



FREEPORT Life

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Where Hope Grows: A Story of Love, Legacy and Local Families

By MARANDA SHAYE SMITH

Imagine just entering parenthood, facing the challenge of balancing a new baby with mounting bills and little support. Whether a pregnancy comes as a surprise or right on time, stepping into that moment can feel overwhelming. Questions, fears and practical needs often rise quickly—especially for those navigating the journey without a strong support system.

When life takes an unexpected turn, Lauren's Legacy Pregnancy Center, right here in Freeport, stands ready to walk beside those facing uncertainty. Serving women and families across Walton and Okaloosa counties, the center provides free, confidential services including pregnancy testing, ultrasounds, parenting programs, counseling and assistance connecting with community resources.

What began as a tribute of love and remembrance has grown into a cornerstone of compassion and care—meeting



physical, emotional and spiritual needs at every step. Executive Director Stacey Reed describes it best, "This is a safe place for women to discuss their options and feel supported. Every story matters here."

Rooted in Love and Legacy

Lauren's Legacy was founded in memory of a young woman whose life continues to touch others through her family's vision of turning loss into purpose. Lauren was known for her compassionate heart and steadfast faith, someone



who naturally reached out to help others in need. After her passing, her family turned their grief into purpose, creating a place that would carry on



her spirit of love and service.

Lauren's Legacy now stands as a reflection of who she was, offering hope and support to women and families facing some of life's most difficult moments, and that legacy lives on through every client who walks through the doors and every child whose life begins with love and support.

Impact That Matters

The past year has been one of remarkable growth

HOPE GROWS
continued on page 2

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It Looks A Lot Like Christmas! Hometown Holidays — Freeport and the Surrounding Area

The holidays have arrived across Freeport and the Emerald Coast, bringing twinkling lights, hometown parades, Christmas concerts, festive markets and family traditions old and new. From Freeport's beloved "Story Book Christmas" celebration to concerts, light shows and magical winter happenings throughout the area, there's something joyful for every age. Here's your guide to the season's can't-miss events!

HOLIDAYS
continued on page 2

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 Community

HOPE GROWS

continued from page 1

and impact for Lauren’s Legacy. From January through September 2025, the center served 110 clients, provided 545 appointments, administered 75 pregnancy tests and 68 ultrasounds, and supported local families through 420 parenting classes. Each number represents a person—someone who found hope, encouragement and practical help when they needed it most.

A Night to Remember: Legacy Night 2025

In August, Lauren’s Legacy hosted its first-ever Legacy Night, a celebration of life, community and hope. The evening raised an incredible \$217,000, thanks to the generosity of local sponsors, donors and volunteers who share the center’s mission.

These funds will help the organization expand its reach, broaden its services, welcome



more families, and continue meeting growing community needs.

Real Life Impact

Lauren’s Legacy exists to meet people right where they are, offering steady, compassionate help when it’s needed most. Access to free pregnancy tests, a no-cost ultrasound, one-on-one education about their options, and a full suite of parenting classes are available free and confidential. When they complete the classes,



they receive essential baby items such as car seats, diapers, strollers



and clothes—giving them a real boost as they start this chapter.

All services are completely free and confidential, including pregnancy testing, ultrasounds, parenting classes and referrals for housing, medical and community resources. Anyone in need can call 850-880-6287 or visit the website to connect with someone who cares and schedule a confidential appointment.

How to Get Involved

Lauren’s Legacy is a faith-

based organization and operates entirely through the generosity of donors, volunteers and community partners. Whether through giving, volunteering or spreading awareness, every act of support helps this mission grow.

To learn more, visit Laurens-Legacy.net or call (850) 880-6287 to find out how you can help.

Together, we can continue to build a community where life is cherished and hope is shared.

16019 Hwy 331 Business, Suite 10, Freeport, 32439

HOLIDAYS

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Monday-Saturday, December 1-6

Festival of Trees

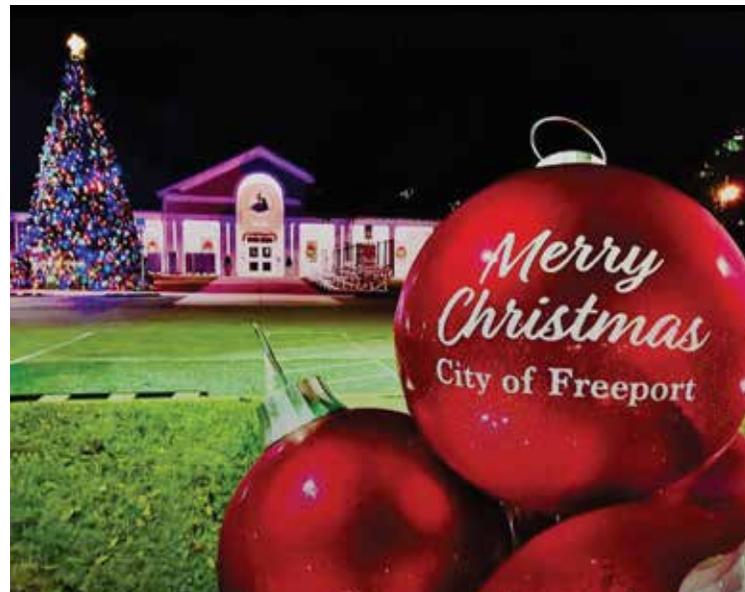
Freeport City Hall | 112 State Hwy. 20 W.

The holiday season lights up as local businesses, churches, schools and organizations decorate festive Christmas displays throughout City Hall for Freeport’s annual Festival of Trees, part of this year’s “A Story Book Christmas” celebration. Visitors

can stroll through the beautifully themed trees all week, enjoy the creativity of local participants and cast votes for their favorites.

Festival Details:

- Public Display: December 1-6
- Set-Up: November 30, 12-5 p.m.
- Public Voting: All week
- Winner Announcement: December 6 at 6:30 p.m. during the Tree Lighting Ceremony and after the Story Book Christmas Parade at 5:15 p.m.
- Break-Down: December 7-8



This free community display is a joyful way to kick off the season and celebrate hometown creativity. Apply to decorate a tree: freeportfl.rja.revize.com/forms/10244

Saturday, December 6 Freeport “Story Book” Christmas Parade & Tree Lighting

Check-in 1:30-4 p.m. | Parade 5:15 p.m. | Tree Lighting 6:30 p.m. Freeport City Hall & Downtown Freeport

One of Freeport’s most beloved holiday traditions returns as the “Story Book Christmas” Parade brings favorite tales to life with festive floats, decorated golf carts, classic cars, horses, tractors, marching groups,

bikes and more. Families line the streets each year to celebrate the season with hometown spirit and creativity.

Event Schedule:

- Check-In: 1:30-4 p.m.
- Float Judging: 4-4:45 p.m. (entries arriving after 4 p.m. are not eligible)
- Parade Begins: 5:15 p.m.
- Tree Lighting Ceremony: 6:30 p.m. at Freeport City Hall

Parade Route:

Begins at Freeport Elementary School (US-331) - Left on Business 331 - Right on State Hwy. 20 W - Left on 83A East - Left on North Street - Dispersal.

Additional Information:

- No Santa costumes, please — Santa makes his own special

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Freeport Celebrates New Community Center

When Freeport broke ground on its new community center nearly two years ago, city leaders promised it would become a vital gathering place in the heart of the community. After the former center closed in 2019, demand for a shared civic hub only grew as Freeport continued its rapid rise.

“Our community is the fastest growing city in the fastest growing county in Florida,” Samantha Graves, senior planner for the City of Freeport, said at the time. “While we do have some other options for citizen meeting places, it has been in progress to build a much better facility for our community.”

That vision moved forward with the official groundbreaking behind Freeport Town Hall, where leaders shared their commitment to restoring a place for residents to gather. “This is something that we’re hoping the citizens will love. It’s going to be nice, it’s going to be something that they can be proud of, that they can come and be part of,” Freeport City Council President Eddie Farris said. “I know it was



a big disappointment when we had to [close the former community center]. We made a promise back then that we would end up and get one built.” At the time, the project was estimated at \$2.5 million.

Now, that promise has been fulfilled. On Nov. 14, the community came together to celebrate the grand opening of the new Freeport Community Center—an impressive, modern space designed to serve residents for years to come.

“There are many groups that have needed a place to meet,” said a Bill Blanken, Freeport Merchants Association presi-

dent. “This gives us a venue for stage productions and entertainment in this area.”

The new center features a commercial-style kitchen, a stage and a large multipurpose event area—flexible spaces that can host everything from civic meetings to performances, receptions and community celebrations.

The excitement is evident. Countless enthusiastic comments include:

- “Honored to be here alongside Mayor Russ Barley and City Planner Latilda Hughes as the city continues to grow and invest in spaces that bring people together. Proud of this mile-

stone for Freeport!” — HomeBiz Properties

- “AT LAST! The stunning, new Freeport Community Center is open! It is nothing short of amazing and is a great new rental venue for all to enjoy!! Job Well Done!” — Tim Ard

- “This evening, our queens were in attendance at the ribbon cutting for Freeport’s brand-new Community Center! What a historic moment to be a part of!” — The Miss Freeport Queens

- “I am so impressed at the City of Freeport’s new community center. This place is amazing. The city has needed space

for all sorts of activities and community gatherings. I see a future where Freeport becomes the arts and culture heart of Walton County. I heard it can seat over 300 people!” — Uriah Matthews

With its doors now officially open, the Freeport Community Center stands as both a fulfillment of a promise and a bold step forward—creating a place where neighbors can gather, celebrate and shape the city’s next chapter together.



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 Community

Warrick Dunn Charities Delivers Life-Changing Surprise for Habitat for Humanity Walton County Mom

A DeFuniak Springs single mom stepped into a new chapter of stability and hope thanks to Habitat for Humanity Walton County—then received an unforgettable surprise on move-in day.

When first-time homeowner Samantha Brown arrived at her new home with her three children, she was greeted by FSU and Tampa Bay Buccaneers legend Warrick Dunn, whose non-profit, Warrick Dunn Charities (WDC), has been changing the lives of single parents for more than 25 years.

Dunn’s signature program, Homes for the Holidays (HFTH), partners with families who are already working hard to achieve homeownership. Instead of giving away homes, HFTH provides the extra support that makes long-term stability achievable—down payment assistance, fully furnished rooms, stocked pantries and a move-in-ready home.

Samantha’s life-changing surprise included \$5,000 in down payment assistance and a home that was move-in ready; \$10,000 worth of new furnishings provided by Aaron’s, the national rent-to-own retailer; and a fully stocked pantry and



household essentials.

Her blessing adds to WDC’s nationwide impact:

- 246 fully furnished Homes for the Holidays recipients
- 667 dependents served
- More than \$1.2 million in down payment assistance donated
- 31 markets reached across the country

Founded in honor of Dunn’s late mother, Betty Smothers, the

charity focuses on breaking the cycle of generational poverty through stability, education and wellness. WDC also operates the Count on Your Future financial literacy program, Health Is Wealth wellness initiatives and scholarship opportunities for student volunteers.

A Milestone Moment for Habitat Walton County

Samantha’s new home also



marked a major achievement for Habitat for Humanity Walton County—the 75th Habitat home built locally and the completion of the organization’s first-ever Habitat neighborhood!

“We are so proud to celebrate Samantha Brown and her three children as the newest Habitat homeowners and the completion of our 75th Habitat home. This home was special, because it was the last home in our first ever Habitat neighborhood,” said Teresa Jones, CEO of Habitat for Humanity of Walton County. “This moment is a testament to faith, perseverance, and the power of partnerships that make dreams of homeownership a reality for hardworking families in our community. We are so thankful to Ryan Jumonville for bringing this wonderful organization to our area.”

Habitat for Humanity Walton County, founded in 1996, has grown its impact steadily over nearly three decades:

- 75 homes completed for Walton County families
- 100% of every donated dollar goes directly to homebuilding
- Hundreds of local volunteers contribute annually
- Sweat equity model empowers families to invest in their homes and futures
- Affordable, no-interest mortgages help families achieve long-term financial stability

The need is great. Many working families in Walton County currently spend more than 50% of their income on housing, making homeowner-



ship feel out of reach. Habitat’s model provides a dignified, sustainable path forward. It partners with people in the community to help them build or improve a place they can call home. Habitat homeowners help build their own homes alongside volunteers and pay an affordable mortgage. With your support, Habitat homeowners achieve the strength, stability and independence they need to build a better life for themselves and for their families.

A New Beginning for a Deserving Local Family

Samantha, an administrative professional with Ascension Sacred Heart Medical Group, supports her family, which includes her 15-year-old son, 8-year-old son and 5-year-old daughter. After completing hundreds of hours of sweat equity, she finally held the keys to her own home—now made even more special by the generosity of WDC. Overjoyed, Samantha was surprised and excited for this new chapter in her family’s story.

To learn about volunteer opportunities, homeownership programs or ways to give, visit Habitat for Humanity Walton County: waltoncountyhabitat.org; Warrick Dunn Charities: wdc.org.



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Community

Get Involved! Volunteer, Donate and Be a Hometown Hero This Christmas

By Christopher Manson

Good news! There are plenty of opportunities to be a Hometown Hero this holiday season by donating, volunteering or simply spreading the good word about our local nonprofits making a huge impact in our community. Here are just a few ways you can make the holidays a lot brighter for those in need:

Since the 1970s, the **Walton County Sheriff's Office Santa Patrol** has spread holiday joy to local children whose families face hard times. The program, in collaboration with school resource deputies, provides hand-selected gifts that are delivered in person by WCSO staffers. The community is encouraged to donate new, unwrapped children's gifts (up to age 17) or make a monetary donation. Every dollar helps us bring warmth and happiness to a family. Let's make sure every child is remembered this Christmas. Make your checks payable to Walton County Sheriff's Office (with "Santa Patrol" in the memo line) or donate safely online via PayPal at <https://www.paypal.com/donate/....> and select "Santa Patrol" in the drop down.

Donations can be dropped off at the Walton County Sheriff's Office at 10 Sheriff Circle in DeFuniak Springs, the South



Walton Substation at 133 Sheriff Drive in Santa Rosa Beach. Any Walton County Fire Rescue, Florida Station also happily accepts donations!

Also, this year, WCSO is teaming up with Grand Boulevard at Sandestin! You can find drop-off locations at the following stores: Stallworth, AMC, Kilwin's, Beaufort Bonnet and Sunset Shoes.

Email any and all questions to SantaPatrol@waltonso.org.

At press time, 59 families with 161 children have reached out to the **Freeport Christmas Angels** program for help. The kids range in age from three months to 17 years, and the Freeport Christmas Angels' goal is to pro-

vide each child with \$125 in gifts along with an additional \$20 for books and snacks.

Current help is still needed. So far, the organization is about halfway to its \$25,000 fundraising goal. Monetary donations, unwrapped presents and sponsors are welcomed. Donations can be made at paypal.com/us/fundraiser/charity/4488075.

The Freeport Christmas Angels holds its Christmas store Saturday, Dec. 20, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday, Dec. 21, from 1 to 5 p.m. at Heritage Church. If you'd like to volunteer, stop in Thursday evening and/or Friday, or call Lisbeth at 850.685.8418.

The **Emerald Coast Chil-**



dren's Advocacy Center (ECCAC) is once again spreading Christmas cheer through its annual **Toy, Gift and Adopt-a-Family Program** — a heartwarming tradition that ensures local children experience the joy of the season.

Each year, **ECCAC's "Wish List"** program connects generous individuals, businesses and organizations with children and families in need across Okaloosa and Walton counties. Donors can adopt a child or family, donate new toys and gifts, or give monetary contributions to help stock **ECCAC's Toy Room**. The Toy Room becomes a magical "shop" where parents can select gifts for their children — all at no cost. Donations also support ECCAC's



partner agencies who serve area families year-round. "Every gift is a message of hope." How to Help: Bring new, unwrapped

Continued on next page



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GET INVOLVED

continued from previous page

toys or gift cards to ECCAC’s Niceville Center (401 McEwen Dr.) or DeFuniak Springs Center (336 College Ave.). Monetary donations can be made online at ECCAC.org.

The **Food for Thought** (ffttl.org) 2025 Christmas Food Drive is Dec. 2-18. Suggested donatables include instant potatoes, stuffing, cornbread mix, canned vegetables, rice, dried beans, macaroni and cheese, pasta and sauce, cereal, pancake mix, juice, and boxed milk. The nonprofit discourages glass containers and does not want expired, open, or leftover foods. “Easy open pop-top cans” are preferred. Individuals and local businesses are encouraged to drop off food items for holiday meals at Food for Thought’s Destin (908 Airport Road) or Santa Rosa Beach (132 Market Street) pantries. Email support@ffttl.org to learn more.

Café Thirty-A in Santa Rosa Beach hosts its yearly **Christmas Charity Ball** Saturday, Dec. 6, from 6 to 10 p.m. Tickets are \$150 in advance (\$175 at the door), with proceeds



benefiting Caring & Sharing of South Walton. Enjoy festive holiday décor, complimentary valet, champagne toast and cash bar, DJ, photo booth, and a large silent auction. If you’re still not convinced, the celebrated Café Thirty-A culinary team will be trotting out delicious hors d’oeuvres, a dinner buffet starring some of the restaurant’s signature dishes, and a dessert spread.

Last year, the charity ball raised a record-breaking \$81,000 from ticket sales, donations, auction, and raffle tickets. Caring & Sharing provides food and financial help to local families and individuals in need. Learn more at caringandsharingsowal.org, and email jessica@proffittpr.com for

sponsorship opportunities.

The **Twin Cities** participate in a **Wreaths Across America** ceremony Saturday, Dec. 13, at Heritage Gardens Funeral Home-Cemetery in Niceville at 11 a.m. You can help honor fallen heroes by sponsoring a remembrance wreath, volunteering or inviting family and friends to attend. Wreaths will also be placed at Sunset Cemetery in Valparaiso beginning at 9 a.m. To learn more, visit wreathsacrossamerica.org

On Sunday, Dec. 14, **Alaqua Animal Refuge** hosts its fourth annual **Blue Mountain Fra-Gee-Lay** (inspired by Bob Clark’s beloved movie “A Christmas Story”) 2K starting around



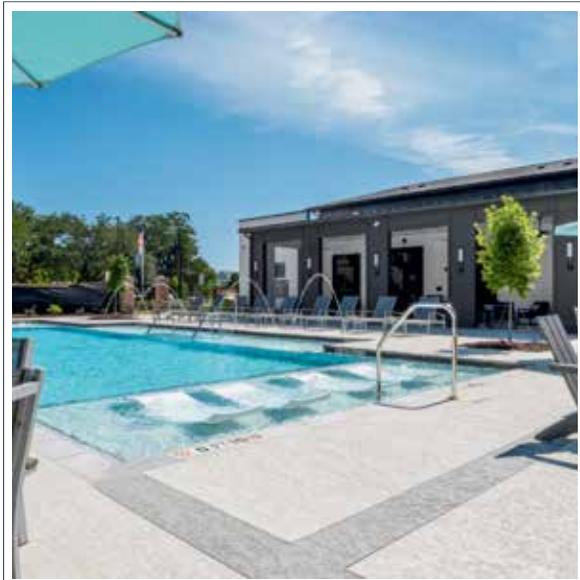
9:30 a.m. The “tacky sweater Christmas race for those who don’t race” includes awards for costumes plus sugar cookies and mimosa refills at the turnaround.

Walk, crawl, sprint, eat, drink, and be merry, and stick around for the awards ceremony at “10:30-ish.” All proceeds benefit Alaqua (alaqua.org). The event takes place at Blue Mountain Bakery, located at 2217 West County Highway 30A. Entry fee is \$20 for adults and \$10 for children 12 and under. Preregister at bluemountainbakery.com. Registration includes choice of mimosa or cinnamon roll.

Make sure a child has a bed to sleep in this Christmas! Donations large and small can be made to **A Bed 4 Me Foundation** – a nonprofit providing beds for children who would otherwise be sleeping on floors or in other inadequate spaces – can help put a child into a new bed. Make your one-time or monthly donation at abed4me.org/donate.

CALM (Crisis Aid for Littles and Moms) depends on Emerald Coast communities to maintain a safe place for mothers and children in crisis situations. Donations provide shelter, provisions and guidance for women seeking a better way of life for themselves and their kids. Donations (please make checks payable to CALM Organization Inc.) can be mailed to CALM Organization Inc., 201 Redwood Ave., Niceville, FL 32578. Visit nicevillecalm.com for more information.

This is just a small sample of the worthy charities in the FREEPORT LIFE readership area. We encourage you to search online for additional opportunities to help others this holiday season! They need you and you’ll be glad you did!



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THE WATERS
AT FREEPORT

 Community



BY BRANDON CERVENKA

As autumn colors arrive and Thanksgiving and holidays approach, many of us pause to count our blessings—health, family, a roof overhead, and the companionship of neighbors and friends. Gratitude isn't just a pleasant emotion; research shows it boosts happiness, strengthens relationships, and even brings health benefits, like a brighter mood and fewer

Safeguarding Blessings: Why Local Insurance Matters This Season

stress symptoms. Giving thanks genuinely makes life richer.

This season, as you reflect on what you cherish, consider who's helping you protect it. Insurance may not be the first thing mentioned around the table, but it quietly shields your home, health, and future. Life, homeowners, and auto insurance are the unsung guardians of family stability, particularly vital during holidays when travel and gatherings increase risks.

Protecting What You're Thankful For

The temptation to buy in-

urance online is real: quick quotes, easy comparisons, and 24/7 access. Yet, nearly 75% of consumers research coverage online, but only 25% end up purchasing without talking to a local expert. Here's why more families still choose a local agent, and a few reasons why you should too:

Personal attention: Local agents listen, learn your unique needs, and guide you through

options tailored for your family and region, ensuring no crucial gap is missed.

Trusted expertise: Community-based agents keep up with evolving policies and know the risks specific to our area—like hurricane, flood, or auto trends—so you're not left guessing about your coverage.

Cost-savings: A good local agent will always be willing to shop your policies through

available carriers to ensure your family is receiving the best premiums.

Peace of mind: When you call or visit, you're not greeted by a chatbot, but by a neighbor who cares and advocates for you at claim time.

Giving back: Local agencies invest in our schools, charities, and events, helping our community thrive all year—a reason to be grateful as we celebrate abundance together.

How to Choose the RIGHT Agent/Realtor Before Buying or Selling

BY TED SHOOP, REALTOR – EXP REALTY, FREEPORT

So, you're thinking about buying or selling a home or piece of property soon. Do you go it alone representing yourself mistakenly thinking that by doing so you will "save money" on the transaction or do you hire a professional real estate agent or Realtor to assist you in what is likely the biggest and most important financial transaction of your life? In most cases, you will realize a better financial outcome and experience a smoother, safer and less stressful transaction by hiring a professional. There are many factors to take into consideration. Here are just a few recommendations that can help ensure a successful outcome.

First, DO NOT interview just one candidate – interview at least three (3) agents. Second, avoid hiring a "friend" or family member, particularly one new to the industry. Your

choice should not be personal, but rather about business and your best outcome. Look for a professional with at least a few years of experience who offers demonstrated skills in negotiating, marketing, networking and perhaps most important, excellent communication skills. Third, consider what education, professional and life experiences do prospective agents/Realtors bring to the table? Finally, choose an agent that offers the highest level of honesty, integrity and professionalism—one who shares facts, answers all your questions and maintains regular contact, letting you know what is going on throughout the entire process.

Ted Shoop is an experienced Freeport Realtor with eXp Realty. Ted is always available to answer your questions and welcomes the chance to interview. Contact him at (850) 273-8636.

A Great Time to Shop

As the Thanksgiving and Christmas season brings families together to appreciate what matters most, it's an ideal time to review your insurance. Are your blessings—home, loved ones, and peace of mind—adequately protected as life changes? This small act is itself an expression of gratitude for all you've built.

As you take stock of what you're grateful for this holiday, ask yourself if your current insurance agent is truly serving your best interests. If not, now is the perfect time to seek a fresh perspective. Don't settle for a one-size-fits-all online solution; reach out to a local expert who will advocate for your needs and help you protect what matters most. This season, make gratitude meaningful—choose an agent who treats your family like their own.

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Why Seniors are Most Vulnerable in the First 30 Days After a Hospital Stay

By TERESA HALVERSON,
DIRECTOR OF BUSINESS
DEVELOPMENT/COMMUNITY
RELATIONS

After a major medical event and a lengthy stay in an acute setting, seniors often are at a loss during the transition of care. This may include the breakdown in communication and coordination between the hospital, the patient/family, and the next care provider, directly leading to preventable readmissions. The senior/caregiver often is unaware of “red flag” symptoms of a worsening condition (i.e. fluid retention in heart failure) or when to call their physician versus 911. This often leads to delayed, inappropriate or overcautious care (i.e. an unnecessary ER visit).

The transition period, particularly the first 30 days post hospital discharge, is the most vulnerable time for seniors because they shift abruptly from 24/7 acute medical care to an often-fragmented system of self-management and family care. This period is often referred to as a state of “post-hospital syndrome,” where patients have depleted physiological reserves and are at high risk for new or worsening conditions. Some of these conditions may include:

Deconditioning and Frailty: Even a short hospital stay can lead to significant muscle loss, weakness, and decline in mobility, making the senior highly susceptible to falls and subsequent injury upon returning home.

Physiological Vulnerability: The stress of illness and hospitalization leaves the body’s immune system weakened, increasing the risk of new infections (like pneumonia or UTIs) or complications from the initial illness.

Cognitive Decline: Hospitalization can often trigger or worsen confusion and delirium, which severely compromises a senior’s ability to understand and follow complex discharge instructions.

Medication Chaos: Seniors are often discharged with an average of 3-5 new medication changes (new drugs, discontinued drugs, or dosage changes). Medication errors, a leading cause of readmission, are most likely to occur within the first 48

hours of being home.

Hospitals work diligently with senior care facilities and health care partners to ensure that seniors are discharged with confirmed plans for support (i.e. home health, skilled nursing and rehab facilities, medical equipment and transportation). If you are being discharged from acute care and require specialized follow-on care, it is important to know your options. A skilled nursing and rehab center relies on a variety of specialists to address the patient’s acute needs following hospitalization.

Going to post-acute rehab after a hospital stay is an essential step for many people because it bridges the gap between acute medical treatment and safely returning home. The primary goal of post-acute rehabilitation is to help you regain the strength, mobility, and skills you need to live

independently, while also preventing complications that could land you back in the hospital. Your treatment plan is customized to your specific condition and goals, ensuring you make measurable progress towards independence.

Who is Post-Acute Rehab For?

Post-acute rehab is typically recommended if you:

- Need continued medical care that can’t be safely managed at home.
- Require multiple types of therapy (PT, OT, SLP).
- Have the physical and cognitive ability to tolerate intensive therapy and are motivated to participate.
- Are recovering from a major event like:
 - Stroke or Brain Injury
 - Major Orthopedic Surgery



(e.g., hip or knee replacement)

- Major Illness (e.g., severe pneumonia, heart failure, prolonged critical illness)

- Major Trauma or Amputation

Your hospital care team (doctors, case managers, and therapists) will assess your condition and recommend the appropriate

level of post-acute care for your needs. Reasons why post-acute rehab is highly beneficial:

Types of Medical & Rehabilitation Specialists

Medical Specialists (Consulting Physicians): While

Continued on page 20



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Around Town



The **City of Freeport** would like to thank the wonderful group of students from **Freeport High School** who came out to volunteer recently. Thanks to their hard work, a new Community Garden has been planted!

Freeport Rotary's 2nd Annual Fire Truck Pull Kicks Off Heroes for Heroes Benefiting Fisher House

The Freeport Rotary Club hosted its 2nd Annual Fire Truck Pull on Friday, November 7, officially kicking off Walton



County Fire & Rescue's Heroes for Heroes, an exciting community event supporting Fisher House of the Emerald Coast.

Teams from across Walton County competed for the fastest time pulling a fully loaded fire truck 50 feet down the street in front of Props Brewery at The Windmills in Hammock Bay. The event drew a large and enthusiastic crowd, uniting local businesses, first responders, students, military groups and families in a shared mission of service. Bill Blanken, President of the Freeport Merchants Association was the Master of Ceremonies and Drea Knotts sang the National Anthem.

Proceeds from Heroes for Heroes totaling over \$10,000 will directly benefit Fisher House and their work to provide free lodging and support for military families of hospitalized service members.

"Events like this not only raise vital funds but also build awareness of the families we serve," said Mia Hughes, Executive Director of Fisher House of the Emerald Coast. "We're incredibly grateful to the Walton Fire & Rescue, Freeport Rotary Club and the Walton County community for rallying behind our mission."

This year's Fire Truck Pull was made possible through the generosity of sponsors and participants. Lead Sponsors: Magnolia Tribe Chiropractic, Mills Heating & Air, and Emerald Coast Title Services Team Sponsors: Express Oil Change, Circle K, Pets R Family, Dough-

boy Burgers, Hammock Bay Dental, Koast Builders, Proactive Data, Sherwin Williams, T48 Athletics, and Thin Blue Line.

The competition was fierce but friendly! 2025 winners include: 1st Place: EOD School, 2nd Place: Walton County Fire & Rescue Cadets and 3rd Place: Oar House

"This is such a fun, high-energy event," said Michelle Jannazo, Chair of the Freeport Rotary Club. "We're thank-

ful for the incredible teamwork of Fire Marshal Jeremy Radney and his crew and all of our community partners who help make it all possible."

Westonwood Ranch Receives \$400,000 in State Funding for New Life Skills and Job Training Center

Westonwood Ranch has secured \$400,000 in State of Florida Appropriations through the Agency for Persons with Disabilities—a transformative investment championed by Rep. Shane Abbott and Sen. Jay Trumbull. The funding will help construct a new life skills and job training building on campus, marking a major step forward in the organization's mission to expand learning and employment pathways for individuals with developmental differences.

The new facility will serve as a central hub for vocational training, independent living instruction, and hands-on workforce readiness programs. It also plays a key role in a broader initiative to address a critical regional need: affordable, supportive housing for young adults with developmental disabilities.

Westonwood Ranch extends its deepest gratitude to Representative Shane Abbott (R-District 5) and Senator Trumbull (R-District 2) for their strong advocacy.

"I am proud to support Westonwood Ranch and their mission to empower individuals with developmental differenc-

es through education, training, and workforce development. Investments like this not only strengthen our communities but also create pathways for independence and meaningful employment. I look forward to seeing the lasting impact this new facility will bring to District 5 and beyond," said Rep. Shane Abbott.

Founder and CEO Lindy Wood added: "This funding is a game-changer for our organization and, most importantly, for the individuals and families we serve. We are especially thankful for Representative Abbott and Senator Trumbull's advocacy and belief in our mission. With this new building, we will be able to expand our training programs, foster greater independence, and create a pipeline of opportunities that help bridge the gap between education and employment."

This appropriation reflects Florida's continued commitment to inclusive workforce development and innovative supportive housing solutions. The expansion will help create a true continuum of care—equipping young adults with developmental disabilities with the skills, confidence, and stability they need to thrive.

Green Thumb Garden Club Receives Grant to Support Eden Park Butterfly Garden Restoration

BY KATHLEEN EDGE, PUBLICITY & WEBSITE CHAIR

The Florida Federation of Garden Clubs District 1 fall meeting, hosted by Green Thumb Garden Club (GTGC) and DeFuniak Springs Garden Club, brought more than 70 attendees to Sandestin's Westwinds Conference Center, where grants and awards were presented to clubs across the Panhandle.

Green Thumb received an FFGC grant and will match the funds to support restoration of the Butterfly Garden at Eden Gardens State Park. GTGC volunteers have helped maintain the garden for 35 years and are honored to contribute to this next phase of its renewal.



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Planning for Long-Term Care: Why Waiting Isn't an Option



BY WILLIAM BLANKEN,
BLANKEN MANAGEMENT

Nearly 70% of people who reach 65 will need some form of long-term care. With odds like that, having a plan isn't optional—it's essential. A solid plan protects your quality of life and helps you and your family stay prepared for whatever comes next, medically, financially and personally.

Still, most people put this off. Thinking about aging, illness or mortality isn't exactly fun. Many only start planning after a crisis hits—a sudden fall, a serious di-

agnosis or an aging parent who can no longer live safely alone. By then, options are limited, emotions are high and decisions get rushed.

I've seen almost every version of aging within my own family. Some relatives passed quickly and unexpectedly. Others navigated long illnesses. Many lived long, steady lives that required increasing support. Some managed at home with help from neighbors and relatives. Others hired caregivers, moved in with family, transitioned to assisted living or entered skilled nursing facilities. Watching all of this shaped how I view my own future. More than anything, I don't want to be backed into a corner or have someone else make decisions for me under pressure.

The truth is, it's never too late to start planning, but it does get harder with time, especially in the middle of a crisis. With the right information, anyone can build a clear, realistic and

flexible long-term care plan that reflects personal goals and aligns financial resources with future needs.

Long-term care (LTC) isn't limited to nursing homes. It includes any ongoing help with activities of daily living, bathing, dressing, eating, mobility and more. Care can happen in many settings: your own home, an assisted living community, a memory care facility or a skilled nursing home. The right option depends on your health, independence and support network. Planning ahead lets you choose care based on your preferences rather than whatever is available during an emergency.

Costs can be significant. A private nursing home room averages over \$100,000 per year, and even in-home care can run thousands each month. People typically cover these expenses through a mix of personal savings, long-term care insurance, Medicaid and family support. Without a plan, financial strain



can escalate quickly.

But, a good LTC plan isn't just about money—it's personal. Ask yourself: Where would I want to live if I needed daily help? Who do I trust to manage my care? What kind of support would I want or avoid?

Put your answers in writing through advanced directives, a living will and healthcare power of attorney documents. Then share your plans with those who matter. Clear communication prevents confusion, conflict and

guesswork later.

And remember: A long-term care plan isn't something you create once and forget. Health changes. Finances shift. Families evolve. Review your plan every few years or after major life events to keep it aligned with your goals.

Long-term care planning isn't about expecting the worst, it's about protecting your independence, dignity and choices. Whether you're 45 or 75, the right time to start is today.



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Christmas Reflections on Lake DeFuniak

A small Southern town finds its glow again



BY KERRI PARKER

There's a moment — just as the sun slips behind historic buildings and mature trees — when Lake DeFuniak becomes a mirror. The century-old homes that curve around its shore soften into silhouette, and then suddenly, with the flick of a switch, Christmas Reflections comes to life. Tens of thousands of twinkling lights ripple across the water of one of only two nearly perfect spring-fed lakes in the world.

DeFuniak Springs was built for gatherings. The L&N railroad once delivered thinkers, teachers, and travelers to this very lakefront, where the Florida Chautauqua flourished in a flurry of lectures, concerts, and conversation. It was a hub of culture, a place where ideas ar-

rived before the rest of the state caught up. Time moves on, as it does. The rails quieted. The world chased the beaches to the south — the sugar-white ones along the Gulf that made Walton County famous.

But here in the county seat, around this improbably round lake, the glow never faded — it simply waited.

Today, visitors are drifting back from across the Southeast — families who've heard that something special is happening here again — discovering what locals have quietly known all along: DeFuniak Springs is stirring.

Along Baldwin Avenue, old brick storefronts are waking up again, many with the careful confidence of a place rediscovering its footing. Chef Todd Misener, who recently opened Iron & Grape Italian Kitchen, has quietly elevated the town's culinary heartbeat. His scratch-made pasta and attention to detail draw locals and visitors alike, not with flash or fanfare, but with the steady rhythm of well-crafted meals and the kind of hospitality that doesn't announce itself. Nearby, other kitchens are quietly staking their claim: Southern comfort



cooked with care, flavors that echo New Orleans, and fresh,

inventive fare that makes even a quick meal feel like part of the evening's experience. It shows up in the clatter of plates, the murmur of familiar voices, and the soft glow of dining rooms. It feels less like a restaurant scene and more like a town remembering how good it is to linger around a table.

And for those who arrive from farther afield — and many do — the night has a way of convincing them to linger a little longer. Travelers who prefer something more tucked-away often find themselves settling into century-old homes now offered as guest stays. It isn't hard to stay the night here. In fact, it feels almost expected — as if Christmas Reflections was meant to be savored slowly, long after the last lights shimmer across the water.

Just down the street, a historic theater has found its breath again, too. National recording artists slip into its intimate acoustics — drawn by the purity of a true listening room — thanks to songwriter Tim Jackson, a full-



time resident championing live music as part of the town's very pulse.

These aren't manufactured attractions. They're the signs of a place remembering exactly who it is.

But the crown jewel — the reason families pack up thermoses of cocoa and make the drive — is Christmas Reflections.

The community has transformed its iconic lakefront into a glowing wonderland every holiday season. Through December nights, the breeze carries laughter from the horse-drawn carriage rides. Families stroll the mile-long promenade beneath archways of evergreen and light, the water throwing their reflection right back at them — a reminder that some moments can only happen here.

Every weekend in December, Baldwin Avenue becomes the sort of scene casting directors scout for holiday films — carolers in the street, small-batch hot chocolate, shop windows frosted just enough to catch a sparkle. It's charming, yes — but never contrived. What's happening in this town isn't a revival — it's a return. A return to gathering for inspiration and connection.

If you're not here on a December night, standing on the edge of a perfect circle of spring water watching stars and Christmas lights mingle as one — well, you'll feel like you've missed something. Something rare.

And if you come once? You'll circle back.

Check the HWY331.com/ my-calendar for event details.



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Spreading Hope: The Pruitt-Gann Christmas Cancer Care Outreach

Bringing Comfort and Cheer to Cancer Warriors This Holiday Season

As the Christmas season approaches, the dynamic duo of Pruitt-Gann Group is turning compassion into action with a heartfelt initiative to make the season a little brighter for those facing one of life's toughest battles: cancer. Julie, a passionate advocate and former cancer warrior herself, has launched the Christmas Cancer Care Outreach – a project dedicated to bringing warmth, comfort, and encouragement to those undergoing cancer treatment during the holiday season.

Julie's mission is simple but powerful: to recruit the hands of many to remind patients that they are not alone. Through her Christmas Cancer Care Packages, she hopes to provide not only practical support but also emotional encouragement. These care packages include thoughtful items such as healthy snacks, warm socks, blankets, beanie hats, and gloves to keep them cozy and comfortable. They are also collecting things like soups and teas, uplifting devotionals, and puzzles to pass the time during treatment. Never underestimate the power of your words as well – they may be exactly what someone needs to hear. A meaningful note of encouragement, scripture, or



venmo

even sharing your own journey with cancer can bring comfort and hope in a way that material things can't.

"You walk in the room with packages and where sadness was, to see the light in their eyes makes it so worth it!" Julie says. "My biggest goal is to spread hope to the patients that might be alone through their journeys and to show them that people truly do care about them."

If you would like to support Julie's Christmas Cancer Care Outreach, either by donating items or spreading the word, here are some ways to help: We are receiving donations via mail, in-person, and Venmo @ julie-pruitt-34 for supplies purchased. You can also contact Julie or Richard through Pruitt-Gann Group's contact information. All donations will need to be completed no later than Friday December 12, 2025. To-

gether, we can make a meaningful impact and deliver hope, one care package at a time.

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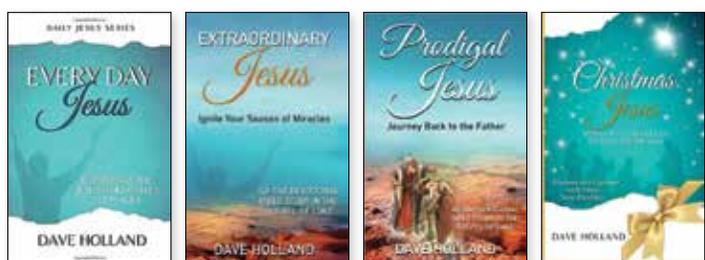
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 Community

NatureView: Freeport's Premier Master-Planned Community Redefines Coastal Living

BY GINA WALKER, BETH JONES AND ANNE WINJUM

As real estate professionals with decades of combined experience, we have witnessed the evolution of our beloved Freeport firsthand and have guided thousands to their ideal homes along the Emerald Coast. Today, we're thrilled to spotlight "NatureView," the latest master-planned development that's elevating the standard for thoughtful, nature-infused living in Walton County. Developed by The Jay Odom Group—the visionaries behind the acclaimed Hammock Bay—NatureView spans 792 homesites on approximately 300 acres, strategically positioned just east of US-331 off Black Creek Road (Highway 3280) and south of Hwy. 20. Nestled amid over 50,000 acres of protected forest, including the adjacent Nokuse Nature Preserve, this community harmonizes modern convenience with the timeless allure of Florida's natural landscape.

With only nine miles to the sugar sand beaches of 30A and proximity to top-rated Freeport schools in the Walton County School District, NatureView is positioned for sustainable growth and convenience. Eglin Air Force Base (just 33 miles away) and Sacred Heart Hospital (20 miles) add layers of practicality for families and professionals alike. With easy access to regional and international airports, residents enjoy seamless connectivity while be-



Gina Walker



Beth Jones



Anne Winjum

ing buffered from urban hustle by lush, preserved greenery. Current home prices start in the mid \$300s, offering exceptional value in a market where coastal appeal meets affordability.

Exceptional Homes Tailored for Every Lifestyle

NatureView's diverse offerings, crafted by two of Florida's most trusted builders, cater to first-time buyers, growing families and those seeking a forever home. DSLD Homes, a national leader among the top 30 U.S. builders and the largest private homebuilder in the region, showcases its signature open-concept designs. Floor plans range from 1,545 to 3,022 square feet, featuring 3- to 4-bedroom configurations that strike a balance between functionality and elegance. Standout features include quartz coun-

tertops, wood-look ceramic tile flooring throughout, upgraded kitchen backsplashes, soft-close cabinetry, under-cabinet lighting, and spacious walk-in pantries. Primary suites boast double vanities, garden tubs, separate tiled showers, and generous walk-in closets. Thoughtful touches, such as framed mirrors in every bath, matte black fixtures, crown molding, and LED recessed lighting, elevate daily living. Models such as the Aubry III (4 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms) and Comstock (4 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms) exemplify DSLD's focus on energy-efficient innovation, including electric kitchen packages and architectural 30-year shingles for long-term durability.

Complementing DSLD's portfolio, employee-owned Holiday Builders—Florida's trusted name since 1983, with over 40,000 families served—intro-

duces 14 selections from its esteemed Cornerstone Collection. These energy-efficient homes offer flexible floor plans ranging from 1,685 to 3,473 square feet, with 2- and 3-car Garage plans available. This allows for personalization in flooring, cabinetry and countertops to suit individual tastes. The Seacrest (3 beds, 2 baths) offers compact sophistication for starters, while the Navarre (5 beds, 3 baths) provides expansive space for multigenerational living. Holiday's designs prioritize coastal harmony with covered porches and an open concept to embrace Freeport's mild climate. Model centers for both builders are now open, with quick move-in options available and construction underway on additional phases.

Amenities That Inspire Connection and Adventure

At the core of NatureView lies a resort-inspired amenity package designed to foster community and outdoor vitality. The centerpiece is a zero-entry pool with an expansive sun deck, ideal for leisurely swims or family gatherings. A modern clubhouse serves as a social hub, complemented by sports courts including pickleball, basketball, and tennis. For wellness enthusiasts, a 1.3-mile nature trail meanders through pocket parks and preserved habitats, featuring exercise stations, benches and

native landscaping that invites wildlife sightings—from deer to birdsong at dawn. Playgrounds, dog parks, and open green spaces ensure there's something for every age and interest, all maintained with reasonable HOA fees that prioritize value.

Imagine starting your day with a trail jog amid towering live oaks, transitioning to a pickleball match at the clubhouse, and ending with a sunset picnic overlooking the forest canopy—all without leaving the neighborhood. This seamless integration of nature and amenities positions NatureView as more than a place to live; it's a lifestyle destination, your personal resort, just 10 minutes from Windswept Dunes' golf courses and the Gulf's white-sand shores.

In an era where homeownership demands both immediacy and longevity, NatureView stands out as Freeport's forward-thinking choice. Pre-sales are brisk, and with builder incentives like lower-interest loans and closing cost assistance (available through select lenders), the timing couldn't be better.

As your local experts, we're here to demystify the process—from virtual tours and financing consultations to personalized lot selections.

If you are ready to claim your piece of this natural paradise, contact us today to schedule a private viewing or discuss how NatureView fits your vision.

Gina Walker at gina@hammockbayfreeport.com (850-543-4991), Beth Jones at beth@hammockbayfl.com (850) 585-9811, or Anne Winjum at anne@hammockbayfl.com (850-259-9502). Let's turn your Freeport dreams into reality—your future home awaits.

Gina Walker, Beth Jones and Anne Winjum are Walton County real estate agents specializing in new construction and luxury coastal properties. All information is current as of November 2025 and subject to change; please verify with builders for the latest details.



The 24th annual running of the
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HOLIDAYS

continued from page 2

- appearance!
- Free to attend and open to the community.
- Applications due Nov. 28 — submit online, by mail, or drop off at City Hall.
- Approved entries will receive email confirmation.
- Float registration: freeportfl.rja.revize.com/forms/10179

Through Sunday, Feb. 8, 2026

Baytowne on Ice

Times vary daily | The Village of Baytowne Wharf, Miramar Beach | baytownewharf.com

The seasonal ice rink returns to the Emerald Coast, bringing a taste of winter to Sandestin. Lace up your skates and enjoy a 90-minute session on the ice—perfect for date nights, family outings or group fun. Skaters must be at least 3; children under 6 require an adult on the ice. Tickets are \$15 per 90-minute session plus \$3 skate rental; schedule and details at baytownewharf.com.

Friday-Sunday, Nov. 28-30

Christmas at the Garden

10 a.m.–4 p.m. | The Garden at Peach Creek, 4401 U.S. Hwy. 98 E., SRB

Kick off the season among fresh Fraser fir trees, handmade wreaths and garlands, kids' crafts, hot cocoa and photos with The Real Santa of 30A (Friday–Saturday, 10 a.m.–2 p.m.). A cozy, woodsy setting makes this a charming stop for families and tree-shoppers alike. Free to attend; trees, wreaths and greenery available for purchase. Details at thegardenatpeachcreek.com.

Saturday, Nov. 29

Turn on the Town & Seaside Holiday Parade

3–8 p.m. | Scenic Highway 30A, Seaside

The magic of the season comes alive as the Holiday Parade winds from Seagrove to Seaside, leading to the grand lighting of Seaside's spectacular Christmas tree. Enjoy caroling, children's theatre, live performances and photos with Santa in the Christmas Village until 8 p.m. Free event; more info at seasidefl.com.



Mistletoe Market

3 p.m. | Baldwin Ave., Downtown DeFuniak Springs

Sip cocoa, shop local makers and enjoy live holiday music along historic Baldwin Avenue. This festive open-air market is a great spot to find one-of-a-kind gifts and soak in small-town charm. Free admission; details at defuniakspings.net.

Here Comes Santa Claus – Santa's Arrival

6–9 p.m. | The Village of Baytowne Wharf, Miramar Beach

Santa arrives “Baytowne-style” with a sparkling fireworks show, festive lights and music. Meet Santa in his sleigh and catch him again during the Wednesday Night Concert Series – Holiday Edition throughout December. Free to attend; visit baytownewharf.com for full holiday schedule.

Dec. 1–Jan. 6

Geek Lights on the Corner

Shows nightly: 6–9:30 p.m. (Sun–Thu) & 6–10:30 p.m. (Fri, Sat & holiday eves)

Bluewater Blvd. & Antiqua Way, Bluewater Bay

Thousands of synchronized lights, towering displays and a custom soundtrack make this tech-savvy light show a must-see. Park, tune your radio to 101.3 FM and watch the 30-minute show dance across the house, mega-tree and arches. This season supports the Junior League of the Emerald Coast's Child Clothing Project, which outfits hundreds of local students with new clothes and supplies. Admission is free; donation boxes and QR codes on-site accept gifts for the featured charity.

Tuesday, Dec. 2

Multi-Chamber Young Professionals Ugly Sweater Holiday Party

5–6:30 p.m. | 3rd Planet Brewing, Niceville

Area Young Professionals from multiple chambers are invited to mingle in their ugliest holiday sweaters for networking, one drink and light bites. Prizes, laughs and new connections guaranteed. Tickets are \$10 and include one drink ticket and small bites; register at business.waltonareachamber.com.

Coastal White Christmas (Multiple Dates)

Festival of Trees Kick-Off – Dec. 2, 4–6:30 p.m.

Holiday Open House & Walk-About – Dec. 6, 12–5 p.m.

ECTC Musical Revue, Photos with Santa & Horse-Drawn Carriage Rides – Dec. 18–23, 5–8 p.m.

Grand Boulevard at Sandestin

Grand Boulevard transforms into a winter-white wonderland with parades, open houses, live performances and more. Most activities are free and open to the public; some specialty experiences and refreshments may have individual costs. Event details at grandboulevard.com.

Saturdays, Nov. 29 & Dec. 6, 13 & 20

DeFuniak Springs Mistletoe Market

3–8 p.m. | Baldwin Ave., Downtown DeFuniak Springs

Each Saturday, Baldwin Avenue fills with artisan vendors, food trucks, music and twinkling lights. Shop local, enjoy festive treats and soak in the historic charm of downtown DeFuniak Springs. Free admission; information at defuniakspings.net.

Continued on next page

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Events

HOLIDAYS

continued from page 15

Friday, Dec. 5

First Friday Concert Series & Holiday Art Bazaar

4 p.m. Art Bazaar | Concert to follow | The Pavilion at Watersound Town Center

Browse local artists and makers at the Holiday Art Bazaar, then settle in for a free, family-friendly concert featuring Martha's Trouble and headliner Shawn Mullins. Bring chairs and your crew for an evening of music, art and community. Free to attend; RSVP and details at culturalartsalliance.com.

Saturday, Dec. 6

Eden Gardens Christmas Candlelight Open House & Luminaries

5-8 p.m. | Eden Gardens State Park, Point Washington

Walk garden paths lined with more than 2,000 luminaries, tour the Wesley House decked in vintage holiday décor and enjoy live music, cookies and hot beverages at this treasured South Walton tradition. Regular state park entry fees may apply; event details at floridastateparks.org (Eden Gardens).

Holiday Pops Concert in Seaside

5-7 p.m. | Seaside Amphitheater, 30A

Spread a blanket on the lawn and relax under the stars as Sin-

fonia Gulf Coast performs holiday favorites in central Seaside. It's an elegant yet easygoing way to ring in the season with friends and family. Free concert; no tickets required. Info at seaside-fl.com.

Troon Goon Christmas Lightshow

Nightly Dec. 6-Jan. 6 | 6-9:30 p.m. | 1074 Troon Dr. E., Niceville (Bluewater Bay)

A high-tech residential lightshow with animated pixels choreographed to classic and modern Christmas music. Shows run every half hour, and guests vote online for their favorite song versions while listening on car radios at 101.3 FM. Free to view; details at troongoonchristmas.com.

Sunday, Dec. 7

Sinfonia Gulf Coast: Toast 'n Jam - Broadway Holiday the "Calla-way"

10:30 a.m. | Hotel Effie, Sandestin

Enjoy a sparkling Sunday brunch concert with Broadway sisters Ann Hampton Callaway and Liz Callaway as they deliver beloved show tunes and holiday favorites in rich harmony. Brunch, performance and valet are included. Tickets start at \$135 per person, with limited front-row seating at \$195; purchase via Sinfonia's ticketing at sinfoniagulfcoast.org (Toast 'n Jam).

Wednesday, Dec. 10

Santa Night

5-8 p.m. | North Beach Social, SRB

Kids can share wish lists and snap photos with Santa while families enjoy bayside views, festive snacks, live music and drinks. A relaxed, coastal take on holiday fun. Free admission; food and beverages available for purchase.

Friday-Saturday, Dec. 12-13

Santa's Camp Christmas

Friday, Dec. 12, 4-8 p.m. | Saturday, Dec. 13, 3-8 p.m.

Topsail Hill Preserve State Park, Santa Rosa Beach

Holiday magic fills the park with music, food, kids' crafts, family activities and a chance to meet Santa and Mrs. Claus at the "North Pole." Ride Topsy's Polar Express past Santa's Workshop and explore festive camp displays. Event admission is free; tickets for Topsy's Polar Express are a suggested \$6 donation per rider and can be reserved in advance via Eventbrite (link from topsailparkfriends.org, search "Santa's Camp Christmas 2025").

Saturday, Dec. 13

Yule of Yesteryear

10 a.m.-4 p.m. | Heritage Museum of NWFL | Perrine Park, 115 Westview Ave., Val'p

Step back in time for a festive day of old-fashioned holi-

day fun. Enjoy craft vendors, children's crafts, a bake sale, school choirs and special activities with the Valparaiso Garden Club and the Walton Guard. Don't miss a visit from the Grinch, greeting guests from noon to 2 p.m. Free community event; more information at heritagemuseum.org or 850-678-2615.

Sinfonia Gulf Coast: Holiday Pops Spectacular

7:30 p.m. | Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center

Celebrate the season with a full orchestra, vocalists and a program that blends classics like "Winter Wonderland" with modern hits such as "All I Want for Christmas Is You," plus beloved tunes from Broadway and film. A big, bright holiday concert for the whole family. Tickets range from \$40-\$69.50 and are available through Sinfonia's ticketing at sinfoniagulfcoast.org (Holiday Pops Spectacular).

Sunday, Dec. 14

Santa Paws

11 a.m.-3 p.m. | AJ's Grayton Beach

Bring your furry family members for brunch in the courtyard and photos with Santa Paws.



Enjoy Tito's drink specials, live music and plenty of tail-wagging holiday cheer, with rescue partners on site sharing how to adopt or foster this season. Free to attend; food, drinks and optional donations benefit local rescue efforts.

Saturday, Dec. 20

Reindeer Run & Ugly Sweater 5K

Packet pickup 7 a.m.; Race start 9 a.m. | The Windmills at Hammock Bay | Freeport

Get ready to dash, prance and maybe set a new PR at the 2nd Annual Reindeer Run & Ugly Sweater 5K, sponsored by The Windmills at Hammock Bay! This fun, family-friendly race invites runners and walkers of all ages to don their tackiest sweaters and hit the holiday course while supporting a great cause. All proceeds benefit the South Walton High School Track & Field and Cross Country programs.

Registration required: thewindmillsreindeerdash5k.itsyourrace.com

Sponsor inquiries: Contact Dalton Cooper at 850-974-1539.

Victorian Christmas Tea

1-3 p.m. | Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, 115 Westview Ave., Valparaiso

Slow down for an elegant afternoon tea complete with Victorian-style décor, light bites and holiday treats. Perfect for girlfriends, mothers and daughters or anyone who loves classic Christmas tradition. Tickets are \$20 for members and \$25 for non-members; RSVP by Dec. 17 at heritagemuseum.org or 850-678-2615.



Holiday Pops SPECTACULAR!

SATURDAY, DEC. 13 | 7:30 PM
DESTIN-FWB CONVENTION CENTER

This festive concert features full orchestra, vocalists and everything from timeless favorites like *Winter Wonderland* to chart-topping hits such as Mariah Carey's *All I Want for Christmas is You*, along with beloved holiday songs from Broadway and film like *It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas*.

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Toast 'n JAM SESSION

BROADWAY HOLIDAY THE "CALLA-WAY"

SUNDAY, DEC. 7 | 10:30 AM
HOTEL EFFIE SANDESTIN

Enjoy a sparkling Sunday brunch concert with Broadway sisters Ann Hampton Callaway and Liz Callaway as they bring their acclaimed show to Destin. This celebrated cabaret performance blends their extraordinary voices. From Broadway classics to pop standards.

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Happenings Around Freeport

2025 EVENTS

DECEMBER

- 01-06** | Festival of Trees
Freeport City Hall | 112 State Hwy. 20 W.
- 02** | Lunch N Learn: How To Use a Retirement Account for Real Estate
11:30 am | Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce | FWB
Lego Club
3 pm | Rebecca Blount Buxton Memorial Library | Freeport
Festival of Trees
4 pm | Grand Boulevard at Sandestin | Miramar Beach
Multi-Chamber Young Professionals Holiday Party
5 pm | 3rd Planet Brewing | Niceville
- 03** | **Anime Club**
3:30 pm | Rebecca Blount Buxton Memorial Library | Freeport
- 04** | **Pokemon Club**
3 pm | Rebecca Blount Buxton Memorial Library | Freeport
Walton Area Chamber Business After Hours
4:30 pm | Habitat for Humanity | Santa Rosa Beach
- 05** | **Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee**
7 am | Christian Life Center at FBC | FWB
Chess Club
3 pm | Rebecca Blount Buxton Memorial Library | Freeport
First Friday Concert Series & Holiday Art Bazaar
4 pm | The Pavilion at Watersound Town Center | SRB
Holiday Market and Demo Pop Up
5 pm | The Yoga Garden Collective | Freeport
- 06** | **Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class**
10 am | Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
Creative Craft Collective
10 am | Rebecca Blount Buxton Memorial Library | Freeport
Holiday Open House & Shop-About
12 pm | Grand Boulevard at Sandestin | Miramar Beach
Photos with The "Mean & Green One" & Holiday Toy Drive
12 pm | The Crab Trap | Okaloosa Island
Seaside Holiday Pops Concert featuring Sinfonia Gulf Coast
5 pm | Central Square | Santa Rosa Beach
A Story Book Christmas Holiday Parade & Tree Lighting Festival
5:15 pm | City Hall | Freeport
Christmas Candlelight Open House & Luminaries
5-8 pm | Eden Gardens State Park | Point Washington

07 | **Sinfonia Gulf Coast's Toast n' Jam: Broadway Holiday the "Calla-way"**
10:30 am | Hotel Effie Sandestin | Miramar Beach

- 07 CONT.** | **Photos with The "Mean & Green One" & Holiday Toy Drive**
12 pm | The Crab Trap | Okaloosa Island
Women's Climbing Circle
5 pm | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin
- 09** | **Lego Club**
3 pm | Rebecca Blount Buxton Memorial Library
- 10** | **Santa Night**
5-8 pm | North Beach Social | SRB
- 11** | **Pokemon Club**
3 pm | Rebecca Blount Buxton Memorial Library | Freeport
Christmas on the Coast with the Greater FWB Chamber
5 pm | Rockin' Tacos Grill & Tequila Bar | Okaloosa Island
- 
- 12** | **Meet Santa**
2 pm | Lou Lou Beans Gift Shop | Freeport
- 12-13** | **Santa's Camp Christmas**
4-8 pm Fri; 3-8 pm Sat | Topsail Hill Preserve State Park | SRB
- 13** | **Children's Craft & Sound Bath**
9 am | The Yoga Garden Collective | Freeport
Creative Craft Collective
10 am | Rebecca Blount Buxton Memorial Library | Freeport
Yule of Yesteryear
10 am - 4 pm | History Museum of NWFL | Valparaiso
Soundwash with Dana Davis
3 pm | The Yoga Garden Collective | Freeport
Holiday Pops Spectacular! with Sinfonia Gulf Coast
7:30 pm | Destin-FWB Convention Center | Okaloosa Island
- 14** | **Santa Paws**
11 am - 3 pm | AJ's Grayton Beach | SRB
- 18-23** | **Coastal White Christmas Events in Grand Park**
4 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach
- 19** | **Friday Book Club**
10 am | Rebecca Blount Buxton Memorial Library | Freeport
- 20** | **Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class**
10 am | Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
Reindeer Run & Ugly Sweater 5K
7 am packet pu; 9 am start | The Windmills at Hammock Bay
Live Music: Josh Davis
6 pm | Props Brewery Hammock Bay | Freeport
- 23** | **Holiday Horse-Drawn Carriage Rides**
4 pm | Grand Boulevard at Sandestin | Miramar Beach

- 26** | **Not Your Mother's Book Club**
10 am | Rebecca Blount Buxton Memorial Library | Freeport
- 27** | **Creative Craft Collective**
10 am | Rebecca Blount Buxton Memorial Library | Freeport
Live Music: Martin Lane
6 pm | Props Brewery Hammock Bay | Freeport
- 31** | **Justice on the Block: Free Legal Help**
11 am | Rebecca Blount Buxton Memorial Library | Freeport
New Year's Eve Dinner Cruise
8 pm | SunQuest Cruises | Miramar Beach



New Year's Eve Fireworks
8 pm | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island



ONGOING EVENTS

- Holiday Horse-Drawn Carriage Rides**
4 pm | Fri & Sat | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach
- Baytowne on Ice | Through Feb. 8**
Times vary daily | The Village of Baytowne Wharf Miramar Beach | schedule at baytownewharf.com
- Geek Lights on the Corner | Dec. 1-Jan. 6**
Shows nightly: 6-9:30 p.m. (Sun-Thu) & 6-10:30 p.m. (Fri, Sat & holiday eves)
Bluewater Bay & Antiqua Way | Niceville
- Mistletoe Market | Nov. 29 & Dec. 6, 13 & 20**
3-8 pm | Baldwin Ave., DeFuniak Springs
- Annie | December 3-21**
Various show times | Emerald Coast Theatre Co. Grand Boulevard at Sandestin | Miramar Beach

FARMERS MARKETS

- Niceville Community Saturdays | 9 am - 1 pm**
Twin Cities Pavilion | Niceville
- Hammock Bay 1st & 3rd Sundays | 8 am**
Victory Blvd | Freeport
- Grand Boulevard Saturdays | 9 am - 1 pm**
Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach



Top College Hoops Return to Raider Arena for Emerald Coast Classic

Tickets still available for men's and women's tournaments Thanksgiving week

College basketball fans will have plenty to cheer about this Thanksgiving as both the men's and women's Emerald Coast Classic tournaments return to Raider Arena on the campus of Northwest Florida State College. Tickets are still available at www.emeraldcoastclassic.com and start at \$20 per session, which includes two games.

Women's Classic: Nov. 24-25

The second annual women's Emerald Coast Classic, presented by Global Sports, will tip off Monday and Tuesday, Nov. 24-25, featuring two brackets of top NCAA programs. Mississippi State, Providence, Middle Tennessee State, and Alcorn State make up the Bay Bracket, while Nebraska, Virginia, Northwestern State, and Purdue Fort Wayne compete in the Beach Bracket.

In the Bay Bracket semifinals on Nov. 24, Providence faces Middle Tennessee State at 11 a.m., followed by Mississippi State vs. Alcorn State at 1:30 p.m. The third-place game is set for 11 a.m. Tuesday, with



Middle Tennessee State finished 26-8 and earned a WBIT berth. Alabama and Creighton captured titles in last year's inaugural women's event.

Men's Classic: Nov. 28-29

The tenth annual men's Emerald Coast Classic follows Thanksgiving weekend, Friday and Saturday, Nov.

the championship tipping off at 1:30 p.m.

The Beach Bracket opens Monday evening with Nebraska meeting Purdue Fort Wayne at 5 p.m., then Virginia facing Northwestern State at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday's third-place game begins at 5 p.m., with the championship at 7:30 p.m.

Mississippi State posted a 22-12 record last season, advancing to the second round of the 2025 NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament. Nebraska went 21-12 and also reached the NCAA Tournament, while

28-29. DePaul will face Georgia Tech in the semifinals at 6 p.m. Friday, followed by Drake vs. LSU at 8:30 p.m. The third-place game tips at 3 p.m. Saturday, with the championship scheduled for 6 p.m.

LSU returns to Niceville after winning the 2021 Emerald Coast Classic, defeating Wake Forest 75-61 in the title game. "This is going to be the wave of the future for weather," said Matt McMahon, now in his fourth season as LSU's head coach, who welcomes a transfer class ranked No. 16 nationally

by 247Sports.

Drake enters with momentum after a school-record 31-4 season, sweeping the Missouri Valley Conference and advancing to the second round of the 2025 NCAA Tournament. Georgia Tech, under third-year coach Damon Stoudamire, finished 17-17 last year with a trip to the NIT. DePaul, guided by first-year coach Chris Holtmann, reached the College Bas-

ketball Crown tournament—its first postseason appearance since 2019.

Produced by Global Sports, which has managed 57 multi-team college basketball tournaments since 2007, the Emerald Coast Classic continues to bring national-level excitement to the Emerald Coast.

Tickets are available now at www.emeraldcoastclassic.com.

Our Story: Whole Outdoors

Growing up on the Emerald Coast, my family and I lived for the outdoors — hunting, fishing, boating, camping and soaking up every bit of nature we could. Some of my



most cherished memories are the adventures I shared with my dad.

Everything changed the day after Christmas in 1997. We were hit head-on by a drunk driver, and life was never the same. I suffered multiple broken bones and injuries that left me dependent on a wheelchair. My dad's injuries caused immediate, permanent paralysis. From that moment on, we had to learn a new way to embrace the outdoor lifestyle we loved — and in doing so, we discovered we were not alone.

Nearly 30 years later, I've learned that losing independence is one of the most difficult challenges anyone can

face. That's why I've turned what was once a stumbling block into a stepping stone — to help others rediscover freedom and independence in the outdoors.

From that mission, Whole Outdoors was born. Our vision is to provide Wheelchair, Handicap, Outdoor, Lifestyle, Experiences (whole) — creating opportunities for those with mobility challenges to reconnect with nature and reclaim their independence.

At Whole Outdoors, we believe nature should be accessible to everyone — so we've made outdoor accessibility our nature. wholeoutdoors.org

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Visit wholeoutdoors.org

Fishing News

20th Annual CCA South Walton Banquet & Auction February 12, 2026 • Point Washington Preserve, Santa Rosa Beach

The South Walton chapter of Coastal Conservation Association (CCA) Florida is rolling out the red carpet for its 20th Annual Banquet & Auction, a signature evening that blends coastal camaraderie with serious conservation impact. Set at Point Washington Preserve in Santa Rosa Beach, the event offers an upscale but welcoming atmosphere where anglers, families, businesses and community partners come together to support Florida's marine resources.

CCA Florida is a membership-based nonprofit dedicated to conserving the state's marine resources and ensuring healthy fisheries and angler access through habitat restoration, advocacy and education. Since 1985, the organization and its partners have completed dozens of artificial reef deployments and more than 100 habitat projects statewide, funded in large part by raffles, banquets and donations.

Locally, the South Walton chapter is one of CCA Florida's most active, with 350-plus members hosting a kids fishing tournament each spring, a "Women on the Water" ladies fishing clinic and tournament in the fall, and more. The chapter also helped launch the South Walton Artificial Reef Association, which has deployed more than 600 reef pyramids and earned national attention for its underwater museum off these shores.

Individual tickets and tables for the February 12 banquet and auction are available online; search "CCA South Walton Chapter Banquet & Auction" on Ticketstripe or visit ccaflorida.org and click on Events to reserve your spot.

Reeling in Success: Get Hook'd Academy Celebrates October Graduates

Families in our area found a standout opportunity recently when Get Hook'd Academy, a youth fishing program, led by LAK Charters and Capt.

Rob Hansill and hosted by IJ Schooners Dockside Restaurant & Oyster Bar and Bluewater Bay Marina, welcomed young anglers. Under the leadership of Mate/Charter Captain Rob Hansill—a Marine Corps veteran—the academy welcomed students ages 7 to 12 for a four-week course of instruction and hands-on angling experience in October.

Each student was outfitted with a full kit of gear (including a Penn rod & reel, cast net, braided line, terminal tackle, hard



and soft baits and essential tools) and engaged in instruction that covered: boating and dock safety, stewardship and conservation of local waters, rigging live bait, choosing lures, in-shore fishing tactics, maintenance of equipment, and sportsmanship. The program emphasized that hobbies such as fishing built confidence, community and a sense of belonging at an early age. Get Hook'd Academy operated as a nonprofit school whose motto was "Get HooK'd on fishing — Get HooK'd on life."

The setting itself underscored the value of the experience: Bluewater Bay Marina offered the students a working waterfront with slip-access, a fuel dock and ship-store services, anchored by the popular IJ Schooners restaurant.

The session concluded on October 27, 2025 with a tournament and awards ceremony for graduates of the academy, which celebrated the students' milestones and the year's accomplishments.

"Biggest Fish" Winners:

1st Place, Parker Dionne; 2nd Place, Liam Davey; 3rd Place, Finn Carter

"Most Fish" Winners:

1st Place, Isabelle Stralka; 2nd Place, Ezra Barrow; 3rd Place, Ethan Hillyer

The academy expects to offer new dates for the 2026 sea-

son—families are encouraged to watch for upcoming announcements to secure a spot early.

Fishing News is brought to you by The Ships Chandler, a trusted name in Gulf Coast boating since 1980, serving Walton County in its Freeport location (17309 Highway 331 (32439). The 14-acre marine

and service center provides top-quality fishing and pontoon boats, outboard motors and complete marine support for local boaters and anglers. This includes name brands such as Twin Vee, Cobia, Pathfinder, Maverick, Hewes and South Bay Pontoons; Bonafide fishing kayaks and LIVE standup paddleboards with accessories; Engine service and sales for Yamaha, Suzuki

and Mercury outboards; Boat repair, detailing, gelcoat and custom marine work; and parts, accessories and electronics installation. Coming soon: 170 covered storage spaces for boats and RVs!

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 Environment

Wildlife in Fall

BY HELEN PETRE

Welcome to fall! It is time for us humans to break out the blankets and jackets, but what do our wild animals do to prepare? Fortunately, they have everything they need to stay warm. In fall, most animals start eating a lot. They need to add a layer of fat to keep them warm and provide energy to sustain them through the winter when there is little food.

The Florida black bear, *Ursus americanus floridanus*

The Florida black bear is the only bear in Florida. There are about 4,000 in all of Florida, but only about 120 in the western Panhandle, mostly on Eglin land. They prefer dense undergrowth in scrub oak ecosystems, swamps, and flatwoods. One was seen in Grayton Beach State Park recently, and it was not small. Should we be worried about large, dangerous animals while walking in the woods or on the beach? Probably not. As with all wildlife you encounter in their habitats, give them room and do not try to interact with them. If you are hiking in an area that is bear habitat, make noise. If the bear hears you, he will most likely move away from you.



Bears mate in the summer, but the eggs do not implant until November, and then, only if the female has gained enough weight. The cubs are born in January as tiny, helpless things weighing less than a pound. Females feed and protect them denning in the saw palmetto understory until spring.

Males are much larger than females, weighing about 350 pounds, while females weigh in around 200 pounds. Bears that

eat garbage, pet and wildlife food are much larger because those foods are higher in calories than the normal diet of mostly plants and insects. Bears eat bees, wasps, and other insects, soft mast consisting of saw palmetto and holly berries, and hard mast, a variety of acorns and hickory nuts.

In fall, bears are eating about 20,000 calories a day in order to prepare for the winter when there is less food, and females



115 pounds and have antlers, and females are about 90 pounds. White-tailed deer are edge species, choosing to browse low growing vegetation along an edge where they can see predators. This makes the side of highways and yards that back to woods, or the edge of fields, great places to see deer. When they are alarmed, they lift their white tails, stamp their feet, and snort.

Deer are crepuscular, active at dawn and dusk, like mosquitos, making driving during those times a bit tricky. Deer often follow each other, so if one deer crosses the road, be prepared for the next.

If you come across a silent, bedded fawn, while walking in high grass or woods, please

leave it alone. Does teach their fawns to sit silently, not move, and wait for their return. If humans intervene and try to help the fawn, it usually does not end well.

Eastern Gray Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*)

Even if you do not get out into the forest and see bears, you will see squirrels, busily collecting their favorite foods, acorns and hickory nuts, getting ready for the winter. The Eastern Gray Squirrel is our backyard squirrel, and has adapted to feeding from bird feeders, if available. These are our friends, as their habit of burying nuts leads to forest regeneration. If you are quiet, you can hear them chattering to each other as they search, bury and eat mast.

As we enjoy the cooler weather and fall colors, this is a good time to go out and walk in the woods or along the dunes at one of our parks. Our animal friends are busy preparing for winter, eating lots of calories and putting on an extra layer of fat to keep them warm in the coming cold. This is a great time to explore nature and learn how animals prepare for the lean season to come. Remember to give them space and let them show you how their world works.

are denned with offspring. That is as much as a normal person should eat in ten days, or the caloric count of about eight pizzas. In fall, bears feed for about 18 hours a day, so the chance of seeing a bear is rather good in fall.

It is illegal to feed bears in Florida. Considering they are trying to gain weight in fall, if a bear finds your garbage, he will happily eat it. This is not good, for many reasons. Human garbage and dog food is not very nutritious for bears. Bears that are accustomed to eating your garbage and dog food lose their fear of humans and become aggressive if you do not have food for them. To prevent bears from wanting to be in your yard, keep garbage in the garage or lock your containers. Take in pet and bird feeders. Bears are usually solitary and quiet animals, but if they smell your tasty buffet, they will come to get it.

White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)

Deer are actually more dangerous than bears, not because they attack people, but because they tend to run out on the road right in front of moving vehicles. Deer feed along the edge of the highway, especially in fall, when they, like bears, are trying to fatten up. Males are about



St. Jude's Episcopal Church

200 North Partin Drive, Niceville, FL 32578

December Special Events Free & Open to the Public

GINGERBREAD HOUSE COMPETITION

Early Entries December 7th 9:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.
Final Entries December 13th 10:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m.
Early Voting December 14th 9:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.
Final Voting December 21st 9:00 a.m.-10:00 a.m.

CHILDREN & YOUTH CHRISTMAS PAGEANT

December 14th at 10:30 a.m.

LESSONS & CAROLS

December 21st 8:00 a.m. & 10:30 a.m.

CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICES

December 24th at 5:00 p.m. & 11:00 p.m.

Music Will Be Presented by the Choir (5:00 p.m.) • Special Guest Soloist (5:00 p.m. & 11:00 p.m.)
11 p.m. "Midnight" Service will be by Candlelight



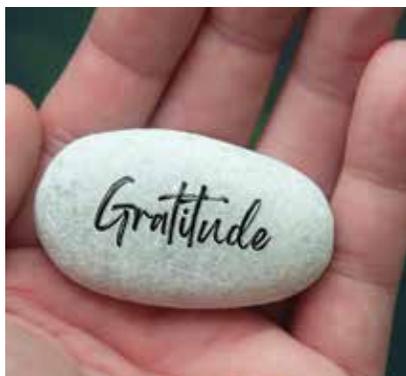
Spread Gratitude



BY STEPHENIE CRAIG,
JOURNEY BRAVELY

When did you last compare your life to someone else's and find yours lacking? When did you last have physical symptoms of stress? When did you last spend hours, days, weeks or months focused primarily on the things in your life you wish were different? Life with technology offers you piles of information to sort daily. Some information is helpful, while much of it leaves you wondering if you and your life measure up to the social media cultural standard. What do you do when you find yourself feeling stressed or your life feeling not enough?

While simple, gratitude often gets overlooked as a highly useful and practical tool for actually feeling better and feeling



enough. Gratitude gets the most attention in November when you think about what you're thankful for around the Thanksgiving table. While a meaningful practice once a year, gratitude can hold a more significant space in your life that can actually change how you feel and experience the world.

Gratitude in its fuller form is a daily practice of slowing down, reflecting on what is already good in your life, savoring and celebrating the goodness, then intentionally acknowledging the goodness in some way such as writing it down, noting it in your phone, or saying it aloud to yourself or another

person. Gratitude is scientifically known to potentially reduce stress, reduce blood pressure, help anxiety, help depression, improve health, increase optimism and increase happiness.

Gratitude is not designed to minimize your struggles. For example, statements like, "I should just be grateful, I don't have real problems like people who are hungry or sick" aren't helpful to caring for yourself properly. Your pain and struggle are real and it is healthy to validate and tend to the hard parts of your life. Gratitude instead offers some balance and perspective to the struggle. Statements like, "I am really struggling with anxiety today and it is hard. And at the same time, I am also so grateful for my support system, for the sun being out today and for my pet who makes me smile," invite the goodness that exists into your processing of the hard.

Gratitude can be contagious if you let it. It has a sneaky way of taking self-focused, negative

thoughts and transforming them into healthy connection with God, self and others. You begin to notice kind things others have done toward you and you begin to engage spiritual gratitude. At its best, gratitude can motivate you toward kindness, generosity and creating opportunities for others to experience gratitude.

So, how do you engage and spread gratitude?

Ways to Practice and Spread Gratitude

Slow down. Set aside a time each day for 3-5 minutes. Set a reminder in your phone to help support the habit. Take a few deep breaths and say to yourself, "I am slowing down to notice the good."

Reflect on a gratitude question. What was good today? What am I taking for granted in my life I could be grateful for? What nature do I see around me? Who am I grateful for? What am I looking forward to? What can I celebrate today? What kind thing has someone done for me?

Savor and celebrate the

good. Think in detail about the beauty of nature. Think about the person you are grateful for and why you enjoy them. Notice deeply what a gift it is to have all of your basic needs met.

Record your observations. Journal, use notes in your phone, send a thank you note, or tell someone what feels good in your life. Note how it feels inside to spend time thinking about good things.

Spread gratitude. Allow gratitude to motivate generosity and kindness. Watch for opportunities to create grateful moments for others. Send a kind note, give a thoughtful gift, use loving words of affirmation, go out of your way to be helpful or meet a need, share your gifts with others.

In a time that encourages you to do more, get more, and keep up. Try engaging in the radical rebellion of slowing down, being grateful and spreading gratitude to others. Be gracious with yourself and others as you grow in gratitude. For support along your journey, connect with us at Journeybravely.com.

SENIORS

continued from page 9

the primary care physician (PCP) or medical director in a skilled nursing and rehabilitation facility oversees general medical care, specialists act as highly focused resources within the interdisciplinary team.

These physicians are typically consulted on an as-needed basis for specific conditions:

Physiatrist (Rehabilitation Medicine Specialist): Directs the overall rehab program. They specialize in nerve, muscle, and bone injuries and aim to restore function lost due to injury or illness.

Cardiologist: Manages conditions like Congestive Heart Failure (CHF) and post-heart attack recovery, adjusting medications and monitoring cardiac status.

Pulmonologist: Treats respiratory issues such as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) or pneumonia recovery, often managing oxygen therapy.

Wound Care Specialist (Physician, Certified Nurse or Certified Therapist): Provides advanced care

for non-healing ulcers, surgical wounds, or pressure injuries (bedsores).

Neurologist: Manages patients recovering from stroke, Parkinson's disease, or other neurological conditions.

Importance and Impact of Specialty Care

The specialized expertise is critical because patients in a skilled nursing facility are in a transition phase, requiring complex, time-sensitive care.

Precision and Complex-

ity Management: Specialists possess a deeper knowledge of high-risk, complex conditions (e.g., managing post-operative joint infection or fine-tuning diabetes control). Their involvement ensures the patient receives care that goes beyond general medicine.

Optimizing Rehabilitation Outcomes: The Physiatrist and therapy specialists (PT, OT, SLP) create highly personalized, goal-oriented treatment plans. Their expertise is required to classify the service as "skilled"

by Medicare, ensuring intensive, rapid functional improvement necessary for the patient to re-

turn home.

Continued on page 23



Stephenie Craig, LCSW
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Making Time for You: Why the Holidays Can Be the Perfect Season for Cosmetic Surgery

By Dr. Clark,
Bluewater Plastic Surgery

The holidays are filled with shopping, travel, and family gatherings, but for many people along the Emerald Coast, this season also presents a unique opportunity: the chance to finally schedule a surgical procedure they've been considering. While it may seem counterintuitive to think about cosmetic surgery during the busiest time of year, December often provides the ideal window for both recovery and renewal.

Built-In Recovery Time

Most cosmetic surgeries require at least a few days of rest and limited activity. The holiday season often includes built-in vacation days, office closures, and school breaks. This natural

downtime makes it easier to schedule procedures like breast augmentation, liposuction, tummy tucks, or facelifts without missing significant work or family obligations. Many patients find it comforting to recover while surrounded by supportive loved ones at home.

Starting the New Year with Confidence

January is naturally a season of fresh starts. For patients who undergo procedures in December, the new year often begins with renewed energy and confidence. Whether it's restoring body contours with liposuction, rejuvenating facial features with a facelift, or reclaiming pre-pregnancy shape with a mommy makeover, surgical solutions can provide dramatic,

long-lasting results that align with new year goals.

Combining Procedures for Comprehensive Results

The holiday season is also a time when patients consider combining procedures. For example, pairing a tummy tuck with breast surgery in a mommy makeover can provide more balanced, transformative results while limiting recovery to a single period. Similarly, combining facial surgery with non-surgical treatments like injectables or medical-grade skincare can help maximize and maintain results.

Privacy and Discretion

Another benefit of holiday-timed surgery is discretion. With many friends and colleagues traveling or celebrating, it's easier to step back for a short

period without raising questions. By the time normal routines resume in January, swelling and bruising have often subsided, leaving only the refreshed results.

To schedule a private consultation and explore your options, contact Bluewater Plastic Surgery today at (850) 530-6064. As a board-certified plastic surgeon, my practice is dedicated exclusively to cosmetic surgery, and I have performed thousands of procedures over the last 25 years. My highest priorities are patient safety and superior results. With more than



250 five-star reviews, I let my patients' experiences speak for themselves. bluewaterplasticsurgery.com

Wreaths Across America Ceremony Returns to Gulf Cemetery Dec. 13 Honoring 160 Veterans in Santa Rosa Beach



Gulf Cemetery in Santa Rosa Beach will once again join the national Wreaths Across America movement on Friday, Dec. 13, at 11 a.m.—timed to coincide with the noon ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery. Held at the historic 109-year-old cemetery located at 1466 S. County Hwy. 393, the event honors the approximately 160 veterans laid to rest on its grounds.

The ceremony includes patriotic music, guest speakers, and the moving tradition of laying remembrance wreaths on veterans' graves—each accompanied by the reading of the veteran's name aloud. Families are encouraged to participate, and children especially enjoy helping place the wreaths, which are marked for

easy location. The program typically lasts about an hour.

Local groups, including the West Florida Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, help sponsor wreaths each year. Community members wishing to support this effort may donate wreaths through the chapter's page at www.wreathscrossamerica.org/FL0762P.

Gulf Cemetery notes that if more wreaths are donated than the number of veterans interred locally, any overflow is shipped to Arlington to help ensure all graves there receive a wreath.

For more information on the ceremony and upcoming events, visit the Historic Gulf Cemetery website at gulfcemetery.org.

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Finding Balance and Gratitude Through Bioidentical Hormones

BY DR. RICHARD CHERN

As the season of Thanksgiving reminds us to pause and reflect on what we're grateful for, there's no better time to appreciate the gift of health and balance. Hormones play a vital role in how we feel every day—our energy, sleep, focus and even our joy. When those hormones fall out of balance, it can be dif-

icult to feel truly thankful for the moments that matter most.

Restoring Harmony Naturally

Bioidentical Hormone Replacement Therapy (BHRT) uses hormones that are identical to those your body naturally produces. Derived from plant sources and carefully customized to your individual needs, BHRT helps restore balance in a way that feels natural and seamless.

Benefits to Be Thankful For

Renewed energy helps you

wake up ready to take on the day with vitality and purpose. Emotional balance brings steadier moods and a brighter outlook. Restful sleep restores the body and mind. Sharper focus enhances mental clarity and motivation. And with revitalized confidence, you can feel more like yourself—inside and out.

A Season for Renewal

Just as autumn reminds us of cycles and renewal, BHRT offers a way to restore your own natural rhythm. Through personalized treatment, you can rediscover balance, vitality, and gratitude

for how good life can feel when your hormones are working with you, not against you.

This Thanksgiving, Give Thanks for You

Health is something we often take for granted until it begins to fade. With bioidentical hormones, you can nurture your well-being, reclaim your energy, and fully embrace the season with gratitude—for your body, your balance, and your life.

Ready to Feel Like Yourself Again?

This November, make your

health the first thing on your gratitude list. A simple lab panel and a thoughtful consultation can reveal exactly what your body needs—and a personalized BHRT plan can help you sleep better, think clearer, and feel more like you.

Call The Hormone Restoration Center at 850-837-1271 to schedule your labs, consultation, and treatment. Our team will guide you step-by-step, answer your questions, and design a plan tailored to your goals. Don't wait to feel well—give yourself the gift of balance and energy now.

SENIORS

continued from page 21

Reducing Hospital Readmissions:

The primary goal of SNF/Rehab is to prevent the patient's condition from worsening and requiring a return to the hospital. Specialists help achieve this by:

Early Detection: Catching subtle changes in a specific condition (e.g., a Cardiologist spot-

ting signs of impending CHF exacerbation).

Aggressive Management:

Implementing swift, expert interventions for conditions like severe wounds or complex IV antibiotic protocols.

Care Collaboration: Specialists communicate their findings and treatment directives to the facility's interdisciplinary team (nurses, social workers, dietitians), ensuring all aspects of

the patient's care plan are integrated and coordinated

Transition to Home

Rehab is designed to prepare you for a safe discharge back to your home environment.

Practice Daily Living Skills:

Occupational therapists work with you to practice everyday tasks in a simulated home environment, teaching you how to manage stairs, get in and out of a shower, or prepare a meal safely with your current limitations.

Equipment and Support

The team (social worker/case manager) coordinates your transition, ordering necessary durable medical equipment (walkers, shower chairs, etc.) and arranging for follow-up services like home health or outpatient therapy.

Family Training: The rehab team can train your family members or caregivers on how to safely assist you once you get home, ensuring continuity of care.

ility, offers a range of high-level specialized services that include neurology, wound care and physiatrist consultations. These specialized physicians work with the patient's primary care physician, medical director and our interdisciplinary care team to ensure the best possible outcomes. For additional information and a tour, please contact us at 850-897-5592 or email: we-care@manoratbwb.com.

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Navigating the Holidays with Confidence: Tips for Looking and Feeling Your Best

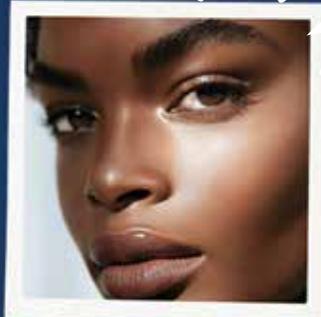
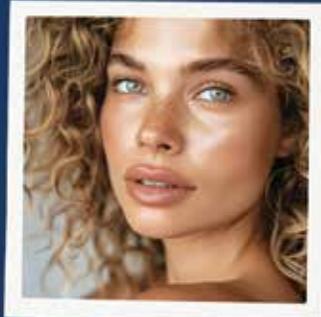
By DR. CLARK,
BLUEWATER PLASTIC SURGERY
The holiday season is filled with special moments — family gatherings, festive parties and countless photo opportunities.

While this time of year brings joy and celebration, it can also come with added stress, late nights and the desire to look refreshed despite a busy schedule. At Bluewater Plastic Surgery, we understand that confidence matters — especially during the holidays — and there are several easy ways to help you look and feel your best, without downtime or drastic changes.

Whether you want to glow for the camera, feel more comfortable in social settings or just give your skin a little extra love, here's how we help patients shine through the season.



Bluewater
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Steven J. Clark, MD, DMD, FACS
Board Certified Plastic Surgeon
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Skincare That Works for the Holidays

Cooler temperatures, indoor heating and holiday stress can all take a toll on your skin. That's why it's important to adapt your routine and invest in products that nourish and protect.

At Bluewater Plastic Surgery, we offer medical-grade skincare tailored to your skin's needs — including products that hydrate, brighten and strengthen your skin barrier. We may recommend:

- A hydrating serum with hyaluronic acid for plump, dewy skin
- A gentle exfoliator to smooth texture before events
- Vitamin C to boost radiance and fight dullness
- A tinted SPF moisturizer to protect and perfect in one step

Even small changes in your skincare routine can give your skin a refreshed, holiday-ready appearance with no downtime.

Quick In-Office Treatments That Deliver

If you're looking for a bit more of a boost before a big event or family photo, we offer several minimally invasive treatments that require little to no recovery time:

Botox, Xeomin or Daxxity: Smooth out frown lines, crow's feet, or forehead creases in just a few days.

Dermal Fillers: Restore subtle volume to areas of the face— cheeks, lips, or under-eye areas with natural-looking results that appear almost instantly.

Laser or Light Treatments: Gentle to aggressive laser treatments can improve skin tone, brighten complexion, and reduce redness or sun spots.

Chemical Peels: Light peels can refresh your complexion and reduce fine lines with just a few days of mild peeling.

ion and reduce fine lines with just a few days of mild peeling.

Diamond Glow or Hydrating facials: Improve skin texture and glow with exfoliating and hydrating treatments for the season's many close-ups.

Most of these treatments can be performed in under an hour, and results begin to appear quickly — often with no



downtime at all. They're a great option for patients who want to feel more confident without looking like they've "had work done."

A Thoughtful Approach to Self-Care

The holidays are about connection — with others and with yourself. Taking time to care for your appearance isn't vanity; it's a form of self-care that can help you show up with confidence and energy. Whether you're prepping for holiday photos, planning a vacation or simply wanting to feel refreshed heading into the new year, we're here to support you.

Schedule a consultation at **Bluewater Plastic Surgery** to explore holiday-friendly treatments that work for your goals and timeline. Let's help you step into the season looking and feeling your best.

Book your appointment today!

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AROUND TOWN

continued from page 10

Members were also recognized for their participation in National Garden Week, held the first week of June each year.

In October, GTGC members donated more than \$600 in food and cash to Caring & Sharing to help local families in need. Walton County Sheriff's Santa Patrol will receive gifts and gift cards for children and teens at the GTGC Holiday Party on Dec. 10, 2025, at Bricktop's in Grand Boulevard. The club has also selected a well-deserving Walton County family as its 2025 Habitat holiday family, providing monetary donations and gifts to brighten their season.

To learn more about GTGC's charitable mission, membership, meetings, and activities, visit greenthumbgardenclubinc.org or email greenthumbgardenclubinc@gmail.com.

Worthy Impact 100 Grant Recipients Receive Awards

BY BARBARA PALMGREN



The Impact 100 Annual Meeting was called to order after a lovely hour of "meet and greet" at the Holiday Inn on Okaloosa Island in Fort Walton Beach. After approval of the meeting agenda and necessary reports, two finalists from non-profit organizations gave five-minute speeches asking for the membership to vote for their non-profit to receive a check of \$100,000 to fund a specific project for that organization.

Impact 100 is an independent non-profit global organization with chapters in the United States. Impact 100 Northwest Florida is one of those chapters. This group of women who each donate financially also may serve on committees to prepare non-profits to write and submit grant proposals. After a year of this work, ten finalists in five categories were presented at the annual meeting for the final vote. Each organization received a check for \$100,000 for their project.

Congratulations to these finalists!

Arts & Culture: Arts and Design Society

Education: Westwood Ranch Environment, Recreation & Preservation: Healing Footsteps

Family: The Pearl Project Health & Wellness: Elder Services

Tom Glavine's Field of Dreams Golf Outing Raises \$200,000

The 5th Annual Tom Glavine's Field of Dreams Golf Outing at Camp Creek Golf Course in Inlet Beach raised \$200,000 for Seacoast Collegiate High School and Northwest Florida State College South Walton Center. MLB Hall of Famer Tom Glavine hosted the Oct. 13 event alongside special guest Gov. Ron DeSantis.

"I've always believed sports have the power to bring people together for something bigger," Glavine said. "The support raised here today directly helps young people in our community gain the skills, education, and confidence they need to build successful futures right here at home."

Tournament Results

- First Place Gross: Jamey Price, JR Holden, John Davenport & Jeff Roland
- First Place Net: McKenzie Burleigh, Kristy Holditch, Arlease Ciatto & Kevin Rosa
- Longest Drive: Miranda Corchis / Peyton Glavine
- Closest to the Pin: Courtney Fields / David Kapitanoff
- 50/50 Raffle: McKenzie Burleigh

Funds support the multi-phase South Walton Center project, now home to new Seacoast Collegiate High School and NWFSC buildings. "This project is a defining step forward for Seacoast Collegiate High School and for Walton County as a whole," said Dr. Tom Miller.

More at SeasideSchools.net.

10th Annual Bloody Mary Festival Raises \$28,000

The Market Shops' 10th Annual Bloody Mary Festival, held Oct. 11 and powered by Step One Automotive Group, raised \$28,000 for Habitat for Humanity - Walton County. More than 800 attendees sampled creative Bloody Marys from 18 local competitors, all using Distillery 98's Half Shell Vodka.

Award Winners

- People's Choice 1st: Café Nola
- 2nd: Down Island

- 3rd: The Gulf Club
- Judge's Choice: The Perfect Pig
- Best Accoutrement: Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort and Spa

Since inception, the festival has raised over \$278,600 for local nonprofits. This year's proceeds support Habitat's next development of nine affordable homes. "The funds raised will go directly to support our next

Habitat development," said Teresa Jones, CEO.

LECOM Expands Dr. Durrell Peaden Jr. Dental Clinic

Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine (LECOM) celebrated the expansion of the Dr. Durrell Peaden, Jr. Dental Clinic in DeFuniak Springs, adding 15 treatment stations and 30 student dentists. The \$3.2 mil-

lion project increases access to affordable dental care and enhances clinical training.

LECOM Board Member Nancy Peaden received the President's Distinguished Service Award during the ceremony. LECOM's total economic impact in the region now exceeds \$4.5 million.

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Business

Panhandle Weather: Your 24/7 Local Weather

BY ED OFFLEY

A new era in local forecasting has arrived for Northwest Florida. Panhandle Weather, a dedicated weather channel for the Emerald Coast and beyond, is now live—streaming 24/7 coverage focused entirely on the Florida Panhandle.

Founded by veteran meteorologists Chris Smith and Dan Nyman, both formerly of Panama City Beach TV station WJHG, the channel delivers continuous, hyperlocal forecasts and severe weather updates for communities from Pensacola to Apalachicola and Crestview to the coast. Viewers can access it



online or through most major streaming platforms.

“This is the wave of the future for weather,” said Smith, who spent 16 years at WJHG and more than three decades in broadcast meteorology. “You don’t need a traditional TV

station to broadcast anymore.”

Operating from a new Inlet Beach studio, Panhandle Weather combines data from the National Weather Service with information from its own growing network of regional weather stations. The team is currently part-

nering with local businesses to install advanced remote monitoring systems that will stream real-time weather conditions and video across the Panhandle.

Unlike national outlets, Panhandle Weather’s programming is locally driven. “Online weath-

er operations have been taking off for a decade now,” said Nyman, a graduate of Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. “But they’re not local,” Smith added.

In addition to forecasts, the channel is equipped to issue real-time alerts for severe weather, including hurricanes, tornadoes, and coastal storms. “If a tornado warning hits, you can grab your phone, go to your safe space, and still watch live coverage,” Smith explained.

The service is free to viewers, supported by sponsors and advertisers. The Panhandle Weather app is available on the

Google Play Store, Apple App Store, and major streaming platforms including Amazon Fire, Apple TV+, and Amazon Prime.

Panhandle Weather is the first stand-alone local weather channel of its kind in Florida, designed for both residents and visitors who depend on accurate, real-time forecasts along the Gulf Coast.

Watch live: panhandleweather.com/#live

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BY MARTA ROSE-THORPE

For years, Jimmy Thorpe had felt the urge to give back. A U.S. Army Veteran who served during the Gulf War, Jimmy had always held the highest regard for the men and women who serve our country and keep us safe. This group also includes First Responders – the men and women who keep our communities safe. In 2014, he created the tagline “Vets Helping Vets” – later elevated to “Vets Helping Vets & First Responders” – and decided to start giving what he had to give: AC units. Jimmy owns A Superior Mechanical, a local business which he launched in 2002. “We are honored to give thanks

to the men and women who put their lives on the line every day for the citizens of our community,” he says.

In the beginning, Jimmy and his team decided to give away eight AC units per year. Veterans and First Responders were encouraged to apply online at ASuperiorMechanical.com; the Giveaway was 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. American Legion Post 392 in Panama City met and voted on all submissions

Continued on page 28

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BY SEAN DIETRICH

I was 15 years old. I walked into the rural library. My father was freshly dead. I was a middle-school dropout. We were poor. It was Christmastime.

The small, public library was decorated for the holiday season. There was plastic holiday crapola everywhere. It was cold outside. I had no winter coat.

I stepped into the library with a blast of sleet and rain. I was wearing a T-shirt. My hair was soaked.

“Where’s your coat?” said the librarian.

“I don’t have one.”

“You don’t have a coat!? It’s 30 degrees outside!”

Shrug.

The librarian’s name was Miss Terry. She was old enough to predate the Roosevelt administration. Her hair was cotton white. Her shoes were Reeboks. Her embroidered sweatshirt read: “Dear Santa, I can explain.”

The library was a converted residential house. And I was a regular here.

“You can’t go around without a coat,” Miss Terry said. “You’ll freeze.”

Shrug Number Two.

I wandered to the fiction section. Fiction was all I was interested in. I read fiction each morning, afternoon, and night. It was escapism, I see that now. And I was a classic escapist. But then, there were very few happy things in my life. Who wouldn’t want to escape?

That day, I checked out two Louis L’Amour books, a few Dick Francis novels. When I brought my selection up to the counter, Miss Terry just looked at me with warm eyes.

“I have a book I want you to

read,” she said.

“You do?”

She placed a leather-bound book atop my stack of books. Written by Lucy Maud Montgomery.

“I think you’ll appreciate this one.”

“It looks like a girl book.”

“Try to keep an open mind.”

I took the books home, I read them the way I always read books. Ferociously. But when I read the Lucy Maud Montgomery book, time stood still. And my heart moved sideways in my chest. I had never read a book with more tenderness.

When I returned to the library a week later, Miss Terry asked how I liked the book. I told her it was maybe the best book I ever read.

I returned my books, and checked out more. This time, she placed another book atop my stack. This one was written by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

I took the books home. I read them in a frenzy, just like before. But Laura Ingalls Wilder was

immediately my favorite.

I brought the books back to the library.

“How did you like the book I gave you?” she asked.

“I read it twice.”

She smiled.

Then it happened. After Miss Terry accepted my stack of books, in return, she gave me a gift-wrapped box. The box was wrapped in glittery red paper, with a green ribbon.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“It’s for you,” she said.

“Is it another book?”

“Just open it.”

I tore the paper. There was a coat inside. Warm and fluffy. I cried when I put it on.

“We can’t have you catching a cold and getting sick,” she said. “There are too many books left for you to read. You might even write one of your own someday.”

I wiped my face. “One day I’m going to grow up and write a book,” I told her. “And when I do, I’m going to write something about you, and how you gave me this coat.”

She smiled and straightened the collar of my jacket. “You won’t even remember me when you’re all grown up.”

Well.

I showed her.

Editor’s Note: In last month’s issue of Freeport Life, we shared Sean Dietrich’s charming story about his lunch outing with his mom here in Freeport. A note that accompanied the article might have caused confusion. To clarify: Sean’s mother—featured in the story—is happily living here in our wonderful community of Freeport. We appreciate the chance to clear this up and are grateful to Sean for sharing his stories with our readers.

Sean Dietrich’s Over Yonder Explores Family, Fatherhood and the Unexpected Roads of Redemption

Acclaimed Southern storyteller Sean Dietrich—known for his thoughtful reflections on family, faith and finding joy in the ordinary—released his newest novel, *Over Yonder*, on Oct. 7. Now available nationwide, the book is quickly resonating with readers for its mix of humor, heart and Southern soul.

Part Southern road novel, part meditation on fatherhood, *Over Yonder* follows a defrocked priest just released from prison, a pregnant teen searching for a way forward and an emotional support goldfish as they journey through the Deep South. Poignant and humorous, the story is Dietrich’s tribute to second chances, flawed families and the unexpected ways people find grace and connection.

As the trio travels through small towns, bayous and backroads, they discover how redemption, presence and unlikely friendships can transform a life. With his signature blend of dry humor and emotional insight, Dietrich captures the quiet moments that



shape us—and the healing that often arrives in surprising forms.

“This book is a love letter to fatherhood,” said Dietrich. “Fathers, those misguided, flawed, beautifully imperfect humans who tried, failed, got everything wrong, and, in spite of themselves, somehow became our greatest teachers on the subject of love.”

“Sean is an innately gifted storyteller—his voice can’t be taught; it’s simply who he is,” said Laura Wheeler, Senior Acquisitions Editor for Thomas Nelson Fiction. “His novels are emotional and redemptive, filled with cantankerous old men with big hearts, tongue-in-cheek humor, and flawed characters who remind us that forgiveness and kindness can be found in the most unlikely places. *Over Yonder* brims with hope and love for humanity, inviting readers to see the world through Sean’s uniquely

compassionate lens.”

Beloved for columns featured in newspapers across the region, Dietrich once again captures the heart of Southern life—its people, its places and the everyday scenes that bind communities together.

Over Yonder is now available everywhere books are sold including Amazon, Barnes & Noble (in-store and online), Bookshop.org and independent bookstores nationwide.

Sean Dietrich is a columnist, humorist, multi-instrumentalist and stand-up storyteller known for his commentary on life in the American South. His work has appeared on The Today Show and in Newsweek, Southern Living, Garden and Gun and Reader’s Digest. His column appears weekly in newspapers such as Freeport Life throughout the U.S. He has authored 18 books and more than 4,000 columns. He tours his one-man show throughout the U.S., makes appearances on the Grand Ole Opry, hosts the Sean of the South podcast—and he’s a really nice guy.

Follow Sean’s daily writing at seandietrich.com or [@seanofthesouth](https://www.instagram.com/seanofthesouth) on Instagram.

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Musing



BY SAM BROWN, CAMPUS PASTOR, CROSSPOINT, FREEPORT

A Pastor's Pondering: Hope You Can See

feels fractured and weary, December has a way of reminding us that light still breaks through the dark.

At Crosspoint, we believe that hope isn't just something we talk about, in fact it's something we live out. That's why our Freeport Campus, along with our Niceville and Bluewater Bay campuses, is joining together again this year to host the Crosspoint Christmas Store.

The Christmas Store is one

of my favorite things we do. It allows families in our community to shop for brand-new gifts for their children at deeply discounted prices with dignity, love and joy. Every toy wrapped and every smile shared point to a greater truth: The hope of Christmas isn't found under a tree; it's found in the One who hung on one for us.

Jesus said in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in

darkness, but will have the light of life." As His followers, we get to reflect that light in our neighborhoods, workplaces, schools and even in the checkout lines this season.

So, let me ask you a quick question: Where and how are you serving people this Christmas? Who around you needs to experience the light of Christ through your kindness, generosity or simple presence? The hope of Christmas grows when

it's shared. Let's be people who share this hope wherever we go and in our sphere of influence.

If you're looking for a place to reconnect with that hope, we'd love to have you join us for our Christmas Eve services at Crosspoint Freeport — Wednesday, December 24 at 2:30, 4:00 and 5:30 p.m.

Come as you are, bring your family and rediscover the joy of Emmanuel, God with us.

Merry Christmas!

VETS

continued from page 26

each quarter, selecting one Veteran in need and one First Responder in need to be awarded the units.

In 2015, the Giveaway began taking the form of a quarterly appreciation lunch at Harley-Davidson of Panama City Beach. The first event hosted around 40 guests and several local businesses co-sponsored. The next lunch brought in a few more guests and sponsors, and the Vet Center and other veteran-relat-

ed organizations joined in. As the word-of-mouth continued, the guest list grew. By 2017, the event had moved to Texas Roadhouse PCB and grew through the years to host around 380+ guests each time. In 2019, Pastor David Butler of Faith Assembly Church in Miramar Beach (AKA "The Rock & Roll Church") invited Jimmy to host a quarterly appreciation lunch there, to reach Veterans and First Responders in the Walton and Okaloosa areas. This lunch took place quarterly, for five years, during which Jimmy gave away 12 AC units, includ-

ing installation, per year. "I feel that giving back to Veterans and First Responders is like taking the time to help my father," says Jimmy, whose father served in the U.S. Marines. "It's something that comes second nature; it's instinctive and something that's driven in me."

The next Veterans & First Responders Appreciation Lunch takes place on Tuesday, April 21, 2026, from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Niceville Community Center, 204 Partin Drive North, Niceville, FL 32578. The event will include a hot lunch catered

by Swiftly Catered, a brief welcome from the sponsors and supporters, and the AC Giveaway. This event is supported and sponsored by the Niceville Community Center, Niceville High School (who will present the colors), United Community Bank, Blanken Management, and Beachworx CoWorking Spaces. Walton and Okaloosa County businesses are encouraged to sponsor; for details, contact Marta Thorpe at (850) 814-3822. To register to win an AC unit, visit ASuperiorMechanical.com and go to ABOUT US > HVAC

GIVEAWAY.

Thorpe says he hopes his AC giveaways serve as an example to the community of how others can give back. "Let us be your template," he shares. "For a long time, I felt the desire to somehow give back, and after talking with my wife about what this would look like, we realized we should give back what we have to give: AC systems. Any business – any person – can do the same and find their own way to give back."



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Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation Awards \$12,100 to 28 Artists In 30th Annual Festival Of The Arts

The 30th Annual Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation (MKAF) Festival of the Arts, held October 24-26 in Destin, Florida, featured exhibits of more than 100 artists from across the United States showcasing a diverse palette of artistic styles in 16 different art mediums.

Highlights of the cultural weekend celebrating art, music, food and family fun featured seven live music appearances, live dance, a kids' creative station, pop-up photo booths, street performers, plus local favorite food trucks and a tented beverage bar.

"Celebrating thirty years is a true testament to the vital role the arts play in our community, and it's a reflection of the remarkable talents of our participating artists, musicians, vendors, board members, and volunteers. All of this comes together under the expert direction of our outstanding festival producer, Deb Nissley," said MKAF CEO & artistic officer Demetrius Fuller.

Guest judges Jason Lindblad, illustrator, artist and gallery director from Paducah, Kentucky, and Yvonne Christine, an instructor at the University of West Florida with an MFA in creative technologies and practice, awarded 29 ribbons and cash prizes recognizing artists whose work reflected exceptional talent and craftsmanship.

Best in Show winner Thomas Wrenn of Sanford, Florida, was recognized for his outstanding mixed media artwork that captivated judges and festivalgoers alike. The Best in Show adult winner of the Collaborative Art Exhibit was awarded to Jessica Mincy of Fort Walton Beach, Florida, for her touching piece Mother Love and Bonding Braids.

Niceville artist Kathy Schumacher was a two-time winner. She was selected as the 2025 featured poster artist with Symphony in Sails, a heavily textured impasto oil of three vibrant sailboats. Her "old world" knife palette technique clearly won over the weekend crowd, earning her the "People's Choice" Award as well.

Honored artists in the 30th Annual Festival of the Arts are as follows:

Best in Show Winner - \$2,000

Thomas Wrenn, Mixed Media (Sanford, FL)

People's Choice Award - \$1,000
Kathy Schumacher, Oil (Niceville, FL)

Poster Art Contest Winner - \$750

Kathy Schumacher, Oil (Niceville, FL)

Award of Excellence Winners - \$850

Mitch Evans, Mixed Media (Baton Rouge, LA)

Jamie Babula, Acrylic (Panama City Beach, FL)

Estelle Grengs, Acrylic (Niceville, FL)

Award of Merit Winners - \$450

Tonitralachrondra Lee, Mixed Media (New Orleans, LA)

Toné Lowe, Acrylic (River Ridge, LA)

Delia Stone, Jewelry (Pensacola, FL)

Tony Cray, Glass (New Melle, MO)

Curtis Whitwam, Watercolor (Tampa, FL)

Judge's Recognition Award Winners - \$250

Corrina Leidy, Acrylic (Sorrento, FL)



Michael Lunsford, Photography (Fort Walton Beach, FL)
Caleb Barnaby, Acrylic (Crestview, FL)

Donna Guidry, Mixed Media (Mandeville, LA)

Robin Holt, Acrylic (Tallahassee, FL)

Maya Blume-Cantrell, Clay (Orange Beach, AL)

Marise Fransolino, Acrylic (Marietta, GA)

Jordan Aucoin, Photography (Miramar Beach, FL)

Evie Davis, Mixed Media (Pensacola, FL)

Robin Renee Hix, Mixed Media (Wimberley, TX)



Collaborative Exhibit Winners (\$1,050)

Best in Show - Adult, Jessica Mincy (Fort Walton Beach, FL)

Adult First Place, John Pope (Shalimar, FL)

Adult Second Place, Don David (Destin, FL)

Adult Third Place, Susan Fyffe (Destin, FL)

Best in Show - Student, Addie Kelly, Destin High School

Student First Place, Gloria West, Destin High School

Student Second Place, Nyah Hercules, Crestview High School

Student Third Place, Ellie Aldrich, Niceville High School

"This year's festival featured great family fun, stunning art-

work from both new and returning artists, and a chance for everyone to leave their cares behind and immerse themselves in the beauty of art. We were honored to present such a diverse array of talent, and the artists were thrilled by the incredible support from our community," said MKAF director of operations and festival producer

Deb Nissley.

Proceeds fund the MKAF's community outreach mission to provide cultural outreach programs serving K-12 students, individuals with special needs, and active-duty military and veterans in our community.

MKAF will begin accepting artist and poster entry applications for the 31st Annual Festival of the Arts in July 2026. The 31st Annual MKAF Annual Festival of the Arts is scheduled for Saturday, October 24, and Sunday, October 25, 2026.

To make a tax-deductible donation or provide a corporate sponsorship, or for more information about becoming a MKAF member, visit www.MKAF.org or call (850) 650-2226.

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Arts & Music



By CAMERON HUGHES

Since I was a little boy, I've always been a fan of Dolly Parton. I can remember watching Hee Haw with my grandfather as a little boy, mesmerized any time Dolly Parton came on the screen. When you hear her full story, starting with her humble childhood in Tennessee, you can see that big dreams, and chasing those dreams, have guided her. I particularly like her perspective that... "dreams build convictions because you pay the price to make sure that they come true."

In 2009 she delivered a speech where she said, "Do not confuse dreams with wishes. There is a difference. Dreams are where you visualize yourself being successful at what's important to you to accomplish. Now, dreams build convictions because you work hard to pay the price to make sure that they come true. Wishes are hoping good things will happen to you, but there's no fire in your gut that causes you to put everything forth to overcome

all the obstacles. So you have to dream more and never, ever, ever blame somebody else if it doesn't happen. That is in your department." She expounded upon that in a 2014 interview when she said, "I've always been a dreamer, and yes, I have always tried. And dreams are special things. But dreams are of no value if they're not equipped with wings and feet and hands and all that. If you're going to make a dream come true, you've got to work with it. You can't just sit around. That's a wish. That's not a dream."

Here at Emerald Coast Theatre Company, we have a lot of dreams. I'm not just talking about the dreams that Anna and I have as co-founders for our organization, I'm talking about Trenton's dream to provide for his family while producing theatre, Emily's dream to choreograph shows, and Beca's dream to create sets that put us in other worlds on our stage. The rest of our team here at ECTC... each one has dreams, each one of them backs those dreams up with action. They are passionate about what they do and whole heartedly let that passion drive their dream in service to our community.

Shirley Simpson, a dear friend who passed away last year, had a lifelong career in theater.

She was a huge fan of Emerald Coast Theatre Company and every time she came to one of our Children's Educational Theatre Productions she would say she's never seen a professional theatre company do so much for children. In her experience, she has seen theatres do children's programming "on the side." She commended us for giving the children the same quality and attention that our professional theatre programming receives.

When Taylor puts together the costumes for the children in those productions, she does it with all the passion and conviction that is built into her dreams. Ora's dreams are built into every prop. I once asked Mr. Heath, who grew up in rural Holmes County, why he is so passionate about educational theatre. He said "because theatre changed my world." Theater expanded his dreams, took him to New York City, and showed him that there was a huge world out there that he could explore.

We have more dreams here at ECTC, dreams that are cultivated through our education classes and then bloom in the future of our students. We recently caught up with Marci and Gary, the parents of one of those students we've been able to watch blossom over the years from elementary school to high school.

With pride, they shared that their daughter Alison credits her involvement at ECTC with her success in law school at Florida State University. Her professors and classmates are impressed with her ability to think quickly, improvise dialogue, and play various characters for mock trials. As a sophomore, she has been nominated to serve on the steering committee of the Trial Law Club, an honor usually reserved for upperclassmen. Richard Olivarez, Chief Marketing Officer of Ocean Reef Vacation Rentals recently sent us an email where he raved about ECTC alum Clara. He highlighted her poise, professionalism, and ability to improvise quickly as a spokesmodel for their video marketing project. He experienced first hand how Clara's training with ECTC informed her performance with the project. We also heard from Tate, another ECTC alum. He is headed off to college and is working toward a degree in Sports Broadcasting. This young man was one of our first students in our inaugural summer camp at Butler Elementary school in 2014, and stayed with us through middle and

high school. He credits his time at ECTC with helping him prepare for his chosen career path.

I see dreams coming true every day at ECTC. I see it when our 5 and 6-year-old Mini Players sing in full voice "It's Possible, anything's possible." from Seussical the Musical. I see it in our 2nd-5th grade Little and Big Players, and their full bodied expression of physical storytelling as they take the stage at the amazement of their friends and families. I see dreams come true every Saturday as eighty middle through high school Teen Players descend on our building and find a unique community where they always belong. A place that accepts them, and actually celebrates them.

All of these dreams are coming true every day at ECTC... from our Mini Players to the whole expanse of our community... and you are a part of that. Your support is the platform that we at ECTC can step up on and reach into the heavens to make dreams come true. You truly are the Heart of ECTC and we are so grateful.

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Studio 237 Music Lessons Winter Recital Dec. 13

A winter student music recital holds a kind of magic that sets it apart from any other performance of the year. As the season brings a sense of reflection, celebration, and togetherness, these recitals become more than just musical showcases, they transform into heartfelt gatherings that highlight growth, creativity, and community spirit.

One of the most special aspects of a winter recital is its

warmth and wonder, creating a setting where both performers and audiences feel connected and inspired.

The music itself often takes on a distinct character during winter recitals. Seasonal pieces, whether traditional carols, classical works, or modern songs with wintry themes, help capture the mood of the season. Performing these familiar melodies invites audiences to participate emotionally, often evoking nostalgia and joy. For many students, it's also an opportunity to explore different genres and styles, broadening their musical horizons while celebrating the diversity of seasonal traditions.

Equally important is the sense of community that blossoms at a winter recital. Parents, teachers, and fellow students gather not only to listen, but to encourage and celebrate each other. Younger students look up to older performers, finding motivation for their own musical journeys. Teachers see the tangible results of their dedication reflected in each confident note and expressive phrase. The recital becomes a shared experience, reinforcing the bonds that make a music school or studio feel like a family.

Beyond the performanc-

es, winter recitals often carry a deeper message of gratitude and hope. Students learn to appreciate the process of creating art, embracing the beauty of imperfection, and the joy of expression. They also discover the gift of giving back through music, whether performing for loved ones, nursing homes, or community events.

Ultimately, what makes a winter student music recital truly special is the combination of music, meaning, and memo-

ry. It's a time when hard work meets heart, when the notes of each song echo with warmth, despite the chill outside, a celebration not just of the season, but of growth, creativity, and the enduring power of music to bring people together.

The local community is invited to attend Studio 237 Music Lesson's Student Winter Recital on Saturday, **December 13th at Christ the King Episcopal Church**, 480 N. County Hwy. 393, Santa Rosa Beach.

The first recital begins at 10:30 a.m. and the second begins at 1 p.m. Join us to support our students as they share a mixture of holiday, classic, and contemporary songs performed on piano, guitar, ukulele, voice, and drums. The event is free to attend. To contact the Studio call or text: 850.231.3199. Visit our website at www.Studio237Music.com. Wishing you a blessed, peaceful, and happy holiday season with family and friends.



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