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FREEPORT Life

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From Death to Life: Stephanie McMinn's BeGenerous Ministry Brings Hope to Local Women

By MICHELLE RUSCHMAN

Stephanie McMinn, founder of BeGenerous, has been providing resources and coming alongside women and their families since 2010. It all began with simply providing diapers to single mothers, but since then, her organization has grown into a source of hope for the women of Okaloosa, Walton, and Bay counties. "I was 16 when I had my first child, so I know what it's like to be a young mother with limited resources. There were food pantries and clothes closets, but there was no diaper bank. One day, I called the health department trying to see where I could help, and the case worker shared with me that while she watched a client dress her baby, she noticed that the baby was dressed without a diaper. When she pointed out that it was missing, the mom told her she hadn't forgotten. She hadn't put it on because they couldn't afford



to have the baby in a diaper while they were at home. From that story, I started going into these homes and seeing how much the mothers were struggling when the home had an absent father, or the dad was in prison. There was poverty, drugs, and sexual exploitation. Once I saw this happening in my own backyard, it wasn't something I could unsee, and

I knew I had to do something about it."

BeGenerous now includes "The Yellow House" and "Pearl House," which offer refuge, healing, and transformation through a 24-month residential recovery program. The women come from the most desperate situations, including domestic abuse, sex trafficking, incarceration, and, especially

close to Stephanie's heart, addiction. In many situations, BeGenerous has been the bridge from death to life.

Sometimes, though, it's when you're battling darkness for others that you can be in the greatest fight of your own. Less than a year after starting BeGenerous, while Stephanie was helping so many families find their fresh start, Stephanie's husband was in the midst of recovery while their sons were in the grip of addiction themselves. Today, Stephanie can say that her oldest son has recovered from addiction and is helping her in her massive efforts, but in 2021, the family got devastating news. "My baby boy, Gage, was 22 years old when he overdosed on fentanyl and passed away. Here I am, doing work in the community, and my kids know what I do, but addiction doesn't re-

BEGENEROUS
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Easter Reflections: It's Friday Now, but Easter is Coming!

By GUEARY CLENDENING

There is a prophecy in the Old Testament of the Bible concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is found in Isaiah 52: 13-15 in the New Living Translation: "See, my servant will prosper; he will be highly exalted. But many were amazed when they saw him. His face was so disfigured he seemed hardly human, and from his appearance, one would scarcely know he was a man. Yet He will startle many nations. Kings will stand speechless in his presence. For they will see what they had not been told; they will

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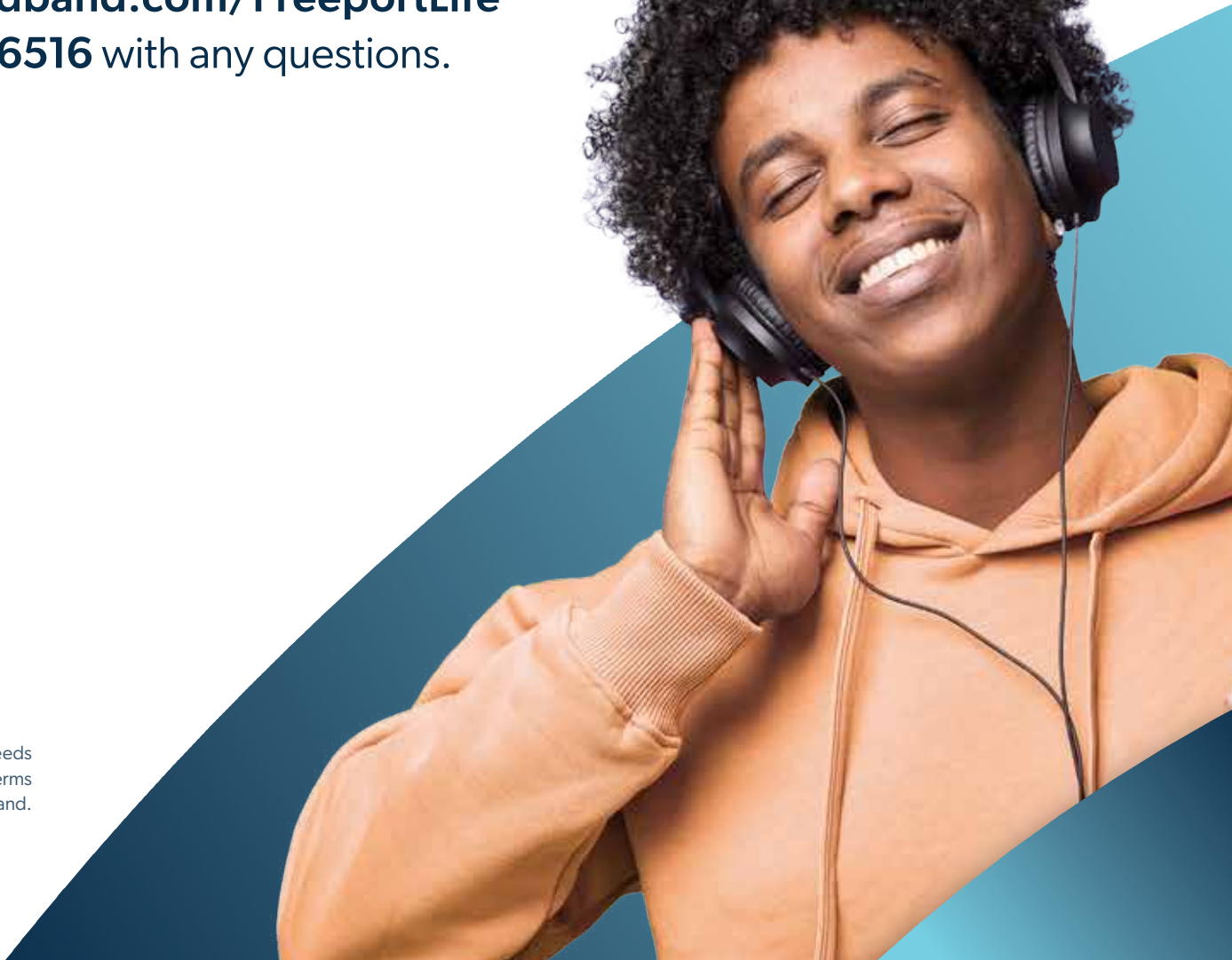
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EASTER

continued from page 1

understand what they had not heard about...”

Seven hundred years later, on a Friday, the Roman soldiers beat Him (the Son of God) with their fists until His face was horribly swollen and His eyes were nearly shut. They stripped Him of His clothes and whipped him with a rock-laced leather whip. His back was ripped open, his skin was shredded, exposing his internal organs. They crowned Him with a bed of thorns, put a reed in His hand, and clothed Him in a scarlet robe, spit on Him and mocked Him as the King of the Jews. They led Him in a procession outside of the

city gate of Jerusalem to a place called Golgotha (Translation: A Hill Called the Skull).

And there they crucified Him, nailing His hands and feet to a wooden cross. The soldiers then gambled for His robe. The religious leaders mockingly shouted, “He saved others but can not save himself.” At around 3pm on that Friday, Jesus cried out “It is finished!” Finally, they laid Him in a borrowed tomb, and sealed it with the Governor’s seal. A group of soldiers were stationed around the tomb to prevent anyone from stealing the body. The events of His death all occurred on Friday- Only Jesus knew Sunday was coming!

“But very early on Sunday morning the women came to the

tomb. They found the stone covering the entrance rolled to the side. They went into the tomb but couldn’t find the body of the Lord Jesus Christ. Suddenly, two men appeared to them, clothed in dazzling robes. The women were terrified. Then the men said, “why are you looking in a tomb for someone who is alive?, He isn’t here. He has risen from the dead. Don’t you remember what He told you back in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of sinful men, that He would be crucified, and that He would rise again the third day.” (Luke 24:1-7)

Friday has past and Sunday has come, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah!

For the past two thousand

years, millions of people have believed the accounts of Christ as revealed in the scriptures, and as a result their lives have been changed. The message is simple; “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, (to die on a cross to pay the penalty for our sins against God) so that everyone who believes in Him, will not perish but receive Eternal Life....For if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that Jesus is Lord, you will be saved.” (John 3:16, Romans 10:9).

Saved means to be forgiven of our sins; placed into the family of God to receive a new life of peace and purpose and to have the assurance of life after death with God forever!

I encourage you, if you have not received God’s gift provided by His Son, that you pray to Christ today! For anyone who calls on the name of the Lord, will be saved (Romans 10:13). That’s God’s promise; believe and receive.

Finally, these past few weeks we have experienced our own “Friday.” All of the things we have relied on have been shaken or removed. I don’t know what the future holds but I do know who holds my hand. Regardless of the outcome, because of Christ, Sunday’s coming!

Gueary Clendenning is a retired Assembly of God pastor, having served as Senior pastor of the Valparaiso Assembly.

BEGENEROUS

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spect anyone.”

To honor Gage, Stephanie started an outreach called “EnGAGE: From Death to Life,” an event that focuses on victory. Along with the concert featuring artists, ASAP Preach and Adrion Butler, attendees will hear messages of hope, learn about com-

munity resources, shop with local vendors, and local food trucks will be on-site. Last year, a concert-goer asked to be baptized. That will continue this year with the hopes that it will become an annual tradition. “During one intermission, a guy came up and said, ‘I want Mama Steph to baptize me. I want to lay this down and leave it behind.’ I just dove right into that water with

him, and the next thing you know, there’s a line of kids waiting to be baptized. We got to close that night, soaking wet, and we knew we had to make this a part of every year from now on.”

Coming to EnGAGE means throwing your expectations to the wind and letting the Holy Spirit move. That’s when you know it’s going to be fun!

EnGAGE will be held on April



25th at 1140 Circle Dr, Defuniak Springs Lakeyard. If you are a vendor, food truck, or non-profit resource who would like to be part of this dynamic event, you can email info@begenerousinc.org

Michelle Ruschman is a local artist, speaker, and writer. She can be reached at michelleruschman@gmail.com or michelleruschman.com.



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Community



By DR. KAREN DEVORE,
TORTOISE CLINIC

We live in a culture that glorifies speed — fast food, fast results, fast fixes. But true longevity doesn't come from rushing. It comes from consistency, balance, and tending to the body with intention over time.

Longevity isn't simply about

adding years to your life. It's about adding life to your years. Through an integrative and holistic approach to medicine, we focus on optimizing how you feel today while protecting your health for decades to come. Here are the five keys I believe are foundational to living longer and living well.

The 5 Keys to Longevity



1. Reduce Inflammation at the Root

Chronic inflammation is one of the most significant drivers of aging and disease. It's linked to heart disease, diabetes, autoimmune conditions, cognitive decline, and chronic pain.

In integrative health, we don't just suppress symptoms. We ask why inflammation is present. Is it driven by diet? Stress? Gut imbalance? Environmental toxins? Hormonal shifts?

By identifying and addressing root causes through anti-inflammatory nutrition, targeted supplementation, acupuncture, stress management, and lifestyle modifications, we can reduce the internal "fire" that accelerates aging and instead create an environment where the body can repair and regenerate.

2. Support Metabolic Health

Your metabolism is far more than calorie-burning. It's the foundation of energy, hormone balance, blood sugar stability, and long-term vitality.

Insulin resistance, blood sugar spikes, poor sleep, and chronic stress all impair metabolic function and accelerate aging. Supporting metabolic health through whole-food nutrition, strength training, adequate protein intake, sleep optimization, and strategic supplementation helps maintain muscle mass, protect brain function, and reduce risk for chronic disease.

Longevity isn't about restrictive dieting. It's about nourishing your body in a way that supports resilience and strength at every stage of life.

3. Balance Hormones Thoughtfully

Hormones regulate nearly every system in the body from mood and metabolism to bone

density and cardiovascular health. As we age, shifts in estrogen, progesterone, testosterone, thyroid hormones, and cortisol can significantly impact how we feel.

An integrative approach to hormone health looks at the full picture. We assess lifestyle, stress patterns, nutrient status, gut health, and detoxification pathways before determining whether bioidentical hormone therapy or targeted nutritional support is appropriate.

Balanced hormones can improve sleep, mental clarity, libido, energy, and muscle preservation, which are all essential components of aging well.

4. Prioritize Nervous System Regulation

You cannot out-supplement chronic stress. The nervous system plays a powerful role in longevity. Persistent sympathetic ("fight or flight") activation increases inflammation, impairs digestion, disrupts hormones, and accelerates cellular aging.

Practices that activate the parasympathetic ("rest and repair") system such as acupuncture, breathwork, meditation, time in nature, meaningful social connection, and restorative sleep, allow the body to heal.

Neuro-acupuncture and integrative therapies are especially powerful for supporting neurological resilience, reducing chronic pain, and optimizing brain health as we age. A regulated nervous system is one of the most underestimated keys to long-term vitality.

5. Invest in Preventative, Personalized Care

Longevity is proactive, not reactive. Rather than waiting for lab values to reach "abnormal,"

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Community

NatureView: Why So Many Buyers Are Turning to Freeport's Newest Community

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

If you talk to almost anyone trying to buy a home right now, you will hear the same story. They have been searching for months. Sometimes longer. They find a home they like, only to discover it needs renovations, sits in the wrong location, or stretches their budget further than they hoped.

Other buyers run into a different problem. They find new construction homes they love, but the community will not be finished for years. The amenities are still drawings on paper. The neighborhood still feels like a construction site.

For many families, the challenge is not simply finding a house. It is finding the right place to live. A place that feels like home from the moment you arrive.

That is exactly why many buyers are starting to look to-

ward NatureView in Freeport, a new master planned community quietly taking shape just minutes from Highway 331. And unlike many developments still years away from completion, NatureView is already coming to life. Homes are available now. Amenities are open. And residents are already moving in.

A Different Kind of New Construction Community

Across Florida, new construction homes are being built at a rapid pace. But not every new neighborhood is designed the same way. Some are built quickly with little attention to long term lifestyle. Others offer beautiful homes but lack meaningful outdoor space or gathering places.

NatureView was designed differently from the beginning. Created by The Jay Odom Group, the same developer behind the highly successful Hammock Bay community, NatureView was planned with a simple



idea in mind: A neighborhood should feel connected to the land around it. Instead of clearing every acre for development, the community is surrounded by more than 50,000 acres of permanently protected forest land, including conservation property owned by Nokuse Plantation and the State of Florida. That natural setting creates some-

thing increasingly rare in today's fast-growing region. Space. Quiet. And the feeling that nature is still part of everyday life. Tree lined streets wind through the neighborhood. Walking trails connect parks and gathering spaces. Pocket parks appear throughout the community where residents can stop, relax, and enjoy the outdoors. It is a

neighborhood designed to slow things down just enough to appreciate where you live.

Homes Designed for Modern Living

For buyers searching for new homes in Freeport, NatureView offers something especially appealing right now. Many homes are already built and ready for move in. That means families do not have to wait months or years for construction to finish. They can tour the homes, walk the neighborhood, and picture exactly what life will look like there. Homes in the community are being built by two respected builders, DSLD Homes and Holiday Builders, offering a variety of thoughtfully designed floor plans. Inside, the homes reflect what many buyers are looking for today. Open living areas that bring families together. Modern kitchens designed for entertaining.

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Community

NATUREVIEW

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Comfortable bedrooms and flexible spaces that can adapt to home offices or growing families.

For many buyers relocating to Walton County or moving up from their first home, the ability to purchase brand new construction homes in Freeport at starting prices in the low \$300s is another major advantage. New construction also means something buyers increasingly appreciate. Energy efficiency. Modern materials. Lower maintenance costs. Instead of inheriting someone else's repairs, homeowners begin with a clean slate.

A Community Where the Lifestyle Is Already Built

One of the most common frustrations buyers experience with new developments is waiting for the community itself to catch up with the homes. Sometimes buyers move in years before amenities are finished. NatureView approached that differently. From the start, the goal was to build the lifestyle alongside the homes.

Today, residents can already enjoy a wide range of community amenities, including:

- A resort style swimming pool
- A fully equipped fitness center
- Pickleball and basketball courts
- A children's playground
- Walking trails with exercise stations
- Pocket parks located throughout the neighborhood

The community clubhouse has quickly become a gathering place where neighbors meet, families relax, and residents connect. Instead of waiting for the future version of the community, homeowners are already experiencing it today. That sense of immediate livability is one of the reasons interest in NatureView continues to grow.

Why Freeport Is Becoming One of the Emerald Coast's Most Sought After Areas

Another reason buyers are paying attention to NatureView is its location. Freeport has quietly become one of the fastest growing areas in Walton County, offering a balance that many buyers find hard to repli-

cate elsewhere on the Emerald Coast. The community sits just minutes from Highway 331, providing direct access to both the beaches and the broader region. Within a short drive, residents can reach:

- The white sand beaches of South Walton
- Employment centers throughout Walton and Okaloosa Counties
- Major military installations including Eglin Air Force Base and Hurlburt Field
- Growing retail and dining destinations along the Emerald Coast

For military families, professionals relocating to the area, and local residents looking for more space, the location offers a unique combination of accessibility and privacy. You can reach the coast quickly. But when you return home, the pace feels different. Quieter. More connected to nature.

The Opportunity of Buying Early

Anyone who watched the growth of Hammock Bay over the past decade understands something about master

planned communities. The early buyers often benefit the most. When neighborhoods begin, pricing is typically at its most accessible. As the community fills in and demand grows, values often rise alongside it.

At NatureView, that early chapter is happening now. Buyers today have access to the best selection of homes and floor plans. They are able to move into a community that is already functioning while still benefiting from its continued growth. For families planning for the long term, that combination can be especially appealing. You are not just purchasing a home. You are becoming part of the foundation of a neighborhood that will continue to evolve in the years ahead.

A Neighborhood With Meaning

Beyond homes and amenities, NatureView also reflects something deeper about the community surrounding it. The development includes a unique initiative known as NatureView Hero Homez, where five homes in the neighborhood will be donated to local heroes selected by community and military organi-

zations. The first home has already been dedicated, creating a moment that brought together residents, local leadership, and members of the military community. It serves as a reminder that neighborhoods are more than streets and houses. They are places where stories begin.

Discover NatureView for Yourself

For those exploring new homes in Freeport or searching for a master planned community in Walton County, NatureView offers something increasingly rare. A neighborhood where the vision is already becoming reality. Homes are ready now. Amenities are open. And the community is growing one family at a time.

The best way to understand NatureView is to experience it firsthand. Walk the trails. Tour the homes. Step inside the clubhouse and imagine everyday life there. Because sometimes the right place does not feel like something you found online. Sometimes it feels like something you discovered. And for many buyers arriving in Freeport, that discovery is happening at NatureView.



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Around Town

Scenic Walton Honors Alys Beach with Design Excellence Award



Scenic Walton recently presented its Design Excellence Award to Alys Beach, recognizing the community's commitment to architectural excellence and scenic beauty along Walton County's Scenic Highway 30A corridor.

The award was presented

Feb. 26 by Scenic Walton Executive Director Leigh Moore, with Board President Tony Vallee in attendance. Robert Stenhammer, vice president and general manager of Alys Beach, accepted the award on behalf of Alys Beach and its owner, EBSCO Gulf Coast Development, Inc. "Alys Beach represents one of the most thoughtfully designed communities anywhere along our coast," Moore said. "Its architectural integrity and commitment to design excellence have helped set a standard for coastal development."

During the ceremony, Moore and Stenhammer also recognized Marieanne Khoury-Vogt and Erik Vogt of Khoury Vogt Architects, recipients of this year's Seaside Prize. The architects have served as Town Architects at Alys Beach for more than 15 years and helped maintain the community's original vision.

WFLDAR Honors Student Essayists and Good Citizens



The West Florida Chapter of the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution (WFLDAR) recently recognized local students during its annual American History Essay Contest and Good Citizens Awards Ceremony.

Founded in 2014, the chap-

ter hosts the event each year to celebrate academic excellence, civic responsibility and patriotism among area students. WFLDAR Regent Robbie Carroll welcomed students, teachers, principals and parents to the ceremony.

The American History Essay Contest invites students in grades 5-8 to explore the nation's past through creative writing. This year's theme, "Lunch with a Signer," coincides with America's 250th birthday on July 4, 2026.

First place was awarded to sixth grader Connelly Grelle for her essay on John Hancock titled "Put Your John Hancock on That." In her winning entry, she wrote that Hancock "was passionate about our country becoming independent from Britain," noting that his bold signature was "a statement to King George III." She also referenced the well-known quote attributed to Hancock: "There, I guess King George will be able to read that without his spectacles!"

Second place was awarded to Freeport Middle School student Sheila Bouldridge.

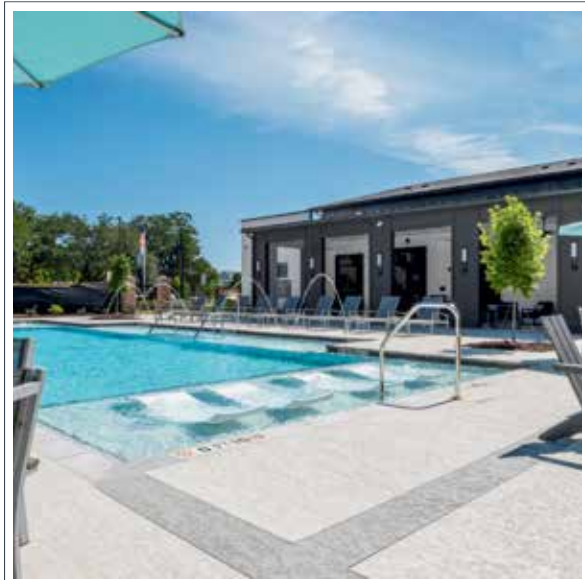
The chapter also honored outstanding seniors through the DAR Good Citizen Program, which recognizes students who demonstrate dependability, service, leadership and patriotism. This year's Good Citizen Award went to Anaya Patel of Seacoast Collegiate High School, with runners-up Elijah Brooks Ordis of Destin High School and Austin Hays Hostetler of South Walton High School.

NWFSC Drives Regional Economic Impact

Northwest Florida State College (NWFSC) continues to serve as a powerful driver of economic growth and opportunity across the region, generating a total annual impact of \$283.1 million and supporting 3,842 jobs in Okaloosa and Walton counties.

A newly released economic

Continued on page 11



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THE WATERS
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Finding the Heart of Freeport

A Town Shaped by Water, Growing Through Community, and Still Defining Its Center



BY KERRI PARKER,
HWY331.COM

Ask most residents where the heart of Freeport is, and you might get a pause. A street? A corner where people gather? For years, the town hasn't had a single, obvious center — but that also leaves room for opportunity.

Historically, Freeport did

have a center. In the 1830s, life revolved around LaGrange Bayou, where Four Mile Creek met the Choctawhatchee River. The town was first called Genoa, then Four Mile Landing, and during the Civil War it became Freeport — perhaps because docking at the port was free, or maybe because a shipment of wine appeared and everyone was invited to enjoy a little “free port.” Either way, the waterfront was the hub of trade, mail, and community life.

Today, Freeport is evolving. Hammock Bay has grown into its own bustling hub, City Hall and its surrounding campus anchor another, and future developments may help define a town center that brings the community together in new ways. Yet the heart of Freeport isn't just about



the FMA unites local businesses, encourages collaboration, and organizes events that bring residents together — from networking breakfasts to townwide celebrations. The group's members meet at different businesses and venues around town, creating a shared “center” wherever people gather. By supporting both long-standing residents and newcomers, the FMA helps weave the town's spirit into a living, active network.

Maybe the real center of Freeport isn't a single building or street. Maybe it's the community itself: families who've lived here for generations, new neighbors building homes and businesses, and groups like the FMA that help bring people together. As Freeport looks toward the future, the question remains: where will the town's center be? And for a place full of potential, that's an exciting question to ask.

buildings or streets — it's about the people who live, work, and connect here.

That sense of community is visible in organizations like the Freeport Merchants Association (FMA). Founded in 2018,



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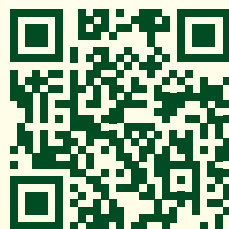
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EVENTS



BUSINESSES



COMMUNITIES



AROUND TOWN

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impact summary highlights the college's role not only as an educational institution, but also as a cornerstone of workforce development, community stability and long-term prosperity.

According to the report, for every \$1 invested in NWFSC, students gain \$6.50 in lifetime earnings — underscoring the long-term value of higher education. “Our mission is not only to educate students, but to empower them to impact communities,” said NWFSC President Mel Ponder. “These numbers tell a powerful story: when students succeed, our entire region benefits.”

The report outlines several key economic impacts, including \$34.9 million in added income generated through operational spending and 982 jobs supported by college-related activities. Student spending also contributes \$3.3 million in added income to the regional economy.

Even more significant is the long-term impact of NWFSC graduates. Alumni contribute \$237.7 million annually in added income to the regional economy through increased earning power and workforce participation. “This is transformation in action,” said Rhea Goff, NWFSC Board of Trustees chair. “Our graduates are fueling local businesses, filling critical workforce needs and building stronger futures for themselves and their families.”

The college's influence is amplified by the fact that many graduates remain in the region after completing their education. According to the report, 83% of NWFSC students stay within the college's service area, while 91% remain in Florida.

Additionally, one out of every 58 jobs in Okaloosa and Walton counties is supported by the activities of the college and its students. “Our graduates don't just leave with a diploma — they stay, lead and serve,” Ponder said. “Northwest Florida State College is where transformation begins — for individuals and for our communities.”

The report also highlights the earning potential tied to education levels. Individuals with a high school diploma earn an average of \$37,100 annually, while certificate holders earn about \$40,300. Those with associate degrees average \$44,600 in

annual earnings, and bachelor's degree holders earn approximately \$64,900.

By expanding access to certificate, associate and bachelor's degree programs, NWFSC continues to help residents move into higher-paying careers while strengthening the region's workforce. “At Northwest Florida State College, we are transforming lives every day,” Ponder said. “When students achieve their goals, our entire region grows stronger. That is the true return on investment in education.” Visit www.nwfsc.edu.

New Workforce Analysis Shows Northwest Florida Outpacing the Nation

A new Labor Supply and Demand Analysis from Florida's Great Northwest (FGNW) shows Northwest Florida's workforce growth and wage gains significantly outpacing national averages.

Originally launched in 2021 through a Triumph Gulf Coast grant, the analysis helps guide workforce training, education programs and economic strategy across the region.

Key findings show the 13-county region added more than 42,000 jobs — an 8.7% growth rate compared to the national average of 5.9%. Average wages also rose nearly 19%. Growth was especially strong in targeted industry sectors, where

jobs increased 12% (about 8,000 positions) and earnings climbed more than 26%. “This analysis is truly transformative for the story we are able to tell,” said Jennifer Conoley, president and CEO of Florida's Great Northwest. “It demonstrates why Northwest Florida is a workforce solution, giving our partners a consistent, powerful

message to share.”


Jay Trumbull Sr., board chair of Triumph Gulf Coast, said the results highlight the impact of long-term regional investment. “At Triumph Gulf Coast, our mission has always been to ensure this region isn't just reacting to the economy, but ac-

Continued on page 25

NFB Académie Opens Auditions for 2026–27

Audition registration is now open for the Northwest Florida Ballet (NFB) Académie 26/27 academic year! Auditions for incoming third-grade students will be held on April 25 from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. and on April 26 from 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., and for incoming fourth graders on April 25 from 2:30 p.m. to 4 p.m. Auditions for incoming fifth-grade students will be held from April 28 to 30 during the regular fourth-grade Ballet class. Appointment reservations are required and must be made by April 23 at 2 p.m.

Celebrating more than 20 years of excellence, the NFB Académie is a free, integrated arts and academic program for third through eighth-grade boys and girls who demonstrate the potential to excel in dance. The NFB Académie is a nationally acclaimed program recognized as an A+ school since its inception. Register or learn more at NFBallet.org/Auditions



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A New Era of Elegance:

McCaskill & Company's Expansion Culminates in a New Rolex Environment

BY CAITLYN BURRUS

In Miramar Beach, McCaskill & Company Fine Jewelry & Watches has completed a carefully curated expansion that redefines the in-store experience while honoring the values that have guided the family-owned jeweler for generations. Long known for its elevated selection of fine jewelry and luxury timepieces, the gallery's multi-year transformation culminates in the completion of a new Rolex space, set to debut in early March 2026.

The expansion began with a practical need—more parking—but quickly evolved into a broader vision with a total showroom renovation and expansion. As McCaskill & Company's designer offerings and customer base grew, so did the desire to create a space that reflected the caliber of the brands represented, particularly Rolex.

For the late Elizabeth Campbell and her daughter, Carolyn Brigman, who together led the gallery alongside husband and father Bill Campbell, the opportunity was about more than square footage.

"We were laser-focused on interesting architectural accents, stonework, and materials that tell a story," they share. "As a family-owned gallery, we wanted the space to feel warm, residential, and elegant—somewhere guests could truly enjoy the experience."

Architect Cherri Pitts of Studio C Architecture in Birmingham, Ala., led the design, while Grand Bay Construction brought the vision to life. While executing one



of the largest commercial renovations in the Miramar Beach area, the team faced the added challenge of keeping the gallery operational throughout the process, which required careful coordination.

The expanded west showroom was the first phase of the transformation, introducing a refined, guest-focused layout with comfortable seating areas, custom artwork, sculptural objects, and lighting designed to enhance the natural brilliance of each piece of jewelry. The Bridal Gallery quickly became a standout, with crystal snowflake-inspired lighting creating a sense of intimacy and celebration.

As work continued, attention shifted to the east showroom, where the most immersive elements of the expansion unfold. Guests will enter through a foyer featuring handblown-glass maple leaves hanging from the ceiling, created by artist Brit Deslonde. "To reflect the store's commitment to exceptional craftsmanship, each glass maple leaf was hand-blown at the furnace without molds and embedded with 24-karat



gold and pure silver, ensuring that every piece is entirely unique," Deslonde says. "I sculpted the leaves to create a light, floating canopy suspended overhead that interacts with light and space, echoing the refinement, individuality, and material beauty found in fine jewelry."



Steps to the right, the Rolex environment represents the grand finale of McCaskill & Company's expansion. Designed to align with Rolex's world-renowned standards of craftsmanship, fit, and finish, the space offers a focused, elevated experience for guests.

Additional brand-focused spaces include a dedicated David Yurman area, reinforcing McCaskill's commitment to full-service, design-driven luxury. The second phase also introduces an enhanced Service Department, including an authorized Rolex Service Center staffed by two highly credentialed watchmakers.

Large viewing windows allow guests to observe the intricate work of watch and jewelry repair and custom design firsthand. "Our goal has always been to offer an elevated shopping experience that still feels personal," Carolyn reflects. "Luxury, to us, means warmth, connection, and artistry."

With the debut of its new Rolex environment, McCaskill & Company completes a transformation defined by intention, craftsmanship, and collaboration, setting a new benchmark for fine jewelry and timepieces on the Emerald Coast.

Visit McCaskillandCompany.com or follow them on Instagram @mccaskillandcompany to learn more.

Publisher's Note:

The Life Media family extends our heartfelt prayers and deepest condolences to the Campbell family and the entire McCaskill & Company team on the recent passing of Elizabeth Campbell. Elizabeth's warmth, vision and dedication helped shape an experience cherished by so many across our community. She will be remembered with admiration, gratitude and great respect.

Celebrate 10 Years of Hope in Walton County

April 8 | 11 a.m. | Pierce Family Children's Advocacy Center | DeFuniak Springs

By KAY PHELAN

The Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center (ECCAC) is pleased to announce their upcoming event to celebrate the opening of their second location in 2016, the Pierce Family Advocacy Center (PFAC) in Walton County. In its first 10 years, this Center alone has seen and helped over 3,000 children in Walton County experiencing abuse, abandonment and neglect.

The public and area businesses are invited to attend the event on

April 8, from 11am – 1pm at the Pierce Family Advocacy Center, 336 College Avenue, DeFuniak Springs, FL. Their keynote speakers will be ECCAC CEO, Julie Porterfield, and Jim and Tammy Pierce, whom PFAC is named after in honor of their generous donation that made ECCAC's Walton County center possible. The celebration of "10 Years of Hope in Walton County" will conclude with light refreshments and tours of the facility.

As well, April is National Child Abuse Prevention Month, an important landmark for ECCAC with their mission to

provide a safe, child-friendly environment to give therapy and services for child victims of abuse and neglect. They also administer many educational prevention safety programs from children to teens in area schools. To create awareness, a special Child Abuse Prevention



Ten years ago, on April 8th, Tammy and Jim Pierce cut the ribbon to open the doors to Walton County's Pierce Family Advocacy Center, the second center for ECCAC.

proclamation will be read by Walton County Sheriff's Office.

The Pierces commented, "We are incredibly honored that the Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center carries our name as it serves abused children in our community. For 10 years, ECCAC has provided hope, healing, and a voice to those who need it most. We are proud to celebrate this milestone and grateful to everyone who makes this mission possible."

Though ECCAC doesn't house children in their two centers in Okaloosa and Walton County, they provide advocacy

services and therapy to children and families at no cost. Their Centers house representatives from the Florida Department of Children and Families, Child Protection Teams, State Attor-

ney's Office, Local Law Enforcement Agencies.

For further information about the PFAC event, please call Julie Porterfield at 850-974-8668, or email julie@eccac.org.

For further information about ECCAC, visit www.eccac.org. If abuse is suspected, report it by calling the anonymous Florida Abuse Hotline at 1-800-96-ABUSE.

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 Environment

Inspiring Stewardship. Protecting Our Future. Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance 2025 Impact

By ALLISON McDOWELL, CBA
For three decades, the Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance (CBA) has worked at the intersection of science, education, and restoration to protect one of Northwest Florida's most vital natural resources. Guided by data and powered by sustainable partnerships, CBA continues to advance meaningful, measurable conservation across the watershed.



- ter quality and coastal resilience.
- 140 vertical oyster gardens cultivated throughout the watershed
 - 200+ tons of recycled oyster shells collected and returned to local waters for habitat creation
 - 3.35 acres of salt marsh and

- oyster habitat restored
- 600+ tons of limestone placed at higher-energy shoreline sites to reduce erosion and support living shoreline development
 - Seagrass restoration lab initiated, with pilot plantings launched to expand submerged aquatic vegetation recovery efforts

Monitoring & Research

As a leader in environmen-

tal monitoring, CBA places science-based conservation at the forefront of protecting the Choctawhatchee Basin. In 2025, CBA added 8 new sites for a total of 145 active water quality monitoring sites across the watershed, continuing to provide essential field expertise and data support for environmental monitoring and research throughout the region. Working alongside university, county, state, and federal partners, CBA helped expand mon-

itoring coverage, improve public access to data, and strengthen the scientific foundation for both coastal and freshwater protection. These collaborative efforts ensure that restoration and management decisions are guided by sound science and a long-term understanding of our waterways.

Education & Outreach

Environmental stewardship begins in the classroom.

In 2025, CBA reached 3,000+ students across 20 public schools and five homeschool groups, delivering monthly hands-on lessons aligned with STEM skills and Florida science standards. Programs like Grasses in Classes and oyster gardening give students real-world environmental experience, connecting classroom learning to tangible restoration outcomes. Through immersive, standards-based curriculum, CBA is cultivating the next generation of scientists, conservationists, and informed citizens.

Sustainable Partnerships

CBA's impact is amplified through collaboration.

Key partnerships in 2025 included:

- Northwest Florida Water Management District
- Oyster shell recycling restaurants
- Islanders Coastal Outfitter
- JW Couch Foundation

Together, these partners help fund, expand, and sustain restoration and education initiatives throughout the Basin.

Restoration

CBA's restoration work in 2025 focused on strengthening natural systems that protect wa-

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*Some restrictions apply. Ask for full details.

Top 10 Tips to Get Ready for Spring

By TED SHOOP

The weather is warming up, the grass and flowers are coming alive and, perhaps, you're wondering what to do to get your home ready to sell this spring or summer. Start now so that you are not overwhelmed when the "For Sale" sign is planted in the yard. Here are some affordable yet effective tips to help you potentially net more at escrow in less time:

- #10 - Improve your home's curb appeal. (Pressure wash sidewalks and driveway.)
- #9 - Clean carpets and flooring. (A little sweat equity goes a long way.)
- #8 - Add colors by the front door. (Think fresh paint and flowers.)
- #7 - Clean and declutter the home throughout. (Eliminate the furniture maze.)

#6 - Thin out closets. (Start packing winter clothes and apparel.)

#5 - De-personalize the home. (Minimize displaying family photos, art & treasures.)

#4 - Clear countertops. (Stow small appliances and items not used daily.)

#3 - Deep clean kitchen & bathrooms. (Buyers touring your home will be critiquing.)

#2 - Make necessary repairs. (Buyers inflate repair costs they will likely incur.)

And—

#1 - Hire a professional REALTOR. You'll net more cash and reduce selling time.

Ted Shoop is an experienced Realtor with eXp Realty who is passionate about serving local customers throughout Freeport and Walton County. 850.273.8636

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NFSO Presents Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 2, the Awe-inspiring "Resurrection"

On April 18, the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra — the region's premier professional orchestra — transforms the stage of the Mattie Kelly Arts Center into a space of breathtaking scale and sound. More than 200 musicians and singers will gather for Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 2, the awe-inspiring "Resurrection" Symphony, in what promises to be one of the most powerful artistic events of the season.

Mahler's Second is not merely a symphony; it is an emotional and spiritual journey. It begins in darkness and uncertainty, wrestling with life's deepest questions, and rises steadily toward a radiant conclusion that proclaims renewal and hope. In its final movement, a full chorus and vocal soloists join the orchestra in a breathtaking affirmation of life after struggle — a moment that has moved audiences for more than a century.

This extraordinary performance unites the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra with the Northwest Florida Symphony Chorale, the Choral Society of Pensacola, and Niceville High School Opus One. The sheer scale of the collaboration — more than 200 performers filling the stage — creates a sound both intimate and immense, surrounding the audience in a shared experience of uncommon magnitude.

Works of this scope are rarely presented in our region. Months of preparation and exceptional artistic forces are required to bring it to life. When the final chorus rises from a whisper to a thunderous declaration, the effect is overwhelming — not only heard, but deeply felt.

Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony will be performed on Saturday, April 18 at 7 p.m. at the Mattie Kelly Arts Center. Tickets are available at MattieKellyArtsCenter.org or by calling 850-729-6000.

Ann Toomey, Soprano

American soprano Ann Toomey is enjoying a significant international career, praised for her rich voice and dramatic presence. She has performed major operatic roles including *Madama Butterfly* and *Tosca* with



Lyric Opera of Kansas City and Florentine Opera, and made a celebrated European debut in *Suor Angelica* at the Berlin Philharmonic under Kirill Petrenko. She has also appeared with the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Gustavo Dudamel and sung Mahler's Symphony No. 8 with the Nashville Symphony, among other acclaimed engagements. A former member of the Ryan Opera Center at Lyric Opera of Chicago, she was a national semifinalist in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions.

Zoie Reams, Mezzo-Soprano

Mezzo-soprano Zoie Reams has garnered recognition for her "velvety" tone and versatile artistry. A graduate of the Houston Grand Opera Butler Studio, she



appears regularly at Lyric Opera of Chicago in roles from *La traviata* to contemporary works, and has sung the title role in *Carmen* at Canadian Opera Company and Oregon's Piedmont Opera. She made her Met-

ropolitan Opera debut in *Porgy and Bess* and appears in major concert engagements including Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Handel's *Messiah* at Washington National Cathedral.

Reams' season also includes appearances with Cincinnati Opera, Minnesota Opera, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic under Gustavo Dudamel.

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 NFSO TODD CRAVEN, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR/CONDUCTOR

MAHLER

Symphony No. 2

"RESURRECTION"

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Events

Events Around Town

Freeport Spring Festival Returns

Saturday, April 4 | 9 a.m.–3 p.m. | Freeport Sports Complex, Freeport

Springtime in Freeport means it's time again for the 16th Annual Spring Festival hosted by the Town Planters Society of Freeport. The beloved community celebration returns Saturday, April 4, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Freeport Sports Complex with a full day of family-friendly fun.

The festival will feature arts and crafts vendors, food vendors and local shopping, along with the crowd-favorite helicopter egg drops for children. Drop times are scheduled for 10 a.m. (walkers–age 4), 10:30 a.m. (ages 4–7) and 11 a.m. (ages 8–11).

One of the highlights of the day will be the 2nd Annual Easter Hat Contest, where participants can showcase their creativity with original homemade 3-D decorative Easter hats. Judging will be based on creativity, originality and theme, with awards presented during the festival.

The event is open to the community and continues a long-standing Freeport tradition of welcoming spring with family fun, local vendors and festive activities.

Arts and crafts and food ven-

dors are currently being accepted. For applications, email tps-freeport@yahoo.com or stop by Freeport City Hall.

Come celebrate spring with neighbors and friends at one of Freeport's favorite annual traditions.

Farmers Markets

Windmills in Freeport Every Other Saturday 4-8 p.m.

Grand Blvd. Saturdays 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

Grayton Locals Market Thursdays 10 a.m.-2 p.m. at Hibiscus Guest House

Seaside Amphitheater Saturdays and Tuesdays 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

Peddlers Pavilion Sundays 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

Rosemary Beach at North Barrett Square Sundays 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

Shakespeare in the Square: A Midsummer Night's Dream

Mondays, March 16–April 20 | 6 p.m. | SEASIDE® Amphitheater, Central Square, Santa Rosa Beach

Step into a world of magic, mischief and moonlit romance as Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC), in collaboration with Seaside, presents William Shakespeare's beloved comedy A Midsummer Night's

Dream. This family-friendly adaptation by Gillette Elvgren will be performed outdoors at the SEASIDE® Amphitheater Stage in Central Square. Shows take place Mondays from March 16 through April 20 at 6 p.m. Admission is free and open to the public.

Alaqua Sunday Sessions Sundays Now-May 31

Sunday Session, a weekly gathering in the Alaqua Arena filled with live music, delicious food, and the peaceful charm of the Refuge returns every Sunday through May 31st from 1-4 p.m. Free to attend, bring your friends, your family, and your love for animals.

Made in Walton County Songwriter Showdown March 26

Made in Walton County Songwriters Showdown returns to The Pavilion at Watersound Town Center from 6-8 p.m. Join in for an evening of live music and friendly competition as local songwriters take the stage to perform original, homegrown songs and compete for cash and prizes. Grab your chair and meet under the shade for this free, family-friendly event. A food truck on site will offer food and drink for purchase.

CAA Creative Kids Night | March 27

Take the night off while your kids enjoy a cozy, holiday-inspired Parents' Night Out at the CAA! Creative Kids Night returns to the Bayou Arts Center from 5-8 p.m. This month's feature project: Enchanted Forest Canvas Paintings. Kids are encouraged to come in their pajamas and bring a sleeping bag to snuggle up with during the film! Aprons will be provided. Kids will kick off the evening with an exciting hands-on painting, then refuel with a pizza dinner before winding down for a cozy movie screening of Fern Gully with an accompanying themed snack. Learn more & purchase tickets: <https://www.culturalartsalliance.com/upcoming-events>.

Under the Moonlit Pines Gala at Biophilia Center | March 28

Join the Biophilia Center for Under the Moonlit Pines Gala, its signature gala celebrating environmental education, biodiversity, and the natural beauty of Northwest Florida at the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center from 4-9 p.m. Guests will enjoy live music from the Panama City Youth Orchestra, delicious catering, an exciting auction featuring unique items, and opportunities to connect in support of

the Center's mission. For tickets and more information, visit eo-wilsoncenter.org. All proceeds benefit the Center's hands-on environmental education programs.

Easter Egg Hunt at the Windmills | March 28



The 2026 Annual Easter Celebration at The Windmills at Hammock Bay in Freeport features a massive helicopter egg drop, live music, and photos with the Easter Bunny. Scheduled for 11 a.m.-2 p.m., this community event invites families to watch thousands of eggs drop at the Windmills Field.

Caring & Sharing Spring Fashion Show | March 29



Join Caring and Sharing for their Spring Fashion Show beginning at 11 a.m. at the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa. During the event, guests will enjoy a fashion show, lunch, a complimentary welcome drink, a silent auction, music, a photo booth, and more. Items will be for sale after the Fashion Show at the popular pop-up boutique curated specifically for this event. Purchase tickets at: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/caring-sharing-spring-fashion-show-tickets-1981237758469>.

Doggie Eggstravaganza at Grand Boulevard | April 3

Dog Harmony presents the

Continued on page 30



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Happenings Around Freeport

2026 EVENTS

APRIL

- 01**
Reading with Bear the Therapy Dog
3:30 pm | Freeport Public Library | Freeport
- 02**
Bands on the Boulevard: Spring Music Series
6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach
- 03**
11th Annual Doggie Eggstravaganza
5:30 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach
- 04**
2026 Spring Festival & Eggstravaganza
9 am | Freeport Sports Complex | Freeport

Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
- 05**
Seaside Easter Celebration
1 pm | Seaside | SRB

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

Easter Sunset Dinner Cruise
5:45 pm | SOLARIS Yacht | Sandestin



- 07**
Sunset Dinner & Fireworks Cruise
6:30 pm | SOLARIS Yacht | Sandestin
- 09**
Jin Shin Jyutsu
9 am | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport

Bands on the Boulevard: Spring Music Series
6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

Concerts in the Village: Smash Mouth
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin



- 10**
Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee
7 am | Christian Life Center at FBC | FWB
- 11**
2026 Earth Day Beach Cleanup
8 am | The Boardwalk | Okaloosa Island
- 16**
Bands on the Boulevard: Spring Music Series
6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

Concerts in the Village: Black Jacket Symphony
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin
- 18**
Florida Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
- 19**
Bonsai Workshop with Zen Den Bonsai
6 pm | Props Brewery at Hammock Bay | Freeport
- 20**
GSSF Indoor League Match
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso
- 21**
A Superior Mechanical Veterans & First Responders Appreciation Lunch
11:30 am | Niceville Community Center | Niceville

- 22**
Reading with Bear the Therapy Dog
3:30 pm | Freeport Public Library | Freeport

- 23**
Greater FWB Chamber 80th Anniversary Celebration
6 pm | Gulfarium | Okaloosa Island



- Concerts in the Village: Yacht Rock Schooner
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin

- 23-25**
21st Annual Destin Charity Wine Auction Weekend
Various Times & Venues



Sold Out!

- 23-26**
South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival
Various Times | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach
- 24**
2026 Walton Area Chamber Spring Golf Classic at Eagle Springs
8 am | Eagle Springs | DeFuniak Springs
- 25**
Earth Day: A Celebration of Nature
9 am | E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center | Freeport
- 29**
Justice on the Block: Free Legal Help
11 am | Freeport Public Library | Freeport
- 30**
Not Your Mother's Book Club
10 am | Freeport Public Library | Freeport

Concerts in the Village: Rumours ATL
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin

FARMERS MARKETS

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

MONTHLY EVENTS

- Library Lego Club
Tuesdays | 3 pm
Freeport Public Library | Freeport
- Concert Series
Wednesdays | 7 pm
Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach
- Chess Club
Fridays | 3 pm
Freeport Public Library | Freeport
- Creative Craft Collective
Saturdays | 10 am
Freeport Public Library | Freeport
- A Midsummer Night's Dream
Mondays, Now-April 20 | 6 p.m. | SEASIDE® Amphitheater



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 Off the Hook

Fish in our Waters



BY HELEN PETRE

Have you ever wondered what was swimming around at

the beach, in the bays, and the dune lakes? Even if you don't see them, there are living things in the water all around you. What are those little fish swimming around your legs? Most are juveniles, searching for protection in shallow, coastal water and sea grass. The most common are pinfish, but many juve-

niles seek protection in shallow coastal water, and feed in bays or the shallow dune lakes. Here are a few. You can catch them in dip nets if you are quiet and quick.

Pinfish

Pinfish have sharp spines on the dorsal fin, providing the com-



Pinfish photo by UFL Rock O'Connor

is a mullet. Mullet are important commercial and recreational fish found year-round in our waters. You can see them jumping while standing on the beach, but they are bottom feeders, most common in grass beds eating algae. According to locals, mullet fries with beans and grits

are a panhandle staple. The striped mullet, or black mullet, is most often food, but we also have white mullets.

There are many other fish you can find in our waters, sea grass beds, and dune lakes. Finding fish makes for a good day. Enjoy the waters.

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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mon name. They are prey for pelicans, gulls, turtles, dolphins and herons, so their life span is short. When he was seven E.O Wilson lost vision in his right eye when a pinfish he caught jumped and struck him in the eye.

Silverside

Silversides are abundant year-round hiding in grass beds from their larger predators.

Pipefish

Pipefish are slow swimmers but blend in with the sea grasses for protection. They are related to seahorses, which are also found in our grass beds. The males of both pipefish and sea horses carry the eggs in pouches, while the females swim unburdened.

Needlefish

Needlefish look like pipefish but there are major differences. Needle fish have teeth, are predators, and swim at the surface of the water.

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Not All Estimates Are Created Equal



BY KIMBERLY C. COLE

You've received an estimate for a construction project. Maybe you even have two or three sitting on your kitchen counter, and they all look different. Now what?

Construction estimates are not like buying a product off a shelf. They are not standardized, and they are certainly not all created equal. If you receive

A strong scope outlines demolition, materials, finishes, installation, and cleanup. Many disputes arise not from bad intentions, but from mismatched expectations. If something matters to you, make sure it is written into the estimate.

Next, review materials and debris disposal. Are materials specified by brand or quality? Is haul-off included? These details affect cost. Also, understand how labor is structured—whether it is a lump sum for the project or calculated differently. The structure itself is less important than clarity around what is being provided.

Allowances are another area that often causes confusion. An allowance is a placeholder amount for items not yet selected—such as cabinets, tile, lighting, or fixtures. For example, an

rot, termites, or outdated wiring. The key is documentation. Change orders should be written, priced, and approved before additional work proceeds. Clear communication protects both parties and keeps projects moving forward without unnecessary tension.

You might also see deposits and payment schedules outlined in your estimate. It is common for contractors to request a deposit, especially for larger projects. Deposits help secure materials and scheduling. Progress payments should align with work completed. A clearly defined payment structure benefits everyone and helps avoid misunderstandings.

Beyond the numbers, consid-

er the warranty being offered. Ask what is covered and for how long. Is it a workmanship warranty from the contractor, a manufacturer's warranty on materials, or both? A warranty should be in writing and clearly explained. It provides peace of mind, but it is only as reliable as the company standing behind it.

Finally, do not overlook references. Reputable contractors should be willing to provide recent clients you can contact. Ask about communication, how changes were handled, whether the project stayed on schedule, and how issues were resolved. Online reviews can be helpful, but a direct conversation often gives a clearer picture of what it is like to work with someone.

When comparing contractor estimates, focus on clarity rather than just cost. A well-written estimate protects both the homeowner and the contractor. It establishes expectations before work begins and reduces the likelihood of problems later. By taking the time to compare scope, materials, allowances, documentation, warranties, and reputation—not just price—you are far more likely to have a successful project.

The goal isn't simply to hire the cheapest contractor. The goal is to hire the one who communicates clearly, documents thoroughly, and stands behind their work long after the project is complete. For more information: 850.797.8428.



multiple bids for what seems like the "same" scope of work, they can vary by thousands of dollars. That doesn't automatically mean someone is overcharging—or that someone else is giving you a great deal. It simply means you need to look more closely at what you are comparing.

First, understand that not all estimates are structured the same way. Some contractors provide detailed, itemized breakdowns. Others provide a single lump-sum number. More detail does not necessarily mean higher cost; often, it reflects greater transparency. The important thing is understanding what is included—and what is not.

The most critical part of any estimate is the scope of work. This section should clearly reflect what was discussed between you and your contractor. Vague phrases like "remodel bathroom" or "repair dock" leave room for interpretation.

estimate might include a \$3,000 cabinet allowance. If you later select cabinets that cost \$5,000, you will pay the difference. Allowances can make an estimate appear lower upfront, so when comparing bids, be sure you are comparing allowance amounts side by side.

Permits should also be clearly addressed. Licensed contractors are responsible for pulling permits when required. While homeowners can sometimes pull permits themselves, doing so shifts responsibility for inspections and code compliance onto the owner. If a permit is required but not obtained, it can create issues later—particularly during resale or insurance claims. Your estimate should specify who is handling permitting.

Change orders are a normal part of construction. Sometimes homeowners decide to adjust finishes or add features. Other times, contractors uncover hidden conditions such as wood






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 Sports

Golf Series: Green Grass, Green Tees, Great Golf at Bluewater Bay Golf Course Await this Spring!



BY BARBARA PALMGREN

Back in the folk-rock era of the 60's, a hit song had folks humming and smiling. It focused on wandering on to "where the grass is greener still."

*"Green, green, it's green they say,
On the far side of the hill.
Green, green, I'm goin' away,
To where the grass is greener still."*

Today, travelers who wander down to our paradise, see soft white sands, green golf courses, emerald green and blue waters and enjoy air-conditioned comfort of tourist stores and restaurants in every part of the Florida Panhandle.

One such place to stop for both golf and a welcoming bar and restaurant after a golf round, is the Golf Club at Bluewater Bay in Niceville. The Blue

Tee restaurant inside the clubhouse offers breakfast, lunch and dinner.

A few days ago, as a golf reporter and one who pretends she is a golfer, I spent time with the person I think is the key to success for any golf course.

That person is the golf course superintendent. Maligned in the movie Caddyshack, Bill Murray was the hopeless man who spent time chasing a gopher in a war he was never going to win. Unlike Bill, Alfredo Riveras, employee of Elite Golf, the management company for the course, is not chasing gophers or other critters. He's stockpiling oak. Lots of oak. Oak trees that once drained precious water from the fairways. And he's winning the battle. If anyone still uses a wood burning fireplace, you may want to contact Alfredo for logs that can be used for your home!

Why is this important? Between the tee box where a golfer hits his or her drive and the green where putts determine the score for the hole, lies the long stretch of fairway. The fairway must be green. Not brown. Not grey. But green. Getting water to this stretch of land is critical. Large trees with roots expanding into the fairway won't work. A mature oak tree can consume over



40 gallons of water a day during growing season.

And we have a longer growing season in the south. A much longer growing season. This competition for water between turfgrass and tree roots can only end in dry spots on the fairways and golfers who won't play the course.

Alfredo Riveras was a trusted assistant superintendent working many years in the Dallas area for Elite Golf. Elite Golf selected Alfredo for this new position

in Bluewater Bay and Alfredo was the perfect choice to be head course superintendent. Greens that were once brown are now green. Alfredo showed me before and after photos. But, I had to know for myself. I walked on these new greens and was amazed. Alfredo knew how to use the right fertilizer, sand, aeration and water to produce what golfers want above all else: perfect greens. Art Jean, one of 330 owners of Preserve Bluewater Bay, the organization who raised

funds to save the course two years ago, is proud of Alfredo's hard work and results. Art had a "I told you so" grin on his face while I took photos of the green.

Alfredo's crew begins work at 6 a.m. mowing fairways, greens, raking sand traps and preparing for morning golfers. They then tackle other tasks: tree trimming, re-edging greens, maintaining equipment and mowing the rough. Equipment is owned by the course and maintained by a mechanic in the maintenance crew. Golf carts for golfers are leased.

Elite Golf analyzed the course before agreeing to manage the business. In addition to the above improvements for greens and fairways, they wanted greens expanded to the original size of the course designed by Jerry Pate. Elite Golf also wanted certain tee boxes lengthened. Why? Eighteen-hole golf courses should all be a minimum of 6,000 yards for a semi-professional golfer. All the 18-hole courses in our area understand this requirement and offer a series of tee boxes to attract all levels of golfers.

So, keep humming that old familiar tune, knowing now, at Bluewater Bay...

*"Green, green, it's green they say,
On the far side of the hill.
Green, green, we're hitting our drives,
To where the grass is greener still."*



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The Lie the Fitness Industry Won't Tell You: Real Results Require Patience, Discipline & Trusting the Process

By ROBYN MENTGEN AITES, CO-OWNER, TRIFECTA TRAINING

In a world obsessed with instant gratification, the biggest lie people believe about fitness is this: **results should happen quickly.**

Scroll social media for five minutes and you'll see promises of "30-day transformations," miracle supplements, and shortcuts ("healthy peptides") that claim to melt fat and sculpt bodies almost overnight. But after more than 25 years as a health-

care professional, certified personal trainer, and nutrition coach, I can tell you the truth many people don't want to hear:

Real health-and-fitness transformation is slow, disciplined, and earned over time.

And that's exactly why so many people quit.

The moment the scale doesn't drop fast enough...

The moment soreness kicks in...

The moment the mirror

doesn't reflect the effort they've been putting in...

They assume the program isn't working.

But here's the reality: **your body is changing long before you can see it.**

Strength is being built.

Metabolism is improving.

Muscles are repairing and growing.

Your heart and lungs are becoming more efficient.

These adaptations take consistency, not weeks—but months and years of effort.

This is where mindset becomes the true difference-maker.

Starting a fitness journey requires more than motivation. Motivation fades quickly. What's required is a **mindset** built on patience, discipline, and personal accountability. It means committing to the daily habits—training, proper nutrition, recovery, and movement—even when the visible results haven't arrived yet.

Trusting the process means understanding that success in health and fitness isn't measured by what happens in a few weeks. **It's measured by who you become over time.**

And let's be honest—this



journey isn't for the faint of heart. It requires showing up on the days you don't feel like it. It requires pushing through self-doubt and the temptation of quick fixes. It requires choosing long-term health over short-term comfort.

But the payoff is powerful: stronger bodies, sharper minds, greater independence, and a quality of life that lasts well into the later decades.

If you're tired of chasing shortcuts and ready to approach your health with a smarter, more sustainable strategy, you're

not alone.

At **Trifecta Training with Robyn and Ken Aites**, we believe real transformation happens when you **train the body, fuel it with proper nutrition, and develop the mindset to stay consistent for the long haul.**

If this message resonates with you, we invite you to start the conversation. Ask questions. Follow along. Or reach out and see how we help people commit to the process—and finally achieve results that last.



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Attention Freeport Families: It's Time to Rethink Living with Pain is Normal

Life is busy! We're grown accustomed to it. Between long workdays, school and sport activities, yard projects, and weekends at the beach, life doesn't slow down for stiff necks, aching backs and struggling bodies. For many people, discomfort becomes part of the routine. Tight shoulders after work. Headaches that come and go. Low back pain that flares up – sometimes after a long day; sometimes for no reason at all!

It's common. But it is NOT normal! And it's not how you're meant to live.

At Shine Chiropractic, Dr. Braxton believes pain is a signal — not just something to cover up, but something to investigate and find out what's causing it. Instead of focusing only on symptoms, his approach centers on identifying and correcting the underlying cause of aches and pains so people can move, work, and enjoy life the way they were designed to. "Too many people assume pain is just part of getting older or work-

ing hard," says Dr. Braxton. "While those things are part of the problem, the real question is why isn't your body adapting and handling those stressors?"

Often, the answer lies in the spine. Your spine protects the nervous system — the communication highway between your brain and body. When spinal joints become restricted or misaligned and don't move the way they should, it can create irritation to those nerves and altered mechanics throughout the body. Over time, that dysfunction may show up as recurring headaches, neck and shoulder tension, low energy, or low back pain.

Dr. Braxton's process begins with listening to each person's story. How the pain started, what's your job, what position do you sleep in? What makes it worse, what makes it better, what have they tried before to find relief? From there, a thorough spinal examination is performed to evaluate joint motion, posture, and overall function. When clinically appropriate,



digital x-rays are used to gain a precise understanding of spinal alignment, which tells him exactly how to adjust that each person.

They notice better mobility, improved posture, fewer headaches, and greater ease with daily activities. Parents say they have more energy to play

With that information, Dr. Braxton creates a personalized care plan tailored to the individual and their goals, not a one-size-fits-all approach. Some people simply want short-term relief, while others want a plan focused on restoring proper motion and function so the body can work the way it was designed to, and better adapt to the stresses we all face in our busy lives.

Patients who choose a corrective care plan often report more than just pain reduction.

Weekend golfers swing more comfortably and drive the ball further. Busy professionals sit and stand with less strain, and produce at higher levels. That's the bigger picture!

Chiropractic care at Shine Chiropractic focuses on helping you function better, feel better, and ultimately live better. Living with discomfort may be common, but it doesn't have to be your normal. If aches and pains are limiting your work, your workouts, or your time with family, it might be time to look deeper than the symptoms. You deserve a body that supports your busy lifestyle, not one that holds you back.

To learn more about how chiropractic care can help address the underlying cause of your discomfort, contact Shine Chiropractic today.

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How Are Your Quercetin Levels?



BY KAY LEAMAN,
HEALTH ARCHITECT

This little gem belongs to a group of plant compounds called flavonoids. It is found in fruits such as grapes, blueberries, strawberries, cherries, apples, grapefruit, cranberries, raspberries and blackberries; vegetables including onions, peppers and broccoli; and beverages like coffee, green tea and red wine.

Quercetin is one of the most abundant antioxidants, and its role is to fight free radical damage. Free radicals can damage our cells, which in turn can promote inflammation. Hippocrates is often quoted as saying, "All disease begins in the gut," and this is closely linked to inflammation.

In an eight-week study, 50 women with rheumatoid arthritis took 500 mg of quercetin daily. They experienced signifi-

cantly reduced early morning stiffness, morning pain and after-activity pain. Quercetin has also been found to help protect against degenerative brain disorders such as Alzheimer's disease and dementia.

Quercetin offers cardiovascular benefits as well. It may help lower blood pressure and reduce cholesterol levels by improving endothelial function. This makes it a promising candidate for supporting heart health and helping prevent cardiovascular disease.

In addition, studies have found that quercetin exhibits anti-cancer properties by inhibiting cell proliferation and inducing apoptosis — a type of programmed cell death in which a cell destroys itself when it threatens the survival of its host.

Many studies continue to explore the benefits of this powerful flavonoid. Research has shown:

- Neuroprotective properties
- Inhibition of tumor growth
- Liver protection
- Prevention support for macular degeneration and cataracts
- Quercetin has also demonstrated anti:
 - Bacterial activity
 - Viral activity
 - Obesity-related effects
 - Diabetic complications



- Hypertensive conditions
- Allergic responses
- Asthmatic responses

This is not an exhaustive list

of its benefits, but they are certainly worth noting. Look up foods and herbs that contain quercetin and begin incorporating them into your diet. Check

your multivitamin to see whether it contains this antioxidant and in what quantity. A common supplemental target is 500 mg daily.

Quercetin is also available in supplement form; Solaray is one brand often recommended.

Disclaimer: If you are currently taking medication for any of the conditions mentioned above, consult your physician and perform your due diligence regarding potential interactions before beginning supplementation.

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Wellness



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that never ends and the sleep won't come. Nights like this are the new norm – a few hours of rest followed by morning fog, and the slow erosion of patience and energy. It feels like stress, but lately it's been more—hot flashes, night sweats, and a restlessness that started when the seasons and hormones shifted.

BY DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

You turn over for the third time, looking over at the clock. 2:13 a.m. Your heartbeat matches second hand as a thin layer of sweat cools on your skin. You turn to the window, pulling the covers back, then lie awake for an hour replaying the day—emails, errands, the list

Sound familiar? Bioidentical hormone pellets are the straightforward and lasting solution you need. At The Hormone Restoration Center we use bioidentical hormone pellets to optimize hormone levels—so nights stop sabotaging your days.

For thousands of patients, when estrogen and testosterone

are where they should be, sleep is just better. These hormones help your body make melatonin - the hormone that tells your brain it's time for bed. They support GABA - the calming brain chemical that relaxes you at night.

They also keep serotonin steady, improving mood and

sleep quality. They help lower cortisol so you're not wide awake at 3 a.m. Finally, they stabilize body temperature so night sweats don't keep kicking the covers off. When hormones are low, people often describe their sleep as "fragile"—light, restless, and easy to interrupt, with lots of tossing, turning, and clock-watching.

How hormone therapy helps:

Hormone therapy in the form of pellets helps, because it delivers hormones in a slow, steady way. No daily creams. No spikes and crashes. Just consistent support that eliminates hot flashes and night sweats, helps you stay asleep and wake up rested and excited to start your day. Progesterone has a naturally calming effect that helps quiet a racing mind at bedtime. As hormones rebalance, everything else just works. Melatonin and serotonin can do their jobs again, and cortisol settles down. The result? Better nights—and better days. When you're sleeping well, your mood, focus, and energy improve, which makes it easier to wind down the next night.

What a hormone consultation and follow up looks like:

Patients can expect a thorough baseline evaluation before starting therapy, including blood testing of sex hormones and key metabolic markers along with a comprehensive symptom review. The insertion procedure itself is brief, performed in the office and involves minimal downtime.

We don't set it and forget it—follow-up is integral to safe, effective care. After insertion we check labs to make sure your levels are optimal. Dosing is adjusted based on lab results and symptom relief. Our team stays in touch between visits for any questions you may have, or needed tweaks in treatment. Routine reviews ensure your plan evolves with your needs so you get steady relief without surprises.

A simple, practical plan:

We combine hormone therapy with lifestyle guidance, including supplements, so changes stick. So, if you're tired of counting sheep, call The Hormone Restoration Center. We listen, run the right tests, and build a personalized plan aimed at getting you sleeping through the night again – and so much more! Call (850) 837-1271 to schedule a consultation.

What people usually notice:

Most patients feel the benefits within the first few weeks and reliable improvement by week six as hormone levels stabilize. Hormone pellet therapy eliminates hot flashes, night sweats, and hormonal swings. If sleep still isn't right after treatment, then other issues like sleep apnea, restless legs, iron deficiency and other concerns often reveal themselves.





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5 KEYS

continued from page 4

integrative medicine focuses on optimal ranges and early intervention. Advanced lab testing, nutrient analysis, gut health assessments, and comprehensive evaluations allow us to personalize care based on your unique biochemistry.

No two patients age the same way and they shouldn't be treated the same way. Preventative care might include optimizing vitamin D levels, improving gut microbiome diversity, supporting detoxification pathways, addressing subtle thyroid dysfunction, or implementing strength and mobility strategies before decline begins.

Small, consistent interventions compound over time, much like investing in your retirement account. The earlier you begin, the greater the return.

Longevity is a Lifestyle

True longevity isn't found in a single supplement, procedure, or bio hack. It's built through daily choices that support inflammation control, metabolic resilience, hormonal balance, nervous system regulation, and personalized prevention.

Aging is inevitable. Decline is not.

When we work with the body, honoring its signals, supporting its systems, and addressing root causes, we create the conditions not just to live longer, but to live stronger. Because wellness, like life itself, is not a sprint. It's a marathon and it's worth pacing yourself well.



AROUND TOWN

continued from page 11

tively shaping it," Trumbull said. "Seeing Northwest Florida emerge as a national leader in workforce excellence is incredibly rewarding — it proves that our strategic investments are successfully bridging the gap between our regional economy and the talent needed to fuel it."

To explore the full report, visit www.floridasgreatnorthwest.com.

CHELCO Announces 2026 Youth Tour Delegates

CHELCO (Choctawhatchee Electric Cooperative, Inc.) recently announced its 2026 FECA Youth Tour and NRECA Youth Tour delegates following a leadership program in Tallahassee.

In early February, 22 high school juniors from across CHELCO's service area traveled to the state capital for the Florida Electric Cooperatives Association Youth Tour. Chaperoned by CHELCO staff, the all-expense-paid program gave students an immersive look at state government through mock legislative sessions in the Florida House and Senate, along with tours of the Capitol complex. Participating students represented schools across the region, including Laurel Hill, Niceville, Baker, Rocky Bayou Christian, Walton, Paxton,

Freeport, Crestview, South Walton and Collegiate High School at NWFSC.

Following the Tallahassee trip, students submitted video reflections about their experiences. An independent panel of judges from energy and electric cooperatives reviewed the submissions and selected four delegates to represent CHELCO at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association Youth Tour in Washington, D.C., this June.

The 2026 CHELCO Youth Tour delegates are Kaylee Yeakos (Paxton School), Calie Brackin (Walton High School), Noah Seeliger (Collegiate High School at NWFSC) and Rose Weinacker (Niceville High School).

Alternates selected were Aidan Enriquez (Crestview High School) and Graham Beauchamp (Niceville High School). "Programs like this reflect CHELCO's commitment to investing in the communities we serve, while inspiring and empowering the next generation of cooperative leaders," said CHELCO CEO Steve Rhodes. "Interestingly, some of our tenured CHELCO employees were once Youth Tour participants themselves, carrying the lessons they learned decades ago into the work they do for our members today." Visit <https://www.chelco.com/youth-tour>.

 Business



Business Spotlight: MaxStrength Fitness in Niceville Celebrates Two Years

By KASSIA GARFIELD, OWNER, MAXSTRENGTH FITNESS

Almost two years ago, MaxStrength Fitness opened its doors in Niceville with a mission

to change the way the community thinks about health and aging. Led by a licensed physical therapist, this locally owned studio has become a trusted destination

for people looking to stay strong, reduce their reliance on medications, and live life with more independence and vitality.

From day one, MaxStrength Fitness in Niceville has focused on a simple, but powerful approach: 20-minute, twice-weekly strength training sessions, customized to each client's needs. It's a method backed by science and designed to deliver maximum results in minimal time—without the noise, crowd or intimidation factor of a traditional gym. "We're not just about fitness," says Kassia Garfield, owner of MaxStrength Fitness and a practicing physical therapist. "We're about helping people take control of their health so they can keep doing the things they love—whether that's traveling, playing with grandkids, or simply staying active and independent or pain free."

Over the past two years, the studio has helped hundreds of local residents—many of whom had never stepped foot in a gym before—build strength, regain confidence, and improve their quality of life. With a focus on safe, low-impact movements and personalized attention, MaxStrength has become especially popular with older adults, people recovering from injury, and those managing chronic conditions. The efficiency of the workouts also makes this a great place for busy professionals. It is not just checking a box, its effective and efficient. "I always tell people, if you can't give me 20 minutes, twice a week, I don't know how to help you," says Kassie.

Clients often report reduced joint pain, improved mobility, and increased energy. In many cases, a reduction in the need for medications related to blood pressure, diabetes, or chronic pain. Others speak about gaining the strength to do everyday tasks—like lifting a suitcase, getting off the floor, or walking without assistance—that they thought were behind them. There is more research backing heavy resistance training for women going through menopause, reversing osteoporosis, fighting the natural aging process of sarcopenia (the loss of muscle mass), and decreasing the pro-

gression of osteoarthritis. This is all without the use of medications (and the side effects that go with prescriptions). There are many amazing side effects of strength training like improved metabolism, improved balance, and decreased pain. All in just twenty minutes, twice a week, all without breaking a sweat. "Our clients don't come in chasing six-pack abs," says Kassie "They come in to feel better, move better, and live better—and they're doing exactly that."

One of the key differences at MaxStrength Fitness is the level of expertise and care. MaxStrength has been open over 20 years, clients benefit from a deep understanding of the body and how to safely build strength, especially after injury or surgery. Every session is appointment-based and led by a personal trainer, providing accountability and consistency that helps people stick with the program long-term.

Now, as the studio celebrated its two-year anniversary in February, it's also celebrating the community its built—one that supports, encourages, and empowers its members every step of the way. MaxStrength Fitness is just a short drive for the lovely people of Freeport!

MaxStrength Fitness Niceville is offering complimentary introductory sessions for new clients and hosts a series of free community seminars on topics like aging well, osteoporosis, chronic pain and maintaining strength through all stages of life. Kassie is also a teacher at NWFSO and believes that community education is valuable to help decrease health issues in aging populations. Even if people choose to strength train elsewhere, Kassie encourages fitness somewhere. "This isn't just about exercise—it's about changing lives," says Garfield. "We're proud to be part of the Niceville community (and hoping to grow members from the Freeport Community)."

For more information or to schedule your free introductory session, visit maxstrengthfitness.com/Niceville or call 850-373-4450. Follow their journey at [@maxstrengthfitnessniceville](https://www.instagram.com/maxstrengthfitnessniceville).

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Sean of the South: Dispatches Del Camino

BY SEAN DIETRICH

“We have no rooms,” the innkeeper says over the phone.

“None?” I say.

“We are full.”

My wife and I are sitting on the ancient steps of la Iglesia de Santiago. The Church of Saint James. We are dusty and sweaty, and one of us smells like a giant armpit. (Moi.)

The stone doorway arch above us features carvings of angels and demons which date back to Roman times. Eight angels surround Christ, who is looking straight at me as though He is saying, “No room’ at the inn?—Now where have I heard THAT before?”

“Please,” I say to the innkeeper. “My wife and I are exhausted, there are no rooms anywhere.”

“I said no room.” And the woman hangs up.

It is late siesta in Spain. No traffic on the highways. No pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago. Streets are vacant. Most pilgrims have already found lodging for the evening and are already getting their complimentary massages.

At least that’s what I imagine. Because we have been hunting for a room all day, and there are no vacancies for another 20 miles. It is Holy Week, and the



Camino is packed with hikers. Finding a room is like trying to locate a porta john at a bluegrass festival.

All day we have been seeing pilgrims turned away from hostels. Some, we learn, have been forced to sleep outside on doorsteps.

I am still staring at the call-ended screen. “She hung up on me,” I say in mock disbelief.

So, I take a moment. I need to get my head together. I need to figure out what we should do. Otherwise we’re sleeping on church steps tonight.

I wander into the church while Jamie sits on the steps watching our backpacks. I cross myself. I take a pew.

Tomorrow is Good Friday. And I am looking at a sculpture of Christ on a cross.

My entire evangelical child-



hood featured imagery of the crucifixion. We sang cute little Sunday school songs about it. We wore tiny crucifixes around our necks. We had paintings portraying the crucifixion. Jesus always had great abs.

But right now, in light of Good Friday, I’m thinking about what it truly means to truly die by crucifixion.

First, you’re stripped nude. You are not a fitness model. You are a 30-something male who eats a lot of bread and drinks wine with every meal. And it shows in your midsection.

Then, a crowd watches as a group of 18-year-old soldiers with egos to prove kick the proverbial excrement out of you. Next, they place you on timbers. They mutilate your hands with nails. Romans didn’t always use just one nail per hand.

Then, you just hang there.

It’s gross. It’s raw. There are no orchestras playing an overture. No cinematic key lighting. Your cross stands erected on Main Street. Your basic human reflex is to shield your nudity. But you can’t.

The boy-soldiers beneath your cross are screwing around, engaging in locker room banter, shooting craps, seeing which one will win your shoes.

You can’t breathe. Your lips are turning blue. Your arms are numb, devoid of circulation. Your serratus muscles and shoulders are torn from struggling against your own body weight.

The worst part is, almost none of your friends are here. Few are brave enough to attend your last hours. Doesn’t anyone care? Isn’t anyone going to say goodbye? Aren’t you important in anyone’s life?

Meantime, there are four other guys crucified alongside you. Hollywood films, and various evangelical bumper stickers will depict only three crosses on this fateful Friday. But in reality, there are five crosses, and you’re just one of them.

In other words, you are not given special treatment. No sacred ceremony. Charleston Heston does not attend your death scene. You are just another state inmate on the roadside. No big

deal.

Most people who are crucified will hang for entire days before finally dying. Crucified persons do not receive burial, either. Usually, Romans let birds pick their skeletons clean. In simple terms, you are trash.

And you know what hurts most? It’s that people did this to you. Not wild animals. Not an act of nature. Fellow human beings.

Because the harsh truth is, people are not always nice. People hate. People start wars. People hurt each other, and often for no reason. They posture, they compete, they gossip. They invent rules and dogmas so they might force others unto their will.

And in this moment of nude agony, you see all these failings of human nature beneath you. You watch it all, with human eyes. And you forgive them. For we are fools who know not what we do.

I cross myself and exit the chapel.

My wife is sitting on the steps with our bags. We still have no rooms. We are low on food. We are in a foreign country, and we have a long way left to walk. But I think, perhaps, I’ve just remembered why I’m walking.



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A Pastor's Ponderings: What If I Told You That "If the Tomb is Empty, Anything is Possible?"



tion of Jesus is more than a moment in history; it's the foundation of our hope. It's the literal crux of our faith. Have you ever asked why?

Because if Jesus truly walked out of that tomb, it means death itself is not the final authority!

It means God can step into situations that seem completely finished and do something new.

And that's where Easter starts to feel personal.

If the tomb is empty, then a struggling marriage is not beyond repair!

If the tomb is empty, you aren't stuck in your past—you can still find a new future!

If the tomb is empty, though you might be walking through grief, hope is around the corner!

If the tomb is empty, the story of your life is not limited to the chapters that feel broken!

Many of us carry things that

feel like sealed tombs, places in our lives where we've quietly assumed nothing will ever change. Easter gently challenges that assumption and shapes our perspective.

The empty tomb reminds us that God specializes in bringing life where we thought the story had ended. Praise God for that!

So, maybe Easter is an invitation to reconsider what we believe is possible. Because, if the tomb is empty, hope is real, forgiveness is real, new beginnings are real. Anything is possible!

I'd love to invite you to experience Easter at Crosspoint, Freeport, this year.

BY PASTOR SAM BROWN, CROSSPOINT CHURCH FREEPORT

That's a bold statement. It almost sounds too hopeful for the kind of world most of us live in. I mean, look around—life has a way of convincing us that some things simply don't change. Certain mistakes follow us. Certain relationships stay broken. Certain situations feel too far gone.

But the truth of Easter offers us a different perspective.

The first followers of Jesus certainly didn't expect it. When Jesus was crucified, their hopes seemed to die with Him. Imag-

ine being there in that moment. The people closest to him, who had seen the miracles, seen the life he lived, shared the meals. They had believed He was the one who would change everything, and suddenly, on Friday, it looked like everything had ended.

When some of them walked to the tomb that Sunday morning, they weren't looking for a miracle. They were grieving.

But, what a surprise it must have been when they found the stone rolled away!

For those who claim to follow the way of Jesus, the resurrec-

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Studio 237 Music Lessons Meet the Voice Teacher: Natalie Rachkov

Natalie Rachkov was born in Ukraine and moved with her family to the United States in the early 2000's. Music has been part of her life since the age of five, when she first began singing on stage. At seven, her parents enrolled her in a music academy, where she studied vocal performance, solfeggio, and piano. There she earned her first diploma.



After moving to the United States, Natalie continued pursuing her passion in voice by enrolling in college to further study music. During that time, she had the privilege of participating in several opera performances, which deeply enriched her vocal training and stage experience. That strong classical foundation continues to shape both her mu-

sicianship and teaching today. Natalie says, "My greatest desire has always been to worship the Lord with the musical gifts He has graciously given me." She has faithfully served in choir and led worship in church, using music to glorify God and encourage others.

As she grew older, Natalie felt called to invest in children. She began teaching small groups of young singers, and by God's grace that group grew into a choir of 80 children. Watching them grow in confidence, discipline, and joy has been one of the greatest blessings of her life. Today, she continues to coach children in vocal lessons, and also teach beginner piano, helping students build strong foundations while nurturing their love for music.

Natalie says, "I truly love music and I love children. It is a beautiful privilege to see young hearts discover their voices and expand their God-given gifts. I give all glory to God for every opportunity and remain committed to inspiring the next generation to grow, shine, and use their talents for His glory."

Studio 237 Music Lessons is excited to have Natalie Rachkov join our staff of music teachers. She is ready to help both young and old discover, develop and demonstrate their God given musical gifts. To schedule a visit or lessons with Natalie, call Studio 237 Music Lessons at 850.231.3199. To learn more about the Studio and its teachers, visit our website at www.Studio237Music.com.

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Events

EVENTS

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11th annual Doggie EGGstravaganza, the annual canine social where dogs hunt for eggs filled with yummy treats from 5:30-7:30 p.m. at Grand Boulevard at Sandestin. Guests will enjoy delicious food, family-friendly games, great prizes, and music. For a \$20 donation in advance (or \$25 on the day of the event), humans and their leashed canine companions will receive a

souvenir bag to sniff out 1,000 colorful eggs filled with delicious dog treats. With two designated hunting areas for dogs over and under 35 pounds, every furry friend has a chance to join in on the fun. Visit dog-harmony.org to learn more, volunteer, donate or adopt.

UNwineD | April 3-4

UNwineD returns to Panama City Beach at Aaron Besant Park. Spend the weekend tasting craft beer, wine, and spir-

its while sampling cuisine from renowned area chefs and local eateries. For details and to purchase tickets, visit <https://www.visitpanamacitybeach.com/unwined>.

Seaside Easter Celebration | April 5

Celebrate Easter Sunday in Seaside! Bring the whole family for a day filled with complimentary photos with the Easter Bunny, live music, face painting, and exciting activities for kids. Kicking off at 1 p.m., the Easter Egg Hunt has over 25,000 eggs and promises an egg-citing adventure for children of all ages.

Gulf Coast Salute Air Show | April 11-12

The Gulf Coast Salute Air Show, a premier aviation event held in Panama City Beach showcasing a spectacular lineup of military and civilian aerial performances, is scheduled at the Russell-Fields City Pier from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. This is a free family-friendly experience. The Thunderbirds will perform at 3 p.m. daily. The other entertainers will proceed them. Food & beverage vendors will be lined up along the beach accesses near Russell-Fields City Pier.

South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival April 23-26 | Grand Boulevard

Tickets are on sale now for the South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival, returning April 23-26 to Grand Boulevard with more than 600 wines, beers and spirits to sample across four days of tastings, live entertainment and culinary experiences.

The weekend kicks off Thursday with Winemakers

and Shakers at Wine World in Destin, followed by Friday's VIP Wine Tasting (4-6 p.m.) featuring rare selections and expert pours, plus Bitters, Brews & Bartenders (5:30-8 p.m.) showcasing craft cocktails, lite bites and a lively mixology competition. The Grand Tasting takes place Saturday (3-6 p.m.) and Sunday (1-4 p.m.), highlighting world-class wineries — including the Willamette Valley Vintners Association — alongside chef-driven pairings in Wine World's Culinary Village.

Guests can purchase featured wines on site, with proceeds benefiting Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation and children in need across Northwest Florida. Pre-sale tickets are available now at sowalwine.com; prices increase April 1.

Walton Chamber Spring Golf Classic April 24 | 9 a.m. shotgun start (registration 8 a.m.) | Eagle Springs Golf Course, DeFuniak Springs

The Walton Area Chamber of Commerce invites the business community to the 2026 Spring Golf Classic, presented by Eglin Federal Credit Union, on April 24 at Eagle Springs Golf Course (171 Country Club Lane) in DeFuniak Springs. The four-person scramble welcomes golfers of all skill levels for a day of friendly competition and networking.

Team registration is \$500. The Eagle Team Sponsorship (\$650) includes team entry, muligans, tee busters and a tee sign. Additional sponsorships and prize or raffle donations (groups of four items) are also welcome.

Register or learn more at WaltonAreaChamber.com or

contact Gabrielle at Gabrielle@WaltonAreaChamber.com.

Destin Charity Wine Auction Turns 21 and Goes Wild for Kids April 24-25



The 21st Annual Destin Charity Wine Auction presented by the Jumonville Family benefits children in need across Northwest Florida through Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation's (DCWAF) 16 partner children's charities. In 2025, the foundation donated \$3.1 million following one of its most successful auctions to date.

The 2026 auction will feature an impressive lineup of celebrity chefs and internationally renowned vintners. Held in conjunction with the South Walton Beaches Wine and Food Festival, the auction also takes place at Grand Boulevard the same weekend. The festival showcases hundreds of premium wines, spirits and culinary offerings, with proceeds benefiting DCWAF. Full details are available at dcwaf.org.

Veterans & First Responders Appreciation Lunch April 21 | Niceville Community Center

A Superior Mechanical will host its inaugural Veterans and First Responders Appreciation

Continued on next page

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EVENTS

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Lunch on Tuesday, April 21, from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Niceville Community Center (204 Partin Drive N., Niceville).

The community-focused event honors local veterans, active military and first responders with a catered hot lunch from Swiftly Catered, special presentations and an AC system giveaway to one deserving ser-

vice member or first responder in need. Eligible participants include members of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, EMT/Medics, Police, Sheriffs and Firefighters. Register for the HVAC giveaway

at ASuperiorMechanical.com under ABOUT US > HVAC GIVEAWAY. Business partners

are welcome to contribute door prizes. For details: Marta Thorpe at (850) 814-3822.

A Walk Down Magnolia Lane" Returns April 8 to Benefit Embrace Florida Kids

Celebrate the world's greatest golf tournament while supporting a meaningful cause at "A Walk Down Magnolia Lane," presented by Shoreline Title. Now in its third year, the golf-themed soiree will take place Wednesday, April 8 at 5 p.m. at the WaterColor LakeHouse in Santa Rosa Beach, benefiting Embrace Florida Kids, a nonprofit dedicated to serving vulnerable children and families across Northwest Florida.

Guests will enjoy tournament-inspired cuisine and cocktails, live music, a silent auction, and a variety of golf activities including a simulator, putting contest, closest-to-the-pin, long-drive challenge and a hole-in-one competition. The evening begins with a cocktail hour at 5 p.m., followed by a Live Calcutta at 7 p.m., where participants can compete for prizes valued at more than \$25,000, including luxury getaway packages to destinations

such as The Breakers in Palm Beach, Old Edwards Inn in Highlands, North Carolina, and The Grand Hotel in Fairhope, Alabama.

Tickets are \$150 and available at walkdownmagnolialane.org/florida.

Sponsorship opportunities remain available and include event badges and promotional recognition. Learn more at walkdownmagnolialane.org/florida or visit Embrace-FLKids.org.

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Limited sponsorships and tickets available at walkdownmagnolialane.org/florida

South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival

April 23-26 | Grand Boulevard

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