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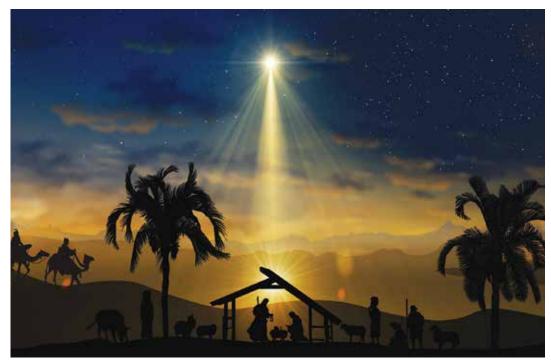
When the Impossible Happens

By Gueary Clendening

How is it that geese fly south in the winter? Who gives them instructions for the trip? How can an ant carry 50 times its weight, the equivalent of a 180-pound man carrying a full-grown cow? It seems to me God is in the business of making the impossible happen!

In Luke's gospel, we are given the story of a young lady named Mary, who is visited by an angel; She's told she will give birth to the Son of God. It's found in Luke, chapter one, verse thirty-four through thirty-eight.

Mary asked the angel, "But how can I have a baby? I'm a virgin." The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; So the baby born to you will be holy, and He will be called the Son of God. What's more, your relative, Elizabeth, has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she is already in her sixth month, for nothing shall be impossible with God."



God's timing is always perfect! Elizabeth's pregnancy was used by God to encourage Mary to believe that God would fulfil His promise.

Another impossibility happened to me personally. On May 2, 2024, I made an appointment for my annual appointment with my cardiologist in Pensacola for May 8, 2025. During the first few

days of May, in the week before my appointment, I began to suffer extreme pain in my throat and chest. On the day of my appointment, I was sitting in my car preparing to leave, when the pain came back again. I sat there for a few minutes, and I decided to go to Crestview. If the pain lessened, I would drive on to Pensacola, but if not, I would

return home. Well, the pain decreased, so I started driving to Pensacola. I explained to the doctor what had happened. He took me up a flight of stairs. By the time we reached the third floor, the pain in my throat and chest exploded. Thankfully,

impossible continued on page 2



Where Hope Grows:

A Story of Love, Legacy and Local Families

By Maranda Shaye Smith

Imagine just entering parent-hood, facing the challenge of balancing a new baby with mounting bills and little support. Whether a pregnancy comes as a surprise or right on time, stepping into that moment can feel overwhelming. Questions, fears and practical needs often rise quickly—especially for those navigating the journey without a strong support system.

When life takes an unexpected turn, Lauren's Legacy Pregnancy Center, right here in our area, stands

HOPE GROWS

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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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IMPOSSIBLE

continued from page 1

the cardiologist's office was in the hospital. They immediately ordered a heart cath. The next morning, he said to me, "You had a ninety-five percent blockage in your main artery. You had a widow-maker and are a very lucky man."

Later, after thinking about

his words, I realized the entire episode was a lot more than just dumb luck. If I had not made that appointment a year ago, I would not have thought about going to Pensacola. God knew a year in advance what was coming, and because of that, I am alive today and writing this article. The impossible happened, God gave me a miracle!

Soon, I will be celebrating

the miracle God gave to Mary. The Son of God was born and came into the world to die for our sins. He lived a perfect life, something you and I cannot even dream of. And yet, a savior was born to a virgin. What God did in sending His Son was to empower Him to have the ability to forgive and remove the blockage and bondage of sin in our lives, so we can live in free-

dom now, and have life eternal forever!

If you haven't already done so, I encourage you to receive Christ now through prayer. He will hear you and remove the past, and give you a new beginning! "If the Son therefore shall make you free, you shall be free indeed." John 8:36.

May the joy of knowing God's Son make this Christmas

the greatest ever for you and your family, because receiving Jesus Christ into your life makes the impossible happen!

Merry Christmas!

Pastor Gueary Clendening is a retired minister with the Assemblies of God. He has ministered for over 50 years and resides in Valparaiso.

HOPE GROWS

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ready to walk beside those facing uncertainty. Serving women and families across Walton and Okaloosa counties, the center provides free, confidential services including pregnancy testing, ultrasounds, parenting programs, counseling and assistance connecting with community resources.

What began as a tribute of love and remembrance has grown into a cornerstone of compassion and care—meeting physical, emotional and spiritual needs at every step. Executive Director Stacey Reed describes it best, "This is a safe place for women to discuss their options and feel supported. Every story matters here."

Rooted in Love and Legacy

Lauren's Legacy was founded in memory of a young woman whose life continues to touch others through her family's vision of turning loss into purpose. Lauren was known for her compassionate heart and steadfast faith, someone who naturally reached out to help others in need. After her passing, her family turned their grief into purpose, creating a place that would carry on her spirit of love and service.

Lauren's Legacy now stands as a reflection of who she was, offering hope and support to women and families facing some of life's most difficult moments, and that legacy lives on through every client who walks through the doors and every child whose life begins with love and support.

Impact That Matters

The past year has been one of remarkable growth and impact for Lauren's Legacy. From January through November 2025, the center served 127 clients, provided 686 appointments, administered 86 pregnancy tests and 78 ultrasounds, and supported local families through 535 parenting classes. Each number represents a person—someone who found hope, encouragement and practical help when they needed it most.

A Night to Remember: Legacy Night 2025

In August, Lauren's Legacy hosted its first-ever Legacy Night, a celebration of life, community



and hope. The evening raised an

incredible \$217,000, thanks to

the generosity of local sponsors,

donors and volunteers who share

the center's mission.

Real Life Impact
Lauren's Legacy exists to

meet people right where they are, offering steady, compassionate help when it's needed most. Access to free pregnancy tests, a no-cost ultrasound, one-on-one education about their options, and a full suite of parenting classes are available free and confidential. When they complete the classes, they receive essential baby items such as car seats, diapers, strollers and clothes—giving them a real boost as they start this chapter.



parenting classes and referrals for housing, medical and com-

Continued on page 4



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A Veteran's Call to Serve Again:

Angel Force Brings Safety and Leadership to Local Schools

By Michelle Ruschman

One of the most important missions we have as a nation is to ensure that our children, teachers, administrators, and the support staff in our schools can focus on education without the distraction of feeling unsafe. Retired veteran Joshua Yirkovsky was inspired to start his private protection company, Angel Force Protection, and his nonprofit organization, Angel Force Foundation, when he saw firsthand what can happen when a school day is halted to deal with an intruder.

"In 2024, I was in the car lane waiting to pick up my kids from a private Christian school. I looked up to see a vagrant pulling on the doors, insisting to be let in, thinking it was the church. He was agitated and using foul language, and I could see the students and teachers through the door, clearly scared, trying to handle it on their own. With my sons being in there, I knew we needed a solution. That was the seed for Angel Force Protection and Angel Force Foundation."



The business and the foundation are two sides of the same coin. The business employs military veterans to become Angel Guards, primarily for schools. The other focuses on providing children, their families, and educators with resources that are "dedicated to advancing school safety through proactive education and comprehensive initiatives." This includes programs like Future Leaders Academy and safety seminars. They also conduct fundraisers so schools have the resources to utilize the instruction and protective services they need to equip their students and staff.

"Schools don't have to use our services, but we do want them to have the option of having safety personnel on-site without worrying about where the backing is coming from."

As a retired 21-year member of the U.S. Navy, Joshua recognized that veterans may leave the career, but the military training, the desire to protect, and the passion to serve are still part of their spirit. It's why they're so suited to protect the vulnerable.

"Our veterans need a sense of purpose. We served our country, and many of us are asking,



'Now what?' We have unique skills and the ability to adapt and overcome in the most adverse situations. We've been trained to be proactive and to see what bad guys look like with smiles on their faces. Being an Angel Guard can be the next chapter. I make sure each applicant is properly vetted, and they go through an extensive physical, emotional, and mental screening to make sure we're putting the right vet at the right school. When they get in there, something amazing happens. They become someone the kids



can rely on, and they become part of that school family. Having an Angel Guard in place frees SROs to be part of the community again, which continues to add another layer of protection for the village we're all a part of."

Not only is Joshua looking to secure the institutions that educate our children, but he wants the students who attend to have the skills to be effective citizens. Future Leaders Academy is his way of serving families, even after the child's school day is over. The lessons are age-appropriate, starting at the age of 7.

Junior Captains (Ages

Continued on next page



Community





HOPE GROWS

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munity resources. Anyone in need can call 850-880-6287 or visit the website to connect with someone who cares and schedule a confidential appointment.

How to Get Involved

Lauren's Legacy is a faithbased organization and operates entirely through the generosity of donors, volunteers and community partners. Whether through giving, volunteering or spreading awareness, every act of support helps this mission grow. To learn more, visit Laurens-Legacy.net or call (850) 880-6287 to find out how you can help.

Together, we can continue to build a community where life is cherished and hope is shared.

16019 Hwy. 331 Business, Suite 10, Freeport, 32439

ANGEL FORCE

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7–9): Young leaders take part in fun, hands-on exercises like group discussions, decision-making games, and interactive leadership challenges. The goal is to instill foundational habits of responsibility and expression.

Rising Stars (Ages 10–12): Participants explore leadership through goal-setting activities, debates, and group projects. They'll learn to manage conflict, collaborate effectively, and lead small teams.

Teen Trailblazers (Ages 13–15): Teens take on leadership roles, practice

public speaking, and develop strategic thinking in team-based projects. Ideal for teens preparing for leadership in school and community roles.

Young Visionaries (Ages 16–18): This advanced group dives into case studies, community service projects, and mentorship experiences to refine leadership identity and prepare for future academic and career goals.

If you're interested in learning more about hiring Angel Force Protection or supporting Angel Force Foundation, go to www.angelforcefoundation.org. Joshua Yirkovsky can also be reached by emailing info@angelfp.com or calling 904-436-3883.



A Success Story

By Carolyn Newcomer KETCHEL

For eight years, Okaloosa County has worked to create an Industrial Park at Shoal River Ranch. Infrastructure was put into place, hoping to draw in a multimillion-dollar manufacturing business at Shoal River Industrial Ranch.

The ranch itself is perfectly situated off Hwy. 90 and one could imagine an interchange off of I-10 that would allow for easy access. It is situated between Mobile and Tallahassee, near Eglin AFB and in close proximity to rail traffic.

The BCC, over the years, acquired a total of 850 acres of land for a future industrial park. A much-needed wastewater treatment plant is presently under construction and will support the project as well as serve residents and businesses located well beyond the park. This \$40.8M plant is an important step towards moving off the septic system.

Following a comprehensive multi-state search, Williams International, the world's leader in gas turbine engine production, announced its intention to locate its new facility in Okaloosa County. In November 2025, Williams International broke ground on a \$1.4 Billion manu-



facturing facility at Shoal River Ranch. This facility will create 336 high-tech jobs producing aviation gas turbine engines. The facility is called Module A by Williams International. The company takes great pride in the fact they produce everything in the United States.

The complex will be constructed in three phases within the industrial park, one of the largest projects in the history of Northwest Florida. The company's first 250,000 sq. ft facility is slated to begin construction later this year, with completion in 2026. A final 500,000 sq. ft. building is planned for the 2035-36 time frame. Williams International has existing plants in Pontiac, Mich., and Ogden,

Numerous state, regional and local partners worked together to create this major economic development success story in Northwest Florida. Gov. Ron DeSantis awarded \$3.2M through the Florida Job Growth

Grant Fund to expand manufacturing in Okaloosa County. Florida Commerce partnered with Career Source Florida, Florida's Great Northwest, Space Florida Okaloosa County and Triumph Gulf Coast on this major economic development success story for our region.

Kudos, in particular, should be given to Nathan Sparks, Economic Development Director,

who worked tirelessly to bring the pieces together to make this success story for Okaloosa County.

This announcement was hailed as a major win, as it establishes the State of Florida as a rising hub for aerospace activity and manufacturing.

Commissioner's note

I want to wish you all a very,

Merry Christmas and many blessings in the New Year. It is an honor to serve as your Okaloosa County, District 2 Commissioner.

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

She can be reached at CKetchel@ myokaloosa.com or 850-651-7105.

Fort Walton Beach Police Department's Winter Wonderland

Friday & Saturday, Dec. 12-13, 2025 | 6-8 p.m. Destin-Fort Walton Beach Rigdon Center

The Fort Walton Beach Police Department invites families to step into a festive Winter Wonderland Friday-Saturday, Dec. 12–13, from 6 to 8 p.m. at the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Rigdon Center. This annual holiday celebration features kids' games, movies, raffle prizes, food and beverage trucks, and a lineup of

local vendors offering seasonal goodies.

A highlight each year is the one-of-a-kind Christmas village, created entirely from decorated and recycled shipping pallets—a community favorite that grows more creative with every season.

Businesses and organizations interested in building a pallet house or participating as a vendor are encouraged to contact Lt. Stalls at kstalls@ fwb.org.

The Destin-Fort Walton Beach Rigdon Center (formerly the Fort Walton Beach Fairgrounds) is located at 1958 Lewis Turner Boulevard.



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News Around Town



Students Showcase Craftsmanship in FWBHS Tiny House Preview

Fort Walton Beach High School's Building Trades program recently hosted district leaders, school board members, business owners, and community guests for an exclusive first look at its student-built tiny house — a project that continues to turn heads across Okaloosa County.

Visitors toured the under-construction home and met the FWBHS Project Management group, which will represent the school at the 2026 NAHB International Builders' Show® in Orlando this February. Students demonstrated professional-level skills in carpentry, electrical, plumbing and finishing work, all part of a program designed to prepare them for real-world, high-demand careers.

"Our Building Trades students are gaining real-world skills that directly translate into high-demand careers, and this tiny house project is a remarkable example of hands-on learning at its best," said Superintendent Marcus Chambers. "Supporting their journey to the International Builders' Show is not just an investment in a trip; it's an investment in the future workforce of Okaloosa County."

The preview also kicked off the program's official fundraising campaign. While the tiny house will ultimately be completed, inspected and sold to support the program long-term, the immediate goal is getting these students to Orlando.

"This tiny house is a true workforce-development project where our students are learning to become tomorrow's skilled trades professionals," said instructor James Martin. "Seeing our district leadership and the business community walk through a home our students are building from the ground up... means everything to these kids."

Principal Lindsey Smith echoed that pride, adding, "This project represents the very best of Fort Walton Beach High School: innovation, dedication and a commitment to



Choctaw HS students at Okaloosa School's Reality Check.

high-quality career and technical education."

Businesses or organizations interested in sponsoring the trip, donating materials or receiving early information about the completed tiny house may contact Mr. Martin at James.Martin@okaloosaschools.com.

Big Green Machine at the Final Four

At the time of this printing, Superintendent Chambers was celebrating Choctawhatchee High School's thrilling football postseason, sharing on Nov. 28:

"Congratulations to the Choctawhatchee High School Big Green Machine for pulling off an incredible upset! ... This victory wasn't just about the score — it was about grit, heart and determination." The 31-28 road win over No. 1 seed St. Augustine sent Choctaw into the FHSAA 4A Final Four.

Chamber Brings National Civics Bee to Okaloosa County

The Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce — presented by Eglin Federal Credit Union — is partnering with the U.S. Chamber Foundation to bring the 2026 National Civics Bee® to Okaloosa County.

Middle school students will compete through a written essay and live regional, state and national competitions, with the local event set for April 2026 at Beachside Church. National finalists will compete for cash prizes, recognition and a \$100,000 529 education savings plan contribution.

"As the first chamber of commerce in Florida to register and host the National Civics Bee, everything about the planning process was new," said Chamber President/CEO Ted Corcoran. "This year, we're eager to see even greater engagement from students, schools, and sponsors."

The essay portal is open now through Feb. 3, 2026. Details: nationalcivicsbee.org.

Choctaw Students Build Life Skills Through Reality Check

Approximately 80 Choctawhatchee High School juniors and seniors participated in the Okaloosa Public Schools Foundation's 4th Annual Reality Check, a hands-on financial literacy simulation held Dec. 3 and sponsored by Origin Bank.

Students were assigned careers, salaries and family scenarios before navigating stations

for housing, utilities, insurance, transportation and more. The goal: understand the real costs of everyday life.

Principal Michelle Heck said the students rose to the challenge sharing their impressions:

Ryan Taporco, Senior: "It was an eye-opening experience... to make practical decisions on wants and needs with the given salary and budget."

Abby Heck, Junior: "It was a great real-world experience for opportunities and decisions we will encounter once we graduate high school."

The event was supported by more than a dozen community partners, volunteers, educators and military members.

Fort Walton Machining Featured in FSU InSPIRE Manufacturing Month

Fort Walton Machining — a longtime leader in precision manufacturing and defense support — is a featured partner this fall in Florida State University's InSPIRE initiative, highlighting high-tech workforce pathways in Northwest Florida.

As part of expanded Manufacturing Month programming, FSU launched new

Continued on page 30

There's a lot to LOVE about Fort Walton Beach!

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I'm Not Your Friend... I Am Not Your Friend

Why Today's Real Estate Market Demands Professionalism Over Friendship



By Paul Andres Domenech

"What's the market like right now?" Hot or cold? Strong or weak? Good or bad?

Those questions dominate real estate conversations today. And while all of those descriptions can be debated, the truth is simple: "good" and "bad" are often just matters of perspective. What truly matters is how you respond to the conditions in front of you.

Real estate professionals are trained to study the past-comparable sales, trends and historical data, to predict future value. When homes sell quickly and multiple offers are common, consistency feels comforting. It becomes our friend. But when the environment changes, that

become a liability.

The past is not a guarantee of the future. What was once "the future" is now the past, and today's market is clearly different. Homes are sitting longer. Price reductions are more frequent. Listings are expiring. This is not a broken marketit's a changing one. And change exposes whether decisions are being made based on current conditions or outdated expecta-

Think of it like stepping back into a sport you once played. You might know the rules, but if you aren't conditioned and in rhythm, jumping into competition can lead to costly mistakes. Real estate works the same way. Many people know the rules. Fewer are actively in the game, adjusting daily to the realities of today's marketplace.

When conditions shift, it's easy to label the moment as "bad." But stormy weather doesn't stop progress, it creates opportunity. While others wait

same consistency can quietly for perfect conditions, those willing to adapt gain ground. Advantage is built in uncomfortable moments

> The key is operating in the present. Learn from the past. Act in the now. Prepare for what's ahead.

> This is where process matters most: Position, Preparation, Promotion and Price. Markets should never be reduced to oneword labels like hot or cold. Perspective matters. What benefits one seller may challenge another. What truly matters is clarity around expectations and real-time market position.

> The best way to gain that clarity is to work with someone who is actively in the gamesomeone showing up daily regardless of conditions. If an agent thrived only when everything felt easy, that doesn't make today's market "bad." It simply means they were built for favorable conditions, not challenging

> Today's environment is not built for friends.

- Longer days on market.
- More negotiation.
- More strategy.
- More accountability.

Kindness is appreciated, but kindness alone does not sell homes.

A real estate transaction exists to serve the client—not the agent. It requires the highest level of service, integrity, and professionalism. A true professional is not your friend. A true professional is your asset.

To create clarity when choosing representation, consider these four questions—the 4 P's:

Position: Where is your agent positioned right now in the market? How many listings do they personally carry? How many are under contract? Results reveal real-time effectiveness-logos do not.

Preparation: What specific steps must be taken to position your home for the highest net in the shortest time? Preparation is not generic—it is strategic.

Promotion: How will your home stand out from other options buyers are seeing? Visibility without distinction is noise.

Price: What will the home realistically sell for today? And, if it doesn't sell within 30 days, what is the adjustment strategy? Pricing should follow buyer behavior, not seller hope.

Confidence is not always comfortable, but it is clear. When you work with someone who is navigating the current market daily and producing consistent results, certainty replaces fear. The market is neither hot nor cold, it simply is.

You don't need a friend.

You need an asset.

And when that asset earns trust through consistency, execution and integrity, something stronger than friendship forms—a professional partnership built on results and mutual respect.

I may not be your friend on day one. But, I will work to earn that title. And to the clients who trusted me and became friends along the way-thank you for the opportunity to serve you.

A House Sold Name



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What Are You Doing New Year's Eve?

By Christopher Manson

As the countdown to 2026 begins, the Emerald Coast is buzzing with celebrations for every age, every family and every kind of New Year's Eve.

Here's a few of our area faves:

Wednesday, December 31 Baytowne New Year's Eve Countdown

The Village of Baytowne Wharf, Miramar Beach, 6 p.m.-1 a.m. | baytownewharf.com

An evening to remember, with fireworks at 8 p.m. and midnight. Plus, kids' activities, face painting, DJ music on the Baytowne Live stage from 6 to 8 p.m., and live music from the Heather Hayes Experience on the Events Plaza stage from 7 p.m. to 1 a.m., drone light shows, and more. Attendees under 21 years old must be accompanied by a legal guardian after 10 p.m.

New Year's Eve at HarborWalk Village

HarborWalk Village, Destin, 7 p.m.-1 a.m. | HarborWalkVillage. com

It's a "Grande" celebration on the Destin Harbor, with fireworks (8 p.m. and midnight), live music from the Aces (7 p.m.)



and New Royals (9:30 p.m.), and more festive fun.

New Year's Eve Dinner

Beach Walk Café, 2700 Scenic Hwy. 98, Destin,

Henderson Park Inn, Times Vary Each Day | opentable.com

Ring in the new year with a chef-inspired dinner, waterfront views, and a sparkling start to 2026 by the shore. Guests must be 13 or older.

New Year's Eve Dinner Cruise Aboard the Solaris

Sunquest Cruises, 8330 Mike Hayes Boulevard, Miramar Beach. 8 p.m.-12:30 a.m., Check-in at 7 p.m. | sunquestcruises.com

Enjoy a four-course dinner and dancing under the moon-light aboard the 125-foot Solaris yacht in Sandestin. Special parking available. The New Year's Eve cruise is exclusively for guests age 21 and up, and includes chef-inspired cuisine, a stunning view of the Village

of Baytowne Wharf's midnight fireworks show, party favors, and a champagne toast to get 2026 off to an awesome start. Cost is \$200 per person; make reservations (required) online or call 850.650.2519. A 72-hour cancellation policy applies to this event.

Okaloosa Island Boardwalk New Year's Eve Fireworks

The Boardwalk, Okaloosa Island, 8 p.m. | theboardwalkoi.com



Ring in the New Year beachside as fireworks launch from the end of the fishing pier, visible from anywhere along The Boardwalk—restaurants, bars, pier or shoreline. Make it a dinner-and-a-show with a front-row view from one of The Boardwalk's beach-facing restaurants, or grab a treat and

spread out along the sand to watch the fireworks light up the night.

LuLu's Annual Noon Year's Eve Celebration

LuLu's Destin, Destin, 10 a.m.-2 p.m. | lulusfunfoodmusic.com

A festive, kid-friendly New Year's celebration featuring face painting, live music and entertainment from Capt. Davy and his Pirates, plus family fun on the sandy beach. Kids enjoy their own countdown to Noon with a giant beach ball drop. Perfect for families looking to celebrate early. LuLu's closes at 3 p.m. on December 31.

Noon Kids' Eve Beach Ball Drop

The Island Resort, 1500 Miracle Strip Parkway SE, Fort Walton Beach, 11 a.m.-1 p.m. | theislandfl. com

New Year's fun for the little ones, with festive crafts and activities, and a countdown to an early beach ball drop to ring in 2026. Public welcome; free for resort guests. Purchase a day pass at resortpass.com.

Noon Year's Eve

HarborWalk Village, Destin, 11 a.m.-Noon | HarborWalkVillage. com

A family-friendly celebration with fun activities, DJ dance party on the lawn, crafts, and an early "smokeshow" fireworks display.



Noon Year's Eve Balloon Bash with Bluey and Bingo

Fort SK8 Family Fun Center, 202 Racetrack Road NW, Fort Walton Beach, 10 a.m.-1 p.m. | fortsk8.com

Join kids' favorites Bluey and Bingo for skating, playground, arcade, games, "themed" snacks, and a balloon drop. Reserve online and save \$5 on tickets, or call 850.863.1223.

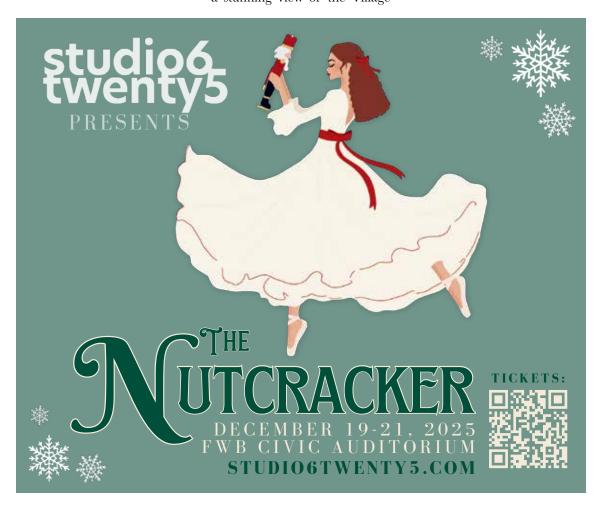
January 1, 2026 Juana's Penguin

Juana's Penguin Plunge 'n Paddle

Juana's Pagodas and Sailors' Grill, Navarre Beach, 9 a.m.-4 p.m. | juanaspagodas.com

The theme of the 2026 Plunge 'n Paddle, benefiting Gulf Coast Kiln Walk Society, is "Freezin' for a Reason." Jump into the Santa Rosa Sound for a fresh start to the new year. There will be a number of tempting raffle items, so get your tickets for \$20 (five tickets in advance, four tickets day of event).

The Gulf Coast Kiln Walk Society's mission is "to promote awareness of the ceramic arts and build a sense of community through clay-related activities, bringing individuals of all ages together to celebrate our heritage and pass it on to future generations." Learn more at gulfcoastkilnwalk.org.







Happenings Around FWB

2025-26

DECEMBER

| Lego Club 10

3 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB

Pizza with a Purpose benefiting **Safe Connections** 4 pm | Task Force Pizza Co. | FWB

11 | Mini Makers and Experimenters Lab

10:30 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

Medicare 101

10:30 am | FWB Public Library | FWB

Greater FWB Chamber Nothing But Networking

11:30 am | AJ's on the Bayou | FWB

After School Artists

3:30 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB

Christmas on the Coast with the Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce

5 pm | Rockin' Tacos Grill & Tequila Bar | Okaloosa Island



Fort Comedy Open Mic Standup 7 pm | Downtown Music Hall | FWB

Winter Wonderland 6 pm | NWFL Fairgrounds | FWB

Cookie Crawl: A Downtown Holiday Stroll 13 8 am | Downtown FWB

Garnier Beach Garden Club

10 am | FWB Public Library | FWB

Girls Empowered with Math and Science (GEMS) Workshop

10:30 am | FWB Public Library | FWB

Book Signing with Local Author Angie Jackson 12 pm | Pottery Barn in Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

Beachy Lil Christmas Sandcastle Spectacular 12 pm | The Island Resort | Okaloosa Island

A Very Merry Christmas Party

5 pm | THICK Cookie Co. | Fort Walton Beach

Holiday Pops Spectacular! with Sinfonia Gulf Coast

7:30 pm | Destin-FWB Convention Center | Okaloosa Island

Yule of Yesteryear

10 am -4 pm | Heritage Museum of NWFL | Val'p

Brunch with Santa

11 am | Soundside Waterfront Bar | FWB

Karoake

9 pm | FUBAR | FWB

Karoake

6 pm | AJs on the Bayou | FWB

Trivia Night

6 pm | Rick's Crab Trap | FWB

18 | Fort Comedy Open Mic Standup 7 pm | Downtown Music Hall | FWB

18-Coastal White Christmas Events in Grand 23

4 pm | Grand Boulevard at Sandestin | Miramar Beach

studio6twenty5 Presents The Nutcracker 19 6 pm | FWB Civic Auditorium | FWB

Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class 20 10 am | Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso Paws and Claus 12 pm | Soundside Waterfront Bar | FWB studio6twenty5 Presents The Nutcracker

Christmas Brunch Market 21 11 am | Soundside Waterfront Bar | FWB

6 pm | FWB Civic Auditorium | FWB

Christmas Miracle Children's Fiesta 12-6 pm | Northwest Florida Fairgrounds | FWB

studio6twenty5 Presents The Nutcracker 2 pm | FWB Civic Auditorium | FWB

Winter Workshops 22 10 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB Holiday Horse-Drawn Carriage Rides 4 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

Winter Workshops 23 |

10 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

Games Club

1 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB

Holiday Horse-Drawn Carriage Rides 4 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

Karoake

6 pm | AJs on the Bayou | FWB

Trivia Night

6 pm | Rick's Crab Trap | FWB

MERRY CHRISTMAS! **Christmas Dinner Buffet** 5 pm | The Island Resort | FWB

Winter Workshops 10 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

Lego Club 27 10 am | FWB Public Library | FWB

9 pm | FUBAR | FWB

Winter Break Fun for Everyone

30 10 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

31 Noon Year's Eve Bash 11 am | FortSk8 | FWB

DESIGN

Noon Year's Eve Beach Ball Drop

DIGITAL

11 am | The Island Resort | FWB

New Year's Eve Dinner Cruise 8 pm | SunQuest Cruises | Miramar Beach

New Year's Eve Fireworks

8 pm | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island



JANUARY

01 | New Year's Pelican Plunge 7 am | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island

Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee 7 am | Christian Life Center at FBC | FWB Winter Break Fun for Everyone 10 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

Discover Science Saturday 03 10 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

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

Mini Makers and Experimenters Lab 02 10:30 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

Medicare 101

10:30 am | FWB Public Library | FWB

Simply the Best: The Music of Tina Turner with Sinfonia Gulf Coast

7:30 pm | Destin-FWB Convention Center | Okaloosa Island

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

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A Living Story of Love: First Baptist's 37th Live Nativity Returns

The 37th annual presentation of the Live Nativity at First Baptist Church of Fort Walton Beach will take place Monday, December 15 through Sunday, December 21, from 6 to 8:30 p.m. nightly.

Presented as the church's free gift to the community, the Live Nativity tells the complete story of salvation — from the miraculous birth of Jesus to His crucifixion and resurrec-

Located beside the church sanctuary at the corner of 2nd Street and Church Street, the Live Nativity offers plenty of free parking just across the street. Guests are invited to step back in time as they witness scenes featuring Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus, along with angels and the three Wise

Upon arrival, each visitor's photo is taken as a keepsake and printed on-site for pickup before departure. From there, guests journey to the Shepherd's Field, where they can meet friendly animals and even help feed them. Handheld feeding trays are provided to keep fingers safe while shar-



ing sweet feed and carrots with the animals.

The field features sheep, miniature donkeys, and two beloved camels Naomi, a longtime favorite, and her young son Nicodemus (Nico), returning for his second year. Helping to keep things tidy are the "middle school shepherds," affectionately known as super-duper scoopers, who make sure the field stays clean and safe for everyone.

To ensure all can participate fully, the church also provides golf cart rides through the Live Nativity for guests with mobility challenges.

As visitors continue their walk, they'll encounter a Roman guard at the cross and an angel at the Empty Tomb asking, "Why do you seek him here? He is risen!" Children

will delight in a stop at the Candy Cane Booth, where they receive a candy cane and hear the story of its invention. At the Deacons' Table, free Bibles are available to take home.

The evening concludes with live seasonal music from the church's music ministry, cookies, hot chocolate, and coffee enjoyed around glowing fire pits - a perfect way to end this heartwarming experience.

The Live Nativity remains a no-cost, no-donation event, lovingly presented each year by the First Baptist Church family. For both the costumed volunteers and guests, it is a time of joy, reflection, and community — a celebration of the true meaning of Christmas and the love of Jesus at His birth.

Becomes a **Community Treasure:** FWB Director Shares 30-Year Christmas Village at City Hall What began as a simple holiday hobby more than three decades ago has grown into a

dazzling Christmas traditionone that Fort Walton Beach Growth Management Director Tim Gibson and his family are sharing with the public for the first time this year.

A Family Tradition

Tucked inside a vacant office just off the Growth Management Department lobby, visitors will now find an elaborate, meticulously crafted Christmas village featuring hundreds of porcelain buildings, figurines, a grand castle, handmade details and even a working model train weaving through the snowy streets.

For Tim's wife, Melissa, the tradition traces back to the late 1980s. "It started with my dad buying these Christmas houses for my mom," she said. Over the years, the family lovingly collected the Mervyn's "Village Square" holiday buildings and figurines— seasonal favorites from the now-closed department store chain.

When the collection was eventually passed down to Tim and Melissa, the couple continued the legacy, fine-tuning and expanding the display each holiday season. "We've built onto it over the years, adding something new every year," Tim said.

Today, the village has grown into a breathtaking miniature world with over 1,000 individual pieces, including an estimated 250 to 300 buildings and countless handmade additions crafted by Tim himself.

This year marks a new chapter: instead of assembling the village at home, the Gibson family chose to bring the magic to City Hall. Tim, Melissa, their daughter Mikayle and Melissa's mother Charlotte Shelton spent evenings and weekends assembling the display—an entirely personal project created without the use of city assets.

The village also includes whimsical "Easter eggs" for sharp-eyed guests to discover: a tiny Where's Waldo, hidden









ladybugs and several cleverly sculpted shapes tucked into the cloud backdrop. "I want people to come in and experience it," Tim said. "Every time you look at it, you see something new. I just felt like it would bring joy to people."

See the Christmas Village

The display is open to the public now through the end of the year at the Growth Management offices in the Fort Walton Beach City Hall complex, 105 Miracle Strip Parkway SW.

Hours: Monday-Friday, 7 a.m. to 5 p.m.





Simplifying Medicare Advantage vs. Supplement Choices



By Greg Durette, Florida Health Connector

This is the time of year when you should review your Medicare options and make important decisions about your coverage for 2026.

Right now, we are in the Annual Election Period (AEP) for all Medicare beneficiaries. It is often referred to as the Annual Open Enrollment Period. This annual event runs from October 15th through December 7th.

Because this period allows ALL Medicare eligible folks to make switches and changes to their plans, it is the most heavily advertised time of the year...not

like I have to tell you that! Folks on Original Medicare (Parts A&B), Supplements (MediGap), Stand Alone Prescription Plans (Part D) and Advantage Plans have a chance to pretty much do anything they want with their coverage mix. The hard part comes with sorting it all out.

One of the things I often talk about with Medicare beneficiaries around this time of year is to make sure you don't get so overwhelmed by all the information out there that you run out of time to take action. It can sometimes become "paralysis by analysis" syndrome. Remember, the AEP ends on December 7th!

Figuring out which coverage options are best for you can be confusing at any age. But, understanding healthcare options for those 65 and older can be even more difficult.

I suggest considering these three things when shopping for Medicare Advantage/Supplement plans:

• **Choice:** When it comes to Medicare, one size does not fit all – what works for your neigh-



bor (or doctor/provider!) might not work best for you. Take the time to learn and understand the benefits and costs of each plan so you can feel confident in your decision and your health care coverage. Remember, you are getting the best for you, not your doctor or other provider.

• Care: Care starts with a strong relationship with your primary care provider. If your plan has a network, make sure you're comfortable with the doctors and hospitals in that network. Check to see if your plan will coordinate your care with the rest of your providers—in and out of state.

• Experience: Medicare can be complex and confusing. It's important to find a seasoned agent/broker that works for you and supports you throughout your health care journey with plan benefits and resources that can help you live more and worry less about out of pocket costs.

Since Medicare Advantage Plans are offered by private companies, one excellent feature is they have more freedom and motivation to include extra benefits such as vision, hearing, gym memberships, dental, overthe-counter pharmacy items and more.

However, it is important to note that, not only do Medicare Advantage plans vary by state, but are different right down to each individual county in each state. Supplements are universal regardless of state/county, but often times cost more premium per month and do not cover prescriptions, requiring additional premium costs to pick up that coverage (Part D).

Your sibling in North Dakota is not going to have the same insurance company/coverage options you would in your Florida county. Try not to get trapped into believing the terms Supplement and Advantage are the same. It is critical to know your specific differences before making a choice that works for you.

This is why it is vitally important to work with a local agent that knows the area and understands the benefits landscape as it applies to you. A famous actor or retired athlete on TV touting a toll-free number from who knows where will likely not.

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



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\$300

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MEDICARE



It's your Medicare.

Get quality care and the health plan you deserve from Florida Blue Medicare and our trusted Medicare Advantage provider network.



Call me today — 1-850-842-2400 Gregory Durette

As a local, licensed Blue Cross Blue Shield agent, I can answer your questions and help you find a plan that fits your needs.





Your 2025 Guide to Gift Giving

By Christopher Manson

The holiday savings ECCO Motors proved so appealing that Santa has decided to ditch the ol' sleigh. Now through December 31, ECCO offers \$500 off all Sierra LSV models. Sleek, stylish and built for performance, it's "the perfect present for under the palm tree." ECCO Motors is located at 147 Professional Place in Miramar Beach. Call 850.837.2600 or visit eccomotors.com. For sales and custom builds, visit their Destin location at 36058 Emerald Coast Parkway across from Regatta Bay.

And Mr. Claus? Well, when he's not zooming down 98 checking out the latest rides at ECCO Motors, he loves to swing by **Baldwin Turf** in Niceville. Word around the North Pole is that Santa heads straight there for creative gifts, luscious greenery, and those made-for-Florida touches that turn any yard into a holiday oasis, helping even the busiest elf (or Claus himself!) deck the halls in style. Explore the magic at www.baldwinturfniceville.com.



Destin's McCaskill Company offers a variety of fine jewelry gift ideas that will add some sparkle to the holidays, from pearl necklaces and earrings to diamond engagement rings (now, there's a Christmas to remember). Custom-made pieces from top jewelry designers are available, too, plus lots more. Located at 13390 Highway 98 West. Call 850.650.2262 or visit mccaskillandcompany.com.

Deck your home in holiday greenery with festive pots, stylish planters and more from **PC**-Beach Pots & Planters. The Panama City Beach retailer offers everything you could imagine to make your space merry and bright. Located at 12405 Panama City Beach Parkway. Call 850.960.7687 or email pcbpotsnplanters@gmail.com.

For the people on your shopping list that love to eat - and who doesn't, really? - pick up a gift card for \$25 (or more!) at some of our favorite restaurants: AJ's (locations in Destin, Fort Walton Beach, Okaloosa Island and Grayton Beach), Tailfins (Destin Harbor), Auston's on 98 (Miramar Beach), The Boathouse (Destin Harbor), Fudpucker's (Destin – check out their one-of-a-kind gift shop, too), Crispy Cajun Chicken (Destin), FUBAR Pizza Bar (Okaloosa Island), and the Saltwater Restaurants family of irresistible eateries - Surf Hut (Miramar Beach), The Crab Trap (Destin and the Okaloosa Island Boardwalk), Rockin' Tacos (Okaloosa Island Boardwalk), AL's Beach Club (Okaloosa Island Boardwalk) and Floyd's Shrimp House (Okaloosa Island Boardwalk).

At Beverly Hills Day Spa, 30-minute massages - Swedish, aromatherapy, prenatal, deep tissue, hot stone, reflexology and more - start at \$50, and that's just one of many spa services available. Purchase an instant gift certificate at beverlyhillsdayspa.com. Located at 114 Palmetto Drive Suite 6 in Destin. Call 850.654.8544 to find out

Other looking good / feeling good options include gift cards from Coastal Protein & En-(facebook.com/coastalprotein) . . . Bluewater Plastic Surgery in Niceville - and coming in January 2026 to Watersound (bluewaterplasticsur- $\operatorname{gery.com})$. . . and $\boldsymbol{Niceville's}$ Gulf Coast Dental - who can turn down a teeth whitening treatment? (gulfcoastdental.

Judging by the lovely tree photo posted on their Facebook page, Blue Bay Lifestyle Co. is serious about this whole Christmas thing. Check out a wide selection of men's and women's apparel, shoes, accessories and gifts, including such quality brands as Vuori, Liverpool Los Angeles, Hobo Bags, Maui Jim Sunglasses, and

more. Located at 27 Racetrack Road, Fort Walton Beach. Call 850.374.8236 or visit bluebaylifestyle.com.

And while you're in the neighborhood, stop by Run With It to satisfy the running/ walking aficionado on your shopping list. 850.243.1007.

Lisa Turpin offers private personal training, a/k/a health and well-being enhancement. Look for Lisa Turpin Fitness on Facebook, call 850.974.2005, or email Lisa.Turpin8r@gmail.

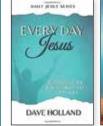
The arts and culture lover in your life will appreciate a **Mat**tie Kelly Arts Foundation Membership, starting at \$75. Benefits include free access to Concerts in the Village, discounts on Festival of the Arts merch, and members-only ticket pricing. Help keep the arts thriving by calling 850.650.2226 or visiting mkaf.org.

More live entertainment options include tickets to studio6twenty5's production of **The Nutcracker**, December 19-21 at the Fort Walton Beach Civic Auditorium (\$15.99-\$30.99 at studio6twenty5.com) . . . **Em**erald Coast Theatre Co.'s Murder on the Orient Express. coming January 15 through February 1, 2026 (emeraldcoasttheatre.org) . . . The Ground Up Project's Second Annual Wacky Tacky Ball, set for January 31, 2026, at Destin's Emerald Grande, promises ridiculous fun for a worthy cause (facebook.com/thegroundupprojectinc) ... Act4Mystery offers gift cards good for any of its comedic murder mystery shows on the Emerald Coast (act4mystery.com).

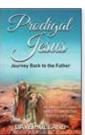
For those who could use a post-holiday charter boat fishing trip - which would be everybody, right? - check out the deals being offered up by the **Destin Princess and Desti**ny charter boats. Visit destinpartyboatfishing.com or call 850.753.8667. Discounts for seniors, military and children.

Speaking of post-holiday fun, who could resist a gift card for a home cleaning from **Spar**kles Cleaning Service? In addition to residential cleaning, Sparkles offers commercial, vacation rental, and move in/ move out cleaning. Visit sparklescleaningflorida.com more info.

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Lifestyle

Stuff Those Stockings: Small Gifts with Big Personality

By Liesel Schmidt Dear Shoppers:

We get it. You're staring down the barrel at Christmas and still have people on your list that you have zero ideas of what you should get them.

Pssst. Put down the cell phone, tablet, or whatever device that serves as central command for your "buy it now" habit and go old school. Touch, feel, smell... Do all the things staring at little tiny pictures on screens doesn't let you do. Let your senses help you pick out the perfect giftand rather than wandering down aisles for hours with all the panicked people who are just trying to get something, pop into Blue Bay Lifestyle Co. to fill those stockings with gifts people will actually keep, use, and love.

Here's your guide to smallbut-mighty treasures that make Christmas morning feel extra magical—all from the brands Blue Bay proudly carries. You're welcome.

P.S. We won't tell that it's actually you and not Santa. Your secret is safe with us.

For the Fashion Lover: Chic, Practical, and Perfectly Packable

Stockings are the ideal place for small accessories that feel indulgent without blowing your budget...Did someone say "ho ho"... Hobo? Sorry, couldn't resist. But bad puns aside, Hobo's buttery leather goods have a dedicated following for a reason: quality. A compact wallet, cardholder, or cross-body bag tucked into a stocking delivers everyday luxury that lasts for years—plus, you'll score some major points.

If you're gifting someone who loves to sparkle, **Bara Boheme** bracelets, necklaces, and earrings strike that perfect balance between earthy, bohemian and effortlessly pretty. Go with a single bracelet for a lovely and delicate look, or build a curated stack that looks intentional and stylish.

For the friend who always asks, "Do you happen to have a hair tie?" (we all have one of those) stuff their stocking with **Teleties.** Their hair ties and claws are both stylish and nearly indestructible—which is every-





thing you could want for beach days, gym days, and messy-bun days. Bonus points for this: They look great peeking out of a stocking.



For the One Who Lives Outside (or Just Loves Looking Like They Do)

Sure, sunglasses might not be the first thing you think of as a stocking stuffer—but they *should* be. Earlier sunsets means that afternoon sunlight is positioned juuuuust right to be blinding at midday, so we love the idea of shades from **SunSki** and **Maui Jim.** Lightweight, durable, and designed for every day on the Emerald Coast, they're the "How did you know I needed these?" gift of the season.

For those who spend half their time on a trail, a court, or the water, tuck a **Clea Ray**



mini bag or zip pouch into their stocking. Rugged, stylish, and adventure-ready, they're ideal for quick trips, travel days, and spontaneous outings.

For the Pickleball Obsessed (Yes, We All Have One. And No, There's No Cure)

Pickleball people are a special breed. They don't just play—they become obsessed. So why not slip some holiday cheer into your pickleball princess's stocking with pickleball-themed earrings from **In-**

Continued on page 27



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- 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

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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!"



Last-Minute Gifts That Make a Big Local Impact

Skip the Shipping Stress: 20+ Thoughtful Finds Discovered Right Here on the Emerald Coast



By Danica LaFaire, Fish Window Cleaning of Northwest Florida

The holidays always seem to move faster than we do. One minute we're planning ahead, and the next we're thinking, "Wait... I still need a gift."

The good news? Some of the most meaningful last-minute gifts aren't ordered online—they're discovered right here at home. When we shop local, we invest in the Emerald Coast, support families, and strengthen the small businesses that give our communities their personality and heart.

At Fish Window Cleaning, we have the unique perspective of seeing the Emerald Coast community and its vibrant businesses up close every day. It's honestly the best part of the job! We love being part of a com-

munity filled with incredible local shops and creators. Here are just a handful of places that make last-minute gifting both easy and genuinely enjoyable.

Jewelry, Boutiques & Apparel

Klara Haloho — Destin: Known for her signature freshwater pearls and simple, elegant designs, Klara's pieces feel timeless and meaningful.

Kiss the Sky Boutique — Destin: A lively, uplifting boutique full of colorful apparel, accessories, and personality-filled finds.

A Christmas to Remember — Destin: A seasonal wonderland of ornaments, décor, and festive treasures — perfect for sentimental gifts.

Ophelia Swimwear — Sandestin: A beautifully curated swim and resort wear boutique for the beach lover or traveler in your life.

Path of Grace Thrift Store & Boutique — Miramar Beach: A thrift boutique with heart and mission. Unique finds and fashionable gems, with proceeds supporting addiction recovery for women.

Beauty, Spa & Self-Care Blissful Beauty Bar



Niceville: High-quality facials, glowing results, and a soothing atmosphere. Their gift cards are perfect for someone in need of true self-care.

Luxe Nail Bar — Destin: A modern, relaxing spot for polished pampering.

Magnolia Soap & Bath Co. — Destin: Hand-poured soaps, bath bombs, lotions, and custom scents — perfect for building a self-care bundle.

Hand & Stone Massage & Facial Spa — Destin: Professional massages, facials, and monthly memberships that offer a genuine reset.

Home, Décor & Local Art
Artful Things — Niceville:

A beautiful mix of local art, pottery, jewelry, and handcrafted gifts full of meaning.

Salt & Story — Niceville: A cozy independent bookstore with carefully curated titles for every age—perfect for escaping the winter rush with a great read.

Sea Glass Interiors — Miramar Beach: Coastal-inspired décor and refined accents for the design-minded person on your list.

Risa's Interiors — Fort Walton Beach: Elegant furniture pieces, art, and unique décor — perfect for someone who loves a thoughtfully designed home.

Hobbies, Collectibles & Specialty Shops

TBS Comics — Fort Walton Beach: Comics, collectibles, and graphic novels — you'll find the inner kid in anyone with these wonderful finds for hobbyists and teens.

Caddies Corner — Fort Walton Beach: Golf accessories, apparel, and gear — ideal for the golfer in your life.

Fort Walton Vintage Records — Fort Walton Beach: A local treasure with thousands of vinyl records, rare finds, and new releases — a dream for music lovers.

H&B Army Navy Store — Fort Walton Beach: A longtime local staple with rugged gear, tools, outdoor essentials, and practical finds.

Health, Wellness & Experience-Based Gifts

Paradise Fit Jiu Jitsu

Destin: An empowering experience that builds confidence, discipline, and strength — won-

derful for both adults and kids.

CRYO 850 — Miramar Beach: Cryotherapy, red-light therapy, and recovery services are perfect for wellness lovers and anyone needing a boost.

Island Time Mobile Detailing — Destin: A practical, thoughtful gift that comes straight to the driveway — everyone appreciates a freshly detailed vehicle.

Solasta 30A — Santa Rosa Beach: A holistic wellness sanctuary offering far more than just a workout. From hot power yoga and sculpting classes to restorative infrared sauna sessions and salt chamber therapy.

Stretch Zone — Santa Rosa Beach: Assisted stretching designed to improve mobility, reduce tension, and support active living — ideal for anyone wanting to feel better in their body.

Robin's Bikes & Fitness

— Miramar Beach: Bikes, accessories, and active-lifestyle essentials — perfect for outdoor enthusiasts and individuals embracing movement.

Fish Window Cleaning
— Serving the Emerald Coast:
Freshly cleaned windows at
home or at your business is a gift
everyone feels immediately. It's
thoughtful, practical, and gives
people the gift of time — something we could all use more of.

Why Shopping Local Matters

Every local purchase creates ripple effects:

- Supports local jobs and amilies
- Builds real community connectionsHelps preserve the Emerald
- Coast's unique character
- Reduces shipping waste

• Strengthens businesses that strengthen others

Last-minute gifting doesn't have to feel rushed or impersonal. Our area is full of amazing, hard-working local businesses ready to help you find something thoughtful, meaningful, and full of heart.

This season, let your gifts reflect connection, gratitude, and pride in the place we call home. From our team at Fish Window Cleaning, we wish you a wonderfully bright and stress-free holiday!







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- private dinners
- weddings
- holiday parties
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Best Places to Watch Your Favorite Teams

AJ's Seafood & Oyster Bar

Attention all die hard football fans, AJ's boasts the one and only Jumbotron on the Destin Harbor, where you can watch your favorite games on the BIG, BIG screen surrounded by the energy and beauty of the Destin Harbor. AJ's serves up delicious daily specials, mouth-watering drinks plus entertaining live music all month, too. Don't miss any of the action!

For 40 years, AJ's Seafood and Oyster Bar has been serving cold Gulf Coast oysters and cool libations. What began as a popular local hang out known for fresh oysters and cold beer has grown into one of the most iconic "hot spots" on the Destin Harbor. From its humble beginning shucking oysters off the deck behind a small trailer on the Destin Harbor, it has grown to four locations along our Emerald Coast, serving fresh seafood, live music and exciting water activities in the Destin area. Come on down to AJ's Seafood and Oyster Bar all season long.

(850) 837-1913 116 Harbor Blvd. ajsdestin.com

AJ's on the Bayou

Located at the base of the Cinco Bayou Bridge in Fort Walton Beach, AJ's on the Bay-

ou offers a beautiful waterfront the Island! setting with both indoor seating and an open-air deck overlooking the bayou. It's the perfect spot to catch a football game outdoors while sipping a mimosa and enjoying a bite to eat. AJ's serves brunch with bottomless mimosas for just \$10.95 with food purchase, plus daily weekday lunch specials for \$12.95 including iced tea. Add in live music or entertainment every day, and you've got one lively destination where the food, fun, and football never stop.

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

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 10 oz. cut of prime rib served with baked potato and side salad, with au jus and horseradish cream sauce for \$22.95 every Thursday at 4 p.m. Key Lime Pie is available all day, every day! Join us for Karaoke every Wednesday night at 7 p.m. and live music all other nights! The most fun on ajsoystershanty.com 108 Santa Rosa Blvd., FWB

FUBAR Pizza Bar

(850) 226-8108

Looking for a favorite place to watch your favorite football teams? Welcome to FUBAR pizza bar nestled on Okaloosa Island. Locally owned and family friendly, Fubar is known for its almost-famous pizza and wings and carries all sports games and live entertainment, along with impeccable service. You can enjoy all that while enjoying the waterfront view.

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

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



between. Open 7 days from 11 a.m.-2 a.m.

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The Boardwalk On **Okaloosa Island**

As us locals know, The Boardwalk is a popular destination. With its ideal location on the Gulf, convenient parking and wide range of activities, it's the perfect place to shop, savor various flavors of cuisine, and take in the incredible views of the Emerald Coast. Want to watch football? Then head to restaurants like Rockin Tacos, The Crab Trap, Floyd's Shrimp Shack or Al's Beach Club & Burger Bar, where you can watch your favorite teams with breathtaking views and breaks

for walks on the beach! Sandy toes and salty swim suits are welcome.

The Boardwalk is an official county park with public beach access, along with free parking, pavilions, picnic tables, public restrooms and outdoor showers for beachgoers.

The Boardwalk hosts community events such as the Emerald Coast Motorcycle Challenge, coastal beach cleanups, "Tricks and Treasures" Halloween event and the New Year's Day pelican plunge. It is also home of two legendary volleyball tournaments: Emerald Coast Volleyball Week in the spring, and the Emerald Coast Fall Classic.

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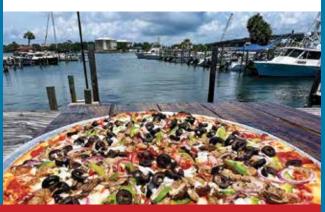
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December 2025 Pro Football Schedule

Week 14

Thursday, Dec. 4

Dallas Cowboys at Detroit Lions, 7:15 p.m., Prime Video

Sunday, Dec. 7

Noon, CBS

Indianapolis Colts at Jacksonville Jaguars, Noon, CBS New Orleans Saints at Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Noon, CBS Miami Dolphins at New York Jets,

Pittsburgh Steelers at Baltimore Ravens, Noon, CBS Seattle Seahawks at Atlanta Falcons, Noon, Fox Tennessee Titans at Cleveland Browns, Noon, Fox Washington Commanders at Minnesota Vikings, Noon, Fox Chicago Bears at Green Bay Packers, Noon, Fox

Denver Broncos at Las Vegas Raiders, 3:05 p.m., CBS Los Angeles Rams at Arizona Cardinals, 3:25 p.m., Fox Cincinnati Bengals at Buffalo Bills, 3:25 p.m., Fox Houston Texans at Kansas City Chiefs, 7:20 p.m., NBC

Monday, Dec. 8

Philadelphia Eagles at Los Angeles Chargers, 7:15 p.m., ESPN Bye week: Carolina Panthers, New England Patriots, New York Giants, San Francisco 49ers

Week 15

Thursday, Dec. 11

Atlanta Falcons at Tampa Bay Buccaneers, 7:15 p.m., Prime Video

Sunday, Dec. 14

Los Angeles Chargers at Kansas City Chiefs, Noon, CBS

Buffalo Bills at New England Patriots, Noon, CBS

New York Jets at Jacksonville Jaguars, Noon, CBS

Baltimore Ravens at Cincinnati Bengals, Noon, CBS

Las Vegas Raiders at Philadelphia Eagles, Noon, Fox

Arizona Cardinals at Houston Texans, Noon, Fox

Washington Commanders at New York Giants, Noon, Fox

Cleveland Browns at Chicago Bears, Noon, Fox

Detroit Lions at Los Angeles Rams, 3:25 p.m., Fox

Tennessee Titans at San Francisco 49ers, 3:25 p.m., Fox

Carolina Panthers at New Orleans Saints, 3:25 p.m., Fox

Green Bay Packers at Denver Broncos, 3:25 p.m., CBS Indianapolis Colts at Seattle Seahawks, 3:25 p.m., CBS Minnesota Vikings at Dallas Cowboys, 7:20 p.m., NBC

Monday, Dec. 15

Miami Dolphins at Pittsburgh Steelers, 7:30 p.m., ESPN

Week 16

Thursday, Dec. 18

Los Angeles Rams at Seattle Seahawks, 7:15 p.m., Prime Video

Saturday, Dec. 20

Green Bay Packers at Chicago Bears, 2:30 or 4 p.m., Fox Philadelphia Eagles at Washington

Commanders, 2:30 or 4 p.m., Fox

Sunday, Dec. 21

Kansas City Chiefs at Tennessee Titans, Noon, CBS New York Jets at New Orleans Saints, Noon, CBS



New England Patriots at Baltimore Ravens, Noon, CBS

Buffalo Bills at Cleveland Browns, Noon, CBS

Tampa Bay Buccaneers at Carolina Panthers, Noon, Fox

Minnesota Vikings at New York Giants, Noon, Fox

Los Angeles Chargers at Dallas Cowboys, Noon, Fox

Atlanta Falcons at Arizona Cardinals, 3:05 p.m., Fox

Jacksonville Jaguars at Denver Broncos, 3:05 p.m., Fox Pittsburgh Steelers at Detroit Lions,

3:25 p.m., CBS
Las Vegas Raiders at Houston Texans,

3:25 p.m., CBS Cincinnati Bengals at Miami Dolphins, 7:20 p.m., NBC

Monday, Dec. 22

San Francisco 49ers at Indianapolis Colts, 7:15 p.m., ESPN

Week 17

Thursday, Dec. 25 (Christmas Day)

Dallas Cowboys at Washington Commanders, Noon, Netflix Detroit Lions at Minnesota Vikings, 3:30 p.m., Netflix Denver Broncos at Kansas City

Chiefs, 7 p.m., Prime Video Saturday, Dec. 27 or Sunday, Dec. 28

*NFL Network has a 3:30 p.m. game and Peacock has an 8 p.m. game on December 27

New York Giants at Las Vegas Raiders Houston Texans at Los Angeles Chargers

Arizona Cardinals at Cincinnati Bengals

Baltimore Ravens at Green Bay Packers

Seattle Seahawks at Carolina Panthers

Sunday, Dec. 28

New Orleans Saints at Tennessee Titans, Noon, CBS

Pittsburgh Steelers at Cleveland Browns, Noon, CBS

New England Patriots at New York Jets. Noon. CBS

Jacksonville Jaguars at Indianapolis Colts, Noon, Fox

Tampa Bay Buccaneers at Miami Dolphins, Noon, Fox

Philadelphia Eagles at Buffalo Bills, 3:25 p.m., Fox

Chicago Bears at San Francisco 49ers, 7:20 p.m., NBC

Monday, Dec. 29

Los Angeles Rams at Atlanta Falcons, 7:15 p.m., ESPN

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December on the Line:

Where the Fish Are Biting from Destin to FWB

As December's cooler temps settle in across the Emerald Coast, anglers shift their attention to inshore winter favorites—Flounder, Redfish and Speckled Trout—while also taking advantage of some underrated offshore opportunities unique to this time of year. Cold weather pushes many species into tighter schools, making them easier to locate once you pattern their movements.

Flounder remain a top target through December. This month offers some of the best action of the year as they move between the Bay and the Gulf, staging on natural and artificial reefs to spawn. Because of their flat shape, flounder stay tight to the bottom, often burrowing into the sand as they ambush prey. Look for them within 200 yards off the beach in 20–60 feet of water or around near-

shore structure along Destin Pass and East Pass. Gulf Flounder and Southern Flounder are the most common; the larger female Southern Flounder can reach up to 28 inches. One perk for anglers: if a flounder misses your bait, they often return for a second strike—so be patient.

Speckled Trout push into deeper, slower-moving water during the winter. Look for them around deep boat docks, bridges, bayou drop-offs, and deep channels in Choctawhatchee Bay and around Fort Walton Beach. Live shrimp, pinfish, and croakers on a Carolina rig work well, as do soft-plastic shrimp tails. A slow troll is an excellent way to locate a school; once you get a hit, switch to live bait to maximize your chances.

Bull Redfish are another winter staple. Massive schools often gather in the Destin Pass,



deep channels, and around the Mid-Bay Bridge. You'll also find them cruising the edges of Crab Island on outgoing tides and schooling off our beaches when conditions are calm. These oversized reds put up an impressive fight and make for great catch-and-release action. Use lures or live bait—preferences can change daily. Because these big reds are spawning, be sure to use circle hooks, wet hands, and a rubber net to ensure a safe release.

Sheepshead, a cold-weather favorite, become increasingly active this month. Look for them around bridge pilings, jetties, docks, and rock piles—especially along the Destin Harbor and Brooks Bridge in Fort Walton Beach. Fiddler crabs, live shrimp, and sand fleas are top-tier baits. Their bite is notoriously subtle, so stay alert.

Black Drum also school up in winter and can be found around

deep channels, bridges, and bay docks. Smaller drum are excellent table fare, while the larger "big uglies" offer fun, steady action on light tackle.

Nearshore and Offshore Winter Notes:

Calmer winter days can offer excellent opportunities for Triggerfish (catch-and-release only in state waters this month), Vermilion Snapper, Blackfin Tuna, King Mackerel (on warm fronts), and Amberjack (season-dependent). Many anglers troll for Blackfin just outside the Pass or hit nearshore wrecks for winter bottom fishing. On the coldest days, keep an eye out for gin-clear water along the beach—perfect for sight-fishing bull reds.

Florida One Sponsors Veterans Day Golf Tournament



By Barbara Palmgren

Fifty-six players participated in a four-person scramble in November at Shalimar Point Golf Course to support a non-profit, Florida One—our local disaster response organization that provides training, education and stress crisis counseling to First Responders throughout Northwest Florida.

Preston Hood provided a hole-in-one car prize for a lucky winner. Unfortunately, no one drove away in the car that was parked at the 8th Par 3 tee box. In a score card playoff, the winners were a four-person team from Rocky Bayou Golf Club with a total score of 54. Congratulations Sandee Sundeen, Jamie Hill, Suhui Borkowski and Shannon Smith! With a





score of 54 the second-place team winners were Ken Isham, Fred Wentland, Dayton Glass and Travis Holland. Longest drive award went to Jeff Grissom and Closest to the Pin was Bob Mathers.

The golf event was organized by Ann Hill, Director of Administration for Florida One. Chairman of the Board, Charles Linden, worked nonstop at the clubhouse with all aspects of the tournament. Located on Green Acres Road in Fort Walton Beach, this non-profit is funded through generous donations and fundraisers.

It's comforting to know that these responders are here for all

us. Their motto, "Prepare, Respond and Recover when Disaster Strikes" says it all. This team is ready to help at any time, and anywhere.





Tired of Constant Fingersticks?

There's a Better Way to Monitor Your Blood Sugar

By Kelly Stalnaker, Baywind Medical

Are you a Type 1 or Type 2 diabetic who's tired of constant fingersticks? It may be time to consider a continuous glucose monitor, or CGM for short.

A CGM automatically tracks your blood sugar levels 24/7 with fewer fingersticks. Instead of using lancets, a tiny sensor is placed just under the skin and held in place with a small adhesive patch. There may be brief discomfort during insertion, but once in place, testing is completely painless, and readings appear instantly on your reader or smartphone.

This small wearable device can be life-changing. By giving you quick, convenient access to real-time blood sugar data, a CGM helps you make better food, activity, and medication decisions throughout the day. Over time, you can spot trends and learn how different meals or activities affect your glucose levels. Many models even alert you when levels are dangerously high or low, helping you stay safe and in control.

Because CGMs are easy to use, they're perfect for patients of all ages. Plus, they are waterproof, durable, and made to handle your active lifestyle. You can work in the garden, enjoy the sauna, toss and turn in your sleep, cuddle with your pets, and even swim and bathe with little chance of it falling off!

If you're a Medicare patient who uses a CGM, or is thinking about making the switch to one, please note that there have been some recent changes in how these devices are covered. In the past, CGMs were classified as a pharmacy benefit, meaning patients could pick them up directly from a pharmacy. Today they are classified as Durable



Medical Equipment (DME), so supplies must be dispensed through a DME provider like Baywind Medical (formerly J&B Medical). Continuing to use the pharmacy for your CGMs may

mean higher out-of-pocket costs for you.

As one of the few local DME providers in the area, Baywind Medical is proud to offer CGMs to Medicare and Tricare patients. We make it easy to get started, simply have a chat with your doctor about whether a CGM might be right for you, then ask to have your prescription sent to Baywind Medical. After we confirm eligibility, we'll ship the equipment directly to your front door. Plus, you'll have access to friendly, knowledgeable representatives in person or by phone, five days a week. As a family-owned business right here in your community, we are committed to the health and wellbeing of our neighbors.

Call Baywind Medical today at (850) 729-2559 or stop by 540 E. John Sims Pkwy in Niceville and experience the care that you deserve.

By Krisy Anderson, Beverly Hills Day Spa

It's the holiday season—and looking your best for every party, picture and gathering is essential! At Beverly Hills Day Spa, the **Ultimate Skin Refiner** is

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GOLDEN

Glow All Season: Holiday Spa Specials to Treat Yourself (or Someone You Love!)

one of the most effective ways to refresh your complexion. After just three treatments of the Ultimate Skin Refiner H2O Facial, you can minimize and deeply cleanse pores, refine tone and texture, and infuse potent antioxidants and anti-aging benefits. It's a safe and gentle way to clear away dirt, debris and oil, revealing fresh, clear, radiant skin.

This 4-step water facial ex-

foliates, extracts and hydrates in one luxurious service. It removes dead skin cells, extracts blackheads, resurfaces the skin, refines fine lines and wrinkles, plumps and hydrates, brightens and softens, minimizes pores, boosts circulation and helps reduce breakouts. Clients have called it a game changer—and the results speak for themselves.

This year, Beverly Hills Day Spa is bringing back its beloved

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holiday package, "Deck the Halls," featuring the hydra skin refiner plus a 90-minute Deep Tissue Massage, the Ultimate Skin Refiner Treatment, Micro-Current lifting and 15-minute Red LED light therapy—all for just \$360 (\$25 sav-

ings!). Treat yourself or gift it to someone special.

Or explore these 2025 Holiday Specials—perfect to give or

Christmas Massage:

Continued on next page









By Dr. Richard Chern, MD

Social media has a way of knowing when a woman has matured. As a woman enters her 40's, her social media accounts are flooded with advertisements touting magical remedies promising to make life bearable again. Night sweats? Solution. Hot flashes? Solution. Mental Fog? Weight Gain? Decreased libido? Solution. Solution. Solution. Solution. And, if you're

Social Media Feels Your Hot Flashes

struggling, you'll click every link offering a way out. Before you know it, your bathroom counter is overflowing with wellness products and supplements. Just keeping track of it all becomes a daily challenge. Unfortunately, these products rarely treat the root of the problem—changing hormones. This is exactly what we do at the Hormone Restoration Center.

Hormone levels in women are constantly changing. Even women in their 20's and 30's can exhibit early signs of estrogen loss, and they often don't recognize the symptoms. Acne, irregular menstruation, fatigue and mood swings are just a few. As women approach perimenopause and menopause, their symptoms are dismissed

as "normal." Detailed hormone panels are rarely ordered by primary care doctors or OB-GYNs, and in reality, doctors receive very little training on hormones or menopause in medical school. Some report as little as one hour of formal instruction. At The Hormone Restoration Center, our mission is to provide the highest quality medical service with a level of personalized care not available anywhere else. Our highly skilled providers have extensive training in bioidentical hormone therapy and tailor treatments to each patient's individual needs. Bioidentical hormone therapy offers significant benefits for women, particularly those experiencing menopause or hormonal disruption. It effectively

alleviates common menopausal symptoms, enhances overall quality of life, and helps prevent long-term health complications.

Hormone therapy is highly effective in reducing menopause symptoms like hot flashes, night sweats, vaginal dryness, mood swings, irritability, and the dreaded "brain fog." These symptoms severely disrupt your daily life. Hormone therapy restores comfort quickly, often within weeks of starting treatment. Hormone therapy alleviates vaginal dryness and pain during intercourse, thereby improving sexual health. Hormone therapy also improves pelvic floor strength, thereby reducing leakage. Hormones are vital for maintaining bone density; hormone therapy reverses

osteoporosis and decreases your risk for fractures. This contribution to bone health reduces long-term disability associated with osteoporosis and increases mobility in later years.

The Hormone Restoration Clinic is the premiere hormone clinic in the region. We invite you to make an appointment with us at 850-837-1271 to schedule a consultation, so you can experience the benefits of hormone therapy for yourself. Forget making life bearable again. Make life spectacular!

January is Thyroid Awareness Month! Call 850-837-1271 to optimize your thyroid. Follow us on Facebook!



GLOW

continued from previous page

60-minute Aromatherapy massage with back and foot sugar scrub – \$90 (\$25 savings)

Mrs. Claus' Night Out: Oxygen Facial with 15-minute Red LED light therapy – \$120 (\$25 savings)

Santa Baby: Ultimate Skin Refiner Facial (HydroFacial) with Collagen Eye & Lip treatment – \$135 (\$50 savings)



A Few of My Favorite Things: Derma-Zen Facial (Dermaplane with Rezenerate) with natural enzyme peel – \$150 (\$25 savings)

Winter Wonderland: Microneedle treatment with Collagen Sheet Mask and Cold

Gloves - \$150 (\$50 savings)

My True Love Gave to Me: 60-minute Deep Tissue Massage, Anti-aging Facial and 30-minute Red LED light therapy – \$185 (\$50 savings)

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holiday pampering easy. Schedule an appointment or pick up a gift certificate for any of these seasonal favorites.

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Journey Bravely: 2025 Year End Reflection

By Stephenie Craig, Journey Bravely

2025 is rushing to a close. Maybe you find yourself overscheduled and weighed down by your own expectations or those of others this month. Maybe your mind is busy with gift planning, meal planning and travel planning. What will your kids do while out of school? How will you manage time away from work? How will you navigate awkward and difficult relationships through the holidays? What will you wear? What pictures will you post? How will you love others well?

December is a brain-busy month. It's easy to fill the days

forgetting to slow down, rest, and reflect on what 2025 has meant to you. Reflecting on what you have experienced and learned each year creates an opportunity for you to approach the next year with intentionality about living life according to your values. Here are some questions and instructions to guide personal reflection regarding the past year, the present, and what you want for 2026.

Create space – Set aside a couple of hours to work through these questions without distraction (including your phone).

Record reflections – Honestly and vulnerably record your answers so you can refer back to them throughout the year and review them at the end of next year.

Share it – Share your responses with one or two trusted people. Sharing intentions with others solidifies them internally and increases your chances of following through.

Live from it – Use the responses to these questions as a daily compass directing your next steps.

The Past Year

What did you accomplish personally and professionally that you feel really good about?

What challenges, struggles and fears did you work through?

What did you hope to accomplish or change but weren't able to? What kept you from doing so?

How are you different from 12 months ago? What did you learn? How did you grow?

How did you make a positive difference in the world around you?

What and who brought you the most joy?

What and who were the greatest stressors?

What did you tolerate this year?

What are you thankful for from the past year?

What are your top 3 insights?

The Present

Life is made up of multiple domains. Take time to check in with yourself by rating each of the following areas on a scale of 1-10:

Personal – How do you feel about yourself?

Physical – How are you taking care of your body (diet, ex-

ercise, rest, etc.)?

Financial – How is your financial situation (income, budget, spending, savings, giving, etc.)?

Spiritual – How satisfied are you with the way faith is integrated into your life?

Vocational – How do you feel about your work/career? Family – How are you doing as a partner and/or parent? Friends – How do you feel about your social relationships?

Fun – How well are you creating time for enjoyment and recreation?

What 2-3 areas of life do you most want to improve in the next year? What steps will you take to make those improvements?

The Upcoming Year

If it were two years from now and you were living your best life, how would you know?

If it were two years from now and you weren't living your best life, what got in the way?

Who do you want to be by the end of the year? In what areas would you like to grow?

What 2-3 things if completed would generate feelings of pride and fulfillment at the end of the year?

What is one thing that if you accomplished it next year would make all your other goals easier or unnecessary?

What do you want to start in the next year?

What do you want to stop in the next year?

How will you make a positive difference in the world around you next year?

If this next year was a chapter in a book, what would you title it?

As you reflect, take time to celebrate and be thankful for the good and growth in 2025 wherever you can find it. And, as you look toward 2026, remember that no one is perfect and you have the ability to grow and gather wisdom each day. Your journey is traveled over a lifetime and all of your growth adds to the depth and beauty of your story. For support along your journey, connect with us at www.journeybravely.com.

WOMEN'S WELLNESS REIMAGINED

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Wellness

Making Time for You: Why the Holidays Can Be the **Perfect Season for Cosmetic Surgery**



By Dr. Clark, BLUEWATER PLASTIC SURGERY

The holidays are filled with shopping, travel, and family gatherings. But, for many people along the Emerald Coast, this season also presents a unique opportunity: the chance to finally schedule a surgical procedure they've been considering. While it may seem counterintuitive to think about cosmetic surgery during the busiest time of year,



December often provides the ideal window for both recovery and renewal. For many of our patients at Bluewater Plastic Surgery, this season becomes the perfect moment to invest in themselves—something we see often as patients appreciate both the flexibility the holidays allow and the attentive, expert care we offer throughout recovery.

Built-In Recovery Time

Most cosmetic surgeries require at least a few days of rest and limited activity. The holiday season often includes builtin vacation days, office closures and school breaks. This natural downtime makes it easier to schedule procedures like breast augmentation, liposuction, tummy tucks or facelifts without missing significant work or family obligations. Many patients

find it comforting to recover while surrounded by supportive loved ones at home.

Starting the New Year with Confidence

January is naturally a season of fresh starts. For patients who undergo procedures in December, the new year often begins with renewed energy and confidence. Whether it's restoring body contours with liposuction, rejuvenating facial features with a facelift, or reclaiming pre-pregnancy shape with a mommy makeover, surgical solutions can provide dramatic, long-lasting results that align with new year goals.

Combining Procedures for Comprehensive Results

The holiday season is also a time when patients consider

> combining procedures. For example, pairing a tummy tuck with breast surgery in a mommy makeover can provide more balanced, transformative results while limiting recovery to a single period. Similarly, combining facial surgery with non-surgical treatments like injectables or medical-grade skincare can help maximize and maintain results.

Privacy and Discretion

Another benefit we value at Bluewater Plastic Surgery is discretion. With many friends and colleagues traveling or celebrating, it's easier to step back for a short period without raising questions. Many patients appreciate the opportunity to move forward discreetly during the season, knowing that holiday schedules naturally provide privacy. By the time normal routines resume in January, swelling and bruising have often subsided, leaving only the refreshed results. Choosing a board-certified plastic surgeon is essential in ensuring these procedures are performed safely, discreetly, and with exceptional outcomes, especially during a busy season.

To schedule a private consultation and explore your options, contact Bluewater Plastic Surgery today. As a board-certified plastic surgeon, my practice is dedicated exclusively to cosmetic surgery, and I have performed thousands of procedures over the last 25 years. My surgical focus includes the face, breast, and body, allowing me to tailor procedures to each patient's goals with precision and experience. My highest priorities are patient safety and superior results. With

more than 300 five-star reviews, I let my patients' experiences speak for themselves.

bluewaterplasticsurgery.com

Bluewater

PLASTIC SURGERY

Steven J. Clark, MD, DMD, FACS

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Wellness



KAY LEAMAN, HEALTH ARCHITECT

There are four main things that help the body to store fat. The more we abuse them, the more the body responds in kind.

There is a plethora of ads aimed to help us rid ourselves of belly fat creating a billion dollar industry. These 'diets' bring success for the first six months or so, and then slowly the fat begins to return and the cycle continues.

We know that it's lifestyle vs. diet that can remove the unwanted fat for the long term. Adequate water intake, quality sleep, managing stress, exercise and diet (calories in -- calories out) should be our goal. However, understanding what causes the fat to accumulate is a critical component to achieving greater success.

The food we eat is either used as energy or stored as fat. When you get up in the morning, how do you feel? Do you survive. Our energy is stored

How to Subtract Fat From Your Body

feel refreshed and ready to go or sluggish and dragging? This is our first clue that something

#1 Food Preservatives

Preservatives are used to extend shelf life. Some of these are more toxic than others. They also make food more difficult to digest. These preservatives can lead to gas, bloating, heartburn, slow metabolism, fatigue, sluggishness, brain fog and a decreased sex drive.

One of the most disrupting is high fructose corn syrup (HFCS). The process in producing this chemical is important in understanding it. Because consumers have become aware of the dangers, companies have spent millions in order to 'rename it' so the consumer can remain unaware. There are even products that state they are high fructose corn syrup free when the label states otherwise and the fine line between these is legal!

Some of the new names being used are: maize syrup, glucose syrup, tapioca syrup, fruit fructose, crystalline fruit, HFCS, esoglucose, corn syrup and dahlia syrup.

The body needs energy to



in the mitochondria of the cell. There are 50 to 2,000 mitochondria in every cell. Within these cells, sugar is converted into glucose and O2. This is turned into ATP and CO2. The preservatives in foods prevent them from being properly digested, which means the calories are not able to be converted to energy; less energy for our brains, muscles, etc. When this process continues, the body goes into starvation mode. This teaches the body to take these calories and store them as fat. The body learns to survive by what we feed it.

Utilizing digestive enzymes can aid the body in better digestion. They can reduce gastric and bowel symptoms and increase the body's ability to covert food to energy rather than fat. By combining digestive enzymes with foods that contain less preservatives, we can aid our bodies to better utilize what

#2 Bad Gut Bacteria

There are 50-100 trillion bacteria in our gut with over 5,000 species. Our guts are biodiverse and contain both good and bad bacteria.

The roles of this microbiome: to break down undigested food (carbohydrates), production and absorption of vitamins B's and K, processing of bile and sterols, strengthens the immune system, defends against infection from bad bacteria, effects brain neurotransmitters (thinking, mood, autism), production of serotonin (low levels can cause depression and anxiety), and hormones that direct fat metabolism and

The effects of when our gut bacteria are out of whack (more bad than good) can be obesity, bowel disease, cancer, brain issues, diabetes, liver disease, immune system issues as well as effects on the skin.

Disruption of this system includes high glycemic foods, chemicals (preservatives and additives), pesticides, fake sugar, toxic metals, antibiotics used in food, irritating and spicy herbs and condiments, parasite tainted food, allergies to food, lack of vitamins and minerals, stress (cortisol), poor general health, and certain medications such as steroids and NSAIDS. Signs of this disruption are nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, gas, bloating, cramping, constipation, heartburn, irritable bowel syndrome, lactose intolerance, food sensitivities, drowsiness or fatigue after meals, depression, frequent illness (colds and flu), forgetfulness, sluggish thinking, weight gain and difficulty losing weight (excess body fat).

When there is an overgrowth of bad bacteria and yeast in the gut, sugars are broken down incorrectly and the signals for fat metabolism and storage are disrupted.

Add a probiotic every other day or daily to your diet. Science has shown that we don't need to replace all the bacteria. The two most important bacteria that can survive the harsh stomach environment are lactobacillus, rhammosus GG, LGG and bifodobacterium BB-12. These can also be stored at room temperature, making it easy to travel with or take to work.

These are the first two out of four things that allow body fat to accumulate. In the January issue, we will discuss Part II.

Have a fabulous Christmas season! Here's to health!

HealthyLife, HealthvDav succeed.hdhl@gmail.com



Smile with Confidence Again

- · Are you embarrassed about smiling in front of people?
- Do you ever put your hand up to cover your smile?
- Do you dislike your smile in photographs?
- When you look through magazines, do you envy the models' smiles?
- Do you wish your teeth were whiter?
- Do you think you show too much or too little of your teeth when
- Would you like to change the way your teeth or gums are shaped?
- Do you have gaps or spaces in between your teeth?

If the answer is "yes" to any of these questions, you may be a good candidate for A Smile Makeover.









Bit-Wizards' Commitment to Community Shines with More Than \$3M in Charitable Contributions

By Jeff Andrejcik

As Bit-Wizards celebrates its silver anniversary, the Managed IT Services company is proud to share a meaningful milestone it's reached beyond the technological achievements made over the last 25 years.

Since its founding in 2000, company co-founders Vince Mayfield and Louis Erickson have purposefully woven philanthropy into their business's DNA, which has led to over \$3 million in contributions, including time, money and inkind support to over 50 non-profit organizations in Northwest Florida.

"My mother was the director of a Catholic Charities member agency and had me volunteering early, from helping Vietnamese refugees at Eglin in 1975 to providing shelter for those in need using our own home," Mayfield recalls. "Louis and I both came from modest beginnings, but we were given what matters most—faith, values and a sense of purpose. We naturally felt the responsibility to give back as our company grew."

Before Bit-Wizards formally launched, both men embraced the idea that success should be shared and that building community was as important as building software.

Raised in Okaloosa County, the founders developed a strong sense of service from giving back at a young age alongside their families. Those early experiences shaped their mindsets, guiding the company's long-term vision and laying the groundwork for what has come to fruition today.







In 2021, Bit-Wizards established its philanthropic legacy by launching the Be the Magic Foundation, named after one of the company's core values. The foundation supports four key areas: youth development, individuals with special needs, animal welfare, and broader



community development.

Since its inception, Be the Magic has backed local organizations, including the Gulf Coast Council of Scouting America and Panhandle Animal Welfare Society (PAWS); for nonprofit Fresh Start for Children and Families, the Wizards

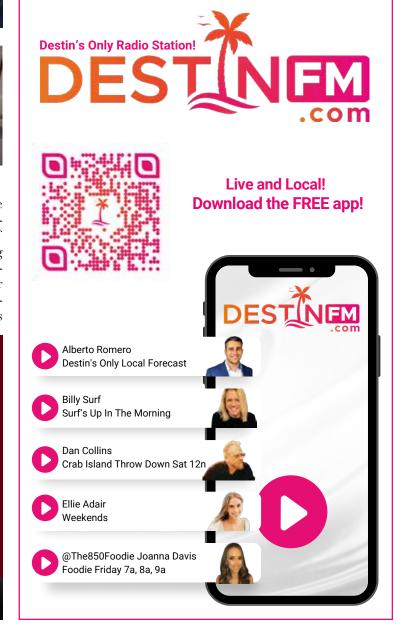
Military Veteran

annually purchase, wrap, and deliver complete wish-lists for children, creating meaningful holiday experiences for families in need.

"Bit-Wizards and Be the Magic have always been about more than signing a check or having our logos at a sponsored event-we want to play an active role in creating positive change for those in our community," said Caroline McCoy, Bit-Wizards chief operating officer and Be the Magic Foundation board member. "We support causes that our people can support with intention, and we'll continue the Foundation's legacy of contributing to initiatives where we can truly make an impact."

For Bit-Wizards, the magic behind 25 years of giving back isn't just a celebration of its past; it's a commitment for the future. For local charity organizations interested in creating a little extra magic, visit https://bet-hemagicfoundation.org/form/request-a-donation.









OP-ED: Educate Before You Donate — Protecting **Donors and Strengthening Local Charities**

By Sheila Hale, Local Former Nonprofit Co-Founder, COMMUNITY ADVOCATE, VOLUNTEER

Every year, especially during the holiday season, residents across Northwest Florida give generously to organizations they believe are helping veterans, families, and animals in need. But in difficult moments - including periods of economic uncertainty and recent government shutdowns — donors must stay informed about where money actually goes.

Before donating anywhere, take 15 seconds to verify an organization's status using Florida's official tool, Check-A-Charity: https://csapp.fdacs.gov/ CSPublicApp/CheckACharity/ CheckACharity.aspx.

It's quick, free and revealing.

Many donors are surprised to learn how little of their contribution reaches programs they intend to support.

As a former nonprofit co-founder who spent years working directly with veterans and service-dog teams, I've seen both sides of charitable work the powerful good that transparent organizations accomplish, and the frustration donors feel when they later discover funds didn't support promised programs. For this reason, I strongly encourage our community to educate before donating.

Why Donor Awareness Matters

Donors often assume that an active Facebook page or heartfelt mission statement signals trustworthy operations. Unfortu-



nately, that's not always the case. Public filings sometimes show:

- High administrative expens-
- Program spending trending downward
- Questionable marketing tac-
- · Outdated or misleading images implying involvement of former staff
- Leadership changes never shared with supporters
- Sharp increases in payroll and legal costs
 - Gaps in state compliance

Even well-intended groups drift from original missions when oversight weakens.

Simple Tools Give Donors Clarity

Florida makes it incredibly easy to check registration status, financial history and complaints against an organization.

Florida Charities FAQ: https://www.fdacs.gov/Consumer-Resources/Charities/ Charities-FAO.

These resources give an unbiased snapshot of how funds flow inside a nonprofit.

Six Questions Donors Should Ask:

- 1. Is registration active with
- 2. What percentage of each dollar supports programs?
- 3. Are reports current and accessible?
 - 4. Has leadership changed?
- 5. Are fundraising claims realistic?

6. Does the group show clear, current impact?

A Community Responsibility

Charities play an essential role here. Many are started by people with sincere hearts and a true desire to serve. But strong missions require strong ethics, responsible spending and honest communication.

Informed donors help raise community standards. When donors ask questions, organizations stay accountable. Everyone benefits - especially the individuals these charities aim to support.

As holidays draw closer and budgets tighten nationwide, I urge every resident to take a moment to verify any nonprofit before contributing. Your generosity should always make a difference — not disappear into administrative costs.

Educate before you donate.





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By Sean Dietrich

I was 15 years old. I walked into the rural library. My father was freshly dead. I was a middle-school dropout. We were poor. It was Christmastime.

The small, public library was decorated for the holiday season. There was plastic holiday crapola everywhere. It was cold outside. I had no winter coat.

I stepped into the library with a blast of sleet and rain. I was wearing a T-shirt. My hair was soaked.

"Where's your coat?" said the librarian.

"I don't have one."

"You don't have a coat!? It's 30 degrees outside!"

Shrug.

The librarian's name was



Miss Terry. She was old enough to predate the Roosevelt administration. Her hair was cotton white. Her shoes were Reeboks. Her embroidered sweatshirt read: "Dear Santa, I can explain."

The library was a converted residential house. And I was a regular here.

"You can't go around without a coat," Miss Terry said. "You'll freeze."

Shrug Number Two.

I wandered to the fiction section. Fiction was all I was interested in. I read fiction each morning, afternoon, and night. It was escapism, I see that now. And I was a classic escapist. But then, there were very few happy things in my life. Who wouldn't want to escape?

That day, I checked out two Louis L'Amour books, a few Dick Francis novels. When I brought my selection up to the counter, Miss Terry just looked at me with warm eyes.

"I have a book I want you to read," she said.

"You do?"

She placed a leather-bound book atop my stack of books.

Written by Lucy Maud Montgomery.

Sean of the South: Christmas Cheer

"I think you'll appreciate this one."

"It looks like a girl book."

"Try to keep an open mind."

I took the books home, I read them the way I always read books. Ferociously. But when I read the Lucy Maud Montgomery book, time stood still. And my heart moved sideways in my chest. I had never read a book with more tenderness.

When I returned to the library a week later, Miss Terry asked how I liked the book. I told her it was maybe the best book I ever read.

I returned my books, and checked out more. This time, she placed another book atop my stack. This one was written by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

I took the books home. I read them in a frenzy, just like before. But Laura Ingalls Wilder was immediately my favorite.

I brought the books back to the library.

"How did you like the book I gave you?" she asked.

"I read it twice." She smiled.

Then it happened. After Miss Terry accepted my stack of books, in return, she gave me a gift-wrapped box. The box was wrapped in glittery red paper, with a green ribbon.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It's for you," she said.

"Is it another book?"

"Just open it.

I tore the paper. There was a coat inside. Warm and fluffy. I cried when I put it on.

"We can't have you catching a cold and getting sick," she said. "There are too many books left for you to read. You might even write one of your own someday."

I wiped my face. "One day I'm going to grow up and write a book," I told her. "And when I do, I'm going to write something about you, and how you gave me this coat."

She smiled and straightened the collar of my jacket. "You won't even remember me when you're all grown up."

Well.

I showed her.

STUFF

 $continued\ from\ page\ 13$

fluence, Kinsal Creative, or Lilliput? From minimalist paddles to bold, kitschy designs, these lightweight earrings bring personality to their courtside style. Pair them with pickleball charm keychains from Influence & Inspire to add a little flair to gear bags and key rings (we're so here for that!).

For the One Who Loves a Good Laugh

If your giftee enjoys humor, sass, or a little irreverence (yes, please), **Ellembee Gifts** will be their stocking-stuffer soulmate. Their snarky canvas zip pouches, witty tea towels, and adorable onesies turn everyday items into conversation starters. Whether it's a pouch that sums up your best friend's personality or a tea towel that makes your sister giggle, these pieces guarantee Christmas-morning fun of the uncensored kind (which we all know is the best kind).

For a warm, cozy vibe that dishes out some well-worded zingers, tuck in a **Whiskey River** candle. Known for

their clever labels and fantastic scents, these candles bring a little mischievous fun to home décor while still feeling gift-worthy and seasonal.

For the Practical, the Prepared, and the Stylish

Some gifts are more than pretty—they're empowering. The **Birdie** personal alarm is a compact safety device perfect for teens, night-shift workers, travelers, and anyone who wants to feel a little more secure. Sleek, modern, and easy to use, it's a small gift that carries big meaning.

And for those hard-to-shopfor teens and women? **Boobeez** nipple covers and **Strap-Its** bralettes offer options for when they want to show off cute straps under an outfit or need to go braless but still want some coverage.

This year, level up your stocking stuffer game with goodies from Blue Bay Lifestyle Co. You'll get on Santa's good side, plus you'll be shopping local. What's not to love?



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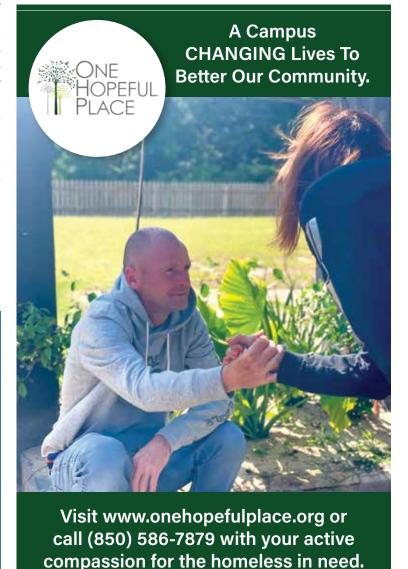


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A Pastor's Pondering: When the Weight Hasn't Yet Been Lifted



By Pastor Doug "Doc" STAUFFER

One of the greatest truths that can transform your life is understanding how God enters the details of your story-especially when the burden of regret still weighs heavily on your heart. I have found more comfort in this truth than in almost anything else, because it reminds me that God continues to work even when I feel I have failed.

The apostle Paul wrote extensively about prayer, but perhaps never more powerfully than in

Philippians 4:6–7: "Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ

The world cannot give you peace, although it offers many ways to cope. But true peace the kind that steadies your heart when everything feels like it's falling apart—comes only from God. His peace doesn't mean ignoring life's pressures or pretending pain isn't there. It means that through prayer, you gain the strength to walk through the storm even when the winds seem too strong.

Sometimes anxiety follows good intentions that go awry. You made a decision that felt right at the moment, but it ultimately turned out to be misguided. Proverbs 14:12 warns, "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death." When outcomes spiral beyond our control, pressure mounts, failure appears near, and the heart feels heavy. King David understood this when he cried, "For mine iniquities are gone over mine head: as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me." (Psalm 38:4)

Anxiety is natural—but surrender is a supernatural act. It's not easy to "turn it over to the Lord." Often, we feel compelled to fix what only He can heal. Yet 1 Peter 5:7 reminds us to "cast all your care upon him; for he careth for you." The word cast means to throw with force—fling it from your hands to His feet.

The devil will try to remind you of your failures, whispering, "You've ruined everything." But the Holy Ghost gently reminds those who are listening, "You're forgiven." Forgiveness doesn't excuse our mistakes—it anchors our hope beyond them.

Peace comes after prayer. We desire peace first, but God says, "Pray first." His peace guards our hearts like a soldier on duty. And thanksgiving—even amid

ongoing pain-shifts our view from panic to praise. "Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me," says Psalm 50:23, "and to him that ordereth his conversation aright will I shew the salvation of God."

Consider King Hezekiah. Surrounded by the Assyrian army, his earlier choices had failed him. Yet when he received the enemy's threats, he "spread it before the LORD" (2 Kings 19:14) and prayed. That night, God sent an angel who destroyed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. Hezekiah couldn't fix his mistake—but peace came when he surrendered it to the one who can help us most.

Or think of Hannah in 1 Samuel chapter 1. Childless and heartbroken, she poured out her soul before the Lord. "S,o the woman went her way, and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad." She had not experienced the answer to prayer but did receive peace.

And Paul, tossed by a storm in Acts chapter 27, declared, "Be of good cheer... for I believe God." His peace didn't come from calm seas but from trusting the One who commands them.

You may not be able to undo a decision or control what has collapsed, but you can commit the rubble to God. The same Lord who saw your mistake sees your heart-and He's not finished with you yet.

"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee." (Isaiah

That perfect peace doesn't always mean the weight is gone—it means you have recognized that you are not carrying it alone. God's peace steadies your heart while His hand rebuilds what was broken. So, while you wait for the burden to lift, remember: the presence of the storm does not mean the absence of your Saviour. Trust Him through the pressure, and in His time, you'll find that the weight has become His-and the peace has become yours.







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Holiday Pops Spectacular and the Sinfonia Youth Orchestra Winter Concert Bring Festive Cheer

Sinfonia Gulf Coast continues its 20th anniversary celebration with two beloved holiday performances that showcase the spirit of the season through dazzling orchestral sound and the inspiring talent of young local musicians.

The festivities kick off Saturday, Dec. 13, at 7:30 p.m. at the Destin-Fort Walton **Beach Convention Center** with the Holiday Pops Spectacular! This cherished annual tradition features the full Sinfonia Gulf Coast orchestra, dynamic vocalists and a program packed with holiday favoritesfrom timeless classics like Winter Wonderland and It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas to contemporary hits such as Christmas (Baby, Please Come Home) and Mariah Carey's All I Want for Christmas Is You. Audiences will also enjoy spirited performances by studio6Twenty5, the Holiday Chamber Chorus and surprise special guests. Tickets range from \$40 to \$75



and are available through the box office or online.

Rounding out the holiday season is the Sinfonia Youth Orchestra Winter Concert on Sunday, Dec. 14, at 5 p.m. at Fort Walton Beach High **School.** This free community event highlights all ensembles of the Sinfonia Youth Orchestraincluding Sinfonietta Strings, Intermediate Strings, Symphonic Orchestra, and the After School Beginning Strings—from across Okaloosa and Walton counties. Each year, this performance shines a spotlight on the remarkable dedication and musicianship of the region's youth. This season's program includes favorite holiday selections such as excerpts from The Nutcracker and Leroy Anderson's Sleigh Ride.

"For me, the holidays are about gathering together with friends, family, and our community to celebrate what truly matters—connection, giving, and the shared joy of live music," said Demetrius Fuller, founder and music and artistic director of Sinfonia Gulf Coast. "There's something extra special about this time of year when our audiences come together to experience the magic of the season through music that uplifts and inspires."

As Sinfonia Gulf Coast marks its milestone 20th anniversary season, these holiday performances offer meaningful opportunities for families and music lovers to embrace the joy of the season.

Proceeds from all ticketed concerts support Sinfonia Gulf Coast's music education and community engagement programs throughout Northwest Florida.

For more information or to purchase tickets, visit SinfoniaGulfCoast.org or call (850) 460-8800.

What Makes the 30A Songwriters Festival So Unique?

Jan. 16–19, 2026 | 30a/South Walton Venues

The 30A Songwriters Festival isn't your average music weekend — it's four days of pure musical immersion. With 120+ artists, 260 performances, and more than 20 intimate venues, you'll never catch it all... but you'll experience more live music in one weekend than most people do all year.

What sets it apart? Every performer is a true singer-songwriter, taking the stage with music they wrote themselves. Add in the setting — state-of-the-art listening rooms stretched along scenic Highway 30A, steps from sugar-white sand and emerald Gulf waters — and you have a festival experience like no

other.

Even better, it all supports a cause. Produced by the Cultural Arts Alliance of Walton County, 100% of net proceeds benefit local arts programs, helping keep creativity thriving in our community.

Expect Americana, blues, country, rock, folk, gospel, jazz, neo-soul and more — no genre walls here, just the best songwriters from across the country.

Discounted tickets available for a limited time. Grab yours, cue up the official 30ASWF playlist, and start planning your musical weekend now. Visit 30aSongwritersFestival.com for tickets and more information.



Holiday Pops

SATURDAY, DEC. 13 | 7:30 PM DESTIN-FWB CONVENTION CENTER

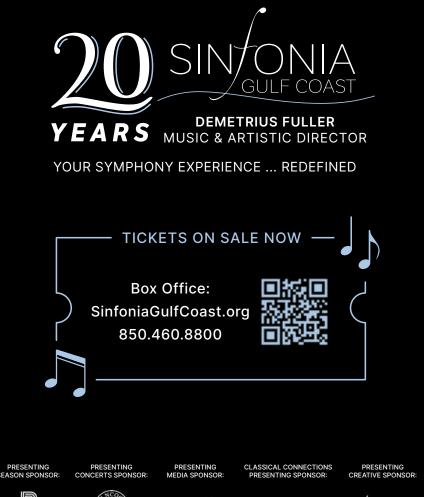
This festive concert features full orchestra, vocalists and everything from timeless favorites like *Winter Wonderland* to chart-topping hits such as Mariah Carey's *All I Want for Christmas is You*, along with beloved holiday songs from Broadway and film like *It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas*.





SUNDAY, DEC. 7 | 10:30 AM
HOTEL EFFIE SANDESTIN

Enjoy a sparkling Sunday brunch concert with Broadway sisters Ann Hampton Callaway and Liz Callaway as they bring their acclaimed show to Destin. This celebrated cabaret performance blends their extraordinary voices. From Broadway classics to pop standards.



AROUND TOWN

continued from page 6

"Choose Your Adventure" virtual tours, including an inside look at Fort Walton Machining's 65,000-square-foot facility and its 140-member skilled workforce. Students can explore workstations, complete guided challenges and submit solutions to industry experts.

"Our region is undergoing an exciting evolution, and we're helping teachers prepare students for the rising demands in industry, education and the trades," said Carrie Meyers, Co-Director of STEM Outreach, Education and Workforce Development.

InSPIRE aims to build a talent pipeline for aerospace, defense and advanced manufacturing careers — with industry partners like Fort Walton Machining at the center.

Thanksgiving Recycle Run Collects 520+ Pounds of Food

More than 375 runners and walkers kicked off Thanksgiving morning at the Northwest Florida Track Club's annual Recycle Run, donating over 520 pounds of food to Sharing & Caring in Fort Walton Beach. Participants contributed a \$10 entry fee and non-perishable items, supporting Sharing & Caring's emergency food services. In the spirit



NWFL Track Club President Drew Crete and Race Director Brian McMahon

of sustainability, runners selected T-shirts and trophies recycled from past events. Donations will stay local, supporting the non-profit's food assistance programs on Beal Parkway.

Smalls Sliders Opens New Fort Walton Beach Can

Fort Walton Beach can now "slide thru!" Smalls Sliders® officially opened its newest Can this month at 822 Beal Parkway, marking the brand's sixth Florida location.

The celebration included a ribbon cutting with Arc of the Emerald Coast, the Can's Smalls Town Hero. "We've felt so much local support this year... and we're proud to finish the year strong here in Fort Walton Beach," said a representative from DPC Smalls Investments. "Smalls is all about bold flavor and supporting the community."

Smalls Sliders has grown rapidly nationwide with its fresh, cooked-to-order cheeseburg-





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er sliders, fries, shakes, queso and fan-favorite Smauce®. Its bright SmorangeTM walk-up/drive-thru Can stands out as the brand continues expanding across Florida. Learn more at smallssliders.com.

Forever Warriors Donates \$50,000 to Support Mission United

United Way Emerald Coast has received a significant \$50,000 investment from Forever Warriors, powered by Step One Automotive Group, benefiting Mission United, which serves active-duty military members, veterans, reservists and their families.

The support has already provided more than \$10,000 in emergency financial assistance and supplied 5,000 pounds of food during a recent distribution event.

Mission United connects lo-



Impact 100 Recipients

cal military families with housing support, mental health services, employment resources and emergency assistance. Since launching in 2023, it has served more than 5,000 service members and veterans across Okaloosa and Walton counties.

"We are deeply grateful to Forever Warriors for stepping forward when our military families need it most," said Kelly Jasen, UWEC President & CEO.

Learn more at united-way. org or by dialing 2-1-1, option 5.

Worthy Impact 100 Grant Recipients Receive Awards

By Barbara Palmgren

The Impact 100 Annual Meeting was called to order after a lovely hour of "meet and greet" at the Holiday Inn on Okaloosa Island in Fort Walton Beach. After approval of the meeting agenda and necessary reports, two finalists from non-profit organizations gave five-minute speeches asking for the membership to vote for their non-profit to receive a check of \$100,000 to fund a specific project for that organization.

Impact 100 is an independent non-profit global organization with chapters in the U.S. Impact 100 Northwest Florida is one of those chapters. This group of women who each donate financially also may serve on committees to prepare non-profits to write and submit grant proposals. After a year of this work, 10 finalists in five categories were presented at the annual meeting for the final vote. Each organization received a check for \$100,000 for their project.

Congratulations to these finalists!

Arts & Culture: Arts and Design Society

Education: Westwood Ranch Environment, Recreation & Preservation: Healing Footsteps Family: The Pearl Project

Health & Wellness: Elder Services

Pier Camera Gets an Upgrade

Following a recent outage of the popular underwater pier camera, Okaloosa County's IT team is installing a new hardwired fiber connection to boost reliability and streaming quality. Conduit installation is underway, and the camera is expected to return online in the coming weeks.

The live feed will be available at youtube.com/@DestinFort-WaltonBeach.







FWB Fire Department Expands Holiday Toy Drive Efforts with 2025 Santa's Firehouse Cruz Thru

The Fort Walton Beach Fire Department is once again gearing up to brighten the holidays for local children and families through its annual Christmas outreach—a tradition that has grown in size, spirit and impact each year. Captain James Freudenberg, who leads the effort, said the department remains committed to "doing everything we can to help as many local children and families as possible."

The Fire Department works closely with area schools, churches and community organizations to collect letters to Santa and ensure every child is matched with gifts chosen especially for them. During the COVID years, the team launched an innovative idea that quickly became a local favorite-the Santa's Firehouse Cruz Thru Toy Drive—a driveup event that gained both regional and national attention.

This year's Cruz Thru will take place Saturday, Dec. 13, from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Fort Walton Beach Fire Department Station 6, located at 5 Hollywood Blvd. NE. Fam-





ilies and supporters can drive through, drop off new toys and enjoy holiday cheer from firefighters and volunteers.

Changes to the **Donation Box Program**

One of the most significant updates for 2025 involves the department's donation box program. After COVID, the fire department partnered with local businesses to help encourage community involvement and support local shopping. While the program was successful, it required extensive manpower and daily coordination. "Unfortunately, without more departmental support, we won't be able to manage the full donation box program this year," Freudenberg said. "We will still have a limited number of donation boxes at select businesses, but we won't be able to handle regular drop-offs or pick-ups."

Businesses that still wish to participate may host their own collection box, and the department will gladly provide flyers and informational materials.

High School Partnerships Grow

Support from local high schools continues to be an integral part of the event's success. The department hopes to partner with Choctawhatchee High School's JROTC to help pair donations with children and families based on their Santa letters. Meanwhile, Fort Walton Beach High School JROTC cadets will return for the fourth

consecutive year to assist with wrapping all the gifts.

Transforming the Fire Station into Santa's Workshop

Once donations are sorted and wrapped, Station 6 transforms into a Christmas wonderland. Families are invited to visit the station, decorate cookies, make ornaments, take holiday photos and enjoy time with Mr. and Mrs. Claus, who personally hand out the gifts. Each child receives presents selected specifically from their letter to Santa, along with a Polaroid keepsake photo. "One of the most special parts of this event is making sure each child receives gifts they actually asked for," Freudenberg said. "That personal touch means the world to these families."

How to Donate

The Fire Department is currently accepting donations of:

- New, unwrapped toys
- Clothing for ages 0–16
- Wrapping paper, tape and gift supplies

Donations can be dropped

off during the Cruz Thru event, delivered directly to the fire station, or taken to select businesses listed on the department's Facebook page.

The department is also seeking sponsors to assist with event supplies, decorations and safety gear for items such as bikes and skateboards. Cash or check donations may be dropped off at Station 6 or during the Cruz

On December 13, Run With It will also collect donations during its annual Reindeer Dash. More details can be found on the store's Facebook page.

Stay Connected

Regular updates, donation box locations and volunteer information will be posted on the Fort Walton Beach Fire Department Facebook page. Questions may be directed to Capt. Freudenberg at (850) 287-6958 or jfreudenberg@fwb.org.

"Thank you for your continued support in making the holidays brighter for children and families in our community," Freudenberg said.

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