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"You Only Get to Be Captain Once!" Meet Bowlegs 71 Kent Tinsley

BY CHRISTOPHER MANSON

On Saturday, June 13, the closely-guarded identity of the incoming Captain Billy—number 71—was revealed at the annual Billy Bowlegs Coronation Pageant held at the Mattie Kelly Arts Center in Niceville. The free public event announced Kent Tinsley as Captain Billy 71, along with his Queen, First Mate and Mistress, Honor Guard consisting of 10 couples, and the theme for Bowlegs 2027.

Keeping the new Captain Billy's identity under wraps involves a ton of planning months before the Coronation Pageant. Tinsley was made aware of the honor last November, after a group of previous Captains get together and narrowed the candidates down to three. The final decision was made by Rique Gwin, the outgoing Captain Billy. "I was honored to pick Kent, based on knowing him for many years to be a quality, good man," says Gwin. "I also respect his longtime ties to the



PHOTO COURTESY OF KREWE OF BOWLEGS
Incoming Captain Billy Kent Tinsley and Queen Tade Wolfe

community and rich heritage in the Krewe."

Tinsley, a lifelong Fort Walton Beach resident, is the son of an Air Force veteran—and past Captain Billy (number 36). "It's a unique perspective, having had my family involved for so many years," he

says. "My dad passed in April, but I was able to share the excitement about being Captain Billy 71." The Fort Walton Beach High School graduate and University of West Florida alum will be using his father's Captain Billy medallion and sword as a tribute.

Tinsley calls wife Mary his "right hand lady, the driving force behind me and my family." She and Tinsley married 20 years ago and joined the Krewe shortly after. Mary is very involved in the community, notably as president of Impact 100.

The 2027 Billy Bowlegs Festival is set for the weekend after Mother's Day, beginning on Thursday and wrapping up with the Monday evening parade put on by the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce. "It's a busy year, but you plan for it," Tinsley says. Fortunately, his "real" job has afforded him the flexibility to travel for the remainder of the year and in early 2027. The Krewe currently consists of 170 members, and Captain Billy 71 spends a good part of his week working on all things Bowlegs. "It's well worth the effort. You only get to be Captain once."

BOWLEGS 71
continued on page 2



Paul Singleton: A Crown Well Earned

BY DOUG "DOC" STAUFFER

Some people attend community events. Paul Singleton has become part of the community itself.

In June, the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce honored longtime Chamber Ambassador Paul Singleton in a way that was both fitting and unforgettable. The occasion marked two remarkable milestones: Paul's 93rd birthday and his 2,000th Chamber event, an extraordinary record of

PAUL SINGLETON
continued on page 2



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Community

BOWLEGS 71

continued from page 1

Come October, Tinsley and some of his mates will attend festivals in Panama City, Apalachicola, and beyond. When I ask him if he ever gets any rest, he says, “Whenever I can find time! What’s the old saying? ‘I’ll sleep when I’m dead.’”

Tinsley says his duties as

Captain Billy started six to seven months before he officially took over. “There’s a lot of planning, and now it’s time to execute. I’ve been looking forward to this for a long time.”

Captain Billy’s Queen is Tade Wolfe, a local speech pathologist. “She and her husband Scott have been in the Krewe for years. We’re great friends and work well together,” says

Tinsley. Local business people Jason and Nicole Floyd have been tapped as First Mate and Mistress. “They got into the Krewe five years ago, and our relationship has grown in that time. It was an easy pick.”

The Krewe is a private organization, and to join, hopefuls are required to be sponsored by a current member. There’s limited space in the Krewe, but

Tinsley encourages people to volunteer for the May festival.

The theme for Bowlegs 71 is “Whiskey In, Wisdom Out.” Tinsley admits that a minimum of thought went into that. “We all enjoy getting together and enjoying bourbon. We spread wisdom throughout the year, too.”

He adds: “It’s really about spreading the good news about

Fort Walton Beach to other communities.”

The Billy Bowlegs Pirate Festival originated in 1954. Over the years, the Krewe has swashbuckled its way into the hearts of locals and visitors with its devotion to service and civic-mindedness. And fun. Learn more at kreweofbowlegs.com.

PAUL SINGLETON

continued from page 1

faithfulness that began back in 1976.

That kind of commitment is almost hard to comprehend. For nearly five decades, Paul has shown up for ribbon cuttings, Ambassador meetings, business expos, grand openings, and countless gatherings where local businesses and community leaders come together. He has not merely attended events; he has encouraged people, supported businesses, built friendships, and brightened rooms with his presence.

The celebration at Home2 Suites by Hilton at Freedom Tech Center was filled with laughter, warmth, and the kind of personal touches that made everyone feel the affection behind it. Paul was dressed in a green robe, wearing a crown, and holding a sceptre, looking

every bit like the reigning king of Chamber ribbon cuttings. Adding to the fun was a large clock featuring Paul’s face, a playful substitute for a gold Rolex and a perfect reminder that, around the Chamber, it has been “Paul time” for a very long time.

And then there was Ted Corcoran, President and CEO of the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce, doing what only Ted can do. He made the celebration meaningful, memorable, and full of heart. Ted surrounded Paul with the ladies, added the right amount of humor, and made sure the day communicated something deeper than ceremony. It was gratitude. It was love. It was the community pausing long enough to say thank you to a man who has spent much of his life showing up for others.

There was also a birthday cake and banana pudding, because a 93rd birthday deserves

to be celebrated properly. But the real sweetness of the day was seeing Paul enjoy it all with such humility and joy. He has never seemed like a man looking for applause, yet he has certainly earned it.

A verse came to mind while thinking about Paul Singleton: Deuteronomy 34:7 And Moses was an hundred and twenty years old when he died: his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated.

While Paul is not quite 120, at 93 he remains spirited, joyful, sharp, and wonderfully present. His eye is not dim when it comes to seeing the good in people, and his natural force certainly does



93rd birthday and his 2,000th Chamber event. What an honor for the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce to have such a pillar in its midst. And what a blessing for all of us to know a man whose joyful spirit continues to shine so brightly.

Paul Singleton may have worn a crown that day for fun, but in many hearts, he has long been royalty.





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not seem abated when it comes to supporting the Greater Fort Walton Beach community. He is still showing up. Still smiling. Still encouraging. Still making somebody’s day brighter simply by being there.

Immediately following the celebration, Paul did what Paul does. He went on to the grand opening and ribbon cutting for Grow With Us Learning Academy at Freedom Tech Center, adding yet another Chamber appearance to his already incredible total. The new early learning center will serve children and families in the Fort Walton Beach area, making the day even more special as the community celebrated both a new beginning and a living legacy.

Paul Singleton represents the kind of quiet faithfulness that holds communities together. Businesses come and go. Buildings rise and change. Leaders serve their seasons, but people like Paul are the human landmarks. They remind us that encouragement matters, presence matters, and loyalty over a lifetime is a gift beyond measure. Thank you Paul!!!

What an honor it was to attend an event celebrating Paul’s



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FWB Chamber Spotlight



Meet Marnie Tate

By DENISE DAVID, STORYTELLER

Marnie Tate, author of the memoir *Defining Moments*, inductee into the Okaloosa County Commission on the Status of Women and the first female board chair of the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce, is still writing her story. As a wife, mother, grandmother and financial advisor, there are many facets to that story.

The qualities that helped define her leadership in 1986, when she was selected to lead the chamber, remain relevant today: determination, collaboration, hard work and a strong sense of purpose.

In February 2026, Tate joined leaders from the Center for Lifelong Learning on a tour of the Okaloosa County Emergency Management Center. Seeing a modern facility staffed by highly trained dispatchers and equipped with advanced technology brought her full circle. It served as a reminder of the effort, teamwork and perseverance required to make the county's 911 system a reality.



While her leadership legacy includes many accomplishments, her role in establishing the local 911 system reveals a service-oriented side that should not be overlooked. What began with a personal experience involving the need for emergency assistance for her child exposed a significant gap in the system. Rather than accept it, Tate committed herself to a years-long effort to create a better solution for the community. "Making It Happen!" became the rallying cry, and it truly took a village.

Jeanne Rief, a fellow female chair of the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce, recalled the effort. "We were creating flyers, giving speeches morning, noon and night," Rief said.



The tireless campaign was not without opposition. Some believed the project was too ambitious. Others questioned its affordability, practicality and necessity. Skeptics challenged the idea of a centralized, county-wide emergency response system that could be reached through a single phone number.

The challenges were significant. Legal hurdles had to be overcome. Funding had to be secured. The U.S. Postal Service became involved in identifying, assigning numbers to and labeling addresses throughout the county. More marathon than sprint, the project was simply too important to ignore, even though it would take years to complete.

Ultimately, seven Public Safe-

ty Answering Points (PSAPs) were established in Crestview, Fort Walton Beach, Niceville, Valparaiso, Eglin Air Force Base, Hurlburt Field and the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office. Together, they formed the foundation of the countywide system.

Legislation was passed authorizing a 50-cent per-number charge to help fund the program. Approximately \$300,000 was required to establish the system, which served roughly 60,000 connected lines. Funding also included a \$27,000 annual salary for a coordinator. The search for and hiring of that first coordinator could fill another chapter in Tate's remarkable story.

Genuine leadership is often

found in the work that happens long before the lights, applause and accolades.

In a fitting moment, the first 911 call in Okaloosa County was taken by Tate herself before a live audience of 500 people. Today, she is affectionately known as "Goldie" by her grandchildren, but she has never forgotten that milestone moment.

Tate recalls the prayers, determination, speeches and broad community support that helped transform a vision into reality. The smile and spark in her eyes when she reflects on the journey—and the difference it continues to make—tell the story better than words ever could.

Our community is fortunate to have leaders like Marnie Tate and others who have dared to envision a better future and then committed themselves to making it happen for generations to come.

Each month FWB Life shines a spotlight on a Fort Walton Beach Chamber member whose story helps tell the story of our community.

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The Top 5 Things Your Doctor Wishes They Could Tell You (Without Hurting Your Feelings)

By Dr. Karen DeVore

If you've ever sat across from a healthcare provider and wondered what they were really thinking, I can assure you it's not judgment. Most of us chose this profession because we gen-

uinely want to help people live healthier, happier lives.

That said, there are a few things many doctors wish we could say more directly. Not because we're frustrated, but because these truths have the pow-

er to change your health more than any prescription, supplement, or procedure ever could.

Here are five things your doctor would probably tell you if they knew it wouldn't hurt your feelings.

1. Your body is talking to you. Stop waiting until it's screaming.

Many people ignore symptoms for months or even years. Fatigue becomes "normal." Weight gain is blamed on age. Brain fog gets brushed aside. Digestive issues become part of daily life.

The problem is that most chronic health issues don't appear overnight. They often start as whispers before they become alarms.

When your energy changes, your sleep deteriorates, your mood shifts, or your body starts functioning differently, pay attention. These are not inconveniences to ignore. They are valuable pieces of information. The earlier you investigate a problem, the easier it often is to address.

2. You can't out-supplement a lifestyle that isn't working.

I say this as someone who



3. Stress is affecting your health more than you realize.

When patients come to me with fatigue, digestive issues, weight struggles, hormone imbalances, headaches, anxiety, or chronic pain, stress is often somewhere in the picture.

We've become so accustomed to being busy, overwhelmed, and constantly connected that many people no longer recognize what chronic stress feels like. They simply assume it's normal. Your body, however, keeps score.



believes supplements can be incredibly helpful when used appropriately. But no supplement can consistently overcome poor sleep, chronic stress, a sedentary lifestyle, excessive alcohol consumption, or a diet built primarily around convenience foods.

Many people are searching for the one thing that will fix everything. The reality is that health is usually built through hundreds of small decisions repeated over time. The basics are not exciting, but they work. Sleep. Movement. Nutrition. Stress management. Meaningful relationships. Consistency. Those habits may not come in a bottle, but they are often the most powerful medicine available.

Stress influences inflammation, blood sugar regulation, hormone production, immune function, sleep quality, and even how quickly you age. Managing stress is not selfish. It is a fundamental part of maintaining your health.

4. Aging is inevitable. Feeling terrible is not.

One of the most common statements I hear is, "I guess I'm just getting older."

While aging does bring changes, we often blame age for things that deserve a closer look. Low energy, poor sleep, decreased strength, brain fog, loss of motivation, weight gain, and declining vitality are not things

Continued on page 30

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Events at the Beach

Pilates with Dolphins at the Gulfarium

Start your morning with a one-of-a-kind fitness experience at Gulfarium's Dolphin Oasis. Led by certified instructor Desiree, this all-levels Pilates class allows participants to strengthen, stretch and recharge while Atlantic bottlenose dolphins swim nearby.

July 11, 7:30 a.m.

July 21, 7 a.m.

July 25, 7:30 a.m.

Aug. 8, 7:30 a.m.

Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park

Ages 12 and up

go.gulfarium.com/pilates

UNDERWATER: The Living Sea Experience

Experience an immersive after-hours yoga session inside Gulfarium's Living Sea Aquarium. Surrounded by marine life, guests will enjoy a slow, ocean-inspired flow followed by a spectacular view of The Boardwalk's Okaloosa Island fireworks display.

Aug. 5, 7:30-8:30 p.m.

Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park

Ages 12 and up

go.gulfarium.com/underwater

PAWS Annual Brunch Fundraiser: Stars, Stripes & Second Chances

Support the Panhandle Animal Welfare Society during an elevated brunch experience benefiting local shelter animals. Guests are encouraged

to dress in patriotic red, white and blue while enjoying a curated brunch, silent auction and more. Sponsorship opportunities are available.

Aug. 9, 11 a.m.-2 p.m.

The Alice, Destin

paws-shelter.org

For sponsorship information: mollys@paws-shelter.org

9th Annual Wine & Fries: Golden Hour for Good

Ronald McDonald House Charities of Northwest Florida's signature fundraiser returns for an evening of waterfront views, wine, local brews, McDonald's famous French fries, live entertainment and auctions. Proceeds help families stay close to children receiving medical treatment.

Aug. 28, 6-9 p.m.

The Alice, Destin

\$115

givebutter.com/c/wine-and-fries

14th Annual Fore Her Golf Outing

Join golfers and supporters for a day on the links benefiting local breast cancer patients throughout Northwest Florida. The tournament features refreshments, prizes, contests and Fore Her's signature "Dress



Like a Lady" hole. Early-bird registration is available through Sept. 1.

Sept. 25

The Links Golf Club at Sandestin

Check-in: 8 a.m. | Announcements: 8:45 a.m. | Tee-off: 9 a.m.

foreher.org

Harbor Nights at HarborWalk Village

Spend Thursday evenings on the Destin Harbor with live music, DJs, glow stilt walkers, lawn games, fire spinners and a fireworks show over the water.

Every Thursday, 6-9 p.m.

HarborWalk Village, Destin

Free admission (parking fees apply)

harborwalkvillage.com

Coastal Country Concert Series

Kick off the weekend with live country music on the HarborWalk Village main stage. Enjoy waterfront views, dancing, fire spinning and fireworks over the harbor.

Fridays, July 24 and 31, 6-9 p.m.

HarborWalk Village, Destin

Free admission (parking fees apply)

emeraldgrande.com/harborwalk-village/harborwalk-village-events

Silent Disco on the Harbor

Grab a pair of glowing wireless headphones and dance the Monday night away while switching between two competing live DJs. This family-friendly event is a unique summer favorite on the Destin Harbor.

Every Monday

HarborWalk Village, Destin

Free admission (parking fees apply)

harborwalkvillage.com

Bingo, Bubbly & a Chance to Win a Designer Handbag

If your idea of a perfect Saturday afternoon includes a little sparkle, a glass of prosecco and the chance to take home a designer handbag, mark your calendar for Pearls & Prosecco Handbag Bingo at The Alice in Destin.

Presented by The Alice and benefiting The Ground Up Project Inc., this elevated twist on traditional bingo combines fashion, fun and philanthropy into one stylish afternoon. Guests will enjoy light bites, drink tickets and 10 rounds of bingo, with designer handbags up for grabs. After all, who

says bingo is just for grandma?

The event takes place Saturday, Aug. 8 at 2 p.m. at The Alice, one of Destin's most beautiful waterfront gathering spaces.

General admission is \$100 and includes light bites, two drink tickets and one bingo card for each round. VIP guests receive all general admission benefits plus an extra drink ticket, raffle tickets, a Grand Finale bingo card, VIP recognition and table service.

Whether you're hoping to win your dream handbag or enjoy an afternoon out with

friends, you'll also be helping support a mission that extends far beyond childhood.

Because autism doesn't end at 18.

The need for support, opportunities and community doesn't end either.

So, gather your friends, don your pearls and enjoy an afternoon of laughter, bubbly, a little friendly competition, lots of memories—and perhaps even a fashionable victory! Pearls & Prosecco Handbag Bingo is shaping up to be one of the season's most stylish events.

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✓ Adult Classes: Register for Aug.-May

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HAPPENINGS AROUND FWB

2026 EVENTS

JULY

- 04
Opening Reception & Courtyard Cookout
5 pm | Arts and Design Society | FWB
- 10
Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's First Friday Coffee
7 am | First Baptist Church of FWB | FWB
- 11
Beach Clean Up
8 am | The Crab Trap on the Boardwalk | FWB
- 12
Painting with a Purpose Fundraiser: Emerald Coast Pet Rescue
2 pm | Painting with a Twist | FWB
- 18
Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
- Repticon
9 am | Fairgrounds | FWB
- 19
Repticon
10 am | Fairgrounds | FWB
- 21
Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's Lunch N Learn; "Data Meets Destiny: Aligning Your Team & Your Metrics"
11:30 am | FWB Chamber | FWB
- 24
Word Wave Writers
5 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB
- 25
Sip & Science: Lost in Space
6 pm | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB
- 31
Emo Night Karaoke
7 pm | Downtown Music Hall | FWB

AUGUST

- 01
Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
- 05
Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's Lunch N Learn
11:30 am | FWB Chamber | FWB
- 07
Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's First Friday Coffee
7 am | First Baptist Church of FWB | FWB
- 09
Paws Annual Brunch Fundraiser - Stars Stripes and Second Chances
11 am | The Alice | Destin
- 12
Bonsai Workshop at Props Brewery & Taproom
6 pm | Props Brewery | FWB
- 13
Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's Nothing But Networking
11:30 am | Knife's Edge Cafe at Air Force Enlisted Village | FWB
- 15
Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
- 18
Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's Lunch N Learn
11:30 am | FWB Chamber | FWB
- 20
Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's Business After Hours
5:30 pm | FWB Chamber | 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

MONTHLY 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
- Free Pirate Show
5 pm | Mon | The Boardwalk | FWB
- SINGO Music Bingo Nights
6 pm | Tues | The Island Resort | FWB
- The Big BLVD Bash - DJ Dance Party Series
6 pm | Tues | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach
- Okaloosa Island Fireworks
9 pm | Wed | The Boardwalk | FWB
- Downtown FWB Coffee Club (March - December)
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
- Alzheimer's Association Caregiver Support Group
1 pm | 2nd Thurs | Trinity UMC | FWB

ONGOING EVENT

Celebrate America's 250th Anniversary Through Art!
Exhibit Dates: June 23 - July 17, 2026 | Gallery Hours: Tues-Fri: 12 PM - 4 PM; Sat: 1 PM - 4 PM
Location: Arts and Design Society | FWB

 Community

SOF Missions Celebrates 10 Years of Impact at Diamond Gala

Shield of Faith (SOF) Missions will celebrate a decade of serving our nation's warriors at its 10th Annual Emerald Coast Gala—The Diamond Gala—on Aug. 29, 2026, at the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center.

Marking 10 years of unwavering commitment to active-duty service members, veterans and first responders, this milestone event promises to be the organization's most memorable gala yet.

SOF Missions is dedicated to combating the devastating epidemic of suicide among our warriors by providing comprehensive care that addresses psychological, physical, social and spiritual well-being. Through its Be Resilient Clinics and Warrior Retreats held locally at EXOS at Andrews Institute, the organization has provided more than \$10.7 million in support to more than 4,000 warriors nationwide. These programs deliver personalized, coordinated care at no cost to participants, ensuring



those in need receive the support necessary to heal and thrive.

The Diamond Gala will be an evening of inspiration, celebration and purpose. Guests will experience an unforgettable evening featuring dinner and dessert service,



a distinguished guest speaker, performances by First Dance



Ballroom Studio and the Bow Tied Music Quartet, dancing, silent auction experiences, and powerful stories highlighting the impact made possible through

community support over the past decade..

Proceeds from the gala directly support SOF Missions' warrior care programs, helping ensure that financial barriers never prevent a warrior from receiving life-changing assistance.

The 10th Annual Diamond Gala is more than a celebration of the past—it is an investment in the future.

A moment to honor how far we've come.

A moment to stand beside those we serve.

And a moment to invest boldly in the future of warrior care.

Whether you are a longtime supporter or new to the SOF Missions community, you are invited to join us for an evening of elegance, a decade of impact and a legacy in the making. Sponsorship opportunities are also available for individuals and businesses looking to make an even greater difference in the lives of our nation's heroes.

Tickets: \$150 per person

Includes dinner, dessert and one complimentary drink.

To purchase tickets or learn more about sponsorship opportunities, **visit www.sofmissions.org/gala.**



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TIME 6PM

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10TH ANNUAL

EMERALD COAST
Gala

SATURDAY NIGHT AUG 29TH, 2026
DESTIN-FORT WALTON BEACH CONVENTION CENTER

\$150 Per Guest
Formal attire (diamond-inspired flair)
(Business Sponsorships Available)
Evening will include dinner, entertainment, and auction.

Keynote Speaker
Major General (ret)
James S. "Hammer" Hartsell

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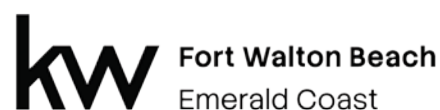


Toast to the Top Awards 2026

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Community Improvements in Okaloosa County

BY CAROLYN NEWCOMER KETCHEL

We are blessed to call Northwest Florida home. Even though we live and work in Okaloosa County, we often do not realize how quickly our county is growing. We now have more than 220,000 residents and will continue to grow with many planned infrastructure projects.

To keep pace with that growth and continue improving the many amenities throughout Okaloosa County, a number of projects are coming to fruition in various parts of the county through your Okaloosa County government.

The property on the south end of the Shalimar Bridge became available several years ago. Located across from Eglin Federal Credit Union, old-tim-

ers may remember it as Carmichael's Surf Side 7, "The Academy of Cultured Anatomy." Okaloosa County purchased the property using tourism development dollars and plans to create a fisherman's park featuring parking, restrooms, a bait shop and boat docks.

On the north end of the Shalimar Bridge sits what is colloquially known as the Dowd property, which became available after the passing of longtime County Attorney John Dowd. The county, in conjunction with the Town of Shalimar, has entered into both a purchase agreement and an interlocal agreement. Shalimar is utilizing tourism development dollars, and funding is included in the approved state budget pending the governor's approval. The

property is expected to close in October, after which design work will begin.

The intent is to create a passive park with swings, picnic tables and grills. Swimming and fishing will be prohibited. The entrance from Highway 85 at the Shalimar Bridge will be closed in favor of a safer entrance from Clifford Street.

Eglin Parkway is beginning to see paving improvements by the Florida Department of Transportation. The section from Richburg and 12th Avenue to the Shalimar Bridge will be completed first.

Our new south-end Ag Extension Building is now open on Lewis Turner Boulevard near the south-end courthouse annex. Turn into the courthouse parking lot and then right to access Ag Extension parking. Please stop by to learn about the various classes offered. If you would like to become a Master Gardener, now is the time to sign up for the yearlong coursework.

Construction is underway on the Cinco Bayou Boat Parking project, a project funded through tourism development dollars. This partnership with the Town of Cinco Bayou will double boat parking and add bathrooms to a very busy ramp. Improvements also include fencing, landscaping, lighting and security cameras. A second phase, currently in design, will improve the boat ramps and replace the dockage, making it more modern, functional and boater-friendly.

The former BBVA Compass Bank building at the foot of Cin-

co Bayou Bridge now houses our Tourism Development staff and was purchased using tourism development dollars.

The Rigdon Center, locally known as the old fairgrounds, is undergoing a major renovation and expansion. The county is adding more than 3,000 square feet across two primary event venues with state-of-the-art technology throughout. The upgraded facility will include new restrooms, two catering kitchens and a concession stand. Additional improvements scheduled later this year include enhanced entryways, a covered walkway, a screen wall and landscaping.

The county is also working with the City of Fort Walton Beach on a land exchange involving property near the former downtown hospital site. This exchange will create a larger, continuous parcel for a major pickleball complex, expanding recreational opportunities for residents and visitors.

Brooks Bridge, named in honor of Thomas Brooks, one of the founding fathers of Fort Walton Beach, is making steady progress. Designed as a simplified suspension bridge, it will replace the existing bridge that has served the community for 75 years.

The new bridge will feature three lanes in each direction separated by a 10-foot median, along with 12-foot-wide multi-use paths on both sides for cyclists and pedestrians. The east-bound bike path will connect to the existing photoluminescent



path along Highway 98 on the Gulf side.

Construction is expected to be completed in 2029, providing improved traffic flow, enhanced safety and expanded recreational access for residents and visitors alike.

The Southwest Crestview Bypass opened to motorists on May 1, 2026. Completed in phases, this remarkable project was a joint effort among Okaloosa County, the Florida Department of Transportation, Triumph Gulf Coast and the City of Crestview. The long-awaited bypass has already begun improving traffic flow in and around Crestview.

The Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport (VPS) is now the largest airport in the Panhandle, serving more passengers than Pensacola and Panama City. With more than 50 direct flights nationwide, VPS is a major economic driver for our county. We are proud of its impact on our economy and community.

Veterans Day on Nov. 11, 2026, will be a memorable America250! event recognizing our 250-year history while honoring the service and sacrifice of our veterans. Please join us for a special morning featuring an inspiring guest speaker, a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Women Veterans Park expansion, and the dedication of four new statues and several beautiful benches generously contributed by community organizations. Mark your calendar for 8:30 a.m. Nov. 11, 2026, inside the Convention Center. This is a celebration you will not want to miss.

It is an honor and a privilege to serve as your commissioner.

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



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Around Town

FWB Rotary Club Grant Helps Transform ADSO Courtyard

The Arts and Design Society of Fort Walton Beach (ADSO) recently received a \$5,000 grant from the Fort Walton Beach Rotary Club, funding most of the cost of a new paver patio that enhances the courtyard space used for social gatherings, art events, classes and fundraisers. “We now have adequate patio space for five picnic tables with umbrellas to host major gatherings for ADSO or other groups looking for a space for a social event,” said ADSO President Blair Supplee.

In addition to its financial support, the Rotary Club, whose motto is “Service Above Self,” provided volunteer labor to help demolish an aging pergola and small brick patio that previously occupied the area.

Fort Walton Beach Rotary Club President Rita Cummins said, “This new patio area is more than an improvement to the facility—it’s an investment in the people, programs, and artistic opportunities that enrich our



community.”

ADSO also received a \$1,000 grant from the CHELCO Operation Round Up Foundation, which will fund shade improvements to further enhance the courtyard’s comfort and functionality.

Several community partners contributed to the project. The Garnier Beach Garden Club purchased plants and designed and installed a new flower bed, while Brazilian Pavers provided discounted installation services. A local irrigation company donated labor and materials to upgrade the courtyard’s sprinkler system.

ADSO volunteers also dedicated countless hours to improving and reorganizing the outdoor space, creating a more



versatile environment for art classes, special events and clay studio operations.

The courtyard project is one part of a broader transformation underway at ADSO. The nonprofit is completing a series of renovations funded through a \$100,000 Impact 100 grant. Several interior remodeling projects within the historic former Fort Walton Beach City Hall building are scheduled for completion this summer. The grant has already funded a new HVAC system serving ADSO’s classrooms and educational spaces.

Together, these improvements are helping ADSO continue its mission of fostering creativity, education and community engagement through the arts along the Emerald Coast.

Got Questions About Air Handling in Hot Weather?

Your HVAC system works around the clock to keep your home or business at a comfortable temperature, but when something goes wrong, it can be one of the calls you dread making. That’s where the Comfort Advisor Team at Executive Air comes in. Understanding the importance of keeping your space safe, comfortable and functioning properly is their priority.

Owner Michelle Royce says, “Let us hear from you.”

Before making that call about a heating or air conditioning issue, many people feel uncomfortable, concerned or frustrated. The team has heard it all. Your system may be making unusual noises, giving off an unpleasant odor or showing other signs that it’s time to take the issue seriously.

The team understands. Their goal is to repair first and replace only when necessary. The Comfort Advisor Team takes the time to eval-

uate the situation, explain the available options and work closely with each client to ensure their home or business is comfortable once again.

Clients are often pleasantly surprised to learn about the latest innovations in air conditioning. “These systems are smart,” Royce says. Unlike older models, many newer systems can proactively respond to changes in humidity, improving overall efficiency and performance. Sometimes, even simple adjustments—such as changing air filters more frequently—can improve results and positively impact your electric bill.

Got HVAC questions? Executive Air understands that earning clients’ trust is critical to serving the local community well. Their team works around the clock to ensure your HVAC system is doing its job effectively and efficiently.



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The 250th Anniversary: A Night to Remember

By BARBARA PALMGREN

There are extraordinary moments in time that we remember. Most people know where they were when President Kennedy was assassinated. They

know where they were on 9/11 when the Twin Towers came down, part of the Pentagon was destroyed and brave Americans forced a plane to crash into the ground rather than strike a tar-

get in Washington, D.C. They remember special visits or places in 1976 when we celebrated the Bicentennial of our nation. And now many will remember this special night: June 12, 2026. The gala at the Rigdon Center in Fort Walton Beach to reenact the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

The celebration was organized by the Okaloosa County America 250 Commission, led by Chair Graham W. Fountain and Vice Chair Mitzi Henley. As a commission member and trustee of the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, I was honored to help plan the event. The museum is also hosting the yearlong exhibit, Celebrate America 250! The Revolution.

The America 250 Commission has scheduled more patriotic events throughout the year. A few of these include a Faith Community Event, a Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra performance at the Mattie Kelly Arts Center, a Heroes and First Responders event honoring our military and first responders and a Patriots Grand Parade in Crestview.

What amazed me was seeing the majority of several hundred dinner guests clothed in period attire of the era, including your publishers and Walton County residents Scott and Lori Miller. And not just dresses and uniforms, but white wigs of all shapes and sizes. Most of those portraying the signers of the Declaration stood and walked up to the document looking as though they were the actual individuals, ready to sign for liberty despite the costs.

I was seated at a table with Valparaiso Mayor Joe Morgan, who proudly portrayed signer John Hart of New Jersey and walked forward to sign alongside Parker Destin, who por-



trayed George Washington, at the table where the historic document awaited signatures. Close by was Scott Miller portraying signer George Clymer of Pennsylvania, and another friend, Niceville Mayor Dan Henkel, portraying Benjamin Harrison V of Virginia.

Friends from other parts of Northwest Florida attended as well, including retired South Walton High School Principal Alexis Tibbetts, a renowned educator in both Okaloosa and Walton counties.

At the podium, emcee Bernard Johnson Jr., External Affairs Manager for Florida Power & Light; Mary Katharine God-

dard, portrayed by Honorable Ginger Madden, State Attorney for Florida's 1st Judicial Circuit; and Reverend George Whitefield, portrayed by Mel Ponder, president of Northwest Florida State College, shared descriptions of the signers, including their professions and the size of their families.

When all 56 signers were seated, the Honorable Patt Maney, Florida House Representative for District 4, invited everyone to rise with champagne glasses in hand and toast the signers and our Declaration of Independence. A large and beautiful cake was then cut and served, followed by the drone show and cannon salute.

More America 250 events are planned throughout Okaloosa County, offering residents across Northwest Florida opportunities to celebrate our shared history and heritage. Follow the Okaloosa County America 250 Facebook page and visit Life Media publications or GetTheCoast.com/America250 for upcoming events.

Happy Birthday, America!



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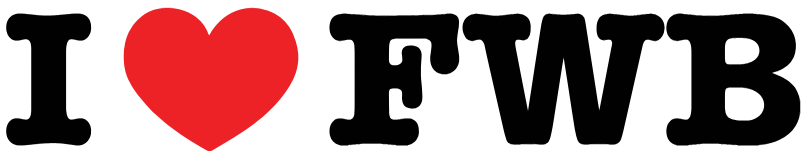
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The Rain Was Never the Story

How our Emerald Coast Wedding Became a Celebration of Family, Friendship, Faith and Community

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

Upstairs in the bridal suite at The Alice in Destin, I stood at a large square window watching what looked like my wedding plans being carried away. Massive floral arrangements were being moved from the cross to beneath a tent we had rented that very morning. A last-minute decision. A rain decision.

For a year, I had envisioned walking down the aisle toward a large wooden cross overlooking the water. The spot was perfect. The view was perfect. Everything had been planned around that moment. But on May 1, 2026, the rain was relentless.

However, a few minutes before the ceremony, as I watched from above, the florals were being moved again—this time back toward the cross. I remember standing there in complete bewilderment. What was happening? Hadn't we already decided the ceremony would have to take place under the tent?

Somebody—I honestly can't remember who because I was so nervous—came running upstairs and exclaimed, "Lori! You're getting married at the cross!" I stared at them. "What?" They explained there appeared to be a brief break in the weather. Fifteen or twenty minutes. Maybe. And according to the radar, it would happen right at 5 p.m.—our ceremony time.

I couldn't believe it. For days, I had been praying for one thing: that somehow we could be married at the cross. And suddenly, there it was. The answer.

The sun never came out. But the rain stopped. For those precious moments, the skies opened just enough.

Our guests stood instead of sitting, because the ceremony chairs had already been moved beneath the reception tent. Yet, somehow that made the ceremony even more intimate.

Afterward, our officiating pastor, Dr. Doug Stauffer, smiled and said, "I think everyone should have a wedding ceremony standing."

Maybe he was right. There was something beautiful about everyone gathering close, fully present, completely engaged in the moment. And, we were married exactly where we had hoped to be married.



The rain returned later. But by then, everyone was safely beneath the tent, laughing, celebrating and sharing a night we'll never forget.

Looking back, I realize something important. The rain was never the story. The people were. And what follows is my attempt to thank many of them.

When the Weather Has Other Plans

As a publisher, I write about weddings, businesses, events and celebrations all the time. But, when it's your own wedding, everything changes. You suddenly discover there are a thousand decisions you never knew existed.

My first wedding happened when I was 23. Back then, weddings were simpler. You booked a church. You had a reception in the fellowship hall. Your friends decorated your car with shaving cream and "Just Married" painted on the windows. And off you went.

Fast forward nearly four decades and wedding planning feels like coordinating a small city. Thank goodness I had Robin Wright, owner of Serenade Weddings & Events, holding my hand through it all. Her creativity, vision and ability to keep everything on track were invaluable.

If there's one piece of advice I would give any bride, regardless of age, budget or venue, it's this: Hire a wedding planner. Immediately. Trust me, there are details you don't know exist until they go wrong.

Robin became guide, counselor, creative director, logistics manager and sometimes therapist. After our first meeting, she created an entire presentation based on the vision I had shared.



Sea glass blue. Butter yellow. Sage green. White. Pearls. Organic textures. Coastal elegance.

A little refined. A little whimsical. A little "under the sea." It became the roadmap for every-

thing that followed.

And when the rain came? Robin pivoted flawlessly. What could have been chaos became calm. What could have been disappointment became beauty.



The Venue That Made It All Possible

Long before The Alice officially opened, Scott and I toured

Continued on next page





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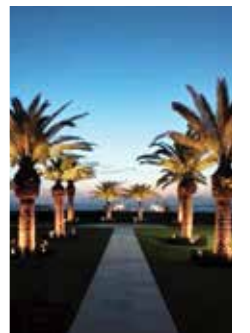
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An Emerald Coast Wedding

WEDDING

continued from previous page

the property with General Manager Kristin Sullivan.

Construction was still under-way. Landscaping was still being installed. But even then, we could see what it would become.

Nestled along the water in Destin with views toward Crab Island, The Alice felt unlike anything else on the Emerald Coast. The grounds are stunning. Palm trees. Walking paths. Beautiful cottages. Water views. Sunsets that seem almost unreal. It felt like home.

And now, after experiencing it firsthand, I can tell you the team—Kristin, Kelly and Diane—is every bit as impressive as the venue itself.

When the weather threatened everything we'd planned, they never panicked. They simply moved to Plan B. Then Plan C. Then back to Plan A. They handled every challenge with professionalism, grace and genuine care. Our friend Will Estell perhaps said it best:

"That was an absolutely beautiful ceremony and reception in celebration of Lori and Scott Miller. Even despite the weather, Kristin and her staff made it spectacular.

"In all my days in the wedding magazine business, I never attended a wedding that was handled that well despite the weather obstacle that was thrown into the mix. The Alice knocked it out of the park."

I couldn't agree more.

Website: thealicedestin.com



Sea Glass, Pearls and Oyster Shells

Once the colors were chosen, the fun began.

Robin introduced me to one of the most unique ideas from the entire wedding—decorated oyster shells. They became part décor, part keepsake and part labor of love.

Robin connected us with local artist Debbie DePew, who graciously taught us the process. Soon my daughters, sister and I were gathered around tables creating shells adorned with pearls and coastal touches. Every one was unique. Every one was handmade. Every one carried a little piece of our story.

Robin also expanded on another creative twist from my good friend Cali that guests absolutely loved: bridesmaids carrying elegant clutch purses adorned with calla lilies instead of traditional bouquets. Not only were they beautiful, but afterward the bridesmaids had a keepsake they could continue to use for special occasions. It was thoughtful, practical and perfectly reflected the personality of our wedding.

The details reflected every-



thing we loved about the coast without feeling themed or overdone. Soft sea glass tones, pearls, oyster shells and lush florals created a look that felt elegant, organic and deeply personal. Every element seemed to tell part of our story.

Adding another meaningful touch, my niece Lauren Turpin, also our flower girl, shared her artistic talents throughout the celebration. She hand-painted champagne glasses adorned with florals in our wedding colors for the bridesmaids and family to enjoy during our day at Beverly Hills Day Spa. She also transformed a simple mirror into a beautiful work of art, painting it with calla lilies and coordinating blooms that welcomed guests as they arrived at The Alice.

The oyster shells, pearls, sea glass colors and organic coastal details tied everything together, creating what many guests later



jokingly called our "Under the Sea" wedding.

The Song That Told Our Story

Most couples choose a song. We had one written.

Our dear friend Bekah Wagner sat down with Scott and me and spent hours learning about our relationship. How we met. What we loved about one another. What made us laugh. What made us strong.

Weeks later, she delivered something neither of us expected: a song called *Southern Gentlemen Have Nothing on You*, now available on Spotify under artist Bekah Lauren. The title makes me laugh, because Scott is a Philly boy and I'm originally an Alabama girl (War Eagle!), but somehow Bekah perfectly captured our relationship and love story in a song we'll treasure forever.

She also wrote a custom song for my daughter Savannah and her husband, Brandon, *Fireman and a Southern Girl*, also available on Spotify. Apparently, writing songs for the women in our family has become one of Bekah's hidden talents!

It became our first dance. Our final private dance. And perhaps one of the most meaningful gifts we have ever received. To this day, when life gets hectic, we'll play it in the car and instantly remember what matters most.

The Dress I Never Would Have Chosen

Like many brides, I spent months looking online. And like many brides, I found absolutely nothing.

Eventually, I visited Simply Elegant Bridal in Fort Walton Beach. Amber greeted us and began pulling dresses. I tried on several. One seemed to be winning.

Then Amber held up another dress. Honestly? I wasn't impressed. Not on the hanger. Not even a little. But she insisted. I tried it on. And immediately everyone in the room started smiling.

That was the dress. The one I never would have chosen. The one that somehow felt like it had been waiting for me all along. And on my wedding day, I felt like royalty in it! It was ME!

Amber, Bob and the entire Simply Elegant team were incredible. Scott's suit came from them as well.

Website: sebridals.com

Continued on next page

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An Emerald Coast Wedding

WEDDING

continued from previous page

Flowers That Brought the Vision to Life

If you've ever seen Kristin Lockhart's work at Couture Florals & Events, you already know she is an artist. From our first conversations, Kristin understood exactly what I was hoping to create. Working within my budget, she designed a floral plan that felt elegant, organic and uniquely us.

White calla lilies. White and green hydrangeas. Lush moss. Flowing amaranthus. Pearls woven throughout. Every floral element felt intentional, sophisticated and perfectly suited to our sea glass-inspired theme.

One of my favorite details was that no two tables were exactly alike. Robin and Kristin worked together to bring our design boards to life, creating stunning tablescapes featuring driftwood, pearls, florals and cascading amaranthus. Each table had its own unique look while still tying beautifully into the overall sea glass-inspired theme.

My bouquet was one of my favorite details of the entire wedding.



ding. Kristin created a stunning arrangement of white calla lilies wrapped in strands of pearls that felt both timeless and distinctive. It was elegant, coastal and unlike anything I had seen before.

When the rain forced everyone to pivot throughout the day, Kristin and her team adjusted seamlessly, ensuring every floral element remained beautiful no matter where it needed to be moved.

Website: couturefloralsdesign.com

A Feast Worth Celebrating

When it came to food, Chef Ernie from Café Nola delivered exactly what we hoped for. Guests enjoyed mini muffulettas, mini NOLA po-boys, seafood gumbo shooters and Cajun chicken shooters before moving into a buffet featuring grilled chicken, prime rib, penne Alfredo, garlic mashed potatoes, vegetables and fresh bread.

Throughout the evening, guests repeatedly told us how much they loved the food. Chef Ernie brought a little New Orleans flair to Destin and created a menu that appealed to everyone. His staff was professional, attentive and helped make the reception flow seamlessly.

Website: cafenola.net

Sweet Details

Rachel Vondell of Lady Ray's transformed an idea floating around in my head into reality. Our cake featured oyster shell inspiration, pearls and approximately 1,400 pieces of delicate rice paper that gave it texture and movement. Stunning! It looked like it belonged beneath the sea.

Adding to its uniqueness, Rachel designed the cake in one of 2026's emerging wedding trends—a sophisticated rectangular cake rather than the traditional stacked design. It perfectly complemented our elegant, organic coastal theme.

Even better, it tasted incredible.

Half chocolate. Half vanilla. A perfect compromise between bride and groom.

Lady Ray's also created beautiful coordinating cupcakes, as well as sea glass blue and ivory, pearl-wrapped, French macarons that echoed our wedding colors and added another elegant touch to the dessert display.

Website: ladyrays.com

Meanwhile, Cindy Smith-Wojdac of CiCi's Cookies & Treats welcomed our guests with beautifully curated gift boxes waiting in their cottages, making them feel welcomed and appreciated.

Later, Cindy created a dessert display that quickly became a guest favorite. One of the most memorable touches was her sea glass and butter candies, each uniquely designed as though they had washed ashore from the Gulf itself. Guests were invited to take home small mesh bags filled with the candies as a sweet reminder of the evening.

The display also featured an assortment of beautifully decorated treats, including chocolate-covered goodies, cookies and other handcrafted sweets that perfectly complemented our wedding colors and coastal theme. Guests returned to that table throughout the evening.

Website: <https://bakesy.shop/b/cicis-cookies-and-treats>

Facebook: [Cicis Cookies & Treats](https://www.facebook.com/CicisCookies&Treats)

Capturing the Memories

One of the greatest gifts of the day was having my daughter, Savannah VonLanken, a professional wedding photographer, photograph her mother's wedding. Yet, I also wanted her to enjoy it. To be present. To celebrate. To dance. To laugh. To be my daughter that day.

That's where Hayleigh stepped in. Together, Savannah and Hayleigh beautifully documented every moment. Rainy skies. Happy tears. Unexpected laughter. Family. Friends. Love.

The photographs throughout these pages tell the story far better than I ever could.

Savvy Leigh Photography: savvyleighphoto.com

Hayleigh Photography: hayleighphoto.com

A Little Pampering; a Lot of Laughter

A few weeks before the wedding, Krisy Whitely Anderson at Beverly Hills Day Spa convinced me to try a facial and chemical peel. I wish I had done it years ago. My skin looked amazing. In fact, now that I've experienced it, I'm hooked.

The day before the wedding, my daughter, Shaye, hosted a spa gathering with Krisy for bridesmaids and family that became our version of a bachelorette celebration. We enjoyed facials,

Continued on next page

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An Emerald Coast Wedding

WEDDING

continued from previous page

massages, laughter, champagne and precious time together.

Website: beverlyhillsdayspa.com

Adrienne Brackett of Pure & Couture and Pure Collective salons helped restore fullness and length to my hair with hand-tied extensions that I absolutely love. Let's just say hair in your 60s isn't quite the same as it was in your 20s. Adrienne worked her magic and now I'm hooked! My hair hasn't looked this great in years!

Websites: pureandcouture.com; purecollectivesalon.com

On wedding day, family member Linsey Robinson styled mine and the wedding party's hair beautifully despite the humidity and rain, while Baylee Elliott somehow managed to make us feel beautiful and cam-

era-ready all day long.

Find Linsey at *Destin Blowout Bar* (@hairby_linseyrobinson) and Baylee at @mua_by_bayleelizabeth

Lights, Music and Memories

Music has always been important to Scott and me. That's why I immediately knew Zoran Subotich would be part of our day. A longtime friend and fellow radio veteran, Zoran handled every musical moment perfectly. I created a custom playlist and he brought it to life in a way that felt personal, joyful and uniquely us. He really just let us be us.

Website: zoranentertainment.net; celebrationsbythesea.com

Ryan Alan Linguiti sang and played the guitar live for our ceremony and cocktail hour. Then he surprised me with something unforgettable—a custom audio tribute featuring voices of family members, lifelong friends and



loved ones who could not attend. There wasn't a dry eye around. You can find Ryan around town singing at Tailfins or The Edge, both at the Harbor.

Instagram: @ryanlinguiti; Facebook: @ryanalanmusic

As evening fell, Destin/30A Lighting transformed the property. Palm trees wrapped in twinkling lights shimmered through the rain. The reflections danced off the wet pathways and the see-through tent's water droplets, creating a glow that some-

how made everything feel even more magical.

Website: destinoutdoorlighting.com

And thanks to Matthew Kuka's photo booth and 360 experience, guests left us with hilarious videos, keepsakes and memories we'll treasure forever. Before long, guests of all ages were grabbing props, striking poses and laughing their heads off. The fun, interactive atmosphere brought people together and captured some of the most candid moments of the evening.

The Finishing Touches

Frill Seekers helped bring so many of our personal details to life. From embroidered sea glass bridesmaid bags to custom cups, napkins and my favorite koozie that read, "It's Miller Time," every detail reflected our personality and wedding theme. They also created a special memorial sign honoring my nephew, whom we lost far too soon. Having his memory represented in such a meaningful way touched our hearts deeply.

Website: frillseekersgifts.com

We also relied on Destin Event Rentals for many of the elements that brought our vision to life—ghost chairs and tables to chandeliers, lighting and the beautiful, transparent reception tent. As evening fell—and the rain—the transparent tent over the reception tables became part of the magic. Reflections from the water shimmered across the clear canopy while the wrapped palm trees glowed outside it, creating a twinkling atmosphere more beautiful than anything we could have planned.

Thanks to the rain, a last-minute tent for the dance floor from Big Day Rentals became one of the most important details. Their quick response gave us one less thing to worry about and helped keep the party going long after the ceremony ended.

destineventrentals.com; thebigday-rentals.com



The People Beside Us

Standing with us that day were our children, grandchildren, family and closest friends.

Austin, who walked me down the aisle. Nick, the best man. Michaela. Savannah. Shaye. My sister Lisa. Flower girl Lauren. Josiah. Jax. Cas.

As beautiful as the venue was...as amazing as the flowers were...as wonderful as the food, music, cake and decorations were...they were the real reason the day mattered.

More Than a Wedding Day

Our wedding celebration extended beyond May 1. We gathered with family and friends for a rehearsal dinner at AJ's on the Harbor the night before and capped off the weekend with a post-wedding cruise aboard Tailfins Tikis around the Destin harbor and Crab Island. Sharing some of our favorite Destin experiences with the people we love, from near and far, made an unforgettable weekend even more special.

tailfinstikis.com, ajsgdestin.com

Looking back now, I don't remember the weather. I remember the way Scott adoringly looked at me—the way every woman hopes to be seen at least once in her life. I remember Austin's arm in mine. I remember hearing our song. I remember our children and grandchildren. I remember family and friends dancing beneath the tent while rain tapped softly overhead. I remember feeling loved. I remember feeling grateful. And I remember standing beneath that cross, exactly where I had hoped to stand, realizing that sometimes God doesn't remove the storm. He simply creates a break in the rain at exactly the right moment.

The rain was never the story. Love was.



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Pieces That Earn Their Keep

BY LIESEL SCHMIDT
Investments.

For most of us, the word refers to things like real estate or stock options. But, in the world of fashion, it refers to those pieces that become foundational to a wardrobe. The ones that might cost more, but will be in use for years, outlasting all the trends that come and go and giving you a cost-per-wear that will make you want to post about it on Instagram. Don't you just love girl math?

Anyway. These investment pieces could seem a little boring, but we'd much rather refer to them as *classics*. Because that's what they are—standard items that will never be out of vogue. Think of them as the backbone of your style: dependable, flattering and endlessly adaptable. At **Blue Bay Lifestyle Co.**, we believe that the most valuable pieces in your closet are the ones you reach for again and again.

The Perfect White Shirt
Who doesn't love the look of a crisp white button-down? As

simple as it is, this is one of the hardest-working pieces a woman can own. Whether paired with tailored **Liverpool** trousers for the office, denim for a casual lunch or even layered over a swimsuit (who would have thought?) for a day at the beach or lounging by the pool, it will forever be effortlessly chic. Look for quality fabrics and a fit that feels both sophisticated and comfortable.

A Well-Tailored Blazer
A great blazer works magic in elevating an outfit. Wear it with your favorite jeans from **Liverpool**, throw it on over a **Lovestitch** maxi dress or add polish to everyday basics like fun graphic tees. Choose neutral shades such as ivory, navy, camel or black, which offer the greatest versatility in styling them with pretty much anything in your wardrobe.

Elevated Denim
Jeans have more colors, cuts, rises and washes than most of us can keep up with, but a flattering pair of premium



denim jeans (we love **Liverpool's** many options) will always earn their keep. Choose a style that works with your body shape as well as the demands of your lifestyle rather than chasing every new trend. Remember: Great denim should be like a great supporting actress—it plays sidekick to your of-the-moment statement tops, bold accessories and seasonal layers.

The LBD
The little black dress has held

its place as a fashion staple for decades because of the simple fact that *it just works*. Whether you're dressing for a cocktail party, dinner, a special event or a last-minute invitation, a well-cut black dress provides endless possibilities for styling. Swap out your shoes, jewelry and handbag, and that very same LBD can feel entirely new each time you wear it. Who doesn't love that?

Quality Handbags
While trendy bags may be all over the pages of the glossies for a season, a beautifully crafted handbag—read: *leather*—maintains its relevancy for years. The classic shapes and neutral colors of **Hobo** bags complement any change in your wardrobe and offer exceptional value over time (remember that whole cost-per-wear thing?). The right handbag doesn't just put the finishing touch on an outfit—it becomes part of your signature style.

Multipurpose Footwear
Whether you'd classify yourself as someone with a shoe

“problem” or not, having a collection of timeless footwear that can carry you through pretty much every occasion and every situation isn't a frivolity—it's crucial. Think comfortable-yet-elegant loafers and refined sandals from **Aetrex**, classic girl boss pumps, supportively versatile sandals and clogs from **Birkenstock**, and sleek ankle boots—all of which keep your wardrobe grounded and on-the-go.

Here's the thing about wardrobe staples: They're only half the story. A great white shirt, blazer or pair of jeans gives you a foundation, but the fun pieces are what give your closet personality. *That's where we come in.*
At Blue Bay Lifestyle Co., we love helping pair those timeless basics that you might already in your closet with colorful prints, statement accessories, beautiful handbags, great footwear and trend-forward pieces that keep your look fresh. Because while classics may never go out of style, there's no rule saying they can't have a little fun.

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Have You Visited The Foxy Boutique in Downtown Fort Walton Beach Lately?

With warm summer days upon us, a girl can sometimes feel like she needs a wardrobe reset. Whether you're shopping for sunny days, travel or simply a fresh pop of color, you'll want to visit The Foxy Boutique.

Owner Stephany Cox started out as a customer and quickly came to love the boutique's real-life clothing and accessories that reflect the beach-forward, easy-to-wear, multifaceted lifestyle we enjoy on the Emerald Coast. Since purchasing the store, she has relocated it from Navarre to Miracle Strip Parkway in downtown Fort Walton Beach.

Summer is the perfect time to shop the boutique, which is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Gather a few friends and browse the ready-to-go flirty or cozy dresses, along with the perfect little jacket for a cooler evening. And don't forget to accessorize! You'll find bags, bracelets and necklaces to complete the look. The variety of colors and styles is sure to delight everyone on your shopping trip.

Once customers discover this fun shop, they return again and again — and tell all their friends. Stop in to browse and say "hi" at 148 Miracle Strip Pkwy. SE in Fort Walton Beach, visit foxyboutiquefwb.com or follow along on social media.

Keeping your look out of the dog days of summer and ready for fun in the sun — or shade — is their mission. There's even more reason to visit now, as a sale is underway to make room for new merchandise. Plus, Tide-water sandals have just arrived.



Aisha Ramirez Honored on July 4 for History Writing Contest

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

Aisha Ramirez, a student at Pryor Middle School, earned second place in the Plank-Schlitt American History Writing Contest, which was open to all seventh-grade students in Okaloosa County. The contest was designed to help students recognize the relevance of the Declaration of Independence and its continued impact on life in the United States today.

Aisha received the \$50 monetary award in May and was recognized again July 4 at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida. Family, friends, museum trustees and Tom Plank, husband of the late Diane Plank, one of the history teachers for whom the award was named, attended the ceremony. Aisha also received a certificate, medallion and scarf.

In the timed competition, students had 50 minutes to complete an essay after selecting one of four grievances from the Declaration of Independence chosen by the school district. Following five minutes of reading time, contestants began writing. Essays were judged on focus, connection to modern-day relevance, evidentiary support and organization, including a clear introduction, transitions and conclusion.

Aisha selected Grievance 11, which states, "He has kept among us, in times of Peace, Standing Armies without the consent of our legislatures."

In her essay, she identified this as the Quartering Act, which allowed soldiers to be quartered, or housed, in private homes

Continued on page 26



Shop local!
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The Patriotic Fire Hydrant Painting Project, a City of Fort Walton Beach Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) Project, is almost finished!

Local Artist Andrew Wargo won the City's "Call for Artists," and since that time, Andrew has painted the 25 FWB Fire Hydrants in his bid.

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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.

ajsgdestin.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

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ajsonthebayou.com

AJ's Oyster Shanty – Okaloosa Island

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

ajsoystershanty.com

108 Santa Rosa Blvd., FWB

(850) 226-8108

FUBAR Pizza Bar

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

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

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



menu for you from Italian food to Prime Rib and everything in between. Open 7 days from 11 a.m.-2 a.m.

850-226-7084

114 Amberjack Dr.,

Okaloosa Island

fubarfwb.com

Magnolia Grill

In 2001, Magnolia Grill in Fort Walton Beach opened its doors after a renovation that took 18 months—and it's been thriving since. A local's favorite dubbed "The Museum That Serves Food," you'll find equal parts museum and dining establishment. Its second floor contains artifacts from World War II, Vietnam and other segments of American history. And downstairs—is where you'll find lunch favorites such as Meatloaf with Mashed Potatoes, Crab Cake with Fettuccine and Shrimp Alfredo Sauce, Red Beans and Rice and many types of burgers, sandwiches, soups and salads. For dinner, savor divine Italian dishes such as Italian Sausage and Peppers with Marinara Sauce and Filet Tips Florentina. But there's also steaks, seafood "Camp Walton style" and even a kids' menu. Hours: Lunch M-F 11-2; Dinner M-Th 5-8; F-Sat 5-9; Closed Sundays.

(850) 812-5761

157 Brooks Street SE, FWB

magnoliagrillfwb.com

The Boardwalk On Okaloosa Island

As us locals know, The Boardwalk is a popular destination. With its ideal location on the Gulf, convenient parking and wide range of activities, it's the perfect place to shop, savor various flavors of cuisine, and take in the incredible views of the Emerald Coast. Head to restaurants like Rockin Tacos, The Crab Trap, Floyd's Shrimp Shack or Al's Beach Club & Burger Bar, all with breathtaking views and breaks for walks on the beach! Sandy toes and salty swim suits are welcome.

The Boardwalk is an official

Continued on page 36



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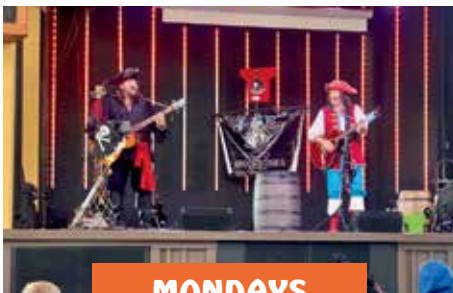
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Sweet Moments Begin in Cindy's Kitchen

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

Some of the sweetest moments from my wedding day began long before Scott and I said, "I do."

As our family and friends arrived from out of town to stay in the charming cottages at The Alice, we wanted them to feel welcomed the moment they opened the door. We envisioned something warm, thoughtful and personal—a little surprise to let them know how much we appreciated them traveling to celebrate with us.

That's when Cindy Smith-Wojdac, owner of CiCi's Cookies & Treats, stepped in. She created charming, thoughtfully curated welcome gift boxes filled with homemade cookies and hand-selected treats that greeted our guests upon arrival, setting the tone for the warm, welcoming experience we hoped they would enjoy throughout the weekend.

It was one of those small details that made a big impression. Guests immediately commented on how special it made them feel, and more than one person asked, "Where did these amazing cookies come from?"

That question is becoming more common as Cindy's home-based bakery continues to delight customers throughout

the Emerald Coast. For Cindy, however, baking has never been just about creating something delicious (though it IS)! It has always been about creating connection.

"Why CiCi?" she asks on her website. The answer is simple. Her greatest inspiration comes from her two beloved granddaughters, who love spending time baking alongside their CiCi. Those flour-covered afternoons filled with laughter, measuring cups and sweet treats eventually inspired a business built around the very things Cindy values most: family, hospitality and bringing joy to others. "This venture is a true labor of love," Cindy says. "For me, cookies and treats are more than just sweets; they're a way to spread joy, comfort and connection."

That philosophy is evident in every order she creates. Through CiCi's Cookies & Treats, Cindy offers handcrafted cookies, brownies, cookie cakes, dessert boxes and custom gift packages designed for birthdays, weddings, baby showers, holidays, corporate gifts and everyday celebrations. Each order is carefully prepared, artfully packaged and designed to make every recipient feel a little extra special.

Our wedding was no exception. In addition to the welcome gift boxes, Cindy created a beautiful dessert display that quickly became a guest favorite. Filled with cookies, chocolate-covered treats and other sweet delights in shades that perfectly complemented our wedding colors, the table was as beautiful as it was delicious. Throughout the evening, guests gathered around it, sampling treats and returning for seconds.

In fact, I never even got one of the cookies I had specifically chosen and couldn't wait to try. Between greeting guests, dancing and enjoying the evening, I didn't make it to the dessert table in time. They were literally gone before the wedding ended! While I was disappointed to miss out, it was also the ultimate compliment to Cindy. The guests clearly loved them every bit as much as I thought they would. It wasn't simply dessert. It became part of the celebration.

That's what makes Cindy's business unique. Whether she is preparing treats for a wedding reception, assembling welcome gifts for vacation guests or creating a special surprise for a birthday or holiday, she understands that food often becomes part of life's most meaningful moments.



PHOTO BY SAVVY LEIGH PHOTO FROM LORI & SCOTT MILLER'S WEDDING



In today's fast-paced world, where so many gifts are ordered with a click and delivered without a personal touch, Cindy's creations feel different. Every cookie, every package and every ribbon reflects the care of someone who genuinely enjoys making others happy.

And perhaps that's no surprise. After all, when something is made with love, people tend to notice. For Cindy, it all comes back to those moments in the kitchen with her granddaughters—the inspiration behind the

business and the reason she continues to bake.

Her hope is simple: that every treat she creates brings a little warmth, happiness and sweetness into someone's day. Based on the smiles she helped create at our wedding, I'd say she's accomplishing exactly that.

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Bakesy: <https://bakesy.shop/b/cicis-cookies-and-treats>
Facebook: CiCi's Cookies & Treats

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Summer Fun Is in Full Swing at Gulfarium

Visit the Gulfarium This Summer

Summer is the perfect time to plan a visit to Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park, where guests can enjoy dolphin and sea lion presentations, exciting animal encounters, and two of the park's newest additions: Manatee Cove and Dolphin Oasis.

At Manatee Cove, guests can observe rescued manatees Romeo, Lil Joe, and Inigo from multiple viewing levels while learning more about their stories and the conservation efforts helping protect this beloved species.

Over at Dolphin Oasis, guests can take in beautiful Gulf views while enjoying engaging dolphin presentations and unforgettable opportunities to connect with Gulfarium's Atlantic bottlenose dolphins.

For an extra special way to start the day, guests can book the Dolphin Rise and Shine Package, which includes early entry, a guided look at the park, a dockside dolphin encounter, and admission to enjoy the Gulfarium for the rest of the day.



Get Fit with the Gulfarium This Summer

This summer, Gulfarium is giving guests a whole new way to move, stretch, and unwind with two unique wellness experiences surrounded by marine life.

Pilates with Dolphins invites guests to start the morning with an all-levels pilates class at Dolphin Oasis. Led by a certified instructor, this special class offers



an energizing workout with dolphins nearby, creating a one-of-a-kind fitness experience in one of the most beautiful settings on the Emerald Coast.

Guests can also experience UNDERWATER: The Living Sea Experience, an after-hours yoga class inside Gulfarium's Living Sea Aquarium. Surrounded by marine life, participants will move through a slow, ocean-inspired flow and step into another world for an evening of movement, relaxation, and wonder.

Whether you are starting your morning with dolphins or winding down inside the Living Sea Aquarium, Gulfarium's summer wellness experiences offer a fun and refreshing way to get fit this season.



Sunset Camp Returns for a Summer of Fun

Looking for a magical summer night activity just for kids? The Gulfarium's Sunset Camp is back and better than ever! This evening camp gives kids ages 6-14 a chance to explore the park after hours, enjoy exclusive animal encounters, and learn about marine life through hands-on fun.

While parents enjoy a night out, campers will dive into adventure with a dolphin dockside encounter, a reptile meet-and-

greet, up-close time with our penguin colony, and dinner by Seal Harbor. They'll also join our education team for beachside learning activities to inspire conservation and curiosity.

Sunset Camp fills up quickly with limited dates throughout the summer, so don't wait! Visit Gulfarium.com to view camp dates and secure your child's spot today.

Visit gulfarium.com.



Open Daily at 9am

850-243-9046

www.gulfarium.com

Located in Destin-Fort Walton Beach



Gulfarium
Marine Adventure Park

 Off the Hook

From Seacrest Beach to the White House: Lulu's Story Changes America

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

Two years ago, our community witnessed something that few who were there will ever forget.

On June 7, 2024, what began as a beautiful summer afternoon at Seacrest Beach turned into one of the most extraordinary stories of courage, faith and humanity our area has ever experienced. (See July 2024 issue of MyDestinLife.com for original article: <https://destin.lifemediagr.com/the-miracle-at-seacrest-beach-america-responds/>)

A shark attacked 15-year-old Lulu Gribbin as she swam in the Gulf. Within moments, complete strangers rushed into the water. A beach attendant, vacationing families, physicians, nurses, an EMT, a former lifeguard and countless others worked together to save her life before South Walton Fire District crews, Walton County Sheriff's deputies and emergency medical personnel arrived.

When we first shared Rick Karle's powerful story, "The Miracle at Seacrest Beach: America Responds," we weren't simply reporting on a tragedy. We were celebrating the remarkable people God placed on



that beach that day. As one physician later reflected, "When we come together, great things can happen."

Now, that miracle has led to something even bigger.

Recently, President Donald Trump signed Lulu's Law, federal legislation that will allow shark attacks to become eligible for Wireless Emergency Alerts—the same emergency notification system used for Amber Alerts and severe weather. The goal is simple: if a confirmed shark attack occurs, emergency officials can quickly notify people nearby before another family unknowingly enters the water.

The legislation, sponsored by U.S. Alabama Sen. Katie Britt, is named for Lulu, who was one of three people bitten during



PHOTO: LULU STRONG (INSTAGRAM)

a string of shark attacks along the Florida Panhandle that day. Lulu lost her left hand and part of her right leg in the attack and has spent the time since advocating for better safety measures to help protect others.

The idea grew from a heart-breaking reality. About 90 minutes before Lulu was attacked off Seacrest Beach, another swimmer had been bitten just a few miles away. Had beachgoers throughout the area known about that first attack, Lulu's family has often said, the outcome might have been very different.

Today, Lulu has become much more than a survivor. She has become an advocate, sharing her story across the country

and encouraging lawmakers to improve beach safety.

In addition to helping inspire Lulu's Law at both the state and federal levels, she and her family established the Lulu Strong Foundation, which works to improve the accessibility, performance and affordability of advanced prosthetics, virtual reality therapy and other life-changing technologies for individuals with limb differences.

Her resilience has drawn national attention. In 2025, Southern Living named Lulu its "Southerner of the Year," recognizing not only her advocacy efforts, but also the remarkable way she has embraced life after the attack. Today, she is an accomplished adaptive golfer and water skier who continues to inspire others while still enjoying life as a teenager.

While Florida has not created its own statewide shark alert system, the new federal law directs the Federal Communications Commission to establish

rules allowing state and local emergency officials to use Wireless Emergency Alerts after confirmed shark attacks.

For those of us along the Emerald Coast, this legislation is deeply personal.

We remember the helicopters overhead. We remember praying for Lulu and the other victims. We remember the countless heroes who stepped forward without hesitation. And we remember a frightened teenage girl who whispered just one sentence after surgery: "I made it."

Today, because of her courage and determination, Lulu's story is helping protect beachgoers not only here on the Emerald Coast, but across America's coastlines.

Publisher's Note: We believed then that God was working through ordinary people to save Lulu's life. Today, her story continues to save lives in a different way—by changing how America responds when every second counts.

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SS United States Nears Final Voyage as World's Largest Artificial Reef

After more than 50 years of retirement and several unsuccessful attempts at restoration, America's fastest ocean liner is preparing for one final record-breaking voyage—not across the Atlantic, but beneath the Gulf waters off Destin-Fort Walton Beach.

The historic SS United States is one step closer to beginning that next chapter. Okaloosa County officials recently announced that environmental remediation of the legendary vessel is complete. The ship remains docked in Mobile, Alabama, awaiting final approvals from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Environmental Protection Agency before deployment as the world's largest artificial reef.

For many local residents, the announcement marks another milestone in a project they have followed closely since Okaloosa County purchased the ship in 2024. What began as an ambitious vision to preserve an American icon has become one of the most unique environmental and tourism projects in the nation.

Launched in 1952, the SS United States carried four U.S. presidents, Hollywood celebrities, military personnel and countless travelers during her years at sea. More than seven decades later, she still holds the trans-Atlantic speed record, a title no passenger ship has ever surpassed.

Rather than allowing the vessel to be scrapped, Okaloosa County chose a different path.

The Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners approved the purchase on Oct. 1, 2024. After nearly 30 years docked in Philadelphia, the ship departed on Feb. 19, 2025, arriving in Mobile on March 3, 2025, where extensive environmental remediation began. That work was completed in May 2026, bringing the project significantly closer to deployment.

The approximately \$13 million effort is funded through tourism development revenues and partner contributions. Funding covers the ship's purchase, towing, environmental preparation, deployment and



SS United States Update (Photos taken May 2026)

support for a future land-based museum dedicated to preserving its history.

Partners include Visit Pensacola, the Coastal Conservation Association, Yamaha Rightwaters, the Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida, Force Blue, NAUI Worldwide, the Explorers Club and Diver's Alert Network. Scientists from Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution will conduct long-term research documenting how an entirely new reef ecosystem develops on the vessel from day one.

Once deployed, the SS United States will become the crown jewel of one of the nation's most successful artificial reef programs. Since the 1970s, Okaloosa County has deployed 48 large vessels and developed nearly 600 artificial reefs in Gulf waters.

County officials expect the ship to generate significant tourism benefits as divers from around the world travel to experience the historic vessel. The project is also expected to support local hotels, restaurants, charter operators, retailers and other businesses throughout the region.

Equally important are the environmental benefits. Prepared under strict federal and state standards, the vessel will create vital habitat for marine life, including grouper, snapper,

tuna, mahi-mahi, marlin, sea turtles and countless other species that support a healthy Gulf ecosystem.

For those concerned about preserving history, county leaders emphasize that the project does exactly that. Rather than disappearing into a scrapyard, the SS United States will continue telling her story beneath the



Gulf as a thriving artificial reef while a future museum shares her remarkable legacy with visitors from around the world.

For a ship that once connect-

ed continents, her final voyage will connect history, conservation and tourism in a way few projects ever have. Soon, the world's fastest ocean liner will begin her slowest journey—settling beneath the Gulf and becoming home to thousands of marine creatures while inspiring future

generations of divers, anglers, scientists and visitors.

For updates on the project, visit destinfwb.com/explore/eco-tourism/ssus.

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Running on the Surface of the Sun

By LIESEL SCHMIDT

Welcome to July in Florida, where the temps feel like you're walking through the middle of an active volcano and the humidity makes breathing an exercise in futility. While a few of you may love this climate (*psst*—we know you're secretly a reptile), most of us are just trying to make it through the day without melting into a puddle and wishing we had the small mercy of a random snowstorm to cool ourselves down. But I digress.

Summer, much like every other season, is a given. Complain all you want (and believe me, you won't be alone)—it. Will. Happen. As will the obscene level of heat that makes any outdoor activity feel like a legal form of torture. It's a hurdle we all have to clear—but how well we do it depends on how well you adapt your own training to the heat. As experts in all things running, we at Run With It have some advice for better summer running.

Slow It Down

As runners, we're all prone to viewing any kind of slow-down as a loss of momentum in training, but that's a misconception—especially when it comes to running in summer heat. Repeat after me so that maybe it sinks into that thick skull of yours: Proper training in the heat requires you to slow your pace. So, channel your inner tortoise and tell the hare to suck it. Experts advise that you should expect to slow your pace by 30 to 60 seconds

per mile and pace yourself according to *effort*, not GPS times. *Pourquoi*, you ask? Simple: Your body responds differently to exercise in the heat, working harder and spiking your heart rate—which naturally causes you to slow down. The key is not to fight the sloth, but to embrace it.

Pro Tip: Run before 10 a.m. or after 6 p.m. to avoid peak temps and try to find areas with plenty of shade. Also, give yourself a break—it takes around two weeks for your body to fully acclimate to the stifling heat.



those miles rather than the other way around.

Observe the Dress Code

Winter might call for *all* the layers, but in summer, going minimal is key. Choose light-colored, loose-fitting technical fabrics (think polyester or nylon) that promote airflow. We love tees, tanks, bras and shorts from **Brooks, Lululemon, Vuori, Chicknlegs, Asics and Roark**. It's also important to protect your skin and eyes from the sun. We recommend lathering on the SPF and wearing sunglasses along with a breathable mesh hat. We love the Swank line from Tifosi Optics and all of the fun prints on Sprints running hats and visors.

Pro Tip: Cool your core by wearing an ice vest, applying cold water to the back of your neck, or putting ice in your hat.

Remember, nobody earns extra points for ER visits (except for the points on your credit card when you pay that hefty bill). So, be smart, be adaptable and give yourself credit for simply showing up when the weather feels like someone left the oven door open (is anyone else's mascara melting their eyelashes together?). Summer running may be far from glamorous, but it builds grit, endurance and an impressive ability to sweat from places you didn't know could sweat.

Now get out there and make questionable decisions responsibly.

Hydrate and Fuel

This is not something you can skip, in the interest of not landing yourself in the ER with heat exhaustion and dehydration. A few key points to keep in mind:

Drink Early and Often: Be consistent about hydrating throughout the day, rather than just gulping water right before you hit the pavement.

Use Electrolytes: Profuse sweating (girl, we are *way* past glowing here) causes the loss of essential minerals—which can't be replaced by plain water. Use an electrolyte mix like **Skratch Labs, Nuun, GU, or Tailwind** for runs longer than 45 minutes, and try a few out to see which work best with your system.

Plan Your Refills: Carry a Nathan handheld bottle or hydration vest, or plan your run in areas with water fountains and safe refill spots.

Carb Up: Your body is burning through carbs like it's being paid to, which means you're using up your stores faster than you normally would. Pack energy gels, bars or waffles from **GU, Honey Stinger and Skratch Labs** into your **FlipBelt** or **Spibelt** to help you scorch



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AISHA RAMIREZ

continued from page 18

and businesses. She understood England's rationale that troops were needed for protection after the French and Indian War, but also recognized why colonists objected to being required to house and feed soldiers without compensation — and often without being asked.

Aisha noted she was relieved that “thanks to our timeline we don't have to worry about it.”

She also discussed the National Guard, explaining that it is not a standing army permitted to enter and stay in private homes today.

We thank Aisha for reminding us that this is not a concern in the 21st century. Congratulations, Aisha, and thank you for sharing your love of history and your understanding of one of the grievances that helped lead the colonists to declare independence.

Golf Series: Children In Crisis Tournament at Shalimar Pointe Golf Course Knows its "Fore the Kids"



BY BARBARA PALMGREN

For over 19 years, Children in Crisis, a non-profit organization, has hosted a golf tournament to support a program that provides emergency shelter services for children who have been removed from their homes from the Department of Children

and Families due to abuse, neglect, or other emergencies. The dedicated staff offer emergency shelter, housing, educational support and tutoring as well as counseling and emotional support.

This organization is committed to keeping brothers and sisters together, providing foster care for abused, neglected, and abandoned children. They work to recruit and support foster parents in the four-county area of Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa and Walton counties.

Renamed the Ken Hair Charity Golf Classic for former CEO, Ken Hair, the shot-gun start for a four-person team, began on Friday, May 22 at 9 a.m. with a scramble format. This



means only one person on the team has to hit a perfect drive off the team, or a second shot, a putt, etc. Your partner hits

an errant shot into the woods? No problem. You won't use that golf shot for sure!

Brunch, a golf shirt, a silent

auction and an awards party awaited all golfers upon return to the clubhouse. The weather was perfect in late spring with cloud cover and a slight breeze. So, no excuses for not hitting golf shots straight, or having balls find their way inside that ever so tiny hole on the putting green.

The winners were:

First place: David Schneeberger, Ken Isham, Bobby Massingill, Fred Wantland

Second place: Bob Hollbrook, George Wall, Julius Turner, Bob Sivill

Third place: John Lewis, Hap Meadows, Sam Carelly, John Hargather

More Than a Martial Arts School: Building a Community That Lasts

BY DAVID DURMAN

When people think of martial arts, they usually picture punches, kicks, self-defense or fitness. Those are certainly part of what we teach at Coastal Martial Arts & Fitness, but they're not the reason many students stay for years.

The real reason is the community.

There's an old saying: It takes a village to raise a child. We believe that's true, but it doesn't stop with children. Adults need community too. In a world where work, family, and busy schedules often leave people feeling disconnected, having a place where you're known, encouraged, and supported can make all the difference.

One of the greatest rewards as instructors is watching friendships develop both on and off the mats. We've had students recognize each other while shopping, eating at local restaurants, or simply walking through town because they were wearing a Coastal Martial Arts shirt. A simple conversation starts with, "Hey... that's my martial arts school!" and often ends with a new friendship.

That's when we know we're building something much bigger than a martial arts school.



Every member helps shape that culture. It's the student who welcomes a newcomer, the parent who encourages another family, the training partner who offers a helping hand, and the high five after a successful grading. Those small moments create an environment where people of every age feel they belong.

That sense of community continues beyond class through our social media pages, where families celebrate achievements, share milestones, and encourage one another. It's another way of staying connected between classes and celebrating the progress of our students.

We also love seeing students

wearing their Coastal shirts around town. Not because it's advertising, but because it represents belonging. It shows they're part of a community built on respect, discipline, perseverance, kindness, and help-

ing others become their best.

Martial arts teaches practical self-defense, improves fitness, and builds confidence. Those are valuable life skills. But perhaps the greatest lesson is learning that success is rarely

achieved alone.

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Communities are built one relationship at a time.

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STAY ACTIVE. BUILD CONFIDENCE. HAVE FUN!

 Wellness


By KASSIA GARFIELD,
MAXSTRENGTH FITNESS

Cancer treatment has traditionally focused on surgery, chemotherapy, radiation and medications. However, growing research shows that one of the most important predictors of cancer outcomes may be something much simpler: muscle mass and physical strength. Strength is no longer viewed as just a fitness measure. It is increasingly recognized as a marker of resilience, recovery potential and overall health during cancer treatment.

Muscle plays a critical role in how the body responds to stress and illness. During cancer treatment, the body experiences increased inflammation, metabolic demand, fatigue and tissue breakdown. Patients with greater muscle mass often tolerate these physical demands more effectively than those with low muscle mass, a condition known as sarcopenia. In fact, sarcopenia has become a major

Strength Matters: Why Muscle May Be One of the Best Predictors of Cancer Outcomes

concern in oncology because it is associated with higher complication rates, longer hospital stays, reduced treatment tolerance and increased mortality.

One reason muscle is so important is that it serves as the body's reserve system. During illness, the body relies on stored nutrients and protein to maintain immune function, heal tissues and preserve organ function. Individuals with more muscle mass have a larger reserve available to withstand the intense physical stress caused by cancer and its treatments. Patients with very low muscle mass can decline more rapidly because they have fewer resources to support recovery.

Research has shown that cancer patients with greater strength and muscle mass often recover faster after surgery. Procedures such as tumor removal, bowel surgeries, mastectomies and orthopedic cancer surgeries place enormous stress on the body. Stronger patients are more likely to get out of bed earlier, regain mobility faster and participate more effectively in rehabilitation. They also tend to experience fewer postoperative complications such as infec-



tions, pneumonia and falls.

Strength also appears to influence how well patients tolerate chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Many cancer therapies cause fatigue, weakness and muscle wasting. Patients who begin treatment already weak or frail often struggle to complete treatment plans because their bodies cannot tolerate the side effects. On the other hand, patients with better baseline strength and fitness levels are often able to maintain activity lev-

els, recover between treatments more effectively and preserve independence throughout the process.

Another emerging area of research is the relationship between exercise and cancer risk reduction. Regular resistance training and physical activity are associated with a lower risk of several cancers, including colon, breast and endometrial cancers. Exercise helps regulate hormones, improve insulin sensitivity, reduce chronic inflammation and support immune function, all of which may contribute to reduced cancer risk. While exercise is not a guarantee against cancer, maintaining strength and muscle mass appears to create a healthier internal environment that may reduce risk factors associated with disease development.

The health care community is increasingly embracing the concept of "prehabilitation," which involves improving a patient's strength and conditioning before surgery or cancer treatment begins. Rather than waiting until after treatment to rebuild strength, clinicians now recognize that entering treatment stronger often leads to bet-

ter outcomes afterward. Even small improvements in strength and endurance before treatment can make a meaningful difference during recovery.

Importantly, building or maintaining strength during cancer treatment does not require extreme exercise. Programs are typically individualized and may include walking, resistance bands, light weights or supervised strength training. The goal is not athletic performance but preserving muscle, mobility and function during one of the body's most difficult challenges.

Ultimately, muscle mass and strength are becoming recognized as critical components of cancer prevention, treatment tolerance and recovery. Strength is not simply about appearance or fitness; it is a powerful indicator of the body's ability to endure, recover and heal.

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By KAY LEAMAN, HEALTH ARCHITECT, CERTIFIED NUTRITION & SKIN ADVISOR

I was cleaning up the side of my fridge the other day where I keep healthy things I need to remember. My June article discussed reading food labels. What I forgot to add are the labels on produce.

Four-digit codes that begin with a 3 or 4 = Conventionally grown

Five-digit codes that begin with 9 = Organic

Five-digit codes that begin with 8 = Genetically modified

The first two codes are what they say. Genetically modified produce tends to be a gray area since producers do not have to tell us how the produce was modified. Take corn, for example. Did you know that they found a way to insert insect-resistant chemicals into corn seeds, thereby making the corn insect resistant? Those kernels may taste good, but what might those chemicals be doing to us? There are many other ways produce is being genetically modified, so by avoiding these, we can put a checkmark next to making another healthier choice.

Next, let's revisit cholesterol as it pertains to heart disease. There is a doctor and research that have shown that the statistics for mortality and morbidity alone prove that cholesterol-lowering drugs (statins) fail to significantly lower the death rate from cardiovascular disease. Risk factors for heart disease include:

Age, low HDL cholesterol, low free testosterone (for men), smoking, HBP, elevated C-reactive protein, homocysteine > 7.0, oxidized LDL, diabetes, genetics, obesity, inactivity, chronic periodontal disease, stress, arterial calcifications and nutritional deficiencies.

Notice that it is not the level of LDL cholesterol, but the level of oxidized LDL. This is why it is so important to pay for the

tests that doctors never run (listed in the February article). It is also notable that diet, exercise and nutritional supplementation play important roles in test results and overall health.

Another note of importance is that, when researching information, be sure to note the parameters of the study being done.

Now on to plastics. Plastic is everywhere, especially in our kitchens: food containers, beverage bottles, dishes, glasses, etc. One thing to remember is to never microwave food in plastic. I have glass containers for leftovers, but I never use the plastic lid to cover the container when reheating. I use my food-safe silicone pad.

All plastic containers have a triangle on the bottom with a number in it. Here is the breakdown:

Green:

#2 – Laundry detergent bottles, milk jugs, folding chairs and tables: No known health concerns.

#4 – Juice and milk cartons (as the waterproof inner and outer layer), grocery bags: No known health concerns.

#5 – Yogurt and margarine tubs, plastic cups and baby bottles, kitchenware, microwavable plastic containers and lids: Microwavable/dishwasher safe does NOT mean it's a healthy practice. It only means it will not warp when heated. Hand-washing is recommended.

Yellow:

#1 – Cosmetics, household cleaners, water, juice, soft drinks, salad dressings, oil, peanut butter: Studies have found antimony (a toxic chemical) leaching from water bottles exposed to heat (*Note:* They are shipped in cases on pallets in trucks.). PETE plastic is only intended for one-time use. Reusing plastic water bottles, etc., can cause chemicals to leach into the liquid.

#7 – Electrical wiring, CD/DVD cases, baby bottles, 3- and 5-gallon reusable bottles: BPA found in these products has been found to be an endocrine disruptor. Look for green numbers as an alternative.

Red:

#3 – Shower curtains, cling



wrap (avoid using, or place a paper towel between food and plastic), pool toys, inflatable structures, clothing, vinyl IV bags used in neonatal intensive care: PVC is toxic and releases gases into the air. Let your cars off-gas before driving. Choose baby toys and pool and bath toys that are PVC-, phthalate- and BPA-free.

#6 – Disposable cutlery, egg cartons, foam cups and to-go foam packaging from restaurants: Long-term exposure to small quantities of styrene can cause neurotoxic, hematological, cytogenic and carcinogenic effects. It is classified as a possible human carcinogen by the EPA. Transfer your restaurant

leftovers to a safe container as quickly as possible. Avoid foam egg cartons. (A study showed that, after three hours, chemicals from the egg carton had leached through the eggshell into the eggs.)

If enough consumers stop buying certain products, it can signal the industry that we demand safer products. I think I'm going to start educating the restaurants we frequent about the dangers of their take-home products as well as their foam cups. ;-)

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Your Best Medicine Might Be a Good Night's Sleep

Why the most powerful recovery tool isn't another supplement—it's something your body was designed to do every night.

By DR. JENNIFER M. TRENDT

We spend nearly one-third of our lives asleep, yet many of us treat sleep as if it's optional. We stay up a little later, wake up a little earlier, and assume we'll simply catch up over the week-end.

Unfortunately, our brains don't work that way. Sleep isn't simply the absence of being awake. It's one of the busiest times of the day for your brain and body.

While you're sleeping, your immune system strengthens, damaged tissues begin repairing, memories are organized, hormones are regulated, and your brain performs one of its most remarkable jobs: house-keeping.

During deep sleep, a network known as the glymphatic system becomes far more active, helping clear metabolic waste that accumulates throughout the day. Scientists now believe this nightly "cleaning cycle" may play an important role in long-term brain health.

When we consistently cut sleep short, we pay a price. Research has shown that inadequate sleep slows reaction time, impairs decision-making, in-



creases pain sensitivity, weakens immune function, and delays recovery from both exercise and injury. If you're an athlete, sleep may be the most effective—and least expensive—performance enhancer available. If you're simply trying to stay healthy, think clearly, or keep up with your family, the same principle applies: your body heals best when it sleeps well.

The good news is that improving sleep often begins long before bedtime.

One of the most powerful ways to reset your body's internal clock is to step outside short-

ly after waking. Spending 10 to 20 minutes in natural morning sunlight, ideally within the first hour of your day, helps synchronize your circadian rhythm—the biological clock that tells your brain when to be alert and when it's time to sleep. Combine that with regular movement, limiting caffeine later in the day, reducing evening screen exposure, and maintaining a consistent bedtime, and you've given your brain the signals it needs to produce deeper, more restorative sleep.

So, where does chiropractic fit into the picture? Every mo-

ment of every day, your brain depends on information coming from your body. One of the goals of chiropractic care is to restore healthy spinal movement and reduce unnecessary stress

on the nervous system, allowing the brain and body to communicate as efficiently as possible.

While chiropractic is not a treatment for insomnia, many patients tell me they sleep more deeply after an adjustment. This makes sense. A nervous system that isn't constantly responding to physical stress is often better able to shift from "fight-or-flight" into the restorative state where healing happens.

A healthier life doesn't begin with another gadget, another energy drink, or another productivity hack. It begins by giving your brain the opportunity to do what it was brilliantly designed to do every single night.

Sleep well. Heal well. Live well.

TOP 5

continued from page 4

you simply have to accept.

Many of these concerns may be related to nutrition, hormones, inflammation, stress, metabolic health, or other factors that can often be improved. The goal isn't to look 25 forever. The goal is to feel your best at every age.

5. Nobody cares more about your health than you do.

This may be the hardest truth on the list. Your doctor can guide you. We can educate you. We can order tests, recommend treatments, and help create a plan. But we cannot make choices for you.

The patients who experience the greatest transformations are not necessarily the ones with the most resources or the perfect genetics. They are the ones

who become active participants in their own health. They ask questions. They stay curious. They follow through. They view their health as an investment rather than an expense.

Your healthcare team can walk beside you, but ultimately, you are the most important member of the team.

At the end of the day, these truths are not meant to make anyone feel guilty. They're meant to be empowering. Your body is remarkably resilient. It is constantly adapting, healing, and responding to the choices you make each day. Small improvements, practiced consistently, can create extraordinary changes over time.

And if there's one thing I hope every patient understands, it's this: it's never too late to start listening to your body and giving it the care it deserves.

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Acute Rehabilitation Versus Skilled Nursing Rehabilitation: What’s the Difference?

By TERESA HALVERSON

You Had a Hospital Stay—Now What?

Leaving the hospital is an important milestone, but recovery often continues long after discharge. Whether you’re recovering from surgery, illness, injury, or a medical event, the right rehabilitation program can help you regain strength, restore independence, and return safely to the activities you enjoy. Choosing the right rehabilitation setting can make all the difference in your journey back to health.

While both acute (hospital based) rehabilitation and skilled nursing rehabilitation facilities provide therapy and nursing/medical care, they differ in the intensity of services, patient requirements and expected outcomes.

Skilled Nursing and Rehabilitation facilities are often most appropriate for people who:

- Need continued recovery after hospitalization or surgery
- Require more nursing care such as wound care management, medication administration and management, and/or monitoring of chronic health conditions.
- Benefit from therapy but may not be able to tolerate several hours of intensive therapy each day.
- Need additional time to build strength and confidence prior to returning home.

Common reasons for admission include:

- Joint replacement recovery
- Cardiac or pulmonary conditions
- Infections requiring on-going care
- General weakness after illness
- Fractures or falls
- Deconditioning following an extended hospital stay

What are the key differences between acute hospital-based rehabilitation and skilled nursing rehabilitation?

Key Features: Acute Rehabilitation

- Patients must participate in three hours of therapy per day, five to seven days per week (all disciplines)
- Care is overseen by a reha-

bilitation physician and an interdisciplinary team.

- Patients must be medically stable but able to tolerate intensive therapy.

- Common diagnoses include stroke, spinal cord injury, traumatic brain injury, major orthopedic surgeries, and complex neurological conditions.

- Shorter ???

Key Features: Skilled Nursing Rehabilitation

- Physical, occupational, and speech therapy are provided, typically one to three hours per day, depending on patient needs and abilities.

- 24-hour skilled nursing care.
- Dedicated Medical Director and On-sight Extenders (PA, NP)

- Patients who cannot yet tolerate intensive rehabilitation can still receive therapy while continuing medical recovery.

- Ideal for patients recovering from hospitalization, surgery, illness, or injury who need ongoing nursing support and rehabilitation.

- Average length of stay varies from a few days to several months, depending on progress and goals.

- Daily Clinical Interdisciplinary Team Oversight

- Physician oversight to include Primary Physician, Psychiatry, Cardio, Nephrology and Respiratory therapy.

Skilled Nursing Rehabilitation is Usually Best For:

Patients who need rehabilitation but also require ongoing nursing care, medication management, wound care, IV therapy, or a slower-paced recovery program.

Why Choose Skilled Nursing Rehabilitation Over Acute Rehabilitation?

While acute inpatient rehabilitation is an excellent option for some patients, many individuals achieve better outcomes in a skilled nursing rehabilitation setting because it offers a balance of therapy, nursing care, and recovery time. Acute rehabilitation requires patients to participate in three hours of therapy every day. Many seniors and medically complex patients simply are not ready for that level of intensity.

The right rehabilitation set-

ting depends on a patient’s medical condition, functional abilities, endurance, and recovery goals. While hospital-based rehabilitation offers intensive therapy for those who can tolerate it, skilled nursing rehabilitation provides a valuable bridge between the hospital and home, allowing patients to regain strength, independence, and confidence at a pace that meets their individual needs.

Better Choice for Frail Older Adults

Many seniors recovering from hospitalization need:

- Assistance with daily activities
- Fall prevention
- Nutritional support
- Strength and balance training
- Smooth transition back home with follow-up

The goal of skilled nursing

rehabilitation is not only to improve strength and mobility but also to prepare patients and families for a successful discharge home through:

- Home safety assessments
- Caregiver education
- Equipment recommendations
- Medication teaching

Continued on next page



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Whether welcoming family for a summer vacation or hosting friends for a long weekend, local residents know that travel doesn't always go exactly as planned. Fortunately, Baywind Medical in Niceville is ready to help when visitors discover they've left an important item behind.

One of the most common needs Baywind Medical sees from travelers is replacement

CPAP equipment. Whether a machine, mask or accessory was forgotten at home, lost in transit or damaged during travel, the team can help visitors find solutions to keep their sleep routines on track.

For guests who need a little extra mobility support while exploring the Emerald Coast, Baywind Medical also offers wheelchair rentals. A wheelchair can make it easier to enjoy local

attractions, scenic waterfronts and community events without missing out on the fun.

Unexpected injuries can happen on vacation as well. Baywind Medical carries products such as cast covers and walking boots to help visitors stay comfortable and active while recovering.

The bottom line? If travel plans take an unexpected turn, Baywind Medical is a trusted



local resource dedicated to helping guests stay comfortable and enjoy their time on the Emerald Coast.

Baywind Medical is located at 540 E. John Sims Parkway in Niceville and is open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more information, call (850) 729-2559 or visit baywind-medical.com.

REHABILITATION

continued from previous page

• Community resource coordination

The Bottom Line

Acute rehabilitation is ideal for patients who are medically



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stable and capable of participating in intensive therapy several hours each day. Skilled nursing rehabilitation is often the better choice for patients who need a combination of rehabilitation, skilled nursing care, medical oversight, and a recovery pace tailored to their individual needs.

Acute rehabilitation is ideal for patients who are medically stable and capable of participating in intensive therapy several hours each day. Skilled nursing rehabilitation is often the better choice for patients who need a combination of rehabilitation, skilled nursing care, medical oversight, and a recovery pace tailored to their individual needs.

For many older adults recovering from surgery, illness, injury, or hospitalization, skilled nursing rehabilitation offers the right balance of healing, therapy, and support to maximize

recovery and safely return home

At facilities such as The Manor at Blue Water Bay, patients benefit from skilled nursing care, personalized rehabilitation programs, and coordinated medical services designed to support a successful recovery and safe return home.

If you or a loved one is recovering from a hospital stay, surgery, illness, or injury, we're here to help. Our dedicated team provides skilled nursing care, rehabilitation services, and personalized support designed to help patients regain strength, independence, and confidence.

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BY NATALIE KESSLER

When it comes to selling a business, confidentiality is king. Premature leaks can disrupt operations, alarm employees, erode customer confidence, and weaken your negotiating position. As a seller, protecting confidentiality needs to be a top priority from day one. Here are some key strategies to keep things under wraps until the deal is done.

The Risks of Breached Confidentiality

What’s the big deal about a few people finding out you’re selling? Some serious consequences:

- Employees may fear for their jobs and start jumping ship



- Customers may take their business to competitors, fearing instability
- Vendors may tighten credit terms or even cut off supply
- Competitors may exploit uncertainty to steal market share
- Landlords may become difficult with lease assignments or renewals
- Opportunistic buyers may lowball offers, sensing desperation

The mere perception that you’re selling can sabotage business stability, even if a deal doesn’t materialize. Confidentiality helps you control the narrative.

Screening Buyers with NDAs and POFs

The first lines of defense in

protecting confidentiality are Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) and Proof of Funds (POF) requirements. Before learning your business identity or receiving sensitive information, serious buyers should be willing to:

- Sign an NDA prohibiting disclosure of the potential sale, restricting use of confidential information, and providing for legal remedies if breached.
- Provide a verified POF document from their bank or lender, proving they have the liquid assets to cover the expected purchase price.

Requiring a POF alongside an NDA quickly weeds out unqualified buyers and preserves confidentiality. Only buyers with verified financial capacity should be given access to your business details. Tiered information sharing is key - withhold the most sensitive data until you’re fully

confident in a buyer’s seriousness, ability to close, and respect for confidentiality.

Maintaining Discretion in Marketing

- How you market your business for sale is critical for preserving confidentiality. Some best practices:
- Use a reputable business broker who understands confidentiality
 - Advertise a generic business description - no identifying details
 - Host showings outside of business hours; meet buyers off-site first
 - Use secure online data rooms for sharing financials and diligence items
 - Be mindful of what’s visible/audible if touring the business

The goal is to minimize disruption to operations while still providing buyers enough information to make an offer.

Your Broker as a Confidential Advocate

- An experienced business broker is your greatest ally in maintaining confidentiality and screening buyers. Your broker can:
- Serve as a confidential point of contact for buyer inquiries
 - Provide and collect signed NDAs from all prospective buyers
 - Verify POF documentation

- before any information is released
- Pre-screen and qualify buyers based on financial capacity and seriousness
 - Facilitate secure information sharing at each stage of due diligence
 - Provide discreet showings and off-site buyer/seller meetings
 - Monitor for leaks and swiftly address any breaches

At First Choice Business Brokers, our proven confidential marketing process includes NDA and POF requirements

for all prospective buyers. We understand the importance of protecting your confidentiality while also efficiently finding qualified, serious buyers who can close.

If you’re considering selling your business and want a trusted partner to screen buyers and safeguard your confidentiality, give me a call at 850-588-1025 or email natalie.kessler@fcbb.com.



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Quieter Hurricane Forecast Is No Free Pass: Bit-Wizards Urges Business Readiness

By JEFF ANDREJCIC

While the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicts a below-normal 2026 Atlantic hurricane season, Bit-Wizards cautions businesses that “below-normal” does not mean “low impact.”

NOAA's outlook calls for an 8–14 named storm season with 3–6 hurricanes and 1–3 major hurricanes, but the agency also

stresses that any season can produce a damaging landfalling storm.

The recent devastation from Tropical Storm Arthur illustrates the risk. The storm drove an estimated \$4 billion to \$6 billion in total economic losses across the Gulf Coast, disrupting power, connectivity, supply chains, and workforce availability. For businesses, even short

outages can cost thousands of dollars per hour, interrupt local and digital operations, and weaken customer trust.

During Arthur, rainfall topped 31 inches in some areas, while localized infrastructure failures showed that a tropical storm—not only a major hurricane—can cripple unprepared commercial operations. Businesses across the Gulf Coast

should use the quieter seasonal outlook as a prompt to review hurricane plans, disaster recovery procedures, and continuity strategies now. “Forecasts are useful, but they can also create a false sense of security,” said Brian Schlechter, Director of IT at Bit-Wizards. “It only takes one storm to knock critical systems offline. The best time to validate backups, test remote access, and confirm recovery procedures is before the first warning cone shows up.”

NOAA leaders have emphasized that seasonal forecasts are not landfall predictions and that significant impacts can occur in years with lower overall activity. Conditions can still support rapid intensification, and a single storm can expose weak points in infrastructure, staffing, and technology. For many organizations, the largest losses come after the wind and rain, when employees cannot access the systems needed to serve customers, process payments, manage payroll, or fulfill orders.

Arthur put that strain on regional small and midsize businesses. While major cellular networks largely stayed online, localized flooding submerged ground-level server racks and utility pole collapses severed last-mile fiber connections. Companies without redundant, cloud-based configurations faced immediate hardware replacement costs ranging from \$5,000 to more than \$50,000, along with halted credit card processing and digital order fulfillment.

A Business Continuity and Disaster Recovery plan is an important first step, but executing it under pressure requires preparation and expertise. Bit-Wizards recommends that organizations work with an IT partner before storms threaten to reduce single points of failure and confirm that recovery plans function in real conditions.

That starts with eliminating on-premise vulnerabilities. Arthur showed that companies relying entirely on local, ground-level hardware risk permanent data loss or expensive emergency recovery when server rooms flood. Cloud backup and virtualization strategies help

keep data safe, dry, and accessible from anywhere. Businesses should also establish last-mile redundancy so a single severed broadband line does not stop operations. Automatic failover options, such as cellular backup routers or satellite data links, can keep point-of-sale systems and cloud platforms running even when local infrastructure goes down.

Organizations should define and test recovery objectives before severe weather arrives. A backup has limited value if it cannot be restored quickly, so proactive restore testing helps confirm whether a business can return online in minutes or hours rather than days. Companies should also enable secure remote work in advance by configuring remote-access protocols, cloud-based communication tools, and device safety guidelines so teams can keep working if an office or storefront becomes inaccessible.

To help organizations get started, Bit-Wizards offers a downloadable planning guide, available here: BCDR Planning Guide (PDF).

Bit-Wizards has supported organizations through disasters and business disruptions since 2000. The company's Managed IT Services are designed to help businesses prepare for hurricanes, unexpected outages, device failures, ransomware attacks and other incidents that can lead to data loss or downtime. “Whether it's major storm damage or a ransomware attack, the outcome often depends on the same fundamentals, backups, documentation, tested recovery steps, and a team that can respond quickly,” Schlechter said.

Experts recommend that businesses have a documented disaster recovery plan, reliable data backups and clearly defined procedures in place before hurricane season arrives. While storms often bring these concerns into focus, the same preparation can help organizations recover from a variety of disruptions throughout the year.

For more information, visit <https://bitwizards.com/contact>.

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Ten Years Later:

How a Dream, a Turtle and Local Support Started It All

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

Ten years ago, many South Walton residents could still remember when Highway 30A felt more like a scenic backroad than a nationally recognized brand. Growth was already underway, but the area still carried the slower rhythm and small-town familiarity locals cherished. Summers were busy, but the quieter months still belonged to the teachers, fishermen, artists, restaurant owners and entrepreneurs who formed the backbone of the community before much of the country fully discovered it.

Then came 2016.

That was the year newspaper man Dave White arrived from New England carrying a simple, but ambitious, dream: to create a publication devoted entirely to the people, stories and spirit of South Walton.

Like so many who now call this area home, Dave's connection to the Emerald Coast actually began years earlier during visits with friends Ray and Lisa Cyr, owners of Studio 237 Music School in Santa Rosa Beach. They introduced him to the charm, beauty and strong sense of community found throughout South Walton. What started as admiration soon became something more — a desire to move here permanently and become part of the community itself. And he did.

Ray helped introduce Dave to local business owners and community leaders while Dave shared the vision for an all-positive publication centered on storytelling, connection and, most importantly for local business owners, direct-mail distribution.

But a brand was still needed that truly reflected the local lifestyle. That inspiration came through South Walton resident and the paper's first-year editor Sarah Stewart. She suggested the now-iconic sea-glass blues and greens, a turtle "mascot" and logo, and a tagline that instantly separated locals from tourists: "Locals get it," which, to be clear, they did. And still do.

And just like that, SoWal Life was born.

The concept was simple — deliver the publication directly to mailboxes and fill it with sto-



PHOTO CREDIT: SAVVY LEIGH PHOTO

(Left to Right) Paul Willms, Sales; Sarah Stewart; Scott Miller; Lori Leath Miller; Dave White; Lisa and Ray Cyr; Grace Ann Russell, Sales; and Denise David, Sales. Not pictured: Jamie Zimchek, Editor Sowel Life and PCB Life; John Tower, Accounting; Dawna Shackley, Sowel Life Graphic Designer; Kim Harper, Life Media Art Director.

ries locals actually cared about: community happenings, events, arts, local personalities, hometown heroes and positive news. Nationally known author Sean Dietrich came aboard alongside monthly columns such as the now longtime faith-based column, A Pastor's Ponderings. With no established playbook, the small team juggled ad sales, last-minute content submissions, production challenges and tight deadlines while working to prove the concept month after month. The vibe was less "breaking news" and more "Hey, did you hear about this?" As SoWal Life continued gaining momentum and reader support, a second SoWal Life edition was launched to expand the publication's reach to Miramar Beach. The strong response confirmed what Dave White and the team had believed from the beginning: people were hungry for positive, community-focused local media that celebrated the place they called home.

The Next Chapter

What started as one community newspaper soon became something much bigger.

In 2018, publisher Lori Leath Smith became a partner in launching Destin Life, bringing the same all-positive, community-centered concept into the Destin market. The response was immediate and enthusiastic.

The momentum continued with the launch of Bay Life in 2019. Through another business partnership, Lori and Scott Miller introduced the publication to the Bluewater Bay com-

munity-focused media outlets.

Today, Life Media Group encompasses eight all-positive community newspapers, digital platforms and specialty publications serving readers across the Emerald Coast. The organization is supported by a dedicated team of 13 staff members, along with a talented network of writers, photographers, designers, contributors and community partners who help bring each publication to life every month.

While each publication maintains its own unique hometown personality, the mission has remained the same from the beginning: celebrate local people, support local businesses, strengthen community connection and shine a light on the positive stories happening all around us every day.

"Readers have embraced the publications as their own," says Dave. "Many say they read the papers cover-to-cover each month for local events, uplifting stories and hometown happenings often difficult to find elsewhere. Others intentionally support businesses they discover inside the pages."

Life Media direct-mails and

distributes more than 87,000 hyper-local copies monthly throughout the Emerald Coast while also reaching thousands more readers digitally through websites, e-newsletters and social media platforms.

More than newspapers, Life Media has always been about connection — and interaction. We love hearing from our readers, receiving story ideas, celebrating accomplishments, spotlighting businesses and learning about the people and organizations making a difference throughout our communities. Some of our readers and advertising partners have been with us since the very beginning, and for that loyalty and support, we are deeply grateful.

The Next Decade

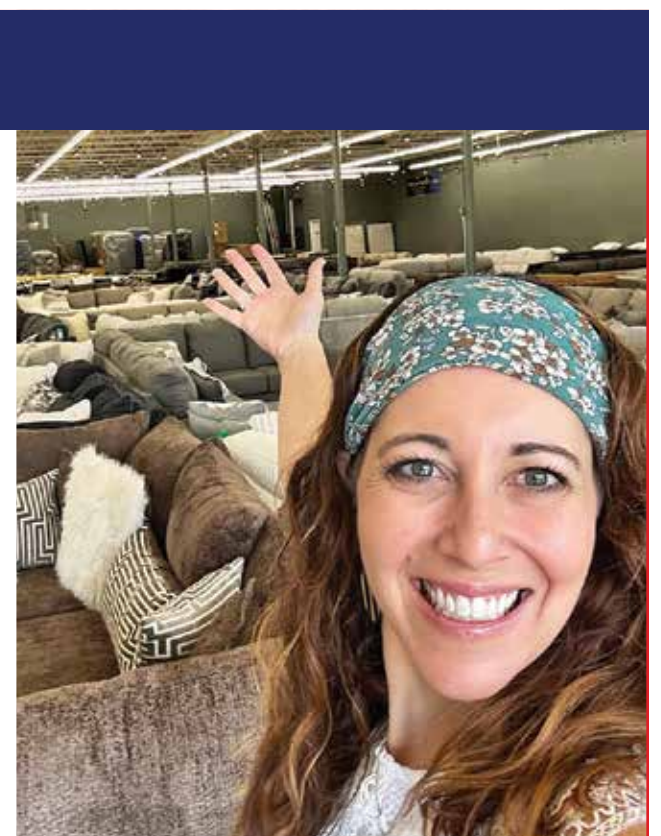
As Life Media moves into its next decade, the mission remains unchanged: sharing positive stories and celebrating the faith, family, businesses and community spirit that make our area so special.

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Continued on page 39



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A Pastor's Ponderings: Liberty Is a Gift, But Freedom Is a Stewardship



BY "DOC" DOUG STAUFFER

As America celebrates 250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the question before us is not only what kind of nation our fathers left to us, but what kind of nation we will leave to future generations.

That question feels especially meaningful here in Northwest Florida. We live in a community where the word "freedom" is not an abstract concept. It has faces. It has uniforms. It has folded flags. It has empty chairs at family tables. It has parents deployed far from home, children learning resilience earlier than most, veterans carrying memories the rest of us may never fully understand, and families who have sacrificed quietly so the rest of us can live freely.

In Okaloosa County, we do

not have to search very far to be reminded that liberty is a gift. From Eglin Air Force Base to Hurlburt Field, from Duke Field to the countless veterans who call this area home, we are surrounded by living reminders that freedom has always required courage, sacrifice, and stewardship.

The 250th Anniversary of America should do more than stir patriotic emotion. It should stir spiritual reflection.

The Declaration of Independence appealed to truths that were higher than government. It spoke of rights given by the Creator, not merely granted by men. That matters. If liberty is only a political arrangement, then it rises and falls with elections, courts, and cultural trends. But if liberty is a gift from God, then freedom carries with it a sacred responsibility.

Freedom was never meant to become selfishness. Liberty was never meant to become lawlessness. Independence from tyranny was never intended to become independence from truth, virtue, morality, or God.

That may be one of the great lessons America needs to remember at 250. A nation can possess freedom and still forget what freedom is for. Freedom is not merely the right to do what-



ever we want. True freedom gives us the opportunity to do what is right.

The Bible says, "For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another." The Bible reminds us that liberty is not a license to live carelessly. It is an opportunity to serve faithfully.

That kind of freedom begins at home. It is seen when fathers and mothers teach their children

truth. It is seen when churches preach the word of God without apology. It is seen when neighbors help neighbors, when citizens pray for their leaders, when veterans are honored, when the fallen are remembered, when children are taught gratitude, and when communities refuse to forget the blessings God has given.

Here on the panhandle, we have a rare opportunity in 2026. As flags wave, fireworks and

drone shows light up the sky, and patriotic celebrations fill our communities, we can do more than celebrate the past. We can recommit ourselves to the future.

What will we leave the future generations?

Will we leave them a country with more division than devotion? More entitlement than gratitude? More noise than wisdom? Or will we leave them an example of faith, family, courage, service, and moral conviction?

The 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence pledged their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor. They were not perfect men, but they understood that liberty required sacrifice. Now, 250 years later, we must understand that liberty still requires sacrifice. Not all sacrifice happens on a battlefield. Some sacrifice happens in the home, in the church, in the classroom, in public service, in private prayer, and in the daily decision to speak up when it seems easier to remain silent.

America's 250th Anniversary is more than a birthday. It is a mirror. It asks us who we are, what we value, and what we are willing to preserve.

Liberty is a gift. But freedom is a stewardship.

May God help us to be grateful for what we have received, faithful with what we have been given, and courageous enough to pass it on.

DINING

continued from page 20

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

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

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Sean of the South: Ball Games



BY SEAN DIETRICH

I remember going to a ball game with my old man. I remember the smells. Stale beer, human sweat, and the odor of unnaturally pink hotdogs that turned your bowels into stone.

I remember before the game, things got very quiet. All 30-odd thousand people rose. The throngs of stadium chairs creaking sounded like the world was splitting.

Everyone’s dad put down his non-evangelical beverage, SLOWLY, careful not to spill. Thousands of American grandpas removed lit cigars and balanced them, with surgical-like care, onto armrests.

The anthem was played.

Back in those days, the anthem was handled differently than it is today. Back then, guest artists did not take the mound, wearing asymmetric haircuts and crotch-revealing trousers. Neither did singers demonstrate 10 minutes of vocal gymnastics until their anthem performance resembled a febrile seizure.

No. Back then the organ played. And everybody sang.

We used to be a nation of singers. Remember that? Singing was just normal for us. Our childhood classrooms had upright console pianos, and our teachers knew how to play them. Mrs. Moore would bang out “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” before each class. Mrs. Smith played “This Land is Your Land” every Friday after the Pledge.

Well, that was a long time ago.

Recently, I attended a modern baseball game. It was a very different experience. My wife and I ordered \$34 nachos from a kiosk, and the cashier asked whether I wanted to leave a 25-percent tip. Beers were \$18 apiece.

During the game, a huge LED timer runs between pitches

so TV producers can fit in more commercials on broadcasts. The bases are now bigger, the distance between bases is now shorter. They’re changing our game.

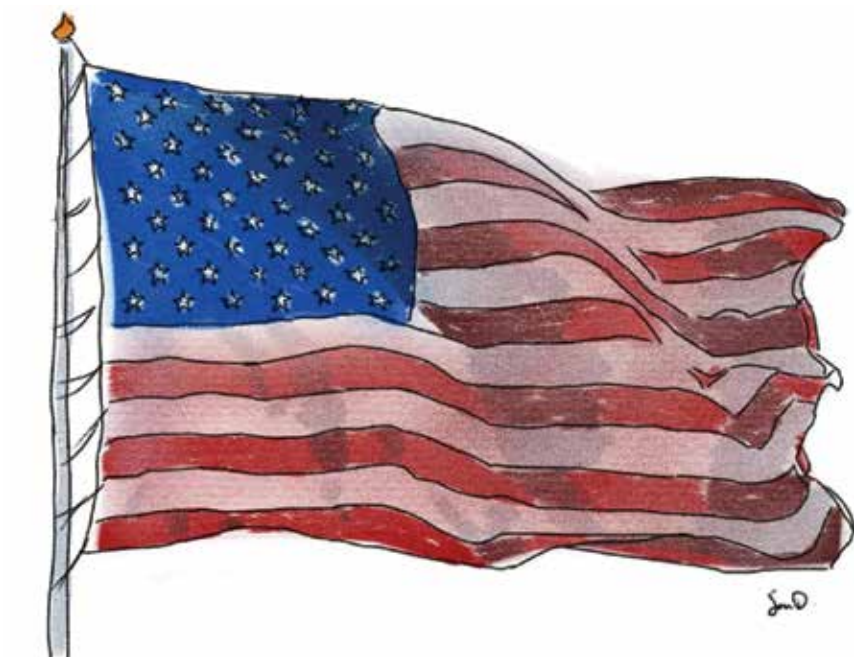
But none of that bothered me. Not really. A Major League park is what it is. Get over it. At a ball game, you get what you get, and you don’t pitch a fit.

What I was most interested in, truthfully, was the anthem. I was curious about it. I wondered: Do people still sing together the way they did 40 years ago?

After all, our world is nothing like it was. Our current world, for example, is almost devoid of classroom pianos. In 1938 the New York Times reported that 5.8 million pianos were sold in America each year. Whereas last year we barely sold 30,000.

So anyway, the moment of truth arrived. The announcer asked everyone to rise for the anthem.

People stood. Chairs creaked. Dads placed beers beneath seats. People who were vaping



expelled a final blast and hid their devices from security.

Everyone looked at the flag. The music began.

And...

Everyone knew the words. Everyone sang. The stadium sounded like it was going to crumble beneath the volume of mass singing.

the people were not. In fact, the crowd was only just getting warmed up. They kept cheering. For whole minutes, they cheered.

Fists pumped into the air. People were hugging. A flag waved on the mega-tron screen. The sound of unified voices was engulfing. Fighter jets flew overhead. Fireworks. People were amazingly, wholeheartedly, demonstratively together. Even if only for a few seconds in time.

And in that beautiful moment of oneness, that moment of palpable joy, do you know something?

Nobody seemed to care about Cracker Barrel’s sign.



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 Arts & Music

Think Blacksmiths Disappeared? Think Again.

Local craftsmen are keeping a centuries-old tradition alive through fire, steel and fellowship

By LORI LEATH MILLER

Blacksmithing may have been popularized in recent years by television shows such as *Forged in Fire* and *Men at Arms*, but in our state, the tradition has been thriving for more than four decades thanks to the Florida Artist Blacksmith Association (FABA).

Founded in 1984, FABA has spent the last 41 years teaching the craft, preserving its history and helping establish historical blacksmith shops throughout the state. Its mission is simple: To teach – To preserve. “Blacksmithing has experienced a renaissance in recent years, but

this isn’t new to us,” said David Sandlin of the Far West Panhandle Blacksmiths chapter. “FABA has been teaching the craft and preserving the traditions of blacksmithing in Florida for more than four decades.”

Today, FABA includes eight chapters across the state, each



hosting monthly meetings where blacksmiths of all skill levels gather to share techniques, ideas and stories while working hot iron at the forge.

For local residents, that opportunity is available through the Far West Panhandle Blacksmiths chapter, headquartered at Traditions Workshop, 418 Green Acres Road in Fort Walton Beach. Meetings regularly feature demonstrations, hands-on projects and open forge time, allowing participants to learn new skills or work on personal projects alongside experienced smiths. “Our mission is to teach and preserve the noble art of blacksmithing,” Sandlin said. “We enjoy the open exchange of ideas as we smite hot iron on the anvil.”

First-time visitors are always welcome at no charge. After that, annual family memberships are just \$30 and provide access to FABA events across Florida, discounts on the organization’s annual conference and a digital subscription to *The Clinker Breaker*, FABA’s monthly newsletter featuring blacksmithing news, projects and events from around the state.

One of the highlights of each year is the statewide convention in Gainesville, where blacksmiths gather for three days of demonstrations, classes and fellowship. This year’s event, FABA CON 41, is scheduled for Oct. 16-18 at the Best Western Gateway Grand in Gainesville.

Beyond teaching traditional skills, FABA members actively seek opportunities to introduce the public to blacksmithing through demonstrations at museums, libraries, festivals and community events. “FABA is

always looking for opportunities to put the noble craft of the blacksmith before the public eye,” Sandlin said. “Museums, libraries and community venues have proven to be great places to meet people and generate interest in our craft.” The organization also welcomes recommendations from groups interested in hosting a demonstration or “hammer-in” event.

Upcoming Far West Panhandle Blacksmiths Events

July 25 John Butler Family Farm, 4112 Bell Lane, Pace | 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

The focus shifts to the annual gift-exchange project, “Something That Twists or Turns.” Demonstrations will include forging a corkscrew under the shade of the pecan trees. Lunch provided; donations appreciated.

Aug. 22 Traditions Workshop | 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

Members pursuing Journeyman certification will work toward completing required standards in preparation for recognition at the October state conference.

Sept. 12 Traditions Workshop | 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

This special out-of-cycle meeting will focus on completing both the chapter competition project and individual gift-exchange projects before the conference season begins.

Oct. 10 Traditions Workshop | 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

Members will prepare equipment and pack the trailer in advance of FABA CON 41 in Gainesville.

Continued on next page

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BLACKSMITHS

continued from previous page



Oct. 16-18 FABA CON 41
| Best Western Gateway
Grand, Gainesville

The statewide convention features three days of demonstrations, classes and educational opportunities for blacksmiths of all experience levels.

Oct. 31 Traditions Work-

shop | 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

Members will share techniques, ideas and discoveries gathered at the conference while resetting equipment for upcoming competitions.

Nov. 7 Timber Creek Distillery, 6451 Lake Ella Road, Crestview | 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

The annual chapter competition returns with a mystery challenge announced closer to the event. Participants will have five hours to create a forged project using either their own steel or material from the chapter's scrap supply. The day traditionally includes pizza from Timber Creek's stone oven, fellowship and plenty of friendly competition.

Winter Schedule: No December meeting is planned due to holiday activities and Renaissance fair commitments.

For safety, all participants and visitors under the forge tent are required to wear safety glasses and sturdy closed-toe shoes or boots. Long pants and long-sleeve shirts made from cotton or other natural fibers are strongly recommended.

For more information about membership, events or hosting a demonstration, visit www.blacksmithing.org or contact David Sandlin at david@traditionsworkshop.com or 850-974-1548.

TEN YEARS

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