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# FREEPORT Life

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## A Revolutionary Year: Heritage Museum Brings America 250 to Life

As the United States approaches its 250th birthday, communities across the country are beginning to reflect on the people, ideals and sacrifices that shaped the nation. Here in our piece of paradise, that reflection is taking on a uniquely local flavor — one rooted in family, patriotism, storytelling and community connection.

While major cities may host massive fireworks displays and national ceremonies, Northwest Florida's America 250 celebrations are becoming something far more personal: an invitation for neighbors, families and children to rediscover history together.

One of the strongest examples of that effort is unfolding just east of Walton County at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida in Valparaiso, where a yearlong "Celebrate America 250!" series is bringing Revolutionary-era history to life through exhibits, lectures, reenactments, educational programs and fam-



ily-friendly events throughout 2026.

For residents of Freeport and Walton County, the series offers a nearby opportunity to participate in the nation's semiquincentennial celebration even as local America 250 planning efforts continue. This year's Heritage Museum's programming goes far beyond traditional exhibits. Organizers are creating immersive experiences designed to make history feel tangible and relevant to modern audiences—ones like the following:

### History Lesson on Historic Date Thrills Audience

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

On April 18, 2026, retired Colonel Karl Eschmann, shared a history lesson surrounding two famous battles influencing the decision to formally revolt from Great

**AMERICA 250**  
*continued on page 2*



## Paws and Pages:

Dog-Harmony Brings Animal-Assisted Children's Literacy Program to Freeport

This summer, children across Okaloosa and Walton counties have a new way to build reading confidence — with the help of some four-legged friends. Dog-Harmony's animal-assisted literacy program, Paws and Pages, is now offering monthly reading sessions at four public libraries, including the Freeport Public Library. Additional participating locations include libraries in Niceville, Fort Walton Beach and

**PAWS & PAGES**  
*continued on page 2*

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Community

PAWS & PAGES

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Crestview.

The program pairs children with registered therapy dog teams trained through READING Paws, an affiliate of R.E.A.D.® (Reading Education Assistance Dogs®), the nation's first comprehensive animal-assisted literacy program. Sessions are open to children of all reading levels and are designed to create a calm, encouraging environment where young readers can thrive.

"Paws and Pages is about more than just books — it's about the connection between the child and the dog that opens the door to a lifelong love of reading," said Nancy Brown, founder of Dog-Harmony. "We see children who were once hesitant to read aloud suddenly blossom when they have a dog by their side."

Research shows four key elements help encourage children to read: a sense of self-efficacy, motivation, viewing reading as a social activity and having a calm environment. Therapy dogs naturally help create that atmosphere. Their nonjudgmental presence can reduce stress and anxiety while encouraging children to read aloud with greater confidence and joy.

One Okaloosa County teacher shared that her student's participation in Dog-Harmony's READING Paws program improved both his confidence and reading abilities. "His state testing score went up a level, and I believe reading with a dog helped him achieve this goal!" she said. "The help they gave him in building a good reading foundation and raising his reading confidence will be with him throughout his education!"

Families are invited to register for individual reading time



slots directly through the participating libraries. Current schedules include:

Freeport Public Library: Every first and third Wednesday afternoon

Niceville Public Library: Every first Saturday morning

Crestview Public Library: Every second Saturday morning

Fort Walton Beach Library: Every third Saturday morning

Dog-Harmony also plans to introduce Paws and Pages programs at Walton-DeFuniak

Library and Coastal Branch Library by the fall.

Founded in 2015 by certified professional dog trainer Nancy Brown, CPDT-KA, Dog-Harmony is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to strengthening the bond between dogs and humans through education and community outreach. The organization's mission is simple: helping dogs rescue people. Its programs include therapy dog team support services, youth education and

well-being initiatives, Keeping Dogs in Homes and pet re-education counseling. These efforts are made possible through grants, donations and dedicated volunteers.

READING Paws, also a nonprofit 501(c)(3), is an affiliate of R.E.A.D.® (Reading Education Assistance Dogs®), a program launched in 1999 by Intermountain Therapy Animals® in Salt Lake City, Utah. Today, READING Paws teams serve schools, libraries and community programs across Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Nevada and Tennessee. All therapy animal-handler teams undergo national criminal background checks and meet strict health, safety and temperament standards.

For more information about Dog-Harmony and participating libraries, visit Dog-Harmony or READING Paws Program Information.

AMERICA 250

continued from page 1

Britain and form a new nation. This formal document was the Declaration of Independence.

We know and remember so little of these battles, but hear the words of Longfellow's famous poem echoing in our heads:

"Listen, my children, and you

shall hear

Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,

On the eighteenth of April in Seventy-Five,

Hardly a man is now alive,

Who remembers that famous day and year."

We also remember the description of the signal lanterns in the Old North Church ("one if by land and two if by sea") and the cry of "The British are Coming!" although the poem used more poetic language as this cry alerted farmers to prepare to fight. There was no trained, standing colonial army as this was only the beginning of a war that would lead to our victory and independence as a new nation, the United States of America. According to Karl, after that battle, the patriots con-

sidered themselves Americans.

So, imagine you are stationed on active duty in the late 20th century at Hanscom Air Force Base in Massachusetts, a base bordering the towns of Bedford, Lincoln, Concord and Lexington. The towns featured prominently in the first battle of the American Revolution. Would you be as intrigued as Karl was, to learn more about this crucial period in our nation's beginning?

That's what happened for Karl and Charlotte Eschmann. Karl devoted time to research

Continued on next page

Advertisement for Gulf Coast Jam festival. Features text: "GULF COAST JAM", "WHO ARE YOU MOST EXCITED TO SEE?", "4 DAYS. 24 ARTISTS. 1 BEACH.", "GET YOUR TICKETS AT www.GULFCOASTJAM.com", and a list of artists including Post Malone, Riley Green, Chris Stapleton, and Keith Urban, with dates from May 28 to May 31, 2026.

Advertisement for North Bay Mercantile. Features text: "NB NORTH BAY MERCANTILE gift & clothing boutique", "Curated Realtor Closing Gifts, Unique finds, Apparel, Home decor, Jewelry", "16400 Highway 331 South Freeport, FL 32439", and phone number "(850) 880-6491".

**AMERICA 250**

*continued from page 2*

the first two battles of the revolution, the battles of Lexington and Concord. Karl graduated from Texas A&M University in 1971 with a Bachelor's Degree in Aerospace Engineering followed by a Master's Degree from the Air Force Institute of Technology in Logistics Management in 1989. Karl is also a distinguished graduate of the Air Command and Staff College, the Air War College, and the Naval War College.

Karl is considered a subject matter expert on these two battles and shared this knowledge free of charge for the public at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida on Saturday, April 18, 2026—250 years after the historic event itself. Truly, a history lesson to be celebrated! Karl is also a member of the museum's 250th committee of "Celebrate America 250! American Revolution" that established the new exhibit to honor the U.S. celebration of 250 years.

One of the history panels, "First Battles of the American Revolution," documents these



two battles. The entire exhibit of people, places and events leading to the signing of the Declaration of Independence can be viewed this entire year at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, 115 Westview Ave, Valparaiso. Museum hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday. Special events for this celebration can be found periodically by visiting [heritage-museum.org](http://heritage-museum.org).

Save the date of July 4 to attend an official community ribbon-cutting at 1 p.m. with a reenactment "shot fired around the world" by Travis Souther in colonial uniform with a flintlock

fowling piece, a smoothbore .62 caliber used for self-defense and hunting purposes. No fear, it is not rifled and no live ammunition will be used. Only black powder put down the barrel and all safety standards and regulations for historic black powder weapons will be followed. Travis will then share a presentation titled "Life, Liberty, and Hard Rations."

Karl will be on-site in the exhibit hall to answer questions about the two famous battles after Travis presents his program. At noon, Tom McKnight will present a special "History Sandwiched In" lecture to explain

"Colonial Paper Currency" using his prestigious donation of that currency beautifully mounted on the exhibit wall next to the famous Trumbell painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

What an exciting opportunity during the day on July 4 to hear about unique aspects of a day we celebrate this year as the 250th anniversary of the birth of our nation. And, at night, throughout the county, fireworks will complete the evening with displays of red, white and blue lighting up the skies.

A special day, a special night for a special year!

Throughout the year, the museum's "History Sandwiched-In" lecture series is exploring pivotal Revolutionary War moments and founding-era stories, including the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, George Washington's leadership and the role women played during the Revolution.

**Additional programming includes:**

- an "America in 1776" student poster contest

- a "Spirit of '76" Book Club
- a theatrical "Night at the Museum" event in October
- and "Yule of Yesteryear: Christmas in the Colonies" during the holiday season

For our growing community, the anniversary also creates an opportunity to reflect on local identity and heritage at a time of rapid change. Once known primarily as a quiet rural crossroads, Freeport is now one of Florida's fastest-growing cities. Yet, many of us remain deeply connected to the values that have long shaped Northwest Florida — faith, family, patriotism, service and community. I believe, that is part of what makes the America 250 milestones resonate so strongly here.

At its heart, America's 250th anniversary is not simply about looking backward. It is about asking what kind of legacy communities hope to leave for the next generation.

*More information about the Heritage Museum's America 250 programming can be found at [heritage-museum.org](http://heritage-museum.org) and Florida's statewide initiative at [america250fl.com](http://america250fl.com).*

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Community

# The Modern Men's Health Conversation



By Dr. Karen DeVore

June is Men's Health Month, and it's time to broaden the conversation around what men's health actually means.

For years, it was almost expected that men would only seek care when something became impossible to ignore such as when symptoms disrupted

daily life or concern from others became unavoidable. That mindset is starting to shift.

More men are thinking about longevity, prevention, recovery, and performance. They're paying attention to sleep, nutrition, strength, and how their bodies function before a crisis happens. And that shift matters.

Because many of the issues men experience daily are common, closely tied to overall health, and often more manageable when addressed early.

I hear consistent themes from men across all stages of life and from the people who care about them.

**“Why don't I feel like myself anymore?”**

This concern rarely comes out directly. More often, it shows up as fatigue, low motivation, irritability, poor recovery, or unexplained weight gain.

While aging plays a role, what I often see is the cumulative effect of chronic stress, poor sleep, under-recovery, inconsistent nutrition, declining muscle mass, and sedentary work.

Modern life doesn't support physiology well. Many men are overstimulated, under-recovered, and running at a high level while quietly depleted. Over time, that catches up but the body is often highly responsive with consistent support.

**“Why am I gaining weight around my stomach even though I'm trying?”**

Abdominal weight gain isn't just cosmetic; it's often a metabolic signal.

As muscle declines and stress stays elevated, the body becomes more efficient at storing fat, especially around the midsection. Blood sugar becomes less stable, energy drops, recovery worsens, and cravings increase.

Many men feel like they're trying, but habits are often more inconsistent than they realize such as skipping meals, under-eating protein, relying on convenience foods, eating late, or cycling between restriction and overeating.

What works better is returning to fundamentals including prioritizing protein, maintaining muscle, walking regularly, strength training, improving sleep, eating consistently, and supporting recovery.

The goal isn't perfection; it's consistency and long-term metabolic resilience.

**“Why am I exhausted but still sleeping poorly?”**

Sleep disruption has become so normalized that many underestimate its impact.

Sleep affects metabolism, re-



covery, mood, cognition, inflammation, and hormone regulation. Yet many men operate in a chronically sleep-deprived state relying on caffeine, late-night stimulation, alcohol, and inconsistent schedules while expecting optimal performance.

Sometimes the issue is sleep apnea. Sometimes it's chronic stress or years of running in “go mode” without real recovery. Improving sleep often changes far more than expected.

**“Why do I feel more anxious, irritable, or mentally checked out?”**

These symptoms are often rooted in physiology as much as psychology.

Brain fog, low motivation, irritability, and anxiety frequently reflect an overloaded system including poor sleep, unstable blood sugar, chronic stress, and inflammation layered onto demanding lives.

Many men are balancing work, family, and responsibility while running on empty. This is where preventive care matters, not because every symptom is serious, but because early understanding can prevent years of unnecessary struggle.

**“Why is this starting to matter more now?”**

At some point, often in the late 30s, 40s, or 50s, health stops feeling theoretical. Energy changes become more noticeable, recovery slows, and small shifts become harder to ignore.

At the same time, many begin noticing changes in others like aging parents, friends facing health issues, or loved ones dealing with diagnoses that once felt distant.

What was once abstract becomes personal. For many men, this isn't about fear. It's about staying capable, present, and

*Continued on page 27*

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## NatureView:

# Maybe the Florida You've Been Looking for Still Exists

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

Lately, a lot of people have been asking themselves the same question: "Where do we actually want to build our life?" Not just buy a house. Not just move somewhere new. But truly create a life that feels calmer, healthier, and more connected.

For many families, professionals, military members, and first-time buyers, that answer is starting to look a lot like NatureView in Freeport.

Because, somewhere along the way, "Florida living" started feeling overwhelming for a lot of people. More traffic. More congestion. More noise. More pressure. And for many buyers, the idea of finding a beautiful new home near the Emerald Coast started to feel out of reach.

NatureView feels different.

Surrounded by preserved natural land and thoughtfully designed with community in



mind, NatureView offers something that feels increasingly rare in today's world — breathing room.

Here, mornings feel quieter. Neighbors gather outside in the evenings. Children ride bikes through the neighborhood. Families spend weekends at the pool, walking the trails, playing pickleball, or simply enjoying

time together without needing to leave the community.

And unlike many developments where amenities are still years away, NatureView's lifestyle is already coming to life today. Residents can already enjoy:

- A resort style swimming pool
- A modern clubhouse and fitness center

- Pickleball and basketball courts
- Walking trails with exercise stations
- Pocket parks throughout the neighborhood
- Beautiful surroundings inspired by nature

But what truly makes NatureView special isn't just the amenities. It's the feeling you get when you arrive. The feeling that maybe life does not have to feel so rushed all the time.

Located in the heart of Freeport, NatureView offers peaceful surroundings while still keeping residents connected to the places that matter most, including South Walton beaches, Highway 331, Eglin Air Force Base, Hurlburt Field, shopping, dining, schools, and growing career opportunities throughout Walton and Okaloosa Counties.

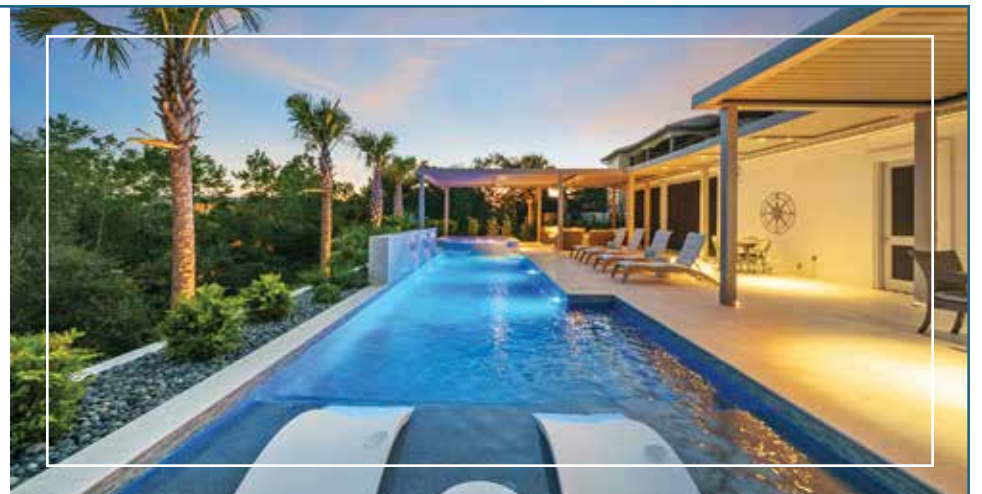
As more people continue discovering Freeport, opportunities like this are becoming harder to find. New construction homes

from DSLD Homes and Holiday Builders are already available, with homes starting in the low \$300,000s — offering buyers the chance to become part of a growing master planned community while it is still in its early chapters.

And maybe that is what makes NatureView resonate with so many people right now. It does not feel like a place trying to be the busiest. It feels like a place where people can finally slow down enough to enjoy what matters. A place where future memories will be made. Where kids will grow up. Where neighbors become friends. Where coming home feels peaceful again.

Tour the homes. Walk the trails. Sit by the pool. Experience NatureView for yourself. Because sometimes, the right place is not something you can explain. It is something you feel.

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



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 Community

# Teaching Teens and Young Adults Financial Literacy Through Real-Life Decision Making



BY WILLIAM BLANKEN

If you are the parent of a teen or young adult, one of the most important responsibilities you face is helping them learn how to make sound financial decisions before the consequences become both expensive and memorable. Ideally, this education begins before they decide that a credit card is simply a convenient way to disappoint their future selves.

While schools, apps, and online resources can provide a useful foundation, financial literacy is rarely developed through

instruction alone. More often, it is shaped through repeated exposure to real-life decisions involving spending, saving, and investing. In practice, the most durable money lessons usually come not from formal lectures, but from having to live with the outcome of a choice.

Financial literacy begins with behavior rather than theory. A young person may be able to define a budget, explain compound interest, or repeat the importance of saving, yet still struggle to weigh competing priorities in real time. That is why practical experience matters. When teens are given the opportunity to make decisions within clear boundaries, concepts such as opportunity cost, delayed gratification, and long-term planning stop sounding like classroom vocabulary and start feeling real.

Everyday spending offers one of the best teaching opportunities. Parents can shift the conversation from whether some-



thing is affordable to whether it is worth prioritizing over other needs or wants. A fixed budget for clothing, school supplies, or discretionary spending can help make this distinction clear. If too much is spent in one category, something else must give. Financial education, in this sense, becomes less about saying no and more about letting reality do the explaining. It is often a more persuasive teacher, and considerably less repetitive.

A broader monthly budget can deepen the lesson further.

When a teen is responsible for managing a set amount across several categories, they begin to practice forecasting, sequencing, and prioritization. If the money disappears too quickly, the resulting inconvenience often teaches more than parental rescue ever could. The key, of course, is consistency. Once the structure is established, parents must resist the understandable urge to quietly cover the shortfall. Otherwise, the lesson becomes less about accountability and more about the astonishing reliability of family bailouts.

Investing concepts can also be introduced early when tied to money that feels meaningful. Funds received from part-time work, milestone celebrations, or graduation gifts can provide a useful opening for discussing saving and long-term growth.

Opening an investment account or Roth IRA, where appropriate, can help a young adult begin to understand ownership, compounding, and market fluctuations. The goal is not to produce a teenage portfolio manager, but to build familiarity with patience, discipline, and perspective.

Ultimately, effective financial education at home is not defined by technical mastery. It is reflected in sound judgment, disciplined habits, and the confidence to make informed decisions. The most lasting lessons are usually learned through experience, reflection, and consistency, preferably before adulthood introduces rent, insurance, taxes, and the unpleasant realization that convenience has a remarkable talent for becoming expensive.

*For more information, call me at Blanken Management, 850-660-1164.*



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# Abide With Us Builds Community, Faith and Purpose for Walton County Teens

BY MICHELLE RUSCHMAN

If your middle schooler or high schooler is looking for a place to find community and serve, Abide with Us ministry at Church at the Bay in Santa Rosa Beach might just be what you're looking for. Founder and veteran Jeremy Vanhooze, along with his wife, Kacy, and their incredible team, have created a youth movement in Walton County that is rooted in John 15 and passionate about Jesus, community, and living truth. It's a unique opportunity for local teens to come together, not only to deepen their faith but also to explore questions openly. "We want to bridge the gap, but it's also meant to be a place where teens who don't typically go to church on a Sunday can come and just see what the body of Christ is like. We've even had teens come from parents who have challenged them to see that God's not real."

Abide with Us isn't looking to replace youth groups, but

provide an additional place for students to meet. Whether they are looking for a place to socialize, grow spiritually, or be mentored to lead, teens are welcome. "We have our meetings on a Thursday, because we don't want to compete with youth groups, which typically meet on a Wednesday. We want our youth to be at church with their parents first, but we did want to offer another outlet for them to be within the body of Christ."

With so many community youths struggling with a sense of belonging, isolation, and a way to get connected, Abide with Us might be the answer. "God really used my time in the military to prepare me for something much greater. Being in the service showed me I was responsible for more than just my own life and what it means to be part of something bigger than myself."

Through Abide With Us, we're leading a generation fac-

**Gatherings**  
Every Thursday | 6-8:30 p.m., Santa Rosa Beach. Fellowship. Worship. Word.

**Stand Firm Saturdays**  
First Saturday of every month | 10 a.m. Guys Bible Study + Ultimate Frisbee. Girls Bible Study + Crafts.

ing so much pressure from the distractions that are coming from a hundred different directions. We see them searching for a sense of belonging, the identity and purpose God has for them, even if they can't explain it. We call these students to a higher standard and challenge them to take responsibility for their actions. We pray that it goes far beyond just inspiring them. We want to help build something inside them that lasts no matter what they face in life."

So, what can families expect on a typical Thursday? "Our worship team starts with mu-

sic, and that can be anywhere between 15 minutes and 45 minutes. We then break into peer-led small groups to discuss the study. Once we return, I will share a message, and then there will be time for fellowship before everyone leaves for the night. We typically go from 6 p.m. to around 8:30 p.m."

In addition to Thursday gatherings, Abide With Us also leads a community outreach initiative called Project Groundwork. Teams of teens and adults visit neighborhoods throughout the area to ask residents about service and prayer needs within the community.

This August, the ministry will host "Rooted Retreat: Power and Witness" from Aug. 6-9, 2026. The retreat is designed to launch students into the 2026-27 school year grounded in Scripture and equipped to return to their schools with a bold, Spirit-filled faith.

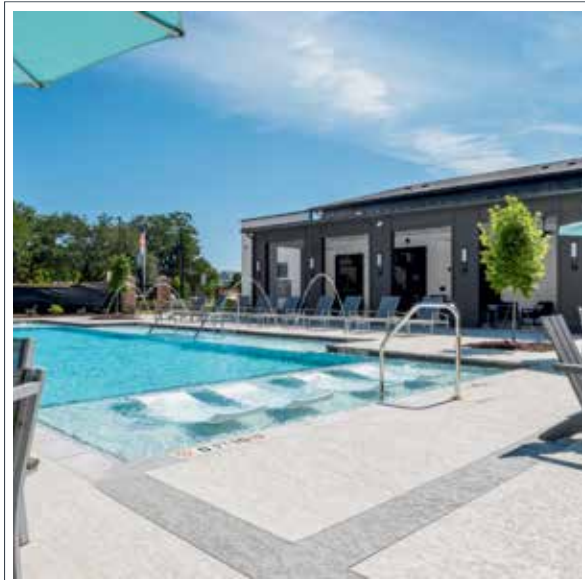
Abide With Us meets Thursdays at 6 p.m. at Church at the

Bay for worship, real conversations and community that feels like family. Organizers describe the atmosphere as laid-back, honest and centered on Jesus. The church is located at 24388 U.S. Highway 331 S. in Santa Rosa Beach.

The ministry also hosts Stand Firm Saturdays — separate Bible studies for guys and girls held the first Saturday of every month. Students walk through a chapter of the Bible together, discuss what it means to live for Jesus and build community through fellowship and shared activities.

If your family or business would like to get involved, visit [www.abidewith.us](http://www.abidewith.us). Jeremy can also be reached by emailing [hello@abidewith.us](mailto:hello@abidewith.us) or calling him directly at 615-809-6065.

*Michelle Ruschman is a local artist, speaker, and writer. She can be reached at [michelleruschman@gmail.com](mailto:michelleruschman@gmail.com) or [michelleruschman.com](http://michelleruschman.com).*



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THE WATERS  
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# Raising Children in Walton County: How Nature, Libraries and the Arts Shape Childhood



BY KERRI PARKER

There is a certain kind of childhood still possible in Walton County.

It lives in sandy shoes lined up outside a library story hour. In children catching minnows beside a coastal dune lake. In afternoons on recreation fields, art classes, nature trails and long days spent outdoors beneath towering pines.

For 10 year old George Glover, it also lives backstage.

“You get to spend time with people you don’t know, and you get to make friends,” George says.

George participates in productions and rehearsals throughout the year through programs connected to the Emerald Coast Theatre Company, whose youth programs now reach children in Santa Rosa Beach, Freeport and DeFuniak Springs. What began as childhood curiosity slowly became confidence.

“When I started, I was nervous because I didn’t know what was going on,” he says. “But over the years I got less and less nervous.”

Theater has taught him something larger than performance.

“You help other people if they don’t know their lines,” he says. “There are no small parts. Everybody gets to have fun and be part of it.”

For children hesitant to try theater, George has simple advice.

“You should come do theater with us,” he says. “You make friends quickly, nobody bullies each other and you make a lot of good friends.”

His words capture something many Walton County families quietly hope for when they enroll children in arts programs, recreation leagues and summer activities.

## Belonging.

Across Walton County, families are discovering that the experiences shaping childhood often become the foundation for creativity, resilience and connection.

As summer begins, local families are signing up for reading programs at the Walton County Library Cooperative, attending arts programs connected to the Cultural Arts Alliance, exploring hands-on learning at the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center and participating in programs through Walton County Parks and Recreation.

The experiences may seem small in the moment, but over time they shape how children understand themselves and the world around them.

## Growing up here teaches a love for the natural world

For Maia Huff, now in her twenties, childhood was shaped by time outdoors.

“We were always outside,” she says. “The beach, the bay, hiking trails, paddle boarding. It is just normal life here.”

She describes an education formed slowly through observation and attention to the natural world.

“You start noticing everything. Birds, tides, storms roll-



ing in, how the water changes through the seasons. It gives you a deep respect for nature.”

There is a sense in her voice that this awareness becomes something larger than habit, a kind of reverence for God’s creation and its quiet order.

“There is something grounding about growing up outdoors,” she says. “It teaches patience, curiosity and gratitude.”

Experiences like these are strengthened by places such as the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center, where students explore ecology, conservation and the living systems that shape Northwest Florida.

## Learning through sports, play and community

Across Walton County, recre-

ation fields, parks and community programs serve as places where children learn perseverance, teamwork and confidence.

Many of these opportunities begin through Walton County Parks and Recreation and continue through school athletics and local programs across the county.

The value of these experiences is not measured in trophies but in character.

Children learn how to show up, encourage others and grow through effort.

Childhood in Walton County is changing alongside growth and development, but many families believe the heart of the community is still found in the experiences that shape children



over time.

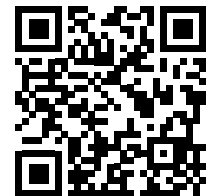
A library card. A first audition. A summer trail walk. A recreation league. A volunteer coach. A community stage.

These moments rarely make headlines.

Yet together, they form the kind of childhood that teaches young people not only how to succeed, but how to care for their neighbors, the natural world and the community they call home.

## Share your Walton County childhood story

HWY 331 invites readers to share stories and memories of raising children in Walton County. Selected submissions may be featured in a future community series celebrating the people, places and experiences shaping the next generation. [hwy331.com/contact](http://hwy331.com/contact)



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# Freeport "Sister Queens" Head to Nationals in Atlanta

Lennox Baker, 9, and Peighton Smith, 6, are currently serving as Miss Freeport queens and will represent Florida at the USA National Miss Nationals in Atlanta this July.



Lennox, who holds the title of Miss Sunshine State, will compete in the Princess division. She is homeschooled, loves dance and volunteers at church. When she grows up, she hopes to become a fashion designer and Miss Universe. Through her platform, "Love Lennox,"

she spreads kindness in creative ways. Each week, she chooses one act from her Kindness Jar and shares her journey online to encourage others to do the same.

Peighton, Miss Sunshine State Junior Princess, is a kindergartener at Freeport Elementary School and will compete in the Junior Princess division. Through her platform, "Peighton's Purpose," she is on a mission to create a chain reaction of kindness by donating

to charities, volunteering in the community and giving out kindness kits. She loves basketball, is excited to try cheerleading and is known for her bright personality.

Together, the girls have formed a special local "sister queen" friendship as they prepare for the national stage. USA National Miss is one of the nation's largest and most prestigious pageant systems, focused on empowering young women through confidence, leadership,

scholarship opportunities, mentorship, community service and positive personal growth.

The girls said they feel honored to represent Freeport on the national stage and are excited for the opportunity. Community members can follow their journey on Instagram at @misslennox baker and @sunshinestaterprincess2026. Those wishing to help support their trip to nationals may also donate via Venmo at @MissSunshineState.

## Leadership Walton Class Leaves Lasting Impact at Westonwood Ranch

There's a new addition at Westonwood Ranch — and it came with a generous dose of teamwork, compassion and community spirit.

The Walton Area Chamber of Commerce Leadership Walton Class of 2025-26 recently completed its annual class service project in support of Westonwood Ranch, building new goat shelters and climbing new goat perches while also raising \$4,125 to help further the nonprofit's mission.

Located in Freeport, Westonwood Ranch serves teens and young adults with autism and related developmental differences through a unique farm-based learning environment. The nonprofit offers a full-time day program, equine therapy, after-school activities and summer camps designed to help participants build confidence, independence and important life skills.

For members of Leadership Walton, the project became more than just a class assignment. It was an opportunity to step into hands-on service while learning firsthand about the impact Westonwood Ranch is making in the lives of local families. "As a class, we are so thankful for the opportunity to make a meaningful community impact while learning more about the incredible work being done at Westonwood Ranch," said Courtney Blackerby, Leadership Walton class president. "Their mission, heart and dedication to serving others is truly inspiring, and it has been an honor to support such an amazing nonprofit that is making a lasting differ-



ence in our community."

The class spent time constructing shelters and play structures for the ranch's goats — an important part of the ranch environment that helps create

engaging, interactive experiences for participants. In addition to the physical improvements, the class presented Westonwood Ranch with a donation check totaling \$4,125.



Each year, Leadership Walton participants select a local nonprofit to support through a collaborative class project. Past projects have included transforming office spaces for A Bed 4 Me and building a study room

for the DeFuniak Springs Public Library.

Since 2000, Leadership Walton has helped develop emerging and established leaders across Northwest Florida, connecting professionals with opportunities to grow their leadership skills while serving our community.

For the Class of 2025-26, the project at Westonwood Ranch reflected exactly what the program hopes to inspire — leadership rooted in service, teamwork and lasting local impact.

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 Community

# Gulfarium C.A.R.E. Center Celebrates Multiple Sea Turtle Releases at Inlet Beach

BY LORI LEATH SMITH

There's just something special about seeing a sea turtle make its way back home to the Gulf. And recently at Inlet Beach Regional Access here in Walton County, locals and visitors gathered for not just one — but multiple unforgettable sea turtle releases hosted by the Gulfarium C.A.R.E. Center.

Earlier this month, seven rehabilitated sea turtles were released back into the Gulf with support from The St. Joe Community Foundation. The event celebrated the recovery journeys of rescued turtles that



had overcome injuries or health challenges under the care of the Gulfarium C.A.R.E. Center team.

One turtle especially captured everyone's attention that morning — Apricot, a 184-pound adult male logger-

head. It took several people to carefully carry the massive turtle down to the shoreline before his long-awaited return to the Gulf. Apricot was the largest of the seven sea turtles released during the event and drew plenty of ex-

citement from the crowd gathered along the beach.

Families lined the shoreline early that morning, cameras in hand, as each turtle slowly made its way toward the water. The release served as both a celebration and a reminder of the important rescue and rehabilitation work happening right here in our back yard at the Gulfarium.

And the turtle stories didn't stop there. Just days later, another special release took place at Inlet Beach when Mr. Krabs — an 11-pound juvenile Kemp's



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## We're Off to the Races!

BY TED SHOOP

By the time this issue of Freeport Life is published, another school year will have come to a close. Perhaps, you and your family are ready to take that long-awaited summer vacation to a destination near or far. If most locals with school-age children are leaving town, what does that mean for home sellers patiently waiting for their home to go under contract and sell? Excellent question! I am glad you asked.

The reality is that homes are bought and sold year-round. Sure, there are certain times of the year when there is more activity. One of the peak times is now — the summer selling season. I can tell you from experience that there is a lot of pent-up demand with home buyers right now. More listings are appearing in the

MLS daily which means more competition between sellers. However, home buyers welcome the fresh inventory to choose from and are finally coming to the realization that mortgage rates will remain relatively steady for the foreseeable future. As a result, many are finally ready to pull the trigger on the starting gun and re-enter the market.

Just as a runner depends on a coach to improve their odds of winning a race, find yourself a skilled real estate advisor to get you across the finish line and a successful closing.

Ted Shoop is a marketing expert with eXp Realty who tirelessly works to provide the highest level of real estate service to residents throughout Freeport and Walton County.

Ridley sea turtle and recent FOX Weather star — returned home to the Gulf after recovering at the CARE Center.

Mr. Krabs was rescued April 24 from the Okaloosa Island Fishing Pier after a hook became lodged in his mouth. After several weeks of treatment and rehabilitation, the little turtle was finally healthy enough to head back into Gulf waters.

Sea turtle releases have become meaningful community events throughout Northwest Florida, offering a firsthand look at conservation efforts while also creating memorable experiences for children and adults alike.

For many in attendance, it was a simple, but powerful, reminder of why protecting our coastal environment matters — and just how rewarding it is to watch these incredible animals get a second chance back in the wild.



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# New Seagrove Regional Beach Access Expands Public Access Along Scenic 30A

Walton County visitors and residents now have expanded access to one of the area's most popular stretches of coastline with the completion of the new Seagrove Regional Beach Access, located at 3910 E. County Highway 30A.

The new regional beach access adds 100 feet of public beach frontage and becomes Walton County's 10th regional beach access site. County officials say the project was designed to improve accessibility, parking and safety while helping accommodate growing demand along the Scenic 30A corridor.

The Seagrove Regional Beach Access includes 23 parking spaces for standard vehicles, ADA-accessible parking and bicycle parking, along with a 1,011-square-foot restroom facility, rinse showers and a handicap-accessible dune walkover connecting directly to the beach. The site also links to the area's multi-use path system.

An extensive storm water exfiltration system was also incorporated into the project to help capture runoff from nearby neighborhoods and improve environmental management in the surrounding area.

According to Walton County officials, the total project cost was approximately \$8.9 million, including \$5 million for property acquisition. Engineering fees totaled slightly more than



\$200,000, with the remaining funds dedicated to construction.

The property was originally purchased by the county in 2017, with the completed project

representing years of planning, engineering and infrastructure work aimed at increasing public beach access in South Walton.

The project was completed through partnerships involving

Atkins Realis, GLC Contracting, Berube Leonard LLC and Stokes Architectural.

In addition to expanded public access, South Walton Fire District lifeguards are now staffing the beach from a newly installed lifeguard tower identified as Tower 21. The tower operates daily from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. through Oct. 31 and includes a beach wheelchair available for public use. The addition brings the district's total to 19 staffed lifeguard towers covering Walton County's 26 miles of coastline.

County officials noted that construction of the Seagrove Regional Beach Access was fully funded through Walton County's Tourism Development Tax, commonly known as the bed tax, collected from short-term lodging stays within South Walton County.

For more information on Walton County beach projects and public beach access improvements, [waltoncountyfltourism.com/projects](http://waltoncountyfltourism.com/projects) or contact Beach Operations at (850) 267-4578.

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 Events

## Events Around Town

### Baytowne Memorial Day Celebration Returns May 23–24 | The Village of Baytowne Wharf, Sandestin

Celebrate the unofficial start of summer during the Baytowne Memorial Day Celebration at The Village of Baytowne Wharf. The weekend will feature live music, family activities and fireworks. Sunday festivities include children's activities throughout the day followed by a fireworks show at 9 p.m. Admission is free.

### Sinfonia Salutes: A Memorial Day Concert & Drone Show May 24 | Alys Beach Amphitheatre

Sinfonia Gulf Coast will present "Sinfonia Salutes" at the Alys Beach Amphitheatre. The free Memorial Day concert and drone show begins at 7:30 p.m., with doors opening at 6 p.m. Guests are encouraged to bring blankets and low-back chairs for the patriotic evening under the palms.



### Grand Boulevard Launches Summer Entertainment Series

**May 21–July 2 | Grand Park at Grand Boulevard, Miramar Beach**

Grand Boulevard is turning up the summer fun with two free weekly entertainment series in Grand Park.

Bands on the BLVD returns Thursdays from 6–8 p.m. with live outdoor performances from local and regional artists. The summer lineup includes Dion Jones & The Neon Tears on May 21, The Salty Strays on May 28, Casey Kearney on June 4, Xcetricks on June 11, The Wildlife Specials on June 18, Cadillac Willy on June 25 and "America Salutes | A Musical Celebration of 250 Years of Freedom," presented by Emerald Coast Theatre Company, on July 2.



The all-new Big BLVD Bash debuts Tuesdays from May 26 through June 30 from 6–8 p.m. Hosted by Emerald Coast Theatre Company, the open-air DJ dance party series offers family-friendly music and entertainment in Grand Park. Guests are encouraged to bring lawn chairs or blankets and enjoy dinner from Grand Boulevard restaurants before the festivities. Free.

**Biophilia Center Hosts Summer Kickoff Celebration  
May 30 | E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center, Freeport**

The E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center will celebrate the start of summer from 9 a.m.–2 p.m. with live music, local food trucks, bounce houses, raffles, wildlife ambassador chats and visits from The Reptile Room. Families can enjoy a day of outdoor exploration and educational fun. Event details: [eowilsoncenter.org/events](http://eowilsoncenter.org/events).

### Baytowne Wednesday Night Concert Series Wednesdays | The Village of Baytowne Wharf

The Wednesday Night Concert Series continues weekly from 7–9 p.m. on the Events Plaza Stage at The Village of Baytowne Wharf. Guests are invited to bring lawn chairs and blankets for free performances featuring regional talent.

May 27 — Modern Eldorados  
June 3 — Cadillac Willy  
June 10 — TBA  
June 17 — The Typos  
June 24 — Sunshine Wranglers

Event details: [eowilsoncenter.org/events](http://eowilsoncenter.org/events).

### 30 Years of Concerts in the Village Through June 11 | Dugas Pavilion, Destin

The Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation continues its 30th Anniversary Concerts in the Village season through June 11 at the Dugas Pavilion in Destin. Concerts are held Thursday evenings and feature tribute acts

and crowd-favorite performers.

May 28 — The Molly Ringwalds

June 4 — The Return: A Beatles Tribute

June 11 — A1A: The Official Jimmy Buffett Tribute Band

### Alaqua Sunday Sessions Sundays Through May 31 | Alaqua Arena, Freeport

Alaqua Animal Refuge continues its Sunday Sessions series every Sunday from 1–4 p.m. at the Alaqua Arena. The free weekly gathering features live music by Rescue Me — Tim Jackson, Holly Winter and John Link — along with rotating food trucks and the peaceful atmosphere of the refuge.

### "The Paper Bear" Screening June 7 | Seaside

"The Paper Bear" will be screened at 7:30 p.m. in Seaside. Blending live-action storytelling with hand-drawn animation, the film follows a father and son documenting Florida black bears while sharing campfire stories and local history. More info: [thepaperbear.org](http://thepaperbear.org)

### Magic & Comedy Returns Ongoing Shows | The Palms Resort, Destin

The Magic & Comedy Destin is an upgraded, high-energy production featuring illusions, comedy and audience interaction.

Headliner Bart Rockett, an internationally known entertainer who has performed in more than 90 countries and starred in his own nationally syndicated television show, blends magic, comedy and ventriloquism into an interactive performance designed for all ages. Special guest appearances by Rockett's children, Kadan and Brooklyn, add to the family-friendly fun.

Guests can enjoy all-table seating with food and drinks delivered directly to their seats, plus dining options at the adjacent Blue Lagoon restaurant. Showtimes include 7 p.m. evening performances and select 4 p.m. Sunday matinees. Seating is limited and advance reservations are recommended. Free parking is available. Tickets & info: [MagicDestin.com](http://MagicDestin.com)

### Emerald Coast Blue Marlin Classic June 17–21 | Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort

The 24th Annual Emerald Coast Blue Marlin Classic returns June 17–21 at Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort. Timed with the Gulf Coast's peak blue marlin season, the tournament attracts anglers from across the region for world-class sport-fishing competition and nightly weigh-ins open to the public at Baytowne Marina. Visitors can enjoy tournament festivities while taking advantage of the resort's dining, shopping and recreational activities.

### Peach Festival Brings Sweet Summer Fun to Freeport June 19–21 | Props Brewery at The Windmills, Freeport

Props Brewery at The Windmills will host its Peach Festival June 19–21 at 1799 Great Hammock Bend in Freeport. Festival hours are 3–9 p.m. June 19 and 12–6 p.m. June 20–21. The family-friendly event will feature local vendors, food trucks, a petting zoo and craft brews from the brewery. Vendor applications: [forms.gle/fB37dY1QP-WXhud937](https://forms.gle/fB37dY1QP-WXhud937)

### Freeport Public Library Invites Families to "Unearth a Story" During 2026 Summer Reading Program

The Freeport Public Library is inviting children and families to dig into a summer filled with books, discovery and dinosaur-themed fun during its 2026 Summer Reading Program, "Unearth a Story."

The Summer Reading Program, which kicks off June 2 and continues through July 28, encourages children to stay engaged in reading while participating in hands-on educational activities hosted by the library.

For details and a complete calendar of events, visit [WaltonLibraries.com](http://WaltonLibraries.com). You can also contact the Freeport Public Library at 850-835-2040 for information on summer programs, volunteer opportunities and sponsorships.

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# HAPPENINGS AROUND FREEPORT

## JUNE 2026 EVENTS

**03**  
**Reading with Bear the Therapy Dog**  
 3:30 pm | Freeport Public Library | Freeport

**04**  
**Concerts in the Village: The Return**  
 6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin



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

**05**  
**Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's First Friday Coffee**  
 7 am | First Baptist Church of FWB | FWB

**06**  
**Concealed Carry Weapons Class**  
 10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

**07**  
**Sunday Sessions featuring Rescue Me**  
 1 pm | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport



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

**08 - 12**  
**NRA Basics of Rifle Shooting Youth Camp**  
 10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso



**11**  
**Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's Nothing But Networking**  
 11:30 am | Harvey F. Eckhoff VFW | FWB

**Concerts in the Village: A1A - Jimmy Buffett Tribute**  
 6 pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation | Destin

**Dwarf Jade Bonsai Workshop**  
 6 pm | Props Brewery Hammock Bay | Freeport

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

**14**  
**Sunday Sessions featuring Rescue Me**  
 1 pm | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport

**15 - 19**  
**NRA Basics of Pistol Shooting Youth Camp**  
 10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso



**17**  
**Reading with Bear the Therapy Dog**  
 3:30 pm | Freeport Public Library | Freeport

**18**  
**Greater FWB Chamber of Commerce's Business After Hours**  
 5:30 pm | Emerald Coast Harley-Davidson | FWB

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

**19 - 21**  
**Peach Festival**  
 Various Times | Props Brewery Hammock Bay | Freeport

**20**  
**Concealed Carry Weapons Class**  
 10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

**21**  
**Father's Day Brunch Cruise**  
 11:30 am | Sunquest Cruises | Miramar Beach



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

**25**  
**Bands on the Boulevard: Summer Music Series**  
 6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

**28**  
**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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 Dining

# Popular Destin Café Lady Ray's Announces Expansion and Founders Club as It Celebrates Four Years

By TIM VONDELL

This month, Lady Ray's celebrates its fourth anniversary, marking a significant milestone for the beloved Destin-based brand known for its whimsical tea parties, refined café offerings, and immersive lifestyle experiences. What began as a charming concept has grown into a thriving, multi-faceted business—and now, it's preparing for its next chapter.

To commemorate the occasion, Lady Ray's has announced plans to begin renovations in May, introducing a highly anticipated addition: a private tea room designed to function as both an elegant lounge and a banquet space. The new area will be available for birthdays, baby showers, and private events, further enhancing the brand's signature tea party experience while expanding its

hospitality footprint.

The space will also serve a practical purpose. During peak café hours, when regulars know seating can be at a premium, the tea room will act as overflow—ensuring that more guests can enjoy the Lady Ray's experience without compromising comfort or ambiance.

Alongside the physical expansion, the organization also plans to introduce a highly cu-



a moment. This new space lets us lean even further into that magic.”

Owner Tim Vondell emphasized that the expansion reflects both customer demand and a long-term vision for the brand.

“Lady Ray's has always been about thoughtful growth,” Vondell said. “We're building something that goes beyond a café—a brand that brings together food, wellness, retail, and community. This renovation is a natural next step in delivering more of what our guests already love.”

## A Brand Built for Experience

Lady Ray's is a Destin-based, multi-concept culinary, beauty, and lifestyle brand operating a diversified portfolio of consumer experiences and product lines. The company integrates food service, wellness, retail, and branded distribution under a scalable platform designed for measured growth, strong community engagement, and long-term brand equity.

Over the past four years, Lady Ray's has distinguished itself not only through its offerings but through its atmosphere—where curated tea parties, delicate pastries, and intentional design converge to create a memorable escape from the everyday.

As renovations begin and the brand continues to evolve, one thing remains constant: a commitment to experience, detail, and community.

“We're just getting started,” Vondell said. “And we're excited to bring our guests along for what comes next.”

With its expansion underway and its reputation firmly established, Lady Ray's appears poised to turn four years of success into a foundation for even greater growth—one tea party at a time.



rated “Founders Club,” an invitation-forward membership experience designed for those who value priority, access, and distinction. Members will receive first-right booking privileges, preferred access to limited seatings, bespoke brand offerings and preferred pricing, as well as invitations—with guest privileges—to private, members-only gatherings and preview events.

Positioned as an elevated extension of the Lady Ray's experience, the Founders Club is intended to deliver a more intimate, refined way to engage with the brand as it continues to grow.

“If you've ever stopped in during our busiest hours, you know we're often at capacity,” said Rachel Ploegmakers. “We've thoughtfully utilized just about every inch of our café space over the years. This expansion allows us to grow while preserving the charm and intimacy our guests love.”

Ploegmakers, the creative force behind the culinary direction at Lady Ray's, has become known for her artful approach to tea service and seasonal menus. Her work blends classic tea traditions with modern, inspired flavors, earning her recognition among both locals and visitors seeking a unique, elevated experience.

“Our goal has always been to create something transportive,” she added. “Tea parties are more than a meal—they're

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# Reeling in the Emerald Coast Hooks Families, Conservation and Outdoor Fun

There's something timeless about kids standing along the water's edge with a fishing pole in hand — especially when it's paired with sunshine, learning and a whole lot of community spirit. That was exactly the scene recently at Topsail Hill Preserve State Park during the annual "Reeling in the Emerald Coast" event.

Hosted by Walton County 4-H and community partners, the family-friendly outdoor event drew hundreds to the park for a day focused on fishing, conservation education and connecting children and families with the outdoors.

According to Misty Williams, 4-H Program Assistant for UF/

youth officially registered for the fishing tournament and an estimated 250 to 300 people participating overall. Officials from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission served as measuring judges for the tournament, where prizes were awarded for the biggest catch, smallest catch and most fish caught during the event. The largest catch of the day measured 12½ inches — a bass that quickly became the talk of the tournament.

Williams credited the event's success to the many community organizations and sponsors that helped make the day possible. Among them were the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, which donated

fishing and pontoon boats, outboard motors and complete marine support for local boaters and anglers. This includes name brands such as Twin Vee, Cobia, Pathfinder, Maverick, Hewes and South Bay Pontoons; Bonafide

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IFAS Extension Walton County, the event's mission goes far beyond the fishing tournament itself.

"Our goal with this event was to get children and families of all abilities enjoying the outdoors together, to learn about our variety of aquatic ecosystems, and how to get involved with local conservation efforts," Williams said.

The event featured hands-on educational booths, wildlife and environmental exhibits, conservation organizations and a youth fishing tournament that kept participants busy throughout the day. Children learned about local ecosystems, aquatic habitats, wildlife rescue efforts and outdoor stewardship while also enjoying the fun of casting lines into the water.

"The variety of interactive and informational booths along with the fishing tournament gives everyone something to participate in," Williams added. "All participants were able to receive a new fishing pole and swag bag."

Attendance was strong this year, with approximately 60

swag bags and tackle boxes for winners, and Australia-based company Hook-Eze, which contributed safe fishing knot-tying tools for participants.

Organizations represented at the event included Florida Sea Grant, Guy Harvey Foundation, Emerald Coast Wildlife Refuge, Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance, Camp Timpoochee, WHOLE Outdoors and South Walton Mosquito Control.

Now in its second year partnering with Topsail Hill Preserve State Park for the event, Williams said planning for next year's "Reeling in the Emerald Coast" is already beginning.

In the meantime, families interested in Walton County 4-H programs, summer day camps and future community events can follow Walton County 4-H on Facebook for updates and registration opportunities.

*Fishing News is brought to you by The Ships Chandler, a trusted name in Gulf Coast boating since 1980, serving Walton County in its Freeport location (17309 Highway 331 (32439). The 14-acre marine and service center provides top-quality*

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# Paws that Protect:

## The Military Working Dogs Defending Hurlburt Field

BY 2ND LT. RACHEL HECK,  
1ST SPECIAL OPERATIONS WING  
PUBLIC AFFAIRS

At 4:30 a.m., while most of Hurlburt Field is still dark and quiet, a security forces handler assigned to the 1st Special Operations Wing begins his shift. He checks his gear, reviews the night's incidents and prepares for a long day of patrol. But before he heads out, he makes sure his partner is ready.

That partner doesn't grab a radio or lace up boots. He waits patiently in a kennel, tail thumping against the gate.

"Me and you—it's time to get to work," the handler tells his

four-legged companion.

Together, they are one of several military working dog teams assigned to the 1 SOW. This group of handlers and canines trained in patrol and detection work to enhance installation security, deter threats and provide an added layer of protection for Air Commandos and their families.

According to the handler, the value of MWDs lies in their unmatched senses and ability to detect subtle changes in an environment long before a human might notice.

"We're able to rely on their ability to think independently,"

the handler described. "They're going to catch what I don't catch."

Their tactical value relies on a unique partnership built on discipline and unwavering loyalty, he further explained.

"I protect him, but he also protects me," said the handler. "We're in this together."

The kennel houses German Shepherds and Belgian Malinois, each paired with a dedicated handler. While every dog and handler qualifies in similar mission sets through their respective training programs at Lackland Air Force Base, each team builds its own dynamic and trust.

"You're trying to learn what makes them tick—what winds them up, what winds them down, what makes them shy away, what amps them up," the handler said.

For this handler, his MWD is more than a partner.

"I get to be a cop," the handler explained. "But I also get my best friend as my ride along partner. It's the best of both worlds."



When the call comes in, however, affection gives way to focus.

"Play time's over. Let's get it done," the handler says to his partner.

In an instant, the same dog that was relaxed moments before is alert, disciplined and mission-ready, serving as a reminder that behind every wagging tail is a highly trained defender, always prepared to protect.

In the quiet parts of the day, their partnership looks a lot like any other bond between a man and his dog. Each MWD has a distinct personality ... some playful, some stubborn, some already eyeing retirement and the promise of a couch somewhere down the line, he noted.

"When I'm driving around, he's relaxed in the back."

## First of Its Kind: F-15E Strike Eagle Lands at Eglin Museum

The Air Force Armament Museum welcomed a historic addition April 10 with the dedication of an F-15E Strike Eagle — the first of its kind ever placed on public display.

Aircraft No. 86-184, a roughly 35-year-old jet, served its entire career as a developmental test aircraft with the 96th and 412th Test Wings at Eglin Air Force Base. It was also one of the oldest F-15Es in the active fleet before its retirement. "This Strike Eagle will take her rightful place here among the equally distinguished artifacts for the public to engage," said retired Brig. Gen. Fran Hendricks, president of the museum foundation.

The aircraft also honors those who flew and maintained it. Former Eglin commander Maj. Gen. Robert Chedister, who piloted 86-184, is commemorated with



his name displayed on the canopy. "His name on the canopy is a lasting salute to a man who gave so much to the country he loved both in and out of uniform," Hendricks said.

Weapons system officer Lt. Col. Rich Bailey and maintainers Master Sgt. Vik Maharaj, Staff Sgt. Robert Lawson and Staff Sgt. Benjamin Haag are also recognized on the aircraft. "This new and first-of-its-kind addition to our museum is both a tribute to all who have served at Eglin and an inspiration to those who will follow," Hendricks added.

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# Charlotte Brooks Rides to a National Title and Auburn University

By DOUGLAS "DOC" STAUFFER

At just 17 years old, local resident Charlotte Brooks has already accomplished what many young athletes only dream of — a national championship title and a collegiate athletic future at one of the nation's premier equestrian programs.

The Okaloosa County native recently captured the coveted Congress Champion title in Youth Hunt Seat Equitation (age 15–18) at the prestigious All-American Quarter Horse Congress — widely recognized as the largest and most competitive single-breed horse show in the world. For those within the equestrian community, the title alone speaks volumes. For those unfamiliar, imagine winning a national championship on one of the sport's biggest stages, against the very best riders from across the country.

And this fall, she will continue her journey at Auburn University, joining the nationally respected Auburn Tigers equestrian team.

But Charlotte's story is about far more than trophies.

### A Life in the Saddle

Charlotte did not stumble into the sport. She was raised in it. Horses have been part of her life from an early age, and she began competing seriously around age ten. What followed was not overnight success, but years of early mornings, long travel weekends, disciplined training sessions, and quiet perseverance.

Equestrian competition requires a rare blend of physical skill, technical precision, and mental composure. Riders must communicate with a thousand-pound animal through subtle cues, balance, and trust. In Hunt Seat Equitation, judges evaluate the rider's form, control, and effectiveness — not just speed or flash. It is a discipline that rewards poise under pressure.

Charlotte has learned to thrive in that pressure. Winning at the Quarter Horse Congress



represents the culmination of years of refinement — hours in the arena, countless practice rounds, and the resilience to improve after setbacks. National titles are not handed out; they are earned stride by stride.

### Balancing Excellence

Unlike many student-athletes who compete locally, Charlotte's competition schedule has taken her across the country. To maintain both academic and athletic excellence, she enrolled in Flor-

ida Virtual School, which allowed her the flexibility to travel and train while staying on track academically.

That decision reflects maturity beyond her years. It takes discipline to manage studies independently while competing at a national level. Charlotte has

demonstrated that excellence in athletics does not require sacrificing academic responsibility. Her ability to balance both speaks to strong family support, personal determination, and a clear sense of purpose.

### The Next Chapter: Auburn

Charlotte's next step brings her to Auburn's equestrian program, one of the most respected in collegiate competition. Auburn competes under the umbrella of the National Collegiate

Equestrian Association, where varsity riders face elite talent from across the nation.

Auburn has a history of national championships and a culture built around discipline, teamwork, and competitive excellence. Charlotte will now test her skills at the highest collegiate level — representing not only her university, but her hometown of Laurel Hill and Okaloosa County. For a local athlete to step onto that stage is significant. For a national champion to do so is remarkable.

### More Than a Title

While the headline reads "national champion," those who know Charlotte would likely describe her differently: dedicated, humble, steady, and focused.

Champions are often defined by what happens in the spotlight. But true character is revealed in the unseen hours — the practice sessions when no one is watching, the moments of disappoint-

*Continued on page 22*

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 Environment

# Flora and Fauna of the Historic Gulf Cemetery

BY HELEN PETRE

South of 98, on 293, almost to the beach, is a cemetery on 40 acres of pristine wild land. The cemetery offers burial sites, but it is also a unique ecosystem that is rare among the housing developments that surround it. Established in 1914 by Woodrow Wilson, the Choctawhatchee sand pines and gopher tortoises have been relatively untouched by human development or fire for an exceptionally long time.

The Historic Gulf Cemetery covers 40 acres of low hills and mature trees that make up a unique ecosystem dominated by Choctawhatchee sand pine (*Pinus clausa* *immuginata*). Sand pines grow on entisol soils which are about 90% sand, and strongly acidic (pH 5). The soil is low in nutrients, lacking ammonium, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, and magnesium, and contains only about 1% organic matter, making it perfect for sand pines, but not for most other plants. Sand is excessively drained, making the soil very dry, even when it rains.

Choctawhatchee sand pines

grow only on the coast of the Gulf of America, mostly in Walton and Okaloosa counties. In fact, they only grow within one degree of latitude. Most of their preferred habitat has been lost to development making the cemetery habitat unique.

The sand in the cemetery, and along the Gulf coast, is of marine origin and was deposited in the Pleistocene as a series of ancient shorelines, forming long, gentle hills and flat ridge tops. This is a distinct community that is strikingly different than long-leaf pine communities, which are higher in elevation and have more organic matter.

Since the cemetery is relatively protected from fire, Choctawhatchee sand pines thrive. The natural ecosystem, without fire, has an open canopy with sparse understory. Turkey oak, prickly pear cactus, wildflowers, and broadleaf grasses are the predominant plant species. Lichens are present in dense clusters on the infertile soil surface.

The lichens in the cemetery are commonly called deer moss; large, puffy, gray-green fruti-

cose lichens. They are a mutualistic relationship between a blue-green algae and a fungus, and look like pale green, round sponges. There are no roots, so the lichens just sit on top of the ground.

Deer moss and Choctawhatchee sand pines in the Historic Gulf Cemetery. W. Keyes.

## Fauna

The sand pine ecosystem provides abundant food and cover for wildlife. Wild turkey, gray squirrel, and mourning dove eat the seeds of Choctawhatchee sand pine. The open canopy provides habitat for woodpeckers, squirrels, and birds of prey. When I was there in March 2026, I saw an eagle, along with many songbirds and squirrels. There are bluebird boxes throughout the cemetery, and most are occupied.

## Gopher Tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*)

The gopher tortoise is an important resident of the Historic Gulf Cemetery. I saw three bur-



Lichens (*Cladonia* species)



Gopher tortoise. W. Keyes.

rows in March 2026. Gopher tortoises are threatened by habitat destruction and need a very sandy substrate to dig burrows. They also need an open canopy in order for their preferred food, grass, to grow. About 75% of their diet is grasses. Gopher tortoises also eat wiregrass, gopher apple, blackberries, and palmetto berries, all present close to the burrows.

Gopher tortoises are seldom seen, as they spend 80% of their time in their burrows. Burrows average 15 feet long and six feet deep, and protect the tortoises from heat, cold, fire, and predators. The burrow provides homes for commensal species, including Florida mice, gopher frogs, and eastern indigo snakes. Gopher tortoises live for about 40 years.

The sand pine ecosystem in

the cemetery is a uniquely wild environment that provides habitat and food for many species. A walk through the cemetery is peaceful and reflective, but it also allows visitors to experience a rare ecosystem in contrast to the surrounding housing and commercial developments. It is a special, protected home for some of my favorite native plants and animals. I am grateful there is a peaceful place for them to live quietly and respectfully, among a place for humans to rest in peace.

*Helen Petre is a retired biologist enjoying her time in nature along the Gulf of America. If you have any nature questions, or suggestions for articles about our bio paradise, email petrehelen@gmail.com. William Keyes is the President of the Board of Directors of the Historic Gulf Cemetery.*

## Thousands of Acres Preserved Along Walton County's Choctawhatchee River



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A major conservation milestone was recently celebrated in Walton County as officials gathered for a ribbon-cutting ceremony marking the preservation of 2,295 acres along the Choctawhatchee River and Bay watershed near Freeport.

Hosted by the Northwest Florida Water Management District and The Nature Conservancy, the April ceremony commemorated the permanent protection of environmentally significant land now included within the Choctawhatchee River Delta Preserve. The event took place near Pitts Bayshore Drive in Freeport and highlighted the ongoing effort to preserve Northwest Florida's waterways, wetlands and wildlife habitats for future generations.

The newly preserved acreage sits within one of Florida's most ecologically important watersheds. The Choctawhatchee River and Bay system spans more than 3.3 million acres across Florida and Alabama

and includes numerous creeks, tributaries and wetlands that support diverse wildlife, water quality protection and outdoor recreation. Choctawhatchee Bay itself covers approximately 129 square miles across Walton and Okaloosa counties.

According to information shared during the event, the Northwest Florida Water Management District has now acquired more than 63,000 acres throughout the Choctawhatchee River basin and surrounding ecosystems to help preserve floodplains, wetlands and critical habitat areas while also providing public recreation opportunities.

The preservation effort also reflects a growing regional focus on conservation amid continued growth across Walton County and the Emerald Coast. Officials emphasized the importance of balancing development with environmental steward-

*Continued on page 28*

# Alaqua Gives Rescued Beagles a Second Chance

## Former Laboratory Breeding Dogs Arrive In Freeport To Begin Life Beyond Confinement

By LORI LEATH SMITH

A new group of four-legged residents has arrived in Freeport, and their journey is already touching hearts across the Emerald Coast.

This month, Alaqua Animal Refuge welcomed 20 rescued beagles from Ridglan Farms, a large-scale Wisconsin breeding and research facility that supplied dogs for laboratory testing. The group includes senior dogs as well as several believed to be pregnant, all now beginning an entirely different chapter of life.

The beagles arriving at Alaqua are part of a much larger national rescue effort now underway across the U.S. Animal welfare organizations estimate approximately 1,500 beagles are being transferred from the Wisconsin facility and relocated to shelters, rescues and foster programs throughout the country. Reports indicate roughly 500 dogs may still remain at the facility as discussions continue regarding their long-term placement and care.

The large-scale rescue operation has drawn national attention and emotional response from animal advocates and pet lovers alike. In addition to Alaqua, other rescue partners involved in the effort include the Center for Humane Economy, Big Dog Ranch Rescue, Beagle Freedom Project, Dane County Humane Society and numerous organizations working together across multiple states to transport and rehabilitate the dogs.

For many of the dogs arriving at Alaqua, everyday experiences are completely new. “These beautiful dogs have never experienced life outside of a cage,” said Laurie Hood, founder of Alaqua Animal Refuge and Florida state director for Animal Wellness Action. “They were born specifically for science — to be bred, poked and prodded, confined and used over and over again.”

According to Alaqua staff, some of the beagles had never walked on grass, rested on soft bedding or learned routines most pets experience naturally. Rescue workers say several dogs initially appeared hesitant around affection and unfamiliar human interaction as they adjusted to their new environment.



The dogs arrived in our area after a lengthy transport coordinated through rescue partnerships spanning several states. Among the group is a 14-year-old beagle believed to have spent its entire life inside the breeding operation.

Despite their difficult beginnings, staff members say signs of hope appeared almost immediately. “When the doors opened, literally they’re all standing and their tails are wagging, and they’re just happy to be alive,” Hood said. “I don’t think there was a dry eye in the whole house.”

Several of Alaqua’s rescued beagles are expected to give birth soon either inside the refuge’s specialized maternity spaces, or potentially placed temporarily in foster homes prepared for neonatal care. Either way, they’ll be in safe, caring environments instead of research confinement.

National scrutiny surrounding Ridglan Farms has continued to intensify in recent months following protests, investigations and growing criticism from animal welfare advocates. Reports indicate the facility has agreed to surrender its Wisconsin breeding license later this year as part of agreements connected to ongoing concerns surrounding animal treatment and oversight.

Public response to the rescue effort has been overwhelming nationwide. One humane society involved in the operation reportedly received more than 1,300 adoption inquiries shortly after rescued beagles arrived at its facility. Celebrity animal advocates have also begun publicly supporting the nationwide placement effort to help the dogs find permanent homes.

Right now, Alaqua’s focus remains on stabilization, medical care and emotional recovery. Each dog is being evaluated individually while staff members

slowly introduce them to normal routines, socialization and daily comfort.

The refuge says future adopters will need patience and understanding, as many of the dogs are still learning basic trust and adjusting to unfamiliar surroundings.

For those who love beagles but may not yet be ready to adopt, Alaqua has created a sponsorship opportunity allowing supporters to play a direct role in a rescued dog’s recovery. A \$1,000 sponsorship helps provide transportation, medical evaluations, veterinary care and daily necessities for one of the

rescued beagles. Sponsors are matched with a specific dog and receive photos and updates as their beagle begins adjusting to life beyond confinement.

You can also purchase a “Finally Free” Beagle T-Shirt created in the beagles’ honor for \$25. Visit [customink.com/fundraising/finally-free-beagles](http://customink.com/fundraising/finally-free-beagles).

Community response in Walton County has already been strong, with local residents reaching out to foster, volunteer, donate and eventually adopt.

Alaqua officials say financial support will help provide veterinary treatment, rehabilitation, food, transportation and long-

term care for the rescued animals. The organization is also encouraging families to consider adopting other pets currently at the refuge to help create additional space and resources as the beagles continue their recovery.

For Freeport, the arrival of the beagles represents more than a rescue effort. It is another example of how local organizations continue making a national impact through compassion and second chances. “These dogs are experiencing life for the first time,” Hood said. “Our responsibility is to ensure their next chapter is safe, compassionate and filled with dignity.”



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## Wellness

# The Body, Mind, Spirit Connection



BY STEPHENIE CRAIG, JOURNEY BRAVELY

Do you ever find yourself feeling a bit off and you can't figure out why? Maybe you've had seasons of trying to heal and feel better using different means. You might feel anxious and go to the doctor only to be told you check out fine and they recommend going to counseling. Other times, you may have gone to counseling trying to resolve feeling low energy to be told you should try going to the doctor and get your blood work checked. Maybe you've prayed and gone to speak to a pastor about emotional pain and while that was helpful, they recommended you get some additional counseling.

It can become confusing trying to sort out the origin of issues you are having and where exactly to go for help. For a long time, humans were encouraged

to view their bodies, minds, and spirits as separate without much overlap. If medical professionals didn't find a medical explanation, people were sometimes told "it's all in your head." As more research emerged, doctors started encouraging people to get mental health support to supplement medical help. For years, people went to counselors talking about problems believing that their mind and their physical experience were two completely separate things. As more research emerged, counselors began understanding the connection between emotions and how feelings are stored and experienced physically in the body. More therapists are now incorporating physical body exercises along with talk therapy with improved results. For many years, some churches discouraged people from trusting mental health support outside the church. Now, many churches encourage church members toward counseling alongside spiritual discipleship.

While it is complicated to sort and determine the next steps in pursuit of healing, what we are all learning is that the body, mind and spirit are deep-

ly connected. You don't have to choose only one pathway of growing and healing. You can choose to address all three areas with a greater chance of feeling more healed and whole. So, what does it look like to embrace the body, mind, spirit connection in day to day life?

## 6 Ways to Embrace the Body, Mind, Spirit Connection

**Evaluate historical messages.** Notice messages you may be carrying from childhood or other times in life that make it hard for you to give credibility to your experiences in your body, mind, or spirit. Were you told that you shouldn't believe in counseling? Was faith modeled for you in harmful ways that create current confusion? Were you encouraged to ignore or skip what your physical body is trying to signal to you?

**Get support to decide what you believe now.** While historical messages can be powerful, you have the option to decide what you want to believe in the here and now. Try doing your own research to develop beliefs about how you want to seek mental or medical support. Try talking to a spiritual mentor about spiritual struggles. Do the work to unblock what might be blocked related to how you grew up.

**Notice.** Start intentionally noticing the connection between what you think, how you feel, what sensations you are having in your body, and how your faith experience is shaping you. All of these work best when you are open to noticing how they work together.

**Try using body, mind,**



**and spirit together to process life experiences.** For example, notice that you are feeling angry and stressed. Notice the physical signs such as tension in your body and exhaustion. Notice the irritable thoughts and feelings. Notice how your anger and stress are related to your relationship with God and how you are living out your faith.

**Try engaging spirit, mind and body to address feeling better.** Try talking openly with God and people in your spiritual community about your struggles. Engage spiritual disciplines to support yourself. Ask for help surrendering spiritually. Seek counseling to understand how historical messages, boundaries, and your internal thoughts might be impacting your stress and anger. Try a stretching class, breathing exercises or other physical activities to engage your body in releasing anger and stress. Each of these can be helpful, however, all of them together work most effectively.

**Practice and repeat.** Use

reminders in your phone and post it notes to notice how mind, spirit, and body are deeply connected and all important parts of how you were created to be a person. Your brain rewires through repetition. The more you connect all three areas in your daily awareness, the more you will notice naturally how they are each at play every day.

Be kind and curious toward yourself as you ponder and practice the body, mind, spirit connection. Connect with us at [Journeybravely.com](http://Journeybravely.com) along your journey for counseling and coaching support.

## CHARLOTTE

*continued from page 19*

ment that require perseverance, and the quiet discipline of improvement. Charlotte's journey reminds us that greatness is rarely dramatic. It is built patiently, consistently, and faithfully.

In a world quick to celebrate viral fame and overnight success, her story stands as a refreshing testimony to sustained effort and earned achievement.

## A Community to Cheer

As Charlotte prepares to ride for Auburn this fall, Okaloosa County has every reason to celebrate one of its own. Her success is not only personal—it is shared. She carries with her the pride of a small community that values hard work and excellence.

When she enters the arena in Auburn colors, she will do so as a national champion — but also as a local young woman who never forgot where she started. And if her past is any indication, the best rides may still be ahead.



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# Ascension Sacred Heart Launches Free Mammogram Program for Uninsured Women

Initiative provides potentially life-saving breast cancer screenings to uninsured women 40 and older across Northwest Florida

Ascension Sacred Heart has launched a new free mammogram program to provide critical breast cancer screenings to uninsured women across Northwest Florida. Uninsured residents over 40 years old are eligible for the screenings. Funding for the program comes from generous donors to the Sacred Heart Foundation.



“Sacred Heart Foundation is committed to ensuring no woman goes without an essential breast health screening,” said Adrienne Maygarden, President of the Sacred Heart Foundation. “Too often, women, especially mothers and caregivers, put their own health on hold. With more than one-third of women behind on critical appointments like mammograms, the need is real. Thanks to the support of our community, we are helping

remove barriers and provide access to potentially life-saving care.”

According to the American Cancer Society, when breast cancer is detected early and remains localized, the five-year

relative survival rate is 99 percent. Breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer among women in Florida, with more than 17,000 new cases diagnosed each year. But only about half of the women over

40 living in Bay, Walton, Okaloosa and Gulf Counties get an annual screening as recommended.

The free mammogram program is available to women who:

- Are 40 years of age or older
- Are uninsured
- Are seeking a preventive screening and have no current breast health symptoms
- Have seen a primary care provider within the last 2 years

The screenings are conducted at four locations in the area:

### Walton and Okaloosa County residents

Ascension Sacred Heart Women’s Diagnostic Center - Emerald Coast in Santa Rosa Beach 850-278-3980  
Ascension Sacred Heart

Women’s Diagnostic Center - Watersound Origins 850-278-3441

### Bay County residents

Ascension Sacred Heart Women’s Diagnostic Center - Bay in Panama City 850-804-3909

### Gulf and Franklin County residents

Ascension Sacred Heart Women’s Diagnostic Center - Gulf in Port St. Joe 850-229-5680

Women seeking a free mammogram can call their nearest location above to schedule an appointment. To find the location near you, visit [ascension.org/sacredheartmammogram](http://ascension.org/sacredheartmammogram). To support this program with your generous donations to the Sacred Heart Foundation visit [givesacredheart.org](http://givesacredheart.org).

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Wellness

# It's Time to Exercise



KAY LEAMAN, HEALTH ARCHITECT, CERTIFIED NUTRITION ADVISOR

The word exercise triggers a range of definitions from 'it's work', I love it, I hate it, I should, I have to, I get to and the list goes on. The bottom line is we should all be moving. Back in the 'old days' we had to get off the couch to change the channel or turn the record over, kids played outside every day, we spent more time on our feet in the kitchen because we didn't have appliance garages, we had to push the manual lawn mower and clip the bushes by hand. We have so many things today that make our lives easier, not paying attention to the gradual move toward lethargy.

We all know we should be exercising but how do we start and what is our goal? Some of us have a home gym while others go to a gym and others use

the internet for their gym. So, where do we start?

The first decision we need to make is what do we want to achieve. We then need to determine what our physical limits are. Our next decision is what type of exercise or exercises do we need and how much time are we willing to commit to it.

The Department of Health shows (Seems to be focused on cardio, but what about everything else?) 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise (heart rate = 50-70% of our maximum) weekly.

OR

75 minutes of high intensity exercise (heart rate = 70-85% of our maximum) weekly.

PLUS

2 days of muscle strength exercises (30 minutes/5 days a week or 10 minutes/3 times daily).

AND

Always warm up with stretches before.

Now, let's take a look at our choices:

- **Aerobic:** walking, running, jogging, cycling, swimming, dancing
- **Strength:** free weights, body weight (does not use any appliance), resistance bands, Pilates (core muscles, posture, flexibility)
- **Flexibility and Stretch-**



**ing:** Yoga, static stretching, dynamic stretching (arm circles, leg swings, etc.)

• **Balance and Stability:** Tai Chi, single leg stands, heel to toe walking, ankle exercises, coordination routines

• **HIIT (high intensity interval training):** sprint intervals, circuit training, jump rope, R.I.P.P.E.D. (resistance, interval, power, plyometrics, endurance, diet).

Dancing is a great place to start. Put on music you love and just start moving! This will exercise your joints, muscles and cardiovascular system as well as lift your spirit and reduce stress. Another good way to start is to take a short walk after dinner. This helps with digestion, decreases stress and ends the day on a fresh air note.

If you have joint issues I en-

courage you to start with pool exercises. There are cardio, resistance and other options available. The water gives excellent support and cuts down on the whole sweat thing.

Some of the exercises cross categories. Advanced yoga includes body weight postures as well as balance. Pilates is also good for flexibility. Tai Chi exercises the brain.

Let's say you want to start a cardio program and have only been walking. Try this: walk for 10 steps, walk fast for 10 steps, run fast for 10 steps, repeat. How many times can you do this? You would be amazed how well this works.

Look up chair exercises. These are great during commercials or while you're sitting at your desk.

Are you someone who just

doesn't have enough time in your day? If that's you then it's time to think outside of the box. Stop trying to find the closest parking spot at the store, power walk the aisles of the grocery store, do squats when you're at the washer/dryer, stand on one leg when you're at the kitchen sink, do ankle exercises at the stoplight, or how about lunges walking between rooms. You can also have walking meetings at work. The options are endless.

There are no excuses. Even the most inactive person can find a place to start. Start with 10 minutes a day and build from there. Oh, did I hear you say you want to increase muscle strength but can't afford weights? Use a one gallon container of milk or a couple large cans of beans. What about your laundry detergent bottle? Like Tom Bodett (Motel 6) once said, 'We don't have a gym but you can carry your luggage around the parking lot.'

It's not about what we can't do or don't have. It's about taking that first step every day and every step makes a difference.

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of

# THE YEAR

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# Reclaiming Your Edge: Precision Performance and Long-Term Health



DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

You're at the gym, pushing for that final set, but the explosive power just isn't there. Back at the office, you're staring at the same report for the tenth time, your focus drifting as a familiar cloud of irritability settles in. By 2:13 a.m., you're staring at the ceiling, heart racing, replaying the day's endless list while a thin layer of sweat cools on your skin.

It's easy to shrug this off as "just getting older," but this slow erosion of muscle, mood, and mental sharpness is often a biological decline, not an inevitable part of aging. While national health trends often highlight mental health and sleep during specific awareness months, maintaining your peak performance is a year-round commitment to your biology.



## Precision Performance, Not a Rollercoaster

At The Hormone Restoration Center, we use bioidentical pellets to optimize hormone levels so your body stops sabotaging your efforts. Unlike messy gels that can rub off on your family or weekly injections that cause emotional "spikes

and crashes," pellets provide a steady, consistent release that mimics your body's natural rhythm.

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support GABA—the calming brain chemical—and keep serotonin steady, sharpening your focus and eliminating the irritability that can strain your professional and personal life.

- **Tactical Recovery & Sleep:** When testosterone is low, sleep becomes "fragile". Pellets help your body optimize melatonin and lower nighttime cortisol so you aren't wide awake at 3 a.m. They stabilize your internal thermostat, meaning you wake up recharged rather than restless.

- **Muscle Retention & Physical Power:** Your physical foundation depends on testosterone as the primary driver of protein synthesis. Optimized levels prevent your body from breaking down muscle for energy, helping you regain the strength, lean muscle mass, and recovery speed you need to perform at your best.

- **Long-Term Preventive Health:** Beyond immediate performance, optimization is an investment in your future. Maintaining healthy hormone levels has a protective effect on heart health and supports bone density, reducing the long-term risk of chronic decline.

## The Path to Peak Optimization

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Most men feel the "lifting of the veil" within the first two weeks, with reliable peak performance by week six. We don't "set it and forget it"—we check labs after insertion to ensure your levels are dialed in perfectly for your specific goals.

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We combine hormone therapy with lifestyle guidance so the changes stick. Don't let another day pass feeling like a shadow of yourself. Whether you want to hit a new personal best or simply want the energy to be the man your family relies on, we are here to help.

*Reclaim your vitality and get back in the game. Call The Hormone Restoration Center at (850) 837-1271 to schedule your consultation and blood work.*



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- 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?

If the answer is "yes" to any of these questions, you may be a good candidate for **A Smile Makeover**.



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# A Superior Mechanical to Host Its Second Appreciation Lunch in October

The Walton and Okaloosa communities are coming together again to give recognition and thanks to our first responders, veterans, and active military. A Superior Mechanical will hold its next Veterans and First Responders Appreciation Lunch at the Niceville Community Center, 204 Partin Drive North, Niceville, FL 32578 on Tuesday, October 20, 2026. Doors open at 11 a.m.; Lunch and the program will begin promptly at 11:30 a.m.

During the event, A Superior Mechanical will donate a new AC system complete with installation to one First Responder or Veteran in need. This giveaway is open to all who have served in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and all first responders including EMT/



Walton and Okaloosa County businesses are encouraged to sponsor; for more information contact Marta Thorpe at (850) 814-3822.

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Medics, Police, Sheriffs and Fire Fighters. Register to win at [ASuperiorMechanical.com](http://ASuperiorMechanical.com) and go to About Us > Hvac Giveaway.

Local businesses are invited and encouraged to donate door prizes and giveaways. A Superior founder Jimmy Thorpe says he hopes this giveaway serves as an example of how others can give back. "We wanted to somehow give back to others, and decided

to give back what we have: AC systems."

The event includes a delicious hot lunch catered by Swiftly Catered, a brief welcome from the sponsors and supporters, and the AC Giveaway. This event is supported and sponsored by the City of Niceville and Niceville Community Center, Niceville High School (who will present the colors), Rocky Bayou Christian School (who will sing the National Anthem), Chelco, United Community Bank, NHance Cabinet Makeovers, One Beach Real Estate, and Beachworx CoWorking Spaces.

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**Publisher/Executive Editor**  
Lori Leath Smith  
[Lori@LifeMediaGrp.com](mailto:Lori@LifeMediaGrp.com)

**Director, Advertising Sales**  
Scott Miller  
[Scott@LifeMediaGrp.com](mailto:Scott@LifeMediaGrp.com)

**Art Director**  
Kim Harper

**Advertising Account Manager**  
Michaela Heshler  
[Michaela@LifeMediaGrp.com](mailto:Michaela@LifeMediaGrp.com)

**Writers**  
Dr. Karen DeVore  
Mimy Kincaid  
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# Sean of the South: You Can Tell a Lot About a Person



BY SEAN DIETRICH

My granddaddy said you can tell a lot about a person by the way they treat a dog. Someone who treats a dog badly, is a bad person. A person who treats a dog with regard and deference is a good egg.



with a blunt object. Her optic nerve scarred over. She lost her vision. The doctor removed one eye.

“What probably happened,” the vet said, “is that someone paid a lot of money for this hunting dog, but Marigold turned out to be gun shy.”

Her abuser wasn’t happy about shelling out thousands of bucks for a dog who doesn’t like noise. So he took his frustration out on the animal. He used a hard object. Perhaps the butt of a rifle.

My wife is softly humming to Marigold. “I love you,” she is quietly singing to the animal.

We’ve had our dog several years now. Life with a blind dog was tricky at first. Not like having a regular dog at all. When we feed Marigold treats, for example, you have to touch her to let her know you’re near. Then, Marigold simply opens her mouth widely, gyrating her head back and forth.

“I don’t know where you are,” she’s saying, “but I’m opening my mouth to make it easier for you.”

Marigold’s internal schedule is all screwed up, too, because blind dogs can’t sense light or darkness. So they have no idea

what time it is. Sometimes Marigold wakes up at 1 a.m. and starts licking my face. And I start cussing and I say, “Please go back to bed.” Whereupon Marigold barks with glee. Because there is nothing half as fun as 1 a.m.

But, we love this animal. Namely, because we don’t have kids. As a result, my wife and I have a huge vacuum in our hearts. Which is why we sometimes fall deeply in love with other people’s children. And it’s embarrassing because they aren’t ours, and people look at

us funny.

Marigold is like our kid. Because this blind dog needs us for everything. She can’t do anything for herself.

She needs us for simple tasks like finding her food bowl, or walking through new places. We hold her when she has nightmares—which is common for blind animals. We talk to her, from whatever room we are in, just so she knows where we are in the house.

It’s been the most rewarding animal relationship I’ve ever had. And whenever I see Mari-

gold crawl onto my wife’s lap, when I see this woman speak softly to this wounded animal, when I see her stroke Marigold’s fur and kiss her broken skull, I feel something profound.

Jamie Dietrich holds the animal like an infant. She kisses the mangled scars where Marigold’s eye used to be.

“Oh, I love you so much,” whispers my wife. She is a woman who is filled with compassion and goodwill. And she has proven to me that my grandfather was absolutely right

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Right now, my wife is holding our blind coonhound, Marigold. She holds our rescue adoptee like a baby. Not like a dog. Marigold’s face was struck

## MEN’S HEALTH

continued from page 4

well for the people who depend on them.

### “How do I know if something is actually wrong?”

The body often signals change long before disease becomes obvious through shifts in energy, sleep, weight, recovery, and lab markers.

That doesn’t mean every symptom is dangerous. But it also doesn’t mean it should be ignored. Paying attention to your health is a practical way to protect long-term quality of life.

### The Bigger Picture

Men’s health isn’t about quick fixes or single solutions. It’s about staying strong, pro-

tecting metabolic and cardiovascular health, maintaining clarity, preserving muscle and mobility, improving resilience, and building sustainable habits.

It requires a more comprehensive approach looking at how systems interact rather than treating issues in isolation.

Health optimization isn’t just for athletes or people in crisis. It’s for everyday men who want to feel well, function well, and stay ahead of preventable decline.

You don’t need perfection.

You don’t need extremes.

And you don’t need to wait until something breaks.

It starts with awareness, followed by consistent action and the right support to understand what your body is telling you.

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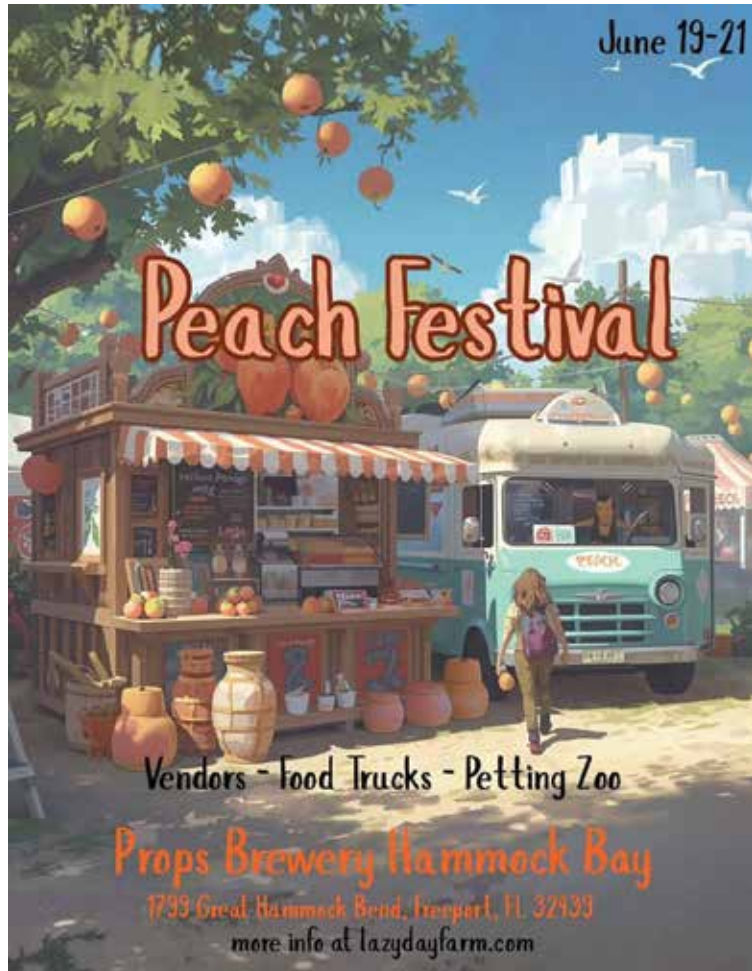
Outdoors

# WCT Offers Complimentary Day-Use Admission to Topsail Hill Preserve and Grayton Beach State Parks

Walton County is once again offering complimentary day-use entry to Grayton Beach State Park and Topsail Hill Preserve State Park from Memorial Day

weekend through Labor Day.

Walton County Tourism is covering day-use fees to highlight the amenities and variety of eco-tourism experiences



available in South Walton. This year marks the 12th year of admission coverage for Topsail Hill Preserve State Park and the 10th for Grayton Beach State Park. "Walton County's state parks offer a unique way to experience our destination, bringing together our beaches, trails and coastal dune lakes in one place," said Matt Algarin, tourism director for Walton County. "This program creates additional opportunity for visitors and residents to explore and enjoy everything these parks have to offer."

Enhanced access to the parks will be available this year via Walton County Tourism's Beach Tram. This service provides a convenient and eco-friendly way to enjoy the parks without worrying about parking, helps reduce traffic congestion and protects the natural surroundings along the way. More information about tram routes and schedules will be posted on [WaltonTransportation.com](http://WaltonTransportation.com) when available.

"We are incredibly thankful for our partnership with the state parks and to Rep. Shane

Abbott who worked diligently with us and at the state level to expand access," Algarin said.

Free entry to the two parks is available during regular hours, typically 8 a.m. to sunset. This year's program starts on Memorial Day weekend, Friday, May 22, and runs through Labor Day, Monday, Sept. 7.

For more information on Topsail Hill Preserve State Park visit: [visitsouthwalton.com/listing/topsail-hill-preserve-state-park](http://visitsouthwalton.com/listing/topsail-hill-preserve-state-park)

For more information on Grayton Beach State Park visit: [visitsouthwalton.com/listing/grayton-beach-state-park](http://visitsouthwalton.com/listing/grayton-beach-state-park)

For more information on the Beach Tram service visit: [waltoncountylftourism.com/transportation](http://waltoncountylftourism.com/transportation)

## ACRES PRESERVED

*continued from page 20*

ship, particularly in areas surrounding rivers, bays and coastal dune lake systems.

The protected property will help safeguard water quality, wildlife corridors and natural flood protection while preserving scenic landscapes that have long defined the character of Northwest Florida. The area also supports recreational activities including paddling, fishing, hiking and wildlife observation.

The ribbon cutting brought together representatives from environmental organizations, local government and community stakeholders who celebrated the collaborative effort behind the preservation initiative.

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# Natural Harmony: Music and the Beach

The rhythm of ocean waves, the warmth of the sun and the gentle breeze rolling across the shoreline create a peaceful setting unlike any other. For many people, a beach vacation is more than a getaway; it is a chance to rest, reflect and reconnect with themselves. Music often becomes the perfect companion during these moments, offering comfort, joy and inspiration while lifting the spirit in ways words alone cannot describe.



Music and the beach share a natural harmony. The steady crash of waves resembles a calming rhythm, almost like nature's own melody. When favorite songs blend with the sounds of the sea, stress begins to fade away. Whether someone is listening through headphones while walking along the shoreline or hearing soft acoustic music from a beachside café, music has the power to deepen feelings of peace and relaxation.

One reason music is so comforting during a beach vacation is because it connects deeply with emotions. Gentle melodies and uplifting lyrics can calm anxious thoughts and help people feel fully present in the moment. Live instrumental music, reggae rhythms, acoustic guitar songs and tropical tunes often create feelings of warmth and freedom. As the sun sets over the water, music can turn an ordinary evening into a meaningful memory filled with gratitude and serenity.

Music also strengthens the

emotional connection people feel with special places. Years later, hearing a certain song can instantly bring back memories of sandy beaches, salty air and carefree summer days. A single melody can transport someone back to a family vacation, a romantic sunset walk or laughter shared with friends around a beach bonfire — dancing and simply enjoying the moment. In this way, music becomes part of the memory itself, preserving emotions that might otherwise fade with time.

For many vacationers, music provides healing and renewal. Modern life can be busy and overwhelming, filled with schedules, noise and constant distractions. The beach naturally slows life down, and music helps complete that experience. Listening to soothing songs while watching waves roll onto the shore can quiet the mind and refresh the soul. It creates space to think clearly, dream again and appreciate life's simple blessings.

Music can also energize and inspire beach adventures. Upbeat songs played during a morning jog on the sand or

laughter, movement and shared joy that become part of the vacation experience.

Perhaps most importantly, music reminds people to

while paddleboarding across the water can fill people with motivation and happiness. Families dancing together near the shoreline or friends singing along during a sunset cruise often discover that music brings people closer together. It encourages

feel deeply. The beach already awakens the senses with beautiful scenery and the endless motion of the ocean. Music adds another emotional layer, turning peaceful moments into unforgettable experiences. Together, music and the beach create a powerful combination that comforts the heart and lifts the spirit.

In the end, a beach vacation is not only about escaping routine; it is about renewing the soul. Music becomes the soundtrack to that renewal, soothing wor-

ries, inspiring happiness and helping people treasure each moment beside the sea.

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Arts & Music

# Accepting Applications for 2026 Walton County Artist of the Year

Walton County Tourism began accepting applications for the 2026 Artist of the Year Award on May 1. Currently in its 24th year, this accolade aims to honor a local artist of Walton County whose unique artistic expression captures the essence of

the destination's renowned creativity and beauty.

The deadline for submissions for the Artist of the Year program is Sunday, May 31, at 5 p.m. CDT. The winner will be announced during the Walton County Tourism Annual Meet-

ing in October 2026. Artists can find instructions and apply online at [waltoncountyaoy.com](http://waltoncountyaoy.com).

The Artist of the Year Award is a community initiative highlighting local artists, spotlighting their work through diverse publicity channels and events



pride • preservation • conservation

throughout the year. The recipient will be granted \$4,000 for creating a commissioned artwork to be showcased in Walton County.

“Walton County is home to incredibly talented individuals who express their craft through creative mediums,” said Matt Algarin, tourism director for Walton County Tourism. “Through our Artist of the Year program, we are not only able to showcase and highlight a truly deserving individual, but we are able to promote and share their work with a larger audience.”

Artwork submissions will be evaluated based on criteria such

as originality, authenticity and overall appeal. Finalists will participate in in-person interviews where they will be required to present three examples of artwork during a panel discussion.

Recent Artist of the Year winners include: Mindy Moore, Sarah Page, Bradley Copeland, Joseph Messer and Chandler Williams. For a complete list of winners, visit [waltoncountyaoy.com](http://waltoncountyaoy.com).

*To learn more about the Artist of the Year program, contact Lisa Foster at (850) 333-2728 or [Lisa@WCTourism.com](mailto:Lisa@WCTourism.com).*



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## MKAF Seeks Artists for 31st Festival of the Arts

Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation is now accepting artist applications for the 31st annual Festival of the Arts, set for Oct. 24–25, 2026, at the Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Village in Destin.

One of the Southeast's premier art festivals, the event features more than 100 artists from across the country, along with live music, Cuisine on the Green, a wine and beer garden, children's art activities and more. This juried show includes a wide range of mediums, from painting and sculpture to photography, fiber, glass and digital art. Artists will compete for \$10,000 in cash awards. A \$30 nonrefundable jury fee applies, with booth fees starting at \$350. “Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation is a champion for arts and culture and



the Festival of the Arts helps to build that creative community. This festival attracts artists from across the country and has become a popular annual fall event with locals and visitors alike,” said Deb Nissley, director of operations for Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation.

Application deadline for artist exhibition and poster art is July 1, 2026. Learn more at [mkaf.org](http://mkaf.org).

# Emerald Coast Theatre Company Presents Blockbuster Season 14 from Sept 10-May 23, 2027

Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC) is proud to unveil its highly anticipated Season 14, a lineup that promises to be bigger, bolder, and more unforgettable than ever before. With a dynamic mix of Tony Award-winning productions, gripping thrillers, a holiday favorite, and a magical regional premiere, this season invites audiences to take a front seat to something truly special on the Emerald Coast.



At the heart of Season 14 is a commitment to storytelling that moves, inspires, and entertains. The season features the Tony Award-winning phenomenon *Come From Away*, the remarkable true story of 7,000 stranded passengers and the small Canadian town that welcomed them during the events of September 11th that redefined humanity and hope. Audiences will then buckle up for Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps*, a fast-paced adventure blending suspense and comedy in a way that keeps viewers on the edge of their seats.

As the holidays approach, ECTC brings the electrifying energy of *Million Dollar Quartet Christmas*, a returning favorite, wrapped up in a new way, where legendary rock 'n' roll icons reunite in a festive, high-octane jam session filled with seasonal spirit. The new year kicks off with 9 to 5: *The Musical*, the smash-hit production that celebrates ambi-

tion, resilience, and the unmistakable influence of Dolly Parton in a story that remains as relevant as ever.

Continuing the season's dynamic offerings, *Dear Jack, Dear Louise* offers a heartfelt and intimate look at a love story that blossomed through letters sent across the Atlantic Ocean during the height of World War II. Closing out the season is a moment audiences have been waiting for as the regional premiere of Disney's iconic *Frozen* takes the stage, bringing the modern classic to life, designed to captivate audiences of all ages.

Season 14 is thoughtfully curated to offer something for everyone, from families experiencing theatre for the first time to longtime patrons seeking unforgettable nights out, to date nights, and much more. Enhancing the experience even further, ECTC's Season 14 VIP program provides early access to the best seats, exclusive invitations to special events, opportunities to meet the cast, and behind-the-scenes

experiences that bring audiences closer to the art. It is through the support of this community that ECTC continues to raise the bar, delivering professional productions that enrich, educate, and inspire.

"This is one of the most exciting seasons we've ever put on our stage," said Nathanael Fisher, Producing Artistic Director of Emerald Coast Theatre Company. "From the scale of these productions to the stories we're telling, everything about Season 14 is designed to raise the bar for what audiences experience at ECTC."

Performances will be held at Emerald Coast Theatre Company, located at 560 Grand Boulevard, Suite 200, Miramar Beach.

ECTC's 2026-2027 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.*

## Destin Seltzer Festival Returns June 6, 2026 at The Market Shops

The highly anticipated Seltzer Festival is back and set to take over The Market Shops on Saturday, June 6 from 1 to 4 p.m. This lively, coastal event will bring together locals and visitors alike for an unforgettable afternoon featuring seltzer samples, light bites from local restaurants, live music, and more.

Guests will have the opportunity to sip their way through a wide variety of seltzers from national and regional brands, with tasting stations offering 2 oz. samples poured by event volunteers. The festival is expected to draw 300-400 attendees, creating a vibrant atmosphere in the heart of the Emerald Coast.

More than just a tasting event, the Seltzer Festival is proud to support a meaningful cause. The event is hosted by Opportunity Place, a local low-barrier homeless shelter dedicated to keeping families together while helping individuals transition into stable housing and self-sufficiency.

100% of proceeds from the festival will directly benefit Opportunity Place's programs and operations, making every ticket purchased a step toward changing lives in the community.

In addition to general admission, a limited number of VIP tickets will be available, offering guests an elevated experience with exclusive perks and access to a private VIP tent featuring enhanced food offerings.

"The Seltzer Festival is about bringing the community together for a fun, high-energy event while supporting an incredible local organization," said event organizers. "We're excited to partner with The Market Shops as our venue sponsor and to showcase a wide range of seltzer brands, local restaurants, and live entertainment—all for a great cause."

For tickets, visit <https://www.eventliveus.com/event/10364/seltzer-fest>.

## Local Coupons

<p><b>CULLIGAN WATER</b></p> <p><b>\$300 OFF</b></p> <p>WHEN YOU MENTION THIS AD/COUPON</p> <p>Offer expires 6/30/26 850-664-7771</p>	<p><b>ROOFPRO</b></p> <p><b>\$500 OFF</b></p> <p><b>FULL ROOF REPLACEMENT</b></p> <p>Offer expires 6/30/26 850-332-3330 Roofproroofing.com</p>	<p><b>BLUEWATER PLASTIC SURGERY</b></p> <p><b>\$100 OFF LASER PACKAGES</b></p> <p><small>INCLUDES LASER HAIR REMOVAL, PHOTOFACIALS, AND PIGMENTATION TREATMENTS (EXCLUDES ULTRACLEAR). PLUS ENJOY A COMPLIMENTARY CONSULTATION WITH MICHELLE, NP.</small></p> <p>Offer expires 6/30/26 Niceville • Santa Rosa Beach 850-530-6064 <a href="http://www.bluewaterplasticsurgery.com">www.bluewaterplasticsurgery.com</a></p>	<p><b>BLUEWATER PLASTIC SURGERY</b></p> <p><b>20% OFF ANY FACIAL</b></p> <p><small>PLUS A FREE SKIN CONSULTATION WITH OUR AESTHETICIAN, MAYA. NEW PATIENTS ONLY.</small></p> <p>Offer expires 6/30/26 Niceville • Santa Rosa Beach 850-530-6064 <a href="http://www.bluewaterplasticsurgery.com">www.bluewaterplasticsurgery.com</a></p>
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*Beth Jones*  
[beth@hammockbayfl.com](mailto:beth@hammockbayfl.com)



*Gina Walker*  
[gina@hammockbayfl.com](mailto:gina@hammockbayfl.com)



*Anne Winjum*  
[anne@hammockbayfl.com](mailto:anne@hammockbayfl.com)



*Bonnie Bianca*  
[bonnie@hammockbayfl.com](mailto:bonnie@hammockbayfl.com)

📍 6932 CO Highway 3280, Freeport, FL, 32439    🌐 [natureviewfl.com](http://natureviewfl.com)