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# FWB Life

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Postal Customer Local

## Bowlegs 70 Brings a Swarm of Swashbuckling Pirates to FWB

BY CHRISTOPHER MANSON

Rique Gwin, a/k/a Captain Billy Bowlegs LXX, is ready for the annual Billy Bowlegs Pirate Festival happening May 14-16 at the Fort Walton Beach Landing Park; but that's not all he's been up to this year.

Gwin's role as Captain Billy goes beyond the festival. Being "Captain Billy" includes promoting tourism in the area, "advertising how wonderful Fort Walton Beach is," he elaborates. Gwin and his Krewe travel from Bradenton on up to Minnesota, visiting lots of regional pirate festivals. Gwin anticipates around a hundred or so out-of-towners coming to the Emerald Coast in May, a mighty boost for the local economy.

Earlier this year, Gwin – as Billy, in full costume – visited Liza Jackson Preparatory School where he read pirate-themed stories to students and handed out beads. Gwin and his "Air Raiders Krewe" will team up with other Krew-



Bowlegs Court: Queen Debbie Fisher, Rique Gwin, First Mistress Mollie Grindland, First Mate Mark Grindland, Kelly Gwin, and J. Mark Fisher

es in Tallahassee later this year, complete with parade float, to entertain special needs children.

Gwin was announced as this year's Captain Billy at a coronation pageant held last June at Niceville's Mattie Kelly Arts Center. The identities of Billy's Queen (Debbie Fisher), First Mate and First Mistress, and Honor Guard were also

revealed. Gwin's involvement with the Krewe dates back 15 years.

This year's festival includes fireworks and live entertainment – the latter in partnership with the City of Fort Walton Beach's much-loved Concerts on the Landing series – along with lots of vendors. The "skirmish" happens Friday night, after which,

Gwin says, laughing, "I'll end up in handcuffs."

Spoiler alert: Captain Billy will be back at the festival site Saturday night to officially storm the city of Fort Walton Beach.

The festival is free to attend and attracted roughly 1,000

**BOWLEGS 70**  
*continued on page 2*



## Taking a Bite Out of an Invasive Species

What began as a creative response to an environmental threat has grown into one of the Emerald Coast's most anticipated—and impactful—spring events.

The Emerald Coast Open Lionfish Tournament and Festival returns May 15–17, bringing together divers, chefs, conservationists and families for a weekend that blends competition, cuisine and conservation. Centered around HarborWalk Village, the event is recognized as

**LIONFISH**  
*continued on page 2*



## Magnolia Grill

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

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Community

BOWLEGS 70

continued from page 1

visitors last year. Gwin says the event was moved back to May from June after Covid, and thanks to that change, "crowds have started to grow again."

The Billy Bowlegs Parade, set for Monday, May 18, along Eglin Parkway, is a popular Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce event that Gwin and his Krewe support and happily participate in.

Prior to Billy Bowlegs Festival 2026, a Downtown Fort Walton Beach pub crawl is scheduled for Friday, May 8. Ben Merrell and Soundside Bar are hosting.

On Thursday, May 14, the Little Pirates Scavenger Hunt

will be held in Downtown FWB. The Krewe will meet the kids on the side street by Parlour Doughnuts and then the children will proceed through Downtown FWB. Gwin encourages Destin Life readers to listen to the local Cumulus radio stations and visit the Billy Bowlegs Pirate Festival Facebook page starting in April to unearth "clues" concerning the Bowlegs coin hunt. The grand prize winner will be announced at the festival Saturday evening.

Gwin wishes to recognize Felicity Plastic Surgery, this year's presenting sponsor, whose event-worthy tagline is "Pursue YOUR happiness." Learn more at felicityplasticsurgery.com. The festival benefits the Wil-



liam Augustus Bowles Historical Foundation, a 501(c)(3) organization that promotes a love for local history.

Vendor applications are available on the Billy Bowlegs Pirate Festival Facebook page.

"The city is really support-

ive," adds Gwin, noting that all of the construction around the Landing is expected to be completed in time for the big event. "Last year was a little challenging with all the traffic barricades."

Discover more at kreweof-bowlegs.com.

The Bowlegs 70 Krewe

Captain Billy LXX – Rique Gwin

Captain's Co-pilot – Kelly Gwin

Queen of Bowlegs – Debbie Fisher

Queen's Navigator – J. Mark Fisher

First Mate – Mark Grindland

First Mistress – Mollie Grindland

The Honor Guard –

Schuyler and Taylor Black, Michael and Erin Goodson, Joe and Morgan Zwickel, Scott Flint and Nancy Kline, Mike and Kelly Bedsole, Tyler and Casey Murray, Chris and Heather Thomas, William Goolsby and Elizabeth Sager, John and Keri Holguin, Matthew and Katie Jaquet.

LIONFISH

continued from page 1

the largest lionfish tournament in the world—and one that continues to make measurable progress beneath the surface.

Big Impact, Growing Each Year

The numbers tell a powerful story.

During the 2025 tournament, more than 20,000 invasive lionfish were removed from Gulf waters, including 7,180 harvested during the pre-tournament and 13,322 during the two-day competition. Since its inception in 2019, the Emerald Coast Open has now removed over 100,000 lionfish, making a significant dent in one of the region's most pressing marine challenges.

"This event has brought a lot of awareness to the invasive lionfish species and created a festive atmosphere for the enjoyment of our visitors and resi-

dents, while fostering prosperity for our local businesses," said Okaloosa County Commission Chairman Paul Mixon.

Lionfish, native to the Indo-Pacific, have no natural predators in the Gulf and reproduce rapidly, threatening native fish populations and reef systems. Because they are not easily caught by traditional hook-and-line fishing, divers using spears play a critical role in controlling their numbers.

Competition with a Purpose

Divers from across the country travel to our area to participate, forming teams and competing for nearly \$175,000 in cash and gear prizes. Categories include most, largest and smallest lionfish caught.

At the 2025 event, standout teams included:

- Most Lionfish: Deep Water Mafia 1 (2,038)
- Smallest Lionfish: Team Lookin' Back (2.8 inches)



• Largest Lionfish: Team In the Clouds (17.2 inches)

Behind the scenes, weigh-ins and measurements took place near the harbor, adding to the excitement as teams brought in their hauls and shared stories of early morning dives, deep-water hunts and record-breaking catches.

"While this event continues to flourish, the opposite is happening for this invasive species," said Natural Resources Chief Alex Fogg. "The public is beginning to realize the impact of the lionfish on our ecosystem and

because of the divers and our amazing partners, we are able to make a difference for our environment in Gulf waters."

From Ocean to Table

Beyond the tournament, the Emerald Coast Open has helped spark a growing culinary trend: lionfish as a sustainable seafood.

Mild, flaky and often compared to snapper or grouper, lionfish is now featured on menus across the area. During the lead-up to the tournament, local restaurants compete in Lionfish Restaurant Week, showcasing creative dishes that highlight the species' versatility.

In 2025, La Paz took top honors for the third consecutive year—further proof that conservation can be as delicious as it is impactful.

Festival attendees can sam-

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70th Annual

# Billy Bowlegs Festival

	May 14	May 15	May 16	May 18
	4pm-6pm	5pm-9pm	10am-6pm	7pm
	Little Scallywags Pirate Walk	Vendor Booths, Concerts at the Landing, Skirmish & Fireworks	Vendor Booths, Live Music by The Aces, Pirates Landing	Torchlight Parade



PRESENTED BY:



Downtown Fort Walton Beach

[www.billybowlegspiratefestival.com](http://www.billybowlegspiratefestival.com)

Proceeds Benefitting the William Augustus Bowles Foundation





## Task Force Pizza: Built on Service, Strategy and a Slice of Community

For Ryan Stanhope, building a business wasn't just about opening a restaurant. It was about carrying forward a mindset shaped by years of service, teamwork and mission-driven purpose.

That mindset is baked into every detail of Task Force Pizza, from its name to its culture and even its logo.

Stanhope, a veteran of Air Force special operations with deep ties to Hurlburt Field, drew inspiration from the concept of a "task force" — a collaborative unit where individuals from different backgrounds come together with a shared goal. "In the military, a task force is about pulling together the right people and resources to accomplish the mission," Stanhope said. "That idea stayed with me."

When it came time to name his restaurant, the choice felt natural. With a family legacy rooted in military service, law enforcement and first responders, no other name captured the heart behind the business quite

like Task Force Pizza.

The brand's logo carries special meaning as well, featuring an AC-130 gunship — a nod to moments Stanhope credits with saving his life during his time in service. "Those gunships saved my bacon many times," he said. "Including that just felt right."

But beyond the name and imagery, it's the operational philosophy that truly sets Task Force Pizza apart.

Stanhope approached entrepreneurship the same way he approached his military career — with strategy, structure and a strong reliance on teamwork. From the earliest stages, he intentionally built a core group of advisers and team members, inviting their insight and buy-in before launching the brand. "As a first-time entrepreneur, I knew I didn't have all the answers," he said. "Having a team that's willing to ask questions, challenge ideas and contribute their knowledge has been critical."

That collaborative culture continues to define the business



today. Nearly three years in, Stanhope remains committed to creating an environment where every team member feels valued and heard. "The goal is for everyone here to feel a sense of success," he said. "When people know their voice matters, it creates a stronger, more cohesive team."

Like any entrepreneurial journey, the path hasn't been without challenges. Stanhope is candid about the lessons learned along the way — and the impor-

tance of being proactive rather than reactive. "Building standards, evaluating honestly and being willing to look for areas where we can improve — that's part of the recipe," he said. "You have to trust the numbers, stay humble and use the resources around you."

Those resources have included key relationships within the local business community, particularly through the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce. Programs like

the Small Business Development Center and Emerging Entrepreneurs network have played a valuable role in supporting his growth.

Today, Task Force Pizza has become more than a place to grab a slice. It's a gathering spot that reflects the spirit of the community it serves — military families, veterans, first responders and locals alike.

Stanhope describes it simply: "We're taking pizza out of the box and doing it with purpose."

Located at 1826 Lewis Turner Blvd., Task Force Pizza invites the community to stop in, share a meal and experience the mission behind the brand. "If you haven't been by yet," Stanhope said, "we'd love to have you."

Visit [taskforcepizza.com](http://taskforcepizza.com).

*FWB Life is proud to be the official print storyteller for the Fort Walton Beach Chamber.*

# YOUR FUTURE LOOKS BRIGHT... SO SHOULD YOUR PARTY



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- COMMENCEMENTS
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Community

# The 5 Keys to Longevity



By DR. KAREN DEVORE,  
TORTOISE CLINIC

We live in a culture that glorifies speed — fast food, fast results, fast fixes. But true longevity doesn't come from rushing. It comes from consistency, balance, and tending to the body with intention over time.

Longevity isn't simply about

adding years to your life. It's about adding life to your years.

Through an integrative and holistic approach to medicine, we focus on optimizing how you feel today while protecting your health for decades to come. Here are the five keys I believe are foundational to living longer and living well.



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### 1. Reduce Inflammation at the Root

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By identifying and addressing root causes through anti-inflammatory nutrition, targeted supplementation, acupuncture, stress management, and lifestyle modifications, we can reduce the internal "fire" that accelerates aging and instead create an environment where the body can repair and regenerate.

### 2. Support Metabolic Health

Your metabolism is far more than calorie-burning. It's the foundation of energy, hormone balance, blood sugar stability, and long-term vitality.

Insulin resistance, blood sugar spikes, poor sleep, and chronic stress all impair metabolic function and accelerate aging. Supporting metabolic health through whole-food nutrition, strength training, adequate protein intake, sleep optimization, and strategic supplementation helps maintain muscle mass, protect brain function, and reduce risk for chronic disease.

Longevity isn't about restrictive dieting. It's about nourishing your body in a way that supports resilience and strength at every stage of life.

### 3. Balance Hormones Thoughtfully

Hormones regulate nearly every system in the body from mood and metabolism to bone density and cardiovascular health. As we age, shifts in estrogen, progesterone, testosterone, thyroid hormones, and cortisol can significantly impact how we feel.

An integrative approach to hormone health looks at the full picture. We assess lifestyle, stress patterns, nutrient status, gut health, and detoxification pathways before determining whether bioidentical hormone therapy or targeted nutritional support is appropriate.

Balanced hormones can improve sleep, mental clarity, libido, energy, and muscle preservation, which are all essential components of aging well.

### 4. Prioritize Nervous System Regulation

You cannot out-supplement chronic stress. The nervous system plays a powerful role in longevity. Persistent sympathetic ("fight or flight") activation increases inflammation, impairs digestion, disrupts hormones, and accelerates cellular aging.

Practices that activate the parasympathetic ("rest and repair") system such as acupuncture, breathwork, meditation, time in nature, meaningful social connection, and restorative sleep, allow the body to heal.

Neuro-acupuncture and integrative therapies are especially powerful for supporting neurological resilience, reducing chronic pain, and optimizing brain health as we age. A regu-

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# Spring in Fort Walton Beach: Where Opportunity and Community Come Together

BY SHERRY OLNEY

The water is that kind of blue again. The kind that stops you for a second. Clear, bright, almost unreal. It stretches along the shoreline like a postcard, but here, it is real life. It catches the light in a way that makes everything feel a little calmer, a little clearer. And this time of year, you can feel it. Not just in the air, but in the energy of Fort Walton Beach itself.

Spring does not define this community. It builds on what is already strong. It brings movement. It brings connection. It brings a renewed sense of momentum that shows up in full restaurants, busy event calendars, and people choosing to step back into community again. You see it in conversations that linger a little longer, in sidewalks that feel a little fuller, and in the simple decision to be present again.

Visitors come for the beauty, but what they experience goes far beyond the view. Because



what truly defines Fort Walton Beach is not just what you see. It is what you feel when people show up.

At the center of that momentum is the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce, a driving force behind the connection, growth, and energy that keeps this community moving forward. This year marks an incredible milestone as the Chamber celebrates 80 years of service, leadership, and impact since 1946. For generations, it has helped shape the heartbeat

of Fort Walton Beach, supporting local businesses, building relationships, and creating opportunities that continue to strengthen the fabric of this community.

Through events, advocacy, and leadership, the Chamber brings people together in ways that matter. It is where ideas turn into partnerships, where small businesses find support, and where the community continues to grow in a way that feels connected, not crowded. That kind of influence does not hap-

pen overnight. It is built over time, through consistency, trust, and a shared belief in the success of this community.

That same spirit carries into the work happening every day at One Hopeful Place. This is where community support becomes something you can see and feel in real time. It is in the volunteers who show up early and stay late, the donors who give without recognition, and the partnerships that continue to stand behind every step forward.

Men and women who have faced some of life's hardest moments are not just given shelter. They are given structure, guidance, and a real path toward stability. Case management, accountability, and support work together to help individuals rebuild their lives in a way that is sustainable. It is where someone who once felt stuck begins to move forward again, step by step.

It is not just about housing.

*Continued on page 9*



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 Community

## Events at the Beach

**ADSO Fine Arts  
Photography Show  
Returns for 26th Year  
April 14–May 16 | Opening  
Reception April 17, 6–8  
p.m. | ADSO Gallery, FWB**

Discover striking visual storytelling at the 26th Annual Fine Arts Photography Show, presented by the Arts and Design Society of Fort Walton Beach. The exhibit features exceptional work across Land & Seascapes, People, Animals and Digital Arts.

Kick off the show at the free opening reception on April 17 from 6 to 8 p.m., where guests can meet local artists and celebrate creativity in a welcoming gallery setting.

The exhibit remains on display through May 16 during gallery hours: Tuesday–Friday, noon to 4 p.m. and Saturday, 1 to 4 p.m.

**NFSO Presents Mahler's  
"Resurrection" Symphony  
April 18 | 7 p.m. | Mattie  
Kelly Arts Center, Niceville**

Experience one of the most powerful works in classical music as the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra performs Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 2, the awe-inspiring "Resurrection." More than 200 musicians and singers will take the stage, joining forces with the Northwest Florida Symphony Chorus, Choral Society of Pensac-

ola and Niceville High School Opus One. This monumental work moves from darkness to a triumphant, hope-filled finale featuring full chorus and vocal soloists. Guest artists include soprano Ann Toomey and mezzo-soprano Zoie Reams.

Tickets are available at [MattieKellyArtsCenter.org](http://MattieKellyArtsCenter.org) or by calling 850-729-6000.

**Veterans & First  
Responders Appreciation  
Lunch**

**April 21 | Niceville Community Center**

A Superior Mechanical will host its inaugural Veterans and First Responders Appreciation Lunch on Tuesday, April 21,

from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Niceville Community Center (204 Partin Drive N., Niceville). The community-focused event honors local veterans, active military and first responders with a catered hot lunch from Swiftly Catered, special presentations and an AC system giveaway to one deserving service member or first responder in need. Eligible participants include members of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, EMT/Medics, Police, Sheriffs and Firefighters. Register for the HVAC giveaway at [ASuperiorMechanical.com](http://ASuperiorMechanical.com) under ABOUT US > HVAC GIVEAWAY. Business partners are welcome to contribute door prizes. For details: Marta Thorpe at (850) 814-3822.

**The Power Table LIVE  
2026 Brings Women's  
Leadership Conference to  
FWB**

**April 22–23 | The Island  
Resort, Fort Walton Beach**

Female founders and business leaders from across the country will gather for The Power Table LIVE, a two-day leadership and visibility conference focused on growth, branding, AI strategy and high-level networking. Founded by entrepreneur Taylor Smith, the event features keynote speakers, workshops, panel discussions and VIP experiences designed to help women scale their businesses and expand their influence. A highlight of the event is the inaugural Power Table 100 Awards, honoring 100 women making an impact in business and leadership.

Tickets and details: [thepowertable.co/conference](http://thepowertable.co/conference).

**Musical Echoes Native  
American Flute Festival  
Celebrates 25 Years**

**April 24–26 | The Landing,  
Fort Walton Beach**

Celebrate 25 years of music, culture and tradition at the Musical Echoes Native American Flute Festival, April 24–26 at The Landing on the Santa Rosa Sound. This free, family-friendly event features three days of live flute performances, cultural dancing, storytelling, art displays and interactive exhibits. Headlining performers include award-winning Northern Cheyenne singer-songwriter Shelley



Morningsong, Zuni/Omaha dancer and storyteller Fabian Fontenelle, and acclaimed Mi'kmaq/Cree composer Gareth Laffely. Guests can also explore Native-inspired arts and crafts, artist demonstrations and competitions, including flute makers and visual artists.

Hosted by the nonprofit Musical Echoes, the festival relies on community support through volunteers, sponsors and donations.

Free admission. For information or to volunteer, email [info@musicalechoes.org](mailto:info@musicalechoes.org).

**Sip, Savor & Celebrate:  
South Walton Beaches  
Wine & Food Festival  
April 23–26, 2026 | Grand  
Boulevard | Miramar  
Beach**

One of the Emerald Coast's most anticipated spring events returns in delicious style as the South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival uncorks April 23–26 at Grand Boulevard. With more than 600 wines, beers and spirits to sample, this four-day, award-winning festival offers a vibrant blend of flavor, fun and flair.

The weekend begins Thursday, April 23, with Winemakers & Shakers from 5–7 p.m. at Wine World in Destin, where guests can sip, sample local fare and meet the makers behind exceptional wines. On Friday, the experience elevates with a VIP Wine Tasting (4–6 p.m.), featuring rare and collectible pours alongside cuisine from Grand Boulevard restaurants. Later that evening, Bitters, Brews & Bartenders (5:30–8 p.m.) brings the energy, with craft cocktails, live music and a lively mixology competition under the stars.

The signature Grand Tasting takes center stage Satur-

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*Continued on page 8*

# Happenings Around FWB

2026  
EVENTS

## APRIL

- 10**  
Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee  
7 am | Christian Life Center at FBC | FWB
- 11**  
2026 Earth Day Beach Cleanup  
8 am | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island  
GEMS Workshop Emerald Coast Science Center  
10:30 am | FWB Public Library | FWB  
Garnier Beach Garden Club  
10:30 am | FWB Public Library | FWB  
studio625 presents Snow White  
2 pm & 7 pm | FWB Civic Auditorium  
Used to Be a Band Kid  
11 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB  
Pins & Paradise benefiting BGCEC  
1 pm | FWB Beach Bowl | FWB
- 11-12**  
NWFL Spring Home Show  
10 am | Destin FWB Rigdon Center | FWB
- 12**  
studio625 presents Snow White  
2 pm | FWB Civic Auditorium
- 13**  
Lawyers in Libraries  
10 am | FWB Public Library | FWB  
Homeschool Science Fair  
4 pm | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB
- 16**  
FWB Woman's Club Sippin' on the Sound  
5 pm | The Venue FWB  
EC Music Alliance American Brass Quintet  
6 pm | Crosspoint Church | Niceville  
Bands on the Boulevard: Spring Music Series  
6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach  
Concerts in the Village: Black Jacket Symphony  
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin  
Planetarium Nights  
6 pm | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB
- 17**  
7th Annual Viking Football Golf Tournament  
9 am | FWB Golf Course | FWB  
26th Fine Arts Photo Show Opening Reception  
6 pm | Arts and Design Society (ADSO) | FWB
- 18**  
Creature Cafe  
9:30 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB  
Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class  
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso  
Simple and Elegant Sewing  
10 am | FWB Public Library | FWB  
Burning of the Lanes - Arc of the Emerald Coast  
12 pm | FWB Bowl | FWB  
CARE on the Coast TurtleFest 2026  
3:30 pm | Gulfarium | Okaloosa Island

- 18 cont-**  
NFSO Mahler Symphony No. 2 "Resurrection"  
7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville
- 20**  
GSSF Indoor League Match  
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Val'p
- 21**  
Veteran's & First Responders Lunch  
11:30 am | Niceville Community Center
- 22**  
Word Waves Writers  
5 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB
- 23**  
Greater FWB Chamber  
80th Anniversary  
Celebration  
6 pm | Gulfarium | Okaloosa Island



Concerts in the Village:  
Yacht Rock Schooner  
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts  
Foundation | Destin



Concerts  
in the Village  
mcaf  
mattie kelly arts foundation  
Yacht Rock  
Schooner  
MKAF.ORG

- 23-26**  
21st Annual Destin Charity Wine Auction Weekend  
Various Times & Venues
- 23-26**  
South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival  
Various Times | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach
- 25**  
Summer Music Series at Soundside  
7 pm | Soundside Waterfront Bar | FWB
- 28**  
Games Club  
1 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB
- April 29 - May 03**  
Emerald Coast Bike Fest  
Various Times | EC Harley-Davidson | FWB
- 30**  
Concerts in the Village: Rumours ATL  
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin

## MAY

- 01**  
Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee  
7 am | Christian Life Center at FBC | FWB
- 02**  
Bring Hope Now Dragon Boat Festival & Race  
8 am | FWB Landing Park | Downtown FWB  
2nd Annual Boat Pickup with MarineMac of FWB 9  
am | MarineMax FWB | FWB  
Discover Science Saturday  
10 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB  
Seltzer Festival  
1-4 pm | The Market Shops | Miramar Beach  
Dancing with the Emerald Coast Stars  
6 pm | Hotel Effie Sandestin

- 02-03**  
38th Annual ArtsQuest Fine Arts Festival  
10 am | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach
- 03**  
Craftathon Beer Festival  
11 am | FWB Landing Park | Downtown FWB  
Women's Climbing Circle  
5 pm | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin
- 04**  
Maker Days: Tune Time  
9 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB  
FWB Library Friends Meeting  
6 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB
- 05**  
Maker Days: Tune Time  
9 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB
- 07**  
Coffee with the City Manager  
8 am | FWB Public Library | FWB  
Concerts in the Village: Brass Transit  
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin

**09**  
5th Annual FORE! The Love of  
Animals Golf Tournament  
10 am | The Links Golf Club at  
Sandestin | Miramar Beach



- GEMS Workshop presented by  
Emerald Coast Science Center  
10:30 am | FWB Public Library | FWB
- Garnier Beach Garden Club  
10:30 am | FWB Public Library | FWB
- Sip-Shop-Sail: All White Brunch Party  
11 am | Soundside Waterfront Bar | FWB
- Adventures in Marriage  
1 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB

### 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



### Community

### EVENTS

continued from page 6

day, April 25 (3–6 p.m.) and Sunday, April 26 (1–4 p.m.), as world-class wineries line the boulevard pouring hundreds of selections from across the globe. Highlights include a showcase from Oregon’s renowned Willamette Valley, plus opportunities to meet winemakers, vineyard owners and industry experts throughout the weekend.

Wine World’s Culinary Village adds to the experience with gourmet pairings, artisan cheeses and chef-driven bites designed to complement each sip. Guests can also purchase featured wines on-site at exclusive prices, with proceeds benefiting the Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation and children in need across Northwest Florida.

Tickets are available now at [sowalwine.com](http://sowalwine.com).

#### 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](http://dcwaf.org).

#### Saturday in the Park Brings Family Fun to Valparaiso Saturday, April 25 | 10 a.m.–4 p.m. (5K begins at 8 a.m.) | Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, 115 Westview Ave., Val’p

The Heritage Museum Association’s annual “Saturday in the Park” returns with a full day of family-friendly fun, beginning with an 8 a.m. 5K run along

Boggy and Tom’s Bayous. Registration is \$30 through April 15 and \$35 after.

Festivities kick off at 10 a.m. with Eglin Air Force Base’s Honor Guard, followed by a lively lineup including craft vendors, historical demonstrations, the Walton Guard, USA 250 activities, children’s crafts, the Valparaiso Garden Club, bake sale, food and live music. Local band 20 West performs from 1–3 p.m., and admission to the museum is free.

For vendor information or 5K registration, call 850-678-2615 or email [Manager@heritage-museum.org](mailto:Manager@heritage-museum.org).

#### Emerald Coast Community Singers Spring Concert: Choral Classics Through Time

#### April 26, 2026 | 3 p.m. | Christ the King Episcopal Church, SRB

Celebrate the beauty of choral music across the centuries as the Emerald Coast Community Singers present their Spring Concert, Choral Classics Through Time. This vibrant local ensemble will take audiences on a musical journey spanning from the 12th to the 21st century, showcasing the timeless power of song to connect and

inspire. Admission is free, and donations are gratefully accepted.

More info: [emeraldcoast-communitysingers.com](http://emeraldcoast-communitysingers.com).

#### Dancing with the Emerald Coast Stars

#### Saturday, May 2 | 6 p.m. | Hotel Effie Sandestin

Seaside School will debut its newest signature fundraiser, “Dancing with the Emerald Coast Stars,” presented in partnership with Fred Astaire Dance Studios Fort Walton Beach. Inspired by the hit TV show Dancing with the Stars, the ballroom-style competition pairs local leaders with professional dancers for an evening of glamour, entertainment and friendly rivalry—all supporting the Seacoast Collegiate High School Expansion Project. The 2026 Emerald Coast Stars include Dr. Lindsey Hoppe of 30A Smiles, Whitney Cooley of Scenic Sotheby’s International Realty and Southern Sand, Destin Mayor Bobby Wagner, and Drew Ward, principal of Seacoast Collegiate High School. Each will perform alongside a professional dancer from Fred Astaire Dance Studios. The evening begins with a cocktail hour and champagne toast, followed by a plated dinner, dance competition, awards ceremony and VIP after-party. Guests—and supporters watch-

ing from home—can vote for their favorite dancer for \$10 per vote.

Tickets: \$350 individual | \$500 couples. Sponsorships and tickets are available at [SeasideSchools.net](http://SeasideSchools.net). For sponsorship information, contact Callie Cox at [cox@seasideschools.net](mailto:cox@seasideschools.net).

#### Destin Seltzer Festival Returns to The Market Shops

#### May 2 | 1–4 p.m. | The Market Shops, Miramar Beach

Sip, savor and soak up the sunshine at the Destin Seltzer Festival on Saturday, May 2. This lively afternoon event features unlimited 2-ounce seltzer tastings from national and regional brands, light bites from local restaurants, live music and a fun, coastal atmosphere.

Hosted by Opportunity Place, the festival supports its mission of helping families and individuals transition to stable housing—100% of proceeds benefit the organization’s programs.

A limited number of VIP tickets offer access to a private tent with upgraded food offerings and added perks. Sponsorships are available. For details, email [opportunityplacefb@gmail.com](mailto:opportunityplacefb@gmail.com). Follow along on social media for updates and ticket information.

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## SPRING IN FWB

*continued from page 5*

It is about restoring dignity. It is about rebuilding confidence. It is about helping people believe in what is possible again. And that is where real change begins.

Right alongside that work, Bridgeway Center provides critical mental health and substance use services that are often the missing piece in someone's journey. Through counseling, crisis response, and outreach, individuals are given the support they need to stabilize, heal, and move forward in a healthier way.

Together, these efforts reflect a powerful truth. Real change happens when a community invests not only in where someone lives, but in how they heal, grow, and rebuild their life.

Across Fort Walton Beach, that commitment shows up in many forms. United Way Emerald Coast connects families to essential resources that keep households stable. Habitat for

Humanity creates pathways to homeownership and long-term security. Catholic Charities provides food, counseling, and emergency support. Sharing & Caring meets immediate needs for families in crisis. Children in Crisis provides safe and stable homes for children who need protection and care. A Bed 4 Me Foundation ensures children have something as simple and essential as a bed of their own. Emerald Coast Food Rescue helps feed families by redirecting food back into the community.

Each organization plays a different role, but together they form something much bigger. They form a network of support that reaches people where they are and helps move them forward. None of this happens by accident. It happens because people choose to be part of it.

You see it in local events, in fundraisers that bring people together, and in everyday moments where someone decides to give their time, their resources,

or simply their presence. You see it in the quiet acts of generosity that never make headlines but change lives all the same. These moments may seem small, but together they create something powerful. They create a community that stands behind its people. That is what makes Fort Walton Beach different.

We do not just welcome people here to visit. We take care of the people who live here.

Yes, we have the crystal-clear water. Yes, we have the white sand and the kind of views people dream about. But, the real strength of this community is not just in its beauty. It is in its energy. It is in its people. It is in the way this community continues to show up, support one another, and move forward together.

And that is what truly makes Fort Walton Beach shine.

## LIONFISH

*continued from page 2*

ple lionfish dishes, watch fillet demonstrations and learn how choosing lionfish supports Gulf ecosystems.

### A Win for Tourism and Local Business

The tournament and festival also provide a strong economic boost for Destin and the surrounding area.

Thousands of visitors travel to the Emerald Coast for the event, filling hotels, booking charters and dining at local restaurants. The combination of competition and festival atmosphere reinforces Destin's reputation as both a premier fishing destination and a hub for conservation-driven tourism.

### A Festival for the Whole Family

While divers compete offshore, the Lionfish Festival brings the celebration onshore.

Held at HarborWalk Village, the family-friendly festival features tastings, educational exhibits, interactive booths, local vendors and activities for all ages. Live music and a lively harbor setting create an inviting

atmosphere where visitors can learn, explore and connect.

It's an event designed to engage everyone—from curious kids to seasoned anglers—while raising awareness about protecting the Gulf.

### More Than a Tournament

At its core, the Emerald Coast Open is about people coming together for a shared purpose.

From returning dive teams to first-time participants, the event fosters camaraderie, competition and a commitment to conservation. What started as a localized effort has grown into a signature Destin event with national reach—proving that a community-driven idea can create lasting environmental change.

As the 2026 tournament approaches, one thing is clear: Destin isn't just hosting a competition—it's leading a movement.

For more information, registration details or festival updates, visit [emeraldcoastopen.com](http://emeraldcoastopen.com).



# It's Back! Destin's Hottest Magic & Comedy Show Returns—Bigger, Bolder and More Interactive Than Ever

The magic is back, and it's hotter than ever. After a wildly successful debut season at The Palms Resort, the Magic & Comedy Destin residency is returning for an encore year—bringing fresh upgrades, up-close illusions and a high-energy experience that's equal parts jaw-dropping and laugh-out-loud fun.

This isn't your typical night out. From the moment you step into the newly enhanced showroom—now featuring all table seating—you're part of the action. Sip your favorite cocktail (or mocktail) delivered straight to your table while world-class performers take the stage just inches away. No lines, no distractions—just pure, immersive entertainment.

At the center of it all is headliner Bart Rockett, a seasoned performer with a global résumé and a knack for keeping audiences on the edge of their seats. With a career that spans more than 90 countries, his own nationally syndicated TV show and a long-running theater in Branson, Rockett brings big-stage talent to an

intimate, coastal setting.

And here's where it gets even more fun—his show blends slick, sophisticated magic with sharp comedy and crowd interaction, making every performance feel personal, unpredictable and completely unforgettable. Add in his signature ventriloquism (honed under the mentorship of Jeff Dunham), and you've got a night that truly delivers something for everyone.

Even better? It's a family affair.

Rockett's children, Kadan and Brooklyn, make special guest appearances throughout the season. You may recognize them from film, television and even a viral Super Bowl commercial with nearly 800 million views. Their star power adds an extra spark to an already electric production.

For Rockett, this residency is more than just another tour stop—it's personal. Having vacationed in Destin since childhood, he's returning to the place that first inspired him. "I am excited to be back for another season here on the Em-

erald Coast and to continue creating magical memories for our guests," he shared.

Make it a full night out by arriving early—or lingering after the final curtain—at the newly opened Blue Lagoon restaurant, located right next to the showroom. Known for its Italian-inspired menu, it's the perfect spot to dine, unwind and keep the evening going. Bonus: you can even bring your drinks into the theater.

Showtimes include 7 p.m. evening performances, with 4 p.m. matinees offered on select Sundays—perfect for date nights, girls' nights, family outings or hosting out-of-town guests.

This show sells out quickly, and seating is limited—so grab your tickets in advance.

Parking is free, the vibe is electric and the magic? Absolutely unforgettable.

Reserve your seats now at [MagicDestin.com](http://MagicDestin.com)—and get ready for a night that will leave you wondering, "How did they do that?"

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# News Around Town




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### Gulfarium's Romeo Makes History as Oldest Manatee Ever



A familiar face at the Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park is making waves far beyond our area.

Romeo, a beloved resident manatee at our own Gulfarium, has officially been named the oldest manatee ever recorded by Guinness World Records at an estimated 71 years old — and possibly even older.

Known affectionately as a gentle giant, Romeo's story spans decades. Originally discovered in the Miami area in 1957 as a young manatee, he has lived under human care ever since, serving as an ambassador for education and conservation. Today, he calls the Gulfarium home, where you can visit him in Manatee Cove alongside his companions.

What makes Romeo's milestone even more remarkable is that manatees typically live just 30 to 40 years, making his longevity truly extraordinary. His life now surpasses the previous record-holder, Snooty, who lived to 69.

Beyond the record, Romeo represents something deeper — a living reminder of the importance of protecting Florida's iconic marine life. Manatees continue to face threats from boat strikes, habitat loss and en-

vironmental challenges, making conservation efforts more critical than ever.

For locals and visitors alike, Romeo's recognition is a point of pride for our community — and a heartwarming reason to celebrate one of the Gulfarium's most cherished residents.

### Freedom Tech Center Hotel Earns National Recognition

A newly opened hotel in Fort Walton Beach is already earning national attention. The Holiday Inn Express & Suites Fort Walton Beach – Eglin Area at Freedom Tech Center has been named a recipient of the 2025 IHG Newcomer Award, placing it among just 15 newly opened hotels recognized nationwide. Opened Sept. 12, 2024, the 115-room property is part of IHG Hotels & Resorts and has quickly stood out for exceptional guest satisfaction, operational excellence and strong first-year performance. The hotel has maintained an impressive 4.9-star Google rating, with guests frequently praising its friendly staff, spotless rooms and stand-out breakfast experience.

Developed and owned by The Jay Odom Group and operated by Odom Hotelz™, the property emphasizes a hospitality philosophy rooted in omotenashi—a Japanese approach centered on thoughtful, anticipatory service and genuine guest experiences. The hotel features a modern, aviation-inspired design honoring nearby Eglin Air Force Base and Hurlburt Field, with unique spaces like the Pilot's Lounge and Flight Deck Boardroom. Amenities include complimentary hot breakfast,

fitness center, business facilities and a manager's reception offered up to twice weekly.

Located within the 52-acre Freedom Tech Center—just minutes from Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport and the Emerald Coast's beaches—the hotel serves military, business and leisure travelers alike, while supporting Eglin Air Force Base through the development's unique partnership.

### Northwest Florida Retired Officers Wives Club's Spring Fashion Show



BY BARB PALMGREN

Each year this group of women host a fashion show to welcome spring. Choosing blouses, skirts, dresses and accessories from the Eglin Main Exchange, they smile and pose for the organization. The luncheon was held in a private room of the Clubhouse Grill Restaurant near the Fort Walton Municipal Golf Course. With over three changes to model new apparel items, the ladies pictured below were certainly quick-change artists. Management from the store described each item and price. Yes, a lovely lunch with lingering thoughts of what one should wear on a cruise or reception.

Variety and options to appeal for all the luncheon attendees. Fashion is something that never goes out of style and the photo below is testament to the fact that "girls just want to have fun."

### JetBlue Takes Off from VPS, Expanding Nonstop Options for FWB Residents

JetBlue has launched new service at Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport (VPS), offering nonstop flights to New York (JFK) and Boston Logan as of March 5, 2026. The routes provide Fort Walton Beach residents with more convenient travel options, along with easy connections to destinations across the U.S., Caribbean and Europe. Competitive fares make the new service appealing for both business travel and quick getaways.



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# The Rigdon Center

BY CAROLYN NEWCOMER KETCHEL

The Okaloosa County Fairgrounds, located behind the courthouse on Lewis Turner Boulevard, were historically owned and operated by the City of Fort Walton Beach. In 2022, the Fort Walton Beach City Council declared the property surplus. Recognizing its poten-

Based on the committee's recommendations, a long-term, five-phase master plan was developed to guide the future growth and direction of the property. As part of this plan, the facility was rebranded as the Rigdon Center Complex in honor of Bull Rigdon, who managed the facility for many years.

go out for bid and will include three new entrances, updated signage, additional parking, decorative walls, covered walkways and refreshed landscaping.

Once Phase I is complete later this year, the facility will offer approximately 50,000 square feet of affordable event space capable of hosting festivals, trade shows, business meetings

seating capacity for up to 3,000 people.

This facility will support a wide range of events, including cheerleading and dance competitions, volleyball, wrestling, pickleball, large trade shows and community and military gatherings. Its capabilities will position the county to attract larger, multi-day events and remain competitive with similar venues.

Planned features include high ceilings (40-plus feet), durable flooring, a mezzanine level, elevators, multiple flooring types, fixed seating, breakout rooms and specialty-use spaces. The building will be a hardened metal structure, enhancing resilience and offering potential use during hurricane events.

The campus includes 20.4 acres of outdoor space for events and parking, along with an additional 15.83 acres of adjacent county-owned land. The City of Fort Walton Beach also

maintains a large asphalt area nearby that may be used for overflow parking or event support on a limited basis.

Project costs include land acquisition, construction, parking, stormwater systems, landscaping and pedestrian access improvements. Funding for the new facility will come from a variety of non-taxpayer sources, including grants from the Gulf Consortium, tourism development funds, legislative appropriations and state agricultural grants. No property tax dollars are planned to be used for this project.

It is an honor to serve as your commissioner.

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



tial value—and the possibility that it could be sold for private development—the Okaloosa Board of County Commissioners entered into negotiations to acquire the site as a valuable public asset. The county officially purchased the property in March 2023.

In July 2023, the board established a seven-member citizen advisory committee to help guide the enhancement and refurbishment of the fairgrounds. The committee included representatives from the Northwest Florida Fair Association, the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce and one appointee from each county commissioner. The Fort Walton Beach city manager served in a non-voting, ex officio role.

Since acquiring the property, the county has made significant progress on Phase I improvements. These include the demolition of dilapidated structures and major upgrades to electrical systems, HVAC, lighting, ceilings, drainage and overall aesthetics. Installation of new epoxy flooring is nearing completion, with security and audiovisual systems scheduled for installation soon.

Additionally, construction is underway on a new 3,000-square-foot building between Buildings B and C. This addition will feature event catering kitchens, concession areas and modern restroom facilities. Completion is expected in just over six months. The facade portion of the project will soon

and a wide variety of community events.

Designing and permitting projects of this scale requires considerable time—often up to a year. As planning continues for Phases II and III, the next step is to begin the design phase for a new multi-purpose event center. This phase is expected to take about a year, with construction bidding likely in 2027.

The proposed expansion includes approximately 50,000 square feet of new space, complementing the existing 50,000 square feet, an additional 20,000 square feet of storage and 15 acres of outdoor event area. The main event hall—approximately 35,000 to 40,000 square feet—will be designed as a flexible, divisible space with

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## Fort Walton Beach Chiropractor Flies Rescue Dogs to their Forever Homes

By JARED WILLIAMS,  
GETTHECOAST.COM

A Fort Walton Beach Chiropractor uses his military aviation background to volunteer as a pilot, flying shelter dogs out of kill shelters to forever homes.

Most days, Dr. Scott Smith treats patients at Fort Walton Beach Chiropractic on Race-track Road. But a few times a year, his office is the cockpit of a Grumman Tiger — and his passengers have four legs.

For the past five to six years, Smith has volunteered as a pilot for two nonprofit organizations — Puppy Rescue Flights and Pilots N Paws — flying dogs out of kill shelters and into the arms of rescue organizations and fos-

ter homes across the country. He does it all on his own dime: the fuel, the flight time, the airplane, his time. “I’m a dog lover,” Smith said. “My wife and I...we travel to eat, drink and pet dogs.”

That love drives him into the sky. Smith estimates he’s transported several dozen animals over the years, anywhere from one dog per flight to as many as four. On his most recent mission, he flew four dogs. One memorable flight had him delivering a mother dog and her roughly four-day-old puppies after a scheduling delay meant the mom gave birth before the transport.

The two organizations



giving back.

Smith said he doesn’t fly just to fly. He needs a mission. “I don’t just go out and fly circles,” he said. “When I’m going somewhere like to visit my parents, I’ll look on the job board and see if there’s animals going in that direction. If I’m already flying that way, why not try to help?”

He tries to fly three to five rescue missions a year and wants to do more, though weather and scheduling sometimes intervene. He’s also flown medical transport missions for people through organizations like Angel Flight.

It’s not just pilots who can help, Smith noted. When weather grounds flights, volunteers step up to drive animals by car. Others serve as short-term foster homes along the route. “You don’t have to be just a pilot to get involved,” he said. “You can drive them, you can house them, you can facilitate that way.”

For Smith, the reward is layered — a love of flying married to a love of dogs, wrapped in something bigger. “Animals are good for people in terms of mental health,” he said. “It’s all full circle.”

### NFB Académie Auditions Open for 2026–27 School Year

Audition registration is now open for the 2026–27 Northwest Florida Ballet (NFB) Académie, a free, nationally recognized arts and academic program for students entering grades 3–8. All auditions are by appointment and will be held at the Sybil Leber Center for Dance Education, 310 Perry Ave. SE in Fort Walton Beach.

Audition dates include April 25 (10 a.m.–2 p.m.) and April 26 (2:30–4:30 p.m.) for incoming third-grade students, April 25 (2:30–4 p.m.) for fourth grade and April 28–30 for fifth grade during a current fourth-grade ballet class. Registration must be

completed by 2 p.m. April 23 at [nfballet.org/auditions](http://nfballet.org/auditions). No dance experience is required for third grade. Fourth-grade applicants must have at least one year of ballet training, and fifth-grade applicants must have two years. Families are invited to attend studio tours April 21 or 23 (10:15–11:15 a.m.) or a Q&A with Artistic Director/CEO Todd Eric Allen on April 22 at 6 p.m.

Celebrating more than 20 years, the NFB Académie combines rigorous academics with daily ballet and weekly instruction in art, music and French. For details, call Joy Elpedes at 850-664-7787.

work differently. Puppy Rescue Flights, based in the Sanford-Orlando area, coordinates multiple pilots who meet in Enterprise, Alabama, where animals from shelters across the state are redistributed among planes and flown south into Central and South Florida. Pilots N Paws operates on a broader, national scale through an online message board where shelters and rescues post transport requests. Pilots like Smith set a geographic radius — his is 300 miles — and receive alerts when animals need to move through their area. Some transports are single flights. Others involve as many as five legs with different pilots.

The goal across both organizations is the same: get animals out of kill shelters and into areas where they have a better chance of being adopted. “A lot of times, if you look at the patterns

of movement, it’s all from rural areas down to higher densely populated areas because there’s more opportunity for them to get adopted,” Smith said.

Smith’s aviation roots run deep. He spent more than 25 years flying, beginning in the U.S. Army where he started in helicopters — including the AH-64 Apache — before transitioning to fixed-wing aircraft. He served as an attack aviation platoon leader, company commander and battalion logistics officer across multiple assignments, including a deployment to Balad, Iraq. His last military aircraft was the C-23 Sherpa. He retired from the Mississippi Army National Guard as a Major in 2015 and holds a Bronze Star among his military awards.

Today, his Grumman Tiger — a four-seat, single-engine piston airplane with fixed gear and a fixed propeller — is his tool for

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# Amazing! Rates Have Risen—Whoo Hooo!



BY PAUL DOMENECH

Now, before you think I've officially lost it, hear me out. The conversation around rising interest rates has become one of the most misunderstood and, frankly, overdramatic topics in real estate today. It's not that rates don't matter—they do. But, what matters more is how people interpret them. And right now, the perception is doing more damage than the numbers themselves ever could.

When buyers hear “rates are up,” many instinctively pull back. Not because the math suddenly made homeownership impossible overnight, but because uncertainty crept in. Un-

certainty slows decision-making. But here's the twist, this hesitation creates opportunity. Less competition means more room to negotiate. Closing costs, price adjustments, better terms—the things buyers used to fight for are now back on the table. The question isn't “Should I wait?” The question is “How do I win in this market?”

On the seller side, rising rates can trigger a different kind of reaction, panic pricing. Sellers start thinking they need to drop their price immediately just to keep up. But let's be clear: that's not strategy, that's emotion. If your home is sitting, it's not automatically because of rates. It's because of positioning. The data is always telling a story, views, saves, showings, feedback. The right move is to read that data and adjust with purpose, not react out of fear.

And yes, affordability shifts when rates rise. That's real. But affordability isn't just about the interest rate. It's about the full picture, taxes, insurance, condition of the home, and how the deal is structured. A well-nego-



tiated deal on a properly positioned home can outperform a “better rate” on a poorly structured one every time. Buyers who understand this don't get stuck, they get strategic.

Will there be fewer buyers? Possibly. But fewer buyers doesn't mean no buyers. In fact, the ones still in the market are typically more serious, more qualified, and more prepared to act. That's why preparation matters more than ever. Sellers who focus on condition, pricing

strategy, and strong promotion don't chase the market, they lead within it. And when you lead correctly, you still achieve what every seller wants: the most money, in the shortest amount of time.

**Here's the bottom line.** The market is never bad, It's just different. And different doesn't mean stop. It means adapt. If your real estate conversation starts and ends with “rates are up,” you're not being led, you're being reacted to. The right con-

versation sounds different. It sounds like, “Here's how we win in this market. Here's how we structure the deal. Here's what we can control.”

Because real estate isn't about luck. It's about leadership, strategy, and execution.

So, whether you're buying or selling, don't lean on noise. Lean on a plan. Not just someone who's “nice” or helped a friend once—but a professional who understands shifting conditions, reads the data, and shows up with a clear strategy rooted in experience.

Markets shift. That's what they do. But with the right approach, you don't just survive the shift, you capitalize on it.

The market isn't bad... it's just different.

And the ones who win in this season aren't waiting on rates—they're adjusting their strategy.

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# A House Sold Name



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Community



BY BARBARA PALMGREN

The Preamble to the Declaration of Independence states:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that*

# Museum Series: 250th Celebration Begins!

*among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

This being a special year to celebrate all year long, each month I will submit articles about key events happening around our county. This entire year, we celebrate the birthday of a document that changed our nation and the world. Okaloosa County has already begun plans for several large events to honor this historic moment. The 2026 America 250th Commission participants meet twice a month

to coordinate events. Two such events are a grand parade in downtown Crestview at 4 p.m. on May 9 and a gala VIP dinner and drone show on June 12 from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. at the Rigdon Center in Fort Walton Beach.

This month, I highlight a special tribute at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida. This local history museum is a special place. Tucked away in old downtown Valparaiso, it houses memorabilia and artifacts from all of Northwest



Florida. So as not to forget these artifacts, a display case was moved from another part of the museum to the new exhibit hall. It contains artifacts found on Eglin Air Force Base property from the time of and before the Revolution, including tools and pottery.

The rest of the exhibit is a history lesson come alive for residents and visitors. Events, places and key patriot heroes are showcased on large panels designed by CJ Signs, with words and pictures taking us back to the time before and including the signing of the Declaration

of Independence. In addition, a tent, movie and Youth Corner provide more visual and hands-on experiences for visitors.

In March, financial contributors to this exhibit were honored with a reception at the museum. A special thank you to Magnolia Grill and Tom Rice for providing delicious appetizers and desserts for the occasion. Each contributor received a "Betsy Ross" pin and an in-depth presentation of the exhibit by Dr. Marie Hallion, curator of the exhibit. Dr. Hallion is the chair of the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida.



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## Spinning Support Forward: Celebrating Community with April Giveaway

BY KRISTINA REED, OWNER, FURNITURE DIRECT

We've been blessed beyond words by the way Fort Walton Beach has supported our small business. From the day we opened our doors almost two years ago, your support has had a huge impact, not just on our family, but on our community. Because of you, we've been able to give back to local nonprofits, sponsor youth sports, support high school music programs, and invest in the places that make our town special.

Now, it's our turn to pass it on. This April, every customer who shops with us gets to spin the wheel at checkout and win a gift card to another small business right here in Fort Walton Beach. It could be a cozy coffee shop, a boutique, a local restaurant, or a fun entertainment spot. Every spin is a chance to explore something new while keeping support local, the same way you've supported us these past two years.

Small businesses are the heartbeat of our community.



By shopping, giving and connecting locally, we all grow together. That's why we're excited to share these gift cards with you: to highlight amazing businesses across town, help them thrive, and keep the spirit of community alive.

So, this April, come by, spin the wheel and leave with more than just furniture. Leave with a reminder that supporting local is a two-way street; and that together, Fort Walton Beach can continue to make a difference.

Furniture Direct is now located on the corner of Eglin and Hollywood next to Emerald Coast Flooring and Sax Grille.

# Rooted in Relationships, Driven by Excellence: Executive Air's Rise on the Emerald Coast

The concept for Executive Air was born during a conversation while Kevin and Michelle Royce were traveling abroad on their honeymoon. With decades of experience in heating & air, gas, plumbing and refrigeration, Kevin carried a depth of technical knowledge that naturally sparked ideas about what a truly comprehensive service company could look like.

Originally opened as Royce Plumbing and Gas in 2015, the business grew steadily as the Royces refined their vision. Later, the opportunity arose to purchase Executive Air, allowing them to bring a full complement of plumbing, cooling, heating and refrigeration services to the Emerald Coast. The acquisition in 2019 from Ronnie Currie, who started the company in 2008, marked the moment their long-term dream became a reality. Ronnie has recently joined the team again to lead marketing and strategic development.

Executive Air thrives in com-



munity involvement and strong alignment with the military and veteran community. As the three of them imagined what their Fort Walton Beach-based company should stand for, one theme kept rising to the top: relationships. Serving local clients with integrity, familiarity and

genuine care became a foundational pillar of the brand.

They also know that the systems' Executive Air services — cooling, heating, refrigeration, are deeply interconnected with plumbing and gas. To deliver consistently excellent results in both companies, they built

strong hiring standards and rigorous training processes. Weekly on-site round-table training that begins with a morning devotional, paired with off-site certification programs, ensures their technicians stay sharp, safe, and ahead of industry standards.

This investment in people

has paid off. Executive Air is known for long-tenured staff, which brings continuity to their sales, service, and maintenance programs. Customers often say they appreciate “seeing the same trusted technician” rather than being a stranger at each appointment — a testament to the culture Executive Air has built.

Executive Air also prides itself on offering a best-in-class line of products, representing well-known, reliable brands the team can stand behind including being a Trane Comfort Specialist.

Above all, Executive Air understands that trust is the currency of a service business. Their signature sea foam green color, seen on their building and their fleet, has become a recognizable symbol of their commitment to the Emerald Coast community — a visual reminder that Executive Air is not just a service provider, but a neighbor.



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- “Prompt service. Employees were very professional and kept a clean work area.”
- “Hands down the best repair service I've ever received!”



## What Your Windows Say About Your Home (Before Anyone Walks In)



BY DANICA LAFAIRE

You clean your floors.

You wipe your counters.

You dust the shelves.

You even fluff the pillows before guests arrive.

But when was the last time you really looked through your windows? Not at them... through them.

Because over time, something subtle happens. Dust settles. Salt in the air leaves behind a slick

film. Rain dries in soft patterns you don't quite notice anymore. And this time of year—a layer of pollen seems to settle on everything overnight. And slowly, barely noticeable, the light in your home begins to change.

It's a gradual change. You don't wake up one day and realize the house is dark; you just slowly get used to the rooms feeling a bit flatter. The views of the coast start to look more like a faded photograph than the real thing. And that's the tricky part—you stop seeing it.

And whether we realize it or not... our windows are always saying something. Not in a loud or critical way. Not in a way that asks for perfection.

Because every home is lived in. Full schedules, growing families, busy seasons—it's all part of it.



When the glass is clear, it changes the whole vibe. It makes the house feel like a place that actually welcomes the sun, rather than just blocking the wind. It says that the family that lives here is creating a home that feels open and inviting. This home believes in fresh starts, and that a space can shift your energy. Our family believes small inten-

tional care, over time, strengthens each of us. We believe the little things matter.

There's something about clean windows that goes beyond appearance. It's not about perfection or impressing the neighbors; it's about the experience of living there. It's the way the morning light pours into your kitchen—warmer, clearer, more alive—and shifts your energy without you even realizing it.

Clean windows don't just change how your home looks; they change how it feels to wake up in it. You pause, just for a second, and finally notice the view you fell in love with in the first place.

This time of year, we talk a lot about spring cleaning. About fresh starts. About opening things up again.

And sometimes, the simplest

change makes the biggest difference. What if, instead, you chose to reset the way your home feels—intentionally?

- Letting the light back in and seeing your home clearly.

- Experiencing your space the way it was meant to be.

If it's been a while since you've really looked through your windows, this might be your moment. And if you see something you can't unsee, we're here to help.

At Fish Window Cleaning, we believe it's often the smallest details that make the biggest difference in how a home feels. Because at the end of the day, it's not just about clean glass. It's about coming home to a space that feels as good as it looks.

## Golf Series: Raven Golf Club Junior Tournament

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

I wonder if Edgar Allan Poe would take up golf knowing there's a course named for his famous poem, *The Raven*. Would he embrace the challenge—or find it as relentless as

the raven at his chamber door?

We may never know, but the Raven course proved plenty challenging March 28–29 as it hosted the Emerald Coast Junior Golf Tournament. Younger players competed over nine

holes Saturday, while older juniors played 18 holes Sunday, vying for spots in the Notah Begay III Junior Championship Regional Qualifier for ages 10–18. Three players in each age group advanced.

The NB3 Junior Golf National Championship is a two-stage qualifying series culminating in a 54-hole national championship broadcast on Golf Channel. In 2026, qualifiers advance to the Florida Regionals—June 8–9 for girls at Indian Springs CC and June 24–25 for boys at Mission Resort Club.



### Top Performers

Girls 10–11: Mackenzie Brown (advances to regionals)

Boys 10–11: 1. James Goodman (77), 2. Luke Stuart (78), 3. Eli Woolsey (all advance)

Girls 8–9: Madelyn Morelock (low medalist)

Boys 8–9: Alden Marek (low medalist)



Baytowne and Stonebrook, with ECJGT events also serving as qualifiers for the Optimist International Tournament at Doral and the FCG Callaway World Championship and U.S. Wing Mojing World Championship at Torrey Pines.

Tournament Director Dennis Attaway, who has led the program since 2020, continues to inspire young golfers and grow the game across the Emerald Coast.

Bounds, Inc. sponsored the Spring Championship. Additional tournaments this season were held at Hidden Creek,

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# Getaway Season Starts Here

BY LIESEL SCHMIDT

You can feel it in the air—that subtle shift that happens just before the heat of summer settles in for an extended stay. *Getaway season is here.*

And while we're all more than ready for a change of scenery—whether it's a quick weekend escape or somewhere that requires a boarding pass and multiple destinations—packing tends to fall near the bottom of the list of things we look forward to. Luckily, a few thoughtfully chosen pieces will set you up for an easy, effortless trip—no last-minute scrambling required. Consider this your guide to packing smarter and more efficiently this season, brought to you by the friendly and well-traveled staff at **Blue Bay Lifestyle Co.**

## Foundational Pieces

Every great suitcase starts with a strong foundation: the versatile staples that make getting dressed feel easy, no matter where the day leads. For cooler mornings or breezy evenings, a pair of well-cut **Liverpool**

jeans offers polish as well as comfort, while soft Vuori joggers and an easy hoodie bring a relaxed, put-together feel to travel days. Paired with a simple tank or classic tee, these pieces carry you effortlessly through shifting temperatures as the day unfolds.

If warmer destinations are in your travel plans, breathable fabrics and easy silhouettes—think tailored **Liverpool** shorts or a relaxed sundress—keep things light without sacrificing style. Coverups like the cute, lightweight linen dresses from **Charlie B** transition seamlessly from beachside afternoons to casual dinners, making them an easy addition to any suitcase. Toss in a **Free Fly** romper (super packable), and you've got an instant ensemble that's easily dressed up or down, depending on your accessories and shoes.

## In-Transit Rituals

Most people (even you) have rituals that go along with travel. Whether it's the scent you wear on every plane trip or a playlist you use as miles of road disap-

pear under your tires, favorite stops on the route or in the airport...It's all ritual.

And often, it starts with a scent. We love the freshness of **Coast + Salt** fragrances—and, best of all, they come in compact, packable, TSA-friendly rollerball vials. Inspired by days spent on the sun-warmed sands of incredible beaches like Rio and Ibiza, each is light, feminine, and perfect for making your signature scent. Pop it into your purse or carry-on for a post-flight refresh.

From there, it's about passing the time. Don't forget to pack whatever is on your TBR list or a journal. Let your mind wander or escape into another world, far away from security lines and filtered airplane air.

When it's time to unwind, sleep can be a struggle on flights. We recommend silk eye masks and neck pillows, plus a well-curated selection of podcasts, audiobooks, or playlist music. Whatever you do to wind down at home, try to emulate that—even if you are hovering at 30,000 feet.

## Beauty & Wellness, Reimagined

See that stockpile of beauty, skincare, and haircare products glutting up your bathroom counter? Repeat after me: *This is not packable.* Even if you somehow magically make it all fit, do you really need six different serums?

Skip generic toiletries—go intentional. Think multi-use skincare like BB or CC creams with SPF (they hydrate, cover, and protect); makeup sticks that work for eyes, lips, and cheeks; and 2-in-1 moisturizers that negate the need for a serum and a lotion. Also, try and find alternate forms of cleansers: shampoo, conditioner, and body bars and dissolvable facewash strips. Each is super simple for packing and won't count toward your liquid limit.

## The "Always Packed" Items


We know you'd be lost without your techy gadgets and all the accompanying charging cables, so make yourself a checklist of all the screens you need






(phone, tablet, laptop, and watch) and don't forget to add the accoutrements. Pack them all into a small, zippered bag (think beaded bags with fun designs or canvas **Ellembee Gift** zip pouches with snarky sayings that are *so you*) to keep them organized.

Cash, cards, IDs, and passports are also a must. Some places you go may have credit card fees or simply not take card payments at all, so always have a stash of cash on hand. Also, be

*Continued on page 20*






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

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## AJ's Seafood & Oyster Bar

Attention all foodies and sports fans—AJ's boasts the one and only Jumbotron on the Destin Harbor where you can watch your favorite games on the BIG, BIG screen surrounded by the energy and beauty of the Destin Harbor and fabulous food.. AJ's serves up delicious daily specials, mouth-watering drinks plus entertaining live music all month, too. For 40 years, AJ's Seafood and Oyster Bar has been serving cold Gulf Coast

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

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

## AJ's on the Bayou

Located at the base of the Cinco Bayou Bridge in Fort Walton Beach, AJ's on the 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.,  
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fubarfub.com

## Magnolia Grill

In 2001, Magnolia Grill in Fort Walton Beach opened its

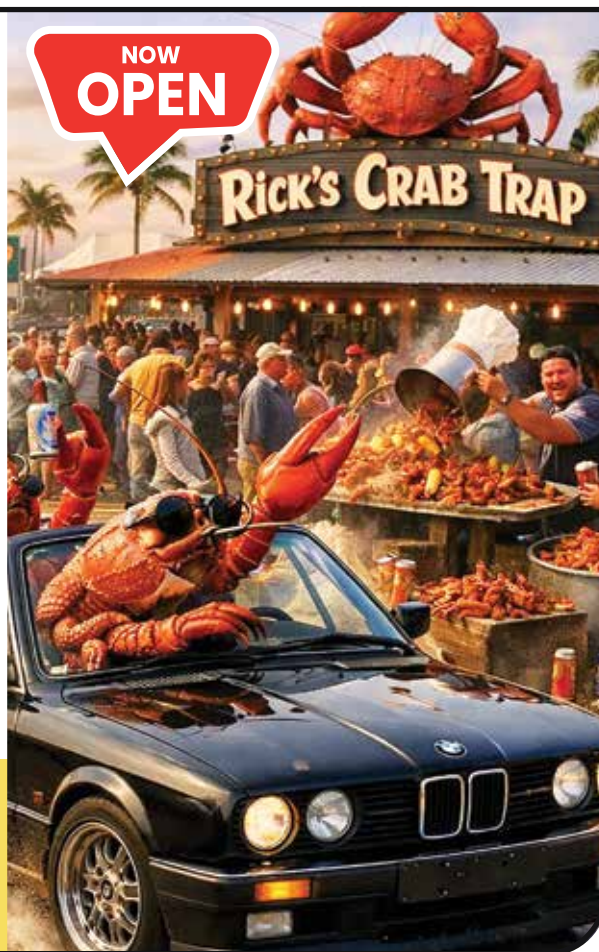
Continued on page 20



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## DINING

continued from page 18

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  
1450 Miracle Strip Pkwy SE, FWB  
theboardwalkoi.com

## GETAWAY

continued from page 17

aware of people around you as your travel—both in-transit and when you arrive at your destination. Nothing ruins a vacay like

a picked pocket. **Birdie** personal alarms are a great secret weapon (and completely TSA approved), and **FlipBelts** pull extra duty as not only a running belt but also for keeping cards, cash, and IDs hidden.

A thoughtfully packed bag sets the tone for everything that follows. Keep it simple, keep it intentional, and leave a little room for whatever the journey brings your way.

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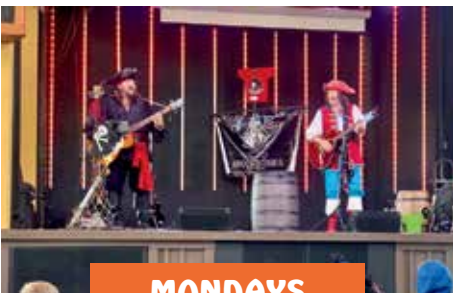
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**MONDAYS**

**PIRATE SHOW**

March 16<sup>th</sup> - August 3<sup>rd</sup>  
Capt. Davy and Kirby Jake & the Crossbones perform a free show from 5-8pm with music, magic & mayhem for mateys of all ages!



**TUESDAYS**

**MOVIES ON THE BEACH**

March 10<sup>th</sup> - August 4<sup>th</sup>  
Grab a beach towel & a spot on the sand for a new featured movie each week at 8pm on the giant inflatable beachfront screen.



**WEDNESDAYS**

**FIREWORKS**

May 27<sup>th</sup> - August 5<sup>th</sup>  
Front row seats to the 9pm fireworks show from the iconic Okaloosa Island pier.

Labor Day Weekend Show:  
Sunday, September 6<sup>th</sup>



**THURSDAYS**

**BEACH LUAU PARTY**

May 28<sup>th</sup> - July 30<sup>th</sup>  
Aloha at Al's from 5:30-8pm with FREE facepainting, balloon animals, and an 8pm island inspired fire & dance performance!

**ENTERTAINMENT, FOOD & FUN FOR EVERYONE!**



 Off the Hook

# Blessing of the Fleet Returns for 69th Year

## May 14 | Destin Harbor

There are few traditions that capture the heart and heritage of our area quite like the annual Blessing of the Fleet—a time-honored celebration where faith, fishing and community come together along the harbor.

Now in its 69th year, the beloved event returns on Ascension Day, Thursday, May 14, 2026, at the docks behind Brotula's Seafood House & Steamer. Rooted in Destin's identity as a historic fishing village, the Blessing of the Fleet remains one of the city's most meaningful and uniquely coastal traditions.

The evening begins at 4 p.m. with a Captains' Praise and Worship Service held under a large tent overlooking the harbor. Around 5 p.m., clergy will process to the docks to begin blessing the vessels—everything from commercial fishing boats to safety and recreational watercraft. Each participating captain receives a signature blue Blessing of the Fleet flag, a symbol proudly flown to signify protection and faith for the year ahead. In 2025 alone, more than 130 vessels took part in the ceremony.

Following the blessings, the community is invited to gather for a Fish Feast beginning



PHOTO CREDIT: IMMANUEL ANGLICAN CHURCH / A.YII

SeaQuest II pauses in front of the clergy dock to receive their blessing from various clergy from around Destin during the 68th annual Blessing of the Fleet

around 5:15 p.m., with a suggested donation. Sponsored in part by Ariel Seafood and Brotula's, the feast offers a true taste of Destin while bringing neighbors and visitors together in fellowship.

Free parking is available at Brotula's throughout the day, with additional public parking across the street opening at 2 p.m. Event T-shirts will also be available for purchase near the main tent.

While Blessings of the Fleet are celebrated in other coastal communities around the world, Destin's stands out for its scale, spirit and deep connection to

the people who built their lives on the water. First held in 1958, it is considered Destin's second-oldest tradition, following the famed Destin Fishing Rodeo, which began in 1948.

The tradition reflects the enduring faith of the early fishermen who founded this "Little Fishing Village" and continues to honor those who make their living from the Gulf today. Each year, families, captains and community members gather not only to celebrate the season ahead, but to pray for protection, provision and safe passage on the water.

The Blessing of the Fleet



PHOTO CREDIT: IMMANUEL ANGLICAN CHURCH / A.YII

Clergy board Captain Tony Davis' Anastasia for the last group blessing of the day. Captain Tony serves as Commodore for the event. His father, Captain William Frank Davis served as Commodore for the Blessing of the Fleet for many years as well.

is part of "Destin's Week of Blessings," a series of faith-based, family-friendly events held throughout the week and supported by local churches. Together, these gatherings offer opportunities to serve, connect and uplift the community.

Captains wishing to participate can register their vessels by contacting Immanuel Anglican Church at 850-837-6324 or by emailing [immanuel@iacdestin.org](mailto:immanuel@iacdestin.org)

with vessel and contact information.

Whether you're a lifelong local, a member of the fishing community, or a visitor looking to experience a truly authentic Emerald Coast tradition, the Blessing of the Fleet offers a meaningful glimpse into the heart of this coastal town—where faith and the sea have always gone hand in hand.



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# Don't Miss CARE on the Coast TurtleFest on 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 Emerald Coast. Every ticket

to-enjoy 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. Stilt walkers and roaming entertainers will keep the energy

ing 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](http://go.gulfarium.com/turtlefest) and be part of the celebration!



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

## Music, Food, and Festival Fun All Day Long

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!

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

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 access to a private area overlook-



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 Off the Hook

# Fish in our Waters



By HELEN PETRE

Have you ever wondered what was swimming around at the beach, in the bays, and the dune lakes? Even if you don't see them, there are living things in the water all around you. What are those little fish swimming around your legs? Most

are juveniles, searching for protection in shallow, coastal water and sea grass. The most common are pinfish, but many juveniles seek protection in shallow coastal water, and feed in bays or the shallow dune lakes. Here are a few. You can catch them



Pinfish photo courtesy UFL Rock O'Connor

es, while the females swim unburdened.

### Needlefish

Needlefish look like pipefish but there are major differences. Needle fish have teeth, are predators, and swim at the surface of the water.

### Striped Mullet

Any time you see a fish jump out of the water, you can bet it is a mullet. Mullet are important commercial and recreational fish found year-round in our waters. You can see them jumping while standing on the beach, but they are bottom feeders, most common in grass beds eating algae. According to locals, mullet fries with beans and grits are a panhandle staple. The striped mullet, or black mullet, is most often food, but we also have white mullets.

There are many other fish you can find in our waters, sea grass beds, and dune lakes. Finding fish makes for a good day. Enjoy the waters.

*Helen Petre is a retired USDA biologist and college biology professor. She spends her time volunteering, teaching, and writing science articles to share her interests with future generations.*

in dip nets if you are quiet and quick.

### Pinfish

Pinfish have sharp spines on the dorsal fin, providing the common name. They are prey for pelicans, gulls, turtles, dolphins and herons, so their life span is short. When he was seven E.O Wilson lost vision in his right eye when a pinfish he caught jumped and struck him in the eye.

### Silverside

Silversides are abundant year-round hiding in grass beds from their larger predators.

### Pipefish

Pipefish are slow swimmers but blend in with the sea grasses for protection. They are related to seahorses, which are also found in our grass beds. The males of both pipefish and sea horses carry the eggs in pouch-

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**UWF Athletics Moves to Division I Competition**

The University of West Florida (UWF) announced April 2 that its athletic programs will transition from NCAA Division II to Division I beginning in fall 2026, marking a major milestone for the Pensacola-based university. The Argonauts will join the Atlantic Sun Conference (ASUN) for most sports and the United Athletic Conference (UAC) for football at the FCS level. UWF will undergo a three-year reclassification period (2026-29), during which teams may compete for conference championships but will be ineligible for NCAA postseason play. Full Division I membership, including postseason eligibility, begins in the 2029-30 academic year.

University President Manny Diaz Jr. said the move aligns UWF with peer institutions, expands national visibility and enhances student recruitment opportunities. UWF enters Division I with strong momentum, having earned 11 national championships and numerous conference titles at the Division II level.

# Golf Series: Green Grass, Green Tees, Great Golf at Bluewater Bay Golf Course Await this Spring!



BY BARBARA PALMGREN

Back in the folk-rock era of the 60's, a hit song had folks humming and smiling. It focused on wandering on to "where the grass is greener still."

*"Green, green, it's green they say,  
On the far side of the hill.  
Green, green, I'm goin' away,  
To where the grass is greener still."*

Today, travelers who wander down to our paradise, see soft white sands, green golf courses, emerald green and blue waters and enjoy air-conditioned comfort of tourist stores and restaurants in every part of the Florida Panhandle.

One such place to stop for both golf and a welcoming bar and restaurant after a golf round, is the Golf Club at Bluewater Bay in Niceville. The Blue Tee restaurant inside the clubhouse offers breakfast, lunch and dinner.

A few days ago, as a golf reporter and one who pretends she is a golfer, I spent time with the person I think is the key to success for any golf course.

That person is the golf course superintendent. Maligned in the movie Caddyshack, Bill Murray was the hopeless man who spent time chasing a gopher in a war he was never going to win. Unlike Bill, Alfredo Riveras, employee of Elite Golf, the management company for the course, is not chasing gophers or other critters. He's stockpiling oak. Lots of oak. Oak trees that once drained precious water from the fairways. And he's winning the battle. If anyone still uses a wood burning fireplace, you may want to contact Alfredo for logs that can be used for your home!

Why is this important? Between the tee box where a golf-

er hits his or her drive and the green where putts determine the score for the hole, lies the long stretch of fairway. The fairway must be green. Not brown. Not grey. But green. Getting water to this stretch of land is critical. Large trees with roots expanding into the fairway won't work. A mature oak tree can consume over 40 gallons of water a day during growing season.

And we have a longer growing season in the south. A much longer growing season. This competition for water between turfgrass and tree roots can only end in dry spots on the fairways and golfers who won't play the course.

Alfredo Riveras was a trusted assistant superintendent working many years in the Dallas area for Elite Golf. Elite Golf selected Alfredo for this new position in Bluewater Bay and Alfredo was the perfect choice to be head course superintendent. Greens that were once brown are now green. Alfredo showed me before and after photos. But, I had to know for myself. I walked on these new greens and was amazed. Alfredo knew how to use the right fertilizer, sand, aeration and water to produce what golfers want above all else: perfect greens. Art Jean, one of



330 owners of Preserve Bluewater Bay, the organization who raised funds to save the course two years ago, is proud of Alfredo's hard work and results. Art had a "I told you so" grin on his face while I took photos of the green.

Alfredo's crew begins work at 6 a.m. mowing fairways, greens, raking sand traps and preparing for morning golfers. They then tackle other tasks: tree trimming, re-edging greens, maintaining equipment and mowing the rough. Equipment is owned



by the course and maintained by a mechanic in the maintenance crew. Golf carts for golfers are leased.

Elite Golf analyzed the course before agreeing to manage the business. In addition to the above improvements for greens and fairways, they wanted greens expanded to the original size of the course designed by Jerry Pate. Elite Golf also wanted certain tee boxes lengthened. Why? Eighteen-hole golf courses should all be a minimum of 6,000 yards for a semi-pro-



fessional golfer. All the 18-hole courses in our area understand this requirement and offer a series of tee boxes to attract all levels of golfers.

So, keep humming that old familiar tune, knowing now, at Bluewater Bay...

*"Green, green, it's green they say,  
On the far side of the hill.  
Green, green, we're hitting our drives,  
To where the grass is greener still."*



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# A Community Loss with Special Recognition – Danton Barto

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

A phone call came one night at our home. It was my son's best friend from Niceville High School. I was also his civics teacher and a fan of all the sports

he played at Ruckel Junior High and Niceville High School. His voice was low and clear. I would have known it anywhere. It was Mickey Barto.

Mickey now lives in St. Peters-

burg, and I see him when I visit family in the area. He always comes to holiday parties, and I play golf with him as he harasses my sons and grandsons while they place bets on every hole.

Mickey asked if he could stay with my husband and me for a few days. He had been invited to attend a luncheon to honor his younger brother, Danton, who died due to complications from COVID-19 in 2021. Danton was only 50 years old.

I was absolutely thrilled to see him, and my husband, who is the chef in our

household, immediately began preparing menus for dinner. Any chance to spoil one of our extended family members is always an opportunity we never miss.

Mickey asked if I would attend the luncheon with him. We walked together into the Emerald Coast Convention Center, where he was surrounded by old friends and his sister, Sara. There were two honorees that day inducted into the All Sports Association 2026 Hall of Fame. Danton was one, and so was Coach John Hicks, also from Niceville. I knew and admired Coach Hicks when I worked at Niceville High as a guidance counselor and International Baccalaureate coordinator. His record of success from 1999 to 2019 is remarkable. This was Niceville's moment to be treasured, for sure.

Emcee Bernard Johnson of Florida Power & Light introduced people who knew and worked with Danton throughout his career. They spoke of his achievements in the many sports he played, with football being his first love — his record tackles, his professional football career, his coaching, and his compassion for others. His football jersey, No. 59, was retired by the Memphis State Tigers. His football jersey, No. 44, was retired by Niceville High. And now, this honor from the 57th Annual All Sports Association.

Someone came up to me and said they heard Mickey was as good an athlete as his brother. I smiled. I didn't want to take anything away from Danton's special day. Yes, Mickey earned numerous athletic awards at Ruckel and Niceville, playing



on the state championship football team in 1988. To say the two brothers grew up learning, loving, and sharing their talents in the sporting world would be an understatement. The difference was that Danton carried his abilities beyond high school into college and professional sports. Danton had a passion for the game that could not be matched.

Danton attended Memphis State, where he was a four-year letterman and two-time Butkus Award nominee. He holds the school record for career total tackles (473). He won the All Sports Male Collegiate Award in 1994. After college, Danton played five years of professional football in the CFL and AFL. He then coached for 10 years as head coach of the Memphis Xplorers, leading the team to its first league championship. Taylor Morton, Rams senior personnel executive, spoke of Barto's work as an NFL scout. Taylor talked about Danton's toughness as a football player and his love of the game.

I watched Mickey listen to the stories, holding back tears. How do you measure the worth of a brother? There is no way. But Danton's memory will not be forgotten in the county where he was loved. Danton will forever be enshrined on the Wall of Honor at the conference center, thanks to the All Sports Association.

With one last look at his brother's photo on that wall, we walked from the luncheon. It was time to change from suit and tie to golf shirt and shorts and play a round with his extended family at Shalimar Pointe Golf Course.

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# Spring is Season of Renewal, Healing and Fresh Starts

## How Short-Term Rehab Helps Seniors Return Home Safely

By TERESA HALVERSON, DIR. OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT/ COMMUNITY RELATIONS, THE MANOR AT BLUE WATER BAY

Spring is a great time to focus on renewal, recovery, and independence. For seniors, the season naturally encourages gentle movement, fresh air, and mental rejuvenation, all of which are important for recovery after surgery, illness, or a fall.

Recovering after a hospital stay can be challenging for anyone, especially seniors. Short-term rehabilitation, also known as post-acute rehab, provides the support and therapy seniors need to regain independence and return home safely.

### What is Short-Term Rehab?

Short-Term rehab is a focused, time-limited program that normally takes place in a skilled nursing and rehab facility. The goals of short-term rehab are to restore strength, mobility, and daily living activities so that seniors can safely manage and return home.

### Short-term rehab includes:

- **Physical Therapy** to rebuild strength and improve balance
- **Occupational Therapy** to practice daily activities of living (cooking, dressing, bathing, etc.)
- **Speech Therapy** for swallowing, communication, or cognitive changes
- **Nursing care** and monitoring to ensure proper medication management and prevent complications

### Why Short-Term Rehab Matters

After an acute care stay in a hospital, seniors may face:

- Weakness or reduced mobility
- Risk of falls or injury
- Difficulty managing medications or chronic conditions
- Decreased confidence in performing everyday tasks

Short-Term rehab addresses these challenges with structured therapy, skilled supervision, and personalized care.

### Ways Rehab Helps Seniors Return Home Safely

**Restoring Strength and Balance:** Physical Therapists create individualized programs to increase muscle strength and balance, reducing fall risk.

**Relearning Activities of Daily Living (ADLs):** Occupational Therapists help seniors practice essential tasks (those tasks we normally take for granted)- cooking, dressing, and bathing. These skills help seniors live independently in the community while staying safe.

**Monitoring Health and Medications:** Nursing staff track vital signs, manage medications, and what for signs and symptoms of potential complications, preventing rehospitalization.

**Discharge Planning:** Dedicated rehab teams plan for a smooth transition back home



including home safety modifications, medical equipment, caregiver training, and referrals to Out-Patient Rehab, Home Health, and Caregiver agencies.

**Boosting Confidence:** Short-term rehab encourages seniors to regain confidence in their abilities, supporting emotional and well-being alongside physical recovery.

### Signs Short-Term Rehab May Be Needed

- Difficulty waking or standing without assistance

- Trouble completing everyday tasks independently
- Weakness or fatigue that prevents one from living at home safely
- Need for continued therapy after surgery or hospitalization

### Choosing the Right Rehab Facility (look for a facility that offers)

- Experienced therapists and skilled nursing staff
- Personalized, goal-oriented rehab programs
- A safe and supportive environment
- Strong communications with families and healthcare providers

### Specialized therapies and oversight include:

- **Cardiac Recovery Program:** Gradually increase stamina for longer walking distances or standing periods; promote circulation to aid healing and prevent blood clots; incorporate low-impact cardiovascular exercises if appropriate.

• **Stroke Recovery Program:** Improve coordination and motor control on the affected side; regain gain and posture to prevent falls; strengthen cognitive-motor skills for dual tasks like walking and talking.

• **Orthopedic Rehab Program** (hip replacements/fractures, knee and spinal)

• **Pulmonary Rehab for respiratory conditions:** Breathing exercises to strengthen lungs; low impact cardiovascular activities (walking, cycling, light resistance training).

• **Balance and Fall Prevention:** Exercises for static and dynamic balance; teach strategies to recover from loss of bal-

*Continued on page 39*



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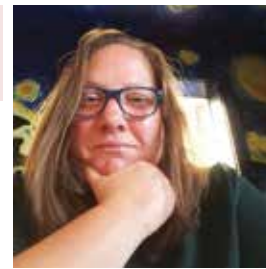
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# Pickleball, Heel Pain, and Plantar Fasciitis: What Every Player Should Know

By Dr. Jennifer M. Trendt

How can you prevent one of the most common injuries in America's fastest-growing sport—and what do you do if it starts slowing you down?

Pickleball has quickly become one of the most popular ways to stay active, and for good reason. It's fun, social, and accessible to a wide range of fitness levels. I see more and more patients discovering the sport—and many of them are playing several times a week.

But with that rise in popularity, I'm also seeing something else more frequently in the clinic: plantar fasciitis.

If you've ever experienced a sharp, stabbing pain in the bottom of your heel—especially with your first steps in the morning—you know how quickly it can take the enjoyment out of staying active.

The encouraging news is that plantar fasciitis is often preventable, and when it does develop, there are effective ways to support the body's natural healing process.

### Why Pickleball Players Are at Risk

The plantar fascia is a thick band of connective tissue that

runs along the bottom of your foot, helping support your arch and absorb impact. Pickleball places repetitive stress on this tissue through quick lateral movements, sudden stops, and frequent push-offs.

Over time, especially without proper preparation or recovery, this can lead to small micro-tears in the tissue. That's when irritation begins—and pain often follows.

Several common factors increase the risk:

- Sudden increases in playing time
- Tight calves or limited ankle mobility
- Worn-out or unsupportive footwear
- Playing on hard court surfaces
- Returning to activity too quickly after time off

### Simple Ways to Help Prevent Plantar Fasciitis

The good news is that a few small habits can go a long way in keeping you on the court and out of pain.

Start with a warm-up.

Even five minutes of movement preparation—such as calf stretching, ankle mobility work, and light walking—can help prepare your body for play.



Strengthen your feet.

Your feet contain small stabilizing muscles that are often overlooked. Simple exercises like balancing on one leg or performing towel scrunches can improve strength and support.

Choose the right footwear.

Court-specific shoes provide the lateral stability and cushion-

ing needed for pickleball's quick movements.

Progress gradually.

If you're new to the sport or increasing your playtime, build slowly. Sudden spikes in activity are one of the most common causes of injury.

### What to Do If Heel Pain Starts

If you begin to notice heel pain, it's important not to ignore it. Pushing through discomfort often leads to longer recovery times and more persistent symptoms.

Traditional approaches may include rest, stretching, ice, orthotics, or anti-inflammatory medications. While these can

help manage symptoms, they don't always address the underlying issue—tissue that hasn't fully healed.

This is where newer, non-invasive options are changing how we approach recovery.

One such option is SoftWave therapy, which uses electrohydraulic shockwaves to stimulate blood flow and activate the body's natural healing response. Rather than simply masking pain, the goal is to support the repair and regeneration of the affected tissue.

Many active adults are drawn to this approach because it requires no injections, no medications, and no downtime.

### Staying Active Without Living With Pain

Pickleball is meant to keep you moving, connected, and enjoying life. Pain shouldn't be the reason you step away from something you love.

If heel pain is beginning to limit your activity, it may be time to explore solutions that focus on healing—not just symptom relief.

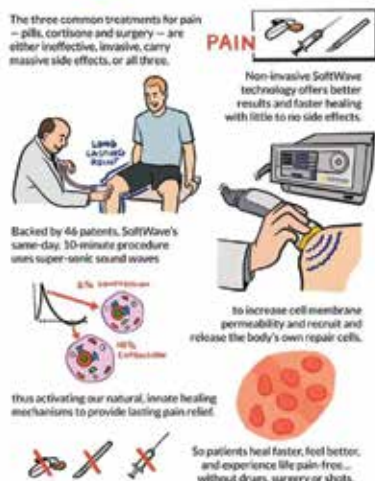
At The Reset Room ~ A Chiropractic Studio, I offer complimentary consultations to help determine whether SoftWave therapy is an appropriate option for your condition. Sometimes a simple conversation and evaluation can provide clarity on the best next step.

Because the goal isn't just getting out of pain.

**It's getting back to doing what you love. Because your body deserves a comeback.**

## Still in pain?

At The Reset Room, we focus on helping your body heal, not just manage symptoms.



Plantar fasciitis can make even simple movement uncomfortable—especially those first steps in the morning. Using advanced SoftWave TRT technology, we stimulate your body's natural healing response—supporting circulation, reducing inflammation, and restoring function. Heel pain doesn't have to become a long-term issue. Before considering more invasive options. Ask yourself: can your body heal with the right support? **Complimentary** consultations are available to determine if SoftWave therapy is right for you.

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# For the Men and More



BY KAY LEAMAN, HEALTH ARCHITECT, CERTIFIED NUTRITION ADVISOR, HEALTHYDAY HEALTHYLIFE

This article covers the basics regarding function, statistics and contributors related to prostate cancer, the second-leading cause of cancer death in men after lung cancer and the leading cause in non-smokers. Only 10% of men have a close relative diagnosed with prostate cancer, which points to the main causes of cancer being high amounts of oxidative stress, obesity, inflammation and unhealthy lifestyle habits. This information is also beneficial for cancer prevention in general.

The prostate's main function is associated with procreation. It also helps keep urine inside the bladder. The most common condition men experience as they age is benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH), or an enlarged prostate. Signs of BPH include

a slower or weaker urine stream, urinating more often or waking at night to urinate, feeling like the bladder isn't empty, or experiencing an intermittent stream. BPH and prostatitis (inflammation caused by an infection) are not thought to increase the risk of prostate cancer, but they can increase PSA test levels by a small amount.

Men 45 and older should consider getting a yearly PSA (prostate-specific antigen) test. In addition to this test, it is recommended that men also evaluate their health habits. This doesn't mean you have to give up what you love, but it does mean your choices affect your health and the quality of life you will have as you age.

There are 10 stages of cancer development. DNA damage, inflammation, cellular disruption and angiogenesis are a few of these stages. I have an extensive article on the subject of cancer (prostate as well as other types) written by a doctor who has researched and treated those with cancer. It includes his personal story of treating his dad, who was diagnosed with stage 4 prostate cancer that had metastasized. His protocol gave his dad another 10 years of a life well lived versus the eight



months his doctor predicted. You can request this article by email (please put CANCER in the subject line).

### Healthy lifestyle choices include:

- A healthy, balanced diet (Mediterranean diet)
- Staying hydrated
- Regular exercise, including

- pelvic floor exercises
- Managing stress
- Yearly exams and PSA testing
- Limiting alcohol and not smoking
- Being aware of your body and noting any changes
- Taking high-quality, broad-spectrum, bioavailable nutritional supplements

Knowing what to take for better health is very important. For instance, take vitamin E as an example. If you are taking the wrong form, it can actually increase the risk of cancer, diabetes and heart disease. Many products have well-crafted ads and attractive pricing but fall short when it comes to the sci-

ence of how they affect the body. I found a trusted website about prostate health that warned against vitamin E. This is due to a lack of understanding regarding the different forms of this nutrient. This can become a rabbit hole that frustrates many of us—who do we believe? It's about finding a source we can trust, and even that can be daunting.

Our quality of life is in our hands. This doesn't mean we won't ever experience a diagnosis or other setbacks. However, if we treat our bodies well, they will be equipped to fight and repair the way God intended.

*Here's to health!  
succeed.hdhl@gmail.com*

## 5 KEYS

*continued from page 4*

lated nervous system is one of the most underestimated keys to long-term vitality.

### 5. Invest in Preventative, Personalized Care

Longevity is proactive, not reactive. Rather than waiting for lab values to reach "abnormal," integrative medicine focuses on optimal ranges and early intervention. Advanced lab testing, nutrient analysis, gut health assessments, and comprehensive evaluations allow us to personalize care based on your unique biochemistry.

No two patients age the same way and they shouldn't be treated the same way. Preventative care might include optimizing vitamin D levels, improving gut microbiome diversity, supporting detoxification pathways, addressing subtle thyroid dysfunction, or implementing strength and mobility strategies before

decline begins.

Small, consistent interventions compound over time, much like investing in your retirement account. The earlier you begin, the greater the return.

### Longevity is a Lifestyle

True longevity isn't found in a single supplement, procedure, or bio hack. It's built through daily choices that support inflammation control, metabolic resilience, hormonal balance, nervous system regulation, and personalized prevention.

### Aging is inevitable. Decline is not.

When we work with the body, honoring its signals, supporting its systems, and addressing root causes, we create the conditions not just to live longer, but to live stronger. Because wellness, like life itself, is not a sprint. It's a marathon and it's worth pacing yourself well.

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 Wellness

# The Importance of Strength

By KASSIA GARFIELD,  
PHYSICAL THERAPIST & OWNER,  
MAXSTRENGTH FITNESS FWB

Starting in your 40's, everyone experiences a natural process called sarcopenia, which is the degenerative loss of skeletal muscle mass, at the rate of about 3 to 5% every decade. That is why strength training has a profound effect on a person's physical and mental abilities. When we lose our muscle mass, it affects all of our other sub systems. It can affect balance, joint health, posture, weight management, endurance, mental health, functional independence and overall longevity. Strength training has a pivotal role in maintaining muscle mass and improving overall health. Without actively counteracting sarcopenia, the loss of muscle mass will continue to accelerate, leading to decreased strength, reduced mobility and a greater risk of injury and loss of independence.

## Why Strength Training is Significant?

Strength training has the benefits of many other forms of training. For example, it can bring some significant improvements to a person's cardiovascular health, because by making muscles work harder, the heart



and lungs must work harder. Strength training also increases flexibility as the exercises put muscles through a full range of motion, stretching them, and increasing pliability at end ranges. Strength training improves a person's overall health profile, making positive changes to cholesterol, blood pressure, blood, sugar, and bone density while also sustaining fat loss.

Osteoporosis can be battled by just increasing strength training. Osteoporosis is the loss of bone density. Muscles attach to bones, so if muscles are consistently being stressed, they are pulling on bones, which starts the natural process of laying down more bone, to counteract the stress of muscles pulling on the bones, and this then increases bone density.

The Cleveland Clinic has shown that there is a significant

reversing of osteoporosis just by adding in strength training. Many older adults enjoying walking as a form of exercise. But, this is not the same as strength training. Anything that can physically fatigue the muscle will drive muscle mass changes. But, we have to 'overload' the muscles. This means that we have to stress the muscle to create physiological changes. Always doing 5 lb. bicep curls and never increasing the weight will not create change. That can include bodyweight exercises, machines, free weights, etc. There are a lot of ways to go about it. The simplest introduction is through bodyweight exercises, like push-ups, pull-ups, squats, and planks—anything that can be done without equipment including strength exercises. Those exercises can be dynamic, which is movement such as a push-

up movement, or a more static movement which should be more of a plank. This depends on the body's abilities. Even people with physical limitations can start strength training while using bodyweight exercises.

## How Can Improving Strength, Improve Mental Health and Combat Stress?

Improving physical strength has a substantial positive impact on a person who is often under significant mental stress, such as a CEO, by enhancing mood and reducing stress. Regular strength training releases endorphins, the body's natural feel good hormone, which can lead to an overall improvement in mood, decrease feelings of anxiety, and can boost confidence and self-esteem. As physical strength improves, so does a person's quality of sleep, which has significant benefits of mental health. Additionally, the mental time-out of doing exercise and physically taxing the body reduces physical symptoms of stress, such as muscle tension and headaches. Also, for aging adults who are beginning to notice changes in their abilities—and feel frustrated by tasks that once came easily but are now more challeng-

ing—strength training can help restore a sense of independence. By improving daily physical function, it can enhance overall confidence and lead to greater satisfaction in retirement.

## When "I Don't Have Time" Is the Obstacle: How to Make Time and Get Started Safely

Many people feel intimidated by the traditional gym setting, especially if they're unfamiliar with the equipment or exercises. That's where working with a professional can help. A trainer provides accountability and proven systems that take the guesswork out of exercise.

Left on their own, many people abandon a program when it becomes challenging. But that's often when they need to keep going—pushing past fatigue to see results. A trainer ensures exercises are performed correctly and safely, while guiding clients to progress beyond where they've been.

Working with a trainer also saves time. With experience and knowledge of the science, a trainer can design an efficient, personalized program and walk clients through it step by step.

*Continued on page 33*

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- Do you wish your teeth were whiter?
- Do you think you show too much or too little of your teeth when you smile?
- Would you like to change the way your teeth or gums are shaped?
- Do you have gaps or spaces in between your teeth?

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BY DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

You turn over for the third time, looking over at the clock. 2:13 a.m. Your heartbeat matches second hand as a thin layer of sweat cools on your skin. You turn to the window, pulling the covers back, then lie awake for an hour replaying the day—emails, errands, the list that never ends and the sleep won't come. Nights like this are the new norm – a few hours of rest followed by morning fog, and the slow erosion of patience and energy. It feels like stress, but lately it's been more—hot flashes, night sweats, and a restlessness that started when the seasons and hormones shifted.

Sound familiar? Bioidentical hormone pellets are the straight-

forward and lasting solution you need. At The Hormone Restoration Center we use bioidentical hormone pellets to optimize hormone levels—so nights stop sabotaging your days.

For thousands of patients, when estrogen and testosterone are where they should be, sleep is just better. These hormones help your body make melatonin - the hormone that tells your brain it's time for bed. They support GABA - the calming brain chemical that relaxes you at night.

They also keep serotonin steady, improving mood and sleep quality. They help lower cortisol so you're not wide awake at 3 a.m. Finally, they stabilize body temperature so night sweats don't keep kicking the covers off. When hormones are low, people often describe their sleep as "fragile"—light, restless, and easy to interrupt, with lots of tossing, turning, and clock-watching.

# Stop Counting Sheep



### How hormone therapy helps:

Hormone therapy in the form of pellets helps, because it delivers hormones in a slow, steady way. No daily creams. No spikes and crashes. Just consistent support that eliminates hot flashes and night sweats, helps you stay asleep and wake up rested and excited to start your day. Progesterone has a naturally calming effect that helps quiet a racing mind at bedtime. As hormones rebalance, everything else just works. Melatonin and serotonin can do their jobs again, and cortisol settles down. The result? Better nights—and better days. When you're sleeping well, your mood, focus, and energy improve, which makes it easier to wind down the next night.

### What people usually notice:

Most patients feel the benefits within the first few weeks and reliable improvement by week six as hormone levels stabilize. Hormone pellet therapy eliminates hot flashes, night sweats, and hormonal swings. If sleep still isn't right after treatment, then other issues like sleep apnea, restless legs, iron deficiency and other concerns often reveal themselves.

### What a hormone consultation and follow up looks like:

Patients can expect a thorough baseline evaluation before starting therapy, including blood testing of sex hormones and key metabolic markers along with a comprehensive symptom re-

view. The insertion procedure itself is brief, performed in the office and involves minimal downtime.

We don't set it and forget it—follow-up is integral to safe, effective care. After insertion we check labs to make sure your levels are optimal. Dosing is adjusted based on lab results and symptom relief. Our team stays in touch between visits for any questions you may have, or needed tweaks in treatment. Routine reviews ensure your plan evolves with your needs so you get steady relief without surprises.

### A simple, practical plan:

We combine hormone therapy with lifestyle guidance, including supplements, so changes stick. So, if you're tired of counting sheep, call The Hormone Restoration Center. We listen, run the right tests, and build a personalized plan aimed at getting you sleeping through the night again – and so much more! Call (850) 837-1271 to schedule a consultation.





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Dr. Chern, MD,  
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Presley Pulse, APRN






Wellness

# Leaning Into Loss and Grief



BY STEPHENIE CRAIG

When did you last lose something or someone important to you? When did you last face an expected or unexpected ending? Loss is incredibly uncomfortable and also inevitable.

Throughout life, you will face many kinds of loss. Sometimes loss is obvious like the death of a pet, a family member, or a friend. Sometimes loss is related to major life transitions such as a loss of a job, moving, or divorce. Other times, loss is a break up or the end of a friendship. And confusingly, sometimes loss is mixed up with celebration like a graduation or wedding. Behind every new and different change in your life is the loss of the way things used to be.

Because loss has so many different faces, it is hard to understand your feelings as you navigate it. Grief is how your brain and body make sense of loss and figure out how to move forward in spite of the loss life brings. Grief gets a bad wrap

because no one wants to feel uncomfortable feelings. Most people attempt to avoid grief by any means possible because they fear the discomfort will last indefinitely. You might try avoiding grief by pretending it doesn't exist, by pushing it down, by numbing with things like alcohol, drugs, shopping, scrolling, or staying busy.

The uncomfortable truth about life is that loss and grief will be part of your journey. There is no preventing it. So instead of avoiding, what if you learn to embrace loss and grief as part of being human and an experience you can develop tools to walk through with health and wisdom?

## 10 Ways to Embrace Loss and Grief with Health and Wisdom

1. Let go of avoiding/numbing. Face the reality that uncomfortable experiences and feelings are part of your humanity. Avoiding discomfort hijacks your growth, learning, and emotional maturing. Loss is a normal, hard part of life. Notice and list activities you engage in to avoid uncomfortable feelings from loss.

2. Notice grief feelings in your body. Grief and loss bring feelings of overwhelm, exhaus-

tion, sadness, despair, anger, confusion, and depression. Notice how these show up in your body. "I am feeling tearful and extra tired."

3. Connect your grief feelings to a specific loss and validate your experience. "I am feeling sad, tired, and overwhelmed. I just moved to a new city and I am starting everything over from scratch. It's normal to feel overwhelmed in this situation."

4. Normalize grief. "Everyone goes through loss and has hard grief feelings. I am normal. It is normal for me to be feeling like this right now."

5. Remind yourself the feelings won't last forever. "My grief feelings are really intense right now and I will find a way through. It won't always feel like this even though it's hard to imagine how I will feel better at this time."

6. Create space for grief. Give yourself time each day to process. Journal about your loss, talk to a friend, cry, punch a punching bag, scream into your pillow. Give grief a way out of your body rather than pushing it down. Try setting a timer for 30 minutes and sit in your hard emotions. Allow yourself to grieve spontaneously when possible.

7. Accept grief as unpredict-



able and largely outside your control. It's okay to grieve without judgement. Remember, everyone will experience grief.

8. Continue living normally as you are able. Though it will feel strange to do normal things during times of loss and grief, it is healthy to do so. Moving forward in your life day to day is not a sign of indifference about your loss, rather, it's part of continuing to live with loss.

9. Lean into the growth grief and loss promote. No one wants to experience loss in order to grow. However, growth is often a byproduct of loss and grieving. Lean into your spiritual life knowing that your feelings are not unmanageable to God. Deep learning about yourself, God, and life often occurs in difficult times.

10. Release victimhood. Remember loss happens to us all. Your current loss is not directed at you, rather, it is part of the human journey you are walking through. Despite the difficulty, you can find a way through and will find meaning in life again.

As grief emerges in your personal story, remember that our shared human experience is tied together by grief. As you navigate your own loss and grief, watch for the spaces where you can connect with others in their loss and grief. You aren't alone in grief even when it feels like you are. Connect with us for support along your journey for counseling and coaching at [Journeybravely.com](http://Journeybravely.com).



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# MaxStrength Fitness Coming to Fort Walton Beach!

More than two years ago, MaxStrength Fitness opened its doors in Niceville with a mission to change the way the community thinks about health and aging. Led by a licensed physical therapist, Kassia Garfield, this locally owned studio has become a trusted destination for people looking to stay strong, reduce their reliance on medications, and live life with more independence and vitality.

From day one, MaxStrength Fitness has focused on a simple but powerful approach: 20-minute, twice-weekly strength training sessions, customized to each client's needs. It's a method backed by science and designed to deliver maximum results in minimal time—without the noise, crowd, or intimidation factor of a traditional gym.

"We're not just about fitness," says Kassia Garfield, owner of MaxStrength Fitness and a practicing physical therapist. "We're about helping people take control of their health so they can keep doing the things they love—whether that's traveling, playing with grandkids, or simply staying active and independent or pain free."

Over the past two years, the studio has helped hundreds of local residents—many of whom had never stepped foot in a gym before—build strength, regain

confidence, and improve their quality of life. With a focus on safe, low-impact movements and personalized attention, MaxStrength has become especially popular with older adults, people recovering from injury, and those managing chronic conditions. The efficiency of the workouts also makes this a great place for busy professionals. It is not just checking a box, its effective and efficient. "I always tell people, if you can't give me 20 minutes, twice a week, I don't know how to help you," says Kassie. "I feel the aging adult is often under-served in the fitness community, and we create a semi private, one on one, safe environment."

Clients often report reduced joint pain, improved mobility, and increased energy. In many cases, a reduction in the need for medications related to blood pressure, diabetes, or chronic pain. Others speak about gaining the strength to do everyday tasks—like lifting a suitcase, getting off the floor, or walking without assistance—that they thought were behind them. There is more research backing heavy resistance training for women going through menopause, reversing osteoporosis, fighting the natural aging process of sarcopenia (the loss of muscle mass), and decreasing



Kassia Garfield, physical therapist & owner, MaxStrength Fitness FWB

the progression of osteoarthritis. This is all without the use of medications (and the side effects that go with prescriptions). There are many amazing side effects of strength training like improved metabolism, improved balance, and decreased pain. All in just twenty minutes, twice a week, all without breaking a sweat. "Our clients don't come in chasing six-pack abs," says Kassie "They come in to feel better, move better, and live

better—and they're doing exactly that."

One of the key differences at MaxStrength Fitness is the level of expertise and care. MaxStrength has been open over 20 years, clients benefit from a deep understanding of the body and how to safely build strength, especially after injury or surgery. Every session is appointment-based and led by a personal trainer, providing accountability and consistency that helps people stick with the program long-term.

MaxStrength Fitness of Fort Walton is offering complimentary introductory sessions for new clients and hosts a series of free community seminars on topics like aging well, osteoporosis, chronic pain and maintaining strength through all stages of life. Kassie is also a teacher at NWFSC and believes that com-

munity education is valuable to help decrease health issues in aging populations. Even if people choose to strength train elsewhere, Kassie encourages fitness somewhere. "This isn't just about exercise—it's about changing lives," says Garfield. "We're proud to be part of the Fort Walton Beach community and we look forward to helping even more people reclaim their health and independence in the years to come." We do a free consult and demo work out for anyone interested free of charge (and be a part of our founding member list, try us out in the first week for free extra sessions!)

*For more information or to schedule your free introductory session, visit [maxstrengthfitness.com/fortwalton](http://maxstrengthfitness.com/fortwalton) or call 1 850-467-9729. You can also follow their journey on social media at [@msffortwalton](https://www.instagram.com/msffortwalton).*

## STRENGTH

*continued from page 30*

There's no need to worry about logistics—just show up and do the work.

Often, the hardest part is simply walking through the gym door. Once there, a trainer provides structure, support and an effective workout in a fraction of the time most people would spend on their own.

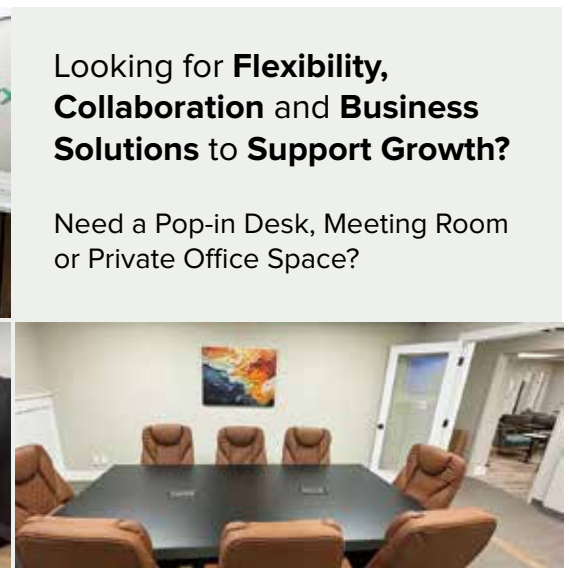
*Kassia is a physical therapist, veteran, educator and life transformer at*

*MaxStrength Fitness of Fort Walton, a fitness studio designed for busy professionals and active aging adults.*

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 Business

# Things You Learn After Talking to 100 Business Owners



BY TIPP SPRADLIN

One of the best parts of my work is getting to sit down with local business owners and hear their stories. Every business is different, every path to ownership is different, and every owner has a slightly different definition of “retirement.”

After enough conversations, though, you start to notice patterns. Here are a few things you only really learn after talking to a lot of people who run businesses.

## 1. Every owner has a “junk drawer” in their financials.

It’s never actually called a junk drawer, of course. It might show up as “miscellaneous,” “supplies,” or the always mysterious “other expenses.” But every business has a handful of charges that make the owner pause, squint at the report, and say something like, “You know... I’m not entirely sure what that one was.”

Things happen. Receipts get fuzzy. Decisions get made quickly. It’s part of running a business.

**Pro tip:** Start itemizing personal expenses that run through the business. Clean financials can make a big difference when it comes time for a valuation.

## 2. Nobody ever feels completely ready to sell.

I’ve rarely met an owner who wakes up one morning and confidently declares, “Today feels like the perfect day to sell my business.”

Most conversations actually start with something closer to:

“I don’t have to sell, but...”

That’s often the best time to talk. When an owner says “I don’t have to sell, but...” what they’re really saying is they want data and guidance to help them make a smart decision about the future.

**Pro tip:** Plan 3–5 years before your retirement goal. A good financial advisor and an experienced business broker make a powerful team when it comes to building a smooth exit strategy.

## 3. The Vacation Metric.

You might assume the most successful owners are the ones working 80 hours a week and never taking a vacation. Those owners are certainly dedicated but often exhausted.

In reality, the strongest businesses are usually the ones where the owner has built systems, trained managers, and

can step away for a week without the place falling apart.

**Pro tip:** Don’t wait until burnout to ask for help. There are many professional services designed to help businesses grow and run more efficiently.

## 4. Every business has a story behind how it started.

Some begin with careful planning. Others start with a moment of opportunity or desperation.

Many businesses along the Emerald Coast started with someone simply deciding to take a chance. A contractor who went out on their own. A couple who opened a shop after moving here for a different lifestyle. A hobby that grew into something bigger than expected.

And my personal favorite: someone who thought, “I could do this better.”

**Pro tip:** Share your origin story on your website and social

media. People love knowing the story behind the business.

## 5. Owners rarely give themselves enough credit.

Running a business requires resilience, creativity, and the ability to solve problems every single day. When owners tell their story, they often downplay it. They’ll say things like, “We just kept at it,” or “It’s nothing special.”

But building something that lasts, especially in a town that changes as quickly as Panama City Beach, takes determination.

Behind every storefront, service truck, and restaurant sign in Panama City Beach is someone who took a risk and built something meaningful. Spend enough time talking with business owners and you quickly realize this town runs on their grit.

# Bit-Wizards Culture of Giving Back Driving Community Impact Across Fort Walton Beach

For Fort Walton Beach-based Bit-Wizards, community service isn’t a once-a-year initiative. It’s a continuous, deeply embedded part of the company’s culture.

As National Volunteer Awareness Week approaches, their commitment to giving back serves as an inspiring example for the Emerald Coast.

Through its Be The Magic Foundation and the individual efforts of its employees, Bit-Wizards has built an environment where volunteerism is not only

encouraged but lived out daily across the community.

“Volunteering and serving my community have always been a meaningful part of my life,” said Sarah Reuille, Morale Coordinator at Bit-Wizards. “When I transitioned to full-time work, I was concerned about whether I’d still have the time to give back—but I’ve been able to stay deeply involved, and that’s something I’m really proud of.”

Reuille’s work has helped

organize large-scale initiatives, including school supply drives reaching over 100 families, coordinate outreach with local nonprofits, and lead programs designed to unify families.

Like Reuille, many Wizards actively pursue volunteer opportunities on their own time, supporting causes that are personally meaningful while collectively strengthening the region.

For Client Success Manager LXS Fregger, that commitment is evident in her service

on boards and volunteer work with organizations such as Fresh Start for Children and Families, Repeat Street Thrift Store, and the Emerald Coast Wildlife Refuge.

Similarly, Solution Consultant Vandy Vela contributes through leadership roles with organizations including the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce, Bring Hope Now, and the Destin Fishermen’s Foundation.

For one Wizard, after learning about Sleep in Heavenly Peace—a nonprofit dedicated to building beds for children in need—he felt compelled to get involved.

“When I was told about the mission, it was eye-opening to hear how many children don’t have a bed of their own,” he said. “It’s something many of us take for granted. There was no question in my mind that I wanted to be a part of what they were doing to help...building beds for families in need is a simple way to make such a meaningful difference.”

Instead of expecting community members to find opportuni-



ties on their own, Bit-Wizards continues to focus on proactive engagement. Just as they run their business, they pride themselves on meeting people where they are and offering support in many ways.

“Bit-Wizards has created an environment where giving back is encouraged and supported,” Reuille added. “It makes it easier to stay involved and reminds you that even small efforts can have a lasting impact.”

Ultimately, this is a story about what happens when people commit to showing up for one another. It’s those actions, taken together, that can strengthen an entire community.

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# 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 pleaser? 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 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.

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 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 proudly 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.



## 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](mailto:nhatten@myokaloosa.com) with your generous contributions



# A Pastor's Ponderings: The Resurrection - The Foundation of Hope for Every Generation

BY PASTOR DOUG "DOC" STAUFFER

The empty tomb is more than a moment in history – it is the living foundation of hope for every generation.

Every spring, the world seems to come alive again. Trees grow new leaves, flowers start to bloom, and the sunshine warms us, reminding us that winter does not last forever. Creation itself seems to whisper a gentle reminder that life follows death and that hope follows despair. For Christians, this season has a much deeper significance. It points us to the most important event in human history—the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The resurrection is more than just a religious tradition

or seasonal celebration; it is the heart of the Christian faith. Without it, Christianity would be indistinguishable from any religion. The Apostle Paul made this point clear when he wrote:

*“And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain” (1 Corinthians 15:14).*

Everything about the Christian message (the gospel) hinges on that empty tomb in Israel. Yet, the resurrection cannot be separated from the cross that came before it. On the cross, Jesus Christ willingly shed His precious blood for our sins, bearing the judgment every sinner deserves. The Scripture declares, *“For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Corinthians 5:21).*

On that cross, the sinless Son of God became our substitute, taking our sins upon Himself and offering His righteousness in place of our sins to all who

believe. The resurrection then stands as God’s declaration that the sacrifice was accepted, that the debt of sin was paid, and that eternal life is now available through the risen Savior, Jesus Christ.

When Christ was crucified, His followers were devastated. Their hopes seemed shattered, and their future uncertain. But early on that Sunday morning, something happened that forever changed history. The stone was rolled away—not to let Jesus out, but so we could see that the grave was empty—and the risen Savior appeared to His disciples as living proof of the victory. Sin and death had been defeated once and for all!

The resurrection was more than a moment of encouragement for the first believers—it became the enduring hope for every generation.

Because Christ lives, death does not have the final word for believers. Because Christ lives, forgiveness is real, and salvation is freely offered. Because Christ lives, those who trust in Him have a secure future for eternity. The Apostle Peter described it this way:

*“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3).*

Notice the phrase—a lively hope. The resurrection gives



believers a living and lasting hope that no circumstance in this world can destroy. Every generation desperately needs that hope. Every individual needs that hope.

We live in a time of uncertainty as world events change rapidly. Nations struggle, cultures shift, and many people feel as though the ground beneath them is shaking. Yet the message of the empty tomb reminds us that the most important foundation has never moved. Jesus Christ is alive.

The resurrection assures us that God still rules over history and that His promises remain sure. It reminds us that light ultimately triumphs over darkness, truth over deception, and life over death.

For believers, the resurrection is not simply something

we remember once a year—it is something we live every day. It shapes how we face difficulty, how we treat others, and how we look toward the future.

And perhaps most importantly, it reminds us that the gospel message must be passed from one generation to the next. The hope found in Christ was never meant to stop in any generation. It is a truth that must be shared with our children, our neighbors, and the generations yet to come.

Two thousand years ago, the angel at the empty tomb spoke words that still echo through history:

*“He is not here: for he is risen, as he said” (Matthew 28:6).*

Because the tomb is empty, hope is alive—and it will remain the foundation of hope for every generation until Christ returns.

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# ECMAF to Host World-Renowned American Brass Quintet for Free Concerts and Student Master Class

By DEBBIE CARLONI

The Emerald Coast Music Alliance Foundation (ECMAF) proudly announces that the internationally acclaimed American Brass Quintet (ABQ) will visit the Emerald Coast April 15–18, 2026. During their stay, the ensemble will present free public performances and lead a master class for area high school students at no cost.

The American Brass Quintet is widely recognized as one of the premier chamber music ensembles of our time, celebrated for its peerless leadership in the brass world. Described as “the most distinguished” of brass quintets by American Record Guide, ABQ has built its stellar reputation through celebrated performances, genre-defining commissioned works, and a steadfast commitment to educating generations of musicians.

A recipient of Chamber Music America’s highest honor, the Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award for significant



and lasting contributions to the field, the group boasts a rich history that includes performances across five continents, more than 60 recordings, and the premieres of over 150 contemporary brass works. Since its founding in 1960, commissions from esteemed composers have significantly shaped contemporary chamber music and the modern brass quintet repertoire. The New York Times

has hailed ABQ as the “premier brass ensemble.”

ABQ will perform a free public concert at Crosspoint Church in Niceville on April 16 at 6 p.m. Seating is limited and may be reserved through Eventbrite.

The student master class will be held April 18 from 9 a.m. to 3

p.m. at Crestview High School and is open to high school students interested in band and brass instruments. Students can obtain additional information through their school’s band leadership. A performance for students, teachers, parents, and the public will follow the master class.

For more information, visit [emeraldcoastmusic.org](http://emeraldcoastmusic.org) or email [bob@emeraldcoastmusic.org](mailto:bob@emeraldcoastmusic.org).

## Young Artists Invited to Shine in Okaloosa Arts Alliance Poster Contest

The Okaloosa Arts Alliance is inviting K–12 students across Okaloosa County to showcase their creativity in the 17th Annual Okaloosa County School Poster Contest.

Open to both first-time participants and experienced young artists, the annual contest celebrates the impact of the arts in everyday life. This year’s theme, “What Does Art Mean to You?”, encourages students to reflect on how creativity shapes their world — from music and visual art to performance and personal expression.

Entries may be submitted through local schools or by individual students. All artwork must be received by May 2 at 3 p.m.

Submissions can be dropped off at Grow Your Gift Conservatory of Music, 105B Lewis St., Monday through Thursday from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., or delivered or mailed to the Okaloosa Arts Alliance, 100 Beal Parkway SW, Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

The community is invited to celebrate the students’ work during a free public reception and showcase May 3 from 1 to 4 p.m. at Grow Your Gift Conservatory of Music. The event will feature student artwork, live music, refreshments, an interactive instrument “petting zoo,” and the announcement of contest winners and Viewer’s Choice awards.

For more information, visit [okaloosaarts.org](http://okaloosaarts.org).



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Arts & Music

# Sinfonia Gulf Coast Welcomes Nearly 2,500 Students

## Interactive Performances of Link Up: The Orchestra Sings

By ZANDRA WOLFGRAM

In March, the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center transformed into a vibrant concert hall as Sinfonia Gulf Coast presented two performances of its annual Link Up concert program, The Orchestra Sings, in partnership with Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute.

As the only fully professional orchestra in the region, Sinfonia Gulf Coast continues its commitment to expanding music education across the community. The 2026 Link Up performances are also part of Sinfonia Gulf Coast's 20th anniversary celebration, marking two decades of innovative programming and impactful arts education initiatives throughout Northwest Florida.

This interactive musical experience welcomed nearly 2,500 third- through fifth-grade students from Okaloosa and Walton counties, who performed on recorders and sang alongside

the professional musicians of Sinfonia Gulf Coast.

Through months of classroom preparation, students learn to read music, play the recorder and explore the fundamental elements of melody, harmony, rhythm and expression before joining the orchestra for this culminating performance.

The Link Up: The Orchestra Sings program explores how melodies are created and how different musical lines work together to form harmony and texture. Students discover how composers use melody and lyrics to tell stories, how voices and instruments blend within an orchestra and how musical ideas evolve through collaboration. During the performance, students actively participate by singing, moving to the music and performing recorder parts alongside the orchestra, transforming the concert into a powerful shared musical experience.

Reflecting on the event, Sinfonia Gulf Coast Music & Ar-



PHOTO CREDIT JIM CLARK

tistic Director Demetrius Fuller shared, "Link Up is my favorite concert of the year. While it may be the loudest concert we present all year, it's also one of the most joyful. Often, it's the only music education many of

these children receive. So, it's incredibly important that we continue to support special programs like this."

The annual Link Up concert is also a live example of Sinfonia Gulf Coast realizing its mission to champion music education in the local community. By bringing students, educators and professional musicians together in a shared performance experience, the program demonstrates how music education can inspire creativity, confidence and collaboration among young learners.

Proceeds from Sinfonia Gulf Coast events and donor support benefit Sinfonia Gulf Coast's music education and community engagement initiatives

throughout Northwest Florida, including musicians and guest artists in schools, free orchestra concerts, student transportation, the Sinfonia Youth Orchestra, Link Up concerts in partnership with Carnegie Hall, Paint the Music (with Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation), Arts in Medicine with Sacred Heart Hospital and more.

Sinfonia's Link Up program is made possible through generous support from the St. Joe Community Foundation, the Dugas Family Foundation and the Emeril Lagasse Family Foundation. Additional funding from Sinfonia Gulf Coast's Crescendo! annual fundraiser, Treble Makers (an honorary membership committee of Crescendo!) and community donors has allowed Link Up to grow into Sinfonia's largest education initiative.

For more information, visit [SinfoniaGulfCoast.org](http://SinfoniaGulfCoast.org), call (850) 460-8800 or e-mail [info@sinfoniagulfcoast.org](mailto:info@sinfoniagulfcoast.org).



# JAWS

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# 20

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# A Gift to the Heritage Museum of NW Florida – Value Beyond Cryptocurrency!

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

Before there were computers, before payments were made over the internet, before there was a single national currency that could be used in every state and around the world, there was colonial currency.

That currency will soon be available for viewing in 2026 in the Celebrate America 250! American Revolution exhibit at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida.

When word began to surface about the upcoming exhibit in Valparaiso, Dr. Tom McKnight and his wife, Sue, looked at one another and knew this would be a gift that could not be measured. They had intended to donate the collection to the muse-

um in their will, but realized they wanted to share this treasure in time for the 250th anniversary of our nation. They removed the collection from their home and presented it to the museum so that countless visitors can appreciate the beginnings of paper money in America. Tom and Sue also know their children and grandchildren will be able to see it each time they visit.

The McKnights, who live in Bluewater Bay, have deep roots in the community. Dr. McKnight practiced family and preventive medicine locally, with a private practice and work at both Eglin and Hurlburt medical centers. He now serves as a physician at the Eglin VA hospital.

Married more than 51 years,



Tom recalled surprising Sue with the purchase of this historic collection representing currency from all 13 British colonies prior to independence. While visiting Mount Vernon's gift shop, he discovered the rare set. After a sleepless night weighing the decision, he returned the next day to make the purchase. Sue was

delighted when the collection arrived.

Speaking as a trustee for the museum, we are equally thrilled. During the interview, many fascinating details emerged. Benjamin Franklin received permission from England to issue currency to the colonies and printed notes for Pennsylvania. To deter counterfeiting, printers used unique leaf patterns that were nearly impossible to replicate.

Colonial currency was often used to pay debts, and once used, a hole was punched in the note so it could not circulate again. Following the Revolution, Alexander Hamilton is credited with establishing a unified national currency, helping stabi-

lize the economy and facilitate trade.

Within the collection, notes from Massachusetts and New Hampshire bear these punched holes. Each piece is signed by a prominent colonist, including signers of the Declaration of Independence, and at the center is an image depicting its signing.

And so, it has come full circle — from colonial currency to independence, from Mount Vernon to Northwest Florida, and now into the hands of a grateful community.

Thank you, Tom and Sue. Words are not enough to express gratitude for this remarkable gift that will be shared for generations to come.

## SPRING

*continued from page 27*

ance; introduce safe home modifications for reduced fall risk.

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safe and effective. For a tour and additional information, please contact us at 850-897-5592; email [wecare@manoratwb.com](mailto:wecare@manoratwb.com).

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