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# FREEPORT Life

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## Anchored in Freeport: A Celebration of Art and Community

BY KERRI PARKER

A new wave of creativity is sweeping through Freeport, one anchor at a time. The Anchored in Freeport Art in Public Spaces Project—a collaboration between the City of Freeport and the Cultural Arts Alliance of Walton County (CAA)—is transforming the city’s public spaces with 4.5-foot concrete anchors, each uniquely decorated by local artists. These anchors are more than public art; they are symbols of connection, pride, and the stories that bind a community together.

“I had the idea for an art in public spaces for Freeport since I moved to town in 2008, but it wasn’t until I found support for the project at Christ the King Catholic Church that I had the courage to bring the idea to the City of Freeport and Cultural Arts Alliance,” said Anchored in Freeport Committee Chair Tracy Louthain. “Determining how to bring this project to life and keep it completely local was our first



challenge. Thankfully over the last two years, our committee took every challenge in stride and never gave up.”

Eight local entities stepped up and believed in the project before the anchor design was even created. These leg-

acy sponsors, including City of Freeport, The Jay Odom Group, Christ the King Catholic Church, Nelkin Real Estate, DR Horton, Walton County Tourism Department, Emerald Coast Title Services and Eglin Federal Credit Union, represented the first step in achieving the goal of an art installation throughout the city.

The committee identified local concrete caster, Bill Roberts at Castaways, as the best local partner. However, there was no anchor mold from which to cast the concrete anchor. With a limited budget and no grant money, Committee Member Frank Berte was inspired by the original Freeport anchor in the fountain at the center of town. With the help of a local friend, he built a symmetrical anchor shape out of pallet wood. The wood structure was then used by Bill to create a fiberglass mold to pour the concrete. The result-

**ANCHORED**  
*continued on page 2*

## Alaqua Well-Being: Finding Healing in the Company of Animals and Nature



BY LAURIE HOOD, ALAQUA  
FOUNDER & CEO

Tucked among the pines and pastures of Freeport, Alaqua Animal Refuge has always been a place of second chances. Every rescued animal carries a story of survival, and every visitor feels the quiet peace that

**ALAQUA**  
*continued on page 2*

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Community

ANCHORED

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ing smooth concrete form is an artistic sculpture on its own and by partnering with eight local artists each sculpture has been transformed into a brilliant work of art.

“Anchored in Freeport is a testament to what’s possible through collaboration,” says Courtney Malone, CAA’s Director of Programs & Creative Placemaking. “In partnership with the City of Freeport and the Anchored in Freeport Committee, this project expands our Art in Public Spaces program and helps fulfill the Cultural Arts Alliance’s mission to advance the Arts throughout all of Walton County. Together, we’re creating opportunities for connection, celebrating local creativity, and expanding access to the Arts for everyone.”

Eight local artists—Estelle Grengs, Juan Adaro, Andy Saczynski, Katherine Boggs, Kendall Boggs, Wes Hinds, Gisselle Barnhart, and Sarah Page—have brought their visions to life. Each anchor tells a story. Some celebrate local heritage and the beauty of Freeport’s coastal home, while others reflect



hope, resilience, and unity.

Andy Saczynski, a Freeport native, recalls the unexpected journey of creating his anchor: “I was surprised how this project brought up so many memories of life, friends, family, and home from childhood to adulthood as I was painting it.” He sees the anchors as more than art: “To me, this project represents the power of art to bring people closer—to turn ordinary spaces into places of meaning.”

For Estelle Grengs, painting her anchor was “more than just adding color—it was about connection. From cleaning and priming to sketching and sealing, every step felt like bringing new life to something that already

had a story to tell.” She found inspiration not just in her work, but in the artists around her. “One of the best parts of the Painted Anchors Project was meeting the other artists involved. Each person brought their own story, style, and perspective—but we all shared the same goal: to create something meaningful for our community.”

The anchors are nearly ready to become permanent fixtures in Freeport. All eight artist-decorated anchors have been completed, sealed by the Cultural Arts Alliance, and their pedestals are being installed by Brown Dog Concrete over the next two weeks. Installation across the city will be completed by the end of

October, with a dedication ceremony planned for early November.

Support for the project continues through the Friends of the Anchor program, with sponsorships helping to maintain these vibrant symbols of community pride. Current sponsors include Gulf Coast Insulation, Newman-Dailey Resort Properties, Green Air, Freeport Shipyard Marina, Estelle Grengs Gallery, and Auralum Signs.

More than decoration, the Anchored in Freeport project is a celebration of creativity, collaboration, and connection. As Andy Saczynski notes, “When we engage the arts in our community, we invite everyone, regardless of

age or background, to participate in something uplifting and lasting.” From every brushstroke to every conversation among artists, the anchors stand as a visible reminder of what makes Freeport extraordinary: a town anchored in history, creativity, and community.

Originally published on HWY331.com. Stay tuned to HWY331.com for artist features, updates and details on installations.

ALAUQA

continued from page 1

comes from being near them. It is that same sense of connection that inspired Alauqa’s newest initiative, Alauqa Well-Being, a program that invites people to slow down, breathe deeply, and heal alongside the animals who

live there.

The idea for Alauqa Well-Being grew out of simple conversations with volunteers. When asked what brought them to the refuge, the first answer was always their love of animals. But as those talks went deeper, something more profound emerged. Many were walking through

their own seasons of grief or change — the loss of a spouse, recovery from illness, divorce, or other personal challenges. Again and again, they shared that it was the animals who gave them the courage to keep going. Watching a once-broken animal learn to trust and love again gave them hope that they could

heal, too. It became clear that the refuge was helping people as much as it helped animals.

Alauqa Well-Being was born from that truth. It is built on the idea that when we care for animals and connect with nature, we also heal ourselves. The pro-

Continued on page 31



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# Building Communities with Purpose: The Story of NatureView



By JAY ODOM

Imagine a community surrounded by 50,000 acres of untouched forest that will never be developed. Thanks to Nokuse Plantation, the largest privately-owned nature preserve in the Southeast, and land owned by the State of Florida, this natural treasure is permanently protected. Families who call NatureView home will always be able to step outside and experience the beauty of nature untouched—a gift that will last for generations.

At The Jay Odom Group, we

believe the best communities are those that leave a lasting legacy. With NatureView, we are proud to bring that vision to Freeport at a time of incredible growth and opportunity, just minutes from Highway 30A and South Walton's world-famous beaches along the Gulf of America.

What makes this community even more special is that the amenities are already open and ready for residents to enjoy from day one. Families can gather at the clubhouse with its coffee bar, ping pong, shuffleboard and inviting spaces. A 24-hour fitness center and yoga studio make wellness part of daily life. The resort-style zero-entry pool is the heart of summer days, while pickleball and basketball courts, garden gazebos, playgrounds, dog parks and peaceful pocket parks bring neighbors together. Miles of nature and fitness trails connect the community, encouraging a lifestyle of health and connection.

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Homes and Holiday Builders are now open and available to tour, showcasing the thoughtful designs and craftsmanship that make NatureView truly exceptional.

One of the aspects I am most proud of is our NatureView Hero Homez program. By donating five unique homes designed and built specifically for the needs of military families, first responders and community heroes, we want to give back

to those in our community who have sacrificed for us.

NatureView is more than a community. It is a chance to belong to something extraordinary — a place where preservation, purpose and lifestyle come together.

Schedule your tour today at [NatureViewFL.com](http://NatureViewFL.com) or call (850) 835-7030 for more information.

— Jay Odom, Founder and Developer, The Jay Odom Group

*NatureView's grand opening was celebrated in Freeport in September with the Jay Odom Group and Walton Area Chamber of Commerce.*

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 Community

# Welcome to Freeport Life — Your All-Positive, All-The-Time Community Newspaper

Freeport, we heard you. I'm thrilled to introduce Freeport Life, your monthly, hyper-local newspaper created for this community, by this community. Each issue lands right in your mailbox—10,000 copies printed, distributed and **direct mailed** to homes and businesses—reaching a potential **25,000+ readers**—so neighbors stay connected to the people, places and progress that make Freeport special. As our inaugural edition debuts, we're proudly "anchoring in Freeport."

### What You'll Find Inside

Uplifting, useful coverage of local news, schools, sports, fishing, dining, business, nonprofits, and events—plus spotlight neighbors whose stories capture Freeport's generous spirit and those who deserve to be celebrated. We pair affordable print advertising with digital lift: monthly e-newsletters, social posts and an online edition (with MyFreeportLife.com coming soon for

easy reading and archives). It's a proven mix—**print + content + digital**—to help local businesses grow on a smart budget.

### Who We Are

Freeport Life is part of a decade of growth for the Life Media family alongside Bay Life, Destin Life, SoWal Life, FWB Life and PCB Life. We started 10 years ago with a simple mission: to bring all-positive, community-powered journalism straight to your door through direct-mail. Since then, we've steadily expanded across the Emerald Coast, building a network that amplifies local stories while keeping each publication truly hometown at heart.

### Why We Do It

As a longtime local and publisher, I've listened to Freeport's dreams and challenges for years. This paper is our way to champion what's good, helpful and hopeful—while giving businesses a trusted platform to tell their



stories and reach customers who live and work right here.

### How We Partner With You

As we begin our first year, we'll tell stories about your neighbors, local pros and heroes—your accomplishments, positive and valuable activities, sports, education, dining, entertainment and events.

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ery print ad also gets value-added digital boost at no extra cost. Ask about launch specials and multi-publication rates across our Life Media network.

**Community:** We invite YOU to submit stories, news, expert advice, events and inspiring local features. If you're a business with a great idea for an ongoing column, we want to hear from you. Businesses, organizations, students, churches, nonprofits and civic groups—this is your chance to find your voice.

### Be Part of the Very First Issues

This is your paper. Let's fill it with the good happening in Freeport—new openings, business growth, school wins, fundraisers, festivals and neighbor-to-neighbor kindness. If you have a story to tell or a business to grow, we're here to help.

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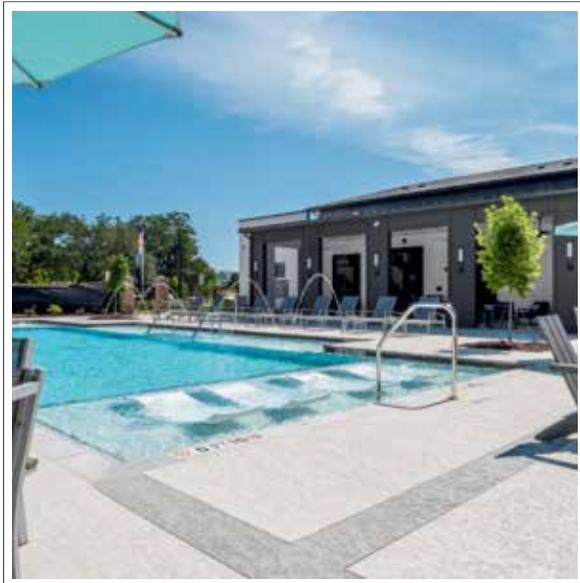
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*Lori Leath Smith,  
Publisher, Freeport Life*



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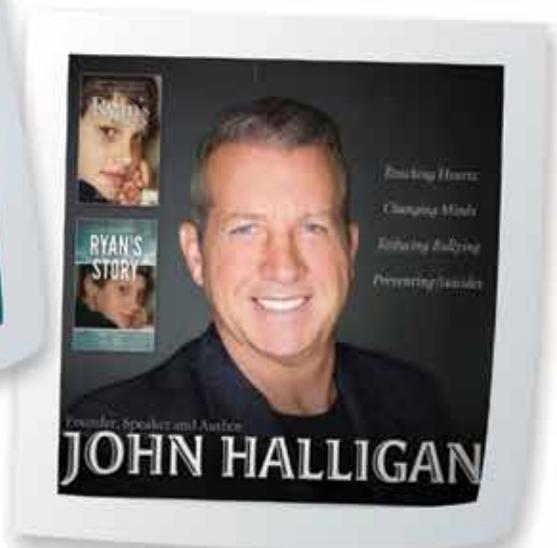
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Community

# A Race for Wellness: Slow, Steady and Intentional Healing

BY DR. KAREN DEVORE

At the Tortoise Clinic, we embrace the philosophy of the tortoise: steady, intentional and focused on the journey. I often reflect on the story of the tortoise and the hare, where the tortoise wins not by speed, but by staying the course with quiet determination. It's a lesson that

I've seen echoed time and time again in my patients' wellness journeys. Health isn't something that can be rushed. True, lasting wellness is a marathon, not a sprint.

When I first began practicing medicine, I saw a gap in how we approached health—one that overlooked the wisdom

of ancient healing methods in favor of fast, superficial treatments. But, I also saw the potential in blending the best of both worlds: the deep, holistic roots of Eastern medicine with the advancements of modern Western science. That's how the Tortoise Clinic came to be, an integrative health center where

the patient's entire well-being is considered—not just the symptoms they present with, but the root causes beneath.

We offer a wide range of services, from acupuncture to massage therapy and holistic health consultations, each tailored to the individual's unique needs. Our Chinese Herb dispensary, the largest in Northwest Florida, is one of the cornerstones



We are also incredibly fortunate to have Dr. Lisa Forsythe on our team, offering Neuro-Acupuncture, a cutting-edge technique that combines traditional Chinese needling with the latest in neurological science. As the only Neuro-Acupuncture specialist within 300 miles, Lisa provides life-changing care for patients recovering from strokes, managing nerve pain or dealing with other central nervous system disorders. Her work is a powerful reminder of why combining these two worlds of medicine is so essential for holistic healing.

of our practice. We create customized raw herbal prescriptions, combining the wisdom of ancient medicine with medical-grade supplements and formulas designed to support the body's natural healing process.

One of the things I'm most passionate about is empowering our patients to take charge of their own health journeys. I love helping people connect the dots between their lifestyle, environment and diet, and how these factors play into their overall wellness. At the Tortoise Clinic, it's not about treating a headache or a sore back in isolation. It's about understanding why that pain exists in the first place and working together to create sustainable solutions. That's where the beauty of integration—Eastern and Western medicine—comes into play.

At the Tortoise Clinic, we don't believe in rushing toward a finish line. We believe in walking alongside our patients, step by step, on a path toward lasting vitality. Like the tortoise, we know that the journey to wellness is slow and steady, but ultimately, it's the most rewarding one you can take.

If you're ready to take that journey with us, I invite you to visit our clinic. Whether you're seeking relief from chronic pain, support with your overall health or just a deeper connection to your body's natural healing abilities, we're here to guide you. Because in the race for health, it's not about how fast you go—it's about how well you get there.

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 Community

# More Than a Policy: Life Insurance as a Legacy of Love



BY BRANDON CERVENKA

Life Insurance isn't just your standard insurance—it's a vital tool for anyone looking to protect loved ones, maintain financial stability, and secure a legacy. Whether raising children, running a business, or planning for the next stage of your life, life

insurance brings peace of mind and steadiness when it's needed most.

**Life Insurance for Families:** For families with children, life insurance is the cornerstone of financial security. If a parent passes away unexpectedly, the death benefit helps replace lost income, pays for everyday living expenses, and allows families to stay financially upright during a potentially tough time. It can also be used to erase outstanding debts like mortgages, protecting a family's home and lifestyle during uncertain times. Simply put, life insurance helps secure your children's and spouse's future, in case anything ever happens to you.

**Life Insurance for Business Owners:** If you own a business, life insurance can be essential to protect both your companies and family. A business designated beneficiary policy covers business debts, ensuring the company doesn't have to be sold off if the owner passes away suddenly. Lenders may even require life insurance as collateral for business loans, guaranteeing financiers get repaid and avoiding hardship for surviving partners or family members.

A few other things business

owners can use life insurance for:

- Fund buy-sell agreements, helping surviving partners buy out the deceased owner's share and keep the business running smoothly.

- Protect against key employee loss with "key person insurance," keeping operations stable after unexpected deaths.

- Ensure their family's financial health, providing funds to maintain living standards and keep the business alive.

**Life Insurance for the Next Season:** Grandparents,

empty-nesters, and retirees alike can also benefit from a simple life insurance policy. It offers a flexible way to support loved ones and manage personal finances beyond just end of life expenses. Life insurance is regularly used to cover final expenses, pay off debts, leave a legacy for heirs or charities, and supplement retirement income through cash value growth in permanent policies. Options like whole, term, universal and final expense policies make coverage accessible—even for those with health concerns—while features such as tax-free death benefits and potential dividends add extra value for retirement and estate planning.

## Making Coverage Work

**for You:** The right life insurance depends on individual needs. Families typically favor term life insurance for its affordable protection during high-need years. Empty nesters benefit from permanent policies that build wealth and preserve legacies. Business owners often need customized coverage—sometimes more than one policy—to protect personal, family and company needs.

Life insurance is your real-life safety net. It can provide certainty, financial stability and a way to care for those who matter most, no matter what the future brings. Regular reviews with a trusted agent help ensure coverage keeps up with changes in family size, retirement plans, or business needs.

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## The Fed's Move and What It Means for Rates Ahead

BY TED SHOOP, REALTOR — EXP REALTY, FREEPORT

In its September 16–17 meeting, the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) delivered a 25-basis-point cut, bringing the federal funds rate down to the 4.00%–4.25% range. The decision comes amid signs of a softening labor market and inflation that remains stubbornly above the Fed's 2% goal. In his public comments, Chair Jerome Powell described the economic situation as "challenging," warning that the Fed must balance the risks of easing prematurely against the need to maintain price stability.

Several Fed officials voiced support for the modest cut but urged vigilance and stated that while the move offers "insurance" against labor weakness, further cuts must be carefully calibrated. Meanwhile, dissenting voices — such as new-

comer Board Governor Stephen Miran — advocated for deeper cuts, even half-point moves, reflecting a range of views within the Fed.

Looking ahead, the FOMC's next meeting is scheduled for October 28–29, 2025. Many economists and market watchers anticipate two more quarter-point reductions (October and December), bringing year-end rates into the 3.50%–3.75% territory. That said, the Fed's path will remain data-dependent — each move focused on the latest inflation, hiring, and growth figures. This paced easing suggests gradual relief for mortgage, auto, and business borrowing costs — though don't expect a steep slide overnight.

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# Post-Acute Care for Seniors: The Critical Bridge After a Hospital Stay

TERESA HALVERSON, DIR. OF COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The autumn season, with its rich colors and comforting traditions, offers a wonderful opportunity to enhance the post-acute care and rehabilitation experience. The landscape of post-acute senior care is rapidly evolving, moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach toward personalized, technology-driven, and holistic models. As the senior population grows in our area, innovative ideas are being implemented to improve outcomes, enhance quality of life and address the complex needs of patients transitioning from acute care settings like hospitals.

Post-acute care (PAC) refers to a range of medical and supportive services provided to patients, particularly seniors, who are discharged from an acute care hospital, but aren't yet ready to return home and live independently. Following an illness, surgery or injury, a hospital stay can often be destabilizing for older adults, leading to a decline in their physical and mental functioning. PAC serves as a critical transition to promote functional recovery, maximize independence and prevent unnecessary hospital readmissions. For seniors transitioning out of the hospital, whether to a PAC (Post Acute Care) facility or directly home, preparation and proactive management are vital for a successful recovery.

**Benefits and Challenges for Older Adults:** Benefits of Post-Acute Care in a Skilled Nursing and Rehab Facility:

**Increased Independence:** The primary goal is to help seniors regain strength and functional abilities (like walking, dressing, and eating) to become more self-sufficient.

**Reduced Readmissions:** Close monitoring and ongoing medical support help to identify and address potential complications early, which significantly lowers the risk of the patient returning to the hospital within 30 days.

**Access to Specialized Care:** Patients receive care from a multidisciplinary team, including specialized 24/7 nursing care (i.e. wound care, IV therapy, medication management), physi-



cal therapists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, and physicians who focus specifically on recovery. The goal is for the patient to regain strength and function and safely return home.

**Understand the Discharge Plan:** Meet with the hospital's discharge planner or case manager as early as possible. Get written clear instructions on all new or changed medications, wound care, activity restrictions, and signs of complications to watch for.

**Complexity of Discharge Planning:** The process of choosing the right setting, understanding insurance coverage, and coordinating care can be confusing and stressful. Carefully review what all post-acute hospital providers offer. It is your right to choose where you would like to go for post-hospital care. Make an informed choice.

**Insurance for Post-Acute Care:** Insurance coverage for this type of care is particularly through regular Medicare.

General overview of Medicare coverage for key post-acute care settings:

**Skilled Nursing Facility (SNF) Care Insurance Coverage:**

**Coverage:** Medicare Part A (Hospital Insurance) covers skilled nursing care on a short-

term basis for rehabilitation or skilled medical care.

**Conditions for Coverage:**

- You must have a qualifying inpatient hospital stay of at least three consecutive days (not counting the day of discharge).

- You must enter the SNF generally within 30 days of leaving the hospital.

- A doctor must certify that you need daily skilled nursing or rehabilitation services.

- The facility must be Medicare-certified.

**Costs (in one benefit period):**

**Days 1–20:** You pay \$0 for covered services (after meeting the Part A deductible for the hospital stay).

**Days 21–100:** You pay a daily coinsurance amount (which changes annually).

**Days 101 and beyond:** You pay all costs.

**Limitation:** Coverage is limited to 100 days per benefit period and ends sooner if you no longer require skilled care. Medicare generally does not cover long-term or custodial care in a nursing home.

**Medicare Advantage (Part C) Plans:** These private plans must cover at least the same post-acute care benefits as original Medicare, but they may have different cost-sharing (copayments/deductibles) and may require you to use specific in-network providers. We often see a patient who has a MA (Part C) plan and still think they have regular Medicare. Be sure to check your plan as not all post-acute providers are in network or accept Part C plans. Part C Plans (MA) require an authorization by your insurance company and

*Continued on next page*



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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 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: There will be a drop off location for donations on November 1st at the "Freeport Night Out Locals Under the Lights" at the Windmills at Hammock Bay from 4:00 pm - 7:00 pm. You can also contact Julie or Richard through Pruitt-Gann Group contact information, or share through Venmo @ julie-pruitt-34 for supplies purchased. All donations will need to be completed no later than Friday December 12, 2025. Together, we can make a meaningful impact and deliver hope, one care package at a time.

**Richard Gann**  
(205) 412-2687  
richard@pruitt-ganngroup.com

**Julie Pruitt-Gann**  
(903) 293-5821  
julie@pruitt-ganngroup.com

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### POST-ACUTE

*continued from previous page*

your care is monitored by a case-worker at the insurance agency.

**Medicare Supplement (Medigap) Plans:** These plans work with Original Medicare and can help pay for out-of-pocket costs like the SNF daily coinsurance.

The specific coverage and out-of-pocket costs can be complex. You should always check directly with the Medicare program or your specific insurance provider (Medicare Advantage, Medigap, or private plan) to understand the current coverage rules, facility network status and anticipated costs before receiving post-acute care.

At The Manor at Bluewater Bay, our commitment is simple: to provide compassionate,

personalized, and professional 24-hour skilled care and rehabilitation. The area's only locally owned and operated skilled nursing and rehabilitation facility, we work tirelessly with our specialized team to ensure every individual achieves their optimum level of independence, empowering them to transition smoothly back to their life and improve their overall quality of life." Contact our Admission's Department (850-897-5592) today for a tour and additional information on how we can help you on your road to recovery.

1500 N. White Point Rd., Niceville, 850-830-2323, acility; 850-897-5592

www.manoratbwb.com



# Niceville Slabs and Cookies: Our Roots Run Deep—and Wide

By GENEVIEVE BURGESS

Tucked just behind a gate off Kelly Road—marked by a bold blue “B” and the faint scent of sawdust in the air—you’ll find one of the best-kept secrets on the Emerald Coast: Niceville Slabs and Cookies, also known as “Your Emerald Coast Wood Source.” But if you’re imagining an old-school lumber yard? Think again.

What started as a garage passion project has grown into a dynamic, community-driven woodworking hub with a mission: connect people to truly remarkable wood and help them bring their creative visions to life.

From the very beginning, NSC wasn’t built on big-box ideas—it was built on relationships, craftsmanship, and a deep respect for the story each tree tells. Whether you’re a first-time DIYer, a professional maker, or someone who just fell in love with the perfect slab for a dining table, you’ll find more than just wood here. You’ll find people who get it.

And now, NSC is leveling up. The business is in the midst of restructuring into three distinct branches designed to serve the growing community of makers, artists, and legacy builders across the Gulf Coast:

**The Wood Shed at NSC** – The heart of the operation. Stocked with over 50 domestic and exotic hardwood species—many milled and kiln-dried on site—The Wood Shed offers raw slabs, cookies, dimensional lumber, and milling services for everyone from hobbyists to high-end builders.

**The Legacy Line at NSC** – Where heirloom meets heart. Specializing in handcrafted custom work, this division brings meaningful builds to life—whether you’re dreaming of a show-stopping dining table, a statement mantel, or floating shelves that feel like they were always meant to be there.

NSC serves both residential and commercial clients, with standout projects including a stunning full interior build at Eagle Eye Vision in Niceville, and a cozy custom library featuring a built-in daybed for a local homeowner. The team works

regularly with trusted names like Randy Wise Homes, Rominger Construction, and other respected contractors throughout the Panhandle.

Each project under The Legacy Line is grounded in craftsmanship, intention, and a deep respect for the material—turning slabs with character into pieces with soul.

**The Shop Shelf at NSC** – Home to all things finished, polished, and wildly giftable. From epoxy charcuterie boards and stabilized pen blanks to hand-finished home goods, this retail space celebrates the creative talent that flows through NSC—and makes it accessible to anyone walking through the door.

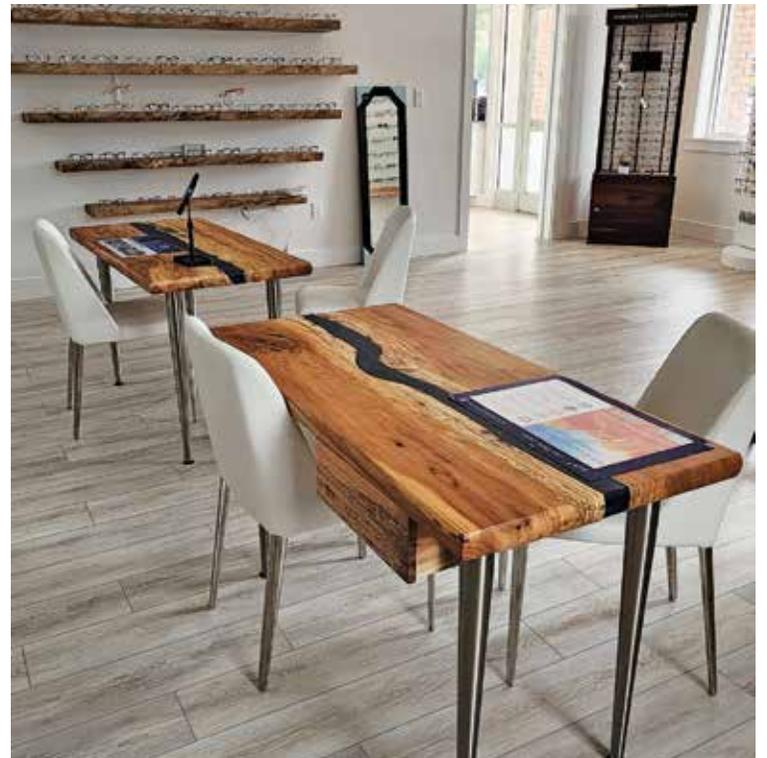
And behind all of it? A crew of hardworking, hands-on, sawdust-covered humans who proudly refer to themselves as Wood Dealers.

There’s Mike—owner, sawmill master, and the quiet force behind the big machines. Kathleen—the in-house accountant with a woodworking obsession and a love for clean cuts and clean ledgers. Aaron—yard expert and lumber wrangler, likely to be your first point of contact when you pull through the gate. And Genevieve—creative director, chaos coordinator, class instructor, and one of NSC’s founding voices, often found giving shop tours or promoting epoxy classes to the next wave of makers.

Together, they’re not just selling wood—they’re building a movement.

NSC regularly hosts woodworking and epoxy classes, live demos, and collaborative workshops with local artists, florists, and small businesses. They also lend their talents and time to causes that matter, donating builds and support to nonprofits like Emerald Coast Autism Center, PAWS, Freedom House, and CALM.

“Our goal has always been to make quality wood more accessible—and to show people what’s possible once they get their hands on the right piece,” Genevieve says. “We’re here to help people create. Whether it’s a massive dining table or a simple epoxy cheese board, it



all starts with the right piece of wood—and the right people to help.”

So the next time you’re nearby, stop in. Browse the slab wall. Ask questions. Get inspired.

Because at NSC, we don’t just sell wood—we deal in possibility.

Visit us at 207 B Kelly Rd., Niceville. Phone 850.897.0038. On the web: [NicevilleSlabsAndCookies.com](http://NicevilleSlabsAndCookies.com).




Niceville Slabs and Cookies



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Community

# Seacoast Collegiate High School and NWFSC Expand South Walton Center

A new era of education has begun in South Walton. Recently, Seacoast Collegiate High School (SCHS), part of the SEASIDE SCHOOL™, and Northwest Florida State College (NWFSC) held a ribbon cutting with the Walton Area Chamber of Commerce to celebrate the opening of the expanded South Walton Center—home to new facilities for both the College and Seacoast Collegiate High School.

The event drew state and local leaders including Gov. Ron DeSantis, Congressman Jimmy Patronis, Sen. Jay Trumbull, Rep. Shane Abbott, Education Commissioner Anastasios Kamoutsas, and MLB Hall of Famer Tom Glavine. Their presence underscored the project's significance in expanding access to high-quality education for Walton County students.

"This center is more than a building—it's a bold investment in the future of Walton County," said Dr. Tom Miller, Executive Director of SEASIDE SCHOOL™. "Together with Northwest Florida State College, we're creating a center that expands access, inspires achievement and prepares our students to lead in a rapidly



PHOTO CREDITS AMY WARD PHOTOGRAPHY

changing world."

The new facility marks the SEASIDE SCHOOL™'s 30th anniversary and strengthens its partnership with the SEASIDE SCHOOL FOUNDATION™. It houses both high school and college classrooms, offering dual enrollment, labs, workforce training, and advanced academic programs.

"The South Walton Center is a model for how collaboration between K-12 and higher education can change lives," said Mel Ponder, President of Northwest Florida State College. "We're not just opening doors to classrooms – we're opening doors to

opportunity for every student in Walton County."

The project was made possible through significant investment, including a \$9.5 million Triumph Gulf Coast grant, \$10+ million in state appropriations, and a \$1 million leadership gift from the Glavine Family Foundation.

"We are proud to invest in educational infrastructure that meets the needs of Florida's future workforce," said Gov. Ron DeSantis. "This center is an example of how public dollars, strategic vision, and local leadership can come together to make a real, lasting impact."



"As a longtime advocate for education and youth development, I'm proud to support this incredible initiative," added Glavine. "This center gives students the chance to dream big, work hard, and succeed in ways that impact their entire community."



Superintendent A. Russell Hughes summed it up: "Students in Walton County now have a homegrown path to higher education, career advancement, and personal growth. This is what it means to invest in people, not just buildings."

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# Achieving Financial Freedom: A Financial Advisor's Perspective



BY WILLIAM E. BLANKEN, JR.,  
BLANKEN MANAGEMENT

In today's complex economic landscape, the concept of financial freedom often feels like a distant dream. However, as a financial advisor, I firmly believe it's an attainable goal for anyone willing to commit to a strategic and disciplined approach. Financial freedom isn't about being rich; it's about having the security and flexibility to make life choices without being constrained by money.

A fundamental step towards financial freedom is gaining a

clear understanding of your current financial situation, which includes meticulously tracking income and expenses to identify spending patterns. This forms the basis for effective financial planning and decision-making. A well-structured budget is your roadmap, allowing you to allocate funds effectively toward your goals while minimizing unnecessary spending. This isn't about deprivation, but rather conscious consumption.

Next, prioritize debt reduction. High-interest debts, such as credit card balances, act as significant roadblocks to financial progress. Developing a plan to systematically pay down these debts, perhaps using the "snowball" or "avalanche" method, frees up cash flow that can then be directed towards wealth building.

Building an emergency fund is non-negotiable. Life is unpredictable, and having three to six months' worth of living expenses readily accessible in a sepa-

rate, liquid account provides a crucial safety net. This prevents you from derailing your financial progress when unexpected events, like job loss or medical emergencies, arise.

Once your emergency fund is established, focus on investing. The power of compounding is a remarkable force, allowing your money to grow exponentially over time. Diversification across various asset classes such as stocks, bonds, and real estate is key to mitigating risk and maximizing returns. It's essential to align your investment strategy with your individual risk tolerance and long-term objectives. Consider consulting with a financial professional to create a personalized investment plan that suits your unique circumstances.

Estate planning is a crucial component of achieving financial freedom. It ensures that your assets are distributed according to your wishes, minimizing potential legal complex-



ities and taxes for your loved ones. It provides peace of mind, knowing that your financial legacy is secure and your family will be taken care of.

Finally, continuous learning and adaptation are vital. The financial world is constantly evolving, and staying informed about market trends, tax laws, and emerging investment opportunities will empower you to make informed and sound decisions. Regularly review your financial plan and adjust as your life circumstances and goals change.

Achieving financial freedom is a marathon, not a sprint. It

requires patience, persistence, and a proactive mindset. By embracing these core principles – budgeting, debt management, emergency savings, strategic investing, and continuous learning – you can confidently navigate your financial journey and realize the freedom you desire.

If you're ready to put these principles into action, Blanken Management, led by Bill Blanken, is here to help you create a personalized strategy tailored to your unique goals. Schedule a consultation today and take the next step toward achieving lasting financial freedom.



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Events

# Freeport Fired Up for the 2025 Fire-Truck Pull

Friday, Nov. 7 | 5:30 p.m. | Props Brewery @ The Windmills, Hammock Bay

The heat is on, Freeport! The 2025 Rotary Fire-Truck Pull is rolling in Friday, November 7, and local teams are revving up for

the ultimate rematch.

- Will The Doughboys defend their crown?
- Will The South Siders blaze ahead?

Will The Dad Bods out-pull e•xpectations?

• And keep your eye on Julia's Ash Kickers—they're fired up and ready to smoke the competition!

Hosted by the Rotary Club of Freeport, this high-energy community event supports the Walton County Fire & Rescue "Heroes for Heroes" campaign, benefiting Fisher House, which provides comfort and care to military families in need.

### Event Highlights

- First team pull at 5:30 p.m.
- Trophies, medals & prizes awarded
- Choose your team's hype song!
- Sponsors still needed for first responder and student-athlete teams

Grab your crew, email [freeportfiretruckpull@gmail.com](mailto:freeportfiretruckpull@gmail.com) or call 850.543.8213 and lock in your spot for one of the most entertaining nights in Hammock Bay. It's gonna be LIT—and all for a great cause!



## Locals Under the Lights: Freeport Night Out Shines Nov. 1

**Saturday, Nov. 1 | 4-7 p.m. | Props Green @ Hammock Bay**

Get ready to light up the night, Freeport! Freeport Night Out returns Saturday, November 1, 2025, from 4-7 p.m. on the Props Green—and this year's theme, "Locals Under the Lights," promises an evening packed with music, food, fun, and hometown pride.

Guests can stroll the Business Expo, enjoy delicious bites from local food trucks, shop the Hammock Bay Farmers Market, and groove to live music on two stages!

Music Lineup:

• Bluegrass on the Green: The Penny Creek Band plays the Windmills Stage, 4-7 p.m.

• Props Pavilion After Party: Rick Esguerra keeps the tunes going at 7 p.m.

Fill out sponsor punch cards during the event for a chance to win prizes in an exclusive raffle!

Hosted by the Freeport Merchants Association in partnership with The Windmills at Hammock Bay and Props Brewery, this community celebration benefits two incredible local nonprofits—Children's Volunteer Health Network and Caring & Sharing of South Walton—supporting families across the area.

A big shoutout to the event's premier sponsors: Props Hammock Bay, The Windmills at Hammock Bay, Valor Communities, Geopoint Survey, Dunlap & Shipman, Shipyard Marina, Eglin Federal Credit Union, Mills Heating & Air, Sandy Paws Resort, The Madison, Hwy 331, Drea Marie Designs and more. Your support makes this unforgettable night possible!

There's still time to join the fun! Sponsorship and vendor opportunities are available—email [events@thefma.online](mailto:events@thefma.online) for details.

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# Happenings Around Freeport

## 2025 EVENTS

### OCTOBER

- 30** | **Barktoberfest benefiting Dog Harmony**  
4:30 pm | Grand Boulevard at Sandestin | Miramar Beach
- 31** | **Halloween Party**  
Time TBD | Props Brewery Hammock Bay | Freeport  
**Halloween on the BOOlevard**  
4 pm | Grand Boulevard at Sandestin | Miramar Beach  
**10th Annual Tricks and Treasures**  
5 pm | The Boardwalk on Okaloosa Island | FWB  
**Escape to Wonderland Halloween Party**  
6 pm | Ara Rooftop Pool & Lounge at Hotel Effie | Sandestin  
**Trick or Treat Street**  
6 pm | The Village of Baytowne Wharf | Sandestin  
**Halloween Dinner Cruise**  
7 pm | Sunquest Cruises - Solaris Yacht | Miramar Beach

### NOVEMBER

- 01** | **Freeport Bayfest**  
9 am | Freeport Sports Complex | Freeport  
**Decades On Display: Automotive History**  
10 am | Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida | Valparaiso  
**11th Annual Eggs on the Beach**  
10 am | Seascape Towne Centre | Miramar Beach  
**Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class**  
10 am | Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso  
**Military Family Appreciation Day presented by Eglin Federal Credit Union**  
10:30 am | The Landing | FWB  
**Pirate Brew Fest**  
11 am | Fudpucker's | Destin  
**Taste of the Bay Cook Off**  
11 am | Freeport Sports Complex | Freeport  
**Freeport Night Out**  
4 pm | Props Brewery Hammock Bay | Freeport  
**Tacos Under the Trees**  
5 pm | E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center | Freeport
- 02** | **Below Alabama with DJ Viper**  
2 pm | Nick's Seafood | Freeport  
**Women's Climbing Circle**  
5 pm | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin
- 03** | **Walton Area Chamber Fall Golf Classic**  
8 am | Camp Creek Golf Course | Inlet Beach
- 04** | **Lunch N Learn: Change Your Story, Change Your Life**  
11:30 am | Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce | FWB
- 05** | **Healthy Walton Summit**  
9 am | Destiny Worship Center | Freeport
- 06** | **Contractors Connect – Walton County Meet Up**  
5 pm | AJ's Grayton Beach  
**Wine Down Wednesday**  
4 pm | Soundside Waterfront Bar | FWB  
**Word Waves Writers**  
5 pm | FWB Public Library | FWB

- 06-08** | **SoWal Jazz Fest**  
Times vary | Venues along Scenic Highway 30A
  - 06-09** | **Seeing Red Wine Festival**  
Various Times & Venues | Seaside
  - 07** | **Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee**  
7 am | Christian Life Center at FBC | FWB  
**Westonwood Ranch Sporting Clays Tournament**  
8 am | Bay County Shooting Range | Freeport  
**30A BBQ Festival**  
5 pm | Grand Boulevard at Sandestin | Miramar Beach  
**Animorè Weekend 2025: 9th Annual 100 Point + Cult Wine Dinner**  
5 pm | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport  
**2nd Annual Fire Truck Pull**  
5:30 pm | Props Brewery Hammock Bay | Freeport
  - 08** | **Heroes for Heroes Firefighter Challenge**  
9 am | The Windmills at Hammock Bay | Freeport  
**Let's Unwrap the Season!**  
9:30 am | Lola's on 30a  
**Pancake Customer Anniversary Appreciation Brunch**  
10:30 am | The Yoga Garden Collective | Freeport  
**Bluegrass Barn Jam & Fall Festival**  
11 am | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport
- 
- 08** | **Gathering in the Garden**  
5 pm | Drive the Coast | Santa Rosa Beach
  - 09** | **33rd Annual Flutterby Arts Festival**  
10 am | Watersound Town Center
  - 13** | **Freeport Merchant's Association Evening Social**  
6 pm | Location TBD
  - 14** | **20 West – Live**  
6 pm | 20 West | Freeport
  - 15** | **Guns & Hoses Charity Softball Tournament**  
9 am | Freeport Sports Complex | Freeport  
**Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class**  
10 am | Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso  
**DIY Folk Remedies Workshop Series #1**  
10:30 am | The Yoga Garden Collective | Freeport  
**Birds & Brews**  
11 am | E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center | Freeport
  - 17** | **GSSF Indoor League**  
10 am | Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
  - 20** | **Freeport Merchant's Association Breakfast**  
8 am | Location TBD

- 20 CONT.** | **Walton Area Chamber's Business After Hours**  
4:30 pm | The Waters at Freeport | Freeport  
**Greater FWB Chamber Business After Hours**  
5:30 pm | Holiday Inn Resort | FWB
- 21** | **Ruthlake Farm Christmas Market**  
1 pm | Destin–FWB Convention Center | Okaloosa Island  
**Hometown Holiday Parade & Celebration**  
5 pm | Grand Boulevard at Sandestin | Miramar Beach  
**Live Music: Josh Davis**  
6 pm | Props Brewery Hammock Bay | Freeport
- 22** | **Ruthlake Farm Christmas Market**  
8 am | Destin–FWB Convention Center | Okaloosa Island  
**Thanksgiving**  
10 am | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin  
**Sparkling Wine & Holiday Lights**  
4 pm | The Village of Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach  
**One Ocean Film Tour**  
6 pm | 684 Fazio Drive | Inlet Beach
- 23** | **La Luna Children's Boutique Holiday Open House**  
11 am | Grand Boulevard at Sandestin | Miramar Beach  
**Nutcracker Ballet Act II**  
5 pm | Seaside Amphitheater | Seaside
- 27** | **Thanksgiving Lunch Cruise**  
11:30 am | Sunquest Cruises | Miramar Beach  
**Thanksgiving Dinner Cruise**  
6 pm | Sunquest Cruises | Miramar Beach
- 28** | **Freeport Lou Lou Beans Black Friday**  
6 am | Lou Lou Beans | Freeport  
**Annie**  
7 pm | Emerald Coast Theatre Company | Miramar Beach
- 28-29** | **Christmas at the Garden**  
Times vary | The Garden at Peach Creek | Santa Rosa Beach
- 29** | **Turn on the Town & Seaside Holiday Parade**  
3 pm | Scenic Highway 30A | Seaside  
**Mistletoe Market**  
3 pm | Baldwin Avenue | DeFuniak Springs  
**Here Comes Santa Claus**  
6 pm | The Village of Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach

**FARMERS MARKETS**

**Hammock Bay Farmers Market**  
1st & 3rd Saturdays | 4 - 8 pm  
The Windmills | Hammock Bay Freeport

**Farmers Market DFS**  
Saturdays | 8 am - 12 pm  
694 Baldwin Ave., Suite 4 | Main Street Defuniak

**Grand Boulevard**  
Saturdays | 9 am - 1 pm  
Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

 Events

# Events: Freeport and Beyond

**Barktoberfest**

**Thursday, Oct. 30 | 4:30–6:30 p.m.** | Grand Park, Grand Boulevard at Sandestin

Paws down, the cutest fall fest around! Bring your pup in costume for trick-or-treating, a doggie costume contest, live DJ, photo booth and tasty bites.

\$15 preregistration (\$20 day-of). Benefits Dog-Harmony. Register: [dog-harmony.org](http://dog-harmony.org)

**Halloween Party at Props Brewery Hammock Bay**  
**Friday, Oct. 31 | Evening**  
| Props Brewery @ The Windmills, Hammock Bay, Freeport

Enjoy a spooktacular evening close to home! Celebrate Halloween Freeport-style with craft brews, costumes, and live music under the Windmills at Hammock Bay. Free entry. Info: [propsbrewery.com](http://propsbrewery.com)

**Trick or Treat Street**

**Friday, Oct. 31 | 6–8 p.m.**  
| The Village of Baytowne Wharf, Sandestin



Ghosts, ghouls, and goblins take over Baytowne! Trick-or-treat at merchant booths, enjoy live music by Steve Hall, and don't miss the Halloween fireworks at 8 p.m. Free admission. Info: [baytownewharf.com](http://baytownewharf.com)

**Festival of Trees at City Hall**

**November | Freeport City Hall**

The holiday season lights up as local businesses and organizations decorate festive Christmas

displays throughout City Hall. It's a wonderful way to kick off the season and showcase community creativity. Free public display. Apply to decorate: [freeport-fl.rja.revize.com/forms/10244](http://freeport-fl.rja.revize.com/forms/10244)

**Decades on Display: A Nostalgic Journey Through Automotive History**

**Saturday, Nov. 1 | 10 a.m. – 1 p.m.** | Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida | Valparaiso

Take a trip through time with classic cars from the '60s, '70s, and '80s at this family-friendly event. Free admission. Vehicle entry: GA \$35 | VIP \$40. Info: 850-678-2615

**Pirate Brew Fest**

**Saturday, Nov. 1 | 11 a.m.–3 p.m.** | Fudpucker's, Destin

Ahoy, mateys! Celebrate coastal fun with live music, games, vendors, beer tastings, and a pirate costume contest. The first 100 pirates receive spe-

cial gifts!

Free admission. Info: [pirate-brewfest.com](http://pirate-brewfest.com)

**Eggs on the Beach - Big Green Egg Cooking Competition**

**Saturday, Nov. 1 | 10 a.m.–1 p.m.** | Seascape Resort, Miramar Beach

Big Green Egg fans unite! Sample unlimited bites from more than 20 cook teams, including local chefs and nonprofit groups, as they fire up creative dishes on the iconic ceramic grills. Vote for your favorites in the 2025 People's Choice Awards and meet celebrity judges from Netflix and Food Network. Hosted by Bay Breeze Patio, this flavorful foodie fest benefits Fisher House of the Emerald Coast and Food For Thought Outreach. Ticketed event: [eggsonthebeach.com](http://eggsonthebeach.com)

**Tacos Under the Trees**

**Saturday, Nov. 1 | 5–9 p.m.**  
| E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center, 4956 State Highway 20 E, Freeport

You won't want to miss this unforgettable evening under the pines! Enjoy an all-you-can-eat taco bar, bottomless margaritas from La Paz Restaurante & Cantina, tequila tastings and live music—all in support of the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center's educational mission. Ticketed event. Details and tickets: [eowilsoncenter.org](http://eowilsoncenter.org)

**Westonwood Ranch Sporting Clays Tournament**

**Friday, Nov. 7 | 8 a.m.–5 p.m.** | Bay County Shooting Range, Freeport

Aim for impact! Teams compete in a full day of sporting clays, benefiting Westonwood Ranch's mission to provide vocational training for individuals

*Continued on next page*

**SOWAL JAZZ FESTIVAL 2025**

SO WAL JAZZ FESTIVAL TRIBUTES

**AMY WINEHOUSE**  
**FRANK SINATRA**  
**BILLIE HOLIDAY**

LEGENDS

*the quiet storm*

**Reid Murphy Quintet**

**NOVEMBER 6 – 8**

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

Video Production by SoWal Talks Studio

Presenting Sponsor: SoWal House | Venue Sponsors: SoWal House, Distillery 98, Black Bear Bar Room, Wild Olives | Premier Media Sponsor: 30A  
Corporate Sponsors: Greenway Station 30A, SoWal Luxury Properties, South Walton Eye Care, Gallion's, 30A Cork & Barrel, Cultural Arts Alliance, SoWal Bocce Co.  
Individual Sponsors: Dave King, Blake Jones, Tim McNulty

## A New Rhythm in South Walton: The First Annual SOWAL Jazz Fest

BY KERRI PARKER

The Gulf breeze will carry more than the scent of salt and pine. It will carry music—smooth, stirring and alive. From Nov. 6-8, the first annual SOWAL Jazz Fest, a three-night celebration of artistry and connection, promises a rich cultural experience.

The festival brings metropolitan sophistication to the coast, transforming familiar venues into intimate jazz clubs reminiscent of the golden age of the genre. Each performance offers a rare opportunity to experience timeless music up close, with showtimes at 6 and 8 p.m. and guaranteed seating for every guest. Tickets begin at \$50, allowing festivalgoers to craft their own rhythm and route from one show to the next.

The lineup is a tribute to jazz in all its moods—nostalgic, raw and ever-evolving. At SOWAL House, Josh Sirten and The Velvet Jazz Quartet will channel the effortless swing of Frank Sinatra on Thursday and Friday nights, followed by Sheila Ford's haunting tribute to Billie

Holiday on Saturday.

Distillery 98 will hum with the smoky energy of Amy Winehouse as Teresa Lombardi and The Midnight Muses Quartet bring her unmistakable voice and spirit to life across all three evenings.

Over in Grayton Beach, Black Bear's Bar Room will host "The Quiet Storm," featuring Bobbie Storm, Wayne Mitchum and Jimmy Ward—a soulful blend of coastal jazz and southern rhythm.

And at Wild Olives in Greenway Station, The Reid Murphy Quartet will fuse modern funk and improvisation into something electric and alive. Each venue contributes its own atmosphere to the experience. Together, they tell the story of a community that's evolving—one that believes world-class artistry can thrive right here at home.

That belief is central to the SOWAL Foundation, the nonprofit behind the festival and the philanthropic arm of SOWAL House. For Dave King, who leads both, the event is



more than a series of performances—it's a manifestation of a mission...cultural experiences that feel metropolitan in scope yet deeply local in spirit. "What makes us different," King says, "is our focus on producing metropolitan-style cultural experiences right here in South Walton—while also providing funding for local artists to pursue their passion projects and giving them a platform to share their work. Jazz Fest embodies that mission: world-class performances, intimate venues and meaningful support for our creative community."

Tickets start at \$50 per show and are available at [sowaljazzfest.com](http://sowaljazzfest.com). Each ticket secures entry to one performance with guaranteed seating, and guests may choose VIP reserved seating for the best views.



**EVENTS**

*continued from previous page*

with developmental differences. Registration required. Info: [westonwood.org](http://westonwood.org)

**30A BBQ Festival - 10 Years of Sizzling Flavor**  
**Friday, Nov. 7 | 5-8 p.m.**  
**| Grand Boulevard, Miramar Beach**

All-you-can-eat barbecue, live music by River Dan, and craft drinks—all to celebrate The Sonder Project's 10th anniversary. GA \$60 | VIP \$125 | Kids 12 & under free. Tickets: [bit.ly/30a-bbq-2025](http://bit.ly/30a-bbq-2025)

**Animoré Weekend of Compassion for Animals**  
**Friday-Saturday, Nov. 7-8**  
**| Alaqua Animal Refuge, Freeport**

Alaqua's signature weekend fundraiser returns! Friday's 100 Point + Cult Wine Dinner (5 p.m.) features rare vintages, gourmet dining by Café Thirty-A, and a live auction. Saturday's Bluegrass Barn Jam & Fall Fest (11 a.m.-6 p.m.) brings live music, local food and family fun for a great cause. Tickets required. Details: [alaqua.org](http://alaqua.org)

**33rd Annual Flutterby Arts Festival**  
**Sunday, Nov. 9 | 10 a.m.-4 p.m.**  
**| Watersound Town Center**

Celebrate art, creativity, and the Monarch migration with family activities, student art exhibits, and a whimsical butterfly parade. Free and family-friendly. Info: [culturalartsalliance.com](http://culturalartsalliance.com)

**Birds & Brews**  
**Saturday, Nov. 15 | 11 a.m.-3 p.m.**  
**| E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center, 4956 St. Hwy. 20 E, Freeport**

Sip, stroll, and spot native species at this fun mix of bird-watching and brews. Enjoy local craft beer and guided nature walks through the beautiful Biophilia Center grounds. Free admission. Details: [eowilsoncenter.org](http://eowilsoncenter.org)

**Hometown Holiday Parade & Celebration**  
**Friday, Nov. 21 | 5 p.m.**  
**| Grand Boulevard, Miramar Beach**

Kick off the holiday season with a festive parade, live entertainment and the lighting of Grand Boulevard's towering Christmas tree.

Free community event. Info: [grandboulevard.com](http://grandboulevard.com)

**Ruthlake Farm Christmas Market**  
**Friday-Saturday, Nov. 21-22**  
**| Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center**

Shop unique holiday gifts from local vendors, enjoy Santa photos, raffles, and festive cheer—all while supporting small businesses. Free admission. Info: [ruthlakefarm.com](http://ruthlakefarm.com)

**Christmas at the Garden**  
**Friday-Sunday, Nov. 28-30**  
**| The Garden at Peach Creek, 4401 U.S. Hwy. 98 E, Santa Rosa Beach**

Get in the spirit with fresh trees, wreaths, garlands, kids' crafts, hot cocoa and photos with The Real Santa of 30A (Friday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-2 p.m.). Free admission. Info: [facebook.com/TheGardenatPeachCreek](http://facebook.com/TheGardenatPeachCreek)

**Turn on the Town & Seaside Holiday Parade**  
**Saturday, Nov. 29 | 3 p.m.**  
**| Scenic Highway 30A, Seaside**

Join Seaside for its charming holiday parade and tree lighting. Enjoy vintage cars, joyful music, and family festivities by the Gulf. Free event. Info: [seasidefl.com](http://seasidefl.com)



**Mistletoe Market**  
**Saturday, Nov. 29 | 3 p.m.**  
**| Baldwin Avenue, DeFuniak Springs**

Shop local vendors, sip cocoa, and enjoy live holiday entertainment at this festive small-town market. Free admission. Info: [defuniaksprings.net](http://defuniaksprings.net)

**Here Comes Santa Claus**  
**Saturday, Nov. 29 | 6 p.m.**  
**| The Village of Baytowne Wharf**

Santa arrives in style for Baytowne's annual holiday kickoff, complete with festive lights, music, and a fireworks finale! Free admission. Info: [baytownewharf.com](http://baytownewharf.com)

**Freeport "Story Book Christmas" Parade**  
**Saturday, Dec. 6 | Check-in 1:30-4 p.m. | Parade begins 5 p.m.**  
**| Downtown Freeport**

One of Freeport's favorite holiday traditions returns! The "Story Book Christmas" Parade invites individuals, businesses, clubs, churches, and organizations to bring their favorite tales to life with festive floats, cars, golf carts, trucks, motorcycles, horses, tractors, bikes or marching groups.

The 1-mile parade route begins at Freeport Learning School Track & Field (360 Kylea Laird Drive) and travels left on Busi-

ness 331, right on State Highway 20 W, left on 83A E, then left on North Street before dispersing.

Float Judging: 4-4:45 p.m. (entries arriving after 4 p.m. not eligible for awards)

Note: No Santa costumes, please — Santa makes his own special appearance!

Applications and liability forms are due by Nov. 28. Entries may be submitted online, by mail, or dropped off at Freeport City Hall (112 State Hwy. 20 W). Approved entries will receive confirmation by email. Free to attend and open to the community. Float registration: [freeportfl.rja.revize.com/forms/10179](http://freeportfl.rja.revize.com/forms/10179)

**30A Songwriters Festival Returns for 17th Year!**

For 17 years, the 30A Songwriters Festival has drawn thousands of music fans from around the world to Scenic Highway 30A, transforming the Gulf Coast into a mecca for original songwriters. The 2026 festival takes place January 16-19 with more than 125 artists performing over 300 shows across 30 unique venues, from intimate patios to 6,000-seat outdoor stages.

Presented by Grand Boulevard, this year's festival will feature headline performances at Grand Boulevard's Town Center main stage by Mavis Staples, Toad the Wet Sprocket, 10,000

Maniacs, I'm With Her, Nikki Lane, and Paul McDonald & the Mourning Doves. Additional artists will be announced this summer.

Venues throughout South Walton will once again be converted into state-of-the-art listening rooms, ranging from 100 to 1,000 seats. Amphitheaters, town halls, restaurants, bars, and theaters provide fans with the rare opportunity to experience world-class songwriters in intimate settings. WMOT, based in Nashville, will again record select performances for its World Cafe sessions in partnership with WXPN Philadelphia.

Weekend passes and VIP tickets are available now. VIP packages include premium seating and complimentary gourmet food and drinks in the VIP tent during main stage shows, as well as full weekend transportation options for groups.

The festival is produced by the Cultural Arts Alliance of Walton County and Russell Carter Artist Management, presented by Grand Boulevard with support from Visit South Walton, WaterColor Inn & Resort, and ASCAP. Festival passes and details are available at [30ASongwritersFestival.com](http://30ASongwritersFestival.com).

**ALAQUA ANIMAL REFUGE** Shelter. Safety. Second Chances... **animoré** A Weekend Benefit for the Love of Animals

**FEATURING SISTER SADIE**

**BLUEGRASS BARN JAM & FALL FEST**

**NOV 8TH SAT 11AM - 6 PM @ ALAQUA**

<b>Gates Open</b> 11AM	<b>Goodbye to Sunshine</b> 11:30AM-1:30PM
<b>Black Creek String Band</b> 2-3:30PM	<b>Sister Sadie</b> 4:15-6:00PM

Non-stop Music Festival | Jam Session  
 Bring your own chair & instrument  
 Vendors | Food Trucks | Kids Activities

Logos: THE THIRTY-A, AUTHENTIC WALTON FLORIDA, THE CRANE CENTER, Mr. Puffs, GALATI YACHT SALES, Tito's Handmade VODKA

 Off the Hook

# Fishing News

## Walton County's Donald Vautrinot Named FWC Lionfish Commercial Champion

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) 2025 Lionfish Challenge marked its 10-year anniversary in a big way — and Walton County's own Donald Vautrinot

took top honors in the Commercial Division.

Vautrinot earned the title of Commercial Champion after removing an incredible 1,161.04 pounds of invasive lionfish from Florida waters during the summer-long tournament. His efforts helped highlight both the environmental importance and

the skill of local anglers working to protect the state's reefs.

The annual FWC Lionfish Challenge drew more than 500 divers statewide who completed over 1,100 dive trips and removed more than 30,000 lionfish. The competition rewards participants who remove the most lionfish throughout the



the record books. With 126 total fishing days, this year marks the longest Gulf red snapper season in state history.

“Florida is the fishing capital of the world— with 4 million licensed anglers and generations of families who enjoy our waters,” Governor Ron DeSantis said in May. “Smart state management of Gulf waters has allowed us to offer these record-breaking opportunities year after year.”

The 2025 Gulf red snapper season opened over Memorial Day weekend and continues with fall weekend openings through December,

including Veterans Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays.

Remaining fall season dates include: Oct. 24–26, Oct. 31–Nov. 2, Nov. 7–9 and 11 (Veterans Day), Nov. 14–16; Nov. 21–23, Nov. 27–30 (Thanksgiving weekend), Dec. 5–7, 12–14, 19–21 and 25–28 (Christmas weekend).

The extended season is made possible through data collected by the State Reef Fish Survey, which helps the FWC monitor recreational harvests and ensure sustainable fisheries management.

Anyone fishing for red snapper from a private recreational vessel in state or federal waters must be registered as a State Reef Fish Angler, even if exempt from fishing license requirements. Registration and more information are available at [GoOutdoorsFlorida.com](http://GoOutdoorsFlorida.com). For full regulations and updates, visit [MyFWC.com/Marine](http://MyFWC.com/Marine).

Now celebrating a decade of success, the FWC Lionfish Challenge continues to inspire conservation-minded divers to help protect native species and preserve Florida's underwater ecosystems.

Learn more at [MyFWC.com/Lionfish](http://MyFWC.com/Lionfish).

## Record-Breaking Gulf Red Snapper Season in Full Swing

Anglers across Northwest Florida are in the thick of the 2025 Gulf Red Snapper recreational season — and it's one for

the record books. With 126 total fishing days, this year marks the longest Gulf red snapper season in state history.

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*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. Coming soon: 170 paved, covered storage spaces for boats and RVs! Open Mon–Fri: 7 a.m.–5 p.m.; Saturday: 7 a.m.–noon; Sunday: Closed (850) 880-6259*

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# Butterflies of Fall

BY HELEN PETRE

Blooms of fall bring butterflies, gathering sweet nectar provided by the colorful flowers. Nectar provides energy for migration and egg production. Flowers and butterflies are abundant on recently burned pine savannahs, where flowers have sun and room to bloom.

## Gulf Fritillary (*Dione vanillae*)

The most common butterfly in the fall is the Gulf Fritillary, which lays its eggs on passionflower (*Passiflora incarnata*), so the caterpillars can eat the



Gulf fritillary feeding on a Mexican sunflower. Wikipedia.

leaves. While Gulf Fritillaries use lantana and other flowers

for nectar, lantana is an invasive nonnative and poisonous to animals. Since animals cannot eat the leaves, nothing inhibits its invasive spread.

The adult Gulf Fritillary lives for only two weeks. Adults migrate north in spring and south in fall.

Gulf fritillaries, like monarchs, have chemical defense mechanisms, which make them unpalatable to predators.

## Blazing star (*Liatris* species)

Gulf Fritillaries are especially attracted to *Liatris*, feeding on nectar before their southern migration. *Liatris* attracts other butterflies, such as swallowtails, hairstreaks, monarchs, and buckeyes, as well as native bees

and moths. There are many species of *Liatris* native to Florida, and different species often grow together in dunes and pine savannahs. Common names include blazing star and gayfeather. All have lavender flowers and bloom from August to October.

*Liatris* grows best in disturbed areas and scrub, areas prone to wildfire, and recently burned areas. If there is no disturbance, pines overgrow, preventing sunlight from reaching the ground, and preventing *Liatris* from growing. This demonstrates the importance of natural areas and fire. *Liatris* is also threatened by coastal development.

## Frostweed (*Verbesina virginica*)

Frostweed blooms with pretty, terminal white flower clusters in late summer through fall and grows tall among *liatris* and goldenrod on the edges of woods, in disturbed areas, and in the dunes. It is a food source for butterflies, especially monarchs, as well as native bees.

## Sweet goldenrod (*Solidago odora*)

Sweet goldenrod leaves smell like licorice when crushed. There are many species of goldenrod, but sweet goldenrod is the only one that is aromatic.

Sweet goldenrod is an important nectar source for native bees and moths. No goldenrod species causes hay fever. Goldenrods bloom from August to September along with ragweed, so people often erroneously attribute allergies to goldenrod. Ragweed has windborne pollen. Goldenrod pollen is carried from flower to flower by native bees. It is not windborne, so it cannot cause hay fever.

## Ragweed (*Ambrosia artemesifolia*)

Ragweed is an annual, native species, but it is invasive and a noxious weed. It blooms from July to October and induces allergies due to copious amounts of windblown pollen. The seeds contain oil, which is coveted by birds.

All of these fall-blooming plants are important food sources for butterflies, birds, and native bees. Fall provides an amazing display of wings and blooms. Enjoy the native ecosystems!

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

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



**NATURE SHOULD BE ACCESSIBLE TO ALL, SO ACCESSIBILITY IS OUR NATURE!**

Partner with us at **WHOLE OUTDOORS** through:

- Prayer • Charitable Contributions • Sponsorships • Land Use

For more information, Contact **Charlie and Stacy Moon**

Email: [wholeoutdoors@gmail.com](mailto:wholeoutdoors@gmail.com) | Phone: 850-333-7397

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# Circle Back DeFuniak: Where the Community Meets the Lake



BY KERRI PARKER

There's something about a Saturday morning on Lake DeFuniak that feels like coming home. The light filters through the trees that edge the perfectly round, spring-fed lake, dappling the water with gold. Ducks chatter near the bank. Someone's kayak scrapes softly against the sand. And as the clock inches toward nine, people begin to gather — walkers, joggers, pad-

dlers, even a few bikers — ready to circle back once again.

For the past month, the Circle Back DeFuniak club has turned Saturday mornings into a small-town ritual. There's no competition here, no start line or finish. The goal is simple: move your body, breathe in the morning air, and reconnect with one another — and with this extraordinary lake that defines our town.

Some come with paddleboards, gliding across the calm water like brushstrokes. Others walk the paved path that loops around the lake, stopping to wave or chat as they go. The rhythm is easy and unhurried. What matters most is showing up.

"Circle Back DeFuniak was born out of a simple idea — that movement and connection go hand in hand," says Kerri Parker, founder of HWY 331, a local community platform. "We wanted to create something that welcomes everyone. You don't



PHOTO CREDIT: ANDREA CASTLE

have to be a paddler. You don't have to be an athlete. You just have to want to move and be part of something that makes this town feel alive."

After the loop, the morning tends to drift naturally toward Baldwin Avenue. Members spill into the farmers market or pop



into local shops and cafés. It's part of the rhythm — supporting local businesses while keeping the sense of togetherness that began by the water. The club was designed with that in mind: to encourage wellness, community, and a deep appreciation for the beauty that surrounds DeFuniak Springs.

There's growing research behind what most of us already know intuitively — that time in nature, especially near water, does wonders for the mind. The gentle repetition of paddling or walking helps quiet the noise that builds up during the week. You return home lighter, calmer, and a little more connected — to yourself and to the people you passed on the trail.

Every Saturday, no matter the weather or the week behind them, they gather again at nine o'clock. Some with coffee in hand. Some with dogs tugging

at leashes. All drawn by the same quiet pull of the lake — and the simple joy of circling back.

Circle Back DeFuniak meets every Saturday at 9 a.m. behind the Chautauqua Hall of Brotherhood. Walkers, paddlers, joggers, bikers and four-legged friends are all welcome. Participation is free and open to all. To register, visit [HWY331.com/circle\\_back\\_defuniak](http://HWY331.com/circle_back_defuniak).

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**100 YEARS**  
**1924-2024**

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**117 Country Club Lane, Defuniak Springs**



*Kerri Parker*  
Founder  
[Hwy331.com](http://Hwy331.com)



BY STEPHENIE CRAIG,  
JOURNEY BRAVELY

When were you last wronged, hurt or offended by someone? Think about the intense moment of offense and try remembering how it felt and what you wanted to do next. Maybe you wanted to use snarky words to put them in their place. Perhaps you wanted to justify your rightness and their wrongness. Or, you may have judged them from a place of self-righteousness. Maybe you labeled the person as bad and less valuable. And, maybe, most of all, you decided to see them as your enemy.

Labeling others as enemies is easy and comfortable, because it allows you to feel right and to avoid self-examination. When you label someone as “them” or your enemy, you view them as

a villain and yourself as a victim; a victim of their behavior, a victim of their values, a victim of their choices, a victim of their decisions. Initially, labeling someone as an enemy feels intoxicating.

You feel justified, good, right and have the illusion of standing on higher moral ground. However, eventually, seeing yourself as a victim creates insidious results. You begin to feel resentful, bitter, vengeful, powerless, depressed and hateful.

In many cases, embracing victimhood results in you becoming a different version of a villain. You may find yourself feeling justified in “an eye for an eye” perspective toward your proclaimed enemies because, after all, their bad behavior justifies your poor response. Labeling others as enemies gives a false sense of permission to treat others poorly without taking accountability for living out your own values. Making others into enemies most often stirs up fear, hatred and defensiveness, rather than stirring love, compassion, confidence and kindness.

While it’s an undeniable reality you will encounter, people who challenge your values and sensibilities, ultimately you are responsible for how you show up in the world. Someone else’s behavior or attitude does not determine yours, even when you see them as an enemy. You have the empowered ability to be in charge of your attitude and behavior regardless of how anyone else is showing up. So, how do you walk away from making enemies easily and lead with love instead?

### 7 Ways to Lead with Love Even When It’s Hard

**Notice.** Notice who you see as an enemy. Who is hard for you to love? Why? Be curious within yourself about why you are bothered by the other person. Focus less on the other person’s behavior and more on what is happening inside of you in response to them.

**Self-examine.** Reflect on your own struggles. Where are you being unforgiving, unkind, judgmental, self-righteous, envious. Remember your own

imperfection before you judge others harshly and label them as enemies. Imagine the grace you would like to receive from others in your areas of weakness when you consider your approach toward others.

**Remember our shared humanity.** Being human isn’t easy and can be a painful struggle. Often those you see as enemies are hurt people struggling with wounds they don’t know how to resolve. Try preceding your judgement with understanding and compassion.

**Remember your values.** Do you value love, forgiveness, justice, goodness, kindness? Consider how you can align your treatment of others with your values in the way you hope others would apply them to you.

**Love anyway.** Try walking in the way of love toward others, even those who feel like enemies. Do something kind when you want to retaliate. Be generous when you want to punish. Walk away when you want to say something unkind. Pray for people who challenge you. Practice radical love even when it is

hard to do so. In loving this way, it will become more clear to you how loved you are by God. Also, it is hard to demonize others when you are busy loving them.

**Engage your power.** You are not a victim of anyone, no matter how difficult the other person is for you. You have been given the power to determine how you want to live and treat people. Use your power wisely and for the greater good.

**Release.** Release your perceived right to hold grudges and hatred toward others. Clinging to bitterness poisons you and the world around you.

We live in a cultural moment that encourages us to see enemies around every corner. Consider trying something different. Instead, remember the best chance of inspiring change in others and the world is to embody a loving, joyful approach to your values while inviting others to come along. Connect with us at [Journeybravely.com](http://Journeybravely.com) for support along your journey.

## Move with Gratitude:

### A Thanksgiving Challenge for Your Health



BY LISA LEATH TURPIN, HEALTH & WELLNESS COACH

As we enter this season of gratitude, let’s take a moment to give thanks for one of our greatest blessings — the ability to move. Movement truly is a gift. The saying “use it or lose it” may sound cliché, but it’s profoundly true. If you’re feeling more achy, stiff or sluggish lately, there’s good news: you can do something about it.

You have more control over how you feel than you might think. Long work hours, technology and daily demands can make self-care tough, but stopping movement only makes life harder. Like athletes who train steadily toward their best, we

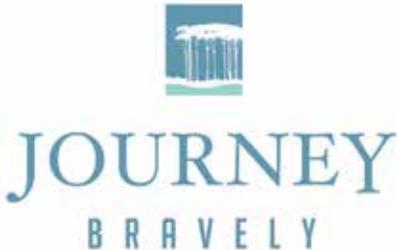
must also keep our bodies active to build strength, stamina and resilience for the stresses of everyday life.

So—just move! Start small, set realistic goals and give yourself grace when you miss a day. Modify when needed, but don’t quit. If one part of your body can’t move, work the others. Movement equals calorie burn-

ing, energy and empowerment.

Try simple body-weight exercises such as squats, lunges, push-ups, planks or dips using a chair or stairs. Or head outside — even a brisk walk or beach stroll in soft sand can tone muscles and boost your mood. The goal isn’t perfection; it’s consistency.

*Continued on page 24*





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# Mommy Makeovers: What They Are and When to Consider One



BY DR. CLARK, BLUEWATER PLASTIC SURGERY

Motherhood is an extraordinary journey — one filled with love, transformation and growth. However, the physical changes that occur during pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding can leave many women feeling disconnected from their pre-pregnancy bodies. At Bluewater Plastic Surgery, we often hear from women who say, “I love being a mom, but I just don’t feel like myself anymore.” For those looking to restore confidence and feel comfortable in their skin again, a customized Mommy Makeover may be the solution.

## What Is a Mommy Makeover?

A “Mommy Makeover” isn’t a single procedure, but rather a personalized combination of surgeries designed to address the areas most commonly affected by pregnancy and childbirth. The most common procedures include:

- **Tummy tuck (abdominoplasty)** to remove excess skin and tighten weakened abdominal muscles.
- **Breast augmentation, lift, or reduction**, depending on how the breasts have changed post-pregnancy.
- **Liposuction** to sculpt and remove stubborn pockets of fat that diet and exercise alone can’t address.

These procedures are usually performed in a single surgical session, which minimizes recovery time compared to spacing them out over months. The goal is not to “snap back” to a previous version of yourself, but to help you feel empowered, confident, and at ease in your own body.

## Is It Right for You?

Ideal candidates for a Mommy Makeover are women who:

- Are finished having children (future pregnancies can impact the surgical results).
- Are close to their target weight and committed to a healthy lifestyle.
- Have completed breastfeeding for at least six months.
- Are in good overall health with realistic expectations about results and recovery.

A Mommy Makeover is not about perfection — it’s about feeling more like you again. Whether it’s restoring volume to your breasts, regaining core strength, or simply being able to wear clothing comfortably, these changes can be deeply meaningful.



## What to Expect

Recovery varies depending on the combination of procedures, but most women take about two weeks off work and gradually resume normal activities over 4–6 weeks. While the initial results are visible fairly quickly, final results continue to refine over the following months as swelling subsides and the body heals.

At Bluewater Plastic Surgery, we take a thoughtful, individualized approach. During your consultation, we’ll discuss your goals, medical history, and any concerns. Together, we’ll build a safe, strategic plan that supports your vision and lifestyle.

## Ready to Feel Like Yourself Again?

You’ve given so much of yourself to your family. If now feels like the right time to reclaim a part of yourself, we’re here to help. A Mommy Makeover can be a powerful act of self-care — one that’s deeply personal and uniquely tailored to you.

To schedule a private consultation and explore your options,

contact Bluewater Plastic Surgery today. As a board-certified plastic surgeon, my practice is dedicated to cosmetic surgery, and I have performed thousands of procedures over the

past 25 years. My priority has always been patient safety and achieving superior cosmetic results. I believe the best measure of success comes from my patients themselves—with more

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# Caregiving for a Loved One with Alzheimer's: Tips for a Compassionate Journey

By NICOLE LESSON

Brook Batson and her family recently moved to Freeport from Tennessee to help take care of her Father-in-law who has Alzheimer's.

They moved in with her mother-in-law to assist her in taking care of her husband.

"He is mobile but gets very confused," Batson said. "Thankfully, he does remember myself,

my husband, Danny and my kids. Once we knew what was going on, we wanted to come before there was a crisis."

Batson shares what she wants people to know about Alzheimer's and other dementia.

ed having depression and 14% reported being in poor physical health.

"This is a disease, not just age appropriate behavior, yes some behaviors are age appropriate but if they can't manage a majority of their daily activities on their own, it's more than aging," Batson said.

According to research from the Alzheimer's Association International Conference, more than 1,500 Walton County residents age 65 and up are living with the disease. Florida has the second highest prevalence of Alzheimer's in the U.S, with more than 580,000 Floridians living with the disease supported by 870,000 unpaid caregivers.

For more than 17 years Brook worked in senior care, both assisted living and memory care. Her passion for helping families through their journey with dementia has now hit her own family. She offers this advice.

"Find a support group, go to the alz.org website, call an assisted living facility as some have memory care daycare, surround yourself with those who understand what you are going through," she said. "Manage it as a family, as it takes a village."

For many, caregiving can be overwhelming and individuals in the role often report experiencing higher rates of stress. According to the Alzheimer's Association 2025 Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures report, 66% of Florida caregivers reported at least one chronic health condition, 29% report-

Practicing self-care is vital to ensure both the caregiver and the person being cared for can have the best quality of life. Services like respite care, adult day care, and support groups can ease the challenges of caregiving. Many of these are available at low or no cost to Floridians through state and local programs. For more information, call the Alzheimer's Association free, 24/7 Helpline at 800.272.3900.

Walk to End Alzheimer's®, an event held across Florida to raise awareness and funds for Alzheimer's, has been a place of support for Batson. She is the new Community Engagement Chair for the Walk to End Alzheimer's Emerald Coast-Ocala County.

"At the Walk you will meet people, companies and vendors that understand exactly what you are dealing with," she said. "You are going to walk away with information you didn't have."

Join others impacted by Alzheimer's for the 2025 Walk to End Alzheimer's Emerald Coast Okaloosa County on Saturday, November 1 at Northwest Florida State College in Niceville. Registration starts at 9 am with the ceremony at 10 am, followed by the Walk. Register your team today at [Alz.org/EmeraldCoastOCWalk](http://Alz.org/EmeraldCoastOCWalk).

## MOVE

continued from page 21

### Holiday Health Challenge: "Weigh Down to Christmas"

This holiday season, let's focus not on losing weight, but on maintaining it. For the next 60 days, aim to stay the same. Enjoy your favorite treats but balance them with activity. Take a short walk after big meals — it helps burn off sugar before it's stored and supports healthy blood sugar levels.

Want accountability? Join me by emailing [beactive850@gmail.com](mailto:beactive850@gmail.com). Let's finish the year feeling strong, thankful and healthy together.

Try This: Protein Pump-

kin Mousse—a guilt-free treat packed with fall flavor: Mix 1/2 cup pumpkin puree, 1 cup non-fat Greek yogurt, 1 scoop vanilla whey protein, 2 Tbsp sugar-free cheesecake pudding mix and 2 Tbsp fat-free whipped topping. Refrigerate an hour, sprinkle with cinnamon and enjoy this creamy, protein-packed dessert.

*Lisa Leath Turpin is a local, certified health and fitness coach and area independent personal trainer with more than 25 years of experience helping others strengthen both body and mind. She holds a bachelor's degree in sports and fitness management from the University of Alabama and is board certified by the National Board of Fitness Examiners. Lisa has managed health and wellness programs for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Huntsville, Ala., and holds certifications from AFAA, Polestar/Balanced Body, Reebok U, SCW Fitness and the American Heart Association.*



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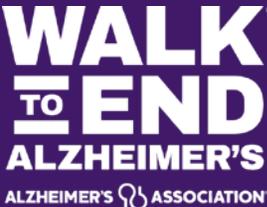
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# Creating Health in the Home



BY KAY LEAMAN,  
HEALTH ARCHITECT

When we think about health we normally think of our bodies; what we put on them and especially what we put in them. On the inside we watch what we eat, continually making better choices as we learn new things. We do the same thing on the outside of our body, choosing healthier lotions, potions, deodorants, makeup, hair products, etc. We add exercise and increase our water intake. But then...

We spend time in our homes where we feel comfortable and safe. The place of our favorite things and people. But how safe are our homes, really?

Some time back, a study was done on the air in downtown Los Angeles vs. the air in the homes around the area. Would you have guessed that the air in downtown L.A. was healthier than the air in their homes? It was.

Here is another interesting find. I watched a video in a training on fires. They set up two rooms with identical furniture, drapes, lamps, etc. One room was from my grandmother's time and the other one was from modern time. An ignition was set in the exact same spot in each room. Once ignited, in less than three minutes, the modern room reached the flash point. In the other room, the couch arm and part of the drapes were burning. Everything else was fine. The difference? Grandma's room was made with all-natural materials such as cotton, wool, etc. The modern room was made up of polyester, nylon, foam, etc. Many of these materials have a petroleum base in their manufacturing. Manmade versus natural.

We nestle into our favorite toxic chair or couch. Sleep in our non-wrinkled sheets. Slip into our favorite synthetic fab-

rics and breathe the off gases from all of it. In the morning we head into the bathroom with all our products to dress for the day. (By the way, the bathroom is usually the most toxic room in our house.)

It's time to stretch our health goals to the home. This is not an easy task. If you thought buying organic was expensive, try pricing out a natural fiber couch or mattress. However, there are steps we can take to offset what we are breathing and absorbing through our skin. Small changes can make a big difference.

Looking for a new rug? Focus on natural fibers such as cotton, wool, jute, hemp, silk, linen, etc. These are also the choices for clothing, curtains, drapes, etc. We have vinyl flooring so I don't walk around the house barefoot. Slippers and socks are my choice for lessening the exposure load. Another good habit is to open your windows whenever possible to allow the gases from the products to escape and let the fresh air in. Even if it's only for 20 minutes early in the morning and longer when the weather is cooler can improve the health of our home. Take your car as an example. The windows always get that film on it after awhile. I used to wonder why they got like that since I wasn't a smoker. Then I learned that it was the



off gassing of all the materials.

Our homes are no different. To minimize harmful substances entering your home take your shoes off at the door. You would be amazed what we track in from parking lots and yards.

It's a bit harder when it comes to the bedroom. The clothes we wear, the mattress we sleep on and the products in the bathroom if it's connected to the bedroom are filled with manufactured materials and chemicals. We spend about 9-10 hours daily sleeping or dressing. Start off small. Update the pillows and sheets with natural

materials. Wear natural fiber sleepwear. Switch out products as they need to be replaced.

When it comes to the kitchen, consider switching dishwasher and dishwashing liquid for a more natural option. The other items to consider replacing are aluminum cookware, plastic storage containers and glasses. Best choices are stainless steel, ceramic, cast iron or glass. Food-grade silicone, stainless steel or wood is a better choice vs. plastic utensils.

Lastly, check the cleaners you use. More natural options are Borax, baking soda and

vinegar. If you opt to stick with certain cleaners, such as for toilets, take precautions to prevent breathing in the fumes and wear gloves.

Spend some time looking around your home. Read the labels on your towels, products, clothes, etc. A little at a time can make a big difference. Be sure to open the windows for a while as often as possible (Do this for your vehicle as well.). Here's to Health!

~ *HealthyDay HealthyLife, succeed.hdhl@gmail.com*



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 Business

# More Than Commerce: Freeport Merchants Association Powers Community Growth

By WILLIAM BLANKEN, FMA PRESIDENT

The Freeport Merchants Association (FMA) is a driving force behind the success of local businesses in Freeport, working to create a supportive environment where all enterprises can grow and thrive. Now with roughly 200 members, FMA is designed to promote economic development, host community events and provide a unified voice for local merchants.

At its core, the FMA is about connecting businesses to customers, merchants to one another, and the entire business community to the larger goals of Freeport. The association regularly organizes events that draw both locals and visitors downtown, increasing foot traffic and exposure for member businesses. Seasonal festivals, sidewalk sales and themed weekends not only boost sales, but also reinforce Freeport's identity as a vibrant, welcoming place to shop, dine and explore.

At the FMA, we equip our members with information and resources designed to enhance their businesses and drive success.

The FMA has two ongoing

events per month. One of the highlights of our calendar is the morning meeting held on the third Thursday of every month at 8 a.m. This gathering takes place at an esteemed FMA members' establishment, where we come together to connect, share and grow. At each morning meeting, we have the privilege of featuring a breakfast sponsor who will share valuable insights about their business as well as a distinguished speaker who brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise tailored specifically for the business community.

An evening social takes place on the second Thursday of every month at 6 p.m., hosted at one of our valued FMA members' establishments. This event is designed to create a relaxed and inviting atmosphere where community members can come together to network, share experiences and build lasting professional relationships. Food and beverages are provided by a FMA Member.

Beyond events, the FMA supports business development through resources, networking opportunities and advocacy. New businesses can lean on the



experience of long-established members, while all benefit from being part of a recognized, respected organization that works to amplify their voices. Membership in the Freeport Merchants Association is available for an annual fee of \$125. This investment provides access to valuable networking opportunities, local

business advocacy, promotional support and community events designed to support and grow your business.

Importantly, the FMA's ef-

forts extend beyond dollars and cents. The organization understands that strong businesses build strong communities. That's why it collaborates with nonprofits, schools and local leaders to support initiatives that improve quality of life in Freeport. Whether it's through beautification projects, sponsorships or educational partnerships, the FMA aims to create a town where businesses and residents thrive together.

In short, the Freeport Merchants Association is more than a business group, it's a catalyst for growth and a pillar of community life. Its mission is to promote local commerce, foster development and advocate for a thriving Freeport is evident in every initiative it leads. As Freeport continues to grow and evolve, the FMA will remain a steady advocate for the people and businesses that make Freeport unique. To become a member, visit <https://thefma.online/membership#join>.

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## A Superior Mechanical Launches Hometown Heroes Comfort Club

A Superior Mechanical, a trusted veteran-owned HVAC company serving Bay County for 23 years, has announced the launch of its new Hometown Heroes Comfort Club, a special membership program providing peace of mind and savings on HVAC services. In a show of appreciation for our community's hometown heroes in Bay, Walton and Okaloosa Counties including first responders, veterans and active military, teachers, doctors and nurses, A Superior Mechanical is offering free Comfort Club membership to these individuals. All other residents can join the club for just \$99 per year.

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"We want everyone to have affordable, reliable comfort in their homes, and peace of mind that comes knowing their equipment is working well," says Jimmy Thorpe, owner of A Superior Mechanical. "Our community's heroes pour into local residents on a daily basis, keeping them safe, healthy, and well educated. This is our way of giving back to them."

Residents can sign up or learn more by visiting [ASuperiorMechanical.com](http://ASuperiorMechanical.com) or calling (850) 258-3225.



# Sean of the South: Freeport



BY SEAN DIETRICH

FREEPORT—Nick’s Seafood Restaurant sits on the Choctawhatchee Bay. I am eating steamed blue crabs with butter sauce, and I am wearing half the meal on my shirt.

Most people know this joint as “Nick’s in the Sticks.” Namely, those who remember what Walton County was like before it turned into a giant cruise ship.

Our area has changed considerably over the years. For example, long ago you could buy live bait at the grocery store. Those days are gone. Today, you go to the store and you see out-of-town fraternity boys surfing atop shopping carts.

But Nick’s hasn’t changed. The seafood place still has fishing boats out front, chickens roaming the parking lot, and views of the Choctawhatchee.

My mother sits across from me. We are eating seafood, looking at the bay. And we talk about the old days. This is what families do. We talk. It’s a shame that there are so many things I can’t remember.

My memory is getting worse the older I get. I suppose this happens to everyone sooner or later.

One day you’re sharp as a bread knife; the next day you’re driving through traffic, radio blaring, and you notice the drive-thru bank deposit tube lying in your passenger seat.

A few days ago, I asked my friend’s elderly mother about this problem of forgetting things. She is a tough woman who has survived a lot in her life. She buried three husbands, and two of them were just napping.

“Being forgetful ain’t all that bad,” she said. “Means you’re an old person. Learn to love it ‘cause if you’re not getting older then you’re dead.”

Well, I have already started forgetting big things. Like certain people I grew up with. I just ran into one such man a few days ago. We weren’t close, but we knew each other. He was

talking about the time when five of us went fishing.

“I don’t remember that,” I said.

“It was definitely you,” he said. “Remember, you were dating that weird girl who was really into politics?”

I had no recollection of it. I was thinking that this guy’s antenna wasn’t picking up all the channels.

Until later that night, when he texted a photo. And sure enough, I was in the picture, standing before a lake.

I guess you can’t pick and choose the memories you keep. And that’s exactly what I’m thinking about while eating blue crab. I am thinking about how little I can recall. And I’m trying to remember as much as I can.

Such as:

How did my sister do in her school play? Did I ever see the aforementioned play? Was it a good play? Do I even have a sister?

What was my favorite song when I was eighteen? Was it “I’m so Lonesome I Could Cry?” Or was it “Boy Named Sue?”

And didn’t I used to drive

my truck along the dirt roads in Freeport, blaring those exact songs, and once I got pulled over by a very grumpy policeman for running a stop sign because I was singing with the radio? Yes, I think I did.

And who was the old man at work who always bought me a hamburger for lunch? He never let me pay for anything. Once, he stole my truck when I was busy working. He returned my truck before I ever knew he was gone.

The next day, I figured out that he had filled my tank with gas. How could I forget his name?

My mother smiles at me from the other side of the table. She pats my hand and says, “It’s part of getting older, don’t worry about forgetting. Your brain remembers the important stuff.”

I suppose it does. After all, I remember her. She and I sort of raised each other.

At this stage of my life, it’s hard for me to believe how much she went through when my father left this world. And it occurs to me, this very moment, that I am about the same age she was when it happened.

I can’t imagine what it must have been like as a young mother, living through hell. But she did it. And unlike me, she isn’t lucky enough to forget things. She has a sharp memory, and remembers everything. Both good and bad.

But you’d never know she suffered during her prime years. She sits across from me, wearing a sundress, eating fried okra. She’s grinning.

“The bay looks pretty,” my mother says. “Doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“It never gets old, does it?”

“No.”

I look at the bay outside the window. The gray water has been a focal point in our lives. Every year I keep getting older, but the bay doesn’t age a bit.

And it reminds me of my whole life. I’m thinking about good dogs, blue crab, nice peo-

ple, and anyone who has ever been careless enough to truly love me. I’m remembering my young mother, long-haired, lean, and beautiful, holding me on her hip. Smiling.

I’m remembering the days when you could buy live bait at the grocery store, and most of all...

Wait.

I’ve forgotten what I was talking about.

*Publisher’s note: Originally written a few years ago, this timeless column feels especially fitting as we launch our inaugural issue of Freeport Life — and continue celebrating voices like Sean’s that uplift our community. Though written before the passing of his beloved mother, its reflection on family, memory and the enduring beauty of life along the Choctawhatchee Bay still rings true today.*

Savvy Leigh PHOTO

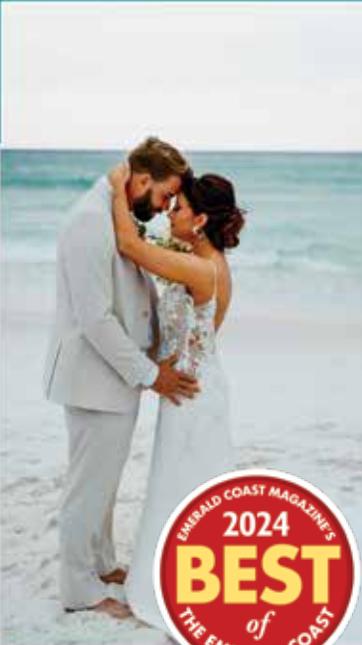
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Musing

# A Pastor's Ponderings: Chautauqua



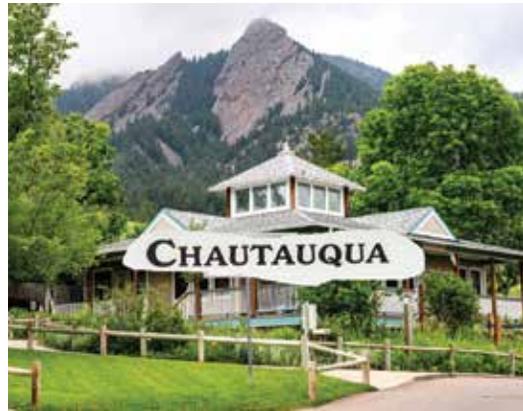
BY RICK MOORE

While spending time with my son in Boulder, Col., I visited a state park at the foothills of the Flatiron Mountains. Near the park entrance was a sign with the words "Chautauqua Park." I had seen the word Chautauqua on signs in Defuniak Springs, which is just 30 minutes from my home. I wasn't sure what the word meant or where the word came from. I asked someone in the Visitor Center of the Colorado Chautauqua if it was related to the Chautauqua in Florida. She gave me a brochure detailing the history of the Chautauqua Movement. This really sparked my curiosity,

and I began researching.

Chautauqua is a county in the northwest corner of New York where, in 1874, a Methodist minister and a businessman joined forces to create a camp to educate Sunday school teachers in the areas of art, education, recreation and religion. Although it started in New York, a few years later it moved to Florida, and then sprouted up across much of the nation. The Chautauqua in Defuniak Springs was so popular that several U.S. presidents came to speak at it. Theodore Roosevelt, who spoke twice at the summer gathering, said, "Chautauqua is the most American thing in America." Thousands attended, with many staying for weeks at a time.

Records reflect that in the early 1900s at a typical Chautauqua, campers learned Latin or French, listened to Beethoven or ragtime, and sampled lectures on literature, art, science and history. Americans who had never studied chemistry saw frozen CO2 and other wonders. Chautauqua also started America's first book club, the Chau-



tautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle. This movement thrived on American curiosity. It became so popular that it spread west to Boulder. Today, the Chautauqua in Florida and in New York seem only a token of their glory days. Though there are still annual festivals at locations across the nation, with the advent of radio and television, the Chautauqua Movement lost most of its influence. That is, except for the Boulder location. The Colorado Chautauqua continues to thrive. Visiting there brought me back to a time when learning was very different. This hands-on approach to

education is the very opposite of Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI is the number one news story of this year. I like AI, but it should never replace non-Artificial Intelligence that is natural and organic. Think about the word artificial for a moment. Artificial sweeteners used to be advertised as superior to natural sweeteners. We now know that is not true. Even our animals can suffer from artificial synthetic ingredients and artificial additives in their food. My wife makes her own dog food, because she has seen firsthand what artificial ingredients can do to our pets. When I see the word artificial, a red flag goes up. If feeding our bodies artificial ingredients is harmful, what does AI do to our minds? What we feed our minds is no different conceptually from what we feed our bodies. AI can be great,

but it should not be a replacement for natural intelligence. Seeing an exotic flower grow on a mountainside is very different from seeing a picture of it on the internet or even with the latest virtual goggles.

If you can't make a trip to the Colorado Chautauqua to enjoy the current offerings of activities, I have a suggestion: There is a local attraction that in many ways carries on the spirit of the Chautauqua. It is the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center located on Highway 20 East here in Freeport. Be sure and check the days and times it is open to the public. Perhaps you can go visit a zoo or aquarium soon. The Artificial Intelligence you get from a VR Headset can never match the experience of being out in nature. The noise my sound machine makes at night is nice, but it will never replace the sound of the waves I hear while sitting on the beach. When you can, go natural.

*Rick Moore is Communication Pastor at Destiny Worship Center.*



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# The Harmonies of Fall: Thanksgiving and the Music That Brings Us Together

As the crisp air of fall settles in and the aroma of pumpkin spice latte fills the air, there's a certain magic in the season that speaks to our senses. Autumn brings with it cozy sweaters, apple cider, and the warm glow of family gatherings. At the heart of it all is Thanksgiving—a day rooted in gratitude, reflection, and connection. And perhaps one of the most powerful ways we express these feelings is through music.

Thanksgiving may not have a specific set of holiday songs, but music remains a powerful backdrop to this season. Whether it's soft folk tunes echoing from the kitchen as a turkey roasts, soulful hymns sung at church services, or a family's traditional playlist playing during dinner, music weaves itself into the fabric of fall traditions.

Historically, since 1620 when the Pilgrims established and settled at Plymouth, Mass., Thanksgiving has been a moment to pause and give thanks

for the harvest and the year's blessings through the good times and the difficult times. It's a celebration of sharing your harvest with friends, family, and those who helped you through those times. This sense of appreciation and community is often reflected in music choices. Songs like "Simple Gifts," a Shaker hymn celebrating the joy of simplicity, or "Come, Ye Thankful People, Come," a classic harvest hymn, bring a sense of reverence and nostalgia. These songs, though centuries old, still resonate because they speak to the timeless values of gratitude, humility, and unity.

Beyond hymns and folk songs, many families create their own Thanksgiving soundtracks. From classic Americana and country to smooth jazz or even pop hits that spark memories, the music we choose reflects our unique traditions. Some may prefer James Taylor or Norah Jones filling the room with mellow warmth, while others lean

into Motown, gospel, or upbeat indie tracks. The diversity of sound reflects the diversity of celebration, especially in multicultural households where Thanksgiving may also incorporate sounds from different cultural heritages.

Music also plays a vital role in shaping the atmosphere. The right playlist can set a calming tone during food prep, provide lively conversation starters at the dinner table, or even inspire a spontaneous post-meal dance session in the living room. It's not uncommon for families to share stories tied to certain songs, maybe a grandparent's favorite tune, or the song that always plays during dessert. These shared musical moments become traditions in their own right.

In schools and community centers, music often accompanies fall festivals and Thanksgiving events. Children may sing seasonal songs or perform in autumn concerts, creating a



sense of belonging and shared celebration. In many churches, Thanksgiving services are rich with musical offerings—choirs, organ pieces or even contemporary worship bands, reminding congregations to lift their voices in thanks.

Ultimately, music during fall and Thanksgiving acts as both a backdrop and a bridge. It historically connects generations, enhances our emotional experience, and reminds us of what we hold dear. Whether it's a quiet instrumental playing during dinner or a rousing family sing-along, music brings warmth,

memory and joy to the season.

So, this fall, as leaves fall and tables fill, take a moment to press play on your favorite songs. Let the music guide your gratitude and let the harmonies remind you: there is much to be thankful for.

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 Arts & Music

# Emerald Coast Theatre Company: **Dreams**



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 your-

self 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 wholeheartedly 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 Olivarrez, 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



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Continued on next page

**ALAQUA**

*continued from page 2*

gram brings together experiences that nurture the mind, body and spirit, including meditation, art, nature walks, counseling and animal-assisted activities. It is a place where compassion becomes a practice and not just a feeling.

One of the most beloved parts of the program is Doggie Day Out, where community members can take an adoptable dog for a few hours or an afternoon adventure. Whether it is a walk on the beach, a car ride or relaxing in the park, these outings give the dogs a break from the shelter and offer people a joyful, stress-relieving experience. Participants often say it is the best therapy they did not know they needed, and many end up adopting their new, furry friends.

Another cornerstone of Alaqua Well-Being is Humane Heroes, the refuge's hands-on learning experience for young people. Students spend time caring for animals, hearing their rescue stories, and learning how empathy and responsibility can change lives. "We have seen kids open up in ways that surprise even their teachers," says Alaqua founder Laurie Hood. "Animals have a way of reaching the parts of us that words cannot."

The program also extends to senior citizens, both at the refuge and through offsite visits.



Many seniors find comfort in brushing a horse's mane, holding a gentle cat or simply sitting quietly with a dog by their side. These simple moments bring back memories, spark conversation and lift spirits in ways that



medicine alone cannot. For anyone seeking stillness, guided nature walks and meditation sessions on Alaqua's trails offer a peaceful escape from the pace of everyday life. The sounds of birds, the rustle of leaves and the presence of animals create a kind of natural therapy — a reminder that calm often lives in the simplest places. Creativity also plays a key role in Alaqua Well-Being. Art classes invite participants to express themselves and find mindfulness through painting, sketching and other forms of creative expression. Alaqua also hosts live music events that bring people together in celebration of community, compassion and the bond we share with animals.

In addition, Alaqua is developing opportunities for counseling and natural healing, connecting participants with professionals and holistic practitioners who share the belief that animals and nature can be powerful partners in emotional wellness.

What ties every part of Alaqua Well-Being together is compassion. The program reflects the refuge's long-standing belief that empathy for animals teaches empathy for people. It is a full-circle approach to wellness that reminds us that healing does not always happen in

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... all the dreams from our Mini Players to the whole expanse of our community... and you are a part of that. You, our patrons, our VIP Members, our Spon-

sors, and our incredible Family of Donors. Your support is the platform that we at ECTC can step up on and reach into the heavens to make dreams come true. Your support, your contribution, your encouragement is foundational to our work and we are so grateful. You truly are the Heart of ECTC.



a clinic, but often in the quiet moments when we simply allow ourselves to connect.

At Alaqua, rescue has always meant more than saving animals. It is about creating a refuge for all living things, people

included. Alaqua Well-Being is the next chapter in that story — a reminder that kindness heals, and that sometimes, the best medicine has four legs and a heartbeat.

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