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# FREEPORT Life

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## A Natural Treasure in Our Backyard: The E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center

BY LORI LEATH SMITH

For many Freeport residents, it's easy to drive along State Road 20 and not fully realize that just beyond the trees lies one of the most extraordinary environmental education centers in the country.

I had the special opportunity recently to visit the amazing E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center. And, believe me, it isn't just a place to visit — it's a point of pride for our community and a powerful example of how Freeport is helping lead the way in conservation, education and environmental stewardship.

Located right here in Freeport on the Nokuse Plantation, the center opened in 2009 thanks to the vision of the late M.C. Davis, a Walton County conservationist who believed deeply that people protect what they love. His mission was simple, but profound: give children and families the opportunity to experience nature firsthand, and



PHOTO: JEFF TALBERT



they will grow up wanting to protect it.

That philosophy is rooted in the concept of "biophilia," a term coined by famed biologist Dr. E.O. Wilson, meaning a natural love for living things. It's a fitting name for a place that has quietly been changing lives in our own backyard for more than 15 years.

Today, the center operates as a nonprofit environmental education facility serving thousands of students each year, many from Walton and Okaloosa counties. Fourth-

and seventh-grade students regularly visit for immersive field experiences that go far beyond a typical field trip. Here, learning happens outside — in the woods, along trails, and through hands-on discovery.

"The E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center lets children and adults explore a unique ecosystem that inspires curiosity and play with the benefit of having a knowledgeable staff available to answer the questions that naturally arise when engaging with nature. Shar-

ing our passion for nature and conservation is our foundation," says Executive Director Nicole Schafer.

For local families, it's especially meaningful knowing that children in our own community have access to this kind of experience. Many students leave with not only new knowledge, but a genuine appreciation for the natural beauty that surrounds Freeport every day.

**BIOPHILIA**  
*continued on page 20*



## A Place to Belong

BY HEATHER BENNETT EYE

In the heart of South Walton, a new kind of living community is taking shape, one built not just with brick and mortar, but with love, determination, and a belief that everyone deserves the chance to live a full and independent life. Established as a 501(c)(3), Harlan's Place is a nonprofit housing community designed for adults with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities, created by parents who dared to imagine a brighter future for their son and for countless families who share the same hopes.

Harlan Carey, who's now eight, is at the heart of this vision. Like all

**BELONG**  
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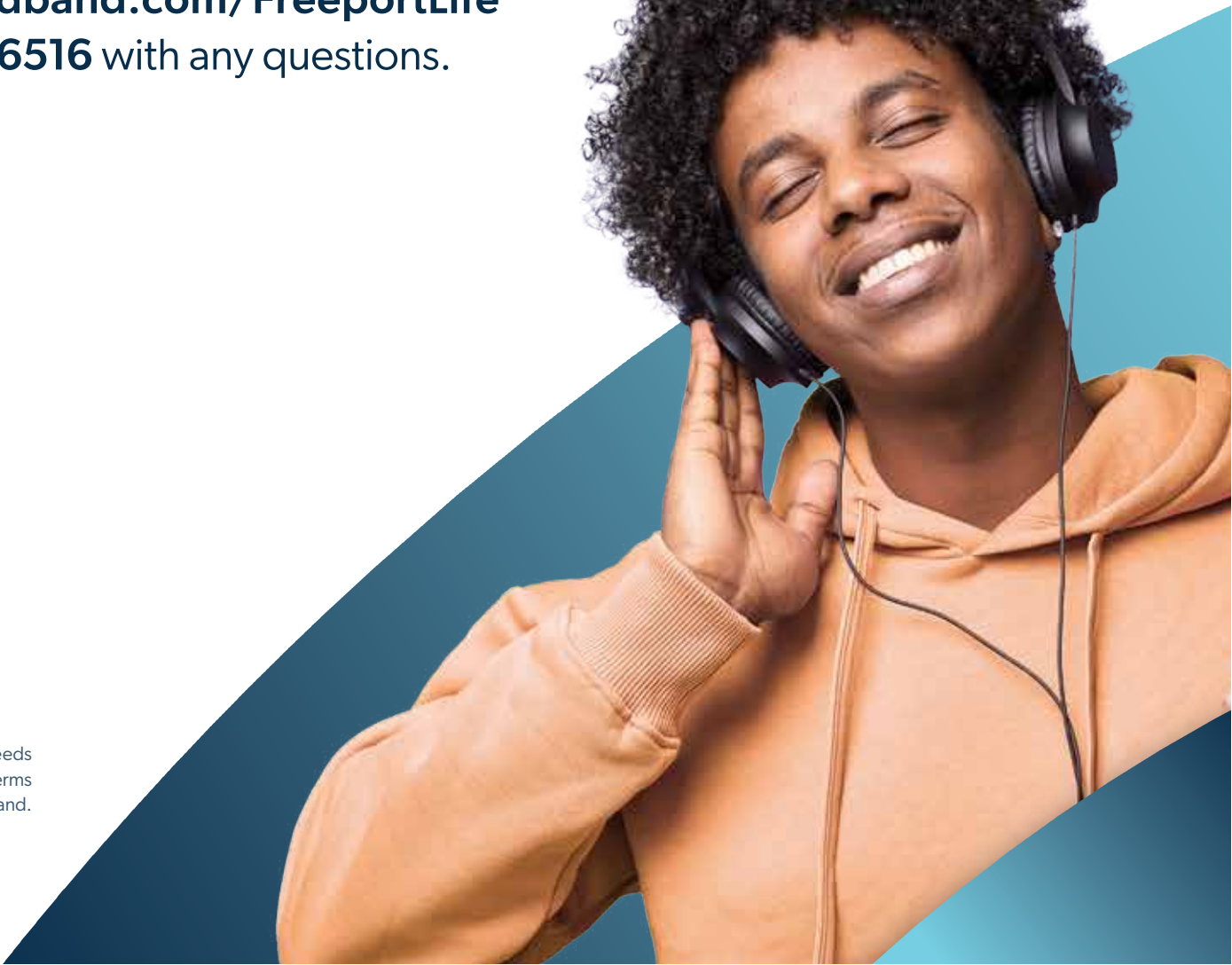
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## BELONG

*continued from page 1*

parents, his family dreamed of a life where he could make his own choices, form friendships, and experience the everyday joys of independence. Yet, they also faced a reality familiar to many families of individuals with disabilities, “What will happen when we can no longer provide care?” From that question, Harlan’s Place was born. “I was looking at what his future looked like, and how I wanted him to live his adult life,” said Harlan’s father and Harlan’s Place founder, Michael Carey. “I started doing a bunch of research. Everything was either institutional or a group home. That’s just not what I had envisioned.”

Out of that concern, Harlan’s Place was born. Michael is committed to building a living environment that goes beyond traditional models of disability care. The goal is simple but powerful: to create a place where people with Down syndrome can thrive, grow, and belong while maintaining dignity, purpose, and independence, and giving families peace of mind when thinking about their child’s future. “Ev-

ery other parent is having the same challenge. Hopefully, we can resolve that for many,” said Michael.

Located next to Stock & Trade Design, Co., the community will feature 60 thoughtfully designed apartment homes for adults who do not require licensed medical care. Each residence will offer a safe, welcoming environment that encourages self-reliance while providing the support needed to succeed. But Harlan’s Place is much more than housing. It’s a purposefully designed apartment community where residents can enjoy shared amenities such as a swimming pool, a walking trail, and a clubhouse for social gatherings. There’s also a communal dining space where residents can enjoy a meal together. For residents who want to cook, they will be able to grab ingredients and directions to prepare meals at home.

There will also be recreational activities to promote physical health, creativity, and connection. There will be sporting classes, basketball, and pickleball, along with the outdoor walking trail. “Something will be happening all the time in the gymnasium,” said Michael.

“There are going to be so many activities. We just want people that had their day packed to feel accomplished.”

Harlan’s Place also believes that true independence comes from being part of the greater community. Residents will have opportunities for job training, volunteering, and community integration, ensuring they become active, valued members of South Walton and the surrounding areas. “We want people that are outgoing, and they want to have responsibility, they want to have interactions with people. They want to show what they can do,” stated Michael. “I’ve been reaching out to people to put together a culinary program,” he adds. “Not only for individuals that live there, but for any intellectually disabled people that want to come to just do the program, and for even those without disabilities to do the program.” Michael also sees potential for the culinary program to lead to a business that provides pastries for local shops and cafes.

“I want this to be a part of the community where we can offer services. If there needs to be speech therapy for a young

child, we’re not going to be worried about how someone’s going to pay for it. We’ll work with the resources we have and not be focused on the bottom line that so many businesses are focused on,” said Michael.

At its core, Harlan’s Place represents a promise to families, to individuals with Down syndrome, and to the community at large, that a future filled with purpose and possibility is not only achievable but worth building together. This is not just a residence. It is a community of hope, where independence is nurtured, uniqueness is celebrated, and everyone has the chance to belong. “We’re a nonprofit. Everything is going back into serving these individuals and helping them find everything they need,” said Michael.

While they haven’t broken ground yet, they are hopeful this is the year of great things to come. They secured their development order at the end of last year and are about 40% through with the construction design while they wait on financing. “We’ve had great feedback, and community involvement. We’ve had two galas now with tremendous support,” stated Michael.



“I feel like this is going to be the year that we really make some good ground coverage.”

Michael hopes that the model of Harlan’s Place can be adopted and put into place all around the country. “We’re going to prove how this is successful. It’ll be something easily replicable, something every community would want because it brings positivity to a community and brings a necessity,” stated Michael. “We can grow it from here, and we can show what an asset these individuals can be to businesses in life. I can see it taking off and multiplying once we get off the ground.”

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Community



# The Menopause Conversation Every Woman Needs (But Rarely Gets)

By DR. KAREN DEVORE,  
TORTOISE CLINIC

What if I told you there would be a period in your life, one that could last up to 10 years, that would fundamentally shift how your body feels and functions?

Imagine a season marked by persistent fatigue, disrupted sleep, weight gain that no longer responds the way it once did, and emotional shifts that feel unfamiliar. And that you would be expected to carry all of this

while maintaining a career, supporting a family, and showing up for your community. For many women, this isn't theoretical. It is the reality of perimenopause and menopause.

For years, this transition was rarely discussed openly. That is changing, as it should. Many women are still navigating this blindly without understanding what is happening, what to expect, or what options they have to support themselves.

This is a natural progression, but it is not always easy, and most women are never taught how to navigate it. With the right understanding and guidance, this phase can shift from something reactive and uncertain to something far more stable and intentional.

Here's what I would share with every woman, regardless of where she is in her transition:

### Build Your Team

You do not have to navigate this phase alone. When you understand what is happening in your body, your decisions, and your outcomes, improve. Your health deserves the same level of support as every other area of your life.

Build a team that will explore this transition with you—one that listens, collaborates, and individualizes your care. The right support shifts this experience from reactive to intentional.

### Explore Your Options

Menopause is not a uniform experience, and your care should not be either.

Support may include nutrition and lifestyle changes, targeted supplementation, hormone therapy when appropriate, and restorative therapies. The goal is not to push through symptoms. It is to understand them and respond appropriately. If something feels off, it is worth addressing.

### Rethink How You Fuel Your Body

Hormonal shifts increase sensitivity to blood sugar fluctuations, driving energy instability,



cravings, weight gain, and brain fog.

Focus on stability: prioritize protein and hydration, include healthy fats and limit highly processed carbohydrates. When blood sugar is stable, energy, mood, and metabolic function follow.

### Build Strength—Not Just Endurance

Muscle becomes increasingly important during this phase of life. Hormonal changes contribute to muscle loss, reduced bone density, and slower metabolic function. Resistance training is one of the most effective ways to counter this.

Build up to strength training 2-4 times per week. This not only preserves muscle, but it places necessary stress on long bones, helping maintain bone density and reduce the risk and progression of osteoporosis.

### Address Sleep Directly

Sleep disruption is common and often one of the most impactful symptoms. Difficulty falling asleep, waking during the night, and non-restorative sleep affect everything from mood to metabolism. Support sleep with a consistent routine, a cool, dark environment, and mindful use of caffeine and alcohol.

For some women, declining progesterone may contribute to sleep disruption. In those cases, targeted support, including

Continued on page 25



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Community

# NatureView: Can You Picture Your Future Here?

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

What does your ideal future look like? Is it mornings spent sipping coffee on your porch while the neighborhood slowly wakes up?

Is it children riding bikes down quiet streets or neighbors gathering for an evening walk?

Maybe it's finally owning a home that feels like a fresh start—modern, comfortable, and surrounded by nature. Or perhaps it's simply finding a place that feels right the moment you arrive.

If you've been searching for that kind of lifestyle, you may want to take a closer look at NatureView, Freeport's newest master-planned community that is already capturing the attention of families, professionals, and first-time homebuyers alike.

### A Community That Invites You to Dream

Imagine driving just a few minutes off Highway 331 and entering a neighborhood where



nature still takes center stage. Towering trees, peaceful surroundings, and thoughtfully designed homes create a setting that feels both refreshing and welcoming.

#### Now ask yourself:

What would it feel like to live in a community where amenities are already open and ready to enjoy?

What if your new home didn't require months of wait-

ing for construction to finish?

How would it feel to invest in a neighborhood at the very beginning of its growth?

These are the questions many buyers are asking—and discovering that NatureView offers the answers.

### A Personal Look Inside NatureView

Recently, I had the opportunity to tour eight newly built



homes within the community, each showcasing a different floor plan. Walking through these homes made it easy to imagine the lives that will soon unfold within their walls.

From the moment I stepped inside, I was struck by the thoughtful layouts and the sense of space. Bright, open kitchens flowed seamlessly into spacious living areas, creating the perfect environment for entertaining or simply enjoying everyday moments with family. Owner's suites provided peaceful retreats, while flexible rooms offered endless possibilities—home offices, playrooms, or guest spaces.

Two standout designs includ-

ed the Denham floor plan by Holiday Builders and the Claudet III G floor plan by DSLD Homes, both beautifully crafted and designed with modern living in mind. Each home reflected quality construction and attention to detail, reinforcing the value of purchasing new construction homes in Freeport.

In fact, after touring these homes, I found myself thinking, "Could I see myself living here?"

The answer was a resounding yes—and I suspect many visitors will feel the same.

### Lifestyle Comes First

One of the most appealing aspects of NatureView is that it offers more than just homes—it provides a lifestyle that is already in place.

#### Residents can enjoy:

- A resort-style swimming pool
- A beautiful clubhouse perfect for gatherings
- A fully equipped fitness center
- Pickleball and basketball courts
- 

*Continued on page 8*



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Community

NATUREVIEW

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- A children’s playground
- Walking trails with exercise stations
- Charming pocket parks throughout the neighborhood

Unlike many new developments where amenities are years away from completion, NatureView allows residents to enjoy these features from the moment they move in. This immediate sense of community creates opportunities for neighbors to connect and for families to establish roots right away.

So, consider this:

What would your weekends look like if these amenities were just steps from your front door?

A Location That Connects You to Everything

Location plays a vital role in choosing the right home, and NatureView offers the perfect balance of convenience and tranquility.

Situated in the heart of Freeport, the community provides easy access to some of the Emerald Coast’s most desirable destinations:

- South Walton’s world-famous white sand beaches – approximately 15–20 minutes away
- Highway 331 – offering convenient north-south connectivity
- Eglin Air Force Base and Hurlburt Field – ideal for military families and professionals
- Nearby schools, shopping, and dining
- Growing employment opportunities throughout Walton and Okaloosa Counties

This strategic location allows residents to enjoy the serenity of a nature-filled environment while remaining close to everything they need.

Ask yourself:

Would you prefer to live in the middle of the hustle and bustle, or return home each day to a peaceful retreat surrounded by nature?

Why Now Is the Time to Act

Timing can make a significant difference when purchasing a home in a master-planned community. Early buyers often benefit from:

- More favorable pricing



- Greater selection of floor plans and homesites
- Potential long-term appreciation as the community grows
- The opportunity to be part of shaping the neighborhood’s culture

At NatureView, homes are currently starting in the low \$300,000s, making it an exceptional opportunity for buyers seeking affordability without sacrificing quality or lifestyle.

With homes already completed and additional construction underway, the community is steadily gaining momentum. As demand continues to increase, today’s pricing represents a unique window of opportunity.

So, the question becomes:

Will you look back a few years from now and wish you had taken advantage of this moment?

Inspired by a Proven Legacy

NatureView is brought to life by The Jay Odom Group, the same developer behind the highly successful Hammock Bay community. Hammock Bay transformed Freeport and played a significant role in the city’s growth, creating a vibrant and desirable place to live.

NatureView builds upon that legacy while introducing a deeper connection to nature and a thoughtfully planned environment designed for the future.

Envision Your Next Chapter

Finding the right home is about more than square footage or architectural style. It’s about envisioning the life you want to create.

- Where will your family gather for holidays?
- Where will your children take their first bike rides?
- Where will you unwind after a long day?
- Where will your future memories be made?

NatureView offers a place where those moments can unfold naturally.

fold naturally.

After touring the homes and experiencing the community firsthand, it’s easy to see why so many people are beginning to envision their future here. And who knows—I may even become one of your future neighbors.

Discover NatureView for Yourself

If you’re exploring new homes in Freeport, FL, or searching for a master-planned community in Walton County, NatureView is a destination worth experiencing in person.

Tour the beautifully designed homes.

- Walk the trails.
  - Relax by the pool.
  - Imagine the possibilities.
- Because sometimes, the perfect place isn’t just found—it’s felt.

Homes are available now, tours are happening daily, and the opportunity to be part of this growing community is here today.

To learn more or schedule a tour, visit [www.NatureViewFL.com](http://www.NatureViewFL.com) or call 850-822-5005.







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# Summer Starts Here: 4-H Camps for Every Interest

From coding and cooking to marine science and energy exploration, Walton County youth can learn, create and explore this summer through University of Florida IFAS Extension and 4-H camps, offering hands-on programs for a variety of ages and interests right here in our community.

## Deep Dive Marine Science Camp

June 10-11 | 8 a.m.-3 p.m. | Ages 13-18 (as of Sept. 1, 2025) | Walton County 4-H | Cost: \$40

Teens can dive into coastal discovery during this two-day, hands-on marine science experience. Participants will explore local ecosystems, conduct water quality testing, identify marine organisms, and learn about conservation initiatives through both lab work and field study.

The camp is held through Walton County 4-H, with limited registration and scholarships available upon request. Register: [wc4hdeepdive2026.4honline.com](http://wc4hdeepdive2026.4honline.com)

## Energy Explorers Power Up Day Camp

June 16-17 | 10 a.m.-3 p.m. | Ages 8-13 (as of Sept. 1, 2025) | Walton County 4-H Office, DeFuniak Springs | Cost: \$25 for both days

In partnership with Bay, Holmes, and Okaloosa counties, this interactive camp introduces youth to the science of energy. Through hands-on experiments, participants will learn how energy works, how it powers our world, and how it can be used efficiently in everyday life—while also exploring potential future careers. Register: [4henergyexplorerscamp.4honline.com](http://4henergyexplorerscamp.4honline.com)

## Sew Crafty Summer Camp

June 23-24 | 9 a.m.-3 p.m. | Ages 11-18 (as of Sept. 1, 2025) | Walton County 4-H | Cost: \$30

Creative teens can learn the timeless art of sewing alongside experienced members of the Chautauqua Quilters Guild. Campers will gain skills ranging from hand-stitching to machine sewing while creating projects and memories that last a lifetime.

Space is limited, and scholarships are available for Wal-

ton County youth. Register: [wc4hsewcrafty2026.4honline.com](http://wc4hsewcrafty2026.4honline.com)

## Tiny Tech Coding Camp

June 24 | 9 a.m.-3 p.m. | Ages 5-7 (as of Sept. 1, 2025) | Walton County 4-H Office, DeFuniak Springs | Cost: \$20

Young learners can take their first step into the world of technology through this fun, beginner-friendly coding camp. Designed to make programming accessible, the camp focuses on problem-solving, creativity, robotics, and critical thinking in an engaging, hands-on environment. Register: [4htinytechcoding.4honline.com](http://4htinytechcoding.4honline.com)

## Ocean Explorers Summer Day Camp

July 7 | 8 a.m.-3 p.m. | Ages 8-12 (as of Sept. 1, 2025) | Walton County 4-H Office | Cost: \$20

This one-day marine science camp invites youth to explore local aquatic habitats and learn about fascinating marine life. With a focus on conservation and environmental stewardship, participants will en-

gage in hands-on activities that bring the coastal ecosystem to life. Register: [wc4hoceanexplorers2026.4honline.com](http://wc4hoceanexplorers2026.4honline.com)

## Food Truck Frenzy Camp

July 14-16 | 8 a.m.-3 p.m. | Ages 11-18 (as of Sept. 1, 2025) | Walton County 4-H Office | Cost: \$60

Future chefs and entrepreneurs will love this three-day culinary camp, where participants learn essential cooking techniques, nutrition basics, and menu planning. Campers will also design their own food truck concept, complete with branding and a 3D model, blending creativity with real-world business skills. Register: [wc4hfoodtruckfrenzy2026.4honline.com](http://wc4hfoodtruckfrenzy2026.4honline.com)

## Small Farm Start-Up School (Adult Program)

April 14-June 23 (Tuesdays, 6-8 p.m. EST) | Florida Cooperative Extension | Cost: \$299 per farm

While not a youth camp, this nine-week program is ideal for adults interested in agriculture. Participants will learn directly from experienced farmers and



experts about business planning, crop production, marketing, regulatory compliance, and more. The program includes virtual classes, farm tours, and networking opportunities. Learn more: [ifas-small-farms-alt-enterprises.catalog.instructure.com](http://ifas-small-farms-alt-enterprises.catalog.instructure.com)

From sparking a love for science to building life skills in the kitchen, workshop, or garden, Walton County's 4-H and Extension programs continue to invest in the next generation through meaningful, hands-on experiences.

With limited spots available for many camps, early registration is encouraged. Scholarships may be available for Walton County youth.

For more information on any program, contact Walton County 4-H Agent III Niki Crawson at [ncrawson@ufl.edu](mailto:ncrawson@ufl.edu) or call 850-892-8172.



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THE WATERS  
AT FREEPORT



# The Lake That Built a Town



BY KERRI PARKER,  
HWY331.COM

There are certain places that quietly shape everything around them. In DeFuniak Springs, that place is Lake DeFuniak.

When I was awarded a grant through the SoWal Foundation, I was given 90 days to create a documentary film. The timeline was tight, but the opportunity was clear: to tell a story that matters and to tell it in a way that honors the people and

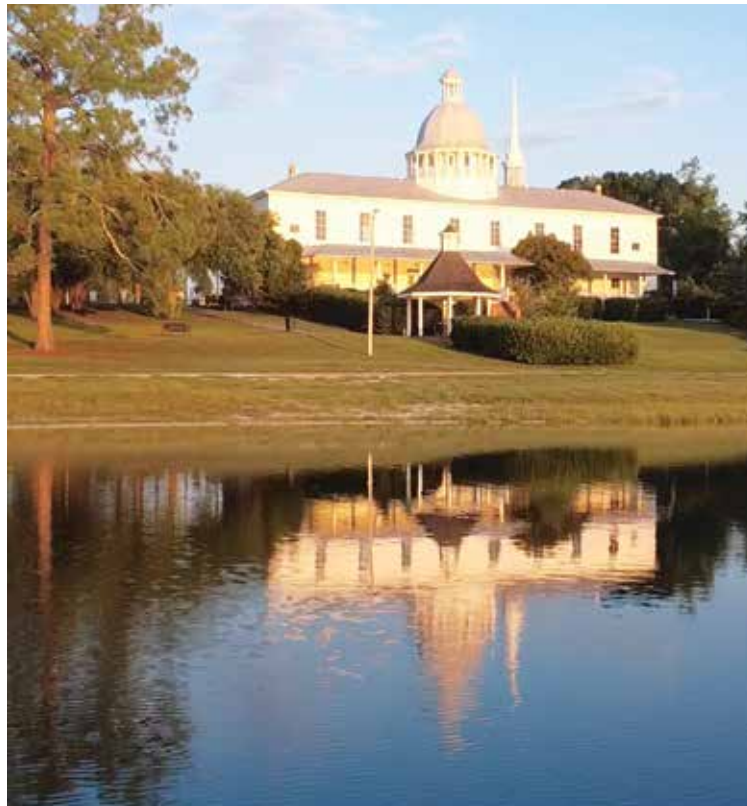
place at its center.

What emerged is a 15-minute documentary titled *The Lake That Built a Town*.

Through intimate interviews and cinematic storytelling, the film traces how the lake influenced settlement, architecture, civic life, and personal memory. What emerges is a portrait of a Southern town built around water, shared experiences, and traditions formed along its shore.

In telling this story, the film reflects a larger truth about small town America: the places that shape community life and collective memory are where identity takes root and where the story of a town is continually renewed.

Small towns across America are constantly changing. Stories fade. Details are lost. Places that once held meaning can become overlooked. Lake DeFuniak is



period of renewed energy and attention. There is a growing sense that the town is stepping into its next chapter. This film is meant to contribute to that momentum and pride. It is meant to remind people what we circle back to: the history, the character, and the sense of place that cannot be replicated.

I hope it helps people see the lake, and the town around it, with fresh eyes.

The film is now available to watch on YouTube. A QR code is included with this article for easy access.

unique, not only in its physical form but also in the role it has played in shaping a community. Capturing that on film felt important, not just for today, but for the years ahead.

DeFuniak Springs is in a

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# Spring is Season of Renewal, Healing and Fresh Starts

## How Short-Term Rehab Helps Seniors Return Home Safely

BY TERESA HALVERSON, DIR. OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT/ COMMUNITY RELATIONS, THE MANOR AT BLUE WATER BAY

Spring is a great time to focus on renewal, recovery, and independence. For seniors, the season naturally encourages gentle movement, fresh air, and mental rejuvenation, all of which are important for recovery after surgery, illness, or a fall.

Recovering after a hospital stay can be challenging for anyone, especially seniors. Short-term rehabilitation, also known as post-acute rehab, provides the support and therapy seniors need to regain independence and return home safely.

### What is Short-Term Rehab?

Short-Term rehab is a focused, time-limited program that normally takes place in a skilled nursing and rehab facility. The goals of short-term rehab are to restore strength, mobility, and daily living activities so that seniors can safely manage and return home.

### Short-term rehab includes:

- **Physical Therapy** to rebuild strength and improve balance
- **Occupational Therapy** to practice daily activities of living (cooking, dressing, bathing, etc.)
- **Speech Therapy** for swallowing, communication, or cognitive changes
- **Nursing care** and monitoring to ensure proper medication management and prevent complications

### Why Short-Term Rehab Matters

After an acute care stay in a hospital, seniors may face:

- Weakness or reduced mobility
- Risk of falls or injury
- Difficulty managing medications or chronic conditions
- Decreased confidence in performing everyday tasks

Short-Term rehab addresses these challenges with structured therapy, skilled supervision, and personalized care.



### Ways Rehab Helps Seniors Return Home Safely

**Restoring Strength and Balance:** Physical Therapists create individualized programs to increase muscle strength and balance, reducing fall risk.

**Relearning Activities of Daily Living (ADLs):** Occupational Therapists help seniors practice essential tasks (those tasks we normally take for granted)- cooking, dressing, and bathing. These skills help seniors live independently in the community while staying safe.

**Monitoring Health and**

**Medications:** Nursing staff track vital signs, manage medications, and watch for signs and symptoms of potential complications, preventing rehospitalization.

**Discharge Planning:** Dedicated rehab teams plan for a smooth transition back home including home safety modifications, medical equipment, caregiver training, and referrals to Out-Patient Rehab, Home Health, and Caregiver agencies.

**Boosting Confidence:** Short-term rehab encourages seniors to regain confidence in their abilities, supporting emotional and well-being alongside physical recovery.

### Signs Short-Term Rehab May Be Needed

- Difficulty waking or standing without assistance
- Trouble completing every-

day tasks independently

- Weakness or fatigue that prevents one from living at home safely
- Need for continued therapy after surgery or hospitalization

### Choosing the Right Rehab Facility (look for a facility that offers)

- Experienced therapists and skilled nursing staff
- Personalized, goal-oriented rehab programs
- A safe and supportive environment
- Strong communications with families and healthcare providers

### Specialized therapies and oversight include:

- **Cardiac Recovery Program:** Gradually increase stamina for longer walking distances or standing periods; promote circulation to aid healing

and prevent blood clots; incorporate low-impact cardiovascular exercises if appropriate.

**Stroke Recovery Program:** Improve coordination and motor control on the affected side; regain gain and posture to prevent falls; strengthen cognitive-motor skills for dual tasks like walking and talking.

**Orthopedic Rehab Program** (hip replacements/fractures, knee and spinal)

**Pulmonary Rehab for respiratory conditions:** Breathing exercises to strengthen lungs; low impact cardiovascular activities (walking, cycling, light resistance training).

**Balance and Fall Prevention:** Exercises for static and dynamic balance; teach strategies to recover from loss of balance; introduce safe home mod-

*Continued on page 22*



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# Rising Waters, Real Risks:

## Debunking Flood Insurance Myths Along the Emerald Coast



BY BRANDON CERVENKA

Many people along the Emerald Coast are understandably unsure about flood insurance, and a big reason is the amount of misinformation and half-truths they've heard over the years. Friends, social media, and even outdated guidance can make it sound like only "high-

risk" or beachfront homes need to worry, which leaves both homeowners and renters confused about their real exposure when the water rises.

This confusion has allowed several persistent myths to stick around—ideas like "I'm not in a flood zone," "My home insurance covers flood," or "FEMA will take care of everything if it's bad enough." In the sections that follow, we'll walk through four of the most common myths one by one and share clear, practical facts so families in and around Freeport can make more confident decisions about protecting their homes and rentals.

### Myth 1: "I'm not in a flood zone"

Every property is in a flood zone; the real question is whether it's considered low, moderate, or high risk, not whether the risk exists at all. National data show that a significant share of flood claims—often cited around 20–40 percent—come from properties outside the highest-risk FEMA zones, which surprises many owners who thought they were "safe." Even homes set back from the Gulf or on slight-

ly higher ground can flood from heavy rain, overburdened drainage systems, or water backing up into streets and yards.

### Myth 2: "My home or renters insurance covers flood"

Standard homeowners and renters policies typically do not cover damage from rising water, including storm surge, overflowing creeks, or water that enters at ground level. To have protection for this type of damage, you generally need a separate flood

insurance policy, often available through the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) or a private carrier. Many people only discover this gap after a tropical system or severe storm when they file a claim and learn that flood damage is excluded.

### Myth 3: "I'm a renter, so I don't need flood insurance"

Your landlord may carry flood insurance on the building itself, but that does not extend to your personal belongings inside the unit. Furniture, electronics, clothing, and other valuables are your responsibility, and without a separate contents-only flood policy, you could be paying out of pocket to replace them after a flood.

### Myth 4: "If it's really bad, FEMA will pay for everything"

Federal disaster assistance is not a guaranteed, full-coverage solution and is only available when a major disaster is officially declared. Even then, help often comes in the form of low-interest loans that must be repaid, and average grants for individuals are typically much smaller than what many families need to rebuild.

*If you find yourself falling into one of these myth categories, you're not alone—and you don't have to figure it out by yourself. Whether you own a house or condo or are renting near the coast, my local agency (850) 622-0448 can walk you through your true flood risk, review what your current policies do and don't cover, and help you decide whether a separate flood policy makes sense for your family.*

## Get Ready, Set, Go!

BY TED SHOOP

The annual peak home selling season is rapidly approaching. The weather is warming up, school year will soon be coming to a close. Anyone thinking about making a move – whether across town, out of state or moving into one of Freeport's lovely communities – are already making preparations. If you are planning to sell your home this year, did you review my Top 10 Tips printed in the last edition of Freeport Life? Did you take action? If not, better get started!

Even though there remain some challenges with inflation, affordable prices and lower mortgage rates in today's economy, given the fact that many of our local residents are active-duty or working in the private sector for companies that support our military, people have a need

to move.

Over the coming weeks, you can expect to see more homes listed for sale and increased traffic of potential home buyers driving through our neighborhoods scoping out available inventory and possibly their next home. Will yours be ready and on the market to show? Procrastinate and you will be competing with a larger number of home sellers lobbying to gain buyer interest and secure an offer. Preparation increases your chances for a successful sale. You should be consulting with a trusted local agent or REALTOR® now, not once school lets out.

Ted Shoop is a seasoned REALTOR® with eXp Realty who is passionate about providing personal yet professional service to Freeport and Walton County customers.

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# Is Your Home a Target?

How a Free Security Inspection Could Change Everything — and Why You Should Call Today



BY TED TOEDTE, CPS, CRIME PREVENTION SPECIALIST, WCSO

Picture this: a deputy responds to a burglary call on your street. While investigating, the deputy notices the broken porch light, the tall shrubs crowding the front door, and the side gate left open — and thinks, “I’ve seen this before.” Because they have. Again and again. The truth is, most residential break-ins are not random acts of desperation. They are choices made by opportunistic offenders who look for the path of least resistance. And far too often, our homes are unknowingly rolling out the welcome mat.

The good news? Those vulnerabilities are fixable — often without spending a dollar. And the Walton County Sheriff’s Office Crime Prevention Division is here to show you how.

*“Most burglaries aren’t forced entry. They’re through unlocked doors, dark corners and missed details. We help you find them first.”*

## What Is CPTED – And Why Does It Matter For Your Home?

CPTED — Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design — is a research-backed approach used by law enforcement, security professionals, and city planners around the world. The core idea is elegantly simple: the physical design of your surroundings either invites or deters criminal activity.

Originally developed in the 1970s by criminologist C. Ray Jeffery and popularized through the work of architect Oscar Newman, CPTED has evolved into a rigorous discipline practiced by certified specialists trained to read a property the way a criminal does. When applied to your home, CPTED principles can dramatically reduce your risk — not by turning your house into a fortress, but by making it look and feel like a much harder target than the next one down the road.

Think of it this way: offenders make quick decisions based on what they see. Natural surveillance (can someone see what’s happening here?), territorial reinforcement (does someone clearly own and care for this space?), and access control (how easy is it to get in and out undetected?) — these are the silent signals your property sends every single day. A CPTED-trained eye knows how to read those signals and help you

change the conversation your home is having with the world.

## What Happens During A Free Home Security Inspection?

When a Crime Prevention Specialist visits your home, you’re not getting a sales pitch or a glossy pamphlet. You’re getting a professional, eyes-on evaluation of your property — the same kind of analytical lens applied to commercial sites, public parks, and community facilities and churches throughout Walton County.

### Here’s what the process looks like:

- A walk of your exterior — assessing sight lines, lighting coverage, landscaping, fencing, and potential concealment areas
- A review of entry points — doors, windows, garage access, and hardware quality
- An evaluation of natural surveillance — who can see your front door from the street? Can a neighbor observe activity from their window?
- A conversation about your routines — because sometimes the greatest vulnerability isn’t a lock, it’s a habit
- A written summary of find-

ings and prioritized, practical recommendations

The inspection is educational, not judgmental. Many homeowners are surprised to discover that small, inexpensive changes — repositioning a motion light, trimming a hedge, adding a strike plate to a door frame — can significantly shift their risk profile. Others might

learn about the value of camera placement, smart locks, or community awareness programs like Neighborhood Watch.

There is no cost. No obligation. No follow-up sales call. Just honest, professional guidance from someone whose job is keeping Walton County safe.

*Continued on page 18*

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 Events

# Destin Boat & Yacht Show Makes Big Debut May 1-3

## 300+ Boats to be Showcased at Sunset Isle Yacht Club on Okaloosa Island

Okaloosa Island is set to host the newest premier boating and celebration of the 'Coastal Lifestyle' event as the inaugural Destin Boat & Yacht Show, which will mark the final stop of the 2026 Gulf Coast Boat Tour, May 1-3 at Sunset Isle Yacht Club. The region's top

dealers and boat manufacturers will showcase over 60 boats in the water and another 250 displayed on the marina property, making this the largest boat show in the Destin market.

The three-day event will feature a 'Boat For Everyone!' Whether you are an experi-

enced boater looking to upgrade your current boat, looking to purchase your first boat, or just enjoy spending a day on the water admiring beautiful boats, this show is for you. Center consoles, tritoons, bay boats, and luxury yachts alongside the latest in marine technology, ac-




# DESTIN

## BOAT & YACHT SHOW

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# MAY 1-3

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cessories, and coastal lifestyle exhibits will all be showcased at the 142-slip Marina at the Sunset Isle Resort and Yacht Club, one of the finest and largest marinas in Northwest Florida.

"Just as we do with our other shows along the Gulf Coast, this is more than just a boat show," said Scott Burt of Wheels Up Special Events, which is the show operator. "This will be a weekend that celebrates Crab Island, East Pass, Destin Harbor, and all of the amazing on-the-water experiences that define Destin's boating community."

Destin, often referred to as the "World's Luckiest Fishing Village," provides the perfect setting for a show of this caliber, according to Chuck O'Neill of Legendary Marine. "The opportunity to have a boat show in Destin in early May is a very critical opportunity for us and other dealers who are most appreciative to be able to showcase our boats to the Destin-area clientele. We know it's going to be a huge success."

Jason Hatcher of MarineMax says Destin has long needed a show like this. "The opportunity for a boat show in May is something no one has done, and

it's going to be a hit, because boat buyers have been asking for an event like this." Hatcher also said the show's location is the perfect venue. "Sunset Isle is a brand new state-of-the-art marina, with huge slips, wide docks, plenty of parking, and getting in and out is easy for everyone."

In addition to boats, a curated lineup of Coastal Lifestyle exhibitors and vendors will showcase the best of Gulf Coast living. Boating accessories, fishing tackle, paddleboarding, kayaking, product demonstrations, seminars, beach furniture, a food barge, beer, and cocktails are all part of the show.

The 2026 Gulf Coast Boat Tour culminates in Destin after highly successful shows in Panama City Beach and also in Orange Beach. Show hours for the 2026 Destin Boat & Yacht Show for Friday, May 1st, and Saturday, May 2nd, will be 10-6, and Sunday, May 3rd, from 10-4. Military members with a valid idea can enter the show for just \$5 any of the three days. To purchase individual day passes to skip the line, as well as up-to-date information on boats, brands, models, dealers, and exhibitors, visit [DestinBoatShow.com](http://DestinBoatShow.com).

# HAPPENINGS AROUND FREEPORT

## MAY 2026 EVENTS

### 01 - 03

**Blueberry Festival at Props Brewery**  
Various Times | Props Brewery at Hammock Bay

### 01

**Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's First Friday Coffee**  
7 am | First Baptist Church of FWB | FWB

### 02

**Freeport Garden Club Meeting**  
9:30 am | Horse Power Pavilion | Freeport

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

### 02 - 03

**38th Annual ArtsQuest Fine Arts Festival**  
10 am | Grand Boulevard at Sandestin | Miramar Beach

### 03

**Sinfonia Youth Orchestra & After School Beginning Strings in Concert**  
2 pm | Destin High School | Destin

**Sunday Sessions featuring Rescue Me**  
1 pm | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport



**Member Appreciation Day**  
1 pm | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

### 04

**Lunch N Learn: Recruiting for Culture**  
11:30 am | Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce

### 05

**Lunch N Learn: Business Boot Camp**  
11:30 am | Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce

### 06

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

### 07

**Concerts in the Village: Brass Transit**  
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin

### 09

**5th Annual FORE! The Love of Animals Golf Tournament**  
10 am | The Links Golf Club at Sandestin | Miramar Beach

**Biophilia Botanical Tea Party**  
10 am | E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center | Freeport

### 10

**Sunday Sessions featuring Rescue Me**  
1 pm | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport

### 14

**Concerts in the Village: Turnstiles**  
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin

### 15

**JAWS Film in Concert by Sinfonia Gulf Coast**  
7:30 pm | Destin-FWB Convention Center | FWB



[SINFONIAGULFCOAST.ORG](http://SINFONIAGULFCOAST.ORG)

### 16

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

**South Walton Boys & Girls Club's Spring Bash**  
11 am | South Walton Boys & Girls Club | Santa Rosa Beach

### 17

**Sunday Sessions featuring Rescue Me**  
1 pm | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport

### 18

**GSSF Indoor League Match**  
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

**70th Annual Billy Bowlegs Torchlight Parade**  
7 pm | FWB

### 20

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

### 21

**Concerts in the Village: Boogie Wonder Band**  
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin

**Bands on the Boulevard: Summer Music Series**  
6 pm | Grand Boulevard at Sandestin | Miramar Beach

### 24

**Sunday Sessions featuring Rescue Me**  
1 pm | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport

**Sinfonia Salutes: Memorial Day Concert and Drone Show**  
7:30 pm | Alys Beach Amphitheatre | Alys Beach

### 28

**Concerts in the Village: Molly Ringwalds**  
6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin



**Bands on the Boulevard: Summer Music Series**  
6 pm | Grand Boulevard at Sandestin | Miramar Beach

### 30

**Summer Kickoff**  
9 am | E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center | Freeport

### 31

**Sunday Sessions featuring Rescue Me**  
1 pm | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport

### FARMERS MARKETS

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

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

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

### MONTHLY EVENTS

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

**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



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Events

# Events Around Town

**Emerald Coast Community Singers Spring Concert: Choral Classics Through Time**  
**April 26, 2026 | 3 p.m. | Christ the King Episcopal Church, SRB**

Celebrate the beauty of choral music across the centuries as the Emerald Coast Community Singers present their Spring Concert, Choral Classics Through Time. This vibrant local ensemble will take audiences on a musical journey spanning from the 12th to the 21st century, showcasing the timeless power of song to connect and inspire. Admission is free, and donations are gratefully accepted.

More info: [emeraldcoast-communitysingers.com](http://emeraldcoast-communitysingers.com)

**Battle of the Bayou Fishing Tournament & Poker Run**  
**April 25–May 2 | Point Washington**

This inaugural, weeklong tournament benefits Point

Washington Medical Clinic and features fishing from April 25–May 2, a Poker Run and an Awards Celebration on May 2 with food, drinks and live music. Early registration ends April 15.

\$100 per angler/\$250 per boat early; \$150/\$300 after. Poker Run \$100; celebration tickets \$25.

Info: [givebutter.com/battle-of-the-bayou-2026-mwrlmi](http://givebutter.com/battle-of-the-bayou-2026-mwrlmi)

**Blueberry Festival at Props Brewery**  
**May 1–3 | Freeport**

Celebrate a berry sweet weekend at Props Brewery in Hammock Bay, May 1–3, with the Blueberry Festival—three days of family-friendly fun, food and local flavor.

Enjoy a petting zoo, shop local vendors and grab a bite from a variety of food trucks while soaking in the festive atmosphere. It's the perfect outing for families, friends and anyone who loves supporting local.

Friday, May 1: 3–9 p.m. |

Saturday, May 2: 2–8 p.m. | Sunday, May 3: noon–6 p.m.

Props Brewery at The Windmills, 1799 Great Hammock Bend, Freeport

Free to attend. Vendors welcome (apply online).

**Dancing with the Emerald Coast Stars**  
**Saturday, May 2 | 6 p.m. | Hotel Effie Sandestin**

In partnership with Fred Astaire Dance Studios Fort Walton Beach and inspired by the hit TV show Dancing with the Stars, this ballroom-style competition pairs local leaders with professional dancers for an evening of glamour, entertainment and friendly rivalry to support the Seacoast Collegiate High School Expansion Project. The 2026 Emerald Coast Stars include Dr. Lindsey Hoppe of 30A Smiles, Whitney Cooley of Scenic Sotheby's International Realty and Southern Sand, Destin Mayor Bobby Wagner, and Drew Ward, principal of Seacoast Collegiate High School. Each will perform alongside a professional dancer from Fred Astaire Dance Studios. The evening includes a cocktail hour, plated dinner, dance competition, awards ceremony and VIP after-party. Guests—and supporters watching from home—can vote for their favorite dancer for \$10 per vote.

Tickets: \$350 individual | \$500 couples. Sponsorships and tickets: [SeasideSchools.net](http://SeasideSchools.net). To sponsor, contact Callie Cox at [coxc@seasideschools.net](mailto:coxc@seasideschools.net).

**Destin Seltzer Festival Returns to The Market Shops**

**May 2 | 1–4 p.m. | The Market Shops, Miramar Beach**

Sip, savor and soak up the sunshine at the Destin Seltzer Festival on Saturday, May 2. This lively afternoon event features unlimited 2-ounce seltzer tastings from national and regional brands, light bites from local restaurants, live music and a fun, coastal atmosphere.

Hosted by Opportunity Place, the festival supports its mission of helping families and individuals transition to stable housing—100% of proceeds benefit the organization's programs.

A limited number of VIP tickets offer access to a private tent with upgraded food offerings and added perks. Sponsorships are available. For details, email [opportunityplacefbw@gmail.com](mailto:opportunityplacefbw@gmail.com). Follow along on social media for updates and ticket information.

**Walton Area Chamber Open House**

**May 4 | Santa Rosa Beach**

The Walton Area Chamber of Commerce invites members, local businesses and the community to a relaxed, come-and-go Open House on May 4 from 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. at its Santa Rosa Beach office (63 South Centre Trail).

Guests can meet the Chamber team, connect with fellow professionals, explore the office and learn about resources and benefits available to support

local businesses across Walton County.

Highlights include a Morning Mingle with mimosas, a featured Lunch & Learn — The Promo Experience presented by A2Z Specialty Advertising (11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., free; RSVP required) — and afternoon appetizers and drinks.

Free to attend; RSVP required for Lunch & Learn.

**FORE! The Love of Animals Golf Tournament**  
**May 9 | The Links Golf Club at Sandestin, Miramar Beach**

Tea up for a great cause at Alaqua Animal Refuge's 5th Annual FORE! The Love of Animals Golf Tournament, presented by Sandestin Investments, on Saturday, May 9, at The Links Golf Club at Sandestin (165 Sandestin Blvd. N., Miramar Beach). This signature fundraiser brings golfers and animal advocates together for 18 holes of scramble-format play with a shotgun start, on-course contests, raffles, awards and a "Pups & Pours" after party. Registration includes a cart, boxed lunch and two drink tickets. Fast Fetch Pricing offers teams of four for \$750 through March 9 (\$850 regular; \$250 individual players). Proceeds support Alaqua Animal Refuge's rescue, veterinary care, rehabilitation and adoption programs across the Southeast. Registration deadline is May 4. Details and sign-up: [app.eventcaddy.com/events/2026-fore-the-love-of-animals](http://app.eventcaddy.com/events/2026-fore-the-love-of-animals).

**Freeport High School Grid Iron Golf Classic**  
**May 9 | DeFuniak Springs**

Hit the course in support of Freeport High School football at the Grid Iron Golf Classic, set for May 9 at Eagle Springs Golf Course. This community tournament brings players and supporters together for a day of friendly competition while raising funds for the Freeport Touchdown Club and its student-athletes.

Eagle Springs Golf Course, 17 Country Club Lane, DeFuniak Springs

Registration and details at [freeporttouchdownclub.com](http://freeporttouchdownclub.com).

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TICKETS

# Taking a Bite Out of an Invasive Species

What began as a creative response to an environmental threat has grown into one of the Emerald Coast's most anticipated—and impactful—spring events.

The Emerald Coast Open Lionfish Tournament and Festival returns May 15–17, bringing together divers, chefs, conservationists and families for a weekend that blends competition, cuisine and conservation. Centered around HarborWalk Village, the event is recognized as the largest lionfish tournament in the world—and one that continues to make measurable progress beneath the surface.

## Big Impact, Growing Each Year

The numbers tell a powerful story.

During the 2025 tournament, more than 20,000 inva-



sive lionfish were removed from Gulf waters, including 7,180 harvested during the pre-tournament and 13,322 during the two-day competition. Since its inception in 2019, the Emerald Coast Open has now removed over 100,000 lionfish, making a significant dent in one of the region's most pressing marine challenges.

"This event has brought a lot of awareness to the invasive lionfish species and created a festive atmosphere for the enjoyment of our visitors and residents, while fostering prosperity for our local businesses," said Okaloosa County Commission Chairman Paul Mixon.

Lionfish, native to the Indo-Pacific, have no natural predators in the Gulf and reproduce rapidly, threatening native fish populations and reef systems. Because they are not easily caught by traditional hook-and-line fishing, divers using spears

play a critical role in controlling their numbers.

## Competition with a Purpose

Divers from across the country travel to our area to participate, forming teams and competing for nearly \$175,000 in cash and gear prizes. Categories include most, largest and smallest lionfish caught.

At the 2025 event, standout teams included:

- Most Lionfish: Deep Water Mafia 1 (2,038)
- Smallest Lionfish: Team Lookin' Back (2.8 inches)
- Largest Lionfish: Team In the Clouds (17.2 inches)

Behind the scenes, weigh-ins and measurements took place near the harbor, adding to the excitement as teams brought in their hauls and shared stories of early morning dives, deep-water hunts and record-breaking catches.

"While this event continues to flourish, the opposite is happening for this invasive species," said Natural Resources Chief Alex Fogg. "The public is beginning to realize the impact of the lionfish on our ecosystem and because of the divers and our amazing partners, we are able to make a difference for our environment in Gulf waters."

## From Ocean to Table

Beyond the tournament, the Emerald Coast Open has helped spark a growing culinary trend: lionfish as a sustainable seafood.

Mild, flaky and often compared to snapper or grouper, lionfish is now featured on menus across the area. During the lead-up to the tournament, local restaurants compete in Lionfish Restaurant Week, showcasing creative dishes that highlight the species' versatility.

In 2025, La Paz took top honors for the third consecutive year—further proof that conservation can be as delicious as it is impactful.

Festival attendees can sample lionfish dishes, watch fillet demonstrations and learn how choosing lionfish supports Gulf ecosystems.

## A Win for Tourism and Local Business

The tournament and festival also provide a strong economic boost for Destin and the sur-

rounding area.

Thousands of visitors travel to the Emerald Coast for the event, filling hotels, booking charters and dining at local restaurants. The combination of competition and festival atmosphere reinforces Destin's reputation as both a premier

fishing destination and a hub for conservation-driven tourism.

## A Festival for the Whole Family

While divers compete offshore, the Lionfish Festival brings the celebration onshore.

Held at HarborWalk Vil-

lage, the family-friendly festival features tastings, educational exhibits, interactive booths, local vendors and activities for all ages. Live music and a lively harbor setting create an inviting atmosphere where visitors can learn, explore and connect.

*Continued on next page*

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 Off the Hook

**LIONFISH**

continued from previous page

It's an event designed to engage everyone—from curious kids to seasoned anglers—while raising awareness about protecting the Gulf.

For more information, registration details or festival updates, visit [emeraldcoastopen.com](http://emeraldcoastopen.com).

*Fishing News is brought to you by The Ships Chandler, a trusted name in Gulf Coast boating since 1980, serving Walton County in its Free-*

*port 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*

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**SAFETY**

continued from page 13

*“Small changes make a big difference. Trimming one hedge or moving one light can take your home off an offender’s list entirely.”*



**Why This Matters Right Here In Freeport**

Here's the encouraging news: Crime in our area has been declining steadily over the last 10 years. That's not an accident. It is the direct result of community awareness, proactive law enforcement, and residents who take their own security seriously. The goal now is to keep that trend moving in the right direction and your participation makes a difference.

Walton County is growing. With that growth comes opportunity and, inevitably, some of the challenges that follow population increases anywhere. As new subdivisions take shape along U.S. 331 and beyond, and as seasonal residents and visitors move through our communities, the importance of proactive crime prevention has never been higher.

The Walton County Sheriff's Office Crime Prevention

Division exists precisely for this moment. Rather than waiting to respond after something happens, crime prevention specialists work upstream — helping residents, businesses, faith communities, and neighborhoods build environments where crime is less likely to occur in the first place.

That work has already touched local churches, public parks, and municipal facilities in Freeport. Now it's your turn. Your home. Your family. Your peace of mind.

**An Invitation To Take Action**

Crime prevention is not about fear. It is about empowerment. It is about looking at your home with fresh eyes — the same eyes that a trained specialist uses every day — and making informed choices that protect the people and things you love most.

The Walton County Sheriff's Office Crime Prevention Division is ready to help. The service is free. The information is practical. And the peace of mind that comes from knowing your home is as safe as it can be? That's priceless.

Call today. Schedule your free inspection. Let's make Freeport safer — one home at a time.

*Ted Toedte is a certified Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) practitioner and Crime Prevention Specialist with the Walton County Sheriff's Office Crime Prevention Division. With over 30 years of law enforcement experience spanning both Florida and California, he brings a broad, field-tested perspective to crime prevention work. He conducts site assessments, community education programs, and security evaluations for residents, businesses, faith communities, and municipal partners across Walton County. He can be reached through the WCSO main line at (850) 892-8111.*

**Five Common Home Vulnerabilities – And Easy Fixes**

You don't need to wait for a formal inspection to start improving your security posture. Here are five of the most common issues identified in home assessments — and what you can do about them right now:

**1. Dark entryways and side yards.** Motion-activated lighting is one of the highest-return investments in home security. Offenders avoid well-lit spaces. A \$25 motion sensor can do remarkable work.

**2. Overgrown landscaping near windows and doors.** Tall shrubs and dense plantings create concealment — a gift to a would-be burglar. Keep vegetation trimmed to a height that preserves sightlines.

**3. Weak door hardware.** A locked door with a flimsy strike plate offers little protection. Upgrading to a three-inch strike plate with long screws is a ten-minute fix that can stop a kick-in.

**4. No visible signs of occupancy.** An empty-looking home invites attention. Timers on interior lights, paused mail delivery, and a trusted neighbor with a watchful eye can make a property look lived-in.

**5. Unlocked side and back entries.** Front doors get attention. Garage service doors, side gates, and back windows often don't. These are frequent points of entry — and they're easy to overlook.

**Schedule Your Free Home Security Inspection**

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- Conducted by a certified Crime Prevention Specialist
- Covers exterior assessment, lighting, access control & more

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# 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 golf-

er 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-pro-



fessional 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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Environment

BIOPHILIA

continued from page 1

And that beauty is something special.

The Biophilia Center sits within the longleaf pine ecosystem, one of the most diverse and endangered habitats in North America. Thanks to restoration efforts on the Nokuse Plantation, millions of longleaf pines have been replanted, bringing this critical ecosystem back to life. It's a quiet but powerful success story happening right here at home.

Visitors to the center can encounter native wildlife, including birds, reptiles, pollinators and the beloved gopher tortoise — a keystone species that plays an important role in the health of the ecosystem. Inside, interactive exhibits and "animal ambassadors" help bring these lessons to life in a way that resonates with all ages.

Beyond its educational programs, the center also supports broader environmental initiatives, hosting researchers, educators and conservation leaders who are working to protect Florida's natural resources. Its sustainable practices — from

conservation efforts to environmental programming — reflect the same values it teaches every day.

For those who haven't visited yet, the center is open to the public on select days and through special events and seasonal programs. It's a perfect outing for your family, grandparents (like me) with visiting grandchildren, or anyone looking to reconnect with nature just minutes from home.

Did you know? The Nokuse Plantation surrounding the center spans more than 50,000 acres, making it one of the largest private conservation efforts in the Southeast — and it's right here in Freeport.

In a fast-growing area where so much is changing, the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center stands as something steady and lasting — a reminder of what makes this community so special.

It's not just a destination. It's part of who we are.

Upcoming Events
It's Almost Time for the Earth Day Expo!

The E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center will host its Earth Day Expo, presented by Pepsi, on



PHOTOS: JEFF TALBERT



Saturday, April 25, 2026, from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Biophilia Center campus, 4956 FL-20 E in Freeport. This family-friendly event will feature environmental education, interactive booths and engaging opportunities for all ages to learn about conservation and sustainable practices.

This year's expo brings together a diverse group of environmental educators and organizations, including Panhandle Wildlife Rescue, the Florida Native Plant Society, Florida Trails Association, Florida Forestry, The Longleaf Alliance, the Florida Wildflower Founda-

tion, local native plant nurseries and more. Guests can explore educational exhibits, native plant vendors, conservation resources and hands-on activities designed to inspire stewardship and awareness of Florida's natural ecosystems.

Hourly talks will take place in the theater, along with a Career Hour featuring speakers

from forestry, fish and wildlife and other environmental organizations. Attendees can also experience the "Essence of Florida Flora" tasting room, highlighting the unique flavors and botanical heritage of Florida's native edible plants. Food trucks will be on site throughout the day.

Admission is \$15 for ages 13 and older and \$10 for children ages 3-12. Biophilia Center members receive free admission.

Summer Kickoff

Mark your calendar for the public's first "non-event" opportunity to come in for the season—

E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center's Summer Kickoff on May 30 from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. This family-friendly fundraiser will feature live music by Jennifer Alvarado, food trucks, bounce houses, animal chats, raffles, and access to the Reptile Room. Admission is \$15 for ages 13 and up, \$10 for ages 4-12, and free for Bio-members. Guests are encouraged to bring a towel and spare clothes for water activities, and come ready to celebrate the start of summer surrounded by nature.

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# Learning at the E. O. Wilson Biophilia Center: Snakes!

By HELEN PETRE

I volunteer at the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center, helping Turtle Bob teach fourth and seventh-graders about snakes and turtles. When the students enter the Turtle Bob room, some are terrified. By the time the class is over, Turtle Bob has convinced even the most uneducated that snakes are our friends. All the snakes the students hold are non-venomous and accustomed to being held. We teach the students that they will encounter snakes in the wild if they go outside.

Most of our snakes in the Panhandle are non-venomous, but a few, like our common cottonmouth, are venomous. Even so, if you wear shoes and keep your hands where you can see them, you will be fine. Venomous snakes do not chase you down or attack you unless you try to kill them, step on them in bare feet, or pick them up. Like bears and bobcats, give them room, do not threaten them, and you will be fine. Any snake will bite if threatened. Any human probably will, too.

## Eastern cottonmouth (Agkistrodon piscivorus piscivorus)

The cottonmouth is our most common venomous snake. It swims well, lives near water, and opens its mouth when threatened. Cottonmouths sometimes shake their tails when threatened, sort of like rattlesnakes. They are just trying to let you know they are there, and they hope you will go away. When cottonmouths are swimming, you can see their entire body on the surface of the water, unlike other water snakes.

Cottonmouths have big heads and skinny necks. They are very thick snakes with very thick tails. They look scary, but unless you step on them in bare feet or try to kill them, they will not bite. Venomous snakes use venom to subdue prey. You are not prey. You are way too big to swallow. Bites are last resorts to make you go away.

Contrary to public opinion, cottonmouths are not aggressive. I almost stepped on one wearing flip flops (which is not a good idea), and the snake just sat there with its mouth open. Yes, I was terrified, but it did not bite. Bites are very uncommon, and although they are not fun, they are very rarely fatal.

Cottonmouths are food for eagles, owls, herons, alligators, kingsnakes, and snapping turtles. They eat fish and frogs. They are important members of an ecosystem that we want to preserve.

## Banded watersnake (Nerodia fasciata)

Some snakes look like venomous snakes, and they do that on purpose. The banded watersnake is a common snake that lives near water like the cottonmouth, but it is not venomous. The banded watersnake hopes you will think it is a cottonmouth and leave it alone. Sometimes that works. The difference is that banded watersnakes have long, pointed heads (not triangular), round eyes, they do not open their mouths when threatened, and you cannot see their entire body when they swim, only their heads. They, and especially their tails, are much thinner than those of a cottonmouth. They also have dark, vertical lines on their heads that are visible in the photo below and can be seen from a safe distance.

When a banded watersnake is threatened, it flattens out its head, but don't be fooled. The head looks flat, not blocky like a cottonmouth.

## Red rat snake (corn snake, oak snake) (Pantherophis guttatus)

Red and gray rat snakes are also called oak snakes and corn snakes. They look alike except some are red and some are gray, or brownish. Red corn snakes are expert climbers. Some people think they look like copperheads, but copperheads are rare in the Panhandle.

Red and gray rat snakes are constrictors, but have no fear, they are way too small to strangle you. They constrict around a mouse, or other rodent when it exhales, and then it cannot inhale. It sounds terrible, but death is quick. Rat snakes are useful to control rodent populations and are beneficial to humans because rodents carry ticks and disease and spoil human food. Rat snakes live about 15 years in the wild in palmetto flatwoods and forests.

## Black racers (Coluber constrictor)

Black racers, or black snakes, are probably the most common urban snake. They are active during the day, so they are often

seen. Black snakes live around freshwater and under shrubs. They eat insects, frogs, and toads. They are also slightly hyperactive and large, so they tend to move quickly and scare people. They do not do well in captivity because they cannot tolerate life in a small box.

## What to do if you see a snake

Nothing. Move away. Give the animal room and take a deep breath. The snake does not want to chase you, bite you, or eat you. It wants you to go away. So go away.

There is no good reason to kill a snake, and if you try, it might not end well for you. If you have



Turtle Bob and a gray rat snake, or oak snake (Pantherophis spiloides)

snakes in your yard, it is probably because there is food: rodents, bird seed, or pet food. Remove the rodent food and the rodents and the snakes will leave.

Snakes are assets to our environments. They eat mice, rats, and other things that we do not want around our yards. Snakes are food for owls, herons, snapping turtles, and alligators. Like

all wild animals, they were here first, and despite the Adam and Eve story, they do not tell us to do bad things. They just want to be left alone to enjoy the sun and rodents. We love snakes at the Turtle Bob room, and we hope you love them in your yards and in the wild.

*Helen Petre is a retired USDA biologist and college biology instructor. Turtle Bob is the turtle guy at E. O. Wilson. We both hope to share our passion for the longleaf ecosystem with all the wonderful people who live here. If you have any questions about science, nature, or the wild world of Florida's Panhandle, email petrehelen@gmail.com*

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Wellness

# Quick Fix or Lifestyle Change?

By ROBYN MENTGEN AITES, CO-OWNER, TRIFECTA TRAINING

Let's be honest—if fad diets, detox teas, magic pills and “miracle” weight loss shots actually worked long-term, we wouldn't still be having this conversation. Yet, here we are... again. The truth? Most quick-fix solutions are exactly that—quick. They often come with a long list of side effects: hormonal disruption, muscle loss, slowed metabolism, nutrient deficiencies, and the all-too-common rebound weight gain. Cross training programs that promise to “torch calories” every day can also lead to burnout, joint stress, and injury—especially as we age and recovery becomes just as important as the workout itself.

Here's the part no one wants to hear: **THERE IS NO SHORTCUT TO LONGEVITY!**

A sustainable, healthy life is built through a personalized strength training program, balanced nutrition, and—most importantly—the right mindset. Strength training isn't just about building muscle; it supports bone density, improves metabolism, enhances mobility, and protects your body as it ages. Proper nutrition fuels your body, stabilizes energy, and supports recovery. And mindset? That's the foundation. Because none of this works unless you decide—truly decide—that you are worth the effort.

And effort is required.

This journey from point A to point B is not easy—especially as we get older, when habits are deeply ingrained and change feels inconvenient at best. It takes discipline over motivation. It takes showing up when you're tired, stressed, or just not “feel-

ing it.” Some days will require grit, sweat, and yes—even a few tears. But those are the days that matter most.

Just ask Steph Parsons, who rebuilt her life after liver failure and breast cancer:



“I've rebuilt a healthy body, improved my eating habits, and can enjoy simple things again... I finally feel like myself again, with more energy and a stronger mindset.”

Or Sammy Fannin, who ad-

mits she started wanting a quick fix:



“I quickly changed my mindset. I've lost 40 pounds and the muscle definition gets more noticeable every day.”

Notice the pattern? No shortcuts. Just commitment.



So, here's the question—are you looking for fast, or are you looking for forever?

If you're ready to stop starting over and finally build a body and life that lasts, start with one simple step: decide you deserve it. Then take action. Show up. Stay consistent.

And if you need guidance, accountability, or someone to walk that path with you—we're here.

Are you ready to choose the lifestyle, or are you still chasing the quick fix?

## SPRING

continued from page 11

ifications for reduced fall risk.

**Post-Surgical/Wound Monitoring and Care:** Tailored exercise programs for joint replacement, fracture repair, or abdominal surgeries; Regular assessment for redness, swelling, drainage, or unusual odors. Pain control strategies include pre-

scribed medications, ice/heat packs, or elevation. Encouraging safe movement to prevent stiffness without compromising wound healing.

### The Bottom Line

Short-term rehab is a bridge between hospital and home. With structured therapy, professional supervision under the direction of physicians, and per-

sonalized support, seniors can recover safely, reduce the risk of complications, and enjoy everyday life again.

At The Manor at Blue Water Bay, our rehab teams focus on helping seniors recover safely, regain independence, and return home confidently utilizing an integrated approach. Our multidisciplinary team includes specialized physicians, physiat-

rists, nurses, therapists, dietitians, and social workers.

This emphasizes the medical expertise and personalized care seniors receive at The Manor at Blue Water Bay, reassuring families that recovery is both safe and effective. For a tour and additional information, please

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# Leaning Into Loss and Grief



BY STEPHENIE CRAIG

When did you last lose something or someone important to you? When did you last face an expected or unexpected ending? Loss is incredibly uncomfortable and also inevitable.

Throughout life, you will face many kinds of loss. Sometimes loss is obvious like the death of a pet, a family member, or a friend. Sometimes loss is related to major life transitions such as a loss of a job, moving, or divorce. Other times, loss is a break up or the end of a friendship. And confusingly, sometimes loss is mixed up with celebration like a graduation or wedding. Behind every new and different change in your life is the loss of the way things used to be.

Because loss has so many different faces, it is hard to un-

derstand your feelings as you navigate it. Grief is how your brain and body make sense of loss and figure out how to move forward in spite of the loss life brings. Grief gets a bad wrap because no one wants to feel uncomfortable feelings. Most people attempt to avoid grief by any means possible because they fear the discomfort will last indefinitely. You might try avoiding grief by pretending it doesn't exist, by pushing it down, by numbing with things like alcohol, drugs, shopping, scrolling, or staying busy.

The uncomfortable truth about life is that loss and grief will be part of your journey. There is no preventing it. So instead of avoiding, what if you learn to embrace loss and grief as part of being human and an experience you can develop tools to walk through with health and wisdom?

## 10 Ways to Embrace Loss and Grief with Health and Wisdom

1. Let go of avoiding/numbing. Face the reality that un-

comfortable experiences and feelings are part of your humanity. Avoiding discomfort hijacks your growth, learning, and emotional maturing. Loss is a normal, hard part of life. Notice and list activities you engage in to avoid uncomfortable feelings from loss.

2. Notice grief feelings in your body. Grief and loss bring feelings of overwhelm, exhaustion, sadness, despair, anger, confusion, and depression. Notice how these show up in your body. "I am feeling tearful and extra tired."

3. Connect your grief feelings to a specific loss and validate your experience. "I am feeling sad, tired, and overwhelmed. I just moved to a new city and I am starting everything over from scratch. It's normal to feel overwhelmed in this situation."

4. Normalize grief. "Everyone goes through loss and has hard grief feelings. I am normal. It is normal for me to be feeling like this right now."

5. Remind yourself the feelings won't last forever. "My grief feelings are really intense

right now and I will find a way through. It won't always feel like this even though it's hard to imagine how I will feel better at this time."

6. Create space for grief. Give yourself time each day to process. Journal about your loss, talk to a friend, cry, punch a punching bag, scream into your pillow. Give grief a way out of your body rather than pushing it down. Try setting a timer for 30 minutes and sit in your hard emotions. Allow yourself to grieve spontaneously when possible.

7. Accept grief as unpredictable and largely outside your control. It's okay to grieve without judgement. Remember, everyone will experience grief.

8. Continue living normally as you are able. Though it will feel strange to do normal things during times of loss and grief, it is healthy to do so. Moving forward in your life day to day is not a sign of indifference about your loss, rather, it's part of continuing to live with loss.

9. Lean into the growth grief and loss promote. No one wants

to experience loss in order to grow. However, growth is often a byproduct of loss and grieving. Lean into your spiritual life knowing that your feelings are not unmanageable to God. Deep learning about yourself, God, and life often occurs in difficult times.

10. Release victimhood. Remember loss happens to us all. Your current loss is not directed at you, rather, it is part of the human journey you are walking through. Despite the difficulty, you can find a way through and will find meaning in life again.

As grief emerges in your personal story, remember that our shared human experience is tied together by grief. As you navigate your own loss and grief, watch for the spaces where you can connect with others in their loss and grief. You aren't alone in grief even when it feels like you are. Connect with us for support along your journey for counseling and coaching at [Journeybravely.com](http://Journeybravely.com).

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# For the Men and More



By KAY LEAMAN, HEALTH ARCHITECT, CERTIFIED NUTRITION ADVISOR, HEALTHYDAY HEALTHYLIFE

This article covers the basics regarding function, statistics and contributors related to prostate cancer, the second-leading

cause of cancer death in men after lung cancer and the leading cause in non-smokers. Only 10% of men have a close relative diagnosed with prostate cancer, which points to the main causes of cancer being high amounts of oxidative stress, obesity, inflammation and unhealthy lifestyle habits. This information is also beneficial for cancer prevention in general.

The prostate's main function is associated with procreation. It also helps keep urine inside the bladder. The most common condition men experience as they age is benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH), or an enlarged prostate. Signs of BPH include a slower or weaker urine stream,



urinating more often or waking at night to urinate, feeling like the bladder isn't empty, or experiencing an intermittent stream. BPH and prostatitis (inflammation caused by an infection)

are not thought to increase the risk of prostate cancer, but they can increase PSA test levels by a small amount.

Men 45 and older should consider getting a yearly PSA (prostate-specific antigen) test. In addition to this test, it is recommended that men also evaluate their health habits. This doesn't mean you have to give up what you love, but it does mean your choices affect your health and the quality of life you will have as you age.

There are 10 stages of cancer development. DNA damage, inflammation, cellular disruption and angiogenesis are a few of these stages. I have an extensive article on the subject of cancer (prostate as well as other types) written by a doctor who has researched and treated those with cancer. It includes his personal story of treating his dad, who was diagnosed with stage 4 prostate cancer that had metastasized. His protocol gave his dad another 10 years of a life well lived versus the eight months his doctor predicted. You can request this article by email (please put CANCER in the subject line).


### Healthy lifestyle choices include:

- A healthy, balanced diet (Mediterranean diet)
- Staying hydrated
- Regular exercise, including pelvic floor exercises
- Managing stress
- Yearly exams and PSA testing
- Limiting alcohol and not smoking
- Being aware of your body and noting any changes
- Taking high-quality, broad-spectrum, bioavailable nutritional supplements

Knowing what to take for better health is very important. For instance, take vitamin E as an example. If you are taking the wrong form, it can actually increase the risk of cancer, diabetes and heart disease. Many products have well-crafted ads and attractive pricing but fall short when it comes to the science of how they affect the body. I found a trusted website about prostate health that warned against vitamin E. This is due to a lack of understanding regarding the different forms of this nutrient. This can become a rabbit hole that frustrates many of us—who do we believe? It's about finding a source we can trust, and even that can be daunting.

Our quality of life is in our hands. This doesn't mean we won't ever experience a diagnosis or other setbacks. However, if we treat our bodies well, they will be equipped to fight and repair the way God intended.


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# Hormone Therapy for Stronger Bones



DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

You're taking care of all of it — work, home, children or grandchildren, spouses, parents, your boss/clients/students/patients. Mother's Day is for the flowers, but every day you show up — lifting groceries, carrying kids, steadying loved ones — you're asking a lot from your bones. This Women's Health Week (May 10-16), let's celebrate all women (the nurturers, the bosses, and everyone in between) by protecting those quiet workhorses. At The Hormone

Restoration Center, we use bi-identical pellets as our method of hormone therapy — here's how pellets can help keep your bones strong.

## Why Pellets – And Why Hormones – Matter

Estrogen slows the breakdown of old bone and supports new bone formation. When estrogen drops around perimenopause and menopause, bone loss can speed up, making fractures more likely over time. Testosterone and progesterone help too, by supporting muscle and balance so you're less likely to fall. Pellet therapy delivers bio-identical hormones under the skin in a slow, steady stream — avoiding daily highs and lows — and gives consistent support that helps preserve bone.

## How Pellet Therapy Helps Bones

By keeping hormone levels steady, pellets can slow or even reverse bone loss for many women, especially when started near the time of menopause. Over time, the benefits of pellet therapy reveal themselves as improved bone density and, importantly, a lower risk of fractures. Pellets often also ease hot flashes and improve sleep and energy — benefits that help with strength and fall prevention.

## What The Pellet Process Looks Like

**Consultation:** We review your health, family fracture history, lifestyle, and order baseline labs.

**Placement:** A brief in-office procedure places small, sterile

pellets under the skin. Minimal downtime and a small dressing afterward.

**Steady delivery:** Pellets release hormones continuously for about 3–6 months, depending on dose and metabolism. No daily dosing to remember.

**Follow-up:** We monitor symptoms and labs, adjust dosing as needed.

## What To Expect

You won't "feel" bones strengthening day-to-day, but many patients notice fewer menopausal symptoms, better sleep, and steadier energy within weeks.

Pellets are one tool in a prac-

tical plan: individualized HRT when appropriate, adequate calcium and vitamin D, resistance and balance exercise, fall-proofing your home, and regular bone checks.

You carry everyone else — let's help your skeleton keep up. If bone health is on your mind, call The Hormone Restoration Center. We'll review your history, run the right tests, and build a personalized pellet plan so you can keep lifting, hugging, and showing up for the people who matter most. Call (850) 837-1271 to schedule a consultation.

## MENOPAUSE

*continued from page 4*

progesterone when clinically appropriate, can help restore more consistent, restful sleep. Quality sleep is a cornerstone of hormonal and cognitive health.

## Support Your Nervous System

This transition affects both

hormones and the brain. Increased anxiety, irritability, and emotional variability reflect real neurological shifts. Daily regulation, through movement, time outdoors, breathwork, or meaningful connection, supports resilience and emotional stability.

These are not luxuries. They are essential tools for navigating this phase well.

Menopause is not the end of

your vitality. It is a significant physiological transition that deserves attention and support, not dismissal. These changes are not random. They are signals.

When you understand what your body is doing and respond accordingly, you move through this phase with greater stability, clarity, and long-term health in mind.



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

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Community

# Scenic Walton Strengthens Leadership

Scenic Walton has appointed Shannon Richmond, Vice President and Director of Membership Services for the Panama City Beach Chamber of Commerce, to its Board of Directors. The organization also announces the election of Bruce Naylor as Vice President and Matt Milliron as Treasurer.



Richmond brings nearly a decade of experience connecting businesses and fostering community engagement through her work with one of the most active chambers in the region. A longtime Panama City Beach resident, her passion for supporting local communities is both professional and deeply personal. Known for her energy, relationship-driven approach, and commitment to championing local businesses, Richmond adds a valuable regional perspective to Scenic Walton's mission. "Joining Scenic Walton is an incredible opportunity to be part of something that truly shapes the future of our

communities," said Richmond. "This region is so special, and I'm passionate about preserving what makes it unique while supporting thoughtful, responsible growth. I'm excited to work alongside this dedicated group to continue making a positive impact."

In addition to welcoming Richmond, Scenic Walton has elected Bruce Naylor as Vice President. A long-time DeFuniak Springs resident and owner and broker of Naylor Realty & Associates, Naylor brings more than three decades of experience in real estate, marketing, and community leadership throughout Walton County. His deep understanding of the

region, combined with his longstanding commitment to preserving its character, makes him a natural fit for this leadership role.

Also elected to a leadership position, Matt Milliron will serve as Treasurer. An ISA Certified Arborist and Branch Manager for SavATree in Santa Rosa Beach, Milliron brings a strong background in environmental stewardship, urban forestry, and sustainable land management. His experience spans wildfire management with the Florida Forest Service, ecosystem restoration, and municipal arboriculture, providing Scenic Walton with valuable expertise in preserving and enhancing natural landscapes.

"As Walton County continues to grow, it is more important than ever to have strong, thoughtful leadership guiding our efforts," said Leigh Moore, Executive Director of Scenic Walton. "Shannon, Bruce, and Matt each bring a unique per-

spective and a deep commitment to this community."

These leadership additions reflect Scenic Walton's ongoing commitment to collaboration, regional engagement, and proactive planning. By bringing together expertise in business development, real estate, and environmental stewardship, the organization is well-positioned to continue advancing initiatives that support both economic vitality and the preservation of Walton County's distinctive character.

Additional board members include (EC) President Anthony Valley, principal - McWhorter Vallee Design; (EC) Secretary Lori Leath Smith, publisher/executive editor - Life Media Group; Cecilia Canut, marketing specialist - the Walton County Tourism Department; Blon Carter, field operations manager - The St. Joe Company; Christy Burke, promotional advertising consultant - Brown & Bigelow/JSA Promos; Hunt-

er Harman, broker associate - Watersound Real Estate; Megan Harrison, president/CEO - Walton Area Chamber of Commerce; Fletcher Isacks, owner - Isacks Imagery; Patricia Jenkins, vice president of training and quality - Alys Beach; (EC) Stephen Schoen, acting director - Walton County Planning Department; John Stevenson, vice president and financial advisor - Regions Investment Solutions; (EC) Ashley Vannoy, Walton community member; and Stacey Wood, executive director - Sandestin Beach Hotel, Ltd. Advisors to the board include Bradford Davis, licensed landscape architect - BRDLA Inc.; Steve Hall, land use attorney and mediator - Steven K. Hall, P.A.; Eric Rosnick, operations maintenance engineer - Florida Department of Transportation; and Bobby Parker, owner - Parker Gene Creative. For more information about Scenic Walton and its initiatives, visit [www.scenicwalton.org](http://www.scenicwalton.org).

# WFLDAR Honors Student Essayists and Good Citizens

Founded in 2014, the West Florida Chapter of the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution (WFLDAR, NSDAR) recently celebrated local students during its annual American History Essay Contest and Good Citizens Awards Ceremony.

WFLDAR Regent Robbie

Carroll welcomed special guests, students, teachers, principals and parents to the event, which recognizes academic excellence and civic character.

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. Students were asked to imagine returning to 1776 to meet a signer of the Declaration of Independence and reflect on how that individual's service contributed to the nation's independence.

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

First place was awarded to

*Continued on next page*



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# Sean of the South: Enough



BY SEAN DIETRICH

What if I told you that you are enough?

Moreover, what if you woke up this morning and, for the first time ever, you actually felt like enough. What if you loved yourself? And I mean really loved yourself.

Do you love yourself? Let's find out.

Are you a perfectionist? No? Yes? Have you ever asked WHY you're a perfectionist? Have you ever wondered why you strive to be flawless so that nobody will find a reason to judge you?

Or are you a people pleaser? Ever wonder why? How did you become a doormat? Why do you fall all over yourself to ensure everyone will like you? Would showing them the real you be that bad?

Or maybe you're critical. Maybe you nitpick those you love. Heck, maybe you nitpick yourself. Maybe you look in the mirror and think, "I'm so fat and ugly."

Perhaps you see photos of yourself and react with true disgust, thinking, "I'm so old and wrinkled. Look at all this flab underneath my neck, jiggling like Jello salad."

Maybe you don't like your nose. Or your teeth. Or the



shape of your bootymus maximus.

Then again, maybe you dislike yourself in much simpler ways. Maybe you're embarrassed about your bank account. "Omigod. Is this ALL you have in savings? What a loser."

Maybe you don't like where you are in your career. What a freaking disappointment you are. You should've been MUCH further along in your field by now. Instead, you're just a supporting actor in someone else's made-for-TV drama.

Maybe you don't feel smart enough. Maybe you are socially anxious. Maybe you think you're too much of an introvert. You're a classic procrastinator. You feel invisible. You hate your hair. You wish you were prettier. Skinnier. Funnier. Happier.

Either way, your inner critic is always screaming, "You're not enough!" You've tried to shut up this blowhard for years. But it doesn't work. The inner critic just keeps talking smack.

"You're simply not enough," the critic keeps saying.

This is shame you feel. You might not be aware that it's shame, but it is. You don't feel shame because of something you've done. You feel shame over who you are.

You dislike the real you. And thus, you've formed a persona to hide the real you. And hopefully, everyone will like this persona because, God knows, you work really hard building it. You built this persona because the real you is not worthy. The real you just isn't enough.

But...

What if I told you that you don't have to feel this way anymore? What if I told you that you ARE enough? What if I said that you are so insanely beautiful as a human being, just the way you are in this moment.

Moreover, what if I am not prodigiously and majestically full of bovine ordure?

There is a way to never feel ashamed again. You will not find the answer through rituals and creeds, nor through the oppression of pious dogmas. You will not find answers in internet videos or poorly written articles on the internet—such as the one you are currently reading.

I have been ashamed of myself for my entire life. Because

of childhood trauma, I became the essence of shame itself. But if I have learned one truth in my short life—if you get nothing out of what I've written you today—I hope you understand one thing, because the entirety of reality rests upon it:

The only way to love yourself is to first love your neighbor. And the only way to love your neighbor is to love the One who made them.

## WFLDAR

*continued from previous page*

his spectacles!" His signature, she explained, symbolized patriotism, courage and unity, inspiring the phrase still used today.

Second place was awarded to Freeport Middle School student Sheilia Boulldridge.

The WFLDAR Good Citizen Program honors outstanding senior high school students who demonstrate dependability, service, leadership and patriotism in their homes, schools and communities. Each recipient receives a Good Citizen pin featuring 13 stars for the original colonies, a

blue enamel band representing the DAR and symbols of honor and understanding.

This year's focus question, "Our American Heritage and Our Responsibility for Preserving It," asked students to reflect on how the characteristics of a good citizen can strengthen the democracy secured by the Patriots of the American Revolution.

The 2026 Good Citizen Award recognized first-place winner Anaya Patel of Seacoast Collegiate High School, with runners-up Elijah Brooks Ordiz of Destin High School and Austin Hays Hostetler of South Walton High School.

Musing



BY RICK MOORE

At the time of his resignation, the outgoing manager gave the new manager a unique gift. He handed the new manager three envelopes. Each envelope

had something written on it, and each contained something inside to help in the event of a crisis. The first envelope had the words “Open During Any Crisis Your First Six Months.” The next envelope had the words “Open During Any Crisis After Your First Year.” The third envelope had the words “Open During Any Crisis After Your Second Year.” The new manager thanked him and stuck the three envelopes in his desk drawer. During the new manager’s

first six months, a major crisis arose. He figured this would be a good time to see what is in the first envelope. He opened it up and read these words: “Blame Your Predecessor In Order To Get Out of Your Current Mess.” He did it, and it worked. Shortly after the new manager’s first year, another major crisis arose. He opened up the second envelope and read these words: “Blame The Lack Of Budget And Human Resources For Your Current Mess.” He did

# Three Envelopes

it, and it worked. The following year he experienced his worst crisis yet. He opened the third envelope and read these words: “Here Are Three Envelopes For You To Give To The Next Manager Who Will Take Your Place.” He did it, and he was out of work. No matter if you are the new person coming in or the old person going out, there are always challenges.

Consider the following scenario that often plays out in the workforce: After you leave a position, people who care for you may say kind things such as “We like the new guy, but he doesn’t (FILL IN THE BLANK) as good as you did.” They may be innocent in their comments, and you may think you are innocent if you fail to show your support for the new person, but such interactions can prove costly for the person who took your place. The new employee, the new doctor, the new teacher, the new coach, the new pastor, etc., will usually have gifts and talents allowing them to do certain things better than their predecessor. But almost always, there will be things the “old person” did better than the “new person.” When those topics come up, we can choose to extinguish the fire or add fuel to it.

Young people moving their way up the ladder of success often complain they are not given opportunities. Older people who secure the best jobs with the best pay often say young people do not want to listen to experience. Compared to generations before us, the most successful type of mentorship has shifted from rigid apprenticeship, hierarchy, and lifelong paternalistic guidance to a model defined by flexibility, a willingness to accept new technology, and reverse mentoring. Reverse mentoring is where junior or younger employees mentor senior leaders, reversing the traditional hier-

archical, top-down mentoring model. It fosters cross-generational knowledge sharing, helps leaders understand new technologies and perspectives, and promotes inclusion. In other words, sometimes I have to ask a teenager how to work certain features on my iPhone. True mentoring is a two-way street. You get out of it what you put into it. The choice is yours. You can change with the times, or you can go buy three envelopes.

*Rick Moore is Communication Pastor with Destiny Worship Center in Miramar Beach*

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# Cultural Arts Alliance Announces Renee Broxson as 2026 ArtsQuest Fine Arts Festival Featured Artist

The Cultural Arts Alliance (CAA) of Walton County proudly announces Renee Broxson as the Featured Artist for the 38th Annual ArtsQuest Fine Arts Festival. Her custom artwork—Crowned in Courage—will be showcased on all ArtsQuest marketing materials. The festival, a beloved May tradition, will take place May 2 & 3, 2026, at Grand Boulevard Town Center's North Park. A second work—Big Ears, Clear Vision—will be the cover image for this spring's #ArtMatters publication available at all official Art Month events.



125 artists from across the U.S., exhibiting in a variety of mediums, including ceramics, sculpture, glass, oils, acrylics, mixed media, photography, metal and wood, jewelry, and works on paper. Artists will compete for awards and cash prizes totaling \$10,000, judged by a panel of distinguished experts.

Additionally, original work by over 40 CAA member artists will be featured in a collaborative tent, with one winning a Member Best In Show Award.

Attendees will enjoy continuous live music and entertainment, a Walton County student

exhibit, a special showcase from the CAA's Prison Art program, an interactive public art installation, a silent auction, live visual art demonstrations, and "Imagination: Where Kids Rule." A full cash bar will be open throughout the weekend in Grand Park, and food options will be available throughout Grand Boulevard's Town Center.

ArtsQuest is the kick-off event for Art Month Walton County, a collaboration of visual, performing and literary arts events presented in diverse formats and venues throughout Walton County in May. Art Month Wal-

ton also includes Digital Graffiti at Alys Beach, the Longleaf Writers Conference, an Open Mic Night with Emerald Coast Storytellers, JAWS in concert with Sinfonia, Mystic Pizza - a production from Emerald Coast Theatre Company, Gallery events, concerts, and more.

Presented by Grand Boulevard Town Center, with additional support from Visit South Walton, Hwy331.com, Emerald Coast Magazine, Capital City Bank, and Ohana Day School. Volunteers are needed through-

*Continued on next page*

Renee Broxson began painting part-time in 2014, guided by a belief that growth comes through curiosity, persistence, and hard work. A lifelong learner, she took up tennis later in life and, through dedication and determination, earned an athletic scholarship to the University of West Florida at age 32 — an experience that continues to shape her disciplined approach to both life and art.

Her artistic practice is rooted in continual skill-building and the pursuit of improvement. Broxson creates whimsical, abstracted figures and animals inspired by individuality and personal expression. She is drawn to the visual language of style — bold clothing, distinctive shoes, expressive accessories, and meaningful tattoos — the details people choose to show the world that quietly tells their stories.

Through playful imagery and simplified forms, her work celebrates character, humor, and the beauty of uniqueness. A portion

of her sales supports local charities benefiting people and animals, reflecting her commitment to connection, community, and giving back through art.

"Being chosen as the featured artist is an incredible honor," said Broxson. "It means I need to focus deeply on my art — someone believes in me, and I will believe in myself. It's a push to work hard, develop my skills, and become the best artist I can be. I'm truly over the moon excited for this opportunity!"

"Renee's work captures joy, curiosity, and the little details that make each of us unique. Her whimsical figures and playful approach to storytelling reflect the creative spirit we celebrate at ArtsQuest," said CAA Vice-President Marketing & Strategy Melissa Wheeler. "We are thrilled to showcase Renee as our Featured Artist for 2026 and to share her incredible talent with our community and visitors."

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Arts & Music

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Music education has long been considered an enriching extracurricular activity, but growing evidence shows that it can play a powerful role in improving student learning and academic performance. Far from being just a creative outlet, music lessons engage multiple areas of the brain, strengthen cognitive skills, and foster habits that directly translate into better grades in school.

One of the key ways music lessons enhance learning is through improved brain function. When students learn to read music, they are simulta-

neously decoding symbols, recognizing patterns, and coordinating physical movement. This activates both the left and right hemispheres of the brain, strengthening neural connections. Studies have shown that students who participate in music education often demonstrate better memory, attention, and problem-solving skills. These cognitive benefits can carry over into subjects like math, science, and reading comprehension.

In addition to cognitive development, music lessons promote discipline and time management. Learning an in-

strument requires consistent practice, goal-setting, and perseverance. Students quickly learn that improvement comes from effort over time, a mindset that can positively influence their approach to homework and studying. As they experience progress in music, they build confidence, which can reduce anxiety and improve performance in academic settings.

Music education also enhances language and literacy skills such as in voice lessons. Rhythm and melody help students recognize patterns in speech and improve phonologi-

cal awareness, which is essential for reading. Singing or playing music can strengthen vocabulary and comprehension, particularly in younger learners. This connection between music and language development often leads to stronger reading abilities and overall academic success.

When it comes to choosing the best instruments for students, the ideal option often depends on age, interest, and learning style. However, some instruments are particularly effective for beginners and offer strong educational benefits.

The piano is widely considered one of the best instruments for improving academic skills. It provides a clear visual layout of notes, making it easier for students to understand musical structure. Playing the piano also requires coordination between both hands, which enhances motor skills and brain development. Because it allows students to play both melody and harmony simultaneously, it offers a comprehensive introduction to music theory.

String instruments such as the guitar or ukulele are also excellent choices. These instruments develop fine motor skills and require careful listening, which strengthens auditory processing. Students who learn string instruments often show

improvements in concentration and patience, as mastering pitch and tone takes time and precision.

Wind instruments like the flute or clarinet are particularly beneficial for developing breath control and focus. These instruments encourage proper posture and lung capacity while also requiring attention to timing and rhythm. They can be a great option for students interested in joining school bands, which adds a social and collaborative dimension to learning.

Percussion instruments, such as drums, are ideal for students who thrive on rhythm and physical activity. They help improve timing, coordination, and pattern recognition. While they may seem less melodic, percussion instruments play a crucial role in understanding musical structure and teamwork.

Ultimately, music lessons provide far more than artistic skills. They nurture cognitive development, discipline, and emotional growth, all of which contribute to improved academic performance. By choosing an instrument that aligns with a student's interests and strengths, parents and educators can help unlock both musical potential and scholastic success.

*Studio 237 Music Lessons in Santa Rosa Beach, FL has teachers ready to help you improve your learning skills. Call or text us at 850.231.3199 or visit our website at www.Studio237Music.com.*

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## ARTSQUEST

*continued from previous page*

out ArtsQuest weekend to work on all aspects of the festival. Those willing to help can sign up at CulturalArtsAlliance.com/volunteer. Sponsorships are still available, and interested businesses can contact Gabby@culturalartsalliance.com for more information.

ArtsQuest is a rain or shine event. The festival is open to the public, and a \$5 - \$10 admission donation per person is requested to support the Arts. Visit CulturalArtsAlliance.com for more information about ArtsQuest as well as other Art Month events, which are supported in part by Visit South Walton.

# ECTC's 1980's Iconic "Mystic Pizza" Debuts April 30

Friendship, love, and small-town dreams take center stage as Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC) closes its 13th season with Mystic Pizza. This iconic coming-of-age story runs April 30 through May 17, with performances Thursday through Saturday at 7 p.m. and matinees on Wednesdays and Sundays at 2 p.m., at ECTC's theater in Grand Boulevard at Miramar Beach.

Based on the beloved classic film, Mystic Pizza follows three young women navigating life, love, and the uncertainty of what comes next, all while working less than glamorous jobs at

a local pizza shop in a coastal town. As they chase their dreams and discover who they are, their bond with one another is tested and strengthened in ways that are both heartfelt and relatable.

With humor, nostalgia, and a vibrant soundtrack of 1980s and 1990s hits like "Girls Just Want to Have Fun," "Addicted to Love," and "Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now," Mystic Pizza captures the magic of growing up and finding your place in the world.

"Mystic Pizza is a story about friendship, growing up, and the moments you look back on years later and realize changed everything," said Nathanael Fish-



er, Producing Artistic Director. "It's nostalgic, heartfelt, and full of music that audiences will instantly connect with."

The leading trio features

Tennessee natives Shea Grande as Josephina "Jo/Jojo" Barboza and Presley Ann Calonge as Daisy Araujo, alongside Olivia Evans as Katherine "Kat" Araujo, coming to the ECTC stage from Lawrence, Kansas.

Returning to the ECTC stage are several familiar faces, including Darla Briganti as Leona Silva, previously seen as Miss Hanigan in Annie and Genie Klein in Beautiful: The Carole King Musical. She is joined by ensemble members Teresa Lombardi, last seen as Brooke Wyndham in Legally Blonde; Mikayla House Pilstrom, who portrayed Cynthia Weil in Beautiful; and Mar-

tha Wingfield, who appeared as Lily St. Regis in Annie.

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

To purchase tickets, make a tax-deductible donation, join as a VIP or sponsor, or learn more about Emerald Coast Theatre Company, call (850) 684-0323 or visit [emeraldcoasttheatre.org](http://emeraldcoasttheatre.org). Engage with ECTC on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. 560 Grand Boulevard, Suite 200, Miramar Beach.

# Local Teacher Celebrates 10K+ Student Artworks

Freeport Middle School art instructor, Joy Cawiezell, deserves recognition for her commitment to art education and her dedication to showcasing her students' efforts in the art room. Cawiezell uses Artsonia.com — the world's largest collection of online student art portfolios — for displaying more than 10,000 pieces of student art throughout her time at Freeport Middle School, creating lifelong portfolios for budding local artists and an extensive online gallery for the school. "Meeting the 10,000 milestone in my fourth year at Freeport Middle School feels like a huge accomplishment," Cawiezell said.



Cawiezell has been teaching art for more than 14 years. Her students fuel her passion for art education. "I'm inspired by the wonder and creativity my students share with me through each project we tackle. I love to see them realize that they can do amazing and beautiful things," Cawiezell shared.

Cawiezell and Freeport Middle School have been maintaining digital student portfolios for three years. In addition to accumulating over 10,000 pieces of art on Artsonia, Cawiezell and Freeport Middle School have connected over 1,000 friends and family members to student galleries. Cawiezell's efforts have created a more arts-centric community, as students' works of art are now visible to audiences worldwide. "I started using Artsonia almost 12 years ago at my first school and have brought it with me to every art position I've held since," Cawiezell said. "My students don't just photograph their work. They archive it, they write about it, they share it with others, and

they often go back through it to look at their progress over the years."

Cawiezell is one of thousands of teachers worldwide who use Artsonia to create online student art galleries and portfolios. Parents and relatives can view the art online, leave comments, and order keepsakes featuring the artwork. As part of its mission, Artsonia donates 20 percent of merchandise revenue directly back to local classrooms and has given back more than \$17 million to local classrooms since 2000. "Our mission at Artsonia is to bring communities together to celebrate children's artistic expressions," said Jim Meyers, CEO and co-founder

of the company. "Teachers like Joy — who are passionate about the process of creating, recognizing, and cherishing student art move that mission forward."

Artsonia is the leading online platform for student art portfolios, featuring more than 125 million works of art from students in over 100 countries. The platform helps teachers showcase student art digitally, organize lessons, and fundraise for their classrooms. Since 2000, Artsonia has donated more than \$17 million to school art programs through its 20% giveback program.

To learn more, visit [artsonia.com](http://artsonia.com).

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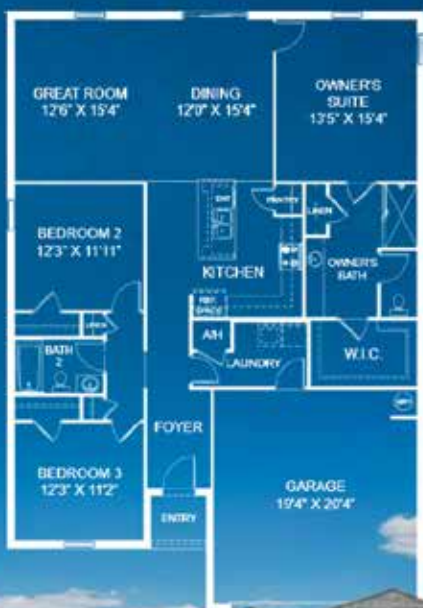
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