactions with healthcare professionals, seniors can develop meaningful relationships and strengthen their sense of connection and community. Isolation and loneliness can negatively affect both physical and emotional well-being.

- Regular social engagement can help:
- Reduce feelings of loneliness
- Improve mood and emotional well-being
- Increase motivation during recovery
- Strengthen cognitive function
- Encourage participation in healthy activities
- A Sense of Purpose Promotes Healing

Remaining active and involved helps seniors maintain a sense of purpose. Participating in therapy, setting personal goals, and celebrating milestones can provide motivation and a renewed sense of accomplishment.

Simple interactions, such as sharing a meal, participating in an activity, or attending a support group, can have a powerful impact on emotional health.

Recovery Is Stronger
Together

Successful rehabilitation involves more than physical healing. Emotional support, social connections, and compassionate care all contribute to a healthier and more fulfilling recovery.

When seniors feel supported, encouraged, and connected to others, they are often more engaged in their rehabilitation journey and better equipped to

maintain their independence and quality of life.

At The Manor at Blue Water Bay, we understand that healing involves caring for the whole person. Through rehabilitation services and meaningful social engagement, we strive to help every patient achieve both physical recovery and emotional well-being. Call us today for a tour and information on how we can help you and/or your loved one on the road to recovery.

Email: wecare@manoratbwb.com



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One of Our Area’s Own: Mayor Mark Franks Sworn in as President

By “DOC” DOUG STAUFFER

Some moments in public service feel bigger than a title or an election. Watching Shalimar Mayor Mark Franks become President of the Florida League of Cities was one of those mo-

ments for me. It was not simply watching another municipal officer move into statewide leadership. It was watching one of our own—a man born and raised in Okaloosa County, shaped by this community and deeply

invested in it—step forward to represent cities across Florida. Mark was installed as the League’s 2026-27 president on August 15 during the Florida League of Cities Annual Conference at The Diplomat in

Hollywood, Fla. The League represents Florida’s 411 cities, towns, and villages and has served as the unified voice of municipal government for more than a century.

Making the occasion all the more special was the man who administered the oath: State Representative Patt Maney. Patt did far more than swear Mark into office. He shared some personal stories about Mark as a young man, giving people from across Florida a glimpse of the person many of us in Northwest Florida have known for years. We all especially enjoyed that part. Titles can tell you what office a person holds; stories tell you something about the person who holds it. If you see Mayor Franks, ask him about the teenage video reenactment that once brought the SWAT team into the story. Apparently, they mistook Mark’s youthful production for the real Miami Vice.

Mark’s roots here run deep. He was born and raised in Okaloosa County, graduated from Fort Walton Beach High School in 1989, and has family ties to the area stretching back to the 1930s. His great-grandfather, James Hayes, was among the local businessmen who helped shape early Fort Walton Beach and built the landmark Goofy Golf in 1959.

Mark has served as Mayor of Shalimar since April 2019. Before reaching the top statewide post as president, he built his leadership experience close to home, including serving as president of the Northwest Florida League of Cities. He joined the Florida League of Cities Board of Directors in 2023 and was elected second vice president in 2024. That began a multi-year progression: first vice president for 2025-26 and now president for 2026-27.

That progression has involved real work, not simply waiting for the next title. As first vice president, Mark chaired the League’s Legislative Committee, helping review policy recommendations affecting municipalities throughout the state. The League’s work includes advocacy, education, training, and resources that help local officials better serve their communities.



What I appreciate about Mark is that he has never forgotten where he comes from. When he first won statewide office in the League in 2024, he spoke about bringing the perspective of smaller cities to the table. That matters. Shalimar may be a small town, but its size has never limited its influence. Good local government is built on service, relationships, and stewardship—and on leaders who remember the people they were elected to serve.

It was wonderful to celebrate this achievement with Mark. I was proud for Shalimar, proud for Okaloosa County and proud for Northwest Florida. Something was fitting about seeing a leader from one of our smaller communities entrusted with helping lead an organization representing municipalities throughout the free state of Florida.

Mark has also been quick to recognize the support of his wife, Luoma, throughout this journey. Those of us who serve in public life know that every elected official has loved ones behind the scenes who share the schedule, the travel, the late nights, and the responsibilities. Mark publicly thanked Luoma when his statewide leadership journey began in 2024 and thanked her again.

Congratulations, President Mark Franks. You have represented Shalimar and Northwest Florida well. Now you can carry that same hometown spirit across the entire state.

It was a privilege to be there and celebrate the moment with you and many of our other Northwest Florida elected officials.



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Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance Announces 2026 Amateur Photo Contest Winners

The Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance (CBA) has announced the winners of its 2026 Amateur Photo Contest, part of the Mattie Kelly Environmental Initiative. Launched earlier this year, the contest challenged amateur photographers of all skill levels to capture the natural beauty and ecological heritage of the Choctawhatchee Bay and the surrounding Northwest Florida region.

Twelve winning images, one for each month, will appear in the 2026 Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance Photo Contest Calendar, offering a year-long look at the Basin through the eyes of local photographers:

January: Bill Horn
February: David Bailey
March: David Bailey
April: Sarah Brock
May: John Cooper
June: Jessica Temple
July: Jennifer Pawlik
August: Anna Brotzman
September: Whitney Walker – 3rd Place Winner
October: Richard S. Ives
November: Richard S. Ives – 1st Place Winner
December: Randal R. Ketchem – 2nd Place Winner

“These images are a reminder that people are paying attention to this watershed, and that connection is exactly what keeps it protected,” said Alison McDowell, Executive Director of the Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance.

Winning photos, along with more on CBA’s ongoing programs, can be found at basinalliance.org.



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Mark Your Calendar:
Family Bay Day Returns in September

Community members will have another chance to celebrate the Bay this fall at the annual Mattie Kelly Family Bay Day, set for Saturday, September 26, 2026, from 10:00 AM to 2:00 PM at Fred Gannon Rocky Bayou State Park. The free, family-friendly event features exploration stations, hands-on learning activities, and the





always-popular fish printing, giving kids and adults alike the chance to connect with the bay up close. The only cost is the park’s standard \$5 per vehicle entrance fee.

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 Education

Niceville High School Graduate Now Serves as Leadership

BY KENNETH BOOKS

If anyone understands what Niceville High School is all about, it's Amy Meyer.

Meyer was named principal of the school at an April 27 meeting of the school district, creating a circle of responsibility and success that began when she was a student at the high school. She succeeds Charlie Marelo, who was named Director of Human Resources for the district. She was formerly the principal of Niceville Elementary.

"(Administration) is something I thought I would never do because I liked teaching," Meyer, 54, said. But, she added, serving as principal enabled her to have a bigger impact than teaching. "I love the relationships I can build with so many people and offer guidance and perspectives," she said. The only thing about administration that she could do without is "the paperwork and emails. I always



want to be able to communicate with people."

Meyer began her years in the classroom as a math teacher, serving special needs children at Valparaiso Elementary School before moving to Niceville

High. She earned her bachelor of arts in psychology and master of arts in educational leadership from the University of West Florida after her family moved back to the area with her Air Force father. Education is a family affair as well, as her husband, Grant, serves as assistant superintendent of operations for the district. She also has two grown sons, Hayden and Harley.

"I always wanted to be a teacher," she said, "starting with elementary and then high school. It doesn't matter the age of the kids. They're all the same. When I was teaching here I recognized some kids I knew from

elementary school. It was really cool to see how far they had come. It really changed my perspective. I realized everyone can grow and learn because there's so much potential in all of us."

While she enjoys this aspect of her career, Meyer looks back fondly of her days in the classroom. "The best part of teaching is reaching the kids who really didn't want to be there," she said, "and trying to motivate them to want to succeed. I want to help all of them."

And sometimes the youngsters who didn't want to be there eventually appreciated her mentorship. "I love hearing from

kids who say, 'Hey, I did that because you taught me,'" she said. "I had one who hated school. She was smart, but unmotivated. But eventually, she went to Troy and got her RN degree. 'Kids often don't know what they want to do, but need to find their passion.'"

What does the future hold for Meyer? "I hope to stay here and finish my career," she said. "I hope to leave the school better than when I found it. I want everyone when they come here to feel welcome and invited. I want people to know I'm happy here and I want to be an open door."

Start Here. Engineer Your Future Here.

A newly approved partnership between Northwest Florida State College and the University of West Florida will give local students a more affordable path to an engineering degree.

Students can begin at NWFSC's Niceville campus, then transition to UWF to complete their bachelor's degree at the schools' joint campus in Fort Walton Beach—remaining close to their families, jobs and community.

The Florida State Board of Education approved four new Specialized Associate in Arts Transfer degree programs at NWFSC:

- Civil Engineering
- Computer Engineering
- Electrical Engineering
- Mechanical Engineering

"A student can start here, stay here and build a successful future here," said NWFSC President Mel Ponder.

Students will complete foundational mathematics, science, engineering and general



education courses at NWFSC before moving into upper-level engineering courses through UWF. The specialized transfer degree includes prerequisites beyond those in a traditional 60-credit Associate in Arts program, helping students transition smoothly.

The additional required credits may qualify for financial aid. Combined with NWFSC's affordability and the option to live at home, this could make an engineering degree attainable for more students.

The partnership also supports Northwest Florida's

demand for engineers in aerospace, defense, technology, construction, infrastructure and manufacturing. By creating a clear path from a student's first college course through a bachelor's degree, NWFSC and UWF hope to prepare more residents for high-demand careers—and encourage them to build their futures locally.

Enrollment details, schedules and anticipated start dates will be announced as implementation plans are completed.

Learn more at NWFSC.edu/engineering.

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5 Tips to Help Your Child Develop Good Study Habits

When it comes to studying, kids need to have good habits to start the year off right and stay on track. Good study habits will build strong math students and instill a positive outlook on their learning, which is so important for young students.

Fortunately, this does not have to be overwhelming. Here are five tips to help your child develop good study habits:

Tip #1: Find the best time to study and stick to it.



One thing is for sure, daily study time is important, and this is undoubtedly true for math. Together with your child, determine the best time to do this each day. When does your child feel they are most productive? Are there extracurricular activities to consider? Since consistency is most important in building habits, it is critical to prioritize these study sessions.

Building this habit is a team effort and can be made into a fun family activity. Perhaps take some time this month to sit with your child and create a monthly or weekly calendar to display the schedule visually. You may need to tweak the schedule throughout the year. Consider a magnetic, Velcro, or dry-erase board. Use stickers and colors so the calendar is attractive. Hang the schedule somewhere where it will be easily accessible all year!

Tip #2: Set aside downtime for rest and play.

A well-rested student shows up alert to school, with a positive attitude, ready to focus. A good night's sleep helps a student process information and better retain the material studied that day.¹ To ensure a good night's sleep, setting rules for electronics use and eating might be helpful.

Besides rest, we know that a balance of study and play is beneficial for any child to keep them engaged and happy. Dedicate time for play, just like you



do for study. A student who gets outside to exercise has an easier time focusing on their studies, is better equipped to face emotional challenges, and has a better night's sleep.

Tip #3: Foster the art of taking good notes ...



... and reviewing them.

Taking good notes in class as well as at home is a valuable skill to have. Here are some ways your child can get the most out of it:

- Copy class notes over by hand. This is a great way to keep it in memory.
- Make sure your child understands what they have written down. If not, ask questions.
- Discuss school lessons with friends or family members. Teaching is a proven way to master your skills.
- Revisit and review notes regularly to keep the material fresh.

Tip #4: Set personal goals.

Whether it is to complete all assigned homework, improve a grade over a specific period, or excel in class in both understanding and grades, a goal will push your child forward.

How you can help:

- Ask what they want to accomplish. Explore academic and non-academic goals.
- Make a checklist to have something to look at and work toward; after all, there is nothing better than checking something off a list! Alternatively, consider a vision board or a goal ladder.
- Avoid comments such as,

“This is easy,” “This is going to be tough,” or “I was never good at this either.” Begin the school year with a clean slate.

Tip #5: Create a study space that works for your child.

Effective study takes place in a space that feels comfortable and safe. Your child will be most productive in a dedicated, organized study space.

Whether it is a separate room or the corner of a shared space, designate an area of study that is distraction-free, clean, and organized. Be sure to have the necessary supplies and keep them in this specific location for easy access. Consider decorating the space with the child's accomplishments and words of inspiration.

A lack of organization directly correlates with student success

and grades. Effective study habits, when implemented correctly and consistently, can lead to personal discipline — a critical component to lifetime success.

For additional support in Math or in reinforcing good study habits, call or stop by Mathnasium of Niceville—serving 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. Mathnasium of Niceville | 1538 E. John Sims Pkwy. | 850-987- MATH (6284).

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Need the perfect space to host your event in 2026? FUBAR is equipped with numerous private sections with the option of having a private bar as well. The outside deck can hold up to 300 people comfortably and can be sectioned off to fit your needs. In addition to the pizza and wings, FUBAR can customize a menu from Italian food to Prime Rib and everything in between. Open 7 days from 11 a.m.-2 a.m.
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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.

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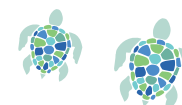
An iconic favorite of locals, owner and operator of JoJo's Coffee and Goodness Angela "JoJo" Stevenson invites you to enter her cafe and relaxed coffee shop atmosphere for a daily dose of "goodness." Stop in for mouth-watering cinnamon rolls, scones, coffee cake, banana and pumpkin breads, apple cider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

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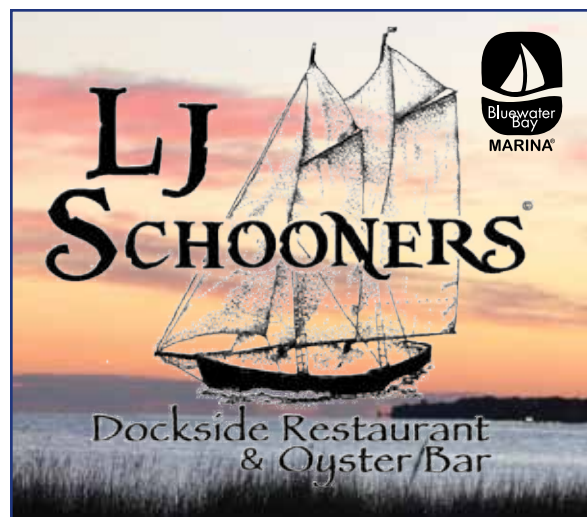
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Wednesday: Kid's Eat Free & BBSC Sailboat Race 6pm

Monday & Tuesday: \$15 Dozen Raw Oysters, \$3 House Pints

Thursdays: Open Mic/Karaoke 6-10pm | Thursday Throw Down 6pm

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



More Events and Live Entertainment

Sept. 4: Trevor Van 6-10pm

Sept. 5: Coconut Radio 4-8pm

Sept. 11: Jody Lucas 6-9pm

Sept. 13: 19th Annual Cardboard Boat Race 4pm

Sept. 13: Niceville Valparaiso Rotary Club Duck Race (Following Cardboard Boat Race)

Sept. 18: The Aces 6-10pm

Sept. 25: Parker & Ivoree Willingham 6-10pm

Sept. 27: Shrimp Boil with Byrd's Seafood Market 4pm-7pm, Ronny Dean Garrett 4-8pm






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Crestview
• 297B James Lee Blvd.

Panama City
• 1360 West 15th St

Callaway
• 809/807 N. Tyndall Pkwy.

Pensacola
• 4600 Mobile Hwy.



Off the Hook

SOLDIERS

continued from page 3

new friendships and experience the camaraderie that develops naturally during a shared day on the water.

For veterans in Freeport and surrounding communities, that fellowship can be particularly meaningful since many remain in the area after military service, continuing to work, raise families and serve their neighbors here.

A past participant, Grady B., described the event’s impact this way: “After the retreat was over and back home, I realized that there are people that care about us. Second, this experience has been a great transformation not only in myself but in others.”

His words capture the heart of Soldiers on the Water: Fishing may provide the setting, but the relationships formed among veterans, caregivers, captains, volunteers and community members carry the event’s impact far beyond the day itself.

Answering the Call

Soldiers on the Water reflects a spirit Niceville and Valparaiso residents know well—neighbors stepping forward to support



those who serve.

The event is made possible through the generosity of people and organizations across the Emerald Coast. Charter captains and boat owners provide vessels, equipment, expertise and time. Businesses and professional organizations contribute financial sponsorships and in-kind donations, while volunteers assist with registration, meals, supplies and logistics.

Community support also provides participants with bags containing water, snacks, sunscreen and other necessities. Additional in-kind needs may include lip balm, coolers, raffle prizes, gift certificates and food support.

Niceville and Valparaiso businesses, civic organizations, professional groups and resi-

dents can all take part. Whether someone volunteers, provides supplies, registers a boat or connects an eligible veteran with the program, each contribution becomes part of a larger expression of gratitude.

ECAR represents more than 5,000 REALTOR® members across Okaloosa and Walton counties and maintains an office in Santa Rosa Beach. Soldiers on the Water allows the organization to extend its community involvement beyond the real estate profession, uniting REALTORS®, local businesses, charter captains and volunteers in honoring those who have sacrificed in service to the country.

Want to Get Involved?

Combat-wounded veterans must register in advance. There



are no tickets to purchase, and eligible veterans participate at no cost. Space is limited, and applicants may be placed on a waitlist.

Local charter captains and boat owners are invited to register a vessel.

Businesses and community organizations can assist through financial sponsorships or in-kind donations.

Niceville and Valparaiso-area residents interested in volunteering or providing other support should contact ECAR to learn which needs remain.

Veterans can register at form.jotform.com/ECAOR/2026-sow-attendee. Prospective sponsors and in-kind donors can visit form.jotform.com/ECAOR/2026-sow-sponsors. Boat owners, charter



captains, volunteers and other supporters can find information at www.emeraldcoastrealtors.com/soldiers-on-the-water/. For additional information or to ask about remaining opportunities, contact Wendy Permenter at info@ecaor.com.

For Niceville and Valparaiso—a home to many veterans and military families—Soldiers on the Water offers a meaningful way to honor neighbors whose courage and sacrifices continue long after their uniforms are put away.



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BY BARBARA PALMGREN

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson! Simon and Garfunkel! Batman and Robin! Lewis and Clark! These dynamic duos solved crimes, wrote extraordinary music, saved Gotham or explored the American West.

But did they ever shank a drive into the woods or three-putt a green? Did they ever work to create and maintain acres of green space on a golf course, book tee times, give golf lessons and provide a once-in-a-lifetime golf experience for members and visitors to the Emerald Coast?

No, that responsibility is now in the hands of two gentlemen. One is Sam Newell, a marketing consultant with an English accent who views The Golf Club at Bluewater Bay as an opportunity to help the local community thrive, with a great golf course at its center.

Sam works with management on course design and development. Born outside London, England, he is now a U.S. citizen and has lived stateside for the past 16 years. His company, SGW Design, relocated from the West Coast to Niceville three years ago, and Sam has thankfully found his forever home on the Emerald Coast.

The other member of this dynamic duo is Jason Timlin. Jason is a certified PGA professional with years of golf club experience, ranging from Southern California to serving



as head golf professional at the Robert Trent Jones course in Birmingham, Alabama. Jason is excited and motivated to make The Club at Bluewater Bay succeed. There was something about the enthusiasm of the Bluewater Bay community that became the clinching point in his decision to move to what he calls “a piece of paradise.”

After he and the board of directors interviewed Jason, Sam said he knew Jason was the perfect candidate to manage the

course. Once Jason was hired, he and Sam began making significant changes. The club can now move forward with additional development to improve the course and its surroundings. Sam said he has great ideas, but Jason knows whether they will work.

One example is the new, netted, five-bay driving range, which enables golfers to warm up and allows Jason to give lessons using a portable Full Swing golf monitor. Another incentive was a one-time, substantial reduction in the cost of individual golf memberships. The roster has grown from 73 to 202 members, giving management additional capital to pay the bills. They have also created annual sponsorships for equipment, the driving range and other course needs — all creative ways to generate income for the course.

Controlling costs in other areas is critical as well. Owning and servicing golf maintenance equipment with the help of a trusted mechanic is a key element of the club’s success, as is leasing gas-powered Yamaha golf carts with a record of durability.

Yes, bringing together Jason and Sam was an inspired move by the board of directors and investors, who all stepped up to save the golf course two years ago.

Congratulations, gentlemen, and may you “live long and prosper,” as Mr. Spock told Captain Kirk. I think that could be translated as, “Live long and hit your drive straight down the fairway.”

But do those things happen only in a galaxy far, far away? Maybe not. They happen at The Club at Bluewater Bay!



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New Era Begins at Niceville Eagle Stadium

Alumnus and 1988 Champion Adron Robinson Leads a Young Niceville Squad into 2026

By “Doc” DOUG STAUFFER

Under a bright August sky at Eagle Stadium, three teams of Niceville Eagles — varsity, junior varsity and freshman — lined up for the annual rite that unofficially opens every high school football season: picture day. Three squads’ worth of players filed onto the same field where, 38 years ago, a Niceville team won the only state football championship in school history.

This year, picture day carries extra weight. It marks the first fall under new head coach Adron Robinson, a Niceville graduate who was a two-way starter on that 1988 Class 4A championship team and who has now returned to lead the program where he once helped establish a championship legacy.

Robinson was hired in April, chosen from a field of 23 applicants by a hiring committee that, according to Niceville principal Charlie Marelo, made him a unanimous pick. “No one has deeper roots with Niceville Eagle football than Coach Adron Robinson,” Marelo said at the time.

Those roots run deep. After graduating from Niceville, Robinson joined the Army before eventually returning home to coach. He joined the Eagles’

staff in 2010, and during his 16 seasons as an assistant, Niceville compiled a 146-47 record and reached the playoffs every year. He also had a stint as head coach of the girls’ flag football program.

Along the way, Niceville advanced to four state semifinal games, winning one, while Robinson learned under three head coaches: John Hicks, Grant Thompson and Richard Morgan, who stepped away after one season in 2025.

That 2025 season ended on a high note that hinted at what this program could become. An eighth-seeded Niceville squad pushed top-ranked Ponte Vedra to overtime in the playoffs before falling 31-30, capping a run in which the Eagles won four of their final five games to finish 6-5.

Robinson’s message to this year’s team, delivered in a sit-down with Niceville Quarterback Club President Heath Rominger — his own teammate on the 1988 title team — was blunt: The game has changed since the 1980s, but the standard hasn’t.

“You still got to run, still got to pass, you got to block, still got to tackle,” Robinson said. “Some



kids want things to be given to them, and that’s just not gonna happen here at Niceville High School. Everything’s gonna be earned.”

He has built his coaching philosophy around a single phrase: “Everything matters.”

That means discipline on the practice field, in the classroom and in the community — not just under the Friday night lights. Robinson wants his players to think of themselves as ambassadors for the program every time they put on an Eagles jersey, on the field or off it.

This is a young football team.

The Eagles return quarterback Deagan McCoy, who threw for 2,071 yards and 23 touchdowns as a sophomore last fall, and running back Jakobe Gilyard, who piled up 1,211 yards and 14 touchdowns — as a freshman.

On defense, junior linebacker Noah Renes returns after rack-

ing up 64 tackles, 18 of them for loss, alongside fellow returning tacklers Clay Nelson, Dominic Ealy and Andy Bocchino.

The Eagles will need to replace graduated leading receiver Robert Oliver, but with so much production coming back from underclassmen, Niceville’s roster this fall is noticeably short on seniors and long on players who may not reach their prime until 2027 or 2028.

For a program accustomed to having the next man ready — Niceville has missed the playoffs only rarely since 2010 — that youth is being viewed less as a rebuilding year and more as a foundation for what could lie ahead.

Robinson has talked openly about tailoring his offense to the talent on the field rather than forcing his players into a single system. With what he describes as a “pretty good quarterback”

and a “pretty good running back,” both still years from graduating, the Eagles will look for a balanced run-pass attack built around what their players do best.

The Eagles opened the regular season Aug. 21 against Prattville, Ala. The 2026 schedule also includes West Florida, Mosley, Navarre, Choctawhatchee, Tate, Godby, Pace, Crestview and Dunnellon.

But for one August afternoon at Eagle Stadium, the schedule could wait.

Three teams’ worth of Eagles — the varsity that will carry Niceville’s tradition forward, the junior varsity developing behind them and the freshman team getting its first taste of high school football — gathered for the photographs that will forever mark the beginning of the Adron Robinson era.

Nearly four decades after Robinson first put on a Niceville uniform himself, he is back at Eagle Stadium.

This time, he is the one leading the Eagles onto the field.

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MIRAMAR BEACH, FLORIDA



Niceville City Council Salutes Little League State Champs

By “DOC” DOUG STAUFFER

There are some nights at City Hall when the best thing on the agenda has nothing to do with ordinances, budgets or roads. Tuesday, August 11, was one of those nights as the Niceville City Council had the privilege of recognizing the Niceville-Valparaiso Little League 8-10 All-Stars, the **2026 Florida Little League Baseball State Champions**. The City of Niceville proudly celebrated the team afterward as the “Niceville Little League STATE CHAMPS!”

It had been **16 years** since a Niceville Little League baseball team at any age level had brought home a Florida state championship. These young men changed that with a remarkable summer run that took them from the District 1 championship through Section 1 and eventually to St. Augustine for the Florida championship.

Niceville dominated Section 1, defeating Northwest Leon 16-1 and 6-0. At state, the competition became tougher, but the victories kept coming. Niceville opened with a 15-5 win over Viera Suntree, followed by an 8-5 victory over North Naples. Their only setback came in a narrow 6-5 loss to Dunedin, located near Clearwater in the Tampa Bay area.

That loss could have ended the dream. Instead, Niceville advanced through a three-team tiebreaker based on the fewest runs allowed, earning a championship matchup with undefeated Winter Garden.

With everything on the line, the Niceville All-Stars responded. They defeated Winter Garden **6-3** and brought the Florida championship banner home to Okaloosa County.

Winning Florida was not

the end of their journey. The team **traveled 779 miles to Wilson, North Carolina**, to represent the Sunshine State in the Tournament of State Champions. For the 8-10 division, the tournament represents the highest level of postseason competition available. Niceville advanced all the way to the semifinals before South Carolina champion Northwood Little League ended the run with a hard-fought 5-3 decision.

At the August City Council meeting, Mayor Pro Tem Kathy Alley and the Niceville City Council recognized the players and coaches with a proclamation honoring their championship season. The team, in turn, presented the City of Niceville with a signed jersey—a fitting keepsake from a group of young men who represented their community so well.

Great coaching produces outstanding results, but youth sports are about far more than the final score. They teach young people how to prepare, work together, handle adversity, and represent something larger than themselves. Those lessons do not happen by accident. They come because adults are willing to invest their time, experience, and encouragement in the next generation.

Niceville-Valparaiso Little League is the largest organized baseball program for boys and girls in District 1, and it is powered by volunteers. Niceville’s recreation facilities have long been part of that partnership. The city’s softball complex, established in 1975, serves as a home for Little League baseball and softball.

Head Coach Chris Brunson was joined by assistant coaches Jacob Lovell, Justin Brazell and Alex Sandroni. The champi-

onship roster included Kellan Tomaschko, Carson Forehand, Chase Lovell, Gunner Gheen, Porter Brunson, Bodhi Spillman, Tyler Broussard, Isaac Dwyer, Liam Sandroni, Pierson Dvorak, Winston Winterer and Jordan Brazell.

It was a joy to meet these young champions at City Hall and congratulate them personally. Their trophy and banner tell us what they accomplished on the baseball field. Their



teamwork, sportsmanship, and determination tell us something even more important about the young people who will someday

lead our community. Niceville is proud of its 2026 state champions—and rightly so.

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Niceville High School

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Aug 28: vs. West Florida, 5 pm
Sep 4: at Mosley, 7 pm (or 5 pm)
Sep 11: vs. Navarre*, 7 pm (District game)
Sep 18: at Choctawhatchee, 7 pm
Sep 25: vs. Tate*, 7 pm (District game)
Oct 2: vs. Godby, 5 pm
Oct 9: vs. Pace*, 5 pm (District game)
Oct 16: at Crestview*, 5pm (District game)
Oct 23: at Dunnellon, 5 pm
Oct 30: Open Week

2026 Rocky Bayou

Aug. 20: at Northview (7 pm)
Aug. 28: vs. Joshua Christian (7 pm CT)
Sept. 11: vs. Aucilla Christian (7P M CT)
Sept. 18: vs. Franklin County (7 pm CT)
Sept. 25: vs. Brookwood (7 pm CT)
Oct. 2: at Deane Bozeman (7 pm)
Oct. 9: vs. Central Milton (7 pm CT – Homecoming)
Oct. 16: at Wewahitchka (7 pm)
Oct. 23: at Maclay (7 pm ET)

 Wellness


By DR. RICHARD CHERN

As we age, our hormone levels naturally decline, often leading to symptoms that affect energy, mood, sleep, and overall quality of life. For many men and women, bioidentical hormone pellet therapy offers a long-lasting option to help restore hormone balance and reduce these symptoms.

Bioidentical hormones are designed to be chemically identical to the hormones naturally produced by the human body. Tiny pellets containing these hormones are inserted just beneath the skin by a healthcare provider,

where they slowly release a consistent dose over several months. This steady delivery helps avoid the highs and lows that can occur with some other forms of hormone therapy.

Women experiencing menopause or perimenopause may notice improvements in common symptoms such as hot flashes, night sweats, mood swings, vaginal dryness, decreased libido, fatigue, and difficulty sleeping. Some women also report improved mental clarity, increased motivation, and better overall well-being when hormone levels are restored.

Men with low testosterone may experience fatigue, reduced muscle strength, weight gain, low sex drive, erectile difficulties, irritability and trouble concentrating. Bioidentical testosterone

pellets may help improve energy, enhance libido, support muscle mass, sharpen focus and promote a more positive mood when low testosterone is the underlying cause of these symptoms.

For example, a woman who has been waking several times each night because of hot flashes may begin sleeping through the night after appropriate hormone treatment, leading to more energy and a better mood during the day. A man who has struggled with low energy and decreased motivation due to low testosterone may notice improved stamina, increased interest in exercise, and enhanced productivity after his hormone levels are optimized.

While many people experience meaningful improvements, hormone pellet therapy is not a

cure-all and is not appropriate for everyone. Symptoms such as fatigue, weight changes or mood concerns can have many causes, so a thorough medical evaluation and laboratory testing are essential before beginning treatment. Hormone therapy should always be individualized and monitored by a qualified healthcare provider to maximize benefits and minimize potential risks.

When prescribed appropriately, bioidentical hormone pellets can be an effective option for men and women seeking relief from symptoms related to hormone deficiency. By restoring hormone levels to a healthier range, many patients report feeling more energetic, sleeping better, thinking more clearly, and enjoying a higher quality of life.

At The Hormone Restoration

Center, hormone optimization is never a one-size-fits-all approach. Every patient receives a comprehensive evaluation, detailed lab work, and an individualized treatment plan designed to address the root cause of their symptoms—not simply mask them. Our experienced team works closely with each patient to monitor progress and make adjustments as needed for safe, effective care.

If you're ready to stop feeling like you're just getting by and start feeling like yourself again, schedule a consultation with The Hormone Restoration Center and call (850) 837-1271 to schedule a consultation. Together, we'll determine whether bioidentical hormone pellet therapy is the right solution to help you look, feel and live your best.

ACUPUNCTURE

continued from page 4

plateaued or symptoms persist despite appropriate treatment.

Fertility and Women's Health

Fertility is another area where acupuncture can complement conventional care.

Some women incorporate acupuncture while trying to conceive naturally, while others use it alongside care from an OB/GYN or reproductive endocrinologist. Treatment may also address accompanying concerns such as stress, sleep or menstrual symptoms during what can be a physically and emotionally demanding process.

It illustrates an important point: patients don't necessarily have to choose between two worlds of healthcare.

Where Could Acupuncture Fit for You?

Perhaps you're living with persistent pain. You're sleeping but rarely waking refreshed. Your headaches have become

too frequent. Stress is affecting your digestion. You're navigating fertility treatment or lingering symptoms after COVID. Or perhaps you or someone you love is managing Parkinson's, vertigo, neuropathy, stroke recovery or another complex neurological concern.

These are very different rea-

sons to consider acupuncture. And that's precisely the point.

The best healthcare doesn't always require choosing one approach over another. Sometimes it means understanding how much more we may be able to accomplish when we thoughtfully bring different disciplines together.



**Dr. Chern, MD,
Sue Griffin, ARNP
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Creatine and Strength Training:

The Powerful Combination for Healthy Aging and Brain Health



BY KASSIA GARFIELD,
MAXSTRENGTH FITNESS

If you've spent any time reading health headlines lately, you've probably seen creatine making a comeback, it is quite the hot topic. Once viewed as a supplement reserved for bodybuilders and elite athletes, creatine is now one of the most researched supplements for healthy aging. Scientists are discovering that when paired with regular strength training, creatine may help older adults preserve muscle, improve physical function, recover faster from sleep deprivation and possibly support brain health.

The key phrase, however, is paired with strength training.

Creatine is not a magic powder. It works best when it supports muscles that are being challenged through resistance exercise.

Muscle Is More Than Strength—It's Brain Insurance

One of the most exciting discoveries over the past decade is the connection between muscle and the brain. Researchers now describe skeletal muscle as an endocrine organ, meaning it releases signaling molecules called myokines that communicate directly with the brain, heart, bones and immune system.

Large population studies consistently show that people

with greater muscle strength have a lower risk of cognitive decline and dementia. Grip strength, leg strength, and overall muscle mass have all been associated with healthier brain aging. While no single exercise prevents Alzheimer's disease, maintaining muscle appears to be one of the strongest lifestyle predictors of preserving cognitive function as we age. Resistance training has also been shown to improve memory, executive function, and overall cognition in both healthy older adults and those already experiencing mild cognitive impairment.

Why? Exercise improves blood flow to the brain, reduces chronic inflammation, stimulates growth factors such as brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), and helps maintain insulin sensitivity—all factors linked to healthier brain function.

Where Creatine Fits In

Creatine is naturally produced by the liver and kidneys and is also found in foods like beef and fish. Approximately 95% of the body's creatine is stored in skeletal muscle, where it helps rapidly regenerate ATP—the body's immediate source of energy during short bursts of activity.

As we age, natural creatine stores and muscle mass gradually decline. This contributes to sarcopenia, the age-related loss of muscle that can reduce mobility, independence, and overall quality of life.

Multiple meta-analyses have found that older adults who combine creatine supplementation with resistance training gain more lean muscle mass and greater strength than those who strength train alone. Average improvements include approxi-

mately 1–1.5 kg (2–3 pounds) of additional lean mass along with greater improvements in upper- and lower-body strength.

Importantly, studies show that creatine by itself produces relatively modest benefits. The greatest improvements occur when muscles are consistently challenged through progressive resistance exercise.

Think of strength training as planting the seed. Creatine simply helps fertilize the soil.

Could Creatine Help the Brain?

This is where current research becomes especially interesting.

Because the brain also requires tremendous amounts of energy (almost 60% of oxygen consumption is our nervous system), scientists have begun studying whether increasing creatine availability may improve cognitive performance in older adults. Early evidence suggests creatine may enhance memory, attention, and mental performance—particularly in older adults or during periods of increased mental stress.

However, the evidence is still developing. Recent systematic reviews conclude that while

several studies report improvements in cognitive function, more large, high-quality clinical trials are needed before creatine can be recommended specifically as a dementia prevention strategy.

What is much clearer is that resistance training itself has a well-established positive effect on brain health. If creatine enhances a person's ability to build muscle, train harder, and maintain independence, it may indirectly contribute to healthier cognitive aging.

A Simple Formula for Healthy Aging

Healthy aging isn't about chasing the latest supplement trend. It's about combining proven habits that work together.

Strength training two to three times per week remains one of the most effective interventions for preventing age-related muscle loss, improving balance, maintaining bone density, and supporting cognitive health. Adding approximately 3–5 grams of creatine monohydrate daily may provide an additional boost for muscle growth and strength in many healthy older adults, especially when paired

with adequate dietary protein. Individuals with kidney disease or other medical conditions should consult their healthcare provider before beginning supplementation.

The conversation around creatine is exciting, but the real headline isn't the supplement itself.

The real breakthrough is our growing understanding that preserving muscle may also help preserve the brain. As researchers continue to explore the muscle-brain connection, one message is becoming increasingly clear: lifting weights isn't just about staying strong enough to carry groceries. It may be one of the most powerful investments we can make in protecting our independence, our memory, and our quality of life for decades to come.

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BY KAY LEAMAN, HEALTH
ARCHITECT, CERTIFIED
NUTRITION AND SKIN ADVISOR

I had heard of microplastics but had not paid much attention to them until recently. However, I think the subject is quite interesting.

A little history: Leo Baeckland, a Belgian immigrant to the United States, developed Ba-

The World of Microplastics

kelite, considered the first fully synthetic plastic, in 1907. Early uses included electrical components; Bakelite was later used in radios, automobiles, and appliances. In the 1930s and '40s, new synthetic materials included polyester, nylon, polystyrene foam, and plexiglass. In 1955, Life magazine published an article titled "Throwaway Living," focusing on how plastics were helping overburdened housewives. Fast-forward to now, and you will find plastics in modern medicine, food packaging, construction, cosmetics, apparel, paint, cleansers, toothpaste, and the list goes on.

Microplastics are particles smaller than 5 millimeters, and

nanoplastics are smaller than 1 micrometer. Some come from larger plastics breaking down, while others are manufactured for use in certain products. Most conventional plastics do not readily biodegrade; instead, they can persist and break into increasingly smaller particles. We find them in the air we breathe, the water we drink, the clothes we wear, and the food we eat. They've been found from the summit of Mount Everest to the ocean depths. To date, microplastics have been found in more than 1,300 aquatic and terrestrial species and detected in various human tissues and fluids.

Stanford physician Desiree LaBeaud has described this as



being “born polluted,” after studies reported microplastics in meconium (a newborn’s first stool). Researchers have also reported microplastics in breast milk. During preliminary research, Teflon specks were visible under a microscope in one child’s tonsil tissue.

Micro- and nanoplastics have been detected in brain and reproductive tissues, among other areas. Researchers are investigating whether smaller particles can cross cell membranes, disrupt signaling processes, or affect other cellular functions. What these findings mean for human health is still being studied.

Researchers struggle to know which substances to study, as more than 10,000 chemicals have been identified as being used in plastics. More than two-thirds have not been fully assessed for safety, and over 2,400 have been identified as potentially hazardous. Heat and sunlight can increase the migration of some substances from plastic bottles, so avoid storing bottled water in hot cars or direct sunlight. Notice how many cases of water are left in the sun at gas stations and other stores.

So, what can we do about it?
Ready, set . . .

Children: When practical, choose well-made, age-appropriate metal or wooden toys that meet current safety standards. How many kids put toys in their mouths?!

Here are some more options for reducing plastic use and potential exposure:

- Purchase clothes, towels, bed linens, rugs, and other items made from natural materials such as cotton, linen, silk, and wool.

- Choose stainless steel, cast iron, glass, or properly made food-safe ceramic or clay cookware.

- Replace single-use plastic water bottles with reusable stainless steel or glass bottles.

- Take a glass container with you when you eat out so you can use it for leftovers. If you receive

leftovers in a polystyrene foam container, transfer them to a different container as soon as you get home.

- When microwaving food, use glass, ceramic, or a container specifically labeled microwave-safe. Dispose of plastic items that are damaged or showing wear.

- Plastic wrap and plastic utensils can contribute to plastic waste and may release chemicals or particles, particularly when heated or damaged. Reduce the number of single-use plastic items in your kitchen. When using plastic wrap, follow the label directions and do not allow it to touch food during microwaving. Consider reusable food-grade silicone lids or Bee's Wrap. I have both, and they are great!

- Do not reuse containers designed for single use. Follow the manufacturer's directions for reusable plastic products.

- Look for products sold in glass jars rather than plastic ones, such as peanut butter.

- Once opened, store meat in a leakproof glass or food-grade silicone container.

- Consider using glass food-storage containers.

- Pick up some inexpensive silverware to use at the beach or on picnics, and keep some in the car for those fast-food stops.

As always, don't overwhelm yourself. Start with what you use most often. The next time you're shopping for clothes, check the material label inside the garment and ask yourself whether the choice supports your health and environmental goals. I recently needed to pick up a few new items and found that some international brands didn't have material labels, so I chose not to buy them.

Look for flatware at thrift stores. Another good place to start is with bed linens and jammies. We spend up to eight hours in them every day of our lives. IKEA has some good stainless steel cookware at a reasonable price. Lastly, if you're at the farmers market and there is a pottery booth, stop in and look for a new pie pan or other items to replace the not-so-healthy ones at home. Just confirm that the pottery is intended for food use, was made by a reputable potter, and has a food-safe glaze.

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\$5 Million Crunch Fitness Coming to FWB

The 37,000-square-foot club will feature Crunch Reform Pilates™ and Pump Strength Training™ studios, with pre-sales beginning this winter.

If you've driven past Longhorn Plaza on Mary Esther Cut Off and wondered what is taking shape, here's the answer: a brand-new Crunch Fitness—and it is going to be big.

The \$5 million, 37,000-square-foot club is expected to open this winter at 546 Mary Esther Cut Off NW, with membership pre-sales beginning this fall. It will serve members from Fort Walton Beach, Mary Esther, Destin and communities around Choctawhatchee Bay, including residents connected to Hurlburt Field and Eglin Air Force Base.

The former retail space is being transformed into a modern fitness club that will be open and staffed 24 hours a day—making it a practical option for shift workers, military members and anyone whose workout schedule doesn't fit neatly between nine and five.

Crunch's 3.0 design will give the club a modern look while or-

ganizing the space so members can move easily between cardio, strength, classes and recovery.

Never been inside a Crunch? Think less “quiet room full of treadmills” and more high-energy fitness playground. Crunch built its name around making serious exercise fun, with a “No Judgments” philosophy that welcomes beginners, longtime lifters, busy parents and everyone in between.

“The Crunch experience is a natural fit for the area's active coastal lifestyle and strong, family-friendly, military-connected community,” said Mike Goodsell, Chief Officer for Fit Fusion, the franchisee opening the club. “Crunch will give the community a place to challenge themselves, connect and feel stronger together.”

Two new specialty studios will help set this location apart. The Crunch Reform Pilates™ Studio will offer instructor-led reformer workouts with digital guidance—bringing the feel of a boutique Pilates studio into a full-service gym. The Pump Strength Training™ Studio will



feature structured, coach-led sessions designed to help members build strength and track their progress. Both studios are included with Peak Results memberships.

There is plenty more under one roof. Plans include expanded cardio, strength and functional training areas; Olympic lifting platforms; indoor turf;

TRX®; hot yoga; advanced HIIT classes; Power Half Hour circuit training; personal training and Crunch's signature group fitness classes.

And because recovery matters, too, the Relax & Recover® area will include HydroMassage® beds, red light therapy and cryotherapy. Members will find tanning, a sauna, full-service locker rooms with showers and Kids Crunch babysitting—a welcome perk for parents trying to fit in a workout without arranging separate childcare.

Memberships start at \$9.99 per month, and Crunch Fort Walton Beach will offer an exclusive, limited-time promotion for founding members. The first 500 members can join for only \$1 and receive their first month free, a limited-edition founding member T-shirt and free Crunch swag, to be part of this Founding 500 group reserve your rate here. Prospective members can also enter

to win one of 10 free one-year memberships info.crunch.com/sweepstakes-presale?club=821.

Local businesses can get involved, too. Crunch's Corporate Membership and Perk Partners programs offer employee discounts and opportunities for small businesses to reach members through the Crunch app, in-club events, gym TVs and social media. Partnership information is available at fitfusion-team.com/crunch-partnerships.

Think Crunch sounds like a great place to work? Explore career opportunities at fitfusion-team.com/careers.

Whether your ideal workout is Pilates, heavy lifting, hot yoga, a quick circuit or simply 30 minutes to yourself while the kids are nearby, Crunch is preparing to offer our Gulf Coast communities plenty of ways to move—and a little more fun while doing it.

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Wellness in Your Home

By MARTA ROSE-THORPE,
WWW.ASUPERIORMECHANICAL.COM

One of the fastest growing wellness trends, growing at a rate of nearly 24% per year, is a thought-provoking sector known as Wellness Real Estate. It represents a cultural and economic shift, where homes are no longer seen as just shelters but as infrastructure meant to actively enhance health span, mental wellbeing, and longevity. It is a design and development trend that integrates neuroscience and architecture. It features ergo-

nomie spaces for movement and mindfulness: dedicated spaces for cold plunges, saunas, daily fitness and yoga, mental relaxation, and meditation.

Wellness Real Estate creates environments in the home that support brain health, reduce stress, improve mental clarity, and promote overall wellbeing. Here are eight elements:

Circadian Lighting - Mimics the natural progress of sunlight. Think: cooler, brighter lights in the morning to boost energy, and warmer, dimmer

lighting in the evening that supports better sleep.

Aromatic Design - Approaches fragrance as environmental neuroscience to elevate mood, cognitive function, and health. This built-in diffusion system of essential oils is integrated directly into the HVAC system. Think eucalyptus in the home gym; lavender in the bedroom.

Acoustic Insulation - Reduces sensory overload and mental fatigue through sound-masking and noise-dampening

architectural materials.

Biophilic Design - Incorporates aromatic plants and herbs directly into the architecture, which allows for natural, plant-based fragrances and helps with air purification.

Low VOC Paint (Volatile Organic Compound) - Emits fewer hazardous airborne chemicals and odors ~ especially important for the bedrooms of family members with allergies.

EMF Home Shielding - Electro Magnetic Fields affect our nervous system regulation, leading to bad sleep. Modify your living environment with shielding fabrics and conductive paint to reduce EMF from outside sources like cell towers.

Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) - Indoor air is estimated to be 2x to 5x more polluted than outdoor air. Toxic microparticles include VOCs from paints, cleaning supplies and air fresheners. Biological pollutants such as mold, mildew, pet dander and pollen. Combustion pollutants like carbon monoxide (CO) and secondhand smoke. And Radon, a naturally occurring radioactive gas that can build up in homes.

Most AC companies use the standard, high-efficient Merve 13 filter that captures 98% of airborne, fine microparticles, but for truly clean air in the home, an Air Scrubber is essential. These advanced, whole-home air purification systems are installed directly into the central air ductwork and utilize activated carbon filters to capture 99.98% of airborne contaminants.

Water Purification and Water Softening - Who doesn't want to drink pure water that tastes and smells good? Reverse Osmosis uses a semi-permeable membrane to remove harmful contaminants from drinking water. Whole-home water softening treatments remove hard chemicals from the water – namely calcium and magnesium – and scale build-up in the pipes – to preserve the home's entire plumbing system and appliances like sinks, dishwasher, and washing machine. Soft water also feels silkier on the skin, is better for your hair, and requires less soap, shampoo and laundry detergent to achieve the same lather.



What's in Our Local Water?

Our primary source of water for the entire Florida Panhandle comes from the Upper Floridan Aquifer. In Bay County, the water comes through the Aquafer into Deer Point Lake. Through environmental runoff and treatment processes, local water contains elements including Chlorine, Copper, Aluminum, Barium, Radium, Nitrate, Blue-Green Algae, and Cyanobacteria which, if ingested, can affect our liver and nervous system. When we do a Water Assessment in a home or business, we are looking for not more than one part per million (PPM) of any of these common toxins.

"Wellness in the Home" embraces a variety of facets, including carefully designed architecture, distinct materials utilized in the home construction process, and placing special systems in the home to optimize Clean Air and Pure Water – the very essence of our bodily health and mental wellbeing. For more information on increasing wellness in your home, feel free to call me at (850) 814-3822.

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A Pastor's Ponderings: America, It Is Time to Look Up Again



BY PASTOR DOUG STAUFFER

We are quick to say, “God bless America.” Perhaps we should stop long enough to ask whether America is seeking the God whose blessings we desire.

Scripture is not silent on the matter. *2 Chronicles 7:14* gives the terms plainly: “*If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.*” Notice the order. God does not say, “*If my people ask for blessing.*” He says seek my face. The blessing is not the first request. It is the fruit of obedience — what follows humbling, praying, seeking, and turning, not what precedes it.

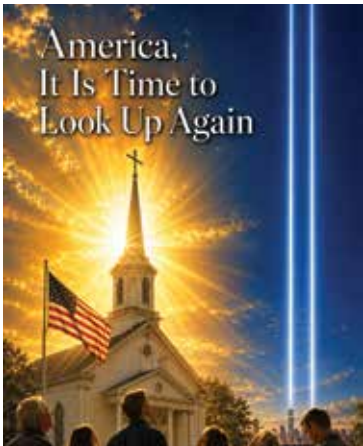
This September marks two anniversaries that ought to be considered together. Two hundred fifty years ago, a fledgling nation declared its independence “*with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence*”—the

founders sought God, not merely invoked His name. And twenty-five years ago this month, the nation buried nearly three thousand of its own in the wreckage of two towers, a field in Pennsylvania, and the Pentagon.

I remember that day and that week. I remember pews filled that had not been filled in years. I remember members of Congress standing together on the Capitol steps, setting politics aside long enough to sing “*God Bless America*” with one voice. For a season, the nation did what *Second Chronicles* asks. It humbled itself. It sought Him.

Washington warned us that the seeking of God would not last on its own. In his Farewell Address he admonished the young republic that “*of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports,*” and that reason and experience both forbid us to expect national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle. He was not offering advice for 1796. He was naming terms that do not expire with the century — terms this republic was tested against twenty-five years ago this month, and is being tested against in more ways than we can enumerate.

And here is the lament: the pews that filled in September of 2001 emptied again. The unity on the Capitol steps did not survive the decade. We kept the



slogan, but we stopped seeking.

A nation does not drift toward God. It drifts away from Him, the way a field left untended does not drift toward harvest -- it drifts toward thorn and thistle. Humbling is a discipline. Prayer is a discipline. Turning from wicked ways is a discipline. None of the three happens by accident, and none of them happens once and stays finished.

So on this September, weighted with two anniversaries, let the church do what the nation will not likely do on its own. Let us humble ourselves. Let us pray. Let us seek His face -- not His hand only, but His face -- and let us turn, specifically and by name, from what needs turning from.

The God who spoke those words in *Second Chronicles* has not changed. America is not Israel, and the promise was given specifically to God’s covenant people concerning their land. But the spiritual principle remains unmistakable: God honors humility, prayer, repentance, and those who genuinely seek His face.

Twenty-five years after September 11, and 250 years into the American experiment, perhaps the question is not whether America still wants God’s blessing. The question is whether God’s people still want God badly enough to seek His face.

America, it is time to look up again.

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Romans 10:17 So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

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 Musing



Sean of the South: Nah, I'm Good

BY SEAN DIETRICH

Marriages are down 60 percent since the '70s. Divorce rates are soaring. And the New York Times reported that more 40-year-olds are choosing to live alone than ever before.

Another recent survey of U.S. high-schoolers showed that the percentage of 12th graders who have ever dated has fallen 85

percent since the '80s. It has fallen another 50 percent within just the LAST FIVE YEARS.

What the heck is going on? Why aren't people dating, or getting married? What's to blame? I can't answer that, I'm too busy scrolling my phone right now.

Nevertheless, one marital expert chimes in.

"The problem is risk. People want guarantees these days. We are a nation of consumers, and consumers require return policies. We need guarantees."

Another psychologist has a different assessment. "It's helicopter parenting that's killing marriage. How can a 20-year-old decide to get married when they haven't ever built a fort in the



woods or ever played House?"

Well, I decided to approach the marriage crisis by asking random people to give their opinions and advice on the institution of matrimony.

Gary and Delores have been married for 54 years. Gary says: "My 38-year-old son has never been married. Recently he asked what it's like to be married, so I told him to 'LEAVE ME ALONE!' When he did, I asked why he was ignoring me."

Simon and Anne have been married 62 years. They were married the same year Kennedy was shot. "Marriage is simple. You can either be happy or you can be right. But you can't be both. Too many people want to be both."

Lydia and Eddie, 48 years: "Nobody tells you that you don't fall in love before you're married. It takes years and years to fall in love. A little more every day."

Pearl and Jacob say: "People don't realize that you actually can survive on love. They've been told otherwise."

Dan and Kristie say: "In marriage, don't use 'absolutes' such as, 'You never,' or 'You always.' They never work, and you always end up sounding like an absolute idiot."

Karen and Dale, 41 years: "I once gave my wife the silent treatment for a week, and at the end of the week she said, 'Hey, we're getting along pretty good, lately, aren't we?'"

Kevin and Rachel: "Don't ever point out your husband's weaknesses during an argument. Wait until the next morning."

Ron and Tiffany, 32 years. "I told my nephew that I haven't spoken to my wife in 20 years, and that's why our marriage worked. My nephew said, 'Why haven't you spoken to her?' I told him 'Because she hasn't stopped talking.'"

Ella and Charles, 59 years: Ella says, "I always tell my married daughters, 'Remember that the grass is always greener over the septic tank.'"

Peter and Catherine, 56 years. "I told my husband that I had a dream he'd given me a diamond bracelet for our 30th anniversary. He smiled and said, 'Wait until tonight, and you'll see.' That night, he gave me a book called 'Interpreting Your Dreams.'"

Sylvia and Tyler. "If your mom is laughing at your dad's jokes, it means there are guests

in your house."

Sarah and Greg, 49 years: "When we got married it was for better or worse. I couldn't have done better, and she couldn't have done worse."

Gina and Todd, 55 years: "If you ever think that women are the weaker sex, try pulling the blankets back to your side."

Sandra and Thomas, 62 years. "If you're not laughing together, you're not really married."

Rhonda and Brian, 55 years: "If you ever start to think you've got marriage figured out, just ask your wife if that's true."

Dori and Andrew, 58 years: "A good husband is someone who, after taking out the trash, acts like he cleaned the whole house."

After all my research, I have come to this conclusion. Marriage has no guarantees, if it's guarantees you're looking for, marry a set of Craftsman socket wrenches.

Sean Dietrich is a columnist, and novelist, known for his commentary on life in the American South. His work has appeared in Southern Living, The Tallahassee Democrat, Good Grit, South Magazine, Alabama Living, the Birmingham News, Thom Magazine, The Mobile Press Register and Life Media publications, and he has authored seven books.

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Midnight Mixtape Brings the Soundtrack of a Generation to a Venue Near You

By WILL ESTELL

If you've ever found yourself smiling from ear to ear when the opening notes of a favorite anthem blast through the speakers, you're definitely not alone. That feeling of instant nostalgia is exactly what Northwest Florida's hottest new band on the block, Midnight Mixtape, has built its reputation on — delivering energetic performances that transport audiences back to some of music's most memorable eras.

Midnight Mixtape has quickly become one of the area's most entertaining live acts, combining exceptional local musicianship, polished vocals and an electric stage presence that transforms every performance into a sing-along. Rather than simply covering familiar songs, this band recreates the feel, emotion, excitement and energy that made these tracks part of the soundtrack of our youth and young adulthood. These guys and girls aren't simply performing songs — they're playing memories.

For its most recent experiment in music history, the band has shifted to "Y2K Rewind: The Ultimate Early 2000s Live Experience," featuring an impressive collection of hits spanning rock,

pop, alternative and dance music from the late 1990s and early 2000s. Think Avril Lavigne, Blink-182, Concrete Blonde, Britney, Evanescence and many more artists whose music defined an entire generation. Whether you grew up burning cheap CDs for friends or loading your first iPod with these bangers, Midnight Mixtape delivers the sounds and shows that instantly reconnect us with those unforgettable moments.

As band co-founder Dan Collins told me, "The concept behind our Midnight Mixtape shows is essentially to pick an era and build an entire show around it. A Midnight Mixtape show isn't simply an array of cover songs; it's an event." Collins added, "We play different themes and learn full new sets for each new theme. Keeping the performance more organic and unplugged, with acoustic guitars, simple hand percussion, the ad-



PHOTOGRAPHY BY SEAN MURPHY

dition of violin playing many of the lead guitar parts, along with keys and multipart harmonies gives the shows a more intimate and up-close vibe."

Collins says he and his fellow band members believe this concept is why, to date, all of their limited-run shows have sold out at every venue where they have performed across Northwest Florida.

Dan Collins, whose lead vocals and guitar anchor each performance with confidence and charisma, has become well

known throughout Northwest Florida as the frontman and founder of Black Eyed Blonde, as well as for producing unique live entertainment events that go beyond the typical cover band performance. He also built his reputation during his time playing with Naked Gunmen and Miss Demeanor.

Sharing center stage is Dan's equally talented wife, Becca (also of Black Eyed Blonde), whose dynamic lead vocals add both power and versatility to the band's sound. Her ability to move effortlessly between emotional ballads and high-energy rock anthems gives Midnight Mixtape an impressive vocal

range that keeps audiences engaged from the first song to the final encore.

The ensemble also includes Sarah Mangum on vocals and keys, adding rich harmonies and melodic depth. Jess Murphy (formerly of Continuum), with her always impressive violin arrangements, gives familiar favorites an unexpected twist, adding a sound and a brand of showmanship that any band would envy. Stacy Clearman delivers strong vocals and percussion that enhance the band's layered sound and infectious rhythm. Together, Midnight Mixtape creates a pol-

Continued on next page

Night at the Museum Brings America's 250th to Life!

By BARBARA PALMGREN

Every few years, the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida brings history to life during a special evening that includes food and beverages. Participants move in small groups through several museum stations, where people from the past come alive through performances. Appetizers and drink refills add to the feel of a storybook garden party. Guests may also receive a souvenir to help them remember the special evening.

Past events have focused on historical figures from area communities. One year, Valparaiso's founders discussed the development and promotion of the city. Another year, prominent Niceville leaders were highlighted. At a Crest-



view-themed event, longtime U.S. Rep. Bob Sikes came to life to discuss politics.

From 6 to 8 p.m. Oct. 3, 2026, the nation's 250th birthday will be celebrated throughout the museum. Guests might even meet George Washington and sign a commemorative copy of the Declaration of Independence. All patriots attending the event will leave their "John Hancock" on a special document commemorating the evening.

Tickets may be purchased by credit card by calling the museum at 850-678-2615 between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Tickets may also be purchased with cash or a check at the museum in Valparaiso.

Seating is limited to the first 80 people who register and pay. Tickets are \$60 per person or \$50 for museum members. Annual memberships are available throughout the year, with prices varying by age. The museum is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, and contributions may be tax-deductible.

Mark your calendar and join us for a memorable night as the nation continues to honor the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.



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Arts & Music

ECTC Kicks Off Season 14 with the Tony Award Winning Musical, "Come From Away," Sept. 10–27



By CAMERON HUGHES

Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC) opens its landmark 14th season with the critically acclaimed musical *Come From Away*. Celebrating compassion, community and the triumph of the human spirit, this inspiring true story runs from Sept. 10 – Sept. 27, at ECTC’s theater in Grand Boulevard. Performances are held Thursday through Saturday at 7 p.m., with matinees on Wednesdays and Thursdays at 1 p.m.,

and Sundays at 2 p.m. Based on the events following the September 11 attacks, *Come From Away* shares the remarkable story of 7,000 air passengers stranded in a small Canadian town, Gander, after US airspace was shut down. The local residents open their homes and hearts to strangers from all over the globe known as “come from aways,” turning a tragedy into a display of kindness and unity.

“Opening our 14th season with *Come From Away* sets a powerful tone for what ECTC is all about: storytelling that unites, uplifts and connects our community,” said Nathanael Fisher, Producing Artistic Director. “It’s a high-energy show with a foot-tapping score that reminds us of the profound impact that hospitality and human kindness can make.”

The talented cast features several returning favorites including Darla Briganti, who returns as Beulah, previously seen as Leona Silva in *Mystic Pizza*, Princess Dragomiroff in *Murder on the Orient Express*, Genie Klein (Carole King’s mother) in *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical* and Miss Hannigan in *Annie*. Joining her is Teresa Lombardi, who takes on the roles of Hannah/Margie after cracking audiences up with her Portuguese accent as Mrs. Araujo in *Mystic Pizza*. Rebeca Lake returns to the ECTC stage as Diane/Crystal, most recently seen on stage as Greta Ohlsson in *Murder on the Orient Express*. Adam Silorey returns as Kevin, following his standout performances as Phileas Fogg in *Around the World in 80 Days*, Zeus in *Xanadu*, as well as Aaron in *First Date*, and Zachary Ryan returns to the stage as Claude, having previously

played Barry Mann in *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*.

Produced right here on the Emerald Coast, the creative team includes Nathanael Fisher as Director, Emily Bainbridge as Choreographer, Rebeca Lake as Scenic Designer, and Taylor Walker as Costume Designer. Tom Baroco returns as Music Director, joined by New York City based Lighting Designer Matt Morris. Baroco and Morris most recently collaborated on Season 13’s hit finale *Mystic Pizza*. Morris also designed the lighting for *Murder on the Orient Express*.

Performances will be held at Emerald Coast Theatre Company, located at 560 Grand Boulevard, Suite 200, Miramar Beach, FL.

ECTC’s 2026–2027 season is made possible with generous support from Grand Boulevard Town Center, St. Joe Community Foundation, Visit South Walton, Howard Group, and Jerry and Alice Zich.

To purchase tickets, make a tax-deductible donation, join as a VIP or sponsor to get the best of what Season 14 has to offer, or learn more about Emerald Coast Theatre Company, call (850) 684-0323 or visit emeraldcoasttheatre.org. Engage with ECTC on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

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MIDNIGHT
continued from previous page

ished production that feels much larger than that of just another local band.

I believe what really separates Midnight Mixtape from many other bands across our coastal communities is the way they invite the audience into the performance. A Mixtape concert becomes an interactive celebration. It’s like a show that you also get to be part of — because it is your show, your memories and your music.

Midnight Mixtape will perform live at Distillery 98 in Santa Rosa Beach on Friday, Aug. 28, 2026, presenting “The Ultimate Early 2000s Live Music Experience.” This two-hour show promises to be a nonstop celebration of the music that defined

the Y2K era.

At press time, a limited number of VIP and general admission tickets were available. However, given the band’s recent enthusiastic crowds, I definitely recommend purchasing tickets soon. You can also follow the band online for more details, dates and performance videos.

Will Estell is a writer, editor, and media entrepreneur with over 750 published articles in a wide array of regional and national publications. Estell is the chief creative officer of Estell Hussey Media and has been instrumental in bringing 12 new startup magazine brands to market over his 25-plus-year media career. He currently consults for publishing companies locally and nationally, as well as maintaining a career in coastal real estate and development. Originally from the backwoods of Booneville, Miss., Will is a father of three, who along with his wife, WEAR ABC 3 anchor, Laura Hussey Estell, now calls Destin and Navarre Beach home.

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