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FWB Life

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Postal Customer Local

Freedom Houses Offer Hope, Healing and a Path Forward for Women in Need

BY MICHELLE RUSCHMAN

Stephanie Fitzgerald, Founder of Freedom Life Compass, is on a mission to provide safe supportive housing for the residents who stay at the Freedom Houses located in Niceville, Fort Walton Beach, Crestview, and soon, Laurel Hill. "I want people to know change is possible. A community doesn't always see what brings someone to homelessness. But, for moms who are living in a car with their children, a woman who is escaping domestic abuse, or any other countless circumstances women can find themselves in, we want our program to be a place of hope."

By the age of 23, Stephanie had plenty of reasons to be hopeless. She grew up in a house with drugs, where teaching life skills to be a successful adult was not part of her training. Addiction was the norm in her home, and eventually, she became homeless. At 23, though, someone spoke words that would begin



the journey toward her calling, "You're better than the life you're living."

"Not everybody ends up in homelessness, domestic violence, or addiction because of their own choices. Often, it is, but it can also be a generational issue. It's the lifestyle we grew up in, and we don't know any other way to live. Sometimes we end up in relationships that help our ruin. The Freedom Houses are about giving people who are ready to change the opportunity to

do so. Other people believed in me and encouraged me, and that is how we were able to open Freedom Houses, so that other women and, hopefully, one day men, will have that community around them to help them find and take their next right step."

Each of the three homes has a different mission. Freedom House One is a transitional home for women only. It can house up to six women in a communal living space, and they are able to stay there



for a six to eighteen-month program. While there, in addition to housing, the women get training in life skills and help with clothing, food, medical needs, employment, and counseling. In turn, they are asked to adhere to the following guidelines:

Work Schedule/Rules

- Must be turned in at the weekly case plan or on the

FREEDOM HOUSES

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Bring Hope Now:

Local Nonprofit Aims to Solve Youth Mental Health Crisis

BY PEGGY BROCKMAN

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

You arrive at the ER, but there's no child psychologist. The ER doctor decides to send your child—

BRING HOPE

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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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200 Eglin Pkwy NE • ajsonthebayou.com

Community

FREEDOM HOUSES

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day received

- Changes communicated to the program manager
- No working at restaurants that serve alcohol, convenience stores, clubs, or bars. No pet sitting or babysitting outside of regular working hours.

Daily Routines

- 7 a.m. Wake up, make your bed, get dressed, and have breakfast
- 8 a.m. Ready for Devotions
- Work - (If you do not have employment, start submitting at least 6-8 applications in a regular workday time frame, showing that you are actively

seeking employment.)

- 2 hours a day on education/career goals
- Curfew 9 p.m. unless you're working or at other approved activity
- 10 p.m. Lights Out

House Rules

- Always speak from a place of love and encouragement. Let's lift one another up without judgment. We are all perfectly flawed!
- When taking phone calls, be mindful of others and continue your call outside of the house.
- Bring your belongings with you when taking showers, and take everything back to your

room, including shampoos, conditioners, clothing, trash, etc.

- We are all grown adults, so please pick up after yourselves. This includes washing any dishes you use and putting them away.
 - There will be no overnight stays unless we have the address and phone number and speak with the individual two weeks in advance. If we do not feel it's a safe place for you to take a home pass, we will deny it. This is for your safety and well-being.
- Freedom House Two is a short-term shelter for women until they can find a more permanent place to live. Freedom House Three houses women and children. Finally, Freedom House Four will be opening

later this year in Laurel Hill for mothers and children. Plans are being made for animal therapy and fostering dogs to use for rehabilitation. Those who would like to see if they qualify for housing can fill out an application at www.freedomlifecompass.org.

It takes \$40 a day per person, per night to house up to the 30 women and children the house can accommodate. This provides safe shelter, food, clothing, medications, and other daily needs. If you would like to be a sponsor or participate in helping any of the Freedom Houses in Niceville, Crestview, or Fort Walton Beach by mentoring, teaching a class, leading a devotion, offering transportation

support, or by donation, go to www.freedomlifecompass.org/get-involved.

You can also attend one of the following events:

Spring Soiree, April 25, 5:30-7:30, Crosspoint Fellowship Hall in Niceville

Blessing of the Emerald Coast, May 16, 11-3 Niceville Mullet Festival Grounds

Niceville Bazaar, October 17, 10-4pm, Niceville Mullet Festival Grounds

For more details, go to freedomlifecompass.org/events.

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

BRING HOPE

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seven hours away—to a facility in Orlando for evaluation. You object. Emotions rise. The doctor blames you and asks you to

leave. Your child is transported anyway, placed in a holding area with wooden slab beds and other children in crisis, screaming. He's terrified.

Three days later, a tele-psychiatrist finds your child isn't a

threat and should be released. But when you return from a brief trip home, you discover your child was already transferred to an inpatient facility in Pensacola—without your consent. He must now remain for another three days, all while you watch helplessly.

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

This is exactly why we founded Bring Hope Now.

A Growing Crisis

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

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



Charts, 168 people in Okaloosa and Walton Counties went to an emergency room for self-harm injuries in 2023. Shockingly, 121 of them—72%—were children

Continued on page 29

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

By the Numbers: Why Local Help Matters

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

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

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

What if that Child Were Yours?

According to Florida Health

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From Tribute to Transition: How Fort Walton Beach Supports Its Veterans



BY SHERRY OLNEY

A Community Rooted in Service

In a community anchored by Eglin Air Force Base and Hurlburt Field, service is not an abstract concept. It is part of daily life. Airmen train here. Special Forces soldiers deploy from here. Navy personnel complete advanced training just miles from our neighborhoods. Many who serve here retire here. They become business owners, church leaders, mentors, and volunteers. Military service is woven into the identity of this region.

The Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce consistently organizes and leads community-wide events that honor that legacy. Most recently, the Chamber commemorated the 35th Anniversary of Desert Shield and Desert Storm. In recent years, it has also brought the community together to mark the 75th Anniversary of the United States Air Force, honor the Doolittle Raiders during the Final Goblet Ceremony, recognize ODA 595, the 12 Horse Soldiers, and commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War.

In one of those moments, Chamber President and CEO Ted Corcoran stands alongside members of ODA 595. The image reflects something deeper than ceremony. It shows a community standing shoulder to shoulder with those who served.

These gatherings are more than tradition. They are reflections of who we are.

When the Uniform Comes Off

For some veterans, the most difficult mission begins after the uniform comes off.

Transition to civilian life can mean navigating complex VA systems, waiting on disability determinations, securing employment, addressing medical or mental health needs, or



rebuilding financial stability. Pride, strengthened through service, can make asking for help difficult.

Even in a strong military community like ours, some veterans experience housing instability. Not because they lack discipline. Not because they lack character. But because transition requires support.

Sometimes the need is quiet. A veteran waiting on a disability determination. A veteran navigating paperwork alone. A veteran sleeping in a car while trying to secure employment. Pride can delay the call for help. But when that call finally comes, response matters.

And in Fort Walton Beach, support does not come from one place. It comes from many.

Veterans Supporting Veterans

In this community, support often begins with fellow veterans.

The Crispy Warriors, pictured together representing decades of service across multiple branches, continue their mission long after active duty ends. Meeting weekly, they remain connected and engaged, offering steady encouragement and accountability to fellow veterans throughout the region.

Their commitment extends beyond camaraderie. They support veterans navigating difficult transitions and contribute financially to strengthen local efforts that ensure veterans are not left without options.

Organizations such as AM-VETS, along with civic groups including Moose and Eagles

Lodges, also continue to advocate for and assist those who served. The Army Air Force Enlisted Village provides housing for surviving spouses of career military members. The Air Force Armament Museum preserves the history that shaped this region and reminds future generations of the cost of freedom.

Each organization reinforces the same message. Veterans are not forgotten here.

Stabilization When It Matters Most

When housing instability becomes part of a veteran's transition, One Hopeful Place plays a direct role in ensuring immediate stability.

Since 2020, 65 veterans have moved into permanent housing through its campus. Veterans are a priority population, and a bed is always available for veterans in need.

One Hopeful Place works closely with the VA to help veterans access the benefits and resources they have earned, while also coordinating with the Homelessness and Housing Alliance across Okaloosa and Walton counties. Through collaboration with Bridgeway Cen-

ter, veterans can access mental health and recovery services that strengthen long-term stability.

This is not the work of one organization. It is a coordinated community effort.

Veteran service organizations, civic groups, and business leaders continue to stand behind those who once stood for us. Financial institutions with deep military roots, such as Eglin Federal Credit Union, and community funders like United Way Emerald Coast invest in housing stabilization and essential services that support veterans in difficult seasons. Their partnership reflects a shared understanding.

Honoring veterans includes ensuring they have the resources needed to rebuild when necessary.

Fort Walton Beach does more than remember military history.

It carries it forward.

It honors publicly.

It supports privately.

It stands ready when service members need support in return.

The men and woman who once stood watch for us deserve a community that stands watch for them.

Here, service does not end.

It continues.



Community

Top 5 Supplements to Spring into Health



By DR. KAREN DEVORE,
TORTOISE CLINIC

Here along the Gulf Coast, the arrival of spring means longer days and a return to the outdoor living that defines our beach communities. For many, it feels like a natural inflection point of renewed momentum and a reminder to re-prioritize

energy, strength, and overall well-being. It's often during this season that people begin reaching for supplements and vitamins in hopes of supporting this shift.

At the Tortoise Clinic, I remind people that supplements are never a substitute for the fundamentals including bal-

anced, protein-forward meals made from real food, restorative sleep, building and maintaining muscle mass, hydration, and thoughtful stress management. Supplementation and targeted nutrient support are tools within a larger health strategy, most effective when guided by informed science and thoughtful clinical oversight.

Not every supplement is appropriate for every person. When selected strategically, with attention to quality, bioavailability, and individual physiology, they can support the systems that drive sustainable energy and resilience.

Here are five I commonly evaluate this time of year, and how I think about applying them.

Vitamin D - A Hormone with Broad Impact

Despite its name, Vitamin D functions as a hormone in the body. It plays a role in immune balance, bone strength, muscle function, and mood regulation. Vitamin D receptors are found throughout the body, which helps explain its wide-reaching influence.

Deficiency remains common, even living in Florida. Indoor work, sunscreen use, skin tone variability, and seasonal shifts all contribute. When levels are sub-optimal, people may notice fatigue, slower recovery, decreased muscle strength, or a subtle dip in mood.

When I look closer: recurrent illness, low energy that doesn't improve with rest, mood changes, bone or muscle concerns, and limited sun exposure

Practical Tip: Vitamin D absorbs best when taken with food that contains healthy fats. Testing provides clarity — optimal levels are individualized, not guessed.

Magnesium - Calm Energy & Recovery

Magnesium supports muscle relaxation, sleep quality, blood sugar balance, and healthy stress response. It participates in hundreds of biochemical processes and is one of the most common nutrients I see run low.

Despite the beauty of coastal living, daily demands such as work, activity, travel, and stress still accumulate, and magnesium depletion is common.



Two forms I often consider:

Magnesium Glycinate: Supports relaxation and restorative sleep.

Magnesium Threonate: May support focus, cognitive clarity, and emotional steadiness.

When I look closer: muscle tension, poor sleep, stress reactivity, headaches, and difficulty focusing

Practical Tip: Magnesium glycinate is often best tolerated in the evening. Magnesium threonate can be used in the morning when focus support is desired. Some individuals divide doses based on response. Because magnesium influences muscle relaxation, higher amounts may also influence digestive rhythm. Gradual adjustments help the body adapt comfortably.

Omega-3 Fatty Acids - Inflammation & Heart Support

Omega-3 fats help regulate inflammation and support heart health, joint comfort, brain function, and mood stability. Even with access to fresh seafood, consistent intake of meaningful amounts of omega-3s is less common than many assume. Modern dietary patterns tend to favor inflammatory fats over anti-inflammatory ones. As activity increases and seasonal allergens rise, balanced inflammatory support becomes increasingly important.

When I look closer: joint stiffness, cardiovascular risk factors, brain fog, mood variability, and seasonal inflammatory symptoms

Practical Tip: If fish oil results in occasional upper digestive discomfort or burping freezing capsules may help. Those taking blood thinners should consult their provider.



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A More Flexible 30A Retirement

Watersound Fountains is the kind of place best experienced firsthand.

That's why short-term stays are part of the story here.

A short-term stay offers the chance to experience retirement living near 30A as it actually unfolds — not during a quick tour, but in real time. A morning routine. A few shared meals. A stretch of days where life moves at an easier pace, without the usual responsibilities.

Whether for a few days, a few weeks, or an entire season, a short-term stay allows guests to step into the rhythm of the community without pressure or long-term commitment. It's an opportunity to live here — not imagine it.

Mornings begin quietly. Sunlight filters through the windows. Coffee is unhurried. Some guests head to the fitness center or pool. Others ease into the day with a walk, breakfast with neighbors, or time outdoors near the surrounding protected forest.

"I happened to be here spending the weekend," one



member laughs. "And I haven't left. I just stayed."

That moment, when a stay starts to feel like everyday life, often comes as a surprise.

During a short-term stay, guests enjoy full access to the community. Chef-prepared meals. Wellness classes. Fitness studios. Social spaces designed for conversation and connection. Maintenance and daily details are handled, freeing up



both time and mental space.

By mid-morning, the community hums gently with activity. A balance class here. Coffee with new friends there. Someone deciding, on a whim, to try the golf simulator or join a book discussion. There's always something happening, but nothing is required.

That flexibility is intentional. "I like that I don't have to commit to anything," a member shares. "Some days I'm busy. Some days I'm not. Either way feels right."

Afternoons stretch into easy hours. Guests gather in the W

Lounge, spend time poolside, or explore nearby favorites along 30A. On Fridays, many discover one of the community's most loved traditions: dinner at The Mark, where reservations, conversation, and chef-prepared meals turn an ordinary evening into something to look forward to.

For some, a short-term stay is about proximity — spending more time near children or grandchildren and being close enough for everyday moments, not just holidays. For others, it's about location: enjoying coastal living, escaping colder climates,

or simply experiencing a different pace of life for a while.

What short-term guests often mention isn't just the amenities or the setting. It's how effortless daily life becomes.

No home maintenance. No property upkeep. Beaches, shops, and local favorites just a short drive away. A new Publix supermarket is right next door.

"It's life, just with fewer things to manage," one member explains. "There's more time to enjoy the day."

That's the heart of a short-term stay at Watersound Fountains. It's not about deciding right away. It's about giving yourself time to settle in, observe, and see what fits.



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Community

Events at the Beach

Raisin' the Green Returns

March 15 | 11 a.m.-3 p.m.
| **Magnolia Grill**

A beloved St. Patrick's Day tradition returns Sunday, March 15, as Magnolia Grill hosts the annual Raisin' the Green fundraiser from 11 a.m.-3 p.m. to benefit Catholic Charities of Northwest Florida and the Air Force Enlisted Village's Bob Hope Village and Hawthorn House assisted living facility.

Guests are invited to enjoy the American St. Patrick's Day favorite of corned beef and cabbage with boiled potatoes, along with shamrocks and traditional Irish background music.

A suggested \$15 donation is requested, with 100 percent of proceeds benefiting the charities. Both dine-in and to-go orders will be available.

For more information, call 850-302-0266.

2026 Bunny Hop Trail

March 27 | 5:30-8:30 p.m.
| **Preston Hood Athletic Complex**

The City of Fort Walton Beach Recreation Department will hold its annual Bunny Hop Trail on Friday, March 27 from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the Preston Hood Athletic Complex, located directly behind the Fort Walton Beach Recreation Cen-



ter at 132 Jet Dr. NW. Parking is available both at the Recreation Center and at the two city lots located on Hollywood Boulevard, directly across from Hampton Hyundai.

There will be treats, bounce houses, face painting, and other fun activities, as well as a "photo booth" where children can have their picture made with the Easter Bunny.

If your business, organization, civic, work or family group would like to participate by setting up a table along our trail and handing out treats, please contact Program Coordinator Pat Sherman at 850-833-9576 or psherman@fwb.org.

RENT: 30th Anniversary Production

Bold. Emotional. Unforgettable.

March 13-22 | Various Show Times | Fort Walton Beach Civic Auditorium

Celebrate the 30th anniversary of the groundbreaking mu-



sical RENT, the powerful story that continues to inspire audiences with its message to measure your life in love. Featuring a live band, this beloved production brings Jonathan Larson's unforgettable score and deeply human story to life on stage.

Loosely based on Puccini's La Bohème, RENT follows a year in the lives of a group of struggling young artists and musicians living in New York City's Lower East Side. As they pursue their dreams and navigate friendships, relationships and creative passions, they also face the realities of poverty, love, loss and the shadow of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Through unforgettable characters like Roger, Mimi, Mark, Tom, Angel, Maureen, Joanne and Benny, the story explores what it means to live authentically, support one another and find hope in the midst of

uncertainty. With iconic songs and emotional performances, RENT remains one of the most influential musicals of a generation.

Note: RENT contains adult themes and language, sexual situations and non-traditional relationships.

Tickets on sale now at StageCraftersFWB.com. See ad for showtimes.

6th Annual Sporting Clay Classic to Benefit Gulf Coast Scouts

March 21 | Holt

The Gulf Coast Council of Scouting America will host its 6th Annual Sporting Clay Classic on Saturday, March 21, from 7:30 a.m.-3 p.m. at Element Training Complex - The Oaks, 4418 Cooper Lane in Holt.

The event features a morning of sporting clays competition followed by lunch, an auction and an awards banquet, with proceeds supporting programs that empower Scouts across the Gulf Coast region. Registration begins at 7:30 a.m. with a continental breakfast, followed by a safety briefing at 8:15 a.m. and a 9 a.m. shotgun start. The cost is \$175 per individual shooter or \$600 for a four-person team. Participants must bring their own gun and ammunition. Sponsorship opportunities are also available. Register at donations.scouting.org/#/council/773/event/758. For sponsorship or media inquiries, contact Sara Lewis at sara.lewis@scouting.org or (850) 974-0287.

is@scouting.org or (850) 974-0287.

Easter Sunrise Service

April 5, 2026 | 6 a.m. | Beasley Park | Okaloosa Island

One of the Emerald Coast's most meaningful Easter traditions returns as worshippers gather before dawn for the annual Easter Sunrise Service at Beasley Park on Okaloosa Island. The interdenominational gathering welcomes residents and visitors alike to celebrate the resurrection of Christ as the sun rises over the Gulf.

Set against the beautiful backdrop of the Santa Rosa Sound and the sugar-white sands of Okaloosa Island, the service has long drawn large crowds, with past gatherings bringing more than 1,500 people together in worship. Sunrise services have been a Christian tradition since 1732, symbolizing the moment the empty tomb was discovered on Easter morning.

Local churches from across Fort Walton Beach and Destin often participate in the service, with additional Easter celebrations held later in the morning throughout the community. Attendees are encouraged to arrive early and bring blankets or beach chairs, as April mornings along the water can still be cool.

Continued on page 8

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Happenings Around FWB

2026 EVENTS

MARCH

- 10**
Games Club
1 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB
- Science Social: Middle School Edition
5:30 pm | EC Science Center | FWB
- Bonsai Workshop by Zen Den Bonsai
6 pm | Wood Foot Beer Company | FWB
- 12**
Mini Makers & Experimenters Lab
10:30 am | EC Science Center | FWB
- Medicare 101
10:30 am | FWB Public Library | FWB
- Greater FWB Chamber Nothing But Networking
11:30 am | Home2 Suites by Hilton FWB | FWB
- Bands on the Boulevard: Spring Music Series
6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach
- 14**
Garnier Beach Garden Club
10 am | FWB Public Library | FWB
- Girls Empowered with Math & Science (GEMS) Workshop
10:30 am | FWB Public Library | FWB
- All Ages: Chicken Rider Painting
12 pm | Painting with a Twist | FWB
- 15**
Get Lucky 10K and Half Marathon
7:30 am | Ferry Park | FWB
- Raisin' the Green: A St. Patrick's Day Celebration
11 am | Magnolia Grill | FWB
- 8th Annual Mac & Cheese Festival
12 pm | Destin Commons | Destin
- 16**
All Ages: Demon Tiger Portal Painting
10 am | Painting with a Twist | FWB
- GSSF Indoor League
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
- General Trivia
6 pm | Soundside Waterfront Bar | FWB
- 16-20**
Spring into the Science Center
10 am | EC Science Center | FWB
- 17**
Canasta Club
1 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB
- 18**
All Ages: Paint Your Original Gaming Character
10 am | Painting with a Twist | FWB
- 19**
Greater FWB Chamber Business After Hours
5:30 pm | Fort Walton Rehabilitation Center | FWB
- Bands on the Boulevard: Spring Music Series
6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach



- 19 CONT.**
Planetarium Night: Egyptian Myths
6 pm | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB
- 20**
Animal Tales
10:30 & 11:45 am | EC Science Center | FWB
- Swingin Sunset Painting
6:30 pm | Painting with a Twist | FWB
- 21**
Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
- 7th Annual International Festival
11 am | The Landing | FWB
- Planetarium Special Feature: True Crime
6 pm | EC Science Center | FWB
- Planetarium Special Feature: Sordid Secrets of the Stars
7 pm | EC Science Center | FWB
- Gulf Coast Scouts Sporting Clay Classic
7:30 am | Element Training Complex | Holt
- 23**
Stranger Things Trivia
6 pm | Soundside Waterfront Bar | FWB
- 24**
Games Club
1 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB
- 25**
Word Waves Writers
5 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB
- 26**
Bands on the Boulevard: Spring Music Series
6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach
- 27**
2026 Bunny Hop Trail
8:30 pm | Prestonhood Athletic Complex FWB

APRIL

- 01**
Bonsai Workshop by Zen Den Bonsai
6 pm | Props Brewery & Taproom | FWB
- 02**
Coffee with the City Manager
8 am | FWB Public Library | FWB
- Bands on the Boulevard: Spring Music Series
6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach
- 03**
Doggie Eggstravaganza
5:30 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach
- 04**
Eggstravaganza Annual Egg Hunt
8:3 am | Lil' Commandos Park | Hurlburt Field
- Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Val'p

- 04 CONT.**
Discover Science Saturday
10 am | EC Science Center | FWB
- 05**
Women's Climbing Circle
5 pm | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin
- Easter Sunrise Service
6 am | Beasley Park | Okaloosa Island
- 06**
FWB Library Friends Meeting
6 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB
- 09**
Concerts in the Village: Smash Mouth
7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin



Bands on the Boulevard: Spring Music Series
6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

ONGOING EVENTS

- VFW Post 7674 - Sunday Breakfasts
8 - 11:30 am | Sun | 231 Carol Ave | FWB
- Brunch Buffet with Gone Coastal
11 am | Sun | Soundside Waterfront Bar | FWB
- SINGO Music Bingo Nights
6 pm | Tues | The Island Resort | FWB
- Downtown FWB Coffee Club (Mar - Dec)
9 - 10 am | 2nd Thurs | The Florida Place Food Trucks | 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 Farmer's Market
Saturdays | 7 am - 2 pm
1954 Lewis Turner Blvd | FWB
- Downtown FWB Farmer's Market
2nd & 4th Saturdays | 8 am - 1 pm
FWB Landing Park | FWB
- Grand Boulevard
Saturdays | 9 am - 1 pm
Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

UPCOMING EVENT

APRIL 25
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Magic + Comedy for Another Year!

After a well-received, successful first season at The Palms Resort in Destin, the Magic & Comedy Destin show has signed on for a second season — along with several new enhancements for guests.

The showroom now features all table seating, with bar wait-staff taking drink orders prior to the performance. Guests can enjoy alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages delivered directly to their tables so they don't miss a moment of the live show.

The action-packed production features world-class magic, comedy and ventriloquism, with interactive illusions performed just inches from the audience. While the sophisticated magic

and smart comedy are geared toward adults, the show remains family-friendly and appropriate for all ages.

The residency is headlined by Bart Rockett, who hosted his own nationally syndicated television show for three seasons, had a co-starring role on the former NBC drama "Parenthood," and headlined his own 1,000-seat theater in Branson, Missouri, for nine seasons. He has performed in more than 90 countries and headlined for most major cruise lines worldwide.

Rockett, who began performing at age 10, trained under Jeff Dunham and is recognized for his ventriloquism, which is featured prominently in the show. After



growing up in the South, Rockett moved to Hollywood, California, where his management team is based. He also coached his children to the finals of NBC's "America's Got Talent," and they have since appeared in major Hollywood projects.

His son, Kadan, starred in the film "Dark Skies" with Keri Russell and appeared on CBS's

"Rush Hour." He joins his sister, Brooklyn, for guest appearances in the Destin show.

Brooklyn gained national attention for her viral Super Bowl commercial, which has nearly 800 million views on YouTube. Most recently, she portrayed the daughter of Bradley Cooper in a project involving Steven Spielberg and Martin Scorsese.

The Rockett family has vacationed in Destin for many years. Now that his children are nearly grown, Rockett says he is excited to return for a long-term residency in the place his grandparents

first introduced him to as a child. "I am excited to be back for another season here on the Emerald Coast and to continue creating magical memories for our guests," Rockett said.

A new restaurant, The Blue Lagoon, is now open before and after each show where guests can enjoy an extensive menu. Known for its Italian fare, the restaurant is located next to the showroom, and beverages may be brought into the theater.

For a full schedule and reservations, visit MagicDestin.com. This season includes 7 p.m. evening performances and 4 p.m. matinees on select Sundays. Advance reservations are required. Parking is free and plentiful.

EVENTS

continued from page 6

South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival April 23–26 | Grand Boulevard

Tickets are on sale now for the South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival, returning April 23–26 to Grand Boulevard with more than 600 wines, beers and spirits to sample across four days of tastings, live entertainment and culinary experiences.

The weekend kicks off

Thursday with Winemakers and Shakers at Wine World in Destin, followed by Friday's VIP Wine Tasting (4–6 p.m.) featuring rare selections and expert pours, plus Bitters, Brews & Bartenders (5:30–8 p.m.) showcasing craft cocktails, lite bites and a lively mixology competition. The Grand Tasting takes place Saturday (3–6 p.m.) and Sunday (1–4 p.m.), highlighting world-class wineries — including the Willamette Valley Vintners Association — alongside chef-driven pairings in Wine

World's Culinary Village.

Guests can purchase featured wines on site, with proceeds benefiting Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation and children in need across Northwest Florida. Pre-sale tickets are available now at sowalwine.com; prices increase April 1.

Destin Charity Wine Auction Turns 21 and Goes Wild for Kids April 24–25 | Grand Boulevard

The 21st Annual Destin



Charity Wine Auction presented by the Jumonville Family benefits children in need across

Northwest Florida through Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation's (DCWAF) 16 partner children's charities. In 2025, the foundation donated \$3.1 million following one of its most successful auctions to date.

The 2026 auction will feature an impressive lineup of celebrity chefs and internationally renowned vintners. Held in conjunction with the South Walton Beaches Wine and Food Festival, the auction also takes place at Grand Boulevard the same weekend. The festival showcases hundreds of premium wines, spirits and culinary offerings, with proceeds benefiting DCWAF. Full details are available at dcwaf.org.



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7th Annual International Festival Celebrates Culture, Food and Music | March 21 | The Landing, Fort Walton Beach

Celebrate the USA's 250th anniversary while experiencing cultures from around the world at the 7th Annual International Festival on Saturday, March 21, from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. at The Landing (139 SE Brooks St., Fort Walton Beach).

Organized by Conexión Media Group to benefit United for a Good Cause Inc., the family-friendly event features international music, food, folklore and art, bringing "The

World UNITES in the Emerald Coast." The festival also welcomes singers, bands, clubs and folkloric groups, along with vendors and business sponsors. Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber members receive a 25% discount on vendor rates. For details or participation opportunities, email conexionflorida@gmail.com, call 850-368-3505 or visit conexionflorida.com.

NFSO Presents Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 2, the Awe-inspiring "Resurrection"

On April 18, the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra — the region's premier professional orchestra — transforms the stage of the Mattie Kelly Arts Center into a space of breathtaking scale and sound. More than 200 musicians and singers will gather for Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 2, the awe-inspiring "Resurrection" Symphony, in what promises to be one of the most powerful artistic events of the season.

Mahler's Second is not merely a symphony; it is an emotional and spiritual journey. It begins in darkness and uncertainty, wrestling with life's deepest questions, and rises steadily toward a radiant conclusion that proclaims renewal and hope. In its final movement, a full chorus and vocal soloists join the orchestra in a breathtaking affirmation of life after struggle — a moment that has moved audiences for more than a century.

This extraordinary performance unites the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra with the Northwest Florida Symphony Chorale, the Choral Society of Pensacola, and Niceville High School Opus One. The sheer scale of the collaboration — more than 200 performers filling the stage — creates a sound both intimate and immense, surrounding the audience in a shared experience of uncommon magnitude.

Works of this scope are rarely presented in our region. Months of preparation and exceptional artistic forces are required to bring it to life. When the final chorus rises from a whisper to a thunderous declaration, the effect is overwhelming — not only heard, but deeply felt.

Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony will be performed on Saturday, April 18 at 7 p.m. at the Mattie Kelly Arts Center. Tickets are available at MattieKellyArtsCenter.org or by calling 850-729-6000.

Ann Toomey, Soprano

American soprano Ann Toomey is enjoying a significant international career, praised for her rich voice and dramatic presence. She has performed major operatic roles including *Madama Butterfly* and *Tosca* with



Lyric Opera of Kansas City and Florentine Opera, and made a celebrated European debut in *Suor Angelica* at the Berlin Philharmonie under Kirill Petrenko. She has also appeared with the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Gustavo Dudamel and sung Mahler's Symphony No. 8 with the Nashville Symphony, among other acclaimed engagements. A former member of the Ryan Opera Center at Lyric Opera of Chicago, she was a national semifinalist in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions.

Zoie Reams, Mezzo-Soprano

Mezzo-soprano Zoie Reams has garnered recognition for her "velvety" tone and versatile artistry. A graduate of the Houston Grand Opera Butler Studio, she



appears regularly at Lyric Opera of Chicago in roles from *La traviata* to contemporary works, and has sung the title role in *Carmen* at Canadian Opera Company and Oregon's Piedmont Opera. She made her Met-

ropolitan Opera debut in *Porgy and Bess* and appears in major concert engagements including Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Handel's *Messiah* at Washington National Cathedral.

Reams' season also includes appearances with Cincinnati Opera, Minnesota Opera, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Gustavo Dudamel.

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

MAHLER

Symphony No. 2

"RESURRECTION"

APRIL 18 7:00 PM
MATTIE KELLY ARTS CENTER

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News Around Town

Honoring Local Heroes at the Okaloosa County Department of Corrections

It takes a special kind of dedication to serve behind the walls of a correctional facility, and in Okaloosa County that responsibility rests with 175 professionals at the Okaloosa County Department of Corrections.

These men and women face daily challenges as they provide custodial care, oversight and support for individuals facing misdemeanor and felony charges. Many in custody also struggle with mental health conditions and substance abuse, making the work both complex and demanding. Alongside correctional officers and nurses, county employees and community partners work together each day to maintain safety and protect the citizens of Okaloosa County.

Each year, the nation recognizes the important role these professionals play during National Correctional Officers Week and National Nurs-



es Week. This year, Okaloosa County officials are expanding that recognition to include the many support staff members whose behind-the-scenes work helps keep operations running smoothly.

In his 1984 proclamation establishing National Correctional Officers Week, President Ronald Reagan noted that correctional officers often serve simultaneously as custodians, supervisors and counselors. "The

professionalism, dedication and courage exhibited by these officers throughout the performance of these demanding and often conflicting roles deserve our utmost respect," Reagan said.

To honor local staff, the department will host its sixth annual Food Truck Frenzy during National Correctional Officers Week and National Nurses Week, May 4-8. The event celebrates staff service while inviting

the community to join in the appreciation.

Organizers are currently seeking support from local businesses and community partners, and residents are encouraged to stop by, enjoy great food and recognize the hardworking professionals who help keep Okaloosa County safe every day.

FWB Seeks Artists for Patriotic Fire Hydrant Project

The City of Fort Walton Beach Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) is inviting local artists to submit design proposals for its Patriotic Fire Hydrant Painting Project, a public art initiative celebrating the nation's 250th birthday.

The selected artist will repaint 25 fire hydrants throughout the city with patriotic-themed designs. Applicants must submit at least five design concepts and will be responsible for preparing, painting and sealing the hydrants, as well as providing materials and submitting before-and-after photos of each location.

Proposals are due by 7 a.m.

March 16, 2026, and may be emailed to cradept@fwb.org or delivered to the CRA Office, 105 Miracle Strip Parkway SW, Fort Walton Beach.

Designs will be displayed for public feedback during the CRA Citizen Input Meeting at 9 a.m. March 18, with the final selection made by the CRA Board on April 28.

For details and the entry form, visit:

fwb.org/DocumentCenter/View/4354/Patriotic-Fire-Hydrant-Project-PDF.

Okaloosa Schools Earn National AP Honor Roll Recognition

The Okaloosa County School District announced that Choctawhatchee High School, Fort Walton Beach High School and Niceville High School have been named to the 2025 College Board AP School Honor Roll, a national distinction recognizing schools that expand access to Advanced Placement coursework while supporting strong student outcomes.

Continued on page 12

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"Oh, We'll Never Get a New Brooks Bridge." - CIRCA 2014

BY CAROLYN
NEWCOMER KETCHEL

I have watched with fascination the construction progress of the new Brooks Bridge. I am not an engineer. So, to me, it is a wonder to see the first half of the new bridge coming together from opposites sides of The Sound. The John T. Brooks Bridge has served as the vital link between mainland Fort Walton Beach and Okaloosa Island since 1966. The original Brooks Bridge was opened in 1935, and was a low-level swing bridge. The swinging center span required a bridge tender to turn the span sideways to allow for tall boats to pass through. Before the swing bridge was built, ferries were used to transport citizens from Fort Walton Beach to Okaloosa Island.

Could you guess that the average annual daily traffic count is 66,000 vehicles? The old four-lane structure is no longer sufficient to support the traffic count. The ongoing \$171.8

million design-build project is replacing this aging landmark with twin parallel spans that will fundamentally change how we move through our south county. Thankfully, for the most part, the traffic delays have not been too lengthy.

It's easy to look at the massive cranes, intricate steel reinforcements, and the logistical nightmare of rerouting modern traffic and feel like we are facing an unprecedented challenge with the Brooks Bridge replacement. The project is undeniably complex, requiring precise coordination between environmental protections, maritime navigation, and the structural demands of spanning the Santa Rosa Sound. Yet, when we zoom out, we see that the Brooks Bridge is part of a grand, millennia-old tradition of human defiance against geography. We are a species that looks at a gap and insists on a path.

Let's take a closer look at the Key Improvements:



- **Expanded Capacity:** Moving from 4 lanes to 6 travel lanes (three in each direction).
- **Enhanced Safety:** 10-foot inside and outside shoulders to prevent traffic gridlock during minor accidents or breakdowns.
- **Pedestrian Access:** Each side will feature a 12-foot wide shared multimodal path featuring scenic overlooks and shade structure, fully separated from vehicle traffic by protective barrier walls. This will link to our bike bath on the south side that can be walked or biked all the way to Destin (Marler Bridge).
- **Navigational Clearance:** Vertical clearance is being increased from 50 feet to 65 feet to meet modern U.S. Coast Guard regulations for the Gulf

Intracoastal Waterway.

- **Eliminating Santa Rosa Blvd Signal:** One of the most significant improvements will be the removal of the traffic signal at Santa Rosa Boulevard. The new bridge extends over this intersection, allowing US 98 traffic to flow uninterrupted while the new "connection" roads handle local island traffic underneath the bridge.

- **East Connection:** A new 4-lane road linking Santa Rosa Blvd to US 98 Eastbound.

- **North Connection:** A dedicated ramp providing seamless access for Westbound drivers.

Engineers have been solving "impossible" infrastructure puzzles since the dawn of civilization. Long before we had computer-aided design or hydraulic machinery, our ancestors were calculating load distributions and hydraulic pressures with startling accuracy. The same spirit of rigorous planning and problem-solving currently being

applied to the piles and piers in Fort Walton Beach has echoed through history—from the Roman aqueducts to the Great Wall. Modern technology has changed our tools, but the fundamental logic of engineering remains a constant thread in the fabric of human progress.

One of the most mind-bending examples of this ancient expertise is Hezekiah's Tunnel, constructed in Jerusalem around 700 BCE, and mentioned in the Bible in the book of 2 Chronicles chapter 32. Faced with an impending siege by the Assyrians, King Hezekiah needed to secure the city's water supply by diverting water from the Gihon Spring to the Pool of Siloam. The catch? The spring sat outside the city walls, and the path to safety lay through roughly 1,750 feet of solid limestone bedrock.

What makes this project a marvel of engineering is how it

Continued on page 15



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 Community

NEWS

continued from page 10

Choctawhatchee High School earned Gold recognition.

- Fort Walton Beach High School earned Silver recognition.
- Niceville High School earned Silver recognition.

The AP School Honor Roll recognizes high schools that meet rigorous benchmarks in college readiness and student achievement, based on data from their most recent graduating class. Schools are evaluated on broad access to AP coursework, student success on AP exams, and sustained participation in advanced academics.

“Recognition on the AP School Honor Roll is a testament to the dedication of our students, teachers, and school leaders,” said Superintendent Marcus Chambers. “Choctawhatchee High School’s Gold distinction and the Silver recognition earned by Fort Walton Beach and Niceville High Schools reflect our district’s continued commitment to academic excellence and preparing students for future success.”

Snowbirds Honored by Fort Walton Snowbird Club

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

“There’s no place like home,” Dorothy once spoke,



as the red slippers carried her back to Kansas from the land of Oz. While more true words could not be spoken, home for residents of the northern states and Canada is Okaloosa County each winter. Area snowbird groups welcome them back and yes, bid a fond farewell, as our friends return back up north to welcome spring.

This was the scenario one morning in Fort Walton Beach in mid-February at the First Baptist Church in Fort Walton where organizations and vendors shared information before a general meeting and entertainment. Tom Rice and Magnolia Grill provided the necessary coffee and snacks as did other groups like Saltwater Restaurants with a tuna salad sample for each person.

The Emerald Coast Community Band performed songs from musicals such as Mama Mia. Conductor Nathan Frymire led this talented volunteer group of musicians as snowbirds listened and applauded their approval. Ken Walsh and

Barb Palmgren, trustees of the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, also performed a short skit about life in the 1920’s in Valparaiso. Ken was James Plew, a major developer of the area, and Barb was Lula Edge, postmistress and school board member. The audience laughed while this comedy team argued about where to put pickleball courts in Valparaiso.

All this doesn’t magically happen. The officers and staff of the Fort Walton Snowbird Club coordinated this and other meeting and events to keep visitors happy and busy. With volunteers like this in our community, we should all be proud!

Farewell, snowbird friends, until next year when silver sands, specialty restaurants, pickleball courts, golf games, and shopping await you once again. And yes, for a few months you will be saying, “There’s no place like Fort Walton.”



EFCU Earns National DOSE Award for Veteran Saves

Eglin Federal Credit Union was one of just five credit unions nationwide to receive the Designation of Savings Ex-

cellence (DOSE) Award for its leadership and outreach during Veteran Saves Week 2025, held Nov. 4–7. The industry-recognized honor celebrates financial institutions that promote effective saving strategies and financial readiness within the veteran community. Launched by America Saves in 2023, Veteran Saves Week encourages veterans and transitioning service members to build financial stability through practical, achievable saving habits and real-life financial check-ins. “We are proud to serve a thriving military and veteran community with services, support and solutions that simplify their financial lives,” said Cathie Staton, Eglin FCU president and CEO. “Our Field of Membership includes active and retired military personnel assigned to or receiving services from Eglin Air Force Base, Hurlburt Field, Duke Field, Camp Rudder or the 7th Special Forces Group. Veterans residing in Okaloosa, Santa Rosa and Walton counties are also eligible for membership. Partnering with Veteran Saves Week was a natural fit, as we share a commitment to helping veterans, transitioning service members and their families build financial readiness for life after service.”

Through the efforts of Eglin Federal Credit Union and more than 900 participating organizations nationwide, Veteran Saves Week 2025 generated nearly \$1.9 million in deposits into new and existing savings accounts and \$370,000 in pledged deposits toward personal savings goals. Outreach included educational resources, community engagement and social media campaigns encouraging veterans to take the Veteran Saves Pledge. “At its core, Veteran Saves Week encourages a financial check-in so Veterans and transitioning service members can better understand their day-to-day finances,” said Krystel Spell, program manager of Veteran Saves.

Prepaid 2-Year College Scholarships for OCSD Students

Superintendent Marcus Chambers has announced an opportunity for three Okaloosa County School District (OCSD) seniors to receive Florida Prepaid 2-Year College Scholarships.

Applicants must be graduating seniors attending an

OCSD public high school, plan to pursue a career in education and meet the basic eligibility requirements for a Florida Prepaid College Plan.

Applications are available now and must be submitted by 11:59 p.m. Friday, March 20, 2026. Students may submit only one application and must complete the digital form in full and upload the following materials: a current transcript, SAT/ACT/PSAT scores, a completed District form MIS 4217 documenting community service hours and a video essay (no longer than two minutes) explaining why they have chosen a career in education.

Applicants should gather all materials before beginning, as the application must be completed and submitted in one session. Incomplete submissions or missing documentation will result in disqualification.

Apply at:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLS-fX-Nh1cRuyH6geebEfgCB-sIGZazI1MTtNt4QOxuzMXJ-1dPg/viewform>

Scholarship recipients will be notified by Wednesday, April 1, 2026. For questions, email catherine.card@okaloosaschools.com.

FWBHS to Host Third Annual Viking Voyage Career Fair

Fort Walton Beach High School will host its Third Annual Viking Voyage Career Fair on Friday, April 10, 2026, from 9 a.m. to noon in the school gymnasium, connecting students with local businesses and community partners for a day of career exploration.

VOYAGE—Vikings Networking with Organizations Yielding an Opportunity for Great Exploration of careers—helps students connect classroom learning with real-world career paths. More than 1,500 students in grades 9–12 are expected to attend.

The school is seeking employers, business leaders and alumni interested in participating to share industry insights and highlight workforce opportunities.

For information, contact Dr. Linda Dugan at Linda.Dugan@okaloosaschools.com or 850-833-3300.



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No More Property Tax for Florida's Homesteaded Residences



BY PAUL DOMENECH

It's interesting timing. I've been talking about affordability and why lowering interest rates alone isn't the solution. Lower taxes and lower insurance—that's how you relieve pressure without pouring fuel on inflation. That's how you protect purchasing power the right way.

Right now, Florida Governor DeSantis is calling for the removal of property taxes for Florida's homesteaded residents, rooted in the belief that the American Dream was built on owning land free and clear. On the surface, that resonates. If you've paid off

your home, why should you continue paying on it? Fair question. But the deeper conversation isn't just about eliminating a tax, it's about how we maintain what protects and supports that property.

Property taxes currently fund public schools, law enforcement, fire departments and EMS, roads and drainage systems, hurricane and emergency management, parks and beach access, libraries, courts, planning and zoning, infrastructure maintenance, and in many areas, water and sewer systems. Especially here on the Emerald Coast, where resilience and public safety are not luxuries but necessities, those services are foundational. So, the real issue isn't simply removal; it's what replaces that revenue and how we continue funding the backbone of our communities.

If not us, then who will pay? If we're going to talk about removing property taxes, then we also need to have an honest conversation about who should car-



ry the weight. I'm comfortable saying it—the companies using our beautiful Emerald Coast to generate profit should be part of that solution. We're no longer just competing with local families building a life here. We're competing with investment funds, short-term rental operators, and out-of-state cash that view our community as a revenue stream. To them, these aren't homes, they're balance sheet assets. When properties are purchased as income vehicles instead of primary residences, supply tightens for the people who actually want to homestead, raise their kids, and plant roots. In a premier

destination market like ours, demand isn't just local, it's national and global. And when outside capital extracts profit without living here, prices rise and affordability becomes tougher for the very workforce that keeps this place running.

If we're going to restructure property taxes, let's be intentional. Protect the homeowners. Protect the workforce. And have the real conversation about how companies profiting from our paradise can help sustain the infrastructure, safety, and systems that make it valuable in the first place.

Let me be clear; this is not a done deal. It's still being worked through. Nothing has been finalized. But, this is the moment to keep your ears open and start paying attention. Because, if this moves forward, it will be up to us to get behind the wheel. This isn't a Democrat issue. It isn't a Republican issue. This is

a for-the-people, by-the-people moment. A chance for our community and our state to champion and pioneer what was once a cornerstone of the American Dream, affordable homeownership, and shape it in a way that truly works for the people who live here.

Home selling is not about a pretty picture, social media popularity, or being known as a Realtor. It's about being worth knowing. So, before buying or selling, when you ask the question, "How is the real estate market?" If the answer starts and ends with interest rates, you might want to find the person who has much more to say. I will continue to follow up to make sure our community is informed. Until then, if you have any questions about buying or selling, feel free to reach out to me personally at 850-543-1418. I welcome all conversations that create a higher level of thinking about real estate and, really, anything.

God Bless AMERICA.

A House Sold Name



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'The place where it happens': Gannet Creative House captures Downtown Fort Walton Beach in motion

By JARED WILLIAMS

The same team behind the SHERO Foundation's 'Protect Girlhood' campaign first tested their approach on their own backyard — with the same result: a community that said yes.

The new Downtown Fort Walton Beach sign had just gone up. Tyler Trant needed an opener.

"That was just luck of the draw," the cinematographer said. "We really wanted to take our time putting something out that we were proud of showing off. So when I was in the final stages, Sean had mentioned there was a new sign put up and I needed a good opener."

The 65-second video that follows moves fast — pickleball at Beach Weekend Coffee, a yoga class at Dragonfly, food trucks packed with customers, nightlife at Jake & Henry's, a musician performing at Docie's Dock. The voiceover calls downtown "the place where it happens" and celebrates "the dreamers who open doors and invite the world in."

Every frame was shot by Gannet Creative House, the same three-person production company that would soon land a national campaign for the SHERO Foundation. But this piece came first.

"We had just formed Gannet on July 25 and were trying to get a jumpstart," said Sean Murphy, the company's photographer. "Fort Walton Beach is so close to my heart, and with all the changes going on downtown, we thought it would be a great time to do a collaboration with a few of our favorite businesses."

Murphy grew up in Fort Walton Beach and graduated from



Choctawhatchee High School before spending decades building a photography career in Los Angeles. Now he's back, with his studio within walking distance of downtown.

"Over the last three decades, the change has been slow," he said. "Things have ramped up and are so exciting."

The shoot took three full days, plus pickup shots afterward — the new sign, a reflection shot outside Suds N Cinema, additional B-roll to fill gaps.

Producer Skye Howard handled logistics, approaching businesses about opening their doors outside normal hours and coordinating talent for specific scenes.

"All of the businesses we approached were so excited to be a part of the shoot and happy to open their doors," Howard said. "A lot of the businesses even helped by bringing in their own clients, friends and family to be in the shoot."

Docie's Dock scheduled specific musicians to ensure the performance scenes looked right on camera. Jake & Henry's reserved its VIP section on a busy night so the crew had

room to work while still capturing a packed house. Tom Tona opened up the Florida Place Food Trucks and helped draw a crowd. Dragonfly Yoga taught a full class midday. Jayme Nabors at Beach Weekend Coffee called in his best pickleball players.

"We literally could not have done it without the support of this community," Trant said.

The team wanted to showcase a mix that reflected everything downtown offers without singling out specific spots. Not every location made the cut.

"It would have been great to show the waterfront aspect of downtown that makes it so unique," Howard said. "But with The Landing still under construction, we didn't feel like we could represent that properly."

Trant wrote the script and storyboarded the entire piece before the crew ever hit record.

"That's how it should always be done," he said. "We had inspiration of what we wanted, but in the end it came down to the edit. I even went off script a little from what we originally planned, but I think it all turned out great."

The language is deliberate. "The place where it happens." "Proudly original and quietly brilliant." "The dreamers who open doors and invite the world in."

The voiceover was delivered by Dan Collins.

"There was no one specific business in mind," Trant said of that last line. "It kind of encompasses all the local businesses, because they were all born from a dream or someone's passion. Every business or person we included is passionate about what they do. And you inevitably invite the world into your dream — whether it be support or criticism, you open yourself up to it."

The handheld shooting style — intimate, energetic, capturing small moments rather than staged poses — would later define their work on the SHERO Foundation's national campaign. But they developed it here first, on familiar streets. "I wanted you to feel like you were a part of downtown and you could picture yourself in all the scenes," Trant said. "I like shooting handheld. I feel that brings a lot of character into a piece like this."

Murphy was clear from the start: this was a passion project. No client. No agency. Just Gannet's own vision for a place they call home. "At some point, an agency will brand downtown Fort Walton Beach," he said. "Maybe we will get a shot at that project, and maybe not. With our piece, there was no input from a client or the city, so we shot it the way we saw downtown."

That freedom shaped everything — the locations, the pacing, the tone. "I hope that the

people who know about Fort Walton Beach and hang out down here will be happy with how we captured it," Murphy said. "And the people who maybe haven't been here yet or don't spend much time here will be pumped to come and check out some of the amazing things we have going on."

His vision for downtown is simple: density, destination, community. "Our hope is to bring density to downtown and have this place be a destination spot for travelers and a super cool hang for locals," he said. "I mean — it's already cool."

The video premiered at a Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce breakfast in February, alongside the Shero Foundation's "Protect Girlhood" campaign. Hundreds of local business leaders saw both pieces back to back — one that traveled the country, one that never left home.

Both were built the same way: a small crew, no budget, and a community willing to show up. "We're really lucky to live in a community where people are so willing to give their time and energy to projects like these," Howard said. "SHERO supported an incredible cause, and downtown Fort Walton Beach was more of a passion project — something that truly showed how proud people are of where they live."

Trant said the hardest part was deciding what to leave out. "It was hard to cut anything, and I think you could make endless versions and get the same feel of the piece," he said. "It was all so good."

Sixty-five seconds.

Three days of shooting.

A downtown in transition, captured by the people who live and work there.

To watch the video: <https://www.getthecoast.com/the-place-where-it-happens-gannet-creative-house-captures-downtown-fort-walton-beach-in-motion/>

To read more about the Shero Foundation's "Protect Girlhood" campaign: <https://www.getthecoast.com/protect-girlhood-filmed-in-fort-walton-beach/>

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

TO SEE WHAT IS HAPPENING

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Indian Temple Mound Museum Reopens Following Major Expansion and Renovation

The Indian Temple Mound Museum at the City of Fort Walton Beach's Heritage Park & Cultural Center has officially reopened following a significant expansion and renovation that enhances the preservation and presentation of the area's rich Native American history.

The museum celebrated its grand reopening Feb. 28 with presentations, a ribbon cutting and free admission for visitors eager to explore the newly updated facility.

Years in the making, the project included the construction of a new 4,800-square-foot addition completed in late 2025. The expanded space now houses a classroom, administrative offices, exhibit storage and a larger museum store, which first opened to the public in November.

Following completion of the addition, staff and volunteers spent several months renovating the original museum building, updating existing displays and installing new exhibits. The refreshed museum now offers an enhanced experience that documents thousands of years of settlement in the region by various Native American cultures.

The Indian Temple Mound Museum is part of the Heritage



Pictured are photos of the museum construction and finished exterior, the new museum store, the Fort Walton Temple Mound, and exhibits in the newly renovated Indian Temple Mound Museum.

Park & Cultural Center campus, which also includes the Camp Walton Schoolhouse Museum and several historic structures surrounding the ancient Fort Walton Temple Mound—one of the most significant archaeological sites along the Gulf Coast.

Admission to the museum is \$5 for adults, \$4.50 for seniors and military members and \$3 for children ages 4–17. Children ages 3 and younger are admitted free. Admission includes access to all museums and historic buildings within the Heritage Park & Cultural Center.

City officials expressed gratitude to former Fort Walton Beach City Councilwoman Chris Gibson and her family, whose generous donation helped make the museum addition possible. Gibson was a

longtime advocate for preserving and sharing the community's unique history.

Additional funding for the project was provided by the Fort Walton Beach Community Re-development Agency, Okaloosa County's Tourist Development Tax and the Okaloosa County Infrastructure Surtax.

The Heritage Park & Cultural Center, operated by the City of Fort Walton Beach's Recreation and Cultural Services Department, is located at 139 Miracle Strip Parkway SE in Fort Walton Beach. The museum is open from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. For more information, call 850-833-9595.



BROOKS BRIDGE

continued from page 11

was built. Two teams of laborers started at opposite ends, tunneling toward each other through the dark rock in a "S" curved path. Without GPS or modern surveying equipment, they managed to meet in the middle with an error of only a few feet. An ancient inscription found on the tunnel wall describes the moment the two teams heard each other's picks through the stone and finally broke through to join the two halves.

Even more impressive is the gradient. To ensure the water flowed properly, the tunnel had to slope downward at a very specific, incredibly slight angle. Over its entire 1,750-foot length, the floor drops only about 12 inches. This level of precision—achieved with hand tools and oil lamps—proves that

while the Brooks Bridge is a major undertaking for 2026, the "complex project" is a challenge we've been winning for nearly 3,000 years.

Make sure to watch the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aK9AiY4DXI4> to learn more about this exciting

project.

It is an honor to serve as you County Commissioner!

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

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 Lifestyle

The Invisible Sales Killer on Your Sidewalk



BY DANICA LAFAIRE
Before they ever walk in, your

customers have already decided. Spring Break is coming whether we are ready or not.

If you're a business owner, you can feel it. The conversations are shifting. Attention to detail is back in the room. Customer experience isn't just a buzzword this year—it's strategy.

Because here's the truth: Just because it's built... doesn't mean they will come. We have to earn it. And earning it starts before a customer ever opens your door.

The Purchase Begins on the Sidewalk

Picture this: You walk up to a restaurant. The windows are streaked. There are cobwebs in the corners. The entry glass hasn't been touched in weeks.

You haven't even looked at the menu yet — but your brain already has. You may still go inside. But instead of ordering the fresh catch or the chef's special, you play it safe.

"Maybe I'll just get the chicken strips."

Why? Because the brain is wired to look for signals of safety and quality. Cleanliness is one of the fastest indicators we use to assess whether something is trustworthy (Journal of Environmental Psychology).

The mind starts building a story long before a transaction happens.

Now imagine the opposite.

You walk up to a storefront that is bright. Inviting. The glass is spotless. The entry feels intentional.

There are no red flags firing in your brain.

Instead of scanning for problems, you're thinking:

"I can't wait to see the menu."

"I want to try that dress on."

"This looks promising."

Clean glass doesn't shout.

It simply removes friction.

The Hard Truth: Your exterior is either reinforcing your brand... or quietly working against it.

High Volume = High Impression Count

Seasonal surges don't just bring more people; they bring more first-time visitors. These are customers who:

- Don't know your reputation yet.
- Don't know your history.
- Haven't built loyalty with you.

All they have is what they see.

Customer experience isn't just what happens inside your walls.

It starts in the parking lot.

On the sidewalk.

In the reflection of your glass.

Are you being intentional about all of it?

This Season, Be Intentional

Spring Break will bring opportunity.

The traffic will increase.

The impressions will multiply.

The opportunities will show up.

The question is — are you positioned to earn them?

Before you invest more in ads this season, take a walk across the street from your building.

Look at it the way a first-time visitor would.

Is there anything creating friction?

Because clean windows don't just look good.

They remove doubt.

They signal care.

They support spending.

And in a season where every interaction matters, why would we leave something that visible to chance?

A Final Thought

At Fish Window Cleaning, we maintain more than glass.

We care for entryways, doors, frames, and storefront facades — because your exterior is part of your marketing whether you plan for it or not.

Our job isn't just to make something shine.

It's to help you protect your reputation and position your business to earn every opportunity that walks up to your door.

If you're preparing for season and want to be intentional about the impression you're making, we're here to help. 850.842.2162





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Exterior Maintenance Impacts Spending Behavior

Research shows that exterior appearance significantly influences whether customers choose to enter a business and—more importantly—how long they stay.

The Psychological Reality:

- If your building looks cared for, customers assume your product is cared for.
- If your exterior feels neglected, customers subconsciously question everything inside.
- When uncertainty enters the “buying brain,” spending decreases. Not because your product isn't good, but because doubt arrived first.

Windows Are Marketing – Whether You Mean Them to Be or Not

We spend thousands on social media ads, SEO, and promotions. But one of the most overlooked marketing tools is the physical condition of the building itself.

Your windows.

Your entry doors.

Your frames.

Even the facade your signage sits against.

They are not just surfaces.

They are signals.

After years working with storefronts, I've seen the difference firsthand. Businesses that consistently maintain their glass don't just look better—they feel more established, more intentional, and more trustworthy.

Spring into Style

BY LIESEL SCHMIDT

We've all been on the roller coaster of summer-like high temps and frigid, frosty days that make us forget we're in Florida, but those cold fronts are giving way to springtime weather that welcomes fewer layers and shorter hemlines...

It's a change that brings with it a wash of color—blues and greens that bring to mind the coastline, pinks and oranges that echo the wash of color at sunset, bright whites that make us want to dig our toes into the sand. At Blue Bay Lifestyle Co., the season's newest arrivals mirror that coastal palette, with fresh silhouettes, soft movement and a return to feminine details that feel both effortless and stylish.

This spring's fashion story is all about color and print, and our collections from Charlie B and Liverpool embrace both with ease. Think shades pulled straight from nature—springy greens, sun-washed corals, shell pinks and breezy blues—woven into relaxed denim, tailored jackets and breezy tops. Lightweight fabrics and flowy cuts

make each piece as comfortable as it they are trendy, perfect for transitioning from a morning coffee run to an evening dinner with a waterfront view.

Dresses and skirts are taking center stage this season, and it's easy to see why. Airy midi dresses move with the breeze, while feminine blouses bring a softness that feels just right for spring. These are pieces designed for real life on the coast—easy to dress up with a statement necklace from Lizou or Studio G and cute-yet-insanely-comfy Aetrex wedges or to keep casual with a pair of sandals from Birkenstock.

Accessories complete the look, and this season the finishing touches are all about warm, sun-kissed shine (and we're not talking about the kind you get from the tanning bed). Gold-filled jewelry from Bara Boheme—delicate, stackable bracelets and rings (the more, the better), layered necklaces and everyday earrings—adds just the right amount of sparkle and shine, reminiscent of the light reflecting off the Gulf in

the late afternoon. Paired with a buttery soft Hobo handbag, the effect is both relaxed and elevated—two of our favorite things.

All of our footwear follows the same philosophy of combining supportive comfort and style. And yes, you *can* have one without the other—but who wants that? Aetrex wedges offer a sophisticated look for spring events, brunches and evenings out, combining support with silhouettes that lengthen the leg and perfectly complement dresses and skirts. For more casual days, Birkenstocks fit the bill of offering orthotic-level arch support with iconic style. Paired with tailored shorts, breezy sundresses from Liverpool, or playful Free Fly rompers, they create that effortlessly laid-back yet perfectly put-together look of beach-town life.

Spring style at Blue Bay Lifestyle Co. is less about chasing trends and more about finding pieces that feel good to wear—clothing that moves with you, that breathes and adapts to the rhythm of life on the coast. Building a wardrobe that works



for spontaneous beach walks, outdoor events, weekend get-aways and those everyday moments that call for a dress code with only two requirements: comfort and style.

Walton Beach, and for us at Blue Bay Lifestyle Co., it's a season that expresses itself through colors, textures and effortless—pieces ready to be worn wherever the day leads.

Spring has arrived in Fort



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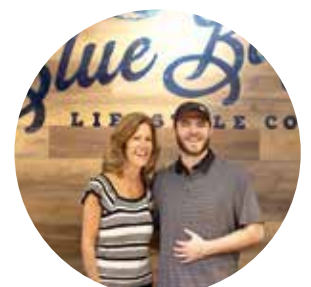
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AJ's Seafood & Oyster Bar

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(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 Bayou offers a beautiful waterfront setting with both indoor seating and an open-air deck overlooking the bayou. It's the perfect spot to catch a game with a view 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 and fun 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 the Island!

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

FUBAR Pizza Bar

Looking for a favorite place to watch your favorite sports 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.

850-226-7084
114 Amberjack Dr.,
Okaloosa Island
fubarfwb.com

Magnolia Grill

In 2001, Magnolia Grill in Fort Walton Beach opened its doors after a renovation that

took 18 months—and it's been thriving since. A local's favorite dubbed "The Museum That Serves Food," you'll find equal parts museum and dining establishment. Its second floor contains artifacts from World War II, Vietnam and other segments of American history. And downstairs—is where you'll find lunch favorites such as Meatloaf with Mashed Potatoes, Crab Cake with Fettuccine and Shrimp Alfredo Sauce, Red Beans and Rice and many types of burgers, sandwiches, soups and salads. For dinner, savor divine Italian dishes such as Italian Sausage and Peppers with Marinara Sauce and Filet Tips Florentina. But there's also steaks, seafood "Camp Walton style" and even a kids' menu. Hours: Lunch M-F 11-2; Dinner M-Th 5-8; F-Sat 5-9; Closed Sundays.

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

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. Head to restaurants like Rockin Tacos, The Crab Trap, Floyd's Shrimp Shack or Al's Beach Club & Burger Bar, all 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.

(850) 301-0959
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FWB
theboardwalkoi.com

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Sugar & Co Serves Up Sweet Treats, Smiles and Community Spirit in Fort Walton Beach

Customers are saying it best: “Amazing service, amazing treats, amazing truck, amazing location and amazing community involvement! Their ice cream is unlike any other ice cream in the area—seriously, go taste it!”



That excitement and enthusiasm perfectly capture the experience at Sugar & Co, a sweet destination that has quickly built a loyal following across the Emerald Coast. Whether you’ve spotted the colorful food truck around town or stepped inside the brand-new shop in Fort Walton Beach, Sugar & Co is on a mission to sprinkle a little joy into your day. “Savor the sweet

side of life with every bite,” the team says. “From ice cream, cookies and brownies, every treat is made with love.”

Originally known for its adorable mobile dessert truck that

pops up at community events, festivals and celebrations, Sugar & Co has now opened the doors to a permanent location where guests can enjoy even more sweet creations in a welcoming, cheerful atmosphere. Now that the shop is open, the team says they can’t wait to welcome guests in person—because life’s better when it’s sweet, and even sweeter when shared.

The menu is filled with crave-worthy desserts designed to delight kids and adults alike. Creamy, handcrafted ice cream is a standout favorite, with customers frequently noting it tastes unlike anything else in the area. Pair a scoop with a warm

cookie, indulge in a rich brownie or mix and match for the ultimate dessert treat.

Of course, the fun doesn’t stop at the storefront. Sugar & Co’s charming food truck remains a community favorite and is available for private events, parties and food truck festivals. Whether it’s a birthday celebration, corporate gathering or neighborhood event, the truck brings the same joyful treats and friendly service that customers love.

Sweet perks extend beyond the menu as well. Locals can join the Sweet Rewards program, which allows you to earn loyalty points, birthday rewards

and other special surprises throughout the year.

From the first bite of ice cream to the last crumb of a brownie, Sugar & Co hopes every guest leaves with a smile. As their motto says: “Taste the Joy & Share the Love!”

For more information or to book the truck, visit the website or message the team through social media.

Sugar & Co is located at 132 Miracle Strip Parkway SE, FWB. Visit weknowsugar.com.

For more information or to book the truck, visit weknowsugar.com or message the team through social media.

Al’s Beach Club & Burger Bar Reopens with New Menu Additions

Spring Break has begun and Al’s Beach Club & Burger Bar is officially open for the 2026 season!

The beachside favorite is welcoming locals and visitors back with its signature burgers, bas-

kets, cold drinks, and homemade custard milkshakes, served just steps from the sand. Known for its laid-back atmosphere and unbeatable sunset views, Al’s marks the start of beach days done right.

New for 2026: Hot Dogs Join the Lineup

This season, Al’s is expanding its menu with a brand-new Hot Dog section, positioned alongside its popular burgers and featuring the shared Build Your Way option under both menu items.

All hot dogs feature an All-Beef Jumbo Super Premium Vienna Hot Dog served on a toasted potato bun.



Guests can choose from:
 The Classic Dog – Split and seared, ready to dress as you like — \$7.99
 Bacon Cheddar Dog – Topped with sliced cheddar and thick-cut bacon — \$9.99
 Southern Dog – Served on housemade Brussels slaw and topped with smoked pulled pork

and barbecue sauce — \$10.99
 The addition brings even more crave-worthy options to the beachfront staple.

Nightly Entertainment Returns

Guests can look forward to the full return of seasonal entertainment, including:

- Movies on the Beach on Tuesday nights beginning March 10
 - Pirate Shows on Monday nights starting March 16
 - Live Music every night beginning March 1 to keep the energy going
- Updated event and entertainment schedules can be found on

Continued on page 26

118 Miracle Strip Parkway SE, FWB

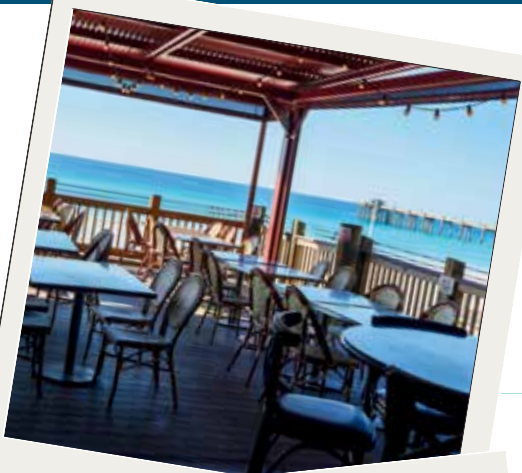
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 Off the Hook

Inspiring Stewardship. Protecting Our Future. Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance 2025 Impact

BY ALLISON McDOWELL, CBA
For three decades, the Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance (CBA) has worked at the intersection of science, education,

and restoration to protect one of Northwest Florida's most vital natural resources. Guided by data and powered by sustainable partnerships, CBA continues to

advance meaningful, measurable conservation across the watershed.

Restoration

CBA's restoration work in 2025 focused on strengthening natural systems that protect water quality and coastal resilience.

- 140 vertical oyster gardens cultivated throughout the watershed
- 200+ tons of recycled oyster shells collected and returned to local waters for habitat creation
- 3.35 acres of salt marsh and oyster habitat restored
- 600+ tons of limestone placed at higher-energy shoreline sites to reduce erosion and support living shoreline development
- Seagrass restoration lab initiated, with pilot plantings launched to expand submerged aquatic vegetation recovery efforts

protection. These collaborative efforts ensure that restoration and management decisions are guided by sound science and a long-term understanding of our waterways.

Education & Outreach

Environmental stewardship begins in the classroom. In 2025, CBA reached 3,000+ students across 20 public schools and five homeschool groups, delivering monthly hands-on lessons aligned with STEM skills and Florida science standards. Programs like Grasses in Classes and oyster gardening give students real-world environmental experience, connecting classroom learning to tangible restoration outcomes. Through immersive, stan-



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Monitoring & Research

As a leader in environmental monitoring, CBA places science-based conservation at the forefront of protecting the Choctawhatchee Basin.

In 2025, CBA added 8 new sites for a total of 145 active water quality monitoring sites across the watershed, continuing to provide essential field expertise and data support for environmental monitoring and research throughout the region.

Working alongside university, county, state, and federal partners, CBA helped expand monitoring coverage, improve public access to data, and strengthen the scientific foundation for both coastal and freshwater

standards-based curriculum, CBA is cultivating the next generation of scientists, conservationists, and informed citizens.

Sustainable Partnerships

CBA's impact is amplified through collaboration.

Key partnerships in 2025 included:

- Northwest Florida Water Management District
- Oyster shell recycling restaurants
- Islanders Coastal Outfitter
- JW Couch Foundation

Together, these partners help fund, expand, and sustain restoration and education initiatives throughout the Basin.

CARE on the Coast TurtleFest Returns April 18!

BY MARY FOMBY, GULFARIUM

A Coastal Festival for Sea Turtle Conservation

Get ready for one of the most exciting days of the year at the Gulfarium — CARE on the Coast TurtleFest, happening April 18! This lively, all-inclusive coastal celebration brings together music, food, art, animal experiences, and conservation for a festival the whole family will love.

Proudly presented by Valparaiso Coca-Cola, TurtleFest raises critical funds for the Gulfarium CARE Center, which rescues and rehabilitates endangered sea turtles along the Emer-

ald Coast. Every ticket purchased helps support the lifesaving care the CARE Center team provides to injured and stranded turtles throughout the year.

food and drinks from amazing local restaurants and vendors stationed throughout the Gulfarium. Between performances, guests can wander the park, discover new flavors, and enjoy the festive energy around every corner.

Adding to the creative spirit of the day, local artist Kelly Pierre will be painting live during the event, giving guests the chance to watch a work of art come to life in real time.

Entertainment Around Every Corner

TurtleFest will have surprises waiting throughout the park.

cess to a private area overlooking Dolphin Oasis, complete with exclusive seating, a private bar, and premium food options. It's the perfect place to relax, enjoy the music, and take in the beautiful coastal setting while supporting sea turtle conservation.

Save with Presale Tickets

TurtleFest is one of the CARE Center's most anticipated events of the year — and the best time to purchase tickets is now. Presale pricing is available for a limited time, along with discounted event T-shirt and commemorative cup add-ons.

Join us on April 18 for a day filled with music, food, wildlife, and community — all in support of protecting endangered sea turtles along the Emerald Coast.

Purchase your tickets now at go.gulfarium.com/turtlefest and be part of the celebration!



From the moment you arrive, guests will enjoy multiple live musicians and bands performing throughout the park, and kids will especially love the pirate band!

Music, Food, and Festival Fun All Day Long

Your all-inclusive ticket means you can explore the park while enjoying all-you-care-to-enjoy

Stilt walkers and roaming entertainers will keep the energy high, while families can visit the Kids Zone for crafts, games, and conservation-themed activities.

Guests will also have opportunities to enjoy animal meet-and-greets with penguins and other Gulfarium residents, making TurtleFest a truly one-of-a-kind experience that blends wildlife, education, and celebration.

VIP Experiences with a View

For an upgraded festival experience, VIP tickets include ac-



All-you-can-to-enjoy Food & Drinks

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Live Music and Entertainment

Supports Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation

Tickets on Sale Now!

SAVE ON PRESALE TICKETS UNTIL APRIL 3RD!





57th Annual All Sports Banquet

The best food. The best company. The best cause.

BY DOUG “DOC” STAUFFER

More than 1,200 people filled the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center for the 57th Annual All Sports Association Awards Banquet—an evening that has become a signature event across Okaloosa and the surrounding counties.

If you love sports and need a shot in the arm for America’s future...

If you love reconnecting with old friends and making new ones...

If you enjoy watching one of the greatest live auctions anywhere on the Emerald Coast...

All Sports Banquet is the place to be.

From business leaders and coaches to educators, elected officials, former pros, and rising stars, it truly was a “Who’s Who” of our region—all gathered for one purpose: celebrating athletic excellence and strengthening youth opportunities through sports.

A Hall of Fame Message

NFL Hall of Famer Derrick Brooks served as the keynote speaker, delivering a powerful message on leadership, perseverance, discipline, and service. His words resonated deeply,



perfectly capturing the spirit of the evening—success on the field means little without character off it.

The Association extended sincere thanks to Brooks for not only sharing his journey, but for continuing to invest in communities and young athletes long after his playing days.

Honoring a Legacy of Service

One of the most meaningful moments of the night was the presentation of the 2026 Colonel Al Byrne Award to Taylor Grigsby of the Okaloosa County Tax Collector’s Office. The award recognizes individuals who uplift local youth through



PHOTOS BY DOUG STAUFFER

athletic support, mentorship, and strong community values. Taylor’s dedication reflects the enduring legacy of Colonel Byrne and his lifelong commitment to young people.

Celebrating the Region’s Best

Since 1970, the All Sports Association has brought together the finest athletes in Northwest Florida. Each February, the banquet honors the area’s top high school, collegiate, amateur, professional, and Special Olympic athletes.

This year’s honorees included:

- Wuerffel Trophy: Michael

- Taaffe (University of Texas)
- Professional Award: Alex Ward (Las Vegas Raiders)
- Male Collegiate Award: Jayce Brown (LSU)
- Female Collegiate Award: Gracie Grant (Dallas Baptist University)
- Taylor Haugen Trophy: Harper Campbell (Niceville High School)
- Amateur Award: Coleman Borthwick (South Walton High School)
- Male Scholastic Award: Deacon Avery (Niceville High School)
- Female Scholastic Award: Izzy Douglas (Fort Walton Beach High School)
- Special Olympian Award: Ethan McCormick (Navarre High School graduate)

The Taylor Haugen Trophy, established in 2009 in memory of Taylor Reid Haugen, continues to remind our community of the motto that defines the award: Don’t Quit. Never Give Up.

More Than a Banquet

The All Sports Association

is made up of dues-paying volunteers whose mission is simple but powerful: raise funds for local youth-oriented nonprofit organizations with an emphasis on sports programs.

Through the annual banquet and summer golf tournament, the Association supports:

- Boys & Girls Club of the Emerald Coast
- Special Olympics Florida – Okaloosa
- Eleanor J. Johnson Youth Center
- Okaloosa Walton FCA

For more than five decades, this event has proven that athletics is about more than trophies. It is about character, discipline, teamwork, and opportunity.

The All Sports Association believers extend a heartfelt thanks to every attendee, sponsor, volunteer, and supporter. This night would not be possible without those who believe in the power of sports to transform lives beyond the field. And judging by the crowd of 1,200 strong—Northwest Florida still believes.

Join us for the inaugural TACP Foundation Golf Cup Weekend, featuring a beachfront kickoff and a premier golf tournament in support of U.S. Air Force Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) Airmen, Veterans, and Gold Star families.

SHALIMAR POINTE GOLF CLUB

APRIL 18

REGISTER AND SPONSOR

TACP FOUNDATION GOLF CUP

HTTPS://BIRDEASE.COM/TACPFOLF CUP

TACP Foundation Golf Cup Weekend to Support Airmen and Veterans

The TACP Foundation will host its inaugural Golf Cup Weekend April 17–18 at Shalimar Pointe Golf Course in Fort Walton Beach, bringing together the U.S. Air Force Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) community and supporters for a weekend of connection, competition and purpose.

The weekend begins Friday, April 17, with a beachfront Sunset Luau Social, followed by the Golf Cup Tournament on Saturday, April 18. Proceeds from the event will support the TACP Foundation’s four core programs and its mission to ensure no TACP Airman, veteran or Gold Star family stands alone. “This event is about more than golf,” the foundation said in a statement. “It’s about taking care of our own, strengthening the

community and continuing support long after the mission ends.”

The tournament will take place at Shalimar Pointe Golf Course in Fort Walton Beach, a hub of the Air Force Special Operations community. Participants may register as players or sponsors, with opportunities available for individuals, teams and corporate partners.

The TACP Foundation is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting TACP Airmen, veterans and their families through advocacy, financial assistance and community-driven programs.

Registration and sponsorship information is available at birdease.com/tacpfgolfcup.

Golf Series: **Blue Tee Restaurant Serves Golfers and Community at Blue Water Bay Golf Club**



BY BARBARA PALMGREN

Growing up in Oklahoma, Trinity Coleman worked at her mother's steakhouse — a restaurant that served three meals a day. Later, she stepped away from the restaurant business as she married Trey Coleman and spent many happy, active-duty military years with Trey and their three children while he served in the United States Air Force.

Five years ago, now retired, Trinity and Trey returned to their restaurant roots. Drawing on years of experience, they

purchased Tisano's restaurant in Bluewater Bay from Mike Tisa. Their culinary creations quickly became part of the Niceville community's favorite reasons to dine out and support local business.

When Trinity learned that the restaurant at Bluewater Bay Golf Club was available, it felt like the perfect opportunity to change locations and help the club once again offer food to golfers and the public. After purchasing the venue in June 2025, Trinity and Trey spent two months preparing the kitchen and restaurant for opening.

What a grand opening it was in August! The community was thrilled that three meals a day would once again be served. And how fitting — Trinity understands that good things come in threes. Her mother's steakhouse served three meals, three children make the perfect family ... and yes, the name Trinity does reference "three," doesn't it? Maybe we should rename a



line from a famous song — "It's three o'clock somewhere."

But don't wait for three o'clock. The Blue Tee opens early with a breakfast menu sure to please, featuring crepes, omelets, egg dishes, burritos, benedicts and more — all the makings of one of the Panhandle's best breakfast menus.

Trinity says the top lunch sellers are the Club Sandwich and the Reuben, though with so

many options, guests may want to return again and again to try them all. Dinner offers a wide variety of choices that won't disappoint. In addition to the restaurant and bar area, a private banquet room is available for rental. Trinity can design special banquets for groups, and food and drink options are also available for meetings and gatherings. She says golfers especially appreciate having the

restaurant open again for food and drinks.

Don't wait any longer to try this outstanding new restaurant, The Blue Tee, located in the Bluewater Bay Golf Course clubhouse in Niceville. It's open to the public for breakfast, lunch and dinner, offering a full bar, cocktails and comfort food in a welcoming setting.



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Golf Series: A Professional Golf Future Fuels the Emerald Coast Golf Tour

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

Once upon a time, professional golfers like Bubba Watson, Boo Weekley and Heath Slocum, three local golf legends, played golf on the Emer-

ald Coast Golf Tour. Why? Because play with the PGA Tour, the Korn Ferry Tour or the Champions Tour, often begins with competition in this venue where skill and patience is test-

ed—and money awarded!

Geno Celano, Tour Director for the Emerald Coast Golf Tour, spoke with me at length at a recent tournament held at Shalimar Pointe Golf Course.



Am that was played on a cold Sunday with windy conditions. Conditions did not improve for the pros the next day and one could see golfers with jackets and winter hats teeing up golf shots. When competition began, the temperature was 40 degrees with an 18-mile-an-hour north wind. Yes, you guessed it—a wind chill of 32 degrees for an unusually cold day in February in the Florida Panhandle!

This regional tournament in several southern states is indeed a training ground for the professional golfer. Geno has been doing this for more than 35 years and shares that his reward is seeing golfers successful at the next level of play and knowing he had a small part in their journey to success on the links. The Emerald Coast tour has included more than 30 PGA Tour winners who have competed on the Emerald Coast Golf Tour.

Entry fees are high and golfers look for sponsors to help with costs. Often, a Pro Am day is scheduled so amateurs can play with these professional hopefuls. Geno schedules at least one and often two tournaments a month with the exception of December.

At Shalimar Pointe Golf Course in February, the 36-hole event included a one-day Pro

Am that was played on a cold Sunday with windy conditions. Conditions did not improve for the pros the next day and one could see golfers with jackets and winter hats teeing up golf shots. When competition began, the temperature was 40 degrees with an 18-mile-an-hour north wind. Yes, you guessed it—a wind chill of 32 degrees for an unusually cold day in February in the Florida Panhandle!

On the first day of play, Kyle Sapp from Gardendale, Ala., shot a hole-in-one on Hole 11. The odds of hitting a hole-in-one are estimated to be 1 in 12,500. On the second day, to add to the excitement, two golfers tied for first place with a two-day score of 144. So, a sudden death playoff was played immediately. Braving wind and cold, we saw Thomas Ponder from Hendersonville, Tenn., winning the tournament with a birdie on the first playoff hole. Jacob Sherline from Dothan, Ala., took second place as a result.

With a field of golfers from as far as Texas and Louisiana, these young men can be proud of their achievements today at Shalimar Pointe Golf Course, where “everyone is treated like a champion.”

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AL'S BEACH CLUB

continued from page 20

Al's Facebook page or at AlsBeachClub.com.

Al's is part of Saltwater Restaurants, Inc. which has grown to become 11 distinctive entities along our Emerald Coast. Waterfront views and fresh Gulf seafood are easily the restaurants' claim to fame, making them a fan favorite for both visitors and locals.

The heartbeat of Saltwater Restaurants lies within the fully operating wild fish processing facility, known as its seafood commissary. The commissary crew receives fresh and local seafood to be weighed, filleted, and quickly distributed across the restaurants on a daily basis. With deliveries arriving straight from the Destin harbor, each year the commissary prepares over 250,000 lbs. of fresh-caught Gulf favorites

such as shrimp, grouper, snapper, mahi-mahi, cobia, wahoo, and amberjack. Saltwater Restaurant's is committed to bringing fresh local seafood directly from the Gulf to the guest.

Saltwater Restaurant's dedication doesn't stop at the table either. The restaurants are fully committed to acknowledging their ultimate asset, the beaches of the Emerald Coast. The company aids in beach preservation initiatives such as hosting bi-annual beach clean-ups and implementing a company-wide “Skip the Straw” campaign. Ongoing events such as waterfront fireworks, luaus, movies on the beach, and pirate shows offer families free entertainment for memories that last a lifetime. The ongoing love for each restaurant is simple. It's everything you come to the beach for—delicious food, happy service, and outstanding waterfront views.

How Medicare Changes Are Impacting Post-Acute Providers and Senior Care

BY TERESA HALVERSON,
BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT/
COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services is removing 285 procedures labeled inpatient-only, or IPO, many of them for acute care surgeries that have historically driven patients to nursing and rehabilitation facilities for follow-up care. Importantly, the agency's Hospital Outpatient Prospective Payment rule made no blanket provision for skilled nursing coverage for patients opting for outpatient alternatives that doesn't include a requisite three-day stay. (-McK-nights)

Post-Acute care (PAC) is a critical bridge between a hospital stay and a full return to home life. While Medicare continues to evolve its payment rules, quality programs and coverage policies are reshaping the landscape for post-acute providers, including skilled nursing and rehabilitation facilities (SNFs) and other settings that serve seniors after a hospital stay.

The year 2026 brings shifts in In-Patient and Out-Patient Policies Affecting Post-Acute Referrals. Medicare's efforts to shift more procedures from in-patient hospitals to outpatient and ambulatory surgical settings are affecting seniors and post-acute care models. The key issue is outpatient status limits Medicare coverage for rehab. As more surgeries move to "Out-Patient" settings, seniors seeking post-acute care will no longer qualify for the 3-night stay to admit to a skilled nursing and rehabilitation facility under Medicare Guidelines. (-Long Term Care News)

This policy can be tough on:

- Seniors who live alone
- Patients with mobility or cognitive issues
- People recovering from joint, spine, or complex procedures

Why does this matter? Medicare will not pay for SNF rehab unless the patient has:

- Three consecutive in-patient mid-nights in a hospital
- Observation or outpatient days do not count

If surgery is outpatient-only, the patient cannot qualify for

Medicare-covered SNF rehab—even if:

- They cannot walk safely
- They live alone
- Their physician recommends rehab

What is Covered After Outpatient Surgery

Medicare may cover:

- Home health care (nursing, PT, OT) if homebound and medically necessary (Home health is intermittent, not 24/7. Outpatient therapy (PT/OT at a clinic)
- Durable medical equipment (walker, Commode, etc.)
- Follow-up visits

What Seniors and Families Should Do Before Surgery

Ask directly:

- "Is this surgery classified as inpatient or outpatient under Medicare?"

Plan the discharge:

- Who will help at home?
- Are home health services arranged?

Ask about alternatives:

- Is inpatient admission ever possible?
- Can surgery timing or complexity change status?

Appeal if appropriate:

- Rare, but sometimes misclassification happens

Clarify Hospital Status (this is critical)

- "Can you confirm whether they were admitted as inpatient or under observation, and on which dates?"

Follow up if needed:

- "Was inpatient admission medically appropriate at any point?"
- "Can we request a status review before discharge?"



Tie Safety Risks to Specific Limitation

Avoid general statements.

Use concrete examples:

- "They cannot transfer safely without hands-on assistance."
- "They are a high fall risk and cannot manage stairs / bathroom independently."

- "They require assistance with toileting, bathing, or medication management."

- "There is no reliable caregiver available 24/7."

If true, say it plainly:

- "Discharging them home

Continued on next page



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Cutting-Edge Care — Without the Cutting: A Smarter Option for Joint and Muscle Pain

“Before you schedule the surgery, ask a better question: Is there a way to help my body heal first?”



BY DR. JENNIFER TRENDT

When did surgery become the first conversation instead of the last resort?

Every week, I meet people who have been told their only real option for chronic joint or soft tissue pain is an injection... or a surgical consult. Rotator cuff irritation. Chronic knee pain. Plantar fasciitis that just won't calm down. Lingering hip or low back injuries. They're frustrated. They're active. And they're not ready to go under the knife.

That's where SoftWave Tissue Regeneration Technology (TRT) comes in.

SoftWave TRT is an advanced acoustic wave therapy designed to stimulate the body's

own healing response. It uses high-energy sound waves that penetrate injured tissue and trigger biological repair processes. These waves increase blood flow, recruit stem cells, reduce inflammation, and help restart stalled healing cycles. This regenerative response has been increasingly supported in orthopedic and sports medicine research.

In simple terms? It helps your body fix what it hasn't been able to fix on its own.

Unlike surgery, SoftWave is non-invasive. There are no incisions. No anesthesia. No downtime. Treatments are performed in-office, and most patients walk out and go right back to their day. For many people trying to avoid surgery, that matters.

Take one of my recent patients, an avid recreational dancer. Chronic pain in both knees had limited her ability to move and disrupted her sleep for months. Instead of an orthopedic consult, she chose to try SoftWave first. After the very first treatment, she felt a noticeable difference. By the end of her third treatment, her pain had significantly decreased, her



range of motion improved, and she was back on the dance floor — without surgical intervention. She went from dancing only a few hours each week to several hours each night. She was even able to travel to Peru for 14 days to compete in an international competition.

Is SoftWave TRT a miracle cure? No. But it is a powerful regenerative tool when applied appropriately.

SoftWave is commonly used for tendon and ligament injuries, joint degeneration, plan-

tar fasciitis, muscle strains, and chronic inflammatory conditions. It works especially well for patients who feel stuck — those who've tried rest, medications, injections, or traditional therapy without lasting results.

At The Reset Room, we don't jump straight to surgery conversations. We evaluate. We assess movement. We look at the root cause. And when appropriate, we use technologies like SoftWave TRT to help patients heal rather than simply manage pain.

Surgery has its place. There are times when it is necessary and appropriate. But it should not be the automatic next step for every musculoskeletal issue.

Too often, people are told to “wait until it gets worse” or move straight toward injections and procedures without first exploring regenerative options. That mindset is outdated.

If you're active, motivated, and not ready to accept that pain is just part of aging, there might be another path.

SoftWave TRT offers a way to support healing, restore function, and stay in the game — without incisions, anesthesia, or long recovery timelines. Healing is possible. Sometimes it just needs the right signal.

Dr. Jennifer Trendt is a chiropractor and founder of The Reset Room, a chiropractic and regenerative therapy studio specializing in non-surgical solutions for joint and soft tissue injuries. She focuses on movement restoration and advanced technologies such as SoftWave Tissue Regeneration Technology (TRT). Visit there-setroomec.com.

Still in pain?

Before you book the surgeon, ask a better question. Is there a way to help your body heal first?



MEDICARE

continued from page 27

today would place them at risk of injury or rehospitalization.”

- Push for rehab screening (even if Medicare won't pay)
- “We want them formally evaluated for all rehab options, including SNF and inpatient rehab.”

Specifically ask:

- “Has an inpatient rehab facility (IRF) referral been considered?”
- “Can PT/OT document why skilled rehab is needed?”
- Documentation = leverage.

If Medicare Won't Cover SNF Use this phrasing:

“We understand Medicare may not cover SNF, but we still need help identifying a safe alternative.”

Then ask:

- “What short-term pri-

vate-pay rehab options exist?”

- “What home health services will start immediately upon discharge?”
- “How soon will therapy begin, and how often?”

As the healthcare system faces ongoing challenges, **The Manor at Blue Water Bay** is a **CMS 5-Star Rated Facility**. Locally owned and operated, we remain committed to being a trusted resource for patients and families. Our team of professionals provide coordinated inpatient and outpatient rehabilitation services to ensure continuity of care after discharge. Call us today at 850-897-5592 and schedule a tour to learn more about how we can help you on your health care journey back to independence.

The Manor at Blue Water Bay, 1500 N. White Point Road, Niceville www.manoratlwbw.com

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The three common treatments for pain — pills, cortisone and surgery — are either ineffective, invasive, carry massive side effects, or all three.

PAIN

Non-invasive SoftWave technology offers better results and faster healing with little to no side effects.

Backed by 46 patents, SoftWave's same-day, 30-minute procedure uses super-sonic sound waves

to increase cell membrane permeability and recruit and release the body's own repair cells.

thus activating our natural, innate healing mechanisms to provide lasting pain relief.

So patients heal faster, feel better, and experience life pain-free... without drugs, surgery or shots.



Because your body deserves a comeback.

Chronic joint or muscle pain doesn't have to mean injections or surgery. At The Reset Room, we use advanced SoftWave TRT technology to activate your body's natural healing response — reducing inflammation, restoring movement, and accelerating recovery without downtime. This isn't about masking pain. It's about restoring function. Stop managing symptoms. Start healing at the source.

Surgery isn't the starting point.

124 E Miracle Strip Pkwy STE 205 Mary Esther
theresetroomec.com

How Are Your Quercetin Levels?



BY KAY LEAMAN,
HEALTH ARCHITECT

This little gem belongs to a group of plant compounds called flavonoids. It is found in fruits such as grapes, blueberries, strawberries, cherries, apples, grapefruit, cranberries, raspberries and blackberries; vegetables including onions, peppers and broccoli; and beverages like coffee, green tea and red wine.

Quercetin is one of the most

abundant antioxidants, and its role is to fight free radical damage. Free radicals can damage our cells, which in turn can promote inflammation. Hippocrates is often quoted as saying, “All disease begins in the gut,” and this is closely linked to inflammation.

In an eight-week study, 50 women with rheumatoid arthritis took 500 mg of quercetin daily. They experienced significantly reduced early morning stiffness, morning pain and after-activity pain. Quercetin has also been found to help protect against degenerative brain disorders such as Alzheimer’s disease and dementia.

Quercetin offers cardiovascular benefits as well. It may help lower blood pressure and reduce cholesterol levels by improving endothelial function. This makes it a promising candidate for supporting heart health and helping



prevent cardiovascular disease.

In addition, studies have found that quercetin exhibits anti-cancer properties by inhibiting cell proliferation and inducing apoptosis — a type of programmed cell death in which a cell destroys itself when it threatens the survival of its host.

Many studies continue to explore the benefits of this powerful flavonoid. Research has shown:

- Neuroprotective properties
- Inhibition of tumor growth
- Liver protection
- Prevention support for macular degeneration and cataracts
- Quercetin has also demonstrated anti:
 - Bacterial activity
 - Viral activity
 - Obesity-related effects
 - Diabetic complications
 - Hypertensive conditions
 - Allergic responses
 - Asthmatic responses

This is not an exhaustive list of its benefits, but they are certainly worth noting. Look up foods and herbs that contain quercetin and begin incorporating them into your diet. Check

your multivitamin to see whether it contains this antioxidant and in what quantity. A common supplemental target is 500 mg daily.

Quercetin is also available in supplement form; Solaray is one brand often recommended.

Disclaimer: If you are currently taking medication for any of the conditions mentioned above, consult your physician and perform your due diligence regarding potential interactions before beginning supplementation.

Here's to health! HealthyDay HealthyLife | succeed.hdhl@gmail.com

BRING HOPE

continued from page 2

ages 5 to 19. Yes, even as young as five.

From the 2023 Florida Youth Survey:

- 22% of students said they almost always felt symptoms of stress, anxiety, or depression.
- 46% said these emotions stopped them from doing daily activities.
- 19% had seriously considered self-harm.
- Encouragingly, 31% sought help.

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

The Mission Ahead

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

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

We also aim to launch a local loss survivor program to support

families who’ve lost loved ones to suicide.

A Community That Cares

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

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

We’re looking for sponsors, volunteers, and in-kind support. Do you know a family who’s lost a loved one to suicide? To get involved or learn more, visit www.BringHopeNow.com.

Mark your calendar now. **The 2026 Annual Bring Hope Dragon Boat Race & Festival** will be April 25th. It’s not only a fundraiser—it’s a celebration of resilience and community. We’re looking for sponsors, racing teams, raffle and auction items, volunteers, and in-kind support. Do you know a family who’s lost a loved one to suicide? You can include a sign in their memory at the event. To get involved or learn more, visit www.BringHopeNow.com.

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

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 Wellness

When a Little Extra Help Can Make All the Difference

Recognizing the Signs a Loved One May Need Support at Home

Caring for an aging parent or loved one can be one of life's greatest privileges—but it can also come with difficult decisions and emotional moments. Many families quietly wonder: When does a little extra help become necessary?

Recognizing the early signs that a loved one may need additional support can make a meaningful difference in maintaining their safety, comfort and dignity, while also giving families peace of mind.

There are several common indicators that an older adult may benefit from in-home companion care.

Families may begin to notice difficulty with everyday tasks, such as cooking meals, doing laundry or keeping the home tidy. Changes in personal hygiene, like skipping showers or wearing the same clothing repeatedly, can also signal that daily routines are becoming more challenging.

Increased forgetfulness is another sign to watch for. Missing medications, forgetting appointments or frequently misplacing items may indicate that additional assistance could be helpful.

Sometimes the signs are more subtle. A loved one who once



care not only helps with daily tasks but also provides meaningful social interaction, helping seniors stay engaged, connected and emotionally supported.

That is where compassionate services like Home Companion come in. They do things differently.

Founder Deneen Johnson and Office Manager Monica Ruth-Maus have spent decades working in and around elder care, giving them a deep understanding of the needs—and sensitivities—involved when supporting older adults and their families.

enjoyed social gatherings may begin to withdraw from hobbies, church or visits with friends. Others may experience unexplained weight loss or poor nutrition, skipping meals or relying on quick, unhealthy snacks instead of balanced meals.

Physical changes can also raise concerns. Frequent falls, balance issues or difficulty navigating stairs may signal mobility challenges that make living alone more risky. And emotional shifts—such as increased anxiety, depression or noticeable mood changes—can indicate loneliness or a need for greater support.

Research shows that senior isolation is more than just loneliness. In fact, studies suggest that prolonged isolation can impact health as significantly as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Companion

Their mission is simple: to help seniors maintain independence at home for as long as possible, while offering families the reassurance that someone caring and attentive is there to help. “We hire staff with a heart for care,” Monica said. “Days may include simple tasks, jokes, puzzles or household chores. Each caregiver brings a joyful attitude and strong listening skills. Having the same caregiver consistently in the home also helps provide stability.”

For family members, the

emotional side of caregiving can be just as challenging as the practical responsibilities. Watching someone you love change through the natural stages of aging can bring mixed emotions—love, concern, uncertainty and sometimes even guilt.

Having a compassionate professional alongside the family can make this journey feel less overwhelming.

Sometimes what families need most is simply someone who understands, someone who can offer support without judgment while helping a loved one remain safe and comfortable in familiar surroundings.

If you've noticed signs that

your loved one might benefit from a bit of extra help, it may be time to start a conversation about companion care. Even small steps—like help with errands, meal preparation or regular visits for conversation—can greatly improve quality of life.

For families navigating this stage of life, knowing that support is available can make all the difference.

For more information about companion care services, contact Home Companion to learn how they can help support both seniors and the families who love them.

850-218-5571 | Companioninhome.com

TOP 5

continued from page 4

Wild-caught fatty fish remains an excellent whole-food option.

Probiotics + Prebiotic Fiber - Digestive Precision

The gut influences immune function, hormone balance, inflammation, and mood. Probiotics introduce beneficial bacteria, the “seeds,” while prebiotic fibers provide the nourishment that allows them to flourish. Together, they help shape digestive terrain.

Not all probiotics are the same. Strains and potencies vary, and prebiotic fibers can aggravate some digestive systems if introduced too quickly. Because not every gut responds the same way, they should be introduced thoughtfully and increased gradually.

It's also important to recognize that not every digestive system benefits from supplemental probiotics or prebiotic fibers. Certain digestive patterns or underlying gut conditions may require a more targeted approach rather than broad supplementation.

When I look closer: bloating or irregular digestion, recent antibiotic use, immune imbalance, and skin or hormone concerns

Practical Tip: Start low. Increase gradually. Monitor response carefully. Individuals using GLP-1 medications may benefit from additional digestive support due to slowed gas-

tric emptying, but adjustments should always be gradual and individualized.

B-Complex Vitamins - Cellular Energy & Stress Support

B vitamins are essential for energy production, nervous system signaling, red blood cell formation, and stress adaptation. They are not stimulants. They support the body's ability to generate steady, efficient energy. Stress, hormonal transitions, digestive variability, dietary restriction, or genetic factors can increase demand.

When I look closer: persistent fatigue, brain fog, elevated stress, hormonal shifts, and limited dietary variety

Practical Tip: Form matters. If B12 has not been helpful in the past, the issue may be the form rather than the dose.

Supplements are tools, not shortcuts. Quality matters. Formulation matters. Dosage matters. Context matters most. The goal is not to take more. The goal is to take what is appropriate for your body, your current demands, and your season of life.

Spring is about renewal, not rushing. Sustainable health is built through steady habits, thoughtful evaluation, and informed decisions, not trends or impulse purchases. When the foundation is strong and support is chosen strategically, small adjustments create meaningful momentum.



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When Spring Comes Back to Life

BY DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

We don't notice it happening at first. Winter rarely announces itself all at once—it settles in quietly. Shorter days. Colder mornings. Longer evenings spent on the couch. Same house, same routine, but something feels different. There's less energy, less motivation, less desire to care.

Where we once enjoyed moving our bodies, getting outside, and feeling strong and capable, now the alarm rings and staying in bed feels easier. Joints ache. Muscles feel weaker. Even simple routines—exercise, cooking well, making time for ourselves—feel like work instead of something life-giving. It's easy to dismiss it as stress, age, or just “the time of year.”

As spring approaches, the light begins to change. A familiar spark returns—the desire to feel better, to take care of ourselves again, to re-engage with life. But the energy we expect doesn't

necessarily follow the season. Motivation fades as quickly as it appeared, leaving frustration and the quiet question: Why don't I feel like I should?

At The Hormone Restoration Center, we hear this story every year.

Winter blues aren't just about the weather. They're also about hormones. As daylight decreases, hormonal signaling in the body shifts. Testosterone, estrogen, progesterone, thyroid hormones, cortisol—and even Vitamin D—all influence how we feel, how we move, how we sleep, and how we recover. What many people don't realize is Vitamin D isn't just a vitamin; it functions as a hormone, affecting mood, immune health, muscle strength, and bone density. During the winter months, when sunlight exposure drops, Vitamin D levels often fall right along with energy and motivation.

When hormones decline or fall out of balance, energy drops, mood flattens, sleep suffers, and winter feels longer and heavier than it should.

Hormones also do far more than influence mood or libido. They are foundational to the body itself. Testosterone and estrogen are essential for main-



taining muscle mass in both men and women. When levels are low, the body loses lean muscle—even with consistent exercise. As muscle declines, metabolism slows, joints lose support, and fatigue becomes the norm rather than the exception.

Hormones play a critical role in bone health as well. Estrogen, testosterone, and Vitamin D work together to protect bone density. When any of them are deficient, bone loss accelerates, increasing the risk of osteoporosis and fractures in both men and women. This loss happens quietly, often for years, before it ever makes itself known.

This is why so many people feel tired, frustrated, and frag-

ile. Why workouts stop working. Why motivation disappears. Why winter feels like survival instead of rest—and why spring can feel like a letdown.

Hormone optimization helps.

When hormones are restored to healthy levels the body responds. Energy improves. Muscle becomes easier to build and maintain. Bones are protected. Sleep deepens. Mood stabilizes. That natural desire to care for yourself returns.

Hormone Replacement Therapy isn't about pushing the body beyond normal. It's about

restoring what time, stress, and life have gradually taken away.

At The Hormone Restoration Center, we take a comprehensive, personalized approach. You're not broken, and you're not alone. You don't have to wait for another season to feel like yourself again. Just call us: (850) 837-1271. It might just change your life.







Stephenie Craig, LCSW
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Wellness

The Art of Healthy Unproductivity



BY STEPHENIE CRAIG,
JOURNEY BRAVELY

Healthy unproductivity is an art and a practice worth learning. Are you a person who has fun and rests without any guilt or internal drive to return quickly to productivity? If so, well done and others can learn from you. Or, are you a person who feels pressure to be productive, to work, to tend to your to-do list all of your waking hours? Maybe you're a person who says work must come first and be complete before you can enjoy yourself and relax. Perhaps you believe that unproductivity is useless and lazy. Life gives you all sorts of messages about productivity vs. unproductivity that can be very hard to sort.

American culture transmits clear values about productivity. Get up earlier, fit more into a day, work harder, earn more, save more, buy more, buy bigger...all in the name of achieving success and the American Dream. The family you come from may also have transmitted some values regarding productivity. Work before play, the early bird gets the worm, only lazy people rest, always moving, never sitting, slowing down will get you left behind. Your personal goals can also be strong drivers that do not permit unproductivity.

While having a good work ethic is admirable and important, it can be overdone. Personal

growth matters, and at the same time, your brain and body need breaks from the stimulation of productivity. Living in over-productivity can result in hypervigilance in your physical body that often leads to anxiety, depression, excessive tension, chronic pain, other health issues, and relationship problems. Balance between productivity and unproductivity is actually a worthy goal. You don't always need another growth-oriented book, Instagram account, or podcast.

Sometimes what you need is consistent time to intentionally put away productivity and embrace fun and rest. Your body was made to need both productive work and unproductive activities meant to spark enjoyment.

So, how do you slow down and pursue some healthy unproductive time?

7 Ways to Practice Healthy Unproductivity

1. Evaluate your current balance of productivity vs. unproductivity. Do you have trouble resting or being still? Do you turn fun activities into something productive? Are you ruled by a to-do list? How often do you engage in intentional unproductive fun or rest?

2. Go deeper. Reflect on what is driving your over-productivity. What current or historical messages make you feel behind or guilty when you rest or are unproductive? What did your parents and other family members teach you about productivity and rest/fun? What are you afraid will happen if you stop producing? How might your sense of value as a person be connected with your produc-



tivity? What spiritual messages might be influencing your views of rest/fun?

3. Give yourself permission to engage in healthy unproductivity. Remind yourself that life is best lived with a balance of productivity and fun/rest. Your mental and physical health need some unproductivity. Rest/fun are not lazy but healthy and kind for yourself. You will be more productive in your work time when you take unproductive rest time.

4. Explore unproductive activities. Remember the whole point is that it is not productive. Remember what has been fun or restful to you before. Read an unproductive book, use creativity for the sake of fun, play with your pet, lay in a hammock, take a nap, dance to music you love, bake for the joy of it, color, do puzzles, watch a funny show, take a long bath, sit in nature,

take a stroll, soak up some sun. Find your version of unproductive fun and rest.

5. Plan. Create intentional and consistent space in your schedule for healthy unproductivity. Mark your calendar. Keep things you need for your fun

pursuits handy so participating in activities is accessible. Create restful space where you can enjoy rest and fun regularly.

6. Practice. Pick an unproductive activity and spend an hour engaging in it. It's okay if it is uncomfortable at first. Gently remind yourself that some unproductivity is good for your mind, body, and soul. Let yourself get immersed. Your tasks will still be there later.

7. Repeat. Mark time off in your calendar once a week when you will not schedule other things. Use that time for healthy unproductivity and through repetition, your brain will begin to embrace your new habit.

Taking time for restorative unproductivity is very likely to bring energy and enthusiasm back into your productive life pursuits. Be gracious and consistent with yourself as you explore healthy unproductivity as a life practice. Connect with us along your journey for counseling and coaching at Journeybravely.com.



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Run the Business. Let the Pros Handle HR. Build a Stronger Exit.

By TIPP SPRADLIN

Most small business owners didn't set out to become HR managers.

They built their companies around an idea, a skill, or a service. Then somewhere along the way, they found themselves Googling employment law at 10:47 p.m., double-checking payroll, and hoping that employee classification was done correctly.

Over time, payroll got handled. Policies were written. Benefits were chosen. Compliance became something to stay ahead of—at least most of the time. It worked. Mostly.

In many small businesses, HR lives quietly in the background, stitched together by experience, good intentions, and a bit of owner oversight. That's fine—until a buyer evaluates the business.

When a buyer or lender looks

at a company, profit is only part of the equation. The deeper question is whether the business can operate cleanly and compliantly without the owner personally managing every people-related issue. Payroll errors, inconsistent policies, unclear classifications, or outdated compliance practices introduce risk. Not dramatic risk. Subtle risk, the kind that slows deals down and lowers confidence.

This is often where a Professional Employer Organization, or PEO, becomes part of the strategy.

A PEO supports the administrative and compliance side of employment—payroll processing, tax filings, benefits administration, workers' compensation, and regulatory updates. For owners, that translates to fewer unknowns and systems that don't rely solely on memory or improvisation.

Companies with roughly 7 to 200 employees tend to benefit the most from this structure. At that size, you're large enough for HR complexity to matter—but often not large enough to justify a full in-house department. A

PEO bridges that gap.

In our brokerage work, we regularly refer business owners to trusted PEO partners years before they ever list their company for sale. Preparing a business for market isn't about last-minute polishing. It's about strengthening the foundation well in advance. Clean HR systems, documented policies, and compliant classifications signal stability. They protect valuation.

Here locally, Amy Yates and Landrum HR Solutions are a resource we confidently connect owners with when it's time to add that structure. As

a family-owned and privately held company with more than 55 years of experience, Landrum takes a hands-on, relationship-driven approach to supporting businesses with compliance, workforce strategy, and long-term stability. Together, they help bring clarity to operations while giving companies of all sizes confidence in compliance and access to Fortune 500-level benefits.

Businesses with professional HR systems tend to operate with more consistency and less friction. Owners spend less time reacting and more time lead-

ing—and fewer evenings playing amateur employment attorney.

Retirement isn't just about stepping away. It's about knowing the company you built can stand on its own. Sometimes the most valuable improvements aren't flashy revenue jumps. They're the quiet upgrades that reduce risk, protect people, and preserve value.

If selling is even a distant "someday" thought, starting conversations now—years in advance—can make a measurable difference later. The strongest exits happen on purpose.

Furniture Direct Uses Business to Bless the Community



By OWNER DENEEN JOHNSON

When my husband and I opened Furniture Direct in June 2024, our goal was simple: we wanted God to use our business to make a positive impact in the community. From the very beginning, we knew we didn't just want to sell furniture—we wanted to bless schools, sports teams,

music programs and local nonprofits in ways that truly matter.

As much as we would love to, as a small and growing business we can't write a check to every organization that asks for support. That's why we created our community fundraising program, which allows local groups to raise funds while bringing people together.

Here's how it works: an organization selects a week to partner with us. I create a digital flyer for them to share with their supporters, and during that week anyone who presents the flyer at checkout will have 10 percent of their purchase donated back to that organization. It's simple, easy and powerful.

Continued on next page

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 Business

Beachworx Fort Walton Beach Celebrates Two Years of Collaboration and Community

Why We Love Working Here

BY LORI LEATH SMITH,
FWB LIFE PUBLISHER

In today's world of remote work, side hustles and growing small businesses, many professionals are discovering that working from home—or the corner of a busy coffee shop—has its limits. That's where Beachworx Fort Walton Beach comes in.

Now celebrating its second anniversary, the flexible co-working space on Lewis Street has quietly become a go-to hub for local entrepreneurs, consultants, remote workers and small business owners looking for a professional place to work, meet clients and connect with other professionals.

Owners Crystal and Brandon Hillenburg opened the Fort Walton Beach location in 2024 after completely remodeling and furnishing the space to create a polished, welcoming environment designed for productivity and collaboration. From the moment you walk in, it's clear they've created more than just office space—they've created a community where tenants feel valued.



At Life Media, we know that firsthand. Our team maintains a workspace at Beachworx, and it has become one of the places where we write, plan upcoming publications, meet with clients and connect with fellow business owners. One of the unexpected benefits has been the side conversations that naturally happen throughout the day—quick chats over coffee or hallway introductions that often lead to new ideas, partnerships and opportunities to promote and sup-



port other local businesses.

That spirit of collaboration is exactly what makes Beachworx special.

The workspace offers private offices, coworking desks, meeting rooms and event space, allowing businesses at every stage to find the setup that works best for them. The well-appointed conference room, equipped with audio-visual technology, is ideal for presentations, team meetings or meeting with clients

in a professional setting.

Longtime tenant Joe Carnes of Holden Business Solutions, a strategic IT advisor, also experiences the flexibility of the space firsthand. Joe initially started with a virtual pop-in workspace before quickly upgrading to a dedicated office as his business expanded. In addition, his firm helped establish the secure internet infrastructure within Beachworx, providing fast, reliable connectivity throughout the workspace without the need for complicated hard-wired setups.

Members often say several aspects of Beachworx stand out. The presence of a receptionist to greet visitors adds a professional touch that many appreciate, es-

pecially compared to working from home or trying to meet clients in a crowded coffee shop. The environment is frequently described as bright, positive and sparkling clean, creating a place where professionals feel proud to conduct business.

There are plenty of practical perks as well, including secure high-speed Wi-Fi, printing and office services, free parking and flexible membership options ranging from day passes to private offices. And one of the most popular spots in the office? The coffee and tea bar, where members can recharge during the day or catch up with fellow tenants.

For many professionals in the Fort Walton Beach area, Beachworx has become more than a workspace. It's a place where relationships form, ideas grow and local businesses support one another.

Two years in, the Hillenburgs continue to foster an environment where collaboration happens naturally and businesses can truly thrive.

105 Lewis St., Suite 103 | FWB
| 850-322-2462

thebeachworx.com/fort-walton-beach-fl

Tours and flexible memberships are available for entrepreneurs, remote workers and small businesses seeking a professional workspace in Fort Walton Beach.



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FURNITURE DIRECT

continued from previous page

It has been incredible to watch God work through something as ordinary as furniture. Sofas, mattresses and dining sets may not seem exciting on their own. But God often uses ordinary things—and everyday people—to do extraordinary things. Through this program, we've been able to help school sports teams purchase equipment, support music programs and assist nonprofits as they continue their important work. Every sale becomes an opportunity to bless others and be part of something bigger than ourselves.

Our passion has always been

making a difference in the community—it just so happens that furniture is the tool God chose for us.

If your school, team or non-profit is looking for a meaningful way to raise funds while strengthening community connections, we would love to partner with you. Email destinfbwfurniture@gmail.com to schedule a fundraising week and learn how God can use something as simple as furniture to bless your cause.

Come by and see us Tuesday-Friday 12-5pm and Saturday 10 a.m.-2 p.m. at 4 Eglin Parkway SE in Fort Walton Beach or call 850.396.0990. furnituredirectfwb.com

Sean of the South: Enough



BY SEAN DIETRICH

What if I told you that you are enough?

Moreover, what if you woke up this morning and, for the first time ever, you actually felt like enough. What if you loved yourself? And I mean really loved yourself.

Do you love yourself? Let's find out.

Are you a perfectionist? No? Yes? Have you ever asked WHY you're a perfectionist? Have you ever wondered why you strive to be flawless so that nobody will find a reason to judge you?

Or are you a people pleas-

ways. Maybe you're embarrassed about your bank account. "Omigod. Is this ALL you have in savings? What a loser."

Maybe you don't like where you are in your career. What a freaking disappointment you are. You should've been MUCH further along in your field by now. Instead, you're just a supporting actor in someone else's made-for-TV drama.

Maybe you don't feel smart enough. Maybe you are socially anxious. Maybe you think you're too much of an introvert. You're a classic procrastinator. You feel invisible. You hate your hair. You wish you were prettier. Skinnier. Funnier. Happier.

Either way, your inner critic is always screaming, "You're not enough!" You've tried to shut up this blowhard for years. But it doesn't work. The inner critic just keeps talking smack.

"You're simply not enough," the critic keeps saying.

thus, you've formed a persona to hide the real you. And hopefully, everyone will like this persona because, God knows, you work really hard building it. You built this persona because the real you is not worthy. The real you just isn't enough.

But...

What if I told you that you don't have to feel this way anymore? What if I told you that you ARE enough? What if I said that you are so insanely beautiful as a human being, just

the way you are in this moment. Moreover, what if I am not prodigiously and majestically full of bovine ordure?

There is a way to never feel ashamed again. You will not find the answer through rituals and creeds, nor through the oppression of pious dogmas. You will not find answers in internet videos or poorly written articles on the internet—such as the one you are currently reading.

I have been ashamed of myself for my entire life. Because

of childhood trauma, I became the essence of shame itself. But if I have learned one truth in my short life—if you get nothing out of what I've written you today—I hope you understand one thing, because the entirety of reality rests upon it:

The only way to love yourself is to first love your neighbor. And the only way to love your neighbor is to love the One who made them.



er? Ever wonder why? How did you become a doormat? Why do you fall all over yourself to ensure everyone will like you? Would showing them the real you be that bad?

Or maybe you're critical. Maybe you nitpick those you love. Heck, maybe you nitpick yourself. Maybe you look in the mirror and think, "I'm so fat and ugly."

Perhaps you see photos of yourself and react with true disgust, thinking, "I'm so old and wrinkled. Look at all this flab underneath my neck, jiggling like Jello salad."

Maybe you don't like your nose. Or your teeth. Or the shape of your bootymus maximus.

Then again, maybe you dislike yourself in much simpler

This is shame you feel. You might not be aware that it's shame, but it is. You don't feel shame because of something you've done. You feel shame over who you are.

You dislike the real you. And

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National Correctional Officers Week and National Nurses Week May 4-8



The week set aside to honor Correctional Officers and Nurses will be May 4-8, 2026

- Several meals will be prepared for members of all shifts throughout the week.
- Prizes, gift bags and tokens of appreciation for staff are being planned.
- On Thursday and Friday of that week, food trucks from far and wide have been invited to the jail to serve our staff and the local community is welcome.

Any support toward the success of the event will be greatly appreciated. Gift cards, items for the staff support bags, monetary donations or sponsorship of staff meals are a tremendous help.

Please contact **Nikki Hatten** at nhatten@myokaloosa.com with your generous contributions

Musing

A Pastor's Ponderings: When Congress Called the Bible "Invaluable"



BY PASTOR DOUG "DOC" STAUFFER

Every generation tends to re-interpret history—often not to understand the past, but to justify the present. One of the most repeated claims today is that America was founded as a secular nation, with religion confined strictly to private life. Its

proponents present this view as authoritative and academic, yet it is a historically false narrative. Here is one proof text.

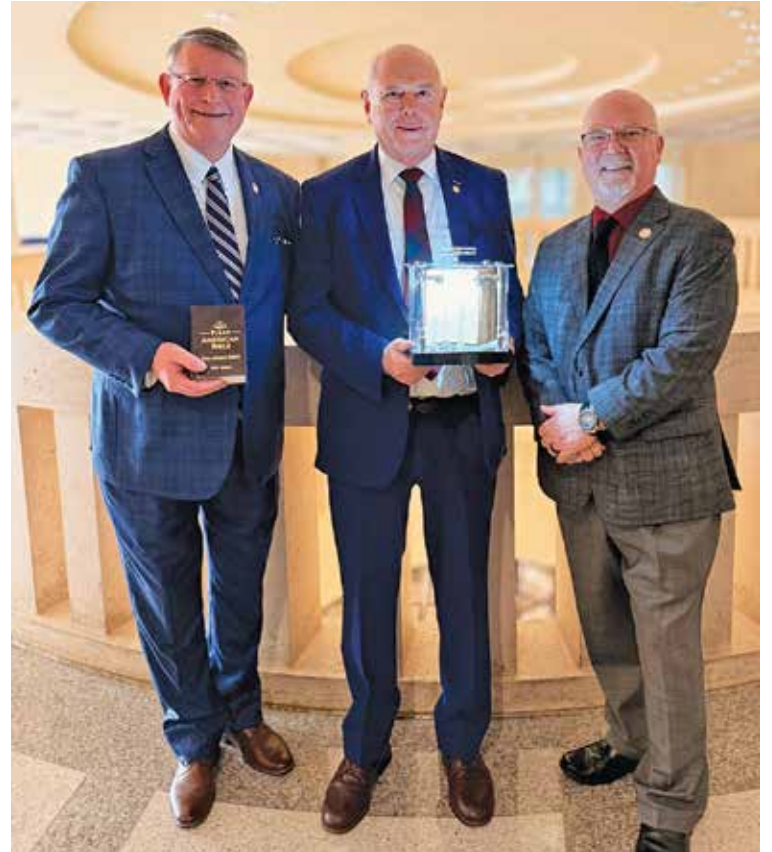
In 1782, while the Revolutionary War was still underway, the United States Congress officially examined, approved, and recommended the printing of a Bible for the American people. Known as the Aitken Bible, it remains the only Bible in U.S. history to receive formal congressional endorsement.

The reason was simple yet revealing. Before independence, the colonies relied almost entirely on England for printed

Bibles. When war severed that supply, Congress was warned of a national shortage. Rather than dismiss Scripture as a private matter, Congress recognized its necessity. They understood that the Bible was not merely a church book—it was foundational to morality, and morality was essential to liberty.

Congress appointed its own chaplains to examine Robert Aitken's text of the King James Bible for accuracy. After their review, Congress passed a resolution recommending the Bible to the inhabitants of the United States and describing it as an "invaluable book." That language was deliberate. Congress was not neutral toward Scripture—they appreciated it.

This single historical act exposes the weakness of the modern secular narrative. The founders did not believe faith threatened freedom; they believed it preserved freedom. They understood that a free people must be virtuous, and that virtue is shaped by biblical truth.



What makes this history especially compelling is that it is not merely an artifact of the distant past. On the opening day

of the 2026 Florida legislative session in Tallahassee, an original Aitken Bible was brought into the Capitol, and a copy was presented to every elected official—including Cabinet members and Supreme Court justices. It was a quiet but powerful reminder that God's Word, once commended by America's first Congress, still speaks to those entrusted with governing today.

As America approaches her 250th anniversary, the Aitken Bible stands as a witness to a forgotten consensus: liberty does not thrive in a moral vacuum. The same Congress that fought for independence believed the Bible was worthy of public encouragement, national respect, and wide distribution.

When modern voices insist that faith has no place in America's public life, history answers back—clearly, calmly, and conclusively. There was a time when Congress did not apologize for Scripture, but recommended it to all Americans.

And perhaps the most important question as America approaches her 250th year is this: if the Bible was once considered invaluable to the survival of the Republic, what has been the result of dismissing it as optional?

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Lauren Ewashko: Airman, Model and Christian Capitalist

BY RICHARD SANDERS

Like so many members of our community, Lauren Ewashko moved to the Emerald Coast courtesy of the U.S. Air Force. When her service concluded, Lauren stayed because her “soul loves it here” (Locals Get It)!

Lauren traveled the world extensively, mostly with just a backpack. Like most Christian Capitalists, Lauren benefited from hard work. “Every time I put everything in storage, I’d go for six months, come back, and work really hard. It was just easy to pick up gigs and get enough funds to support myself to go out for months at a time. I loved it!”

Her simplified life brought her closer to God: “Every time I’d come back, I would clear more out of the storage unit. I started feeling more clarity. My clarity with God started.”

Lauren then landed on a core principle of the Christian Capitalist: “I am so grateful to



give, because I receive... there’s something that I just trust and have faith that more will come.

There is trust in a gift. So, I choose to give. Therefore, I choose to allow and to trust and

to receive and live and just let God move through me.”

A few months after her young daughter passed away, Lauren decided to go to a restaurant for the first time. Her server was in a desperate situation. When she was ready to leave, God called Lauren to give the server \$100. That was half of all the money Lauren had left! Lauren explains: “So I go in and I take her \$100 and I give it in love. I’ve got tears pouring down my face. I was like: ‘I’m so grateful.’ This is the first time I’ve been out. You blessed my life.”

As many folks have mentioned on the podcast, Lauren received a benefit from her gift very quickly after that. A few months later, she received a surprise invitation to attend a coaching course complimentary called Immersion on a Friday, and the course started the following Monday. “Guess how much the course costs? \$10,000! A hundredfold for that \$100 just

a few months later after I gave it... it is one of the reasons why I’m here right now. It’s a blessing to be a blessing to others. It just comes back if you’re open to receiving.”

Lauren decided that the best way for her to recover from her grief was to give back to the community. As the Chief Engagement Officer of the Advanced Sacred Heart Academy, a school for children with developmental differences in Fort Walton, Lauren gets to advocate for those kids every day, and she helped raise funds for its new building.

Lauren recently appeared on the Christian Capitalist podcast, and you can listen to the entire episode on SOWAL Life’s website. We are excited to share inspirational stories of hard work and generous giving to the poor and needy in the name of Jesus Christ, like Lauren Ewashko!

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Arts & Music

Musical Echoes Returns: A Festival Where Ancient Sounds Meet the Emerald Coast

By LORI LEATH SMITH

Each spring, something remarkable happens along the shores of the Santa Rosa Sound. The gentle notes of the Native American flute drift through the air, dancers move in colorful regalia and locals and visitors gather to celebrate one of the Emerald Coast's most unique cultural traditions.

From April 24–26, 2026, the Musical Echoes Native American Flute Festival will celebrate its 25th anniversary, inviting the community to experience three unforgettable days of music, art and heritage at 139 Miracle Strip Parkway SE in Fort Walton Beach. Set against the stunning backdrop of the Santa Rosa Sound, the festival is free and open to the public.

Since becoming part of the fabric of Fort Walton Beach in 2001, Musical Echoes has grown into one of the premier

Native American flute and art festivals in the nation, honoring the rich traditions, storytelling and artistry of Native American culture.

You can expect a vibrant weekend filled with live performances, flute concerts, cultural dancing, art displays, storytelling and interactive exhibits. The hauntingly beautiful sound of the Native flute—an instrument long used for storytelling, ceremony and reflection—creates a peaceful atmosphere that perfectly complements our Fort Walton Beach environment.

This year's festival features several acclaimed performers:

Shelley Morningsong, a Northern Cheyenne singer-songwriter and 2019 Native American Music Awards Artist of the Year, brings her powerful alto voice and heartfelt song-

writing to the stage. With seven albums and multiple Native American Music Awards to her name, Morningsong blends contemporary Native music with blues influences reminiscent of artists like Buffy Sainte-Marie and Bonnie Raitt.

Joining her is **Fabian Fontenelle**, a Zuni/Omaha performer and descendant of the famed Omaha Chief Big Elk. Fontenelle captivates audiences with powerful dance performances, traditional storytelling and sacred songs performed in the Native Zuni language. His vibrant regalia and rhythmic drumming bring ancient traditions to life in a mesmerizing cultural experience.

Also performing is **Garreth Laffely**, an award-winning Mi'kmaq/Cree composer whose Native flute compositions have been featured on NPR's Hearts of Space and networks including Discovery Channel, PBS and A&E. Laffely is the youngest composer ever to reach

No. 2 on the Billboard New Age chart and has collaborated with George Lucas' Skywalker Symphony.

Beyond the stage, the festival also highlights Native-inspired artistry and craftsmanship. Visitors can explore arts and crafts vendors, cultural exhibits and artist demonstrations, while artisans compete in both the Arts Competition and the Flute Makers Competition, showcasing handcrafted pieces that blend music, tradition and visual art.

The event is supported by the local community and volunteers. Those interested in helping can assist with activities such as the information booth, raffle sales, silent auction support or festival photography. Volunteers who contribute at least four hours receive a free festival T-shirt, and high school students can earn community service hours.

As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, Musical Echoes relies on sponsorships and donations



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to continue offering this unique cultural event to the public each year. Contributions of any size—including memorial or honorarium gifts—help sustain the festival's mission of celebrating Native American music, art and heritage.

Many locals will tell you Musical Echoes is more than a festival—it's an immersive cultural experience that leaves a lasting impression long after the final flute note fades.

Whether you come for the music, the art or simply the peaceful atmosphere by the water, one thing is certain: once you hear the echoes, you'll want to return year after year.

Musical Echoes Native American Flute Festival April 24–26, 2026

The Landing | 139 Brooks St. FWB

Info: info@musicalechoes.org

Volunteers: volunteers@musicalechoes.org

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Okaloosa County America 250 Commission Begins Planning Efforts for America 250 Celebration

By NICK TOMECEK,
OKALOOSA COUNTY PIO

The Okaloosa County America 250 Commission held its first meeting on Thursday, February 5, 2026, in Shalimar to discuss and plan various 250 anniversary events to celebrate the birth of the United States and encourage every American in Okaloosa County to engage in this historic moment in our nation's history.

Commissioners attending the first meeting included the Sons of the American Revolution, Daughters of the American Revolution, Florida State America 250 Commission, the Florida Historical Commission, Okaloosa County School District, Chambers of Commerce, Okaloosa League of Cities, local US Military Bases, Scouting America NW Florida, Billy Bowlegs Association, first responders, and five (5) at-large appointees of the Okaloosa County Commission. Community volunteers interested in serving as support staff for the Commission were also in attendance.

"We have a rich history that deserves to be recognized both nationally and in Okaloosa

County," said Okaloosa America 250 Commission Chairman Graham Fountain. "We can all come together, pause and reflect on the contributions made by our patriot ancestors who fought and died to create our great republic and those many heroes that continue to make the United States of America a true example of freedom throughout the next 250 years."

The Commission will be identifying, scheduling, and co-sponsoring various 250 anniversary events throughout the 2026 celebration year. Events will be added and adjusted throughout the planning process.

Events include:

February 20 - All Sports Association kicked off a new Military Award in honor of Patriots and acknowledged America250!

February 28 - The Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce hosted A HEROES DINNER, honoring our military.

March 21 - United for a Good Cause will host an America250! International Festival

May 9 - Patriots Day will



be held in downtown Crestview with a Grand Parade and America 250 celebration at the courthouse.

June 12 - Patriotic Drone Show at the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Rigdon Center from 6-10 pm with a community tailgate at Freedom Tech Center/Fairgrounds for the show.

June 12 - A Gala will be held (hosted by the Choctawhatchee Bay DAR) in the evening at Destin-Fort Walton Beach Rigdon Center following the drone show. This event is open to anyone with purchased tickets.

July 4th America250! - Fireworks will be held by our local municipalities

In October, the Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce plans to organize a "Remember

9/11" event with a Patriots focus.

November 11 - Veterans Day program at the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center on Okaloosa Island at 9 a.m., an 11:00 a.m. ceremony at Beal Memorial Cemetery, and a 1:00 p.m. Veterans Day Parade in Mary Esther.

To get us in the "spirit of 1776," the Commission encourages attendees/participants at events to dress in colonial/continental attire/period clothing; civilian wear, colonial military uniforms, dresses, tricorne hats and ladies' bonnets. "Part of the fun in paying tribute to the colonial/continental period of our history is learning more about our founders and ancestors

and dressing in period attire at America 250 events," said Vice Chairman Mitzi Henley.

How to promote your event:

Organizations wishing to have their event posted and advertised publicly should follow the instructions for submissions on the official Okaloosa America 250 website at getthecoast.com/America250.

The Commission encourages organizations to add @OkaloosaCountyAmerica250 as a co-host on Facebook to help promote the event.

Submit photos, flyers, logos and other assets for your event at <https://bit.ly/Okaloosa250Assets>

For questions, please email the Commission's Chairman, the Hon. Graham W. Fountain at america250@myokaloosa.com or call (850) 830-0002. Find us on Facebook at @OkaloosaCountyAmerica250. For additional information concerning the upcoming May 9 Grand Parade/250 Celebration in Crestview, please contact Melissa Carter, Crestview Special Events Manager at cartere@cityofcrestview.org or 850-974-8136.

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