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Postal Customer Local

SOCKS TNR Army: Tackling Okaloosa County's Community Cat Crisis

BY LORRAINE WHETSTONE

The family dog found the litter of kittens underneath the kids' playhouse. Jennifer Fuhrman had no idea they were there. She didn't feed outside cats. She didn't even have a cat. She loaded a box with the six black, mewling kittens into her car and called a shelter as she was backing out the driveway.

The shelter was full and couldn't take them. Neither could another shelter, nor another. "I was like, What? Why? That's what you DO."

"I thought people were handling it," she said. "I didn't realize there were no good options."

In Okaloosa County, there are an estimated 36,000 un-owned, free-roaming community cats. Those cats give birth to 80 percent of the kittens that overwhelm local shelters – particularly right now during "kitten season." * People find kittens everywhere – under porches, at shopping centers, in boats, in engines, running across roads. They



contact shelters, desperate for help, but there is not remotely enough help, space or money available.

SOCKS TNR Army

Fuhrman is now working to provide the only good option. She commands the "TNR Army," a targeted "trap, neuter, return" program established by Save Our Cats and



Kittens Shelter (SOCKS) in Fort Walton Beach. Employees jokingly call her the "TNR Czar." Colonies of community cats are trapped, spayed/neutered, then released back where they were trapped.

Targeted TNR is the only humane, scientifically proven method to reduce feline overpopulation. Colonies can't be simply removed. More cats will arrive to fill the space. "Jennifer is typical of many people in our area who thought there was help for unwanted cats. She is unusual because she took the time to get involved in such a meaningful way," said SOCKS Executive Director Nancy Schimmer. "Cat overpopulation is going largely unchecked, except for programs like ours and other rescues stepping up to help."

The largest TNR project so far sterilized 89 cats in July. It was a partnership between SOCKS and the Panhandle Animal Welfare Society (PAWS), funded by grants, including a \$2,000 grant to SOCKS from PennyFix.

The second largest was 56 cats in a neighborhood off Racetrack Road in December. For that, SOCKS part-

SOCKS TNR
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Celebrating Augustus Tart's Legacy

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

Next to the Shalimar Library is the gravesite of a man whose legacy is celebrated as that of an early pioneer in Okaloosa County. That man was Augustus "Gus" Tart, an Afro-American born into slavery in 1840 in South Carolina who registered to vote as a free man and moved to Northwest Florida in 1864 to begin a new life. His life is an example of integrity and perseverance.

And what a life! Near Garnier's Bayou on Choctawhatchee Bay, Gus, a widower with two sons, be-

AUGUSTUS TART
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Magnolia Grill

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

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Community

AUGUSTUS TART

continued from page 1

came a skilled outdoorsman, taking prominent visitors fishing and hunting at the camp he created. Newspaper articles from Pensacola describe governors, senators and judges visiting his camp and commending his warmth and honesty.

In 1903, under the Homestead Act, Gus acquired approximately 134 acres of land along Choctawhatchee Bay from President Theodore Roosevelt. Yes, when you visit the County Courthouse or cheer for the football team at Meigs Middle School, you are standing on land once owned by Augustus Tart. Modern-day Shalimar is

part of his lasting legacy.

Gus also prepared meals for John Thomas Brooks, one of the founders of Fort Walton Beach, and bequeathed most of his real and personal property to Brooks in his will, dated Oct. 3, 1915.

On Saturday, August 22, 2026, hundreds of people gathered for a dedication ceremony at the Armament Museum to honor this historic pioneer. The ceremony was a joint effort of the NAACP, Okaloosa County Branch; the Okaloosa County American 250 Commission; the Town of Shalimar; the Shalimar Library and Thrift Store; and other community leaders and organizations. Stories about Gus were shared by Mrs. Kay Brooks on behalf of the Brooks



family, Mr. Johann Behken from the Shalimar Library, and Mr. Statia McNeese from the NAACP Research Committee.

Further remarks were made by Carolyn Ketchel, Okaloosa County Commissioner; Graham Fountain, on behalf of Congressman Jimmy Patronis;

Shannon Hayes, Vice President of the Carver Hill Museum; and Mark Franks, Mayor of the Town of Shalimar. Sabu Williams, President of the Okaloosa Branch of the NAACP, made closing statements. A lovely reception followed, with memorabilia on display for visitors.

A permanent historical marker will soon be installed near the Augustus Tart gravesite, close to the Shalimar Library. Recognition and appreciation continued with proclamations by Congressman Patronis and Mayor Franks. The City of Shalimar has proclaimed that August 22 will be Augustus Tart Day.

Mayor Franks shared a quote at the event that was so meaningful: "I want you to think

about this for a moment. A man who was born into slavery became a landowner whose property would help shape the community in which we stand today. Let us honor Gus Tart not simply by remembering his name, but by remembering what his life represents, which is freedom, perseverance, dignity, entrepreneurship, community, and the enduring power of a person to leave a mark far greater than he could ever imagine."

Thank you, Mayor Franks, for saying what we all knew as we listened to tales about the life of Augustus Tart—the man who first owned the land that is now Shalimar, Florida. His legacy is indeed one for us to admire and remember.

SOCKS TNR

continued from page 1

nered with veterinarian Mack the SNipper and trappers from 30A Cats, Okaloosa Animal Protection League, PAWS and Animal Advocates of Northwest Florida. Donations covered \$3,860 in veterinary costs.

Valerie Arciaga lives in the neighborhood and said cats were "howling and yowling and fighting all the time because they were mating." One fight "was like the Tasmanian devil in the driveway." Males sprayed in her garage. Cats got hit on the roads. You'd drive down a road

and there were a dozen cats facing off. "It looked like a gang war," she said.

After the TNR project, fighting and spraying stopped. Cats looked healthier. Without biting, there's less risk of transmitting diseases. "It's quiet. They're much more chill," she said. "There's no kittens. We usually have hordes of kittens. "It's fabulous."

Mack the SNipper

Back when Fuhrman discovered kittens under her playhouse, there were no high-volume, low-cost spay/neuter veterinary clinics in Okaloosa

County. The closest were in Panama City; Dothan, Ala.; and Ocean Springs, Miss. SOCKS and other rescues drove hours with vanloads of cats to get those cheaper surgery costs. For the public, getting just one cat "fixed" at a local veterinary hospital costs hundreds of dollars. Some vets offer discounts, but there are limited surgery slots available.

Grants help bring down the cost, but due to Okaloosa County ordinances, shelters can't qualify for some large amounts of money. Schimmer hopes local officials will learn about the issue and what actually works

so that cats will not continue to suffer and colonies can be alleviated.

One promising development is the recent arrival of Sara Mackinze, a.k.a. "Mack the SNipper," in Okaloosa County, offering \$85 packages for community cats that includes surgery, vaccines and an "ear tip," the universal sign that a cat has been sterilized. Mackinze, who can perform 60 feline spay/neuter surgeries a day, has a mobile veterinary unit called the "Spayship," and a brick-and-mortar clinic in downtown Crestview. "A couple members of our team are from Baker originally, and they were the ones that said we need to ... bring this talent out here," Mackinze said. "So that's why we came, and that's why we've stayed. We love it here, and we see the need is really great."

TNR in Shalimar

Cats multiply quickly. Kittens can get pregnant at four months old and have up to four litters a year. Cats can get pregnant with a new litter while nursing another.

Brenda Armacost started TNR'ing in her Shalimar neighborhood to help out a friend who started out feeding a few cats. "And then it went from five or six cats to 20 cats," Armacost said. Armacost is a veterinary technician at Crossroads Animal Clinic in Fort Walton Beach, so it's convenient for her to trap cats and take them to work for surgeries. Since November 2024, she's TNR'd 74 cats in the neighborhood. Ten kittens were tameable and

found inside homes.

She takes a firm stance on

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FWB Chamber Spotlight



Local Elks Lodge 1795 Helps McCormack Family Find Answers and Support

BY DENISE DAVID

As parents, we want our children to have the best possible opportunities. One local family found themselves searching for answers and assistance to help their children have a more positive learning experience—but they were unsure where to turn.

The McCormack family had a kindergartner who was feeling stressed about school and a preschooler who was being sent home almost daily because of behavioral challenges. Parents Jessica and Chris struggled to find helpful resources. Their pediatrician dismissed their concerns, and although a school administrator recommended testing, the family was not making progress.

Then the children's grandmother, Susie Johnson, recalled an article she had read in Florida Elks Magazine. As a new member of Elks Lodge 1795 in Fort Walton Beach-Destin, she wondered whether the organization might be able to help her grandson.

The family decided to ho-

meschool both children while actively seeking a solution. After further research, they began the application process for their young son, Charlie.

Following a period on the Elks program's waiting list, Charlie and his mother participated in a two-day assessment and diagnostic evaluation at the Florida Elks Youth Camp in central Florida. Rather than a brief clinical appointment, the evaluation gave staff time to connect with Charlie through play, meals tailored to his sensory preferences and observations of his social interactions.

Jessica was impressed by the beautiful campus, comfortable accommodations and clear explanations provided throughout the process.

With a psychometrist and psychiatrist on staff, the program helped the family obtain the answers they needed before Charlie's 5th birthday. The family was then able to apply for a Step Up scholarship. The resulting financial assistance has allowed them to enroll Charlie



in a summer camp, purchase helpful tools for use at home and look forward to a brighter future.

At first, the family encountered uncertainty, denial and a lack of understanding from some members of the community. There was also concern that receiving a diagnosis at such a young age might nega-

tively affect Charlie. Instead, the answers, support and future services now available to him have given the entire family renewed hope.

Throughout Florida, members of the Fraternal Order of Elks collectively raise funds and awareness to support local families through Florida Elks Children's Therapy Services.

"In addition to the more than 650 children we treat through FECTS, we are blessed to have our new Florida Elks for Autism program," said Colleen Gallant, director of Florida Elks Children's Therapy Services. "To date, we have tested 120 children and continue to test 10 children every other month at the Florida Elks Youth Camp."

"The way our program works is that we bring the family to the Youth Camp for testing. While the family is at camp, we provide meals and, if needed, a room at the Smith Conference Center. The Adult and Pediatric Institute uses the ADOS-2 test, and once testing is complete, the family receives a detailed report with a diagnosis and information about resources available in their area. All of our services are provided at no charge to the family."

Families seeking additional information can visit elkstherapy.com, where they will find program details, a brochure and the necessary application.

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Okaloosa County Improvements

BY CAROLYN NEWCOMER
KETCHEL

Eight years ago, the voters of Okaloosa County approved a 10-year, half-cent surtax on fuel purchases to fund infrastructure projects. Prior to that vote, the County published a list of projects that would be addressed with the funds generated by the surtax. I want to thank each and every one of you for that vote. We used the funds to address the needs listed below, and all of these projects are finished or nearing completion.

Southwest Crestview Bypass

Public Safety

- Emergency Services Communication Equipment
- Fleet Improvements for Improved Response
- Headquarters Improvements
- School Resource Officer Equipment and Support

Transportation Capacity

- Bone Creek Road Improvements
- College Boulevard Improvements
- Commons Drive Improvements
- CR 393 Phase 3 Reconstruction
- Crestview Northwest Bypass
- Dowdy Road Roadway Improvements
- Ellis Road Improvements
- Highway 2 Bridge Replacement and Roadway Improvements
- John King Widening and Intersection Improvements
- Millside Road Roadway Improvements
- Old River Road Roadway Improvements
- **U.S. 98 and Stahlman**

Drive Intersection Improvements

- West Dodson Road Improvements

Transportation Safety

- Carmel Drive and Beal Parkway Intersection Improvements
- Farmers Market Access Improvements
- Forest Road Improvements
- Hill Avenue and Lovejoy Road Intersection Improvements
- Hospital Road and Lewis Turner Boulevard Intersection Improvements
- Poquito Road and Lewis Turner Boulevard Intersection Improvements
- Prioritized Multimodal Improvements
- Redwood Avenue and John Sims Parkway Intersection Improvements

Stormwater

- 6th Avenue Area (Port Dixie) Stormwater Enhancements
- Bayshore Area Stormwater Improvements
- Beachview Drive Drainage Improvements
- Echo Circle Area Stormwater Improvements
- Griffith Mill Area Stormwater Improvements
- Indian Lakes Stormwater Improvements
- Lake Lorraine Area Stormwater Improvements
- Lancaster Drive Area Stormwater Improvements
- Lloyd Street/Mayflower Area Stormwater Improvements
- Mooney Road Stormwater Improvements
- Northridge Area Stormwater Improvements
- Overbrook Area Stormwater



- Improvements
- Santa Rosa Boulevard Stormwater and Roadway Improvements
 - South Avenue Area Drainage Improvements
 - Standish Court Stormwater Enhancements
 - Union Avenue Stormwater Improvements
 - West U.S. 98 Area Stormwater Improvements
 - Willow Bend/Green Acres Area Stormwater Improvements

A half-cent may not seem like a lot of money, but a small amount has added up to big improvements. An estimated 30% of all surtax revenue comes from visitors to our area.

This surtax is set to expire in 2028. On November 3, 2026, the voters of Okaloosa County will have the opportunity to extend it for another 10 years. To show you what we are planning, I have included the 2026–2027 needs list below.

- College Boulevard intersection improvements
- Santa Rosa Boulevard improvements
- Mar Walt Drive improvements

- West U.S. 98 Collector
- Northwest Crestview Bypass
- Gap Creek area stormwater improvements
- Hollywood Boulevard improvements
- 3rd Avenue stormwater improvements
- Eglin Drive sidewalk
- Poquito Road and Sunset Lane intersection improvements
- Sunset Boulevard area stormwater improvements
- Rocky Bayou area stormwater quality
- Commons Drive improvements
- Edgewater Drive sidewalk
- Bluewater Boulevard pedestrian improvements from State Road 20 to Oakmont Drive
- Oakmont Drive pedestrian improvements
- Antioch Road improvements
- Log Lake Road improvements
- Rocky Bayou Drive multiuse path from Forest Road to Crossing Boulevard
- Rocky Bayou Drive and State Road 20 intersection improvements
- Redwood Avenue and State Road 20 intersection improvements
- John Givens Road and Adora

*“Christmas is coming, the
goose is getting fat.
Please put a penny in the
old man’s hat.
If you haven’t got a penny,
a ha’penny will do.
If you haven’t got a
ha’penny, God bless you.”*

- Teal Way intersection improvements
- Dirt-to-pave improvements on antiquated platted roads—“The Last 8 Miles”
 - Sidewalk improvements
 - Pavement preservation and equipment
 - Land acquisition for parks and conservation
 - Multipurpose building at the OCSO Training Center
 - 911 radio recorder
 - Evidence Section fire-suppression upgrades at OCSO headquarters
 - Larry Ashley Training Center elevator
 - Multifunction crisis command and mobile E911 vehicle
 - Facilities
 - Debt service

Together, we can continue improving Okaloosa County in many ways. This surtax measure will be on the ballot on November 3. I want you to be informed about the many ways a half-penny has made a difference. It is an honor to serve as your Commissioner.

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

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

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BY DR. KAREN DEVORE

Mention acupuncture and most people still think of one thing: pain. Back pain. A stubborn shoulder. Sciatica. Headaches. An injury that just doesn't seem to completely resolve.

And for good reason. Acupuncture can be an extraordinarily useful tool for managing pain, muscle tension and many musculoskeletal complaints. But what often surprises patients is how much further its clinical application can extend.

Acupuncture may support patients navigating stress, insomnia, headaches and migraines, digestive issues, fertility, inflammatory conditions and long COVID. With specialized training in neuroacupuncture, its applications can extend to neuropathy, vertigo, Parkinson's disease, stroke rehabilitation, PTSD, autism, ADHD, anxiety and other neurological and neuropsychiatric concerns.

For some patients, acupuncture addresses a specific problem. For others, it becomes part of how they support their health, function and quality of life over time.

Acupuncture Through a Contemporary Lens

Acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine have remarkably long histories of clinical use. What I find particularly interesting today is the convergence of that accumulated clinical tradition with our evolving scientific understanding of the nervous system, pain signaling, physiology and botanical medicine.

Modern research continues to investigate how acupuncture influences nervous-system signaling and pain processing, while pharmacological research examines the bioactive compounds found within medicinal plants.

We don't have to position traditional medicine in opposition to modern healthcare. Instead,

we can ask thoughtful questions: What works? How does it work? For whom might it be useful? And where can it fit within a comprehensive health plan?

Acupuncture also doesn't have to be something you try only after everything else has failed. Nor does choosing acupuncture mean stepping away from conventional medicine. It can complement care from a primary care physician, neurologist, physical therapist, OB/GYN, psychiatrist or other specialist.

More than Needles

Acupuncture treatment is highly individualized. Two people with the same complaint may receive different treatment based



on their health histories, symptoms and goals.

Care may also extend beyond needles. Depending on the individual, traditional Chinese medicine can incorporate cupping, fire cupping, gua sha, food-based recommendations or customized Chinese herbal medicine.

Like many therapies, acupuncture is rarely best understood as a "one-and-done" treatment. Some people notice changes quickly, while others experience therapeutic benefit over a series of treatments. Frequency and duration depend on the individual, the complexity and chronicity of the concern, and how that person responds.

That individualized approach matters because the body doesn't organize itself into separate compartments. Sleep affects pain. Stress can affect digestion. Pain influences mood and sleep. Our nervous, hormonal, immune and musculoskeletal systems are deeply interconnected.

That interconnectedness is

one reason acupuncture can fit naturally within a broader health plan.

A Specialized Approach to Neurological Care

One of the most fascinating

developments within the field is neuroacupuncture.

Neuroacupuncture is not simply traditional acupuncture applied to someone with a neurological diagnosis. It requires advanced specialized education

integrating acupuncture techniques with detailed study of neurological anatomy, function and rehabilitation.

This specialized approach

Continued on page 27

Beyond Pain Relief: A Broader Approach to Acupuncture



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Events at the Beach

Concerts at The Landing

Fridays, Sept. 11-Oct. 23 | 6 to 8 p.m.

Fort Walton Beach Landing, 139 Brooks St. SE | FWB

Bring a lawn chair or blanket for eight weeks of free concerts at the newly renovated waterfront park in downtown Fort Walton Beach. The city presents the series in partnership with Dan Collins Entertainment and 102.1 The Wave.

The fall lineup includes:
Sept. 11: Sons of Saints — rock

'n' roll variety.

Sept. 18: Saucy FuzZ — alternative, indie and funk rock.

Sept. 25: Black Eyed Blonde — rock variety.

Oct. 2: Below Alabama — country and Southern rock.

Oct. 9: Cat Rhodes & The Truth — blues, funk and neo-soul.

Oct. 16: Chase Mitchell Band — country and Southern rock.

Oct. 23: Rockstarfish — party rock variety.

Emerging Choreographers' Project Blackbox

Friday and Saturday, Sept. 11-12 | 7:30 p.m. each night

Northwest Florida Ballet Studios | FWB

Northwest Florida Ballet opens its 2026-27 season with this intimate, dancer-led production featuring original ballet and contemporary works choreographed by selected company members. A visual art exhibition by NFB Académie students will

accompany the performances.

Individual tickets are \$30. Subscribers may purchase tickets for \$26 each with a season subscription. Visit nfballet.org.

From 9/11 to Today: Strength in Every Long Walk

Saturday, Sept. 12 | Memorial workout at 8 a.m.; dinner and panel discussion at 4:30 p.m.

EOD Training Squadron | Eglin Air Force Base; The Island Resort, Maui Ballroom | FWB

The EOD Warrior Foundation will commemorate the 25th anniversary of 9/11 with a day honoring the legacy of the 137 explosive ordnance disposal service members who lost their lives during the Global War on Terror.

"One Last Sweat for the EOD 137," a memorial workout honoring the community's strength, resilience and sacrifice, begins at 8 a.m. The evening dinner and panel discussion will feature stories and reflections on the lasting impact of Sept. 11.

Registration is required.

The Church at Shalimar's 75th Anniversary Celebration

Sunday, Sept. 13 | 11 a.m., followed by an anniversary lunch

The Church at Shalimar, 1 Old Ferry Road | Shalimar

The Church at Shalimar welcomes friends, former members and the community to celebrate its 75th anniversary with one combined worship service featuring former pastor Larry Bryars as guest preacher. An anniversary lunch will follow in the Family Life Center.

The church traces its beginnings to June 17, 1951, when members of First United Methodist Church of Fort Walton Beach organized a worship service in the concession stand of the Florida Drive-In Movie Theatre, just off Eglin Parkway in Shalimar. The gathering planted a new congregation in what was then a largely rural area.

Over the years, the church built two sanctuaries, with the older one now serving its music team. It added education wings in the 1960s, started a preschool in 1972 and built the Family Life Center in 1996 to

accommodate contemporary worship and community events. Members also helped establish Sharing and Caring, the Ben Gordon Visitation Center, now Safe Connections, and Children in Crisis.

Three-Dimensional Art Exhibition

Sept. 15-Oct. 9 | Noon to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Friday; 1 to 4 p.m. Saturday
Arts and Design Society of Fort Walton Beach, 17 First St. SE | FWB

Explore sculptures, ceramics, woodwork, glass, fiber art and mixed media in this exhibition featuring three-dimensional works by local and regional artists.

A free opening reception takes place from 6 to 8 p.m. Friday, Sept. 18, offering an opportunity to meet the artists and enjoy an evening of art and conversation. The exhibition remains on display during regular gallery hours through Oct. 9.

For information, visit artsdesignsociety.org.

Rally on the Court Tennis and Pickleball Tournament

Friday and Saturday, Sept. 25-26 | Pickleball at 5 p.m. Friday; tennis time TBA for Saturday
Fort Walton Beach Tennis Center, 45 West Audrey Drive NW | FWB

The city of Fort Walton Beach and USTA Florida host a weekend of tennis and pickleball benefiting the Rally Foundation and its support of childhood cancer research. Proceeds help fund research into better treatments with fewer long-term side effects and, ultimately, cures.

Entry is \$47 per player, recognizing the 47 children diagnosed with cancer each day in the United States. Players and spectators are welcome.

Register at fundraise.rallyfoundation.org/event/rally-on-the-court-2026/e819899.

The tennis center is owned by the city and operated by USTA Florida. For information, call 850-344-0230 or visit fwbtennis-center.com. Learn more about the beneficiary at rallyfoundation.org.

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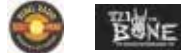
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HAPPENINGS AROUND FWB

SEPTEMBER

10-27
Come From Away
Times vary | Emerald Coast Theatre Company | Miramar Beach

11
Concerts at The Landing: Sons of Saints
6 pm | The Landing | FWB

11-12
Emerging Choreographers' Project: Blackbox
7:30 pm | NFB Studios at Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville

12
One Last Sweat for the EOD 137 Memorial Workout
8 am | EOD Training Squadron | Eglin AFB

Rotary Sandy Bags Cornhole Tourney!
9 am | The Back Porch | Destin

Bobbin Lace Day
1 pm | Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida | Valparaiso

From 9/11 to Today: Strength in Every Long Walk—Dinner and Panel Discussion
4:30 pm | Maui Ballroom at The Island Resort | FWB

Cirque Du Canines
7 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Center | Niceville

13
The Church at Shalimar 75th Anniversary Celebration
11 am | The Church at Shalimar | Shalimar

Emerald Coast Community Singers: Celebration of American Music
3 pm | Christ the King Episcopal Church | SRB

Sept. 15-Oct. 09
3-Dimensional Art Exhibition
12-4 pm Tue.-Fri.; 1-4 pm Sat. | Arts and Design Society | FWB

16
UNDERWATER: The Living Sea Experience
7 pm | Gulfarium | Okaloosa Island

17
Greater FWB Chamber Business After Hours
5:30 pm | Emerald Coast Healthcare Coalition | FWB

18
Greater FWB Chamber Lunch N Learn; Operational Growth Advisors; Why Is Our Business Getting Harder to Run?
11:30 am | FWB Chamber | FWB

3-Dimensional Art Exhibition Opening Reception
6 pm | Arts and Design Society | FWB

Concerts at The Landing: Saucy Fuzz
6 pm | The Landing | FWB

19
13th Annual Soldiers on the Water
7 am check-in; 8 am boat departure | Brotula's | Destin

Oktoberfest
11 am | Fort Walton Elks Lodge | FWB

2nd Annual Aces for Autism No Sweat Poker Tournament
Noon | Shoreline Church | Destin

Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast's 6th Annual Burgers, Bourbon & Beer Festival
1 pm | Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Village | Destin

Croctoberfest 2026
6 pm | Gulfarium | Okaloosa Island

23
C.A.R.E.ing for Turtles
5 pm | Gulfarium | Okaloosa Island

23-27
Battle for the Buckle (Westonwood Ranch)
Times vary | Harbor Docks | Destin

25
14th Annual Fore Her Golf Outing
8 am check-in; 8:45 am announcements; 9 am tee-off | The Links Golf Club at Sandestin | Miramar Beach

Rally on the Court Pickleball Tournament
5 pm | FWB Tennis Center | FWB

Concerts at The Landing: Black Eyed Blonde
6 pm | The Landing | FWB

25-27
Destin Seafood Festival
Times vary | Destin Harbor | Destin

26
Emerald Coast Science Center's Day of Play with ACM and Nickelodeon
10:30 am | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

Rally on the Court Tennis Tournament
Time TBD | FWB Tennis Center | FWB

27
4th Annual 5K Mullet Run/Walk
2 pm packet pickup; 4-6 pm event | The Deck at Destin Brewery | Destin

29
Greater FWB Chamber Lunch N Learn; Executive Air Refrigeration and Cooling; Preventive Maintenance: Your Ticket to a Warm Winter & Cool Savings
11:30 am | FWB Chamber | FWB

OCTOBER

02
Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee
7 am | First Baptist Church of FWB | FWB

Concerts at The Landing: Below Alabama
6 pm | The Landing | FWB

03
Dog Daze
9 am | The Landing Park | FWB

6th Annual ECAR Foundation Barbecue Cook-Off
11 am | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville

Walk a Mile in Her Shoes®
3 pm | Ferry Park | FWB

Night at the Museum Fundraiser
6 pm | Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida | Valparaiso

05
Columbus Day Weekend Pirate Show
5:30 pm | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island

06
Columbus Day Weekend Movie on the Beach
8 pm | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island

07
Columbus Day Weekend Karaoke
7 pm | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island

2026 EVENTS

08
Greater FWB Chamber Nothing But Networking at American Legion Post 235 with Kalai's Hawaiian Kitchen
11:30 am | American Legion Post 235 | FWB

Sinfonia Gulf Coast's Cabaret at Seagar's: An Evening with New York Voices
5:30 pm | Seagar's Prime Steaks & Seafood | Miramar Beach

09
Concerts at The Landing: Cat Rhodes & The Truth
6 pm | The Landing | FWB

10
11th Annual Bloody Mary Festival
11 am | The Market Shops | Miramar Beach

11
Columbus Day Weekend Karaoke
7 pm | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island

Columbus Day Weekend Fireworks Show
9 pm | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island

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



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 Community

The Boardwalk on Okaloosa Island Introduces Columbus Day Weekend Celebration, Fall Lineup

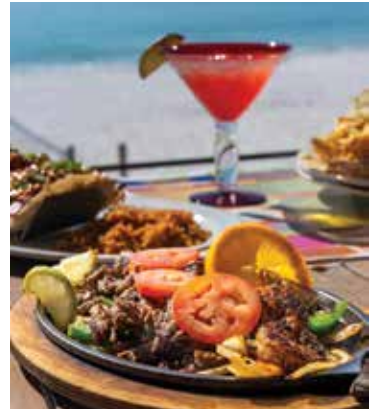
Four days of pirate-themed entertainment, a beachfront movie, karaoke and fireworks join returning favorites, including Labor Day fireworks and the 11th annual Tricks & Treasures.

The Boardwalk on Okaloosa Island is adding a new Columbus Day weekend celebration to its 2026 fall calendar, joining a lineup that includes the annual Labor Day fireworks show and

the 11th annual Tricks & Treasures Halloween event.

The new celebration features four days of activities from Oct. 5 to 11, bringing together pirate-themed entertainment, a

beachfront movie night, karaoke and a fireworks finale. The Boardwalk will also serve as a host location for two community events this fall: the International Coastal Cleanup Day beach cleanup and the Emerald Coast Volleyball Tournaments' Fall Classic.



New Columbus Day weekend celebration Oct. 5-11, 2026

The Boardwalk's first Columbus Day weekend celebration offers activities on four days, beginning with a pirate show Monday and closing with karaoke and fireworks Sunday.

Monday, Oct. 5: Pirate show, 5:30 to 8 p.m.

Tuesday, Oct. 6: Movie on the Beach, 8 p.m.

Wednesday, Oct. 7: Karaoke, 7 to 10 p.m.

Sunday, Oct. 11: Karaoke, 7 to 10 p.m.; fireworks show, 9 p.m.

All Columbus Day weekend events take place at The Boardwalk on Okaloosa Island.

11th annual Tricks & Treasures Saturday, Oct. 31, 2026

The Boardwalk's Halloween

tradition returns for its 11th year with a free, family-friendly evening of trick-or-treating, costume contests, carnival games and live entertainment.

Time: 5 to 8 p.m.
Admission: Free.

Community events at The Boardwalk

In addition to its own fall celebrations, The Boardwalk will welcome volunteers and beach volleyball competitors as a host location for two community events.

2026 International Coastal Cleanup Day Beach Cleanup

Saturday, Sept. 19, 2026

The Boardwalk is one of five locations hosting this family-friendly beach cleanup, which features cleanup contests with prizes, free event T-shirts and a complimentary breakfast after the cleanup at select locations.

Time: 8 to 10 a.m.

Locations: The Boardwalk on Okaloosa Island; The Crab Trap/James Lee Park in Destin; The Surf Hut in Miramar Beach; Norriego Point Beach in Destin; and Henderson Beach State Park in Destin.

Complimentary breakfast will be available at The Boardwalk, The Crab Trap and The Surf Hut cleanup locations.

Emerald Coast Volleyball Tournaments' Fall Classic Oct. 14-18, 2026

The Boardwalk will also host the Emerald Coast Volleyball Tournaments' Fall Classic, bringing competitive beach volleyball to Okaloosa Island.

Location: The Boardwalk on Okaloosa Island.

Schedule and prizes: Visit the Fall Classic website for details.

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 involve-

ment. 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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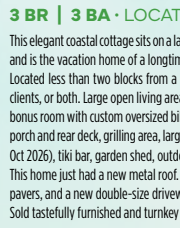
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Beyond the Festivals: An October Weekend for Big Ideas

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

October on the Emerald Coast does not exactly slow down. If anything, the local calendar shifts into another gear. Weekends fill with festivals, concerts, food events and community celebrations. In that busy fall lineup, the 27th Annual Emerald Coast Home & Boat Show offers something distinctly different: a weekend devoted to the homes we maintain, the projects we imagine and the outdoor lifestyle that makes this area home. The show returns Saturday and Sunday, **Oct. 10-11**, to the **Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center**. Admission is **FREE**, and the doors will be open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday. Inside, more than 100 home and general business vendors will offer ideas for projects large and small. Some attendees may arrive with renovation plans and lists of questions. Others may come simply to see what is new and leave thinking differently about a kitchen, backyard or

long-postponed repair. That is part of what separates the Home & Boat Show from many other October events. It is a place to ask questions, handle materials, compare options and talk face-to-face with professionals who understand homes and businesses along the Emerald Coast. Exhibitors will represent nearly every corner of homeownership, including roofing, plumbing, heating and air conditioning, flooring, furniture, windows, doors, generators and landscaping. Visitors can also meet professionals specializing in pools and spas, shutters, painting, restoration, remodeling and interior design. Kitchen and bath projects will have a strong presence, along with information about insurance, mortgages and solar energy. Bringing so many specialists together gives residents an opportunity to explore several ideas without scheduling appointments all over town. General business and retail exhibitors will also introduce products and services ranging



from computers and mobile phones to health and wellness, including chiropractic care, hearing services and massage therapy. Outside, the focus moves from the home to the water and the open road. Emerald Coast Marine, Captains Choice Boats and Camping World are scheduled to bring boats and recreational vehicles to the convention center grounds for a combined display and sale. Guests can step aboard, look around and imagine their next fishing trip,

family outing or road-bound Florida, where home improvement and outdoor living often That combination feels especially at home in Northwest

Continued on page 31

Get Strong and Celebrate at MaxStrength Fitness!

Tuesday, Oct. 6 | 4:30 to 6:30 p.m.
73 Eglin Parkway, Suite 113, Uptown Station | Fort Walton Beach

MaxStrength Fitness is celebrating its Fort Walton Beach grand opening—and the community is invited to join the fun! Stop by for drinks, door prizes and a lively evening at the new Uptown Station studio.



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dating gym atmosphere. Come meet the trainers, explore the studio and see the MaxStrength Fitness experience for yourself. New clients can also claim two free sessions! For information, visit maxstrengthfitness.com/location/fortwalton or call 850-467-9729.



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 Community

Eight Women, Lasting Legacies: Meet Okaloosa's 2026 Hall of Fame Class

Across Okaloosa County, their influence can be seen in courtrooms and classrooms, health care and business, emergency services, foster care, national defense and the arts. Eight women whose leadership has opened doors, strengthened institutions and changed lives now share a new distinction: induction into the 2026 Okaloosa County Women's Hall of Fame.

The Okaloosa County Commission on the Status of Women (OCCSW) honored the eight distinguished inductees as part of an annual tradition celebrating extraordinary women whose visionary leadership, dedicated public service and pioneering achievements have elevated the status of women and enriched the quality of life throughout Okaloosa County.

This year's class represents a remarkably diverse group of leaders spanning business, health care, advocacy, educa-

tion, public service and the arts. Olympic medalist and Crestview native Mia Manganello was also honored as a Hometown Heroine. "Each of these extraordinary women embodies the courage, resilience, and spirit of service that defines Okaloosa County," said Kelley Fuller, Chair of the Okaloosa County Commission on the Status of Women. "From groundbreaking business ventures and healthcare advocacy to dedicated mentorship and public service, their decades-long contributions have reshaped our community for the better and serve as a powerful inspiration for future generations."

The 2026 Hall of Fame honorees are:

Megan Blanco, Niceville — Professional/Business

A magna cum laude graduate of the University of Akron School of Law, Blanco built a



statewide legal practice specializing in health care license defense while actively mentoring women launching their own firms. She co-founded the Okaloosa Chapter of the Florida Association for Women Lawyers (FAWL), received the Leader in the Law Award at the 2026 FAWL State Convention and serves on the First Judicial Circuit's Professionalism Panel.

Vanessa d'Aquin, MSN, APRN, FNP-C, Niceville/Valparaiso — Humanitarian

As director of clinical services at Crossroads Center, d'Aquin has expanded health care access for vulnerable women, increasing patient services by more than 200% and providing free care to nearly 1,000 women. An alumna of Northwest Florida State College and the University of West Florida, she has secured no-cost mammograms for uninsured patients, supported women recovering from addiction through multiple local recovery networks and cared for patients within the Florida correctional system.

Simona Faroni, Fort Walton Beach — Pioneer

After arriving in Okaloosa County from Italy in 1996, Faroni overcame immense regulatory and language hurdles to co-found GS Gelato, a nationally distributed manufacturer employing more than 150 people and reporting \$38 million in sales in 2025. A naturalized citizen, GrowFL mentor and philanthropist supporting local schools and the Boys and Girls Club, Faroni has received honors including Enterprising Women of the Year and multiple appearances on the Inc. 5000 list.

Dr. Cristie Kedroski, Niceville — Community Service

During more than 15 years at Northwest Florida State College, Kedroski grew the NWFSC Foundation's endowment from \$36 million to more than \$62 million and oversaw \$75 million in grants before serving as interim president in 2024. She serves on the boards of HCA Florida Fort Walton-Destin Hospital and CCB Community Bank and chairs the Niceville-Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce.

Christina Larson, Shalimar — Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts

Okaloosa County's first female paramedic, Larson has spent more than 50 years bridging emergency services, advocacy and the arts. She founded "Paddle Power" for residents with disabilities, fostered 145 children with special needs and founded the county's Foster Parent Association. Larson also assisted Mattie Kelly in establishing the Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation and co-created the Shoal Sanctuary Nature Preserve.

Heather Ruiz, Fort Walton Beach — Contemporary

A graduate of Niceville High School and Florida State University, Ruiz built a prominent career in marketing and commercial real estate, including leadership roles at Destin Commons, Talking Parents and Bit-Wizards. One of the youngest women to chair the Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce, she also serves on the Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation board and mentors young people through Take Stock in Children.



Dr. Linda Smith, Niceville — Education

A local resident since 1961, Smith spent decades as a teacher and principal before becoming a Guardian ad Litem Certified Child Advocate Manager. She oversees more than 25 volunteers, guides young people in protective custody toward graduation and mobilizes community groups to provide essential clothing and comfort items for children entering care.

Dr. Michele Stevenson, Shalimar — Military/Government

Holding degrees from the University of West Florida and Virginia University of Lynchburg, Stevenson leads the Mentor Protégé Program for the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, supporting small businesses in defense contracting. Locally, she partnered with the City of Fort Walton Beach to restore the historic NAACP Legacy Walk of Fame and serves on the Homelessness and Housing Alliance's Grants Review Committee.

Stevenson is also the first Hall of Fame legacy inductee. Her mother, Mary Stevenson, was inducted in 2012.

Established in 1995 by the Okaloosa County Commission on the Status of Women, the Okaloosa County Women's Hall of Fame recognizes and preserves the contributions of outstanding women whose achievements in education, business, health care, human services, the military and the arts have made a lasting impact.

For more information, visit occsww.com.



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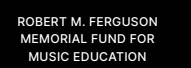
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Is Now the Perfect Moment to Make A Move in the Real Estate Market? Let's Dive In...



BY PAUL DOMENECH

Is it a Good Time to Buy?

A good time to buy is when you are in a position to buy. Often, people think they should wait for interest rates to go down. Well, let's walk through that scenario. If you are waiting, do you think you are the only one? Most likely not. So, if the rates drop and more buyers come to the table to purchase the same home, what do you think will happen to that value?

Yup, you guessed it—multiple offers drive the price up, which then causes an increase in price and multiple offers for the next round. Not a great place to be as a buyer.

So, is now a good time to buy? If you can do it, do it now, and if or when the interest rate drops, refinance. Just make sure you have a team in your corner that will 'DOMEnate' the process, ensuring all the major items are inspected properly to avoid big-ticket expense surprises.

Is it a Good Time to Sell?

What a great question. With interest rates being what they are and a limited pool of buyers, the correct answer is both YES and NO. I am noticing that consumers in the market to buy are leveraging their "upgrading funds" to increase their monthly payment budget. So, if your home has all the big-ticket items and features upgraded, it's a JACKPOT—perfect selling

conditions with the right team that can "DOMEnate" the promotion and marketing of the property.

If you don't have the means to improve the space and major items but want or need to sell, the answer is still yes, it is a good time. However, you need the right team that will be able to present and navigate the value of the property to buyers and if necessary help you with the items that need upgrading. My team does have a program to help those in need get top dollar.

However, today is not the time to have the "Let's just put it on the market as is and see if someone will bite" mentality. The only bites taken for those listings are right out of the listing price. This is where we are seeing most of the drop-in prices. That's a NO-go situation.

So, plan to "DOMEnate" the market as close to turn-key, or hold tight; the time is not right.



When Should I Refinance?

Talk to your original lender. Sadly, the mortgage industry, like the real estate industry, has shifted, and when that happens, people tend to shift their focus to survival. A lot of promises and offers tend to shine but lose their luster in the long run. The habit of "have now and deal with later" is a culture that has been adopted by many, and a good talk track from a stranger with no long-standing relationship with you can lead to a win-lose situation. So, I advise making sure you are calling your original lender or feel free to contact

me for a lender that, in the end, will lead you into the future, not have you living just for today.

Thank you for taking the time to read my thoughts. If you need anything related to real estate—from roofs to cleaning and anything in between—give me a call. I've got a guy. I'm your HOMEboy. It's what has been coined by our customers as the Domenech Effect.

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Community

SOCKS TNR

continued from page 2

reducing outdoor cat overpopulation. “If an unfixed cat is outdoors — even if someone owns it — I’m going to spay or neuter it,” she said. “That’s one more cat who won’t contribute to the cycle, and the owner gets the benefit of a free procedure.”

The cost — about \$5,500 so far — is covered by the Okaloosa Animal Protection League, SOCKS, neighborhood donations and the occasional fundraiser, where Armacost trims dog nails in the community park. She posts pictures of the trapped cats on the community Facebook page so residents see where their money is going. “There are a lot of communities dealing with the exact same problem we are,” she said. “The need is so great that I’ve continued maintenance trapping just to keep the population under control.”

TNR Help

The SOCKS TNR Army trains people how to trap, and has traps available to borrow for a \$75 deposit that’s returned when the trap is. The program



makes it feasible for the community to manage its community cats. “We can help. We can support, but the ultimate success is gonna come from the community managing these cats on their own — in their own backyards, behind their own businesses.”

Some people find trapping exciting, kind of like “benevolent hunting.” But, for Fuhrman,

the only fun part is when cats return home. “I love it when you release them and then they kind of run off and they turn around and look back at you like ‘What the heck just happened to me?’”

*Population estimate from a formula used by Florida Animal Friend, the organization behind Florida’s “spay/neuter” license plate. Percentage from Humane World for Animals (formerly the Humane Society of the United States and Humane Society International).

*For more information about the SOCKS TNR Army: <https://saveourcatsandkittens.com/tnr/>

*For more information about Mack the SNipper: mackthesnipper@gmail.com or (850) 417-8779

*It is illegal to shoot cats with BBs or worse. To prevent cats from congregating in yards or gardens, use motion-activated sprinklers, ultrasonic devices, or natural deterrent scents, such as citrus peels, coffee grounds, or safe essential oils.

EVENTS

continued from page 6

Walk a Mile in Her Shoes

Saturday, Oct. 3 |

3 to 6 p.m.

Ferry Park, 240 Hughes St. NE | FWB

Join Shelter House for a community walk raising awareness and funds to support local survivors of domestic violence. Participate individually or gather friends, family or co-workers to form a team. Heels, sneakers and comfortable footwear are welcome.

Preregister by Sept. 10 to guarantee a shirt on walk day. Sign up using the event flyer’s QR code. For information, visit shelterhousenwfl.org or call 850-243-1201.

Night at the Museum

Saturday, Oct. 3 |

6 to 8 p.m.

Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, 115 Westview Ave. | Valparaiso

The Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida brings America’s 250th anniversary to life with costumed portrayals of historical figures. The evening

also includes drinks, appetizers, photo opportunities and a silent auction.

Admission is \$60 per person and \$50 for museum members. For information, call 850-678-2615 or email assistant@heritage-museum.org or manager@heritage-museum.org.

11th Annual Bloody Mary Festival

Saturday, Oct. 10 |

11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

The Market Shops | Miramar Beach

Guests ages 21 and older can enjoy unlimited tastes of creative Bloody Marys prepared by area restaurants, bars and caterers, along with local food samples, live music, champagne, craft beer, seltzers, a cigar bar, SEC football, a photo booth and shopping.

Attendees can vote for the People’s Choice Award, while local celebrities and food critics select the overall and Best Ac-coutrement winners. Proceeds benefit Habitat for Humanity—Walton County and its work to provide stable, affordable housing for local families.

Purchase tickets at themarketshops.com/bloody-mary-festival.



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By LIESEL SCHMIDT

The satisfying click of tiles against the background noise of easy conversation that may or may not include gossip (we're here for it). The sound of laughter, friendly competition and, of course, sips of something a little boozy (or maybe a lot)...

If that conjures up images of grandmothers gathered around a card table, playing mahjong somewhere in South Florida, you're not alone. But this centuries-old game has gotten a seriously stylish glow-up—and at **Blue Bay Lifestyle Co.**, we're loving getting in on the fun.

Invented in 19th century China, mahjong eventually found its way around the world as explorers travelled to and

from the country, developing different styles of play along the way. By the early 20th century, the game had reached the United States, where it found a particular popularity among Jewish American women in the 1920s and '30s.

A century later, there's a reason this oldie has become one of the popular girls: Her colorful tiles and playful personality appeal to anyone wanting a social connection or a great girls' night activity—plus have you seen how pretty she is?

She's finally having her moment—and while the competition is fun, mahjong has always been about more than the game playing out on the table. It creates a reason to gather, because a mahjong table is a place to talk, laugh, catch up and occasionally (or frequently) question the wisdom of the person sitting across from you. Regular games even have a habit of becoming traditions lasting years—or decades—with friendships growing alongside them.

That social element is exactly why mahjong has gained



such intense popularity—and why it seems to fill a void. In an era when most of our “connections” are lived out on a screen, mahjong offers something refreshingly real and *tangible*: four people, one table and a game that demands everyone be present.

Of course, it doesn't hurt that the game is also exceptionally photogenic. Mahjong tiles are like miniature works art, covered in colorful characters, numbers, flowers, bamboo, dragons and winds. Vintage sets carry their own beauty, while newer versions have an updated feel, with brightly colored tiles and more contemporary designs.

Naturally, all that visual personality has broken free of the



mahjong table and into mahjong-themed *everything*. You name it, you can probably find it. And as mahjong mavens ourselves, we at Blue Bay think we have a winning hand: Fun **graphic tees** let players advertise their allegiance even when it's not game night, while mahjong-themed **keychains** infuse a little personality into everyday essentials. Trinket and **jewelry trays** bring the game's colorful designs to a nightstand, dresser or entryway and (bonus) make an easy gift for the friend whose weekly mahjong game is practically sacred (you know the one).

And because every good game night should have great ambiance, scented mahjong-themed **candles** add another layer to the ritual. Light one, set out the tiles, pour the drinks and let the games begin.

Our collection also offers plenty of possibilities for hostess gifts. Because, sure, you could arrive at your next mahjong gathering with (yet *another*) bottle of wine, but why not have a little more imagination and bring something inspired by the game itself—especially if your host is always keeping everyone supplied with snacks and settling disputes over the rules.

Whether you're an experienced player, just beginning to learn or simply love the colorful, bold aesthetic surrounding the game, mahjong offers plenty of ways to join the fun.

And while some trends disappear almost as quickly as they arrive, mahjong has already been around for generations. This time, she just has a really good T-shirt and her very own swag—and *psssst*...she got it at Blue Bay.

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LaFamiglia

La Famiglia's new Shalimar location brings the welcoming spirit and rich flavors of an Italian family table to the Fort Walton Beach area. Begin with fresh Burrata La Famiglia, homemade meatballs over whipped ricotta or an Italian board filled with imported meats and cheeses. Then explore an enticing selection of handmade pasta, risotto, pizza, seafood and traditional entrées. Favorites include Mezze Maniche Carbonara, Lasagna Della Nonna, Lobster Ravioli, Osso Buco and Cioppino, along with distinctive pizzas topped with ingredients such as



truffle cream, prosciutto, burrata and imported mortadella. A kids' menu makes it easy to bring the whole family. La Famiglia also offers online ordering, catering and private-party packages for gatherings of all sizes. Reservations are available, and

walk-in guests are always welcome. Hours: M-Sat 11-9; Closed Sundays.

850-279-4527

1281 Eglin Parkway,
Shalimar
lafamigliaitalianshalimar.com

Magnolia Grill

In 2001, Magnolia Grill in Fort Walton Beach opened its doors after a renovation that took 18 months—and it's been thriving since. A local's favorite dubbed "The Museum That Serves Food," you'll find equal parts museum and dining

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

(850) 812-5761

157 Brooks Street SE, FWB
magnoliagrillfwb.com

Smoothie King

Smoothie King in downtown Fort Walton Beach serves convenient, health-focused choices

through its drive-through window. The locally owned franchise offers fruit-and-vegie 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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CRESTVIEW
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FORT WALTON BEACH
3 Eglin Parkway SE
Fort Walton Beach, FL 32548

Seafood, Sounds & Harbor Views

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!



Columbus Day

Weekend Event

10/5

Pirate Show

10/6

Movie on the beach

10/7

Karaoke Night

10/11

Fireworks on the beach

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Fried Caribbean Lobster Bites



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food for thought

We're proud to support Food for Thought Outreach, an organization dedicated to fighting childhood hunger in our community. Through Bites for Backpacks, every Lobster Bite appetizer purchased helps provide meals to food-insecure children across Okaloosa and Walton counties.

\$1 from each appetizer goes directly to filling backpacks with nutritious food, ensuring that local students have access to meals outside of school.



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Live Music
Every Day



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- Split & seared on our butter grilled signature bun.



SaltwaterRestaurants.com



Okaloosa Island
Destin
Perdido Key





AJ's on the Bayou

Kick back by the water and cheer on your team at AJ's on the Bayou, located at the base of the Cinco Bayou Bridge in Fort Walton Beach. With indoor seating and an open-air deck

overlooking the bayou, AJ's lets fans pair football with a beautiful waterfront view, a refreshing mimosa and something delicious to eat.

Make a weekend game even better with brunch and bot-

tomless mimosas for just \$10.95 with a food purchase. AJ's also serves \$12.95 weekday lunch specials that include iced tea. With live music or entertainment every day, it's a lively destination where football, food and

fun come together.

200 NE Eglin Parkway | FWB
850-226-7579
ajsonthebayou.com

AJ's has everything you need for a winning football season.

116 Harbor Blvd. | Destin
850-837-1913
ajsdestin.com

AJ's Seafood & Oyster Bar

Go big on game day at AJ's Seafood & Oyster Bar, home to the one and only Jumbotron on the Destin Harbor. Watch your favorite football teams on the big, big screen while taking in the energy and beauty of the harbor, enjoying fabulous food and sipping a game-day drink.

For 40 years, AJ's has been serving fresh Gulf Coast oysters and cool libations. What began as a popular local hangout for fresh oysters and cold beer—shucked from the deck behind a small trailer on the harbor—has grown into one of Destin's most iconic hot spots with four locations along the Emerald Coast. Add daily specials, mouthwatering drinks, live music throughout the month and exciting water activities in the Destin area, and

AJ's Oyster Shanty – Okaloosa Island

Bring your appetite and your game-day crew to AJ's Oyster Shanty on Okaloosa Island. A dozen for me, a dozen for you—and plenty of football-season fun for everyone! The Shanty serves fresh, cold oysters and seafood alongside some of the best live music on the island.

Thursday football pairs perfectly with the Prime Rib Dinner Special, available every Thursday beginning at 4 p.m. Enjoy a 10-ounce cut of prime rib with a baked potato, side salad, au jus and horseradish cream sauce for \$22.95. Save room for Key lime pie, served all day, every day.

Continued on page 18

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT FOOTBALL IS HERE

RICK'S YOUR FOOTBALL
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Every dish, every detail, and every moment is created with the hope of making you feel welcome and at home. Visit soon and let them share the passion for delicious flavors with you.

LaFamigliaItalianShalimar.com

Game Day Starts Early at Rick's

Football takes center stage at Rick's Seafood and Sports. Owners Chris and Jen Pike are passionate football fans with Pittsburgh roots, and they've created a gathering place filled with a TON of TVs, game-day drink specials and a creative bar menu. Rick's will also broadcast local high school football whenever coverage is available. Follow RicksFWB on Facebook for featured games, schedules and specials.

On Saturdays and Sundays, breakfast is now available so fans can arrive early, claim a favorite seat and enjoy the pregame action. The ever-popular eclectic football menu is back, too, giving guests even more ways to fuel up from the opening kickoff through the final whistle.

Beyond the games, Rick's proudly supports local creativity. Paintings and locally made jewelry from the restaurant's house artists are displayed and available for



purchase, allowing guests to discover something original while supporting area makers.

Formerly Rick's Crab Trap, Rick's combines a modern coastal sports-bar atmosphere with the Pike family's tradition of hand-prepared seafood and welcoming hospitality. Wear your team colors, bring the crew and make Rick's your football headquarters.

Rick's Seafood and Sports is located at 178 Eglin Parkway NE in Fort Walton Beach. Call (850) 664-0110, visit www.ricksfwb.com and follow @RicksFWB on Facebook for game-day updates.



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Niceville
• 1106 John Sims Pkwy.

Mary Esther
• 251 Mary Esther Blvd.

Pensacola
• 4051 Barrancas Ave.

Fort Walton Beach
• 901 Beal Pkwy NW
• 1285 Eglin Pkwy.

Crestview
• 297B James Lee Blvd.

Panama City
• 1360 West 15th St
Callaway
• 809/807 N. Tyndall Pkwy.
Pensacola
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SEC Football Schedule

SEC	Sept 5	Sept 12	Sept 19	Sept 26	Oct 3	Oct 10	Oct 17	Oct 24	Oct 31	Nov 7	Nov 14	Nov 21	Nov 28
Alabama	E CAR	@UK	FSU	S. CAR	@MISS ST	UGA	@TENN	A&M	OPEN	@LSU	@VANDY	UTC	AUBURN
Arkansas	N ALA	@UTAH	UGA	TULSA	@A&M	TENN	@VANDY	OPEN	MIZZOU	@AUB	S CAR	@TEX	LSU
Auburn	BAYLOR (ATL)	S. MISS	FLA	VANDY	@TENN	OPEN	@UGA	LSU	@OLE MISS	ARK	@MISS ST	SAMFORD	@BAMA
Florida	FLA ATL	CAMPBELL	@AUB	OLE MISS	@MIZZOU	S CAR	@TEX	OPEN	UGA (ATL)	OKLA	@UK	VANDY	@FSU
Georgia	TENN ST	WKU	@ARK	OKLA	VANDY	@BAMA	AUB	OPEN	FLA (ATL)	@OLE MISS	MIZZOU	@S CAR	GA TECH
Kentucky	YSU	BAMA	@A&M	S ALA	@S CAR	LSU	@OKLA	VANDY	OPEN	@TENN	FLA	@MIZZOU	LOUISVILLE
LSU	CLEMSON	LA TECH	@OLE MISS	A&M	MCNEESE ST	@KU	MISS ST	@AUB	OPEN	BAMA	TEXAS	@TENN	@ARK
Ole Miss	LOUISVILLE	CHARLOTTE	LSU	@FLA	OPEN	@VANDY	MIZZOU	@TEXAS	AUB	UGA	@OKLA	WOFFORD	MISS ST
Miss St	ULM	@MINN	@S CAR	MIZZOU	BAMA	OPEN	@LSU	OKLA	@TEX	VANDY	AUB	TENN TECH	@OLE MISS
Missouri	UAPB	@KANSAS	TROY	@MISS ST	FLA	A&M	@OLE MISS	OPEN	@ARK	TEX	@UGA	KU	OKLA
Oklahoma	UTEP	@MICH	N MEX	@UGA	OPEN	TEX (DAL)	KU	@MISS ST	S CAR	FLA	OLE MISS	A&M	MIZZOU
S Carolina	KENT ST	TOWSON	MISS ST	@BAMA	KU	@FLA	OPEN	TENN	@OKLA	A&M	@ARK	UGA	@CLEMSON
Tennessee	FURMAN	@GA TECH	KENNESAW ST	TEX	AUB	@ARK	BAMA	@S CAR	OPEN	UK	@A&M	LSU	@VANDY
Tex A&M	MIZZ ST	ARIZ ST	UK	@LSU	ARK	@MIZZOU	CITADEL	@BAMA	OPEN	@S. CAR	TENN	@OKLA	TEX (11/27)
Texas	TEXAS ST	OHIO ST	UTSA	@TENN	OPEN	OKLA (DAL)	FLA	OLE MISS	MISS ST	@MIZZOU	@LSU	ARK	A&M (11/27)
Vanderbilt	AUSTIN PEAY	DELAWARE	NC ST	@AUB	@UGA	OLE MISS	ARK	@KU	OPEN	@MISS ST	BAMA	@FLA	TENN

BEST PLACES
continued from page 16

Join the fun with karaoke every Wednesday at 7 p.m. and

live music every other night. With food, entertainment and island energy, AJ's Oyster Shanty is ready for football season.
108 Santa Rosa Blvd. | FWB

850-226-8108
ajsoystershanty.com

FUBAR Pizza Bar
Pizza, wings, football and a waterfront view—FUBAR Piz-za Bar has the game-day lineup covered. Nestled on Okaloosa Island, this locally owned, family-friendly favorite carries all sports games and offers live entertainment, impeccable service and an inviting place to cheer on your team.
FUBAR is known for its al-most-famous pizza and wings, but the fun goes well beyond the menu. Kids can enjoy an assort-ment of games, while adults can challenge friends to pool, corn-hole or darts. Boaters can pull into one of FUBAR's slips after a day on the water, and furry friends are welcome to join the party on the patio.
Planning your own football

gathering, party or special event? FUBAR offers sev-eral private sections with the option of a private bar. Its outdoor deck can com-fortably accommodate up to 300 guests and can be divided to suit your needs. Customized menus can fea-ture everything from Italian favorites to prime rib.
Open seven days a week from 11 a.m. to 2 a.m.
114 Amberjack Drive | Okaloosa Island
850-226-7084
fubarfwb.com



The Boardwalk on Okaloosa Island
Turn game day into a day at the beach at The Boardwalk on Okaloosa Island. With its prime Gulf-front location, convenient parking and variety of dining, shopping and entertainment

options, The Boardwalk offers football fans plenty of ways to watch their favorite teams while enjoying the sights and flavors of the Emerald Coast.
Grab a table at Rockin Ta-cos, The Crab Trap, Floyd's Shrimp House or Al's Beach Club & Burger Bar, then enjoy a halftime walk along the shore. The breathtaking views are al-ways on the menu, and sandy toes and salty swimsuits are wel-come.
The Boardwalk is also an official county park with pub-lic beach access, free parking, pavilions, picnic tables, public restrooms and outdoor showers. Throughout the year, it hosts community favorites such as the Emerald Coast Motorcycle Challenge, coastal beach clean-ups, the "Tricks and Treasures" Halloween event and the New Year's Day Pelican Plunge. It is also home to two legendary vol-leyball tournaments: Emerald Coast Volleyball Week in the spring and the Emerald Coast Fall Classic.
1450 Miracle Strip Parkway SE | FWB
850-301-0959
theboardwalkoi.com

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2026 High School Football Schedules

Fort Walton Beach Vikings
Aug 13: vs. Niceville (Kickoff Classic)
Aug 21: vs. Pensacola
Aug 28: vs. South Walton
Sep 4: at West Florida Tech
Sep 11: vs. Milton*
Sep 18: vs. Walton
Sep 25: at Gulf Breeze*
Oct 2: at Navarre
Oct 9: at Choctawhatchee*
Oct 16: vs. Escambia*
Oct 23: at Booker T. Washington*
Oct 30: Open Week
* Denotes District Game.

Choctawhatchee Indians
Aug. 14: vs. Bay (KO Classic)
Aug. 20: at Mosley
Aug. 28: vs. Auburn (AL)
Sept. 4: at Pace
Sept. 11: at Escambia (District Game)
Sept. 18: vs. Niceville
Sept. 25: at Milton (District Game)
Oct. 9: vs. Fort Walton Beach (District Game)
Oct. 16: vs. Booker T. Washington (District Game)
Oct. 23: vs. Gulf Breeze (District Game)
Oct. 30: at Thompson (AL)

All games 7 p.m.

Don't Miss Croctoberfest on September 19!

By MARY FOMBY, GULFARIUM

Raise a Glass to Oktoberfest, Gulfarium Style!

Grab your event cup and get ready to say Prost! **Croctoberfest** returns to Gulfarium on **Saturday, September 19**, for an adults-only evening filled with craft beer and wine tastings, live music, food, games, and plenty of wild Gulfarium fun.

From 6 to 9 p.m., guests ages 21 and older can explore the park after hours while sampling drinks from breweries and wineries from across the region. VIP guests can get the celebration started even earlier with entry beginning at 5:30 p.m.

Unlimited Tastings from Local and Regional Favorites

Every General Admission and VIP ticket includes an exclusive Croctoberfest event cup, which guests can use for unlimited craft beer and wine tastings throughout the evening.

More than 20 breweries, win-



eries, distilleries, and food vendors are joining the celebration, including Perfect Plain Brewing, McGuire's Irish Pub of Destin, Coastal County Brewing Company, Ology Brewing Co., Destin Brewery, 3rd Planet Brewing, Florida Avenue Brewing Co., Duplin Winery, 30A Distilling, Simply Brats, Salty Pop Popcorn, and more.

Come hungry, too. Local food vendors will be serving up

bites throughout the evening, with food available for purchase separately.

Gators, Reptiles, and After-Hours Fun

Of course, it wouldn't be Croctoberfest without the crocodilians!

Throughout the night, guests can enjoy gator chats, reptile meet-and-greets, and animal training demonstrations along-



side live music and yard games. It's a chance to experience Gulfarium in a completely different way, combining the atmosphere of an Oktoberfest celebration with some of the animals that make a night at Gulfarium anything but ordinary.

Get Your Croctoberfest Tickets

Croctoberfest takes place

Saturday, September 19, from 6 to 9 p.m., with VIP entry beginning at 5:30 p.m. Gather your crew, raise your cup, and join us for an adults-only evening of beer, bites, gators, and Gulfarium fun.

Purchase your tickets now at go.gulfarium.com/croctoberfest and join us for Croctoberfest 2026!



Unlimited tastings

20+ Local Vendors

Animal Meet & Greet

Live Music and MORE!!

September 19
6 PM to 9 PM

Beer. Bites. Gators. Prost!

Tickets at go.gulfarium.com/croctoberfest

 Off the Hook

Veteran Divers Clear 1,000 Pounds of Local Reef Debris

By NICK TOMECEK,
OKALOOSA COUNTY PIO

Some of the most damaging debris beneath the waters off Destin-Fort Walton Beach weighs almost nothing at all. Nearly invisible fishing line can remain tangled across artificial

reefs for years, threatening marine life long after it is lost or discarded. During a recent cleanup mission, military veteran combat divers with FORCE BLUE joined the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Natural Resources Team to confront that underwater

hazard. Working across 10 sites in the area's artificial reef system, divers recovered 1,022.93 pounds of debris—including an estimated 40 pounds of derelict fishing line. By the county's conservative estimate, that line stretched roughly 64,000 linear

feet, or approximately 12 miles.

The artificial reef system off Destin-Fort Walton Beach is one of the largest in the nation, drawing divers and anglers from across the country and supporting a significant share of the region's marine tourism economy. Left unaddressed, derelict fishing line and other debris accumulate on reef structures over time, entangling marine life, damaging habitat and posing a hazard to the divers and anglers who rely on these reefs. "We take the responsibility of being good stewards of the environment very seriously," said Okaloosa County Board Chairman Trey Goodwin. "Partnering with FORCE BLUE to maintain our growing artificial reef system is a great collaboration that prioritizes both the marine habitat and the well-being of our veterans."

Though fishing line made up a comparatively small share of the debris removed by weight, its ecological footprint is disproportionately large. Nearly invisible underwater, fishing line continues to entangle fish, sea turtles and marine mammals long after it is lost or discarded, a phenomenon commonly known as "ghost fishing." The material can take years to break down. The 12-mile estimate uses a conservative assumption of heavier, 100-pound test line; lighter or braided line recovered in the same haul would represent significantly more linear footage per pound. "Forty pounds of fishing line sounds small next to a thousand-pound total, but by our conservative estimate that's about 12 miles of line that can pose a threat to marine life and these habitats," said Danielle Lasseigne, Coastal Resources Coordinator for Okaloosa County. "This material doesn't weigh much, but it does a disproportionate amount of damage the longer it stays on the reef. Partnerships like this one with FORCE BLUE let us tackle that problem directly, and they help us document the ongoing maintenance our reef system needs to keep supporting healthy fish populations and a strong diving community."

This marks the sixth mission FORCE BLUE has conducted in partnership with Destin-Fort Walton Beach. Past missions have included living shoreline



creation, invasive lionfish removals and additional marine debris removal efforts across the area's reef system and Destin East Pass jetties. Funding for this mission was generously provided to FORCE BLUE through a Publix cash register campaign.

FORCE BLUE is a nonprofit that recruits and trains U.S. military special operations veterans and first responders as professional divers, pairing their skills with hands-on marine conservation work. Beyond each mission's environmental impact, the organization gives veterans a renewed sense of purpose and community following their service, channeling their training toward restoring reefs, shorelines and marine ecosystems that coastal communities depend on. "Our divers train for exactly this kind of mission, methodical, structure-heavy dives where visibility and current can change fast," said Brown, FORCE BLUE Mission Leader. "The Destin-Fort Walton Beach reef system is an impressive resource, and it was clear from the amount of debris we recovered how much value there is in doing this work regularly. We're proud to give these veterans a continued mission, and we're grateful to Okaloosa County for making this partnership possible."

Okaloosa County's Natural Resources team manages one of the largest artificial reef programs in the country, with dozens more artificial reef construction projects currently underway. The county continues to pursue partnerships with research institutions and conservation organizations to support the long-term health of its reef system.

For more information on Okaloosa County's artificial reef program, visit the Tourist Development Department's Natural Resources page at destinfbw.com/explore/eco-tourism/artificial-reefs.



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\$5 Million Crunch Fitness Coming to FWB

The 37,000-square-foot club will feature Crunch Reform Pilates™ and Pump Strength Training™ studios, with pre-sales beginning this winter.

If you’ve driven past Longhorn Plaza on Mary Esther Cut Off and wondered what is taking shape, here’s the answer: a brand-new Crunch Fitness—and it is going to be big.

The \$5 million, 37,000-square-foot club is expected to open this winter at 546 Mary Esther Cut Off NW, with membership pre-sales beginning this fall. It will serve members from Fort Walton Beach, Mary Esther, Destin and communities around Choctawhatchee Bay, including residents connected to Hurlburt Field and Eglin Air Force Base.

The former retail space is being transformed into a modern fitness club that will be open and staffed 24 hours a day—making it a practical option for shift workers, military members and anyone whose workout schedule doesn’t fit neatly between nine and five.

Crunch’s 3.0 design will give the club a modern look while or-

ganizing the space so members can move easily between cardio, strength, classes and recovery.

Never been inside a Crunch? Think less “quiet room full of treadmills” and more high-energy fitness playground. Crunch built its name around making serious exercise fun, with a “No Judgments” philosophy that welcomes beginners, longtime lifters, busy parents and everyone in between.

“The Crunch experience is a natural fit for the area’s active coastal lifestyle and strong, family-friendly, military-connected community,” said Mike Goodsell, Chief Officer for Fit Fusion, the franchisee opening the club. “Crunch will give the community a place to challenge themselves, connect and feel stronger together.”

Two new specialty studios will help set this location apart. The Crunch Reform Pilates™ Studio will offer instructor-led reformer workouts with digital guidance—bringing the feel of a boutique Pilates studio into a full-service gym. The Pump Strength Training™ Studio will



feature structured, coach-led sessions designed to help members build strength and track their progress. Both studios are included with Peak Results memberships.

There is plenty more under one roof. Plans include expanded cardio, strength and functional training areas; Olympic lifting platforms; indoor turf;

TRX®; hot yoga; advanced HIIT classes; Power Half Hour circuit training; personal training and Crunch’s signature group fitness classes.

And because recovery matters, too, the Relax & Recover® area will include HydroMassage® beds, red light therapy and cryotherapy. Members will find tanning, a sauna, full-service locker rooms with showers and Kids Crunch babysitting—a welcome perk for parents trying to fit in a workout without arranging separate childcare.

Memberships start at \$9.99 per month, and Crunch Fort Walton Beach will offer an exclusive, limited-time promotion for founding members. The first 500 members can join for only \$1 and receive their first month free, a limited-edition founding member T-shirt and free Crunch swag, to be part of this Founding 500 group reserve your rate here. Prospective members can also enter

to win one of 10 free one-year memberships info.crunch.com/sweepstakes-presale?club=821.

Local businesses can get involved, too. Crunch’s Corporate Membership and Perk Partners programs offer employee discounts and opportunities for small businesses to reach members through the Crunch app, in-club events, gym TVs and social media. Partnership information is available at fitfusion-team.com/crunch-partnerships.

Think Crunch sounds like a great place to work? Explore career opportunities at fitfusion-team.com/careers.

Whether your ideal workout is Pilates, heavy lifting, hot yoga, a quick circuit or simply 30 minutes to yourself while the kids are nearby, Crunch is preparing to offer our Gulf Coast communities plenty of ways to move—and a little more fun while doing it.

To learn more visit:
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By DAVE DURMAN

A woman recently called our school and asked a question that sounds simple: “How long will it take me to learn self-defense?”

The problem is, there isn’t an honest one-size-fits-all answer.

Self-defense is not a single technique you learn, test off, and possess forever. It is a collection

Self-Defense Takes More Than A Seminar

of physical skills, awareness, judgment, timing, coordination and reactions that develop through training.

A good seminar can absolutely be valuable. It can introduce important concepts, teach awareness, demonstrate simple techniques and give someone a better understanding of how to respond in a threatening situation. But an introduction is not the same thing as developing a skill you can reliably use under

pressure.

For a brand-new student, the first challenge may simply be learning to move properly. Which foot moves first? Can you punch without losing your balance? Can you coordinate both sides of your body while protecting your head? Before we worry about escaping a bear hug, applying a wrist lock or taking someone down, those basic physical skills have to start becoming natural.

Then comes repetition.

Can you perform the technique when someone is resisting instead of standing still and co-operating? Can you recognize the right moment to use it? Can you stay calm enough to act when your heart rate jumps and the situation becomes stressful?

That is why our short self-defense programs are described as introductions to self-defense. They are designed to give people useful tools, greater awareness and a starting point, not the false belief that a two-hour class prepares them for every possible situation.

Real self-defense is a process. You build coordination. You improve fitness. You practice with different partners. You make mistakes, correct them and repeat the process until those movements become more natural.

A seminar can open the door. Training is what prepares you to walk through it.

Dave Durman is the Head Instructor at Coastal Martial Arts & Fitness in Fort Walton Beach. He has more than 40 years of martial arts experience and has been teaching martial arts for over 25 years.

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Emerald Coast Gator Club Awards Academic Scholarships

The Emerald Coast Gator Club (ECGC) is proud to announce it has awarded \$32,500 in academic scholarships to 21 recent high school graduates across Okaloosa and Walton counties as they prepare to begin their freshman year at the University of Florida.

Continuing its long-standing dedication to local youth and higher education, the ECGC has distributed approximately \$100K in scholarships over the past five years. Highlighting the strength and reach of the program, every single eligible applicant for the past three consecutive years has been granted a scholarship toward their inaugural year in Gainesville.

“Investing in the next generation of Gator leaders is at the core of our club’s mission,” said Emerald Coast Gator Club President Jen Owczarski. “We are thrilled to celebrate these remarkable students as they join Gator Nation.”

Additionally, each year, one student is selected as the Hathcock Scholar by local Gators Kalah and Hugh Hathcock. The 2026 Hathcock Scholar is Brennan Gould from Ft. Walton Beach High School. These merit-based awards are made possible through the generosity of local Gator alumni, supporters, and area business sponsors. Throughout the year, the ECGC hosts several signature community events to fuel its

scholarship fund: Fall Season Kickoff & Auction, Spring Emerald Coast Golf Classic and Gator Football Watch Parties throughout the Fall at Harry T’s Lighthouse.

2026 Emerald Coast Gator Club Scholarship Recipients

Choctawhatchee High School: Kady Folsom, Astrophysics
Collegiate High School at Northwest Florida State College: Kendall Feal, Wildlife Ecology & Conservation
Niceville High School: Zach Gideons, Aerospace Engineering; Zachary Ott, Molecular Biology; Katherine Robertson, Psychology; Wyatt Rolison, Mechanical Engineering; Jonathan Shimko, Biomedical Engineering; Donovan Sjoberg, Engineering; Colin Smith, Aerospace Engineering
Ft. Walton Beach High School: Bradley Buckthal, Health Sciences; Emily Coteat, Health Sciences; Katie Eubanks, Health Sciences; Brenna Gordon, Biochemistry, Brennan Gould, Aerospace Engineering & Music Performance; Anthony Pham, Biomedical Engineering; Cole Rewis, Biochemistry; Isabella Riggs, Finance; Anna Sculthorpe, Political Science; Jeda Srichareon, Chemical Engineering
Walton High School: Bella Baker, Architecture and Eli Rhodes, Journalism



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

Healing Goes Beyond
Physical Recovery

When seniors begin rehabilitation after an illness, injury, or hospitalization, the focus is often placed on rebuilding strength, improving mobility, and restoring independence. While these physical improvements are important, rehabilitation also plays a significant role in supporting emotional health.

For many older adults, health challenges can lead to feelings



of frustration, anxiety, loneliness, and a loss of confidence. Rehabilitation provides more than therapeutic exercises and treatment plans. It offers encouragement, structure, social interaction, and renewed hope.

Improving Quality of Life
Through Rehabilitation

The goal of rehabilitation is not simply to treat symptoms. It is to help seniors remain active, independent, and engaged in the activities they enjoy.

With the right combination of therapy, education, and support, older adults can successfully manage chronic health conditions while maintaining their independence and improving their overall quality of life.

At **The Manor at Blue Water Bay**, our rehabilitation team is committed to providing

The Emotional Benefits of Rehabilitation and Social Engagement

compassionate, personalized care that helps seniors overcome challenges, achieve their goals, and continue living life to the fullest. At the Manor at Blue Water Bay, our comprehensive inpatient and outpatient rehabilitation programs are designed to help patients regain strength, restore independence, and improve their quality of life through personalized therapy and compassionate care.

Rebuilding Confidence
Through Rehabilitation

Physical, occupational, speech therapy and skilled nursing services help seniors regain abilities that may have been lost following surgery, illness, or injury. Each small achievement, whether walking farther, preparing a meal independently, or improving communication skills, helps restore confidence.

As progress is made, many seniors begin to feel more optimistic about their recovery and more comfortable participating in everyday activities. The goal is to return home stronger and healthier.

The Importance
of Social
Engagement

Rehabilitation programs provide valuable opportunities for social engagement. Through therapy sessions, group activities, educational programs, and interactions with healthcare professionals, seniors can develop meaningful relationships and strengthen their sense of connection and community. Isolation and loneliness can negatively affect both physical and emotional well-being.

- Regular social engagement can help:
- Reduce feelings of loneliness
- Improve mood and emotional well-being
- Increase motivation during recovery
- Strengthen cognitive function
- Encourage participation in healthy activities
- A Sense of Purpose Promotes Healing

Remaining active and involved helps seniors maintain a sense of purpose. Participating in therapy, setting personal goals, and celebrating milestones can provide motivation and a renewed sense of accomplishment.

Simple interactions, such as sharing a meal, participating in an activity, or attending a support group, can have a powerful impact on emotional health.

Recovery Is Stronger
Together

Successful rehabilitation involves more than physical healing. Emotional support, social connections, and compassionate care all contribute to a healthier and more fulfilling recovery.

When seniors feel supported, encouraged, and connected to others, they are often more engaged in their rehabilitation journey and better equipped to

maintain their independence and quality of life.

At The Manor at Blue Water Bay, we understand that healing involves caring for the whole person. Through rehabilitation services and meaningful social engagement, we strive to help every patient achieve both physical recovery and emotional well-being. Call us today for a tour and information on how we can help you and/or your loved one on the road to recovery.

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Creatine and Strength Training:

The Powerful Combination for Healthy Aging and Brain Health



BY KASSIA GARFIELD,
MAXSTRENGTH FITNESS

If you've spent any time reading health headlines lately, you've probably seen creatine making a comeback, it is quite the hot topic. Once viewed as a supplement reserved for bodybuilders and elite athletes, creatine is now one of the most researched supplements for healthy aging. Scientists are discovering that when paired with regular strength training, creatine may help older adults preserve muscle, improve physical function, recover faster from sleep deprivation and possibly support brain health.

The key phrase, however, is paired with strength training.

Creatine is not a magic powder. It works best when it supports muscles that are being

challenged through resistance exercise.

Muscle Is More Than Strength—It's Brain Insurance

One of the most exciting discoveries over the past decade is the connection between muscle and the brain. Researchers now describe skeletal muscle as an endocrine organ, meaning it releases signaling molecules called myokines that communicate directly with the brain, heart, bones and immune system.

Large population studies consistently show that people with greater muscle strength have a lower risk of cognitive decline and dementia. Grip strength, leg strength, and overall muscle mass have all been associated with healthier brain aging. While no single exercise prevents Alzheimer's disease, maintaining muscle appears to be one of the strongest lifestyle predictors of preserving cognitive function as we age. Resistance training has also been shown to improve memory, executive function, and overall cognition in both healthy older adults and those already experiencing mild cognitive impairment.

Why? Exercise improves blood flow to the brain, reduces chronic inflammation, stimulates growth factors such as brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), and helps maintain insulin sensitivity—all factors linked to healthier brain function.

Where Creatine Fits In

Creatine is naturally produced by the liver and kidneys and is also found in foods like beef and fish. Approximately 95% of the body's creatine is stored in skeletal muscle, where it helps rapidly regenerate ATP—the body's immediate source of energy during short bursts of activity.

As we age, natural creatine stores and muscle mass gradually decline. This contributes to sarcopenia, the age-related loss of muscle that can reduce mobility, independence, and overall quality of life.

Multiple meta-analyses have found that older adults who combine creatine supplementation with resistance training gain more lean muscle mass and greater strength than those who strength train alone. Average improvements include approximately 1–1.5 kg (2–3 pounds) of

additional lean mass along with greater improvements in upper- and lower-body strength.

Importantly, studies show that creatine by itself produces relatively modest benefits. The greatest improvements occur when muscles are consistently challenged through progressive resistance exercise.

Think of strength training as planting the seed. Creatine simply helps fertilize the soil.

Could Creatine Help the Brain?

This is where current research becomes especially interesting.

Because the brain also requires tremendous amounts of energy (almost 60% of oxygen consumption is our nervous system), scientists have begun studying whether increasing creatine availability may improve cognitive performance in older adults. Early evidence suggests creatine may enhance memory, attention, and mental performance—particularly in older adults or during periods of increased mental stress.

However, the evidence is still developing. Recent systematic reviews conclude that while several studies report improvements in cognitive function, more large, high-quality clinical trials are needed before creatine can be recommended specifically as a dementia prevention strategy.

What is much clearer is that resistance training itself has a well-established positive effect on brain health. If creatine enhances a person's ability to build muscle, train harder, and maintain independence, it may indirectly contribute to healthier cognitive aging.

A Simple Formula for Healthy Aging

Healthy aging isn't about chasing the latest supplement trend. It's about combining proven habits that work together.

Strength training two to three times per week remains one of the most effective interventions for preventing age-related muscle loss, improving balance, maintaining bone density, and supporting cognitive health. Adding approximately 3–5 grams of creatine monohydrate daily may provide an additional boost for muscle growth and strength in many healthy older adults, especially when paired with adequate dietary protein. Individuals with kidney disease or other medical conditions should consult their healthcare provider before beginning supplementation.

The conversation around creatine is exciting, but the real headline isn't the supplement itself.

The real breakthrough is our growing understanding that preserving muscle may also help preserve the brain. As researchers continue to explore the muscle-brain connection, one message is becoming increasingly clear: lifting weights isn't just about staying strong enough to carry groceries. It may be one of the most powerful investments we can make in protecting our independence, our memory, and our quality of life for decades to come.

If you are looking to jumpstart your fitness journey, 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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Destin Physicians Offer Individualized Health Insights

Two esteemed physicians have opened MDVIP-affiliated practices in Destin and they are currently accepting new patients.

Our bodies undergo more than 3,000 age-related changes over a lifetime. And little by little, they can leave traces that tell a story about how long – and how well – you may live. Typically, standard lab panels and annual physicals do not detect the biomarkers that can reveal insights into a person’s overall health and prospects for longevity.

Dr. John E. Loudermilk, MD, and **Dr. Chris G. Pappas, MD,** have opened independent 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.

They also have more time to spend with each patient, including unhurried visits, same- or next-day appointments and after-hours availability. Their personalized care and membership-based preventive health

and wellness services work with insurance and Medicare.

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.

Drs. Loudermilk and Pappas

are currently accepting new patients. Learn more about the attentive, personalized care they offer by visiting mdvip.com/DrChrisPappas or mdvip.com/DrJohnLoudermilk.

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A New Chapter in Feeling Your Best

By DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

Life can feel different when your energy, motivation, sleep, mood, or sense of vitality changes. For some men and women, those changes may be connected to shifting hormone levels. That’s why more people are exploring options such as bioidentical hormone therapy (BHT) pellets as part of a personalized approach to feeling better.

BHT pellets are small implants placed under the skin by a qualified healthcare professional. They can provide a steady release of hormones over time, rather than requiring daily applications or frequent dosing. For appropriate patients, hormone therapy may help address certain symptoms associated with hormone deficiency or menopause and may support improvements in overall well-being.

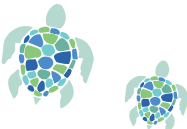
But feeling better isn’t simply about taking a pellet—it’s about finding the right treatment for you. At the Hormone Resto-

ration center we can review your symptoms, medical history, laboratory results, and individual goals to determine whether hormone therapy is appropriate.

Imagine approaching each day with renewed confidence: having the energy to stay active, the focus to pursue your goals, and the motivation to make the most of the life you’ve built. The right treatment plan can be one piece of a broader commitment to wellness.

If you’ve been feeling unlike yourself, don’t assume you simply have to accept it as part of getting older. Schedule a consultation by calling (850)837-1271. Together, we’ll determine whether BHT pellets—or another treatment option—may be right for you.

Your best chapter may still be ahead.



Dr. Chern, MD,
Sue Griffin, ARNP
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BEST IN DESTIN 

 Wellness


BY KAY LEAMAN HEALTH
ARCHITECT, CERTIFIED
NUTRITION AND SKIN ADVISOR

Also known as EMFs, these unseen waves have been extensively debated as far back as Thomas Edison. They exist in everything from power lines to cell phones, appliances to batteries. The electromagnetic fields are typically classified as low-frequency, 0-300 Hz, such as power lines and appliances up to high-frequency, 10 MHz-300 GHz, such as mobile phones and microwave ovens.

Radiation does not accumulate in the body in the same way that some substances do. However, it can cause damage to cells and DNA when absorbed. The body can repair some of this damage.

Repeated exposure to radiation can increase the risk of long-term health effects, such as cancer.

Low-frequency fields may induce weak currents in tissues,

affecting neural and muscular systems. High-frequency fields on the other hand are linked to both thermal and non-thermal effects, including oxidative stress, calcium overload, and cellular dysfunction.

Below is a list of affected areas based on low to high frequencies:

- (Earth's EMFs) Brain orientation, plant growth direction and circadian system
- Nervous, muscular and cardiovascular systems
- Cellular stress
- Organ level functions
- Endocrine disruptions
- Reproductive system
- Oxidative systems
- Circadian regulation
- Neuronal oscillation

Documented impacts from a study (2017-2024) include effects on humans, animals, and plants, targeting various cell types (e.g., blood, cancer, thyroid, cochlea), genotoxicity, cardiovascular parameters (e.g., heart rate, blood pressure), male fertility (e.g., testes, sperm), neuronal brain activity, and photosynthesis in plants. The findings demonstrated that EMFs negatively affect a wide array of biological systems of living organisms, including mechanisms

of oxidative stress, inflammatory responses, and disruptions in cellular, physiological, and ecological processes.

While radiation does not accumulate in the body, some forms of radiation can damage cells and DNA after sufficient energy is absorbed. Ionizing radiation, including X-rays and gamma rays, can break DNA directly or through the production of reactive molecules. Ultraviolet radiation can also create DNA lesions. Radiofrequency EMFs from cell phones, Wi-Fi, and household appliances are non-ionizing and do not have enough photon energy to break DNA directly. Although some laboratory and animal studies have reported DNA damage under particular exposure conditions, the results are inconsistent and do not establish that ordinary, low-level radiofrequency exposure causes DNA damage or cancer in humans.

So, basically, radiation itself does not accumulate in the body, but unrepaired or incorrectly repaired DNA damage can persist. The body is able to repair some of this damage. However, repeated exposure to some of these types of radiation can increase the risk of long-term health effects, such as cancer and inflammation.

Many believe inflammation is a root cause of all disease.

Did you know? In electric and hybrid vehicles, the highest concentration of EMFs is sometimes found in the back seat (where your kids sit). Though available research has generally found in-vehicle exposure levels to be within established safety guidelines, cars today, in general, have more EMF emissions in part due to the increase of electronic systems that produce electromagnetic fields.

So, what can we do? Being mindful and informed is the first step. As it goes with health, every step we take makes a difference and these accumulating steps can make a big impact on our health.

If you would like to reduce your everyday exposure as a precaution, consider some practical measures:

- Don't stand in front of the microwave. Inspect it regularly. Do not use it if the door, hinges, latch, or seals are damaged.
- Stop putting your cell phone to your ear when talking. Use the speaker.
- Don't keep your bluetooth earbuds in constantly. Give your

head an EMF break.

- Don't wear your cell phone. Put it in your purse or choose the side pocket of cargo pants so that it does not come in direct contact with your organs. Note: My friend who was diagnosed with breast cancer was told two things: stop storing your phone in your bra and stop using deodorant containing aluminum. You can also purchase a case that has a lining in it which blocks the EMFs (this is the side that would be against your body.)
- Reduce the EMFs in the bedrooms. Take the TV out, put your phone in the drawer, etc. Your TV may be off but it continues to emit EMFs as does any appliance that is plugged in, including lamps.
- Don't work with your computer on your lap. You can purchase a protective case or place it on a pillow or box or book to separate it from your body.
- Turn off or unplug electronic devices when they are not needed. This may reduce energy use as well as unnecessary exposure.

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Buy It, Build It, Sell It



By NATALIE KESSLER

There's a version of business ownership that doesn't get talked about enough. Not the venture-backed startup. Not the franchise with a six-figure entry fee. Just a solid, local business, owned and operated by someone who knows the work, runs it well, and eventually sells it for more than they paid. Rinse and repeat, or ride off into the sunset. Either way, it works.

It's called buying an owner-operator business, and for the right person, it might be the best financial decision they ever make.

An owner-operator business

is exactly what it sounds like. A business where the owner is also in the business, doing the work or managing the people who do. A cleaning company. A landscaping route. A boutique store. A pool service. These aren't glamorous headlines, but they generate real income, they have real customers, and they sell every day to buyers who are ready to trade a paycheck for a stake in something of their own.

The entry point is often lower than people expect, and with SBA financing, many of these businesses can be purchased with 10% percent down and paid for by the business itself.

The part that most buyers miss is where it gets interesting. Most people buying a small business are thinking about income. What will I make? That's a fair question, but the smarter question is: what will this be worth when I'm ready to move on?

From the moment you take ownership, every decision you make either adds to that future value or doesn't. Clean up the

books. Build a team that doesn't depend on you for everything. Diversify the customer base. Document how things get done. None of this is complicated, but most owner-operators never do it because they're too busy running the business to think about selling it.

The ones who do? They sell for multiples that make the original purchase price look like a bargain.

It's a simple formula: Buy a business with good bones and real cash flow. Run it well. Make it less dependent on you over time. Sell it in five to 10 years to someone who sees exactly what you built.

That's not a get-rich-quick

scheme. It's a patient, practical path to building real wealth, the kind that doesn't require a startup idea or a venture capital pitch deck.

This model works especially well for people coming out of a career in the trades, the military, corporate life, or any field where they've built skills and discipline but never had a vehicle to build personal wealth. You don't need to reinvent anything. You need to find a business that fits your background, run it better than the last owner did, and keep one



eye on the exit from the very beginning.

The best time to think about selling is before you even buy.

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.

ACUPUNCTURE

continued from page 5

may be incorporated into care for people navigating Parkinson's disease, neuropathy, vertigo, stroke recovery and other neurological conditions, as well as PTSD, autism, ADHD, anxiety and complex neuropsychiatric concerns.

Many of these patients already have neurologists, psychiatrists, therapists or rehabilitation specialists involved in their care. The goal is not to replace those relationships. A more useful question is whether adding another appropriate modality may help support function, symptom management and quality of life, particularly when recovery has plateaued or symptoms persist despite appropriate treatment.

Fertility and Women's Health

Fertility is another area where acupuncture can complement conventional care.

Some women incorporate acupuncture while trying to conceive naturally, while others use it alongside care from an OB/GYN or reproductive endocrinologist. Treatment may also

address accompanying concerns such as stress, sleep or menstrual symptoms during what can be a physically and emotionally demanding process.

It illustrates an important point: patients don't necessarily have to choose between two worlds of healthcare.

Where Could Acupuncture Fit for You?

Perhaps you're living with persistent pain. You're sleeping but rarely waking refreshed. Your headaches have become too frequent. Stress is affecting your digestion. You're navigating fertility treatment or lingering symptoms after COVID. Or perhaps you or someone you love is managing Parkinson's, vertigo, neuropathy, stroke recovery or another complex neurological concern.

These are very different reasons to consider acupuncture. And that's precisely the point.

The best healthcare doesn't always require choosing one approach over another. Sometimes it means understanding how much more we may be able to accomplish when we thoughtfully bring different disciplines together.

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A Pastor's Ponderings: America, It Is Time to Look Up Again

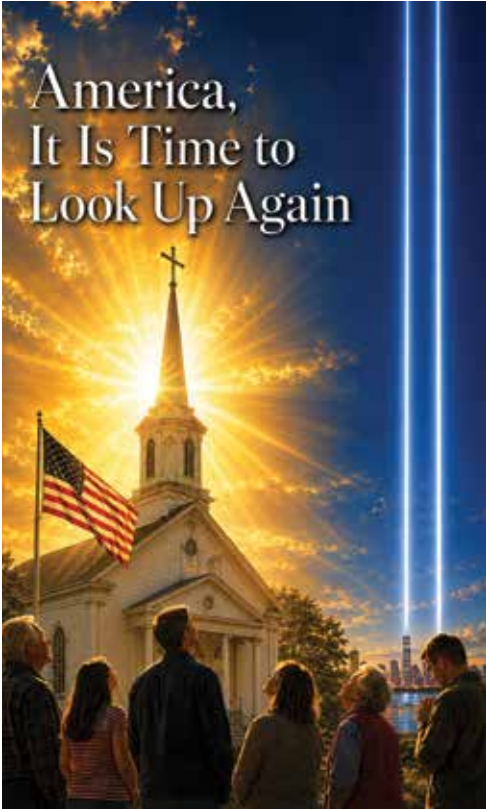


By PASTOR DOUG STAUFFER

We are quick to say, “God bless America.” Perhaps we should stop long enough to ask whether America is seeking the God whose blessings we desire. Scripture is not silent on the matter. *2 Chronicles 7:14* gives the terms plainly: “*If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked*

ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.” Notice the order. God does not say, “*If my people ask for blessing.*” He says seek my face. The blessing is not the first request. It is the fruit of obedience — what follows humbling, praying, seeking, and turning, not what precedes it. This September marks two anniversaries that ought to be considered together. Two hundred fifty years ago, a fledgling nation declared its independence “*with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence*”—the founders sought God, not merely invoked His name. And twenty-five years ago this month, the nation buried nearly three thousand of its own in the wreckage of two towers, a field in Pennsylvania, and the Pentagon. I remember that day and

that week. I remember pews filled that had not been filled in years. I remember members of Congress standing together on the Capitol steps, setting politics aside long enough to sing “*God Bless America*” with one voice. For a season, the nation did what Second Chronicles asks. It humbled itself. It sought Him. Washington warned us that the seeking of God would not last on its own. In his Farewell Address he admonished the young republic that “*of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports,*” and that reason and experience both forbid us to expect national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle. He was not offering advice for 1796. He was naming terms that do not expire with the century — terms this republic was tested against twenty-five years ago this month, and is being tested against in more ways than we can enumerate. And here is the lament: the pews that filled in September of 2001 emptied again. The unity on the Capitol steps did not survive the decade. We kept the slogan, but we stopped seeking. A nation does not drift toward God. It drifts away from Him, the way a field left untended does not drift toward harvest -- it drifts toward thorn and thistle. Humbling is a discipline. Prayer is a discipline. Turning from wicked ways is a discipline. None of the three



Let us pray. Let us seek His face -- not His hand only, but His face -- and let us turn, specifically and by name, from what needs turning from. The God who spoke those words in Second Chronicles has not changed. America is not Israel, and the promise was given specifically to God’s covenant people concerning their land. But the spiritual principle remains unmistakable: God honors humility, prayer, repentance, and those who genuinely seek His face. Twenty-five years after September 11, and 250 years into

the American experiment, perhaps the question is not whether America still wants God’s blessing. The question is whether God’s people still want God badly enough to seek His face. America, it is time to look up again.



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A Superior Mechanical to Host 2nd Veterans & First Responders Event

The Walton and Okaloosa communities are coming together again to give recognition and thanks to our first responders, veterans, and active military. A Superior Mechanical will hold its second **Veterans and First Responders Appreciation Lunch** at the Niceville Community Center, 204 Partin Dr. N., Niceville, on Tuesday, October 20, 2026, from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Please save the date!

During the event, A Superior Mechanical will donate a new Water Heater System complete with installation to a local First Responder or Veteran in need. This giveaway is open to all who have served in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and all first responders including EMT/Medics, Police, Sheriffs and Fire Fighters. Register to win at **ASuperiorMechanical.com/Giveaways**.

The event includes a delicious hot lunch catered by Swiftly Catered, a brief welcome from the sponsors and supporters, and the Hot Water Heater. This event is supported and sponsored by United Community Bank, Lyle Allamon-Realtor & Homes For Heroes, the City of Niceville and Niceville Community Center, Niceville High School (which will present the colors), and Rocky Bayou Christian School (which will sing the National Anthem). Walton and Okaloosa County businesses are encouraged to sponsor; for more information contact Marta Thorpe at (850) 814-3822.



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Sean of the South: Dear Sean



BY SEAN DIETRICH

“Dear Sean, your column yesterday about embracing my inner child and childhood was inaccurate. I’m 67 with more life experience than you... And my childhood wasn’t idyllic like yours obviously was... “I choose NOT to remember childhood. I was abused and don’t want anything to do with my inner child. From reading comments on yesterday’s post many others feel like I do and prefer not to approach childhood memories which I think is best. “...No offense, but you’re not a psychologist. How about leaving therapy to professionals?” Good idea. You’re absolutely right. Please allow me to apologize. I’m no professional. In fact, I have a longstanding habit of talking out of my rearmost orifice. I will, however, point out that your email contains a few misconceptions about me. My childhood was anything but happy. I won’t go into detail, I’ve written entire books on this subject. But I grew up beneath

the weight of abuse. My “idyllic” youth was peppered with abuse, fear, depression, panic attacks, eating disorders, attempted murder, gun violence, suicide, and all manner of other “idyllic” things you regularly see featured in Lifetime Channel movies. To make matters worse, during those years, the University of Alabama football team was undergoing a major “suck” era. So, I began therapy as an adult. I still undergo therapy. I believe in therapy. Speaking of therapy, friend. If you’ve ever been to therapy, you know that the first thing you’ll end up talking about ain’t the weather. It’s childhood. Nevertheless, I’ll stop here, since I am, I think we can all agree, a blowhard. Instead, I’d like to finish this column by telling you about a friend. I’ll call her Lori. She was midforties. She had the quintessential American suburban life. Successful husband. Nice house. Two-point-five children. Luxury SUV with crappy gas mileage. One day, Lori developed a hardcore case of asthma. Soon, she was seeing several doctors. She started taking meds, undergoing treatments, and trying everything. Nothing worked. So she tried therapy. It took six years of talking to a therapist before she finally admitted that she had been raped. The incident happened when she was a child. By a family member. And



it happened many times. As a therapeutic exercise, she wrote a letter to her abuser. She never intended on actually sending the letter. This was simply for healing. But one afternoon, for no explainable reason, Lori took things one step further and visited her abuser’s home to deliver the letter by hand. When her tormentor opened the door, he found a beautiful, middle-aged mother on his stoop, with a letter in her hand, suffering from a full-blown asthma attack. Lori hurriedly presented this man with the letter. Then, she used three words. “I forgive you.” Lori then sprinted away, in tears. Gasping for air. But wait. There’s more. A few years later, her abuser became very ill. He was dying. He had no health insurance, so hospice was not an option.

Thus, Lori began caring for him. She stayed at his house, organized sitters, and personally nursed him. She bathed him, clutching his limp body in her arms, scrubbing him, as she stood clothed in the shower.

She emptied his bedpan. She addressed his bedsores. In fact, Lori remained at his bedside during his final hours. After he died, it was Lori who read the eulogy at his funeral. And it was also Lori who placed a letter of forgiveness she wrote, squarely into his casket. And since, as stated earlier, I am not a professional, I think it is only best to give Lori the last word of this column: “I have been asthma free for 22 years.” 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

Celebrate the Songs at the Second Annual Destin Songwriter Festival!

By WILL ESTELL

This Oct. 24 and 25, the white sands and emerald waters of the World's Luckiest Fishing Village will serve as the picturesque backdrop for five stages of music and fun at the second annual Destin Songwriter Festival. If you're a fan of great songs, beautiful backdrops and all the fun that fall along our coastal paradise offers, you're going to want to grab your tickets fast and join in on the celebration.

This year's festival features intimate acoustic, songwriter-round-style performances and unforgettable headliner sets across five stages over two days, offering music lovers a firsthand glimpse into the stories behind the songs.

In my two decades covering festivals and writing interview features on numerous songwriters — from Kenny Chesney, Alan Jackson and Sara Evans to Darius Rucker, Lyle Lovett and even the late, great Jimmy Buffett — I've often said that to sing is one thing, but to write and breathe lyrical and musical life into a song is another entirely. This is what the Destin Songwriter Festival is all about.

I asked festival CEO and co-founder Matthew Pennings

for a little insight into some of the second-year changes to the festival, and this is what he had to share: "Throughout the festival, music lovers can enjoy free performances at multiple popular venues along Destin Harbor, coupled with paid ticket holders being able to access the main stage and featured acts. The Destin Harbor stages include Boathouse Oyster Bar, Sky Bar and Edge Seafood Restaurant. All of the shows at those venues will be free to attend, while the main stage events will be available to ticketed patrons only."

As for the talent on hand for this second rendition of the growing music fest, fans are sure to be impressed. The most notable headliner, Jeffrey Steele, is a personal favorite of mine, having seen him perform numerous times at various festivals I have covered. Steele is a six-time Grammy nominee with more than 65 million airplays for hits penned for artists such as Keith Urban, Eric Church, Zac Brown Band, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Cher, Faith Hill, Tim McGraw, Rascal Flatts and numerous others.



His accolades include induction into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame, the Country Music Hall of Fame's Poet and Prophet Honor and multiple BMI and NSAI Songwriter of the Year awards. Steele's chart-toppers include "Raise 'Em Up," "What Hurts the Most" and "My Wish," along with so many other hits you will know and sing along to. Steele has received more than 35 BMI Country and Pop awards, a Golden Globe nomination for "I Thought I Lost You" from Disney's "Bolt" and recognition as one of Billboard's top five writers for eight consecutive years.

Other artists on hand to share their songwriting and performance talents include: Terri Jo Box has an impressive catalog that includes Lainey Wilson's "Hillbilly Hippie," Ashley McBryde and Trisha Yearwood's "Bible and a .44," Cody Johnson's "God Bless the Boy" and Miranda Lambert's "Dear Old Sun."

Carolyn Dawn Johnson is a well-versed hit songwriter and recording artist. Johnson penned Chely

Wright's No. 1 hit "Single White Female" and Jo Dee Messina's "Downtime," in addition to Johnson's own 2001 hit, "Complicated."

Bridgette Tatum, best known for writing Jason Aldean's "She's Country," Randy Houser's "Back" and Gretchen Wilson's "Big Wood Deck," has helped shape the sound of modern country music.

Saturday's main stage will be located directly in front of The Edge Seafood restaurant. Pennings says the main stage shows are bring-your-own-chair events and run from 4 to 8 p.m. Saturday main stage tickets are only \$30, with a very limited number

of eight-person tables also available for purchase.

Saturday Main Stage

4-4:50 p.m. — Destin Songwriter Competition finalists

5-5:50 p.m. — "Next of Nashville" with Bryce Leatherwood, Jessie G and Reed Foley

6-6:50 p.m. — "Female Power Round" with Terri Jo Box, Bridgette Tatum and Carolyn Dawn Johnson

7-7:50 p.m. — Headliner Jeffrey Steele, solo

For Sunday, the festival moves to the remarkable grounds of The Alice, where lucky ticket holders will relish an intimate VIP experience with reserved high-top seating. Sunday tickets are remarkably priced at only \$60, with on-site food and beverages available for purchase. Pennings tells me that a very limited quantity of only 10 tables, with eight seats each, are also available for purchase and will include special VIP swag.

Sunday at The Alice

Doors open: 3 p.m.

4-4:30 p.m. — Surprise artist TBA

4:45-6:15 p.m. — Operation Song presents Jamie Floyd, Matt Wynn and Kelli Johnson

6:15-6:30 p.m. — Official premiere of the music video "Something Blue," the story of Kristin Sullivan, written by Jessie G and Matt Wynn

6:30-7:30 p.m. — "Female Power Round" featuring headliners Terri Jo Box, Bridgette Tatum and Carolyn Dawn Johnson

7:45-8:45 p.m. — Headliner Jeffrey Steele, solo

I asked my friend and fellow music lover Destin Mayor Bobby Wagner what having Destin Songwriter Festival back for its second year means to him. "As someone who loves music, I see this festival as more than entertainment. It's a chance for our locals to revel in the talent and for our visitors and vacationers to experience the spirit of Destin through both song and the beautiful backdrops of our harbor area and The Alice."

Organizer and CEO Pennings also reminded me that while the festival is about music,

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Continued on next page

SONGWRITER

continued from previous page

it’s also about giving back. As such, a portion of the proceeds will benefit Operation Song, a 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to helping veterans, active-duty service members and their families tell their stories through songwriting — a mission that reminds us of the powerful connection between music and

healing. Being a veteran-owned festival is something Pennings says he is especially proud of.

When I asked Pennings what he was most excited about in coming back for a second year of Destin Songwriter Festival, he enthusiastically said, “I couldn’t be prouder of how much this festival has grown in just one year. A huge part of that momentum comes from the incredible support of our



presenting sponsor, Patriot Vodka, and North American Spirits Inc. Their belief in this festival and commitment to helping us

bring it to life has been instrumental in taking us to the next level.

We’re incredibly grateful to have Patriot Vodka in our corner as we build something truly special that we believe can become a signature event for Destin. I want to encourage everyone to come out, experience it for yourself and help us continue building.”

Visit destinsongwriterfestival.com

for the latest updates, ticket information, artist announcements and insider travel tips for making the most of your festival fun.

Will Estell is a writer, editor and entrepreneur whose 25-plus-year media career includes more than 750 regional and national articles and the launch of 12 magazines. Chief creative officer of Estell Hussey Media and CEO of 399 Ventures, he also consults for media entities nationwide and works in coastal real estate and development.

BEYOND

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overlap. A renovated patio may be where fishing stories are told. New storage may be designed around paddleboards and beach gear. A boat or RV may represent not simply a purchase, but weekends with family and friends.

The event is organized by Wes Fell, a 36-year resident of the Destin-Fort Walton Beach area. Fell moved to Northwest Florida from Louisville, Kentucky, in 1990 and has since organized home and boat shows, business expos, health and job fairs, networking events and music festivals throughout the area.

He also supports Networks of Northwest Florida, a free business-networking organiza-

tion, and has promoted the Paradise Music Festival and other community events.

For Fell, the Home & Boat Show continues a tradition of bringing local businesses and residents together. Companies can explain what they do while homeowners move beyond online searches and speak directly with people who may help bring a project to life.

In an October filled with entertainment, the show offers a different kind of outing — one that may begin with a few hours of browsing and end with the first real step toward a new idea.

The show will be held at the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center, 1250 Miracle Strip Parkway SE in Fort Walton Beach. Look for our Life Media table, come by to say hi and register for a FREE giveaway!

For more information, contact Wes Fell at **850-353-2832** or wesfell@cox.net, or visit

ParadisePromotionsFL.com. Businesses interested in exhibiting may also ask about

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