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Beyond the Uniform: A Veterans Day Call to Purpose and Community

By Bruce R. Duty, Retired U.S. Army Chaplain, CrossCountry3



As Veterans Day approaches, I find myself thinking about the remarkable men and women who have served our nation in uniform—and especially those who now call Okaloosa County home. From Valparaiso, Niceville and Bluewater Bay to Destin and Fort Walton Beach, veterans are woven into the fabric of our communities. They are our neighbors, business owners, teachers, coaches, pastors, parents and grandparents.

Their service deserves our gratitude. But, perhaps Veterans Day should also remind us that our veterans still have much to offer—and much worth hearing.

Our region has a remarkable military heritage. Nearby Eglin Air Force Base and the Army's 7th Special Forces Group are reminders of those who continue to defend our nation. Many veterans have chosen to make Okaloosa County their home, bringing with them extraordinary experience, leadership, courage, resilience and a willingness to serve.

As a local retired Army chaplain, I understand something of that journey. My military career, including combat deployments to Iraq, allowed me to walk alongside remarkable soldiers and their families. Those experiences reinforced something I have never forgotten: Military service changes you – ordinary men and women serving in extraordinary circumstances.

It teaches discipline, sacrifice, teamwork and the importance of the person standing beside you. It also provides something that can be surprisingly difficult to replace when the uniform comes off—a powerful sense of purpose and belonging.

When military service ends, the mission can suddenly seem less clear. The question quietly becomes, What is my mission now?

Recently, I traveled to Boise, Idaho, where I attended a Mission43 event featuring acclaimed author and journalist Sebastian Junger. His remarkable book, Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging,

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Meet Our Hometown Hero:

Bernard Johnson

A Lifetime of Showing Up

By Doug Stauffer

Plenty of laughter filled Bernard Johnson's October 1 "retirement" reception. Ted Corcoran, president and CEO of the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce, served as emcee and opened with a gentle roast, complete with a meme casting Bernard as FPL's virtual assistant. Familiar sayings and affectionate stories kept everyone smiling. As the evening unfolded, the tributes grew more personal. Those who had worked alongside Bernard wanted him to know how much he is loved.

Bernard is one of the kindest, gentlest souls I know. He is quick-witted, has a wonderful sense of humor, and brings warmth to every occasion. If there is an important event in Okaloosa County, you can expect to find him involved. At this gathering, the man who so often

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Community

VETERANS DAY

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explores our fundamental need for community, meaningful responsibility, and purpose.

During his presentation, Junger contrasted environments of high consequence and low consequence. Military service often places individuals in situations where their decisions and sacrifices have immediate significance. Returning to civilian life, where that same sense of responsibility may be less obvious, can be difficult.

Junger's message reinforced something I witnessed repeatedly as an Army chaplain: Veterans don't simply need appreciation. They need connection, purpose and opportunities to continue contributing.

One particularly meaningful suggestion Junger makes in Tribe involves communities creating opportunities for veterans to speak openly about their experiences. He encourages gatherings similar to town halls, where veterans can share what they witnessed, what they learned, and what they believe their fellow citizens should understand about military service and war.

I believe that is an idea worth pursuing right here in Okaloosa County. Imagine bringing together veterans from different generations and branches of service—not simply to recognize their accomplishments, but to listen. Some might discuss combat, others the challenges of transitioning to civilian life or lessons learned about leadership, sacrifice, family and friendship. And perhaps some would simply appreciate being heard.

Through CrossCountry3, the nonprofit ministry I lead, I would like to explore hosting such a gathering. I invite Okaloosa County veterans and family members interested in participating to contact me. Perhaps we begin with a simple gathering over coffee and see where it leads. This would not be a political rally or another ceremony filled with speeches, but an opportunity for veterans to speak, neighbors to listen and our community to grow stronger.

Veterans Day is certainly a time to remember and honor those who served. Yet, our responsibility extends beyond saying, "Thank you for your service." We should also be asking, How can we continue serving together? Okaloosa County possesses an extraordinary reservoir of veteran experience, character, leadership and wisdom. Our challenge is not simply to celebrate it, but to engage it.

I firmly believe that retirement from military service does not mean retirement from significance. The uniform may hang in the closet, the rank may belong to our history and the deployments may be over. But the opportunity to lead, mentor, encourage and serve remains. Some of our greatest contributions may still lie ahead.

This Veterans Day, perhaps the greatest way we can honor our veterans is not merely to thank them for what they have done, but to invite them to help shape what our community can become. To my fellow veterans throughout Okaloosa County: Your experiences matter. Your perspective matters. And your voice deserves to be heard.

The military teaches us that every mission eventually comes to an end. But a life of purpose does not.

Perhaps the most important question we can ask this Veterans Day is not simply, What have we done with our lives? It is, What is our mission now?

An Invitation to Okaloosa County Veterans

If you're a veteran interested in participating in a community town hall or informal gathering, I would welcome hearing from you. Let's bring veterans together, share our experiences, and explore how we can continue serving our communities.

bruce@crosscountry3.com | dutybruce6@gmail.com | www.crosscountry3.com

BERNARD JOHNSON

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helps recognize others was the honored guest.

When Bernard finally took the microphone, his first thought was of his wife, Lisa. He recognized her and presented her with flowers before mentioning his own career. After an evening devoted to honoring him, Bernard began by honoring her.

Bernard then quoted two Scriptures that helped explain the kind of man we had gathered to honor. The first was about a good name: Proverbs 22:1 "A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold."

Those words carried weight in that room. We had heard from people representing businesses, military organizations, education, and community service. A good name develops through the way a person conducts himself, keeps his commitments, and treats others. The evening gave us an opportunity to hear what Bernard's name meant to the people who knew him best.

The second Scripture concerned friendship: Proverbs 18:24a "A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly…"

Bernard has certainly shown himself friendly. His approachable manner and ready humor make people glad to see him.



Nathan Sparks of One Okaloosa Economic Development Council spoke about his positive attitude and constant smile. That friendliness has helped him build relationships across our county.

Tony Mallini, who was Gulf Power's general manager when Bernard was hired, offered a memorable compliment. He joked that when his wife wished he were more like someone else, he answered, "I wish I was more like Bernard." Coming from someone who had known Bernard's work for so many years, that was a remarkable expression of respect.

Mallini described Bernard's priorities as his Lord and Saviour first, then his family, and then his customers. He also shared a saying that suited Bernard's approach to work: "Think like a customer and act like an owner." The Scriptures Bernard quoted and the flowers he presented to Lisa reflected those priorities. Bernard also reminded us that God has a plan for all things.

Of course, an evening honoring Bernard would have been incomplete without his familiar phrases. Patt Maney brought up one that many people have heard when Bernard offers to help: "I know a guy." Those few words capture his knack for knowing whom to call and connecting people with someone who can help.

Maney's advice was affectionate and practical: "Stay around, stay involved, or at least give us the list." The joke worked because so many people understood it. Bernard's relationships have helped organizations accomplish their work, and his willingness to make a connection has been a service in itself.

Gordon King, CEO of Okaloosa Gas, added another chapter to the story. He recalled persuading Bernard to convert his home to gas appliances, an amusing accomplishment given Bernard's employer for almost four decades. Even the story of a fireplace that stopped working brought us back to the familiar "I know a guy." King ended by joking that Bernard would move in with Okaloosa Gas now that he was retired from the power company.

Neko Stubblefield of Eglin Federal Credit Union found humor in another part of Bernard's communication style. She said she used Claude, an artificial (super) intelligence assistant,

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Care becomes personal when it touches someone you love. For Todd Harrell, helping care for his grandfather brought first-hand understanding of the responsibilities families carry. The practical tasks mattered, but so did patience, trust, and knowing that someone cared.

That perspective remains part of the story of Home Instead in Fort Walton Beach. Since opening in March 2002, the local office has focused on helping older adults receive support in the place they call home.

Meet Todd and Carly

Todd and Carly Harrell are Florida State University graduates and parents of three sons: Brody, Wade, and Jack. Todd studied criminal justice and played baseball; Carly earned a marketing degree.

Carly joined the business in 2003, contributing across marketing, staffing, training, and administration. Their experiences as a family and as local business owners shape a shared commitment to care that recognizes the individual behind every request for help.



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Grateful for Your Trust

We are grateful to the local families who have welcomed Home Instead into their homes. Their trust inspires us to listen closely, honor familiar routines, and build caring relationships through everyday acts of kindness.

For Todd, Carly, and the local Home Instead team, the purpose remains personal: helping older adults feel supported and families feel heard. If your family is beginning to explore care, we would welcome the chance to learn your story and talk about what home means to you.







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Community



You're Not Supposed to Need a Holiday From Your Own Body

By Dr. Karen DeVore

The turkey is not the only thing carrying tension this Thanksgiving.

Your shoulders have been somewhere near your ears since September. Your lower back has opinions about the drive to see family. And the headache you hoped would disappear has invited itself to dinner.

But there are groceries to buy, deadlines to meet, and people counting on you. So you reach for your usual remedy, say "I'm fine," and keep going.

Sound familiar?

Before you spend another holiday working around your body, consider giving it some attention. Acupuncture could be one way to begin.



When "Normal" Starts Costing You

You may have gotten very good at living with discomfort. You know which chair to avoid. How long you can stand before your back starts protesting. Which activities will leave your knees aching tomorrow.

Those adjustments can feel small until you realize how much of your day they control. Pain takes more than comfort. It takes concentration, patience, spontaneity, and sometimes the desire to participate at all.

That is why the conversation about acupuncture should begin with a question: What would you like to get back to doing?

Cooking without constantly leaning against the counter? Enjoying a walk after Thanksgiving dinner? Making the drive to see someone you love without dreading every mile?

Those are meaningful treatment goals.

Small Needles. Meaningful Possibilities.

Acupuncture involves placing very fine needles at selected points on the body. Rooted in traditional Eastern medicine, it is also the subject of modern research examining its effects on pain and the nervous system.

Some of the strongest evidence supports acupuncture for chronic lower back pain, neck pain, and knee pain associated with osteoarthritis. For someone living with those conditions, relief may make everyday movement and activities more manageable.

Acupuncture may also help reduce the frequency of migraines and tension headaches. Imagine what fewer headache days could mean: fewer canceled plans, fewer afternoons spent distracted by discomfort, and more time available for your life.

Results vary. Acupuncture does not help everyone, and improvement may take multiple visits. But you deserve to know that another option exists.

Your Treatment Should Start With Your Story

A sore back does not tell us everything we need to know about you. When did it start? What makes it worse? What have you already tried? Are you sleeping comfortably? What are you avoiding because you are afraid it will hurt?

A thoughtful consultation connects your symptoms with the way you actually live.

Acupuncture fits within an integrative approach that considers your health history, current care, and personal goals. It can complement appropriate medical treatment, physical therapy, and movement.

We also recognize when symptoms need further evaluation. The goal is a plan that makes sense for you, with progress measured by changes you can notice in daily life.

About the Part That Makes You Nervous

Yes, acupuncture uses needles.

They are much thinner than those used for injections. You may notice a brief pinch, pressure, or a dull ache. Your practitioner should explain the process, check your comfort, and respond to your feedback.

Some people find the experience relaxing. During a season of constant demands, having time devoted entirely to your care can feel welcome.

Choose a licensed practitioner who uses sterile, single-use needles. Discuss your medications, medical conditions, and any pregnancy or bleeding concerns before treatment. You can arrive curious, skeptical, or ner-

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Community

The Vine Foundation: Removing Barriers, Restoring Hope

By Michelle Ruschman

For those who are trying to leave an abusive relationship, The Vine Foundation can be the first step to a new life. Founder Shannon Dwyer knows firsthand how difficult it can be to do it on your own. "I tried to leave my abuser five times over 10 years. So many people ask survivors, 'Why didn't you just leave?' but it's not that simple. In my situation, we were trauma-bonded. The abuse wasn't the only part of our relationship. There were good times woven in and out of the abuse. For a time, we built a home together and had children together. You hold onto those precious moments with the hope he'll finally change."

Abuse can also be more subtle and go deeper over time. "Over the years we were together, my perception became distorted. He went to work and provided for our family, so I'd wonder why I wasn't more grateful. Somehow, financial support became justification for how I was expected to tolerate being treated. I was made to feel like I did not have the right to push back, question him, be angry about how he spoke to me, or expect better because, after all, he paid for everything.

"I think that is the part of this story I most want another woman to understand. Abuse does not have to begin at its worst for it to be abuse.

"You do not have to wait until someone punches you in the face before you are allowed to call what is happening to you physical abuse.

"Someone paying your bills does not purchase the right to control, degrade, intimidate, restrain, or frighten you."

Separation from people you used to see regularly and the distance put between the victim and their loved ones are also signs that shouldn't be ignored. "Every time I wanted to go out, he'd accuse me of cheating. It just became easier to stay home until I found myself isolated and alone. As a result, his voice was the only one I heard."

What also makes it difficult for victims to "just leave" is that there are so many moving parts they have to consider:

- If the car is under my abuser's name, what will I use to leave?
- If I have no job and no access to the finances, how will I have the money to start a new life?
- If my abuser has an upstanding public persona, will anyone believe me?
- How do I leave with the least disruption to my children? What will this do to their friendships and ability to attend their school?
- How do I navigate the shame once this gets out?
- Is there a shelter I can go to that will have room for my kids and me? What will I be exposing them to once we get there?
- How will I retain a lawyer?

This is where The Vine Foundation can be a lifeline. "The goal of this foundation is to be able to ask, 'What do you need RIGHT NOW so you can leave?' and have the resources to remove any barrier. Is it rent, gas money, a job? We don't want those answers to be a hindrance from having a life that's free from abuse."

Shannon was in the process of making The Vine Foundation a 501(c)(3) nonprofit when she was in a head-on collision while visiting Ireland in May. Recovery has been long and painful, but she's finally in a place where she can focus once again on making that goal a reality. "I'm so thankful to the people who have offered to help, but for now, I'm asking that any potential donations be set aside until I can legally accept these funds directly to the foundation."

Shannon and her husband, Brendan, have been doing what they can until that day arrives. In addition to funding, volunteers are needed to provide the resources victims need to start a new life. As part of that effort, The Vine Foundation brought community partners together for its Visionary Luncheon on Oct. 24, 2026. The gathering was designed to unite professionals in legal services, counseling, housing, transportation, medical care, child care, employment, financial guidance, advocacy and other community partnerships. The goal was to build a network of resources that helps survivors overcome barriers and take the next steps toward a life free from abuse.

If you are someone who is in an abusive relationship or you love someone who is, Shannon wants to pass on some advice. "When it is safe to do so, call law enforcement when an incident occurs and document everything you possibly can. Take photos and save text messages, voicemails, emails, and screenshots. Write down dates, times, witnesses, and exactly what happened. Keep copies somewhere your abuser cannot access.

"In the moment, you may want to minimize what happened, protect them, avoid embarrassment, or convince yourself that you'll never need that documentation. But there may come a day when your safety, your children, or your ability to prove a pattern of abuse depends on having a record of what actually happened.

"You are far more likely to wish you had documented and reported an incident than to wish you hadn't. Your future self may desperately need the evidence that your present self is afraid to create.

"I know how easy it is, when you are living inside of something, to move the line for what you'll tolerate. I moved that line for years. Eventually, I realized I was no longer asking myself whether the relationship could be saved. I was asking myself whether staying in it could cost me my life."

The Vine Foundation also plans to expand its services to include men, recognizing that abuse affects men as well as women.

The best way to reach Shannon and The Vine Foundation is by calling 850-684-5653 or emailing admin@thevinefoundationnwfl.com. You can also go to Facebook at The Vine Foundation or to Instagram at @thevinefoundationnwfl.

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



Five Things to Review During Medicare Open Enrollment for 2027



Medicare Open Enrollment runs October 15 through December 7.

If you live in Okaloosa or Walton County, here are five things to review before deciding whether to keep your coverage for 2027.

By Max Zlobin, Founder and Licensed Insurance Agent, SwitchBlue Insurance Agency

Medicare Open Enrollment runs from October 15 through December 7, 2026. Changes made during this period generally take effect January 1, 2027. You can change Medicare Advantage plans, change prescription drug coverage, or move between Medicare Advantage and Original Medicare.

Even if your current plan worked well this year, take a few minutes to see what is changing before deciding to keep it.

1 Read your Annual Notice of Change

If you have a Medicare Advantage or Part D plan, your plan sends an Annual Notice of Change, or ANOC, each fall. It outlines changes for the following year, including premiums, deductibles, copays, drug coverage and provider networks.

Start with the things that affect you most: your doctors, hospital, pharmacy and prescriptions.

2 Check your doctors, pharmacies and prescriptions

Networks and drug formularies can change each year. Confirm that your doctors, specialists, hospitals and pharmacy will still be covered in 2027.

For each prescription, check that it remains covered, review its formulary tier, and see whether your plan uses preferred pharmacies with lower copays.

3 Look beyond the monthly premium

A $0 plan premium does not mean there will be no out-of-pocket costs.

Review what you may pay for doctor visits, hospital stays, outpatient care, prescriptions and deductibles. Also check the plan's annual maximum out-of-pocket amount for covered medical services. This shows the most you could pay for covered Part A and Part B services during the year. Prescription drug costs follow separate Part D rules.



4 Understand Medigap and TRICARE rules

If you are considering moving from Medicare Advantage to Original Medicare, you may also want a Medicare Supplement, or Medigap, policy to help pay costs Original Medicare does not cover.

Florida has certain protected enrollment situations in which you may have guaranteed-issue rights for a Medigap policy. Outside those situations, an insurer may ask health questions, use medical underwriting, and may decline an application. Florida does not have a broad annual "birthday rule" that lets people switch Medigap plans each year without underwriting.

Florida Medigap policies are issue-age rated. Your premium is based on your age when you buy the policy and does not increase simply because you get older. Premiums can still increase for other reasons, including medical costs, claims experience or rate changes affecting a group of policyholders.

If you have TRICARE For Life, you generally need Medicare Parts A and B to keep that coverage. Medicare generally pays first for covered services, and TRICARE For Life generally pays after Medicare. TFL includes prescription drug coverage, so you do not need Medicare Part D to have prescription coverage. In some cases, however, Part D may provide coverage for drugs TFL does not cover. Check with TRICARE before making a Medicare Advantage or Part D change.

5 Start early

Do not wait until December. Gather your current plan information, medication list, doctors' names, hospital preferences and pharmacy information so you have time to review what is changing.

If you are enrolled in Medicare Advantage, you also have a Medicare Advantage Open Enrollment Period from January 1 through March 31. During that time, you may switch to another Medicare Advantage plan or return to Original Medicare. If you return to Original Medicare, you may also be able to join a separate drug plan.

Max Zlobin is the founder of SwitchBlue Insurance Agency, an independent agency that helps beneficiaries compare coverage without charging a separate fee. The agency is compensated by the carriers it represents. This article is for educational purposes and is not a recommendation of any specific plan.

*This is a solicitation for insurance. Not affiliated with the U. S. government or federal Medicare program.

IMPORTANT: We do not offer every plan available in your area. Currently we represent eight organizations which offer 30 products in your area. Please contact Medicare.gov or 1-800-MEDICARE to get information on all of your options.

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Community

38th Annual Thunderbird Intertribal Powwow Celebrates Native American Heritage

By Kirby Locklear, Thunderbird Intertribal Council Chairperson

November is National American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month, a time to honor the rich histories, cultures and contributions of Native Americans. Established through congressional legislation and presidential proclamation, this annual observance provides a meaningful opportunity to celebrate the traditions of America's Indigenous peoples. Here on the Emerald Coast, that celebration comes to life Nov. 6-8 during the 38th Annual Thunderbird Intertribal Powwow at Twin Oaks Park (Mullet Festival Grounds) in Niceville.

Hosted by the Thunderbird Intertribal Council, this three-day, family-friendly event brings together Native American dancers, drummers, singers, storytellers and artisans to share their heritage with the community. Visitors can experience intertribal dancing, traditional music, authentic Native American-themed crafts, special exhibits, demonstrations and more.

Festivities begin Friday, Nov. 6, with Children's Day from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., welcoming more than 500 local schoolchildren for educational exhibits, storytelling and demonstrations, including presentations from the Indian Temple Mound. Friday evening's powwow begins at 7 p.m. with the Grand Entry of dancers, followed by intertribal dancing until 9 p.m.

Saturday's opening ceremony begins at noon with a special tribute honoring veterans and a Grand Entry showcasing various traditional dance styles. Contest dancing follows, with a special performance by the Pacific Islanders Dance Company during the 5-7 p.m. dinner break. Dancing resumes at 7 p.m. Sunday's festivities begin at noon and continue until 4 p.m.

Understanding Powwow Traditions and Etiquette

A powwow is a social gathering that brings members of different tribes together in peace and harmony, a tradition that continues today. Open to the public, powwows offer a unique opportunity to experience Native American culture while learning the customs and etiquette that make these gatherings meaningful.

The Master of Ceremonies guides the event, including the





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Grand Entry, when dancers enter the arena in traditional regalia. Dancing takes place within a circle representing the circle of life. Spectators should enter the dance arena only when invited, and guests are encouraged to participate when an invitation is extended.

Dance styles vary by tribal tradition and region, with Northern and Southern styles featuring distinctive movements and regalia. Categories include Women's Traditional, Fancy Shawl and Jingle Dress dancing, along with Men's Traditional, Fancy and Grass dancing.

Respect for dancers and their regalia is especially important. Traditional regalia should never be called costumes or touched without permission. These carefully crafted outfits often take years to complete and may include treasured family heirlooms. Eagle feathers are particularly sacred and should never be handled by spectators, even if one falls to the ground. Instead, notify an event official.

Drum groups and singers are equally important, providing the music that accompanies each dance. Songs may honor veterans, commemorate loved ones or celebrate specific traditions. Visitors should never enter the drumming area or touch the drums without permission.

Photography is generally permitted during intertribal and competition dancing, but guests should seek permission before photographing individual dancers or recording performances. The Master of Ceremonies will announce when photography is prohibited.

Above all, attendees are encouraged to approach the experience with curiosity, courtesy and respect. Native American traditions are diverse, reflecting the unique histories, languages and customs of hundreds of tribes.

The Thunderbird Intertribal Powwow welcomes everyone to learn, participate and celebrate Native American heritage in an alcohol- and drug-free, family-friendly environment. Food and beverages will be available for purchase.

Admission is $3 for Children's Day and $7 for adults and $4 for children during the powwow. Gates open at 9 a.m. Friday and Saturday and 10 a.m. Sunday.

The event takes place at Twin Oaks Park, at Highway 85 and College Boulevard in Niceville. For additional information, visit www.thunderbirdpowwow.org or call Kirby Locklear at 850-279-1931. Volunteers are also welcome and may contact the Thunderbird Intertribal Council at committee@thunderbird-powwow.org.





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6 pm | Salt and Story Bookstore | Niceville

Chess Night
6 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville

05

Coffee and Conversations
7 am | 4580 Range Road | Niceville

6th Annual BBQ & Bingo Fundraiser
5 pm | The District | Valparaiso

06

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

Greater FWB Chamber Lunch N Learn: Primerica Financial Services; "How Money Works, A Primer on Personal Finance
11:30 am | FWB Chamber | FWB

30A BBQ Festival
5:30 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

Trivia Night in Bluewater Bay
Time TBA | The Blue Tee | Bluewater Bay Golf Club | Niceville

06-07

Emerald Coast Rodeo
5:30 pm | NWFSC | Niceville

Mountainfilm on Tour
Gates 5:45 pm; Films 7 pm | WaterColor | SRB

06-08

38th Annual Thunderbird Intertribal Powwow
Times Vary | Twin Oaks Park | Niceville

07

Season 19 Community Build Day #1
9 am | Geek Lights on the Corner | 201 Antiqua Way

Walk to End Alzheimer's – Emerald Coast
Registration 9:30 am; Ceremony 10:30 am; Walk 10:45 am | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

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

Eggs on the Beach
10 am | Seascape | Miramar Beach

Charity Car Show
10 am | Horse Power Pavilion | Freeport

08

Flutterby Arts Festival
10 am | The Pavilion at Watersound Town Center | Watersound

09

Greater FWB Chamber Lunch N Learn; Celebrating Women in Military Service, Guest Speaker Dr. Elvira Chiccarelli
11:30 am | FWB Chamber | FWB

11

Celebrating All Veterans at Women Veterans Park
8:30 am (Arrive by 8 am) | Destin-FWB Convention Center & Women Veterans Park | Okaloosa Island

Active Military & Veterans Appreciation Event
4 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

12

Greater FWB Chamber Nothing But Networking with Vibe Productions at The Place on Beal
11:30 am | The Place on Beal | FWB

13

10th Annual 100 Point Cult & Wine Dinner
5 pm | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport

14

Nautical Flea Market
10 am | Bluewater Bay Marina | Niceville

Alaqua Animal Refuge Bluegrass Barn Jam & Fall Fest Presented by Café Thirty-A
11 am | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport

Tacos & Tequila Under the Trees
12 pm | E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center | Freeport

Reduce, Reuse, Refashion Show
4:30 pm | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

Sinfonia Gulf Coast Classical Connections feat. Howard Levy, Harmonica + Piano
7:30 pm | Destin High School | Destin

18

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

19

Cheers to 30 Years! Tricia Brunson's Chamber Farewell
5:30 pm | Niceville-Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce | Niceville

20

Paws to the Pavement Fun Run
9 am | Edge Elementary School | Niceville

Greater FWB Chamber Lunch N Learn; Victory Health Coaching; " Holiday Harmony: Managing Stress, Food & Feelings"
11:30 am | FWB Chamber | FWB

Grand Boulevard Holiday Parade
6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

20-22

The Nutcracker - Northwest Florida Ballet
Times Vary | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville

21

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

NOVEMBER 2026 EVENTS

21 Continued

Rock Out Climbing Gym Thanksending
10 am | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin



8th Annual Chili Cook-Off - Benefiting CALM
4 pm | LJ Schooners Restaurant | Niceville

28-29

Gingerbread House Making Event
9 am | Safe Harbor United Methodist Church | Niceville

FARMERS MARKETS

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

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

Stage Crafters Presents Guys & Dolls!
November 6, 7, 13 and 14 | Fridays & Saturdays | 7:30 pm
November 8 and 15 | Sundays | 2 pm
Stage Crafters | 109 Miracle Strip Pkwy. SW | Fort Walton 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

CALM Furniture Resale Store
9 am | Sat | 201 Redwood Ave. | Niceville

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

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Community

Join Us at Life Media Sponsored Events

It's Almost Emerald Coast Rodeo Time

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

Saddle up for two nights of thrilling rodeo action at the fourth annual Emerald Coast Rodeo! Named Best Rodeo in Its Division for 2025 by the Professional Cowboys Association, this family-friendly event brings professional cowboys and cowgirls to Niceville for exciting bull riding, barrel racing, roping and more. Little cowboys and cowgirls get in on the fun with mutton bustin' at 6:30 p.m., followed by professional rodeo competition at 7:30 p.m. Gates open at 5:30 p.m. Tickets are $20 in advance or $25 during rodeo week. Children younger than 3 are admitted free. Last year's event sold out, so advance tickets are encouraged! 100 College Blvd. E., Niceville. emeraldcoastrodeo.com

Vote for Your Best at 30A BBQ Festival

Nov. 6 | 5:30-8 p.m. | Grand Blvd. at Sandestin



The 30A BBQ Festival returns to Grand Boulevard from 5:30-8 p.m. to celebrate The Sonder Project! A rain-or-shine event, enjoy all-you-can-eat barbecue, served up by the best grill masters along the Emerald Coast as they compete for the trophy for '30A's Best BBQ' voted by you! In between bites, enjoy live music by River Dan, a photo booth, a silent auction, and a variety of refreshments from local purveyors including craft brews from Grayton Beer Company, wine and water. Details and tickets at https://www.bigtickets.com/events/the-sonder-project/30a-bbq-festival.

Fire Up the Flavor at Eggs on the Beach

Saturday, Nov. 7 | 10 a.m.-1 p.m.

Seascape Resort | Miramar Beach

Get ready to taste, vote and enjoy some serious Big Green Egg creativity when the 12th annual Eggs on the Beach Big Green Egg Cooking Competition fires up! Hosted by Bay Breeze Patio, the popular culinary competition brings together nonprofit organizations, backyard grill masters and restaurant teams, all cooking up bite-sized creations on Big Green Eggs.

Tasters get in on the action, sampling the dishes and voting for their favorites, while honorary judges score entries for taste, presentation and creativity. And it's so good, it's challenging to judge. I know, because I've been one! Winners earn prizes, the coveted Judges' Trophy and, of

Continued on page 31

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







Celebrating All Veterans at Women Veterans Park

By Carolyn Newcomer Ketchel

As many of you know, the County has been adding new pathways to Women Veterans Park. The newest statues and benches are being placed, and we also have a new feature on the plaza known as the Charters of Freedom. The latest additions to the park will be unveiled on Veterans Day, Nov. 11, 2026. There will be an inspirational program inside the Convention Center allowing the community to celebrate all veterans. Please plan to arrive by 8 a.m. The program will begin promptly at 8:30 a.m. before transitioning to the Service Plaza immediately following the indoor ceremony.

Charters of Freedom

The Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights — along with the Civil Rights Amendments — are our country's founding documents. They represent who we are and what we believe, as a country, to the rest of the world. These amazing documents can be viewed in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Unfortunately, not everyone has the ability to make such a trip.

Following a moving trip to the National Archives in 2011, Vance and Mary Jo Patterson formed Foundation Forward Inc. as a nonprofit educational project to promote civics, education and the preservation of American history. Part of their mission is to provide stainless steel replicas of our founding documents to each county in the United States. Okaloosa County received its set on Monday, April 27, 2026.

Most communities placed their Charter displays in or near their seats of government, but Okaloosa County is a bifurcated county with two main population areas. Making a decision about the display location was difficult because we wanted them in the north and the south ends. We decided to reach out to the Foundation and request a second set — and they said yes! Our north end residents have easy access to view these historic documents at the Courthouse in Crestview. For folks in the south end, they can be found on the Plaza at Women Veterans Park.

Pathway Expansion

In March 2024, we began the process of expanding the walking trails at Women Veterans Park by adding an additional one-quarter mile of pathways. Infrastructure projects are complex, involving everything from budgeting and site evaluations to design work and bidding procedures. And then there is the weather! Mother Nature does not always have the same timeline we have. However, after months of hard work on the part of our dedicated Okaloosa County staff and contractors, the expanded, fully handicap-accessible pathway is nearing completion and will be ready for visitors by the end of the month.

Four New Statues

So, what will we see on this new, expanded pathway? I am glad you asked! On Women Veterans Day 2025, we unveiled statues of Linda Bray and Florence Finch. On Veterans Day 2025, we unveiled Nicole Gee and an Iroquois Warrior. These four ladies will be placed along the newly completed pathways.

Capt. Linda Bray, U.S. Army (Ret.), was the commanding officer of the 988th Military Police Company at Fort Benning when her unit deployed to Panama during Operation Just Cause. What began as a mission to secure an area escalated into a three-hour firefight involving grenades, machine-gun fire and rifle fire. Although military police were primarily expected to perform a combat-support role, the situation deteriorated to the point that Bray and her soldiers had to respond to the hostile fire. At the time, women were restricted from assignment to certain combat roles, making Bray's leadership during the engagement particularly significant. For her actions during the firefight, Bray received the Army Commendation Medal, which was later upgraded to the Bronze Star Medal with the "V" device on Dec. 8, 2023.

Loring May Ebersole, later known as Florence, was born in 1915 to a Filipino mother and



an American father. After high school, she took a job as a stenographer with U.S. Army Intelligence Headquarters in Manila, where she met and married Charles Smith. Six months later, she was widowed.

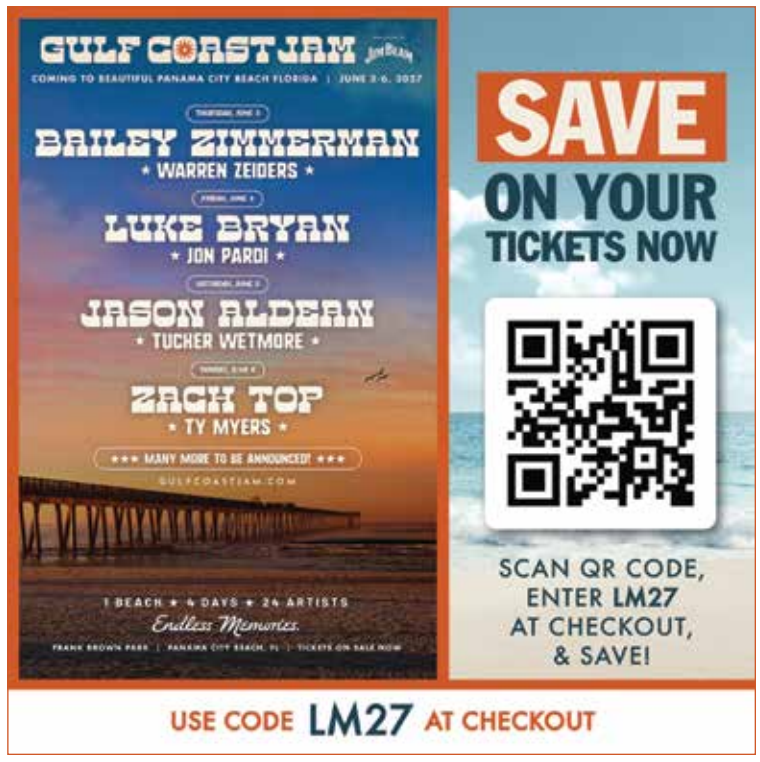
Being half Filipino, she was able to hide her American sympathies from her new employer, the Japanese-controlled Philippine Liquid Fuel Distributing Union. Working with the Philippine underground, she diverted fuel and other critical items to the resistance. Soon she became part of a network of private citizens smuggling food, medical supplies and clean clothes to POWs. Her activity was eventually discovered, and she was arrested in October 1944. She was imprisoned and tortured until her release in February 1945, having never betrayed the resistance. After her liberation, she moved to New York, where she joined the Coast Guard in July 1945.

When her U.S.C.G. superiors learned of her work in the Philippines, she was awarded the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Ribbon and later the Medal of Freedom.

Sgt. Nicole L. Gee, 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, a maintenance technician by specialty, also served a vital role in the evacuation of Kabul by communicating with and facilitating support for Afghan women and children.

On Aug. 26, 2021, Sgt. Gee was assisting with the evacua-

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Community

Bay Buzz

Niceville Valparaiso Chamber Foundation Launches Hurricane Relief Fund

In the aftermath of Hurricane Isaias, the Niceville Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce Foundation is stepping up to help neighbors in need through its newly established Local Hurricane Relief Fund.

As residents and businesses continue cleaning up, making repairs and rebuilding, some face expenses that insurance or other assistance may not cover. The Foundation's relief fund aims to bridge that gap, providing financial assistance for storm-related cleanup and minor repairs that might otherwise go unaddressed.

One hundred percent of monetary donations will directly benefit local residents and businesses affected by Hurricane Isaias. Whether helping a neighbor remove storm debris, complete an essential home repair or assist a business in reopening, every contribution makes a difference.

To encourage community participation, two generous individuals have pledged matching donations when contributions reach $500, helping extend the impact of local generosity.

Donations may be made online through the Niceville Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce Foundation's donation portal or mailed or delivered to 1055 E. John Sims Parkway, Niceville, FL 32578. Please designate contributions for "Local Hurricane Relief."

The Foundation is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization, and donation receipts will be provided for tax purposes.

Whether contributing $10, $50, $100 or simply sharing the opportunity with others, everyone can play a part in helping Niceville and Valparaiso recover.

Together, the community can demonstrate what "Neighbors Helping Neighbors" truly means.

Geek Lights on the Corner Returns for 19th Season, Supporting Twin Cities Pavillion

A beloved Bluewater Bay holiday tradition is gearing up for its 19th season! Geek Lights on the Corner returns Nov. 30 through Jan. 6, bringing thousands of synchronized Christmas lights, music and animated displays to the corner of Bluewater Boulevard and Antiqua Way.

Created by Jeff Werner, the "Northwest Florida Geek," and his wife, Wendy, the elaborate computerized production has



become a seasonal favorite for families throughout the Emerald Coast.

This year's show introduces an exciting change: Two different 30-minute performances running back-to-back, providing more music, stories and holiday favorites than ever before.

"We hope this will give our guests the flexibility to watch all or part of the show," said Jeff Werner, chief Geek, and proprietor of the show. "I am always hearing from people that we left out one of their favorites, so this new format will give me the room to include a lot more content without having the whole show filled with repeated songs."

Performances begin nightly at 6 p.m., with Part 1 starting on the hour and Part 2 on the half-hour. Shows continue until 10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday and 11 p.m. Fridays, Saturdays and holiday eves. Admission is free.

This year's sponsored charity is Niceville's Twin Cities Pavillion, a nonprofit assisted living facility that has served the community for more than 40 years, providing a safe, caring home for individuals who can no longer live independently.

"We could not be more blessed than to live in a community that demonstrates such concern for its vulnerable elderly and handicapped individuals," said Patti Snow, Twin Cities Pavillion Facility Director. "Being chosen for Geek Lights on the Corner is like the ultimate gift of selflessness. With their support we will continue our efforts to provide a loving and safe alternative for those at-risk who no longer feel secure living alone. You are truly angels!!"

Visitors may contribute through a donation box at the display or electronically using a QR code. All donations go directly to Twin Cities Pavillion.

Community members can also help bring the magic to life! Volunteers are invited to participate in Community Build Days on Nov. 7, 14 and 21, beginning at 9 a.m. each Saturday.

To volunteer or learn more, visit Facebook.com/GeekLightsOnTheCorner.

Elder Services of Okaloosa Invites Seniors to Connect, Enjoy Meals and Fellowship

Elder Services of Okaloosa, serving the community since 1971, remains committed to helping vulnerable seniors maintain healthy, independent lives in the comfort of their own homes.

One of its valuable programs is the Congregate Meal Site at the historic Valparaiso Community Center, offering a welcoming place where seniors can gather, socialize and enjoy activities together.

Located at 268 Glenview Ave. in Valparaiso, the center provides opportunities for fellowship, bingo, educational presentations and conversations with peers who understand the experiences and challenges of aging.

Participants also receive a hot, nutritious midday meal at no cost, helping promote wellness while addressing food insecurity among older adults.

Elder Services of Okaloosa encourages community members ages 60 and older to visit, experience the fellowship and discover the benefits of participating.

The center is open Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. There is no charge to attend, participate in activities or enjoy a meal.



With new treatments emerging in the fight against Alzheimer's and all other dementia, now is the time for hope.

Join us the Alzheimer's Association Walk to End Alzheimer's®, the world's largest fundraiser to fight the disease.

2026 Walk to End Alzheimer's
Grand Boulevard
600 Grand Blvd
Miramar Beach

Saturday, Nov. 7 | 9:30 a.m.

Join us at alz.org/walk

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Education

5 Ways Math Practice Impacts Brain Development for K-12 Students

Ever wonder why math feels like such a mental workout? It's because it is… literally. Regular math practice actively supports math and brain development. Each problem a student solves and each pattern they recognize helps boost their brain's executive functions and skills like focus, memory, planning, and adaptability. Benefits of math learning extend to emotional regulation, decision-making, and cognitive flexibility.



What Happens in The Brain When Kids Practice Math?

When your child works through a math problem, they're building powerful mental muscles. Neuroimaging research shows that math and brain development are deeply connected, particularly through activation of the prefrontal cortex, the region responsible for planning, problem-solving and self-control. Arsalidou & Taylor (2011) found that solving arithmetic problems consistently stimulates this area, which supports logical reasoning, working memory and multistep thinking. Like a cognitive workout, math trains the brain to follow rules, recognize patterns and manage multiple pieces of information simultaneously.

Sustained math education in adolescents may also support structural brain development and neural inhibition levels in regions associated with visual-spatial reasoning and executive control [Zacharopoulos et al. (2021)]. Consistent math practice strengthens the brain's core learning architecture and exercises executive functions, helping children focus, resist distractions and plan their actions. Maloney & Beilock (2015) highlight how ongoing math engagement improves inhibition (the ability to pause before acting), working memory and cognitive flexibility. These skills extend beyond the classroom, helping children manage time, navigate social situations and handle stress.

5 Long-Term Benefits of Math Practice

Consistent math practice supports cognitive growth, strengthening memory, focus, problem-solving and mental flexibility. These benefits extend beyond the classroom, helping children think critically, adapt to challenges and develop skills for lifelong success. Here are five research-backed ways math supports brain development:

1. Stronger Cognitive Flexibility: Cognitive flexibility is the brain's ability to shift between ideas, strategies and tasks. It helps children move from addition to multiplication, rethink difficult problems and approach concepts from different angles. A 2022 meta-analysis found that cognitive flexibility is a good predictor of math achievement in children up to age 12 across conceptual, procedural and general math skills, with a significant weighted effect size. By solving word problems, navigating multistep equations and selecting appropriate operations, students learn to adapt their thinking. Each new strategy strengthens mental agility and problem-solving skills that extend into everyday life.

2. Improved Working Memory: Working memory acts like a mental scratchpad, helping children temporarily retain numbers, steps and rules while solving problems. Whether tracking place value during long division or calculating fractions mentally, math continually exercises this skill. Several notable studies have shown that regular, structured problem-solving, especially in environments encouraging reasoning and step-by-step thinking, improves working memory alongside math skills. Stronger working memory also helps students follow multistep directions, understand cause and effect in science and comprehend complex reading passages.

3. Sharper Attention and Focus: In a world filled with distracting screens, maintaining focus is increasingly challenging. Math strengthens attention and mental stamina through activities such as calculating percentages, solving algebraic expressions and tackling everyday problems. The Spiegel et al. (2021) meta-analysis states that consistent math learning activates the brain's executive attention networks, helping children stay present and complete more complex tasks. Regular practice builds mental endurance, helping students concentrate longer, recover from distractions, participate in lessons, complete timed tests and transition confidently between activities.

4. Greater Mental Resilience: Just as physical exercise builds endurance, math practice helps children develop perseverance and resilience. Working through difficult problems and overcoming wrong answers teaches patience, emotional regulation and persistence. As seen in research by Maloney and Beilock (2015), regular engagement with math supports the development of coping skills and emotional regulation. Children gain confidence not because they solved a problem on the first try, but because they persevered until it made sense. This determination extends beyond academics, helping them navigate homework setbacks, peer conflicts and everyday frustrations with greater confidence and self-control.

5. Transferable Thinking Skills: Math develops pattern recognition, logical reasoning, planning and structured thinking that apply across subjects and everyday situations. Analyzing number patterns, testing strategies and sequencing solutions strengthen skills useful in science experiments, reading comprehension and long-form writing. Raghubar et al. (2010) review highlights that math instruction supports broad cognitive development, particularly in areas like planning, attention and problem-solving. These skills help students approach unfamiliar challenges with confidence and flexibility. Whether breaking large tasks into manageable steps, adjusting plans, budgeting an allowance, following a recipe or playing a board game, mathematical thinking supports better decisions, adaptability and problem-solving.

Your local Mathnasium of Niceville can transform how your student thinks and feels about math, supporting all skill levels. We specialize in helping students build deep understanding and long-term confidence, whether struggling with fractions, ratios, Prealgebra or just feeling lost, we're here to help. 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, 538 E. John Sims Pkwy., Niceville. 850-987-MATH (6284).

Thanksgiving Math Fun at Mathnasium of Niceville!

Keep young minds sharp this Thanksgiving with two hands-on math activities from Mathnasium of Niceville — free for pickup at the center!

Thanksgiving Color-by-Sum – Perfect for lower elementary students, this festive coloring sheet helps kids practice addition while revealing a hidden Thanksgiving picture.

Thanksgiving Graphing Challenge – Designed for upper elementary students, this connect-the-dots graphing activity uncovers a secret holiday message through coordinate plotting.

Stop by to pick up your copies! Or visit https://www.mathnasium.com/blog/thanksgiving-math-activities to download and print.

Mathnasium of Niceville, 538 E. John Sims Pkwy., Niceville. 850-987-MATH (6284).



Education

BERNARD JOHNSON

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to interpret his text-message lingo. If even Neko—who is every bit as well connected in Okaloosa County as Bernard—needed help deciphering his texts, the rest of us never stood a chance.

The gifts were memorable too. A flag presentation took a comic turn when the flag measured just two by three inches rather than one that flew over the Capitol in Washington. The Chamber presented socks bearing Bernard's face. Sam and Gus from Harley-Davidson gave him a jacket and welcomed him into the Harley-Davidson family. The all-too-familiar Vince Mayfield of Bit Wizards presented this. Those presentations had plenty of personality.

Behind the laughter was a career that began much more modestly. Bernard recalled moving here in 1984 and working in Kmart's garden ("flower") shop. It took two years to get hired



at Gulf Power. He started on a line crew and worked his way through other responsibilities, including engineering. His career with Gulf Power and Florida Power & Light spanned nearly forty years, with experience in customer service, marketing, and operations.

His last day with FPL was September 30, 2026. For about two decades, he was a principal contact for Gulf Power and later FPL, building relationships with elected officials and military leaders. As regional manager of external affairs, he worked with many of the people and organizations who gathered to thank him.

Bernard also recalled beginning his board service in 1992, with the Boys and Girls Club among his earliest commitments. That involvement grew to include dozens of boards. He is reported to be among the few people who have served on the board of every chamber of commerce in Okaloosa County. If a board is doing important work, Bernard is often involved, frequently as chairman or president.

Northwest Florida State College President Mel Ponder and Foundation Executive Director Chris Stowers helped recognize his service to the college and foundation. Chamber Chair Bonnie Barlow of Bridgeway Center also joined an evening that reflected the breadth of his relationships. Representatives

Continued on next page

Area Math Teacher Connects With Music in a Unique Contribution

By Barbara Palmgren

Retirement for many teachers often means time to follow and excel in other fields, often to the benefit of others. Ever smiling and ever volunteering to share her talents as a musician, Ellen Shepard is one of those rare individuals.

I had the privilege of working with Ellen at Niceville High School in the late '90s and into the 21st century … wow, I'm definitely feeling so much older and not a bit wiser! Ellen was a teacher for the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program at the school. She taught IB Math Methods, the most difficult of the IB math curricula, with students having to score well in subjects like calculus. Each year, as IB coordinator, I saw high scores for all her students, with many earning the full IB diploma as well as a high school diploma.

What happened to this gifted teacher upon retirement? Her passion and dedication continued with music. Volunteering to play the hammered dulcimer for herself, her church and many organizations, Ellen has produced CDs to share the joy of the sound created by this large, trapezoidal instrument, played by striking its strings with small wooden or felt hammers. The sound is mesmerizing. It helps preserve a historic musical tradition associated with major folk revivals in our country.

Ellen's creativity didn't stop. With her sister, Scottie Fredrickson, who resides in South Carolina, Ellen wrote the score for a musical presentation, "Daniel's Ballad, A Folk Opera." Her sister wrote the lyrics. The musical centers on events involving the exiled Judeans and Daniel's dreams as recorded in the Bible. One can almost feel the courage and faithfulness of Daniel and those facing captivity. Both humor and drama come to life through words and music.

This uplifting experience is a must for all of us. We have an opportunity to see and enjoy the masterpiece these two sisters have created Wednesday, Dec. 2, 2026, at 5:30 p.m. at St. Simon's on the Sound Episcopal Church in Fort Walton Beach. Come and enjoy this free concert, a gift for the holiday season indeed!



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Environment

Same Mission, Broader Role: **CBA Is Now the Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance Estuary Program**

The Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance (CBA) has a new name and a larger job. The organization is now the Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance Estuary Program (CBAEP), a transition that adds regional coordination to the restoration, monitoring, research, and education work it has carried out since 1996.

For residents, the most important news is what stays the same. CBAEP will keep restoring oyster reefs and seagrass beds, monitoring water quality, and teaching local students through programs like Grasses in Classes. That hands-on work continues without interruption, led by the same team. "We're not replacing CBA; we're building on it," said



Executive Director Alison McDowell. "The work we've been doing isn't going away. We're still the same organization, with the same people and the same commitment to the watershed. What's changing is that we have a bigger opportunity to bring people together, connect the work that's already happening, and take on some of the bigger challenges facing the Choctawhatchee watershed."

What's New

Local governments, scientists, nonprofits, businesses, and volunteer groups all work to protect the Choctawhatchee's bays, rivers, and coastal waters. As an estuary program, CBAEP now serves as the hub that connects them. The organization will:

- Coordinate projects among partners to reduce duplicated effort and stretch resources
- Pursue more funding, including estuary-wide grants, to speed up restoration
- Serve as a central point of contact for residents, partners, and funders
- The transition also supports long-term goals for the region, including raising the watershed's national profile and opening the door to additional federal and state resources for restoration.

Building on Shared Groundwork

CBAEP builds on a strong foundation. Okaloosa County and other Choctawhatchee County Estuary Coalition members laid important groundwork, developing the region's Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan and bringing partners together around a shared vision for the watershed. As the program moves forward under CBA and Northwest Florida State College, it carries that foundation into its next phase, with a stable home to build on and room to grow across the entire watershed.

How to Get Involved

CBAEP still needs volunteers for restoration projects, oyster gardening, and community science, and donations still support work in local waterways and classrooms. Find volunteer opportunities at basinalliance.org.

BERNARD JOHNSON

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from Warren Averett also joined in the appreciation. His involvement with the All Sports Association and the Taylor Haugen Foundation further illustrates his interest in serving young people.

Major General Leslie Hadley of Air Force Special Operations Command offered some remarkable details. Colonel Chris Keithley, Base Commander, 96th Test Wing, called Bernard a "mover and shaker." Their remarks reflected the relationships Bernard has built with the military community throughout his career.

The Destin Chamber had already honored him on September 11 with its Lifetime Membership Award. At the retirement reception, it was easy to understand why organizations wanted to recognize him. His work and his community involvement had become closely connected. When people needed an answer or help getting something done, they called Bernard.

Bernard also kept the evening in perspective. "The graveyard is full of indispensable people," he said. It was a reminder about humility from a man whose accomplishments had been celebrated all night. Then he offered a practical rule that helps explain how he gets so much done: "If something takes two minutes or less, do it now."

We finally heard Bernard's beehive story, which had given his friends plenty of material for the evening's gentle roast. He explained that civic programs such as honorary commander bring people "inside the hive," where they can see how relationships are built and decisions get made. From outside, people may wonder how it all happens. His explanation had the room laughing, but the point came through: Bernard has spent years opening doors, making connections, and helping people get into the hive.

His next chapter is already taking shape. Bernard announced that he will join the Jay Odom Group in mid-October, another respected organization deeply involved in our community. The sun has set on his FPL career, but a new opportunity is already rising. Apparently, Bernard's retirement will last about two weeks, so we can expect him to keep showing up.

Ted returned to the stage for the final moment. "Jay Odom owns the mic," he said, encouraging Bernard to drop it and walk off. After some good-natured prodding, Bernard finally dropped the microphone and left the stage. It was a fitting ending to a wonderful evening honoring a man whose kindness has made so many people glad to see him walk into a room. Here's to you, Bernard. We'll always save you a seat at the table—unless you get there first and save one for us.





Off the Hook

Go Fishing in Local Lakes!



By Helen Petre

Fishing builds confidence, curiosity and respect for nature. You do not need much gear, but you do need a positive attitude. Sometimes you catch a fish. Sometimes you do not. Sometimes it does not matter. A fisherman learns critical life skills while fishing, successful or not. Every child should discover the outdoors, and every child should have a chance to fish. It is a learned skill. Someone has to teach you. Fishing is learning about fish and fish habitats, but it is also learning important life skills, like patience, perseverance and problem-solving.

I walk down to the lake in my neighborhood often to explore the shore, the frogs and turtles, the weeds that are host plants for butterflies and the native bees that pollinate the plants. It is rewarding, regenerating and positive. One Saturday late afternoon, it was exceptionally rewarding. I met up with a whole bunch of middle school boys fishing. The boys rode their bicycles, under their own muscle power, down to the lake carrying their poles and bait. No phones. No parents. No fear. There are snakes in the high grass around the lake. They knew that. They showed me spiders and damselflies. They showed me fish. They had no problem talking to some weird old lady who walks and bikes around the neighborhood looking for snakes and spiders.



Liam Gurley



Nick Schafer



James Lapierre, with a really big largemouth

While we were at the lake, they caught several largemouth bass. These fine fishermen are the next generation of anglers, and they are also the next generation of confident analysts and project managers. All fishermen start like this. Someone, probably their parents, teaches them to fish, and they learn more than how to fish. They learn independence, problem-solving and critical thinking. They can do it by themselves. They can decide what to use, where to cast and when to fish. Sometimes they learn patience and persistence, and sometimes they just learn that it is really nice to be outside. Being out on the grassy shore with all those living things is like entering a world that is all your own. People that do not do it never know. It is freedom, and these boys have parents who gave them freedom.

The boys were nice, excited, happy and confident, and they wanted to show me their catch. That is something to be proud of. I am proud of them and their parents. The daily bag limit is five, with only one over 16 inches. Youth under 16 do not need a license, and these boys fishing the lake in Owl's Head were all under 16. They could have easily caught more than five, but they were all just catching and releasing.

Largemouth Bass (Micropterus salmoides)

Largemouth bass are the most popular game fish in Florida freshwater, and these boys know all about them. Fishing along the shore, they caught one every time they cast. Their bait was soft plastic worms. They tried single-tail grubs, but the Senko wacky worms worked best.

Here are some of the boys with their afternoon catches. I hope to see them out here often. Something tells me I will.



Sports

Golf News



By Barbara Palmgren

Miracle Strip Tournament Showcases Top Girls Golf Teams

Every autumn, top high school girls golf teams compete at Fort Walton Beach Municipal Golf Course in this time-honored tournament. This year, with beautiful weather, girls in grades 9-12 from schools throughout the Florida Panhandle competed for top team and individual honors. Participating schools included Niceville, Fort Walton Beach, Choctawhatchee, South Walton (Santa Rosa Beach), Chiles (Tallahassee), Rocky Bayou, Navarre, Mosley (Lynn Haven), Pensacola, Crestview, North Bay Haven (Panama City), Bay (Panama City) and West Florida (Pensacola).



Tournament director Justin Reid, a teacher and golf coach at Meigs Middle School, organized the event. Justin has directed the tournament for the past four years at The Pines Course. A graduate of Choctawhatchee High School with a master's degree in educational leadership from the University of West Florida, Justin lives in and loves this area of Florida. Checking on the pace of play and encouraging golfers, Justin enjoyed the competition and determination of these young teens as they pitched errant shots out of sand traps and learned how to get out of trouble when a tee shot didn't land in the fairway. Sometimes golf balls just don't listen as they should!

At the end of the day, Class 1A, Region 1 team honors went to Niceville High School with a total score of 344 for 18 holes. Top individual honors resulted in a tie! Tenley Sharron and Rayna Perkin of South Walton (Santa Rosa Beach) both scored 76 for 18 holes. Congratulations to all the young ladies enjoying golf and bringing honor to their schools.

Military Golf Tournament Supports Morale and Development

On Sept. 18, 2026, the weather cooperated with cooler temperatures at Shalimar Pointe Golf Course for the 350th Spectrum Warfare Wing Enlisted Council. Yes, no heat index over 100 degrees for this military group on a picture-perfect day!

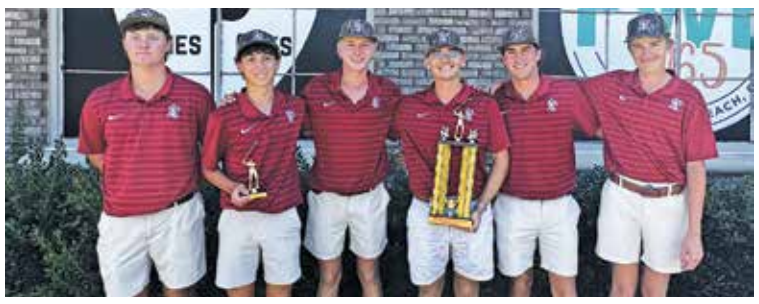
More than 80 golfers in four-person teams began a shotgun-start scramble over water, into trees, searching the rough and occasionally finding the fairway. As always, there was the challenge of mastering the elusive approach shot to the green or making a 5-foot putt.



Elizabeth Roman, one of the organizing team members, spoke with me about the challenges this military organization faces daily and how money raised for its foundation helps support morale-boosting events and professional development. Hearing the trash talk behind me as members enjoyed lunch while waiting for scores to be posted brought a smile to my face. Thinking about their mission, having an event like this is a welcome reward for a job well done.

The winning team posted a low score of 54 for 18 holes. Congratulations to Tony Stamm, Chase Rankin, Dan King and Steve Fish! Second- and third-place teams were close behind with scores of 55.

With such a strong military presence in our area, it's an honor to once again thank the members of this military group for their service and support of future projects.



Boys Invitational Draws Top Northwest Florida Golfers

On a bright, sunny autumn day at The Pines Course of Fort Walton Beach Municipal Golf Course, teams from Northwest Florida and as far away as Tallahassee competed for school and individual honors.

Tournament director Patrick Lucy, a teacher and golf coach at Choctawhatchee High School, has led the event for four years. Encouraging golfers and ensuring water and snacks were available during play, with pizza afterward, Patrick was pleased the weather cooperated for the 96 young players. Seventeen teams began 18-hole play at 9 a.m., with parents allowed to follow in carts but prohibited from offering advice. These young men were soloists in a sport demanding patience and accuracy.

Participating schools included Choctawhatchee, Fort Walton Beach, Niceville, Crestview, Rocky Bayou, Destin, Tate, Gulf Breeze, Chiles (Tallahassee), South Walton, Mosley, West Florida, Bay, Pensacola, Aletheia, Walton and North Bay Haven.

Cade Denecke, a junior from Mosley High School, earned Class 3A, Region 1 individual honors with a score of 72 for 18 holes. Team honors went to Tate High School, Class 3A, Region 1, District 1, with a total score of 300. The four boys' scores averaged 75 to secure this top honor.

Congratulations to all these future golf stars as they represent their schools. Golf in Northwest Florida is indeed growing in popularity, not only among adults but also among our area teenagers.



Local Football Fan Favorites



By Scott Miller

Football season is now in full swing. Whether you're strictly an SEC fan or College Football fan across the board, an NFL die-hard or an armchair quarterback / Fantasy Football guru…

There's no better place to watch the action then here along The Emerald Coast. Some of the best sports bars and restaurants anywhere are right here in our own back yard. They're ready to welcome us in, serve up some really great food, cold beer and delicious specialty drinks, and make every game feel like a championship. Here are a few of my favorites. So, grab your crew, claim your spot and get in on the action—I'll see you there!



Our beans are roasted in house!

Breakfast: Bakery • Breakfast Sandwiches • Burritos

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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 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

FUBAR Pizza Bar

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



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

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

(850) 226-7084

114 Amberjack Dr., Okaloosa Island

fubarfwb.com

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

Continued on page 20



Nautical Flea Market & Flea Market

New Date: November 14th | 10am-2pm

Treasure hunters & bargain lovers — this one's for YOU!

Join us for a dockside day of deals, finds and fun!

Vendors: reserve your free spot NOW by calling 850-897-2821

8th Annual Chili Cookoff

November 21st | Tasting 4-6pm

Benefitting CALM, Crisis Aid for Littles and Moms

Compete or Consume!

Chef's Judging 4:15pm • Awards 6:30pm

Free for competitors - must register. Details and Rules at:

bluewaterbaymarina.com/2026/10/12/8th-annual-chili-cook-off/



More Events

Margarita Monday
$5.00 House Margaritas 3-10pm
Taco Tuesday
Chef's Taco Special each Tuesday 3–9pm
Wednesdays - Kids Eat Free 5-9pm
*Kids 10 & Under with Purchase of Adult Entree (One child per Adult)
Open Mic & Karaoke Thursdays 6-10pm
Sign-Ups start at 6pm. Warm up your vocal cords and come enjoy a fun evening!
Sunday Brunch 9am - 1pm
Purple Monkey Nov.13 6-10pm

Visit www.bluewaterbaymarina.com for more events & live music!

Oyster Bar Hours: Monday-Tuesday 3-9pm • Wednesday-Thursday 3pm-10pm • Friday-Saturday 11am to midnight • Sunday 9am to 9pm
Restaurant Hours: Monday-Tuesday Closed • Wednesday-Saturday 11am to 9pm • Sunday 9am to 4pm • Sunday Brunch 9am to 1pm

290 Yacht Club Dr., Niceville • Bluewater Bay • (850) 897-6400 • Visit www.bluewaterbaymarina.com



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Fort Walton Beach
• 901 Beal Pkwy NW
• 1285 Eglin Pkwy.

Crestview
• 297B James Lee Blvd.

Panama City
• 1360 West 15th St

Callaway
• 809/807 N. Tyndall Pkwy.

Pensacola
• 4600 Mobile Hwy.

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SEC Football Schedule

SEC	Oct 10	Oct 17	Oct 24	Oct 31	Nov 7	Nov 14	Nov 21	Nov 28
Alabama	UGA	@TENN	A&M	OPEN	@LSU	@VANDY	UTC	AUBURN
Arkansas	TENN	@VANDY	OPEN	MIZZOU	@AUB	S CAR	@TEX	LSU
Auburn	OPEN	@UGA	LSU	@OLE MISS	ARK	@MISS ST	SAMFORD	@BAMA
Florida	S CAR	@TEX	OPEN	UGA (ATL)	OKLA	@UK	VANDY	@FSU
Georgia	@BAMA	AUB	OPEN	FLA (ATL)	@OLE MISS	MIZZOU	@S CAR	GA TECH
Kentucky	LSU	@OKLA	VANDY	OPEN	@TENN	FLA	@MIZZOU	LOUISVILLE
LSU	@KU	MISS ST	@AUB	OPEN	BAMA	TEXAS	@TENN	@ARK
Ole Miss	@VANDY	MIZZOU	@TEXAS	AUB	UGA	@OKLA	WOFFORD	MISS ST
Miss St	OPEN	@LSU	OKLA	@TEX	VANDY	AUB	TENN TECH	@OLE MISS
Missouri	A&M	@OLE MISS	OPEN	@ARK	TEX	@UGA	KU	OKLA
Oklahoma	TEX (DAL)	KU	@MISS ST	S CAR	FLA	OLE MISS	A&M	MIZZOU
S Carolina	@FLA	OPEN	TENN	@OKLA	A&M	@ARK	UGA	@CLEMSON
Tennessee	@ARK	BAMA	@S CAR	OPEN	UK	@A&M	LSU	@VANDY
Tex A&M	@MIZZOU	CITADEL	@BAMA	OPEN	@S. CAR	TENN	@OKLA	TEX (11/27)
Texas	OKLA (DAL)	FLA	OLE MISS	MISS ST	@MIZZOU	@LSU	ARK	A&M (11/27)
Vanderbilt	OLE MISS	ARK	@KU	OPEN	@MISS ST	BAMA	@FLA	TENN

Scott's November Game-Day Picks

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

Week 10, November 7
Arkansas @ Auburn, TBA
Miami (FL) @ Notre Dame, 6:30 pm, NBC
BYU @ Utah, TBA
Georgia @ Ole Miss, TBA
Alabama @ LSU, TBA
Oklahoma @ Florida, TBA
Kentucky @ Tennessee, TBA
Texas @ Missouri, TBA
Oregon @ Ohio State, TBA
Penn St. @ Washington, TBA

Week 11, November 14
Auburn @ Miss. State, TBA
Missouri @ Georgia, TBA
Texas @ LSU, TBA
Ole Miss @ Oklahoma, TBA
Tennessee @ Texas A&M, TBA
Florida @ Kentucky, TBA
Alabama @ Vanderbilt, TBA
Duke @ Miami (FL), TBA
Florida St. @ Pittsburgh, 6pm, ESPN
Minnesota @ Penn St. TBA
Northwestern @ Ohio State. TBA
USC @ Indiana, TBA

Week 12, November 21
Samford @ Auburn, 2:30 omitted, SECN
Kentucky @ Missouri, TBA
LSU @ Tennessee, TBA
Georgia @ S. Carolina, TBA
SMU @ Notre Dame, 6:30 pm, NBC
Virginia Tech @ Miami (FL), TBA
NC State @ Florida St. TBA
Rutgers @ Penn State, TBA
Ohio State. @ Nebraska, TBA
Indiana @ Washington, TBA

Week 13, November 27 & 28
Auburn @ Alabama, Sat. 11/28, TBA
Miss. State @ Ole Miss, Fri. 11/27, 11am
Florida @ FSU, Fri.11/27, 2:30 pm, ABC
Texas@Texas A&M, Fri. 11/27, 6:30pm,ABC
Michigan @ Ohio State Sat. 11am, FOX
USC @ UCLA, Sat.11/28, TBA
Georgia Tech @ Georgia, Sat. 11/28, TBA
Penn State @ Maryland, Sat.11/28, TBA
LSU @ Arkansas, Sat. 11/28, TBA
Tennessee @ Vanderbilt, Sat. 11/28, TBA



FAN FAVORITES

continued from page 18

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.

(850) 737-6194
bigorangehousedesigns.com
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4652 Highway 20 E., Niceville

LJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant

Suds, Songs, Sunsets and Sports! Gather your team for a meal before kickoff and enjoy waterfront views, oysters and a varied menu.

Named after "LJ Schooner" — short for Lazy Jack — a cherished four-legged icon on the Bluewater Bay Marina docks, the open-air oyster bar and restaurant offers views of the water, marina and spectacular sunsets any time of year. Dinner specials include dishes such as blackened mahi and grilled shrimp with hollandaise, served over cheese grits. Come for a bite and enjoy a relaxed waterfront setting as part of your game-day plans.

Oct. 10: Nautical Flea Market and Flea Market – 10 a.m. – 2 p.m.

Oct. 17: 33rd Annual Single-Handed Race

Oct. 18: Missing the Mullet - Mullet Toss 4 p.m.; Mullet Hair Contest 6 p.m.

Sundays: Brunch, 9 a.m. – 1 p.m.

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

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

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

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

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

Oyster Bar Hours: Mon.-Thurs. 3-10 p.m. • Fri.-Sat. 11 a.m. to midnight • Sun. 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. - Lunch Served 1 p.m.

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.

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





Crunch Fitness: The Workout You'll Want to Come Back To

The more you enjoy moving, the more likely you are to keep coming back.

What makes you want to do a workout again?

The music? The instructor who gets one more rep out of you? The energy of a room full of people moving together? Or simply finding a workout you look forward to instead of one that feels like another item on your to-do list?

That is the idea behind Crunch Fitness and its longtime philosophy: Make Serious Fitness Fun.

When Crunch Fort Walton Beach opens this winter in Longhorn Plaza, members will have plenty of ways to find their kind of fun.

Want strength? Try Crunch formats like Chisel It or Belly, Butt & Thighs. Prefer mind-body movement? Yoga Body Sculpt combines yoga with weights, cardio and strength work. Want to move to the music? Zumba® brings high-energy dance and cardio together.

Then there is HIIT. Crunch's HIIT classes combine fast-paced intervals, strength, cardio and functional training, with some formats adding team-style drills and friendly competition.

The Hot Studio adds even more variety with Hot Yoga and Hot Pilates.

Fort Walton Beach will also be a flagship location for two of Crunch's newest boutique-style concepts: the Crunch Reform Pilates™ Studio and Crunch Pump™ Strength Studio. Reform Pilates will blend instructor-led coaching with integrated digital guidance, while Crunch Pump will focus on progressive, coach-led strength training.

Peak and Peak Results memberships include group fitness classes, so members can mix things up, try something new and find workouts they enjoy. Access to the new boutique studios is included with Peak Results.

Research into exercise motivation has found that enjoyment can play an important role in helping people stay active. If you like the experience, there is more reason to come back.



Crunch adds music, energetic instructors, variety and connection. A class can become more than a workout. It can be the instructor you love, familiar faces or the class you never want to miss.

Crunch's No Judgments® philosophy ties it all together. You do not have to move at the same pace, have the same goals or like the same kind of workout. The idea is to give everyone more ways to find movement they enjoy.

Because when you find a workout you love, coming back gets a whole lot easier.

Recovery is part of the experience, too. Crunch's Relax & Recover® area will feature HydroMassage® beds, red light therapy and cryotherapy, plus tanning, a sauna, locker rooms with showers and Kid's Crunch babysitting. The club will be open and staffed 24 hours a day.

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 here. Prospective members can also enter to win one of 10 free one-year memberships here.

Local businesses can get involved, too. Crunch's Corporate Membership and Perks Partner programs offer employee discounts and ways for local businesses to connect with Crunch members through the 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

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Wellness



More Than a Smile:
Why Oral Health Matters

By Kay Leaman, Health Architect, Certified Nutrition and Skin Advisor

The oral cavity, aka the mouth, is a crucial part of the body's health system. Most of us enjoy going to the dentist (a white lie). It is recommended to go every six months for a cleaning and checkup. The results of these checkups reveal how well we have done our part in keeping our mouths healthy.

Let's look at some facts:

We swallow about 140 billion bacteria daily, which seeds our gastrointestinal tract.

We carry around trillions of microscopic bugs that live in and on our bodies, including the skin, gastrointestinal tract and mouth.

The mouth is the primary entrance to the digestive system.

Our oral microbiome influences health and disease in many other body systems.

The mouth is home to the second most diverse population of microbes in the body, and the health of these microbes is linked to heart disease, joint health, diabetes and digestive disorders. Because of the world we live in and what we eat, our mouths are exposed to potentially harmful bacteria every day. If our mouths are healthy (microbes in good balance), they help us form a strong defense against infection and illness.

When our mouths aren't up to par, they can allow potentially harmful bacteria into the bloodstream and are commonly associated with cavities, bad breath, gingivitis and periodontal disease. Note: Oral pathogens can colonize for life, leak into blood vessels and circulate throughout the body. This can result in many systemic diseases elsewhere in the body. Back in the day (way back), I was a Certified Dental Assistant with expanded duties. We would see patients who had been sent to us by their doctors to bring their oral cavities back to a healthy state. However, unless the patient takes responsibility for their part, their results will be short-lived.



Most of us know what we should be doing, but do we know what we should be avoiding? Let's take a look:

- I recommend avoiding antibacterial toothpaste as well as those containing fluoride, as I believe these can disrupt the balance of our microbiome system.
- Mouthwashes can destroy our beneficial microbes.
- Work on not breathing through your mouth. Many of us unconsciously breathe through our mouths when we are winded, stressed, etc.
- Begin moving to natural oral health products.
- Consume probiotic-rich foods: plain yogurt (unsweetened), sauerkraut, pickles that are naturally fermented, etc.

A healthy lifestyle also contributes to oral health. This includes avoiding processed sugars, fast food, etc. Include a diet rich in fiber and veggies, as they are high in prebiotics (food for your beneficial microbes). Yes, we need to feed the good bacteria, and our guts are not the only area that needs our attention.

Lastly, take time to floss and brush (soft bristles) properly each morning and evening. Be sure to brush your gums as well as your teeth. Don't use a lot of pressure, as this can harm your gums and wear the tooth enamel. If you see blood when you floss, this is a sign that your gums need extra attention. Did you know that your teeth are not attached to bone but are attached via ligaments? If your gums remain in an unhealthy state, these ligaments can be destroyed, causing the need for extractions. AND, if you don't own a tongue scraper, you can pick one up at Walmart. You will be amazed at what hides in the spaces of your tongue. That is why dentists check your tongue, as it gives them clues into the health of your oral cavity. Start from the back of your tongue and scrape toward the tip. Another thing you can add during the day is a G-U-M brush. This will help remove food between the teeth and aid in keeping your gums clean between brushings.

We normally think of our smiles when it comes to our mouths. It's time to work at making your gut smile, too.

Here's to Health!

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HOLIDAY

continued from page 4

vous. Bring your questions.

Stop Saving Yourself for January

There is always a reason to postpone care. After the guests leave. After the shopping is finished. After the year ends.

Meanwhile, your life keeps happening. The family walk happens. The grandchildren get on the floor to play. Someone starts telling a story that makes everyone laugh until they cry.

You deserve to experience those moments with as much comfort as possible.

This November, give yourself something more useful than another promise to take care of yourself later. Start a conversation about what hurts, what you miss, and whether acupuncture could help.

Everyone else is already on your list. Put yourself on it, too.

Wellness

A Quick Test of Strength and Why It Matters



By Kassia Garfield, Owner, MaxStrength Fitness

When was the last time you thought about how you get out of a chair? It is something most of us do dozens of times a day without giving it a second thought. But try this simple test: Sit in a sturdy chair, cross your arms over your chest and stand up without using your hands to push yourself up. Then sit back down under control.

Did it feel easy? Did you have to rock forward, push through your thighs or reach for the armrests? Maybe you surprised yourself. Did you flop back with no control?

This simple movement can tell you something important about your physical health, and it is worth paying attention to long before it becomes a problem.

If that did feel easy, put one leg out, almost like you are going to stand up just using one leg. Try both sides. Did one side feel easier? Could you do it at all? This could show an imbalance from side to side.

More Than Just Getting Out of a Chair

Standing up from a chair requires a combination of leg strength, balance, coordination and control. Your quadriceps, glutes and other muscles must generate enough force to lift your body weight against gravity. Your nervous system must coordinate those muscles, and your balance system must keep you stable as your center of gravity shifts.

As we age, these abilities can gradually decline. We may lose muscle mass, muscle strength and the ability to produce force quickly. These changes are part of a process called sarcopenia, the age-related loss of muscle mass and function. Every time you use your hands, you are not using your legs, slowly weakening them.

The tricky part? It often happens so gradually that we don't notice.

You might start using the armrests because it is easier. You might push off your thighs without thinking about it. You might avoid sitting on low couches or choose a higher chair because standing up feels more comfortable. Eventually, you may find yourself needing help with something that used to be automatic.

The change doesn't happen overnight. It can sneak up on you, one small adjustment at a time. Using your arms might only take 10% of the load off your legs, but that is slowly reducing how much strength you need, and your body accommodates to doing less. Beyond the natural loss of muscle as you age, the lack of using the strength you have also progresses the muscle loss.

Why This Matters for Longevity

The ability to stand up from a chair is more than a measure of leg strength. It is one indicator of functional capacity: Your body's ability to handle the physical demands of everyday life.

Research has linked poorer performance on chair-rise tests and other measures of physical function with increased risks of disability, loss of independence and mortality. These tests do not predict an individual's future



with certainty, but they can help identify when physical capacity may be declining.

Think about what happens when getting out of a chair becomes difficult. Getting off the toilet, climbing stairs, getting into a car and rising from the floor can become harder, too. Activities that once required little thought may start limiting where you go and what you do.

Maintaining strength gives you a greater physical reserve. If you have more strength than your daily activities require, you have more capacity to handle an illness, recover from a hospital stay or manage an unexpected challenge. That reserve can make a meaningful difference in how independently you live as you age.

The Good News: Strength Is Trainable

One of the biggest misconceptions about aging is that getting weaker is inevitable and there is little we can do about it. Although aging brings biological changes, muscle strength can improve well into older adulthood. It's never too late to start.

Progressive resistance training challenges muscles to produce force and adapt. Exercises that strengthen the quadriceps, glutes and other lower-body muscles directly support movements such as standing, climbing stairs and walking. With appropriate training, people can improve their strength and ability to perform everyday tasks and improve balance.

The goal isn't necessarily to lift the heaviest weight in the gym. It is to maintain the physical ability to do the things that matter to you.

That might mean getting up from the floor to play with your grandchildren, carrying groceries, traveling, gardening or simply getting out of your favorite chair without assistance.

Try the test, but don't treat it as a diagnosis. Use a sturdy chair against a wall, and only attempt the movement if you can do so safely. If you feel unsteady, have significant pain or are concerned about falling, don't attempt it alone. A physical therapist or qualified exercise professional can help assess your ability and find a safe starting point. Included are the norms for how many sit-to-stands (no hands) someone can do in 30 seconds. Below the norm puts you at a high risk for falls.

Your future independence is built through the physical capacity you maintain today. Don't wait until standing up becomes difficult to start working on your strength.

Sometimes, one of the most important measures of how well you are aging is something as ordinary as getting out of a chair.

If you are having a hard time fitting in a workout, feeling 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)!





Wellness

Fall Prevention for Older Adults

By Kelly Stalnaker

According to a 2021 CDC study, falls caused over 38,000 deaths among older adults. Falls are the leading cause of fatal and nonfatal injuries and can lead to long-term disabilities and hospitalizations. While the risk of falling rises with age, many falls can be prevented.

It has been proven that healthy, physically active seniors are less likely to suffer a fall, so engaging in regular exercise that targets strength and balance is one of the best overall ways to significantly reduce the risk of falling. In addition to this, it is also important to maintain regular visits with all of your doctors. Falls can occur for many different medical reasons, such as poor eyesight, restless sleep, various conditions/illnesses, general weakness or even a vitamin deficiency. Include an eye and ear exam every year, as the ability to see and hear well is important for good balance. Routinely review medications with your doctor or pharmacist because, as we age, it becomes more necessary to treat medical conditions, as well as general aches and pains, but taking multiple medications increases the chance of side effects and the risk of falling.

A healthy lifestyle is a great place to start, but there are many other measures that can be taken. Thousands of older adults fall at home each year due to common household hazards, but prioritizing home safety can help prevent falls with just a few easy steps. Remove trip hazards such as throw rugs, cords or clutter and position furniture to create a path for easy movement throughout the home. Increase visibility by replacing burned-out light bulbs as quickly as possible, and add nightlights throughout the home for safer movement in the dark. Be mindful of how you store frequently used items; keep them between waist and shoulder height for easy accessibility without the need for a step stool. More than 80% of falls in the home occur in the bathroom, so consider purchasing shower seats, grab bars and/or security poles for these high-risk areas. Falls from the bed are also quite common, but you can protect yourself with a bed rail, fall mat and/or bed alarm.



A large variety of innovative products are available nowadays to help prevent falls. The selection may seem overwhelming, but Baywind Medical can help! We carry several different options, such as toilet safety rails, shower chairs and benches, security poles, bed rails, fall mats, ramps, mobility aids and so much more! Stop by and chat with us about your safety concerns and check out all of the options on display in our showroom. We're here Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. to answer any questions at 540 E. John Sims Parkway in Niceville. Or call us at 850-729-2559. And for more information about fall prevention, visit cdc.gov/falls.





Better Sleep with Bioidentical Hormone Pellets

By Dr. Richard Chern

Getting enough quality sleep is essential for physical health, emotional well-being, memory, and daily energy. Yet, sleep problems become increasingly common as men and women age, particularly when natural hormone levels begin to change. Bioidentical hormone therapy (BHRT) helps improve sleep by addressing hormonal imbalances and symptoms that interfere with restful sleep.

Bioidentical hormones are designed to have a molecular structure identical or very similar to hormones naturally produced by the body. Depending on an individual's needs, hormone therapy may involve estrogen, progesterone, testosterone, or a combination of hormones. Treatment should be individualized based on symptoms, medical history, laboratory blood testing, and an assessment of potential risks and benefits.

How Hormones Affect Sleep

Hormones play an important role in regulating the body's sleep-wake cycle. Changes in hormone levels can contribute to nighttime awakenings, difficulty falling asleep, reduced sleep quality, and daytime fatigue.

For women, declining estrogen and progesterone during perimenopause and menopause can contribute to hot flashes, night sweats, anxiety, and other symptoms that disrupt sleep. Estrogen therapy reduces hot flashes and night sweats, potentially allowing women to sleep more consistently. Progesterone may also have calming effects on the nervous system and has been studied for its potential influence on sleep.

Men can experience changes in testosterone levels as they age. Low testosterone may be associated with fatigue, changes in mood, reduced energy, and other symptoms that can affect overall sleep and quality of life. For men with clinically confirmed testosterone deficiency, testosterone replacement therapy improves certain symptoms and, in some cases, sleep-related quality of life.

An Individualized Approach

For individuals whose sleep difficulties are related to changing hormone levels, properly managed hormone therapy may be one part of a comprehensive approach to better sleep. Combining appropriate medical treatment with healthy sleep habits, regular physical activity,

Continued on page 27

Wellness

Giving Thanks for Recovery

Caring for Our Community-One Patient at a Time



By Teresa Halverson, Business Development/ Community Relations Director

This Thanksgiving season, we celebrate the strength of the human spirit, the support of family, and the compassionate care that helps older adults take the next step toward recovery.



Thanksgiving is a time to reflect on what matters most: our health, our families, our independence, and the people who make a difference in our lives. The holiday season is filled with family gatherings, favorite traditions, and new opportunities to make lasting memories. For older adults recovering from an illness, injury, surgery, or hospitalization, this season can also be a reminder of how important the right care and support can be during life's unexpected challenges. As families prepare for upcoming celebrations, it is important to understand how post-acute hospital care and rehabilitation can help loved ones move forward on their recovery journey.

While leaving the hospital is an important milestone, recovery often continues long after discharge. Many patients need additional medical attention, nursing care, and rehabilitation before they can safely return home. This is where post-acute rehabilitation can make a meaningful difference.

Rebuilding Strength, One Step at a Time

Recovery looks different for everyone. Some patients may need help with walking after surgery, while others may be rebuilding strength following a serious illness or learning new ways to manage daily activities after a stroke. Rehabilitation can help patients work towards these important goals.

Physical Therapy: Rebuilding Strength and Mobility

Helps improve strength, balance, mobility, and coordination through individualized exercises and functional training. Individuals can work toward walking more safely, transferring in and out of a chair, navigating their homes and reducing their risk of falling.

Occupational Therapy: Regaining Independence in Activities of Daily Living (ADLs)

Focuses on everyday activities such as bathing, dressing/ grooming, and other tasks that support independence in the home. Therapists may also recommend adaptive equipment and/or energy-conservation techniques to make daily life safer and more manageable.

Speech Therapy: Supporting Communication and Swallowing

Speech Therapy helps individuals address difficulties with communication, memory-related skills, and swallowing when these abilities have been affected by an illness or medical condition. Speech Therapy can be especially important for individuals recovering from a stroke, and other neurological conditions.

Working together, along with skilled nursing services, these therapies can help patients work toward meaningful milestones and prepare for the next stage of recovery.

At The Manor at Blue Water Bay, we are grateful for the opportunity to serve individuals and families in our communities during important moments in their lives.

Our in-patient and out-patient skilled nursing and rehabilitation services focus on individualized care, helping patients recover following hospitalization and work toward improved strength, function and independence. We recognize that behind every patient is a personal story, a family that cares, and hope for what comes next.

This Thanksgiving season, we extend our gratitude to the patients who inspire us, the families who trust us, and the healthcare professionals who dedicate themselves to helping others.

If you or a loved one is preparing to leave the hospital, we encourage you to ask the hospital team about post-acute care and where skilled nursing rehabilitation may be appropriate.

Because every step toward recovery is something to be thankful for.

The Manor at Blue Water Bay | 1500 N. White Point Rd. | Niceville
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Museum

Museum News

Northwest Florida State College Receives Historic Doolittle Raid Artifacts for Permanent Exhibit

Northwest Florida State College (NWFSC) welcomed historic Doolittle Raid artifacts, including a mission-flown signal mirror and navigation equipment belonging to Lt. Col. Carl R. Wildner, to its permanent exhibit during a special donation ceremony.

NWFSC President Mel Ponder accepted the artifacts, with remarks from state Rep. Patt Maney, Florida Historical Commission and Okaloosa County School Board member Parker Destin and Destin City Council member Dewey Destin, whose efforts helped secure the donation. Congressman Jimmy Patronis also attended.

"As a former student and adjunct instructor, I was excited by the opportunity to tie together the local history of the Doolittle Raiders represented by these instruments to the future of the Okaloosa County as represented by Northwest Florida State College, as we celebrate America's 250 years of freedom sacrifice and heroism. Go Raiders!" said State Representative Patt Maney.

"These artifacts are more than pieces of military history. They are tangible reminders of the courage, sacrifice and determination of the men who answered their nation's call during one of the most challenging periods in American history," said NWFSC President Mel Ponder. "We are honored to preserve these remarkable pieces of history and share their story with our students, our community and future generations."





On April 18, 1942, Lt. Col. James "Jimmy" Doolittle led 80 American airmen aboard 16 B-25 bombers launched from the USS Hornet in a daring raid on Japan, boosting American morale during World War II.

The college's Raiders name honors their courage, perseverance and teamwork.

"The Raiders' legacy is not simply something we preserve. It is something we carry forward," Ponder said. "Our name represents far more than our athletic teams or our school spirit. It reflects values we strive to instill in our students and demonstrate through our service to this community every day."

The artifacts join NWFSC's permanent Doolittle Raid exhibit inside Raider Arena, preserving this important connection to Northwest Florida for future generations.

Oh, What a Night! Night at the Museum 2026!

By Barbara Palmgren

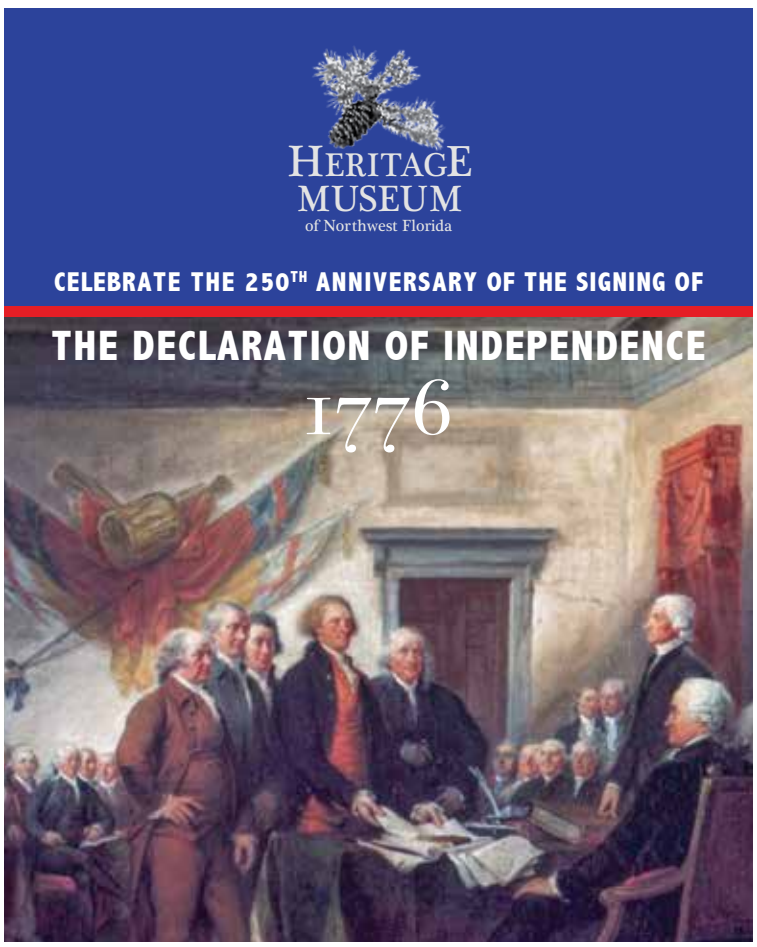
On Oct. 3 at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida in Valparaiso, a special event called Night at the Museum honored the 250th anniversary of the birth of our nation.

Everyone enjoyed meeting and hearing from Valparaiso Mayor Joe Morgan, portraying Thomas Jefferson; Travis Souther, representing a colonial soldier; and Parker Destin, depicting George Washington. Each of these actors was located in a separate area of the museum, coming to life and entertaining small groups of 12-18 participants in a cozy atmosphere to make the experience up close and personal.

The fourth reenactment was a mini-musical, "Abigail's Choice," written and directed by Barbara Palmgren. "Oh, what a night! Late December back in '76," sang Ken Walsh, dressed as John Hancock, who fantasized about how he might open John Hancock Insurance because of his famous signature. Of course, Mike McMain, representing John Adams, reminded him of how Hancock kept a low profile the night they "threw the tea into the harbor." The cast included Bryan Griffin, Erica Griffin, Ken Walsh, Mike McMain, Barbara Palmgren and Connie Wolfe, with Michael Weaver as musical director.

The audience consisted of local supporters from Okaloosa and Walton counties and a visitor from Texas who said she learned a lot about our history while being entertained. She thought every student studying American history should see these presentations. And who knows, because the acts were videotaped by a teen volunteer from Niceville High School earning community service hours, this just might be possible. One special group consisted of members of the Okaloosa County 250th Commission, many dressed in colonial attire as they continued with still many more events to complete this extraordinary year.

The event took planning and organization from management staff Arthur Edgar and Debra Reddick, as well as volunteers who poured drinks and served food throughout the evening. Festivities ended with the cutting of a special cake, participants bidding on silent auction items and guests viewing exhibits throughout the museum. The Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida also had a large copy of its own Declaration with a few famous lines and welcomed more signatures so that this historic year would be preserved.





Musing



Sean of the South: **The Chalkboard**

By Sean Dietrich

We have this place in our kitchen. It's a wall. It used to be a door, some 102 years ago, when the house was built.

There used to be stairs outside this kitchen door, leading to the backyard. But the doorway has been sealed off. Now it's just a big blank space in our kitchen.

The wall is painted with black chalkboard paint. So it's basically a big blackboard, just like the kind you once used for working out algebra problems in front of your whole class.

We write things on this board. My wife and I. The writings always change.

Usually you walk into the kitchen, and you'll just happen to notice that someone has erased the old writing, and added something new.

My wife writes messages like, "Welcome home, you've been on the road for two weeks, we missed you!"

"The dogs say 'We 'ruff' you, Daddy.'"

"Happy birthday, Sean. I cannot imagine my life without you."

Little messages. Little words. Small words. But words carry power. Words are not lightweight.

In the mornings, as I make the coffee, standing in the kitchen with a bad case of bedhead, I stare at this chalkboard. And sometimes, in my half-waking state, I get lost in the chalkboard text. Gazing into the black-and-whiteness of it all.

During the Thanksgiving season, my wife writes messages to—well—to God, I guess. She writes things she is thankful for.

And as the coffee percolates, I shuffle over to the chalkboard for deeper inspection. Then, I and add my contribution to the lot.

The dogs see me squatting, writing with a small piece of chalk. Squatting, of course, puts me closer to their eye level. So, because I am hunching low, my dogs naturally assume I must have ham.

And they attack me.

Soon, I have lost my balance. I am now on the floor. Flat on my butt. With three dogs swarming, trying to muzzle their way past the other, as if to say, "He's mine!" "No, no! He's mine!" "Get out of the way, everyone knows he's mine!"

Tails wagging. Butts wagging. Lots of panting. Lots of licking.

All three of them are pressing their surgically cold noses on my bare skin. Each dog, wholly unashamed, devoid of ego. Fully vulnerable. Unconditionally honest with themselves, and with each other, in all regards. They are expressive, effusive, and rhapsodic with their demonstration of love. They love others like they've never been hurt.



And when I am thoroughly covered in dog saliva, which contains 98 percent water, a variation of proteins, enzymes, and other compounds, such as lysozyme and immunoglobulins, which aid digestion and have potent antimicrobial properties, I start to laugh privately.

I'm still looking at the chalkboard. I'm still holding the piece of chalk in my hands. And I'm thinking about my life. About my people. About my little family.

I'm looking at the white hairs on the snouts of my dogs, and remembering when they were mere puppies, cradled in my arms.

I'm thinking of how many generations this 102-year-old house has seen—how many Thanksgivings, Christmases, birthdays, and how many funerals.

I'm thinking about how friends become our truest family. About how nothing in this world lasts forever except memories. About how thankful I am. About how my life has been guided by an unseen hand, steering me from self-destruction, guiding me toward real love.

But mostly, I'm thinking about how it all went by so fast.

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

BETTER SLEEP

continued from page 24

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Musing



A Pastor's Ponderings:
Thankful for Those Who Answered the Call

By Pastor Doug Stauffer

Thanksgiving will mean something a little different for many of us in Northwest Florida this year. We have always had plenty of reasons to thank God, but Hurricane Isaias gave us a few thousand more.

On Friday evening, Oct. 9, Hurricane Isaias made landfall near Destin as a powerful Category 2 hurricane, with sustained winds of 105 mph. After reaching Category 3 strength with winds of 120 mph, the hurricane brought destructive winds, flooding and widespread power outages.

But while many of us prepared to ride out the storm, thousands of others prepared to go to work.

As a Niceville city councilman, I visited the Okaloosa County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) at NWFSC several times before and after the hurricane. What impressed me was not simply the technology, equipment or personnel, but the tremendous coordination behind the scenes. Most people will never witness the remarkable planning, split-second decisions and countless hours spent protecting our communities.

Our public safety director, Patrick (Pat) Maddox, and his emergency management team carried enormous responsibilities. They had to make decisions, evaluate information, coordinate resources and address emergencies. While many watched weather reports, these dedicated individuals were protecting lives and property.

The numbers are remarkable. More than 16,000 utility and restoration personnel were positioned across Northwest Florida before the storm. Approximately 5,000 Florida National Guard soldiers and airmen were activated, along with nearly 400 Florida State Guard personnel. Law enforcement officers, firefighters, emergency medical personnel, public works employees and countless volunteers joined the response.

And you know things are serious when Bernard Johnson, who had barely begun enjoying his retirement from Florida Power & Light, was called back into action to help with the hurricane response! Think about those numbers — thousands leaving their families, postponing responsibilities and sometimes risking their lives to help complete strangers.



During my EOC visits, I witnessed elected officials from every level of government working together. U.S. Sen. Rick Scott, U.S. Reps. Jimmy Patronis and Byron Donalds, state Sen. Jay Trumbull and state Rep. Patt Maney came to assess the situation and support recovery efforts. Most county commissioners, along with numerous mayors, city council members and other community leaders, were also involved.

Gov. Ron DeSantis visited Destin on Saturday, Oct. 10, accompanied by Attorney General James Uthmeier, Chief Financial Officer Blaise Ingoglia, Florida Division of Emergency Management Executive Director Jared Perdue and FDLE Commissioner Larry Keefe. Their visit underscored the importance of coordinating state and local resources. Florida has become a model for disaster preparedness and response, showing what leadership, advance planning and cooperation at every level can accomplish.

But some of the greatest heroes will never appear in a photograph or receive recognition. They are the linemen working through the night, crews clearing roads, dispatchers answering calls, volunteers distributing supplies and neighbors checking on elderly residents. They are also the spouses and children waiting at home while someone they love serves others.

The Bible reminds us in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, "In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." Scripture does not tell us to be thankful only when everything goes according to plan. We are not thankful for destruction or suffering, but even in hardship, we can recognize God's goodness and others' kindness.

Some neighbors are still recovering. For them, the storm is not over simply because the winds have stopped and the water has receded. Gratitude should move us beyond words to practical assistance. Hebrews 6:10 reminds us, "For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister." People may overlook a sacrifice. God does not.

This Thanksgiving, let's do more than thank God for the food on our tables, the roofs over our heads and the electricity in our homes. Let's thank Him for the people who helped make those blessings possible. When you see a first responder, utility worker, public employee or volunteer who helped our community through Hurricane Isaias, take a moment to say thank you. After all, thankfulness should never be limited to one Thursday in November.

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Arts & Music

A Holiday Tradition Comes to Life: Northwest Florida Ballet's The Nutcracker

The magic of the holidays takes center stage this November as Northwest Florida Ballet celebrates its 47th annual production of The Nutcracker, bringing one of the season's most beloved traditions to life at the Mattie Kelly Arts Center in Niceville, Nov. 20-22.

For nearly five decades, this enchanting production has delighted Emerald Coast audiences with the timeless story of Clara, her magical Nutcracker Prince and a journey into a world of dancing snowflakes, dazzling costumes and the unforgettable Sugar Plum Fairy. From the excitement of the Christmas party to the wonder of the Land of Sweets, it's a holiday experience that continues to capture the imaginations of children and adults alike.

As the area's only full-length presentation of The Nutcracker, this year's production features more than 140 performers, including internationally acclaimed guest artists and more than 100 local children. For many young dancers, the opportunity to share the stage with professional artists is a dream come true,



while audiences enjoy seeing familiar faces from their own communities become part of the holiday magic.

Adding to the enchantment, the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of Northwest Florida Ballet Music Director and Conductor David Ott, will perform Tchaikovsky's celebrated score live at every public performance. The combination of graceful choreography, beautiful costumes and the stirring sounds of a full orchestra makes this production an especially memorable way to welcome the holiday season.

Performances are Friday and Saturday, Nov. 20-21, at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday, Nov. 22, at 2:30 p.m. Tickets start at $28 for adults and $14 for children ages 12 and younger, with three seating tiers available.

Whether it's a cherished family tradition or a first introduction to the ballet, The Nutcracker offers a wonderful opportunity to celebrate the beauty, imagination and joy of the season.

For tickets and information, visit nfballet.org/the-nutcracker.

VETERANS

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tion of Kabul when a suicide bomber killed 13 U.S. service members, including Sgt. Gee.

"In Afghanistan Sergeant Gee would work multiple shifts a day just to be around the children and families being evacuated. She was the most loving and caring individual I've ever met, she was the 'mom' of any group she was a part of and had a knack for brightening anyone's day." — Sgt. Landon Workman, teammate

Representative example of a female Iroquois Warrior circa 1812. They Also Served: American Indian Women in the War of 1812, an article published in NMAI Magazine, discussed evidence of the enlistment of Six Nations women in American military service. At least five Native women received military pensions for officially serving as "cooks": Polly Cooper, Susan Jacob, Dinah John, Julia John and Dolly Schenandoah. These women enlisted in regiments of Indian volunteers and served honorably. Though officially labeled as "cooks" in pension records, many served in combat alongside their husbands as a matter of necessity.

Granite Benches

Several Okaloosa County lineage and philanthropic groups have stepped forward to enhance the enjoyment of Women Veterans Park by placing commemorative granite benches throughout the space. Choctawhatchee Bay Chapter Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) placed the first of 13 benches. That donation was quickly followed by gifts from West Florida DAR, Emerald Coast Sons of the American Revolution, Snowden Horne Society Children of the American Revolution, Euchee-anna Chapter Daughters of the Colonists and Old Spanish Trail Daughters of 1812. This collaborative effort to honor history also includes deep community backing from veteran groups and civic organizations alike, such as the Air Force Enlisted Village Women Veterans Group, VFW Post 7674, Fort Walton Beach Woman's Club, Center for Lifelong Learning, Gregg Chapel AME, Okaloosa Island Garden Club and Republican Women of Okaloosa Federated. To maintain visual harmony, the granite benches feature a uniform design. Each is engraved with the logo, emblem or graphic image representing the donating group as well as an inscription of the group's name. Placement in the vicinity of the park's statues provides a peaceful setting for rest and contemplation.

What Else Is Here

Beyond its monuments, the park is a thriving ecological sanctuary. The Audubon Society has identified over 240 species of migratory birds, alongside a bustling rookery that holds 35 pairs of nesting herons. Other local wildlife species include turtles, bears, foxes and two recently discovered small alligators. Autumn is a wonderful time to visit, as the park sits directly within the southern migration path of the Monarch butterflies. With so much vibrant natural life to experience, fall offers the perfect opportunity to visit, walk the trails and enjoy everything Women Veterans Park has to offer.

It is an honor to serve as your Commissioner.

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



Arts & Music

Beyond the Uniform:
A Veteran's Mission to Preserve Stories of Courage

By Breanna Becker

Every veteran has a story. Some are celebrated in history books, while others are carried quietly for decades, tucked away behind memories too painful to revisit. Each represents a life shaped by service, sacrifice, and experiences most civilians will never fully understand.

Retired U.S. Army Captain Dr. Stephanie Hennessy (Niceville, FL) understands this reality firsthand. Her 21-year military career began with 11 years of enlisted service in military intelligence before she transitioned into her final decade as a licensed clinical social worker. In May 2026, she completed her PhD in industrial-organizational psychology, furthering her lifelong commitment to understanding human behavior, resilience, and the experiences that shape us.

Today, Hennessy brings those perspectives together through an unexpected calling: children's literature.

Her Veteran Adventure Stories series introduces young readers to the extraordinary lives of ordinary people who answered their nation's call. Her purpose extends beyond preserving military history. She wants children to understand the humanity behind the uniform.

"Why do we say thank you for your service?" Hennessy asks. "What have they contributed to our country that is missing if we don't continue to tell their stories?"

Her three illustrated books explore courage through distinctly different experiences.

Charlie Plumb follows a Kansas boy whose dreams of flying lead him into the Navy, where he becomes a fighter pilot, survives being shot down over Vietnam, and endures nearly six years as a prisoner of war.





Gregory Gadson tells the story of a young athlete whose football ambitions lead him to West Point and a military career. After losing both legs in Iraq, Gadson discovers that perseverance, leadership, and purpose are not defined by physical limitations.

Her third book, Eric Cobb Jr., explores perhaps the most tender form of courage: loyalty.

Drafted into Vietnam shortly after losing his father, Cobb served alongside Moose, a military working dog trained to detect enemy soldiers. Together, they navigated the dangers of war, developing a bond rooted in trust and survival.

During Hennessy's interview with Cobb, he shared painful experiences he had carried for more than 50 years. His account left her wrestling with how to honor his truth without overwhelming young readers.

She spent months considering how to tell his story.

That deliberation reflects a conviction at the heart of her work: Children deserve honesty, delivered with compassion.

Hennessy has encountered resistance from educators concerned about exposing children to frightening subjects. Yet she believes avoiding those conversations entirely risks losing something far more valuable.

Understanding courage requires understanding what makes courage necessary.

Her commitment to authenticity extends to the books themselves. Despite the financial demands of publishing, Hennessy continues working with human illustrators rather than replacing their artistry with artificial intelligence.

Her dedication is gaining recognition. Her first two books were named finalists in the Military Writers Society of America's 2026 awards competition. Both are also carried by military museums in Pensacola and Fort Walton Beach.

As communities recognize Veterans Day this November, Hennessy's work reminds us that honoring service requires more than a moment of gratitude.

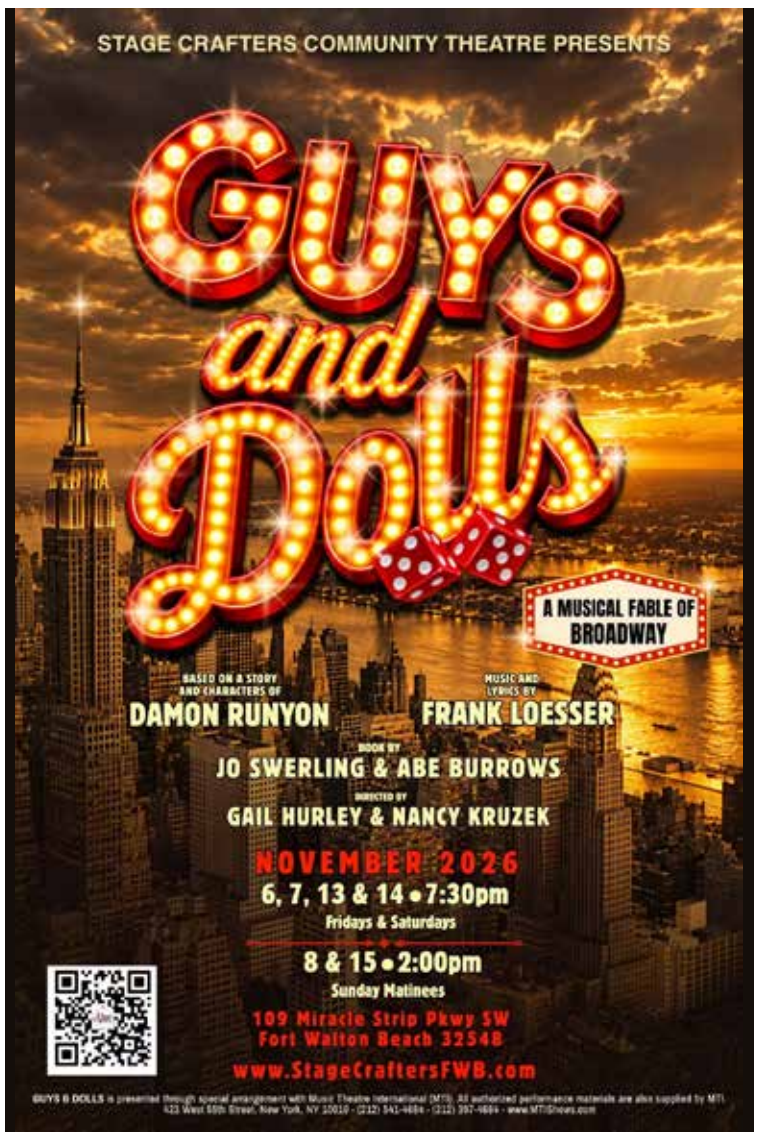
It requires listening.

Behind every uniform is someone who was once a child with dreams, a family, and a future they could not yet imagine. Their service may have changed the course of their lives, yet their humanity remains the most important part of their story.

Through the eyes of children, Hennessy is ensuring those stories are not forgotten. Because gratitude begins with understanding, and remembrance begins with a story.

(All of Dr. Hennessy's published children's work can be found on Amazon.com.)





EVENTS

continued from page 10

course, bragging rights.

The competition also cooks up plenty of good for the community. Many nonprofit teams have signed on and each participating nonprofit earns a cash donation based on taster votes.

A few spots remain, and registration fees are waived for nonprofit teams. Spots also remain for backyard and restaurant teams, with registration $50 for teams of up to six.

Advance taster tickets are $60 for adults and $21 for ages 11-17; children 10 and younger are free.

Tickets, team registration and information: EggsontheBeach.com; 850-269-4666.

Walk to End Alzheimer's – Emerald Coast

Nov. 7 | Registration 9:30 a.m. | Ceremony 10:30 a.m. | Walk 10:45 a.m. Grand Boulevard | 600 Grand Blvd., Miramar Beach

Participants of all ages and abilities are invited to walk in honor or memory of someone impacted by Alzheimer's or another dementia. The morning includes the moving Promise Garden ceremony, with colored flowers representing each participant's personal connection to the disease. Registration is free. Participants are encouraged to raise funds to support the Alzheimer's Association's mission.

Register at alz.org/EmeraldCoastWalk.

Celebrate with a Cause: Animore Weekend 2026! Bluegrass Barn Jam & Fall Fest presented by Cafe Thirty-A

Saturday, Nov. 14, 2026 | 11 a.m. – 6 p.m. Alaqua Animal Refuge Grounds (155 Dugas Way, Freeport, FL)

Spend a beautiful autumn day surrounded by the peaceful acreage of Alaqua Animal Refuge, where live bluegrass music fills the air, local vendors offer plenty to browse and shop, and family-friendly activities make it a fun outing for all ages. There's just something about the combination of crisp fall air, great music, animals, friends and community coming together in such a beautiful setting that makes this event feel extra special.

And perhaps the best part? Your day of fun has a purpose. Every ticket purchased directly supports Alaqua's lifesaving mission of rescuing, rehabilitating and finding hope and new beginnings for animals in need.

Come for the music, shopping and fall fun — and leave knowing you helped make a difference.

TICKETS: Online Pre-Sale Tiers: Available through Nov. 11. At-the-Gate: $15 for Adults | $5 for Children (Under 12). Online sales end Nov. 12. VIP Experience: Includes preferred concert seating at Angel's Arena and access to the exclusive VIP Patron Lounge.

Information & Tickets: alaqua.org

Tacos & Tequila Under the Trees

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



Enjoy an afternoon of tacos, margaritas, music and outdoor adventure at this nonprofit fundraiser! Explore the nature trails during a scavenger hunt, discover hidden treasures, test your knowledge with nature trivia and enjoy tequila tastings along the way. Sponsored by Juan Taco Panama City Beach, this adults-only (18+) event features a taco bar and plenty of fun under the trees. General admission is $70, or $40 for nonalcoholic admission. E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center, 4956 State Highway 20 E., Freeport. Purchase tickets: eowilsoncenter.org.

A Gift of Song - Niceville High School Chorus Holiday Concert

December 7 | 7 p.m. | Mattie Kelly Arts Center

Kick off the holiday season with music from all seven NHS choruses, accompanied by professional instrumentalists. This concert will feature guest alumni soloists Jared Herzog, Lisa Olson, and Lloyd Reshard, performing a mix of classical and traditional holiday favorites.

Tickets on gofan.co. $10 through December 1, $15 after December 1

Upcoming Art Classes at CREATE! Big Orange House Designs

Oct. 28-Dec. 16 | Six-Week Pottery Series | $267.50

Oct. 30 | Open Studio Glass Art — Make What You Want! | $37.45

Oct. 30 | Private Evening Cookie Decorating | $42.80

Oct. 31 | Open Studio Glass Art — Make What You Want! | $37.45

Nov. 6 | Open Studio Glass on Glass | $48.50

Nov. 7 | Open Studio Glass Art — Make What You Want! | $26.75

Nov. 10 | Evening Seasonal Pottery Plates | $53.50

Nov. 13 | Private Glass Art — One Plus | $37.45

Nov. 13 | Private Glass Class for One Plus | $26.75

All classes are held at CREATE! Big Orange House Designs, 4652 E. Highway 20, Suite 102, Pineapple Plaza, Bluewater Bay, Niceville.

Details and registration at bigorangehousedesigns.com/book-online. For information, call or text JoJo at 334-320-6658.

Advance registration is encouraged. Class fees are nonrefundable, but transfers may be possible with at least 24 hours' notice. Private classes are reserved for specific groups.

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