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Emerald Coast Fitness Foundation Offers Year-Round Public Swimming

By WENDY RUDMAN

Ten years ago, four swim enthusiasts sat around a kitchen table in Fort Walton Beach brainstorming about how to bring public pools back to local communities. All of the pools had closed overnight in October 2014 after the local YMCA went bankrupt.

The middle school competitive swim season had been set to begin in two weeks, leaving hundreds of young athletes without a place to practice or compete. Those students were just a fraction of those who depended on the YMCA pools for fitness, competitive opportunities, swim lessons, and the sense of community that forms around a pool.

Generations grew up swimming in the FWB indoor pool, which dates back to the 1980s.

“We were stunned when the news came out,” recalled Kathi Heapy, one of the four-some around that kitchen table in January 2015. “What are we going to do?” was the big question.”



PHOTOS BY WENDY RUDMAN

Lessons are offered at both of the Emerald Coast Fitness Foundation's pools. The Taj Renee Community Aquatic Center's family pool opens in April for lessons.

By the end of that long ago conversation, Kathi and Gary Heapy, as well as Pam and Bruce Braseth, had decided to form a nonprofit.

Each couple put in money to give the fledgling Emerald Coast Fitness Foundation some legs and they went to work, starting with the pool in Fort Walton Beach. They faced

many obstacles, not the least of which was the complicated ownership issues surrounding the property. The Air Force had leased it to the city with the stipulation that it be used for recreation. The city had leased it to the YMCA, which built the pool and the building.

The solution came from a partnership with Liza Jackson

Preparatory School. The popular charter school was operating out of a former Walmart on Mary Esther Boulevard, but had limited athletic facilities. The former YMCA property had a gym, as well as locker rooms and acreage for sports fields.

About five months after ECFF was formed, Pam, Kathi, and three school leaders – including new principal Kaye McKinley – sat down to see if they could find a way to work together.

“We are educators and not swimmers. We’re not in the business of teaching people to swim and managing a swimming pool,” Kaye recalled of initial concerns. “Founder Terri Roberts and the board kept emphasizing that it’s a community and we want to save a community resource.”

The women decided each would write a proposal asking the city to lease the facility

SWIMMING
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Athletes Shine at Annual All-Sports Banquet

Championship Football Coach, Urban Meyer, To Inspire All

The All Sports Association will host its 56th Annual Awards Banquet on Friday, Feb. 21, 2025, from 5:30 - 10 p.m. at Northwest Florida State College. A key event for the association, the event honors outstanding athletes and people who have significantly contributed to youth sports in the area and nationally, recognizing excellence and character of worthy athletes in the categories of Professional, Amateur, Collegiate, Scholastic and Special Olympian.

Guest speaker, Urban Meyer, is one of the most successful and celebrated college football head coaches in recent history. Having coached

ATHLETES
continued on page 2



Magnolia Grill

Equal parts museum and dining establishment, the walls of this 1910 catalog house are covered with pieces of local history

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Community

ATHLETES

continued from page 1

17 seasons as a head coach, Meyer is most well-known for his tenures at both the University of Florida and Ohio State University, where he earned three national championships (2008 and 2009–University of Florida; 2014 Ohio State University (OSU)).

Though well-known for his football success, Meyer has been a key figure in community initiatives through his involvement in charitable organizations. He and his wife, Shelley Meyer, co-founded the Urban and Shelley Meyer Fund for Cancer Research, which focuses on raising money to support cancer research at Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center. Meyer also helped shape a culture of responsibility and personal growth for student-athletes by developing the "Real Life Wednesdays"

program during his tenure at Ohio State University.

Through this initiative, student-athletes were given opportunities to intern, network and gain real-life experience in various industries, preparing them for life after football. Currently, Urban Meyer works as a college football studio analyst on the Big Noon Kickoff show on Fox Sports, and serves as a co-host The Triple Option podcast.

Kevin Bowyer, All Sports Association President, shared his excitement about Meyer's involvement. "We are thrilled to have Urban Meyer as our guest speaker this year. His contributions to college football and his commitment to nurturing young talent make him a perfect fit for our event. Our goal is to inspire and celebrate those who excel in athletics, and having a figure like Coach Meyer aligns perfectly with that mission," Bowyer said.

Held every February, the An-



nual Awards Banquet celebrates top athletes from high school, college, amateur, professional and Special Olympic levels. It also acknowledges individuals who have made notable efforts in promoting youth activities. Several prestigious honors are awarded, including the Wuerffel Trophy, the Colonel Al Byrne Award and the Taylor Haugen Trophy.

The Wuerffel Trophy is awarded to a college football player who shines not only on the field but also in community

service and academics. The Colonel Al Byrne Award goes to a local individual who has shown exceptional support for youth sports. The Taylor Haugen Trophy, established in memory of Taylor Reid Haugen, a Niceville High School wide receiver who tragically passed away from football injuries in 2009, is awarded to an area athlete who best demonstrates a balance between academics, athleticism, leadership, community service and faith.

Based in Fort Walton Beach, the All Sports Association is a non-profit organization focused on supporting local youth sports programs. Founded in 1970, the association has raised over \$2 million in the last 10 years, due to the support of its volunteers and supporters. These funds help various youth sports organizations and charitable causes, fostering the development of young athletes.

Key beneficiaries include the Boys & Girls Club of the Emerald Coast, Special Olympics Florida-Okaloosa, Eleanor J. Johnson Youth Center, and Okaloosa Walton FCA. The association's dedication to youth sports and community development is also seen in its Hall of Fame, which honors individuals who've made significant contributions to sports in Northwest Florida.

Please join All Sports Association for a fun evening supporting this year's award winners! Great food, auctions and more!

- Doors open for guests at 5:30 p.m.
- Banquet VIP starts at 4 p.m. (for corporate sponsors only)
- Seating starts at 6 p.m.
- Program starts at 6:45 p.m.
- Silent auction will take place from 5:30-6:30 p.m.
- Live auction will take place during the event

Single Ticket Purchases: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/all-sports-association-annual-awards-tickets-1146081453479>

(Food is included with Single

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Ticket Purchases and the chance to be upgraded to VIP!)

**Please note that due to the nature of the event, all ticket sales for the All Sports Association Annual Awards Banquet are final, and no refunds will be issued. Thank you for your understanding.

For Banquet Table Sponsorship or donation options, please reach out toASATickets850@gmail.com.

All Sports Association continues to celebrate and support youth athletics and the 56th Annual Awards Banquet promises to be another memorable event that aligns with its mission of fostering community spirit through sports. "This event is more than just a celebration; it's a testament to the hard work and dedication of our young athletes and the community that supports them," said Bowyer. "Having Urban Meyer speak adds an extra layer of inspiration that we hope will resonate with everyone involved!"

For more information, visit allsportsassociation.com or [Facebook.com/AllSportsAssociation](https://www.facebook.com/AllSportsAssociation).

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The NFSO Presents: "Stars of Tomorrow: The Roaring Twenties!"

February 22, 2025 | 7 PM | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Main Stage | Niceville

Step back in time and experience the energy, innovation and glamour of the Jazz Age as the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra presents Stars of Tomorrow: The Roaring Twenties! on February 22, 2025, at the Mattie Kelly Arts Center in Niceville.

This dynamic concert celebrates a transformative decade when jazz, classical music and culture collided to create something entirely new. The evening features Audrey Kelly's *Speak-easy: Four Vignettes of the Roaring Twenties*, a bold and vibrant tribute to the flapper era and the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage. The program also includes Ravel's swirling *La Valse*, Gershwin's jazzy *An American in Paris* and the grandeur of Respighi's *Pines of Rome*, capturing the era's artistic revolution.

Highlighting the next generation of musical stars, the concert showcases winners of the John Leatherwood Concerto Competition, students from the Northwest Florida Symphony Youth Orchestra and a special appearance by guest composer Audrey Kelly.

Join the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra for an unforgettable night of music that bridges the past and the future—where the Roaring Twenties come alive once again!

Tickets are \$35 for adults and \$16 for youth. To purchase and for more information, call 850-729-6000 or visit MattieKellyArtsCenter.org.

Don't miss this captivating journey through one of history's most exciting decades!

Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra
 NFSO TODD CRAVEN, MUSIC DIRECTOR/CONDUCTOR

ROARING TWENTIES

Featuring

The Stars of Tomorrow

This program celebrates the spirit of the 1920s with Audrey Kelly's *Speak-easy*, Ravel's *La Valse*, Gershwin's *An American in Paris*, and Respighi's *Pines of Rome*. Highlighting the evening are performances by our exceptional concerto winners and the Northwest Florida Symphony Youth Orchestra, embodying the future of classical music.

Guest Soloists:
 Winners of the 24/25 John Leatherwood Concerto Competition

Guest Composer in Residence:
 Audrey Kelly



Clara Gonçalves



Annelise Ossi



Christopher Wheaton



Audrey Kelly

6:00 pre-concert lecture in Tyler Recital Hall with guest composer Audrey Kelly

February 22, 2025 | 7:00 PM

Adults: \$35
Youth: \$16

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Northwest Florida State College does not discriminate in its programs, activities, or employment. For more information, visit nwfsc.edu.



Events Around Town

Tropical Reunion Wedding Vow Renewal at LuLu's Feb. 15, 1-3 p.m.

Looking for the perfect romantic Valentine's Day present for your spouse? Celebrate your love and commitment by officially renewing your wedding vows at LuLu's Tropical Reunion on Sat., Feb. 15, 1 to 3 p.m. at Lulu's at the foot of the Mid Bay Bridge. Couples should pre-register at the restaurant or LuLu's website, so LuLu's can have special Certificates of Reunion ready. There will be complimentary champagne toasts, wedding cake, flowers for the "brides" and photos for the couples. Prizes will be awarded to the couples who were married the longest, shortest and dressed the most festively. To register, visit www.LulusFunFoodMusic.com/destin or call (850) 710-5858.

Calling all Shrimp & Grits Enthusiasts! Feb. 22

Don't miss out on the 6th Annual Shrimp & Grits Festival on February 22, 12-4 p.m. behind



Brotula's Seafood House and Steamer benefiting the Boys and Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast. Delight your taste buds with creative twists on this classic southern dish from local chefs, sip on refreshing drinks, groove to a live DJ and cast your vote for the best Shrimp and Grits on the Emerald Coast. To purchase tickets, visit www.eventbrite.com/e/5th-annual-shrimp-grits-festival-tickets-741754897867.

Dog-Harmony Hops for Hounds Feb. 23

Dog Harmony's 5th Annual "Hops for Hounds" dog walk and after party, will be held February

23rd, 1-3 p.m. at Props Brewery in Hammock Bay, Freeport. The day will start with a pictur-

esque, short stroll followed by a lively after-party at Props Brewery, complete with craft beer (for thirsty humans 21 and older), live music, vendors, food trucks and more.

Tickets are \$35 per entry (includes one human and one fur friend), an adult-sized t-shirt, and a digital photo of participants with their pets. Each human walker will also receive a complimentary craft beer from Props Brewery – Must be age 21 or over to partake.

To register, visit <https://dog-harmony.org/hops-for-hounds-2025/>. (All dogs must be current on rabies vaccinations and at least six-months old. No prong, shock or choke collars will be permitted.) To become a sponsor, contact hello@dog-harmony.org. All proceeds benefit Dog-Harmony and its efforts to support the pups and programs in our communities.

Emerald Coast Quilt Show March 7-8

Flying Needles Quilt Guild of Niceville presents Emerald

Coast Quilt Show 2025, Friday, March 7 from 9 a.m. – 5 p.m. and Saturday, March 8 from 9 a.m. – 4 p.m. at the Northwest Florida Fairgrounds, 1958 Lewis Turner Blvd. in Fort Walton Beach.

Quilt Entry Categories include: Large Pierced, Medium Pierced, Small Pierced, Applique, Modern and Mixed Techniques.

Show Theme is Gulf of Dreams. Attendees will also experience mini-demonstrations, vendors, boutique, quilter's Walk and Quilt of Valor Block Party. For more information, visit flyingneedlesquiltguild.org.

La Vie En Rouge Friday, March 7th, 6 pm - 9 pm.

Immerse yourself in the glamour of 19th-century Parisian cabaret at La Vie En Rouge, presented by Emerald Coast Theatre Company on Friday, March 7th. This exclusive signature event will feature exhilarating live performances, dazzling costumes, and a vibrant atmosphere for guests

21+. Get ready to indulge yourself in an evening of elegance, as we transport you to the iconic Moulin Rouge for a night of dinner, dancing, entertainment, silent auction, and many more unforgettable moments.

TICKETS:

Reserve a table up to 4 seats for \$600.

Reserve a seat at a table for \$150.

General Admission for \$125.

Purchase tickets at emeraldcoasttheatre.org/special-events.

ECCAC's Signature Gala & Golf Events March 8-9

The Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center (ECCAC) is putting on its annual signature Gala & Golf event this year, presented by Peggy and Jerry Swanson. The Gala features a cocktail hour starting at 5:30 p.m., with dinner at 6:30 p.m. on Saturday, March 8, at the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa. Guests will enjoy dinner and live entertain-

Continued on page 6



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Happenings Around FWB

2025 EVENTS

FEBRUARY


- 11 | **Paint Party: A Lovely Sunset**
6 pm | Painting with a Twist | FWB
- 12 | **Lego Club**
3 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB
- 13 | **Mini Makers and Experimenters Lab**
10:30 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

Greater FWB Chamber Nothing But Networking
11:30 am | Holiday Inn Resort | FWB
- 14 | **Paint Party: Kissin' Red Bottoms**
3 pm | Painting with a Twist | FWB

Couples Mixology Class
4 pm | Soundside | FWB
- 15 | **Simple and Elegant Sewing**
9 am | FWB Public Library | FWB

Ultimate Elvis in Vegas
7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville
- 20 | **Curiosity Club**
4 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB

Planetarium Nights
6 pm | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB
- 21 | **Steak Night**
5 pm | VFW Post 7674 | FWB
- 22 | **Second Chapter Book Donation Drive**
10 am | FWB Public Library | FWB

6th Annual Shrimp & Grits Festival
12 pm | Behind Brotula's Seafood House | Destin


Emerald Coast Poker for Autism
12 pm | Festival of Fears | Mary Esther

3rd Annual Plew PLA Purse Bingo
5 pm | The Island Resort | FWB

Blind Light Beer Competition
5:30 pm | Soundside | FWB

4th Annual Heritage Food and Wine Tasting
7 pm | Home2 Suites by Hilton | FWB

Roaring 20s featuring The Stars of Tomorrow
7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville

- 25 | **Games Club**
1 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB

Paint Party: Violet Van Gogh
6 pm | Painting with a Twist | FWB
- 27 | **Van Porter Student Art Show Reception**
5 pm | Arts and Design Society (ADSO) | FWB

Greater FWB Chamber Business After Hours
5:30 pm | Beach Weekend - The Venue | FWB
- 28 | **CRESCENDO! Vintner Dinners**
6 pm | Various Venues

MARCH

- 01 | **Kiwanis Annual Pancake Breakfast & Silent Auction**
8 am | Niceville Community Center | Niceville

Discover Science Saturday
10:30 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

3rd Annual My Chemical Cocktail
6 pm | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

- 02 | **CRESCENDO! Main Event**
11:30 am | Hilton Sandestin Resort | Miramar Beach


Women's Climbing Circle
5 pm | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin
- 07 | **Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee**
7 am | Christian Life Center at FBC | FWB

La Vie En Rouge
6-9 pm | Emerald Coast Theatre Co. | Miramar Beach
- 07-08 | **Emerald Coast Quilt Show 2025**
9 am | Northwest Florida Fairgrounds | FWB

- 08 | **Girls Empowered with Math and Science (GEMS) Workshop**
10:30 am | FWB Public Library | FWB

Brunch & Bubbly
10:30 am | Home2 Suites by Hilton | FWB

ECCAC Gala
6:30 pm | Hilton Sandestin Beach | Miramar Beach
(Golf Tourney | March 9 | 10:30 am/Shotgun Start Noon)

ONGOING EVENTS

- VFW Post 7674 - Sunday Breakfasts**
8 - 11:30 am | Sundays | 231 Carol Ave | FWB
- SINGO Music Bingo Nights**
6 pm | Tues | The Island Resort | FWB
- Live Trivia Nights**
6 pm | Thurs | The Island Resort | FWB
- Live Trivia Nights**
6:30 pm | Thurs | AJs on the Bayou | FWB
- Kluge's Karaoke Night**
6 pm | Fri | Kluge's Flucken Fidiculous BBQ | FWB

FARMERS MARKETS

- Okaloosa County**
Saturdays | 7 am - 2 pm
1954 Lewis Turner Blvd | FWB
- Downtown FWB**
2nd & 4th Saturdays | 8 am - 1 pm
FWB Landing Park
- Grand Boulevard**
Saturdays | 9 am - 1 pm
Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach



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 Community

SWIMMING

continued from page 1

to them. If the foundation was chosen, they would keep the pool and sublet the rest to the school. If the school was chosen, they would sublet the pool to the foundation.

That way, Pam explained, the city had a choice.

Renovations began and fundraising continued. In the end, \$250,000 was raised, with large donations from the All Sports Foundation and local business owners, Tim and Sharon Smith, pushing it to completion.

In December of 2015, more than a year after the pools had closed, the Bernie R. LeFebvre Aquatic Center opened, named in honor of Sharon Smith's father, a local swim coach whose passion for the sport changed the lives of countless young swimmers.

During the Bernie's first year of operation, the founders started working on reopening the Destin facility. Another \$250,000 later and months of renovations, the facility now known as the Taj Renee Community Aquatic Center re-



PHOTOS BY WENDY RUDMAN
Family swim, offered on Friday nights and Saturday and Sunday afternoons is popular at the Bernie. Monthly passes are \$40 for the whole family.



Aquacise is for everyone and it's offered every weekday at 10 a.m. at the indoor Bernie R. LeFebvre Aquatic Center in Fort Walton Beach at the site of the old YMCA.

opened in August of 2017. This larger facility boasts a seasonal family pool with a slide and an eight-lane 25-yard competition

pool that's open year-round. About 20 swim meets a year are hosted at the Taj, which has a large enough pool deck to accommodate spectators. It's also home to the Panhandle Pirates Water Polo Club.

Both pools are used for everything water safety and competitive swimming, to aquacise, lap swim, water polo and birthday parties. They are the only publicly accessible pools in Okaloosa County. The foundation has more than 5,000 regis-

tered members and dozens of business sponsors. But operating a community pool is not for the faint-hearted. Even with a goal of breaking even every year, it's a journey.

"People who didn't know me and Pam when we started this whole process thought we were crazy," recalled Kathi. "The people that knew us, and they knew us because we had coached their kids, they believed that we could do it."

"And we did."

More Info

The Emerald Coast Fitness Foundation, a local nonprofit, operates two pools open year-round to the public in Okaloosa County. Pay by the day, week, month, or purchase a 10-visit punch card.

heated pool, open year around with 10 aquacise classes a week and hours of lap swim every day. Family swim times are also available at discounted rate.

Taj Renee Community Aquatic Center

4345 Commons Drive West, Destin, 850-837-7946

Eight lane 25-yard pool heated and open year-round. Facility closes when the air temperature drops below 40 degrees.

Bernie R. LeFebvre Aquatic Center

1127 Hospital Road (entrance is off Lewis-Turner Boulevard), Fort Walton Beach, 850-863-7946

Six-lane 25-yard indoor

EVENTS

continued from page 4

ment; an exciting live auction, as well as a featured guest speaker. The Gala is an energetic, yet important ECCAC fundraiser to benefit children by providing services at no cost to help identify, treat and support child vic-

tims in abusive situations.

The Golf Tournament, also to benefit ECCAC, will take place on Sunday, March 9, at Kelly Plantation Golf Club with registration and a cookout meal from 10:30 to 11:45 a.m. to be ready for a tournament shotgun start at noon. An Awards Ceremony will follow the tour-

namment. Teams of 4 players are \$1,000. Gala tickets are \$250 per individual and \$500 per couple. Please make reservations on-line at eccac.org. Sponsorships are still available.

NFB to Perform Cinderella March 8-9!

Northwest Florida Ballet returns to perform Cinderella at the Mattie Kelly Arts Center to conclude Season 55 on Sat., March 8, at 7:30 p.m. and Sun., March 9, at 2:30 p.m. With live music by the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra led by NFB Music Director and Conductor David Ott, this beloved classic features the choreography of NFB Artistic Director Todd Eric Allen and the music of Serge Prokofiev. Presented in three acts, Cinderella brings to life a cavalcade of enchanting characters, brilliant dancing, vibrant costumes and magical scenery sure to hold you under its spell.

Box office prices for NFB's Cinderella are \$48 for adults and \$22 for children 12 and under. Cinderella is brought to you by Season Production Sponsor the Mattie Kelly Arts Center,

and Season Signature Sponsors, Scarlett Magazine and NFB's Official Sports Medicine & Orthopaedic Provider, NFBJS Foot & Ankle Surgeon Dr. Sonya Ahmed.

Visit <https://www.nfballet.org/cinderella> or call 850-729-6000 to learn more or purchase your tickets.

SeaLight Festival Returns! Thursdays to Sundays, Through - April 13, 2025

Kaleido Entertainment presents a dazzling wonderland of light and Chinese culture, running January 30 through April 13, 5:30 p.m. - 9:30 p.m., with last entrance at 8:30 p.m. at Seascape Golf, Beach & Tennis Resort in Miramar Beach.

Each unique piece holds a story of its own with depictions of Chinese legends and lore, as well as the beauty of nature. Modern LED lights are combined with traditional hand-crafted lantern frames made from small pieces of Chinese silk cloth and steel wire.

In addition to the spectacular lights display, guests can also enjoy live entertainment by the

award-winning Zigong Acrobatic Troupe. The circus group has traveled the world and will perform incredible show-stopping acts including juggling, balancing, face-changing and more. There will also be a variety of vendors, games, food & drink, and cultural booths boasting artisanal gifts for purchase. Ticket prices start at \$24.99 for adults and \$17.99 for children ages 12 and under and are available here. For more information, visit www.sealightfestival.com/destin.

Wear Shades of Pink! Women United Brunch & Bubbly March 8

Join the ladies of Women United for Brunch and Bubbly presented by Eglin Federal Credit Union Sat., March 8, at 10:30 a.m. and hosted by Home 2 Suites by Hilton, 1930 Lewis Turner Blvd., Fort Walton Beach. Contributions support the work of United Way Emerald Coast and Women United to provide mental health resources, access, and education to local women and girls. Tickets available for purchase at united-way.org/womenunited.



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The Emerald Coast Boat & Lifestyle Show Returns February 28-March 2nd

\$40 Million Dollars of Marine Inventory Coming to Aaron Bessant Park
 More Than 400 Boats to be Displayed in Panama City Beach
 Curated Premier Line-Up of Exhibitors for Those Who Love the Coastal Lifestyle

It only happens one weekend a year. From the Panhandle to Tallahassee, boating, fishing and outdoor lifestyle enthusiasts gather in Panama City Beach for the Emerald Coast Boat and Lifestyle Show at Aaron Bessant Park, which returns February 28th-March 2nd.

Whether buying their first boat or upgrading their cur-

Bob Price of Panama City Beach, who never misses the show, purchased a 17-foot center console in 2019 and upgraded to a 24-foot center console last year. "Boat show pricing is a real thing," he said. "I know for a fact I got my best deal on both boats I purchased at this show."

In addition to boats, this show also highlights the best of

honor military members and first responders on Sunday. For the most up-to-date information

on the show, including dealers, brands, exhibitors, and vendors, or to purchase tickets in ad-

vance allowing you to 'skip the line,' visit EmeraldCoastBoat-Show.com



the Coastal Lifestyle. Attendees who love the sugar-white sand, glistening Gulf waters, sunrises and sunsets, salty breezes, and making family memories along the coast celebrate together at The Emerald Coast Boat and Lifestyle Show!

The curated line-up of exhibitors and vendors showcases boating, fishing, paddle boarding, kayaking, biking, electric carts, product demonstrations, seminars, beach furniture, coastal artists, condo and beach house furnishing, kids' activities, live music, food trucks, beer, and cocktails inspire thoughts of outdoor activities and glorious weather all along the Emerald Coast.

Parking for the show is always free at the adjacent Pier Park. The show will once again

rent model, boat buyers enjoy a shopping experience featuring the top dealers in the Southeast displaying more than 400 boats, valued at more than 40 million dollars. Bay boats, pontoons, cruisers, personal watercraft, and center consoles, from 17' to those well over 40', will be on display, along with the latest marine electronics and innovations.

This onsite collection of dealers and manufacturers allows buyers to compare boats side by side while taking advantage of the best discounts and incentives available exclusively at the show.



EMERALD COAST BOAT & LIFESTYLE SHOW

PANAMA CITY BEACH, FL

FEB 28-MAR 2

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Mayor Dick Rynearson: A Life of American Service

By KELLY MURPHY-REDD

Dick Rynearson was born in Ohio, in 1945. Graduating from Kent State University in 1967, he immediately entered the Air Force and graduated pilot training in February of 1969. His first aircraft was the Caribou; (C-7A) a twin-engine, short takeoff and landing utility transport. It could carry 26 fully equipped paratroops, 20 patients, or more than three tons of equipment.

In June of 1969, Dick deployed to Vietnam. He flew army personnel, ammunition, food and supplies, including ducks, chickens and pigs to various locations in S. Vietnam,

Cambodia, and Thailand. Dick loved every minute of it.

A situation occurred requiring Dick and his crew's help. Viet Cong nailed a snake to a village sign "casting a spell." Villagers said the only way to remove this curse was to sacrifice a White Water Buffalo. Dick got orders to transport a White Water Buffalo to the village.

They loaded up the buffalo and tied his nose ring to the rings on the floor of the plane. The buffalo had 360 degrees of motion. Everything was fine until the engine started. This startled the buffalo and he lost control of his bowels in a 360 degree radius.

Dick received a call on the radio informing him of a detail not mentioned earlier. Removing the spell wouldn't work unless the right forefoot of the buffalo was the first foot out of the plane. The loadmaster procured a jeep, tied the right forefoot to the bumper, and gently pulled the buffalo down the ramp. Fifteen minutes later, the buffalo was sacrificed and the spell was broken.

A more serious mission, resulting in Dick's Silver Star occurred in April of 1970 – the Siege of Dak Seang. Several hundred people lived there. Twenty-five to 28 U.S. Army Rangers were defending the

camp. The North Vietnamese wanted it, because it was a critical crossroads for travel in a valley. The rangers were running out of ammunition.

Dick was in Cam Ranh Bay, working in the scheduling room when the phone rang asking how many crews could be ready to take ammo to Dak Seang. Three crews were ready along with two additional crews from another base.

It was 7 p.m. and still day-

light. There were mountains on three sides with one way in and out. The planes flew in 20 seconds apart. They needed to avoid the 50mm gun on a particular hill. They couldn't land on the runway because it had been blown up. The planes flew six feet above the runway and shoved the supplies out. Then they turned to fly out, climbing to avoid arms fire. Dick's best

Continued on next page



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MAYOR

continued from previous page

friend flew over that hill and was hit by the 50mm gun. Dick saw the fire and watched the plane go down. His friend and the crew died.

Next time, they decided to go in under cover of darkness. They painted the bellies of the planes black and went in at 11 p.m. The rangers lit fires along the runway. It worked great. They were shot at, but not hit. The crews went back multiple times until the camp was saved. Dick served 366 days in Vietnam.

His next assignment was flying B-52Gs in Blytheville, Arkansas. While sitting nuclear alert one day, Dick got the call telling him he was being deployed. The next morning, his crew flew to Guam.

The mission was to drop iron bombs in South Vietnam and Cambodia. No one shot at them during the 12-14-hour missions. Four months later he came home. Twenty-eight days later he got another call. He was going back. During this second tour, before Christmas, President Nixon ordered a massive



carpet-bombing campaign in North Vietnam, primarily Hanoi. Officially called Operation Linebacker II, it became known as the 11 Days of Christmas.

Now Dick was bombing in North Vietnam and the enemy was shooting back with SA2 missiles. The B-52Gs did not have missile defense to work against SA2 missiles. Three hundred pilots were called into a briefing, shown the target on the map, and were told six percent of them were not coming home. Eighteen planes were lost. Dick says he was lucky. He

and all who participated were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Dick came home. An engineer by degree, he came to Eglin AFB to be in on the ground floor of testing the IIR Maverick missile. It was a three-year tour which lasted four-and-a-half years.

Then it was time to go back to the B52Gs at Fairchild AFB in Washington as senior captain. He was offered the opportunity to work for Hughes Aircraft in California and separated from the Air Force. During that time,



in the missile business, where he is today.

Sixteen years serving in public office while still working is Dick's version of "retirement." Describing himself as "100% pure American," he loves his country and would do anything to defend it. He says he's had a great life, married for 58 years to his childhood sweetheart, has four children, 14 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. Dick isn't done yet. He has a saying, "If you rest, you rust."

he earned his Master's degree and began working on the AM-RAAM missile until his first retirement in 2005.

After retiring, he helped his wife Janie in her shop, P.S. Gifts. He started watching city council meetings and was concerned about the contentious nature of the meetings. He ran for city council, served two terms and then ran for mayor. His second and last term as mayor is up in April 2025. In 2019, KBR asked him to come back to work



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2025 Florida Real Estate Expectations



BY MELISSA FORTE-LITSCHER

As Florida's real estate market faces 2025, a mix of economic factors, mortgage rates

and insurance challenges continue to shape buyer and seller behavior. While affordability remains a pressing concern, industry experts remain optimistic about the state's long-term housing demand.

According to Dr. Brad O'Connor, chief economist for Florida Realtors®, mortgage rates remain the biggest factor impacting Florida's housing market. Prices stopped rising when rates increased, as higher borrowing costs made homeownership less attainable. Inventory levels have grown—not because of an influx of new listings, but because homes are staying on the market longer due to reduced demand. However, inventory is still near 2019 levels, and distressed sales re-

main rare due to stable pricing.

With migration slowing across the country, including in Florida, O'Connor suggests that the best way to boost home sales is through lower mortgage rates or reduced prices. Millennials, in particular, remain eager to buy and are adjusting their expectations, willing to take on larger mortgages when affordability improves. Retirees with significant home equity are less impacted by mortgage rates, but may delay downsizing if they require a loan for the new home.

Logan Mohtashami, lead analyst at HousingWire, predicts that Florida's market could see a resurgence if mortgage rates drop below 6%, especially in the western part of the state. Miami remains somewhat immune to

these shifts due to its high percentage of cash buyers, but the rest of Florida depends on financing affordability.

For rates to fall below 6%, either a weaker labor market or Federal Reserve intervention addressing the housing affordability crisis would be necessary. However, home sales are unlikely to crash, as multiple generations—from Gen Z to Baby Boomers—are ready to enter the market when conditions improve. Each time rates hover near 6%, a surge in mortgage applications follows, indicating demand that has built up by people waiting to purchase. Historically, rates between 6 and 7% make for a healthy market.

Homeowner's insurance rates could deter some buyers, especially those requiring home financing. Cash buyers typically self-insure, so those buyers are not as affected. Insurance costs remain a significant affordability barrier for Florida homeowners. As private insurers left the state in recent years, 1.3 million homeowners have turned to Citizens Property Insurance Corp., the state's insurer of last resort. With hurricanes increasing claims, Citizens faces financial strain, making the situation worse. Unfortunately, we

have seen that insurance issues killed multiple deals in 2024, particularly in our area. The increase in insurance prices often pushes a potential buyer out of their approved purchase limits. Even when an owner has had insurance for years with the same company, upon sale of the home, the buyers will be subject to purchasing a brand new policy at today's rates and limitations. To attract buyers, sellers will need to consider replacing roofs older than 15 years, ensure their home's plumbing and electrical is up to today's code, or prepare to lower their asking prices. There is good news as a few more insurers entered the Florida market in 2024 and have taken over some Citizens policies due to significant legislation passed in 2022.

While insurance and affordability remain challenges, we are optimistic that the sluggish market at the end of 2024 is behind us, and we look forward to a stable, more balanced market for buyers and sellers in 2025. If you are interested in hearing more about real estate, call me, I'm at your service.

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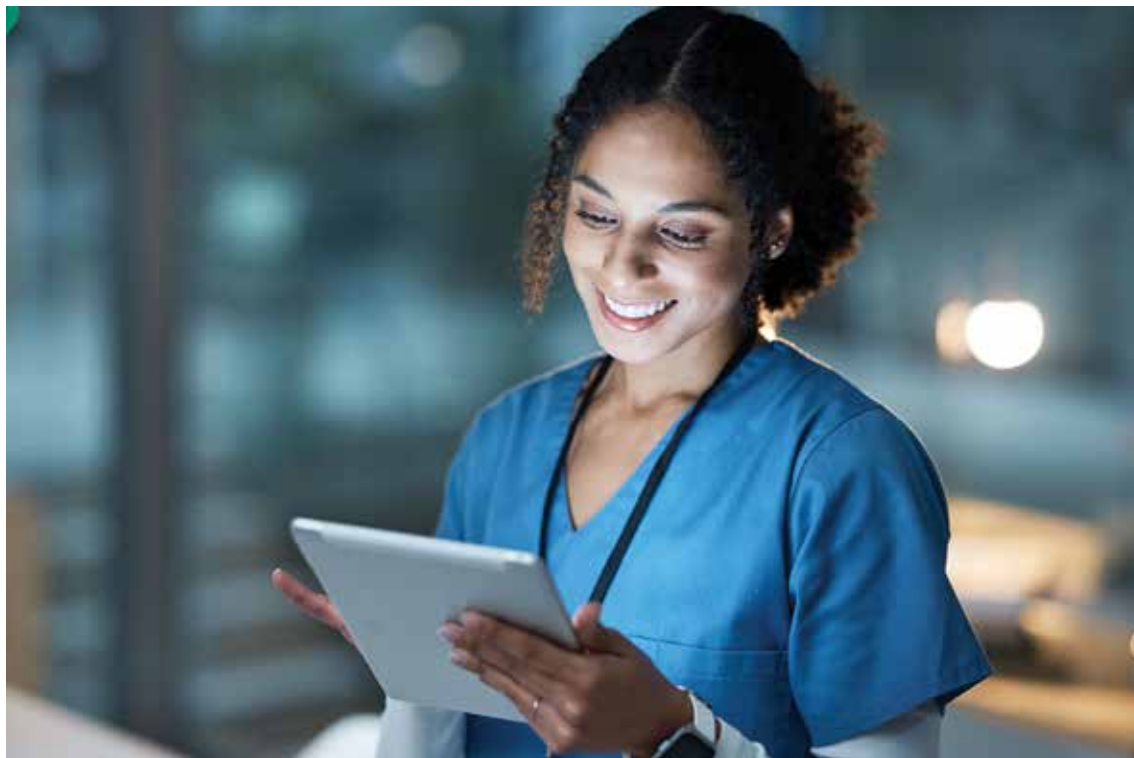
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Choosing the Right Service for Post-Hospital Care

BY TERESA HALVERSON, BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT/COMMUNITY RELATIONS DIRECTOR

When transitioning from hospital to a rehabilitation facility, it is critical for families to know what to look for in post-hospital care to ensure their loved ones receive the best support possible. Choosing the right service for your care is crucial. One of the most important factors is to consider personalized care. Depending on the needs of you or your loved one, be sure to ask questions about specialized programs. Below are some examples of what to look for:



- Stroke Recovery Program: Is there a Certified Stroke Therapist on staff?
- Wound Care – Vaporox wound Treatment – Certified Physical Therapist
- Parkinson’s Rehab: Does the facility offer a dedicated Parkinson’s Therapeutic program (“Big and Loud” Certified Staff?)

- Respiratory Program/Pulmonary Program: OmniFlow Breathing system offered?
- Cardiac recovery
- Dementia/Cognitive Rehab
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- Orthopedic recovery programs
- Outpatient Rehabilitation programs

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Community

Why is the Medicare Open Enrollment Period Important to You?

By GREG DURETTE, FLORIDA HEALTH CONNECTOR

Now that the Medicare Annual Election Period (AEP) is over (ended December 7th), you can finally take a breather from

all those ads, phone calls and mailers. As of January 1st, you are now able to try out your new Medicare Advantage, Supplemental and/or Prescription plan.

If you suddenly discover the

plan you selected during the AEP is not right for you, all is not lost. You will get one more bite at the apple to make changes to your plan.

As with many situations, in order to have a good outcome, you first have to ask the right questions. In this case, the questions you should ask first are:

Did you sign up for a new Advantage Plan or a stand-alone Part D prescription drug plan during the last Annual Enrollment Period (AEP)?

Do you have an existing Advantage Plan or a stand-alone Part D prescription drug plan that renewed with a January 1st effective date?

If the answer to either of these questions is yes, then the Medicare Open Enrollment Period (OEP) is very important to you.

The OEP runs annually from January 1st to March 31st.

During this time, Advantage plan holders are given the option to make certain changes to the plan they selected in the AEP.

These allowed changes are:

- Cancel your stand-alone Part D prescription drug plan
- Drop your Medicare Advantage Plan and return to Original Medicare (A & B only)
- Enroll in a stand-alone

Medicare Part D prescription drug plan

- Elect to change from one Medicare Advantage Plan to another

Let's take a look at each option a bit deeper. First, why would someone elect to cancel their stand-alone Part D prescription plan? The only reason one could have would be it was being replaced by other qualifying coverage. If you cancel without replacing, penalties will accrue



may have something to do with provider networks which are insufficient for the beneficiary or some other unusual event. Again, this rare circumstance would require you to also remain in or enroll in a stand-alone Part D prescription drug plan in order to avoid accruing the future penalties I just mentioned.

Again, enrolling in a stand-alone Part D prescription drug plan is a requirement if you do not have qualifying coverage elsewhere and want to avoid those penalties. If you neglected to get that done during the AEP, now is the time to look at this.

Last, some folks have a change of heart once they see the detailed materials of the Advantage plan they enrolled in during the AEP. Perhaps you find your HMO plan does not have the providers you need, but a PPO plan does. Or, perhaps the terms of coverage are better in a plan different from your current plan. Maybe another plan costs less (or even \$0!).

You don't need any reason to switch plans provided you do so before the OEP expires on March 31st. Just remember, you only get one chance to make this change. Once you do, you will have to keep that plan until the next AEP, which begins on October 15th of every year.

The best options for your particular situation should be thoroughly discussed with your insurance agent/broker to make sure you have all the facts about the choices you might be thinking about, and get all your questions answered.

Greg Durette is a qualified, licensed agent with Florida Health Connector providing Medicare throughout the State of Florida and is based in Niceville. He has been in the insurance industry for nearly 42 years and can be reached at his office at 850-842-2400 or his mobile at 978-509-2941.



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What You Should Do Right After An Accident

By JULIE A. MARTIN

It can be scary to be driving along one minute, and the next, either you've been run off the road, or spun out into the intersection, or even into a ditch. You or your passenger might even be injured, and need medical attention. Here is the short version of how to handle auto accidents so that you know you handled everything correctly and your stress level can come down.



auto id cards and your registration in your glove box.

Pull over safely to the side of the road and call 911. Calling for help is the first essential step in making sure that any injuries are treated in a timely fashion, as well as making sure the police arrive to do a full accident report.

If your vehicle is not drive able after the accident, you have two choices. If you have AAA, you can have them pick up your vehicle and drop it off at your preferred auto repair shop. If you have towing on your auto policy, and the site of your accident is less than five miles away from your repair shop, you can potentially use the towing coverage on your policy for this accident.

Take photos of the other vehicle(s) involved including the drivers, as the position of the vehicles, for your insurance company, so that there is photo evidence of all damage as well as an accurate representation of who was in which car, as well who was driving.

If you are injured, go to the hospital to get checked out or your primary care physician, if your injuries are not serious. Personal Injury Protection in the state of Florida pays 80% of your \$10,000 coverage, minus the deductible. This includes hospital bills, medical bills relating to your accident injuries,

Make sure you have your license, registration and insurance information on hand. I recommend keeping a copy of your declarations page, your

physical therapy, casts, crutches, etc. If you have medical payments on your policy as well, they will start where the Personal Injury Protection ends. If the at fault driver is not you, and they either have no bodily injury liability coverage, or not enough to cover your injuries, this is where uninsured/underinsured motorist coverage comes in. You insure for those times that you get hit, you're hurt, but the person who causes the accident does not have enough coverage to cover your medical expenses.

If you have not already called your insurance company to put in the claim, do so now, calling your agent and explaining to them what happened. Answer their questions and do not guess if you do not know the answer. Let them know that the police have been on the scene. Give them the case number the police give you and they will get the accident report when it becomes available. Write down the claim number and any other instructions the claims representative, and your agent give you for the accident.

you need to know what to do. Call 850-424-6979.

Dear reader, we all get into a scrape from time to time, and hopefully this list is helpful when

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East Pass Park to Reopen With Improvements

By CAROLYN NEWCOMER KETCHEL

In spring of 2020, Eglin AFB made a decision to close the park on the south side of Marler

(Destin) Bridge, mainly because of the trash that had become unmanageable. Coast Guard personnel spent every Monday morning cleaning trash that had

been left behind by weekend users of the area. As a mother of two Eagle Scouts, we taught our scouts to “leave no trace,” which means the area visited

should look better than when you found it. Sadly, this idea was not adhered to by those using this property for recreation. The southern view, across from Noriego Point is a stunning piece of property that locals enjoyed for a “day at the beach” for many years as we entered the “World’s Luckiest Fishing Village.”

The county has worked in partnership with Eglin AFB leadership to come up with a workable solution for managing the area and East Pass Park is set to re-open as a public beach. Okaloosa County has agreed to be in charge of the property. We intend to have paved parking spaces, bathrooms, lifeguards, park rangers and sheriff marine patrol. We will also have fencing, boardwalks, signage, trash receptacles, beach cleanup, turtle lighting and similar improvements.

The intent is a safe area that is clean and well attended that can be utilized by everyone. Our military partners at Eglin are pleased with the plan.

The park amenities will be paid for by Tourist Development Council (TDC) dollars. We expect the cost of the park improvements to be somewhere between \$.5 million and \$1 million.

Many of you have followed the Bike Path that is being built on the Gulf side of Hwy. 98 from Brooks Bridge to Marler Bridge. It is set to open late March or beginning of April. East Pass Park will also serve as a trailhead and eastern terminus for the bridge to bridge bike path.

Although we have had a number of years without the use of this area, the solution should

make this a safer and cleaner environment for everyone. As locals know, the current of the east pass is strong when the tide rolls out. Over the years, there have been drownings and injuries in the pass. With the addition of lifeguards and sheriff marine patrol, we will provide happy memories, for our time at the beach for locals and visitors alike in a well-maintained environment.

On another note: In the category of community recreation, Okaloosa County is actively working on new waterfront parks in partnership with the Town of Shalimar at the Shalimar Bridge and the City of Mary Esther at Cristobal Lane. Using TDC dollars, we hope to clear these areas and make them a recreational amenity and beautiful areas for our community to enjoy. Cleanup and demolition have already occurred. Design and permitting is underway in Mary Esther and soon to be in Shalimar.

As residents understand, we benefit financially from the tourism dollars and it is a nice to see community and recreational improvements from those dollars. We are grateful for our partnership with Eglin AFB as the bike path becomes a reality and the East Past Park is opened on Eglin property. Local residents, including military personnel and visitors, will benefit from our community recreational improvements. 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.

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Love and Fashion Is in the Air!

BY LIESEL SCHMIDT

Welcome to February—the month of amethysts, violets and—of course—so many pink and red heart-shaped everything that you have no excuse for forgetting that Valentine’s Day is mere weeks away. And while love is in the air, we at Blue Bay Lifestyle Co. can’t think of a better time to dive into date-night dressing.

For those of us who have put thought and effort into what we wear on a date only to have the other party show up in dirty jeans and a ratty tee after mowing the lawn—well, the importance of “date night dressing” is not a point that needs much making. What you wear—i.e., the care you take—in getting ready to go out, whether it’s with your friends, your spouse, your significant other or even someone you’re on a date with for the very first time, shows that you consider them worth making an effort over. So, what, pray tell, constitutes proper date night attire? As with anything, the answer is situational and depends on the type of date. For instance, are

we talking a casual coffee date, or are you headed to an upscale restaurant or fancy party? Is there an activity involved—say, hiking or bowling? Weather is also an important consideration. After all, if you’re uncomfortable because you’re too cold or even overly warm, you won’t be able to enjoy the actual date.

Casual First Dates: As anyone who’s spent time swimming in the dating pool knows, first dates can be stressful simply for the fact that you’re headed into a situation filled with unknowns—making your choices over what to wear even more difficult. Nine times out of ten, your first date will be on the casual side—which means opting for something comfortable yet fashionable.

Ladies, denim on denim has made a resurgence. So, consider pairing Liverpool’s fitted jeans with a concert T-shirt and a denim blazer. Top it off with Maui Jim oversized sunglasses, a classically chic leather purse, like one from Hobo, and a pair of Aetrex leather flats or mules.

Guys, try a collared shirt from

Vuori or Flag & Anthem paired with Vuori khakis. You’ll look pulled together and confident, and your date will feel like you took time to look good for them.

Coffee Meet-Ups: Coffee dates are a common choice for first dates, because they offer a low-pressure atmosphere for the getting-to-know-you game. Your outfit should match the laid-back vibe of the date. Keep it low-key, easy, and chic. Once again, jeans will be your friend here. Try styling some high-rise jeans with a striped cardigan from Flag & Anthem or bomber-style jacket from Liverpool, depending on the weather. White sneakers and a simple leather belt keep the look classic, while a fun crossbody bag from lululemon or Vuori adds a pop of color and personality.

For the male counterparts of the equation, why not break out a pair of Vuori Sunday Joggers and a North Face three-quarter zip-up? You’ll exude comfort without looking sloppy, and—who knows—you might end up extending the date for a walk or a few frames at the bowling al-



Think comfortable, a little bit flirty and 100-percent put-together. And remember that movie theaters are typically aggressively air-conditioned, so layering is ideal. Try a cute jacket paired over a bodysuit with a plunging neckline for a comfortable, sexy look and complete the outfit with a crossbody bag and Aetrex ankle boots for a modern vibe.

Guys will want effortless comfort and style, as well; so, check out Roark’s tees to pair with your favorite jeans or joggers.

Romantic Dinners:

Dinner dates are a classic option for romancing—and who doesn’t love to get dressed up for a night out on the town? Ladies, you’ll want to balance out how much skin you’re showing. For short dresses, keep the skin exposure up top minimized with long sleeves or a high neckline. Longer length skirts, dresses or faux-leather trousers give you the opportunity to show off a little with a deep-V neckline or an

ley. So, you’ll be ready to roll for whatever comes next.

Movie Nights: Since the advent of motion pictures, movies have been a go-to date option for couples, whether they’re on a first date or can’t remember a time when they weren’t together. Sure, movie dates are casual—but you still want to look stylish. Just because you’ll spend hours in the dark doesn’t mean you can get away with looking like you got dressed in the dark.

Continued on page 30



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ajsonthebayou.com
200 NE Eglin Pkwy., FWB
(850) 226-7579

AJ's Oyster Shanty - Okaloosa Island

A dozen for me; a dozen for you! Located on Okaloosa Island, AJ's Oyster Shanty serves up fresh, cold oysters, fresh seafood and the best live music on the Island. Don't miss the Thursday Prime Rib Dinner Special - enjoy a 10oz cut of prime rib served with baked potato and side salad, with au jus and horseradish cream sauce for \$22.95 every Thursday at 4 p.m. Key Lime Pie is available all day, every day! Join us for Karaoke every Wednesday night at 7 p.m. and live music all



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144 Palm Blvd N., Niceville
brozinnispizza.com

FUBAR Pizza Bar

Looking for a sports bar to call home? 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 a 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 for you 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.,
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fubarfub.com

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ajsoystershanty.com
108 Santa Rosa Blvd., FWB
(850) 226-8108

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Brozinni Pizzeria's family-friendly pizza place offers you a taste of New York right here in Niceville. Featuring the Big Apple's signature crust, its famous buttery garlic knuckles will leave you wanting more, including appetizers such as buttery garlic knuckles, bread sticks, homemade stuffed pepperoni or sausage sticks, cheese bread, meatball sticks, pizza, Cocoons Famous smoked tuna dip, and crackers/pita chips. There are also salads, build your own pizza, specialty pizzas, pasta/spaghetti, calzones, drinks and desserts. Every ingredient used has been hand-selected. Call to Order or Order Online at brozinnis.revelup.online and have your mouth-watering fare delivered!

Magnolia Grill

In 2001, Magnolia Grill in Fort Walton Beach opened its doors after a renovation that took 18 months—and it's been thriving since. A local's favorite dubbed "The Museum That Serves Food," you'll find equal parts museum and dining establishment. Its second floor contains artifacts from World War II, Vietnam and other segments of American history. And downstairs—is where you'll find lunch favorites such as Meatloaf with Mashed Potatoes, Crab Cake with Fettuccine and Shrimp Alfredo Sauce, Red Beans and Rice and many types of burgers, sandwiches, soups and salads. For dinner, savor divine Italian dishes such as Italian Sausage and Peppers with Marinara Sauce and Filet Tips Florentina. But there's also steaks, seafood "Camp Walton style" and even a kids' menu. Hours: Lunch M-F 11-2; Dinner M-Th 5-8;

Continued on page 18

Brunch & Bubbly

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DINING

continued from page 16

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 (850) 812-5761

The Boardwalk On Okaloosa Island

As us locals know, The Boardwalk is a popular destination. With its ideal location on the Gulf, convenient parking and wide range of activities, it's the perfect place to shop, savor various flavors of cuisine, and take in the incredible views of the Emerald Coast. Fresh off the beach? No worries! Sandy toes and salty swim suits are welcome. Also known as Newman C. Brackin Wayside park, The Boardwalk is an official county park with public beach access. Along with free parking,



pavilions, picnic tables, public restrooms and outdoor showers for beachgoers, there are several restaurants including The Crab Trap, Rockin Tacos, Floyd's

Shrimp House and Al's Beach Club.

The Boardwalk hosts community events such as the Emerald Coast Motorcycle Chal-



lenge, coastal beach cleanups, "Tricks and Treasures" Halloween event and the New Year's Day pelican plunge. It is also

home of two legendary volleyball tournaments: Emerald Coast Volleyball Week in the spring, and the Emerald Coast Fall Classic. And sports fans don't forget, you can also watch your favorite team with breathtaking views and breaks for walks on the beach!

theboardwalkoi.com
 1450 Miracle Strip Pkwy SE,
 FWB
 (850) 301-0959

A Taste of Mardi Gras: Food, Wine, Craft Beer and More!

A Taste of Mardi Gras, this year's Food and Wine Tasting Festival supporting the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra's youth programs, will feature a jazz combo, tastes of 40 different wines, local craft beers and samples of cuisine such as Aegean Greek Restaurant, Cafe Bienville, Magnolia Grill, Peppers Mexican Cantina, Papa's Smokehouse, PB&J Bistro & Cafe and several others.

Scheduled for Sunday, Feb. 16, 2025, from 1-4 p.m. in the Raider Central of Northwest Florida State College in

Niceville, the event will also include a silent auction containing a variety of items such as gift cards, art, jewelry and gift baskets.

Sponsored by the Northwest Florida Symphony Guild, the event raises funds to support the Symphony's youth programs, such as the Fifth-Grade concerts and the annual John Leatherwood Concerto Competition.

Tickets are \$65 and can be purchased by calling the Mattie Kelly box office at 850-729-6000 or online at www.MattieKellyArtsCenter.org.

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Golf Series: Presentation to Honor the "Power of Print" at the PGA Show in Orlando

By BARBARA PALMGREN

January, 2025, brought a record snowstorm to the Panhandle of Florida while I was in Orlando making a presentation at the annual national golf show.

Traveling home through the crunchy snow along I-10 and local roads, I thought about this wonderful sport and how frustrated golfers must feel being unable to challenge their game.

(White balls on white snow simply don't go together.)

At Shalimar Pointe Golf Course, along with many other courses, a plea went out to avoid sledding, snowboarding, etc.

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The Power of Print in Marketing for the local community

Dr. Barbara Palmgren, Shalimar Pointe Golf Course Board of Directors



on fairways and greens to protect the fragile grass. I certainly didn't want to arrive home and see a snowman with a golf club posing on a tee box!

At the show, I shared a Power Point presentation to discuss the importance of keeping printed material available and in front of the community as well as tourists. Every participant received a copy of FWB Life, Bay Life or Destin Life with a notation of the page where they could read an article about golf in our area. Articles highlighted an area golf course, junior golf tournaments or other special tournaments.

Other printed material was discussed as well with due respect to QR codes that one can scan to locate a course and book a tee time. Watching members of the audience turn the pages of our local papers brought a smile to my face. I had two international golf professionals from Malaga, Spain, who thanked me for putting forward an idea they would bring back to their city.

One new course owner was especially interested in using printed material as well as Apps to market their product. Every community is different, and

during the Q & A, ideas were exchanged on marketing golf. Everyone agreed that it's of strategic importance to promote golf for the next generation and to communicate with members as well as outside public play to get return business. Membership is a key factor for course survival as bills must be paid.

Course managers for larger urban areas appreciated hearing how our area courses support one another. In our county, when one course hosts a daily or weekend tournament, management often recommends another course to a tourist for that day. Golfers appreciate this courtesy and friendly comraderies that are evident along the Emerald Coast.

I was an educational presenter two years ago at this show and was surprised to learn that presentations are more streamlined than ever before. My simple PowerPoint was transposed onto their template. So yes, it looks so much more professional; but no, that's not me hitting the drive with my hair flying as I hit a drive several hundred yards! Instead, I'm happy to get to the tee box and see if my drive goes straight and at least 100 yards.



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A New Chapter in Manatee Care: The Gulfarium Welcomes Lil Joe and Inigo

In a profound stride toward protecting one of Florida's most beloved marine creatures, the Gulfarium proudly announces the arrival of two rescued manatees—Lil Joe and Inigo—to its newly renovated manatee habitat. This milestone is the culmination of a three-year vision that began in 2022, when Patrick Berry, CEO of the Gulfarium, first spoke with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service about creating a haven dedicated to nurturing manatees in need of long-term care.

Originally a 300,000-gallon dolphin habitat, the space, now named Manatee Cove, has been meticulously transformed to meet the specialized needs of rescued manatees. Improved viewing windows invite guests into the gentle underwater world of these animals, while enhanced Life Support Systems (LSS), a dedicated medical area, and intentionally designed resting ledges ensure that Lil Joe, Inigo, and future manatee residents receive the focused attention they need to thrive.

Yet this undertaking is about far more than a physical renovation—it is a testament to the Gulfarium's dedication to giv-

ing manatees a second chance at life. With so many of these gentle giants, a federally threatened species, facing threats in the wild, it became clear that an expanded facility was necessary to help manatees beyond their initial critical care stages.

By joining forces with the Manatee Rescue and Rehabilitation Partnership (MRP), U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), the Gulfarium is now the first facility in the Florida Panhandle to provide housing for rescued manatees requiring extended care. This vital collaboration relieves pressure on central Florida's critical-care facilities, allowing them to focus on more urgent cases and strengthening statewide efforts to save manatees from harm. Additionally, the Gulfarium plans to further develop its manatee program by expanding to provide critical care for manatees in need within the northern Gulf Coast region.

Lil Joe and Inigo, who previously called The Seas with Nemo & Friends their home, will serve as living ambassadors for their species—sharing a



message of resilience and hope with everyone who comes to see them. Visitors will discover their stories in a newly created education area, where daily chats and additional educational programming with the Gulfarium's team shine a light on the challenges manatees face in the wild and how each of us can play a role in their protection.

"The Gulfarium is honored to welcome Lil Joe and Inigo, two extraordinary manatees who will help illuminate the urgent conservation needs of their species," said Patrick Berry. "Our vision has always been to create a caring environment where manatees can continue their healing journeys while inspiring our guests to connect more deeply with marine life. By taking on the long-term care of

these animals, we enable facilities in central Florida and elsewhere to devote critical resources to those manatees in acute need. We're proud to stand with our partners in the MRP to protect these vulnerable creatures."

Central to the Gulfarium's mission is public engagement. In addition to providing top-tier animal care, the new manatee habitat fosters a deeper understanding of manatees' plight. Through interactive programs, visitors can learn about Florida's marine ecosystems, ongoing rescue efforts, and the simple steps we can all take to protect wildlife.

This vision aligns seamlessly with the Gulfarium's accreditations by the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks & Aquariums (AMMPA) and the Interna-

tional Marine Animal Trainers' Association (IMATA), underscoring an unwavering commitment to the highest standards of animal care, conservation, and public education. By welcoming Lil Joe and Inigo, the Gulfarium demonstrates the power of compassion, collaboration, and community engagement in safeguarding Florida's remarkable marine life.

For those eager to learn more about manatees and experience the wonder of these gentle giants firsthand, Lil Joe and Inigo can be viewed as part of general admission to the Gulfarium. Guests are encouraged to explore Manatee Cove, attend daily educational chats, and discover how their own actions can make a positive impact on manatee conservation efforts.



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How's Your Vagus Nerve?

By KAY LEAMAN, HEALTH ARCHITECT, HEALTHYDAY HEALTHYLIFE

This very crucial nerve (the 10th of 12 cranial nerves) winds its way from the brain down the spinal column to the heart, lungs, liver, stomach, spleen and GI tract. As part of the para-

sympathetic system (rest and digest) its role is to transmit signals from the brain to the body. This nerve plays a role in our heart rate, immune system, mood, mucus and saliva production, skin and muscle sensations, speech, taste and more.

When the vagus nerve is

not functioning properly, one can experience symptoms such as heart rate irregularities like bradycardia (slow beat), palpitations or an irregular heart-beat. Our mood and wellbeing can change due to a change in the neurotransmitter levels and stress responses. These height-

ened stress levels and/or mood swings can be experienced with no apparent cause.

Managing daily stress is a huge part in our optimal health. Because stress stems from the sympathetic system (fight or flight), it is important to have a strong vagus nerve which tells the sympathetic system that everything is ok and we can relax. This happens by stimulating the vagus nerve.

By exercising and stretching the vagus nerve on a regular basis, we can build up a resilience against stress. There are many different ways we can do this, and if you meditate, exercise, sing or gargle, you are on the right track. This being said, exercising the vagus nerve when we are experiencing stress or symptoms of a compromised nerve can be done at work, in the car, at the movies or while fishing. In other words, any time anywhere.

Other things we can do to keep this very important nerve strong are:

- Strength training
- Running
- Yoga
- Diaphragmatic breathing
- Box breathing (inhale (nose) for 4, hold for 4, exhale (mouth) for 4, hold for 4)
- Fasting
- Massage
- Laughter (Fake it if you have to.)
- Spending time outside
- Stimulating acupuncture points: carotid artery and 3



points on the ear.

- Tapping - EFT (emotional freedom technique)
- Singing - slower songs are better
- Gargle - 30 to 60 seconds. This causes vibration in the throat which stimulates the nerve.

There are plenty of videos online with stretches and other exercises. There are also machines that can stimulate the nerve. My vote is to incorporate a few of the options into my daily routines. The one thing I didn't mention that can stimulate the nerve is a cold face plunge. So, if you're a cold plunger go for it. I'll keep my face warm and happy as I make a joyful noise in song.

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Healing in Harmony: Acupuncture's Role in Modern Medicine



BY DR. KAREN DEVORE

In the story of the tortoise and the hare, there's a lesson we often overlook—the power of steady, patient progress over quick, short-lived victories. True wellness, much like the journey of the tortoise, is about a measured approach. Acupuncture, which has been practiced for thousands of years, aligns with this principle, offering a way to support the body's natural healing processes through slow, purposeful adjustments. It's a reminder that lasting health isn't achieved overnight, but cultivat-

ed over time.

Acupuncture, in its traditional form, works by targeting specific energy pathways, or meridians, within the body. These meridians are thought to carry “chi,” or vital energy, and when they become blocked or disrupted, physical symptoms often arise. The careful placement of needles along these pathways reestablishes flow, reducing inflammation and pain, and promoting harmony within the body. In this way, acupuncture doesn't just address surface symptoms but fosters an inner balance that can profoundly support the body's resilience and overall health.

While traditional acupuncture is widely known, the field has evolved to include specialized techniques like Neuro-Acupuncture. Neuro-Acupuncture focuses on conditions that affect the central nervous system, such as stroke recovery, nerve pain, and various neurological disorders and diseases. By blending traditional acupuncture meth-

ods with insights from neurology, Neuro-Acupuncture can help restore functionality in ways that complement conventional treatments. Having studied this technique extensively across the globe and in some of China's most prestigious hospitals, Dr. Lisa Forsythe, Tortoise Clinic's Acupuncture Physician, witnessed its transformative potential. This type of acupuncture integrates Eastern philosophy with Western medical understanding, offering patients an evidence-based approach to address complex neurological challenges.

Today, acupuncture is recognized as a valuable therapeutic modality across some of the world's top institutions, including Johns Hopkins and Sloan Kettering, where it's used alongside conventional treatment protocols. Studies have demonstrated its safety and effectiveness, particularly for pain management, stress reduction, and immune support. For patients dealing with chronic conditions

or those recovering from illness or injury, acupuncture offers a natural, non-invasive way to aid in the body's recovery process and enhance the effects of traditional medical treatments.

At the Tortoise Clinic, we take a holistic approach, recognizing that true health lies in addressing the root causes of imbalance. Alongside acupuncture, we offer an extensive dispensary with customized Chinese medicine herbal formulas and medical grade supplements to further support the body's natural defenses. These herbal therapies work in tandem with acupuncture, nourishing the body from within and offering additional support to systems under stress.

Acupuncture isn't a quick fix; it's a commitment to a path of healing. Each session builds on the previous one, gradual-



ly promoting equilibrium and resilience in the body. Like the tortoise's journey, acupuncture's effects unfold gradually, each treatment moving us closer to a balanced, sustainable state of well-being.

I invite those who are curious to explore this path and learn more about what acupuncture has to offer. In a world often focused on fast solutions, acupuncture offers an opportunity to step back and engage with our health in a meaningful, enduring way—one that prioritizes the journey as much as the destination.



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Wellness



By STEPHENIE CRAIG, JOURNEY BRAVELY

Have you ever done something kind for someone you value to then feel like it went largely unnoticed? Do you feel frustrated when you spend time and energy investing in a relationship to feel like the other person doesn't really see or appreciate your investment? Doing thoughtful things for your loved ones matters. However, the human instinct, most often, is to do for others what you would like someone to do for you. And, while that approach works sometimes, often the other person in the relationship feels most loved and seen in ways that might be different than what helps you feel loved and seen.

Maybe you are spending energy cleaning your child's room and packing time consuming

Investing Relationship Energy Strategically

lunches when what really makes your child feel seen and loved is playing a game with you. Maybe you are spending energy buying something for your partner when what really makes them feel seen or loved is time and meaningful conversation. Maybe you are spending energy planning a party for a friend when what makes them feel most loved is spontaneous lunch with you.

Investing energy in relationships unintentionally can create frustration, confusion and disconnection over time as both parties can end up feeling unseen. So, how do you figure out how to invest energy in your relationships strategically so your effort is landing in a way that feels meaningful to the other person? And, how do you learn to communicate your needs clearly to others, so they can invest energy strategically in their relationship with you?

Seven Ways to Invest Relationship Energy Strategically

1 - Let go of mind reading. Mind reading is a myth.

Culture has sold you a false idea that mind reading equals love. No one can read your mind and you can't read theirs. And, that's perfectly okay. Let go of expecting yourself or others to read minds when it comes to what makes you or them feel seen and loved.

2 - Reflect on what makes you feel seen and loved. Notice what makes you feel valued, connected, deeply seen and known. Do you feel most seen with side by side time together, meaningful conversation, acts of service, physical touch, encouraging words, gifts, surprises? Notice that what makes you feel seen works for you but is not necessarily the same for others.

3 - Ask the other person what makes them feel seen and loved. Be curious and take notes. Remember, your way of feeling seen is not the right way, it's just your way. Let the other person have space to need and want what feels best and most connecting to them in the relationship.

4 - Make adjustments in your approach. Make con-



would make you feel loved.

6 - Give and notice positive feedback. When your friend does something that felt meaningful, tell them directly what it meant to you.

When your family member tells you the focused time you spent with them was meaningful, take mental note and prioritize spending focused time with them.

7 - Initiate check in conversations periodically. Try directly discussing connection in your relationships. Ask the other person how it's going for them? Don't judge their response. Share your connection needs.

sistent and meaningful efforts to spend more energy on what helps the other person feel seen and loved and less energy on things that do not matter as much to them.

5 - Tell people what you need. Communicate clearly what helps you feel seen and connected in your relationships. Remember that communicating what you want and need does not take away from the value when the other person gives you what you're asking for. Being clear about your needs makes you more likely to get what you need and to feel connected in your relationships. Instead of hoping someone reads your mind about wanting a nice dinner for your birthday, tell them a nice dinner

Spending your relationship energy strategically feels better and much less frustrating. Be patient with yourself and others as you learn. Connect with us along your journey for coaching and counseling at Journeybravely.com.



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Mild Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy: Non-Invasive Support for Health and Well-being



By MELANIE YOST

Mild Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy (mHBOT) is a revolutionary approach to improving overall health, well-being, and longevity. Traditionally Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy (HBOT) has only been associated with treating conditions like decompression sickness, carbon monoxide poisoning, and wound healing, but the growing body of research shows that it offers a broader range of benefits. With new research highlighting its effectiveness, HBOT is quickly becoming a popular, safe and non-invasive way to enhance physical and mental health.

What is HBOT and mHBOT?

Hyperbaric oxygen chambers increase atmospheric pressure to elevate oxygen levels in the body. High-pressure chambers provide between 1.5 and 3 ATA (16–66 feet below sea level), whereas mild hyperbaric chambers (mHBOT) operate at 1.3 ATA (10 feet below sea level). This mild increase is exceptionally safe and effective for boosting oxygen levels in the blood plasma.

For years, experts believed that only high-pressure HBOT had therapeutic benefits. However, recent studies demonstrate that mHBOT can be just as effective in promoting healing and, in some cases, even more beneficial, with no risk of oxygen toxicity.

What Conditions Can mHBOT Help?

Although the FDA has approved HBOT for 14 specific indications, mHBOT is increasingly used off-label to address a wide range of health concerns.

Benefits include:

- **Anti-aging:** Slows the aging process and reverses biological age by lengthening telomeres.
- **Neurological Conditions:** Supports recovery from concussions, traumatic brain injuries, and neurodegenerative diseases.
- **Chronic Health Issues:** Reduces symptoms of autoimmune disorders, diabetes, and inflammatory bowel disease.
- **Brain Health and Mood Disorders:** Helps with PTSD, depression, and anxiety.
- **Physical Performance and Recovery:** Enhances athletic performance, speeds up recovery, and reduces inflammation.
- **General Health and Wellness:** Improves energy, sleep quality, mental clarity, and overall well-being.

Many users report a higher quality of life and symptom relief, making mHBOT a valuable tool for long-term health maintenance.

How Does mHBOT Work?

The mild pressure in the chamber pushes oxygen into the blood plasma, increasing oxygen delivery to tissues of the body and the brain. This process:

- Reduces chronic inflammation and oxidative stress
 - Boosts the immune system
 - Stimulates stem cell mobilization and proliferation
 - Enhances neuroplasticity (the brain's ability to adapt and heal)
 - Promotes cell regeneration
- These effects collectively contribute to improved physical and mental health, helping the body repair itself from the inside out.

What to Expect During a Session

A typical mHBOT session is simple, relaxing, and comfortable. Clients lie down on a soft mattress inside the chamber, wearing a nasal cannula to enhance oxygen intake. The atmospheric pressure increases gradually, causing a slight sensation in the ears (similar to airplane

takeoff). Once at pressure, most clients feel relaxed, with many choosing to nap or meditate.

After the session, users often report immediate benefits such as reduced aches and pains, increased energy, and a sense of calm. Over time, cumulative sessions lead to enhanced mental clarity, better sleep, improved mood, and reduced symptoms of chronic conditions.

Next Steps

If you feel you or a loved one would benefit from Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy, give us a call. We want to help you! Come in for a FREE consultation, so that we can meet your individual needs.

Melanie Yost is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and owner of Be Well Solutions and Complete Ketamine Solutions in Destin. She has been in the healthcare field for over 35 years and can be reached at 850-786-2051.

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A Pastor's Ponderings: "What is Love?"



BY PASTOR DOUG STAUFFER

Many people naturally turn their attention toward love and relationships every February. Many couples celebrate Valentine's Day with cards, chocolates, flowers, and other romantic gestures. What does the Bible say about love? More importantly, how does God define love?

Love Is Giving

The most well-known verse in Scripture, John 3:16, provides a foundational definition of love: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Love, as demonstrated by God, is selfless and sacrificial. It is giving, not for personal gain, but for the good of others. God's ultimate gift of His Son is the highest expression of love—a love that seeks the salvation of souls.

Love is giving without expecting anything in return. Consider Jesus' words in Acts 20:35: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." True love seeks the welfare of others, as exemplified by God's ultimate gift to mankind.

Love Is Sacrificial

The story of Ruth is a beautiful picture of sacrificial love. Ruth's decision to stay with her mother-in-law, Naomi, even after the death of her husband, shows a love that goes beyond mere obligation. Ruth declared: "Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Her selfless devotion not only provided Naomi with companionship but also led to her inclusion in the lineage of Jesus Christ.

Love Is Forgiving

The parable of the prodigal

son, found in Luke chapter 15, illustrates another vital aspect of love: forgiveness. When the wayward son returns home, his father runs to meet him, embraces him, and restores him to his place in the family. Despite the son's failures, the father's love never wavered. His response to the prodigal reflects God's boundless mercy and grace.

"But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). This verse, along with many others, underscores the forgiving nature of God's love. Just as the father in the parable forgave his son, God stands ready to forgive all who repent and trust wholly in His Son for the forgiveness of sins. "In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise" (Ephesians 1:13).

Love Is Enduring

The King James Bible uses the word "charity" in First Corinthians chapter 13 to describe the enduring nature of love: "Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up" (1 Corinthians 13:4). While the modern concept of charity often refers to acts of kindness, the biblical term encompasses a deeper, enduring love that reflects God's nature.

The Bible continues by describing charity even further. This magnitude of love does not give up but "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, and endureth all things" (1 Corinthians 13:7). It is not based on fleeting emotions but a commitment to act in the best interest of others—regardless of the cost. Love is a choice, not a mere emotion.

Love Is Eternal

God's love is not confined to time. Jeremiah 31:3 declares: "Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore, with lovingkindness have I drawn thee." God's love is eternal and unchanging, providing a firm foundation for our lives. As we reflect on love this Valentine's season, let us remember that God's love is the standard by which all love should be measured.

May we strive to reflect God's giving, sacrificial, forgiving, enduring, and eternal love in our interactions with others. Let us not be content with superficial expressions of affection but seek to embody the kind of love that transforms lives and glorifies our Creator.

This February 2025 (Valentine's month), remember that true love is found in the example of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Be a loving example to a world where love grows ever colder. Choose to make a difference!

Dr. Doug Stauffer is pastor of Faith Independent Baptist Church. He was saved July 6, 1980, in Niceville, while stationed at the 33rd Tactical Fighter Wing at Eglin Air Force Base and has now been in the ministry for over 35 years.

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Musing

Sean of the South: Love



BY SEAN DIETRICH

We were newlyweds, living in a grungy apartment.

Each morning, I would wake before her. I would pass my morning hours writing poetry on a yellow legal pad, sipping coffee.

Mostly, I'd write the kinds of god-awful things you'd expect newlyweds to write. I'm talking painfully corny stuff. I'd leave these poems on slips of paper scattered throughout our apart-

ment for her to find.

One such poem read:
 "Together, the two of us,
 "In thought, and deed, and
 breath, and heart,
 "Shall never be lacerated
 apart."

Gag me with number-two pencil. "Lacerated?" What kind of a dork uses that word? In fact, I'm not certain this verb works in this particular case.

LACERATE [verb: las-uh-reyt] lac'er at'ed, lac'er at'ing
 1. to tear; mangle; rip. Example: "Hey dude, that poem you wrote really freakin' lacerated."

My wife saved all my crummy poems in a shoebox, and today they reside in a storage closet.

Anyway, when we first married, we lived in an apartment that smelled like dead squirrels. I am not being figurative. I mean our apartment actually had a nest of decomposing



squirrels in the attic above our master bedroom.

The place was tiny, and about as ugly as homemade soap. The tenant before us had painted the walls black and greenish-gray. Sherwin Williams officially titled this color "Seasick Granite®."

When we moved in, we made the place our own. We painted the walls brown and khaki. We bought a used coffee table and some scented candles.

My friend, Chubbs, found an old console television on the side of the road. I was lucky enough to claim the TV before the garbage man came.

The thing was heavier than a dead preacher, but we got it up the stairs. Chubbs, however, would suffer from severe disc degenerative problems for the rest of his life.

Our building sat across the street from a Waffle House, a Chick-fil-A, and an ice cream

shop. And this is why we gained nearly fifty pounds within our first year of marriage.

We never went to the movies because we didn't have the money. We ate Hamburger Helper without hamburger sometimes.

We saved our cash for a new window unit AC—our air conditioner was on the fritz. The thing would only work on days of the week beginning with "R."

On weekends, every weekend, we ate donuts. It was our simple ritual, and I loved it. Krispy Kreme was only a stone's throw from us, and when the hot-and-ready light would glow, by God, we were there.

Over donuts, we would talk for hours about nothing. Heavy doses of sugar can do things to the human mind. It can make a person honest.

She told me all her stories. I told her mine. You can do a lot of soul-searching over crullers.

My professional life was non-existent, I took whatever jobs I could get. I spent days crawling rooflines, swinging a hammer, or operating a commercial lawn mower. She worked as a preschool teacher at church, or in a kitchen.

For extra income, I played pi-

ano at a Baptist church on Sundays, Sunday nights, Wednesday nights, Thursday night choir practices, and Saturday night prayer meetings.

We learned things about each other. We learned important things.

We learned how to argue in the middle of a Winn-Dixie, and how to attend two Thanksgivings in one day. How to share a sunset, seated on the hood of a truck. How to read in bed with a flimsy battery-powered book light.

We learned how to travel together with paper maps. And after years of practice, we finally learned how to make a bed together without me getting murdered.

We learned how to hold each other when loved ones die. We learned how to sit together—me reading a magazine, her playing a crossword puzzle.

We learned how to wring our hands in hospital waiting rooms. We learned how bury dogs with a shovel and a burial sheet.

We learned how to make a life together.

A lot has changed since those days, but I still wake early in the mornings to write. I don't use a legal pad anymore, I use a laptop.

This morning, however, I did not write. Instead, I sifted through our storage closet. I found things. An old coffee-tin sewing kit, some scented candles, love poems, and the picture of a young man and his new wife in their first apartment.

In the picture, the place had ugly gray walls, but that's the only ugly thing about this photo.

He's holding her. She's holding him. They are young. Their skin is smooth. I wish I could tell you how much I love these two people in the picture.

I wish you could see their faces, and their punch-drunk smiles. You can tell they belong together by looking at them. You simply know that their names should never be said apart.

It's as though nothing bad in this life can ever touch them. As though the two of them, in thought, and deed, and breath, and heart, shall never be lacerated apart.

I suppose that word is growing on me.

Happy Valentine's Day, Jamiee.

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The Northwest Florida Ballet Presents Cinderella, Featuring Live Music by the NFSO

The Northwest Florida Ballet (NFB) returns to the Mattie Kelly Arts Center to conclude Season 55 with the beloved fairytale, Cinderella, on Sat., March 8, at 7:30 p.m. and Sun., March 9, at 2:30 p.m. The Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra (NFSO), led by NFB Music Director and Conductor David Ott, will provide musical accompaniment.

Presented in three acts, this timeless classic features the acclaimed choreography of NFB Artistic Director Todd Eric Allen and the beautiful music of Sergei Prokofiev, bringing to life a cavalcade of enchanting characters, brilliant dancing, vibrant costumes and a magical set sure to hold audiences under its spell.

“Cinderella’s story is beloved by many and set to an impeccably written score by Sergei Prokofiev. This ballet is also an exciting challenge for the NFB dancers, both physically and artistically. It’s such a joy for us to present and is the perfect way to close out our 55th season,” said

NFB Artistic Director/CEO Todd Eric Allen.

While the story has taken on many forms in cultures across the globe, 17th-century French writer and political figure Charles Perrault is credited with the original story that most Americans have come to know.

The first staging of Cinderella as a ballet was conceived by Sir Fredrick Aston in 1948 for London’s Sadler’s Wells Ballet and was hailed as an instant classic. The weary post-war audiences were eager to be enchanted. They were thoroughly charmed by the rags-to-riches story about a young girl’s magical journey from struggle and heartbreak to the ultimate happy ending.

“Although Walt Disney’s animated version is the one they are most familiar with, audiences are often surprised to find out that Cinderella’s origins can go back to ninth-century Chinese folklore that praised the virtues and loveliness of women with tiny feet,” said Allen.



NFB guest artists Daynelis Muñoz and Rafael Quenedit portray the roles of Cinderella and her handsome prince, respectively. Muñoz, a Cuban-born Principal International Guest Artist, showcased her exceptional talents with the National Ballet of Cuba, Mexico Ballet and Tulsa Ballet before embarking on a freelancing journey. She has graced stages across Spain, France, Colombia, Mexico, and more. Her repertoire includes leading roles in iconic classics such as Swan Lake, Giselle, Don Quixote,

Nutcracker, Sleeping Beauty, Romeo and Juliet, Serenade and La Bayadere. Prior to his current role as a principal dancer with the Cincinnati Ballet, Quenedit was a principal at the National Ballet of Cuba, where he performed principal roles in Sawm Lake, Don Quixote, Giselle, La Fille Mal Gardée, The Nutcracker, Romeo & Juliet, Carmen, La Bayadere, Cinderella and Theme & Variations. Sharing his art with dance lovers worldwide has been one of his passions, as he has performed lead roles in the United States, Italy, Spain, France, Canada, Mexico and many others.

To get to her prince, Cinderella has to get past her cruel step-sisters, hilariously performed by NFB guest artists Max Murdock and John Aaron Wiggins, with NFB company members Isabella Austin and Timothy Knoll dancing the roles of the conniving wicked stepmother and Cinderella’s overwhelmed father, respectively. Also featured in this year’s production will be NFB

company member Valerie Buck as the Fairy Godmother and NFB guest artist Telmen Munkherdene as the comical Jester. NFB company members Jenna Buchholz, Lolea Hill, Maille Blow and Sophia Killelea will perform the roles of the fairies of the seasons.

Ott, a Pulitzer Prize and Grammy award nominee, will lead the NFSO and provide live musical accompaniment for all public performances of NFB’s Cinderella. In his ninth year as the NFB Music Director, Ott has been cited

among America’s most-performed composers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The NFSO is the Emerald Coast’s premiere 65-piece professional orchestra under the leadership of Music Director Todd Craven and resides at the Mattie Kelly Arts Center.

Box office-priced tickets for Cinderella are \$48 for adults and \$22 for children 12 and under. Visit <https://www.nfballet.org/cinderella> to purchase.

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Arts & Music

Top 10 Reasons to Crescendo!

The event extravaganza of the season supports Sinfonia Gulf Coast and its music education community outreach initiatives

By ZANDRA WOLFGRAM

1. Crescendo (/krə'SHēn,dō/) Even the name is full of fun! It's such an exciting word — it's a noun, adverb, adjective and verb.

2. Cheers! With the celebratory signature cocktail by Skybar at the Edge, lauded winemakers pouring select vintages and spirit purveyors sharing samples of their tasty craft, it is easy to raise a glass to toast the delicious libations at Crescendo!

3. We're seeing red ... in the best of ways. This year's theme is Paint the Town Red. Whether you choose elegant, edgy, classic or regal, we can't wait for you to dazzle us with your individual spin on this year's "red hot" theme.

4. Let us entertain you! From can-can and acrobatic aerialists to New York cabaret stars, Crescendo! always surprises and

delights. This year's featured artists include award-winning artist Bradley Copeland (known for her "big pouty kisses") and electric string quartet sensations Violectric! We'd say that is "party red-y" entertainment for sure.

5. The venue. The event will be held at the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa, so it is sure to be a swank soiree. You had us at "ballroom."

6. We're starved! With the excitement of this extravaganza, we've already worked up quite an appetite. We love a proper Sunday luncheon served at linen clothed tables set with candles and creative decor. Delish!

7. Party prizes! The raffle, the silent auction of art, wine, jewels, excursions and more, plus the live auction of curated A-list travel getaways, you couldn't possibly plan yourself. Win-win!



8. Gathering with gal pals and gents. The perfect way to shake off the winter blues and

usher in spring with the red-iculously hot sizzle of Crescendo!

9. Treble Makers! As a member of the Treble Makers, you're considered a VIP at Crescendo! and enjoy one complimentary ticket and early admission! Your \$650 contribution will enable Sinfonia to continue to perform music with 3,500 elementary students throughout Okaloosa and Walton Counties, thanks to Link Up — Sinfonia's collaborative partnership with Carnegie Hall's Weill Institute of Music.

10. Local kids! Proceeds from Crescendo benefit Sinfonia and its music education programs, which include musicians/guest artists in schools, free orchestra concerts, bus transportation for students, Sinfonia Youth Orchestra program, Arts in Medicine initiative with Ascension

Sacred Heart Hospital on the Emerald Coast and Link Up and more.

Save the Dates!

Crescendo! 2025 Vintner Dinners are Friday, Feb. 28 at 6 p.m. at various private homes, resorts and restaurants along the Emerald Coast. Tickets are \$500 per person.

Crescendo! Main Event is Sunday, March 2 at 11:30 a.m. at Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa. Tickets are \$225 per person, and includes reception, lunch, gratuity, wine, and entertainment.

Purchase tickets online at SinfoniaGulfCoast.org. For sponsorships, contact Daniel Milana at dmilana@sinfoniagulfcoast.org. To volunteer, contact Beth Clavier at bclavier@sinfoniagulfcoast.org.

LOVE AND FASHION

continued from page 15

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Snow Day in Ft. Walton Beach!

January 21, 2025, is a day Ft. Walton Beach locals won't forget anytime soon—a historic winter storm brought us something we rarely see: snow! A few inches blanketed the area, with some

spots even breaking records. The Emerald Coast transformed into a stunning winter wonderland, and we didn't waste a second enjoying it. Families built snowmen topped with

seashells, seaweed, palm branches and beach hats, blending our beachy, coastal charm with a picture-perfect winter scene right off a Hallmark Christmas card. Snowball fights broke out,

snow angels filled the yards, kids and kids-at-heart "snow surfed" on anything they could find and we all soaked in a moment we might not see again for years. Even our sugar-white sand was

overlaid with glistening snow! It was pure magic—one of those rare experiences that stick with you forever. Or, as my 8-year-old grandson put it: "Best day ever!"



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 destinoverheaddoor.com

BEACHSIDE SLIDING GLASS DOOR MAINTENANCE, LLC
\$25 OFF SLIDING DOOR TRACK REPAIR WITH ROLLER REPLACEMENT
FREE ESTIMATES
 Offer expires 3/15/25
 BeachsideSlide.com
 850-98-SLIDE (850-987-5433)



Sunday
BRUNCH
10AM-3PM

AYCE
ALL YOU CAN EAT
SHRIMP
4PM-CLOSE TUESDAY

Trivia
Night!
6:30-8:30 THURSDAY

KIDS EAT
FREE
4PM-6PM
TUESDAY-FRIDAY

KARAOKE
5PM TUESDAY

PRIME RIB
THURSDAYS
STARTING 4PM

CRAWFISH
BOIL
12PM SATURDAY