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The 17th Annual 30A Songwriters Festival Brings Top-Notch Talent and Music Lovers from Around the Globe

BY WILL ESTELL

If you consider yourself a fan of great music and the talented songwriters who make the music you love come to life, you definitely want to make plans to attend the 17th Annual 30A Songwriters Festival. Ranked as one of the top three songwriter festivals in the entire country, there are plenty of reasons to make this your first musical event of the new year: over 125 reasons in fact—and that’s just the number of artists playing it!

The renowned festival of music and fun celebrates its 17th year, January 16 - 19, 2026, with four days of performances, including two days of headliners on presenting sponsor Grand Boulevard’s main stage in beautiful Miramar Beach. The winter weekend of music and fun is celebrated by music lovers around the globe and somehow seems to get better every single year. That’s something I can attest to, as



I attended the very first one! With performances at more than 30 venues, spanning over 30 miles of South Walton’s beach communities, this year’s festival offers something for everyone. Whether you’re a fan of Americana, rock, folk, country or jazz, the popular

festival brings some of the best songwriters to ever grace any stage: all converging on our beautiful, NWFL beaches.

This year’s lineup is another assortment of phenomenal artists, from Saturday’s Grand Boulevard main stage headliners Paul McDonald & The

Mourning Doves, I’m With Her, and 10,000 Maniacs to Sunday’s headliners, Nikki Lane, Toad The Wet Sprocket, and the iconic Mavis Sta-

SONGWRITERS
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The New Year’s Evolution:

How Modern Integrative Medicine Is Redefining Wellness

BY DR. KAREN DEVORE,
TORTOISE CLINIC

January is a natural invitation to reevaluate how we care for ourselves—not just in terms of resolutions, but in how we want to feel as we move through a new year. More rested. More resilient. More focused. More capable of adapting to life’s changes without feeling depleted by them.

WELLNESS
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SONGWRITERS

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ples. Additionally, 2026's lineup includes such well known lyrical masters as Abe Partridge, Charlie Starr of Blackberry Smoke, Benji Shanks, Shawn Mullins, Jeffrey Steele, Paul Thorn, David Ryan Harris, Murray Attaway, Dan Navarro, Brian White, Charlie Mars, Jesse Lynn Madera, and a plethora of both first timers and returning 30A SWF favorites.

When I asked multi-hitmaker and award-winning songwriter Jeffrey Steele what keeps him coming back to perform year-after-year, he said, "I always look forward to 30A Songwriter's Festival, not only as another opportunity to do what I love: singing and entertaining, but also seeing the fans and many of my writer friends I don't see often. Just catching up and hangin' at the beach."

Another returning favorite, Baton Rouge native CJ Solar tells me, "I've been going to 30A Songwriters Fest on and off since its first year. I drove over from Baton Rouge my senior year of high school to see my hero Jeffrey Steele in person for the first time. Jump ahead and I've been invited to play the ASCAP stage a handful of times over the years and am so excited to be back again as a performer! There's

nothing like starting the year off in my favorite part of Florida, doing my favorite thing: playing songs for people who love them!"

Since its inception in 2010, 30A Songwriter's Festival has grown year after year, and is one of many endeavors made possible by Walton County Cultural Arts Alliance (CAA), a remarkable organization that adds so much to Northwest Florida's coastal community through numerous artistic and philanthropic endeavors. 30A Songwriters Festival is co-produced by Russell Carter Artist Management who has been the driving force behind booking the talent since the festival began in 2010. With 100% of the festival's net profits going toward supporting the CAA's mission to advance the arts in Walton County through education, leadership, advocacy, and the funding of special arts related programs within the community, festival goers are not only having a great time, they are also making a positive difference in the lives of so many that CAA serves.

Festival Co-Producer Russell Carter, President of Russell Carter Artist Management, has good reason to be immensely proud of the festival he helped to create. Carter tells me, "This festival began as a small event and grew quickly into a premier one-of-



a-kind showcase for world-class songwriters. Our goal was to curate a festival that presents the absolute best in touring songwriters and performers. We always want our audiences to experience musicians representing diverse genres of music – jazz, blues, country, folk, Americana and rock, with just two stipulations – they have to write their own music and they have to be really great at it!"

I asked Carter about some of the aspects of the 2026 festival that he's most excited about. He said, "We're excited to add

a new headline show on Friday, January 16th at Seaside Amphitheater, featuring 2026 Grammy Nominee Margo Price with her full band. She will feature songs from her catalog, including the just released deluxe album version of 'Hard Headed Woman.' We pride ourselves on supporting emerging artists on the verge of mainstream success. I highly encourage everyone to take this opportunity to see Nikki Lane and Paul McDonald & The Mourning Doves. Both have opening sets on the mainstage, as well as late night club sets at various 30A area venues, and both have critically acclaimed new albums and that are poised to break big, commercially, sooner than later."

Grab Your Festival Passes Fast!

Full weekend passes start at only \$395.00, premium seating VIP passes are just \$1,040, and Premiere VIP passes, with special front row seating at the Grand Boulevard Headliners Stage are only \$1,385. All of these ticket packages come in at quite the bargain considering you have the ability to see and hear so many remarkable songwriters across four days along the idyllic beach communities that have become a favorite vacation destination around the world.

For a full menu of perform-

ers, venues and showtimes, as well as grabbing those limited passes while you still can, visit: 30ASongwritersFestival.com and join us for the festival of music and fun!

Will Estell is a writer, editor, and multimedia consultant with more than 750 published features across travel, music, real estate, and automotive genres. He has conducted one-on-one interviews with a wide range of notable artists, including Kenny Chesney, Jimmy Buffett, Alan Jackson, Darius Rucker, Lyle Lovett, Amy Grant, Sara Evans, Brian Kelly, Styx, Eli Young Band, Drake White, and many others.

Will Estell is the chief creative officer of Estell Hussey Media and has co-founded 12 magazines from concept to launch, while also serving as editor for numerous additional titles. His newest media venture, HIM Magazine—a lifestyle publication for men—is slated to debut on newsstands nationwide in the third quarter of 2026.

Originally from rural Mississippi, Estell is a father of three who now lives in Destin and Navarre Beach with his wife, WEAR ABC 3 news anchor Laura Hussey-Estell. He is a longtime regular contributor to Life Media's family of publications.

WELLNESS

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It's become quite common for me to see more and more patients shifting from simply

treating illness to supporting everyday function and long-term vitality. They want to sleep more deeply, recover more efficiently, think more clearly, move through hormonal transitions



with confidence, and understand how food, environment, and genetics influence their health. This reflects a growing recognition that real wellness is less about chasing symptoms and more about supporting the body's natural ability to regulate and restore.

At the heart of that regulation is communication between the nervous system, hormones, immune function, and metabolism. When these systems communicate clearly, the body adapts with remarkable preci-

sion. When that communication becomes disrupted, however, we start to feel "off," even if we can't pinpoint exactly why.

Integrative medicine aims to restore this clarity. It blends foundational practices such as nutrition, acupuncture, herbal medicine, medical massage, and lifestyle therapeutics with modern clinical tools including IV nutrients, hormone support, advanced testing, targeted supplementation, and, when appropriate, peptides. None of these

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A Veteran's Call to Serve Again:

Angel Force Brings Safety and Leadership to Local Schools

By MICHELLE RUSCHMAN

One of the most important missions we have as a nation is to ensure that our children, teachers, administrators, and the support staff in our schools can focus on education without the distraction of feeling unsafe. Retired veteran Joshua Yirkovsky was inspired to start his private protection company, Angel Force Protection, and his nonprofit organization, Angel Force Foundation, when he saw firsthand what can happen when a school day is halted to deal with an intruder.

"In 2024, I was in the car lane waiting to pick up my kids from a private Christian school. I looked up to see a vagrant pulling on the doors, insisting to be let in, thinking it was the church. He was agitated and using foul language, and I could see the students and teachers through the door, clearly scared, trying to handle it on their own. With my sons being in there, I knew we needed a solution. That was the seed for Angel Force Protection and Angel Force Foundation."

The business and the foundation are two sides of the same coin. The business employs military veterans to become Angel Guards, primarily for schools. The other focuses on providing children, their families, and educators with resources that are "dedicated to advancing school safety through proactive education and comprehensive initiatives." This includes programs like Future Leaders Academy and safety seminars. They also conduct fundraisers so schools have the resources to utilize the instruction and protective services they need to equip their students and staff.

"Schools don't have to use our services, but we do want them to have the option of having safety personnel on-site without worrying about where the backing is coming from."

As a retired 21-year member of the U.S. Navy, Joshua recognized that veterans may leave the career, but the military training, the desire to protect, and the passion to serve are still part of their

spirit. It's why they're so suited to protect the vulnerable.

"Our veterans need a sense of purpose. We served our country, and many of us are asking, 'Now what?' We have unique skills and the ability to adapt and overcome in the most adverse situations. We've been trained to be proactive and to see what bad guys look like with smiles on their faces. Being an Angel Guard can be the next chapter. I make sure each applicant is properly vetted, and they go through an extensive physical, emotional, and mental screening to make sure we're putting the right vet at the right school. When they get in there, something amazing happens. They become someone the kids can rely on, and they become part of that school family. Having an Angel Guard in place frees SROs to be part of the community again, which continues to add another layer of protection for the village we're all a part of."

Not only is Joshua looking to secure the institutions that educate our children, but he wants



the students who attend to have the skills to be effective citizens. Future Leaders Academy is his way of serving families, even after the child's school day is over. The lessons are age-appropriate, starting at the age of 7.

Junior Captains (Ages 7-9): Young leaders take part in fun, hands-on exercises like group discussions, decision-making games, and interactive leadership challenges. The goal is to instill foundational habits of responsibility and expression.

Rising Stars (Ages 10-12): Participants explore leadership through goal-setting activities, debates, and group projects. They'll learn to manage conflict, collaborate effectively, and lead small teams.

Teen Trailblazers (Ages 13-15): Teens take on leadership roles, practice public speaking, and develop strategic thinking in team-based projects. Ideal for teens preparing for leadership in school and community roles.

Young Visionaries (Ages 16-18): This advanced group dives into case studies, community service projects, and mentorship experiences to refine leadership identity and prepare for future academic and career goals.

If you're interested in learning more about hiring Angel Force Protection or supporting Angel Force Foundation, go to www.angelfp.com and www.angelforcefoundation.org. Joshua Yirkovsky can also be reached by emailing info@angelfp.com or calling 904-436-3883.



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continued from page 2

replace conventional medicine; rather, they deepen and complement it, allowing us to treat both root causes and overall function.

Evolving Tools for a New Year: Peptides, IV Nutrients & Hormone Support

Peptides are one of the most

discussed emerging tools in modern integrative care. These naturally occurring amino acid chains act as subtle messengers, helping regulate inflammation, tissue repair, metabolic and hormonal signaling, and connections between the gut, brain, and immune system. Their goal isn't to override the body but rather to support pathways that have been strained by stress, aging, illness, or environmental demands.

Current research explores peptides' role in recovery, immune modulation, inflammation balance, gastrointestinal support, and healthy aging. Within my practice, peptides are chosen with careful consideration of each patient's history, medications, lab results, stress patterns, and goals. They are never used as a quick fix, but as a targeted support within a broader, thoughtful plan.



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Hormone replacement therapy, when appropriate and medically supervised, can bring relief and stability during transitions such as perimenopause, andropause, or thyroid dysfunction. Balanced hormones can support cognitive clarity, metabolism, sleep, and overall well-being.

These advanced therapies are most effective not on their own, but when combined with a strong foundation.

The Nervous System: The Center of Regulation

No matter which therapies we use, everything ultimately returns to the nervous system. Stress, disrupted sleep, past trauma, or chronic inflammation can keep the nervous system in a heightened state, affecting mood, hormones, digestion, immunity, and pain perception.

I always begin with a comprehensive evaluation including history, lifestyle, symptoms, and both conventional and specialty lab testing to understand the patterns at play. From there, treatment may include acupuncture or neuro-acupuncture, medical massage, tailored herbal formulations, nutritional

support, or breath and lifestyle practices aimed at restoring regulation.

When the nervous system is supported, peptides, IV nutrients, and hormone therapy gain a clearer path to work. Without that foundation, progress is often slower or less sustainable.

A Thoughtful Approach to the Year Ahead

Optimization is not instantaneous; it unfolds gradually. The smallest physiological shifts such as better sleep, steadier energy, fewer inflammatory flares are often the signs that regulation is returning. They build upon one another, creating resilience in ways that feel both subtle and profound.

For over 30 years, the Tortoise Clinic has brought together Eastern tradition and Western science to support our community's well-being. Our mission remains unchanged to offer thoughtful, individualized care rooted in safety, evidence, and respect for the body's natural intelligence.

As we move into a new year, consider that meaningful transformation doesn't require dramatic reinvention. It begins with understanding your body's needs, supporting its communication pathways, and allowing small shifts to create meaningful change over time because your wellness is a marathon, not a sprint.

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Around Town

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

Westonwood Ranch has been awarded \$400,000 in State of Florida appropriations through the Agency for Persons with Disabilities to support construction of a new life skills and job training building on its campus. The funding was championed by Rep. Shane Abbott (R-District 5) and Sen. Jay Trumbull (R-District 2).

The new facility will serve as a hub for vocational training, independent living skills and hands-on workforce readiness programs for individuals with developmental differences. It is also a key component of a broader initiative to address a critical need in Northwest Florida: affordable, supportive housing for young adults with developmental disabilities.

By expanding its campus resources, Westonwood Ranch will be able to prepare more participants for success in both personal and professional settings, empowering them to lead fulfilling and independent lives.

“I am proud to support Westonwood Ranch and their mission to empower individuals



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

Lindy Wood, founder and CEO of Westonwood Ranch, called the appropriation a turning point for the organization and those it serves.

“This funding is a game-changer for our organization and, most importantly, for the individuals and families we serve,” Wood said. “We are especially thankful for Representative Abbott and Senator Trumbull’s advocacy and belief in our mission. With this new building, we will be able to expand our training programs, foster greater independence, and create a pipeline of oppor-

tunities that help bridge the gap between education and employment.”

The appropriation underscores the state’s commitment to inclusive workforce development and innovative programs that support long-term stability and opportunity. When complete, the expanded Westonwood Ranch campus will help create a continuum of care designed to equip young adults with developmental disabilities with the skills, confidence and support needed to thrive.

Forever Warriors Donates \$50,000 to Support United Way Emerald Coast’s Mission United

United Way Emerald Coast (UWEC) received a \$50,000 investment from Forever Warriors to support Mission United, a program serving active-duty service members, veterans, reservists and their families across the Emerald Coast.



PHOTO BY MISSION UNITED AND UNITED WAY EMERALD COAST.

Local volunteers pack and distribute 5,000 pounds of food to active-duty service members and their families.

The funding comes at a critical time, as recent challenges have increased the need for military family support throughout the community. In the first month of the partnership, UWEC and Forever Warriors hosted a drive-through food distribution in collaboration with Hurlburt Field First Sergeants and provided more than \$10,000 in emergency financial assistance to help military families cover essential expenses.

One recipient shared the impact of Mission United, stating, “We are profoundly grateful for their essential support. Their financial assistance came at a critical moment for an Airman who was grieving the loss of a family member and welcoming a new baby, all while being the sole provider for his three children and veteran partner. This aid provided a much-needed sense of security, allowing him to focus on his family; a testament to your dedication to our military members.”

Mission United connects

military-affiliated individuals with critical resources when other funding is unavailable, including emergency assistance, mental health services, housing support, and employment or career transition assistance. Since its launch in 2023, the program has served more than 5,000 service members and veterans in Okaloosa and Walton counties.

“This investment allows us to meet urgent needs today while continuing to provide long-term stability and support through Mission United. It’s a powerful example of the strength of our community,” said Kelly Jasen, president and CEO of United Way Emerald Coast.

To learn more about United Way Emerald Coast or to get involved, visit united-way.org or follow @uwemeraldcoast on social media. Military members in need of support can also contact United Way’s Florida Veterans Support Line by dialing 2-1-1, selecting option 5, or calling 1-844-MyFLVet.



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Nourish Alaqua: Caring for the Caregivers

BY LAURIE HOOD, FOUNDER

Every day at Alaqua, our staff and volunteers show up for animals in their hardest moments. They care for creatures who arrive frightened, injured or broken in ways most people will never witness. They help them heal, rebuild trust and rediscover joy. This work is powerful, but it can also take a quiet toll.

People who choose animal welfare often carry the weight of what they see long after a shift ends. The same compassion that makes them extraordinary can make them vulnerable to burnout and exhaustion. That's why we created Nourish Alaqua.

Nourish Alaqua is our new wellness initiative designed to care for the people who care for every animal who comes through our gates. It's built on a simple belief: if we want to give animals the very best chance at healing, we have to make sure our team feels supported and cared for too.

This program focuses on strengthening both emotional and physical well-being. It gives



stay nourished throughout the day. We're exploring ways to partner with local restaurants and chefs who may want to support our caregivers by offering an occasional meal. It would be a meaningful way for the community to show appreciation for the people who give so much of themselves to animals in need.

At its core, Nourish Alaqua is about creating a culture where wellness is woven into daily life. It's a reminder that healing isn't only for the animals, it's for the people standing behind them. When our team feels cared for, they can pour their heart into each rescue with even more strength and clarity.

This is just the beginning. As the program grows, we hope it becomes a model for what caring for caregivers can look like in animal welfare.

Because here at Alaqua, wellness isn't just for animals. It's something we want every living being on this property to feel.

our caregivers space to reset, breathe, and reconnect with each other. It also acknowledges something very real about this work: some days are so packed with urgent care and unexpected needs that staff miss meals without even realizing it. We want to change that.

A big part of Nourish Alaqua will be providing healthy, ready-to-grab meal options on site so our team has what they need to

How the Community Can Support Nourish Alaqua

Nourish Alaqua was created to care for the people who care for our animals. If you're a community member, restaurant, or business looking for a simple, meaningful way to help, here are a few options:



Provide a healthy meal.

Local restaurants or chefs can donate an occasional lunch or prepare grab-and-go meals for our staff and volunteers. Even a single meal makes a big impact on days packed with rescue work.

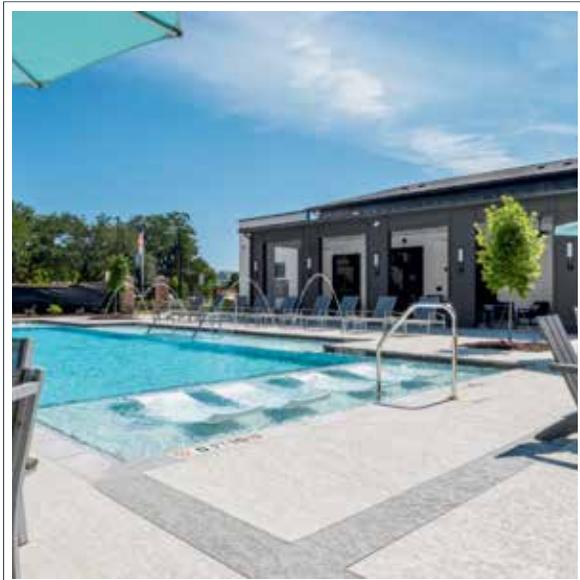
Sponsor wellness supplies.

Items like healthy snacks, hydration stations, mindfulness tools, or nature-based wellness materials help keep our team grounded and energized.

Host a wellness activity.

Yoga instructors, sound-bath facilitators, therapists, or nature-based practitioners can offer short sessions that help our caregivers recharge.

Every contribution, big or small, helps us care for the hearts and health of the people behind Alaqua's mission.



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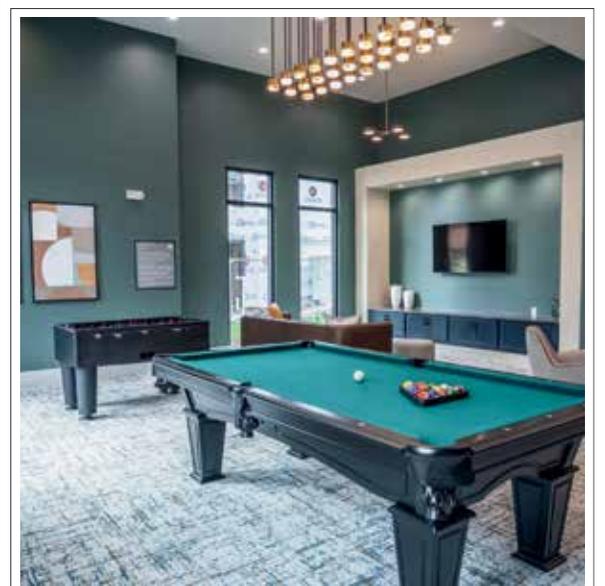


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THE WATERS
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 Community

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

pinetrees, 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 gath-

ering 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.

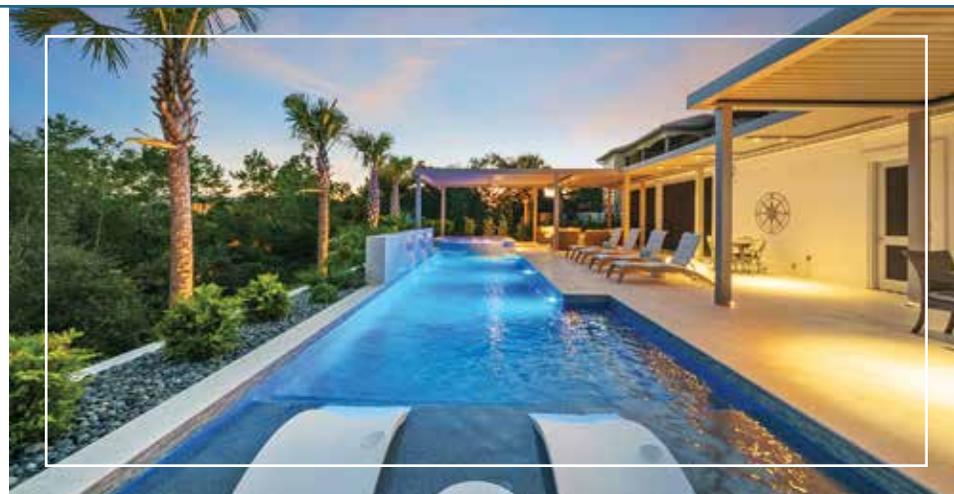
Sometimes the most special places are not the loudest ones. They are the ones that feel right the moment you arrive.

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



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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 ex-

perience a learning environment intentionally designed for adolescents. 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 Stubley 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 engi-

neering, 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 January 9th 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.

30 Years of Excellence

**LOTTERY APPLICATION
OPENS JANUARY 9
FOR THE 2026-2027 SCHOOL YEAR
— GRADES 5-12 —**



Scan the QR code or visit SeasideSchools.net to learn more and apply. The lottery application is open from January 9th to February 13th.



Top 5 Reasons to Apply

- 1 **30 Years of Excellence & Proven Academic Results**
For 30 years, The Seaside School has delivered consistent academic excellence. Ranked in the Top 2% in Florida, our students graduate confident, prepared, and ready for what’s next.
- 2 **Exceptional, Highly Qualified Educators**
Students learn from experienced, credentialed, relationship-driven educators who know them well, hold high expectations, and support their academic, social, and emotional growth.
- 3 **Personalized Support in a Safe, Close-Knit Community**
Small cohorts, daily tutoring, individualized academic and college planning, and strong student-adult relationships ensure every student is known, supported, and challenged.
- 4 **Education Beyond Textbooks — Experiences That Build Confidence**
Students grow through leadership, athletics, arts, and real-world experiences. Programs include AI, STEM, cybersecurity, robotics, Rock Band, Theatre, Debate, service leadership, mentorship, and dozens of clubs and sports—building confidence, resilience, teamwork, and voice.
- 5 **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 will-

ing 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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No limit on edited photos

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2024
BEST
of
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For your life's special moments

WEDDING PACKAGES ALSO AVAILABLE






EVENTS



BUSINESSES



COMMUNITIES



HWY331 Podcast



Grateful for a Year of Giving

BY HEATHER BENNETT EYE

We want to recognize the compassion and tireless work the volunteers and organizers of our local food banks, churches, and nonprofits pour into addressing food insecurity by providing meals for our community. You provide more than meals; you provide dignity, hope, and comfort for families during their hardest moments. Your kindness strengthens our neighborhoods and reminds us that even in challenging times, generosity and care can make a profound difference.



When someone in our community struggles to access healthy food, it can affect their physical health, mental and emotional health, and overall well-being. Acknowledging that food insecurity exists close to home reminds us that compassion, awareness, and support matter. We are deeply grateful for the hearts of those serving others, and for the positive impact you continue to create. Thank you for all that you do. By standing together, we can help ensure that no one in our community faces hunger alone.

Food insecurity is not a distant issue. It affects families, neighbors, coworkers, and friends in Walton County. It's not always visible and can touch more lives than we realize. It can affect anyone – families working multiple jobs, seniors on fixed incomes, students, single parents, and those facing sudden illnesses, job loss or other hardships. It's a reminder that life can shift unexpectedly.

Caring and Sharing of South Walton fed 1,000 families in October, which was the largest number in their 30 years of operation. As of the end of October, Emerald Coast Food Rescue had distributed 2.35 million pounds of rescued food, which is a 23% increase compared to that time in 2024. Food for Thought is expecting a 20% increase in requests for support this holiday season, which is 140 more families in addition to the 700 they already serve.

Please consider reaching out to an organization near you to see how you can serve our community through donating or volunteering.

Caring and Sharing of South Walton – 112 Lynn Drive, Santa Rosa Beach, (850) 267-2866: Food distributions are twice a month on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, 9 a.m. – 2 p.m.

Hearts & Hands Food Pantry by First Baptist Church of DeFuniak

Springs – Tri-County Building at 105 W Main Avenue, DeFuniak Springs, (850) 892-2722: Food distribution is every Friday 9 a.m. – 11 a.m.

First Methodist Church of DeFuniak Springs – 88 Circle Drive, DeFuniak Springs, (850) 892-5332: Distributions are on the second and fourth Thursdays of the month, 9 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.

Food for Thought – 2132 US-90, DeFuniak Springs, (850) 290-4056: Food distribution to students on the Free/Reduced Lunch Program are Mondays, 4 p.m. – 6 p.m. at 132 Market Street, Santa Rosa Beach and Tuesdays, 8:30 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. at 2132 US Hwy 90 W DeFuniak Springs.

Helping Hands (Southwide Baptist) – 1307 Coy Burgess Loop, DeFuniak Springs, (850) 892-3835: Food distribution is on Mondays, 12 p.m. – 3 p.m., based on when the food truck arrives, and on availability.

The Matrix COC – 37 North 9th Street, DeFuniak Springs, (850) 892-1090: Food distributions are weekly, but not on a fixed schedule due to timing and availability of food deliveries. Call (850) 892-1090 Monday – Friday 9 a.m. – 4 p.m. for more information.

New Life Adventist – 532 Lakeview Drive, DeFuniak Springs, (850) 892-7777: Food distribution is on Mondays, and registration starts at 4:30 p.m.

Open Door Food Pantry – 24388 US 331, Santa Rosa Beach, (850) 685-0684: Food distribution is very Saturday from 9 a.m. – 3:30 p.m.

Spreading Hope: The Pruitt-Gann Christmas Cancer Care Outreach

Bringing Comfort and Cheer to Cancer Warriors This Holiday Season

This Christmas season, the Pruitt-Gann Group's dynamic duo has been busy doing what they do best — spreading hope, love and compassion. And they haven't been doing it alone. Many of you have stepped forward with open hands and generous hearts to help lift the spirits of those courageously battling cancer during the holidays.

Thanks to this incredible outpouring of support, the team has gathered hundreds of thoughtful donations — cozy gloves and beanies, soft blankets, warm socks, soothing teas and uplifting devotionals. Each item will be tucked into special Christ-

mas Cancer Care Packages, created with the intention of bringing comfort, warmth and a reminder that no one fights alone.

Beyond these meaningful gifts, the community has contributed more than \$1,300 in monetary donations. With this support, Julie and Richard were able to stock the patient pantry with healthy, nourishing options to strengthen both body and spirit.

Because of your kindness, countless patients will feel a little more cared for, a little more supported and a whole lot more hopeful this holiday season.



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 Community



Fender-benders. Accidents. Wrecks.

your family following an automobile incident.

Stay Safe and Secure the Scene

First, check yourself and your passengers for injuries and call 911 immediately if anyone is hurt, if traffic is blocked, or if there is significant damage. Turn on your hazard lights and, if it is safe and legal to do so, move vehicles out of traffic to reduce the risk of a secondary crash. Remain at the scene until law enforcement tells you that you can leave.

Gather Details for Your Insurance

Once everyone is safe, ex-



change names, phone numbers, addresses, driver's license numbers, license plate numbers, and insurance company and policy numbers with all drivers involved. Avoid discussing fault; simply stick to facts when you

speaking with the other driver or witnesses. Use your phone to take clear photos of all vehicles, the wider crash scene, traffic signs, road conditions, and any visible injuries, and jot down the date, time, weather, and a brief description of what happened while it is still fresh.

Get and Use the Police Report

If officers respond, ask how and when a formal police report will be available and write

down the report number if it is provided at the scene. Later, contact the appropriate agency (such as city police or highway patrol) or visit their website to request a copy, and check it for accuracy in details like location, vehicles involved, and insurance information. Share the report number and a copy with your insurance company, and keep one with your own accident file in case there are questions about fault or injuries down the road.

Call Your Insurer the Right Way

Contact your auto insurance agent as soon as possible, ideally from the scene once you are safe and calm. Have key details ready: location, time, other drivers' insurance information, and a basic description of the damage and injuries. When you speak to the representative, answer questions honestly but briefly.

Protect Yourself During the Claims Process

If the other driver's insurer calls, you are not required in most situations to give a recorded statement right away; you can politely decline or say you will call back after reviewing the situation. Keep a written log of every conversation with any insurance company, including dates, times, names, claim numbers, and what was discussed. Save all accident-related documents in one place: photos, repair estimates, towing and rental receipts, medical bills, and any letters or emails from insurers.

Questions about auto insurance or other coverages? Contact Brandon Cervenka Insurance Agency—local, friendly, and here for your family.

Pay Attention to the Details

By TED SHOOP

Want to Increase The Chances of a Successful Outcome When Your Home Hits the Market?

You've likely heard that PRICE, LOCATION and CONDITION matter when buying or selling a home (or any real estate). Of these three things, sellers often overlook the easiest and least expensive item—the condition of the property. Not only do you have the most control over the appearance of the home's interior and exterior, attention to detail (or lack thereof) can make or break a sale. Believe it or not, even the smallest things sometimes overlooked by a seller are noticed by and matter to the buyer.

In marketing, you want to appeal to the largest audience and attract as many interested parties as possible. Ensure that your agent's photos and videos used for MLS, social me-

dia and print advertising are of professional quality and accurately represent the home's features and benefits. If the lawn, shrubs or home are unkept and not inviting, chances are that the buyers will never tour the inside in-person. Declutter the home, closets and garage. Depersonalize by taking down family photos and personal art or collections. Thoroughly clean throughout the home, particularly the kitchen and bathrooms. Replace defective bulbs, repair/repaint damaged or scuffed walls, replace HVAC filters, and replace worn carpet or flooring. The best part? You can do many of these tasks yourself and save money.

Ted Shoop is a local Realtor with eXp Realty whose business is focused on serving customers and clients within Freeport and Walton County.

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IDIDAHIKE 2026: Fall in Love with Florida's Wild Side

For Freeport residents, one of Florida's most remarkable conservation stories is unfolding right in their own backyard. This Valentine's Day, locals are invited to experience it firsthand during IDIDAHIKE 2026, hosted by the Choctawhatchee Chapter of the Florida Trail Association.

Set for Saturday, Feb. 14, 2026, the annual event brings hikers, families and outdoor enthusiasts together for a day of guided exploration through the Nokuse Land Conservancy, which surrounds the city of Freeport and protects more than 55,000 acres of longleaf pine forests, wetlands and wildlife habitat.

Nokuse — a Creek word meaning "bear" — is a cornerstone of the Florida Wildlife Corridor, providing critical habitat for Florida black bears, gopher tortoises and countless other native species. For many

birds and signs of the wildlife that gives Nokuse its name.

"These hikes help people understand why protecting places like Nokuse matters," organizers say. "It's about conservation, stewardship and ensuring future generations can experience Florida the way it once was."

Freeport's Role In Conservation And Learning

A highlight of IDIDAHIKE 2026 is the opportunity to visit the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center, located in Freeport and operated by the Nokuse Education Foundation. Named for the late renowned biologist and conservationist Edward O. Wilson, the center serves as a hub for environmental education, scientific research and community engagement.

Open to IDIDAHIKE participants on Saturday afternoon, the Biophilia Center features in-

teractive exhibits, nature-based learning programs and outdoor spaces that connect visitors of all ages to the surrounding preserve. For Freeport families, it stands as a proud local resource — and a reminder that world-class conservation and education are happening right here at home.

A Weekend Escape

For those wishing to extend their Valentine's Day adventure, overnight camping is available

on Friday, Feb. 13, and Saturday, Feb. 14, at Pine Log Wildlife Management Area, located in Bay County near Youngstown, just north of Panama City.

A limited number of 40 campsites will be offered, providing participants a peaceful overnight experience under the stars — all within easy driving

distance of Freeport and the Emerald Coast.

For more information, visit floridatrail.org. Register for the hike at: <https://floridatrail.org/ididahike>.



locals, it's easy to forget just how rare and significant this preserved landscape is on a state-wide level.

A Local Trail with Statewide Significance

IDIDAHIKE highlights the Florida National Scenic Trail, which passes directly through Nokuse and just outside Freeport's city limits. Nearly 28 miles of the trail wind through the preserve, maintained by volunteers from the Florida Trail Association — including members of the Choctawhatchee Chapter who call Walton County home.

Participants can choose from four curated hikes designed to showcase the area's diverse ecosystems, from open pine flatwoods and shaded forest corridors to wetlands and elevated boardwalks. Along the way, hikers may spot deer, migratory

teractive exhibits, nature-based learning programs and outdoor spaces that connect visitors of all ages to the surrounding preserve. For Freeport families, it stands as a proud local resource — and a reminder that world-class conservation and education are happening right here at home.

Community, Connection and Valentine's Day on the Trail

While the trail is at the heart of the event, IDIDAHIKE is designed as a welcoming community gathering. Educational speakers will share insights into Northwest Florida's natural ecosystems, while food trucks and gathering areas provide space for hikers to relax, refuel and connect.

With its playful Valentine's Day and "Bear" themes, IDIDAHIKE welcomes cou-



 Events

Save the Date for Taste of the Race

Get ready for an unforgettable evening as SEASIDE SCHOOL™ kicks off its annual Half Marathon + 5K Race Weekend with one of 30A's most eagerly anticipated events: Taste of the Race, 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.

Mark your calendar for Friday, February 13, 2025, at the iconic SEASIDE® Lyceum.

VIP ticket holders gain early entry at 6 p.m., an exclusive VIP gift, culinary tastings, complimentary wine and craft beverages, and a special live performance from the SEASIDE NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL™ Performance Band. VIP guests will also enjoy exclusive side-stage access during Rubiks Groove's performance.

General Admission opens at 7 p.m., with Rubiks Groove taking the stage for a high-energy show sure to have the

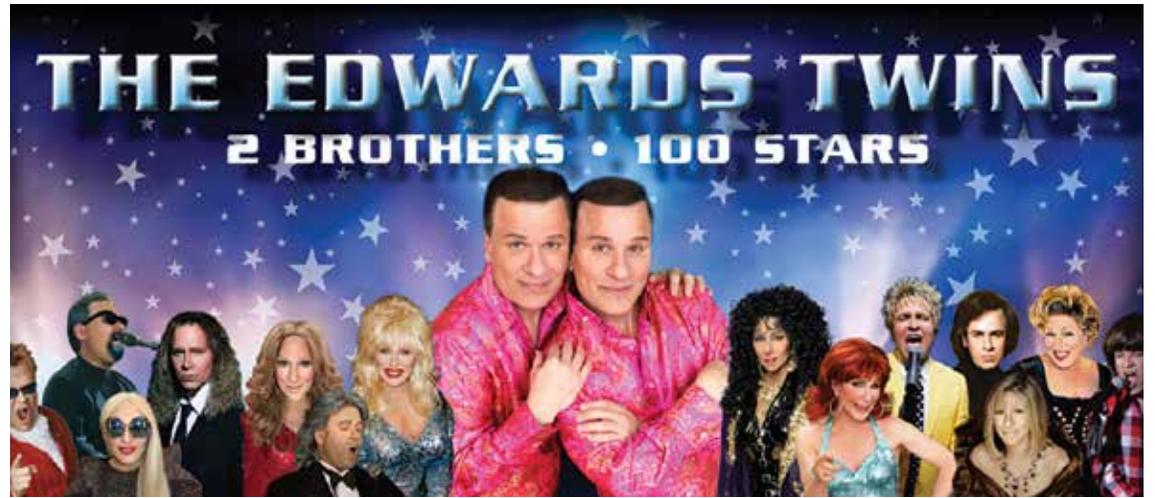
entire Lyceum dancing under the stars. Experience the culinary talents of the Gulf Coast's top chefs and restaurants as they compete for prestigious awards including People's Choice, Judges' Choice, and Chef's Choice. Enjoy delicious tastings from more than a dozen talented chefs, complemented by fine wines, craft cocktails, and local brews, all while soaking in the lively musical entertainment.

Proceeds from Taste of the Race support the SEASIDE SCHOOL FOUNDATION™, benefiting programs that enhance academic and extracurricular opportunities for students at SEASIDE NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL™ and Seacoast Collegiate High School.

To purchase tickets to Taste of the Race or learn more about the SEASIDE SCHOOL™ Half Marathon + 5K Race Weekend, visit RunSeasideFL.com.

Local chefs or restaurants interested in participating may contact Callie Cox at coxc@seasideschools.net.

See Las Vegas Entertainment at The Palms of Destin



All your favorite legendary superstars come alive in An Evening with the Stars, starring The Edwards Twins, at The Palms of Destin Resort. Anthony and Eddie Edwards, twin brothers and the country's premier celebrity impersonators, perform all live vocals and utilize the latest Hollywood-grade makeup and prosthetics, along with fashion designed by the stars themselves, to create an end result that truly must be seen to be believed.

A nonstop parade of musical icons, the show has earned national praise. The New York Times said, "They bring such love and attention to recreating

celebrities that in many ways it's better than watching the real thing!" The NBC Today show called it "one of the most extraordinary shows we have ever seen." The brothers have also appeared on The Tonight Show, Entertainment Tonight, Ellen, and currently appear in The Kominsky Method with Michael Douglas and Alan Arkin.

Their show, inspired by the classic variety shows of the 1970s and '80s, features a rotating lineup of stars that changes from show to show. The Edwards Twins are master impersonators in both look and sound, portraying Sonny and

Cher, Billy Joel, Elton John, Neil Diamond, Lionel Richie, Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, Lady Gaga, Celine Dion, Rod Stewart, Bette Midler, Barbra Streisand, Andrea Bocelli, Tom Jones and many more.

The showroom at The Palms of Destin Resort offers excellent table seating in an intimate setting that puts audiences up close and personal with the performers. Plentiful free parking, along with a variety of alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages available in the showroom, make for a perfect evening out.

Hollywood-based entertainment producer Bart Rockett also produces a year-round house show featuring never-before-seen magic and illusions paired with hilarious comedy ventriloquism. While written for adults, the show is family-friendly and regularly enjoyed by children. Other guest headliners are brought in throughout the year, including The Edwards Twins of Las Vegas, who will perform four special shows Jan. 9-12, with 4 and 7 p.m. showtimes. Also coming to the showroom is film and television star and comedy legend Yakov Smirnoff, performing Feb. 6-8 with 4 and 7 p.m. showtimes.

Reservations are required for all shows and may be made online at MAGICDestin.com, the main website for the magic and comedy show. To book reservations for The Edwards Twins or Yakov Smirnoff, scroll to the bottom of the homepage to access their individual booking links. Reservations may also be made by emailing the box office at MagicTicketAgent@gmail.com.

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Happenings Around Freeport

2026
EVENTS

JANUARY

01

New Year's Day Pelican Plunge
7 am | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island

02

Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's Installation & Awards Breakfast
7 am | Christian Life Center at FBC | FWB

03

Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

Creative Craft Collective
10 am | Freeport Public Library | Freeport

04

Women's Climbing Circle
5 pm | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin

06

Lego Club
3 pm | Freeport Public Library | Freeport

08

Sinfonia Gulf Coast's Simply the Best: Music of Tina Turner
7:30 pm | Destin FWB Convention Center | FWB



09-12

Evening with the Stars
4 & 7 pm | The Palms | Destin

09

Chess Club
3 pm | Freeport Public Library | Freeport

15

Pokemon Club
3 pm | Freeport Public Library | Freeport

Greater FWB Chamber Business After Hours
5:30 pm | Emerald Coast Science Center | FWB

16-19

30A Songwriter's Festival
Various Times & Locations

17

Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

Creative Craft Collective
10 am | Freeport Public Library | Freeport

20

Lego Club
3 pm | Freeport Public Library | Freeport

21

NIL Reimagined: The Blueprint for Branding & Social Media
11:30 am | Walton County Chamber | SRB

22

2nd Annual Bourbon, Whiskey, & Smoke
5:30 pm | Bud & Alley's | Santa Rosa Beach

23

Chess Club
3 pm | Freeport Public Library | Freeport

24

Biophilia Art Festival
1 pm | E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center | Freeport

Red Shoe Party
6 pm | Old Florida Fish House | SRB

28

Justice on the Block - Free Legal Help
11 am | Freeport Public Library | Freeport

29

Pokemon Club
3 pm | Freeport Public Library | Freeport

31

Pink Run 5K and Survivor's Stroll
8:30 am | Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach

FARMERS MARKETS

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

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

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

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Events

What Are You Doing New Year's Eve?

Here are a few of our area favorites, all in one easy-to-scan format:

Baytowne New Year's Eve Countdown

The Village of Baytowne Wharf, Miramar Beach | 6 p.m.-1 a.m.

Ring in 2026 with a high-energy celebration featuring fireworks at 8 p.m. and midnight, DJ music on the Baytowne Live stage from 6-8 p.m., and live music by the Heather Hayes Experience on the Events Plaza stage from 7 p.m.-1 a.m. The evening also includes kids' activities, face painting, drone light shows and more. Guests under 21 must be accompanied by a legal guardian after 10 p.m. Free and open to the public. baytownewharf.com

New Year's Eve Dinner Cruise Aboard the Solaris

SunQuest Cruises, 8330 Mike

Hayes Blvd., Miramar Beach | 8 p.m.-12:30 a.m. (check-in at 7 p.m.)

Celebrate in style aboard the 125-foot Solaris yacht with a four-course chef-inspired dinner, dancing, party favors and a champagne toast at midnight. Guests enjoy stunning views of Baytowne Wharf's fireworks while cruising the bay. This event is 21+ only. Tickets are \$200 per person; reservations are required online or by calling 850-650-2519. A 72-hour cancellation policy applies. sunquestcruises.com

New Year's Eve at North Beach Social

North Beach Social, Santa Rosa Beach | 6-9 p.m.

Celebrate early at this bay-side favorite at the foot of the Hwy. 331 bridge. Enjoy live music from Matt's Jazz Jam (6-8 p.m.), Chef Joyce's famous paella, and \$4 champagne specials



drop and fireworks take place at 8 p.m., followed by the midnight Beach Ball Drop from Celebration Tower to ring in 2026. Free and open to all ages. visitpanamacitybeach.com

Alys Beach Noon Year's Eve Celebration

Alys Beach Amphitheatre, Alys Beach | 10 a.m.-12 p.m.

Celebrate early with this free, family-friendly Noon Year's Eve event featuring live music by Kenny on the Keys, bubble machines, inflatable snow globes, complimentary children's crafts, face painting and more. Perfect for young families and those who prefer daytime fun. alys-beach.com

Old Florida Fish House New Year's Eve Party

Old Florida Fish House, Santa Rosa Beach | 9:30 p.m.-midnight

Ring in 2026 with a full band, handcrafted cocktails, champagne toast and a midnight balloon drop. Party tickets include party favors and a commemorative flute. VIP tickets (\$149) include a three-course dinner and reserved table for the night. Tickets required; purchase online in advance. oldfloridafishhouse.ticketspice.com/new-years-eve-2026

LuLu's Annual Noon Year's Eve Celebration

LuLu's Destin, Destin | 10 a.m.-2 p.m.

A festive, kid-friendly New Year's celebration featuring face painting, live music and entertainment from Capt. Davy and his Pirates, plus family fun on the sandy beach. Kids enjoy their own countdown to Noon with a giant beach ball drop. Free to attend. LuLu's closes at 3 p.m. on Dec. 31. lulusfunfood-music.com

Hotel Effie Fire & Ice NYE Bash

Hotel Effie, Sandestin | 7 p.m.-1 a.m.

Celebrate New Year's Eve on Hotel Effie's rooftop with high-energy entertainment, vibrant cocktails, panoramic views and fireworks. The Fire & Ice Bash features an exclusive DJ performance by Brandon Gomes (MTV's Siesta Key). Tickets are \$65 plus tax and gratuity and must be purchased in advance. hoteleffie.com

all evening at North Beach Social and upstairs at Farm & Fire. No tickets required. A relaxed, festive way to welcome the New Year before midnight. northbeach.social

couraged to bring blankets and lawn chairs for this free community event. seasidefl.com

PCB New Year's Eve Beach Ball Drop

Pier Park & Aaron Bessant Park, Panama City Beach | Begins at 4 p.m.

Panama City Beach's signature New Year's Eve celebration returns with live music, fireworks and the famous Beach Ball Drop. Festivities begin at 4 p.m., including the Kids FUN Zone at Aaron Bessant Park with free activities. An early ball

Seaside New Year's Eve Celebration

Seaside Amphitheater, Seaside | 4-9 p.m.

A family-friendly New Year's Eve celebration in Seaside's Central Square featuring arts and crafts, face painting, live music by Monsters of Yacht, and fireworks. Guests are en-

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<p>CHICKEN & ANDOUILLE JAMBALAYA 1 quart of Tony Chachere's Crispy Cajun chicken & andouille sausage jambalaya with New Orleans French bread loaf, Ayeeee \$19.99</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>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>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>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>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>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>MINI NOLA PO-BOYS 25 mini ham & cheese dressed New Orleans po-boys sandwich pieces with Crispy Cajun sauce and frilly toothpick Ayeeee \$39.99</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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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

WATERSOUND FOUNTAINS

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 op-

tions 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.



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.”

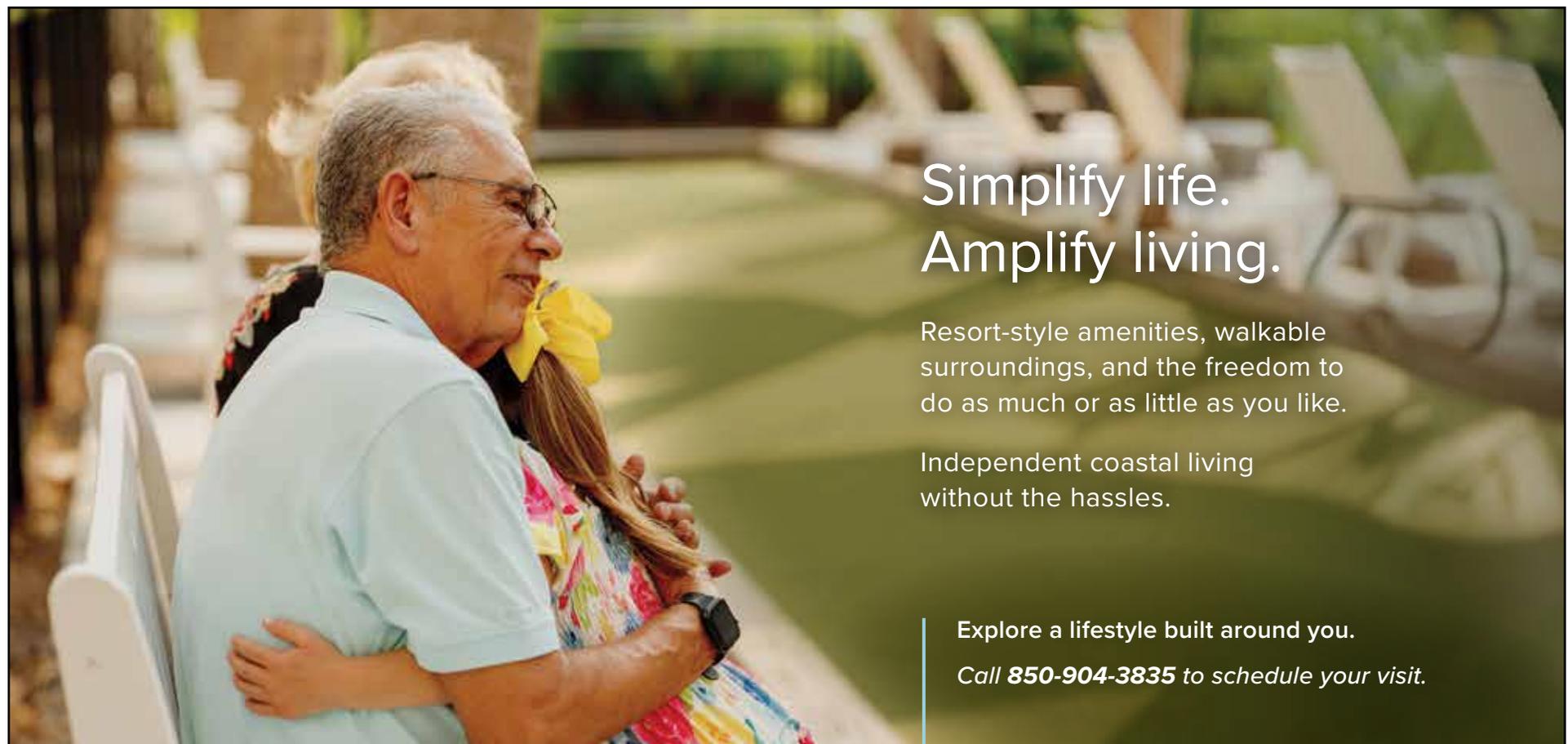
And maybe that’s the truest through line here.

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.”

Watersound Fountains Independent Living — where independence, wellness, and coastal living come together.

To schedule a visit, call 850-904-3835 or visit watersoundfountains.com.

There’s always movement, always laughter, always someone waving from a walkway or calling out a hello — the kind of



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 Education

Walton County School District Celebrating Success and Looking Ahead to a Bright New Year

BY DR. JOSHUA BLEDSOE, PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER, WALTON COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

As we come to the end of 2025, the Walton County School District is excited to highlight the incredible achievements and celebrations that made this fall standout across our campuses. From academic and artistic accomplishments to athletic excellence and major facility upgrades, our students and staff showcased the EPIC spirit that defines Walton County schools.

November began with one of our most anticipated recognitions of the year: the announcement of each school's

Teacher of the Year and Educational Support Professional of the Year. These honorees represent the Excellence, Professionalism, Innovation, and Collaboration that define our District. We invite families and community members to visit individual school websites and social media platforms to view photos of the winners and help celebrate these exceptional staff members.

Athletics also shone brightly this month. In golf, Brody McCormick claimed the District Tournament Championship, an accomplishment that also earned him an individual spot at the Regional Tournament.





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Both the South Walton boys' and girls' golf teams advanced to Regionals as well, joined by individual qualifiers Aiden Anderson (WHS) and Haley Chapman and Isabella Dickens (FHS). Their hard work and perseverance throughout the season earned them well-deserved recognition at the regional level.

On the football field, all three district high schools advanced to the regional quarterfinals, marking a successful season for each program. South Walton High School carried its momentum even further, making an exciting run that concluded at the Regional Semifinals. Their teamwork and determination exemplified the competitive spirit we are proud to see in all our student-athletes.

In volleyball, South Walton High School continued to raise the bar with an outstanding season that landed the Lady Seahawks in the State Semifinals. Their grit and passion throughout the year made this deep playoff run possible, and we congratulate them on this extraordinary achievement.

November also brought significant campus milestones. South Walton High School celebrated the ribbon-cutting of its new state-of-the-art stadium, providing students and athletes with a cutting-edge facility for years to come. The Magnet Innovation Center unveiled a major campus addition that is as innovative as the faculty and staff who occupy its halls. At

the same time, Emerald Coast Technical College revealed newly completed renovations to its Watersound campus. These enhancements highlight the district's commitment to expanding innovative learning opportunities and ensuring that students have access to exceptional educational environments.

Creativity shone as well through the accomplishments of Piper Wood from Freeport Middle School, who won the Art in the Capitol contest. Her work will be proudly displayed at the Florida State Capitol during the upcoming legislative session, beginning in January. This is a tremendous honor for a talented young artist.

Across the district, schools held heartfelt Veterans Day ceremonies, honoring the courage and sacrifice of the men and women who have served in our armed forces. We extend our sincere gratitude to our veterans for their service and for inspiring our students and families.

Christmas Break begins December 22, with teachers returning on January 5 and students back in class on January 7.

Stay connected with district news and celebrations by following us on Facebook, Instagram, and X, and by listening to our official podcast, EPIC Exchanges, available on Spotify and Apple Podcasts.

We wish all our families a joyful and restful holiday season!



January on the Line: Winter Fishing Around Freeport and Choctawhatchee Bay

January brings some of the coldest water temperatures of the year to South Walton County, and with it, some of the most predictable fishing patterns for anglers around Freeport. As winter settles in, fish move into deeper, more stable water and often group tightly together, rewarding those willing to slow down and fish methodically. With lighter boat traffic and clear winter water, January is a prime month to target inshore species close to home.



Flounder remain available in January, though their numbers begin to thin compared to late fall. Around Freeport, anglers should focus on deeper bay channels, creek mouths, bayou drop-offs and areas where sandy bottoms meet shell or mud. Flounder hug the bottom during cold weather, often burying themselves in the sand while waiting to ambush prey. Slow-moving baits fished tight to the bottom are key. Patience remains important — flounder frequently strike more than once if they miss the bait.

Speckled trout are a top January target and often stack up in deeper water during extended cold spells. In the Freeport area, look for trout holding around deep docks, marina basins, bayou mouths and channel edges throughout Choctawhatchee Bay. Live shrimp on a Carolina rig works well when available, while soft-plastic shrimp and paddle tails fished slowly near the bottom are effective alternatives. Afternoon warming periods can trigger short but productive feeding windows.

Redfish are reliable throughout January, especially around oyster beds, creek mouths and deeper bay edges. During cold snaps, redfish push into deeper holes and channels, then move shallow on sunny afternoons as the water warms. Schools of bull reds may also be encountered in deeper water this time of year and provide exciting catch-and-release opportunities. Because these fish are in their spawning cycle, anglers are encouraged to use circle hooks and practice careful handling to ensure a healthy release.

Sheepshead fishing peaks

in January as water temperatures drop. These structure-loving fish congregate around docks, pilings, bridge structure, rock piles and marina areas throughout the bay. Their bite is subtle and often difficult to detect, making light tackle and close attention essential. Fiddler crabs and live shrimp remain the top baits.

Black drum also become more active in January and are commonly found schooling around deeper channels, docks and bridges. Smaller black drum are excellent table fare, while larger fish offer steady action and are a popular target for anglers fishing from shore or docks during the winter months.

Nearshore and Winter Gulf Notes

When winter weather cooperates, calm January days can open the door for productive nearshore fishing in the Gulf. Vermilion snapper, triggerfish (catch-and-release only in state waters), and blackfin tuna may be available depending on conditions. Cold fronts often bring exceptionally clear water along the beaches, creating ideal sight-fishing opportunities for bull redfish on sunny afternoons.

January fishing around Freeport favors preparation, patience and a slower approach. With fish holding in deeper water and feeding less aggressively, anglers who adapt to winter conditions often find some of the most rewarding and peaceful fishing of the year.

Fishing News is brought to you by The Ships Chandler, a trusted name in Gulf Coast boating since 1980, serving Walton County in its Freeport location (17309 Highway

331 (32439). The 14-acre marine and service center provides top-quality fishing and pontoon boats, outboard motors and complete marine support for local boaters and anglers. This includes name brands such as Twin Vee, Cobia, Pathfinder, Maverick, Hewes and South Bay Pontoons; Bonafide fishing kayaks and LIVE standup paddleboards with accessories; Engine service and sales for Yamaha, Suzuki and Mercury outboards; Boat repair, detailing, gelcoat and custom marine work; and parts, accessories and electronics installation. Coming soon: 170 covered storage spaces for boats and RVs!
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 Environment

Our Endangered Animals

BY HELEN PETRE

Our home here in the Panhandle is a paradise of animals and plants, perfect weather, dune lakes, pine savannahs, springs and creeks, and miles of beach. Our parks and wildlife management areas are teaming with life. Our highways are full of traffic, tourists, and not much wildlife, other than the occasional deer during the rut. We are building residential and commercial projects faster than our endangered animals can escape.

Here are the names and habitats of some of our endangered species. They share our paradise. They were here first. If you see them, please protect them. The fact that they are endangered means you probably will not see them.

St. Andrew's Beach Mouse (*Peromyscus Polionotus Peninsularis*)



The St. Andrew's beach mouse is a subspecies of beach mouse (*P. polionotus*). It lives in the dunes in Gulf and Bay Counties. The St. Andrew's

Beach Mouse is six inches long with a two-inch white tail. Beach mice eat invertebrates and seeds from dune plants. They are monogamous and sexually mature at 30 days. Females have four pups after a gestation of 23 days. They are ready to breed again in 24 hours.

With that great breeding record, it seems like they should not be endangered, but they are federally endangered due to beach development, destruction of dunes, and fragmentation of their habitat. Other threats include predation from cats, foxes, coyotes, and racoons.

Choctawhatchee Beach Mouse (*P. Polionotus Allophrys*)



Another subspecies of beach mouse, the Choctawhatchee Beach Mouse, is also federally endangered. Like all beach mice, they eat seeds and fruit of dune plants and forage at night. The Choctawhatchee Beach Mouse lives in Bay, Walton, and Okaloosa Counties.

Leatherback Sea Turtle (*Dermochelys Coriacea*)



Leatherback sea turtles are federally endangered. They live 45 years, are seven feet long and weigh 2,000 pounds. They are the largest turtles on Earth, and they have been for 100 million years. Tyrannosaurus rex walked the Earth about 66 million years ago. Leatherbacks have a leathery, bluish, flexible carapace, in contrast to other turtles with hard shells. They can dive 4,200 feet down and stay under water for 85 minutes.

Leatherbacks take the longest migration between breeding and feeding of any turtle species, an average of 3,700 miles. They mate in the ocean. The females come ashore, some right here on our beaches, and lay about 80 eggs. The temperature of the nest determines the sex of the offspring. At 85 degrees F, half are male, half are female. At warmer temperatures they are females, at colder temperatures males. Females return to

the beach they were born on to lay eggs. Males spend their entire lives at sea.

One in a thousand hatchlings reaches adulthood. Turtles die when they ingest plastic bags which they mistake for jellyfish. Some dead turtles have been found with as much as 11 pounds of plastic in their stomachs.

Gulf Moccasinshell (*Medionidus Penicillatus*)



Gulf moccasinshells are two inch long, oval shaped, greenish, thin, river mussels. Like all mussels, they filter feed, consuming plankton and detritus, or dead stuff. Since mussels take in whatever is in the water and use the nutrients for food, they take in pesticides and chemicals, which are a significant threat. Gulf moccasinshells are federally endangered. They live in the Ecofina Creek, which is spring fed and empties into Deer Point Lake, north of Panama City.

Deer Point Lake is the water supply for Bay County.

Male mussels release sperm into the water, and females take the sperm into their shells, where eggs are fertilized. Like all mussels, the glochidia, or larva, attach to the gills of fish, where they live for a while, until they are mature. Host fish are blackbanded darters, eastern mosquitofish, guppies, and gulf darters.

Reticulated Flatwoods Salamander (*Ambystoma Bishop*)



Reticulated flatwoods salamanders are burrowing, or mole, salamanders. They live in seasonally wet savannahs, such as longleaf and wiregrass. Adults burrow into the litter. In October, they lay eggs in ephemeral wetlands with emergent vegetation, a habitat which is pretty rare in October, our dry season. Besides that, emergent vegetation occurs only after summer burns. The eggs hatch only if there is water, and the hatchlings require water for three months. That means October through January. It does not rain much between October and January. That is also the time when the forest service does its winter burns. Things do not look good for this confused salamander.

These are just a few of the most endangered organisms cohabiting with us in our paradise. We cannot make it rain, but there are things we can do to keep our habitat fit for our endangered animals. Please be kind and protect them by reducing use of plastic, recycling, putting trash in trash receptacles, staying on trails, keeping the beach flat, and reducing fertilizer and pesticide use. I am grateful to share my world with these amazing creatures. I hope my grandchildren will be able to enjoy them, too.



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Trifecta Training: Where Body, Mind, and Spirit Find Balance

By ROBYN MENTGEN AITES

Trifecta Training isn't just a fitness program — it's a transformation of body, mind and spirit, created by two people who have lived both the struggle and the victory. I spent 10 years as a personal trainer in a large Chicago gym and became an IFBB Pro in 2011, yet behind every win was a life lived in extremes. I could help others, but I wasn't living healthy myself — overtraining, overworking, over-everything.

Ken had his own battle. At 45, he weighed more than 320 pounds and felt exhausted, stressed and stuck. Trainers didn't help. Diets didn't last. He knew that if he didn't change, he might not have a future.

Then God wrote a new chapter.

We met on Christian Mingle and shared our stories, our faith and our scars. We got engaged, married and decided our wedding would be our "stage." Eighteen weeks. We meal-prepped, trained, prayed and showed up every single day. Ken lost 30 pounds before the wedding and has now lost 90. I dropped 25 and discovered

"Then God wrote a new chapter — and we found balance, not extremes."



what I had been missing my entire life — balance.

We no longer live in extremes. We live with strength, moderation, gratitude and joy.

That journey became the heartbeat of Trifecta Training.

We don't offer quick fixes or crash diets.

We build strong bodies, resil-



proves strength, flexibility and balance while nurturing mind-set and emotional well-being. As virtual FitPro trainers, we work one-on-one through online coaching and nutrition support — from home, at your pace, with real accountability.

ient minds and peaceful spirits through balanced nutrition and real-life habits.

And our calling is clear:

We specialize in empowering older adults to reclaim strength, vitality and independence.

We understand that aging comes with real challenges — joint pain, stiffness, limited mobility and low energy.

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Our holistic approach im-

Whether you're navigating arthritis, osteoporosis or simply want to move better and stay independent, Trifecta Training is here to help. Say goodbye to limitations and hello to confidence, mobility and joy.

If you're ready to say, "Yes, I'm all in," we will walk with you — step for step, rep for rep.

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Visit www.trifecta-training.com.

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Wellness

Journey Bravely: 2025 Year End Reflection



BY STEPHENIE CRAIG,
JOURNEY BRAVELY

2025 is rushing to a close. Maybe you find yourself overscheduled and weighed down by your own expectations or those of others this month. Maybe your mind is busy with gift planning, meal planning and travel planning. What will your kids do while out of school? How will you manage time away from work? How will you navigate awkward and difficult relationships through the holidays? What will you wear? What pictures will you post? How will you love others well?

December is a brain-busy month. It's easy to fill the days forgetting to slow down, rest, and reflect on what 2025 has meant to you. Reflecting on what you have experienced and learned each year creates an opportunity for you to approach the next year with intentionality about living life according to your values. Here are some questions

and instructions to guide personal reflection regarding the past year, the present, and what you want for 2026.

Create space – Set aside a couple of hours to work through these questions without distraction (including your phone).

Record reflections – Honestly and vulnerably record your answers so you can refer back to them throughout the year and review them at the end of next year.

Share it – Share your responses with one or two trusted people. Sharing intentions with others solidifies them internally and increases your chances of following through.

Live from it – Use the responses to these questions as a daily compass directing your next steps.

The Past Year

What did you accomplish personally and professionally that you feel really good about?

What challenges, struggles and fears did you work through?

What did you hope to accomplish or change but weren't able to? What kept you from doing so?

How are you different from 12 months ago? What did you learn? How did you grow?



How did you make a positive difference in the world around you?

What and who brought you the most joy?

What and who were the greatest stressors?

What did you tolerate this year?

What are you thankful for from the past year?

What are your top 3 insights?

The Present

Life is made up of multiple domains. Take time to check in with yourself by rating each of the following areas on a scale of 1-10:

Personal – How do you feel about yourself?

Physical – How are you tak-

ing care of your body (diet, exercise, rest, etc.)?

Financial – How is your financial situation (income, budget, spending, savings, giving, etc.)?

Spiritual – How satisfied are you with the way faith is integrated into your life?

Vocational – How do you feel about your work/career? Family – How are you doing as a partner and/or parent? Friends – How do you feel about your social relationships?

Fun – How well are you creating time for enjoyment and recreation?

What 2-3 areas of life do you most want to improve in the next year? What steps will you take to make those improvements?

would generate feelings of pride and fulfillment at the end of the year?

What is one thing that if you accomplished it next year would make all your other goals easier or unnecessary?

What do you want to start in the next year?

What do you want to stop in the next year?

How will you make a positive difference in the world around you next year?

If this next year was a chapter in a book, what would you title it?

As you reflect, take time to celebrate and be thankful for the good and growth in 2025 wherever you can find it. And, as you look toward 2026, remember that no one is perfect and you have the ability to grow and gather wisdom each day. Your journey is traveled over a lifetime and all of your growth adds to the depth and beauty of your story. For support along your journey, connect with us at www.journeybravely.com.

The Upcoming Year

If it were two years from now and you were living your best life, how would you know?

If it were two years from now and you weren't living your best life, what got in the way?

Who do you want to be by the end of the year? In what areas would you like to grow?

What 2-3 things if completed

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www.journeybravely.com

New Year, New You: Setting Realistic Aesthetic Goals



BY DR. CLARK, BLUEWATER PLASTIC SURGERY

As the holiday season winds down, many of us begin to reflect on the year behind us and set intentions for the one ahead. While health and wellness resolutions are common in January, more patients are also choosing to include aesthetic goals as part of their personal care and confidence-building journey. At Bluewater Plastic Surgery, we

maintain a youthful appearance in a professional setting or align their outward appearance with the vibrancy they feel inside. When your motivation comes from self-respect rather than comparison or pressure, the experience is far more rewarding.

Setting the right goals is equally important. Success doesn't come from doing everything at once—it comes from choosing steps that fit your lifestyle, health, budget, and timeline. Some patients start with subtle enhancements such as a refreshed skincare regimen or trying Botox for the first time. Others are ready to address a single feature that has bothered them for years or explore a larger transformation. During your consultation, we take time to discuss what's realistic, what options make sense, what timing looks like, and whether surgery

care can support a larger commitment to confidence, wellness, and self-care in the year ahead. At Bluewater Plastic Surgery, we approach every patient's goals with education, safety, discretion, and thoughtful guidance at the forefront.

To schedule a private consul-

tation and explore your options, contact Bluewater Plastic Surgery today. As a board-certified plastic surgeon, my practice is dedicated exclusively to cosmetic surgery, and I have performed thousands of procedures over the last 25 years. My highest priorities are patient safety and

superior results. With more than 300 five-star reviews, I let my patients' experiences speak for themselves.

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believe in setting realistic, safe, and empowering goals—not for vanity, but for the meaningful impact that feeling good in your own skin can have on every aspect of life.

Whether you're considering a procedure for the first time or looking to refresh your routine, the new year is a wonderful moment to reset, refocus, and approach your aesthetic goals with clarity.

A fresh start begins with reflection. Before making any decisions, it helps to pause and consider why you're seeking a change. Some patients want to feel more confident in their bodies, while others hope to reverse changes from aging, pregnancy, or weight loss. Many want to

or non-invasive treatments are the best fit. From injectables and skin-tightening to procedures like a facelift or tummy tuck, every plan is customized.

Timing itself is a powerful part of the process. If you have an event, milestone, or vacation coming up, we help you work backward to create the right timeline for healing and results. Many people choose the quieter winter months for procedures that require downtime so they can welcome spring and summer feeling refreshed and confident.

You've spent the year caring for others—now may be the perfect time to invest in yourself. Whether it's a subtle boost or a transformative change, aesthetic

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Wellness



Time to Get the Plump Out Aren't You Done Eating Yet?

BY DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

It's almost over! Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years. If you are anything like me, you'll be five pounds heavier with stairs harder than usual. Eating is such a social event and Thanksgiving starts the social smorgasbord. One scoop of everything followed by seconds of the good stuff. A few cookies left on the sheet, a bit of potatoes in the pan, one lonely slice of pie? And work on those left overs just before bed. I can hear Amanda asking, "Aren't you done eating yet?" as I'm bringing some scraps to bed.

Well, once the holidays are over, it's the time to hear it. I love you all, but you're plumping out. It's the time to get life under control and start working towards the same goal we all have. Eat better, get active, lose weight, feel better. It sounds so easy. Change is hard, but The Hormone Restoration Center can help you achieve your goals.

It's not all about weight loss, but it's a good start. Weight loss has multiple causes, so any solution needs to be customized to you. That is what we do so well. After providing a comprehensive consultation, discussing symptoms and reviewing labs, we give our recommendation and provide a range of options for the best path to success.

Most important, and often forgotten, is hormone optimization. If your estrogen is out



of whack or your thyroid is not optimal, you will never lose weight. Unfortunately, traditional medicine does not look at labs properly and that's why you will always hear, "Everything's normal." It's not.

Optimizing hormones can significantly reduce weight. It also routinely improves sleep, mood, libido and energy while

eliminating fatigue, brain fog, hair loss and sexual dysfunction.

Proper thyroid function can supercharge weight loss, increase energy levels, as well as promote healthy hair growth and healthier skin. Plus optimizing thyroid reduces cardiovascular risk. Why

matter what we do to help you get the weight off, you will be destined to gain the weight back until you develop healthy habits to keep the weight off.

Luckily for you, at The Hormone Restoration Center we can do the heavy lifting for you. We will get you on track and headed in the right direction. Once your weight loss starts, energy increases, and mood improves, the hard stuff just gets easier.

Join our family here at The Hormone Restoration Center; we'll support you every step of the way. Together, we will create a personalized plan that aligns with your goals and helps you embrace a healthier, happier you.

Reach out to us today at 850-837-1271 and let's kickstart your New Year with a new approach to weight loss and wellness!

would you not?

GLP-1 options like Semaglutide and Tirzepatide provide almost magical results. I have never seen medications that work so well to help lose weight while also reducing chronic diseases.

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Myth-Busting: Debunking Common Misconceptions

"Weight loss medications don't require lifestyle changes."

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Rilion Gracie Jiu Jitsu Freeport: Building Strength, Discipline and Faith—On and Off the Mat

What began as a vision to serve families in Freeport has grown into a place where physical training, personal growth and encouragement go hand in hand. Rilion Gracie Jiu Jitsu Freeport was founded by Rob and Lisa Braniff and their family in March 2021, originally as Freeport Jiu Jitsu, with a mission to share the life-changing benefits of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu with the local community.

In 2024, the academy was and from any background, and that it can be an invaluable asset in life,” said Head Coach Rob Braniff. “Our academy includes students as young as four and others well into their 60s. It’s never too late to begin a journey of growth and life change with us.”

The academy’s Kids Program focuses on simple, foundational learning blocks designed to help children remember basic movements and concepts

honed to partner with the globally respected Rilion Gracie Jiu Jitsu organization. Through this affiliation, the academy has strengthened its ties not only with world-class academies across the globe, but also with families, organizations and neighbors right here in Freeport.



honed to partner with the globally respected Rilion Gracie Jiu Jitsu organization. Through this affiliation, the academy has strengthened its ties not only with world-class academies across the globe, but also with families, organizations and neighbors right here in Freeport.

Rilion Gracie Freeport is supported by the Gracie family and their staff. The affiliation is led by Master Rilion Gracie, son of Carlos Gracie, who is widely recognized as the founder of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. Coach Rob and his staff are mentored by Professor Marcelo Herz, a 6th-degree black belt, ensuring instruction rooted in both tradition and excellence.

Since opening its doors, the academy has served hundreds of families and continues to partner with military members, law enforcement, first responders, educators and civic groups—united by a shared goal of strengthening the community.

“We believe that Jiu Jitsu can help anyone, at any age

they can carry with them well into the future. “We want our students to build confidence early,” Braniff said. “For our other classes, we emphasize sound fundamentals first, then layer in advanced concepts.”

All programming at Rilion Gracie Freeport includes both self-defense and sport Jiu Jitsu training. This balanced approach, Braniff explained, helps develop well-rounded martial artists while reinforcing discipline, awareness and resilience.

Coach Rob is confident in the deeper impact of a Brazilian Jiu Jitsu lifestyle. “The lessons we teach on the mats translate far beyond training,” he said. “Physical and mental health, problem-solving, perseverance, critical thinking and the ability to remain calm in stressful situations are strengthened off the mats as well.”

From the beginning, the mis-

sion of Rilion Gracie Freeport has been to be a faithful presence in the community—one that encourages individuals and families and reflects values of service, integrity and growth. That commitment, Braniff said, remains at the heart of everything they do.

When asked what he would say to those curious about trying Jiu Jitsu, Coach Rob offered a simple invitation: “Visit our website, schedule a free class

and come see us. We’re always available to answer questions, and we look forward to meeting you and helping you and your family begin the journey.”

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 Business

Estate Planning at Any Age: It's Not Just for the Wealthy



BY BILL BLANKEN

One of the biggest estate-planning delays comes from a common misconception: that estate planning is just for the wealthy. It's not.

It's true that in 2022, a filing is required for estates with combined gross assets and prior taxable gifts exceeding \$11.4 million. That's the threshold that beckons the tax man.

But even if you don't meet the estate tax threshold, a lack of estate planning means that after your death, your money and other possessions could sit on the sidelines while fees and court costs eat away at your assets. Bottom line: everyone

should take up some degree of estate planning.

First, let's determine just what we're talking about. Estate planning can mean putting together everything from a will and a health care directive to life insurance, naming guardians, and figuring out who gets your cash. Even things as simple as selling your car or paying your credit cards can become a long, expensive hassle for those you leave behind.

Name Names

Your first step is determining beneficiaries, including charities, for your insurance and retirement accounts. Just remember to track, and if necessary, update, your beneficiaries so you don't end up sending a fat insurance check or a hefty IRA payout to an ex-spouse or, if the beneficiary has died, to probate court.

Your will gets reviewed by probate court, becomes public, can be legally challenged by disgruntled relatives, and generally takes more time and money than you may have banked on



before it gets where you intended.

And that introduces a little irony that's one of the first rules of estate planning: Many estate planners recommend keeping as much as possible out of your estate.

Give Now

One way to give now is to make gifts of your assets while you're still alive. Under current law, you can give up to \$15,000 annually to anyone without incurring a gift tax. If you and your spouse team up, that's \$30,000.

And rather than leaving \$100,000 for a grandchild's college education, you can make contributions to a 529 college savings plan, potentially lowering your tax bill. Keep in mind

that if the child's parents set up the plan, they qualify for the tax treatment. Only the creators of the account (whether the grandparents or any other party) get the break from Uncle Sam. Note that each child can be the beneficiary of more than one account.

You can front-load up to five years of 529 contributions in 2019—totaling \$75,000 per child, per individual contributor, so \$150,000 for couples filing jointly—without hitting IRS gift-tax rules. Please check individual plan rules for more details.

Under Lock and Key

Trusts are another way to potentially keep your assets away from probate and tax costs to the full extent possible. To get a tax break, though, you'll need to keep assets in an irrevocable trust. That means you give up control but not necessarily the benefits.

One consideration is the qualified personal residence trust, where you put your home into a trust for whomever you

designate. This lets you stay in the home if you pay rent. If you put the home in a trust for a family member and then pay that family member rent, you'll be passing on additional cash outside of your estate. Consult a financial planner to determine if such a trust makes sense for your situation.

Yet another tactic is a life estate. You donate your house to a charity now but continue to live in it for the rest of your life. After your passing, the property goes to the charity, which can use it or sell it. This brings two benefits: It gives you a tax deduction while you're alive, and it keeps the property out of your estate, reducing your estate's taxable value.

For the Cause

Another challenge lies in balancing your family's unknown future financial needs and your desire to benefit those charities near and dear to your heart.

One approach is a charitable remainder trust, which is tax

Continued on page 29



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Sean of the South: It Was Late



BY SEAN DIETRICH

It was late. I pulled into the campus after seven o'clock to attend my last class of the semester. My last college class. Ever. It was a night class.

In America, most self-respecting people my age were finishing supper, settling down to watch "Wheel of Fortune." But I was in school.

I had been attending community college for 11 years. I had been taking a lot of night courses. Which meant that I had perfected the art of eating supper in my truck, on the way to class. I drove with my knees, ate with my hands, and controlled the radio with my big toe.

Supper often consisted of foil-wrapped tamales, purchased from Carmela, a middle-aged Mexican woman who visited our construction jobsites. Carmela traveled in a battered '84 Nissan Maxima that looked like a roving salvage yard.

Every time I'd buy a tamale,

Carmela would pat my cheek and say, "Joo are very sweet boy, but joo need a bath, joo smell like goat butt."

So parked my truck. I rushed into class, smelling like the fundamentals of a horned barnyard animal.

Eleven years it had taken me to finish school. Me. A middle-school dropout. My formal education ended in seventh grade, after my father took his own life with a hunting rifle. I simply quit going to school. I was a rural child. It wasn't a big deal. Nobody seemed to care what rural dropouts did.

I got my first job hanging drywall at age 14. I started working in bars, playing music shortly thereafter. I had a lot of jobs. I hung gutter. I worked as an ice-cream-scoop. I was a telemarketer. I was a nobody. I was white trash.

Until I enrolled in community college.

I enrolled as an adult, and my life changed. I became alumni at Okaloosa-Walton Community College.

I completed high-school equivalency courses. I finished the collegiate coursework. It took me eleven years. I worked hard. And I count every year I spent at OWCC as a blessing.

I don't care what you've



heard, community college is the beating heart of America. Your big, fancy schools are well and good. But show me a community college, and I'll show you the vascular system of this nation.

America is not built on the shoulders of Harvard or Yale graduates. America's internal organs are made up of men and women who know the difference between good and bad tamales.

That night, our classroom consisted of a commercial plumber, an electrician's assistant, a few GIs, and a Hooters waitress who looked as though she had come directly from work. And me, a degenerate bar musician/tile-layer.

Our literature teacher arrived. Soon, we were discussing what was known to our class as "TKAM." "To Kill a Mockingbird." And everyone in our classroom had something to say about TKAM.

Namely, because this book

was not just literature to us. It was a taste of home. The book took place in Monroe County, Alabama. We were one-point-five counties away from Monroe County.

We all talked about deeper meanings within the book. We spoke of metaphors and hyperboles and allegories and a bunch of other five-dollar words nobody understood except the Hooters waitress. And it was a great night.

And when class was finished, our teacher got this tear-stained look in her eyes and said, "I'm going to miss you all."

She said, "A few of you are going to graduate this year, and I wanted to do something special for you to mark this occasion."

She invited the graduates to the front of the room. We all shyly walked forward. She gave us tiny potted begonias and greeting cards. She kissed our foreheads.

They don't kiss your foreheads at Yale.

The Hooters waitress and I stood shoulder to shoulder. The

teacher made a big deal about how we were all such important people. She told the Hooters waitress that she was going to be a big-time nurse someday. The waitress blushed.

Then the professor told the classroom that she believed I would become a writer one day. I wanted to bury my face from embarrassment.

But the old woman touched my cheek and said, "You are so beautiful, Sean. I know God is going to use your past to make a marvelous future." Then she kissed my forehead again.

If there was a dry eye in the classroom it belonged to a needle.

And anyway, this goat butt will forever be a proud community college graduate.

Publisher's Note: When this story takes place, Northwest Florida State College was known as Okaloosa-Walton Community College (OWCC). While the name has changed, the mission—and the life-changing impact of our local community college—remains the same.

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Musing

A Pastor's Ponderings: What's on Your License Plate?



BY RICK MOORE,
COMMUNICATIONS PASTOR,
DESTINY WORSHIP CENTER

from folks from Wisconsin. A person from Kansas may live a totally different lifestyle than someone from Minnesota. Missouri's plates say "Show Me" on them, and Kentucky plates say "Unbridled Spirit." Whenever I see a license plate from Canada, I ask myself two questions: Did they really drive all the way down, and have they ever heard of airplanes? The most puzzling license plate I have ever seen here on the Emerald Coast was from Iceland: "You tell me."

Living on the Emerald Coast, one may see license plates from as many as a dozen different states in one day. We will not mention any state by name, but there is a particular group of visitors who drive, shall we say, a bit more aggressively than the others. It is not always fair to judge a person based on the state they are from, but if the license plate fits...

During the winter months, snowbirds from all over make the drive to Florida. Sometimes their license plates give us a glimpse into their culture. Folks from Ohio are different

While in the 4th grade, I asked my parents for a license plate for Christmas. No, I didn't have a car. It was for my bicycle. The plate was about 3" long, attached to the front of the bike's handle bars, and had my name "Ricky" on it. On Christmas morning I opened up many presents, but the little license plate was by far my favorite gift. After attaching the plate to my bike, I rode around the block with the greatest of pride. Other kids may have gotten a brand-new bike that Christmas, but I had my own personalized license plate. That bicycle was a



big part of my identity.

On my 16th birthday, I inherited my mom's station wagon. My oldest brother got a new T-top Trans Am when he turned sixteen, and my other brother got a new Z-28 when he turned 16. But the year I turned sixteen my dad fell into some financial difficulties. Just the same, I was happy to get the station wagon. My big challenge was what to put on a custom license plate

for the front of the car. That same year God had turned my life around and I started going to church. You might not think someone so young could have much of a past to turn from, but I did. I wanted to show the world I was a changed person. A local gift shop had an airbrush artist that could customize a plate for the front of a vehicle. I thought about putting John 3:16 on it, but that seemed a bit

overdone. Instead I had the letters T-G-B-T-G airbrushed on the plate. More than a few people asked me what those letters stood for. The answer: To God Be The Glory. I tried to drop my identity and let everyone who crossed my path know that any good found in my life is because of God. I was more proud to drive that station wagon around town than I would be if I was driving a new corvette.

Recently my sister was cleaning our mom's old house and she sent me a letter I had written to Mom when I was in college. The letter ended with the words, "To God Be The Glory." Somewhere along the way I quit using those words. Maybe it seemed too churchy, or maybe I had drifted back to the prideful days when I had my name front and center. All of us have a proverbial license plate. When we walk into a room, others see it even though it is invisible. None of us are perfect, but perhaps on this very day we can all pause, take a look at the good in our lives, and say... T-G-B-T-G.



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The Paper Bear Makes Its Florida Theatrical Debut at the Historic Florida Chautauqua Theater

The Paper Bear, a feature-length conservation film and nonprofit initiative, made its Florida theatrical debut Dec. 4-6 at the historic Florida Chautauqua Theater, giving local audiences their first opportunity to experience the award-winning film on the big screen.

Screenings were held inside the 1921 Murray Theater, home

The Paper Bear explores Florida's diverse ecosystems through the eyes of a father and son on a journey to find the Florida black bear. Along the way, stories shared around a campfire come to life through animated sequences, offering a fresh and imaginative lens on the region's biodiversity.

Following its world premiere

connection we all share with nature," said Arix Zalace, a local resident and director of The Paper Bear.

The film features rare, close-up footage of wild Florida black bears in their natural habitat,

captured by Zalace over more than two and a half years in the field. Designed to be informative and accessible for all ages, the film encourages audiences to deepen their connection to nature and better understand

the importance of conservation.

To learn more, view the trailer at youtu.be/mdEEtpi0O_o, or see upcoming theater dates and ticket information at thepaperbear.org/theaters.



to the Florida Chautauqua Theater and a cornerstone of Walton County's arts community for more than four decades. From its beginnings as a volunteer-led troupe to its evolution into a regional hub for performance, education and cultural enrichment, the theater's mission of community storytelling made it a fitting venue for the film's statewide launch.

Blending live-action wilderness footage with 2D animation,

at the 2025 Florida Film Festival, The Paper Bear was also named a finalist in the Trailblazer Category at Jackson Wild, widely regarded as the "Oscars® of environmental filmmaking." The film has continued to earn praise for its original storytelling and its ability to spotlight Florida's black bears and the wild landscapes they call home.

"The Paper Bear is both a love letter to Florida's wild heritage and a reminder of the deep

care proxy, and other basics. Then move on to an experienced financial planner, insurance expert, and estate or tax attorney. This team can show you how tax shelters, trusts, and insurance can give you ideas and alternatives now (and maybe tax benefits too). They'll help ensure your concerns are covered while keeping heirs' tax hassles to a minimum.

More Than Just an Asset Giveaway

Hopefully, it's clearer now; estate planning isn't just about giving away your assets. It can also help you set goals concerning what you want financially and personally in life. And beyond that, it can give you a chance to see your heirs or favorite charities benefit from some of your assets while you're still enjoying your own retirement.

ESTATE PLANNING

continued from page 26

exempt and irrevocable. The trust actually buys an insurance policy on you (and your spouse if you choose) equal to the size of your gift, naming your family members as beneficiaries. The trust pays the insurance premiums and your family gets the income from the policy. Then, after the established time period of payouts has passed, the remaining assets go to the assigned charity.

Proper Authorities

There are naturally costs associated with the setup and maintenance of all these plans. But if you end up preserving more of your estate in the long run, it could be well worth it. Start by visiting an experienced lawyer to create a will, a health



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Arts & Music

MKAF 30th Anniversary of Concerts in the Village

Celebrate three decades of music under the stars as the Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation (MKAF) marks the 30th anniversary of its beloved Concerts in the Village series. The area's first live outdoor concert series returns Thursday evenings from April 9 through June 11, 2026, at the MKAF Dugas Pavilion in Destin.

This 10-concert, family-friendly series features premier regional and national artists and top tribute bands performing everything from classic rock, rhythm and blues, and disco to yacht rock and modern pop favorites.

The season opens April 9 with Smash Mouth, followed by Black Jacket Symphony recreating Van Halen's 1984. Other highlights include Yacht Rock Schooner, Rumours ATL (Fleetwood Mac tribute), Brass Transit: The Music of Chicago, The Turnstiles: A Tribute to Billy Joel, Boogie Wonder Band, The Molly Ringwalds, The Return: A Beatles Tribute performing



Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, and a season finale with A1A: The Official Jimmy Buffett Tribute Band.

"We are thrilled to celebrate 30 years of Concerts in the Village with one of our most dynamic and diverse lineups yet," said MKAF CEO Demetrius Fuller. "When you purchase a concert ticket, you are supporting our mission to bring

arts education and engagement programs to thousands across Northwest Florida. We invite everyone to join us this season for unforgettable nights of music and community."

Gates open at 6 p.m., with concerts beginning at 7 p.m. Attendees are encouraged to bring lawn chairs and picnics, or enjoy food and beverages available for purchase from featured restau-



rants and food trucks.

General admission is \$40 per adult (including processing fees), with discounts available for active-duty military with ID. Children 12 and under are free. Tickets are available at MKAF.org/events.

A limited number of VIP tables, seating eight guests for the entire season, are available. For availability or sponsorship information, call (850) 650-2226 or email info@mkaf.org.

MKAF members receive early entry, free admission to every concert, and discounts to other MKAF events. Learn more at MKAF.org.

Concert lineup is subject to change. All sales are final. Pets,

drones, and tables larger than two feet are not permitted. Children 17 and under must be accompanied by a parent or guardian.

The 2026 Concerts in the Village schedule:

- Thursday, April 9 | Smash Mouth
- Thursday, April 16 | Black Jacket Symphony: The Music of Van Halen
- Thursday, April 23 | Yacht Rock Schooner
- Thursday, April 30 | Rumours ATL
- Thursday, May 7 | Brass Transit: The Musical Legacy of Chicago
- Thursday, May 14 | Turnstile: The Music of Billy Joel
- Thursday, May 21 | Boogie Wonder Band
- Thursday, May 28 | The Molly Ringwalds
- Thursday, June 4 | The Return: A Beatles Tribute
- Thursday, June 11 | A1A: The Official Jimmy Buffett Tribute Band

CAA Awards Emerald Coast Theatre Company Arts For All Grant

Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC) has been awarded a \$5,000 Arts Education Grant for Organizations from the Cultural Arts Alliance of Walton County (CAA) in support of its 2025-2026 season. This contribution strengthens ECTC's mission to enrich and entertain the Emerald Coast community through professional theatre productions, youth educational programs, and meaningful community outreach initiatives. This funding comes from the CAA's Arts For All Grant Program which is designed to empower creative expression, foster cultural en-

richment, and strengthen the arts throughout Walton County. These grants specifically back initiatives that inspire creativity, enhance learning, and expand access to the arts for students of all ages.

The CAA has been a cornerstone of artistic growth and cultural enrichment throughout Walton County. Its collaboration with ECTC extends beyond financial support as the CAA also features rotating exhibitions of local artists in the ECTC lobby as part of their partnership, giving patrons the opportunity to experience the local

and vibrant visual arts along-



side live performance. "We are incredibly grateful to the Cultural Arts Alliance for their ongoing commitment to ECTC and for the impact they have

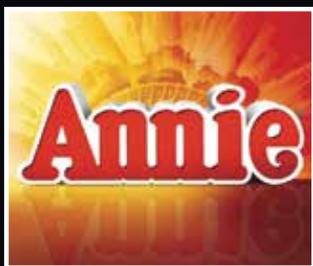
on creative organizations like ours," said Producing Artistic Director Nathanael Fisher. "We are so honored to have them as a longstanding partner and their support elevates our work on-stage, enhances the experience for our audiences, and gives us the opportunity to help amplify the voices of so many talented artists across the Emerald Coast."

The donation helps support ECTC's family theatre offerings with Season 13's production being Elephant and Piggie's "We Are In A Play". The CAA's support also allows ECTC to offer field trips to local private

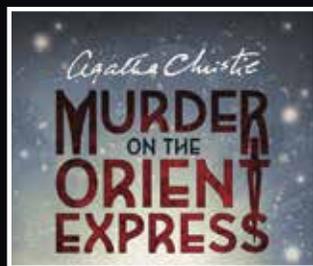
and public schools throughout Northwest Florida. Through partnerships like the CAA's, ECTC is able to nurture creativity and connection in Walton County and beyond, with satellite programs in both Freeport and Defuniak.

ECTC's 2025-2026 season is made possible with generous support from Grand Boulevard Town Center, St. Joe Community Foundation, Howard Group, and Jerry and Alice Zich.

For more information, call (850) 684-0323 or visit emeraldcoasttheatre.org. Engage with ECTC on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.



Nov. 28 - Dec. 31



Jan. 15 - Feb. 1



Feb. 12 - March 1



More Info and Tickets:
www.emeraldcoasttheatre.org

January Is the Perfect Time to Begin Music Lessons

As the calendar turns to January, many people feel a renewed sense of motivation and possibility. The start of a new year naturally encourages fresh goals and positive habits, making January an ideal time to begin music lessons. Whether you're a parent considering lessons for your child or an adult finally ready to pursue a long-held musical dream, January offers several unique advantages that can set you up for long-term success.



One of the biggest benefits of starting music lessons in January is the mindset that comes with the new year. After the reflective pause of the holidays, people often feel more focused and ready to commit to structured routines. Music study thrives on consistency, and January is a time when schedules tend to stabilize. With holiday travel over and fewer disruptions, it's easier to establish a regular practice schedule and weekly lesson time, which are essential for steady progress.

January also provides a clean slate for goal-setting. Beginning lessons at the start of the year allows students to set clear, achievable musical goals and track their progress over the coming months. For children, this might mean mastering basic technique or preparing for a recital later in the year. For adults, it could be learning to read music, playing favorite songs, or gaining the confidence to perform for others. Starting in January makes

it natural to measure improvement as the year unfolds, which can be highly motivating.

Another advantage is the extended runway before busy seasons arrive. Students who start lessons in January have months to build strong foundational skills before spring and summer activities fill the calendar. This early start helps prevent the rushed feeling that can occur when lessons begin closer to recital season or the school year's end. By the time performances, exams, or ensembles come around, January starters often feel more confident and prepared.

From a practical perspective,

January can also be a quieter time at music studios and schools. After the holiday rush, teachers often have greater availability and flexibility in their schedules. This can mean more choice in lesson times and, in some cases, a more personalized learning experience. Teachers may also have more time to focus on goal-setting and long-term planning with new students.

Finally, beginning music lessons in January supports overall well-being during the winter

months. Learning music provides a creative outlet that can boost mood, reduce stress, and bring a sense of accomplishment especially valuable during shorter, colder days. Having a positive, engaging activity to look forward to each week can make winter feel more productive and enjoyable.

In short, January combines motivation, structure, and opportunity in a way few other months can. By starting music lessons at the beginning of the year, students give themselves

the gift of progress, creativity, and growth that can last well beyond January and well into the future.

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