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The Art of Healing

Ten years after its founding, MKAF's groundbreaking Warrior Arts program continues to create connection, calm and community through creativity.

By Zandra Wolfgram

A pen touches paper. A line becomes a curve, the curve becomes a pattern, and before long, a small square of paper has become something intricate, personal and entirely unexpected.

For participants in Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation's Warrior Arts program, however, what happens while creating the art can matter as much as the finished piece.

This year, MKAF celebrates the 10th anniversary of Warrior Arts, a groundbreaking component of its ArtsReach program founded in 2016 by Melanie Moore, MKAF's director of education and community engagement. Warrior Arts connects active-duty military service members, veterans and their families with the transformative power of art, particularly those living with traumatic brain injuries, post-traumatic stress and other visible and invisible injuries.

Through tailored workshops and art experiences, Warrior Arts uses creative expression as a therapeutic tool to promote mindfulness, resilience and connection while addressing some of the unique challenges military personnel and their families face. At its heart is a simple but powerful idea: Art can offer a pathway to communication, creative expression and recovery.

A Legacy of Access

The idea is deeply rooted in MKAF's history. Founded in 1995, the nonprofit organization carries the name and spirit of Destin matriarch Mattie Kelly, a lifelong patron of the arts who wrote poetry, played piano and organ, composed music and supported cultural organizations. Kelly and her husband, Coleman, moved to Destin in 1935 and became prominent business owners and philanthropists in the growing fishing community.

Today, MKAF carries that legacy forward with a mission "to champion access to the arts for all in Northwest Florida." Its concerts, Festival of the Arts and other public programs help support ArtsReach, the foundation's community education umbrella serving K-12 students, children and adults with special needs, and the military community.

The numbers tell part

WARRIOR ARTS
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In "Paradise," a Promise:

Harvest Wine Festival Turns 10 with NWF's Children at Heart

By Lori Leath Miller

The wine is exceptional. The food is unforgettable. But the true beauty of **Harvest Wine & Food Festival** is found in the lives being changed long after the final glass is poured.

As Harvest Wine & Food Festival prepares to celebrate its 10th anniversary, Kate MacMillan is marking a milestone of her own: 10 years

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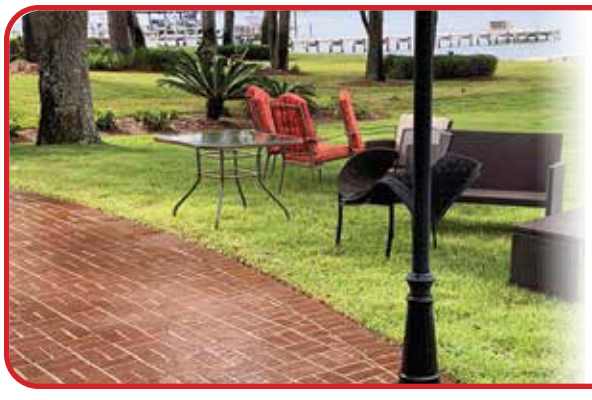

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Community

HARVEST WINE

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with Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation (DCWAF). I recently caught up with Kate, now DCWAF's senior director of strategic partnerships, about what the festival's first decade has meant beyond the festivities. She has had a front-row seat to Harvest's growth—and the deeply personal ways its mission touches local families.

A few years ago, a young mother and local business owner called Kate out of the blue about sponsoring the festival. Her connection to DCWAF had begun long before that call. Years earlier, her youngest son had spent time in the NICU at Sacred Heart Hospital on the Emerald Coast. She first noticed the Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation name at the NICU entrance. Then she saw it again on equipment throughout the room where she sat rocking her baby.

Later, after learning her son was on the autism spectrum and would likely need specialized educational support, she encountered the DCWAF name once more while touring Westonwood Ranch and Emerald Coast Autism Center.

DCWAF had quietly been there throughout her family's journey, supporting trusted local organizations when help was needed most.

Years passed. Her business grew. And when she found herself in a position to give back, she knew exactly which organization she wanted to support. "Her story captures the heart of our mission: supporting a network of trusted nonprofit partners that can care for children through different needs and stages of life," Kate said. "It also demonstrates how generosity comes full circle—helping a family during a critical time and inspiring that family to create the same opportunity for others."

That story explains the heart of Harvest better than I—or any event schedule—ever could: a family receiving support during a frightening time, then one day extending that same support to someone else.

It's also a reminder that behind every ticket purchased, every bottle poured, every auction bid, every wine dinner hosted and every sponsorship is a child whose life may be changed in ways most festival guests will never see.

Harvest returns **Oct. 15-18 in WaterColor.** Over the past decade, the festival alone has raised more than $1 million for programs addressing healthcare, education, housing, food security, mental health and other essential needs of children throughout Northwest Florida. "As we celebrate this milestone, we are especially proud that every ticket purchased, every bottle poured and every partnership formed has helped create meaningful, lasting impact right here at home," Kate said.

That is certainly worth celebrating!

What began as an elevated wine and culinary experience has grown into one of our area's most anticipated fall events. I know—I've attended for several years, and it's truly one of the best I've experienced. It is beautiful and sophisticated, but also warm, lively and fun. There's something special about strolling beneath the trees in WaterColor, discovering a remarkable wine, tasting food prepared by gifted local chefs and sharing it with friends.

I've even had the delightful surprise of running into friends from Birmingham—my hometown. Those unexpected reunions, warm hugs and opportunities to catch up over a glass of wine help make Harvest so special. It's fun to look across the crowd and spot a familiar face.

Harvest gives guests every reason to enjoy themselves. But it also gives that joy a greater purpose.

In Northwest Florida, we live in a place so beautiful we often describe it simply as paradise. Visitors see white-sand beaches, emerald water, lovely homes, thriving businesses and bustling restaurants. But what they might not see are the families sustaining that tourism economy while struggling with rising housing and living costs. "Our area is known for its beauty and hospitality, but that image can obscure the realities facing many families who sustain our tourism economy," Kate said. "As housing and other living costs continue to rise, even those working full time can struggle to meet basic needs, leaving their children vulnerable to housing and food insecurity, limited healthcare access and educational disruption."

They may not see the child living with housing instability or hunger. The child whose education is repeatedly disrupted. The child recovering from abuse. The child who needs medical treatment, therapy or specialized instruction that a family cannot afford alone. Those hardships rarely exist in isolation. "The challenges facing children in Northwest Florida are deeply interconnected, making it difficult to identify any single need as the most urgent," Kate explained. "A child experiencing housing instability may also face food insecurity, limited access to healthcare, disruptions in education or trauma."

That is why DCWAF's network of 16 partner charities is so important. "Their collective strength lies in working together to support the whole child," Kate said. "By sharing resources, identifying gaps in services and connecting families with additional support, our partners create a coordinated network of care that extends far beyond what any one organization could provide alone."

Since its founding in 2005, DCWAF has donated more than $38 million to Northwest Florida children's charities, impacting more than 100,000 young lives. Those are extraordinary numbers. But numbers alone cannot fully express what

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WARRIOR ARTS

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of the story: ArtsReach now presents more than 150 programs annually, reaches more than 25,000 participants each year and has served more than 420,000 people through more than 100 schools and partner agencies since 1995.

Moore joined MKAF in 2015 and created Warrior Arts the following year. Under her leadership, ArtsReach has grown from a handful of outreach programs into a robust initiative reaching communities throughout Northwest Florida.

MKAF CEO Demetrius Fuller credits Moore with helping make outreach central to the foundation's identity. "We're so fortunate to have somebody of Melanie's education and arts pedigree to lead the charge for us on outreach, which is essentially the product of Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation," Fuller said.

When You "Tangle Up," You Power Down

Warrior Arts has grown to more than 100 programs annually, incorporating visual art, painting, improv and other creative practices. One of its most successful offerings is Zentangle, an easy-to-learn method of creating images from structured patterns, or "tangles."

Moore, a Certified Zentangle Teacher, describes the focused drawing process as an active form of meditation. "When you tangle up, you power down," she said. "The act of focused drawing becomes a form of meditation and mindfulness that supports recovery and relaxation." There are no mistakes — only "mis-tangles." There is no prescribed finished product. Participants simply begin drawing, one line at a time. That low-pressure approach can be especially meaningful for people accustomed to high-stakes environments demanding precision and control. Moore has seen participants leave sessions calmer, carrying not only a

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HARVEST WINE

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that help means.

I was reminded of that at a recent DCWAF check presentation where $3 million in funding was awarded in a single year. Pure joy—that is what I felt walking into the ballroom and seeing the people behind these local charities: founders, directors, board members, volunteers and donors who serve children day in and day out.

I witnessed tears of joy. Excited joy. Thankful, grateful joy. You could hear it in the voices of those who stepped to the microphone, and you could feel it throughout the room.

Every person who donates, volunteers, serves on a board, bids in an auction, hosts a wine dinner or simply purchases a ticket to an event such as Harvest plays a part in changing real lives right here in our own backyard.

You may never know how many children you helped grow up and graduate. How many you helped escape a terrible situation. How many you gave hope, healing, a safe place to sleep or even a beautiful new smile. You might never meet them or hear their stories. But the difference is real.

That deeper purpose does not diminish the fun of Harvest. If anything, it adds to it. "Wine and food have a remarkable ability to bring people together and create a shared sense of community," Kate said. "Our events begin with an exceptional experience, but the connection to our mission gives that experience greater meaning."

"This anniversary is an opportunity to celebrate how far Harvest has come, but it is also the beginning of its next chapter," Kate said.

That next chapter begins Thursday with six intimate wine dinners at acclaimed locations throughout South Walton, featuring Alpha Omega Wine Collective, Bordeaux wines, Innumero Wines, Lerner Project, Pahlmeyer and Sign of the Dove.

On **Friday, Harvest After Dark** returns to Cerulean Park with elevated wines and culinary creations from celebrated chefs across the Southeast. "This year's festival will honor the experiences guests have come to love while adding a little extra

sparkle in celebration of our 10th anniversary," Kate said.

That reimagined evening will blend glamorous after-hours energy, unexpected pairings and a touch of Studio 54 flair. "It will feel distinctly celebratory while remaining true to what has made Harvest so special for the past decade: exceptional wine and food, meaningful connections and a shared commitment to supporting children in need across Northwest Florida," she said.

Saturday brings the signature **Grand Tasting,** where guests can explore hundreds of wines from around the world while enjoying seafood, barbecue and other creations from talented chefs and makers.

The weekend concludes **Sunday** with a **jazz cocktail brunch** featuring ingredient-driven cocktails and a New Orleans-inspired menu by award-winning chef Tory McPhail.

A virtual silent auction featuring rare wines, luxury travel and staycations will add another way to participate—even for those unable to attend in person.

It promises to be a spectacular four days. Yet the most meaningful result will not be found on a menu, in a wineglass or beneath the lights of a beautifully decorated tent. Through stories like the young mother's, we know that impact extends far beyond the festival weekend. It is found months—and even years—later in a NICU, a classroom, a counseling room, a safe home or a mother's arms.

I have long believed the compassion and generosity of our relatively small Northwest Florida communities rival those of much larger cities and regions. We may be small in size, but when it comes to giving, serving and taking care of our own, our hearts are huge. Harvest is one more beautiful expression of that heart.

In a place known as paradise, it is easy to celebrate what is visible. Harvest asks us to look deeper—to notice the needs that are often hidden, to pull up another chair and to make room at the table for children who deserve every opportunity to thrive.

Ten years in, that is something truly worth raising a glass to!

The **10th annual Harvest Wine & Food Festival** will be held **Oct. 15-18 in WaterColor. Tickets** for available events, the complete schedule and virtual-auction information are available at **HarvestWineandFood.com.**

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Community

Needles, Fire and Herbs: The Not-So-Scary Side of Acupuncture

By Dr. Karen DeVore

October is the season for haunted houses, bubbling cauldrons and things designed to make us shiver. Yet for many people, nothing sounds quite as intimidating as voluntarily lying down while someone places needles in their body. Add herbs, glass cups and perhaps even a flame, and I can understand the hesitation.

Fortunately, acupuncture is usually far gentler than the anticipation. The needles are remarkably thin, and most patients are surprised by how comfortable—and often deeply relaxing—the experience can be.

But the needle is only the beginning of the story.

Acupuncture exists within a much broader Eastern medicine tradition that considers patterns, relationships and the interplay between structure, function, energy and environment. Traditional acupuncture, neuroacupuncture and facial rejuvenation acupuncture can use the same tiny needle in very different ways. Herbal medicine, cupping and other complementary techniques expand the possibilities even further.

So, in the spirit of October, let's make the needles, herbs and fire a little less mysterious.

Traditional Acupuncture: Much Bigger Than You Think

If your idea of acupuncture begins and ends with back pain, you are seeing only a small part of the picture.

People explore traditional acupuncture for headaches, sleep, stress, digestive concerns, fertility, hormonal transitions, musculoskeletal complaints, neuropathy and chronic or complex pain. For one person, it may complement physical therapy or medical treatment. For another, it may be part of preparing for pregnancy, navigating perimenopause or staying active as the body changes with age.

Eastern medicine has also long valued prevention—paying attention to changes in sleep, digestion, energy, tension and recovery before they become impossible to ignore.

Acupuncture is about more than placing a needle where something hurts. Research continues to explore its relationship with pain modulation, sensory signaling and nervous system activity, while the traditional framework considers the individual's larger pattern of function and balance. That versatility allows it to be restorative or proactive, highly focused or whole-person, and able to stand alone or complement other care.

Neuroacupuncture: When the Nervous System is Part of the Story

Neuroacupuncture takes acupuncture into remarkably complex territory. This specialized approach incorporates carefully selected scalp and body acupuncture around neurological and functional goals involving the brain, spinal cord, peripheral nerves, movement, sensation, balance and coordination.

This is where neuroplasticity becomes particularly interesting. The brain and nervous system retain an ability to adapt and reorganize in response to stimulation, learning, injury and rehabilitation—even in adulthood.

Neuroacupuncture may be incorporated as supportive care during stroke recovery or for people living with Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, neuropathy, neuralgia, tremors, weakness or certain forms of paralysis. It may also be explored around specific symptoms or functional goals for people with PTSD, anxiety or autism, as well as neurological symptoms associated with complex chronic illnesses.

Treatment is individualized

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Community

WARRIOR ARTS

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finished piece of original art but a sense of accomplishment.

Few people understand that transformation better than retired Army Chief Warrant Officer 3 Charles Burkett. A 2004 helicopter crash left Burkett with a traumatic brain injury, extensive nerve damage and severely limited fine motor skills on his dominant right side. He incorporated Zentangle into his physical rehabilitation, first learning to write with his left hand and eventually retraining his right. Within months, he had regained 80% of his fine motor skills; by year's end, he had regained full control of his right arm, hand and fingers. In 2022, MKAF sponsored Burkett's training to become a Certified Zentangle Teacher, allowing a veteran who experienced its benefits firsthand to teach other military members as a peer.

See Warrior Arts in Action

The public can experience that spirit of creativity and connection during MKAF's 31st annual Festival of the Arts, Oct. 24-25 at the Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Village in Destin. Throughout the weekend, visitors can stop by the Warrior Arts Tent, meet participants and instructors, view artwork created by veterans and service members and try tangling themselves. On Saturday at 2 p.m., Moore and Burkett will take the Dugas Pavilion Stage for "Tangle Time with Melanie & Chief," a live Zentangle demonstration.

The free festival features more than 100 artists, live entertainment, demonstrations, children's activities, food and more. Proceeds support ArtsReach. For MKAF, that creates a fitting circle: Come for the art. Discover what art can do. Then help make it accessible to someone else. Attend the Festival, become a member, volunteer or make a gift. After all, your support keeps the Arts FUNded.

Experience Warrior Arts

Warrior Arts Tent
Saturday, Oct. 24,
9 a.m.-5 p.m.
Sunday, Oct. 25,
10 a.m.-4 p.m.

Meet Warrior Arts participants and instructors, explore artwork created by veterans and service members, and try your hand at Zentangle during interactive lessons.

Tangle Time with Melanie & Chief
Saturday, Oct. 24 | 2 p.m.
Dugas Pavilion Stage

Certified Zentangle Teachers Melanie Moore and Chief Charles Burkett demonstrate how simple lines and patterns can become an engaging mindfulness practice.

31st Annual Festival of the Arts
Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Village, Destin

Admission and parking are free.

Learn more at MKAF.org.

10 Reasons to Become a Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation Member

From free concerts under the stars to a milestone year for Warrior Arts, Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation (MKAF) membership makes supporting the arts rewarding—and fun. Since 1995, MKAF has championed arts access in Northwest Florida through presenting programs and ArtsReach initiatives. Membership supports that mission while connecting you to the Emerald Coast's favorite cultural events. Here are 10 reasons to join.

1. You keep the arts FUN-ded.

Membership supports MKAF's year-round programming, helping bring art, music and creative experiences to more people throughout Northwest Florida.

2. Warrior Arts celebrates 10 years.

In 2026, this ArtsReach initiative marks a decade of connecting active-duty military members, veterans and their families with art's transformative power. Creative experiences, including popular Zentangle classes, encourage expression, connection and healing.

3. Festival of the Arts offers a masterpiece of a weekend.

The 31st annual festival returns Oct. 24–25 to the Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Village with more than 100 artists, original artwork, live entertainment, artist demonstrations, children's activities and food. Admission is free.

4. Wine Walkabout is back.

Returning by popular demand Nov. 5, 2026, Wine Walkabout is another reason to gather friends and celebrate the arts. Members enjoy preferred rates on select MKAF events throughout the year.

5. 10,000 Maniacs kicks off the 2027 concert season.

Concerts in the Village opens April 8, 2027, with 10,000 Maniacs. The eight-week series runs through May 27 at the Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Village in Destin.

6. All eight concerts are FREE for members.

Pack a picnic, bring a blanket or lawn chair and enjoy eight Thursday nights of live music under the stars with complimentary admission to the entire 2027 series.

7. You get a head start on the fun.

Members receive early concert admission, allowing extra time to set up their VIP table or claim a favorite lawn spot.

8. There's a membership for everyone.

Four membership categories start at just $75, with benefits lasting one full year from the date you join.

9. You help inspire the next generation.

ArtsReach serves K–12 students, people with special needs and the military community. Since its inception, MKAF has inspired more than 424,000 children across more than 100 schools and partner agencies.

10. You belong to a creative community.

Join members, volunteers, artists, patrons and sponsors who make live music, visual arts and community outreach possible year after year.

Ready to join? Visit MKAF.org for current membership levels, benefits and pricing, or call (850) 650-2226.

Community

When Probate Gets Complicated:
Early Warning Signs Families Miss

By Kimberly Cole

Probate disputes rarely appear overnight. More often, they develop quietly, through missed conversations, unresolved expectations, or growing uncertainty about fairness.

One of the earliest warning signs is often a simple lack of trust. A beneficiary may begin questioning why the probate is taking so long, why a house has not been sold, or why they have not received a distribution. Another family member may believe certain personal belongings were promised to them. Someone else may question how money was handled before the death. None of these concerns necessarily mean a dispute is coming, but when questions go unanswered, suspicion can grow quickly.

Another common warning sign is disagreement over what the person who died "really wanted." A Will may say one thing, while family members remember conversations that suggest something different. Unfortunately, verbal promises and family expectations do not necessarily control how an estate is administered. In Florida, the Personal Representative has a legal obligation to administer the estate according to the Will, when there is one, and Florida law, not according to which family member is the most vocal.

Poor communication is one of the fastest ways to turn uncertainty into conflict. Probate can feel painfully slow to someone who does not understand what is happening behind the scenes. There may be creditor deadlines, property issues, tax matters, court filings, or other tasks that must be completed before beneficiaries receive anything. When beneficiaries hear nothing, they often assume nothing is happening. Worse, they may begin to wonder whether the Personal Representative is hiding something or treating someone unfairly.

That does not mean a Personal Representative must provide a running commentary on every decision. But reasonable communication about the status of the estate and realistic expectations about timing can prevent many misunderstandings before they become accusations.

Sometimes the warning signs have very little to do with the law. Emails become more frequent or more confrontational. A beneficiary begins demanding detailed explanations for every expense. Family members stop communicating directly and begin communicating through other relatives. Someone threatens to "get their own lawyer." Old family disagreements suddenly become part of conversations about the estate. These are signs worth paying attention to.

Probate has a way of bringing old family dynamics to the surface. Grief, money, property, and unresolved relationships can be a difficult combination. A disagreement over a piece of furniture may actually have very little to do with the furniture at all.

Families should seek help, ideally, before positions become entrenched. If there are questions about the validity or interpretation of a Will, concerns about the actions of a Personal Representative, disagreements regarding estate property, questions about money transferred before death, or simply a growing sense that communication is breaking down, it is worth getting legal guidance early. Seeking advice does not necessarily mean preparing for litigation. In fact, early involvement by an experienced probate attorney can sometimes accomplish exactly the opposite. Understanding everyone's legal rights and responsibilities can remove some of the uncertainty that fuels conflict.

Families do not have to agree about everything for an estate to be administered successfully. They do, however, need a clear understanding of the process, realistic expectations, and someone who can separate legal issues from the emotions that naturally accompany the loss of a loved one.

When I work with families through a Florida probate, part of my role is recognizing these warning signs early and helping keep the administration moving in the right direction. Sometimes that means explaining the law. Sometimes it means helping establish reasonable expectations. And sometimes it simply means making sure everyone understands what is happening and why.

Probate can be complicated enough on its own. Addressing concerns early can often prevent misunderstandings from becoming disputes and allow families to focus less on fighting over the estate and more on moving forward.

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Community

Beyond the Festivals: An October Weekend for Big Ideas

By Lori Leath Miller

October on the Emerald Coast does not exactly slow down. If anything, the local calendar shifts into another gear.

Weekends fill with festivals, concerts, food events and community celebrations. In that busy fall lineup, the **27th Annual Emerald Coast Home & Boat Show** offers something distinctly different: a weekend devoted to the homes we maintain, the projects we imagine and the outdoor lifestyle that makes this area home.

The show returns Saturday and Sunday, **Oct. 10-11,** to the **Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center.** Admission is FREE, and the doors will be open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday.

Inside, more than 100 home and general business vendors will offer ideas for projects large and small. Some attendees may arrive with renovation plans and lists of questions. Others may come simply to see what is new and leave thinking differently about a kitchen, backyard or long-postponed repair.

That is part of what separates the Home & Boat Show from many other October events. It is a place to ask questions, handle materials, compare options and talk face-to-face with professionals who understand homes and businesses along the Emerald Coast.

Exhibitors will represent nearly every corner of homeownership, including roofing, plumbing, heating and air conditioning, flooring, furniture, windows, doors, generators and landscaping. Visitors can also meet professionals specializing in pools and spas, shutters, painting, restoration, remodeling and interior design.

Kitchen and bath projects will have a strong presence, along with information about insurance, mortgages and solar energy. Bringing so many specialists together gives residents an opportunity to explore several ideas without scheduling appointments all over town.

General business and retail exhibitors will also introduce products and services ranging from computers and mobile phones to health and wellness, including chiropractic care, hearing services and massage therapy.

Outside, the focus moves from the home to the water and the open road.

Emerald Coast Marine, Captains Choice Boats and Camping World are scheduled to bring boats and recreational vehicles to the convention center grounds for a combined display and sale. Guests can step aboard, look around and imagine their next fishing trip, family outing or road-bound adventure.

That combination feels especially at home in Northwest Florida, where home improvement and outdoor living often overlap. A renovated patio may be where fishing stories are told. New storage may be designed around paddleboards and beach gear. A boat or RV may represent not simply a purchase, but weekends with family and friends.

The event is organized by Wes Fell, a 36-year resident of the Destin-Fort Walton Beach area. Fell moved to Northwest Florida from Louisville, Kentucky, in 1990 and has since organized home and boat shows, business expos, health and job fairs, networking events and music festivals throughout the area.

He also supports Networks of Northwest Florida, a free business-networking organization, and has promoted the Paradise Music Festival and other community events.

For Fell, the Home & Boat Show continues a tradition of bringing local businesses and residents together. Companies can explain what they do while homeowners move beyond online searches and speak directly with people who may help bring a project to life.

In an October filled with entertainment, the show offers a different kind of outing — one that may begin with a few hours of browsing and end with the first real step toward a new idea.

The show will be held at the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center, 1250 Miracle Strip Parkway SE in Fort Walton Beach. Look for our Life Media table, come by to say hi and register for a FREE giveaway!

For more information, contact Wes Fell at **850-353-2832** or wesfell@cox.net, or visit **ParadisePromotionsFL.com.** Businesses interested in exhibiting may also ask about booth space and the 10% Life Media reader discount.

Events Around the Bay

Northwest Florida Fair

Sept. 29–Oct. 3 | Destin-FWB Rigdon Center | FWB

Enjoy midway rides, games and family fun at the Northwest Florida Fair at the Destin-FWB Rigdon Center, 1958 Lewis Turner Blvd., Fort Walton Beach. Admission is $10; ride armbands are sold separately. Visit nwffair.com for details.

Night at the Museum

Saturday, Oct. 3 | 6–8 p.m. | Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, 115 Westview Ave. | Valparaiso

Celebrate America's 250th anniversary with costumed portrayals of historical figures, drinks, appetizers, photo opportunities and a silent auction. Admission is $60 per person and $50 for museum members. For information, call 850-678-2615 or email assistant@heritage-museum.org or manager@heritage-museum.org. heritage-museum.org

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

Thursday, Oct. 8 | 5:30 p.m. | Seagar's Prime Steaks & Seafood | Miramar Beach

Sinfonia Gulf Coast presents Grammy Award-winning vocal ensemble New York Voices during its farewell tour, The Four and Only. Celebrate 40 years of vocal jazz with arrangements 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's music education and community engagement programs. sinfoniagulfcoast.org

Special "250th History Sandwiched In" Lunch

Friday, Oct. 9 | Noon | Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, 115 Westview Ave. | Valparaiso

Bring a sack lunch for a free presentation by Dr. Marie Hallion, curator of America 250! The Revolution. "The Road to Independence: Siege of Boston (1775–1776) and Colonial Resistance" explores events leading to American independence as part of the nation's 250th anniversary celebration. heritage-museum.org

Dogs, Bands & Beer Festival

Saturday, Oct. 10 | Gates open at 1 p.m. | Mattie Kelly Amphitheater at NWFSC | Niceville

Bring your dog for a fall day of classic hits, cool drinks, food trucks and live music, followed by an evening under the stars featuring Atlanta Rhythm Section and Firefall. Dogs are welcome at this outdoor concert. Tickets: www.mattiekellytickets.com or 850-706-5206.

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HAPPENINGS AROUND THE BAY

01
United for Impact: A Non-profit conference
8 am | Beachside Church | FWB

Bands on the BLVD Fall Series Concert
6-8 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

Emerald Coast Theatre Company Presents Comedy on the Boulevard
7 pm | Grand Boulevard at Sandestin | Miramar Beach

02-31
Niceville Pumpkin Patch
Mon-Fri 8 am - 5 pm| Sat 9 am - Noon | Katie's House of Flowers | Niceville

02
Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee
7 am | First Baptist Church | FWB

First Friday Fall Concert
6-8 pm | Grand Boulevard Town Center lawn | Miramar Beach

03
Dog Daze
10 am | The Landing | FWB

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

6th Annual ECAR Foundation Barbecue Cook-Off
11 am | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

Rock the Dock for Alaqua
2 pm | 4576 Co Hwy 3280 | Freeport

Night at the Museum Fundraiser
6-8 pm | Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida | Valparaiso

04
Women's Climbing Circle
5 pm | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin

05
Columbus Day Weekend Pirate Show
5:30-8 pm | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island

06
Niceville Young Professionals
11:30 am | Niceville-Valparaiso Chamber | Niceville

Columbus Day Weekend Movie on the Beach
8 pm | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island

07
Greater FWB Chamber Lunch N Learn with AVALONHR
11:30 am | FWB Chamber | FWB

Columbus Day Weekend Karaoke
7-10 pm | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island

08
Greater FWB Chamber Nothing But Networking at American Legion Post 235 with Kalai's Hawaiian Kitchen
11:30 am | American Legion Post 235 | FWB

Cabaret at Seagar's: An Evening with *New York Voices*
5:30 pm | Seagar's Prime Steaks & Seafood | Sandestin

08-10
Rockin' in Paradise with Styx and Friends
3-10 pm daily | 100 Seascape Drive | Miramar Beach

10
Nautical Flea Market & Flea Market
10 am | LJ Schooner's and Bluewater Marina | Bluewater Bay

11th Annual Bloody Mary Festival
11 am-2 pm | The Market Shops | Miramar Beach

Dogs, Bands & Beer Festival - Atlanta Rhythm Section and Firefall
Bands start at 1:30 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville

10 Continued
Emerald Coast Home & Boat Show
10 am | Destin-FWB Convention Center | FWB

America 250 Heritage Festival and Scouting Expo
9 am | Destin-FWB Rigdon Center | FWB

11
Emerald Coast Home & Boat Show
10 am | Destin-FWB Convention Center | FWB

Columbus Day Weekend Karaoke
7 pm | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island

Columbus Day Weekend Fireworks Show
9 pm | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island

12
Walton County Fair
5-9 pm Monday-Thursday; 5-10 pm Friday; noon-9 pm Saturday

14
Second Wednesday Breakfast
7:15 am | Niceville Community Center | Niceville

15-25
Emerald Coast Theatre Co.'s The 39 Steps
Times vary | Grand Boulevard at Sandestin | Miramar Beach

16
Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation Harvest After Dark
7 pm | Cerulean Park | WaterColor

ADSO's Celebrate Autumn Art Exhibition Opening Reception
6-8 pm | Arts and Design Society, 17 First Street SE | FWB | Exhibition Dates | Oct. 13-Nov.7 | Tues-Fri: 12-4 pm; Sat: 1-4 pm

16-17
Baytowne Wharf Beer Festival
Times vary | Village of Baytowne Wharf | Sandestin

17
Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

Niceville Bazaar
10 am | Mullet Festival Grounds | Niceville

Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation Harvest Grand Tasting
1 pm | Cerulean Park | WaterColor

Taylor's Tailgate: A Low Country Shrimp Boil
4PM - 8PM | 3rd Planet | Niceville

Sip and Science: Wizarding World
6 pm | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

Sinfonia Gulf Coast Film in Concert: The Wizard of Oz
7:30 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation Dugas Pavilion | Destin

33rd Annual Single-Handed Race
LJ Schooners | Bluewater Bay Marina

18
Missing the Mullet
4 pm Mullet Toss | 6 pm Mullet Hair Contest | LJ Schooners/ Bluewater Bay Marina

20
First Responders Appreciation Lunch by A Superior
11:30 am | Niceville Community Center | Niceville

22
Planetarium Special Feature: Spooky Secrets of the Stars
6 pm | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

All-Sports Association Casino Night
5:30-9 pm | Legendary Marine Showroom

23
Grand Boulevard Barktober Fest
5 pm | Grand Boulevard | Sandestin

OCTOBER 2026 EVENTS

23-25
Shinedown's Lunatic Ball Beach Weekend
3 pm daily | Seascape Resort | Miramar Beach

24-25
31st Annual Festival of the Arts
Times vary | Dugas Pavilion green | Destin

Destin Songwriter Festival
Times vary | Multiple locations at Destin Harbor & The Alice

25
Boys and Girls Club of the Emerald Coast Brunchfest
11 am | 130 E Government St | Pensacola

28
Greater FWB Chamber Lunch N Learn "Steady & Strong: Metabolic Health for the Season Ahead"
11:30 am | FWB Chamber | FWB

30
Dog-Harmony's 11th Annual Barktoberfest
4:30 pm | Grand Boulevard at Sandestin | Miramar Beach

31
Halloween on the BOOlevard
4 pm | Grand Boulevard | Sandestin

FARMERS MARKETS

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

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

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

MONTHLY EVENTS

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

Oils and Acrylics with Rosalyn O'Grady
10 am | Tues | Spires Gallery | Niceville

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

Watercolor Basics (Adults) with Elia Saxer
10 am | Thurs | Spires Gallery | Niceville

Visual Literacy for Adults
5:45 pm | Thurs | Spires Gallery | Niceville

One Stroke Advanced
10 am | Fri | Spires Gallery | Niceville

One Stroke Advanced for Young Adults
2:30 pm | Fri | Spires Gallery | Niceville

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

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

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Community

EVENTS

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Bloody Mary Festival

Saturday, Oct. 10
The Market Shops | Miramar Beach

The Market Shops' 11th annual Bloody Mary Festival returns to Miramar Beach from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Presented by Beach Liquors, the event benefits Habitat for Humanity of Walton County and features unlimited bloody mary tastings, food, other beverages, live music by Catalyst and SEC football on a big screen. Tickets are $65 in advance or $75 at the door. Free shuttle service runs from The Beach House at Sandestin from 10:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tickets and details: themarketshops.com/bloody-mary-festival.

Celebrating 15 Years!

Gulf Coast Jam Announces Star-Packed 2027 Lineup

June 3–6, 2027 | Frank Brown Park | Panama City Beach

Bailey Zimmerman is the opening-night headliner (Thursday) for the 15th Annual Gulf Coast Jam Presented by Jim Beam. He joins country superstars Jason Aldean (Friday), Luke Bryan (Saturday) and Zach Top (Sunday) for four days of live music and beachside fun. A fourth and final headliner will be announced in the coming weeks.

Four-day passes are currently available for General Admission, College, First Responder and Military levels. Elevated experiences include Caymus Premium Standing, Caymus VIP, Overlook Club and Side Stage. Ticket-and-hotel packages and payment plans are also available.

Billboard Magazine called Gulf Coast Jam Presented by Jim Beam one of "The 10 Best Country Music Festivals," drawing over 25,000 fans nightly to the four-day event in May. Ticketmaster listed Gulf Coast Jam Presented by Jim Beam as one of the Best Country Music Festivals to See in 2026. Music Festival Wizard named it the number one festival in their Top 50 Most Popular Fests in the World 2024 – Voter's Choice poll and their Best Beach Music Festivals This Summer in 2025.

Jammers are encouraged to follow Gulf Coast Jam Presented by Jim beam at www.GulfCoastJam.com and on Facebook, X, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat for special announcements about the Festival.

To purchase discounted tickets through Life Media, scan the QR code and enter LM27!

Stay tuned to Life Media papers for lineup announcements and festival updates leading up to the event. GulfCoastJam.com

Celebrate Autumn Art Exhibition

Oct. 13–Nov. 7 | 6–8 p.m. | ADSO | FWB

Celebrate local creativity at the Arts and Design Society of Fort Walton Beach! The opening reception on Friday, Oct. 16, from 6–8 p.m. features opportunities to meet local artists, enjoy the artwork and experience the Battle of the Brushes. Admission is free and open to the public.

The exhibition runs Oct. 13–Nov. 7 at ADSO, 17 First Street SE, Fort Walton Beach. Gallery hours are Tuesday–Friday, noon–4 p.m., and Saturday, 1–4 p.m. Learn more at artsdesignsociety.org.

18th Annual Baytowne Wharf Beer Festival

Friday–Saturday, Oct. 16–17 | Friday, 6–8 p.m.; Saturday, 2–5 p.m. | Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach

Sample craft beers from across the nation during this ticketed festival at Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort. Highlights include Seltzer Lane, bourbon tastings, food pairings and the new Baytowne Backyard Bash with bonfires. baytownebeerfestival.com

33rd Annual Single-Handed Race

Oct. 17 | Start times assigned at the skippers meeting | Bluewater Bay Marina Complex

Join upwards of 30 boats for a short race offering fun, challenge and bragging rights. Sailors of all experience levels are encouraged to participate, with only one person per boat. Sponsored by Budweiser, Bluewater Bay Marina Complex and LJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant & Oyster Bar. Registration and the skippers meeting take place at 6 p.m. Friday, Oct. 16, at LJ Schooners Dockside Oyster Bar. Exact start times for the Bermuda Start Race will be assigned at the meeting. Call (850) 897-2821, email frontdesk@bwb-marina.com or visit bluewaterbaymarina.com.

6th Annual BBQ & Bingo Fundraiser

Nov. 5, 2026 | 5–8 p.m. | The District

Enjoy BBQ, bingo and community fun while supporting local education! The Okaloosa Public Schools Foundation hosts its sixth annual fundraiser Thursday, Nov. 5, from 5–8 p.m. at The District, 511 Government Avenue, Valparaiso. Proceeds support student educational opportunities, teacher

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Community

Celebrate the Songs at the Second Annual Destin Songwriter Festival!

By Will Estell

This Oct. 24 and 25, the white sands and emerald waters of the World's Luckiest Fishing Village will serve as the picturesque backdrop for five stages of music and fun at the second annual Destin Songwriter Festival. If you're a fan of great songs, beautiful backdrops and all the fun that fall along our coastal paradise offers, you're going to want to grab your tickets fast and join in on the celebration.

This year's festival features intimate acoustic, songwriter-round-style performances and unforgettable headliner sets across five stages over two days, offering music lovers a firsthand glimpse into the stories behind the songs.

In my two decades covering festivals and writing interview features on numerous songwriters — from Kenny Chesney, Alan Jackson and Sara Evans to Darius Rucker, Lyle Lovett and even the late, great Jimmy Buffett — I've often said that to sing is one thing, but to write and breathe lyrical and musical life into a song is another entirely. This is what the Destin Songwriter Festival is all about.

I asked festival CEO and co-founder Matthew Pennings for a little insight into some of the second-year changes to the festival, and this is what he had to share: "Throughout the festival, music lovers can enjoy free performances at multiple popular venues along Destin Harbor, coupled with paid ticket holders being able to access the main stage and featured acts. The Destin Harbor stages include Boathouse Oyster Bar, Sky Bar and Edge Seafood Restaurant. All of the shows at those venues will be free to attend, while the main stage events will be available to ticketed patrons only."

As for the talent on hand for this second rendition of the growing music fest, fans are sure to be impressed. The most notable headliner, Jeffrey Steele, is a personal favorite of mine, having seen him perform numerous times at various festivals I have covered. Steele is a six-time Grammy nominee with more than 65 million airplays for hits penned for artists such as Keith Urban, Eric Church, Zac Brown Band, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Cher, Faith Hill, Tim McGraw, Rascal Flatts and numerous others.

His accolades include induction into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, the Country Music Hall of Fame's Poet and Prophet Honor and multiple BMI and NSAI Songwriter of the Year awards. Steele's chart-toppers include "Raise 'Em Up," "What Hurts the Most" and "My Wish," along with so many other hits you will know and sing along to. Steele has received more than 35 BMI Country and Pop awards, a Golden Globe nomination for "I Thought I Lost You" from Disney's "Bolt" and recognition as one of Billboard's top five writers for eight consecutive years.

Other artists on hand to share their songwriting and performance talents include: Terri Jo Box has an impressive catalog that includes Lainey Wilson's "Hillbilly Hippie," Ashley McBryde and Trisha Yearwood's "Bible and a .44," Cody Johnson's "God Bless the Boy" and Miranda Lambert's "Dear Old Sun."

Carolyn Dawn Johnson is a well-versed hit songwriter and recording artist. Johnson penned Chely Wright's No. 1 hit "Single White Female" and Jo Dee Messina's "Downtime," in addition to Johnson's own 2001 hit, "Complicated."

Bridgette Tatum, best known for writing Jason Aldean's "She's Country," Randy Houser's "Back" and Gretchen Wilson's "Big Wood Deck," has helped shape the sound of modern country music.

Saturday's main stage will be located directly in front of The Edge Seafood restaurant. Pennings says the main stage shows are bring-your-own-chair events and run from 4 to 8 p.m. Saturday main stage tickets are only $30, with a very limited number of eight-person tables also available for purchase.

Saturday Main Stage

4-4:50 p.m. — Destin Songwriter Competition finalists

5-5:50 p.m. — "Next of Nashville" with Bryce Leatherwood, Jessie G and Reed Foley

6-6:50 p.m. — "Female Power Round" with Terri Jo Box, Bridgette Tatum and Carolyn Dawn Johnson

7-7:50 p.m. — Headliner Jeffrey Steele, solo

For Sunday, the festival moves to the remarkable grounds of The Alice, where lucky ticket holders will relish an intimate VIP experience with reserved high-top seating. Sunday tickets are remarkably priced at only $60, with on-site food and beverages available for purchase. Pennings tells me that a very limited quantity of only 10 tables, with eight seats each, are also available for purchase and will include special VIP swag.

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Community

EVENTS

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grants and innovative learning initiatives throughout the Okaloosa County School District.

For tickets, sponsorships or volunteer opportunities, contact Debbie Tate at (850) 974-0742 or tated@okaloosaschools.com.

Emerald Coast Rodeo

Friday–Saturday, Nov. 6–7 | 5:30–9:30 p.m. | Northwest Florida State College | Niceville

Bring the family to the fourth annual Emerald Coast Rodeo. Gates open at 5:30 p.m., mutton bustin' begins at 6:30 p.m. and rodeo action starts at 7:30 p.m. emeraldcoastrodeo.com

Eggs on the Beach Cooking Competition

Saturday, Nov. 7 | Time to be announced | Seascape Resort | Miramar Beach

Bay Breeze Patio hosts the 12th annual Big Green Egg cooking competition, featuring backyard, restaurant and nonprofit teams. Taster votes determine cash donations for nonprofit competitors, with every participating nonprofit receiving a donation. Advance taster tickets are $60 for adults and $21 for ages 11–17; children 10 and younger attend free. Team registration is $50 for up to six cooks, with fees waived for nonprofit teams. Discounted demo Big Green Eggs will also be available. Visit EggsontheBeach.com or call 850-269-4666.

America 250 Veterans & Patriots Grand Parade

Nov. 7 | 11 a.m. | Main Street | Downtown Crestview

Celebrate 250 years of American history at the rescheduled America 250 Veterans & Patriots Grand Parade on Saturday, Nov. 7, at 11 a.m. along Main Street in downtown Crestview. Enjoy floats, marching bands, tributes to veterans and community groups, with Crestview native and Olympic medalist Mia Manganello serving as Grand Marshal. Wear red, white and blue or colonial-era attire to join the celebration!

The weather make-up date is Sunday, Nov. 8, at 2 p.m. For updates, visit GetTheCoast.com/America250. For parade information, contact Melissa Carter at carterc@cityofcrestview.org or (850) 974-8136.

Alaqua's Bluegrass Barn Jam & Fall Fest

Saturday, Nov. 14 | 11 a.m.–6 p.m. | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport

Enjoy a family-friendly celebration presented by Café Thirty-A, with more than six hours of music at Angel's Arena headlined by Grammy-nominated bluegrass group Sister Sadie. Firetown Bluegrass and Black Creek Strings Band will also perform. Additional festivities include bluegrass jam sessions, food trucks, a full bar, local vendors, fall photo opportunities, crafts, games and encounters with rescued animals. General admission and VIP options are available. alaqua.org/events/bluegrass-barn-jam-fall-fest-presented-by-cafe-thirty-a/

Tacos & Tequila Under the Trees

Saturday, Nov. 14 | Noon–4 p.m. | E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center | Freeport

Enjoy a taco bar, tequila tasting along a trail scavenger hunt, live music and margaritas under the pines during this fundraiser benefiting the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center. Open to guests ages 21 and older. General admission is $70, and nonalcoholic admission is $40. Purchase tickets: eowilsoncenter.org.

Barbecue for a Cause: ECAR Foundation's 6th Annual Cook-Off

Bring your appetite—and the whole family—to the ECAR Foundation's sixth annual Barbecue Cook-Off on Saturday, Oct. 3, 2026, beginning at 11 a.m. at 3rd Planet Brewing, 1400 E. John Sims Parkway, Niceville.

Hosted by the Emerald Coast Association of REALTORS® Foundation, the event benefits Twin Cities Pavilion and Crestview Manor. Enjoy barbecue, music, cold drinks and family-friendly fun while sampling entries from local grillers and competition teams. Cast your votes to help crown the People's Choice winner!

Adult tasting tickets are $35 and include three voting tickets and two drink tickets. Tickets for children ages 12 and under are $12 and include one voting ticket. Advance purchase is encouraged to skip the line.

Ready to compete? Grillers of all skill levels are welcome. Registration is $35 and includes a dedicated table, two drink tickets, serving supplies and electricity upon request.

Local businesses can also get involved through sponsorships supporting everything from entertainment and prizes to children's crafts and event supplies, with promotional recognition opportunities available.

Community

America 250 Heritage Festival & Scouting Expo Oct. 10

Celebrate America's 250th birthday with a day of history, entertainment and Scouting activities on Saturday, Oct. 10, beginning at 9 a.m. at the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Rigdon Center, formerly the Northwest Florida Fairgrounds. Hosted by Scouting America's Gulf Coast Council with support from the Okaloosa County America 250 Commission, this day-long event is free and open to the public.

Enjoy historical reenactments from multiple American military conflicts, museum displays, live entertainment, food trucks, vendors and community exhibits. Dignified flag retirement ceremonies will also be held, and attendees are invited to bring flags for retirement. Scouts camping on-site throughout the weekend will practice outdoor skills, teamwork and stewardship while celebrating the nation's history.

Visitors can also vote for their favorite Northwest Florida nature photographs in the "Celebrate America in Nature" Photo Contest. Submissions are accepted Sept. 7–Oct. 4, 2026. For contest rules and photo submissions, visit gulfcoastcouncil.org/america-250-heritage-festival/. For additional event details, visit gulfcoastcouncil.org.

Niceville Fire Department Seeks Community Input on Strategic Plan

The Niceville Fire Department is asking the community to help shape its future through its first-ever Strategic Plan Survey. Feedback will guide the department's priorities and services over the next three to five years.

The survey takes approximately 10–15 minutes and invites residents, businesses and partnering agencies to share their experiences, priorities and expectations.

"This is an important first step as we look toward the future, and we want to hear from the people we serve," said Niceville Fire Chief Alex Kukulus.

Responses will help the department understand community needs, identify strengths and find opportunities to improve. Participants are encouraged to share the survey with others who live or work in Niceville. Responses are anonymous unless participants choose to provide contact information.

Complete the survey by scanning the QR code. For more information, contact Public Information Officer Shannettra Francis at pio@nicevillefl.gov.

DESTIN SONGWRITER

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Sunday at The Alice

Doors open: 3 p.m.

4-4:30 p.m. — Surprise artist TBA

4:45-6:15 p.m. — Operation Song presents Jamie Floyd, Matt Wynn and Kelli Johnson

6:15-6:30 p.m. — Official premiere of the music video "Something Blue," the story of Kristin Sullivan, written by Jessie G and Matt Wynn

6:30-7:30 p.m. — "Female Power Round" featuring headliners Terri Jo Box, Bridgette Tatum and Carolyn Dawn Johnson

7:45-8:45 p.m. — Headliner Jeffrey Steele, solo

I asked my friend and fellow music lover Destin Mayor Bobby Wagner what having Destin Songwriter Festival back for its second year means to him. "As someone who loves music, I see this festival as more than entertainment. It's a chance for our locals to revel in the talent and for our visitors and vacationers

to experience the spirit of Destin through both song and the beautiful backdrops of our harbor area and The Alice."

Organizer and CEO Pennings also reminded me that while the festival is about music, it's also about giving back. As such, a portion of the proceeds will benefit Operation Song, a 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to helping veterans, active-duty service members and their families tell their stories through songwriting — a mission that reminds us of the powerful connection between music and healing. Being a veteran-owned festival is something Pennings says he is especially proud of.

When I asked Pennings what he was most excited about in coming back for a second year of Destin Songwriter Festival, he enthusiastically said, "I couldn't be prouder of how much this festival has grown in just one year. A huge part of that momentum comes from the incredible support of our presenting sponsor, Patriot Vodka, and North American Spirits Inc. Their belief in this festival and commitment to helping us bring it to life has been instrumental in taking us to the next level.

We're incredibly grateful to have Patriot Vodka in our corner as we build something truly special that we believe can become a signature event for Destin. I want to encourage everyone to come out, experience it for yourself and help us continue building."

Visit destinsongwriterfestival.com for the latest updates, ticket information, artist announcements and insider travel tips for making the most of your festival fun.

Will Estell is a writer, editor and entrepreneur whose 25-plus-year media career includes more than 750 regional and national articles and the launch of 12 magazines. Chief creative officer of Estell Hussey Media and CEO of 399 Ventures, he has written one-on-one features on Kenny Chesney, Darius Rucker, Alan Jackson, Florida Georgia Line, Sara Evans, the iconic Jimmy Buffett and dozens of other artists. He also consults for media entities nationwide and works in coastal real estate and development. A father of three from the backwoods of Booneville, Miss., Estell and his wife, WEAR ABC 3 news anchor Laura Hussey Estell, call Destin and Navarre home. He is a longtime regular contributor to Life Media's family of publications.

Carolyn Newcomer Ketchel, Okaloosa County Commissioner, District 2

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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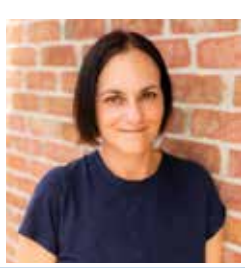

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Education

Is Your Child Struggling in Math?

If you're wondering how your child is doing in math, you can start by asking them directly. This lets them know that their math progress is important to you, and it may begin a conversation that they didn't know how to start. But even if they're willing to have that talk, they may not be totally transparent about how they're doing in the classroom, especially if they're feeling frustrated, lost, or overwhelmed by math. Knowing the signs to look out for will allow you to get them the math help they need.

1. Negative Comments About Math

It's not uncommon for a child to say that they don't like a certain subject. But if you're hearing your child say repeatedly that they hate math or that math is boring, they probably have not been learning it in a way that makes sense to them. Many children will even decide from a very young age that they just aren't good at math. But people aren't wired to be "good" or "bad" at math; some just haven't learned it the right way. Enrolling them in a math-learning program outside of school could be what they need to achieve success and gain confidence.

2. Teacher Showing Concern

If your child is having difficulty understanding certain concepts or applying them correctly, or if their grades are consistently low, their teacher may alert you. Take advantage of the fact that your child's success is important to the teacher. You can work together to determine what steps are necessary to turn things around. The sooner you get help for your child, the sooner they'll be able to catch up with the class.

3. Difficulty with Concepts from Earlier Years

Because math concepts build upon each other, anything that a child failed to learn or skipped over will continue to be problematic as new material is presented. At first, a child may get away with moving through math class without understanding all the material, but as concepts become more difficult, the gaps in their learning will become evident.

4. Math Grades Lower Than in Other Subjects

If your child is normally a high performer and they're getting good grades in every subject but math, it's a clear sign that they're struggling. They may be avoiding the one subject that's giving them a hard time — math — and putting all their focus on the subjects in which they know they'll do well.

5. Anxiety Around Math

Sometimes a child may not outwardly express negative feelings about math, but their discomfort can show through in other ways. If your child grows anxious or upset when asked to solve math problems, whether it be in school or at home, they're letting it be known that they're not confident with their math knowledge. Even if what is being taught makes sense to them at first, they may feel lost when it comes to practical application.

The good news is that once you've recognized your child is struggling, you can get them the help they need. For instruction that targets their specific issues, consider going beyond hiring a math tutor and enrolling your child in a math-learning program with a history of setting children on the right path toward academic success.

Mathnasium Learning Centers start students off with an individual assessment which pinpoints a child's exact strengths and weaknesses. A customized learning plan is then created, detailing the specific math concepts the child needs to catch up, keep up, and even get ahead. Attentive, highly trained instructors teach students face-to-face at the pace that's right for them. And both in-center and online learning is available.

Once a child develops confidence in their knowledge of the concepts, they have the potential to enjoy tremendous success in math. By responding to your child's need for help, you're opening doors to higher achievement and helping them reach their full potential.

If your child seems to be struggling in math and needs additional support, 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).

Kids who learn to love math gain confidence for a successful year. Mathnasium students learn from highly trained instructors in a fun and engaging environment. As their skills increase, they grow in confidence not just in math, but in all their subjects.

Mathnasium of Niceville
850-987-MATH (6284) | niceville@mathnasium.com
mathnasium.com/niceville
1538 E. John Sims Parkway, Niceville

Contact us for a FREE Assessment.
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Environment

Rare Presence of Scallops Found in the Choctawhatchee Bay During Great Scallop Count

By Okaloosa County PIO Nick Tomecek

The Choctawhatchee Bay annual Great Scallop Count drew a strong showing of community volunteers this week and their efforts paid off with a significant milestone: the first physical evidence of bay scallops in Choctawhatchee Bay in years. However, the discovery came with a caveat, as no live scallops were found among the shells collected.

The event, organized by Okaloosa County's Natural Resources Team and Florida Sea Grant, assembled 29 participants who fanned out across designated survey grids in the bay to search seagrass beds for scallops, a shellfish species historically found in Choctawhatchee Bay but one that has gone unseen for years.

"The turnout this year was fantastic and it made all the difference," said Danielle Lasseigne, Coastal Resources Coordinator for Okaloosa County. "With that many people in the water covering ground, we were able to search far more of the bay than we normally could, and that's exactly how we ended up finding shells for the first time in years."

By the end of the day, teams had recovered more than 200 scallop shells. However, every shell recovered was empty, with no live scallops observed anywhere in the survey area.

The find is bittersweet for researchers. Survey teams conducted preliminary monitoring in the bay last month and documented numerous live scallops, raising hopes that a small but viable population may have been reestablishing itself in Choctawhatchee Bay. This week's results suggest that the population suffered a mortality event in the weeks since.

"Going from live animals last month to nothing but empty shells is tough," said Dana Stephens of Florida Sea Grant. "But I don't want that to overshadow what a big deal it is to have confirmed evidence of scallops in this bay again. That's the first sign in years that conditions can support them, even if only briefly, and it gives us something concrete to build on."

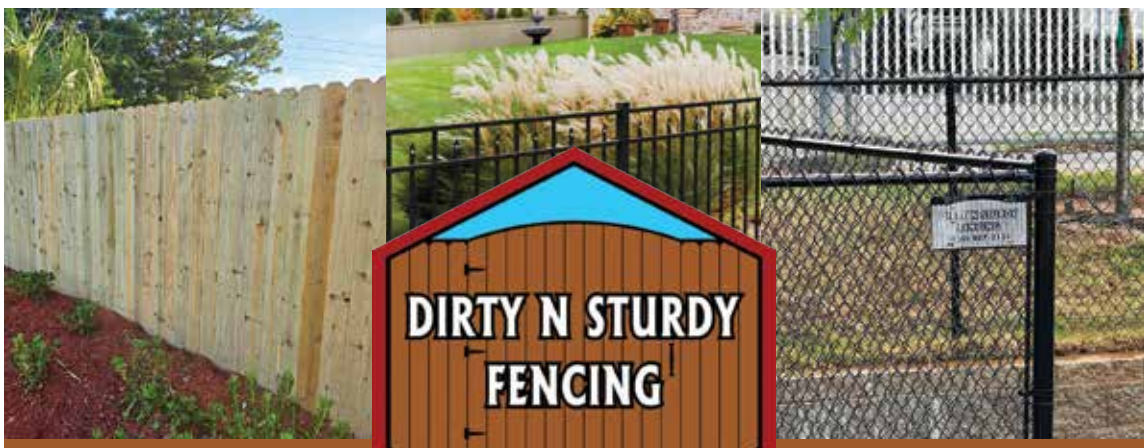
Bay scallops are highly sensitive to water quality conditions, including low dissolved oxygen, high water temperatures, and salinity fluctuations, any of which could plausibly affect a small, localized population over a short period. Follow-up surveys are planned in the coming months to determine whether any scallops survived.

The count also drew heavy participation from the Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance, a leading authority on restoration efforts for Choctawhatchee Bay. Eglin's Jackson Guard also supported the effort with personnel and local business Luther's Pontoons donated the use of vessels

for the day, allowing volunteer teams to reach survey grids that would otherwise have been difficult to access.

"This is an inspiring find," said Trey Goodwin, Chairman of the Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners. "Our waters once supported healthy populations of bay scallops, and this discovery offers hope that they can again. Okaloosa County is committed to improving the health of our bays and bayous so that a thriving scallop population can one day return to Choctawhatchee Bay."

The Great Scallop Count is part of Okaloosa County's broader effort to monitor the health of Choctawhatchee Bay's seagrass and shellfish communities. It depends each year on community volunteers or citizen scientists to cover its survey areas. This year's showing of volunteers was a crucial part of the success of the findings.



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Dirty N Sturdy Fencing: Honoring 25 Years of Sacrifice and a Community That Stands Beside Us

By Jonathan and Brittany Younker

This September marked 25 years since September 11, 2001—a day that changed our country and an entire generation of military families.

As veterans ourselves, this anniversary hit close to home. We know the sacrifices made by those who raised their right hand, but we also know military service is rarely carried by one person. Spouses, children, parents and friends serve in their own ways through deployments, moves, missed holidays and countless unknowns. That's one reason being part of the Emerald Coast means so much to us.

Dirty N Sturdy Fencing may build fences, but this business has given our family something much bigger: a community. Being veteran-owned in an area with such a strong military presence has allowed us to meet incredible people, hear their stories and build relationships with customers who often become friends. Every time someone trusts our small business with their home, recommends us to a neighbor, shares one of our posts or simply waves when they see our truck, it means something to us. This community has supported our family and helped turn an idea into a business we are incredibly proud of.

Twenty-five years later, we remember those we lost on 9/11, those who answered the call afterward, and the families who stood beside them. To our military members, veterans, first responders and their families: thank you. And to the Emerald Coast community that continues to support this veteran-owned family business: thank you for giving us a place to call home, a business to be proud of, and neighbors worth building for.

We're proud to be Dirty N Sturdy—and even prouder to be part of this community.

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Sports

Golf Series: **Junior Champions and a New School Season**

By Barbara Palmgren

Niceville's Aiden Yang and Other Junior Golfers Battle Heat for Season Championship

Despite a heat index approaching triple digits, young golfers searched for birdies in the two-day Emerald Coast JGY Season Championship. Boys and girls younger than 13 competed in nine-hole championship divisions.

One course, you ask? No, two totally different fairways and greens awaited young golfers Aug. 22 and 23. Those two challenging courses were Santa Rosa Beach and Regatta Bay Golf and Yacht Club.

Tournament sponsors were many, but special thanks go to

Blake and Charles Rigdon Real Estate for arranging for overall winners Lars Wiggins and Rayna Perkins to receive a fitting for the new Callaway driver when it is released in 2027. Exciting tools of the trade will have to wait, Blake and Rayna, but I'm sure you will use them for more victories!

Congratulations to the following season championship tournament first-place winners, whose two-day scores and totals are listed below. Congratulations also to Aiden Yang, who finished only two strokes behind leader Lars Wiggins to secure second place.

Boys college prep division, 6,805 yards
Lars Wiggins: 79-71—160
Girls college prep division, 5,850 yards
Sarah Carter Hare: 75-78—153
Girls ages 12-18
Rayna Perkins: 73-74—147
Boys ages 14-18
Cash Welch: 78-83—161
Boys ages 12-13
Matthew DeRoy: 3 over par (35 holes due to darkness)
Boys ages 10-11
Davis Grant: 33-39—72
Girls ages 10-11
Riley Harper Lawrence: 42-42—84
Boys ages 8-9
Jett Jeter: 35-36—71
Girls ages 8-9
Addison Som: 40-46—86

The ECJGT scholarship winners for 2026 were announced. Each receives $750 to assist with playing golf in college. They are Ethan MacGregor, who will play for St. Mary's University; Abby Vernier, who will play for the University of North Florida; and Julie Waldo, who will play for Jacksonville State.

Girls High School Golf Season Begins

On a beautiful but warm early September afternoon, girls golf teams from four high schools in Okaloosa County competed at Shalimar Pointe Golf Course. The nine-hole matches began at 4 p.m., with the girls playing the front nine.

In these beginning matches, there are so many groups, and only the top scores count toward determining the winning high school and earning bragging rights.

I recognized school colors: the brown of Niceville, the green of Choctawhatchee, the blue of Fort Walton and the blue of Rocky Bayou Christian. The girls were smiling and encouraging each other, just as it should be.

The winner of the Sept. 8 Class 3A, Region 1 tournament was Niceville High School, with Rocky Bayou Christian coming in second. Niceville's Tenlet Sharron earned medalist honors for the lowest score, shooting a 38.

And so it begins: a fall season full of golf for boys and girls teams. Golf is a learning experience, and as one young lady told me, "I need to stay out of those sand traps." Yes, my dear, avoid them at all costs!

Off the Hook

Veteran Divers Clear 1,000 Pounds of Local Reef Debris

By Nick Tomecek,
Okaloosa County PIO

Some of the most damaging debris beneath the waters off Destin-Fort Walton Beach weighs almost nothing at all. Nearly invisible fishing line can remain tangled across artificial reefs for years, threatening marine life long after it is lost or discarded. During a recent cleanup mission, military veteran combat divers with FORCE BLUE joined the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Natural Resources Team to confront that underwater hazard. Working across 10 sites in the area's artificial reef system, divers recovered 1,022.93 pounds of debris—including an estimated 40 pounds of derelict fishing line. By the county's conservative estimate, that line stretched roughly 64,000 linear feet, or approximately 12 miles.

The artificial reef system off Destin-Fort Walton Beach is one of the largest in the nation, drawing divers and anglers from across the country and supporting a significant share of the region's marine tourism economy. Left unaddressed, derelict fishing line and other debris accumulate on reef structures over time, entangling marine life, damaging habitat and posing a hazard to the divers and anglers who rely on these reefs. "We take the responsibility of being good stewards of the environment very seriously," said Okaloosa County Board Chairman Trey Goodwin. "Partnering with FORCE BLUE to maintain our growing artificial reef system is a great collaboration that prioritizes both the marine habitat and the well-being of our veterans."

Though fishing line made up a comparatively small share of the debris removed by weight, its ecological footprint is disproportionately large. Nearly invisible underwater, fishing line continues to entangle fish, sea turtles and marine mammals long after it is lost or discarded, a phenomenon commonly known as "ghost fishing." The material can take years to break down. The 12-mile estimate uses a conservative assumption of heavier, 100-pound test line; lighter or braided line recovered in the same haul would represent significantly more linear footage per pound. "Forty pounds of fishing line sounds small next to a thousand-pound total, but by our conservative estimate that's about 12 miles of line that can pose a threat to marine life and these habitats," said Danielle Lasseigne, Coastal Resources Coordinator for Okaloosa County. "This material doesn't weigh much, but it does a disproportionate amount of damage the longer it stays on the reef. Partnerships like this one with FORCE BLUE let us tackle that problem directly, and they help us document the ongoing maintenance our reef system needs to keep supporting healthy fish populations and a strong diving community."

This marks the sixth mission FORCE BLUE has conducted in partnership with Destin-Fort Walton Beach. Past missions have included living shoreline creation, invasive lionfish removals and additional marine debris removal efforts across the area's reef system and Destin East Pass jetties. Funding for this mission was generously provided to FORCE BLUE through a Publix cash register campaign.

FORCE BLUE is a nonprofit that recruits and trains U.S. military special operations veterans and first responders as professional divers, pairing their skills with hands-on marine conservation work. Beyond each mission's environmental impact, the organization gives veterans a renewed sense of purpose and community following their service, channeling their training toward restoring reefs, shorelines and marine ecosystems that coastal communities depend on. "Our divers train for exactly this kind of mission, methodical, structure-heavy dives where visibility and current can change fast," said Brown, FORCE BLUE Mission Leader. "The Destin-Fort Walton Beach reef system is an impressive resource, and it was clear from the amount of debris we recovered how much value there is in doing this work regularly. We're proud to give these veterans a continued mission, and we're grateful to Okaloosa County for making this partnership possible."

Okaloosa County's Natural Resources team manages one of the largest artificial reef programs in the country, with dozens more artificial reef construction projects currently underway. The county continues to pursue partnerships with research institutions and conservation organizations to support the long-term health of its reef system.

For more information on Okaloosa County's artificial reef program, visit the Tourist Development Department's Natural Resources page at destinfwb.com/explore/eco-tourism/artificial-reefs.

Crunch Fitness Brings Boutique Fitness Studios All Under One Roof in Fort Walton Beach

The new $5 million, 3The new $5 million, 37,000-square-foot club combines specialty fitness studios, a full-service gym and recovery amenities in one membership.

Pilates one day. Strength training the next. Hot yoga, HIIT or group fitness in between. HydroMassage when it's time to recover.

Fort Walton Beach residents will soon be able to find it all under one roof.

Crunch Fitness is transforming the former retail space at 546 Mary Esther Cut Off NW in Longhorn Plaza into a $5 million, 37,000-square-foot fitness destination that combines the energy, coaching and community of boutique fitness studios with everything members expect from a full-service gym.

Expected to open this winter, Crunch Fort Walton Beach will serve Fort Walton Beach, Mary Esther, Destin and communities around Choctawhatchee Bay, including residents connected to Hurlburt Field and Eglin Air Force Base.

Two of the biggest additions will be Crunch's latest boutique-style fitness concepts. The Crunch Reform Pilates™ Studio will combine instructor-led coaching with integrated digital guidance for a modern reformer Pilates experience, bringing one of today's most popular boutique workouts into a full-service gym without the premium price tag.

The club will also be one of the first to feature the new Crunch Pump™ Strength Studio, a dedicated space for progressive strength training through structured, coach-led programming with integrated digital guidance. Members can build strength, track progress and train in a focused, motivating environment. Both studios are included with Peak Results memberships.

Classes offer more than a great workout. Training alongside others can create community, accountability and commitment. There is an instructor leading the way, people working alongside you and a reason to keep showing up.

It is the kind of experience people often seek from individual boutique studios, but Crunch is bringing multiple ways to train together in one place, without the serious prices that can come with joining several different studios. And the membership doesn't stop at the studio door.

Members will also have access to expansive cardio, strength and functional training areas, Olympic lifting platforms, indoor turf, TRX®, advanced HIIT classes, Power Half Hour circuit training, personal training and Crunch's signature group fitness classes. The Hot Studio will offer heated classes including Hot Yoga, Hot Pilates and other hot fitness formats.

"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 Crunch Fitness franchisee opening the club. "We're bringing together so many different ways to work out, but what makes classes special is the community that forms around them. People motivate each other, hold each other accountable and have fun while getting stronger."

Recovery is part of the experience, too. Crunch's Relax & Recover® area will feature HydroMassage® beds, red light therapy and cryotherapy. Members will also find tanning, a sauna, full-service locker rooms with showers and Kid's Crunch babysitting. The club will be open and staffed 24 hours a day, providing flexibility for military members, shift workers, busy parents and anyone with a nontraditional schedule.

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 become part of the Founding 500, reserve your rate at info.crunch.com. Prospective members can also enter to win one of 10 free one-year memberships.

Local businesses can get involved, too. Crunch's Corporate Membership and Perks Partner programs offer employee discounts and opportunities for local businesses to reach Crunch members through the Crunch app, in-club events, gym TVs and social media. Learn more about Crunch partnerships.

Think Crunch sounds like a great place to work? Explore career opportunities with Fit Fusion.

For Fort Walton Beach, the new Crunch will bring Pilates, strength training, hot classes, HIIT, group fitness, a full gym and recovery together in one place, giving the community more ways to find a workout they love, people to do it with and a reason to keep coming back.

To learn more visit: CrunchFortWaltonBeach.com

546 Mary Esther Cut Off NW, Fort Walton Beach | 850.655.8285

Local Football Fan Favorites

By Scott Miller

Ah, October. Football season is in full swing, rivalries are heating up and fall weekends are looking pretty good.

In my humble opinion, no other sport delivers the passion, excitement and camaraderie of good ol' American football. So, break out your favorite team's jersey, rally your friends and head to one of the area's best places to watch the action.

AJ's Seafood & Oyster Bar

Go big on game day at AJ's Seafood & Oyster Bar, home to the one and only Jumbotron on the Destin Harbor. Watch your favorite football teams on the big, big screen while taking in the energy and beauty of the harbor, enjoying fabulous food and sipping a game-day drink.

For more than 40 years, AJ's has been serving fresh Gulf Coast oysters and cool libations. What began as a popular local hangout for fresh oysters and cold beer—shucked from the deck behind a small trailer on the harbor—has grown into one of Destin's most iconic hot spots with four locations along the Emerald Coast. Add daily specials, mouthwatering drinks, live music throughout the month and exciting water activities in the Destin area, and AJ's has everything you need for a winning football season.

850-837-1913
ajsdestin.com
facebook.com/AJsSeafoodAndOysterBar
116 Harbor Blvd. | Destin

JoJo's Coffee and Goodness

Start your football Saturday with a tailgate takeout stop at JoJo's Coffee and Goodness. Owner and operator Angela "JoJo" Stevenson serves up a daily dose of "goodness" with freshly roasted coffee, hearty breakfast favorites and sweet treats to fuel your game-day plans.

Breakfast burritos are rolled and ready daily, with andouille, bacon, chorizo or veggie options. Try a piece of quiche, kolache-hash brown casserole or a made-to-order breakfast sandwich on a croissant or bagel with two eggs and cheese. Add JoJo's homemade smoked jalapeño beef bologna, bacon, house-smoked barbecue or ham.

Bring something sweet to your gathering with cinnamon rolls; cranberry orange, chocolate caramel or cheddar thyme scones; strawberry coffee cake; cranberry orange muffins; red velvet cookies; brownies with espresso ganache; or caramelitas. Cinnamon rolls and kolaches are top sellers, so stop in early! Featured muffins, coffee cake or pound cake pair perfectly with a maple cinnamon latte or caramel macchiato — a little fall flavor before kickoff.

Hours: 7:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday.

Continued on next page

High School Football Schedules

Niceville High School
Aug 21: vs. Prattville (AL), 5 pm
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)

SEC Football Schedule

SEC	Sept 5	Sept 12	Sept 19	Sept 26	Oct 3	Oct 10	Oct 17	Oct 24	Oct 31	Nov 7	Nov 14	Nov 21	Nov 28
Alabama	E CAR	@UK	FSU	S. CAR	@MISS ST	UGA	@TENN	A&M	OPEN	@LSU	@VANDY	UTC	AUBURN
Arkansas	N ALA	@UTAH	UGA	TULSA	@A&M	TENN	@VANDY	OPEN	MIZZOU	@AUB	S CAR	@TEX	LSU
Auburn	BAYLOR (ATL)	S. MISS	FLA	VANDY	@TENN	OPEN	@UGA	LSU	@OLE MISS	ARK	@MISS ST	SAMFORD	@BAMA
Florida	FLA ATL	CAMPBELL	@AUB	OLE MISS	@MIZZOU	S CAR	@TEX	OPEN	UGA (ATL)	OKLA	@UK	VANDY	@FSU
Georgia	TENN ST	WKU	@ARK	OKLA	VANDY	@BAMA	AUB	OPEN	FLA (ATL)	@OLE MISS	MIZZOU	@S CAR	GA TECH
Kentucky	YSU	BAMA	@A&M	S ALA	@S CAR	LSU	@OKLA	VANDY	OPEN	@TENN	FLA	@MIZZOU	LOUISVILLE
LSU	CLEMSON	LA TECH	@OLE MISS	A&M	MCNEESE ST	@KU	MISS ST	@AUB	OPEN	BAMA	TEXAS	@TENN	@ARK
Ole Miss	LOUISVILLE	CHARLOTTE	LSU	@FLA	OPEN	@VANDY	MIZZOU	@TEXAS	AUB	UGA	@OKLA	WOFFORD	MISS ST
Miss St	ULM	@MINN	@S CAR	MIZZOU	BAMA	OPEN	@LSU	OKLA	@TEX	VANDY	AUB	TENN TECH	@OLE MISS
Missouri	UAPB	@KANSAS	TROY	@MISS ST	FLA	A&M	@OLE MISS	OPEN	@ARK	TEX	@UGA	KU	OKLA
Oklahoma	UTEP	@MICH	N MEX	@UGA	OPEN	TEX (DAL)	KU	@MISS ST	S CAR	FLA	OLE MISS	A&M	MIZZOU
S Carolina	KENT ST	TOWSON	MISS ST	@BAMA	KU	@FLA	OPEN	TENN	@OKLA	A&M	@ARK	UGA	@CLEMSON
Tennessee	FURMAN	@GA TECH	KENNESAW ST	TEX	AUB	@ARK	BAMA	@S CAR	OPEN	UK	@A&M	LSU	@VANDY
Tex A&M	MIZZ ST	ARIZ ST	UK	@LSU	ARK	@MIZZOU	CITADEL	@BAMA	OPEN	@S. CAR	TENN	@OKLA	TEX (11/27)
Texas	TEXAS ST	OHIO ST	UTSA	@TENN	OPEN	OKLA (DAL)	FLA	OLE MISS	MISS ST	@MIZZOU	@LSU	ARK	A&M (11/27)
Vanderbilt	AUSTIN PEAY	DELAWARE	NC ST	@AUB	@UGA	OLE MISS	ARK	@KU	OPEN	@MISS ST	BAMA	@FLA	TENN

Scott's October Game-Day Picks

Week 5, October 3
Penn St. @ Northwestern 7pm, Fri. 10/2, FOX
Auburn @ Tennessee, TBD
Alabama @ Mississippi St., TBD
Florida @ Missouri, TBD
Notre Dame @ N. Carolina, TBD
Miami @ Clemson, TBD
Virginia @ Florida St., TBD

Week 6, October 10
USC @ Penn State, 6:30 pm, NBC
Georgia @ Alabama, TBD
LSU @ Kentucky, TBD
Ole Miss @ Vanderbilt, TBD
S. Carolina @ Florida, TBD
Texas @ Oklahoma 2:30 pm, ESPN

Week 7, October 17
Auburn @ Georgia, TBD
Florida @ Texas, TBD
Mississippi St. @ LSU, TBD
Alabama @ Tennessee, TBD
Penn State. @ Michigan, TBD
Ohio State @ Indiana, TBD

Week 8, October 24
LSU @ Auburn, 11 am, ESPN
Ole Miss @ Texas, TBD
Texas A&M @ Alabama, TBD
Pittsburgh @ Miami (FL), TBD
Indiana @ Michigan, TBD
Tennessee @ S Carolina, TBD

Week 9, October 31
Auburn @ Ole Miss, TBD
Florida @ Georgia, 2:30 pm, ABC
Mississippi St. @ Texas, TBA
Ohio State @ USC, TBD
Purdue @ Penn State, TBD

FAN FAVORITES

continued from previous page

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Restaurant Hours: Mon.-Tues. Closed • Wed.-Sat. 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. • Sun. 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. - Sun. Brunch 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. - Lunch Served 1 p.m.

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Wellness

The Electro Magnetic Field

By Kay Leaman Health Architect, Certified Nutrition and Skin Advisor

Also known as EMFs, these unseen waves have been extensively debated as far back as Thomas Edison. They exist in everything from power lines to cell phones, appliances to batteries. The electromagnetic fields are typically classified as low-frequency, 0-300 Hz, such as power lines and appliances up to high-frequency, 10 MHz-300 GHz, such as mobile phones and microwave ovens.

Radiation does not accumulate in the body in the same way that some substances do. However, it can cause damage to cells and DNA when absorbed. The body can repair some of this damage.

Repeated exposure to radiation can increase the risk of long-term health effects, such as cancer.

Low-frequency fields may induce weak currents in tissues, affecting neural and muscular systems. High-frequency fields on the other hand are linked to both thermal and non-thermal effects, including oxidative stress, calcium overload, and cellular dysfunction.

Below is a list of affected areas based on low to high frequencies:

- (Earth's EMFs) Brain orientation, plant growth direction and circadian system
- Nervous, muscular and cardiovascular systems
- Cellular stress
- Organ level functions
- Endocrine disruptions
- Reproductive system
- Oxidative systems
- Circadian regulation
- Neuronal oscillation

Documented impacts from a study (2017-2024) include effects on humans, animals, and plants, targeting various cell types (e.g., blood, cancer, thyroid, cochlea), genotoxicity, cardiovascular parameters (e.g., heart rate, blood pressure), male fertility (e.g., testes, sperm), neuronal brain activity, and photosynthesis in plants. The findings demonstrated that EMFs negatively affect a wide array of biological systems of living organisms, including mechanisms of oxidative stress, inflammatory responses, and disruptions in cellular, physiological, and ecological processes.

While radiation does not accumulate in the body, some forms of radiation can damage cells and DNA after sufficient energy is absorbed. Ionizing radiation, including X-rays and gamma rays, can break DNA directly or through the production of reactive molecules. Ultraviolet radiation can also create DNA lesions. Radiofrequency EMFs from cell phones, Wi-Fi, and household appliances are non-ionizing and do not have enough photon energy to break DNA directly. Although some laboratory and animal studies have reported DNA damage under particular exposure conditions, the results are inconsistent and do not establish that ordinary, low-level radiofrequency exposure causes DNA damage or cancer in humans.

So, basically, radiation itself does not accumulate in the body, but unrepaired or incorrectly repaired DNA damage can persist. The body is able to repair some of this damage. However, repeated exposure to rsome of these types of radiation can increase the risk of long-term health effects, such as cancer and inflammation. Many believe inflammation is a root cause of all disease.

Did you know? In electric and hybrid vehicles, the highest concentration of EMFs is sometimes found in the back seat (where your kids sit). Though available research has generally found in-vehicle exposure levels to be within established safety guidelines, cars today, in general, have more EMF emisisons in part due to the increase of electronic systems that produce electromagnetic fields.

So, what can we do? Being mindful and informed is the first step. As it goes with health, every step we take makes a difference and these accumulating steps can make a big impact on our health.

If you would like to reduce your everyday exposure as a precaution, consider some practical measures:

- Don't stand in front of the microwave. Inspect it regularly. Do not use it if the door, hinges, latch, or seals are damaged.
- Stop putting your cell phone to your ear when talking. Use the speaker.
- Don't keep your bluetooth ear buds in constantly. Give your head an EMF break.
- Don't wear your cell phone. Put it in your purse or choose the side pocket of cargo pants so that it does not come in direct contact with your organs. Note: My friend who was diagnosed with breast cancer was told two things: stop storing your phone in your bra and stop using deodorant containing aluminum. You can also purchase a case that has a lining in it which blocks the EMF's (this is the side that would be against your body.)
- Reduce the EMFs in the bedrooms. Take the TV out, put your phone in the drawer, etc. Your TV may be off but it continues to emit EMFs as does any appliance that is plugged in, including lamps.
- Don't work with your computer on your lap. You can purchase a protective case or place it on a pillow or box or book to separate it from your body.
- Turn off or unplug electronic devices when they are not needed. This may reduce energy use as well as unnecessary exposure.

Here's to Health!

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Wellness

Muscle, Metabolism and Why the Scale Doesn't Tell the Whole Story

By Kassia Garfield, owner, MaxStrength Fitness

Many people begin an exercise program with one goal in mind: losing weight. While weight loss can be beneficial for some individuals, focusing solely on the number on the scale often misses a much more important measure of health and fitness — body composition.

Body composition refers to the proportion of muscle, fat, bone and other tissues that make up your body. Two people can weigh exactly the same but have dramatically different body compositions and health outcomes. This is where muscle becomes incredibly important.

Muscle tissue is metabolically active, meaning it requires energy to maintain itself. Every muscle cell contains thousands of mitochondria, often called the "powerhouses" of the cell. These mitochondria continuously use oxygen and nutrients to produce energy, even when you're resting. While muscle doesn't burn hundreds of calories per pound as some fitness myths suggest, having more muscle does increase resting metabolic rate and total daily energy expenditure.

However, the relationship between muscle and metabolism is often oversimplified. While adding a few pounds of muscle will not suddenly double your calorie burn, it does create a measurable increase in resting metabolic rate. More importantly, muscle improves the body's ability to process carbohydrates, regulate blood sugar, store glycogen and utilize fat as fuel. These metabolic improvements can have a significant impact on long-term health and weight management.

The process begins when strength training challenges muscle fibers. The body responds by increasing protein synthesis, repairing damaged fibers and building new contractile proteins. Over time, this leads to larger and stronger muscles. Maintaining this additional tissue requires energy 24 hours a day, creating a higher metabolic demand compared to fat tissue. Building muscle also

creates a phenomenon known as muscle protein turnover. Muscle tissue is constantly being broken down and rebuilt, even when you are not exercising. This continuous cycle requires energy and contributes to overall metabolic activity. In addition, strength training sessions stimulate muscle protein synthesis for up to 24-72 hours after exercise, temporarily increasing energy expenditure as the body repairs and strengthens muscle fibers.

Building muscle and changing metabolism are not overnight processes. Early strength gains during the first four to eight weeks of training are primarily due to improvements in the nervous system. Your brain becomes better at recruiting muscle fibers, coordinating movement and producing force. Significant increases in muscle mass typically become more noticeable after eight to 12 weeks of consistent training, though this varies based on age, nutrition, training intensity and genetics.

As muscle mass increases over months and years, metabolism gradually changes as well. In addition to the direct energy cost of maintaining muscle tissue, strength training improves insulin sensitivity, enhances glucose uptake into muscles and increases the body's ability to utilize nutrients efficiently. These physiological adaptations help support long-term weight management and metabolic health.

This is why many people become discouraged when the scale doesn't change despite exercising consistently. A person may lose several pounds of fat while simultaneously gaining muscle. Because muscle is denser than fat, their weight may stay the same even though their waist circumference decreases, their clothes fit better and their overall health improves.

The goal should not always be to weigh less. In many cases, the better goal is to improve body composition by increasing muscle mass and reducing excess body fat. A stronger body burns more energy, moves more efficiently, tolerates physical stress better and remains more functional with age.

Instead of asking, "How much weight have I lost?" consider asking, "How much stronger have I become?" The answer to that question often provides a far more meaningful measure of progress. Over time, increased strength, greater muscle mass and improved body composition can lead to a healthier metabolism and a healthier life — even if the number on the scale changes very little.

If you are having a hard time fitting in a workout, feel like you don't know where to start or just need some help, try MaxStrength Fitness. We do effective, efficient and safe 20-minute workouts, just twice a week. We deliver results with a science-backed program. Give us a call at 850-373-4450 (Niceville) or 850-467-9729 (Fort Walton Beach)!

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- When you look through magazines, do you envy the models' smiles?
- Do you wish your teeth were whiter?
- Do you think you show too much or too little of your teeth when you smile?
- Would you like to change the way your teeth or gums are shaped?
- Do you have gaps or spaces in between your teeth?

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Wellness

ACUPUNCTURE

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around the person, their neurological presentation and their goals. Neuroacupuncture does not replace appropriate neurological, medical, psychological or rehabilitative care. Instead, it offers another potential tool within a thoughtful, coordinated plan.

Facial Rejuvenation Acupuncture: A Different Approach to Aging Well

Needles in the face may sound particularly appropriate for October, but these needles are tiny, remarkably fine and meticulously placed.

Facial rejuvenation acupuncture is considerably more sophisticated than placing a few needles around a wrinkle. Precise needling creates controlled stimulation within the tissues, supporting local circulation and the body's normal tissue-repair response. Research continues to explore its potential influence on skin elasticity and other features associated with facial aging.

This is typically a progressive approach, with sessions building upon one another as the practitioner monitors the response over time. It may appeal to someone noticing that stress, hormonal changes and time are showing differently in the mirror—or someone interested in complementing an established aesthetic or skin-health routine.

Eastern medicine brings an interesting perspective to aesthetics: the face does not exist independently from the person attached to it. Sleep, chronic stress, hormonal transitions, nutrition and overall health eventually show up in how we look and feel. The goal is not to make someone look like a different person, but to support the face while still paying attention to the whole person.

Herbal Medicine: More Than "Natural"

No October discussion of Eastern medicine would be complete without a few herbs.

Botanical medicine has deep roots across Eastern traditions, where plants may be used individually or combined into carefully constructed formulas. Plants contain biologically active compounds, which is precisely why species, preparation, sourcing, formulation and dose matter.

Herbal medicine may provide additional support alongside conventional care or offer another avenue when certain options are limited or poorly tolerated. That does not mean ignoring pathology. Good integrative care respects diagnosis, appropriate testing and conventional treatment while continuing to ask what else may reasonably support the individual.

At Tortoise Clinic, our in-house dispensary includes raw Chinese herbs, carefully selected formulas, professional-grade supplements and targeted nutrients. It supports individualized patient protocols and is also open to the public.

Cupping: An Old Practice with Modern Appeal

Cupping has been used for centuries and has found a modern audience in sports, physical recovery and wellness settings.

Traditional fire cupping may be dramatic to watch, but the flame is removed before the glass cup is placed on the body and never touches the skin. Contemporary methods create a similar lifting effect without fire.

Unlike the downward pressure of massage, cupping lifts the tissues and may be incorporated for muscular tension, mobility, restriction, discomfort or recovery after physical activity. Whether it is a golfer maintaining shoulder mobility, a runner recovering from training or someone carrying years of tension through the neck and back, cupping offers another tool within a broader approach to movement and recovery.

Eastern medicine can appear mysterious from the outside. There are needles, unfamiliar herbs, glass cups and occasionally even fire. Behind them is a long history of observation, individualized care and an evolving body of research.

For me, the interesting part is not choosing between Eastern and Western medicine. It is understanding where each has something meaningful to offer and when they can complement one another.

So, this October, save the fear for the haunted houses and scary movies. The needles are tiny. Fire is optional. And the herbs are far more sophisticated than a bubbling cauldron might suggest.

Dr. Karen DeVore is the owner of Tortoise Clinic in Santa Rosa Beach, a multidisciplinary clinic bridging Eastern and Western perspectives and providing the North Florida community with thoughtful, individualized, whole-person care.

Wellness

Skilled Nursing and Rehabilitation Facilities: What to Expect

By Teresa Halverson, Business Development/ Community Relations Director, The Manor at Blue Water Bay

Skilled Nursing and Rehabilitation facilities provide a wide range of medical and rehabilitative services for individuals who are recovering from an illness, injury or surgery. The goal of the stay is to help a patient regain strength and independence, so they can safely return home. Choosing a skilled nursing facility (SNF) is often a decision made after a hospital stay when a patient needs more intensive medical care and rehabilitation than can be provided at home. The primary purpose is to bridge the gap between a hospital stay and a patient's home, helping them recover fully and regain independence. This constant supervision is crucial for patients needing post-acute (hospital) care and requires monitoring to watch for complications and manage pain after surgery.

What type of conditions and services are normally available?

Surgery: Especially joint replacement surgeries (hips, knees, shoulders) or other major procedures to include back surgery.

Acute Illness: Pneumonia, infections or complications from chronic conditions like heart failure or COPD.

Injury or Fall: For patients who need to regain mobility and strength after an accident.

Stroke or other Brain Injuries: Skilled nursing facilities have a strong focus on neurological rehabilitation.

Wound Care: Complex or Chronic wound management including dressing changes and monitoring for infection. Some SNFs now utilize the Vaporox wound care system that greatly enhances the healing of wounds.

IV Therapy: Includes the administering of medications or fluids intravenously.

Medication Management: Supervising and administering a patient's medication regimen, which is very important for complex cases.

Pain Management: Licensed staff are trained to monitor and assess a patient's pain levels and implement a plan to manage it. These discussions are held with the patient's physician.

Medical Monitoring: Includes the continuous monitoring of vital signs and other health conditions.

Catheter and Colostomy Care: Specialized care for patients with these specific needs.

Respiratory Care: Management of conditions such as COPD and other lung problems.

Chronic Condition Management: While many stays are temporary, SNFs can also provide long-term care for individuals with chronic conditions who require a higher level of medical support. This may include specialized units for conditions like:

Dementia and Memory Care: Providing a safe a structured environment with specialized programs.

Hospice and Palliative Care: Focusing on comfort and quality of life for patients with serious illnesses.

These services are provided on-site, allowing patients to focus on their recovery without the stress of arranging multiple appointments and transportation.

Rehabilitative Services:

A core component of a skilled nursing facility is rehabilitation. These services are designed to help patients restore function and improve their quality of life. The therapy teams include:

Physical Therapy (PT): Physical therapists help patients improve mobility, strength, balance, and gait. They may work on tasks to include learning to use a walker or climbing stairs.

Occupational Therapy (OT): Occupational therapists focus on regaining the skills a patient needs for activities of daily living (ADLs) such as dressing, bathing, and eating. They also help patients adapt to their environment and use assistive devices if necessary.

Speech-Language Pathology (SLP): Speech Therapists address a variety of issues including communications difficulties, cognitive impairments, and swallowing disorders (Dysphagia) which can be common after a stroke or with certain condition of dementia.

What to expect:

Assessment: Upon admission, a team of specialists will assess the patient's needs and create a personalized care plan.

Therapy Services

Clinical Nursing and Medical Supervision: Physicians and nurses will monitor the patient's progress and manage any medications or medical needs.

Social and Recreational Activities: Most facilities offer social events, recreational activities, and spiritual care to support overall well-being.

Transitioning home: A Focus on Returning Home Safely:

While skilled nursing and rehabilitation facilities offer Long-term residential living, the focus of rehab is to set goals to help patients recover enough to re-

Continued on next page

Business

A Superior Mechanical Hosts Second Veterans & First Responders Event

Okaloosa and Walton communities are coming together again to give recognition and thanks to our first responders, veterans, and active military. A Superior Mechanical will hold its inaugural Veterans and First Responders Appreciation Lunch at the Niceville Community Center, 204 Partin Drive North, Niceville 32578 on Tuesday, October 20, 2026, from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Please save the date!

During the event, A Superior Mechanical will donate a new Hot Water Heater complete with installation to one First Responder or Veteran in need. This giveaway is open to all who have served in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and all first responders including EMT/Medics, Police, Sheriffs and Fire Fighters. Register to win at ASuperiorMechanical.com and go to About Us > HVAC Giveaway.

The event includes a delicious hot lunch catered by Swiftly Catered, a brief welcome from the sponsors and supporters, and the Hot Water Heater. This event is supported and sponsored by the City of Niceville and Niceville Community Center, Niceville High School (who will present the colors), Rocky Bayou Christian School (who will sing the National Anthem), Walton and Okaloosa County businesses are encouraged to sponsor; for more information contact Marta Thorpe at (850) 814-3822.

SKILLED NURSING

continued from previous page

turn to their own home or an assisted living facility. Staff members work as teams with patients and family members to create a personalized care plan that focuses on achieving this goal. The focus on "transitional care" can lead to a faster and more complete recovery, reducing the risk of complications and hospital readmissions. Nurses, Physicians, therapists and other team members work together, share information and adjust the patient's care plan as needed. This integrated and holistic approach ensures that all of the patient's needs-from medical to emotional – are being addressed. The goal is to help patients return home safely with the skills and confidence to manage their daily lives. This may involve training in assistive devices, home modifications or arranging for home health services.

The Manor at Blue water Bay is the only locally owned and operated skilled nursing rehabilitation facility in the area. A 5-Star, CMS rated facility with over 32 years of experience serving our community's healthcare needs, we have built a strong foundation of trust and expertise. This long-standing commitment allows us to provide reliable, compassionate care that truly understands and addresses the unique needs of the people we serve. We are proud to have been a consistent and dedicated partner in the well-being of our community for more than three decades. Questions? We are here to help. Please contact our Admission's Team at 850-897-5592 or email: wecare@manoratbwb.com for more information and how we can assist you in your future health care needs.

Musing

Sean of the South: **AI**

By Sean Dietrich

Right now, the news media is in an uproar over AI. The headlines are bleak. Experts are saying our cherished way of life is in danger. Pretty soon, if things keep going this direction, they say we will lose basic human abilities, such as empathy, sustained focus, and the ability to spel withot autocorrek.

And while I know I'm supposed to be terrified of AI, I'm not worried. Namely, because right now, I'm busy watching "The Dog House."

"The Dog House" is a TV series about people who adopt pets in Godmanchester, England. The show documents stories of animal rescues from the Wood Green Pets Charity, and it is crack for dog lovers.

After a few moments of watching, you're rooting for families, for rescues, for the rescue staff, and you've finished two bags of Chili Cheese Fritos.

This show is nearly perfect. On the "International Sean Dietrich Adorable-TV Scale," a scale ranging from 1 to 10 (with 10 being, say, "Lilo & Stitch," and one being "A Clockwork Orange"), "The Dog House" receives a score of 632,348.

This is because the show is positive.

Have you ever tried practicing positivity? Have you ever actively been positive for a full 24 hours?

Yes. I know. Some see positivity as willful ignorance. Others see positivity as pure stupidity. But personally, I have always seen positivity as a five-syllable word.

Even so, positivity is not just ANY five-syllable word such as "geometrical," "vegetarian," or "Lithuania." Those are regular five-syllable words. No, positivity is real.

Everything in this world is made of energy. If you were to magnify any object to the atomic level, you'd see only waves or particles. Many particles carry an electrical charge.

That chair in the corner is really just energy. The phone you're holding: Energy. The crumpled Frito-Lay bag lying next to you on the sofa: Also energy.

So, in electrical terms, "positivity" actually means something different than you might think.

Let's go back to high-school physics class for a moment. Quit doodling in your history textbook and altering that image of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, you pervert. Let's talk about electrical circuits.

Recall that an electrical circuit won't work if each point carries the same voltage. Take your house. Light and power only happen in your home when there is a potential difference between high points (positives) and low points (negatives).

Now apply this to life in general.

Daily life is filled with high and low points. A high point in your day might be finding $50 in your coat pocket, whereas a low point would be, for example, undergoing an IRS audit that lasts about as long as dental school—not that this has ever happened to me.

Positive thinking isn't about pretending low points don't exist. Hardship, frustration, grief, disaster—those things happen. But in electrical terms, these low points offer low electrical potential.

You CAN'T get an electrical current flowing if you're not positively charging your circuit.

So, once again, sticking with electrical jargon:

If you deal with the low points, but actively aim for the high points, you will generate a current. The current will start small. But it will build. Because that's what energy does. It grows.

The more positivity you build, the more positive the people around you will become. One electrical current can spread across the world. Across the universe. Across time and space. Touching nearly every human on the planet.

If, however, you only focus on low points, you're—electrically speaking—dead. Like a dead electrical outlet. Or a dead toaster oven.

Over time, your body and mind will become so lethargic you'll require energy from external sources to survive. Other people in your life can feed you positive energy for a little while, but not forever.

Ultimately, you'll drain your loved ones until their batteries are almost dead, too. Pretty soon, THEY'LL become negatively charged. Your negativity will alter them. Their negativity will alter THEIR loved ones. And the negativity loop will get bigger and bigger, affecting more and more people, until there's nothing left on this Earth but AI.

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Musing

A Pastor's Ponderings:
Don't Celebrate America at 250 and Forget God

By Pastor Doug Stauffer

Much of America is spending 2026 celebrating the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Rightfully so! But October brings another anniversary worth remembering. Two hundred forty-five years ago this month, the promises written on parchment in Philadelphia were preserved on the battlefield at Yorktown.

Five years from now, in October 2031, America will mark the 250th anniversary of the Yorktown surrender. There will undoubtedly be ceremonies, reenactments and speeches. But perhaps we should begin remembering the story now—especially the part too often left out. The men who experienced Yorktown believed God had intervened.

By autumn 1781, the Revolutionary War had dragged on for more than six years. America was exhausted. Britain remained the world's most powerful military empire, and victory for the young United States was anything but certain. Then an extraordinary series of events began to come together.

General George Washington had been considering an attack on New York, but his attention suddenly shifted south to Virginia. French troops under General Rochambeau joined Washington's army and marched south. The Marquis de Lafayette helped contain British General Charles Cornwallis in Virginia. Meanwhile, French Admiral de Grasse arrived with his fleet and defeated the British at the Battle of the Chesapeake. The sea route was closed.

By late September, about 17,600 American and French troops surrounded Cornwallis and his army of about 8,300 men at Yorktown. The trap was closing.

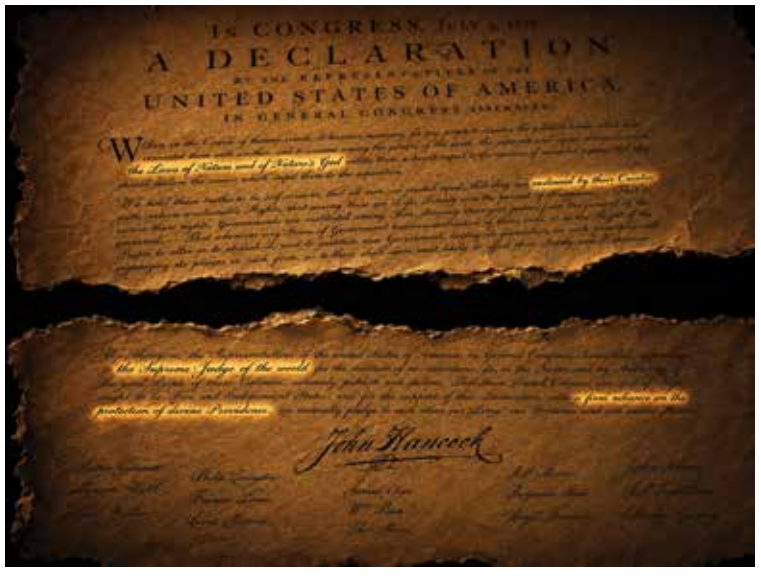
On October 14, American and French forces attacked two key British fortifications. French troops captured Redoubt No. 9, while American troops under Alexander Hamilton stormed Redoubt No. 10. Their capture enabled allied artillery to move even closer to the British lines. Cornwallis was running out of options.

Then came the night of October 16. Cornwallis made a desperate attempt to save his army. His plan was to ferry his troops across the York River to Gloucester Point and try to break out. Some of his soldiers had already crossed when a violent storm struck—something no general could command.

The wind scattered the boats and forced Cornwallis to abandon his escape. Think about that. Generals could plan. Soldiers could march. Artillery could fire. Ships could sail. But no commander at Yorktown could order the wind to blow. Scripture says it this way:

Proverbs 21:31 *The horse is prepared against the day of battle: but safety is of the LORD.*

There is nothing unspiritual about preparation. Washington prepared. Lafayette fought. Hamilton charged. Rochambeau coordinated. De Grasse controlled the Chesapeake. Yet preparation and Providence are not enemies. Man prepares the horse. God still determines the outcome.



By the morning of October 17, Cornwallis knew his position was hopeless. A British officer appeared with a flag of truce, and negotiations began. Two days later, on October 19, 1781, the British army marched out of Yorktown and laid down its arms between lines of American and French soldiers.

The war was not technically over. That would come with the Treaty of Paris in 1783. But Yorktown effectively ended the major fighting and destroyed Britain's realistic hope of defeating the American Revolution militarily. America had won an astonishing victory.

What happened next may tell us as much about that generation as the battle itself. Washington did not simply congratulate his troops and celebrate military genius. On October 20, he ordered divine services throughout the army. He urged the troops to attend with seriousness and "gratitude of Heart" as they considered what he called the "reiterated and astonishing interpositions of Providence." Washington had seen the pieces fall into place.

The French fleet arrived just when it was desperately needed. Cornwallis was trapped between an allied army and a blocked Chesapeake. The redoubts fell. British reinforcements did not arrive in time. And when Cornwallis attempted to escape across the York River, a violent storm helped seal his fate. Washington

Continued on next page

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Arts & Music

Local Author Bookshelf: **A Daughter's Legacy Brings Hope to Families Facing Pediatric Cancer**

By Michelle Ruschman

As a mother whose family persevered through pediatric cancer, author Fran Fulcher is on a mission to support other families going through the same journey. Fulcher's interactive children's book, "Amazing Grace and the Wishing Tree," honors her daughter's memory and resilience.

She hopes her book gives families a quiet time to focus on their hopes and prayers during treatment. Fulcher knows firsthand how critical this can be. Her own family spent years traveling for treatment, often requiring parents and children to be apart.

"It's a difficult journey and can take a toll. Families are often split up during radiation or chemo, with one parent having to travel with a child for treatment as the other parent remains at home taking care of the rest of the family. School, home life and activities have to keep going even while we're separated."

Fulcher's daughter, Grace, had a type of brain cancer called anaplastic astrocytoma. According to Fulcher, the family was told the average patient lived another three to 10 years. Still, they held out hope that a clinical trial could be conducted during that time.

Grace was 15 when she was diagnosed and was determined to graduate with her peers. She

reached out to her teachers to develop a plan combining in-person and online learning. Although they wanted her to concentrate on her health, Grace was determined to maintain this sense of normalcy during a tumultuous time.

Fulcher knew she would do anything she could to help Grace meet her goals. While traveling to Pensacola every two weeks for treatment, Grace continued to thrive academically and musically, drawing on her natural tenacity, intelligence and resilience.

"She was always a go-getter, even as a child. I never had to ask Grace to do her homework. She just did it and picked things up so easily. She was always a leader and joined every club in high school that she could think of. She was even part of the first flag football team at her high school and played violin with the Sinfonia Youth Orchestra. Grace graduated in 2017 summa cum laude."

In "Amazing Grace and the Wishing Tree," Grace entertains other children in the hospital with her violin. She and her brother, Maxx, lead people to the Wishing Tree, where families can tie their hopes, dreams and prayers to its branches, sending them to Jesus.

"In the book, there is a character named Nurse Jessica, and she's based on a real nurse who was an incredible Christian woman. Jessica would leave work and still check on Grace. I truly could not have survived without the nurses that took care of our family. They gave me moments of rest, even for just 30 to 45 minutes, and I would sit under one particular tree to get some fresh air and vitamin D. That tree would eventually become the Wishing Tree in the book."

Grace died in 2018, but her spirit lives on through her friends, family and her mother's book. "Amazing Grace and the Wishing Tree" was published by Bell Asteri Publishing, whose mission is to improve the lives of children in the cancer community through storytelling.

The book is available at Amazon.com, Walmart.com and BarnesandNoble.com. Bell Asteri says proceeds from its book sales benefit Gold Together for Childhood Cancer and other nonprofit organizations. Gold Together is the American Cancer Society's childhood cancer initiative, supporting research, advocacy and patient support.

Grace's family also established the Amazing Grace Scholarship through the Children's Brain Tumor Foundation to help brain tumor survivors pursue higher education.

Families seeking additional information or support can contact Fulcher at franfulcher@proton.me.

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

PASTOR'S

continued from previous page

knew military skill had played its part. Yet when victory came, he looked higher.

Congress did the same. When news of the surrender reached Philadelphia, the Continental Congress resolved on October 24 to proceed together to church to "return thanks to Almighty God" for the victory. That is a part of Yorktown that modern America should never forget. The generation that won our independence did not congratulate itself and then erase God from the story.

Washington saw Providence. Congress thanked Almighty God. A victorious army was called to worship.

An unmistakable connection links 1776 and 1781. The Declaration of Independence acknowledged our Creator, appealed to the Supreme Judge of the world, and expressed reliance on the protection of Divine Providence. Five years later, they were still looking upward. Perhaps that is the lesson America needs in 2026.

We are rightly celebrating 250 years of independence, but independence from tyranny was never intended to mean independence from God. Our founders prepared, sacrificed, fought and bled. But when victory came, they possessed enough humility to recognize that there were forces beyond their ability to command. In October 2031, America will celebrate 250 years since Yorktown. We should not wait five more years to remember its lesson.

At Yorktown, America won a victory. Just as importantly, America remembered whom to thank.

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Arts & Music

Sinfonia Gulf Coast Presents The Wizard of Oz: Film in Concert Oct. 17 to Open 2026-2027 Season

Beloved cinematic classic comes to life on the big screen with Sinfonia Gulf Coast performing live under the stars

Follow the Yellow Brick Road as Sinfonia Gulf Coast launches the Main Event concert series of its 21st annual season with The Wizard of Oz: Film in Concert on Saturday, Oct. 17, at 7 p.m. at the Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation Dugas Pavilion in Destin.

One of the most beloved films of all time comes to life in a magical new way as the full Sinfonia Gulf Coast orchestra performs live with the brilliantly restored classic on the big screen. The production features new orchestral transcriptions of Harold Arlen's score, accompanying Judy Garland's original 1939 studio recordings and transporting audiences of all ages to Oz.

Presented outdoors on the Dugas Pavilion green, the evening offers a distinctly different way to experience both a symphony concert and a timeless movie — exactly the kind of unexpected programming that has become a hallmark of Sinfonia Gulf Coast and Music & Artistic Director Demetrius Fuller.

As the area's only fully professional orchestra, Sinfonia continues to push beyond the traditional concert hall, and The Wizard of Oz: Film in Concert is a fitting example of how Fuller brings the organization's mantra, "Your symphony … redefined," to life.

"Film in concert is such an exciting way to experience a symphony orchestra because it brings together two art forms audiences already love and allows them to hear and see them in an entirely new way," Fuller says. "And presenting The Wizard of Oz outdoors makes the experience even more special. You have this extraordinary film on the big screen, our full orchestra performing live and an audience gathered under the stars. It really embodies what we mean by 'Your symphony … redefined.'"

The production was created by Emmy Award-winning producer John Goberman, producer of Live From Lincoln Center and creator of the acclaimed A Symphonic Night at the Movies. It premiered in summer 2005 to sold-out crowds at Wolf Trap and the Ravinia Festival.

From Over the Rainbow and Dorothy's first steps along the Yellow Brick Road to the Emerald City and beyond, audiences can rediscover the music, characters and unforgettable moments that have enchanted generations.

Released in 1939, The Wizard of Oz earned six Academy Award nominations, including best picture. Over the Rainbow, composed by Harold Arlen with lyrics by E.Y. Harburg, won the Academy Award for best original song.

The concert marks the first Main Event of Sinfonia Gulf Coast's 2026-2027 season and continues the orchestra's tradition of pairing world-class musicianship with innovative programming designed to make symphonic music accessible, relevant and engaging.

Lawn seating is $25 per person, $15 for students and $20 for military. Table seating is $45 per person.

Tickets are available at SinfoniaGulfCoast.org or by calling (850) 460-8800.

Proceeds benefit Sinfonia Gulf Coast and its music education and community engagement initiatives throughout Northwest Florida.

Emerald Coast Arts Festival Announces Call to Artists for 2027 Festival

Artists from across the country are invited to apply for the 2027 Emerald Coast Arts Festival, presented by the Arts & Design Society of Fort Walton Beach (ADSO). The festival will take place April 10–11, 2027, at the Freedom Tech Center in Fort Walton Beach, Florida, bringing together talented artists, art enthusiasts, families, and visitors for a weekend celebrating creativity and the visual arts.

The Emerald Coast Arts Festival offers artists an opportunity to showcase and sell their original work in a vibrant festival setting along Florida's beautiful Emerald Coast. The event will feature a diverse selection of fine art, along with live music, artist demonstrations, food, and beverages.

Artists working in a wide variety of mediums are encouraged to apply. The festival is designed to provide participating artists with an engaging venue to connect directly with art buyers and the community while showcasing their creativity and craftsmanship.

Artists interested in participating are encouraged to submit their applications before the early bird deadline of September 30 to receive the discounted application rate.

Application Deadlines

Artists are encouraged to apply early:

Early Bird Deadline: September 30, 2026 — $35 application fee

Final Application Deadline: November 15, 2026 — $50 application fee

Applications are being accepted online through ZAPPlication.

Apply here: https://www.zapplication.org/event-info.php?ID=14804&preview_only=1

With artists expected to travel from throughout the country, the Emerald Coast Arts Festival provides an exceptional opportunity to reach both local patrons and visitors while becoming part of the thriving arts community of Northwest Florida.

Arts & Music

A Comedically Fun Murder Mystery Hits the ECTC Stage This October

By Cameron Hughes

October is the perfect time for a murder mystery, and Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC) is bringing plenty of intrigue to the stage with The 39 Steps, running October 15–25 at Grand Boulevard.

Based on Alfred Hitchcock's classic thriller, The 39 Steps combines murder, espionage and romance in an adventure filled with rapid-fire comedy. Four actors take on more than 150 characters as one ordinary man finds himself caught in an extraordinary chase filled with twists, turns and laughs, making for a fun night out this fall.

Lovers of last season's Murder on the Orient Express will find plenty to enjoy in this fast-paced thriller, including the return of audience favorite Hayes Mercure. After keeping audiences guessing as American businessman Samuel Ratchett, Hayes returns to the ECTC stage in The 39 Steps for another suspenseful adventure, this time on a deadly pursuit through the Northern European countryside.

Following The 39 Steps, ECTC heads into the holidays with its third production of Season 14, Million Dollar Quartet Christmas, running December 3–20. Featuring the music of Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins and Elvis Presley, this high-energy holiday celebration combines rock 'n' roll classics with Christmas favorites for a festive night of live music, nostalgia and holiday spirit.

Performances of The 39 Steps run October 15–25 at Emerald Coast Theatre Company, located at Grand Boulevard in Miramar Beach. Tickets and more information are available at emeraldcoasttheatre.org.

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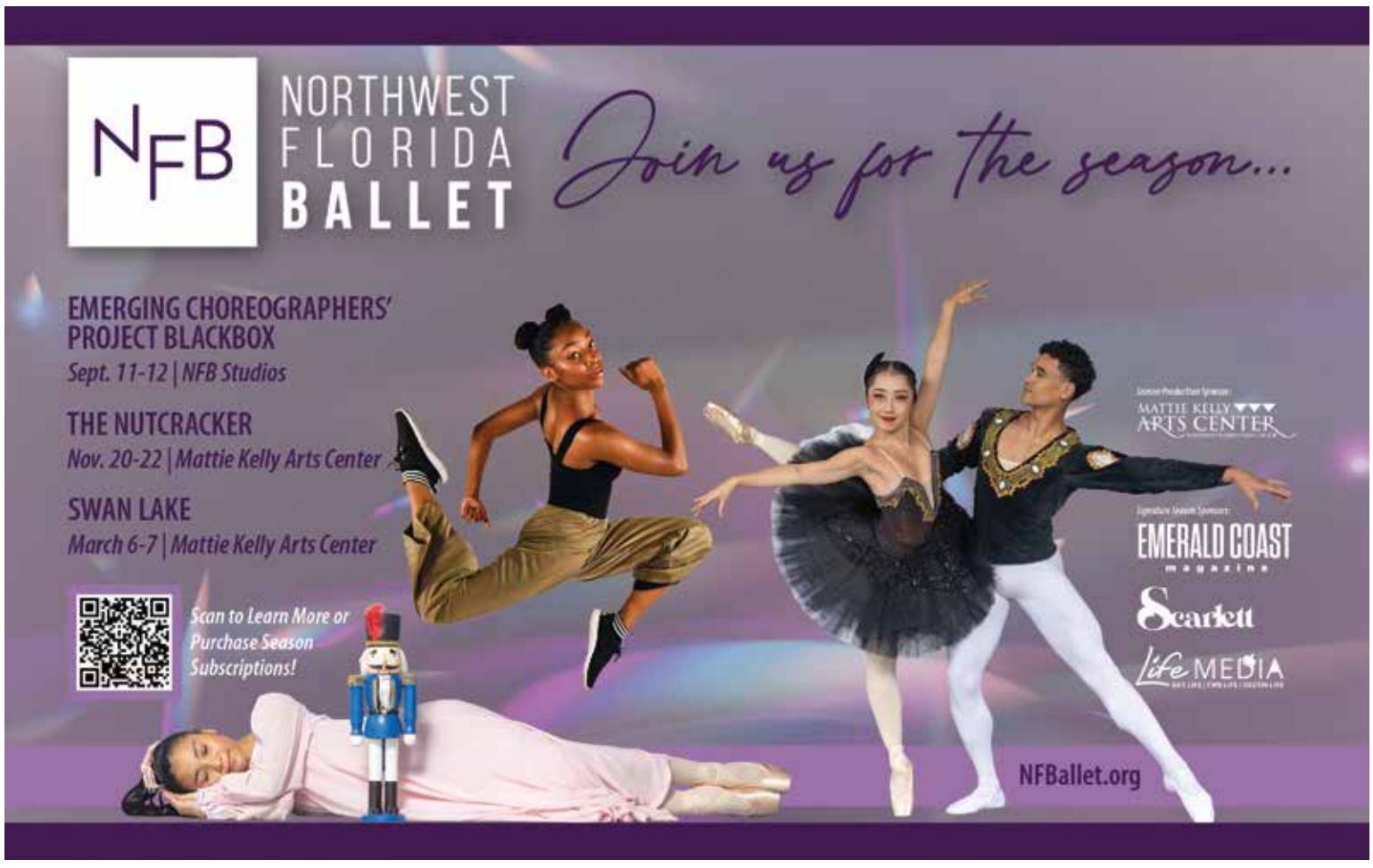

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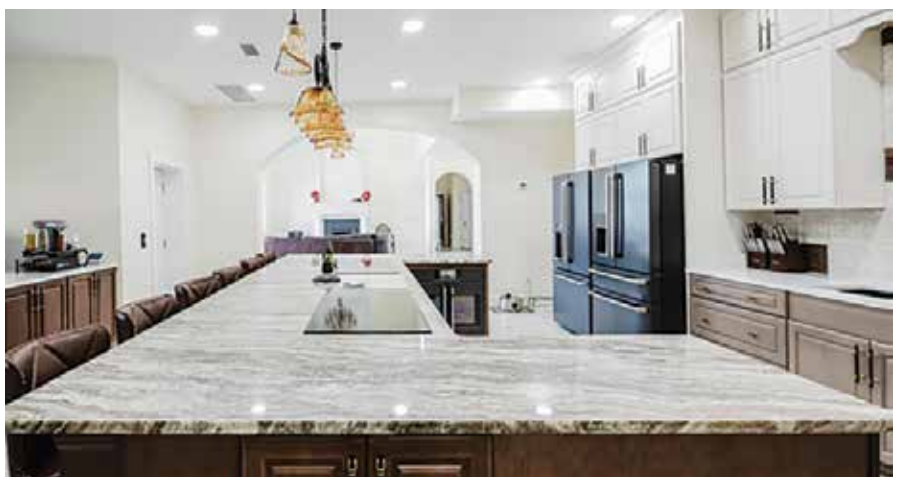

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