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Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center Celebrates 25 Years of Helping Children Heal

By KAY PHELAN

For a quarter of a century, the Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center (ECCAC) has been dedicated to providing hope, healing and justice to child abuse victims and their families in Florida's Okaloosa and Walton Counties. ECCAC has two centers—the Pierce Family Children's Advocacy Center in DeFuniak Springs and the Julie Sacco Porterfield Children's Advocacy Center in Niceville. ECCAC is an accredited part of the National Children's Advocacy Center non-profit organization. There are 900 Centers across the country, with 28 of them located in Florida.

How ECCAC Works

The centers don't house children, but instead provide many needed services 24/7 in a child-friendly environment where children can safely tell their stories. Along with ECCAC's staff and volunteers,



both of our local centers house a multidisciplinary team of child protection representatives from the Florida Department of Children and Families,

Child Protection Team, State Attorney's Office, local law enforcement and licensed mental health counselors. In ECCAC's 25-year history,

over 33,000 children have received more than 200,000 services at no cost.

The single most important hallmark of ECCAC's process is the fact that the impacted child, dealing with the immediate trauma and stress of their situation, can tell their story in one room, just one time. They do not have to repeat it numerous times at different places to different people. In other words, all pertinent parties that can help the child victim are all there at the centers at the same time. Once the child tells their story, action is immediately taken as required for that particular case. It is estimated that for every child ECCAC helps in the two counties, there are two children out there who are not helped due to lack of reporting to authorities.

ECCAC

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New Phase, New Era:

The Ships Chandler Opens 170 Covered Boat & RV Storage Spaces in Freeport

By LORI LEATH SMITH

A long-anticipated milestone has officially arrived at The Ships Chandler. Phase Two of the company's Freeport expansion is now complete, and with it comes one of the most significant marine infrastructure additions in the area: 170 covered boat and RV storage spaces, now open and accepting reservations at 850-880-6259.

SHIPS CHANDLER

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 Community
ECCAC

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The Progress to Help Children Continues

The Niceville center was the first to open 25 years ago. With Jim and Tammy Pierce's major financial support in 2015, the second center in DeFuniak Springs was made possible. The Pierce Family Children's Advocacy Center became a reality and opened on April 8, 2016. This enabled a major increase in the number of children who can be



DeFuniak Springs Center in Walton County.



Niceville Center in Okaloosa County.

Comedy Legend Yakov Smirnoff Brings Heart, Humor and Hope to Town

TV and film star and comedy legend Yakov Smirnoff is coming to town to perform his most up-close and personal shows ever. From his first appearance on The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson to his most recent return with Jimmy Fallon, Yakov's career has truly stood the test of time.

A beloved regular on the hit TV comedy Night Court, Smirnoff has also appeared in films alongside Tom Hanks, Meryl Streep, Robin Williams, Jack Nicholson and Richard Pryor. He is set to join Mark Wahlberg in a brand-new feature film scheduled for worldwide release in late 2026.

Yakov's incredible journey began in 1977 when he left his homeland in the former Soviet Union to pursue the American dream. His charming, insightful perspective as a newcomer

to America quickly resonated with audiences, propelling him to the top of the comedy world and leading to success on both the big screen and television. His PBS television special Happily Ever After was named "Best Special" in both 2016 and 2017, and he has had the rare honor of performing for four U.S. presidents.

More than just jokes, Yakov Smirnoff's comedy is a journey of heart, humor and hope. His storytelling blends innocence with wisdom, absurdity with insight, and laughter with humanity, appealing to families, couples and anyone seeking clean, timeless comedy with genuine meaning.

Yakov will perform on Feb. 6, 7 and 8, with 4 and 7 p.m. showtimes at The Palms of Destin Resort. The venue features an intimate showroom

with excellent table seating, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, and plentiful free parking. The Palms is also home to a year-round house show produced by Hollywood-based entertainment producer Bart Rockett, featuring never-before-seen magic, illusions and hilarious comedy ventriloquism. While written for adults, the show is family-friendly and regularly enjoyed by children as well.

Tickets for Yakov Smirnoff's performances, as well as other shows at The Palms, are available at MagicDestin.com. Scroll down on the home page to find Yakov's link or explore additional performances. Reservations may also be made by emailing the box office at MagicTicketAgent@gmail.com.

helped. As well, with prevention being key to making a difference for children, many support programs have been instituted over the years, such as Child Safety Matters, which has advocates who have taught awareness programs to over 17,000 students in both counties. Also, through another grant program, 2 1/2 years ago ECCAC implemented its CARES program, a preventative family-oriented initiative with a myriad of services designed to be the bridge to keeping children in safe and supported homes and out of the judicial child welfare system. CARES stands for Community Awareness, Advocacy, Resources, Education and Support.

Leadership and the Community Make A Difference

Julie Sacco Porterfield, ECCAC's CEO has been heading up the organization since the very beginning. Her dedication and diligence have been significantly responsible for ECCAC's success and continuing commitment to help area children.

Porterfield commented, "Twenty-five years ago, we stood on the front porch to open the Niceville Center. Our dedicated team members made a promise to our community to protect the most vulnerable in our community. This would not have been possible were it not for our incredible agency partners, our Board of Directors, generous donors, dedicated volunteers and our caring community." She further added, "One day we will hang that "Closed for Business" sign – not in defeat, but in triumph, because every child will be living free from abuse, abandonment and neglect. Children deserve absolutely no less. We will continue to build a better, healthier future by ending child abuse, one child at a time."

How to Help Make a Difference in a Child's Life

Until that day, the community can help by serving on the Board of Directors, volunteering, giving or advocating for the children. For more information, visit www.eccac.org, or call 850-400-3488. If abuse is suspected, report it by calling the anonymous Florida Abuse Hotline at 1-800-96-ABUSE.



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Thanks to Dog-Harmony, More Tails Are Wagging

By CHRISTIE SOLOMON

Where the therapy dogs' wagging tails go, area students are learning empathy toward animals and each other, and patients are healing faster with smiles. Dog-Harmony, a 501(c)(3) affiliate of Intermountain Therapy Animals (ITA), evaluates and manages therapy dog teams in Bay, Walton, and Okaloosa counties in Northwest Florida.

For example, Dog-Harmony currently coordinates 12 volunteer therapy dog teams that serve public and nonprofit organizations such as Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center and HCA Florida Twin Cities Hospital in the nearby Niceville area through animal-assisted interactions, including the R.E.A.D.ing Paws program. Dog-Harmony is dedicated to reducing the shelter dog population through ongoing, community-focused, humane education and therapy dog programs that enrich the human-animal bond.

What is Humane Education?

"Humane education [is] designed to cultivate compassion for humans, animals, and/or the environment." The Animal Legal Defense Fund states that the field "exists to foster creative and critical thinking skills within people, which enable them to make benevolent choices and enhance respect for the natural world and its inhabitants." Access to humane education programming for children is critical as they begin developing empathy skills and humane attitudes.

The Role of Therapy Dogs in Humane Education

Therapy dog teams, consisting of an evaluated therapy dog and handler, support Dog-Harmony's humane education and responsible dog care programs for children and families, helping them practice what they learn. At the end of November, 4,250 children in Okaloosa and Walton counties had attended Dog-Harmony's humane education programs in 2025.

Studies have shown that



humane education programs improve children's empathy toward animals and, in turn, each another.

A study of 257 students, aged 10 to 17, who participated in The Marine Humane Society's after-school humane education programs between the Fall of 2014 and the Spring of 2018, revealed that the students' evaluation scores improved for both treatment of animals and empathy (attitudes towards other people) after completing the eight-week program.

A 2021 study of 110 third-grade students in Hong Kong found that class-based, animal-assisted humane education increased cognitive competence and empathy and reduced hyperactivity among participants. The researchers also identified three central qualitative themes from the study: "enhancement of self-control, promotion of humane attitude, and improvement of reading skills."

Published in 2023, the results of an academic-year-long study of 605 first-grade students in six

schools across four cities in eastern China revealed that the animal and nature content of the country's humane education program, "Caring for Life," increased the students' affective and cognitive empathy scores. Affective empathy, associated with altruistic and prosocial behaviors in children, is the ability to share others' emotions, whereas cognitive empathy is the ability to understand them.

R.E.A.D.ing Paws Program

In addition to empathy, therapy dogs can also encourage a love of reading. Dog-Harmony is an affiliate of ITA's R.E.A.D.ing Paws (Reading Education Assistance Dogs) program, an initiative designed to help children build confidence and improve their literacy skills

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Community



Training for the Long Run: A Smarter Way to Think About Your Health

BY DR. KAREN DEVORE, TORTOISE CLINIC

If you've ever laced up your shoes for a long walk, a run, or even just committed to showing up for yourself day after day, you already understand something

fundamental about health: real progress takes time.

In my work, I see it constantly—people who are frustrated, exhausted, and overwhelmed because they've tried everything. The detox teas. The extreme




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cleanses. The 30-day challenges promising a brand-new body and life by next month. And when those promises inevitably fall short, they blame themselves.

Here's the truth I want you to hear clearly: your body is not the problem. The problem is the belief that wellness should be fast, dramatic, and immediate.

Health doesn't work that way. It never has.

The Myth of the Quick Fix

We live in a culture that celebrates instant results. Faster internet. Overnight shipping. Before-and-after photos that suggest transformation can, and should, happen in weeks. It's no wonder people feel discouraged when their own bodies don't keep up with those expectations.

But your body is not a machine you can reboot. It is a living, adaptive system shaped by years of stress, habits, hormones, sleep patterns, relationships, injuries, and emotions. Expecting it to "snap back" after a few weeks of effort is not just unrealistic, it's unfair.

Fads and trends often work briefly because they shock the system. They rely on restrictions, extremes, or novelty. And while they may produce short-term changes, they rarely create lasting health. Once the trend ends, as it always does, the symptoms return, sometimes louder than before.

athon, I don't mean it has to be miserable or exhausting. Quite the opposite. Sustainable health is built through consistent, manageable choices that your body can integrate over time.

Think about how trust is built in a relationship. It's not created by grand gestures alone. It's built through reliability. Showing up. Listening. Responding with care. Your body works the same way.

When you nourish yourself regularly, move in ways that feel supportive, address stress gently, and prioritize sleep, your nervous system begins to relax. Hormones rebalance. Digestion improves. Pain softens. Energy returns, not all at once, but gradually, reliably.

This is not flashy progress. It's quiet. And it's powerful.

Real Life Doesn't Happen in Perfect Conditions

One of the biggest reasons people abandon their wellness efforts is because they believe they've "fallen off the wagon." Life happens—a busy week, a sick child, a stressful deadline, a holiday meal—and suddenly it feels like everything is ruined.

But a marathon isn't lost because you slow down for water. Or because you stumble. Or because one mile feels harder than the last. You keep going.

Health is not about perfection. It's about resilience and return—coming back to yourself again and again without punishment or shame.

Why Slow and Steady Actually Works

When I say wellness is a mar-

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Revocable Living Trusts: Not as Complicated as They Sound



BY BILL BLANKEN

Estate planning may not top anyone's weekend to-do list. It usually lands somewhere between cleaning out the garage and finally organizing old photos. Still, local financial professionals say planning ahead can spare families a lot of stress later, and one tool worth understanding is the Revocable Living Trust.

Despite the intimidating name, a revocable living trust is simply a legal way to manage your assets while you're alive and make life easier for the peo-

ple you leave behind. Think of it as a set of clear instructions, written while you're thinking clearly, instead of leaving loved ones to figure things out during an already difficult time.

One of the biggest advantages of a trust is avoiding probate court. Probate can be slow, costly, and public, which means family finances become part of the public record. Assets held in a trust typically transfer directly to beneficiaries, saving time, money, and more than a few headaches.

Privacy is another major benefit. Unlike a will, which becomes public once it enters probate, a trust keeps personal and financial details out of the spotlight. For many families, that privacy alone makes a trust appealing.

A revocable living trust also allows for flexibility. While you're living, you stay in control. You can add or remove assets, update beneficiaries, or change instructions as life evolves. New



homes, new family members, or new goals can all be reflected without starting from scratch.

Trusts can also help in the event of incapacity. If someone becomes medically, mentally, or physically unable to manage their affairs, a successor trustee can step in immediately. There's no need for court intervention, and bills, investments, and property can continue to be managed without disruption.

Another key step is "fund-

ing" the trust, which means retitling assets into the trust's name. Professionals note this step is critical. Without it, even the best-written trust won't work the way it's intended.

People are often surprised to learn that trusts aren't just for the wealthy. Homeowners, parents with minor children, blended families, and small business owners can all benefit from having a clear plan in place. Trusts can also help reduce family con-

flicts by clearly spelling out who receives what and when.

A revocable living trust becomes irrevocable upon the grantor's death or incapacity. At that point, the instructions are locked in, and the trust carries out its purpose: transferring assets smoothly, privately, and according to the grantor's wishes.

Estate planning professionals often remind clients that a trust works best when paired with other documents, such as powers of attorney and healthcare directives. Together, these tools help ensure financial and medical decisions are handled the way someone would want, even if they can't speak for themselves.

It may not be the most exciting topic for casual conversation, but a little planning today can save families from confusion, conflict, and courtrooms tomorrow. And for many people, that peace of mind is well worth the effort.



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A Night of Hope: Legacy Five in Concert

Tickets are now on sale for a special benefit concert featuring Legacy Five, the Dove Award-winning Southern Gospel group, performing Friday, Jan. 30, at 7 p.m. at Good News Church. Presented by The Crawford Family, 100% of proceeds will benefit Caring & Sharing of South Walton.

Renowned for rich four- and five-part harmonies, Legacy Five brings together five nationally acclaimed vocalists. This marks the group's fourth return to Walton County in support of Caring & Sharing, promising an inspiring evening of music and community impact.

General admission tickets are \$20, with doors opening at 6:30 p.m. VIP tickets are \$100 and include preferred seating and a 6 p.m. meet-and-greet; VIP doors open at 5:30 p.m. Tickets are available online at <https://tinyurl.com/y4hfcwu5>.

"Caring & Sharing is a blessing to many in Walton County," said Jennifer Crawford, sponsor



and longtime supporter. "Sharing a night of Dove Award-winning Legacy Five music to raise funds feels like pure joy, and we're thrilled to bring this opportunity back to our community."

"Having Legacy Five return for a fourth year is incredibly exciting, and it's all thanks to The Crawford Family," said Carly Barnes, executive director of Caring & Sharing of South Walton. "Every dollar raised



will help us meet the growing needs of our neighbors." As Caring & Sharing begins 2026 amid unprecedented de-

mand, the concert will help sustain essential services for more than 1,100 families served each month. Sponsorship opportunities are still available. To learn

more, volunteer, donate or get involved, visit www.servesowal.com or email carly@caringand-sharingowal.org.

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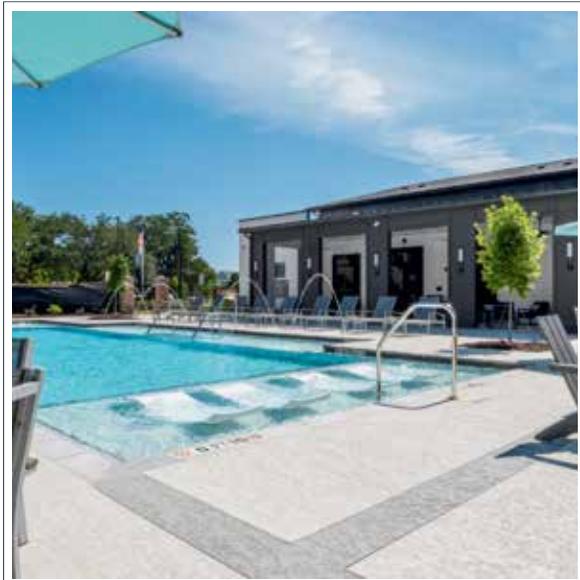


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THE WATERS
AT FREEPORT

NatureView:

A Community Rooted in Nature; Built for Generations

BY MIMY KINCAID, MARKETING AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR, THE JAY ODOM GROUP

Some projects come along once in a career. NatureView is

one of those.

As someone who has had the privilege of helping shape NatureView's story and identity from a brand perspective, I can say this with certainty. This is not

just another neighborhood. It is a rare opportunity to do something thoughtfully and intentionally, with a long view of what truly matters to families in Freeport and to generations to come.



NatureView is uniquely positioned in the heart of Walton County, surrounded by more than fifty thousand acres of permanently protected forest and conservation land. That kind of setting is incredibly rare in new development today. Here mornings begin with birdsong instead of traffic, and evenings are shaped by quiet skies, tall pines, and a sense of calm that feels increasingly hard to find.

And yet you are still remarkably close to everything.

Within minutes, residents can access the everyday conveniences of Freeport and, in just 9 miles, arrive at the sugar white beaches and turquoise waters that define our coast. It is this balance of peaceful seclusion without isolation that makes NatureView truly one of a kind.

Freeport is one of the fastest-growing cities in Florida, and growth brings responsibility. NatureView was designed with that responsibility in mind. This is a master-planned community not only in its layout but also in its philosophy. Preserved green space, thoughtful infrastructure, and community-focused amenities were part of the vision from the very beginning.

At the heart of the neighborhood is a resort-inspired amenity center featuring a clubhouse, fitness facilities, a zero-entry pool, sports courts, and gathering spaces designed to bring people together. Miles of trails wind through pocket parks and natural areas, encouraging an active lifestyle and daily connection to the outdoors. This is a place where neighbors know each other by name, where children ride bikes, and where time outside is part of everyday life.

What makes this even more meaningful is its accessibility.

NatureView offers brand new homes starting in the low three hundreds, built by trusted, well-established builders. In today's market, that combination

of new construction, preserved nature, and resort-style amenities, especially this close to the coast, is incredibly rare. It is the kind of value that makes people pause, look again, and realize something different is happening here.

From a brand and community perspective, it has been an honor to help introduce NatureView to the people of Freeport and beyond. Developments like this shape more than a home. They become the backdrop for first homes, growing families, milestones, and memories that last for decades. Long after the last home is built, the community continues to live, breathe, and evolve.

NatureView is not about fast growth. It is about lasting growth.

It is about creating a neighborhood that feels grounded, connected, and meaningful. A place people are proud to call home, not just today but for generations to come.

If you are curious, I invite you to experience NatureView for yourself. Walk the trails, stand beneath the trees, and tour the model homes by DSLD Builders and Holiday Builders to see how this community is coming to life today.

Sometimes the most special places are not the loudest ones. They are the ones that feel right the moment you arrive.

For more information or to schedule a tour, visit NatureViewFL.com or reach out to me at mkincaid@thejayodimgroup.com



DID YOU BUILD OR PURCHASE A HOME LAST YEAR?

PROPERTY TAX EXEMPTION FILING DEADLINE MARCH 1, 2026

Gary J. Gregor, Walton County Property Appraiser, reminds property owners who intend to make application for Homestead Exemption, Deployed Military Exemption, Combat Disabled Veteran's Discount, Veteran's Exemption, Disability Exemption, Agricultural Classification, Additional Senior Exemption, or Widow's and Widower's Exemption, the absolute filing deadline is **MARCH 1, 2026**.

If you plan to file your exemption for the first time, please bring with you a copy of your recorded deed or tax receipt, the social security number(s) of all owners of property, Florida driver's license number, Florida auto tag number, and voter's registration number. If you are entitled to disability exemption, please bring proof of disability (two doctors' statements). If you are filing Homestead Exemption on a mobile home, please bring the title or registration certificate.

If you are filing for the "Additional Exemption for Persons 65 and Older" there is a total household income limitation (adjusted annually for cost-of-living; proof will be required).

If you would like information to determine your eligibility for exemptions, please call **850-892-8123** or **850-267-4500**, Monday thru Friday, 8:00 a.m. until 4:30 p.m.

You may file for exemptions at the following office locations of the Property Appraiser Monday thru Friday, 8 a.m. until 4:30 p.m.

DeFuniak Springs - Courthouse

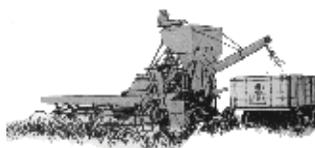
571 Hwy. 90 East
DeFuniak Springs, FL 32433

Santa Rosa Beach - Courthouse Annex

31 Coastal Centre Blvd., Suite 600
Santa Rosa Beach, FL 32459

THE ABSOLUTE FILING DEADLINE FOR 2026 EXEMPTIONS IS MARCH 1, 2026.

Have You Applied For Ag Classification of Newly Acquired Agricultural Lands For 2026?



Preparing Students for Any Future: **Celebrating 30 Years of Excellence at THE SEASIDE SCHOOL™**

This year marks 30 years of excellence for The Seaside School, a public charter school system recognized throughout South Walton for academic achievement, strong relationships, and a future-focused approach to education. Serving students in grades 5–12 through Seaside Neighborhood School and Seacoast Collegiate High School, The Seaside School has built a reputation for preparing students not only for college, but for life.

At the foundation of The Seaside School's success is a deep understanding of how adolescents learn, grow, and develop confidence. Across both campuses, students engage in rigorous academics while developing durable life skills including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, adaptability, leadership, and problem-solving that equip them for any path they choose.

At Seaside Neighborhood School (grades 5–8), students experience a learning environment intentionally designed for ado-

lescents. Small cohorts, strong teacher-student relationships, and engaging, interdisciplinary instruction help students feel safe, known, and academically confident during these critical years. SNS is known for its focus on literacy, numeracy, inquiry-based learning, and the arts, while also providing leadership and mentorship opportunities that empower students to find their voice.

Community engagement is central to the SNS experience. Through arts programming, mentorship, service leadership, and community-based projects, students learn responsibility, empathy, and civic engagement, developing a strong sense of purpose and belonging while contributing meaningfully to the world around them.

This strong academic and developmental foundation carries seamlessly into Seacoast Collegiate High School (grades 9–12), where students experience a reimagined high school model that blends traditional student



life with advanced academic opportunity. Students participate in athletics, arts, debate, leadership programs, clubs, and school traditions while also accessing dual enrollment and career-aligned pathways.

Ranked in the Top 2% of Florida public schools, Seacoast students benefit from highly qualified, relationship-driven educators, daily tutoring, and personalized academic and college planning. Many graduate, having earned up to 60 tuition-free college credits, often completing an Associate's Degree before high school graduation, saving

families an average of \$30,000 in college tuition.

Seacoast student voices reflect the impact of this model. Fernanda Leyva shared, "I'm grateful for every single person and opportunity—everyone here is an advocate for me."

Sullivan Stublely noted, "Seaside prepares me through its accelerated tracks."

And Kincsó Tischler emphasized the strength of relationships, saying, "The faculty genuinely cares about my well-being, and I have a special relationship with my counselors."

Seacoast's impact continues to grow through its expansion at the Northwest Florida State College South Walton Center campus, where the high school now operates within a new, state-of-the-art facility featuring an Innovation Lab, advanced technology and engineering spaces, and collaborative learning environments.

Students engage with industry-standard tools while exploring fields such as engineering, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, design, business, healthcare, and the arts—all without leaving South Walton.

As a tuition-free public charter school, enrollment at The Seaside School is completed through an annual lottery. Families interested in Seaside Neighborhood School or Seacoast Collegiate High School are encouraged to apply during the current application window from now to February 13th.

With 30 years of proven results, a strong foundation of trust, and a bold vision for the future, The Seaside School continues to set the standard for innovative, student-centered public education, supporting students from early adolescence through college readiness and beyond.

Families must apply before **February 13** to be considered in the open lottery. For more information, visit SeasideSchools.net.

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- Education Beyond Textbooks — Experiences That Build Confidence**
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- Dual Enrollment, Certifications & Flexible Pathways for the Future**
Students can earn up to 60 tuition-free college credits through dual enrollment at Northwest Florida State College, often completing an Associate's Degree and saving families an average of \$30,000. Along the way, students earn industry certifications (AI, cybersecurity, CAD, Fusion 360), the Florida Seal of Biliteracy, and develop durable life skills—critical thinking, adaptability, and problem-solving—preparing them for any path they choose.





New Beginnings Along HWY 331



BY KERRI PARKER

A new year carries the quiet thrill of possibility—the chance to pause, reflect and imagine what comes next. Along HWY 331, that spirit flows through the communities that line the corridor, linking DeFuniak Springs, Freeport and Santa Rosa Beach in a shared rhythm of courage, creativity and renewal.

Here, new beginnings aren't always grand or headline-making. They are neighbors choosing to come together to im-



prove a street, families creating traditions that honor the past while embracing the future and entrepreneurs opening doors that bring fresh energy to the community. Each act, large or small, is part of the pulse of the corridor—proof that potential

is alive wherever people are willing to try.

The magic of HWY 331 is that these efforts don't exist in isolation. A revitalized storefront in one town inspires ideas in another; a community project sparks collaboration across

neighborhoods. The energy flows, carrying hope, ambition and resilience from place to place. It's a living reminder that beginnings are stronger when they are shared, and that growth is most meaningful when it connects people across the corridor.

The power of a new beginning isn't measured by size or speed. It's in the choice to step forward despite uncertainty, to invest in a vision and to believe that your actions

matter. Along HWY 331, that courage is tangible—in restored

spaces, fresh ventures and the people who refuse to stand still.

As this new year unfolds, may we embrace fresh starts, celebrate the journeys of those around us and recognize that beginnings—like the corridor itself—are most vibrant when we move forward together. Along HWY 331, the road ahead is open and the possibilities are endless.

From local businesses to inspiring community projects, the corridor is alive with stories of growth, courage, and connection. Visit HWY331.com to stay inspired and discover the people, places and events shaping our communities.



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HWY331 Podcast

A New Way to Live in Retirement

Before the first streaks of sunrise settle over Inlet Beach, one member is already at the gym — stretching, lifting, moving with a quiet determination. “I wake up at 4:30,” he says with a shrug, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. “I work out, head back for breakfast, and then I decide: golf simulator... or swimming?”

He smiles. “I feel better than I have in years.”

Across the community, the day opens at its own gentle tempo. A woman clips a leash on her dog and walks toward one of the community’s dog-friendly outdoor areas, grateful for the easy routine they’ve settled into. Not long ago, she was living with her daughter in Alys Beach, watching Watersound Fountains being built across the highway. She never imagined it would one day be home.

“I thought, Those places aren’t for me,” she admits.

But when her daughter insisted she come take a look, everything shifted — the bright, thoughtfully designed apartments, the welcoming outdoor



spaces for her dog, the light, the openness, the surprising sense of possibility.

“After the first week,” she says, “there was no going back.”

The beauty of a morning here is that everyone’s version looks a little different. Some head to the balance studio for physical therapy. Others meet friends on the walking trails that curl through Watersound and 30A. Some hop on a bike. Some linger over coffee. Each person finds their own pace.

By mid-morning, the community hums with activity. One member laughs as she lists her schedule: “Today I had, back-to-back: physical therapy, a fitness class, book club, then happy hour.” She shakes her head, still amused. “It’s just kind of nonstop here.”

And yet, it’s never rushed. Life simply unfolds — with options around every corner.

For many, the choice to move to Watersound Fountains was about proximity. After years in



Georgia, far from children and grandchildren, one couple realized they wanted the holidays, the milestones, and the simple weekends back. Now their son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter live minutes away. “We do more now,” they say. “Especially with family so close.”

Afternoons often stretch into easy hours. Neighbors meet in the W Lounge. Others gather around the open hearth pizza oven, where flatbreads are rolled out right in front of them. On Fridays, The Mark dining room becomes the community’s favorite tradition — a dressed-up, reservations-only dinner with filet, snapper, grouper, and the kind of conversations people look forward to all week.

There’s always movement, always laughter, always someone waving from a walkway or

calling out a hello — the kind of natural, everyday community that makes a place feel alive.

What surprises many is not how much there is to do, but how effortless daily life feels here. The physical therapist is downstairs. The gym is steps away. The trails are safe and beautifully maintained. The beaches and local favorites are just a short drive. Every day can unfold at its own pace.

“You can do as much or as little as you want,” a member says as she waves to a neighbor. “It’s like living in a resort — but it feels like home.”

And maybe that’s the truest throughline here.

Occasionally, one member’s daughter will call and say, “Come home — come stay some.” And she’ll laugh and reply, “But I am home. This is my home.”

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 Community



A Few Simple Tips to Save Money on Homeowners Insurance in 2026

BY BRANDON CERVENKA

Owning a home along the Emerald Coast is something to take pride in — but protecting that home doesn't have to be a financial burden. With insurance rates climbing statewide, many homeowners around Santa Rosa Beach are looking for ways to keep premiums manageable without sacrificing protection. The good news is, there

are several practical steps you can take to reduce your annual costs and still maintain quality coverage.

1. Hire A Home Inspector

Having a wind mitigation and four-point inspection completed on your home by a licensed Florida home inspector is one of the quickest ways to reduce rising insurance premiums. A licensed inspector uses the state's Uniform Mitigation Verification Inspection Form (often referred to as form OIR-B1-1802) to document features like your roof shape and attachment, sec-

ondary water barrier, and opening protection.

Florida law requires insurers to provide insureds with actual discounts or credits on the wind portion of your policy if they provide a valid inspection. In fact, carriers and industry examples show that strong wind-mitigation profiles can lead to meaningful reductions on the windstorm part of your premium, with many home-

owners seeing double-digit percentage savings that compound year after year.

2. Invest in Home Safety Features

Insurers love risk reduction — and they often show it with better rates. Installing a monitored alarm system, smart smoke detectors, or water leak sensors can earn you discounts. In our coastal area, wind mitiga-



tion is again especially valuable. Roof tie-downs, impact-resistant windows, and storm shutters all help reduce storm damage risk, which can drop your premium noticeably.

3. Build and Maintain Your Credit

Many insurers use credit-based scores when setting rates. Making on-time payments, reducing debt, and monitoring your credit report can help you qualify for better insurance pricing over time.

4. Work with a Local Expert

Every home and policy is unique, and what works best for your neighbor may not be ideal for you. That's why it helps to talk with a local insurance professional who understands our area's specific risks — from coastal storms to rebuilding costs. A brief policy review might be all it takes to find new savings opportunities for your home.

Questions about property insurance or other coverages? Contact Brandon Cervenka Insurance Agency (850-622-0448)—local, friendly, and here for your family.

Is it time to WAIT or CUT BAIT and GO?

BY TED SHOOP

Amongst the new year resolutions, many are likely weighing their options when it comes to housing. Is now a good time to buy or sell? What's going on in the economy, job market, home inventories, and what is on the mind of virtually everyone — mortgage rates.

The reality is that homes sell year-round; however, there are peaks and valleys every year. If your listing recently expired or you put off buying your first or next home because of all the doom and gloom offered by the news and social media, pay attention: Don't Give Up!

A few of the lenders I work with shared this past week that they have begun underwriting some loans with rates below 6%. This hasn't occurred in over three years! Prices have stabilized and inventories are

slightly up from a year ago.

The next Federal Reserve meeting will be held on January 27-28. Although the Fed's earlier comments lean toward pausing further reductions this quarter, the actual performance indicators are consistently beating "expert" projections. What does this mean? Well, my crystal ball hasn't worked in decades. But, after studying real estate trends, local market data and experiencing the bubble of 2007-2009 first-hand—Get Ready—the real estate rocket ship is on the launch pad, fueled, and ready to take flight!! Contact me if you would like more statistics for your neighborhood.

Ted Shoop is an experienced local Realtor with eXp Realty focused on serving customers within Hammock Bay, Freeport and Walton County communities.

WE HAVE OUR WINNER!

Congratulations to Randy W. of Freeport who WON Ted's 65" Samsung 4K Smart TV Giveaway!



Randy shared with me that his old TV ironically gave out last month. Therefore, receiving the news he had won a new 65" 4K TV couldn't have come at a better time!



Brandon Cervenka
Local Allstate Insurance Agent

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DOG HARMONY

continued from page 3

with the help of trained therapy dogs and their handlers. Evaluated therapy dog teams interested in participating in this program are required to take the R.E.A.D.ing Paws workshop and undergo (human) background checks before being put into service.

The Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI) states, “Children have reported liking the animal and enjoying reading to them, increasing their motivation to read... Pets are not judgmental, they do not laugh [or] criticize, and allow children to read at their own pace. Dogs can reduce the stress

reactions of children performing a stressful task.”

Therapy Dogs in Health Settings

In addition to social and emotional learning and literacy benefits for children in schools, interactions with therapy dogs can actively reduce stress and anxiety in medical and at-risk youth advocacy settings. Therapy dogs can improve human mental and physiological health through acceptance, physical comfort, mental stimulation, socialization, and entertainment through animal-assisted interactions.

According to HABRI, animal-assisted interactions have been shown to positively “in-

fluence levels of blood pressure, heart rate, [and] hormones correlated with well-being, including cortisol, oxytocin, β -endorphin, prolactin, phenylacetic acid and dopamine.”

Ways to Get Involved

Dog-Harmony founder, Nancy Brown, a Certified Professional Dog Trainer-Knowledge

Assessed (CPDT-KA), knows that the continued growth of the organization’s therapy dog program relies on volunteers and the generosity of corporate sponsors and individual donors. Compassionate support volunteers help coordinate therapy dog visits in hospitals and support Dog-Harmony teams in the community. This support

volunteer role provides an opportunity to shadow current therapy dog teams and offers insights into a potential future team role paired with an evaluated therapy dog.

To learn more, request a therapy dog visit, or become a volunteer, visit www.dog-harmony.org.

Freeport Life is printed and delivered to 9,500 homes & businesses in the Freeport & Hammock Bay area each month!
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At Pruitt-Gann Group, real estate is more than buying and selling homes—it’s about serving people, building relationships, and strengthening the communities we call home. With decades of combined experience in real estate, marketing, and leadership, our team is proud to help families, retirees, and investors navigate one of life’s most important decisions.

Our roots run deep in Northwest Florida, particularly in Freeport and the surrounding areas. We’ve watched this community grow and evolve, and our track record reflects that local commitment. To date, our team has successfully closed more than \$57 million in real estate sales in the Freeport area alone, giving us firsthand knowledge of market trends, neighborhoods, and property values. That experience allows us to guide clients with confidence—whether they’re

first-time buyers, relocating families, or long-time residents ready for their next chapter.

What sets us apart is our team approach. Every client benefits from our combined expertise, clear communication, and hands-on service from start to finish. We believe in being accessible, responsive, and honest, and we work hard to ensure our clients feel informed and supported throughout the entire process.

At the heart of everything we do is a genuine passion for helping people achieve their version of the American Dream. We are grateful for the trust our clients place in us and for the opportunity to continue serving this community we love.

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 Environment

Coastal Dune Lakes at State Parks

BY HELEN PETRE

Our special part of the panhandle is famous for beaches, 30A, and dune lakes. While tourism makes up most of our economy, we benefit from state forests and parks which preserve our special environments. Part of that is our coastal dune lakes, all of which are threatened by coastal development and all that comes with it, yet some lakes are preserved by our land use choices.

Coastal dune lakes are permanent lakes that form inland of dunes. There are hundreds of dune lakes all over the world. Walton County has 19, or maybe 15, based on different classifications.

Walton County's dune lakes are tannin-stained, which makes the water look brown due to organic matter in the lake. It does not negatively affect the water quality. Tannin means "crushed oak bark." The tannin in the lakes is from the surrounding oak trees. Tannin is used for tanning animal skins.

Dune lakes are shallow (between 0.9 and 2.4 meters), and irregularly shaped. Most of our dune lakes have an intermittent connection with saltwater, or an outflow, which allows for water exchange, and results in an estuarine environment with

a mixture of salt and fresh water, or brackish water. Some of our lakes have outflows that flow into other lakes, or storm water drainage ditches, or the outfalls do not exist because of alterations for development. Many of our lakes have outflows that flow through constructed tunnels under 30A. The lakes in our state parks retain their natural outflows. Each lake is different, and all are treasures to preserve.

All of our lakes are fed by groundwater. Characteristics of lakes vary based on the size and shape of their basins, outflow channels, and the surrounding land use, but the water in the lakes always resembles ground water, because water tends to flow out of the lakes more than into them from the Gulf.

Groundwater levels are close to the ground surface, even during dry seasons. The sand and gravel aquifer brings ground water from high points in Alabama to our coast, so water tends to flow, only a few feet below the surface, from north to south, and empty into the Gulf, or close to it, in springs or dune lakes. The groundwater flow is unconfined and recharged from rainwater as well as river water from the north. Since ground water flows south, the lakes drain freshwater into the Gulf.



PHOTO COURTESY FLORIDA STATE PARKS
Grayton Beach State Park

Waves and tides, and especially storm events, can move saltwater into the lakes, but the water in the lakes still remains more characteristically fresh than salt.

Dune Lakes From East To West

Lake Powell is the largest and farthest east of our dune lakes. The outflow is in Bay County, while the lake is in both Walton and Bay Counties, at Camp Helen State Park. The outfall is open often, and it is amazing. Lake Powell is about a half a mile walk from the Camp Helen parking lot, either on a beach trail or through the woods.

Camp Creek Lake is surrounded by dense residential development and a golf course. The lake flows under 30A to connect to the Gulf. Access

is limited except by walking along the beach or living in a community with access.

Deer Lake is part of Deer Lake State Park. A culvert passes under 30A connecting it to the Gulf.

Tresca Lake is the smallest dune lake. The outflow is permanently closed due to residential development, however, water overflows into Deer Lake.

Eastern Lake is on both sides of 30A and surrounded by residential and commercial development.

Western, Northeast, Western, and Grayton Lakes are connected bodies of water. They have one outflow at Grayton Lake, which tends to open with high rainfall events. Western Lake is in Grayton Beach State Park.

Alligator Lake is on both sides of 30A, with a culvert connecting the two sides.

Little Redfish Lake and Big Redfish Lake are surrounded by dense residential development and are on both sides of 30A. Both have no public access other than walking along a beach.

Draper Lake is an elongated lake surrounded by dense residential development. There is no public access other than

walking from a beach access.

Oyster Lake is surrounded by residential development. There is no public access. The outflow is under 30A.

Allen Lake overflows through a storm water ditch to Oyster Lake. Allen Lake is north of 30A. There is no public access.

Stallworth Lake is surrounded by residential development. There is no public access except to walk along the beach from Topsail.

Topsail Hill Preserve State Park

No Name Lake, Campbell Lake, and Morris Lake and are within Topsail Hill Preserve State Park, with its pine forests and freshwater wetlands. Lakes within Topsail Hill Preserve State Park are accessible only by foot, or tram within the park.

These three lakes are least impacted by development because they are in the park and require effort to reach.

Fuller Lake is on the western edge of Topsail Hill Preserve State Park and overflows into Morris Lake. Fuller Lake is inside the Coffin Nature Preserve. The only access is through the nature preserve.

Preserving our lakes

Most of our dune lakes are within residential communities. The people that live there surely

Continued on page 21



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Events Around Town

Night of Hope Concert Benefiting Caring & Sharing Jan. 30

Tickets are now on sale for a special benefit concert featuring Legacy Five, the Dove Award-winning Southern Gospel group, performing Friday, Jan. 30 at 7 p.m. at Good News Church. The event is brought to the community by The Crawford Family, with 100% of event proceeds benefiting Caring & Sharing of South Walton.

Renowned for their rich four-and-five-part harmonies, Legacy Five brings together five uniquely gifted vocalists whose artistry has earned the group national acclaim. Their return to Walton County marks their fourth performance benefiting Caring & Sharing, promising an inspiring evening of music and community impact. Tickets: www.tinyurl.com/y4hfcwu5.

Biophilia Center Sips & Scenes Jan. 31

Join the Biophilia Center for a fun and inspiring celebration of art as you tap into your creative side! An adults-only event (18+), Sips at Scenes begins at 11 a.m. This experience features a guided craft led by a talented local artist. A Biophilia Animal Ambassador will make a special appearance during the activity to spark creativity and help inspire your masterpiece. An additional up-close animal encounter is also available as an add-on with your ticket. Guests must be 21 or older to enjoy alcoholic beverages. BYOB is encouraged, and participants 21+ will enjoy bottom-less mimosas included with their ticket. Tickets: <https://secure.qgiv.com/for/nokuseeducation/event/biophiliartfestivalkid-scraftday>.

Pink Out for a Purpose Jan. 31

Fore Her welcomes all “walks of life” to lace up and “pink out” on Saturday, Jan. 31 at 8:30 a.m. at the Village of Baytowne Wharf for the annual Pink Run 5K, presented by Emerald Coast Hospice Care, a signature event that raises funds to provide essential financial assistance to breast cancer patients undergoing treatment. Visit <https://PinkRunBenefitingForeHer.itsyourrace.com> to register. For

more information and available sponsorship opportunities, visit foreher.org/pinkrun or email Amy@foreher.org.

Annual Father-Daughter Dance Feb. 6

Hammock Bay families are invited to enjoy an evening of music and memories at the Annual Father-Daughter Dance on Friday, Feb. 6, from 6 to 8 p.m. at the Steamboat Landing Clubhouse. This free event is open exclusively to Hammock Bay residents and will feature finger foods and snacks, drinks, a photo booth and a DJ. Advance RSVP is required. To register, visit <https://forms.cloud.microsoft/r/4XEfhr5shc>.

Nick's Seafood Annual Bonfire Feb. 7

They'll be firing up the biggest bonfire in the county and throwing the kind of party only Nick's can get away with starting at 5 p.m. DJ Viper opens and closes, and the Velcro Pygmies are rolling in to crank the night into full rock-and-roll mode. There will be food service inside of the restaurant, an ATM, and a cash bar located on premises. Additional parking will be located west of the restaurant. Expect big fire, loud music, cold

drinks, and a lot of good-natured coastal debauchery on the bay. Bring your crew. Bring your stories. Leave the quiet nights at home.

Camellia Festival at Eden Gardens State Park Feb. 7

Choctawhatchee Audubon will host educational stations during the annual Camellia Festival on Saturday, Feb. 7, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Eden Gardens State Park in Santa Rosa Beach. Festivalgoers can explore the historic gardens while learning about native birds, habitats and conservation efforts. For more information about Choctawhatchee Audubon programs and events, visit choctawhatcheeaudubon.org.

Palate & Palette Feb. 7

Shelter House will host its 10th annual Palate & Palette fundraising event on Saturday, Feb. 7, bringing together art, cuisine and community in support of survivors of domestic violence. The evening features wine, tapas, live painting and silent and live auctions, with keynote speakers Nicole Schmidt and Tara Petito of the Gabby Petito Foundation. Festivities

Continued on next page

Shrimp & Grits Festival Returns with New Venue, National Headliner

The Emerald Coast's popular Shrimp & Grits Festival is heating up for its seventh year with a new location and a national music headliner. The event will take place Saturday, Feb. 28, 2026, from 4 to 7:30 p.m. at the Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation Cultural Arts Village in Destin.

Guests will enjoy unlimited samples of creative shrimp and grits dishes prepared by local restaurants, along with craft beverages and live entertainment, as chefs compete for the title of Best Shrimp & Grits on the Emerald Coast. Proceeds benefit the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast, supporting youth programs across Northwest Florida, including Destin, Fort Walton Beach, DeFuniak Springs, Crestview, South Walton and Pensacola.

“This festival continues to grow in both impact and excitement,” said Shervin Rassa, CEO of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast. “Our move to the Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Village and the addition of Erin Kinsey mark



an exciting new chapter, while every ticket purchased helps support the futures of thousands of local Club kids.”

Adding to the excitement is a featured performance by rising country artist Erin Kinsey, known for her powerful vocals and relatable storytelling. Kinsey's charting songs and high-energy performances have earned national recognition, including appearances at the Grand Ole Opry.

General admission tickets are \$100 and include unlimited food samples and drink tickets for craft beer and cocktails. VIP tickets are \$175 and include early entry, access to a VIP lounge with a private bar, exclusive tastings and preferred concert seating. The event is rain or shine, with tickets available while supplies last.

For sponsorship or restaurant participation information, email cmayes@bgcec.com.



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<p>FAMILY BOX BONE CHICKEN 16 pieces of mixed bone chicken marinated with Tony Chachere's & fried crispy with 12 Crispy Cajun sauce cups. Ayeee \$49.99</p> <p>CHICKEN & ANDOUILLE JAMBALAYA 1 quart of Tony Chachere's Crispy Cajun chicken & andouille sausage jambalaya with New Orleans French bread loaf, Ayeee \$19.99</p> <p>CORNBREAD BISCUITS 1 dozen Tony Chachere's new cornbread formulated biscuits with six Mike's Hot Honey packs and six regular honey packs \$18.99</p> <p>CAJUN COLE SLAW 1 quart of Chef Ernie's own Cajun Cole slaw with shredded green & purple cabbage with Tony Chachere's flavored dressing \$18.99</p>	<p>CAJUN FRIED TURKEY 10-12 lb whole turkey injected with Tony Chachere's creole butter garlic marinate, rubbed with Tonys seasoning & fried crispy \$59.99</p> <p>RED BEANS & RICE 1 quart of Tony Chachere's andouille sausage red beans and rice with 1 quart of steamed white rice & a French bread loaf \$19.99</p> <p>CHICKEN & ANDOUILLE GUMBO 1 quart Tony Chachere's chicken & andouille sausage dark roux Cajun gumbo with 1 pint of steamed white rice & French bread \$26.99</p> <p>MINI NOLA PO-BOYS 25 mini ham & cheese dressed New Orleans po-boys sandwich pieces with Crispy Cajun sauce and frilly toothpick Ayeee \$39.99</p>	<p>CRISPY CAJUN TENDER BOX 24 pieces of Tony Chachere's Crispy Cajun marinated jumbo chicken tenders with one dozen Crispy Cajun sauce cups Ayeee! \$49.99</p> <p>CAJUN DIRTY RICE 1 quart of Tony Chachere's dirty rice Cajun style with fresh sautéed ground meat and lots of flavor with French bread loaf \$19.99</p> <p>CAJUN SHRIMP ÉTOUFFÉE 1 quart of Tony Chachere's Cajun style shrimp étouffée with 1 pint of steamed white rice & 1 New Orleans French bread loaf \$28.99</p> <p>MINI MUFFULETTA 24 mini muffuletta sandwiches with salami, ham, mortadella, provolone, olive salad on Gambino roll with frilly toothpick \$49.99</p>
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 Events

EVENTS

continued from previous page

begin with a cocktail hour at 6 p.m., followed by a five-course seated tapas tasting at 7 p.m., prepared by local chefs and paired with fine wines. The event takes place at Drive The Coast. Tickets and event details are available at shelterhousenwfl.org.

DCWAF Annual Galentine's Fundraiser Feb. 7

DCWAF's Galentine's Day Fundraiser is turning five, and we're going all out to honor the queens in our community that come together to give back! Hosted in Destin at the home of Candis Wilson, Galentine's brings influential women in the community together to support one another while raising

money for programs designed to empower young girls through DCWAF's 16 partner children's charities and beyond. All individuals and businesses affiliated with the production of this event are female owned and operated. The cards have been dealt, and every Queen deserves her moment during this fun day of giving. More info/tickets: <https://www.dcwaf.org/events/5th-annual-galentine-day-fundraiser>.

Sowal Comedy Fest Feb. 12-14

SOWAL Comedy Fest (formerly Sand Up Comedy Fest) returns Thursday, Feb. 12 through Saturday, Feb. 14, 2026, bringing three days of sharp, big-city stand-up to South Walton over Valentine's weekend — an ideal date-week-end escape built around intimate rooms, capped

attendance, and unforgettable nights out. Headliners include Peter Wong (New York, NY) Anjelica Scannura (New York, NY) and Carter Deems (Atlanta, GA). Venues include SOWAL House Wild Olives and Distillery 98. Tickets are on sale now (purchase by date, venue, or headliner) at www.sowalcomedy-fest.com.

Taste of the Race at SEASIDE® Lyceum Feb. 13

SEASIDE SCHOOL™ kicks off its annual Half Marathon + 5K Race Weekend with one of 30A's most eagerly anticipated events: Taste of the Race, 6 p.m. in Seaside, presented by Publix and headlined by Rubiks Groove, a nationally acclaimed, character-driven musical act known for its "outside of the box" performances featuring iconic hits from the '80s, '90s,

and '00s. Experience the culinary talents of the Gulf Coast's top chefs and restaurants as they compete for prestigious awards including People's Choice, Judges' Choice, and Chef's Choice.

Proceeds from Taste of the Race support the SEASIDE SCHOOL FOUNDATION™.

To learn more and purchase tickets, visit RunSeasideFL.com. Local chefs or restaurants interested in participating may contact Callie Cox at coxc@seaside-schools.net.

Hard Hats & High Heels Feb. 13

Habitat Walton County invites you to join the annual Hard Hats & High Heels, a women's empowerment luncheon bringing together a cross-section of the Emerald Coast's professional, social and philanthropic leaders. This year's keynote speaker, Lisa Gunderson, rallies groups and individuals to make life and leadership changes that truly make a difference.

Taking place at The Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa from 11 a.m.-1 p.m., tickets are available for purchase online for \$75 at: <https://www.giveeffect.com/campaigns/33480-7th-annual-hard-hats-high-heels>.

Baytowne Annual Mardi Gras Parade Feb. 15!

Mardi Gras is bigger and better than ever at The Village of Baytowne Wharf! The Village streets will be filled with unique and colorful floats, golf carts, ve-



hicles and costumed dogs along with their humans. Mardi Gras music will fill the air as parade participants and four-pawed friends shower parade-goers with a barrage of beads, moon pies and other trinkets. Visit baytownewharf.com.

An Outsider's Guide to the Florida Panhandle Feb. 24

UF/IFAS Extension invites residents to a free, four-part educational series, An Outsider's Guide to the Florida Panhandle, designed to help participants learn about local climate, plants, lawns and landscapes. The series will be held Feb. 24 and March 3, 10 and 17 at Padgett Park, 810 J.D. Miller Road in Santa Rosa Beach. Each session is offered twice in one day, from 10 a.m. to noon or 2 to 4 p.m., allowing attendees to choose the time that works best.

Topics include understanding the Panhandle's climate and native plants, lawn care basics, landscape installation and maintenance, and pest and disease control. There is no cost to attend. For more information or to register, call 850-892-8172.



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A Taste of Mardi Gras: Food, Wine, Craft Beer and More

A Taste of Mardi Gras, this year's Food and Wine Tasting Festival benefiting the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra's youth programs, will feature live jazz, tastings of more than 40 wines, local craft beers, and samples of cuisine from area restaurants. Participating eateries include Aegean Greek Restaurant, Cafe Bienville, Magnolia Grill, Peppers Mexican Cantina, Papa's Smokehouse, Olive Garden, Twisted Grape Wine Bar and several others.

The event is scheduled for Sunday, Feb. 1, 2026, from 1 to 4 p.m. at Raider Central (Building 400) on the campus

of Northwest Florida State College in Niceville. Guests can also browse a silent auction featuring a variety of items, including gift cards, art, pottery, jewelry and themed gift baskets.

Sponsored by the Northwest Florida Symphony Guild, A Taste of Mardi Gras raises funds to support the Symphony's youth initiatives, including the annual John Leatherwood Concerto Competition.

Tickets are \$65 and may be purchased by calling the Mattie Kelly box office at 850-729-6000 or online at MattieKellyArtsCenter.org.

Happenings Around Freeport

2026 EVENTS

FEBRUARY

- 01**
Women's Climbing Circle
5 pm | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin
- Mardi Gras Food & Wine Festival**
1-4 pm | Raider Center, Bldg. 400 | NWFSC
- 03**
Freeport State of the City Breakfast hosted by Walton Area Chamber
7:30 am | E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center | Freeport
- 06**
FWB Chamber of Commerce's First Friday Coffee
7 am | Christian Life Center at FBC | FWB
- 07**
Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport | Val'p
- Creative Craft Collective**
10 am | Freeport Public Library | Freeport
- Camellia Festival**
10 am-2 pm | Eden State Gardens | Santa Rosa Beach
- Annual Bonfire**
5 pm | Nick's Seafood | Freeport
- Palate & Pallette**
6 pm | Drive The Coast | Santa Rosa Beach
- Sinfonia Gulf Coast's Classical Connections**
7:30 pm | Destin High School | Destin
- 13**
Hard Hats & High Heels
11 am | Hilton Sandestin | Miramar Beach
- Valentine's Day Sunset Dinner Cruise**
5 pm | Baytowne Marina | Miramar Beach
- Taste of the Race**
6 pm | Seaside | Santa Rosa Beach
- 14**
Love Local - Sip & Shop
10 am | Grand Boulevard at Sandestin | Miramar Beach
- Valentine's Day Sunset Dinner Cruise (Adults Only)** 5 pm | Baytowne Marina | Miramar Beach
- 15**
Sinfonia Gulf Coast's Toast 'n Jam: Sincerely, Sondheim with Nicholas Rodriguez
10:30 am | Hotel Effie Sandestin | Miramar Beach
- Mardi Gras Parade**
2 pm | Village of Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach
- Valentine's Day Sunset Dinner Cruise**
5 pm | Baytowne Marina | Miramar Beach

- 17**
Baytowne Beads & Bingo Bash
5 pm | Village of Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach
- 20**
Walton Area Chamber Annual Awards Gala
5:30 pm | Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa | Miramar Beach
- All-Sports Association Annual Awards Banquet**
5:30 pm | Destin-FWB Convention Center
- 20-21**
37th Annual Sandestin Gumbo Festival
12 pm | Village of Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach
- 21**
Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
- Creative Craft Collective**
10 am | Freeport Public Library | Freeport
- 37th Annual Sandestin Gumbo Festival**
12 pm | Village of Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach
- 24**
Outsider's Guide to Florida Panhandle
10 am or 2 pm | Padgett Park | Santa Rosa Beach
- 25**
Justice on the Block - Free Legal Help
11 am | Freeport Public Library | Freeport
- 27**
Not Your Mother's Book Club
10 am | Freeport Public Library | Freeport
- 28**
Creative Craft Collective
10 am | Freeport Public Library | Freeport
- 7th Annual Shrimp & Grits Festival**
4 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin
- 4th Annual My Chemical Cocktail**
6 pm | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

FARMERS MARKETS

Niceville Community
Saturdays | 9 am - 1 pm
Twin Cities Pavilion | Niceville

Hammock Bay
1st & 3rd Sundays | 8 am
Victory Blvd | Freeport

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

MONTHLY EVENTS

Library Lego Club
Tuesdays | 3 pm
Freeport Public Library | Freeport

Library Chess Club
Fridays | 3pm
Freeport Public Library | Freeport

Valentine's

DINNER CRUISE

February 13-15

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 Off the Hook
SHIPS CHANDLER*continued from page 1*

Known as Pete's Boat and RV Storage, the new facility offers open and covered storage with dedicated power and water at each space, providing full-service convenience for boat and RV owners across Walton County and beyond. Located directly at The Ships Chandler's

Freeport marine and service center, the storage expansion answers a growing need in a community rapidly becoming a regional boating hub.

The storage facility, which opened in December and is now fully operational, represents the realization of a vision first shared with the community several years ago — and one that reflects Freeport's steady growth

as a centralized, accessible location for marine services without beach traffic congestion.

A Vision Years in the Making

The story of The Ships Chandler's Freeport location began in early 2021, when the family-owned marine business broke ground on its second major operation outside of Destin.

Situated on more than 14 acres at 17309 U.S. Highway 331, the Freeport marine and service center was designed to bring full-scale boat sales, service and customization closer to inland and North Walton County boaters.

"Freeport has always been a wonderful city filled with good hard-working people," said owner Peter Wright Jr. in 2021. "We're excited to become a part of the community and help it grow with the help of all the surrounding communities in Walton County."

That first phase officially opened in 2022, bringing boat sales, outboard motor service, marine repairs and customization under one roof — with room to grow. From the beginning, plans included a second phase dedicated to expanded service capacity and covered storage, a feature increasingly critical as boat ownership continues to rise across the region.

Phase Two Becomes Reality

In spring 2023, The Ships Chandler broke ground on Phase Two, which included a 12,000-square-foot service building dedicated to engine repowers, electronics rigging, fiberglass and gelcoat work, painting and large-scale custom projects — along with the covered storage component that is now open. "We have always loved the customization and refit side of working on boats," said Peter Wright. "The new building has given us a dedicated space to house and work on the more in-depth projects we do with boats, including fiberglass, painting and electronics."

With the completion of this phase, the Freeport location is able to operate as a full-service marine hub, offering both long-term storage and advanced service capabilities on the same property — a rare combination in our region.

A Full-Service Marine Destination

Additionally, the Ships Chandler's Freeport location supplies customers with new and pre-owned fishing boats and pontoons, including brands such as Maverick, Hewes, Pathfinder, Cobia, Avid, Pair and Chittum boats.

The service department supports Yamaha, Suzuki, Tohatsu and Mercury outboards, offer-



ing engine sales, warranty work, parts and routine maintenance. Additional services include marine repairs, detailing, gelcoat and fiberglass repair, electronics installation, boat restoration and custom refurbishing projects.

Despite its growth, the company remains rooted in its family-owned history, which dates back to 1980 in Destin. "We'll always keep the same small-town, family-owned business feel," Peter Wright Jr. has said. "When businesses get too big, they lose track of the customer service side of things quickly. We know how important that is to people."

Built for Freeport — and the Future

The addition of covered boat and RV storage further cements Freeport's role as a strategic marine center for Walton County and the greater Panhandle. Easy highway access, expansive acreage, and now secure, service-connected storage make The Ships Chandler a one-stop destination for both recreational and serious boaters.

From its beginnings as a Destin Harbor staple to its present-day Freeport expansion, The Ships Chandler's growth has followed a consistent philosophy: invest in infrastructure, invest in people, and stay focused on service.

With Phase Two now complete and Pete's Boat and RV Storage officially open, that philosophy has taken its most visible shape yet — offering Freeport residents and regional boaters a new level of convenience, capability and confidence heading into the year ahead.

The Ships Chandler's Freeport marine and service center is located at 17309 Highway 331 in Freeport. For information, reservations or service inquiries, call (850) 880-6259, email info@theshipschandler.com, or visit theshipschandler.com. Freeport Hours are Monday through Friday from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturday from 7 a.m. to noon. Closed on Sundays.

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Golf Series: The Golf Club at Bluewater Bay - Just Down the Road from Freeport!



BY BARBARA PALMGREN

Just down the road on Highway 20, the Bluewater Bay Golf Club welcomes the Freeport community to enjoy golf and join as members as well.

What many may not know is that this special course has a recent success story that inspires everyone.

There was a chance two years ago that the golf course could possibly close. With that threat, members of the community rallied to raise \$2.5 million to be sure a precious green space remained in place for the commu-

nity and visitors to enjoy.

Today, the Golf Club at Bluewater is guided by a management company—Elite Golf. Nestled among homes in the Bluewater Bay community, golfers enjoy a course layout that is challenging but fair. Tee times can be booked with Golf Now or by phoning the pro shop. With scenic views that often distract in a positive way, the course can now be enjoyed by golfers at all levels of play. With over seeded greens and tee boxes as well as reasonable fees, the beautiful course is ready for the winter. This could not have been done without the efforts of Golf Course Superintendent Alfredo Francisco and his staff.

General Manager Stephan Kleemeyer has worked tirelessly over the past year, to ensure growth and success for the club. With the added bonus of now having a full-service restaurant, the Blue Tee, golfers and residents can enjoy breakfast, lunch, or dinner from 7 a.m. to 9 pm. It



might be chilly in January, but a warm lunch with accompanying beverage should be a perfect way to share stories of how an approach shot to the green resulted in a birdie on the hole!

Plans are also underway for a party for snowbirds — a sign that social events are becoming an integral part of club life. I sense that once parties become part of

the fabric of this club, membership will enjoy more than watching a tee shot head straight down the fairway.

Membership is the heart and soul of a golf course and new member rates encourage golfers to join. Golf carts are included in the rate. Yes, public play is important, but membership is the key to continued revenue to

support the club.

So, congratulations, Preserve Bluewater Bay, LLC, you have protected 150 acres of green space for community enjoyment and golf club operations. Now the golfers in Okaloosa and Walton counties, especially those along Highway 20, are the beneficiaries of this gift to the Panhandle of Florida!



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Derrick Brooks to Headline 2026 All Sports Association Banquet

Get ready for an inspiring evening of recognition, community and athletic excellence as the All Sports Association (ASA) hosts its 2026 Annual Awards Banquet on Friday, February 20, 5:30 p.m. at the Destin / Fort Walton Beach Convention Center. The banquet promises to bring together athletes, community leaders, coaches and sponsors in Northwest Florida for an evening to remember.

A Star-Studded Keynote

This year's keynote speaker is NFL Hall of Famer Derrick Brooks — Super-Bowl champion, defensive powerhouse and committed community leader. With 11 Pro Bowl selections, nine All-Pro honors and induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2014, Brooks brings not only elite athletic credibility, but a passion for service and character.

You can expect a formal awards dinner celebrating the top athletes, coaches and civic

partners of 2025–2026, with honors presented to individuals who excelled not only on the field, but also in the classroom and the community. Brooks' keynote address will offer powerful insights on leadership, perseverance and success in sports and in life. In addition, you'll enjoy opportunities to network with local sports programs, sponsors and youth volunteers and also receive updates on upcoming ASA initiatives and the distribution of funds that support youth-focused sports and service organizations throughout the region.

The ASA Mission

The All Sports Association was founded in 1970 under the leadership of Colonel Al Byrne, with the first banquet held at the Holiday Inn on Okaloosa Island. From those modest beginnings, ASA's membership of volunteers has grown to raise funds and provide time-based service to support youth sports and community programs

across the Emerald Coast.

Funded primarily through the awards banquet and an annual golf tournament, the organization channels its proceeds to local non-profits including the Boys & Girls Club of the Emerald Coast, Special Olympics Florida-Okaloosa, the Eleanor J. Johnson Youth Center and Okaloosa Walton FCA.

At the heart of the ASA's recognition program lies a simple, yet powerful, standard: the athletes honored must excel not only in their sport but also in their academics and community involvement. Through the banquet and associated awards, ASA underscores the belief that true excellence includes character, responsibility and service.

Recipients are those who maintain strong grades, are active in their schools and volunteer in the community — reflecting ASA's full mission to boost youth, sport and citizenship alike.

Over the years, ASA's ban-

quet has hosted renowned keynote speakers who bring experience, inspiration and perspective to the local stage among them Herschel Walker, Bo Jackson, Tim Tebow, Nick Saban, Urban Meyer, Chad Hennings and several others. From professional athletes to community champions, these voices have helped elevate the banquet beyond mere awards to a moment of collective motivation and connection.

For athletes, coaches, volunteers and sponsors in our region, the ASA banquet is more than a gala—it's a celebration of the values we prize: teamwork, dedication, citizenship and community investment. It brings together high school and youth sports programs, local businesses, civic leaders and families under one roof to honor triumphs and galvanize support for what's next.

With Derrick Brooks as this year's keynote, the event carries added prestige and excitement—offering both young ath-

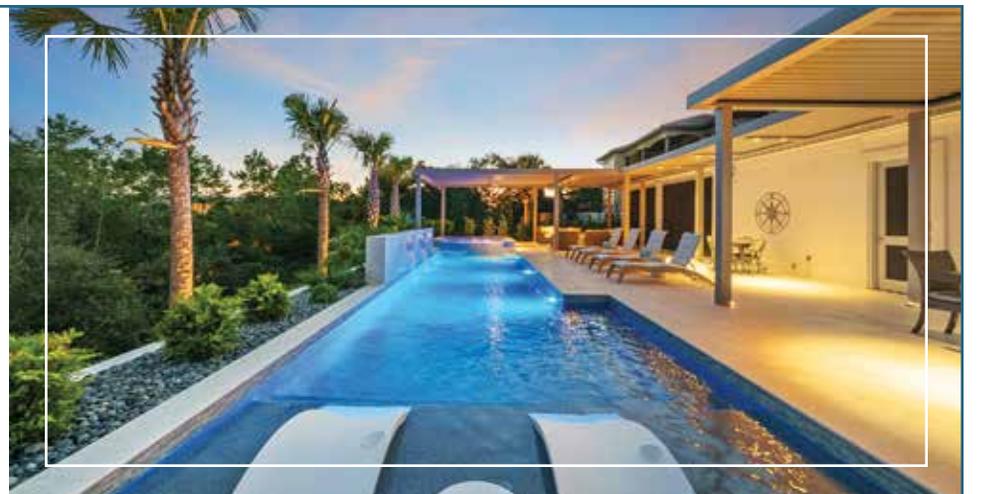


letes and the wider community a chance to hear from someone who not only mastered football, but leveraged his platform for impact.

Want to Help?

Those interested in sponsorships, table reservations or event participation can visit the ASA website: www.allsportsassociation.com.

Join on February 20, 2026, as we celebrate champions in sport, service and character — and help invest in the bright future of youth athletics right here on the Emerald Coast.



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Golf Series: First Tee Winter Ball Tournament Inspires Young Golfers

By BARBARA PALMGREN

On a cold, really cold and windy Sunday in December, young golfers with a parent partner, braved the weather to participate in an annual event at Shalimar Pointe Golf Club. This was the club's 8th year to participate in the First Tee event.

Organizers, Jean Wallace and Donna Rayburn, members of the Shalimar Pointe Ladies Golf Association, spent months fundraising and preparing for 54 juniors with adult playing partners to play the front nine of the golf course. Other members helped



register players and Doris Anderson baked cookies for the entire crowd. Of course, a delicious meal with hamburgers and chips awaited each team when they finished.

The First Tee organization is a youth development organization that enables young golfers to build strength of character as well

as learn golf skills. As part of this national organization, First Tee Gulf Coast is located in Pensacola, and hosts events all along the Gulf Coast. Marty Stanovich, Executive Director, arrived to congratulate all the players and Ty Aulger, Tournament Director, presented awards.

First place winners come from a variety of locations ranging from Freeport to Santa Rosa Beach. Here are the first-place

winners:

Girls 5-11: Charlie Miller from Santa Rosa Beach

Boys 5-11: Dillon Bond from Niceville

Girls 12-18: Rayna Perkins from Freeport

Boys 12-18: Luke Pearce from Gulf Breeze

Yes, the family that golfs together stays together...even under cold conditions.

DUNE LAKES

continued from page 14

want to keep the lakes pristine and natural, but it is difficult to develop land around water resources without altering them. Since the lakes naturally overflow into the Gulf, houses built around them must be built so they are not impacted by the outflow. People living in the communities must be conscious of the effects of fertilizer, pesticides and land use.

The lakes that are accessible to the public and are within our state parks are preserved and semi wild. Although many people walk to the outflows, especially at Camp Helen, they are often in awe, and unaware of what they are seeing. It is an ecosystem specially preserved for all of us, but a bit of a secret for those who know what it is. I am grateful that we have preserved these dune lakes, and not altered them, within our parks. When you visit the parks

and see the outflows, remember what you are experiencing is something you most likely will not see anywhere else, and it is only due to the decisions we

make about our land use and development that future generations can experience this.



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Wellness

Are You Too Old to Pick Up a Weight— Even Though Your Mind Says YES?

By ROBIN AITES,
CO-OWNER, TRIFECTA

If your mind says yes but your body hesitates, you're not alone. Many adults reach a point where the desire to feel stronger, healthier, and more

independent is there—but fear, doubt, or old beliefs step in. The idea that strength training is only for the young has been deeply ingrained, yet science and real-life experience tell a very different story. The truth is,

if your mind says yes, your body is capable of far more than you think—especially as you age.

At every stage of life, movement is medicine. Strength training improves muscle tone, cardiovascular health, and met-

abolic function at any age. But later in life, its benefits become essential rather than optional. As we age, we naturally lose muscle mass, bone density, and balance. This doesn't just affect how we look—it impacts how we live. Simple daily tasks like climbing stairs, carrying groceries, getting out of a chair, or maintaining balance can become challenging without strength.

The good news is that resistance training directly combats these changes. Lifting weights helps preserve and rebuild muscle, which supports joints and reduces pain and stiffness when done properly. It strengthens bones, lowering the risk of osteoporosis and fractures. It improves balance and coordination, significantly reducing the likelihood of falls. These are not cosmetic benefits—they are life-preserving ones.

Strength training also boosts energy levels, supports healthy blood sugar, and improves heart health. Many older adults report



better sleep, sharper focus, and improved mood once they begin moving consistently. Mentally, it restores confidence. There is something powerful about realizing you can still grow stronger, learn new movements, and challenge yourself safely.

Perhaps most importantly, working out later in life supports independence. Strength equals freedom—the freedom to travel, play with grandchildren, stay active, and live without fear of physical limitations. This isn't about lifting heavy or training like a bodybuilder. It's about smart, progressive movement tailored to your body and your goals.

So, ask yourself: if your mind says yes, why should age say no? You are not too old to pick up a weight. In fact, your future self **DEPENDS** on it. Strength isn't about turning back the clock—it's about moving forward with confidence, capability, and joy.

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SOUTH WALTON
FLORIDA



Journey Bravely: Increase Your Life Experience and Impact in 2026



BY STEPHENIE CRAIG, JOURNEY BRAVELY

When did you last experience a big, uncomfortable feeling you did not manage well? Maybe you experienced rejection and felt deeply sad. Maybe someone treated you poorly and you felt intense anger. Perhaps you made a mistake and you felt shame. How did you behave when you experienced the feeling? Were you unkind to yourself? Did you behave poorly and then blame others? Did you drink or scroll to numb out? Did you break something?

Feelings come and go throughout each day and yet most of us do not have a sense of confidence about managing uncomfortable feelings. In his book, *Dealing with Feeling*, Marc Brackett, PhD, founding director of Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence shares that only 10% of the American population receive any education about how to understand or manage feelings. In my experience meeting with people for 25 years, about 9 out of 10 people entering therapy do not understand how to identify or work through uncomfortable feelings.

Most of us are engaging in avoidance or numbing strategies such as drinking, other substance use, scrolling, shopping, gambling, controlling others, over scheduling, among others

to keep from facing uncomfortable feelings. Avoidance produces a cycle of emotional dysregulation that negatively impacts relationships, life performance, and overall health. In short, not knowing how to identify and manage your feelings well is likely reducing your quality of life and your positive impact in the world.

So, if you want to grow in emotional maturity to increase your positive experience and impact in life, what do you do?

6 Ways to Learn How to Manage Your Feelings Well

Reflect and set intention.

How are you managing feelings? Take notes about how you and others are experiencing your emotional highs and lows. Note if you have been ashamed or received negative feedback regarding your emotional expression. Create 1-2 goals about how you would like to improve your handling of feelings. "I would like to know how to use 3-4 healthy strategies to manage feelings."

Cultivate physical emotional curiosity. Notice your body's signals about what you are feeling. Notice sensations in your stomach, chest, face, head, and extremities. Notice body temperature, muscle tension, energy level. Notice tears, urge to slam something, exhaustion level. Your physical body gives you signals to help you determine what specific feeling you are experiencing. Listen closely to your body rather than ignoring physical signals.

Name your feelings. After

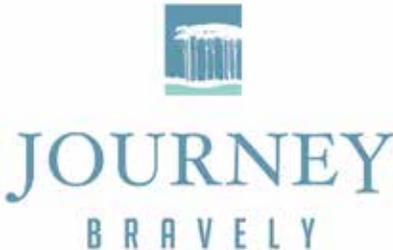
collecting physical data, practice matching data to a feeling word. When you notice tight jaw, hot body temperature, and desire to slam something, that might be anger. When you notice tight chest, pit in your stomach, and fast heart rate, that might be anxiety. Try recording your common feelings and list physical sensations that go with each feeling. Continue recording over time until you feel confident your list reflects your emotional experience.

Evaluate emotional coping tools. Name/record avoidance/numbing strategies, and record trends of when and how

you use them. "I start drinking around 4 and continue until bedtime to take the edge off." "I start scrolling when I'm stressed and bored and am logging five hours per day." Begin practicing healthy coping strategies that regulate emotional highs and lows creating space to return to a feeling from a calm state to process its meaning for your life. Try taking a walk, voice or regular journaling, talking to a trusted person, deep breathing exercises, fitness ac-



tivities, creative pursuits, getting into nature, and nervous system regulation tools (search "vagal toning exercises").



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Wellness



BY DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

Sitting on opposite ends of the couch wondering if they were still in love. Same house, same couch, same bed, same routine, but where is the love, the fun, the passion? It seems like years since they've been intimate.

She doesn't seem interested anymore. He's tried so many times he just doesn't ask anymore. She always seems angry about this or that. Complaining about things that shouldn't even matter; but, apparently they matter a lot. Complaining

about not sleeping or waking up all night and always being tired. Is she just tired of him? It's like there's no way to make her happy anymore.

He doesn't seem interested anymore. When was the last time he came on to me? I can't even remember the last date we went on. We never spend time together. He's always asleep on the couch and we never talk anymore. If I still love him, why don't I have any desire? I thought marriage was supposed to get easier.

Does this sound familiar? It should. It's the story we hear from patients all the time. No libido, never feeling rested, just surviving each day so you can get home and crash, the weight gain, the irritability. And why is everyone getting so annoying?

It's amazing what hormones are responsible for. Everyone



seems to think testosterone = mean and muscles and estrogen = emotional overload. That's so far from the truth. It's hard to describe, but I might say, testosterone = fearless desire to engage in life, and estrogen = the emotional awareness to enjoy every moment.

Forget the health benefits of hormones today, and there are tons. Let's talk about how it changes your life.

Imagine peacefully drifting off to sleep and waking after eight hours feeling fresh and

rested. Not even an ounce of tired. None. I'm talking ready to hop out of bed with a list of tasks to accomplish and looking forward to accomplishing every single one. You can't wait to get out of bed excited for the day. Sounds impossible.

Imagine actually taking the steps toward a goal instead of just having some hazy snippets of a daydream where you don't really know what you want, where you would go or what you would do, because it seems like you will never get there anyway.

Imagine your spouse approaching you with that look in his eye and you smile, because you've been waiting for him all day.

That's just a taste of what hormones do. I used to feel like you. I got treated 12 years ago. It changed my life. I felt alive. I slept. I was happy. I wasn't

afraid of life. So, I quit my job and left over 20 years of traditional medicine. Why? So, I could help you feel better, too.

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SMARTER WAY

continued from page 4

The Body Responds to Patience

I've watched patients experience profound change not because they did more, but because they did less—less forcing, less self-criticism, less urgency. They learned to listen instead

of override. To adjust instead of quit. To trust that small improvements compound over time.

And they do.

A little better sleep leads to better energy. Better energy leads to gentler movement. Gentler movement supports hormone balance. Hormone balance improves mood and fo-

cus. Suddenly, the person who felt stuck begins to feel capable again.

That's how marathons are won. Not by sprinting at the start, but by pacing wisely.

Redefining Success

What if success wasn't measured by how fast you change, but by how well you sustain?

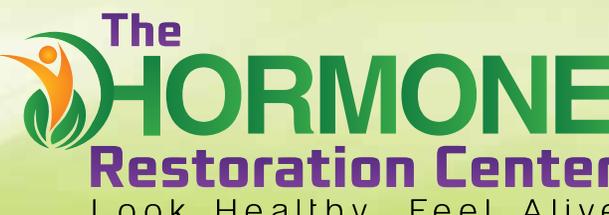
What if progress meant fewer crashes, quicker recovery, and a deeper sense of connection to your body?

Wellness is not a finish line you cross. It's a relationship you build.

So, if you're feeling discouraged, tired of trends, or tempted by the next "miracle" solution,

pause. Take a breath. Ask yourself not what will fix you fastest, but what will support you longest.

Your body is in this for the long haul. And when you meet it with patience, consistency, and care, it will carry you farther than any shortcut ever could.



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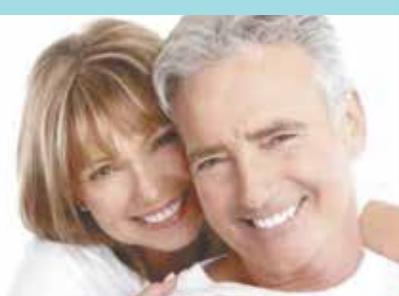
- Are you embarrassed about smiling in front of people?
- Do you ever put your hand up to cover your smile?
- Do you dislike your smile in photographs?
- When you look through magazines, do you envy the models' smiles?
- Do you wish your teeth were whiter?
- Do you think you show too much or too little of your teeth when you smile?
- Would you like to change the way your teeth or gums are shaped?
- Do you have gaps or spaces in between your teeth?

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 Musing

Top 10 Valentine's Day Songs

Valentine's Day is a celebration of love in all its forms: romantic, passionate, tender, and timeless. Few things capture those emotions quite like music. Over the years, certain songs have become synonymous with Valentine's Day because of their heartfelt lyrics, unforgettable melodies, and emotional depth. Here are the top 10 Valentine's

Day songs and what makes each one truly special.

1. "All of Me" – John Legend

This modern classic is a raw and honest declaration of unconditional love. With simple piano accompaniment and deeply personal lyrics, "All of Me" resonates because it embraces imperfections and vulnerability,

making it a favorite for weddings and Valentine's playlists alike.

2. "At Last" – Etta James

Few songs capture the feeling of love finally fulfilled like "At Last." Etta James's powerful, soulful vocals paired with lush orchestration make this song a timeless anthem for enduring romance.



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3. "Can't Help Falling in Love" – Elvis Presley

This gentle ballad remains one of the most iconic love songs ever written. Its simple message—that love is inevitable combined with Elvis's warm delivery gives it an innocence that continues to charm listeners across generations.

4. "Thinking Out Loud" – Ed Sheeran

Ed Sheeran's promise of lifelong devotion has made this song a modern Valentine's staple. Its lyrics imagine love that grows stronger with time, which resonates deeply with couples dreaming of a shared future.

5. "My Heart Will Go On" – Celine Dion

Forever linked to the film Titanic, this song is about love that transcends time and loss. Celine Dion's soaring vocals convey deep emotion, making it a powerful reminder that true love never fades.

6. "I Will Always Love You" – Whitney Houston

This song is often associated with heartbreak, but at its core, it is a profound expression of selfless love. Whitney Houston's unmatched vocal performance elevates the song into an emotional masterpiece that still moves listeners decades later.

7. "Let's Stay Together" – Al Green

Smooth, soulful, and optimistic, this song celebrates commitment and sticking together through life's ups and downs. Al Green's warm vocals and groovy rhythm make it a perfect Valentine's Day choice for couples who value lasting love.

8. "Something" – The Beatles

Written by George Harrison,

"Something" stands out for its sincerity and understated beauty. Frank Sinatra once called it one of the greatest love songs ever written, and its gentle melody continues to prove why.

9. "Endless Love" – Diana Ross & Lionel Richie

A duet that defines romance, "Endless Love" captures the magic of two voices blending into one emotional message. Its lyrics express devotion, unity, and a love without limits which are perfect themes for Valentine's Day.

10. "Make You Feel My Love" – Adele

Adele's soulful interpretation of this song adds depth and vulnerability to its lyrics. It's about unwavering support and standing by someone no matter what, making it a powerful expression of true, enduring love.

Why These Songs Endure

What makes these Valentine's Day songs special is their ability to express universal emotions. They speak of devotion, longing, commitment, and hope feelings that never go out of style. Whether classic or contemporary, each song offers a soundtrack for love, making Valentine's Day a little more meaningful through music.

Studio 237 Music Lessons is ready to help you get started learning how to express yourself in music whether on guitar (acoustic, classical, bass), ukulele, voice, piano, keyboards, song writing, or drums. We teach people of all ages 6 and up. Give us a call at 850.231.3199, email Studio237Music.com, visit our website www.Studio237Music.com.

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Sean of the South: Love

BY SEAN DIETRICH

We were newlyweds, living in a grungy apartment.

Each morning, I would wake before her. I would pass my morning hours writing poetry on a yellow legal pad, sipping coffee.

Mostly, I'd write the kinds of god-awful things you'd expect newlyweds to write. I'm talking painfully corny stuff. I'd leave these poems on slips of paper scattered throughout our apartment for her to find.

One such poem read:

"Together, the two of us,

"In thought, and deed, and breath, and heart,

"Shall never be lacerated apart."

Gag me with number-two pencil. "Lacerated?" What kind of a dork uses that word? In fact, I'm not certain this verb works in this particular case.

LACERATE [verb: las-uh-reyt] lac'er at'ed, lac'er at'ing
1. to tear; mangle; rip. Example: "Hey dude, that poem you wrote really freakin' lacerated."

My wife saved all my crummy poems in a shoebox, and today they reside in a storage closet.

Anyway, when we first married, we lived in an apartment that smelled like dead squirrels. I am not being figurative. I mean our apartment actually had a nest of decomposing squirrels in the attic above our master bedroom.

The place was tiny, and about as ugly as homemade soap. The tenant before us had painted the walls black and greenish-gray. Sherwin Williams officially titled this color "Seasick Granite®."

When we moved in, we made the place our own. We painted



the walls brown and khaki. We bought a used coffee table and some scented candles.

My friend, Chubbs, found an old console television on the side of the road. I was lucky enough to claim the TV before the garbage man came.

The thing was heavier than a dead preacher, but we got it up the stairs. Chubbs, however, would suffer from severe disc degenerative problems for the rest of his life.

Our building sat across the street from a Waffle House, a Chick-fil-A, and an ice cream shop. And this is why we gained nearly fifty pounds within our first year of marriage.

We never went to the movies because we didn't have the money. We ate Hamburger Helper without hamburger sometimes.

We saved our cash for a new window unit AC—our air conditioner was on the fritz. The thing would only work on days of the week beginning with "R."

On weekends, every weekend, we ate donuts. It was our simple ritual, and I loved it. Krispy Kreme was only a stone's throw from us, and when the hot-and-ready light would glow, by God, we were there.

Over donuts, we would talk

for hours about nothing. Heavy doses of sugar can do things to the human mind. It can make a person honest.

She told me all her stories. I told her mine. You can do a lot of soul-searching over crullers.

My professional life was non-existent, I took whatever jobs I could get. I spent days crawling rooflines, swinging a hammer, or operating a commercial lawn mower. She worked as a preschool teacher at church, or in a kitchen.

For extra income, I played piano at a Baptist church on Sundays, Sunday nights, Wednesday nights, Thursday night choir practices, and Saturday night prayer meetings.

We learned things about each other. We learned important things.

We learned how to argue in the middle of a Winn-Dixie, and how to attend two Thanksgivings in one day. How to share a sunset, seated on the hood of a truck. How to read in bed with a flimsy battery-powered book light.

We learned how to travel together with paper maps. And af-

ter years of practice, we finally learned how to make a bed together without me getting murdered.

We learned how to hold each other when loved ones die. We learned how to sit together—me reading a magazine, her playing a crossword puzzle.

We learned how to wring our hands in hospital waiting rooms. We learned how bury dogs with a shovel and a burial sheet.

We learned how to make a life together.

A lot has changed since those days, but I still wake early in the mornings to write. I don't use a legal pad anymore, I use a laptop.

This morning, however, I did not write. Instead, I sifted through our storage closet. I found things. An old coffee-tin sewing kit, some scented candles, love poems, and the picture

of a young man and his new wife in their first apartment.

In the picture, the place had ugly gray walls, but that's the only ugly thing about this photo.

He's holding her. She's holding him. They are young. Their skin is smooth. I wish I could tell you how much I love these two people in the picture.

I wish you could see their faces, and their punch-drunk smiles. You can tell they belong together by looking at them. You simply know that their names should never be said apart.

It's as though nothing bad in this life can ever touch them. As though the two of them, in thought, and deed, and breath, and heart, shall never be lacerated apart.

I suppose that word is growing on me.

Happy Valentine's Day, Jamie.

Musing



BY SAM BROWN, FREEPORT CAMPUS PASTOR, CROSSPOINT CHURCH

Welcome to what is often known as "Love Month"!

February gives us a version of

A Pastor's Ponderings: Love That Does Not Quit

love that is easy to recognize and easy to consume. Think about it—cards, flowers, chocolates, and carefully chosen words, promise affection and devotion. There is nothing wrong with these expressions. In fact, they are reminders that love should be celebrated.

But I think they also raise a deeper question worth pondering:

What happens when love is

no longer easy to give or receive?

Most of us grow up believing love is primarily a feeling. But we throw the word around like we double tap social media posts. Have you ever said "I love this shirt!" Or "I just love the color blue." The word love has been reduced to a phrase to describe more what we like and not the true emotion.

When the feeling is strong, love feels effortless. When the feeling fades, love feels optional. However, scripture presents a very different picture. Biblical love is not rooted in emotion but in commitment. It is not sustained by chemistry but by character.

The Apostle Paul writes that love is patient and kind. That love keeps no record of wrongs. That love always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres. Those words are not poetic exaggerations. They are descriptions of a love that chooses to stay when leaving would be easier.

This kind of love is most



clearly seen in Jesus. Jesus did not love humanity because we were lovable. He loved us because love is who He is. He stepped toward broken people, difficult people, wounded peo-

ple, and even those who would ultimately reject Him. His love was not conditional on response. It was anchored in faithfulness.

That has implications for how we live. Love is not something we fall into and out of. Love is something we practice. It is formed in everyday moments when patience is tested, when forgiveness is costly, and when choosing grace feels undeserved. Love grows strongest not in grand gestures but in quiet faithfulness.

For some, this season may highlight longing. Others may feel disappointment or loss. Some may feel grateful for relationships that feel strong. Wherever you find yourself, the invitation remains the same. Let love be more than a feeling you pursue. Let it be a way of life you embody.

The kind of love that changes the world does not demand perfection. It demands presence. It demands courage. It demands a willingness to keep showing up. That is the love God has shown us, and it is the love we are called to reflect.

So, let me close by asking: are you seeking to reflect the type of love that Christ has shown you? Our world needs it. Our world needs love. Let's do our best to reflect it!

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Crescendo! 2026 Brings Pink Martini to the Stage with Sinfonia Gulf Coast

Crescendo! 2026 is set to strike a bold new chord as Pink Martini joins forces with Sinfonia Gulf Coast for a one-of-a-kind live orchestral performance — a first in the history of the beloved annual fundraiser.

The Crescendo! Signature Main Event takes place Sunday, March 1, at 3 p.m. in the Magnolia Ballroom at Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort. The afternoon promises a milestone moment for the region's arts scene, marking both the first time Sinfonia Gulf Coast has performed live at Crescendo! and what is believed to be the first full professional orchestra ever staged in the Magnolia Ballroom.

Internationally acclaimed and delightfully genre-defying, Pink Martini has spent more than 30 years captivating audiences around the world. Often described as a "little orchestra," the ensemble blends classical, jazz, Latin, and vintage pop into concerts that feel equal parts elegant and exuberant. Performing in more than 25 languages, Pink Martini's shows are joyful, theatrical celebrations that invite audiences of all ages to join the party.

Founded by pianist Thomas Lauderdale, the group is frequently fronted by powerhouse vocalist Storm Large, whose bold, genre-crossing style and dramatic stage presence have earned worldwide acclaim. Pink Martini has performed at legendary venues including Carnegie Hall, the Hollywood Bowl, Royal Albert Hall, and the Sydney Opera House, consistently praised for glamorous arrangements, impeccable musicianship, and an infectious sense of fun. Paired with the lush sound of the full Sinfonia Gulf Coast orchestra, this Crescendo! performance promises a musical experience that is sophisticated, surprising, and irresistibly entertaining.

As part of Sinfonia Gulf Coast's 20th anniversary season, Crescendo! 2026 elevates the gala tradition to new heights. Guests will enjoy reserved table seating, passed hors d'oeuvres, an elegant seated late lunch, curated wines and spirits, exciting auction offerings, and an

all-inclusive afternoon of music, food, and celebration — all in support of Sinfonia's mission to inspire, educate, and connect the community through music.

Adding to the fun, guests are encouraged to dress to theme in emerald and pink. Emerald represents growth and renewal, honoring Sinfonia Gulf Coast's two decades of artistic impact, while pink offers a playful nod to the afternoon's special guest artists.

"Crescendo! is unlike any other event we produce," says Sinfonia Gulf Coast Music & Artistic Director Demetrius Fuller. "Bringing Pink Martini together with our full orchestra



for the first time at Crescendo! — perfectly captures the bold, celebratory spirit of our 20th anniversary while directly supporting the education and outreach programs at the heart of our mission."

Tickets are on sale now. Crescendo! Main Event tickets are \$250 per person and include the reception, lunch, wine, gratuity, and live entertainment. Tables seating 10 are available by reservation.

Proceeds from Crescendo! benefit Sinfonia Gulf Coast's extensive music education and community engagement initiatives across Northwest Florida, including musicians and guest artists in schools, free orchestra concerts, student transportation, the Sinfonia Youth Orchestra, Link Up concerts in partnership with Carnegie Hall, Paint the Music (with Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation), Arts in Medicine with Sacred Heart Hospital, and more.

Those looking to take their support a step further are invited to become "Treble Makers," an honorary committee celebrating Sinfonia's mission. For a \$650 contribution, Treble Makers receive one ticket to the Crescendo! Kick Off Lunch and Main Event, recognition in the

event program, reserved seating at closed-to-the-public Link Up student performances on March 11, 2026, at the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center, invitations to private events, a special Treble Maker gift, and

additional benefits.

For Crescendo! sponsorship inquiries, contact Klara Mikolai at kmikolai@sinfoniagulfcoast.org. Volunteer opportunities are also available; those interested may contact Beth Clavier

at (850) 460-8800 or bclavier@sinfoniagulfcoast.org.

Tickets, sponsorships, and additional details are available at SinfoniaGulfCoast.org or by calling the box office at (850) 460-8800.

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Arts & Music

The Emerald Coast Music Alliance Festival 2026

BY DEBBIE CARLONI

Our Passion for Music Education

“Music is a more potent instrument than any other for education,” Plato quoted. This

belief is at the heart of The Emerald Coast Music Alliance (ECMA). Our mission is to foster a love for classical music and to share its significant educational and health benefits with students, seniors, individuals with

developmental challenges, and the broader community of the Emerald Coast.

Festival 2026: A Week of World-Class Music

We are thrilled to announce our 10th annual Festival 2026, featuring accomplished artists who will perform from January 28th through February 8th at various locations. Performances will take place in Okaloosa-Walton County schools, senior centers, assisted living facilities, and agencies serving special needs populations, among others. Each festival includes 50-60 performances, and there is no cost to any participating school, agency, or organization.

Featured Artists

Under the guidance of our artistic director and concert pianist, Alon Goldstein, we have invited an outstanding roster of musicians for Festival 2026:

- The Cerus Saxophone Quartet
- Clarinetist Alexander Fiterstein
- Guitar Duo Ziggy & Miles
- Pianist Regina Tanujaya
- Free Community Concerts

In addition to performances at schools and community agencies, ECMA will present three



Free Community Concerts featuring Alon Goldstein and our guest musicians:

- Fort Walton Beach Civic Auditorium on February 5th
- Crosspoint Church Niceville on February 6th
- Chautaugua Theatre Defuniak Springs (date TBA)

What People Are Saying

ECMA is grateful for the encouragement and support we receive through testimonials, which reinforce our mission to enrich lives through music.

Bob Hope Village: We

had absolutely amazing performances from Emerald Coast Music Alliance Foundation!!!! They were absolutely amazing and our ballroom was FULL. Thank you for joining us! They are a very talented group of performers and heavily rely on donations.

Rocky Bayou Christian School: When I think that our students woke up in the piney woods of the Central Florida Panhandle, came to school this morning, and were able to hear a world-class musician spend an hour and a half demonstrating to them the beauty and passion of great music, I am amazed that such a program exists and that such people exist to make this possible. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts and PLEASE come back!

Join Us and Support Our Mission

We can't wait to perform for you this January – February!

Emerald Coast Music Alliance is a 501c3 organization that operates on the generous donations of businesses and individuals. Sponsorship opportunities for individual concerts are also available. To make a donation or for more information on how to become a sponsor, please visit <https://www.emeraldcoastmusic.org/donate.html>.

Please check our website <https://www.emeraldcoastmusic.org> for more information and updates on Free Concert times and how to reserve your seats. Or contact us by Email at info@emeraldcoastmusic.org.

ECTC Presents "Everlasting Love" — A Valentine's Day Musical Revue Fundraiser

Love takes center stage this Valentine's season as Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC) presents Everlasting Love, a special Valentine's Day musical revue fundraiser celebrating romance, connection, and timeless love songs on February 14th at 7 P.M. This intimate evening of music and storytelling will feature beloved performers Teresa Lombardi, Taylor Walker, Skylar Smith, and Jackie Rose.



Everlasting Love invites audiences to experience an unforgettable night filled with iconic love songs from stage and screen that span generations. Designed as both a celebration of love and a fundraiser supporting ECTC's mission, the revue offers a perfect Valentine's date night with a meaningful cause at its heart.

"Everlasting Love celebrates shared dreams and the meaningful relationships that grow when people come together," said Nathanael Fisher, Producing Artistic Director of Emerald Coast Theatre Company. "This evening is about connection, possibility, and supporting the future of theatre here on our Emerald Coast."

Everlasting Love will be held at Emerald Coast Theatre Company, located at 560 Grand Boulevard, Suite 200, Miramar Beach, FL. Tickets are \$150 each and are sold in pairs. Each

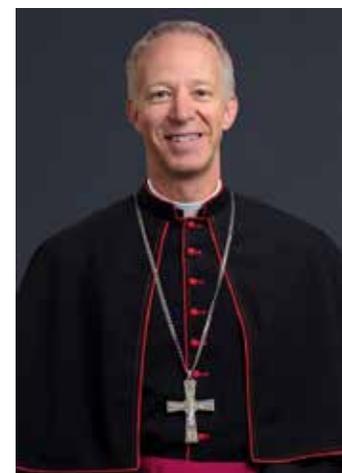
pair of tickets includes a bottle of wine along with a sweet or savory charcuterie. Proceeds from the event directly support ECTC's youth educational programming and community outreach initiatives.

To make a tax-deductible donation, become a VIP or sponsor, or learn more, call (850) 684-0323 or visit emeraldcoasttheatre.org.

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45th ANNUAL LITURGICAL CELEBRATION COMMEMORATING BLACK HISTORY MONTH



Homilist
Most Reverend Bishop William A. Wack, CSC
Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee

**"Darkness To Light:
God Calls, Teaches, and Sends Us to Share His Truth"**

Sunday, 25 January 2026, 2 P.M.
Musical Concert by the Eglin Brotherhood Gospel Choir

Christ Our Redeemer Catholic Church
1028 White Point Road
Niceville, Florida 32578

To Watch Virtually On-Line: <https://corcatholic.org/black-history-mass>

Presented By: The Catholic African American Cultural Awareness Group of Okaloosa County

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Kaley Lazzaro & Son

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