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Postal Customer Local

A Community Honors Its Veterans with More Than a Day of Fishing

Soldiers on the Water Returns Sept. 19

BY LORI MILLER

With deep military roots and generations of veterans living and working nearby, Fort Walton Beach has a special connection to the upcoming 13th Annual Soldiers on the Water. On Saturday, Sept. 19, combat-wounded veterans will board local charter boats for a day created entirely in their honor.

The Emerald Coast Association of REALTORS® (ECAR), in partnership with the ECAR Foundation, local charter boat captains, sponsors and volunteers, presents the event at no cost to participating veterans. The day combines world-class fishing with fellowship, recognition and the reassurance that their service and sacrifices have not been forgotten.

Since its beginning in 2013 with 35 military participants, Soldiers on the Water has grown to serve more than 100 combat-wounded veterans.



Organizers hope to welcome approximately 125 participants this year.

"Soldiers on the Water is one of the most meaningful traditions our Association has the privilege of hosting," said representatives of ECAR. "This event is about more than fishing—it's about showing our appreciation, building connections, and giving combat-wounded veterans an opportunity to enjoy a day

surrounded by people who are grateful for their service. We are incredibly thankful to the sponsors, charter captains, and volunteers whose generosity makes this event possible year after year."

The event will take place behind Brotula's Seafood House & Steamer at the Destin Fishing Fleet Marina. Veteran check-in and a light breakfast begin at 7 a.m., followed by an 8 a.m. boat



departure. Participants will spend the morning fishing the waters surrounding Destin aboard vessels provided by volunteer charter captains and boat owners.

After the excursion, everyone will return to shore for an afternoon meal, fellowship and an awards presentation recognizing accomplishments

SOLDIERS

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Ham Radio Connects Generations, Builds Community

BY MICHELLE RUSCHMAN

Ham radio is an intergenerational hobby for men and women, and people can get started with varying levels of ability and interest. DJ Stewart, call sign KI4ZER, is president of both the **Playground Amateur Radio Club (PARC)** and the **North Okaloosa Amateur Radio Club (NOARC)**. He has fond memories of getting started in

HAM RADIO

continued on page 2



Magnolia Grill

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

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THURSDAYS



6:30pm-8:30pm

Community

HAM RADIO

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ham radio in early childhood. “My father and grandfather were both hams in Wisconsin. When we moved to St. Peters, my dad started the St. Peter’s Emergency Operations Center. They had no emergency resources at the time and were dependent on St. Louis, Missouri, which was 35 miles east. Since few resources were allocated to people outside the city, the response times were slow. The center became a very robust program as they helped people during times our community faced tornadoes, fires, floods, and even tremors. Watching my dad help our town through those efforts taught me a lot.

From there, we started working with local governments and local police. Other hams got involved, and that experience led to a love affair with electronic equipment and communications of all types.”

In the early 19th century, the term “ham” radio distinguished amateurs from professional operators. It stemmed from “ham-fisted,” an old wired-telegraph slang term describing clumsy Morse code operators. It has evolved into a term signifying the fellowship of those interested in a communication style that endures through the digital age. “Our clubs are where every walk of life comes

together – men and women of varying occupations, veterans and civilians, seasoned operators and people who are brand new to amateur radio. What we have in common is our desire to understand this hobby. We help each other get to whatever level the individual wants to reach, whether it be in selecting or setting up equipment, figuring out the various signals, or getting ready for the next license.”

To fully experience amateur radio, operators can use a variety of handheld gear or desktop transceivers to communicate by voice, Morse code or digital data. However, a license is required. Individuals obtain one by passing a test for a fee, which legally grants the operator privileges to broadcast on the frequencies designated for that license class.

There are three license classes: Technician, General and Amateur Extra. Each license dictates the range of frequencies on which a ham radio operator can legally transmit. The tests become progressively more difficult and cover radio theory and regulations. In the United States, the Federal Communications Commission manages and enforces these rules. “Based on how much someone wants to get involved, I would encourage people to try different meetings at different clubs. This is an incredibly social hobby, and each club has unique areas of focus,



whether it be more technical or community-oriented. Some people come seeking help with electrical projects, others want to get together to prepare for the next license, and others appreciate the sense of camaraderie until they decide to commit to the hobby. You’ll learn something no matter what you come for, and the club members are some of the greatest people I’ve met.”

Not only can people find a new hobby and make friends through amateur radio, but they also have opportunities to serve the community and take part in community events. Club members have served as points of contact at 5K events and oth-

er races, escorted parades and helped supplement communications.

Members will also be at these upcoming events:

Saturday, Oct. 10, from 8 a.m. to noon

Trade show: Amateur Radio Club Hamfest at the Crestview Community Center, 1446 Commerce Drive, Crestview.

Saturday, Nov. 21, from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Amateur radio electronics flea market: SwampFest at the roller derby hangar, Hangar 41, 41 Wyndham Ave. SE, Fort Walton Beach.

In addition to these events, there are opportunities to practice picking up radio signals using personal equipment well before emergencies occur. During the Fox Hunt, a mini transmitter is hidden in a defined area, and operators work their way toward it using their mobile radios.

Events range from local to nationwide. Field Day, held twice a year in June and January, brings together amateur radio operators throughout the nation to see how many other hams they can find using a variety of frequencies.

Visitors are welcome to attend club meetings, meet area experts and learn more about what ham radio operators can do.

PARC meets at 7:30 p.m. on the first and third Thursdays at 17 First St. in Fort Walton Beach. More information is available at w4zbb.org.

NOARC meets at 7 p.m. on the second and fourth Thursdays at 4565 Live Oak Church Road in Crestview. More information is available at w4aaz.org.



Questions can also be emailed to parcfwb@gmail.com. Additional clubs in the area include the Panama City Amateur Radio Club and the Milton Amateur Radio Club.

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



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An Unexpected Vintage

From Casual Wine Tastings to Vineyard Ownership in Argentina's Uco Valley

By DENISE DAVID

For a local area couple, Zane and Mindy Holscher, the journey to Argentina's Uco Valley did not begin in a vineyard. It began around a table.

The couple had always shared a love of travel and a curiosity about wine. When the pandemic brought their travels to a halt, they began spending more time tasting wines with friends and family, learning about different varieties and discovering the stories held within each bottle.

Then came an opportunity neither could have imagined: the chance to purchase vineyard property within a fully operating wine enterprise in Argentina's renowned Uco Valley. There was only one extraordinary detail—they had never personally visited the region.

The Holschers considered themselves wine enthusiasts, certainly, but not experts. What they lacked in formal experience, however, they made up for with curiosity, determination and a willingness to learn.

Over time, Zane and Mindy



worked alongside local experts, winemakers and producers, deepening their understanding of the land, the grape varieties and the people responsible for creating Argentina's world-class wines. The experience transformed an interest into a calling—and an unexpected opportunity into VINUV.

Today, VINUV offers two distinct wine labels, each reflecting a different part of the Holschers' story.



The VINUV label takes its name from "vin," meaning wine, and the Uco Valley, where its grapes are grown. It represents the company's super-premium wines and celebrates the quality and character of the region.

Defenders, the company's premium label, pays tribute to Zane's military service. Its wines are designed to be approachable, welcoming and easy to enjoy.

Together, the labels express



the philosophy at the heart of the Holschers' business: exceptional wine does not have to feel exclusive or intimidating.

"Wine can be intimidating," Mindy said. "Often, people keep buying the same wine because they aren't aware of other options."

That understanding has shaped the way Zane and Mindy introduce people to VINUV. They want wine drinkers to feel comfortable stepping beyond the familiar and discovering something new, while still honoring the craftsmanship, heritage and distinctive character that have made Argentina one of the world's great wine regions.

What began as informal tastings with friends and family has since grown into an award-win-

ning wine brand, with bottles available for nationwide shipping through VINUV.com. Yet for the Holschers, the journey has become about far more than producing and sharing wine.

Argentina welcomed them with open arms. Through their travels, they encountered a culture rich in warmth, hospitality and tradition—and met people who now feel like family.

Their hope is that each bottle offers others a connection to those people, places and experiences. Every pour is an invitation to discover the culture of the Uco Valley and what Zane calls "some of Argentina's best-kept secrets."

It is a fitting description of the journey itself: unexpected, deeply personal and meant to be shared.

As the VINUV philosophy says, "With Every Pour, A Story Unfolds."

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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Community



When the Gut Speaks First: Understanding the Back-to-School Stomachache

By DR. KAREN DeVORE

The first week of school has arrived. The backpacks are packed, the lunches are made, and after one last search for a missing shoe, everyone heads out the door. Then, just as you're reaching for the car keys, your child quietly says, "My stomach hurts."

For many parents and caregivers, this scene is as much a part of the back-to-school season as shopping for school supplies and navigating busy car lines.



The child who seemed perfectly healthy all summer suddenly doesn't want breakfast, complains of a stomachache before school, or makes repeated trips to the bathroom. Naturally, families wonder: Are they getting sick?

Sometimes they are. But sometimes, the stomach is simply the first place the body speaks.

The brain and digestive system are in constant communication through what scientists call the gut-brain axis. When children experience change, whether it's a new teacher, new classmates, academic expectations, a disrupted routine, or the excitement and uncertainty that naturally come with a new school year, the digestive system may respond before children have the words to describe what they're feeling.

Sometimes, the gut speaks first. That can look like stomachaches, nausea, constipation, diarrhea, changes in appetite, or even changes in bowel habits. The question isn't whether these symptoms are real; it's why they're happening.

One of the most helpful things parents and caregivers can do is look for patterns rather than focusing on a single episode.

Does the stomachache happen only before school? Does it improve later in the day? Does it appear before a test, after a difficult interaction with friends, or on Sunday evenings before the week begins?

Patterns like these may suggest the nervous system is playing a role, but they don't rule out an underlying medical condition. Pain that wakes a child from sleep, is accompanied by fever, persistent vomiting, blood in the stool, unexplained weight loss, poor growth, or continues regardless of the situation deserves prompt medical evaluation.

Rather than asking only, "Where does it hurt?" it can also be helpful to ask: "When does it happen?" "What was happening just beforehand?" "Has anything changed recently?"

Sometimes those questions provide clues that the symptom alone cannot.

Today's children navigate full schedules, academic expectations, extracurricular activities, changing friendships, and a constant stream of information. While these experiences are a normal part of growing up, they can place greater demands on a developing nervous system. For some children, those demands may show up in the digestive tract long before they have the words to explain what they're experiencing.

What Can Parents and Caregivers Do?

If a child says, "My stomach hurts," and otherwise appears well, the first response doesn't always have to be finding the medicine cabinet. Instead, create a few minutes of calm.

Turn off the television or music. Set aside phones and other screens. Sit together quietly. Offer a reassuring hug, hold their hand, or simply be present. Children often take emotional cues



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Continued on page 32



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October 23, 2026 | 7:00 PM

THE CARPENTERS SONGBOOK
November 3, 2026 | 7:00 PM

MYSTIC PIZZA
January 10, 2027 | 7:00 PM

CLUE
January 29, 2027 | 7:00 PM

MAGIC SCHOOL BUS
February 2, 2027 | 9:45 & 11:30 AM

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NOVEMBER 14, 2026
7:00 PM

The Lion King: Film with Live Orchestra
JANUARY 23, 2027
7:00 PM

Holiday Pops: A Candlelight Christmas
DECEMBER 4, 2026
7:00 PM

Stars of Tomorrow: Rising Voices
FEBRUARY 20, 2027
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Final Classics Puccini: La Bohème
APRIL 17, 2027
7:00 PM

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Events at the Beach

History Sandwiched-In: "Women in War Today"

Friday, Aug. 14, 2026 | Noon

Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida

Join the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida for History Sandwiched-In, its free, ongoing lunch-and-learn series. Dr. Chiccarelli will present "Women in War Today," exploring how women have become an integral part of today's fighting forces.

Admission is free. Guests are welcome to bring lunch.

Ken Ludwig's "Moriarty"

Aug. 14-16 and 21-23
Fort Walton Beach Civic Auditorium

Stage Crafters Community Theatre presents Ken Ludwig's Moriarty, directed by Douglas Henderson. Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson return when an investigation into the Bohemian king's stolen letters becomes an international mystery filled with spies, blackmail and intrigue.

With world peace at stake, Holmes and Watson join forces with American actress Irene Adler to battle criminal mastermind Professor Moriarty and his

network of devious henchmen. Five actors portray more than 40 characters in this fast-paced adventure featuring danger and laughter around every corner.

Performances begin at 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays. Purchase tickets at stagecraftersfwb.com.

Fort Walton Beach Community Chorus Rehearsals

The Fort Walton Beach Community Chorus will start rehearsals on Tuesday, August 18th, for their Christmas Show, December 11, 12 and 13, 2026.

We will accept new members until September 15. Rehearsals are held every Tuesday evening at First Christian Church, 201 St Mary Ave, FWB. Please arrive at 6:30 p.m. to sign in and get music. The FWBCC has been entertaining the Emerald Coast since 1975. We do two shows each year, Spring and Christmas. As a non-profit organization, we award music scholarships each year to graduating seniors who will be continuing their music education at the college level. If you have any questions please contact us at fwbcc1975@gmail.com."



more than \$3,000 in prizes and giveaways. The event will also feature a luxury bridal runway show highlighting the latest wedding designs from Dare Bridal Boutique.

VIP admission — 12:30 p.m. and includes early entry, an upgraded welcome bag and five raffle tickets. General admission — 1 p.m. and includes a welcome bag and one raffle ticket. Purchase tickets at coastalweddings.ticketspice.com/wedding-expo-destin. Learn more at coastalweddingsmagazine.com.

Coastal Weddings Expo Sunday, August 23, 2026 | 12:30-4 p.m.

Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center

Getting married? Connect with leading wedding professionals at the Coastal Weddings Expo Destin. Meet local venues, photographers, caterers, florists and other vendors while enjoying tastings, mocktails, live demonstrations, music, exclusive show specials and

Wine & Fries: Golden Hour for Good

Friday, Aug. 28, 2026 | 6-9 p.m.

The Alice | Destin
Ronald McDonald House Charities of Northwest Flori-

Continued on page 8

Toss for a Cause at Sandy Bags!

4th Annual "Bags on the Porch" Cornhole Tournament
Saturday, Sept. 12, 2026 | 9 a.m.-2 p.m. | The Back Porch, 1740 Scenic Hwy. 98, Destin

Grab your favorite cornhole partner and get ready to toss some bags for an incredible local cause! The Destin Rotary Sunset Club's Sandy Bags tournament promises friendly competition, plenty of laughs and a great day at The Back Porch.

Not playing? Come cheer from the sidelines, enjoy the action and support the teams. Proceeds benefit Fore Her,



which provides support, transportation and treatment assistance to local women facing breast cancer, as well as other

Rotary community initiatives. Life Media is excited to return as a tournament sponsor! This event is amazing fun for a meaningful cause, and we're honored to be part of it again this year.

Player registration, donations and sponsorships—starting at \$150—are available at tinyurl.com/sandybags2026. Learn more about Fore Her at foreher.org.

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2026

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October 17, 2026

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Early Registration Ends Oct 14 at 12 PM

Day of Registration Plus \$5

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\$35 Grass Field Parking

Registration Times: 0800 - 1000 AM - Awards: 2:30 PM

Limited Spaces - Register Early



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HAPPENINGS AROUND FWB

2026 EVENTS

AUGUST

- 12
Bonsai Workshop at Props Brewery & Taproom
6 pm | Props Brewery | FWB
- 13
Nothing But Networking at Knife's Edge Cafe at Bob Hope Village
11:30 am | Bob Hope Village | Shalimar
- 14
Moriarty - A Sherlock Holmes Adventure
7:30 pm | Stage Crafters Community Theatre | FWB
- History Sandwiched-In
Heritage Museum | Valparaiso
- 15
Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
- 18
Lunch N Learn: RNR Property Solutions; "How To Get Mailbox Money In Real Estate"
11:30 am | The Chamber Conference Room | FWB
- 20
Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's Business After Hours
5:30 pm | Hyatt House Destin | Destin
- Elvis '56: The 70th Anniversary
7:30 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville
- 21
Opening Reception for the Birds of a Feather Gallery Show
6 pm | Arts and Design Society | FWB
- Lunch N Learn: People's Home Health
11:30 am | The Chamber Conference Room | FWB
- 28
Wine & Fries: Golden Hour for Good
6 pm The Alice | Destin
- 29
Duchess LIVE
8 pm | Jake & Henry's | FWB

SEPTEMBER

- 04
Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee
7 am | Destin FWB Rigdon Center | FWB
- 05
Discover Science Saturday
10 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB
- 17
Greater FWB Chamber Business After Hours
5:30 pm | Emerald Coast Healthcare Coalition | FWB
- 19
Boys and Girls Club of the Emerald Coast's 6th Annual Burgers, Bourbon, and Beer Festival
1 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation Cultural Village | Destin
- 26
Emerald Coast Science Center's Day of Play with ACM and Nickelodeon
10:30 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB



10TH ANNUAL

HARVEST WINE & FOOD FESTIVAL

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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

Community

EVENTS

continued from page 6

da's signature fundraiser returns with waterfront views, wine, local brews, McDonald's famous French fries, live entertainment and auctions. Proceeds help families remain close to children receiving medical treatment.

Tickets are \$115. Purchase tickets at givebutter.com/c/wine-and-fries.

End-of-Summer DJ Pool Party and Beach Ball Drop

Sept. 5 | Noon-4 p.m.

The Grotto Pool |
The Island Resort, FWB

Make a splash and celebrate the end of summer with an afternoon of music and poolside fun at The Island Resort. Dance to upbeat tunes from the DJ, cool off in the Grotto Pool and don't miss the colorful beach ball drop from the Grotto!

Labor Day Weekend Celebration and Fireworks

Sunday, Sept. 6, 2026 |

Celebration from 6-9 p.m.; fireworks at 9 p.m.

HarborWalk Village |
Destin Harbor

Celebrate Labor Day week-



end along the Destin Harbor, followed by a fireworks show lighting up the sky at 9 p.m. Watch from the boardwalk, the water or a waterfront table.

The celebration is free and open to the public.

Battle for the Buckle

Wednesday-Sunday, Sept. 23-27, 2026

Harbor Docks | Destin

The 2nd Annual Westonwood Ranch Battle for the Buckle brings together anglers, business leaders and community supporters for four days of competitive fishing, camaraderie and giving back. Tournament highlights include a \$10,000 winner-take-all White Marlin prize and \$2,000 prizes for Catch and Release, Heaviest Tuna, Heaviest Wahoo, Heaviest Dolphin and the Junior Angler Youth Division. A \$1,500 Daily White Marlin Jackpot is also available.

Daily and Overall Calcutta registration takes place Sept. 23, with 10% benefiting Westonwood Ranch. The boat entry fee is \$1,000. Boats should register by Sept. 23; tournament T-shirt sizes may not be guaranteed for entries received after Sept. 1.

The tournament supports Westonwood Ranch and its mission to empower teens and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities through life-skills education, workforce development and meaningful employment opportunities.

Register at westonwood.org/battleforthebucklefishingtournament. For additional information, contact tournament director Joe Donovan at (850) 572-3695.

14th Annual Fore Her Golf Outing

Friday, Sept. 25, 2026 |

Check-in at 8 a.m.; tee time at 9 a.m.

The Links Golf Club at Sandestin

Golfers of every skill level are invited to think pink and hit the links for a great local cause. Presented by Emerald Coast Hospice Care, the outing includes a Bloody Mary Bar from Ruby

Slipper Cafe, breakfast from Chick-fil-A, 18 holes of golf, the popular "Dress Like a Lady Hole," food at the turn and an after-party featuring lunch, music, prizes, giveaways and raffle drawings. Funds raised help Fore Her offset living expenses for local breast cancer patients undergoing treatment along the Emerald Coast.

Early BIRDIE registration is available through Sept. 1 for \$175 per golfer or \$700 per team of four. After Sept. 1, registration increases to \$200 per golfer or \$800 per team. Register at foreher.org/golffouting. Sponsorship and volunteer opportunities are also available; contact Amy Walsh at amy@foreher.org.

Cabaret at Seagar's: An Evening with New York Voices

Thursday, Oct. 8, 2026 |
5:30 p.m.



Seagar's Prime Steaks & Seafood

Sinfonia Gulf Coast presents an intimate evening with Grammy Award-winning vocal ensemble New York Voices as part of the group's farewell tour, The Four and Only. Peter Eldridge, Kim Nazarian, Darmon Meader and Lauren Kinhan will celebrate 40 years of vocal jazz with inventive arrangements and seamless harmonies spanning jazz, pop and Brazilian influences.

Tickets are \$375 per person and include valet parking,

Continued on next page

More Than Bratwurst and Beer: Oktoberfest Returns to Fort Walton Elks Lodge

Live music will drift across Choctawhatchee Bay as friends gather for bratwurst, pretzels and friendly competition during the annual Oktoberfest at Fort Walton Elks Lodge No. 1795.

The celebration will take place from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 19, at the lodge's Tiki Beach on Okaloosa Island. Elks members and community guests are invited to enjoy Bavarian traditions while supporting the lodge's charitable mission.

Oktoberfest favorites, including bratwurst, sauerkraut and pretzels, will be served beginning at 11 a.m. while supplies last. Live music will provide the soundtrack for an afternoon of food, fellowship and panoramic views of the bay.

Guests looking for friendly competition can test their strength in the stein hoist and keg toss. Additional games and activities will offer entertainment for participants and spectators alike.

The event continues the lodge's long tradition of service and community involvement. After celebrating its



75th anniversary in 2025, Fort Walton Elks Lodge No. 1795 continues to host events that build friendships, create lasting memories and support the work of the Elks.

"Oktoberfest is important because it brings our community together and gives us the opportunity to show who we are and what we do," said Cindy Carter, chair of Oktoberfest 2026.

Whether enjoying the music, sharing a meal, cheering on the competitors or taking in the view from Tiki Beach, guests can experience an afternoon that brings together Bavarian tradition, community spirit and a commitment to giving back.



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USE CODE LM27 AT CHECKOUT

EVENTS

continued from page 8

a sparkling-wine reception, a multicourse dinner with wine, gratuity and the performance. Proceeds benefit Sinfonia Gulf Coast's music education and community engagement programs throughout Northwest Florida.

27th Annual Emerald Coast Home & Boat Show
Saturday, Oct. 10, 2026 |
10 a.m.-5 p.m.

Sunday, Oct. 11, 2026 |
10 a.m.-3 p.m.
Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center
1250 Miracle Strip Pkwy.
SE | Fort Walton Beach

Explore more than 51,000 square feet of exhibits featuring over 100 indoor vendors, boats, home-improvement products, healthcare services, local businesses and pet-rescue organizations. Visitors can take advantage of special home-show pricing, end-of-season boat discounts and more than \$20,000

in door prizes and giveaways.

Admission is free. Life Media is proud to sponsor this two-day community event.

Vendor and sponsor spaces are available. Contact Wes Fell at (850) 353-2832 or wesfell@cox.net. Learn more at ParadisePromotionsFL.com.

10th Annual Harvest Wine & Food Festival
Oct. 15-18

WaterColor and locations throughout South Walton

Sip, savor and celebrate during four unforgettable days of exceptional wine and cuisine at the Harvest Wine & Food Festival, produced by the Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation.

The festivities begin Thursday with intimate Harvest Wine



Dinners at restaurants and venues throughout South Walton. Friday's Harvest After Dark brings elevated wines, unexpected pairings and culinary creations to Cerulean Park. Saturday features the signature Grand Tasting, followed by a spirited Jazz Cocktail Brunch on Sunday.

Proceeds benefit the Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation and its mission to help children in need throughout Northwest Florida.

Tickets are on sale now. Visit dcwaf.org/harvest-festival for the complete schedule and ticket information.

A Decade of Service: SOF Missions' Diamond Gala

Shield of Faith (SOF) Missions will celebrate 10 years of serving the 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.



SOF Missions works to combat suicide among active-duty service members, veterans and first responders by providing comprehensive, no-cost care addressing psychological, physical, social and spiritual well-being. Through Be Resilient Clinics and Warrior Retreats—including local programs at EXOS at Andrews Institute—the organization has provided more than \$10.7 million in support to over 4,000 warriors nationwide.

The Diamond Gala will feature dinner and dessert, a distinguished guest speaker, performances by First Dance Ballroom Studio and the Bow

Tied Music Quartet, dancing, silent auction experiences, and powerful stories celebrating a decade of impact.

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

Date: Aug. 29, 2026

Location: Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center

Tickets: \$150 per person, including dinner, dessert and one complimentary drink

Sponsorships: Opportunities are available for individuals and businesses

Purchase tickets or learn more at www.sofmissions.org/gala.

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What Do My Property Taxes Pay For?

I write to you today regarding an important ballot issue: exempting homesteads from taxation. Many of you will vote by mail, and others will vote on November 3rd in person. It is important to understand what this vote means for our citizens.

Proposed Amendment
CONSTITUTIONAL
AMENDMENT
ARTICLE VII, SECTIONS

4, 6, AND 9
ARTICLE XII
SAVE OUR HOMES
FROM EXCESSIVE PROP-
ERTY TAXES.—
Exempting homestead properties from taxation.
Ensuring funding for core services.
*Requires local governments to use re-
maining property taxes solely for core
public needs, including public safety,
education and schools, infrastructure,
and natural resources.*



not use tourism dollars to build roads or airport money to fund lifeguards. That is why general revenue—those tax dollars from ad valorem taxes—is important to local government. They fund services most citizens believe are a government responsibility.

The Board of County Commissioners will be forced to eliminate or likely reduce important services such as:

- Funding to the Sheriff
- Emergency Management funding
- Funding for School Resource Officers for public schools
- Beach Safety & Beach Park Rangers
- Corrections
- Veterans Services housed in the Administration Building
- Solid Waste
- Mosquito Control (Can you imagine living here without it?)
- Animal Services (We had hoped to bring additional services into the county.)
- Library Cooperative Funding
- Parks
- Roads & Bridges

There is no cavalry coming from the statehouse with extra money. This will be it for local funding, and the services we have enjoyed will be eliminated or greatly reduced in quality.

Local government is closest to the voters and answerable to the voters. Let's not let Tallahassee tell us what services we need in Okaloosa. There are 67 counties in Florida. The needs of Miami and Tampa are different than those in the Panhandle. Local government is closest to the people.

As you cast your vote, I encourage you to thoroughly consider the benefits and disadvantages of voting for or against this initiative. Please understand that we must offset the lost revenue somehow, either by a loss of services or an increase in some other tax. Make no mistake: if this initiative passes, there will be significant changes to how local government functions in Okaloosa County.

It is an honor to serve as your County Commissioner.
Carolyn Ketchel, District 2 County Commissioner, 850-651-7105



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If approved, the amendment would take effect on January 1, 2027.

This sounds like a winner and makes a great political sound bite until the results of the vote are considered closely. Make no mistake: the ballot language is misleading as to the reality of what will happen in counties throughout Florida. Let me explain.

Your Okaloosa County Commissioners have spent the summer going over the budget details, as we do each year. FY 2026–2027 will continue with Okaloosa County Commissioners voting to hold the property tax millage rate at 3.8308 mills for the 11th consecutive year.

The countywide millage (3.8308 mills) brings in \$114.7 million. The non-countywide MSTU (0.2880) brings in \$3.8 million. The total is \$118,699,312 for General Fund expenditures.

Here is the issue: If the Homestead Exemption is approved by the required 60% of voters, **the amendment would reduce Okaloosa County's General Fund revenue by approximately \$14.5 million** in its first year and about \$24 million in year two; the second-year impact would leave about \$2.5 million to fund a range of county services after core obligations are met.

The General Fund provides services that impact our everyday lives as citizens. These are services that we have come to expect from our county and that will be decreased or eliminated if the homestead exemption passes on the November ballot.

First and foremost, Okaloosa County citizens expect public safety, which means that when you dial 911, we expect a rapid response from our sheriff and EMS. The passage of this measure will force us to consider reducing funding, which most certainly could not continue at the FY 2026 level.

The budget process is confusing to anyone not familiar with it. We have many pots of money, but each one has specific guidelines for spending established by the Florida Legislature or the Federal Government. Why not take the money from another pot of money? After all, we have other sources of funding in the county budget. The answer is that each source of money, by law, cannot be interchanged with money from another area. For instance, Enterprise Funds—which, by definition, means they generate their own source of funding—can be spent only on their respective departments. The Enterprise Funds are Airports, Water and Sewer, and Tourism, and those dollars can only be used for those departments. For example, we can-

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

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Around Town



Captain Billy Bowlegs 71 Kent Tinsley is pictured with his wife, Mary. An incorrect photo accompanied last month's article introducing the new captain. We are pleased to share the correct image and congratulate Tinsley as he prepares to lead the Krewe into the Bowlegs 2027 season.

Young Savers Recognized

Eglin Federal Credit Union joined Okaloosa Saves and six other financial institutions for the annual Teach Children to Save campaign. This year, 189 participants deposited \$42,337.39. Since 2004, 2,686 children have saved more than \$463,000 through the program.

Ten young savers received \$50 deposits: Cali Branson (Fort Walton Beach), Kate Kennedy, Titus Kidder, Khai Mays, Alice Morton, David Nelson, Liam Law, Marin Lee, Sofia Simonova (Fort Walton Beach) and Liam Walbert. More information is available through Okaloosa Saves on Facebook.

DUI Checkpoints Planned

Fort Walton Beach police will conduct DUI checkpoints during the Labor Day holiday period as part of the national Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over campaign. Checkpoints are scheduled from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. Aug. 28 and Sept. 3 at Wright Parkway and Rogers Street and from 10 p.m. to 3 a.m. Sept. 5 on U.S. 98 at Fort Walton Beach City Hall. Drivers who plan to drink should arrange a designated driver, taxi or rideshare in advance.

City Pickup Programs

Fort Walton Beach sanitation crews will collect large household items from residential cus-

tomers at no additional charge through Aug. 27. Items should be placed curbside on the regular yard-waste collection day, away from fire hydrants and utility boxes. Construction debris, concrete, bricks, glass, tires and hazardous materials are not accepted. Free tire collection is Aug. 28. Residents must schedule service by calling 850-833-9655 between Aug. 24 and 28. Both programs are limited to residential sanitation customers within city limits. For more information, call the City of Fort Walton Beach Sanitation Division at 850-833-9655 or visit fwb.org/285/Residential-Services.

Park Renovation Rescheduled

Renovations at Liza Jackson Park, 338 Miracle Strip Parkway SW, are now expected to begin the week of Sept. 14. The park's west side and west entrance will close for construction. The six-month project includes a new 832-square-foot restroom, additional vehicle

and boat-trailer parking, a redesigned boat-launch traffic area, sidewalks and storm water improvements. The \$3.1 million project is funded by the city's Community Redevelopment Agency, Infrastructure Surtax Fund and a \$1 million Okaloosa County Tourist Development Tax contribution.

Students Compete in Civics Bee

Arianna N., Emma C. and Rishi T. represented Northwest Florida at the National Civics Bee state finals June 30 in Tallahassee. The middle school students advanced after placing among the top three at the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce's regional competition in April. The chamber plans to host the regional program again next year. The bee encourages students to learn about government, civic responsibility and community leadership. The National Civics Bee® State Champion will go on to compete at the National Civics Bee®, taking place in

Washington, D.C., on October 13-14, 2026.

Visit fwbchamber.org/national-civics-bee.

United Way Marks \$3.1 Million Impact

United Way Emerald Coast reported a community impact valued at \$3.1 million during its 2026 Annual Meeting, presented by Eglin Federal Credit Union. The organization reached 48,789 children, individuals and families across Okaloosa and Walton counties through partnerships with businesses, schools, military organizations, nonprofits, donors and volunteers.

United Way welcomed David Deitch as board chair and recognized outgoing chair Sheila Fitzgerald for her service.

The organization also presented its inaugural Hidden Gems Awards to Nic Evans and Shaun Foster of United Fidelity Bank; Paul and Donna Montalvo of A2Z Special-

Continued on next page

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The First Day: Every Journey Begins Somewhere



BY SHERRY OLNEY

Every August brings a sense of excitement. Children pick out backpacks, sharpen new pencils and wonder what the first day of school will bring. Parents watch them walk through classroom doors, hoping the year ahead will hold opportunity, growth and memories they will carry for a lifetime.

This August, that anticipation belonged to two women in our community. However, Heather and Brooke were not preparing for a new school year. They were preparing for a new

life! After years of overcoming childhood trauma and challenges they never chose, each had received the keys to an apartment. As they talked about unpacking boxes, decorating their new places and pursuing long-held dreams, it was impossible not to share their excitement.

For most of us, the first day of school simply begins another year. For Heather and Brooke, this first day marked the future they had fought to build. Long before they needed a safe place to live, they needed a safe place to grow up. Their paths to homelessness began in childhoods marked by trauma, instability and the absence of the security every child deserves. Their stories remind us that trauma may explain part of a person's journey, but it does not have to write the ending.

For Heather, childhood never looked the way it should. She never knew her mother, and life with her father was marked by instability and uncertainty.

When Heather was 15, her father went to prison and she was left to grow up on her own. At an age when most teenagers were thinking about school, friends and the future, she was simply trying to survive.

Those experiences followed her into adulthood. Years of surviving taught her to stay guarded, react quickly and expect disappointment. Looking back, Heather understands that what others saw as a tough attitude was often a lifetime of hurt and a need to protect herself.

Heather has called Fort Walton Beach home for 10 years and raised four children here. When she arrived at One Hopeful Place in June 2025, she was not looking for someone to erase her past. She wanted the opportunity to build a different future. With guidance from Donna Morgan and Liz Qualiana, Heather learned to pause before reacting, consider another perspective and believe she was capable of more than getting through the day. Hearing other women's stories also helped her realize she was not alone.

Then her daughter welcomed a baby girl. Becoming a grandmother gave Heather another reason to move forward. She wanted her granddaughter to know a woman who had broken the cycle, and she wanted her children to see that yesterday's hardships did not have to determine tomorrow. Today, Heather has a job she enjoys and is saving for the future. She dreams of earning her cosmetology license and opening a salon. Her apartment keys meant independence, stability and healing. For the first time in years, Heather was not merely surviving. She was building a home and future of her own.

For Brooke, childhood was measured less by birthdays and



Brooke came to One Hopeful Place looking for a chance to keep moving forward. She found accountability, personal growth and second chances. She learned practical life skills, healthier communication and ways to manage her emotions so she could build a future instead of reacting to the past.

Today, Brooke is creating a life she once believed was beyond her reach. She hopes to become a Registered Behavior Technician, helping children with autism and supporting their parents through difficult seasons. There is something beautifully full circle in that dream: A little girl who needed guidance now wants to help children feel safe, understood and valued.

Her apartment keys were proof that childhood trauma does not have to become a life sentence, addiction does not get the final word and healing is possible. Her first day at home was not only about opening a door. It was also about closing one on the little girl who spent years wondering whether life would ever get better.

When I interviewed Heather and Brooke, they spent little time talking about what they had lost. They talked about what lay ahead. After months of hard work, saving and learning to believe in themselves, each held the keys to a future she had earned.

As children across our community begin another school year, Heather and Brooke remind us that new beginnings are not measured by age, but by courage. Sometimes the most important first day comes much later in life. Sometimes it begins with a key.

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- Live orchestra performances for students
- Ensembles in Residence in the schools in partnership with Florida State University

Educational outreach remains at the forefront of Sinfonia's mission. Since it was established in 2007, Sinfonia Gulf Coast has introduced music to more than 220,000 children in Okaloosa, Walton, and Bay Counties.

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SILVER SANDS PREMIUM OUTLETS A HOWARD GROUP AND SIMON CENTER

AROUND TOWN

continued from page 11

ty Advertising; Emily Dahm of the 96th Test Wing Mission Support Group; Dakota Scott of Destin-Fort Walton Beach/Okaloosa County; and Coedy Robinson and Noah Scofield of 1Shot Creations.

Workplace Honors

Bit-Wizards and TalkingPar-



ents were named among Florida Trend's Best Companies to Work For in Florida. Bit-Wiz-

ards ranked No. 3 among small companies, marking its 17th consecutive year on the list. TalkingParents ranked No. 8 among medium companies and earned recognition for the third consecutive year. The annual program is managed by Florida Trend and Workforce Research Group. See the full list at floridatrend.com/best-companies.

STOP Asking if the Real Estate Market is Good or Bad

The answer is simple—It just is. Instead, ask the question that actually matters:
“What can I do to make this market work for me?” I have your answer.

By PAUL A. DOMENECH

One of the questions I’m asked most often is, “Is now a good time to buy or sell?”

My answer usually surprises people. The market isn’t good or bad—it simply is. Markets aren’t emotional. People are.

The real estate market moves through cycles, just as it always has. Interest rates change. Inventory rises and falls. Consumer confidence shifts. Employment changes. Migration patterns evolve. These factors influence the market, but they don’t make it “good” or “bad.” They simply create different opportunities for different people.

There are certainly regions of the country experiencing extraordinary demand as people continue relocating from higher-tax states in search of lower taxes, warmer weather, and a different quality of life. Those areas have seen price spikes that don’t necessarily reflect what is happening across most of the country.

Here along the Emerald Coast, our market behaves much like many established markets that aren’t driven by unusual circumstances. It shifts. It adjusts. It rewards those who are prepared rather than those attempting to predict it.

One of the current misconceptions is the belief that waiting will create the perfect opportunity.

Many buyers tell me they’re waiting for interest rates to come down. Many sellers are waiting for prices to climb higher. The reality is that you generally don’t get both advantages at the same time.

Typically, buyers will experience one of two scenarios: lower interest rates paired with higher home prices, or higher interest rates paired with lower home prices.

Could there be a brief moment when both rates and prices are low? Absolutely. Can anyone accurately predict when that moment will occur? Only if they can

also predict the winning Powerball numbers.

The truth is, nobody consistently times the market. Successful buyers and sellers prepare for it instead. The people who consistently make great real estate decisions share five common characteristics.

They are **Patient, Prepared, Prosperous, Positioned,** and ready to **Pounce.**

Patience means understanding that opportunity doesn’t arrive on your timeline. **Preparation** means having your finances, documentation, and current home in order before opportunity knocks. **Prosperity** means having the financial ability to act without unnecessary obstacles or contingencies. **Positioning** means knowing exactly what you’re looking for and recognizing value when it appears. Finally, when the right opportunity presents itself, you **pounce.** Take the kids, the dog, the cat, grandma, and leave the rest.

Hesitation often costs more

than making a well-informed decision. The buyers who secure exceptional opportunities usually aren’t the luckiest people in the room. They’re simply the ones who were ready when everyone else was still deciding.

Locally, we’ve seen different segments of the market moving at different speeds. The single-family home market has remained relatively strong, while the condominium market has softened. Visitors continue to enjoy our beaches and our community, but fewer are choosing to buy investment properties, creating opportunities for local investors willing to look beyond today’s headlines.

If you have those five qualities in place, I believe there are opportunities in today’s market that didn’t exist just a few years ago.

For homeowners planning to sell and purchase another property, waiting isn’t necessarily a winning strategy. You’ll likely trade one market condition for another.

What I do know is this: People

are buying homes every single day. The question isn’t whether the market is good or bad. The question is whether you’re ready when your opportunity arrives.

At The Domenech Group, we’ve built our business around adapting to today’s market instead of wishing for yesterday’s. Our focus has never been on predicting the market. It’s been on preparing our clients to succeed in it.

That’s what we call The Domenech Effect, a proven strategy designed to help buyers and sellers win in the market we have today. We have sold and have under contract over 90 homes year to date with a team of four, keeping it personal and profitable for our customers.

If you’ve been thinking about buying, selling, or investing, let’s have a conversation and build a strategy that works for the market we actually have, not the one everyone is waiting for.

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Start Here. Engineer Your Future Here.

New NWFSC–UWF partnership will allow local students to pursue four engineering degrees without leaving Northwest Florida

For many local students, earning an engineering degree has traditionally meant moving away from home—and taking on the added costs that come with it. A newly approved partnership between Northwest Florida State College and the University of West Florida is creating another option.

Students will soon be able to begin their engineering education at NWFSC's Niceville campus and then transition to UWF to complete a bachelor's degree at the schools' joint campus in Fort Walton Beach.

That means Fort Walton

Beach-area students can pursue a high-quality engineering degree while remaining close to their families, jobs and community.

The Florida State Board of Education recently approved four new Specialized Associate in Arts Transfer degree programs at NWFSC:

- Civil Engineering
- Computer Engineering
- Electrical Engineering
- Mechanical Engineering

"A student can start here, stay here and build a successful future here," said NWFSC Pres-

ident Mel Ponder. "Students will be able to start their engineering degree at Northwest Florida State College, continue to the University of West Florida and complete a high-quality bachelor's degree close to home."

A Smoother Path to an Engineering Degree

The new programs are designed to take some of the uncertainty out of transferring from a two-year college to a university engineering program.

Students will complete foundational mathematics, science, engineering and general education courses at NWFSC. They can then move into upper-level engineering courses through UWF in Fort Walton Beach.

The specialized transfer degree—known as a SAAT degree—allows NWFSC to include required courses beyond those typically offered in a tra-



ditional 60-credit Associate in Arts program. This helps ensure students have completed the prerequisites they need before beginning their upper-level engineering studies at UWF.

Importantly for families, the additional required credits can qualify for financial aid. The combination of financial-aid eligibility, NWFSC's affordability and the ability to live at home could make an engineering degree more attainable for many

local students.

"This partnership reflects what higher education should do—create opportunities that meet students where they are and prepare them for where they want to go," said UWF President Manny Diaz Jr. "Students can begin their academic journey at NWFSC and then complete a UWF engineering degree without leaving the community they call home."

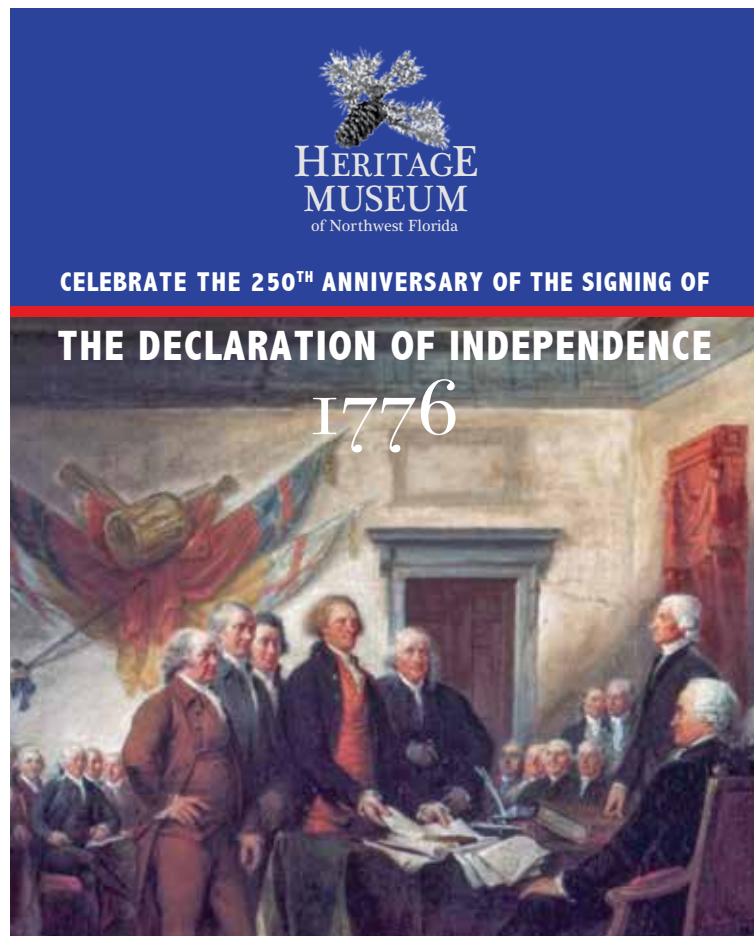
Preparing Students for Local Careers

The new pathways are also closely connected to Northwest Florida's workforce needs.

Engineers play important roles throughout the region's military installations and its growing aerospace, defense and technology industries. They are also needed in construction, infrastructure, manufacturing and other industries that support everyday life in our communities.

By creating a clear path from a student's first college course through completion of a bachelor's degree, NWFSC and UWF hope to prepare more local students for these high-demand careers—and encourage them to build their futures here. "Students should not have to leave Northwest Florida to pursue an engineering education or prepare for careers in industries that are vital to our region," said Rhea Goff, chair of the NWFSC District Board of Trustees. "These new pathways give local students an affordable and accessible starting point while helping employers develop the highly skilled workforce they need."

For local high school students who are beginning to consid-



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Continued on next page

Education News

Meal Applications Open

Okaloosa County School District families may apply for free or reduced-price meals for the 2026-27 school year. A new application is required each year, even for students who previously qualified. Families are encouraged to apply as soon as possible through the secure, confidential process at myschoolapps.com or through the district app.

Gator Club Awards Scholarships

The Emerald Coast Gator Club awarded \$32,500 in academic scholarships to 21 Okaloosa and Walton county graduates entering the University of Florida. The club has distributed about \$100,000 in scholarships during the past five years and has awarded scholarships to every eligible applicant

athan Shimko, biomedical engineering; Donovan Sjoberg, engineering; and Colin Smith, aerospace engineering.

Fort Walton Beach High School: Bradley Buckthal, health sciences; Emily Coteat, health sciences; Katie Eubanks, health sciences; Brenna Gordon, biochemistry; Brennan Gould, aerospace engineering and music performance; Anthony Pham, biomedical engineering; Cole Rewis, biochemistry; Isabella Riggs, finance; Anna Sculthorpe, political science; and Jeda Srichareon, chemical engineering.

Walton High School: Bella Baker, architecture; and Eli Rhodes, journalism.

Project SEARCH Honored

Okaloosa County School District's Project SEARCH

employment. The program combines classroom instruction, workplace immersion and hands-on training. The local partnership with Innisfree Hotels celebrated five graduates in May and has 10 interns enrolled for the coming school year.

NWFSC Expands Guarantee

Northwest Florida State College has expanded its Money-Back Guarantee Program from three workforce programs to six. Physical therapist assis-

tant, medical laboratory technology and early childhood education have joined nursing, radiography and paramedic on the eligible list.

Qualifying graduates may receive a full tuition refund if they cannot find employment in their field within six months of graduation and meet the college's academic, attendance, job-search and regulatory requirements. No refunds have been issued since the program began in 2024, reflecting strong graduate employment.

NWFSC's nursing program recorded a 100% first-quarter NCLEX-RN pass rate this year. Its physical therapist assistant program has achieved 100% employment among licensed graduates during its past three graduating cohorts, while medical laboratory technology has maintained 100% placement among graduates seeking work or continuing their education.

For information, visit nwfs.edu or contact NWFSC Admissions at 850-502-2895.



for three consecutive years. Brennan Gould of Fort Walton Beach High School was named the 2026 Hathcock Scholar.

Recipients, listed by school, are:

Choctawhatchee High School: Kady Folsom, astrophysics.

Collegiate High School at Northwest Florida State College: Kendall Feal, wildlife ecology and conservation.

Niceville High School: Zach Gideons, aerospace engineering; Zachary Ott, molecular biology; Katherine Robertson, psychology; Wyatt Rolison, mechanical engineering; Jon-

program at Hilton Garden Inn Fort Walton Beach received the Florida Project SEARCH Excellent Outcome Award for its 2024-25 employment results. The award recognizes sites achieving employment outcomes of 77% to 99%. The local program was one of five honored among Florida's 45 sites and one of 166 recognized among approximately 800 sites worldwide, placing it in the top 21% globally.

Project SEARCH prepares students ages 18-21 with disabilities who have completed their high school credits and deferred their diplomas for competitive

START HERE

continued from previous page

er college options—as well as working adults thinking about a new career—these programs could open the door to an engineering education that once seemed out of reach.

Information about enrollment, advising, course schedules and anticipated program start dates will be announced as implementation plans are completed.

Students and parents can learn more by visiting nwfs.edu/engineering.

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 Weddings

Where Floral Dreams Become Art

How a Sister's Bridal Shower Bloomed Into Couture Florals & Events

By LORI LEATH MILLER

I knew Kristin Lockhart was talented long before I sat down to interview her.

I knew it the moment I walked into my wedding reception at The Alice in Destin and saw months of planning transformed into something even more beautiful than I had imagined. As a recent Couture Florals & Events bride, I had experienced the finished product firsthand. What I hadn't yet discovered was the story behind it.

That story begins long before weddings, floral installations and luxury events. Creativity has been part of Kristin's life for as long as she can remember. Long

before she was designing celebrations along the Emerald Coast, she spent hours scrapbooking, turning simple photo albums into keepsakes filled with ribbon, embellishments and artistic details.

That creative spirit found a new outlet in 2012 when she designed an Alice in Wonderland-themed bridal shower for her sister. What began as a labor of love would eventually become the spark that launched **Couture Florals & Events**, now one of the area's premier wedding and event design companies.

At the time, Kristin had little experience with floral design beyond creating a few silk arrangements for family members.

But for her sister's shower, she envisioned something extraordinary. The space was transformed into a whimsical tea party complete with moss-covered displays, trees, stacked teacups, tree stumps, squirrel accents and even a custom tea kettle cake. "When people walked in, they were amazed," Kristin recalled. "Throughout the event, so many people told me I had a natural talent and creative eye for this type of work."

More importantly, the experience awakened what would become her passion. "That truly sparked something in me," she said.

Kristin began exploring floral

design more seriously, eventually working professionally with fresh florals while managing a floral department. As her skills and confidence grew, so did her vision. In 2016, she launched Couture Florals & Events with a desire to create meaningful, elevated celebrations tailored to each client.

Today, what started as a shoestring startup has grown into a thriving business trusted by couples, wedding planners and event professionals throughout Northwest Florida. For Kristin, however, the attraction was never simply flowers. "I completely fell in love with the artistry, creativity and emotion behind transforming spaces and bringing people's visions to life," she said.

That blend of artistry and organization continues to shape her work today. While many people imagine floral design as a profession spent arranging beautiful blooms, Kristin says the reality is far more demanding. "People often think this job is just playing with flowers all day, but there is so much more that goes into what we do," she said. "Behind the beauty is an incredible amount of planning, logistics, problem-solving, physical labor, setup, execution and cleanup."

Over the years, she has learned to intentionally separate creative time from business time, allowing her to remain fully present when designing for clients. Even so, she believes artistry extends far beyond the flowers themselves, viewing each proposal as the first step in helping couples visualize the wedding or event of their dreams.

Like many entrepreneurs, Kristin faced uncertainty in the early years. One of the most difficult seasons came during the COVID-19 pandemic when weddings and events were postponed, rescheduled or canceled. "It was extremely difficult navigating the uncertainty while trying to protect and sustain a newer business at the time," she said. Still, she remained committed to the business she believed in. "There is always risk involved with entrepreneurship,



but I truly believed in what I was building and continued pushing forward." Those challenges ultimately strengthened both Kristin and her company, teaching resilience, adaptability and the importance of relationships.

Today, **Couture Florals & Events** is known for designs that feel deeply personal rather than simply decorative. "I believe florals should feel emotionally connected to the people and the celebration," Kristin said. "My goal is always to create an atmosphere that feels intentional, immersive and reflective of each client's unique story and style."

That process begins long before a flower is selected. When meeting with a couple for the first time, Kristin focuses on far more than color palettes and Pinterest boards. "I pay attention to their connection — how they interact, communicate and naturally vibe together," she said. "You can truly feel the love they have for each other, and that often becomes the inspiration behind the overall design."

She believes unforgettable weddings are created through thoughtful layers of candlelight, texture, place settings and carefully curated design elements that create a complete guest experience. "The small, intentional details and, of course, the couple themselves, are what separate a beautiful wedding from a memorable one," she said. "The love, energy and connection a couple shares are what truly set the tone."



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Continued on page 18



BY LIESEL SCHMIDT

Stonewashed, dark rinse, faded, ripped, bedazzled, bootcut, slim-fit, low-rise, mid-rise...

The many iterations of denim that exist today would leave Jacob Davis and Levi Strauss speechless, as would the fact that—on average—the world population owns anywhere from six to ten pairs of jeans each, making good old dungarees the single most common form of everyday casual wear across cultures, ages and gender identities.

Look at your own jeans (because, statistically speaking, chances are high that you're wearing one of the many pairs you own right at this very moment). That textile you've gotten used to wearing on the regular was invented in the 17th century

by French guys who needed something sturdy enough to stand up to the wear and tear of hard labor. Centuries later in 1873, Davis and Strauss patented and manufactured the first pair of rivet-reinforced blue denim jeans, introducing the pants to the factory, farm, railway and shipyard workers that were their main market until the 1950s, when the counterculture began wearing them as a show of rebellion and nonconformity. As it trickled down to the youth, denim was pushed into the mainstream fashion industry. By the late 1960s, jeans had gained popularity outside of the United States and were widely adopted in other parts of the world.

Long story short, jeans are a beautiful example of function becoming fashion—and we at Blue Bay Lifestyle Co. do love a good origin story. But more than that, we swoon for a great pair of jeans.

And as we begin the painfully slow creep toward the cooler months of fall, we'll start shifting our focus from the denim shorts that have been our best



friends throughout the heat of summer (Liverpool cuts an awesome pair) and thinking about the ways to round out the lineup of jeans in this year's rotation. Because, as fantastically worn-in as your old threads might be, it never hurts for a refresh that livens up your wardrobe and keeps you looking current.

And yes, gentlemen—that includes *you*.

Jeans are, in their way, the great equalizer. Whether young



or old, man or woman, blue-collar worker or C-suite executive (or vice versa), most people own and wear jeans as a regular part of their ensemble. The comfort, the versatility, the durability and longevity all make jeans a wise investment piece that will see other trends come and go, all while enjoying pride of place and permanence in the world of fashion.

At Blue Bay, we love showing off our jeans (and boy, do we have

great jeans). From our ankle-length Charlie B trouser-cut denim to boot cut, dark wash Liverpool, our women's styles will give you indigo inspiration for every occasion. As for you men out there, we've got Liverpool styles that may make you reconsider which pair of jeans gets top billing in your closet—and you won't even have to wade your way through a massive department store to find them.

Of course, great denim isn't limited to jeans. We've also stocked the racks with shorts, skorts, skirts, capris, jackets and chambray tops, proving that this hardworking fabric can do just about everything.

So, before sweater weather officially arrives, stop in at Blue Bay Lifestyle Co. to give your denim lineup the refresh it deserves. After all, every closet has a hero—and chances are, it's made of denim.



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"How Sweet It Is!"

Sugar & Co. is a must-stop on Miracle Strip Parkway in downtown Fort Walton Beach. Owner Jenna Mendez pours plenty of TLC into a menu of sweet, cool treats that will have the whole family asking to return. Whether you've spotted the Sugar & Co. food truck around town or stepped inside the bakery, you'll find decadent cakes, cookies, buttery pastries,

savory bites and more—all made with love and a dash of whimsy. A fan favorite is the "Slayer," available in fun flavors such as peanut butter, cool mint and more. Scoops of ice cream layered with sauces and toppings make these delicious creations irresistible cups of joy. The menu also features dirty sodas, sundaes, brownies, ice cream



cakes and nearly everything in between. Can't decide between a brownie and a sundae? Treat yourself to a brownie sundae! Be sure to watch for seasonal selections and unexpected surprises from this playful desert shop. The warm welcome, tempting flavors and enormous variety all reflect the heart behind this sweet stop.

For Mendez, Sugar & Co. is about much more than scoops, pours and baked goods—it is a mission with purpose. As a Christian businesswoman, she wants the shop to reflect her faith, passion and desire to bring joy to others. Stop in soon, savor the sweet side of life and say, "Hello, Sugar!"

FLORAL DREAMS

continued from page 16

"I especially love when couples fully trust us in the process and allow us the artistic and creative freedom to bring their vision to life in a meaningful and elevated way." As she described her design process, I found myself thinking back to my own wedding day. Months of planning suddenly became reality the moment I stepped into our reception space. The florals did more than decorate the room — they helped tell mine and Scott's story.

What impressed me most was Kristin's ability to take fragments of ideas and transform them into a cohesive vision. Calla lilies, moss, driftwood and flowing amaranthus came together in ways I never would have imagined, creating a design that felt sophisticated, personal and completely authentic to us. It wasn't simply beautiful. It felt like us. While trends continue to evolve, Kristin remains drawn to timeless elegance paired with natural texture and movement. Yet some of her greatest inspiration comes from the Emerald Coast itself. "What excites me

most creatively about designing for clients in Destin is the atmosphere and natural beauty of our area," she said. "The emerald water, sugar-white sand and relaxed, yet elevated, atmosphere create a backdrop that is hard to replicate anywhere else." Perhaps the most rewarding part of her work comes when a couple sees the finished design for the first time. "When a bride genuinely gasps, becomes emotional or gives a heartfelt reaction to what I created for her, it makes every long hour and stressful moment completely worth it," Kristin said. "I truly

live for those moments." As **Couture Florals & Events** continues to grow, Kristin hopes to keep challenging herself creatively through larger installations, new design opportunities and unforgettable events. Recognition may come, but it has never been the goal. When asked what she hopes couples remember long after the flowers have faded, her answer is simple. "I want them to remember the experience," she said. "If they look back on their wedding day and remember feeling completely taken care of and genuinely wowed by the end result, then I know we've

done our job well." Having recently entrusted my own wedding to **Couture Florals & Events**, I left our interview with an even greater appreciation for what happens behind the scenes. The flowers were stunning. The designs were memorable. But what stayed with me most was exactly what Kristin hopes every client remembers: the feeling. Long after the bouquets have faded and the candles have been extinguished, the memories remain. For Kristin, flowers are the medium, but creating lasting memories is the true art.

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

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CiCi's Cookies & Treats

CiCi's Cookies & Treats is a home-based Emerald Coast bakery specializing in hand-crafted cookies, brownies, cookie cakes, dessert boxes and custom gift packages. Perfect for weddings, birthdays, baby showers, holidays, corporate gifting or a thoughtful everyday surprise, each order is carefully prepared and beautifully packaged. Serving Fort Walton Beach, Destin and Niceville, CiCi's brings a personal touch to every celebration.

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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.

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114 Amberjack Dr.,
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Lady Ray's Culinary Delights & Tea Room

Lady Ray's Culinary Delights now welcomes visitors to its new Tea Room in Destin, an elegant space created for traditional afternoon tea, celebrations and private events. Guests can enjoy premium teas, finger sandwiches, freshly baked scones and handcrafted pastries during two daily seatings. Tea seatings: Morning Tea, 11 a.m.-12:30 p.m.; Afternoon Tea, 2-3:30 p.m. Reservations are required: LadyRays.com/Pages/Tea-House

Beyond the Tea Room, Lady Ray's is a charming café, bakery and pastry bar known for small-batch baked goods, artisan fare, specialty cakes, creative seasonal menus and warm, thoughtful hospitality. Hours: Wednesday-Saturday, 8 a.m.-4 p.m.; Sunday, 8 a.m.-2 p.m. Closed Monday and Tuesday.

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LadyRays.com | Facebook: [Lady Ray's Culinary Delights](https://www.facebook.com/LadyRaysCulinaryDelights)

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,

Continued on page 22

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Okaloosa Island
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DINING

continued from page 20

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**RICK'S Seafood & Sports**

Formerly Rick's Crab Trap, this longtime local favorite has entered a new era with a fresh name, full remodel and modern coastal sports-bar atmosphere. The Pike family's restaurant roots date to 1989, and today Chris and Jen Pike continue the



tradition with hand-prepared Gulf seafood and casual, family-friendly hospitality. Menu favorites include handmade crab cakes, grouper nuggets, raw or steamed oysters and loaded steam platters, along with daily lunch specials. With numerous TVs and NFL Sunday Ticket, RICK'S is also a lively neighborhood destination for game day. Hours: Daily 11-9; Lunch specials 11-4; Happy Hour M-F 3-6.

(850) 664-0110

178 Eglin Parkway NE, FWB
rickscrabtrap.com**Smoothie King**

Smoothie King is now open in downtown Fort Walton Beach, serving convenient, health-focused choices through its drive-through window. The locally owned franchise offers fruit-and-veggie smoothies, protein-packed fitness blends and hydrating favorites such as the

Pineapple Mango—delicious with a Greek yogurt enhancer. Guests can also enjoy açai bowls, avocado or peanut butter toast and satisfying chicken flatbreads. Ingredients are selected for peak ripeness, flavor and nutrients, while water and ice undergo a multifaceted filtration process. With 16 protein options—including vegan, keto-friendly and muscle-building blends—there's something for nearly every lifestyle. Join the loyalty program for BOGOs, freebies and other rewards. Hours: M-F 7-9; Sat 8-9; Sun 10-8.

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3 Eglin Parkway SE, FWB
locations.smoothieking.com**The Boardwalk On Okaloosa Island**

As us locals know, The Boardwalk is a popular destination.

Continued on page 26

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Come hungry—the Destin Seafood Festival returns Sept. 25–27 for its 48th year, bringing three days of Gulf flavors, live music and family fun to the Destin Harbor. More than 30,000 locals and visitors are expected to attend the free waterfront celebration.

Stretching nearly a mile from HarborWalk Village to Heron Harbor, the festival will feature more than 75 food and craft vendors, along with favorite harbor restaurants serving seafood specialties and cold drinks. Browse jewelry, clothing, sculpture, glasswork, paintings and other handmade creations—and be sure to pick up this year's official festival T-shirt.

Five stages will showcase local and regional musicians playing rock, reggae, country, tropical tunes and more. Harbor restaurants and bars will add their own entertainment throughout the weekend, so bring a chair, find a spot along the docks and enjoy the soundtrack.

Young festivalgoers can get creative in the expanded Fudpucker's Kids Zone with oyster shell painting, sand art and play areas. HarborWalk's Kids Fun Zone adds hamster balls, a climbing wall, zip line



and face painting, plus shaded seating for parents.

Admission remains free, but VIP passes offer unlimited tastings from participating restaurants and chefs, exclusive entertainment, private restrooms, TVs and access to a cash bar.

The festival began in 1978 as a one-day gathering honoring local fishermen. Today, it with the festive kickoff to October's month-long Destin Fishing Rodeo.

Parking is available at several harbor-area lots, with free shuttles running from Morgan Sports Complex.

Hours: Friday 4–10 p.m.; Saturday 10 a.m.–10 p.m.; Sunday 10 a.m.–6 p.m.

For maps, entertainment schedules, vendor details and VIP passes, visit DestinSeafoodFest.com or email info@destinseafoodfest.com.

Come hungry. Leave happy. See you on the Harbor!

Last Chance for Summer Fun at Gulfarium

Make the Most of August at Gulfarium

BY MARY FOMBY, GULFARIUM

Summer may be winding down, but there is still time to enjoy some of Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park's most exciting seasonal experiences. Throughout August, guests can explore the park, meet incredible animals, enjoy daily dolphin and sea lion presentations, and take part in special programs that will only be available for a few more weeks.

The Rise & Shine Dolphin Package offers guests a peaceful and memorable way to begin their day at Gulfarium. The experience includes early entry to the park, a guided look around Gulfarium, a dockside encounter with Atlantic bottlenose dolphins, and general admission for the remainder of the day.

Guests can also get closer to Gulfarium's African penguins during Penguin Plunge, a seasonal in-water penguin encounter. This unique experience gives participants the opportunity to step into the water and interact



with members of Gulfarium's penguin colony while learning more about their personalities, behaviors, and care.

Catch the Final Summer Fitness Classes

Gulfarium's summer fitness experiences offer two unique ways to move, stretch, and unwind in settings unlike anywhere else on the Emerald Coast.

Pilates with Dolphins invites

guests to begin the morning with an all-levels Pilates class overlooking Dolphin Oasis. Led by a certified instructor, the class combines an energizing workout with beautiful Gulf views and dolphins nearby.

Guests can also experience UNDERWATER: The Living Sea Experience, an after-hours yoga class inside Gulfarium's Living Sea Aquarium. Surrounded by marine life, par-



ticipants move through a relaxing, ocean-inspired flow in the peaceful atmosphere of the aquarium.

Only a limited number of Pilates with Dolphins and Underwater Yoga classes remain this summer. Guests are encouraged to reserve their spots before the final August sessions sell out.

One More Summer Adventure at Sunset Camp

Kids ages 6 to 14 still have time to experience an evening of animal encounters, exploration, and hands-on learning during Gulfarium's Sunset Camp.

While parents enjoy an evening out, campers explore Gulfarium after hours with activities

that include a dockside dolphin encounter, enrichment time with the penguin colony, beach exploration, conservation activities, and dinner at Seal Harbor.

Sunset Camp gives future marine biologists the opportunity to connect with animals, learn directly from Gulfarium's team, and experience the park in a completely different way.

The final Sunset Camp dates of the summer are approaching, and availability is limited.

Plan Your August Visit

Whether you want to exercise beside dolphins, unwind inside the Living Sea Aquarium, meet a penguin in the water, or give your child one more summer adventure, August is your final chance to enjoy these seasonal Gulfarium experiences.

Visit Gulfarium.com to explore available dates, reserve your experiences, and make the most of the final weeks of summer.



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Gulfarium
Marine Adventure Park

Off the Hook

SOLDIERS

continued from page 1

such as the day's biggest catch and most fish caught. The full event is scheduled from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Soldiers on the Water is dedicated exclusively to combat-wounded veterans. The relaxed outdoor setting gives

participants an opportunity to spend time with fellow veterans, form new friendships and experience the camaraderie that develops naturally during a shared day on the water.

For veterans in Fort Walton Beach and surrounding communities, that fellowship can be particularly meaningful since many remain in the area after

military service, continuing to work, raise families and serve their neighbors here.

A past participant, Grady B., described the event's impact this way: "After the retreat was over and back home, I realized that there are people that care about us. Second, this experience has been a great transformation not only in myself but in others."



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His words capture the heart of Soldiers on the Water: Fishing may provide the setting, but the relationships formed among veterans, caregivers, captains, volunteers and community members carry the event's impact far beyond the day itself.

Answering the Call

Soldiers on the Water reflects a spirit Fort Walton Beach residents know well—neighbors stepping forward to support those who serve.

The event is made possible through the generosity of people and organizations across the Emerald Coast. Charter captains and boat owners provide vessels, equipment, expertise and time. Businesses and professional organizations contribute financial sponsorships and in-kind donations, while volunteers assist with registration, meals, supplies and logistics.

Community support also provides participants with bags containing water, snacks, sunscreen and other necessities. Additional in-kind needs may include lip balm, coolers, raffle prizes, gift certificates and food support.

Fort Walton Beach businesses, civic organizations, professional groups and residents can all take part. Whether someone volunteers, provides supplies, registers a boat or connects an eligible veteran with the program, each contribution becomes part of a larger expression of gratitude.

ECAR represents more than 5,000 REALTOR® members across Okaloosa and Walton counties and maintains an office in Fort Walton Beach. Soldiers on the Water allows the organi-

zation to extend its community involvement beyond the real estate profession, uniting REALTORS®, local businesses, charter captains and volunteers in honoring those who have sacrificed in service to the country.

Want to Get Involved?

Combat-wounded veterans must register in advance. There are no tickets to purchase, and eligible veterans participate at no cost. Space is limited, and applicants may be placed on a waitlist.

Local charter captains and boat owners are invited to register a vessel.

Businesses and community organizations can assist through financial sponsorships or in-kind donations.

Fort Walton Beach-area residents interested in volunteering or providing other support should contact ECAR to learn which needs remain.

Veterans can register at form.jotform.com/ECAOR/2026-sow-attendee. Prospective sponsors and in-kind donors can visit form.jotform.com/ECAOR/2026-sow-sponsors. Boat owners, charter captains, volunteers and other supporters can find information at www.emeraldcoastrealtors.com/soldiers-on-the-water/. For additional information or to ask about remaining opportunities, contact Wendy Permenter at info@ecaor.com.

For Fort Walton Beach—a community shaped by military service and home to so many veterans and military families—Soldiers on the Water offers a meaningful way to honor neighbors whose courage and sacrifices continue long after their uniforms are put away.

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Multi-County Collaboration to Add 224-Foot Vessel to Artificial Reef System

BY NICK TOMECEK, OKALOOSA COUNTY PIO

The Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners recently approved an agreement between the county and the Panama City Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau (CVB) on June 16, 2026, to expand the Gulf’s artificial reef system with the deployment of the 224-foot Henry Alex vessel to create the Sposit Reef, the newest addition to a growing network of large-vessel artificial reefs in the region.

The partnership builds on a successful history of collaboration between Okaloosa County’s tourism department, Destin-Fort Walton Beach, and the Panama City Beach CVB, including the deployment of the 239-foot Deep Stim III in 2023.

“The marine life that benefits from these artificial reefs does not see borders,” said Okaloosa County Board Chairman Trey Goodwin. “We are pleased to be working again with our neighbors in Panama City Beach on

this effort as a showing of how the power of partnerships can create something worthy for our residents, visitors and the environment.”

The \$450,000 cost to purchase, prepare and transport the vessel will be shared equally between Okaloosa County and the Panama City Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau, with each organization contributing \$225,000.

“This project is another example of how strong partnerships can create lasting benefits for our Gulf,” said Erin Graham, coastal resources manager for the Panama City Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau. “By working alongside Okaloosa County and CCA Florida, we are expanding critical habitat for marine life while creating new opportunities for anglers and divers to experience the incredible resources our waters have to offer.”

The Coastal Conservation Association (CCA) Florida, a longtime partner in marine con-



servation and artificial reef development, will provide an additional \$60,000 to cover towing and deployment expenses. Beyond supporting numerous artificial reef deployments, CCA has partnered with the county on invasive lionfish removal efforts, habitat restoration projects, redfish release initiatives and the ongoing SS United States artificial reef project.

All funding for this project is provided through tourism development tax revenue and partner contributions. The Sposit Reef was named by CCA in memory of the late Rebecca Sposit, human resources director at the

CCA national office.

“Rebecca Sposit did so much for marine conservation through her role at CCA, in ways the public could never see,” said Pat Murray, CCA’s national president and CEO. “She was a beloved part of CCA, and this reef is a lasting testament to her impact on the organization and the marine environment.”

“The Sposit Reef deployment serves as a lasting tribute to Rebecca’s life and legacy while reflecting our ongoing commitment to the conservation and enhancement of Florida’s marine resources and coastal ecosystems. We are grateful for the

opportunity to work alongside our partners on initiatives that strengthen marine biodiversity, expand critical habitat for fish and other marine species, and support economically important local industries, including recreational fishing and diving,” said Brian Gorski, executive director of CCA Florida.

The proposed deployment site is located at 30° 05.831’N, 86° 17.749’W, in approximately 120 feet of water, 22 nautical miles from the Destin East Pass and 28 nautical miles from the Panama City Pass. The official reef name will be the Sposit Reef. Deployment is expected in fall 2026.

Okaloosa County has deployed 48 large vessels in the Gulf since the 1970s. Those vessels are part of nearly 600 existing artificial reefs in Gulf waters. Explore 3D imaging of the county’s large-vessel reefs at <https://www.destinfwb.com/explore/eco-tourism/artificial-reefs/3d-models/>.



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Four teams will compete in the tournament Nov. 23-24 which will be held at Raider Arena on the campus of Northwest Florida State College. Michigan State will face Alcorn State in a semifinal round game at 11 a.m. central time on Monday, Nov. 23, while Virginia Tech will play UT Martin at 1:30 p.m. The third-place game will be played at 11 a.m. on Tuesday Nov. 24 with the championship game scheduled for a 1:30 p.m. tip off on that Tuesday.

Michigan State went 23-9 last season, including an 11-7 record in the Big Ten Conference advancing to the second round of the NCAA Tournament. Michigan State earned a No. 5 seed, which was its highest seed since the 2015-16 season. The Spartans, under coach Robyn Fralick, return a pair of All-Big Ten honorees in graduate guard Theryn Hallock and redshirt-junior guard Kennedy Blair.

Virginia Tech posted a 23-10 overall record in 2025-26,



including a 12-6 mark in the ACC, while also advancing to the NCAA Tournament. Grad student Carleigh Wenzel, an all-ACC selection who led the Hokies in scoring last year with a 15.6 avg., heads the list of returning starters for Coach Megan Duffy.

Alcorn State played in the Women's National Invitational Tournament last year en route to posting a 17-14 record. UT Martin recorded a 13-17 mark in 2025-26.

Online tickets for the tournament will go on sale later this summer through www.emeraldcoastclassic.com

DINING
continued from page 22

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

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

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

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Golf Series: TJ Vidinha Wins Shalimar Pointe Club Men's Club Championship

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

In a grueling two-day tournament at Shalimar Pointe Golf Club, TJ Vidinha won the Men's Club Championship with a score on Saturday of 79 and on Sunday of 73. From dry to wet conditions after a torrential rain on Sunday, the greens became a challenge for all golfers.

Taylor, or TJ to all who know him at the golf course, is active duty in the United States Air Force at Eglin Air Force Base and is the Superintendent of

the 58th Aircraft Maintenance Unit. With a 0.0 handicap, TJ can challenge any golfer and any golf course. His love for the game began in childhood and he played golf on his high school team in California. TJ resides in Crestview, Florida.

Golfers who participated played from a variety of tee boxes. Tee boxes are offered for all levels of play as the course motto is that "everyone is treated like a champion." As golf is a sport for all ages, there were

Super Senior, Senior and Men's divisions as well as the Championship division.

The first and second place winners are listed below for all groups as reported by John Jenkins, Club Manager. All groups except for the Championship flight had gross and net winners.

Congratulations, gentlemen!

Super Senior -
Winner - Fred Gross
1st Net - Richard Villa



2nd Gross - George Dorris

Senior -
Winnert - Earl Thornton
1st Net - Mark Kunz
2nd Gross- Mike Dehart

Men's -
Winner- John Sykes
1st Net - Chris Abrasley

Championship
Winner - TJ Vidinha
2nd - Ray LeBlanc

School Prepares Children for a Career. Martial Arts Prepares Them for Life.

BY DAVID DURMAN

Every August, parents across Fort Walton Beach prepare their children for another school year. New uniforms, backpacks, stationery, and calendars quickly fill with activities. It's an exciting season of fresh opportunities, new friendships, and new challenges.

Schools do an incredible job teaching reading, writing, mathematics, science, and the skills children need for future careers. But some of life's most important lessons can't be taught from a textbook.

Listening with intent. Concentrating despite distractions. Persevering when something feels difficult. Showing respect while building genuine confidence. These qualities are developed through experience, repetition, and encouragement.



At **Coastal Martial Arts & Fitness**, we see children arrive with every kind of personality. Some are shy. Some struggle to focus. Others have endless energy but need help learning to channel it. Many are simply looking for a place where they feel accepted and belong.

Real growth doesn't happen in a single class or by earning one belt. Week by week, chil-

dren learn to listen before they act, observe before they attempt something new, and understand that mistakes are part of learning. They discover that perseverance overcomes frustration, effort produces results, and confidence is built through consistent practice.

The belts and certificates they earn are milestones, not the destination. Every promotion reflects improved skill, stronger character, self-control, helping others, accepting correction,

and refusing to give up when things become difficult.

Every parent hopes their child never needs to defend themselves physically. But life will challenge them with peer pressure, disappointment, failure, uncertainty, and difficult decisions. In those moments, confidence, resilience, discipline, and good judgment become every bit as valuable as academic achievement.

That's why we believe school and martial arts are partners,

not competitors. One prepares children for successful careers. The other helps prepare them for life.

Dave and Sally Durman are the owners of Coastal Martial Arts & Fitness in Fort Walton Beach, where they help children, teens, and adults build confidence, character, and practical self-defence skills in a supportive, family-friendly environment. To learn more or book an introductory consultation, visit coastalmartialarts.com or call (850) 608-9888.

2026 High School Football Schedules

Fort Walton Beach Vikings	Destin High School Sharks
Aug 13: vs. Niceville (Kickoff Classic), 7:00 PM	August 14: vs. Arnold (Kickoff Classic)
Aug 21: vs. Pensacola, 7:00 PM	August 21: vs. Port St. Joe
Aug 28: vs. South Walton, 7:00 PM	August 28: @ Baker
Sep 4: at West Florida Tech, 7:00 PM	September 4: vs. North Bay Haven
Sep 11: vs. Milton*, 7:00 PM	September 11: @ Marianna
Sep 18: vs. Walton, 7:00 PM	September 18: Bye / Open Week
Sep 25: at Gulf Breeze*, 7:00 PM	September 25: vs. Pensacola Catholic (District Game)
Oct 2: at Navarre, 7:00 PM	October 2: @ Northview
Oct 9: at Choctawhatchee*, 7:00 PM	October 9: @ Walton (District Game)
Oct 16: vs. Escambia*, 7:00 PM	October 16: vs. Graceville
Oct 23: at Booker T. Washington*, 7:00 PM	October 23: @ Freeport (District Game)
Oct 30: Open Week	October 30: vs. Bozeman (District Game).

* Denotes District Game.

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 Wellness


By KASSIA GARFIELD,
MAXSTRENGTH FITNESS

When people think about building muscle and improving their health, they usually focus on exercise and nutrition. While both are incredibly important, there is a third factor that is often overlooked: sleep. In many ways, sleep is the body's secret weapon for recovery, muscle growth, and overall health. You don't get stronger during your workout—you get stronger when your body recovers afterward, and much of that recovery happens while you sleep.

Sleep is an active biological process during which the body repairs tissues, regulates hormones, consolidates memories, and restores energy stores. During deep sleep, the body releases large amounts of growth hormone, one of the primary hormones responsible for tissue repair and muscle recovery. This hormone helps rebuild muscle fibers that were challenged during exercise and supports the

recovery of tendons, ligaments, and other connective tissues.

Sleep is also critical for muscle protein synthesis, the process by which the body repairs and builds new muscle tissue. Resistance training creates microscopic damage within muscle fibers. While this sounds negative, it is actually the stimulus that tells the body to adapt and become stronger. However, without adequate sleep, the body cannot fully complete the repair process, limiting strength gains and muscle growth.

The effects of poor sleep extend beyond recovery. Even a few nights of inadequate sleep can negatively impact hormones that regulate hunger and metabolism. Sleep deprivation increases levels of ghrelin, the hormone that stimulates appetite, while decreasing leptin, the hormone that signals fullness. This can lead to increased cravings, overeating, and difficulty maintaining a healthy body composition.

Lack of sleep also increases cortisol, the body's primary stress hormone. Chronically elevated cortisol can interfere with recovery, impair muscle growth, increase fat storage, and contribute to feelings of fatigue and decreased motivation. In contrast, consistently getting seven



to nine hours of quality sleep helps create an internal environment that supports muscle gain, fat loss, and overall wellness.

Interestingly, the relationship between exercise and sleep works both ways. Just as sleep improves exercise performance and recovery, physical activity improves sleep quality. Regular movement helps regulate the body's internal clock, known as the circadian rhythm, making it easier to fall asleep and stay asleep. Exercise also helps reduce stress and anxiety, two common barriers to restful sleep.

Resistance training may be especially beneficial. Studies have shown that strength training can improve sleep quality,

increase the amount of deep sleep, and reduce the time it takes to fall asleep. Challenging the muscles during the day creates a physiological demand for recovery, encouraging the body to enter deeper, more restorative stages of sleep at night.

The combination of resistance training and quality sleep creates a powerful cycle. Better workouts improve sleep, and better sleep improves recovery, strength, energy, and performance. Together, they produce results that neither can achieve alone.

If exercise is the stimulus for change, sleep is the time when that change actually occurs. For anyone looking to build mus-

cle, improve recovery, manage weight, or simply feel better, prioritizing sleep may be one of the most effective health decisions they can make.

While sleep, nutrition, and recovery are all essential components of health, they ultimately serve a common purpose: supporting the body's ability to build and maintain muscle. Research continues to show that muscle mass and strength are among the strongest predictors of long-term health, independence, resilience, and longevity. Stronger individuals recover better from illness, surgery, and injury, maintain mobility later in life, and have lower risks of disability and chronic disease. Sleep may be the recovery superpower, but muscle is the long-term investment. The better we support recovery, the better we can preserve and build the strength that helps us not only live longer, but live better.

If you are having a hard time fitting in a workout, try MaxStrength Fitness. We do effective, efficient and safe 20-minute workouts, just twice a week. We deliver results with a science backed program. Give us a call at 850-373-4450 (Niceville) or 850-467-9729 (Fort Walton Beach)!

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

I had heard of microplastics but had not paid much attention to them until recently. However, I think the subject is quite interesting.

A little history: Leo Baekeland, a Belgian immigrant to the United States, developed Bakelite, considered the first fully synthetic plastic, in 1907. Early uses included electrical components; Bakelite was later used in radios, automobiles, and appliances. In the 1930s and '40s, new synthetic materials included polyester, nylon, polystyrene foam, and plexiglass. In 1955, Life magazine published an article titled "Throwaway Living," focusing on how plastics were helping overburdened housewives. Fast-forward to now, and you will find plastics in modern medicine, food packaging, construction, cosmetics, apparel, paint, cleansers, toothpaste, and the list goes on.

Microplastics are particles smaller than 5 millimeters, and nanoplastics are smaller than 1 micrometer. Some come from larger plastics breaking down, while others are manufactured for use in certain products. Most conventional plastics do not readily biodegrade; instead, they can persist and break into increasingly smaller particles. We find them in the air we breathe, the water we drink, the clothes we wear, and the food we eat. They've been found from the summit of Mount Everest to the ocean depths. To date, microplastics have been found in more than 1,300 aquatic and terrestrial species and detected in various human tissues and fluids.

Stanford physician Desiree LaBeaud has described this as being "born polluted," after studies reported microplastics in meconium (a newborn's first stool). Researchers have also reported microplastics in breast milk. During preliminary re-

search, Teflon specks were visible under a microscope in one child's tonsil tissue.

Micro- and nanoplastics have been detected in brain and reproductive tissues, among other areas. Researchers are investigating whether smaller particles can cross cell membranes, disrupt signaling processes, or affect other cellular functions. What these findings mean for human health is still being studied.

Researchers struggle to know which substances to study, as more than 10,000 chemicals have been identified as being used in plastics. More than two-thirds have not been fully assessed for safety, and over 2,400 have been identified as potentially hazardous. Heat and sunlight can increase the migration of some substances from plastic bottles, so avoid storing bottled water in hot cars or direct sunlight. Notice how many cases of water are left in the sun at gas stations and other stores.

So, what can we do about it? Ready, set . . .

Children: When practical, choose well-made, age-appropriate metal or wooden toys that meet current safety standards. How many kids put toys in their mouths?!

Here are some more options for reducing plastic use and potential exposure:

- Purchase clothes, towels, bed linens, rugs, and other items made from natural materials such as cotton, linen, silk, and wool.
- Choose stainless steel, cast iron, glass, or properly made food-safe ceramic or clay cookware.
- Replace single-use plastic water bottles with reusable stainless steel or glass bottles.
- Take a glass container with you when you eat out so you can use it for leftovers. If you receive leftovers in a polystyrene foam container, transfer them to a different container as soon as you get home.
- When microwaving food, use glass, ceramic, or a container specifically labeled microwave-safe. Dispose of plastic items that are damaged or showing wear.
- Plastic wrap and plastic utensils can contribute to plastic waste and may release chemicals or particles, particularly

when heated or damaged. Reduce the number of single-use plastic items in your kitchen. When using plastic wrap, follow the label directions and do not allow it to touch food during microwaving. Consider reusable food-grade silicone lids or Bee's Wrap. I have both, and they are great!

- Do not reuse containers designed for single use. Follow the manufacturer's directions for reusable plastic products.
- Look for products sold in glass jars rather than plastic ones, such as peanut butter.
- Once opened, store meat in a leakproof glass or food-grade silicone container.
- Consider using glass

food-storage containers.

- Pick up some inexpensive silverware to use at the beach or on picnics, and keep some in the car for those fast-food stops.

As always, don't overwhelm yourself. Start with what you use most often. The next time you're shopping for clothes, check the material label inside the garment and ask yourself whether the choice supports your health and environmental goals. I recently needed to pick up a few new items and found that some international brands didn't have material labels, so I chose not to buy them.

Look for flatware at thrift stores. Another good place to start is with bed linens and

jammies. We spend up to eight hours in them every day of our lives. IKEA has some good stainless steel cookware at a reasonable price. Lastly, if you're at the farmers market and there is a pottery booth, stop in and look for a new pie pan or other items to replace the not-so-healthy ones at home. Just confirm that the pottery is intended for food use, was made by a reputable potter, and has a food-safe glaze.

As more of us change our buying habits, the market will begin to change as well. This is how we can fight back.

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pendent MDVIP-affiliated practices at 4608 Opa-Locka Lane. They offer the annual MDVIP Wellness Program, which includes advanced screenings and tests to help identify risk factors like those listed here that could be addressed earlier or even prevented.

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Doctors Who Offer Insights into Longevity

You may have heard the buzz about “longevity.” It has become one of the most talked-about topics in health and wellness, but pinpointing which biomarkers actually predict how long – or how well – you’ll live is more complicated than the headlines suggest.

Having an MDVIP-affiliated physician at your side to translate biomarker tests and develop a personalized plan to help you

pursue living not just longer but better can be a smart, proactive way to protect your health.

For instance: Did you know grip strength, one of the most studied longevity biomarkers, can predict muscle loss (sarcopenia) and bone mineral density? Studies suggest it may be a better predictor of early mortality than traditional measures like blood pressure.

Also, the time it takes to walk 20 feet (gait speed) reflects both muscle strength and mobility. Similarly, the body roundness index (BRI) has emerged as what researchers consider a more precise longevity indicator than body mass index (BMI).

Biomarker testing for C-reactive protein, cytokine levels and white blood cells offer a window into inflammation, but these labs are not typically included in a typical annual physical.

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When Is It Time for More Care? A Quick Guide for Family Members and Caregivers



BY TERESA HALVERSON, DIR. OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT & COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Caring for an aging loved one is one of life's greatest acts of love. It can also be one of the most challenging. Many families struggle with knowing when occasional help is no longer enough and when professional care could improve their loved one's safety, health, and quality of life.

Recognizing the signs early can prevent unnecessary hospitalizations, reduce caregiver stress, and help seniors maintain the highest possible level of independence. Many families wonder if they're doing enough

- Afraid of falling
- Becoming less active because of poor balance

Physical therapy and rehabilitation can help improve strength, balance, and confidence. The Manor at Blue Water Bay offers in-patient and out-patient therapy.

Increased Hospital and/or Emergency Room Visits:

Repeated hospitalizations or emergency room visits often indicate that additional nursing care, medication management, and rehabilitation are needed to promote recovery and prevent future complications.

Difficulty Managing Medications:

Missing doses, taking medications incorrectly, or forgetting prescriptions can lead to serious health issues. Skilled nursing professionals can help ensure medications are taken safely and correctly. Did you know that medication mistakes are one of the leading causes of hospi-



to help an aging loved one. Recognizing the signs early can make all the difference in preventing falls, avoiding hospitalizations, and improving quality of life.

What are some signs that your loved one may need more support?

Frequent Falls:

One fall can change everything. If your loved one has fallen, is unsteady on their feet, or avoids walking because they are afraid of falling, it may be time for professional assessment and rehabilitation services. Look for these signs:

- Falling more often
- Holding onto furniture while walking

tal visits among older adults? Warning signs may include:

- Missed doses
- Taking medications at the wrong time
- Confusion about prescriptions
- Running out of medications

Professional nursing support can help keep medications safe and effective.

Declining Mobility:

If getting out of bed, walking, climbing stairs, or performing everyday tasks has become difficult, physical and occupational therapy may help restore strength and independence.

Changes in Memory or Judgment:

Signs that Memory May Be Changing

Forgetting appointments, becoming confused, wandering, or making unsafe decisions may indicate the need for additional supervision and support. Things to look for include:

- Frequently repeating the same questions or stories.
- Forgetting recent conversa-

tions or appointments.

- Misplacing items and being unable to retrace steps.
- Difficulty remembering names of familiar people or places.
- Losing track of dates, seasons, or time.
- Getting confused in familiar locations. Experiencing difficulties in daily living activities.
- Needing increasing reminders for everyday tasks.
- Difficulty following recipes,

instructions, or conversations.

Signs That Judgment May Be Changing

- Poor financial decisions or giving away large amounts of money.
- Falling for scams or telemarketing calls.
- Wearing inappropriate clothing for the weather.

Continued on next page



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Wellness

GUT SPEAKS

continued from page 4

from the adults around them, and a calm presence can be incredibly grounding.

Encourage slow breathing. A simple technique such as box breathing can help calm the nervous system: inhale through the nose for four seconds, hold for four, exhale gently for four, and pause for four before repeating. Younger children may enjoy imagining they're smelling a flower on the inhale and slowly blowing out birthday candles on the exhale.

Offer a few small sips of water and allow the moment to slow down.

These simple steps aren't meant to replace medical care. They create an opportunity to observe whether symptoms begin to settle while helping children reconnect with their bodies.

If stomachaches have happened around previous school years, don't wait until the first difficult morning to talk about them. A relaxed conversation a few days before school starts can go a long way.

Ask open-ended questions: "What are you most excited about this year?" "Is there anything you're a little nervous about?" "I remember your tummy bothering you before school last year. How are you feeling

about going back?"

Sometimes children don't know exactly what's bothering them until they're given a safe space to think about it. If this has been a recurring pattern, consider letting your child's teacher or school staff know ahead of time. A little extra reassurance or simply having another trusted adult aware of the situation can make the transition easier.

Supporting the whole child also means supporting healthy daily habits. Consistent sleep, balanced meals with protein and fiber, regular movement, outdoor play, hydration, and opportunities for meaningful conversation all help children adapt more effectively to change.

Not every stomachache is related to the nervous system, and it's important not to assume it is. If stomachaches become frequent, interfere with school or daily life, or are accompanied by concerning symptoms, reach out to your child's pediatrician. They know your child's medical history and can help determine whether additional evaluation or treatment is needed.

Perhaps the most important takeaway is this: Symptoms are information.

Rather than asking only, "How do we make this go away?" it can be equally valuable to ask, "What might this symptom be trying to tell us?"

Sometimes the answer lies in

the digestive system. Sometimes it's the nervous system adapting to change. Often, it's a combination of several factors.

As another school year begins, remember that children don't always have the words to explain what's happening inside. Sometimes the gut speaks first.

When families respond with curiosity instead of assumptions, they become better equipped to recognize when a child simply needs reassurance, when they may need a little extra support, and when it's time to partner with their pediatrician. Because every symptom has a story, and sometimes, listening is the first step toward understanding it.

TIME FOR MORE

continued from page 31

- Neglecting personal hygiene or grooming.
 - Forgetting to take medications or taking them incorrectly.
 - Leaving the stove on or forgetting food is cooking.
 - Driving unsafely or getting lost while driving.
 - Making impulsive or risky decisions that are out of character
- These changes often happen gradually. Receiving extra support can help seniors remain safe while maintaining their dig-

nity and independence.

Caregiver Burnout:

Now, let's talk about caregiver burnout. Family caregivers often put their own health last. Feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, anxious, or unable to keep up with caregiving responsibilities is a sign that additional support may benefit both you and your loved one.

Seeking Help is a Sign of Strength:

Many families worry that asking for help means they are giving up. Seeking additional care is an act of compassion.

Professional skilled nursing and rehabilitation services work alongside families to provide expert medical care, therapy, and support while helping loved ones recover, regain independence, and live as safely as possible. Watch for these signs:

- Feeling constantly tired, even after sleeping
- Increased anxiety, stress, or depression
- Irritability or mood swings
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Changes in appetite or sleep patterns
- Feeling isolated or withdrawing from family and friends

- Losing interest in hobbies or activities once enjoyed
 - Frequent headaches, body aches, or illness
 - Feeling guilty, resentful, or hopeless
 - Neglecting your own health appointments or medications
- You are Not Alone!**
- Taking care of yourself is essential—not selfish.
- If you're beginning to wonder whether your loved one needs more care, trust your instincts. Having a conversation early can make all the difference. Our team is here to answer your questions, discuss available options, and help you determine the level of care that's right for your family.

At The Manor at Blue Water Bay, we are committed to providing compassionate, personalized post-acute rehabilitation and skilled nursing care that helps patients recover with confidence while giving families peace of mind. Now offering professional physician consultations and oversight for Cardio, Physiatry, Nephrology, Neurology and in-house Palliative Care programs. Call us today for a tour and additional information on how our team of professionals can help.

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Wellness in Your Home

By MARTA ROSE-THORPE,
WWW.ASUPERIORMECHANICAL.COM

One of the fastest growing wellness trends, growing at a rate of nearly 24% per year, is a thought-provoking sector known as Wellness Real Estate. It represents a cultural and economic shift, where homes are no longer seen as just shelters but as infrastructure meant to actively enhance health span, mental wellbeing, and longevity. It is a design and development trend that integrates neuroscience and architecture. It features ergonomic spaces for movement and mindfulness: dedicated spaces for cold plunges, saunas, daily fitness and yoga, mental relaxation, and meditation.

Wellness Real Estate creates environments in the home that support brain health, reduce stress, improve mental clarity, and promote overall wellbeing. Here are eight elements:

Circadian Lighting - Mimics the natural progress of sunlight. Think: cooler, brighter lights in the morning to boost energy, and warmer, dimmer lighting in the evening that supports better sleep.

Aromatic Design - Approaches fragrance as environmental neuroscience to elevate mood, cognitive function, and health. This built-in diffusion system of essential oils is integrated directly into the HVAC system. Think eucalyptus in the home gym; lavender in the bedroom.

Acoustic Insulation - Reduces sensory overload and mental fatigue through sound-masking and noise-dampening architectural materials.

Biophilic Design - Incorporates aromatic plants and herbs directly into the architecture, which allows for natural, plant-based fragrances and helps with air purification.

Low VOC Paint (Volatile Organic Compound) - Emits fewer hazardous airborne chemicals and odors ~ especially important for the bedrooms of family members with allergies.

EMF Home Shielding - Electro Magnetic Fields affect our nervous system regulation, leading to bad sleep. Modify your living environment with shielding fabrics and conductive paint to reduce EMF from outside sources like cell towers.



Indoor Air Quality (IAQ)

- Indoor air is estimated to be 2x to 5x more polluted than outdoor air. Toxic microparticles include VOCs from paints, cleaning supplies and air fresheners. Biological pollutants such as mold, mildew, pet dander and pollen. Combustion pollutants like carbon monoxide (CO) and secondhand smoke. And Radon, a naturally occurring radioactive gas that can build up in homes.

Most AC companies use the standard, high-efficient Merve 13 filter that captures 98% of airborne, fine microparticles, but for truly clean air in the home, an Air Scrubber is essential. These advanced, whole-home air purification systems are installed directly into the central air ductwork and utilize activated carbon filters to capture 99.98% of airborne contaminants.

Water Purification and Water Softening

- Who doesn't want to drink pure water that tastes and smells good? Reverse Osmosis uses a semi-permeable membrane to remove harmful contaminants from drinking water. Whole-home water softening treatments remove hard chemicals from the water - namely calcium and magnesium - and scale build-up in the pipes - to preserve the home's entire plumbing system and appliances like sinks, dishwasher, and washing machine. Soft water also feels silkier on the skin, is better for your hair, and requires less soap, shampoo and laundry detergent to achieve the same lather.

What's in Our Local Water?

Our primary source of water for the entire Florida Panhandle comes from the Upper Floridan Aquifer. In Bay County, the water comes through the Aquafer into Deer Point Lake. Through environmental runoff and treatment processes, local water

contains elements including Chlorine, Copper, Aluminum, Barium, Radium, Nitrate, Blue-Green Algae, and Cyanobacteria which, if ingested, can affect our liver and nervous system. When we do a Water Assessment in a home or business, we

are looking for not more than one part per million (PPM) of any of these common toxins.

"Wellness in the Home" embraces a variety of facets, including carefully designed architecture, distinct materials utilized in the home construc-

tion process, and placing special systems in the home to optimize Clean Air and Pure Water - the very essence of our bodily health and mental wellbeing. For more information on increasing wellness in your home, feel free to call me at (850) 814-3822.

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Wellness

HCA Florida Fort Walton-Destin Hospital Among First in Nation to Perform Robotic-Assisted Shoulder Replacement Surgery

HCA Florida Fort Walton-Destin Hospital has become the first hospital along the Gulf Coast and one of the first in the nation to perform robotic-assisted shoulder replacement using an innovative new robotic platform designed to enhance surgical precision.

The advanced system features enhanced imaging, real-time tracking capabilities, and new tools that support surgical planning and execution, including virtual screw-depth measurement. These advancements are intended to improve accuracy and efficiency during robotic-assisted

shoulder replacement procedures while helping surgeons tailor treatment to each patient's unique anatomy.

"Our commitment is to bring the latest innovations in healthcare to the communities we serve," said KC Donahey, CEO of HCA Florida Fort Wal-

ton-Destin Hospital. "Introducing this advanced robotic technology for shoulder replacement demonstrates our dedication to delivering exceptional orthopedic care close to home. By investing in leading-edge technology and partnering with highly skilled physicians, we are helping provide patients with a more personalized surgical experience and the highest level of precision available."

Board-certified orthopedic surgeon David Dean, MD, who has specialized training in robotic-assisted orthopedic surgery,

next-generation robotic technology for shoulder replacement," said Dr. Dean. "Every advancement that allows us to improve accuracy and better personalized surgery has the potential to benefit our patients. This technology represents another important step forward in orthopedic care, and I'm proud to work with HCA Florida Fort Walton-Destin Hospital to make these innovative treatment options available to our community."

Shoulder replacement surgery may be recommended for patients experiencing severe





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also became the first surgeon along the Gulf Coast and one of the first in the nation to perform shoulder replacement surgery using the new robotic system at HCA Florida Fort Walton-Destin Hospital.

"It is a privilege to be the first surgeon in our region and one of the first in the nation to use this

shoulder arthritis, irreparable rotator cuff injuries, or chronic shoulder pain that interferes with everyday activities, mobility, or restful sleep.

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Is Buying a Business Better Than Starting One?



BY NATALIE KESSLER, BROKER/OWNER

Most people who dream of owning a business picture the same path: come up with an idea, write a business plan, find a location, build it from scratch, and hope it works. That's one way to do it. But there's another path that a lot of successful business owners have taken, and it gets far less attention than it deserves. Buying an existing business.

You're Not Starting at Zero

When you start from scratch, everything costs money before you make a dollar. Equipment, inventory, marketing, staffing, licenses - and then you wait. Months, sometimes years, before the business finds its footing. Many never do.

When you buy an existing business, you're buying something that already works. Customers are already coming in. Employees know their jobs. Vendor relationships are in place. Revenue is flowing on

day one. That's the hardest part of building a business, already done.

The Numbers Make Sense

Here's something that surprises a lot of first-time buyers: you can often purchase a profitable business using an SBA loan with as little as ten percent down, and the business's own cash flow covers the debt. In many cases, a buyer is clearing more on day one, after loan payments, than they would earn working for someone else.

Starting from scratch rarely looks this clean. There's no revenue history to borrow against, which means more personal risk, more out-of-pocket expense, and a longer road to profitability.

The Learning Curve Is Already Paid For

Every business has hard-won knowledge baked into it: what works, what doesn't, who the reliable suppliers are, which customers keep coming back, what time of year gets slow. When you buy an existing business, that knowledge often comes with it. Sellers typically stay on for a transition period to walk the new owner through operations and hand off relationships.

You're not figuring it out alone. You're inheriting a play-book.

It's Not Without Risk

Buying a business isn't a guaranteed win. You still have to

do your homework - reviewing financials, understanding why the seller is moving on, making sure the business can thrive once the owner steps away. A good broker and a good accountant are worth every penny.

But it's worth remembering that starting from scratch carries plenty of risk too. An existing business with real customers, real revenue, and a track record has already cleared the hardest hurdles.

So. Which Path Is Right?

If you have a truly unique concept and the runway to build it, starting from scratch can absolutely make sense. But if the



goal is to own something profitable, be your own boss, and start building equity, buying an existing business is worth a serious look.

It's a path more people are taking and one that doesn't get

nearly enough credit.

Natalie Kessler is the Broker/Owner of First Choice Business Brokers of NW Florida. She can be reached at 850-588-1025 or natalie.kessler@fcbb.com.

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A Pastor's Ponderings: Before You Pack the Backpack



BY PASTOR "DOC" DOUG STAUFFER

August brings the annual migration of parents and children into crowded store aisles in search of school supplies. Somewhere, a teacher has requested seventeen glue sticks, four fold-

ers in colors that apparently do not exist, and a box of tissues large enough to handle every runny nose in Okaloosa, Walton and Santa Rosa counties.

Parents carefully purchase pencils, notebooks, lunch boxes, school clothes, and backpacks that may cost more than the first car they purchased. Everything is labeled, organized, and ready. At least it is ready until the second day of school, when one child has already lost a water bottle, broken three pencils, and forgotten where the homework folder goes.

We spend considerable time preparing what our children will carry into the classroom. However, we should also consid-



er what they will carry in their hearts into the classroom.

Before you pack the backpack, pack some prayer.

Pray with your children before they leave home. Let them hear you ask God to protect them, guide them, help them make wise choices, and give them strength to do what is right. A child may forget where he put his lunch money, but he should never forget that someone at home is praying for him.

Before you pack the backpack, give them confidence.

Children need to know that their worth is NOT determined by their grades, athletic ability, popularity, clothing, or number of friends. There will always be someone who runs faster, reads

better, dresses differently, or seems to receive more attention. Teach your children to work hard without measuring their value by someone else's accomplishments or appearance.

Before you pack the backpack, include kindness.

Schools are filled with children who are carrying burdens no one can see. Some are lonely. Some are frightened. Some come from troubled homes. Some may eat lunch alone while pretending it does not bother them when it really hurts.

Teach your child to notice the student who is overlooked. Encourage him to invite someone to sit nearby, offer a kind word, or defend a classmate who is being mistreated. Kindness does not require money, popularity,

or exceptional ability. It only requires someone willing to care.

Ephesians 4:32 And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.

Before you pack the backpack, add courage.

Our children will face pressure to follow the crowd, laugh at what is wrong, remain silent when someone is mistreated, and accept ideas simply because everyone else appears to accept them. They need courage to stand alone when necessary.

Courage does not mean being rude, argumentative, or disrespectful. Biblical courage is the strength to remain kind while refusing to compromise what is right.

Joshua 1:9 Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.

Finally, before you pack the backpack, teach them the difference between right and wrong.

Children need more than information. They need wisdom. A student may learn mathematics, science, history, and technology, yet still be unprepared for life if he has never learned honesty, responsibility, self-control, respect, and a true reverence for God Almighty.

Schools have an important responsibility, but parents must never surrender their God-given role to anyone. The home should be the most influential classroom. It may sound cliché but children learn more from what they see than what we tell them.

They notice how we speak when we are frustrated. They watch how we treat people who obviously unable to reciprocate. They observe whether our faith is merely something we put on full display on Sunday or something we live every day.

Soon, children throughout our community will walk into classrooms carrying backpacks filled with supplies. Let us make sure they are also carrying prayer, confidence, kindness, courage, and a clear understanding of right and wrong.

And parents, you may also want to pack an extra pencil. By lunchtime, the first one will probably be missing, broken or given away.

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Sean of the South: Lightning Bugs



BY SEAN DIETRICH

It's a quiet night in Avondale. The sun is low in the western sky. The air is lit with lightning bugs. There are a few neighborhood kids, playing in front yards, trying to catch them with Tupperware.

And the memories are getting so thick you have to swat them away like gnats.

I remember the first time I ever heard a lightning bug called a "firefly." I was 11 years old. A kid from California had recently moved into our neighborhood. He got excited when the front yards were alight with summer lightning bugs.

He said, "Look, fireflies!"

All us kids looked at the new boy as though his cheese had slid off his cracker. Fireflies?

"They're not fireflies," said Margaret Ann. "They're LIGHTNING BUGS."

Truer words.

"No they're not," he answered. "They're FIREFLIES."

"What the [expletive] is a firefly?" said my cousin, Ed Lee.

"They're bugs that light up."

We howled with delight. My cousin Ed Lee almost peed himself. "Californians!" my cousin remarked.

Then the Californian went on to tell us he'd never seen lightning bugs before. He said they didn't have them in the Golden State. We were aghast. No lightning bugs? That was like not knowing Jesus. Or Dale Earnhardt.

"You've never seen lightning bugs?" we said in disbelief.

The Californian shook his head stating that, no, he'd never seen anything like these bugs with the iridescent hindparts.

Which gave us great pride. Because, you see, ever since this Californian had come to our school, he immediately became the hippest kid in our hillbilly class.

Namely, because he had

wavy blonde hair, a skateboard, and he knew what tofu was. And one time, for Show and Tell, the kid declared that he had gone surfing. The girls in the class went crazy for him and indicated that they would be interested in bearing his offspring someday.

But he'd never seen lightning bugs. And this made us very proud.

"Wanna catch lightning bugs?" suggested my cousin.

Replied the Californian, "You mean you can CATCH fireflies?"

"No," answered Cousin Ed Lee. "But you can catch lightning bugs."

So we raided my mother's kitchen cabinets. We emerged from the house with Ball mason jars—something else the Californian had never seen before.

"These are funny-looking jars," he said. "And they have funny lids."

"These are moonshine jars," said Margaret.

"What's moonshine?" said the Californian.

You have to worry about America's youth.

The next thing we knew, we were all outside, using mason



jars the way the Good Lord intended—to catch lightning bugs (fireflies). Which as it happens are neither bugs nor flies. They are beetles.

To catch a lightning bug, you had to have good technique:

You must (1) take the jar in your right hand; then you must (2) hold the lid in your left hand; then (3) you fling the jar through the air haphazardly like one who hath consumed too much moonshine; whereupon you (4) slam the lid over the jar and shout, "I got one!" even if this is a lie.

It was okay to lie about catching lightning bugs because nobody paid any attention to you inasmuch as they were all busy trying to catch their own. We

were all chasing the nanoscopic glowing dots.

Once we had jars full of lightning bugs, the Californian asked, "Now what do we do with 'em?"

Margaret replied, "You just look at 'em."

"Then you let them go," added Cousin Ed Lee.

"LET THEM GO?" answered the Californian. "But why go to the trouble of catching so many if you're just going to set them free?"

"Because," said Sandra. "They only live 30 days."

We were mesmerized by the bright dots in our mason jars, lit up like miracles, meandering to

and fro. Their little butts glowing greenish-yellow.

"I'm going to keep my fireflies," said the Californian.

"You can't," said Margaret. "Lightning bugs have to go free so they can make babies."

"They have to make babies," said Sandra, "or else we'll never have lightning bugs again."

So we kept them for a few minutes. We observed them closely. Then, immediately after our mothers called us inside for supper, we wandered down to the creek and let them all go. We watched the insects fill the night with millions of tiny lights.

"They're so beautiful," said the Californian. "I wish beautiful things lived longer lives."

Truer words.

Sean Dietrich is a columnist, and novelist, known for his commentary on life in the American South. His work has appeared in Southern Living, The Tallahassee Democrat, Good Grit, South Magazine, Alabama Living, the Birmingham News, Thom Magazine, The Mobile Press Register and Life Media publications, and he has authored seven books.

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 Arts & Music

Midnight Mixtape Brings the Soundtrack of a Generation to a Venue Near You

By WILL ESTELL

If you've ever found yourself smiling from ear to ear when the opening notes of a favorite anthem blast through the speakers, you're definitely not alone. That feeling of instant nostalgia is exactly what Northwest Florida's hottest new band on the block, Midnight Mixtape, has built its reputation on — delivering energetic performances that transport audiences back to some of music's most memorable eras.

Midnight Mixtape has quickly become one of the area's most entertaining live acts, combining exceptional local musicianship, polished vocals and an electric stage presence that transforms every performance into a sing-along. Rather than simply covering familiar songs, this band recreates the feel, emotion, excitement and ener-

gy that made these tracks part of the soundtrack of our youth and young adulthood. These guys and girls aren't simply performing songs — they're playing memories.

For its most recent experiment in music history, the band has shifted to "Y2K Rewind: The Ultimate Early 2000s Live Experience," featuring an impressive collection of hits spanning rock, pop, alternative and dance music from the late 1990s and early 2000s. Think Avril Lavigne, Blink-182, Concrete Blonde, Britney, Evanescence and many more artists whose music defined an entire generation. Whether you grew up burning cheap CDs for friends or loading your first iPod with these bangers, Midnight Mixtape delivers the sounds and shows that instantly reconnect us with those unfor-

gettable moments.

As band co-founder Dan Collins told me, "The concept behind our Midnight Mixtape shows is essentially to pick an era and build an entire show around it. A Midnight Mixtape show isn't simply an array of cover songs; it's an event." Collins added, "We play different themes and learn full new sets for each new theme. Keeping the performance more organic and unplugged, with acoustic guitars, simple hand percussion, the addition of violin playing many of the lead guitar parts, along with keys and multipart harmonies gives the shows a more intimate and up-close vibe."

Collins says he and his fellow band members believe this concept is why, to date, all of their limited-run shows have sold out at every venue where they have performed across Northwest Florida.

Dan Collins, whose lead vocals and guitar anchor each performance with confidence

and charisma, has become well known throughout Northwest Florida as the frontman and founder of Black Eyed Blonde, as well as for producing unique live entertainment events that go beyond the typical cover band performance. He also built his reputation during his time playing with Naked Gunmen and Miss Demeanor.

Sharing center stage is Dan's equally talented wife, Becca (also of Black Eyed Blonde), whose dynamic lead vocals add both power and versatility to the band's sound. Her ability to move effortlessly between emotional ballads and high-energy rock anthems gives Midnight Mixtape an impressive vocal range that keeps audiences engaged from the first song to the final encore.

The ensemble also includes Sarah Mangum on vocals and keys, adding rich harmonies and melodic depth. Jess Murphy (formerly of Continuum), with her always impressive violin arrange-



PHOTOGRAPHY BY SEAN MURPHY

ments, gives familiar favorites an unexpected twist, adding a sound and a brand of showmanship that any band would envy. Stacy Clearman delivers strong vocals and percussion that enhance the band's layered sound and infectious rhythm. Together, Midnight Mixtape creates a polished production that feels much larger than that of just another local band.

I believe what really separates Midnight Mixtape from many other bands across our coastal communities is the way they invite the audience into the performance. A Mixtape concert becomes an interactive celebration. It's like a show that you also get to be part of — because it is your show, your memories and your music.

Midnight Mixtape will perform live at Distillery 98 in Santa Rosa Beach on Friday, Aug. 28, 2026, presenting "The Ultimate Early 2000s Live Music Experience." This two-hour show promises to be a nonstop celebration of the music that defined the Y2K era.

At press time, a limited number of VIP and general admission tickets were available. However, given the band's recent enthusiastic crowds, I definitely recommend purchasing tickets soon. You can also follow the band online for more details, dates and performance videos.

Will Estell is a writer, editor, and media entrepreneur with over 750 published articles in a wide array of regional and national publications. Estell is the chief creative officer of Estell Hussey Media and has been instrumental in bringing 12 new startup magazine brands to market over his 25-plus-year media career. He currently consults for publishing companies locally and nationally, as well as maintaining a career in coastal real estate and development. Originally from the backwoods of Booneville, Miss., Will is a father of three, who along with his wife, WEAR ABC 3 anchor, Laura Hussey Estell, now calls Destin and Navarre Beach home.




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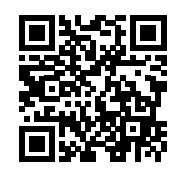
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Love of Home Turns Into Emerald Coast Mahjong Masterpiece

BY M. SHAYE SMITH

Marilu Morgan never planned to launch a Mahjong business.

For the local artist known for capturing the beauty of the Emerald Coast, inspiration arrived in an unexpected place: a Mahjong table.

When she couldn't find a set that reflected the beauty of the Emerald Coast, she created her own. Filled with hand-drawn illustrations of native flowers, emerald waters, sugar-white beaches and nods to Destin's fishing heritage, the collection has quickly become a local favorite and is now finding homes on Mahjong tables across the country.

Known for her vibrant, colorful coastal artwork celebrating the Emerald Coast lifestyle, Morgan has built a following through pieces that capture the beauty and charm of coastal living. Designing a Mahjong collection became a natural extension of the place that has inspired her work for years.

When she searched for a set that matched her artistic style, Morgan realized something was



JAMIE KAMBER PHOTOGRAPHY



missing. "There are so many beachy sets out there," Morgan said. "I really wanted one that reflected the place I call home."

So, she picked up her pencil and designed one herself.

Not intending to sell the collection, she shared the finished set with friends before posting a video on Instagram. The response surprised her. "I posted a video on Instagram and it blew up," she said. "I knew I had stumbled on something special at that point."

That personal project has since grown into the Emerald Coast Mahjong Collection, a hand-illustrated tribute to Northwest Florida.

Every tile is illustrated by Morgan without AI-generated artwork or clip art. Native flowers, local wildlife, emerald waters and sugar-white beaches all appear throughout the collection. Even the backs of the tiles feature a photograph Morgan captured while at the beach with her children, transformed into a watercolor-inspired wave pattern.

The local touches continue throughout the set. The Joker tiles depict tourists, her husband's suggestion, with one featuring a fisherman proudly holding a red snapper, a nod to Destin's fishing heritage.

Morgan also credits the local Mahjong community with helping shape the collection. She learned the game from local instructor Morgan Smith, leaned on Jenn Marvel through-

out the design process and relied on her Mahjong group to test sample sets and provide honest feedback. "They've given me so much encouragement, constructive criticism and help," she said.

This summer, Morgan celebrated the collection's debut with three launch parties in Destin, two at Bitterroot and one at Camille's at Crystal Beach. Guests enjoyed open play on the new sets, shopped the collection and celebrated almost a year of work coming to life.

During each event, Morgan asked a simple question: "Who traveled here from out of state?"

More than half the room raised their hands.

Guests had traveled from Texas, Louisiana, Tennessee, Mississippi, Georgia and Alabama to celebrate the launch. "That really blew me away," Morgan said. "That so many folks would plan a trip to Destin to play with the tiles I designed? A pinch me moment, for sure."

The excitement has continued since launch. Morgan said nearly 90% of online orders have shipped outside Florida, with her Emerald Coast-inspired designs now finding homes from California and Idaho to New York and New Hampshire.

For Morgan, the collection has become another way to celebrate the Emerald Coast through art and share a place she loves with people across the country.

The Emerald Coast Mahjong Collection is available online, with select items also available locally at Zoo Gallery, Mahjong Beach House, Patchouli's and Lola's. Sold-out tile sets are expected to return soon, along with new mat designs and matching accessories. MariluMorgan.com/mahjong

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