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Postal Customer Local

100 Men Who Care – A Driving Force in Our Community

Milestone quarter pushes local giving past \$100,000 in donations

By Lori Leath Smith

In a world that often moves too fast to notice those in need, a local group of men is pausing—once a quarter—to make a lasting difference. And that pause is powerful!

This past quarter, 100 Men Who Care — Emerald Coast awarded \$9,300 to the Northwest **Florida Guardian ad Litem Foundation** (NWF-GAL), a nonprofit that stands in the gap for some of our community's most vulnerable children.

At a recent check presentation, members of the group met with Roslyn Snyder and Donna Franke of NWFGAL at their Fort Walton Beach offices to learn firsthand how their collective donation will directly impact children who are navigating the court system due to abuse, neglect, or abandonment.

"These are young people seeking stability in heartbreaking situations," said Don Rob-



erts, a 100 Men Who Care member and GAL volunteer. "Many come from homes affected by drug or alcohol addiction, incarceration, or other

traumatic disruptions. Guardian ad Litem steps in so that every child has someone to stand beside them—someone whose only goal is to advocate

traumatic disruptions. Guard- for their best interests. It's a ian ad Litem steps in so that role that can truly change the

100 MEN continued on page 2

Bring Hope Now:

Local Nonprofit Aims to Solve Youth Mental Health Crisis

By Peggy Brockman

Imagine receiving a call from your child's school: your middle-schooler, diagnosed with ADD, lost his temper and screamed, "I wish I were dead." Because the staff knows you, they give you the option to take him to the emergency room yourself, instead of calling law enforcement.

You arrive at the ER, but there's no child psychologist. The ER doctor decides to send your child—seven hours away—to a facility in Orlando for evaluation. You object. Emotions rise. The doctor blames you and asks you to leave. Your child is transported anyway, placed in a holding area with wooden slab beds and other children in crisis, screaming. He's terrified.

Three days later, a tele-psychiatrist finds your child isn't a threat and should be released. But when you return from a brief trip home, you discover your child was already transferred to an inpatient facili-

BRING HOPE continued on page 3





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

100 MEN

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course of a child's life."

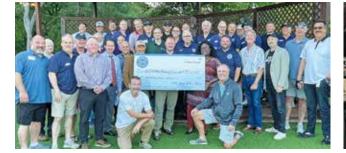
The Florida Guardian ad Litem Office pairs trained volunteer advocates with children involved in the dependency court system. Here in Okaloosa and Walton Counties, NWFGAL goes beyond the courtroomraising funds to meet the daily needs of these children: things such as clothing, school supplies, tutoring, therapy, summer camps, and even birthday giftssimple things that remind a child they matter.

"Our mission is about more than just showing up in court," said Roslyn Snyder. "It's about helping children cope and showing them someone cares. Whether it's ensuring they have shoes that fit, a backpack to carry to school, or a counselor to help them work through trauma—we want them to feel seen, safe, and supported. This gift helps make that possible."

For the men of 100 Men Who Care, the act of giving is rooted in purpose. Since the chapter's founding, their "quiet, but aimful pauses" have contributed more than \$100,000 15 nonprofits throughout Okaloosa and Coun-Walton ties—supporting organizations that serve children, single mothers, veterans, the homeless

and those with unmet medical

The model behind 100 Men Who Care is refreshingly simple—each member commits to donating \$100 quarterly, creating a powerful giving pool. I first spoke with Scott Rude, founding member of the Emerald Coast chapter, when the





his message was welcomed, find-

ing an exceptional number of

community minded men to help

shape a vision rooted in efficien-

cy and generosity. These men

bring experience from fields such

as business, education and non-

profit leadership, and are united

by one common goal: to make a

tangible difference in their com-

munity without the barriers of

red tape or complex fundraising.

wanted something lean, fast and

impactful. Just real guys doing

good things for our community,"

said Ed Lagrou, steering com-

gathering

like-minded men and pooling

contributions, membership pro-

vides local nonprofits with signif-

icant, immediate support-with-

out asking for more than a few

hours each year. That concept

quickly resonated, and the im-

pact has grown steadily. At each

quarterly meeting, members

hear from three nominated non-

profits, then vote on which one

complicated

mittee member.

"We didn't want another

nonprofit—we

group launched in 2021. Scott one evening, lives are changed. networked, met with Rotaries, "What amazes me most is the local chambers, and wherever

unbelievable people and organizations we're called on to support. Our members nominate these area nonprofits. Then, we come together to hear their needs and make a contribution to help meet needs in our community," said Scott. "We're all busy, but this simple format gives us a way to make real, local impact in just one hour every few months. In an hour, we've changed a life. It's fast, it's efficient—and it's power-

The next quarterly meeting will be held at The Craft Bar - Harbor in Destin at 6 p.m. on Tuesday, Septem**ber 16.** All men who care about the community are welcome to attend, meet the members, and learn how they can be part of something bigger.

"This community is full of people with good hearts. Sometimes they just need an easy and enjoyable way to give back. We may each give \$100, but collectively, the ripple effect is far greater. That's the beauty of this model—it turns simple generosity into powerful change. That's what we built," said Scott.

tinue to grow, so does their impact—one quarter, one check, one deserving local charity at a

> To learn more or get involved, visit 100mwcec.com, email 100mwcec@gmail.com, or connect with the group on Facebook.





will receive the full donationnow nearing \$10,000. In just And, as their donations con-Founding and Steering Committee Members of 100

Men Who Care – Emerald Coast

Established in 2021

Scott Rude – Retired business executive and community volunteer (Santa Rosa Beach)

Drew McDowell - Financial Advisor, Mariner Wealth Advisors (Destin)

Ed LaGrou - Retired Colonel, USAF (Niceville)

David Glinka - Retired

Master Sargeant, USAF and community volunteer (Nicev-

The membership has created a giving circle built on simplicity, local impact, and personal connection. The model has inspired nearly 100 new members and thousands in charitable giving.



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Community

BRING HOPE

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ty in Pensacola—without your consent. He must now remain for another three days, all while you watch helplessly.

This is the true story a mother shared with me after a recent Bring Hope Now presentation. Though a few years have passed and improvements have been made—such as the addition of Mobile Response Teams that now evaluate students on campus—children in crisis in our area still face long waits in local ERs and may be transported hours away due to a lack of local facilities.

This is exactly why we founded Bring Hope Now.

A Growing Crisis

In 2019, two community leaders—David Triana, founder of United for a Good Cause, and myself, Peggy Brockman—joined forces to address a terrifying trend: Northwest Florida, particularly Okaloosa County, had one of the fastest-growing youth suicide rates in the state.

We set out to bring hope through a national peer-to-peer suicide prevention program in local schools. Eglin Federal Credit Union kickstarted our mission with a \$50,000 donation. With support from Superintendent Marcus Chambers and the Okaloosa County School Board, the program launched in 2020. By the end of 2022, every school in the district had the program in place. It became a model of success.

In 2024, Bring Hope Now officially separated from United for a Good Cause to pursue broader goals. We expanded into the military community with "Hope on the Line," a peer-led suicide prevention initiative for active-duty personnel. But another pressing need was calling us: a lack of local youth mental health facilities.

By the Numbers: Why Local Help Matters

The data is staggering. In the 2022–2023 school year, 376 children under 18 in Okaloosa and Walton Counties were involuntarily Baker Acted. Of those, 76% were first-time cases, and 92 were repeat cases.

Statewide, 87% of youth Baker Acts are due to suicidality: 46% had suicidal thoughts, 28% had a plan, and 10% had



made an attempt.

Children are typically taken to a local ER, where they wait for an inpatient bed to open in Pensacola or Panama City. Some wait days. If extended treatment is needed, they're sent even farther—to Jacksonville or Orlando—hours from family and support systems. Many families can't even afford to retrieve their children afterward.

What if that child were yours?

According to Florida Health Charts, 168 people in Okaloosa and Walton Counties went to an emergency room for self-harm injuries in 2023. Shockingly, 121 of them—72%—were children ages 5 to 19. Yes, even as young as five.

From the 2023 Florida Youth Survey:

• 22% of students said they

almost always felt symptoms of stress, anxiety, or depression.

- 46% said these emotions stopped them from doing daily activities.
- 19% had seriously considered self-harm.
- Encouragingly, 31% sought help.

But we need more resources. And we need them here.

The Mission Ahead

With strong leadership from Board Chair Kathy Houchins and a growing board of community advocates, Bring Hope Now's next mission is clear: establish a youth mental health treatment facility for Okaloosa and Walton Counties.

We're currently seeking a facility or land to build a welcoming, home-like inpatient center. Until that becomes a reality, we continue to train community members through QPR Gate-keeper Training—equipping everyday citizens with the tools to recognize suicide warning signs and how to respond.

We also aim to launch a local loss survivor program to support families who've lost loved ones to suicide.

A Community That Cares

We believe in this mission because we've lived it. I've personally experienced the pain of a suicide attempt and subsequent residential treatment with a grandson. I know what families are facing.

Bring Hope Now is not just one organization—it's a movement of people, volunteers, educators, parents, and advocates committed to changing the story for our youth.

On September 6, we'll host our 3rd Annual Bring Hope Dragon Boat Race at The Gulf on Okaloosa Island. It's not only a fundraiser—it's a celebration of resilience and community. We're looking for sponsors, racing teams, raffle and auction items, volunteers, and in-kind support. Do you know a family who's lost a loved one to suicide? We'd be honored to include a sign in their memory at the event.

To get involved or learn more, visit www.BringHope-Now.com.

It may take a village to raise a child—but it takes a whole community to save one.





Palms Resort Brings Dinner, Drinks, Live Magic & Comedy to Destin!

An action-packed live show featuring World-Class Magic Comedy and Ventriloquism is now open with nightly shows at the newly renovated Palms Destin Resort Showroom.

Interactive magic takes place just inches away in an intimate showroom that offers excellent table seating. The performance features sophisticated magic & smart comedy targeting adults but is family-friendly and appropriate for all ages. The show is headlined by Bart Rockett who hosted his own nationally syndicated television show for three seasons, had a co-starring role on the former NBC Drama Parenthood and headlined his own 1.000-seat theater in the tourist mecca of Branson, Missouri for nine seasons. He has appeared in 85 countries around the globe and headlined for most every major cruise line.

AS SEEN ON

NBC CBS

Featurings

Hallmark



Rockett, who started at the age of 10, trained under Jeff Dunham and is recognized for his excellent comedy ventriloquism which is featured in the show. After growing up in the South, Rockett moved to Hollywood, California where his management team is located. He produced his teens to the finals of NBC's America's Got Talent and they have gone on to do major Hollywood projects over the years. Kadan, who starred in the movie Dark Skies with award winning actress Keri Russell and on CBS's rush hour

"Daw-dropping magic act"

combines forces with his Sister, Brooklyn to make guest appearances in Rockett's Destin show.

Brooklyn is well known for her viral Super Bowl commercial that currently has nearly 800 million views on YouTube and most recently played Hollywood superstar Bradley Cooper's daughter in a project with Steven Spielberg and Martin Scorsese.

This talented family has been vacationing in Destin for many years and now that Rockett's

kids are almost grown, he is excited to be back for a longterm residency in the place his Grandparents first introduced him to as a child. Rockett shared, "For me, coming back here feels like coming home. Some of my greatest childhood memories happened on these beaches and it's my desire to bring something unique to the area that is a fun experience for families to attend & make their own amazing memories."

Nightly shows happen at

7:30 p.m. with 5 p.m. early seatings offered on Sunday's and select dates. A variety of alcoholic & non-alcoholic beverages are available as well as a full menu of food and dessert offerings before or after the show. Parking is plentiful and free in The Palms Destin Resort multi-level parking garage, that is attached to the showroom.

Advance reservations are required and can be made at the official ticketing site: USATour-Tickets.LIVE.

26th Annual Emerald Coast Home & Boat Show Coming to Destin-FWB Convention Center

Wes Fell, a longtime resident of Destin/Fort Walton Beach and the promoter of the Emerald Coast Home & Boat Show, invites the community to the 26th Annual event on Saturday and Sunday, September 20-21, 2025, at the Destin-FWB Convention Center, 1250 Miracle Strip Parkway, FWB.

This exciting two-day event—now in its 26th consecutive year-will feature over 100 Home Show and general business vendors. Attendees

can explore information and discounts on:

- Insurance, Roofing, A/C, Plumbing, Mortgages, Homes
- Interior Design, Flooring, Pools, Spas, Shutters, Leaf Guards
- Furniture, Generators, Siding, Heating & AC, Solar, Painting, and Remodeling
- Closets, Bath & Kitchen Remodeling, Windows, Doors, and more
- Electronics, Computers, Cell Phones, Vacations
 - Plus, health and wellness

vendors including Chiropractic, Hearing, Massage Therapy, and Skin Care

Emerald Coast Marine will also host a Super Boat Show and Sale with discounted boat show specials.

To register for booth space or for more info, contact Wes Fell at 850-353-2832 or email wesfell@cox.net.

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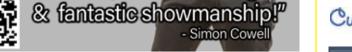












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To Become a Vendor or Sponsor in This Great Event - Contact Wes Fell (Event Promoter) at 850-353-2832 or WesFell@Cox.Net More Info & Registration Form at www.ParadisePromotionsfl.com

This is Another Great Paradise Promotion



Happenings Around FWB

2025

EVENTS

AUGUST

- 11 | Lawyers in Libraries 10 am | FWB Public Library | FWB
- ECPRO Lunch & Learn Lights, Camera, Impact: Visual Storytelling for PR Pros

11:30 am | Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce | FWB

Games Club

1 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB

Beachy Twilight Moon Painting

6 pm | Painting with a Twist | FWB

Mini Makers & Experimenters Lab 10:30 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

> Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's Nothing But Networking

11:30 am | Knife's Edge Cafe at Bob Hope Village | Shalimar

Choctawhatchee High School vs. Milton 7 pm | Choctawhatchee High School | FWB

15 | Through the Harvest Moon Trees Painting 6 pm | Painting with a Twist | FWB

> FWB High School vs. Blountstown 7 pm | Fort Walton Beach High School | FWB

Murder's in the Heir - An Interactive Murder Mystery Comedy

7:30 pm | FWB Civic Auditorium | FWB

Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class 10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

> Murder's in the Heir - An Interactive Murder Mystery Comedy

7:30 pm | FWB Civic Auditorium | FWB

Harvest Moon Galaxy Painting 1 pm | Painting with a Twist | FWB

> Murder's in the Heir - An Interactive Murder Mystery Comedy

2 pm | FWB Civic Auditorium | FWB

- Music Trivia 6 pm | Soundside Waterfront Bar | FWB
- Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's 19 **Business After Hours** 5:30 pm | Destin-FWB Convention Center | Okaloosa Island
- Choctawhatchee High School vs. Gulf Shores 7 pm | Choctawhatchee High School | FWB

Murder's in the Heir - An Interactive Murder Mystery Comedy

7:30 pm | FWB Civic Auditorium | FWB

Simple and Elegant Sewing 23 | 10 am | FWB Public Library | FWB

> All Ages: Anime Yourself Painting Workshop 11 am | Painting with a Twist | FWB

Live Music: Shenanigans

6 pm | Soundside Waterfront Bar | FWB

Murder's in the Heir - An Interactive Murder Mystery Comedy

7:30 pm | FWB Civic Auditorium | FWB

Live Music: The Stolen Faces 8 pm | Docie's Dock | FWB

The Ground Up Project - The Resting Tree 24 Program Open House

11 am | 1177 John Sims Pkwy | Niceville

Murder's in the Heir - An Interactive Murder Mystery Comedy

2 pm | FWB Civic Auditorium | FWB

- Fireflies Painting 6 pm | Painting with a Twist | FWB
- Splash & Drip Gallery Show Reception 29 6 pm | Arts & Design Society (ADSO) | FWB Choctawhatchee High School vs. Navarre 7 pm | Choctawhatchee High School | FWB
- 2nd Annual Clean Water Festival 30 | 10 am | The Landing | Downtown FWB

All Ages: Glow Mushrooms Painting 12 pm | Painting with a Twist | FWB

Labor Day Weekend Fireworks 9 pm | The Boardwalk | Oklaoosa Island



SEPTEMBER

- 01 | Disney Trivia 6 pm | Soundside Watefront Bar | FWB
- Business Entrepreneur Night (BEN) 5 pm | Soundside Waterfront Bar | FWB
- Coffee with the City Manager 8 am | FWB Public Library | FWB

Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's First Friday Coffee

7 am | Christian Life Center at FBC | FWB

FWB High School vs. West Florida 7 pm | FWB High School | FWB

Rookie Rumble 06

8 am | CrossFit FWB | FWB

Bring Hope Dragon Boat Race 8:30 am | The Gulf | Okaloosa Island

- Women's Climbing Circle 5 pm | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin
- ECPRO Lunch & Learn Pitch Perfect: Mastering Media Outreach for PR Success 11:30 am | Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce | FWB

1 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB

Destin vs FWB vs Navarre Young Professionals Cornhole Tournament

5 pm | Wood Foot Beer Co. | FWB

9th Annual SOF Missions Gala 6-11 pm | Destin-FWB Convention Center

ONGOING EVENTS

VFW Post 7674 - Sunday Breakfasts 8 - 11:30 am | Sun | 231 Carol Ave | FWB

SINGO Music Bingo Nights 6 pm | Tues | The Island Resort | FWB

Live Trivia Nights

6:30 pm | Thurs | AJ's on the Bayou | FWB

Karaoke Night

7 pm | Thurs | Soundside Waterfront Bar | 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

BUILT TO LEAD: Women in Construction Summit Thursday, August 21

Emerald Grande, Harborwalk Village, Destin To attend: Email info@beespokeconsulting.com

















Do You Know ADSO?

By Laura Kester Duerrwaechter

I had the privilege to chat with Helen Harris and Wally Ratcliffe recently about the history, contributions and needs of our visual arts community. Both women are strong advocates of an art-centric network, sharing memories and explaining plans to continue the involvement of ADSO through the next decade and beyond.

The Arts and Design Society of Fort Walton Beach (ADSO) has supported our local communities since 1956. Throughout its remarkable history and through the dedication of its Board of Directors and volunteers, residents and visitors have been welcomed through its doors. Housed in the original



City Hall Complex, the physical building has endured many temporary fixes and minor renovations.

Artful Things Niceville will host a fundraising event in their own gallery, on Sunday, August 10th from 2-5 p. m., to further support ADSO in its continued stewardship.

"ADSO is a very welcoming community for children, adults and anyone with varied artistic abilities," remarked Wally



Ratcliffe (current Membership chair). Helen Harris (President,) added, "It's not just an art gallery it's a home to any and all artists." Their mission statement reads: The mission of the Arts and Design Society of Fort Walton Beach, Inc., is to facilitate fine art exhibitions, conduct art classes to enhance the appreciation of the visual arts, and to further educate fledgling and established artists.

The Society has been a successful grass roots effort in promoting and preserving the visual arts. The volunteer staff gives tirelessly of their time to teach and organize events that are focused on keeping the arts a necessary and vibrant component of our daily lives. Their social media platforms include their website, a Facebook Group, Instagram and an online newsletter.

They are currently applying for the Impact 100 grant to help with needed repair to the building, located at 17 First St SE, Fort Walton Beach. Last year they tied with Destin History and Fishing Museum. Grant monies would help to cover the cost of renovating the Clay Studio by installing new flooring, replacing street side window, replacing some doors and upgrading the courtyard.

ADSO together with the Okaloosa Arts Alliance and Okaloosa Public Arts strive to support the public schools, charter and home school curriculum with opportunities to explore artistic creativity. Pyramid, Inc has partnered with ADSO for consecutive years as part of their curriculum for people with developmental disabilities. The annual summer Kids Art Camp had expanded to three weeks this year with discounted



enrollment for members. Each weekly camp showcases an art show which is open to the public and located in the Art Gallery. Snowbirds from Okaloosa, Walton and Santa Rosa Counties enjoy a continued relationship.

ADSO can boast membership from Escambia and Santa Rosa Counties as well. Membership levels are tiered and anyone can apply. There is no formal membership drive; just call the office to inquire. They are actively recruiting membership and have seen a recent boost in interest.

The gallery space hosts many juried competitions throughout the year. The Members Show, Beaux Art Exhibition, Van Porter Student Art Show, Photography and Digital Arts Exhibition, and ADSO Christmas Arts and Crafts Market are staples. Just this year, special exhibits include: Let's Go Fishing, Americana Gallery Show, ADSO Splash & Drip Gallery Show and a 3-D Show. Monthly gallery shows are free and open to the public during regular business hours.

ADSO was the recipient of The Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber's "Spreading Art Throughout the Community of Fort Walton Beach."

Personally, I am grateful for the dedication, strength and vision of the artists/artisans of The Arts and Design Society. It is truly a creative collective; consistently engaging and promoting visual art along the Emerald Coast. ADSO will continue at their iconic location through 2040 (when their current lease expires). Please support them by attending the fundraising event AND signing up for membership! See you at the gallery!







Menopause Doesn't Have to Be Miserable

By Dr. Karen DeVore

Let's start with something every woman deserves to hear:

Menopause is not the end of your vitality.

It's a transition—a powerful, sometimes challenging, often misunderstood chapter in your life. And at the Tortoise Clinic, we believe it can also be one of your most empowered.

A New Conversation Around Women's Health

Too many women come to me saying the same things:

"My doctor told me everything's normal, but I still feel off."

"I was offered antidepressants but never asked about my hormones."

"I'm gaining weight, can't sleep, and I don't feel like myself anymore." Sound familiar?

Menopause and the years leading up to it (peri-menopause) can cause a wide range of symptoms—hot flashes, mood swings, insomnia, brain fog, low libido, fatigue, and weight changes. But instead of support, many women are dismissed or handed a pill without a deeper conversation.

That's where integrative care changes the game.

What Is Integrative Menopause Care?

Integrative medicine blends the best of both Eastern and Western healing traditions. It means we don't just look at your labs—we look at your life. We consider your diet, stress levels, sleep, relationships, work, and everything else that impacts your well-being.

At the Tortoise Clinic, menopause care is never one-size-fits-all. It's personal, proactive, and designed around you.

Your Hormones Aren't the Whole Story–But They Matter

As your estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone shift, it can affect nearly every system in your body—from mood to metabolism to memory. We use advanced hormone testing (including DUTCH and blood panels) to uncover where imbalances are hiding.

But we also look beyond hormones.

• Is stress overloading your adrenals?

- Is poor sleep undermining your immune system?
- Is your gut health affecting your mood or inflammation?

All of these matter. And all of these can be addressed—often without relying solely on medication.

Our Holistic, Patient- Centered Approach

Every woman's body is different. That's why we offer personalized wellness plans that meet you where you are. Here's what menopause support can look like at the Tortoise Clinic:

Functional Lab Testing: We go beyond standard bloodwork to assess hormone patterns (including DUTCH testing), thyroid function, nutrient status, and inflammatory markers. "Normal" isn't always optimal—we help you find what's right for you.

Herbal Medicine & Supplements: We craft custom herbal formulas and use medical-grade supplements to support sleep, reduce hot flashes, regulate cycles, and improve energy and focus.

Acupuncture: These therapies help calm the nervous system, improve circulation, balance hormones, and reduce the intensity of menopausal symptoms naturally.

Nutrition & Lifestyle Coaching: We guide you in making smart, sustainable changes that support hormone health, blood sugar stability, and overall vitality. No fads. No deprivation.

Real Conversations: We take the time to listen to your story, your goals, and your challenges. You won't be rushed or brushed off. You'll be heard.

Why This Matters

Menopause doesn't mean you have to slow down, suffer through, or give up on feeling great. It's a biological transformation, and it deserves thoughtful care. When supported correctly, women often feel more grounded, intuitive, and powerful than ever.

And the results speak for themselves: Women at the Tortoise Clinic tell us they're sleeping better, thinking clearer, reconnecting with their energyand feeling more like themselves again.

Your Next Step Toward Vibrant Health

If you're in perimenopause, menopause, or even postmenopausal and struggling with energy, mood, sleep, or weight—don't wait for it to get worse.

Let's get to the root of it, together.

We're proud to be voted Best in Destin for Women's Wellness—and we'd be honored to support you on your wellness journey. Give us a call at 850.267.5611 or visit Tortoise-Clinic.com to schedule your consultation and mention this article to receive \$30 off your first service as a new patient.

Menopause isn't the end of anything. It's the beginning of living in deeper alignment with your body—strong, aware, and empowered. Let's walk that path—slow and steady—togeth-

WOMEN'S WELLNESS REIMAGINED

What if your story mattered as much as your labs?

What if "normal" isn't optimal for you?

What if your fatigue, bloating, or anxiety isn't just stress - but a sign your body needs support?



BEST DESTINATION AND * 2025

WOMEN'S WELLNESS PROVIDER

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Hurricane Preparedness

By Carolyn Newcomer Ketchel

As I write this artticle, it is raining, and it is a welcome relief from the scorching summer heat. Even those who like Florida summers have found it to be a difficult season. Around the world we are seeing earthquakes, volcanoes erupting that have been dormant for centuries, unprecedented flooding in some regions and forest fires. Our earth is changing, as it has throughout history, and we are living through this groaning.

Northwest Florida occasionally gets the full force of a Hurricane e.g. Michael, Erin, Opal and the 1935 direct hit to our



area. Each of us bears a personal responsibility to be ready for such a catastrophic event. Hopefully, you have the list for your preparedness kit, from nonperishable food to batteries, that will sustain you for at least the first 72 hours, three days.

We are now in the peak sixmonth window, when anxious eyes turn to the tropics and we try to decipher potential local tropical impacts, known as the Cape Verde Season. Most of us have been through this exercise many times before. But, for our newer Okaloosa County citizens, as well as the seasoned ones, let's review our plans.

Develop an evacuation plan, assemble disaster supplies, review Homeowners and Flood Insurance policies. Harden your home with hurricane straps on your roof, hurricane impact garage doors and windows, install shutters or fitted plywood and complete a written plan of ac-

tion. Walk through your home and take a video of each room on your cell phone to provide evidence of loss to your insurance companies. Evaluate trees on your property with an eye to potential damage.

Some useful websites:

Floridadisaster.org (Disaster Supply Kit Checklist, Hurricane Hazards, What Should I Do When a Watch or Warning is Issued)

AlertOkaloosa.com for daily conditions and to sign up for local weather alerts.

MyOkaloosa.com/ emergency-management for local preparedness resources including the updated Hurricane Guide, EOC Activation Level, Evacuation Zones, Shelters, Disaster Supply Lists and Special Needs Registry Information.

Data on previous engagements demonstrates that we need to pay very close attention to how our environment responds to similar threats under similar circumstances. It is vital to know how much rainfall it takes to flood your street or property, how your property and avenues of ingress/egress behave under different storm surge levels, to know the limitations of your structure and damage caused by previous storms, and how long it takes for your family unit to mobilize if necessary.

Each storm has a different personality. On August 3, 1995, Hurricane Erin brought flooding rain which saturated the ground. Two months later, on October 4, Opal, a Category 4 storm, brought winds of

150mph which uprooted trees from the saturated ground causing severe damage to homes and other structures. Opal escalated from a Category 3 to a Category 4 storm while the community slept. People awoke in a panic and immediately began packing to attempt evacuation, which was impossible by that time. It is important to listen to our emergency management authorities when they instruct us to evacuate. Plan for the worst case sce-

nario.

During a crisis is not time for organization. Plan for the storm when things are calm. Changes to a family member's physical abilities may require different actions this year, or construction near your evacuation route may require a changed timeline. Rehearsing your plan with family members will reduce stress which will make these low frequency/high impact events a bit less frightening and result in greater efficiency and peace of mind. Remember to plan for your pets, notify a trusted person of where you intend to travel, and plan for extended medication needs.

Listen to directions from your local authorities and act early. Our county leadership is working hard to keep you safe and recognizes the value of the trust you place in us to do so. Together, we make a great team and can weather any storm.

It is an honor and a pleasure to serve as your Commissioner.

Carolyn Ketchel is Okaloosa County Commissioner, District 2, Vice-Chairman 2024-2025

She can be reached at CKetchel@myokaloosa.com or 850-609-6149.





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Deals Are Dying—But Here's the Move That Could Save Yours (And Add \$10K in Value)



BY PAUL DOMENECH, MINDSET COACH, REALTOR, TEAM LEADER, THE DOMENECH GROUP

What's the proper way to value a home?

Most would say location, square footage, or recent comps. But in today's Florida market, affordability is king. And right now, it's under attack, not just from interest rates, but from a quieter, deadlier force: insurance premiums.

Here in Florida, we're seeing

more and more deals collapse, not because the buyer didn't qualify, but because the insurance quote pushed the monthly payment past the pain point. In some cases, it's adding hundreds of dollars a month, pricing buyers out and slowing down momentum for sellers.

Everyone loves to blame the Fed. And sure, rates are a factor. But to think this market is being shaped by interest rates alone is short-sighted. The real killers of affordability right now? Insurance and fear.

But here's what most people don't know: there's a state-funded solution already in play that could be a game changer.

The My Safe Florida Home Grant Program, backed by the state and launched under Governor Ron DeSantis, provides eligible homeowners with up to \$10,000 in grant funding to harden their homes, things like impact windows, storm-rated doors and new roofs. These upgrades don't just make your

home safer, they make it more insurable. And that's the key.

By reducing risk, you reduce premiums. And when you reduce premiums, you reduce total monthly cost. In a high-rate environment, that matters more than ever.

This program doesn't just benefit homeowners staying put. It also positions sellers to stand out, and helps buyers afford more. It's one of the rare opportunities where everyone can win.

Want in? Visit MySafeFL-Home.com to check eligibility and apply. It's fast. It's free. And it could unlock real value in a tight market.

Now let's talk about the next steps.

Because while this program is great, it's not the full solution. What you need is a strategy, not just a grant. You need a plan tailored to this market, built around your goals, and led by someone who's not just chas-



ing transactions but maximizing outcomes.

That's where Pauly and The Domenech Group come in.

With hundreds of homes sold and boots-on-the-ground experience through every shift in this market, we don't guess—we guide. Whether you're buying, selling, or trying to time your next move, our team knows how to navigate challenges and turn pressure into profit.

We don't chase deals. We create results.

Visit THEDOMENECH-GROUP.com to connect with a team that knows how to move with purpose and lead with value—no matter what the market throws your way.

The opportunity is real. Let's go get it.

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Events Around Town

Solve the Mystery at **Stage Crafters' Murder's** in the Heir

Aug. 15-24, 2025 | Fri.-Sat. 7:30 p.m. | Sun. 2 p.m. | Fort Walton Beach Civic Auditorium

Get ready to play detective at Stage Crafters' latest production, Murder's in the Heir, running Aug. 15-24 at the Fort Walton Beach Civic Auditorium. This interactive murder mystery comedy lets the audi-

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ence decide "whodunit"—so no two shows are alike!

The plot centers around eccentric millionaire Simon Starkweather, whose family and staff gather for the reading of his will—only for murder to strike before the night is through. At intermission, you'll cast your vote for the killer, influencing the play's ending and adding to the fun. Performances are Fridays and Saturdays at 7:30 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. Tickets

DECIDE!

are \$25 (with discounts for students and seniors) and available at stagecraftersfwb.com or via Ticketor.

Stage Crafters is Florida's longest-running community theatre, delighting local audiences with all-volunteer productions for more than five decades. Don't miss your chance to help solve this "killer" mystery!

Built to Lead: Women in Construction Summit

Thursday, Aug. 21 | Emerald Grande, HarborWalk Village, Destin

Join ContractHER Connect for a dynamic day of leadership, networking, and industry insight tailored for women in construction, design, and development. Featuring keynote speaker Sarah Stein (Sarah Stein Homes), expert panels, lunch, and a networking mixer at AJ's.

Tickets \$150. Info: contractors-connect.com/contracther-connect or email info@ beespokeconsulting.com.

Solaris Dinner Cruise for Taylor Haugen Foundation Wednesday, Sept. 10, 2025 | Baytowne Marina, Miramar Beach

Set sail for an unforgettable evening supporting the Taylor Haugen Foundation and its mis-

sion to protect student athletes from abdominal injuries. Enjoy fine yacht cuisine with chef-selected desserts, a wine pull, and silent and live auctions—all while hearing inspiring stories from founders Brian and Kathy Haugen.

Boarding: 5:30 p.m. | Sail: 6-8 p.m.

Proceeds provide education and advanced protective gear for secondary youth athletes.

Tickets & sponsorships: TaylorHaugen.org.

SOF Missions Gala Honors Heroes Sept. 13

Saturday, Sept. 13, 2025 | **Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center**

Shield of Faith (SOF) Missions hosts its 9th Annual Emerald Coast Gala on Saturday, Sept. 13, at the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center. This year's theme, Military Code: RED-Resilience, Determina-Empowerment, tion-honors warriors including veterans, active-duty service members and first responders. Guests will enjoy a formal redthemed evening with dinner, dessert, live music by Thin Ice, auctions and a keynote address from a distinguished warrior guest. Proceeds benefit SOF's Be Resilient Clinics and Warrior Retreats, which provide no-cost, comprehensive care for those struggling with suicide and mental health challenges.

Tickets are \$100 and include dinner, dessert and one drink. Sponsorships available. Formal red attire encouraged. Tickets and further details: sofmissions. org/gala.

LadyWorld Festival - Pop Culture, Podcasts & Power Vibes

Sept. 26-28 | Seascape Resort, Miramar Beach

The LadyGang is back with LadyWorld 2025, an immersive weekend escape packed with pop culture, comedy, music, and inspiration. This 3-day retreat features powerhouse headliners like Hannah Berner and the Girls Gotta Eat podcast duo, plus Kaitlyn Bristowe, Rachel Lindsay, Stassi Schroeder, and more.

Dive into glam workshops, wellness events, live podcasts, signature cocktails, photo ops,

and plenty of Instagrammable moments! Multiple ticket tiers and accommodation options available. VIPs get exclusive merch, private planning access and more.

Grab your girlfriends and get your passes at Ladyworld.co

Golf4TheCure -**Gulf Coast Tournament** Friday, Sept. 12 | Raven Golf Club, Sandestin

Swing into action for a great cause at the 2nd Annual Golf4TheCure - Gulf Coast Tournament, benefiting St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. Enjoy 18 holes at the stunning Raven Golf Club, plus player gifts, raffle prizes, hole contests, and a post-play celebration complete with dinner, live music, a Kid's Zone, and the magical Lighting of the Lanterns tribute.

Register or sponsor at Golf4TheCure-Gulf-Coast.perfectgolfevent.com.

10th Annual Bloody Mary Festival - A Decade of **Delicious!**

Saturday, Oct. 11 | 11 a.m.-2 p.m. | The Market Shops, Miramar Beach



Get ready to Eat, Drink, and B MARY! Celebrate 10 years of bold flavors and brunch vibes at the 10th Annual Bloody Mary Festival, powered by Step One Automotive Group. Sample unlimited creative bloody marys from the area's best restaurants and bars-loaded with overthe-top garnishes from grilled cheese to sushi.

Also enjoy craft brews, bubbly, food vendors, live music, a cigar bar, and SEC football on the big screen. 21+ only. Proceeds benefit Habitat for Humanity - Walton County.

Info and tickets: TheMarket-Shops.com/Bloody-Mary-Fes-





Conquer Chiari Malformation

By Christopher Manson

Eleven years ago, Marion Gipson was diagnosed with Chiari malformation type 1. "I had it all my life, but didn't know," she says. "It started with headaches every day. No matter what I took, they wouldn't go away. The doctors told me I had migraines, but I forced the issue and got an MRI which led to my diagnosis."

Chiari malformation is a condition in which brain tissue extends into the spinal canal. According to mayoclinic.org, this occurs when "part of the skull is misshapen or smaller than is typical. The skull presses on the brain and forces it downward." It is not a common condition, and increased use of imaging tests has led to more diagnoses in recent years.

This year, Gipson is organizing her third Conquer Chiari Walk. (She also serves on a special advisory board.) The event is set for Saturday, Sept. 20, at PROPS in Freeport's Hammock Bay. Registration is from 8 to 9 a.m., and the walk starts at 9:30. The walk will feature vendors, food trucks, a silent auction and more. Additional performers and speakers will volunteer their

"Alaqua Animal Refuge is bringing some of their puppies out for the kids to enjoy," says Gipson. "The dogs are very therapeutic for us, and I'm really looking forward to it." The Hammock Bay Line Dancers





are slated to appear as well. "It's a big deal!"

Gipson's goal is to bring awareness to Chiari malformation. She says the medical community "has got kind of a grasp on it now. Once I put it out there, a lot of people let me know that they or their kids have

it." She formed a support group for "Chiarians" and people with related conditions.

She meets people with Chiari malformation every month and is planning for other meet and greet type events in the future. "I've put together Purple Night Out to bring the Chiarians in this area (together). We have a pot luck, and everyone wears purple" which is to Chiari what pink is to breast cancer.

For years, Gipson says she "didn't have a clue what was going on." She kept having symptoms, and her doctors kept dispensing medication. "My chiropractor actually told me what was happening to me and sent me to a neurologist," she says. The neurologist told Gipson she would need to undergo brain decompression surgery, but she ended up not having the procedure.

"My issues are mild," says Gipson. "I'm able to function and drive around the area. There are limitations. I can't lift over 10 pounds, do anything strenuous, or stand or sit for long periods of time, because of the pressure of the brain tissue

on the spine. I have to be very cautious.

She and her husband live in Freeport and work as commercial loan brokers. Gipson is the chairperson for the Freeport Merchants Association, and she's a substitute teacher. The couple have lived here for over a decade. "My husband was working at Hurlburt Field. I came down to visit and wanted to retire here."

Last year's Conquer Chiari Walk drew 50 participants, some with painted faces and purple tutus. "It's really growing, and people come together." All proceeds from the event go to the Conquer Chiari Foundation for research and education. "There is no cure for this condition, and funding is really needed for research," says Gipson.

"I want to continue to bring awareness. If people are having headaches and their doctors are calling it migraines, they need to be advocates for their own bodies and make sure it's not Chiari malformation or something related "

Discover more at walk.conquerchiari.org.





United Way Emerald Coast Celebrates Annual Meeting

United Way Emerald Coast ted nonprofit programs, re-(UWEC) gathered more than 100 donors, volunteers, community leaders and partners at The Place on Beal in Fort Walton Beach on July 29 for its sold-out Annual Meeting, presented by Eglin Federal Credit Union. The evening highlighted the organization's achievements over the past year and celebrated the power of collaboration in addressing local needs.

In 2024-2025, UWEC coordinated 17,135 volunteer hours, impacted 56,000 lives, and distributed \$700,000 through 63 grants to 34 vet- coast on social media.

sulting in a \$2.6 million total community impact—up more than \$200,000 from the previous year. Awards included the President's Circle, honoring top corporate partners Eglin Federal Credit Union and Forever Warriors by Step One Automotive Group. Leaders shared inspiring stories, thanked supporters and reaffirmed their commitment to uniting resources to create lasting change across Okaloosa and Walton counties.

Learn more at united-way. org or follow @uwemerald-

EVENTS

continued from page 10

Lyrics on the Harbor: Destin's First Songwriter Festival Debuts This Fall October 10–11, 2025 | Heron Harbor, Destin

For the first time, our historic Destin Harbor will echo with the stories behind the songs

you love. The inaugural Destin Songwriter Festival arrives October 10–11, 2025, transforming Heron Harbor (314 Harbor Blvd.) into two days of music, storytelling and coastal beauty.

Expect free daytime performances on three side stages at harbor-front bars and restaurants, followed by ticketed evening headliner shows on the Main Stage — all set against

the beautiful Destin Harbor. Acclaimed songwriters from throughout the country will share intimate acoustic sets and the inspiration behind their hits, creating an unforgettable experience for music lovers and storytellers alike.

- Tickets & Details
- GA 2-Day Pass: \$60
- GA Friday or Saturday: \$35/day

• VIP Table (2-Day): \$1,000

Main Stage shows require GA or VIP tickets; side stages are free.

A portion of proceeds supports Operation Song, a nonprofit helping veterans and military families heal through songwriting.

Visit DestinSongwritersFestival.com to learn more and get your tickets.

Annual FWB Greek Festival Returns!

Oct. 17–19, 2025 | Sts. Markella and Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church | FREE

Fri. 4–8 p.m.; Sat. 11 a.m.–8 p.m.; Sun. 11:30 a.m.–4 p.m.

The parishioners of Sts. Markella and Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church in Mary Esther invite the community to their annual Greek Festival Oct. 17-19., where you'll feel you've been transported to Greecesitting under a canopy, enjoying delicious food with family and friends, while music and dancers provide you with enchanting entertainment. Held on the church grounds (104 Bryn Mawr Blvd., Mary Esther), the festival celebrates Greek culture with authentic food, pastries, coffee, music, dancing, vendor booths and children's activities. Church tours, including newly completed icons, will also be offered. And don't forget the scrumptious desserts with a Greek coffee! Admission is free, and all are welcome to experience this lively weekend of Greek tradition-- the sights, sounds, and flavors of Greece! More information: greekfestfwb.com or call 850-244-0822.

Support the Fall Silent Auction Benefiting Emerald Coast Food Rescue

Friday, Oct. 24 | 6-9:30 p.m. | Local Market, Destin

Emerald Coast Food Rescue (ECFR) invites the community to its Annual Fall Silent Auction—an evening of giving, good food and meaningful impact raising vital funds to support ECFR's mission of rescuing food surplus and redirecting it to those facing hunger in Okaloosa and Walton counties. Inkind donations for the auction will directly help fund operations that deliver over 250,000 pounds of food each month—at no cost—to 43 local programs,

including food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, after-school programs and subsidized clinics. Your support ensures that food doesn't go to waste—and families don't go hungry.

To donate or learn more, visit Emerald Coast Food Rescue or email info@emeraldcoast-foodrescue.org.

Eggs on the Beach - Cook Team Registration Now Open!

Saturday, Nov. 1 | 10 a.m.-1 p.m. | Seascape Resort, Miramar Beach

Get fired up for the 11th Annual Eggs on the Beach, the beloved Big Green Egg cooking competition hosted by Bay Breeze Patio! This family-friendly foodie fest brings together backyard grillers, chefs, and nonprofit teams to serve up creative, bite-sized samples hot off the Egg to a hungry crowd and a panel of honorary judges.

Compete for trophies, cash prizes, a brand new Big Green Egg, and the coveted "People's Choice" title. Registered cook teams receive commemorative t-shirts, rubs, and an Egg to use onsite. Nonprofit teams also compete for donations toward their mission.

Proceeds benefit Fisher House of the Emerald Coast and Food For Thought, two impactful local charities serving military families and food-insecure children.

Taster tickets go on sale soon, and Demo Eggs used at the event are available for pre-sale at a discount! Whether you're grilling or grazing, you won't want to miss this smokin' hot

Sign up or sponsor at Egg-sOnTheBeach.com or call (850) 269-4666.

30A BBQ Festival - 10 Years of Sizzling Flavor!

Friday, Nov. 7 | 5–8 p.m. | Grand Boulevard, Miramar Beach

The 6th Annual 30A BBQ Festival, presented by 360 Blue, serves up all-you-can-eat barbecue, live music by River Dan, drinks, a silent auction, and more—all benefiting The Sonder Project's 10th anniversary.

GA: \$60 | VIP: \$125 | Kids 12 & under free

Tickets: bit.ly/30a-bbq-2025 | Sponsorships: jessica@proffittpr.com

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- Eyelid Lift (Blepharoplasty)
- Gynecomastia Surgery
- Post-Weight Loss Body Contouring

Niceville • Santa Rosa Beach (850) 530-6064





Meet Hometown Hero Trey Bell:

Choosing Better — One Step at a Time



By Sherry Jones

Not all heroes wear uniforms. Some carry the weight of their past, push through hardship and wake up every day determined to do better. Trey Bell is one of them.

Trey's journey is a powerful reminder that rock bottom doesn't have to be the end of the story. Despite a childhood marked by challenges and a young adulthood filled with setbacks, poor choices and homelessness, Trey found a way forward. His transformation is not just a story of luck or circumstance—it's the result of his own determination, paired with the support and structure provided by One Hopeful Place and Bridgeway Center. Together, they offered him the tools and guidance. But, it was Trey who chose to rise, to do the work and to build a new life from the ground up.

A local native, Trey grew up with strong values instilled by his single mother—faith, discipline and the importance of showing up. Life was structured: school, chores and a sense of purpose. From a young age, Trey struggled with learning disabilities and ADHD. School was never easy and despite his best efforts, retaining information didn't come naturally. Still, he graduated from Niceville High School with a special education diploma— an achievement earned with persistence and heart.

As a young boy, Trey imagined himself one day wearing a badge. Around the age of 8 or 9, he dreamed of becoming a

sheriff's deputy like his grandfather. That dream stuck with him and even though his special diploma disqualified him from entering law enforcement or firefighting, he didn't give up on the idea. Hoping to find a way in, Trey volunteered with the City of Valparaiso Fire Department as a young adult—trying to get as close as he could to the world he admired.

After high school, he began receiving Social Security due to his disability. But Trey didn't want to depend on it forever. He started working at Kelly's Grocery, Little Caesars, Marco's Pizza, Big Lots, Sam's Club and for a tree service company. He lived with his grandmother for a time before finally moving into the Niceville Housing Authority, hoping to build a stable life of his own.

But that foundation quickly crumbled.

Legal trouble caused Trey to lose his housing. He started working overnight at Tom Thumb, but was making poor financial choices. He bought a Dodge Charger, spent money on car accessories and fell behind on rent. "I thought it would make things better," he said. "But I just ended up falling further behind."

He found a steady job at Harbor Freight and stayed for three years—but got caught up with the wrong crowd, leading to substance use and ultimately losing his job. Still, Trey doesn't blame others. "It wasn't the drugs. It was me. I made the decision. The downfall was my fault. I lost everything, because of choices I made."

Even after leaving those influences behind, he continued down the wrong financial path. "The car replaced the drugs," he said. "It still cost me."

By 2022, Trey was sleeping in that very car. One night, he paid for a hotel room just to get decent rest. "I was tired, mentally and physically," he said. The next morning, when he walked out of the hotel, his car was gone—repossessed. "It was

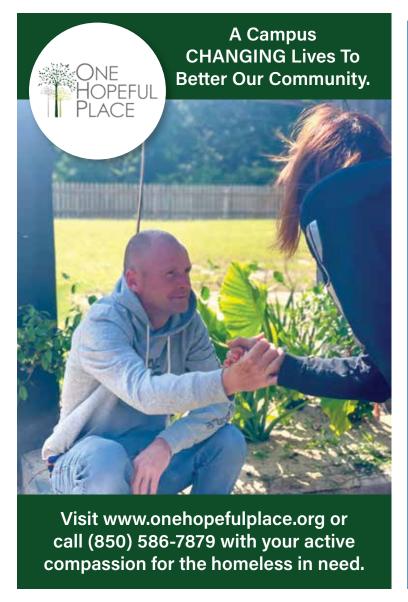
the last thing I had," he said. "I didn't want to go to my family. I didn't want to rely on anyone."

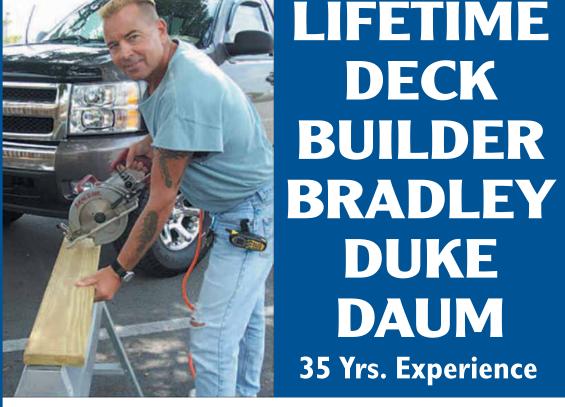
With nowhere else to go, Trey began researching online for homeless services in the area— and that's how he found One Hopeful Place. When he arrived at One Hopeful Place, it became his turning point. "I knew I had a year to get on my feet. I was ready to do the work." Living in a dorm-style setting with nearly 50 other men wasn't easy. "There are a lot of personalities," he said. But he leaned into the structure.

"Most of the homeless population don't have structure—and structure has rules. And rules are what's needed in life," Trey explained. "A lot of people in homelessness also lack responsibility. One Hopeful Place teaches both. That's what people need to get back on their feet."

Trey didn't just adapt—he stepped up. He became a lead

Continued on page 22





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Emerald Coast Excellence:

Okaloosa Schools Earn Top Florida DOE Grades

The Florida Department of Education has released school grades for the 2024-2025 academic year, and it's great news! Okaloosa County School District has earned coveted "A" ratings, underscoring its commitment to academic excellence, student success and continuous improvement. These ratings reflect strong performance in key indicators such as graduation rates, learning gains, middle and high school acceleration, and college and career readiness.

Okaloosa County School District (OCSD) sustained excellence across the board once again earning an "A" rating, continuing its tradition of academic achievement. OCSD is one of only three districts in Florida to have earned an "A" every year school grades have been issued since 2014. The district posted a total of 793 points, up from

beyond.

772 last year, and saw 92% of schools receive an A or B-an increase from 86% in the previous vear.

OCSD also maintained an impressive 88% graduation rate and posted academic gains in English Language Arts, Math, Science and Civics. Notably, there was a 9-point gain in middle school acceleration and a 6-point increase in college and career acceleration.

Graduation Rates by **High School:**

- Laurel Hill School 100%
- Niceville High School 97%
- Crestview High School 97%
- Baker School 95%
- Choctawhatchee High School -91%

School Grade Improvements (2024 - 2025):

- · Schools earning an A increased from 15 to 19
- Schools earning a B decreased from 17 to 15
- Schools earning a C decreased from 5 to 3

Notable School Improve-

- B to A: Baker School, Bruner Middle School, Davidson Middle School, Walker Elementary
- C to B: Choctawhatchee High School, Edwins Elementary, Shalimar Elementary

Schools Just One Point Shy of an "A":

• Fort Walton Beach High School

Schools with Consistent "A" Ratings (Past 3 Years):

- Elementary: Antioch, Bluewater, Destin, Edge, Florosa, Plew
- Middle: Destin, Ruckel
- Specialized: Okaloosa STEMM Academy, Northwest Florida Ballet Academie
- High School: Niceville High School

Superintendent Marcus Chambers praised the district's accomplishments, saying, "Once



again, Okaloosa County has demonstrated what is possible when students, teachers, families, and school leaders work together toward a common goal. Earning an A rating is a reflection of the high standards we hold ourselves to and our belief in continuous improvement."



• Fort Walton Beach High • Meigs Middle School School - 89% • Northwood Elementary School Pogo Pass: One Pass. Unlimited Fun. Only \$49.99! Pogo Pass gives you free There are a variety of venues memories for over a decade admission to multiple famifor everyone. We love Pogo and is now one of the largest ly-friendly venues for one full and all the memories we have entertainment passes in the year — all for just \$49.99. It's a made!" - Amy K country, with locations in cities single pass that unlocks unlim-"I couldn't possibly give a like Nashville, Houston, Dalited visits to partner attractions full account of how awesome las, Phoenix, Kansas City and Pogo Pass is! Not only for date across the Emerald Coast and Las Vegas. nights with my spouse, but it's Use code FunLife at check-Families love it: also great for family activities out for 50% off your pass. "Pogo Pass is amazing. with all my kids... all ages!" See all participating venues There are so many fun expe-Jason C at www.PogoPass.com. riences to enjoy with family. Pogo Pass has been creating







Fall Fashion for Real Life:

Easy Style for Moms & Teachers on the Go

By Liesel Schmidt

Admit it: When all those back-to-school commercials start and you have to start thinking about all the things you need to get your kids or your classrooms ready, hitting the refresh button on your own wardrobe is a task that falls way down on the to-do list

Pssst...We have a little secret: You deserve to feel great in what you wear—whether you're in front of a classroom, running errands between soccer practice and piano lessons, or finally grabbing that well-earned coffee after school drop-off. And we know you need one.

At **Blue Bay Lifestyle Co.**, we totally get it. That's why we've curated a collection of stress-free mix-and-match, ease-into-fall pieces that are cute, comfortable and functional—without feeling like you're wearing a uniform (unless, of course, that uniform is cute joggers and a buttery soft cardigan—in that case, we're totally here for that). Think effortless style you can live in, from

the classroom to Sam's Club to a casual dinner out. Because who has time for a wardrobe change?

Classroom Style

You spend your day molding young minds, walking miles around your classroom (we know you check your step count) and managing it all with poise—or, at least as much of it as you can muster on any given day. You need clothes that work as hard as you do and still look great at 3 p.m. when the last kid goes home.

We love the idea of stylish comfort, so we're picturing soft, breathable tops from Vuori. They may feel like pajamas, but these pieces look polished enough to wear while leading morning circle time or heading to a staff meeting. Paired with pull-on trousers or polished denim from Liverpool and you'll have a tailored look that doesn't sacrifice comfort—which is perfect for long school days that feel as though they might never end (and we know there are plenty of those).



Accessorize with Ellesee polymer clay earrings to add a fun pop of color without weighing you down. And, don't forget a buttery soft and infinitely stylish Hobo bag to fit your essentials and keep you looking polished. Finish it all off with supportive (but cute) flats or ankle boots from Aetrex. From pacing your classroom to the late nights of a parent conference, your feet will be happy all day.

Mom Duty

The daily routine of the school year can make you feel like you're on a hamster wheel, just trying to keep up with everything that's on the calendar (and we know there's a lot). Whether you're dropping kids off at school, squeezing in work meet-

ings or doing the daily juggling routine of activities and errands, dressing stylishly shouldn't slow you down—it should keep up with your life.

We're loving leggings or joggers from Vuori—they're the Holy Grail of comfort and function, plus the cute factor is off the charts. Pair them with a Liverpool button-up or a Rhythm tee for that effortlessly chic look that makes people wonder how you have the time to look so pulled together. When the cooler weather hits (it'll get here eventually, just wait) layer with a soft cardigan or shacket to add warmth and instant style points. You can throw it over a tee on cool mornings and keep it handy for breezy afternoons.

Elevate the basics with accessories that do the work for you. Try mix-and-match metals from Lizou Jewelry or a pair of statement earrings from Fran & Bel. These pieces make even your simplest outfit feel styled. Add trendy sneakers or a pair of cute-yet-supportive sandals from

Aetrex and you're ready for anything from lunch duty to a PTA meeting.

Whether you're a mom or a teacher, we know your days are full and your time is short—but that doesn't mean you have to settle for boring basics or uncomfortable trends. We at Blue Bay Lifestyle Co. are here to make getting dressed in the morning easier—and way more fun. From cute everyday separates to fall-ready layers and thoughtful accessories, you'll find everything you need to feel confident, comfortable, andmost importantly—totally you. From wrangling second graders to carpooling across town, vour wardrobe should work with your life—not against it. Your closet—and your overly packed schedule—will thank you.

Shop easy, wear happy. That's the Blue Bay way!

Open Mon-Sat, 10 a.m. – 5 p.m., 27 Racetrack Road NE, FWB (Located in the Run With It plaza), bluebaylifestyle.com.







Run, Walk, Play — We've Got Your Perfect Fit!

Crush your fitness goals—big or small—with Run With It. From running and walking to court sports and pickleball, we've got the shoes, insoles, apparel and gear to keep you moving. Plus, join our Tuesday night runs or sign up for local racing events and discover a community that moves with you.

- Top Brands You Love: ASICS, Brooks, HOKA, Mizuno, New Balance, On Cloud, Saucony, Topo
- Everything Active: Running, walking, court shoes, sandals, apparel and accessories
- Expert Fittings: Ensure comfort with every step.
- Community Vibes: Join our public racing events and Tuesday Night Group Runs.
- Pickleball Perks: Indoor courts at The Palms, demo paddles, and easy reservations at courtreserve.com

Find us in the Run With It Plaza:
21 & 27 Racetrack Road NE, Fort Walton Beach

"FROM FIRST STEP TO FINISH LINE — FIND YOUR PERFECT SHOE!"



Elevate your everyday with Blue Bay Lifestyle Co. — your go-to for high-quality men's and women's apparel, sandals, sneakers and accessories. Whether you're after laid-back luxe or gifts that wow, we've curated the perfect mix of comfort and style — all chosen to help you look and feel your best, from errands to adventures.

- Fan-Favorite Finds: Vuori, Liverpool Los Angeles, Hobo Bags, Maui Jim Sunglasses, Merrell, Keen, On, HOKA, Aetrex, Naot
- Effortless Style: Apparel, sandals, handbags, sunglasses, and more
- **Gifting Made Easy:** Accessories and gift cards for every occasion

Located next door to Run With It: 27 Racetrack Road NE, Fort Walton Beach

"STYLE THAT FEELS LIKE A VACATION!"



Built to Grow:

Why Investing in People Makes a Stronger Community



By Danica LaFaire, Owner – Fish Window Cleaning, Destin

The sun reflecting off a perfectly clean window here in Destin is a beautiful sight. But, what truly shines at Fish Window Cleaning isn't just the glass – it's the people behind it.

If you've ever walked into a business and just felt the energy — that sense of pride, kindness and ownership — then you already understand the kind of workplace I'm trying to build.

At Fish Window Cleaning here in Destin, we clean glass, yes. But that's just the tool. What we're really doing is building people up, creating jobs with purpose, and helping Northwest Florida shine — inside and out.

I've been asked before, "Why

put so much energy into cul-

My answer is simple, "because how a business treats its people affects everything. It affects the service customers receive. It affects the mood employees carry home. And it absolutely shapes the strength and resilience of our local community."

That's why our mission is clear:

To provide year-round, growth-focused employment while keeping Northwest Florida beautiful, delivering excellent service, and being positive community stewards.

And that mission starts with our team

Culture Is the Founda-

We believe in:

- Fairness, Kindness, and Respect
- Choosing a Positive Attitude
- Doing the Right Thing
- Creating Wow Moments

These aren't just things we say — they're how we operate. Every Monday, our team comes together to check in on goals, share wins (like glowing Google reviews), and train around safety and service. And yes — safety always comes first.

New team members are given



a copy of The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, along with a note from me. That book helps us anchor our culture in trust, healthy conflict, shared accountability, and the drive to win as a group.

We've also built tools — like our team app — that make it easier to stay connected, solve problems, and celebrate progress, whether someone's in the field or heading to their next job.

Growth That Goes Be-

We pay commission on every job. Bonuses are real. Sales

opportunities are available. That means our team members control their earning potential — and we teach them how to grow it.

But more than that, we teach goal-setting, personal budgeting, and long-term thinking. Because I don't want anyone just clocking in and out here. I want them leaving this business better than they came in — as leaders, as providers, and as people.

We're not here to create jobs that plateau. We're here to

create careers that launch.

That's why every leadership opportunity we build — as we grow toward future satellite offices — we plan to fill from within.

Why This Matters to the Community

When you invest in your people, they show up with energy, integrity, and purpose. That shows up in how they treat your customers, how they show up in their own homes, and how they engage with the community around them.

And when a business models this kind of leadership, it raises the bar for everyone.

We're also proud to give back directly — not for attention, but because it's part of who we are. We provide in-kind cleanings, monetary support or volunteer time for:

- Children in Crisis
- Path of Grace Thrift & Boutique

- Semper Fi & America's Fund
- The Fort Walton Chamber of Commerce
- United Way Emerald Coast

We want to be the kind of company that doesn't just succeed — but contributes.

The Bigger Picture

I know we're just one small business. But I've seen firsthand what happens when you create space for people to grow: they rise to meet you.

Imagine the impact if more local businesses — big or small — created environments that nurtured their team's potential, rewarded effort, and built real trust. We'd see stronger families, more resilient storefronts, and a tighter, more vibrant community.

That's the kind of momentum we're proud to help lead.

For us, it's never just been about windows.

It's always been about people. And if we can keep growing a team that reflects that — while making our coast just a little brighter every day — then I believe we're doing something that matters.

Ready to Join Our Team?

We're always looking for individuals who share our values and want to grow with us. If you're a positive, driven person looking for a career with purpose, we encourage you to explore what we have to offer.

Visit FishWindowCleaning. com/3249 to learn more about current opportunities.

Or if you're looking for a reliable, community-minded partner for your home or business, we'd love to serve you.

Call us at 850.842.2162 for a free estimate.

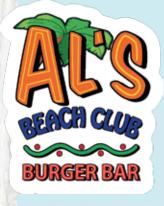












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SUNDAY 10:00 am - 2:00 pm

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Support Bites for Backpacks - Nourish a Child in Need

We're proud to support Food for Thought
Outreach, an organization dedicated to fighting
childhood hunger in our community. Through Bites
for Backpacks, every Lobster Bite appetizer
purchased helps provide meals to food-insecure
children across Okaloosa and Walton counties.

\$1 from each appetizer goes directly to filling backpacks with nutritious food, ensuring that local students have access to meals outside of school.









Fort Walton Beach Dining, Entertainment, Specials

AJ's on the Bayou

Located at the Base of Cinco Bayou Bridge in Fort Walton Beach. AI's on the Bayou is in a beautiful setting offering indoor as well as outdoor seating on the open-air deck overlooking the Cinco Bayou. AJ's on the Bayou serves brunch and bottomless mimosas with food purchase for \$10.95. Serving up daily weekday lunch specials for \$12.95 with ice tea, entertainment or

live music everyday. 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 AJ's for Karaoke every Wednesday night at 7 p.m. and live music all

Saltwater Restaurants' "Bites for Backpacks Program" Raises Nearly \$3,000

Restaurants' Saltwater Bites for Backpacks initiative has raised \$2,985 to date for the Food for Thought Outreach mission. The campaign, which launched earlier this summer, supports the organization's work to fight food insecurity in Okaloosa and Walton counties.

Participating restaurants, including The Crab Trap in Destin and at The Boardwalk on Okaloosa Island, Surf Hut, Rockin' Tacos, and Floyd's Shrimp & Steak House, have contributed to the effort through specialty menu items and promotions. Notably, \$1 from every Lobster Bites appetizer sold goes directly to Food for Thought to help fill backpacks with nutritious food for local students.

The fundraising push continues through mid-August, helping Food for Thought Outreach prepare for the upcoming school year. "This is a cause that's close to our hearts," said Nick Sarra, CEO of Saltwater Restaurants. "Our community is strongest when our children are nourished and ready to learn. We are proud to support Food for Thought in its essential mission."

Food for Thought Outreach provides weekly backpacks filled with healthy food to students who rely on free or reduced-price school meals. To contribute or learn more, visit fftfl.org.

Saltwater Restaurants, Inc. operates 11 distinctive dining destinations along Florida's Emerald Coast, known for their fresh Gulf seafood and stunning waterfront views. At the heart of the company is its wild fish processing facility, where more than 250,000 pounds of locally caught shrimp, grouper, snapper, mahi-mahi, cobia, wahoo and amberjack are prepared each year and distributed daily to its restaurants straight from the Destin harbor.

Beyond the plate, Saltwater Restaurants invests in preserving the beaches that inspire them, leading bi-annual cleanups and promoting eco-friendly initiatives such as its "Skip the Straw" campaign. Locals and guests also enjoy family-friendly eventsfireworks, luaus, movies on the beach and pirate shows—that create memories as vibrant as the views.

Visit saltwaterrestaurants. com.



other nights! The most fun on the Island!

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

Brozinni Pizzeria

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 bronzinnis.revelup.online and have your mouth-watering fare delivered!

(850) 678-7778 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



New York right here in Niceville Weekly Specials

Pizza Calzones Wings Salads Pasta

Family Priendly Pizza Place

Monday: One 20" Specialty Pizza \$21.99

Tuesday: Two Calzones \$20

Wednesday: Family Size Chicken, Alfredo or Spaghetti & Meatballs, Family Salad, 6 Breadsticks, 2l/Gal Tea \$40

Thursday: Buy One Pizza, Get Another 1/2

Price

Friday: Two 16" 1 Topping Pizzas \$29.99 Saturday: Family Night XI 20" Pepperoni, 1/2 Cheese Bread, 6 Wings, Tea/2l \$40

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pizza bar

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Fubar

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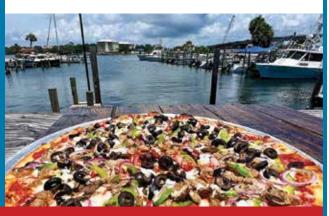
11am-2pm

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Niceville

• 1106 John Sims Pkwy.

Mary Esther

• 251 Mary Esther Blvd.

Pensacola

• 4051 Barrancas Ave.



Fort Walton Beach

- 901 Beal Pkwy NW
- 1285 Eglin Pkwy.
- 290 NE Eglin Pkwy.

Crestview

• 297B James Lee Blvd.

Panama City

• 1360 West 15th St

Callaway

• 809/807 N. Tyndall Pkwy.

Pensacola

• 4600 Mobile Hwy.

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Destin Seafood Festival Returns for 47th Year with Local Flavors and Live Music

By Cali Hlavac

One of Destin's most beloved traditions is back and bigger than ever. The Destin Seafood Festival returns Sept. 26–28 for its 47th year, transforming the Destin Harbor into a milelong celebration of fresh Gulf seafood, live music and coastal culture. More than 30,000 locals and visitors are expected to attend this free, family-friendly event.

Stretching from HarborWalk Village to Heron Harbor, the festival features five stages of live music with local and regional artists performing everything from rock and reggae to country and tropical tunes—and more. The pedestrian-friendly, waterfront boardwalk and docks become a feast for the senses as more than 100 local food and craft vendors - jewelry, clothing, sculpture, glass, watercolors, oil paintings, designs and more — plus Destin's favorite restaurants — serve up seafood specialties, cold drinks and handmade art. And don't forget this year's seafood festival T-shirt!

A Festival with Local Flavor: What began in 1978 as a one-day gathering on "Kelly's Hill" to honor local fishermen has grown into a can't-miss Des-





tin tradition. Proceeds still benefit the community, supporting the Destin Charter Boat Association, Miss Destin scholarships, the Destin Fisherman's Fund and other local causes.

Festival organizers pride themselves on keeping admission free, though VIP passes are available for those who want an elevated experience. With your paid ticket, the VIP area offers unlimited tastings from local restaurants and chefs, private restrooms, a cash bar, TVs and exclusive live music. This year's VIP highlight is Cajun TwoStep founder, viral cooking sensation and influencer Stalekracker, who will take over the VIP Main Stage on Sunday with live demos and plenty of Louisiana flair!

Fun for All Ages: Kids won't be left out of the fun. The expanded Kids Zone, sponsored by Fudpucker's, features oyster shell painting, sand art and play areas for little ones. The HarborWalk Kids Fun Zone adds hamster balls, a rock-climbing wall, zip line and face painting — with a shaded seating tent nearby for parents to relax.

Music on the Harbor:



Music lovers can bring a chair, kick back or dance along the docks as local bands play on each of the five stages throughout the weekend. Harbor restaurants and bars will also host their own lineups of local favorites. A full entertainment schedule will be announced at DestinSeafoodFestival.com.

Parking and Shuttle Information: Festival parking will be available at Heron Harbor, HarborWalk Village, the Marler public lots, Destin Community Center and the Destin Fishing Museum. Free shuttles will run from Morgan Sports Complex to the Destin Harbor throughout the weekend.

The Destin Seafood Festival serves as the kickoff to October's month-long Destin Fishing Rodeo, another cornerstone of local tradition. Whether you're a longtime local or first-time visitor, this is your chance to savor fresh Gulf flavors, soak up harbor views and celebrate the community's fishing heritage.

For festival maps, vendor information, VIP passes and sponsorship opportunities, visit DestinSeafoodFestival.com or email info@destinseafoodfest.com.

Come hungry. Leave happy. See you on the Harbor! Info & VIP Tickets: DestinSeafoodFestival.com.

DINING

continued from page 18

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., Okaloosa Island fubarfwb.com

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; F-Sat 5-9; Closed Sundays.

magnoliagrillfwb.com 157 Brooks Street SE, FWB (850) 812-5761



Off the Hook

Celebrating 70 Years of Marine Animal Magic!

By Mary Fomby, Gulfarium

Since opening its doors on August 14, 1955, Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park has been a cornerstone of the Emerald Coast—captivating guests with unforgettable marine animal encounters while making a lasting impact on ocean conservation.

For 70 years, the Gulfarium has remained dedicated to educating, entertaining, and inspiring generations of visitors. What began as one of the world's first oceanariums has grown into a beloved institution and a leader in marine animal care and rescue. From dolphins leaping into the hearts of visitors to rescued sea turtles returning to the waves, the Gulfarium's mission has always centered on connecting people with marine life—and protecting it for the future.

In 2023, the Gulfarium unveiled Dolphin Oasis, a stunning new habitat designed to enhance both animal well-being and guest engagement. This 24-million-dollar expansion includes expansive saltwater habitats, lush surroundings, and





state-of-the-art features. Dolphin Oasis reflects our continued commitment to providing the highest standard of care for our animals. It's also a beautiful and immersive addition for guests, offering new opportunities to connect with our resident dolphins. As we celebrate this milestone year, the Gulfarium remains focused on both our guest experiences and the lives of the animals in our care.

In recent years, the park's conservation efforts have tak-



en center stage. Since 2015, the Gulfarium C.A.R.E. Center has rescued, rehabilitated, and released hundreds of sea turtles back into the Gulf. This vital work supports the survival of endangered species like the Kemp's ridley and loggerhead turtles, and it's only growing.

In addition, the Gulfarium recently partnered with the Manatee Rescue and Rehabilitation Partnership (MRP) to provide continuous care for rescued manatees at the newly opened Manatee Cove habitat. This 3.5-million-dollar collaboration is a milestone in the park's history and an exciting opportunity to contribute to national manatee conservation efforts. Fittingly, one of our current manatee residents—Romeo—is also over 70 years old,



making him the oldest known manatee in human care and a living symbol of the Gulfarium's own 70-year journey.

As the Gulfarium celebrates its 70th anniversary year, the community is invited to join in the celebration. From August 10–17, a special membership sale will offer guests the chance to enjoy unlimited visits at a reduced rate. And on August 16-17, the park will offer admission for just \$19.55—a nod to the year it all began. This discounted rate applies to all ages, making it the perfect time for families, friends, and longtime fans to experience the wonder of the Gulfarium.

The celebration doesn't stop in August. Throughout the rest of the year, the Gulfarium will mark this milestone with exclusive 70th-anniversary merchandise, special member-only events, and community programs that honor the legacy of marine conservation and education

From its earliest days to its newest achievements, the Gulfarium has remained committed to marine life, innovation, education, and community. Now, as we celebrate 70 years of care, we look forward to continuing that legacy with new generations of ocean advocates.



Sports



By Barbara Palmgren

A few months ago, the article I wrote about one of Destin's premier golf courses focused on its renovation. Skillfully planned over a two-year period during off season in the winter, the course is now the challenge it promised members and the public.

With tour angled sand pro-

Golf Series: **Kelly Plantation Challenges the Emerald Coast Golf Tour**

tected by capillary liners installed in new bunkers, scores could be improved...if one knows how to hit the perfect sand shot from the bunker onto the green and even in the hole itself!

John Townsend, General Manager, gives credit to the designer and can be quoted as saying "Bill Bergin has enhanced Fred Couples and Gene Bates original design, bringing out its best features and making the course even more enjoyable for everyone."

During the middle of July, golfers on the Emerald Coast



Golf Tour teed up their balls and began a three-day tournament.

They enjoyed the new challenge of this beautiful course and had only praise for the course and the staff at Kelly Plantation.

There were three winners after three grueling days in the heat. Grant Leaver emerged victorious as the first-place winner with scores of 71,65, and 68 for a total of 204. Dylan Vause and Hayden Carner shared second place with a score total of 217.

Tour director, Geno Celano, attended to present awards and congratulate all the golfers that spent three hot but memorable days on the famous emerald green course nestled in the heart of Destin.

2025 High School Football Schedule

Fort Walton Beach Vikings:

Head Coach: Josh Pulliam (1st Year) Kickoff – 7 p.m.

8/15 – vs. Blountstown (KO Classic)

8/22 - at Tate

8/29 - at South Walton

9/5 – vs. West Florida

9/11 – vs. Washington 9/19 – at Walton

9/26 – at Rickards

10/3 – vs. Wakulla

10/10 - vs. Arnold *

10/17 – Open Week 10/24 – vs. Choctawhatchee

10/31 – at Crestview

Choctawhatchee Indians:

Head Coach: Frank Beasley

Kickoff – 7 p.m. 8/14 – vs. Milton

8/22 - vs. Gulf Shores (AL)

8/29 – vs. Navarre

9/4 – at Crestview

9/12 - vs. Pine Forest

9/19 – at Niceville

9/26 – at Arnold * 10/3 – at South Walton

10/10 – vs. Rickards *

10/24 – at Fort Walton Beach *

10/30 – vs. Enterprise (AL)

* Denotes District Game

CHOOSING BETTER

continued from page 13

participant, a trusted volunteer role where he helped oversee the campus and served as a point of contact when staff weren't onsite. "They trusted me," he said. "I didn't take that lightly."

With the help of Donna and Liz and community partner Bridgeway Center, Inc., Trey started actively job hunting. "Donna and Liz bent over backwards for me and anyone in the shelter. They give you the tools for success but expect you to put in the effort." After months

of effort, he was hired by CES Construction. "They helped me every step of the way—applications, interviews, everything," he said. Trey officially began working there in January 2025 and he's still employed today.

Without a car, Trey rides his bike to work—rain or shine. He pays his bills ahead of time, saves money and is working toward buying a reliable vehicle. Thanks to community support and grant funding, One Hopeful Place helped Trey move into a fully furnished apartment, providing the bed, kitchen basics and the quiet restart he needed. "It's quiet. I have my cats. I have a routine now. I go home—and I'm at peace."

Trey now lives independent-

Continued on next page





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From Combat to Clean Living: A Hometown Hero's Mission for Healing - How Toxic Freedom Got Started

By Tre' Baity

It's crazy how life works. I never thought the hardest battle I'd fight wouldn't be overseas—but right here, inside my own body.

My wife, Ashley, and I spent over a decade in the Army. We flew drones and deployed three times—two tours to Iraq and one to Afghanistan. On our last deployment, we arrived at a base that had just been hit by a ballistic missile. The strike was over by the time we got there, but the aftermath was everywhere.

The gym walls were coated in thick, black soot. We walked past it every day, worked out in it, lived around it. No one said much. Eventually, a memo circulated listing all the toxins still lingering in the air—chemicals that had no business being near human lungs. But to us, it was just paperwork. We had a mission, and as soldiers, you push through and get the job done.

Then people started getting sick. Passing out. Seizing. Muscles breaking down. My own body began failing, and no one could explain why. I bounced in and out of hospitals, drown-

Attire RED!

(Table Sponsorships Available)

Evening will include dinner,

entertainment, and



ing in prescriptions—22 at one point. One day, while working out at the gym, I got a call from the ER: I needed to come in immediately. My labs showed I'd been having heart attacks and was likely having one right then.

I felt like I was dying—not just physically, but mentally, emotionally, spiritually. The meds weren't saving me. They were numbing me. Slowly killing me.

At some point, I decided—I'm done. If I'm going out, it's going to be on my terms.

I stopped everything. The medications. The endless appointments. The fear. I turned to prayer.

Then I turned to plants—herbs, smoothies, juicing, whole



foods. I dove into learning about natural medicine, detoxing and ancient healing practices. I had to figure it out myself. Nobody else was coming.

And little by little... I started coming back.

The weight dropped. The prescriptions disappeared. My mind cleared. My spirit returned. My self returned. Through it all, Ashley was right there—my anchor, my warrior. She saw me at my lowest and believed in me when I barely could.

That healing sparked something bigger. We realized this wasn't just our story. Countless people are silently suffering—facing mysterious health issues, feeling off but not knowing why.

That's how **Toxic Freedom** was born.

It wasn't about selling products. It was about giving people what we wished someone had handed us—a place where everything is clean, non-toxic and real. Products we trust enough to use on our son, in our home, in our lives.

We built www.toxic-freedom. com so everyone can easily access what we offer-no matter where they are. If you're local, we provide convenient delivery right to your door in Destin, Fort Walton Beach and Miramar Beach—no traffic, no hassle. And if you're further away, we ship nationwide with just a click, delivering clean, non-toxic living right to your doorstep. Toxic Freedom is personal to us. We went to war overseas. Now we're fighting a different war here at home—a war against silent toxins and ignorance.

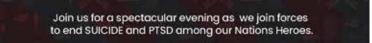
And for healing. Real, lasting, deep healing.

That's our mission now. And I know why we had to go through everything we did.

Because now, we're finally doing the work we were meant to do.

Ready to make the switch? Visit **www.toxic-freedom. com** and bring clean, non-toxic living straight to your doorstep.

Tre' Baity is co-founder of Toxic Freedom. He lives in Destin with his wife, Ashley, and their son.





More info contact: Kristi Beckman-kristi@sofmissions.org

CHOOSING BETTER

continued from previous page

ly. His apartment is clean. His life is steady. His outlook is clear. "One Hopeful Place taught me how to live on my own," he said.

"How to manage money. Clean. Be responsible. That structure shaped how I live today. My apartment is clean, my bills are paid and I'm not just surviving—I'm finally living."

The road hasn't been easy,

but it's been worth it. Trey Bell's story is one of second chances, hard lessons and quiet strength. "Everything has a reason," he said. "I just had to be ready."



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KAY LEAMAN, HEALTH ARCHITECT, HEALTHYDAY HEALTHYLIFE

There are more than 300 types of honey, each with its own unique flavor, color and nutritional properties. Be sure to look for raw and unfiltered honey. Other honeys are usually pasteurized (exposed to high heat) destroying the yeast that is naturally present as well as destroying most of the honey's nutritional properties.

Visiting as many as 50,000 flowers every day to collect nectar and pollen and then delivering it to the hive where the worker bees turn it into honey, are a honey bee's job. The flowers they thrive on determines the color, tastes, benefits and uses. Honey has been found in ancient tombs and it was still edible. It has no expiration date unless it is introduced to water.

The varying glucose and fructose levels found in honey is what causes it to crystallize at different rates. This does not affect the honey. It can be softened by placing a bowl with the honey in warm water. To help prevent honey from crystallizing store in a room temperature area and out of direct sunlight in glass jars rather than plastic containers. It is also recommended to use wood vs. metal for extracting honey from the jar. Consistent exposure can affect the enzymes in the honey, and since honey its acidic, it can cause corrosion of the metal over long exposure.

Honey can also contain antioxidant and antibacterial or expectorant properties, probiotics, anti-inflammatory agents or be rich in iron. There are other properties as well, and each honey has its own medicinal ap-

Hey, Honey

plications. Here are some great

ones to place in your arsenal. **Tupelo Honey** - Found in Florida and the remote swamps of Georgia. Buttery and sweet making it good for BBQ sauces and as a drizzle over desserts or ice cream Benefits include antioxidant and antibacterial prop-

Alfalfa Honey - Also known as Lucerne honey is good for baking or as a sweetener for lemonade, teas, etc. Consume regularly to treat diabetes, anemia and fever. It's rich in probi-

Eucalyptus Honey - Australia and California. Use for mild coughs and colds. Acts as a potent anti-inflammatory and antioxidant agent to boost the immune system

Buckwheat Honey - Darkest and strongest among popular types of honey in the world. High in antioxidants and rich in iron. Great for treating anemia, sore throats, coughs and boosts lower cholesterol levels. Also good for wound cleaning and skin care.

Sage Honey - California. Incredible for fighting diabetes and helps indigestion. It has antioxidants, antibacterial and expectorant properties.

Orange Blossom Honey -Spain and Mexico and common in Texas, southern California and Florida. Boasts high natural anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties that support the immune system.

Wildflower Honey - Widely used to fight allergies, especially when consumed as a natural sweetener in smoothies and

Dandelion Honey - Australia. Excellent for boosting immune system and superb for gastrointestinal tract and bowel health

Fireweed Honey - This honey is created by the plant that sprouts and grows after a forest fire. Great for baking, gourmet cooking, glazes, marinades and grilled food. Has antibacterial and antioxidant properties boosts immune system

Sourwood Honey - Appalachian Mountains. Superior antibacterial and antioxidant properties.

Linden Honey - Most part of Europe. Used in desserts, tasty cheese and tea sweeteners. Helps alleviate insomnia (before-bed herbal tea) and anxiety as it acts as a sedative. Ideal for treating coughs and colds and detoxifying the body

Avocado Honey - Mexico and California. Rich in minerals, antioxidants, and vitamins. Boosts immune system, aids in preventing anemia and hastening wound healing.

Acacia Honey - North America and parts of Europe. Great for treating diabetes, cleansing the liver and regulating the intestines.

Manuka Honey - New Zealand Has incomparable medicinal benefits and is a top pick in the pharmaceutical industry. Has many medicinal applications from wound healing to several internal benefits.

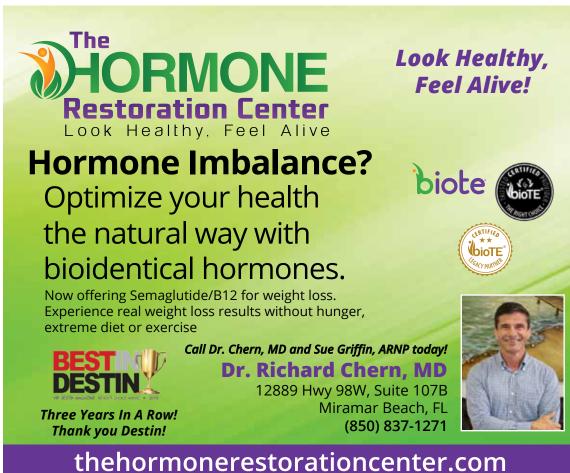
Clover Honey - New Zealand and Canada. Excellent in salad dressings, sauces and cooking recipes. High amounts of phenolic acids improves heart and lung function and boosts the nervous system.

Blueberry Honey - Michigan and New England. Excellent spread on toast and biscuits and sweetener for granola or drizzles on fruits and yogurt. Boost immune system and fighting colds. Exceptional antioxidant and antibacterial powers.

I have a few on my list to try. Using it in recipes in place of sugar as well a teaspoon for a special evening treat sounds like to good place to start.

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Grayton Beach: Nice Dogs, Strange People

By Bradley Duke Daum

Editor's note: Longtime locals know the saying, "Grayton Beach - Nice Dogs, Strange People." Well—it's become part of the area's quirky charm. Here, the man behind the phrase shares how it came to be and why it still resonates today.

It was the mid-90s on 30-A Highway in Walton County. Folks were just beginning to settle back in after Hurricane Opal had turned so many lives upside down.

Some things never change, though—the long-time residents, the beautiful white sand beaches. I had been building custom decks for years. So, transitioning into dune walkovers and beach structures after the storm felt like a natural fit.

During one of those restoration projects, I met Chris and Roxy Wilson. They were restoring an older building on Hotz Avenue, right across from the Red Bar. While I was there, they asked if I could build a boardwalk along the entire front of their new art gallery on the ground floor. And just like that, the Zoo Gallery was born.

As with most of my projects, I wanted to incorporate benches. Back then, very few businesses had seating out front—even the Red Bar didn't have enough places for waiting patrons. Benches added charm to the gallery and gave people a comfortable spot to relax.

But, with every project comes the "retired deck experts"—older men sent out by their wives to critique other people's work. In this case, even the wives joined in, offering plenty of unsolicited advice as they passed by the new benches.

Every day, folks would walk past with scowls on their faces, tossing out comments such as, "You're ruining the town," or, "You're going to attract homeless bums." You'd think I would have been used to criticism after building projects across the country for 20 years, but it never really gets easier.

Honestly, I think every builder should be required to take psychology classes to prepare for the public's reactions. People have an intense fear of change, and they don't always trust what's new. Funny enough,



it's usually women who stop to say what a great job I'm doing, while men stay up all night trying to figure out what I did wrong. In this case, everyone seemed equally uneasy about change.

The best visits, though, weren't from people at all—they were from the dogs. Back then, dogs roamed Grayton Beach freely. They'd stop by my project just to wag their tails, say hello, and smile. And not once did they lift their legs on my work.

That contrast—the eccentric people and the wonderful

dogs—inspired me to create something fun. I started printing bumper stickers and T-shirts with a phrase I came up with out of sheer frustration: "Grayton Beach - Nice Dogs, Strange People." Locals started buying them and proudly putting the stickers on their cars. Before long, it became Grayton Beach's unofficial slogan.

A few years later, I learned about another unofficial slogan that popped up in Austin, Texas: "Keep Austin Weird." It reminded me how many people claim they invented catchphras-



es like these. Red Wassenich, the man who actually coined Austin's slogan, is rarely mentioned. He never sought fame or fortune from it. I know how he feels.

Sometimes it's worth enduring the criticism just to speak the truth.

And sure enough, not long after my project wrapped up, other businesses around Grayton Beach started building benches, too.

Today, "Grayton Beach Nice Dogs Strange People" still pops up on bumper stickers and T-shirts across 30A—a playful reminder of the town's free-spirited roots. It's a phrase that captures the heart of Grayton: laidback, dog-friendly, and just a little eccentric—in the best way possible.

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Sean of the South: The Whale



By Sean Dietrich

Seldovia, Alaska, sits somewhere near the top of the world. It's a nanoscopic village on the North Pacific. Population 225. Tons of fishing boats. A lot of cold, icy, Kachemak Bay water.

A few days ago, a local spotted something huge stranded on the beach. It was a minke whale. About the same length as a midsize Toyota.

The whale was struggling. Thrashing around and panting. The whale was fighting to breathe.

The passerby ran for help.

When a live whale finds itself stuck on a beach, you don't have a lot of time. Maybe 20 minutes,

Dehydration is often what kills the whale. Or the whale might drown because its airway faces the tide. Often, it's suffocation that kills a stranded whale.

Remember when you were a kid, and you swam in the pool all day? Remember how when you got out of the pool, your whole body felt heavy? That's because for hours water supported your body weight while all your friends played Marco Polo, thereby traumatizing some unfortunate child so that this child would be receiving therapy for the next, say, 30 or 40 years of his or her respective adulthood. Not that I would know anything about this.

So anyway, after being buoyant all day, your little-kid muscles weren't used to supporting your weight. Once you got out of the pool, your body felt heavy.

Likewise, whales spend a lifetime in the water. Their bodies are not built to handle their own weight. When a whale lies on the beach, gravity crushes its huge frame, making it almost impossible to breathe.

The whale in Seldovia was gasping, with roughly three tons sitting on its lungs. It was dehydrating in the sun. It wouldn't be long before the whale would just give up and die. Each year, about 2,000 whales strand themselves on beaches

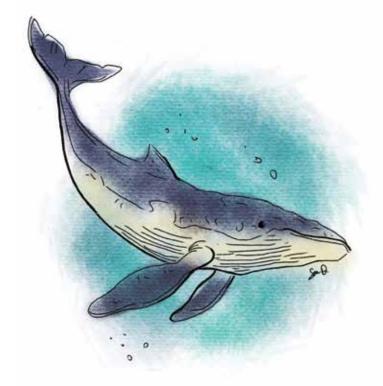
and die. That number is rising. Nobody really knows why. Even fewer seem to care.

Someone in the village contacted Stephen Payton, the environmental coordinator. In his 10-year career, he had never encountered a live beached whale. He wasn't sure what to expect when a neighbor offered him a ride on a four-wheeler.

"It was really scratched up," Payton said. "You could tell it had probably been rolling around on the rocks."

When he got to the beach, he had likely expected to find a dead whale. What he found, however, was not a deceased cetaceous creature.

When Payton arrived at the shore, there was a crowd of locals who had formed a buck-



et brigade. They were hauling seawater from the Pacific, using five-gallon buckets, dousing the

The villagers had wrapped the whale in wet towels to protect it from sun exposure. They did not leave the whale's side. Twenty minutes turned into an hour. One hour turned into six.

After a full day of caring for the animal, the tide arrived. The whale reoriented itself and swam into the water and the crowd cheered.

But the whale did not swim off into the deep. The whale stayed in local waters for days, surfacing frequently, and spouting at local villagers. Like it was saying thank

Now think of all the times you honestly believed you weren't going to make it. Try to remember the individuals who appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, who stood beside you during hard times, even when odds were not in your favor. Remember those people?

Good.

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A Pastor's Pondering: Time—What a Terrible Thing to Waste

By Pastor Doug Stauffer

"Redeeming the time, because the days are evil." (Ephesians 5:16)

The month of August: Summer is winding down, school is

about to start, and routines are shifting from relaxed to more structured. Before the busyness takes over, this is a perfect moment to pause and reflect on how you're spending your time—and how you can make the most of it.

The Bible reminds us in Ephesians that we are to redeem the time because the days are evil. This phrase expresses a sense of urgency. The Apostle Paul wrote to believers living in a world filled with distractions, temptations, and danger. One wonders if today's distractions are not multiplied even more. The culture around us pulls us constantly toward apathy, entertainment, and self-indulgence. But God calls us to something higher—He calls us to what I call intentional living.

Redeeming the time means more than staying busy; it means living with a sense of divine purpose. It means seizing every opportunity to glorify God, serve others, and deepen our faith. Summer may have brought moments of rest, travel or family time, but we must ask: Have we used that time to draw nearer to the Lord, or has another opportunity slipped through our fingers?

August provides a natural opportunity to refocus and recalibrate. As families prepare for the new school year, why not strengthen your spiritual focus? Just as children get ready to go



back to class, so should each of us get our hearts ready for a new season of ministry and discipleship. The world will try to push in—but we need to press on spiritually.

For parents, this is a critical time. The world is working overtime to disciple your children; so, we must be even more diligent to teach them God's truth.

"And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up." (Deuteronomy 6:7)

God commands us to use everyday moments as opportunities to disciple. Teaching children the truth of God's Word isn't limited to Sunday mornings—it's to be a way of life.

As believers, we must also recognize the times. From rising immorality to growing confusion, we do not live in spiritually neutral days. The enemy is active—but so is our Saviour. That's why our time is important. Redeeming the time isn't just about managing our schedules; it's about aligning our lives with God's eternal purpose. It's about living with holy urgency.

As you look toward fall, don't just count the days—make the days matter. Reevaluate your priorities. Recommit to personal prayer and Bible reading. Reengage with your local church. Reconnect with those who need Christ. Time is a gift—but it's also a test. What we do with it shows who we are becoming.

Let August be a turning point—not just in the calendar, but in our hearts.

"And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed." (Romans 13:11)

Wake up!

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.







Built to Last:

Cadillac Willy Celebrates Silver Anniversary

By Christopher Manson

Labor Day weekend, 2020. Guitarist Clayton Bonjean and his band Cadillac Willy played their first gig on Okaloosa Island. This month, the group commemorates its 25th anniversary with a star-studded performance—featuring members past and present-in Santa Rosa Beach.

"We were younger, obviously, and had just moved to the area,' Bonjean says of Cadillac Willy's origin all those years ago. "The music scene wasn't nearly what it was now. Everyone was playing Jimmy Buffett and Matchbox Twenty." Bonjean played in bands while attending Ole Miss, and percussionist Louis Antoon was a member of the "hot" local band Salty Dog.

"I was into jam bands, and Louis was interested in doing jam stuff like Grateful Dead and Widespread Panic with the congas and timbales," says Bonjean. "I was always trying to put a band together." Prior to hooking up with Antoon, he met Patrick Wilson, who played bass guitar with Willy for 22 years. "He's retired from the band, but he still plays with us occasional-

The other founding members were guitarist John David Sullivan, and Josh "JP" Pace, that rarity in live music—a performer who can sing and drum simultaneously. "At that first gig, JP had a five-piece drum set, but we partied so hard we lost one of his tom-toms!" Cadillac Willy's set list was pretty light at the time (Bonjean recalls playing Neil Young's "Walk On."), but Sullivan promised the venue that if they booked the band, they would fill the place up. And they did.

Following JP's departure, Tim O'Shea sang with Willy for years, and the well-traveled Charles Pagano kicked out the jams. Over the years, John Mark Turner (Blues Old Stand) and the late great Kenny Oliverio (Dread Clampitt) have collaborated with the band. Turner filled in as guitarist on a few occasions and picked up the bass guitar when Wilson went through his celebrated pedal steel phase.

About 15 years ago, drummer



Cadillac Willy's Clayton Bonjean, Louis Antoon, and Patrick Wilson in the early days.

Shawn Shackelford and vocalist/keyboardist Metz Barnesboth recognized by the local Beachcomber Magazine Music Awards—joined. Multi-instrumentalist Ricky Stanfield is a recent recruit. Bonjean describes him as "a big bluegrasser and an excellent banjo and mandolin player. He's been a great addition."

The current and original Cadillac Willy lineups will perform Friday, August 29, at Red Fish Taco in Santa Rosa Beach starting at 6 p.m. "We'll play until around 9," says Bonjean. "We don't do 'late' gig anymore. The bands and people have all gotten older. I think the young latenight crowd is more into DJs."

He says the band will set up additional rigs to entice any and all former members and "sit-ins" to participate in the celebration. "It's going to be a great night," says Bonjean, adding that Red Fish Taco has been Cadillac Willy's main spot after building their fan base at



Cadillac Willy's current lineup as they celebrate 25 years of jamming on the Emerald Coast.

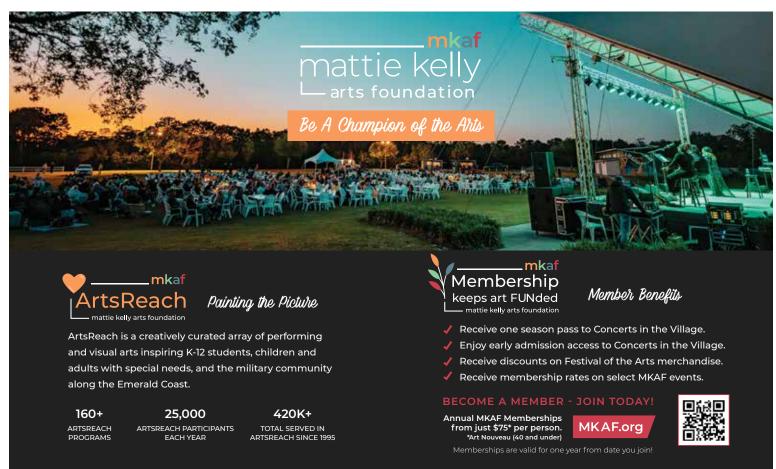
venues like Harbor Docks and the much-missed Funky Blues Shack. "We're booked there two Fridays a month through Christmas 2026."

In 25 years, Cadillac Willy have never entertained the idea of calling it quits. "Louis always says, 'You can't kill Cadillac Willy," says Bonjean. "A big part of why we've been together so long is because nobody is really in

charge. Whoever books the gigs is responsible for collecting the money. Everybody is pretty laid back—nobody takes themselves too seriously. Everyone respects everyone despite different political views and lifestyles. We're all on the same page musically."

Bonjean informs me that the band has learned a lot of new songs since Stanfield jumped on board. "We can always play Widespread Panic all night, though. But we've added a lot more complex songs by the Dead and some others. We have to keep it fresh, or we get bored."

Take a deep dive into the band's classic jams and funky stuff at cadillacwilly.com.



Curtain Up: Music and Dance Light Up the Local Stage

From youth music programs to world-class ballet, Northwest Florida's arts scene is buzzing this season. Sinfonia Gulf Coast opens registration for its youth ensembles and Northwest Florida Ballet announces a season filled with fresh choreography, a holiday classic and a whimsical new premiere.

Sinfonia Gulf Coast Opens Registration for 2025-2026 Youth Programs

Sinfonia Gulf Coast has announced open registration for its 2025–2026 youth music education programs, offering beginner to advanced student musicians the chance to train and perform with the only professional orchestra in the region.

Programs include the Sinfonia Youth Orchestra (SYO) with advanced, intermediate, and beginner-level ensembles, as well as an After School Beginning Strings program expanding to new schools this fall. The ensembles welcome strings, winds, brass, percussion, and piano accompanists.

Since its launch in 2007, Sin-



fonia's education efforts have reached more than 220,000 local children. The organization offers unique performance opportunities, mentorship from professional musicians, Bright Futures volunteer hours, free concert tickets, and scholarship eligibility for senior members.

"We believe our youth orchestra programs foster a strong sense of community, allowing members to connect with like-minded fellow musicians in a safe, collaborative, and welcoming environment," says Sinfonia Youth Orchestra director Margaret Gordon. "It is our goal to achieve high level performances while making sure every student is assisted in reaching their full potential as musicians."

Gordon adds, "It is an honor to be able to offer beginning strings instruction to students of Okaloosa and Walton Counties through our after-school programs. I am incredibly excited to welcome a potential 160 new students in our programs this year."

For more information or to register, visit SinfoniaGulfCoast. org or contact Margaret Gordon at mgordon@sinfoniagulfcoast.org.

Northwest Florida Ballet Unveils 2025-26 Season

Northwest Florida Ballet's upcoming season features three distinctive productions. It opens Sept. 19-20 with the Emerging Choreographers' Project Blackbox at NFB Studios in downtown Fort Walton Beach. Showcasing the innovative choreography of selected members of the NFB company, this production features ballet and contemporary works set to a diverse range of music genres, accompanied by a visual art exhibition that offers audiences a compelling glimpse into the next generation of artists from the NFB Académie.

The beloved holiday classic Nutcracker returns Nov. 21–23 to the Mattie Kelly Arts Center, featuring more than 140 performers, including international guest artists and over 100 local children, with live music by the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra.

The season concludes March 7–8 with the company premiere of Jill Eathorne Bahr's Alice in Wonderland, a vibrant new ad-



PHOTO BY EDWARD MCGRATH

aptation blending neoclassical dance and imaginative storytelling.

Season subscriptions, which include tickets to The Nutcracker and Alice in Wonderland plus numerous subscriber perks and discounts, are now available at NFBallet.org—\$80 per adult and \$37 per child (12 and under), a savings of more than 15% compared to box office prices. You can also purchase season subscriptions, additional performance and event tickets, and membership packages.

















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News Around Town

Fort Walton Beach Aims to **Become 'Cleanest City on** the Emerald Coast'



The City of Fort Walton Beach is challenging residents to help it earn the title of "Cleanest City on the Emerald Coast." The city has rolled out a series of beautification and litter-reduction efforts, including volunteer cleanups, an "Adopt-a-Road" program for businesses and civic groups, and recognition for local properties that shine.

City crews will also conduct the Biannual Neighborhood Cleanup now-Aug. 28, picking up large household items such as furniture, mattresses and appliances placed curbside. Residents can report areas needing extra attention through the "Report a Concern" feature at fwb. org or via the city's SeeClickFix app on both Apple and Google Play app stores. "These are just a few of our ideas; we're working on more," city officials said in announcing the campaign. "What ideas do you have and would you like to help us make Fort Walton Beach the Cleanest City on the Emerald Coast?" Contact FWB City Manager Jason Davis at 850-833-9612 or idavis2@fwb.org.

Cleanup Ends with 107 Pounds of Debris



In an impressive display of teamwork and environmental stewardship, on Aug. 3, 120 divers from across the Panhandle including an extraordinary coalition of local teams such as the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office, Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park and Visit Destin-Fort Walton Beach Natural Resources — dove into the usually off-limits waters, and over the course of a few hours, cleared out 107 pounds of debris. Led by Cory Mitrenga of Gulfarium, the team recovered

fishing rods, lures, tangled lines and even a stray piece of roofing. These dives not only improve safety for marine life like sea turtles, tiger sharks, seahorses and spiny lobsters, but also give divers a rare glimpse of the thriving ecosystem beneath the pier. Zookeeper Lionfish provided specialized collection devices for divers and Captain Shelby with Okaloosa Beach Safety helped ensure diver safety. This year's event saw a significant decrease in collected debris—a promising sign that ongoing conservation efforts and community awareness are reducing the amount of waste accumulating beneath the pier. Source: Oka $loosa\ Island\ Pier\ Cleanup-Facebook$

Boys 2 Men Seminar Set for Sept. 13

The Rho Omicron Lambda Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. will host its annual Boys 2 Men Seminar on Saturday, Sept. 13, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Okaloosa County School District office, 202 FL-85, Niceville. The free seminar is open to male high school students for the 2025-26 school year and includes lunch.

Topics will focus on further-

ing education, keys to success, financial management, interacting with law enforcement and health awareness, encouraging open discussion and practical skills for young men preparing for adulthood. Presenters represent diverse fields including medicine, engineering, law enforcement, marketing and the military.

The seminar is part of Alpha Phi Alpha's Go-to-High School, Go-to-College national program, which promotes scholarship and leadership among youth. Space is limited to 30 students; interested participants should consult their parents and contact Finley Woods at (478) 919-5923 by Aug. 31 to reserve a spot.

Photo Speed Enforcement Resumes for Back-to-School

As students head back to class, the City of Fort Walton Beach reminds motorists that Photo Speed Enforcement in school zones will resume. The program operates at multiple schools within city limits, including Choctawhatchee High, Pryor Middle, Liza Jackson Prep, Bruner Middle, Silver Sands, Fort Walton Beach High, Edwins Elementary, Elliott Point Elementary and Saint Mary Catholic School.

Using radar and cameras, the system flags vehicles traveling more than 10 mph over the posted limit. After police verification, a \$100 civil citation is mailed to the registered owner. Enforcement is active 30 minutes before school starts, during the school day and 30 minutes after dismissal; hours vary by school. Drivers are urged to observe posted school zone speeds to protect students' safety. Details: fwb.org/565/Photo-Speed-Enforcement

Citizens Academy Begins Oct. 8 in FWB

The City of Fort Walton Beach will launch a five-week Citizens Academy for adult residents, held Wednesdays from Oct. 8 to Nov. 5, 6-8 p.m. at rotating locations. The program offers an inside look at city operations, covering public safety, parks, public works and more.

Space is limited to 20 participants. To apply, email your name, phone number and address to Devon Ravine at dravine@fwb.org.

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