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America's Big Birthday, Freeport Style

Two hundred and fifty years ago, a group of determined Americans signed a document that changed the course of history.

This 4th of July, communities across the nation will celebrate America's 250th birthday, and here in Freeport, residents will celebrate that big birthday in true small-town style—from decorated bicycles and hometown parades to live music, food trucks and a spectacular fireworks finale lighting up the night sky.

For many, Independence Day is about family traditions, backyard cookouts and patriotic pride. This year, however, carries special significance as our community begins to commemorate the nation's semiquincentennial, the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

And few places celebrate community quite like our beautiful Freeport.

Patriotic Bike Parade

The day begins in Hammock Bay with one of our



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TIM ARD PHOTO

community's most beloved traditions—the annual Residents Bike Parade. Neighbors, children and families are invited to gather at the General Store parking lot near the gazebo beginning at 9 a.m., with the parade rolling out at 9:15 a.m. Decorated bicycles, wagons and patriotic costumes transform the neighborhood

into a sea of red, white and blue as participants show off their creativity and community spirit.

Prizes are typically awarded for the best-decorated bikes, wagons and participants, making it a favorite family tradition, especially for our kids.



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Celebrate All Day

After the morning festivities, residents can continue the celebration throughout Hammock Bay's Town Center. Local favorites such as Props Brewery and Big Mike's Smokehouse offer gathering

BIG BIRTHDAY

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Ten Years Later:

How a Dream,
a Turtle and Local
Support Started It All

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

Ten years ago, many South Walton residents could still remember when Highway 30A felt more like a scenic backroad than a nationally recognized brand. Growth was already underway, but the area still carried the slower rhythm and small-town familiarity locals cherished. Summers were busy, but the quieter months still belonged to the teachers, fishermen, artists, restaurant owners and entrepreneurs who formed the backbone of the community before much of the country

TEN YEARS

continued on page 2



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 Community

TEN YEARS

continued from page 1

fully discovered it.

Then came 2016.

That was the year newspaper man Dave White arrived from New England carrying a simple, but ambitious, dream: to create a publication devoted entirely to the people, stories and spirit of South Walton.

Like so many who now call this area home, Dave's connection to the Emerald Coast actually began years earlier during visits with friends Ray and Lisa Cyr, owners of Studio 237 Music School in Santa Rosa Beach. They introduced him to the charm, beauty and strong sense of community found throughout South Walton. What started as admiration soon became something more — a desire to move here permanently and become part of the community itself. And he did.

Ray helped introduce Dave to local business owners and community leaders while Dave shared the vision for an all-positive publication centered on storytelling, connection and, most importantly for local business owners, direct-mail distribution.

But a brand was still needed that truly reflected the local lifestyle. That inspiration came through South Walton resident and the paper's first-year editor Sarah Stewart. She suggested the now-iconic sea-glass blues and greens, a turtle "mascot" and logo, and a tagline that instantly separated locals from tourists: "Locals get it," which, to be clear, they did. And still do.

And just like that, SoWal Life was born.

The concept was simple — deliver the publication directly to mailboxes and fill it with stories locals actually cared about: community happenings, events, arts, local personalities, hometown heroes and positive news. Nationally known author Sean Dietrich came aboard alongside monthly columns such as the now longtime faith-based column, A Pastor's Ponderings. With no established playbook, the small team juggled ad sales, last-minute content submissions, production challenges and tight deadlines while working to prove the concept month after month. The vibe was less "breaking news" and more "Hey, did you hear about this?" As SoWal Life continued gaining momentum and reader support, a second SoWal Life edition was launched to expand the publication's reach to Miramar Beach. The strong response confirmed what Dave White and the team had believed from the beginning: people were hungry for positive, community-focused local media that celebrated the place they called home.

The Next Chapter

What started as one community newspaper soon became something much bigger.

In 2018, publisher Lori Leath Smith became a partner in launching Destin Life, bringing the same all-positive, community-centered concept into the Destin market. The response was immediate and enthusiastic.

The momentum continued

with the launch of Bay Life in 2019. Through another business partnership, Lori and Scott Miller introduced the publication to the Bluewater Bay community, followed shortly thereafter by a second Bay Life edition serving Niceville and Valparaiso. Growth continued across the Emerald Coast with the addition of PCB Life in Panama City Beach, FWB Life in Fort Walton Beach and the newest publication, Freeport Life.

As the family of publications expanded, Scott recognized the need for a stronger umbrella brand to unite the growing network. Together, they established Life Media Group, creating a cohesive identity for what had become a thriving collection of community-focused media outlets.

Today, Life Media Group encompasses eight all-positive community newspapers, digital platforms and specialty publications serving readers across the Emerald Coast. The organization is supported by a dedicated team of 13 staff members, along with a talented network of writers, photographers, designers, contributors and community partners who help bring each publication to life every month.

While each publication maintains its own unique hometown personality, the mission has remained the same from the beginning: celebrate local people, support local businesses, strengthen community connection and shine a light on the positive stories happening all around us every day.

"Readers have embraced the publications as their own," says Dave. "Many say they read the papers cover-to-cover each month for local events, uplifting stories and hometown happenings often difficult to find elsewhere. Others intentionally support businesses they discover inside the pages."

Life Media direct-mails and distributes more than 87,000 hyper-local copies monthly throughout the Emerald Coast while also reaching thousands more readers digitally through websites, e-newsletters and social media platforms.

More than newspapers, Life Media has always been about



PHOTO CREDIT: SAWY LEIGH PHOTO

(Left to Right) Paul Willms, Sales; Sarah Stewart; Scott Miller; Lori Leath Miller; Dave White; Lisa and Ray Cyr; Grace Ann Russell, Sales; and Denise David, Sales. Not pictured: Jamie Zimchek, Editor Sowel Life and PCB Life; John Tower, Accounting; Dawna Shackley, Sowel Life Graphic Designer; Kim Harper, Life Media Art Director.

connection — and interaction. We love hearing from our readers, receiving story ideas, celebrating accomplishments, spotlighting businesses and learning about the people and organizations making a difference throughout our communities. Some of our readers and advertising partners have been with us since the very beginning, and for that loyalty and support, we are deeply grateful.

The Next Decade

As Life Media moves into its next decade, the mission remains unchanged: sharing positive stories and celebrating the faith, family, businesses and community spirit that make our area so special.

WE'LL CONTINUE providing a trusted community voice while offering affordable, effective promotion through the powerful combination of direct-mail print and digital marketing.

WE'LL CONTINUE connecting readers through engaging editorial, websites, e-newsletters, social media, events and community involvement throughout the region.

Most importantly, WE'LL CONTINUE believing positive news still matters.

What began with one dream, one turtle and one small newspaper in South Walton has grown into something far greater than anyone imagined 10 years ago.

And we're just getting started.

Cheers to 10 Years!



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CrossCountry3:

Helping Veterans Rediscover Purpose Through Service

“The transformative effects of building resiliency are life changing.”
— Bruce Duty

In our community, military service is woven into the fabric of everyday life. From active-duty personnel at Eglin Air Force Base and Hurlburt Field to the thousands of veterans who call the Emerald Coast home, many have dedicated their lives to serving others. Yet, when military service ends, some find themselves searching for a renewed sense of purpose, identity and hope.

That need inspired the creation of CrossCountry3, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping veterans rediscover purpose by empowering them to serve others in the fight against human trafficking.

At its heart, CrossCountry3 exists because many veterans possess unique skills, leadership abilities and a deep desire to continue making a difference. After years of serving their

country, some veterans struggle to find a renewed sense of purpose once military service ends. The organization believes every veteran has tremendous value and untapped potential that can continue to positively impact society.

CrossCountry3 was created to help bridge that gap. Rather than focusing solely on the challenges veterans face, the organization emphasizes opportunities for transformational growth. By connecting veterans with meaningful missions that combat human trafficking, CrossCountry3 provides a pathway for them to use their strengths, experiences and commitment to service in ways that directly benefit vulnerable individuals and communities.

A key part of CrossCountry3’s impact is the leadership and community engagement of its founder, Bruce Duty. Based locally, the organization serves a region with one of the nation’s largest concentrations



of military personnel, veterans and military families, including those connected to Eglin Air Force Base, Hurlburt Field and the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne).

Through years of relationship-building within the military and veteran community, Duty has helped create a mission that reflects the values of service, sacrifice and freedom deeply rooted throughout the Florida Panhandle. By fostering partnerships and encouraging veterans to engage in the fight against



human trafficking, CrossCountry3 offers veterans a pathway to continue making a meaningful difference while helping protect some of society’s most vulnerable individuals.

The organization’s approach is built upon three core values: **faith, family and freedom**. Whether through workshops, retreats or individual training, CrossCountry3 remains committed to helping veterans build resilience and discover renewed purpose.

Resilience training teaches

veterans the importance of a positive self-identity, living with purpose and embracing a horizon of hope through serving the brokenhearted and vulnerable.

Faith serves as the foundation for hope and personal growth. CrossCountry3 encourages veterans to discover a deeper sense of purpose and meaning, helping them understand their lives and experiences continue to have significant value.

Family represents the im-

Continued on page 28



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The Top 5 Things Your Doctor Wishes They Could Tell You (Without Hurting Your Feelings)

By Dr. Karen DeVore

If you've ever sat across from a healthcare provider and wondered what they were really thinking, I can assure you it's not judgment. Most of us chose this profession because we gen-

uinely want to help people live healthier, happier lives.

That said, there are a few things many doctors wish we could say more directly. Not because we're frustrated, but because these truths have the pow-

er to change your health more than any prescription, supplement, or procedure ever could.

Here are five things your doctor would probably tell you if they knew it wouldn't hurt your feelings.

1. Your body is talking to you. Stop waiting until it's screaming.

Many people ignore symptoms for months or even years. Fatigue becomes "normal." Weight gain is blamed on age. Brain fog gets brushed aside. Digestive issues become part of daily life.

The problem is that most chronic health issues don't appear overnight. They often start as whispers before they become alarms.

When your energy changes, your sleep deteriorates, your mood shifts, or your body starts functioning differently, pay attention. These are not inconveniences to ignore. They are valuable pieces of information. The earlier you investigate a problem, the easier it often is to address.

2. You can't out-supplement a lifestyle that isn't working.

I say this as someone who believes supplements can be incredibly helpful when used appropriately. But no supplement can consistently overcome poor sleep, chronic stress, a sedentary lifestyle, excessive alcohol consumption, or a diet built primarily around convenience foods.

Many people are searching for the one thing that will fix everything. The reality is that health is usually built through hundreds of small decisions repeated over time. The basics are not exciting, but they work. Sleep. Movement. Nutrition. Stress management. Meaningful relationships. Consistency. Those habits may not come in a bottle, but they are often the most powerful medicine available.

3. Stress is affecting your health more than you realize.

When patients come to me with fatigue, digestive issues, weight struggles, hormone imbalances, headaches, anxiety, or chronic pain, stress is often somewhere in the picture.

We've become so accustomed to being busy, overwhelmed, and constantly connected that many people no longer recognize what chronic stress feels like. They simply assume it's normal. Your body, however, keeps score.



Stress influences inflammation, blood sugar regulation, hormone production, immune function, sleep quality, and even how quickly you age. Managing stress is not selfish. It is a fundamental part of maintaining your health.

4. Aging is inevitable. Feeling terrible is not.

One of the most common statements I hear is, "I guess I'm just getting older."

While aging does bring changes, we often blame age for things that deserve a closer look. Low energy, poor sleep, decreased strength, brain fog, loss of motivation, weight gain, and declining vitality are not things you simply have to accept.

Many of these concerns may be related to nutrition, hormones, inflammation, stress, metabolic health, or other factors that can often be improved. The goal isn't to look 25 forever. The goal is to feel your best at every age.

5. Nobody cares more about your health than you do.

This may be the hardest truth on the list. Your doctor can guide you. We can educate you. We can order tests, recommend treatments, and help create a plan. But we cannot make choices for you.

The patients who experience the greatest transformations are not necessarily the ones with the most resources or the perfect genetics. They are the ones who become active participants in their own health. They ask questions. They stay curious. They follow through. They view their health as an investment rather than an expense.

Your healthcare team can walk beside you, but ultimately

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Community

NatureView: Why So Many Families Are Choosing Freeport Before Everyone Else Does

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

For years, people moved to the Emerald Coast for the beaches. Today, more and more families are moving here for something else entirely. They're looking for space. They're looking for community. And they're looking for a place where life feels a little less rushed.

That's one reason **NatureView** is quickly becoming one of the most talked-about new communities in Walton County. Located in Freeport, Nature-

View offers something that has become increasingly difficult to find across Northwest Florida: a brand-new master-planned community surrounded by nature, yet still connected to everything residents need.

In a region experiencing tremendous growth, NatureView was intentionally designed to be different. Instead of being surrounded by commercial development, NatureView is bordered by thousands of acres of permanently protected conservation land, creating a setting that feels peaceful, private, and connected to the natural beauty

that first made this area so special. NatureView sits on approximately 276 acres and is surrounded by more than 50,000 acres of protected forest and conservation lands.

Residents enjoy a lifestyle centered around both community and the outdoors. Miles of nature trails, pocket parks, gathering spaces, a resort-style pool, clubhouse, fitness center, pickleball courts, basketball courts, and playgrounds are all part of the vision for the neighborhood.

But what makes NatureView stand out isn't just the amenities. It's the feeling. Children



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riding bikes through the neighborhood. Neighbors gathering outside in the evenings. Families meeting friends at the pool after work. Morning walks surrounded by towering pines instead of traffic. It's a lifestyle many people thought had disappeared from modern communities.

NatureView is also positioned in one of the fastest-growing areas in Florida. Freeport has experienced remarkable growth over the last decade, attracting families, professionals, military personnel, retirees, and first-time homebuyers who want to be near the Emerald Coast without sacrificing affordability or quality of life. NatureView's location provides convenient access to South Walton beaches, Highway 331, Eglin Air Force Base, Hurlburt Field, shopping, dining, and schools while offering a quieter pace of life.

New homes from DSLD Homes and Holiday Builders are already available, giving buyers the opportunity to become part of a growing community while many of the most

desirable homesites are still available. Homes are currently starting in the low \$300,000s.

And while many developments talk about creating community, NatureView has already demonstrated its commitment through initiatives like Hero Homez, a program dedicated to providing homes for deserving local heroes and military families. Five homesites within the community have been designated for this initiative.

Perhaps that's why NatureView resonates with so many people.

It's not trying to be the biggest. It's not trying to be the busiest. It's simply offering something many people have been searching for all along.

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To learn more or schedule a tour, visit NatureViewFL.com or call 850-822-5005.



Someone They Trusted

The Most Dangerous Person in a Senior's Life Is Often the Last One You'd Suspect



BY TED TOEDTE, CRIME PREVENTION SPECIALIST, WCSO

"Elder abuse doesn't usually look like violence. It looks like someone helping — right up until the moment they aren't."

Every year in the U.S., one in 10 older adults experiences some form of elder abuse — and many endure multiple types simultaneously. That is not a fringe problem. That is your neighbor. Your parent. The widow at your church. The veteran down the street.

And the numbers only tell part of the story. Only one in 24 cases of elder abuse is ever reported to authorities. For every case that surfaces, dozens more stay buried — hidden by fear, shame, and the heartbreaking reality that 60 percent of elder abusers are family members, most often spouses or adult children.

Elder abuse is a crime. And, it's happening in our community right now.

The Scale of The Problem

The consequences of elder abuse are severe. Older adults who are abused are twice as likely to be hospitalized, four times as likely to enter a nursing home, and three times as likely to die prematurely. This is not a quality-of-life issue. It is a life-and-death one.

The World Health Organization estimates that 320 million seniors will suffer from elder abuse by 2050. The time to act is not later. It is now.

What Elder Abuse Actually Looks Like

Most people picture elder abuse as something dramatic — a physical assault, a visible injury. The reality is far more layered.

Physical Abuse — Unexplained bruises, injuries inconsistent with the explanation

given, sudden weight loss, poor hygiene, or untreated medical conditions.

Emotional Abuse — Threats, belittlement, cutting seniors off from loved ones. A senior who seems fearful or withdrawn around a specific person may be experiencing it right now.

Financial Exploitation — The fastest growing form. Unauthorized use of funds, forged signatures, sudden changes to wills or accounts. Seniors lose at least \$2.6 billion every year to financial abuse alone — and only one in 44 cases is ever reported.

Neglect — Whether intentional or not, failure to provide adequate food, medication, or hygiene care causes real and lasting harm.

Scams: The Other Threat At The Door

Seniors are the primary targets of organized scam operations — and the tactics are growing more sophisticated every year. The most common include government impersonation calls threatening arrest or benefit suspension, grandparent scams now using cloned voices powered by artificial intelligence, tech support fraud that gains remote access to financial accounts, and door-to-door contractor schemes that collect deposits and disappear.

The red flags are the same across every scheme: urgency, secrecy, and unusual payment methods. If someone is pressuring you to act immediately, asking you to keep it secret, or demanding payment by gift card or wire transfer — stop. Hang up. Call someone you trust.

Warning Signs Every Neighbor Should Know

- Unexplained changes to financial documents, wills, or account beneficiaries
 - Unpaid bills despite adequate income
 - A caregiver who speaks for the senior or refuses to leave them alone with visitors
 - Withdrawal from friends, church, or family activities they previously cherished
 - Sudden new companions with unusual influence over financial decisions
- Abusers depend on isolation.



Your visits — even brief, casual ones — break that isolation and change everything.

WCSO Safety Net Daily Call-In Program

The Walton County Sheriff's Office Safety Net Program provides daily check-in calls for seniors who live alone or lack regular contact with family or friends. If a call is missed and contact cannot be made, a welfare check is initiated promptly.

To enhance the program, members of the Sheriff's Posse also conduct personal home visits, providing both a safety check and a friendly face. Together, the daily calls and in-person visits help protect seniors from the risks associated with isolation, including medical emergencies, falls and a lack of regular social interaction. Enrollment is free.

The WCSO Crime Prevention Unit also offers free presentations for faith communities, senior centers, civic organizations, assisted living facilities, neighborhood associations and other groups. Presentations are tailored to each audience and cover elder abuse awareness, scam prevention and available local resources.

To schedule a presentation, call (850) 892-8111 or email crimeprevention@waltonso.org.

Ted Toedte is a certified

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) practitioner and Crime Prevention Specialist with the Walton County Sheriff's Office. He has more than 30 years of law enforcement experience in Florida and California. He can be reached at (850) 892-8111 or crimeprevention@waltonso.org.

Important Contacts

WCSO Safety Net Program (Free)

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Why Rhonda Skipper Endorses Brian McBroom for Walton County Tax Collector



Dear Friends,

I invite you to join me in voting for **Brian McBroom** as our next Walton County Tax Collector on August 18, 2026. Brian has my full support, and I hope you'll vote for him too.

I have worked with Brian for 21 years and have seen what an outstanding leader and colleague he is. Respected by his team, the community, and others in the tax collection field, Brian's dedication and loyalty to Walton County are unmatched.

As Chief Tax Collector, Brian consistently goes above and beyond to deliver exceptional customer service to our residents, continually seeking ways to improve how we serve the public. His servant leadership and problem-solving skills have made the office a positive and unified place.

Brian shows integrity, honesty, faith, family values, and strong morals in everything he does. These are qualities that matter in an elected official. He is a humble, community-minded professional who always puts the community and team first.

Brian has the exact character, integrity, and hands-on experience needed to lead our County's office seamlessly into the future. I hope you'll join me in voting for him as our next Tax Collector!

With my blessings,
Rhonda Skipper

P.S. Please visit Brian's website to learn more: www.VoteMcBroom.com

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 Community

FOX & Friends Brings National Spotlight to Our Area

BY "DOC" DOUG STAUFFER

Before sunrise touched the emerald waters of the Gulf, excitement had already begun in our area. Long lines wrapped around Fudpucker's Beachside Bar & Grill as people gathered hours before dawn to welcome the nationally televised morning show FOX & Friends and one of its most recognizable personalities, Steve Doocy.

For many in attendance, the event was far more than a television broadcast. It became a celebration of community, patriotism, military pride, and the distinctive spirit that defines the Florida Panhandle.

The May 15 stop in our area was part of the show's "For All America" road trip, celebrating America's upcoming 250th anniversary. Yet, as cameras rolled live, it quickly became clear that the story was not just about a television show coming to town. It was about the energy of the people who arrived long before daylight, simply to be part of something memorable.

The crowd was jubilant from the start. Some arrived before 3

a.m., and by the time the broadcast began, the atmosphere inside and outside was electric. Red, white, and blue clothing filled the venue, while local families, veterans, community leaders, and supporters of the show packed every available space.

One of the highlights of the morning was watching Steve Doocy interact with the crowd. While many television personalities keep their distance once the cameras stop rolling, Doocy seemed to thrive on personal connections. Between live segments, he moved through the crowd, taking selfies, shaking hands, telling jokes, and making everyone feel included.

At one point, Doocy laughed about how many people mistakenly called him "Peter," referencing his son, senior White House correspondent and fellow FOX host Peter Doocy. The audience loved it, and his humor immediately made the event feel personal rather than staged.

Perhaps the biggest crowd-pleasing moment came when Doocy decided to crowd

surf through the audience. After a single practice, he confidently launched himself into the cheering crowd, where people, including myself and Life Media's own Scott Miller, held him above their heads during the live broadcast. The moment perfectly captured the morning's relaxed, fun-loving atmosphere and instantly became one of the event's most talked-about memories.

The 70th-anniversary celebration of Billy Bowlegs also added a distinctly local flavor to the broadcast. Pirates from the Krewe of Bowlegs arrived in full force, bringing their pirate ship, cannons, costumes, and enthusiasm. The pirate-themed entrance to Fudpucker's became one of the show's visual centerpieces and showcased the traditions that make the Emerald Coast unique.

For many locals, seeing our area highlighted on national television sparked a sense of pride. Throughout the morning, people received text messages and calls from friends and family across the country, each



saying they had seen our area live on television.

That may have been one of the most meaningful parts of the broadcast. Beyond the entertainment and excitement, the event reminded viewers nationwide that communities like our area still embody something deeply American — patriotism, hospitality, faith, military appre-

ciation, family values, and genuine friendliness.

The Fort Walton Beach High School Stars Dance Team added excitement and energy to the early-morning broadcast as they lined the entrance to Fudpucker's, waving pom-poms and cheering on the crowd. Despite the pre-dawn start, their enthusiasm helped create the electric atmosphere that defined the event.

For three hours, our area became America's front porch, and those present experienced far more than a television show. They experienced a celebration of community that many will not soon forget.



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The 250th Anniversary: A Night to Remember

By BARBARA PALMGREN

There are extraordinary moments in time that we remember.

Most people know where they were when President Kennedy was assassinated. They know where they were on 9/11 when the Twin Towers came down, part of the Pentagon was destroyed and brave Americans forced a plane to crash into the ground rather than strike a target in Washington, D.C. They remember special visits or places in 1976 when we celebrated the Bicentennial of our nation.

And now many will remember this special night: June 12, 2026. The gala at the Rigdon Center in Fort Walton Beach to reenact the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

The celebration was organized by the Okaloosa County America 250 Commission, led by Chair Graham W. Fountain and Vice Chair Mitzi Henley. As a commission member and trustee of the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, I was honored to help plan the event. The museum is also hosting



the yearlong exhibit, Celebrate America 250! The Revolution.

The America 250 Commission has scheduled more patriotic events throughout the year. A few of these include a Faith Community Event, a Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra performance at the Mattie Kelly Arts Center, a Heroes and First

Responders event honoring our military and first responders and a Patriots Grand Parade in Crestview.

What amazed me was seeing the majority of several hundred dinner guests clothed in period attire of the era, including your publishers and Walton County residents Scott and Lori Mill-



er. And not just dresses and uniforms, but white wigs of all shapes and sizes. Most of those portraying the signers of the Declaration stood and walked up to the document looking as though they were the actual individuals, ready to sign for liberty despite the costs.

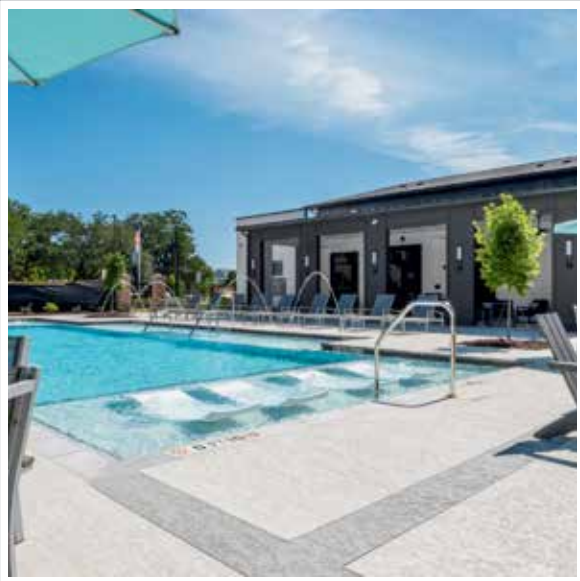
I was seated at a table with Valparaiso Mayor Joe Morgan, who proudly portrayed signer John Hart of New Jersey and walked forward to sign alongside Parker Destin, who portrayed George Washington, at the table where the historic document awaited signatures. Close by was Scott Miller portraying

signer George Clymer of Pennsylvania, and another friend, Niceville Mayor Dan Henkel, portraying Benjamin Harrison V of Virginia.

Friends from other parts of Northwest Florida attended as well, including retired South Walton High School Principal Alexis Tibbetts, a renowned educator in both Okaloosa and Walton counties.

At the podium, emcee Bernard Johnson Jr., External Affairs Manager for Florida Power & Light; Mary Katharine Goddard, portrayed by Honorable

Continued on page 30



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THE WATERS
AT FREEPORT



Why Growth, Healthcare, and Community Investment Are Moving North



BY KERRI PARKER, HWY. 331
FOUNDER

For years, conversations about growth in Walton County often centered south.

That has shifted.

Across North Walton, healthcare investment, commercial expansion, downtown revitalization efforts, housing development and new business activity are reshaping how the region

understands its future. What is changing is not only the pace of growth, but the direction of confidence.

Economic development research consistently identifies healthcare investment as one of the strongest signals of long-term stability in a community. Medical offices, specialty providers, rehabilitation services, hospitals, and outpatient care expand when organizations believe population trends and economic demand will continue.

And when healthcare expands, it produces ripple effects across the local economy. A single practice creates jobs directly, but also increases demand for housing, restaurants, childcare, retail, transportation, construction, and professional services. Growth begins to move through connected systems rather than isolated projects.

But the defining feature of North Walton's current moment is not only economic. It is relational.

Growth here is still visible at



the community level.

People notice who shows up. They notice which businesses sponsor youth sports, support local nonprofits, participate in fundraisers, attend farmers markets, invest in school initiatives, and contribute to civic conversations. This visibility is not incidental. In smaller and mid-sized communities, trust is often built through consistent presence and meaningful participation rather than isolated interactions.



This is where North Walton's growth story becomes more complex for new and expanding businesses entering the region. Community partnerships are not peripheral marketing tactics. Sponsorships, local partnerships, volunteer involvement and consistent presence create opportunities for businesses to become part of the places where they operate. Businesses might arrive because of growth, but becoming part of a community requires something more.

Infrastructure may enable growth, but participation often determines whether that growth takes root. Smaller communities such as DeFuniak Springs and Freeport notice which businesses become part of the community fabric.

HWY 331 exists to highlight those connections and partner with organizations that support local storytelling, community engagement and visibility across Walton County.

Celebrating America's BIG Birthday in Freeport If You Go...

Residents Bike Parade (Hammock Bay)

Meet at the General Store parking lot near the gazebo

Line-up begins: **9 a.m.**

Parade begins: **9:15 a.m.**

Decorated bikes, wagons and patriotic attire encouraged

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Parade begins: **6 p.m.**

Starts at **Freeport Learning Center**

Ends at **Freeport Regional Sports Complex**

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Applications available at Freeport City Hall, 112 U.S. Highway 20 West

Deadline: June 26 at 5 p.m.

Road Closure Alert

State Road 20 along the parade route closes at approximately **5:45 p.m.**

Reopens after the parade passes

Fireworks & Family Fun

Location: **Freeport Regional Sports Complex**

Address: **563 Hammock Trail East**

Food trucks and community activities before the show

Fireworks immediately following the evening festivities

More Information

Visit www.freeportflorida.gov for parade route maps, updates and event details.

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What Happens When Steve Doocy Comes to Town?

When the cameras aren't rolling, a conversation about pirates, positive news, grandchildren and why America's stories still start locally

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

The first thing I learned about Steve Doocy is that he can carry on a full interview while jumping out of a vehicle, walking into Publix and searching for bottled water.

The second thing I learned is that despite spending decades on national television, the longtime FOX & Friends co-host is exactly what viewers see every morning: warm, approachable, genuinely curious and surprisingly funny.

I caught up with Doocy shortly after he landed in Northwest Florida as part of FOX & Friends' nationwide America 250 tour, which recently brought the popular morning show to Fudpucker's Beachside Bar & Grill in Destin.

Before discussing television, politics or ratings, we found ourselves talking about weather—specifically, what us locals affectionately call the “Destin Bubble.” After I explained our theory that somehow storms seem to part around Destin while sunshine magically appears, Doocy laughed. “That’s great. I love it,” he said. When I mentioned that some locals credit the Gulf’s unique weather patterns for helping create the phenomenon, he quickly connected it to another local tradition. “Well, that’s why the pirates came, I guess,” he joked.

As it turns out, Doocy had already been reading up on the Billy Bowlegs Pirate Festival and was preparing to be escorted by pirate ship during his visit to Fort

Walton Beach. That could only happen on the Emerald Coast.

While the FOX & Friends team travels extensively, Doocy said Destin stood out as a natural stop for the show’s America 250 tour, which highlights communities, businesses and traditions that helped shape the nation. “As we travel America for America 250, we’re trying to highlight all these amazing towns and amazing places,” Doocy said. “The Panhandle was just one of those places we haven’t been to for a while, and it’s one of those places where people have heard about it, they’ve wanted to visit it, and we thought, ‘We should go there.’”

Part of the appeal was the location itself. “Fudpucker’s is legendary,” he said with a laugh. “You’ve got gators, you’ve got pirates, you’ve got a lot of happy people who need coffee. That’s a pretty good recipe for first thing in the morning.”

It wasn’t his first visit to the area. Long before arriving as a television host, Doocy first visited Destin as a college student making the trek from the University of Kansas in search of a Florida beach vacation. “It was the closest beach in Florida from Kansas,” he said.

Years later, he and his wife returned to explore the area as a potential second-home destination. “We absolutely loved it,” he told me. “We spent a couple of days looking around and thought it was just very, very nice.”

Like many visitors, he was



particularly drawn to the communities along Scenic Highway 30A. During that trip, he even spent time exploring the area with former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who maintained a home in South Walton for many years. Had he purchased property back then, he joked, he probably would have quadrupled his investment by now.

The conversation eventually turned to food — not surprising considering Doocy and his wife, Kathy, have authored several cookbooks together. When asked about memorable local dining experiences, he immediately recalled enjoying smoked fish dip while watching the sunset at Bud & Alley’s in Seaside. “It’s another iconic place,” he said. “Everybody has to go there.”

As our conversation continued, one theme surfaced repeatedly: the power of local stories. Although Doocy works in national media, he believes the stories that resonate most with viewers are often rooted in hometown communities. “When I was a reporter in Washington, D.C., every national story was a local story,” he said.

In today’s media landscape, he argues that local storytelling might be more important than ever. “Every national story starts somewhere locally,” he said. “And thanks to social media and all the different platforms we have now, a local story can become a national story overnight.”

That philosophy is at the heart of what we do. As publishers of all-positive community newspapers across Northwest Florida, we often hear readers say they appreciate stories that celebrate people, businesses and communities making a difference. It turns out Doocy hears much of the same feedback from FOX & Friends viewers.

“I think people love the segments because they’re positive,” he said. “There’s a lot of news on, and a lot of it is not great news. What I hear when I travel around the country is that peo-

ple appreciate hearing stories about communities, businesses and people doing good things.”

One recent example came after a Route 66 broadcast. Doocy recalled a woman approaching him after the series aired. “She said, ‘I just wanted to tell you how much I loved that series,’” he remembered. “‘There’s just not enough good news out there.’” He paused and smiled while recounting the moment. “That’s a good report card.”

Those positive stories often create real-world impacts as well. Doocy shared how small businesses featured during FOX & Friends road trips sometimes see visitors arrive from across the country months or even years later. Recalling one Florida restaurant owner in particular, Doocy said one of the most rewarding aspects of the road trips is seeing the lasting impact on small businesses. “People would come in and say, ‘I saw you on TV,’” he said.

After more than three decades of commuting into New York television studios, Doocy said life on the road still brings a sense of adventure. “When you’re driving into New York every day for 30 years, you know exactly how it’s

Continued on page 29



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Community

Walton County Expands Beach Tram Service, Offers Free State Park Admission

Walton County Tourism has expanded its Beach Tram service to include transportation to Grayton Beach State Park and Topsail Hill Preserve State Park while once again covering day-use admission fees to both parks through Labor Day.

The complimentary admission program, now in its 12th year at Topsail Hill Preserve and 10th year at Grayton Beach State Park, allows visitors and residents to enjoy the parks free of charge from Memorial Day weekend through Sept. 7.

This year, access is even easier thanks to the expanded Beach

Tram network, which provides free transportation from municipal parking facilities in Grayton Beach and along County Highway 393. The service is designed to reduce traffic congestion, ease parking demands and help protect the area's natural resources.

Beach Tram routes serve Grayton Beach State Park, Topsail Hill Preserve State Park and several regional beach access points. Tram operations are coordinated with state park capacity limits to help visitors know park availability before arriving.

For route schedules and ad-



ditional information, contact Beach Operations at (850) 267-4578 or visit WaltonTransportation.com. For more information about complimentary day-use admission to Topsail Hill Preserve State Park and Grayton Beach State Park, visit walton-countyfltourism.com.

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Contact Ted Shoop for more details or to schedule an in-person tour.

Demystifying Mortgage Insurance

By TED SHOOP

Two primary types exist: Mortgage Insurance Premium (MIP) for FHA loans and Private Mortgage Insurance (PMI) for conventional loans—each serving a similar purpose but differing in structure, cost, and cancellation policies. While MIP is typically required for all FHA borrowers regardless of down payment size, PMI can often be removed once sufficient equity is built. These safeguards make loans more accessible, especially in high-cost coastal areas where entry-level prices continue to rise.

MIP is required on FHA loans, regardless of down payment size. This means even if you put down more than 20%, you'll likely pay an upfront mortgage insurance premium at closing and ongoing monthly premiums. For many borrowers within Hammock Bay, Freeport and Walton County, FHA loans are popular due to lower credit score requirements and down payment options as low as 3.5%, but the trade-off is long-term MIP costs, which can last for the life of the loan depending on terms.

PMI, on the other hand,

applies to conventional loans when the down payment is less than 20%. Unlike MIP, PMI can be canceled once the homeowner reaches 20% equity, offering a clearer path to eliminating extra costs. It's also typically less expensive than MIP over time, especially for buyers with stronger credit and lower debt-to-income ratios.

Have more questions or need a good mortgage lender recommendation? Ask Ted Shoop, a seasoned Realtor with eXp Realty, who provides expert advice and guidance to those with real estate selling and buying needs.

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Think Blacksmiths Disappeared? Think Again.

Local craftsmen are keeping a centuries-old tradition alive through fire, steel and fellowship

By LORI LEATH MILLER

Blacksmithing may have been popularized in recent years by television shows such as *Forged in Fire* and *Men at Arms*, but in our state, the tradition has been thriving for more than four decades thanks to the Florida Artist Blacksmith Association (FABA). Founded in 1984, FABA has spent the last 41 years teaching the craft, preserving its history and helping establish historical blacksmith shops throughout the state. Its mission is simple: To teach – To preserve. “Blacksmithing has experienced a renaissance in recent years, but this isn’t new to us,” said David Sandlin of the Far West Panhandle Blacksmiths chapter. “FABA has been teaching the craft and preserving the traditions of blacksmithing in Florida for more than four decades.” Today, FABA includes eight chapters across the state, each hosting monthly meetings where blacksmiths of all skill levels gather to share techniques, ideas and stories while working hot

iron at the forge. For local residents, that opportunity is available through the Far West Panhandle Blacksmiths chapter, headquartered at Traditions Workshop, 418 Green Acres Road in Fort Walton Beach. Meetings regularly feature demonstrations, hands-on projects and open forge time, allowing participants to learn new skills or work on personal projects alongside experienced smiths. “Our mission is to teach and preserve the noble art of blacksmithing,” Sandlin said. “We enjoy the open exchange of ideas as we smite hot iron on the anvil.” First-time visitors are always welcome at no charge. After that, annual family memberships are just \$30 and provide access to FABA events across Florida, discounts on the organization’s annual conference and a digital subscription to *The Clinker Breaker*, FABA’s monthly newsletter featuring blacksmithing news, projects and events from around the state.



One of the highlights of each year is the statewide convention in Gainesville, where blacksmiths gather for three days of demonstrations, classes and fellowship. This year’s event, FABA CON 41, is scheduled for Oct. 16-18 at the Best Western Gateway Grand in Gainesville.



Beyond teaching traditional skills, FABA members actively seek opportunities to introduce the public to blacksmithing through demonstrations at museums, libraries, festivals and community events. “FABA is always looking for opportunities to put the noble craft of the blacksmith before the public eye,” Sandlin said. “Museums, libraries and community venues have proven to be great places to meet people and generate interest in our craft.” The organization also welcomes recommendations from groups interested in hosting a demonstration or “hammer-in” event.

Upcoming Far West Panhandle Blacksmiths Events

June 27 Traditions Workshop, Fort Walton Beach | 9 a.m.-3 p.m.

Members will focus on drawing out heavy steel while working on the chapter’s competition piece for display at the October conference. This year’s project incorporates the themes of motion, balance and inspiration from the cosmos. Open forges will follow the demonstration. Lunch provided; donations appreciated.

July 25 John Butler Family Farm, 4112 Bell Lane, Pace | 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

The focus shifts to the annual gift-exchange project, “Something That Twists or Turns.” Demonstrations will include forging a corkscrew under the shade of the pecan trees. Lunch provided; donations appreciated.

Aug. 22 Traditions Workshop | 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

Continued on page 30

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Area Independence Day Festivities 2026

Emerald Coast Theatre Company Patriotic Revue
July 2 | 6-8 p.m. | Grand Park, Grand Boulevard, Santa Rosa Beach

Enjoy patriotic music and dance performances celebrating 250 years of American freedom.
Info: grandboulevard.com | (850) 837-3099

Star-Spangled Food Truck Festival
July 3 | 5-9 p.m. | Destin Commons

International cuisine, live music, family activities and fireworks at 9 p.m.
Info: destincommons.com | (850) 337-8700

Hotel Effie Rooftop Fourth of July Celebration
July 3-4 | Hotel Effie Sandestin, Miramar Beach

Rooftop DJs, festive cocktails and Baytowne Wharf fireworks viewing.
Info: hoteleffie.com | (850) 351-3000



Celebrate America's 250th!
July 4 | Beginning at 11 a.m. | Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, Valparaiso

Free celebration featuring history presentations, living history demonstrations and the America 250 exhibit grand opening.
Info: heritagemuseum.us | (850) 678-2615



Alys Beach Fourth of July Concert & Fireworks
July 4 | 7-9 p.m. | Alys Beach Amphitheatre

Live music by Five Star Funk Lounge followed by Gulf fireworks at 9 p.m.
Info: alysbeach.com | (850) 213-5500

DeFuniak Springs Fourth of July Celebration
July 4 | Historic Lake DeFuniak

Family activities, vendors and

a fireworks display over the lake.
Info: defuniaksprings.net | (850) 830-1661

Grayton Beach Fourth of July Celebration
July 4 | Beginning at 8:30 a.m. | Grayton Beach

Community parade, Star-Spangled Brunch, live music and family activities.
Info: ajsgrayton.com | (850) 231-410

Continued on page 30

Bingo, Bubbly & a Chance to Win a Designer Handbag

If your idea of a perfect Saturday afternoon includes a little sparkle, a glass of prosecco and the chance to take home a designer handbag, mark your calendar for Pearls & Prosecco Handbag Bingo at The Alice in Destin.

Presented by The Alice and benefitting The Ground Up Project Inc., this elevated twist on traditional bingo combines fashion, fun and philanthropy into one stylish afternoon. Guests will enjoy light bites, drink tickets and 10 rounds of bingo, with designer handbags up for grabs. After all, who

says bingo is just for grandma? The event takes place Saturday, Aug. 8 at 2 p.m. at The Alice, one of Destin's most beautiful waterfront gathering spaces.

General admission is \$100 and includes light bites, two drink tickets and one bingo card for each round. VIP guests receive all general admission benefits plus an extra drink ticket, raffle tickets, a Grand Finale bingo card, VIP recognition and table service.

Whether you're hoping to win your dream handbag or enjoy an afternoon out with

friends, you'll also be helping support a mission that extends far beyond childhood.

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So, gather your friends, don your pearls and enjoy an afternoon of laughter, bubbly, a little friendly competition, lots of memories—and perhaps even a fashionable victory! Pearls & Prosecco Handbag Bingo is shaping up to be one of the season's most stylish events.

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JULY 2026 EVENTS

01
Chessport
6 pm | Freeport Public Library | Freeport

02
America Salutes presented by Emerald Coast Theater Company
6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

04
Women's Climbing Circle
5 pm | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin

4th of July Dinner Cruise
6 pm | Sunquest Cruises | Miramar Beach



4th of July Parade
6 pm | Freeport Learning Center | Freeport

08
Power of Networking Breakfast
7:30 am | Mezcal Mexican Grill | Miramar Beach

10
Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee
7 am | First Baptist Church of FWB | FWB

16
Young Professionals Summer Social
4:30 pm | Baytowne Marina | Sandestin

Revolutionary Illinois: How Our State Shaped Our Nation, presented by John Kokoris, "Mr. Illinois"
6:30 pm | Freeport Public Library | Freeport

18
Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | EC Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

Watermelon Festival at Hammock Bay
2 pm | Props Brewery Hammock Bay | Freeport

19
Watermelon Festival at Hammock Bay
6 pm | Props Brewery Hammock Bay | Freeport

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Twin Cities Pavilion | Niceville

Hammock Bay
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The Windmills | 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
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Freeport Public Library | Freeport

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Freeport Public Library | Freeport

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Events

Patriots Point Aims to Create a Lasting Tribute for America 250

By LORI LEATH MILLER

As communities across the nation celebrate America’s 250th anniversary throughout the year, a project taking shape in West Bay is inviting local families, veterans, businesses and community supporters to become part of a permanent tribute to our nation’s history.

Known as Patriots Point, the initiative is the nonprofit arm of The Corner PCB, a community-focused development in Panama City Beach that seeks to create a gathering place centered on faith, patriotism, history and civic engagement. At the heart of the project will stand a towering American flag surrounded by a commemorative plaza designed to honor the nation’s founding, military service and enduring ideals.

What began as a local passion project led by Steven Franco, owner of Rodos Realty, and his daughter, Bebe Franco, is quickly evolving into something much larger. Franco and a team of longtime Beachworx members, Rodos Realty colleagues and respected community leaders—including decorated military veterans Gary Redden and Bill Blanken, real estate partner Greg Ganske, and service providers Jeff Margaretten, Aerial Payne and Dillon Turner—have collaborated on community-focused initiatives for years. Together, they believe Patriots Point has the potential to become a regional destination and



a meaningful part of the nation’s America 250 celebration. “Patriots Point started as a local project, but the more we developed the vision, the more we realized it represents something much larger,” Franco said. “Northwest Florida has one of the strongest military connections anywhere in the country. We want this to be a place where residents and visitors alike can reflect on the freedoms we enjoy and the people who have helped protect them.”

That military connection is one reason Franco, Redden and the others believe the project is uniquely positioned to resonate with residents throughout Northwest Florida. In close proximities to West Bay are military installations including Tyndall Air Force Base, Eglin Air Force Base, Hurlburt Field, Naval Air Station Pensacola, Duke Field, Naval Air Station Whiting Field, Naval Support Activity Panama City and additionally Corry Station (Center for Information Warfare Training), the U.S. Coast Guard Station Panama City and Fort Novosel (formerly known as Fort Rucker) nearby in Alabama. Generations of Air Force, Army,

Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard personnel have trained and served throughout the region, making the area one of the nation’s most significant military corridors.

As America approaches its semiquincentennial, Patriots Point seeks to create a place where local families, veterans, business owners and community leaders can leave their mark and ensure their stories become part of a larger American story.

One of the most distinctive features of the project is a 1,776-square-foot commemorative walkway that will surround the flag plaza, symbolically honoring the year America declared its independence. The walkway will be constructed using custom engraved brick pavers purchased by supporters.

Each engraved paver can feature a family name, business, veteran tribute, memorial dedication or personal message. The pavers will become a permanent part of Patriots Point, creating a lasting connection between community members and the landmark itself. Project plans call for up to 5,000 engraved pavers, allowing individuals to honor loved ones, celebrate family legacies, recognize military service or showcase local businesses that support the effort. Supporters can also purchase duplicate engraved pavers as keepsakes.

The vision extends well

beyond the paver program, however. Design plans reveal a thoughtfully crafted public space featuring elements that symbolize key aspects of American history and government. Monument columns will represent significant eras of American history, while additional features will honor the nation’s military branches, the 50 states and the three branches of government.

For Redden, the project is ultimately about creating something that future generations can experience and appreciate. “As America approaches its 250th anniversary, we have a unique opportunity to create something lasting,” Redden said. “Every brick tells a story. It might honor a veteran, recognize a family or celebrate a local business, but together they become part of a larger story about our community and our country.”

At a time when communities throughout the country are reflecting on what it means to be American, Patriots Point seeks

to create a place where the stories of local residents can be shared and remembered for generations to come. Whether through a family name engraved in brick, a tribute to a veteran or support from local businesses, Franco’s team hopes Northwest Florida residents will come together to build a lasting legacy that reflects the patriotism, service and community spirit that have long defined the region. More than a monument, Patriots Point is envisioned as a place where future generations can gather, reflect and remember the people whose service, sacrifice and love of country helped shape the community they call home.

For more information or to purchase an engraved paver, visit thecorneratpatriotspoint.org or scan the QR code.



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'Time Is': Remembering Bruce Cheves

By LORI LEATH MILLER

The boats returned to the docks at A.J.'s Seafood & Oyster Bar just as they had thousands of times before. Captains tied off lines. Friends gathered along the harbor. Members of the fishing community exchanged hugs, stories, memories and some tried-n-true AJ's barbecue. But this time, something was missing.

For the first time in more than four decades, the familiar voice that had become synonymous with the Destin Fishing Rodeo was not there to greet them.

On May 30, family, friends, anglers and longtime Rodeo supporters gathered at A.J.'s to celebrate the life of Bruce Cheves, the beloved Destin Fishing Rodeo weighmaster who passed away April 30 following a battle

generations of captains, anglers and residents. The gathering drew a large crowd from across the fishing community, a testament to how deeply Bruce was loved and respected.

For those who attended, the evening felt fitting for a man who spent much of his life bringing people together. In many ways, the celebration reflected the same sense of community that Bruce helped create throughout his decades at the Destin Fishing Rodeo.

The Voice of the Destin Fishing Rodeo

Born Feb. 21, 1951, in Monterey, Ca., Bruce grew up surrounded by coastal waters and developed a lifelong love for fishing and the sea.

his own. With trademark sayings that became part of local folklore, he entertained crowds while preserving the traditions of one of our area's most cherished events. Generations of anglers can still hear his familiar introduction: "From guppies to Godzilla, caught in a bathtub or

a battleship ... bring me a fish and I'll make you famous." And when it came time to officially record a catch, the harbor would fall silent as Bruce delivered the words that became his signature: "Time is!"

Throughout his career, Bruce announced more than 20

world-record catches, including an 8.9-pound pompano, a 39-pound red grouper and a 54-pound kitty mitchell. He also witnessed and announced every Destin Fishing Rodeo record catch since 1984, includ-

Continued on next page



with cancer. As the sun began to set over the Destin Harbor and boats set out, the community came together to honor a man whose voice, humor and larger-than-life personality helped define generations of fishing memories.

For many, Bruce wasn't simply the Rodeo's weighmaster. He was the Rodeo.

The evening served not only as a celebration of Bruce's life, but also as a reflection of the deep connections he built throughout our communities. Family members expressed gratitude to A.J.'s Seafood & Oyster Bar for its hospitality and support, to the crew of the American Spirit Party Boat for providing a meaningful burial at sea and to Father Mike Hesse for offering heartfelt prayers and words of comfort during the ceremony.

Throughout the evening, friends and family shared stories, laughter and memories that reflected the impact Bruce had on

That passion eventually brought him to Northwest Florida in 1977. After arriving in Crestview, he found his way to Kelly Docks and immersed himself in the traditions and culture of Destin's fishing fleet.

Guided by local captains and inspired by the words of Capt. Bruce Marler — "If you pay attention, you will learn something every day." — Bruce devoted himself to learning every aspect of the sport, from weather patterns and moon phases to the instincts and knowledge passed down through generations of Gulf fishermen.

In 1984, Bruce began working alongside legendary Rodeo weighmaster Bill Sherman, learning the art and precision of official fish weigh-ins long before digital scales became common. What began as an opportunity to help soon became a calling.

Over the next 42 years, Bruce transformed the role of weighmaster into something uniquely

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Off the Hook

BRUCE CHEVES

continued from previous page

ing a 70.2-pound grouper, a 111.6-pound amberjack and a massive 358.8-pound warsaw grouper.

Yet, statistics and records tell only part of the story. Bruce possessed a rare gift for making every angler feel important, whether they brought in a world-class catch or a small fish caught by an excited child experiencing the Rodeo for the first time.

More Than a Weighmaster

Bruce was a storyteller, historian, mentor and ambassador for Destin's fishing heritage.

He loved sharing tales from local waters and adventures around the world. He encouraged young anglers, celebrated longtime captains and helped preserve the stories that shaped Destin into the "World's Luckiest Fishing Village."

Every Oct. 16 at 5 p.m., Bruce led a memorial ceremony at the Rodeo weigh-in barge behind A.J.'s to honor captains, anglers and friends who had passed away. The tradition became so meaningful that the City of Destin officially proclaimed Oct. 16 as Bruce Cheves Day in 2010.

His contributions extended far beyond the harbor. Bruce received the University of West Florida Presidential Medal of Honor for his decades of public

service, philanthropy and dedication to preserving our area's maritime history.

To countless residents and visitors, however, his greatest contribution was something less tangible. He made people feel welcome. Whether standing behind the scales, swapping stories on the docks or encouraging a young fisherman with a first catch, Bruce embodied the spirit of the fishing community.

While Bruce's voice became familiar to generations of Rodeo participants, those closest to him knew him simply as family and friend. He leaves behind his daughter, Brianna Cheves; sisters Sharon Ralston and Linda Hughes (Bruce Bishop); nephews Franklin Vaughn (Stephanie), Tyler Dunn, Evan Dunn, Zack Dunn (Patricia) and Ian Dunn; niece Cat Grey and great-niece CJ, as well as many dear friends who became family over the years.

A lifetime auxiliary member of Crestview VFW Post 5450, Bruce often said the Destin Fishing Rodeo community was an extension of his family. The hundreds of anglers, captains, volunteers and friends who gathered to celebrate his life would



PHOTO AJ'S



PHOTO AJ'S

likely have said the same about him.

A Community Reflects

Since news of Bruce's passing spread throughout our communities, tributes have poured in from friends, family members and fellow fishermen whose lives he touched over the decades.

Mary Anne Windes shared



PHOTO KIRK AUSBURN



PHOTO KIRK AUSBURN

a favorite memory from 1998 when her son, Capt. Trey Windes, dressed as Bruce for Halloween. "We shopped for days trying to find the perfect belt and shorts as Trey wouldn't settle for 'close enough,'" Mary Anne recalled. "Bruce was tickled pink. Rest in peace, Bruce! We love you, man!"

Richard Drago found comfort in one of Bruce's most famous phrases. "I can imagine God, upon calling him home, said the same words we heard Bruce announce to the Rodeo crowd to mark the catch official: 'Time Is,'" he wrote. "We know you were a big enough catch for heaven's net to scoop you right up, my friend."

R.J. Shelley remembered meeting Bruce shortly after Hurricane Opal in 1995. "I was a snot-nosed kid running around the docks most of my younger years," she wrote. "I listened to countless stories and could listen for hours. Him and Ms. Helen Wren always kept a watchful eye on me."

Longtime friend Jim Roberson reflected on the dedication many never saw behind the scenes. "Many don't know of the many days over the many years that he stood in the rain, heat, worked around Hurricane Opal and performed with an unbelievable level of dedication to the Rodeo, the city and the sport he loved so much," Jim wrote. "Too

"From guppies to Godzilla, caught in a bathtub or a battleship... bring me a fish and I'll make you famous!"
- Bruce Cheves

many stories to share here, but I pray his legacy lives on."

Chester Kroeger recalled working with Bruce on a "Legends of Destin" T-shirt years ago featuring Bruce and the blue marlin he famously caught while traveling alone to Bimini in heavy seas. "Bruce truly is a legend in this community and his legacy will live forever," Chester wrote.

For his nephew, Franklin Vaughn, the loss is both personal and deeply felt throughout the fishing community. "He was not only the weighmaster of the Rodeo, but a true icon of Destin," Franklin wrote. "He is what made the Rodeo what it is today — a place where anyone can be made famous from guppies to Godzilla. It didn't matter if you brought him a fish; he would weigh it, no questions asked. Destin will not be the same without him."

Marina Point native Zach Vagias remembered Bruce as part of the fabric of the harbor itself. "He wasn't just a weighmaster; he was an entertainer," Zach wrote. "The best decision the Destin Fishing Rodeo ever made was naming Bruce Cheves as their weighmaster. He brought a color and personality it had needed for years."

"Time Is"

The fishing community will undoubtedly continue gathering each October to remember the captains and anglers who have gone before them. This year, however, one more name will be added to that list.

The man who spent decades honoring others will now be remembered alongside them.

And somewhere in the hearts and memories of those standing along the docks, the familiar words that echoed across Destin Harbor for more than 40 years will remain forever: "Time is."

Publisher's Note: Bruce's family has requested any donations be made to the Destin History & Fishing Museum to help establish a permanent tribute by renaming the Rodeo Room the "Bruce Cheves Rodeo Room."



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Red Snapper Season Returns

Red snapper season is finally here, and 2026 is shaping up to be one of the best years in recent memory for Gulf Coast fishermen.

The federal red snapper season for federally permitted charter boats and head boats opened June 1 and will remain open through Oct. 26, giving anglers a 147-day season — the longest federal for-hire season since 2006. The season is 19 days longer than last year's federal season.

Florida's private recreational red snapper season opened May 22 and runs daily through July 31. Additional fishing opportunities begin Sept. 1, with a combination of daily openings, weekends and holiday periods extending through Jan. 4, 2027. Florida's 2026 season spans 140 days, making it the longest Gulf red snapper season since the state assumed management of the fishery.

For many families in our area, red snapper season is one of the most anticipated times of the year. Destin's charter fleet and private anglers alike look forward

to harvesting one of the Gulf's most popular and best-tasting reef fish.

Current regulations for private recreational anglers include a two-fish daily bag limit and a 16-inch minimum size limit in Gulf waters. Anglers should always verify current regulations before heading offshore, as rules can change.

One area that often creates confusion is the difference between state and federal waters. In the Gulf, Florida state waters extend nine nautical miles offshore. Federal waters begin beyond that boundary. Depending on where you fish and what type of vessel you are fishing from, different seasons and regulations might apply.

Private recreational anglers may harvest red snapper in state waters during Florida's season and in federal waters when federal regulations allow. However, special rules apply when traveling through state waters with fish caught offshore.

State-licensed guide boats that do not carry a federal reef fish permit must follow state



regulations and generally cannot harvest federally managed species such as red snapper in federal waters. A federal permit is required. Federally permitted charter boats and head boats operate under a separate set of federal regulations and may only harvest federally regulated species during federally established seasons.

The differing seasons exist largely because the needs of anglers vary. Charter operators typically prefer long, consecutive seasons that allow visitors to plan vacations and fishing trips well in advance. Many local, private boat owners, meanwhile, favor weekends and holiday openings that fit their work schedules.

Fortunately, improved data collection and management have helped create longer fishing opportunities for everyone. State officials credit enhanced harvest tracking and Florida's management program for expanding angler access while maintaining conservation goals.

For anglers unsure of current regulations, the Fish Rules app remains one of the easiest tools available. Users can select saltwater or freshwater fishing, enter their location and instantly view current regulations for most species.

Whether you're heading offshore on a private boat or booking a trip with one of Destin's many charter captains, the 2026 season offers plenty of opportunities to enjoy one of the Gulf's signature fishing experiences.

Know Before You Go

Before heading offshore, anglers should verify current

regulations, season dates and size limits, as rules can change throughout the year.

Helpful Resources:

- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission: www.MyFWC.com
- Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council: www.GulfCouncil.org
- NOAA Fisheries: www.Fisheries.NOAA.gov
- Fish Rules App: Available free for Apple and Android devices

2026 Gulf Red Snapper Regulations

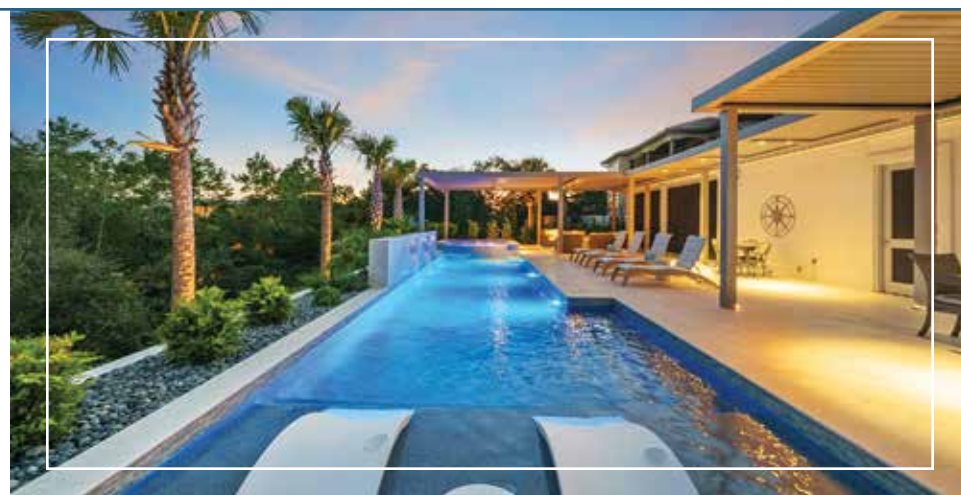
- Private Recreational Season: May 22-July 31, plus additional fall and holiday openings beginning Sept. 1
- Federal Charter/Headboat Season: June 1-Oct. 26
- Daily Bag Limit: Two fish per person
- Minimum Size Limit: 16 inches total length

For the latest red snapper season dates and regulations, search "Red Snapper" at MyFWC.com.



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 Outdoors

Sea Turtle Nesting Season Has Returned!

BY GRACE ANN RUSSELL

The month of May marked the return of many long-awaited events for South Walton; the end of school year, gentler breezes and a warmer gulf. Amidst the excitement of all-things-summer was the start of sea turtle nesting season. The season runs from May 1 through October 31 along Florida's Gulf Coast, and local volunteers are already preparing for another season of education, awareness,

and conservation

For the volunteers at Friends of South Walton Sea Turtles (FOSWST), nesting season is much more than a date on the calendar. It is months of community outreach, school education programs, beach ambassador efforts, and reminders to both locals and visitors that even the smallest actions can make a difference for these threatened marine animals.

Founded in 2015, FOSWST

is an all-volunteer non-profit organization dedicated to sea turtle conservation through awareness and education. While South Walton Turtle Watch monitors and protects nests, FOSWST focuses on helping the public understand how human behavior impacts nesting turtles and hatchlings.

One of the organization's most recognizable messages is the phrase "Clean. Dark. Flat."

Beachgoers are encouraged to remove trash and beach equipment before leaving for the night, keep beachfront lighting low and turtle-friendly, and flatten holes or sandcastles that could become obstacles for nesting turtles or hatchlings trying to reach the water.

These efforts matter. Female loggerhead, green, and leather-back sea turtles return to Florida beaches each year to lay their eggs, often depositing more than 100 eggs in a single nest.



Yet survival remains difficult. Experts estimate that only about one in 1,000 hatchlings survives to adulthood.

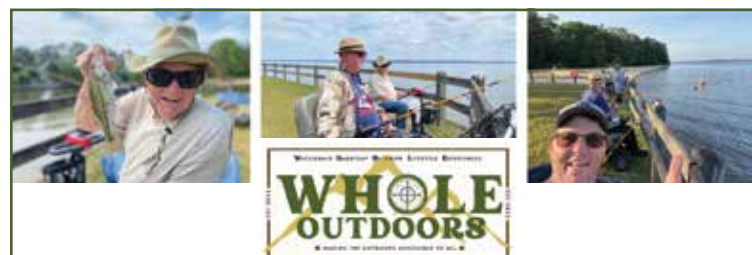
Artificial lighting remains one of the greatest threats during nesting season. Hatchlings instinctively move toward the brightest horizon — historically the reflection of moonlight on the Gulf. Today, bright condo lights, flash photography, and beachfront activity can disorient them, sending them inland instead of toward the water.

That is why local education efforts have become so important in South Walton. Through beach ambassador programs, school visits, public events, and informational materials distributed throughout the community, FOSWST continues to build awareness one conversation at a time.

Protecting sea turtles starts

with community awareness, and every small act of stewardship helps give the next generation of hatchlings a fighting chance. Theo the Turtle, a plush stuffed animal created to inspire conservation awareness, donates a portion of every purchase to Friends of South Walton Sea Turtles. Theo's mission is to help sustain the sea turtle population along the Gulf Coast by encouraging children to connect with marine life in a tangible way.

You can find Theo in various shops along highway 30A, as well as surrounding area's. Theo's mission is a small example of how education, heightened awareness, and community engagement each play a vital role in achieving one common goal—protecting our precious marine life right here in the heart of Walton County.



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Make Men’s Health A Priority This Summer

BY CLAUDIA EMAMI, MD, CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER, ASCENSION SACRED HEART EMERALD COAST

As summer reaches its peak, many of us are spending more time outdoors, traveling and enjoying time with family and friends. While it’s easy to focus on everything else this season brings, maintaining your health should remain a priority. Preventive care, regular screenings and healthy lifestyle choices can help men stay strong, active and engaged in the moments that matter most.

Statistics show that men often lag behind women in preventive healthcare. In fact, women are 33% more likely to visit a doctor than men. This gap often leads to delayed screenings and less favorable health outcomes. At Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast, we want to remind men to schedule a yearly check-up.

Your First Line of Defense: Primary Care.

One of the best ways to stay healthy is through regular visits with a primary care doctor. During these visits, your doctor will review your health and family history to recommend the right screenings and services for you.

Beyond a general physical,



your doctor can order essential bloodwork to check:

- Heart health: Blood pressure and cholesterol levels, which are early indicators of heart problems.
- Diabetes risk: Blood sugar levels to identify pre-diabetes or manage existing conditions.
- Testicular health: Physical exams to check for lumps or nodules.

Understanding Cancer Risks and Screenings

Early detection leads to better outcomes. Prostate cancer is the second most common cancer in men, and we encourage all men to discuss their risk factors with their doctor. While many believe only older men are at risk, 35% of diagnoses occur in men

younger than 65.

Screening usually involves a prostate-specific antigen (PSA) blood test. For those at average risk, clinicians may offer a baseline PSA test between ages 45 and 50. However, Men of Black ancestry or those with a strong family history, should discuss

starting screenings as early as age 40.

Lung cancer also remains a significant concern. At Sacred Heart Emerald Coast, we offer low-dose CT lung screenings for eligible adults between the ages 50 to 80 who are current smokers, or who have quit within the last 15 years and have a 20 pack-year history. This quick, painless imaging test takes only minutes and can find nodules when they are most treatable.

Strengthening Your Heart

Heart disease remains the leading cause of death for men in the United States. Many men don’t realize they have a condition until they experience symptoms like chest pain, shortness of breath or extreme fatigue.

At Sacred Heart Emerald Coast, we offer advanced heart

imaging, including heart calcium scoring. This quick, non-invasive CT scan detects plaque build-up in the arteries even in early stages, allowing you to make informed decisions about your health.

Take the Next Step

Prioritizing your health is a sign of strength. This month, we encourage you to embrace a diet of whole foods and aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity per week.

To find a doctor near you visit ascension.org/doctors.

TOP FIVE

continued from page 4

ly, you are the most important member of the team.

At the end of the day, these truths are not meant to make anyone feel guilty. They’re meant to be empowering. Your body is remarkably resilient. It is constantly adapting, healing, and responding to the choices you make each day. Small improvements, practiced consistently, can create extraordinary changes over time.

And if there’s one thing I hope every patient understands, it’s this: it’s never too late to start listening to your body and giving it the care it deserves.

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BEST IN DESTIN

Wellness



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

Ah, the joy of reading a label; it can truly make us wonder what all the names we can't pronounce are and if they're safe. Learning to use the information contained on a label for our benefit can cut

our shopping time and improve our health.

Let's start with the label itself. It is broken up into six categories.

- **Servings** - The label is based on a serving, so knowing how many servings are in the container is important. Here is an example of a popular soda drink: Serving size 12 oz., calories 150, sodium 55, carbohydrates 40, protein 0, servings per container 6. If you plan to consume 24 oz., multiply the above numbers by 2.

Tool Chest: Total carbohydrates divided by 4 = total teaspoons of sugar. In this scenario, you would be consuming 20 tsp. of sugar. A single serving of a

The Wonder of Labels



tasty yogurt has 6.25 tsp. of sugar.

- **Calories** - Important if you are watching how many you eat.
- **Carbohydrates** - There are good and bad carbohydrates.

Tool Chest: Focus on carbs from nature and cut back on the carbs from factories.

- **Fats** - Choose olive or avocado oil and cut back on processed oils. Do your due diligence on olive oil, as many of them are mixed with other oils and currently don't need to note it on the label. Also consider using real butter versus fake butter (better known as Vaseline). Natural will always be a better choice.
- **Protein** - Needs to be a quality protein to count toward daily intake.
- **Nutrients** - Tool Chest: The percentage listed is the recommended dietary allowance. This

amount is the minimum the body needs to prevent a deficiency disease such as scurvy. It is not the optimal amount the body needs to function at its best.

Now, for some ingredients. Ingredients are listed in order of percentage from most to least. This category is an ongoing struggle due to the lack of strict guidelines. The corn industry has invested millions of dollars in defense of High Fructose Corn Syrup. With their help, this ingredient is now disguised under these syrup names as well: corn, maize, glucose, tapioca, fruit, crystalline, isoglucose, dahlia or invert sugar. And there are others.

Sugar has more than 65 different names, and often there are several sugars in a product. Rather than trying to remember them, use the carbohydrate equation above and then determine if you are willing to consume that amount.

Dyes are next on the list. These are chemical substances used to enhance the appearance of foods. They are normally reds, blues and yellows. They can be found in candy, sports drinks, frosting and baked goods, popsicles, condiments, cereal, sauces, preserved fruits, ice cream, pack-

aged soups, snacks and canned peas. I buy my pickles from the international aisle. They are the only ones I've found that don't have yellow dye added.

BHA (butylated hydroxyanisole) and **BHT** (butylated hydroxytoluene) are antioxidants, synthetic preservatives made from petroleum and used in the food and manufacturing industries. They are found in food and cosmetics. They are prohibited in the EU and listed as known carcinogens. Canada Chemical Management states they are harmful to the environment. They are potential endocrine disruptors. I have found them listed just below the ingredients.

Tool Chest: A great place to start when reading ingredients is to pick a couple of labels of what you need and compare the number of ingredients. The longer list goes back on the shelf. Next, look for dyes and preservatives. After that, look for the hidden names for High Fructose Corn Syrup.

Changing out your "go-to" brands can be daunting, so pick a couple of things each time you go to the store and take some time to find your new healthier brand. I have found healthier options in the international aisle for some products. Many canned goods have sugar, but there are labels that don't.

Every choice we make can affect our health. This journey can be frustrating at times, but it's important to remember that little changes can make a big difference. Be patient and kind to yourself and enjoy the wonder of labels.

Here's to Health! succeed.hdh1@gmail.com





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Freeport Takes Mosquito Control Into Its Own Hands

Summer in Freeport brings plenty to love: long days, backyard gatherings, ballfields full of families, time on the water and evenings that stretch just a little longer. But along with the sunshine and afternoon rains comes another familiar part of life in Northwest Florida — mosquitoes.

This year, Freeport residents might notice something new behind the scenes. The City of Freeport now has its own mosquito control program, giving the fast-growing community a more localized approach to one of Florida’s most persistent seasonal challenges.

As Freeport continues to experience rapid growth, city leaders established Freeport Mosquito Control in October 2025 to provide a more localized approach to mosquito management. According to city information, the goal is to preserve the health and comfort of Freeport residents through informed and responsible mosquito control practices. The city now conducts its own surveillance, monitoring and treatment efforts tailored to conditions within the community.

Rather than simply spraying on a set schedule, Freeport’s program is built around surveillance. The city operates eight permanent mosquito traps across Freeport and places additional traps in areas of concern. Those traps are baited with carbon dioxide, using dry ice to imitate human breathing, then left in the field and retrieved 24 hours later.

What happens next is where the science comes in. Mosquitoes collected from the traps are identified by certified personnel. That matters because Florida has nearly 90 species of mosquitoes, and not all behave the same way. Different species prefer different habitats, bite different hosts and carry different levels of disease concern.

The city also monitors mosquito larvae, treats problem areas before mosquitoes become adults and uses mosquito fish, also known as Gambusia, in more permanent bodies of water such as retention ponds, wooded pools and some ditch systems. In areas where water may dry up but still produce larvae, bacterial treatments are used to target mosquito larvae



while limiting impact to people, pets, fish, birds, amphibians and other wildlife.

Storm drains are also part of the plan. Because water can collect inside them and create ideal breeding conditions, Freeport treats storm drains twice each year using alternating products, including bacterial treatments and methoprene, an insect growth regulator that prevents mosquitoes from reaching adulthood.

Even with those efforts, some adult mosquitoes still take flight. According to the city, when adult mosquito traps consistently catch more than 25 mosquitoes in a night, it may be time to send out the spray truck. The city uses ultra-low-volume spraying, which distributes small droplets of adulticide into the air.

As of mid-June, Freeport had posted 2026 mosquito trap reports on the city website, including reports from May and June. The city also began making public spray announcements when trap counts remained high. One recent notice stated that spraying would begin about one hour before sunset and continue into the evening.

That does not appear to mean Freeport has a fixed weekly summer spray calendar. Instead, the city’s approach appears to be based on trap counts, mosquito activity, weather conditions and areas of concern. Residents looking for updates can check the city’s mosquito trap reports and watch for city announcements.

As a resident, you also play an important role. Mosquito control works best when neighborhoods help reduce breeding areas around homes and businesses. Even small amounts of standing water can produce

mosquitoes, including water in buckets, flowerpots, bird-baths, clogged gutters, toys, tarps, trash can lids, pet bowls and low spots in yards.

City officials are also asking residents to keep an eye out for one of the area’s most common backyard mosquitoes: *Aedes albopictus*, better known as the Asian tiger mosquito. These small black-and-white striped mosquitoes live in close proximity to humans and rarely travel more than about 700 feet from

where they hatch. Because they stay so close to home, you might be unknowingly raising them in their own yard!

Their larvae can develop in almost any container that holds water, including flowerpots, children’s toys, buckets, tires and other items left outdoors. If you spot standing water with tiny wiggling mosquito larvae swimming in it, simply dumping the water can make a big difference.

Otherwise, a few simple habits can help reduce mosquito populations throughout the community: empty standing water weekly, keep gutters clear, refresh birdbaths, store containers upside down, maintain pools and fountains, repair screens and use repellent when spending time outdoors at dawn, dusk or after heavy rains.

Freeport Mosquito Control officials say these small efforts can have a significant impact. By eliminating breeding sites around homes and businesses, residents help protect their families, neighbors and the broader community from mosquito problems before they begin.

For Freeport, mosquito control is more than a comfort issue. It is part of public health, quality of life and keeping outdoor spaces usable during the summer months. Having our own local program allows Freeport to respond to conditions close to home, from neighborhood complaints to trap counts in specific areas.

For questions or concerns, contact Freeport Mosquito Control at mosquitocontrol@freeportflorida.gov. The city’s main number is 850-835-2822.

In Florida, mosquitoes may always be part of summer. But in Freeport, the fight against them is becoming more local, more data-driven and more vis-

ible — one trap, one treatment and one neighborhood at a time. Visit freeportflorida.gov/

government/department/mosquito_control.php for more information.



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Hurricane Safety Tips from Florida Power & Light

An average Atlantic hurricane season produces 14 named storms, seven hurricanes and three major hurricanes, according to long-term climate averages from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The 2025 season continued a trend of above-average activity across the Atlantic Basin and Gulf Coast, reinforcing the importance of storm preparedness for coastal communities.

The 2026 Atlantic hurricane season began June 1 and runs through Nov. 30. Early forecasts from NOAA and the National Hurricane Center project 13 to 19 named storms, including six to 10 hurricanes and three to five major hurricanes of Category 3 strength or higher.

It's not a matter of if, but when the next hurricane will impact Florida, making preparation essential throughout the six-month season. Whether you're a longtime Floridian or new to the state, having a plan in place is one of the best ways to stay safe.

Hurricane Emergency Plan

- Determine whether your home or business is in a flood or evacuation zone, review evacuation routes and identify a backup power source or relocation plan if a storm warning is issued.
- Keep your gas tank at least half full throughout hurricane season. Electric vehicle owners should maintain a charge between 50% and 80% whenever possible.
- Contact Walton County Emergency Management if you or someone you know has special medical needs and apply for FPL's Medically Essential Service designation if anyone in your home depends on electric-powered medical equipment.

Hurricane Emergency Kit

- Stock nonperishable food, bottled water, flashlights, batteries, medications, a first-aid kit, phone chargers, power banks and a waterproof container for important documents.
- Include insurance policies, health cards, birth certificates,



Social Security cards, emergency contact information and a recent copy of your FPL bill.

Prepare Your Home

- Install approved hurricane shutters or alternate coverings such as plywood over windows and doors.

- Bring patio furniture and outdoor items indoors, secure doors and windows and move valuables away from windows or cover them with plastic.
- Unplug unnecessary electronics, including pool equipment, and set refrigerators and freezers to their coldest settings to help preserve food during outages.
- Never trim trees or vegetation near power lines yourself. Hire qualified professionals and visit FPL.com/trees for information about FPL's tree-trimming policies.
- Before using ladders or scaffolding, identify nearby power lines and stay at least 10 feet away from them with both equipment and tools.

After the Storm

- Follow all manufacturer instructions when using portable generators. Operate generators outdoors only and connect appliances directly to the generator. Never connect a generator directly to your home's breaker or fuse box.
- Stay far away from downed power lines and avoid flooded or debris-covered areas where power lines may be hidden.

Stay Informed

- Bookmark FPL.com and save 1-800-4-OUTAGE (1-800-468-8243) to report outages and check restoration status.
- Follow local news and @insideFPL for updates and safety information. Additional storm-preparedness resources are available at FPL.com/storm.
- Sign up for local alerts and updates at www.mywaltonfl.gov/1063/Emergency-Management and follow www.facebook.com/WaltonCountyEM for timely storm information.

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Florida Lt. Gov. Jay Collins Brings Message of Leadership, Opportunity to Locals

By LORI LEATH MILLER

Florida Lt. Gov. Jay Collins visited Beachworx recently for a community conversation with local business owners, elected officials and residents, sharing his personal story, leadership philosophy and views on issues affecting Northwest Florida.

Collins, a former Green Beret, state senator and nonprofit leader, opened with a message rooted in resilience and service. He described being born to a teenage mother, adopted by his grandparents and raised on a family farm that was later lost. “A son never forgets,” Collins said, referring to a phrase passed down by his father. “You don’t forget where you come from. The roots that create who you are drive you.”

Collins served in the Army as a Green Beret, surviving serious injuries that ultimately led to the amputation of his leg. Afterward, he requalified as a Green Beret and continued serving for five more years. He later led a nonprofit that provided millions of meals after disasters, including hurricanes across Florida. “Leadership isn’t about talking,” he said. “Leadership is about being on the ground where people need help.”

Throughout his remarks, Collins emphasized that government, business and the economy are ultimately about people. He said his priorities have remained consistent from his time in the



Florida Senate to his current role as lieutenant governor: safety, the economy, education and opportunity. “It’s not about me,” he said. “It’s about we.”

Education and workforce development drew significant attention during the question-and-answer portion. Collins voiced support for school choice while also emphasizing accountability. He said most Florida students will continue to attend public schools and said every educational option receiving public dollars should be held responsible.

He also called for stronger alignment between education and the workforce, particularly through trades, apprenticeships and career pathways in high school. “I don’t believe in second-class citizens,” Collins said. “We have to equally reward

people who go down different paths, whether that is college, trades, entrepreneurship or going straight into a career.”

Collins said Florida should better connect commerce, universities, state colleges and high schools to identify workforce

needs. He pointed to shortages in trades and agriculture, noting the average age of both tradesmen and farmers is near 58.

Questions also focused on housing affordability, insurance and the challenge of retaining skilled workers in tourism,

health care and construction. Collins said the state must pursue short-, mid- and long-term strategies, including veteran transition programs, apprenticeship opportunities and policies

Continued on next page

Mr. Nick Azzarita Wins HVAC From A Superior Mechanical

By MARTA ROSE THORPE

A Superior Mechanical recently held its inaugural Veterans & First Responders Appreciation Lunch in Okaloosa County. “We were blown away by the attendance of Veterans from every branch and local First Responders,” shared Jimmy Thorpe, founder of this 24-year-old, veteran-owned business. The HVAC winner, Mr. Nick Azzarita, served 20 years in the US Air Force in the Korean War and in Vietnam. The following 20 years, he served as a math teacher at Niceville High School. “To say this gentleman is humble is an understatement,” shared event organizer Marta Thorpe. “There couldn’t have been



a nicer human being to win this.”

Thank you to event sponsors: Beachworx, Chelco, Blanken Financial Management, NHance Cabinet Makeovers, United Community Bank, One Beach Real Estate specializing in Homes For He-

roes, Randy Wise Homes, Gulf Coast State College VBOC, and Okaloosa Vet Center. Also present at the event was the Chamber Choir from Rocky Bayou Christian School, the Niceville High School ROTC, and a beautiful invocation by Pastor Dave Butler. “Big thanks to Jeff and Christi at the Niceville Community Center,” added Marta.

Save the date for the next Appreciation Lunch: Tuesday, October 20, 2026. For information on sponsoring, contact Marta Thorpe at (850) 814-3822. For general information visit us at ASuperiorMechanical.com.



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A Decade of Gratitude: Thank You, David White

For the past 10 years, Studio 237 Music Lessons in Santa Rosa Beach has been blessed with a wonderful opportunity to share our story, our students, and our passion for music through the pages of Freeport Life, Sowl Life and Bay Life newspapers. As we reflect on this decade-long partnership, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to Dave White for his generosity, encouragement and commitment to building community through local journalism.

Music has a unique way of

bringing people together. It inspires creativity, strengthens relationships and enriches the lives of people of all ages. At Studio 237 Music Lessons, our mission has always been to help students discover the joy of music while fostering a sense of connection throughout our community. The opportunity to regularly share articles in Freeport Life, Sowl Life, Bay Life and PCB Life has helped us extend that mission far beyond the walls of our studio.

Dave and the Life Media team have consistently recog-

nized the value of local stories and community-centered organizations. By providing a platform for Studio 237 Music Lessons over the past decade, they have helped shine a light on the importance of music education and the positive impact it has on families throughout the area. Through student achievements, musical insights, educational articles and stories of inspiration, countless readers have been encouraged to appreciate the role music plays in enhancing our lives.

Local newspapers are more

than just sources of information; they are the heartbeat of a community. They celebrate accomplishments, preserve local history and connect neighbors through shared experiences. Dave and the team's dedication to Life Media Newspapers has created a welcoming space where businesses, artists, educators and residents can come together and support one another. These efforts have helped strengthen the sense of community that makes our area such a special place to live.

We are especially thankful for Life Media's belief in the importance of arts education. In a world that often moves at a fast pace, music provides a source of comfort, inspiration and personal growth. The opportunity to discuss these benefits with readers year after year has allowed us to reach families who might never have considered music lessons and has helped cultivate a vibrant local music community.

On behalf of our students, families, instructors and supporters, we extend our heartfelt thanks to Dave and Sowl Life newspaper for ten years of friendship, support and partnership and, over the years, the rest



of the Life Media team. Your commitment to serving our community has made a meaningful difference, and we are honored to have been part of the stories shared through your publication.

We look forward to many more years of celebrating music, community and the people who make our area a place where creativity and connection continue to flourish.

Thank you, Dave, for your kindness, your vision and your unwavering support of Studio 237 Music Lessons and the arts in our community where the "Locals Get It."

Sincerely,
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JAY COLLINS

continued from page 1

that reduce the cost of building and owning homes.

He said permitting and impact fees are adding significant costs to home prices and should be part of the affordability conversation. On insurance, he said Florida has made progress attracting more insurers but still has more work to do, particularly related to fraud, litigation and rebuilding barriers after storms. "We cannot allow the conversation about affordability and the American dream to be about just getting by," Collins said. "I want homeownership to be on the rise."

Growth and development were also part of the discussion. Collins said Florida must manage growth thoughtfully while protecting farmland, water, beaches and green spaces. "People are going to move here," he said. "The question is how we manage growth while keeping Florida what it is."

Local attendees also asked about small business concerns, agriculture costs, women entrepreneurs, wildlife rescue funding and community projects, including an America 250 initiative called Patriots Point. Collins repeatedly encouraged residents to bring specific facts, maps and details to the table. "Come with details and we can talk problems," he said. "You will have a seat at the table."

For the Panhandle, Collins said the region's military and veteran population is especially important to him. "If you signed your name on the dotted line, the very least we can do is be present, hear you out and help make a difference in your life," he said.

Collins closed by returning to the theme of opportunity, saying his own life is proof that the American dream remains possible. "When people tell you the American dream isn't real, they're wrong," he said. "I've lived it."

Sean of the South: Letter from a 4th Grader – Dad



BY SEAN DIETRICH

I get a lot of letters from kids. Such as the letter that came yesterday, via snail mail. It was penned in a childish hand.

“My teacher reads your stories to our class sometimes and I wanted to know, can you write about me? If it’s not too much trouble for you to do?”

“I am in fourth grade. I don’t really have anything cool about me. I have red hair. But you can probably come up with something cool. My dad died this year the same way yours did, so my teacher said you are the same as me. It’s okay if you can’t write back.”

To the little boy who wrote to me: Red is the most prestigious hair color in the world. That is not an opinion.

Fifty years ago, experts estimated that redheads made up approximately 8 percent of the earth’s population. But the percentage of redheads sharply decreases each year.

This year, the percentage is at an all-time low. About 1 percent of the world’s population have red hair. Ours is the rarest hair color in the solar system. So welcome to the club, friend.

Our red hair is caused by a gene called the MC1R gene. Genes are microscopic very scientific things in the human body. They float around in your bloodstream, wearing little lab coats and carrying around tiny clipboards and pocket protectors.

A gene is something your parents carry around with them, all the time. Sort of like auto insurance, only more dependable.

So if both your parents had the MC1R gene, this means that you have a 25 percent chance of being born with red hair.

Congratulations, your parents both had the MC1R gene. You’re a ginger. May God have mercy on your soul.

I got my red hair, personally,

from my dad. My dad had the MC1R gene. He was a redhead. He came from a long line of redheads. Although when he got older, his hair became more auburn.

That’s something they don’t tell you about red hair. The pigment changes throughout your lifetime. In fact, red hair will never go gray. The pigment will only fade over time and appear white, or even blond. My hair has change shades thrice in my lifetime.

Of course, my father didn’t live long enough to find out what his hair would do.

My dad was very special. Everyone liked him. He was a good man who loved baseball, old movies and jokes. He had a prodigious memory when it came to jokes. He had a million of them.

“Yesterday, I went to buy camo hunting pants, I couldn’t find any.”

“When life gives you melons, you might be dyslexic.”

“Adam was a Southern Baptist, because only a Baptist could stand next to a naked woman and be tempted by fruit.”

“What’s the difference between ignorance and apathy? I don’t know and I don’t care.”

My old man would have my little friends rolling on the ground. He was pretty great.

My dad coached our Little



League team. He showed up to every practice with a World-War-II era duffel bag, filled with bats and balls and gloves. Our team was made up of a bunch of underprivileged kids. My father sought these unfortunate boys out.

Daddy would recruit kids from the sticks, boys who came from families without squat.

Each year, our team would hold fundraisers so that every underprivileged boy had a nice, brand new uniform. My father gave them all free baseball gloves and free bats for Christmas.

This kind of thing was important to my father because he, too, grew up underprivileged. He knew what it meant to have nothing.

Before every practice, my father would drive his Ford all over town, picking up youngsters from squalid homes that featured blue tarps on the rooftops.

We boys rode in the bed of his F-100, happy as larks. Afterward, we all ate ice cream from Dairy Queen. Daddy paid for the ice cream. Because that’s the kind of guy my paw was.

I’ll bet your dad was pretty great, too.

So don’t remember your father by the way he died. Don’t let your dad’s life be defined by the word “suicide.”

Your father was much more than an ugly word. Your father was a great man.

Today, your father lives with God himself. Just like mine. Your daddy was awesome. He carried some pretty great genes, too. We know this to be true because he helped make you.

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 Musing


BY REV. PETE HYDE

They stood at opposite ends of a long dark hallway – one in his 70s and the other in his 40s. It was a tense meeting. They met once before when the younger was still a small child, but there were no memories, only questions tucked away in the younger one's mind and heart. The elder had wondered throughout his life what became of this young life he dropped off at the orphanage so many years before.

The meeting took place after much prayer and discussion. God had a hand in the arrangements for the meeting – the right contacts had been made, information was easy to

acquire, and thousands of miles had been traveled easily. A language barrier separated the two strangers but yet related men, which made the meeting even more difficult and tense. It was father and son meeting for the first time since the father gave up the younger for adoption at the age of two. Over the next few days, a relationship was built – not a deep one, but a relationship. Answers came that led to more questions. Given his life circumstances, the father did the best and loving thing for his son as a single parent with little prospect for being able to raise a child successfully.

A man stands at a graveside in the sweltering Oklahoma August heat. Only about 10 people came to the service including family. Taps played in the distance. The firing squad squeezes off the 21-gun salute that pierces the quiet of the small town cemetery. He stands by the grave. Everyone is gone except his immediate family. He reflects on

the life of his father – his adopted father. He was a strict man, a flawed man, a driven man. Being number one was his only option. The typical son things ran through his mind as he stood by the final resting place of the man who raised him – baseball games, golf, fishing, camping, military life, anger, temper, drinking, the final months as this one who shared his life began to deteriorate.

He turns and gets in the car and seldom returns to the quiet of that place. It's been almost 30 years, but the hole in his son's heart is still there. He knows in his mind and his training has taught him it won't go away. Perhaps he needs to return to that spot more often.

He now takes a few minutes to reflect on his role as a husband and father. He hopes he hasn't done irreparable damage to his children. He hopes he has been the husband he has worked so hard to be. He said and did the things he said he would never say and do from his childhood. He is sorry sometimes. He is so proud of how they turned out and how his children have handled life. He knows he is blessed

Fathers



beyond measure to have a woman at his side God placed there specifically for him. He doesn't tell them enough. Now he is a grandpa and a whole new role opens up.

He sits in the quiet of the church sanctuary before anyone else is there, before the phone begins to ring, before the week's schedule begins to cloud his perspective. His Father is there - his Father in heaven. He has been blessed. No, life hasn't always been easy, and struggles are at the same time past, immediate and long range. But God's fatherly hand has been on his shoulder for a long time, even when he didn't acknowledge

it. He pauses in these few quiet moments to give thanks on this Father's day to his heavenly father for the blessing, guidance and protection granted to him throughout his years.

Regardless of your experience of or your relationship with your father, remember today the influence, touch and presence of your Heavenly Father before Father's Day buzzes off the calendar and is forgotten until next year. He is with you every day and that's all we really need to face whatever is before us.

Rev. Pete Hyde serves as chaplain with the South Walton Fire District.



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CROSSCOUNTRY3

continued from page 3

portance of relationships, connection and community. Veterans often miss the camaraderie and brotherhood they experienced during military service. CrossCountry3 fosters a supportive environment where veterans can build meaningful connections, strengthen families and encourage one another.

Freedom is both a principle and a mission. Veterans have dedicated portions of their lives protecting freedom, and CrossCountry3 extends that commitment by fighting human trafficking, one of the greatest assaults on human freedom. By engaging veterans in efforts that help protect and advocate for victims, the organization creates opportunities for continued service that align with the values many veterans have upheld throughout their lives.

Ultimately, CrossCountry3 exists because veterans deserve more than gratitude for their service — they deserve opportunities to continue living lives

of significance and impact. By providing identity, meaning and hope through a mission-centered approach, the organization helps veterans write a new chapter of service.

In doing so, CrossCountry3 demonstrates that purpose does not end when military service concludes. Instead, it can evolve into a powerful force for good — helping veterans, families and victims of human trafficking move toward a future defined by hope, freedom and human dignity.

At CrossCountry3, building resilience in the face of adversity and experiencing restoration physically, mentally and spiritually remain at the core of the mission.

For more information, visit crosscountry3.com.

Bruce Duty, Maj. (Ret.), U.S. Army, is the founder and president of CrossCountry3. A retired Army chaplain with more than 22 years of active-duty military service, Duty served with the 3rd Infantry Division, 2nd Infantry Division and 10th Mountain Division, including two combat

deployments to Iraq.

Prior to becoming an Army chaplain, Duty served nearly nine years as an enlisted service member before earning both a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Divinity degree. He also served as a pastor in Missouri and Florida before answering the call to military chaplaincy during the Iraq War surge in 2007.

Throughout his military career, Duty received numerous honors, including the Bronze Star Medal, Meritorious Service Medal, Meritorious Unit Commendation, Iraqi Campaign Medal and additional military awards and decorations. He is also certified in Master Resilience Training, Pathfinder Resilience Training, ASIST Suicide Intervention Training, Strong Bonds Family Training and several military medical and leadership programs.

Today, Duty uses both his military and civilian experience to help individuals and organizations build resilience, overcome adversity and pursue restoration physically, mentally and spiritually. He remains passionate about faith, family, freedom and helping others discover hope and purpose through service. Duty resides in Niceville.



By RICK MOORE

It wasn't really a diet. We weren't trying to lose weight. It was more or less a plan to stop gaining weight. Because we were on the road for hours each day, both my wife and I would purchase several of our meals from fast-food chains. Our plan was to stop eating French fries for a month to see if it would make a difference. A week into the self-imposed plan, my wife called and asked me to pick up dinner from a drive-thru on the

way home. Driving past one of my favorite hamburger joints, I couldn't help but notice a huge banner which read, "Buy 1 Combo and Get The 2nd Free!" I did a U-turn and pulled into the drive-thru. Suddenly remembering we aren't supposed to be eating fries, I did the math and realized we would still be better off to order the combos and throw away the fries. After receiving the meals, I pulled over to the dumpster behind the restaurant and ditched the French fries.

As we are sitting at the kitchen table eating, my wife looks at the receipt taped to the side of the bag from the restaurant and saw where I had received two orders of fries. She became irate. "I can't believe you ate two orders of fries in the car on the way

home!" I promised I didn't and began explaining how the cost of the two combos was cheaper, and that I had thrown away the fries in the dumpster. She wasn't buying it. She said she knew me too well and there was no way in the world I would throw away two orders of fries. Then, out of nowhere, she came up with a new label she tried to put on me, a label I'd never heard before. She said, "I knew you would go fast-fooding on me." I didn't even know "fast-fooding" was a thing. Now I'm upset. I jump in the car and do the only reasonable thing left to do. I drive back to the restaurant dumpster. No, this isn't a Seinfeld sketch.

I leaned over the dumpster, stretching as far as possible, but the French fries were still inches away out of reach. I grabbed a

long stick and tried to pull them towards me, but that didn't work either. Taking a picture of them as proof would have been a reasonable thing to do, but that could never be as good as securing the evidence. So, I jumped into the dumpster and picked up the two containers of French fries. After gently setting them on the ledge of the dumpster making sure they would not tip over, I began realizing getting into the dumpster was easier than getting out. It is at that moment a bunch of young people pulled into the drive through. With their windows down and cell phones out taking pictures and videos, I heard one of the teenagers say, "I've never seen someone dumpster diving at a restaurant before."

To this day, I'm still not sure

my wife believes I didn't eat the fries. In her defense, I was known to sneak around and eat candy bars when I shouldn't. We want to be trusted, and we want to trust others. My father used to say trust isn't given, it is earned. No matter if you agree with that or not, that was the rule in the home I grew up in. If I snuck out in the middle of the night and was caught, I would be grounded and not allowed to drive the car for a week. The punishment of being grounded was bad, but what really hurt the most was to hear my father say, "I can't trust you." One of the highest honors a person can receive is to be told they are trustworthy. Trust is the fragile cornerstone of all human connection. Go earn it.

Rick Moore is Communication Pastor at Destiny Worship Center

STEVE DOOCY

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going to go," he said. "Out here, you never know what's going to happen. You're going to meet interesting people, hear some great stories and probably have a few surprises along the way." That unpredictability is part of what keeps the broadcasts fresh.

Doocy said one of the things he looks forward to most when the show travels is the enthusiasm of local viewers. "They're so excited when we first walk in with the cameras rolling," he said. "And the excitement really doesn't diminish."

That enthusiasm was amplified by FOX & Friends' nationwide America's 250 RV giveaway, which had generated enormous local interest. "Everybody wants to win it," Doocy said. "I don't blame them. It's a really nice vehicle."

Perhaps nowhere was Doocy's pride more evident than when discussing his son, Peter Doocy, now one of the most recognizable White House correspondents in America. When I asked how it feels watching his son follow in his footsteps, his voice immediately softened. "We're really proud of him," Doocy said. "In the beginning, we never pushed him into this business because it's a complicated industry. But he's worked hard, he's done a great job and it's exciting watching him succeed." At the time of our interview, Peter was

traveling internationally with the president. Like any parent, Steve watches closely.

Like any grandparent, he was equally happy discussing his grandchildren. A grandfather for only a few years, he smiled while talking about his young grandchildren and admitted there is nothing quite like the experience.

For all the excitement surrounding national television, RV giveaways and coast-to-coast broadcasts, those moments may

have revealed the most about who Steve Doocy really is. By the end of our conversation, I found myself hoping this wouldn't be Steve Doocy's last visit to the Emerald Coast.

What was scheduled to be a short interview stretched into a much longer conversation about family, food, local communities, television and the stories that connect us. In a profession where interviews can sometimes feel rushed, scripted or transactional,

our conversation felt more like catching up with an old friend who happened to have spent the last three decades on national television. It was one of the most enjoyable and genuinely pleasant interviews I've conducted. And I think he had fun, too!

Before ending our conversation, I asked if there was anything he wanted local readers to know. His answer was simple. "Thank you for the wonderful welcome and the great rollout,"

he said. "We really appreciate it."

By the end of our conversation, Doocy wasn't talking about ratings, television production or celebrity. He was talking about communities. About local businesses. About people gathering together. About stories worth telling. "Every story is local," he said.

And in a place like "our neck of the woods," that's a story worth telling.



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Arts & Music

250TH

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Ginger Madden, State Attorney for Florida's 1st Judicial Circuit; and Reverend George Whitefield, portrayed by Mel Ponder, president of Northwest Florida State College, shared descrip-

tions of the signers, including their professions and the size of their families.

When all 56 signers were seated, the Honorable Patt Maney, Florida House Representative for District 4, invited everyone to rise with champagne glasses in hand and toast

the signers and our Declaration of Independence. A large and beautiful cake was then cut and served, followed by the drone show and cannon salute.

More America 250 events are planned throughout Okaloosa County, offering residents across Northwest Florida opportu-



nities to celebrate our shared history and heritage. Follow the Okaloosa County America 250 Facebook page and visit Life Media publications or GetTheCoast.com/America250 for upcoming events.

Happy Birthday, America!

EFCU Celebrates America 250 with Cruise Giveaway

Eglin Federal Credit Union (EFCU) is inviting Northwest Florida residents to celebrate America's 250th birthday with special in-branch festivities and the chance to win a dream vacation.

The celebration begins July 1 and 2, when visitors to any EFCU branch can enjoy complimentary cookies and patriotic-themed giveaways while supplies last.

The festivities continue throughout the summer with the credit union's "Cruise on in for America's 250th Celebration Giveaway." From July 1 through Aug. 31, community members can enter for a chance to win a five-day, four-night cruise vacation for two to Mexico, the Bahamas or the western Caribbean.

A total of 12 winners — one from each EFCU branch

— will be selected through a random drawing. Entries must be submitted in person at an Eglin FCU branch, with a limit of one entry per person per day. Participants must be at least 21 years old to enter. "This is a special opportunity for us to celebrate our country's history while connecting with the communities we serve," said Laura Coale, EFCU senior vice president of marketing and public relations. "We're excited to provide a memorable experience for our members, welcome prospective members into our full-service locations, and give everyone a chance to win an unforgettable vacation."

Complete giveaway rules and entry details are available at local Eglin FCU branches and online. For more information, visit EglinFCU.org.

INDEPENDENCE DAY

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Rosemary Beach Fourth of July Celebration

July 4 | Barrett Square & Western Green

Bike parade, family field day, live concert and Gulf fireworks at 9 p.m.

Info: rosemarybeach.com | (866) 348-8952



Sandestin's Red, White & Baytowne

July 4 | Village of Baytowne Wharf

Live music, family activities and a fireworks finale over the lagoon.

Info: sandestin.com | (877) 496-2024

Seaside Fourth of July Celebration

July 4 | Beginning at 9 a.m. | Central Square, Seaside

Patriotic performances, bike

parade, hot dog eating contest, Sinfonia concert and fireworks at 8:30 p.m.

Info: seasidefl.com | (850) 225-4436

SunQuest Cruises Fourth of July Dinner Cruise

July 4 | 6-9:30 p.m. | Baytowne Marina, Sandestin

Dinner cruise aboard the Solaris with live entertainment and fireworks viewing from the water. Reservations required.

Info: sunquestcruises.com | (850) 650-2519

BLACKSMITHING

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Members pursuing Journeyman certification will work toward completing required standards in preparation for recognition at the October state conference.

Sept. 12 Traditions Workshop | 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

This special out-of-cycle meeting will focus on completing both the chapter compe-

tition project and individual gift-exchange projects before the conference season begins.

Oct. 10 Traditions Workshop | 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

Members will prepare equipment and pack the trailer in advance of FABA CON 41 in Gainesville.

Oct. 16-18 FABA CON 41 | Best Western Gateway Grand, Gainesville

The statewide convention features three days of demon-

strations, classes and educational opportunities for blacksmiths of all experience levels.

Oct. 31 Traditions Workshop | 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

Members will share techniques, ideas and discoveries gathered at the conference while resetting equipment for upcoming competitions.

Nov. 7 Timber Creek Distillery, 6451 Lake Ella Road, Crestview | 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

The annual chapter competition returns with a mystery challenge announced closer to the event. Participants will have five hours to create a forged project using either their own steel or material from the chapter's scrap supply. The day traditionally includes pizza from Timber Creek's stone oven, fellowship and plenty of friendly competition.

Winter Schedule: No December meeting is planned due to holiday activities and Renaissance fair commitments.

For safety, all participants and visitors under the forge tent are required to wear safety glasses and sturdy closed-toe shoes or boots. Long pants and long-sleeve shirts made from cotton or other natural fibers are strongly recommended.

For more information about membership, events or hosting a demonstration, visit www.blacksmithing.org or contact David Sandlin at david@traditionsworkshop.com or 850-974-1548.



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Summer on the Green at ECTC

BY CAMERON HUGHES

Summer is teeing up for an unforgettable day on the course as Emerald Coast Theatre Company hosts its first-ever Charity Golf Tournament on Monday, June 29 at Noon at the exclusive Burnt Pine Golf Club in Sandestin. Benefitting ECTC Youth Education Programs, this exciting inaugural event will bring together community leaders, local businesses, golf lovers, and supporters of the arts for an afternoon packed with great food, drinks, prizes, live entertainment and giving back to the next generation of performers.

Known as the crown jewel of Florida golf, Burnt Pine Golf Club offers a breathtaking course experience overlooking the Choctawhatchee Bay, featuring rolling fairways, stunning natural scenery, and one of the most sought-after private golf destinations in the region. Players will enjoy an elevated tournament experience from start to finish, including lunch provided by Firehouse Subs before play begins and post-tournament food included following the event.

Throughout the day, golfers can also enjoy complimentary beverages provided by Tito's Handmade Vodka, Birdie Cocktails, and Odd Pelican Beer Company while networking, competing, and supporting arts education along the Emerald Coast. Every player will receive one free mulligan, and excitement will build across the course with contests, prizes, and more throughout the tournament.

One of the biggest highlights of the day will be the Hole-In-One Challenge, where players will have the opportunity to win a Rolex watch — provided by McCaskill & Company.

Proceeds from the tournament directly support Emerald Coast Theatre Company's Youth Education Programs, helping provide camps, classes, top teaching talent, scholarships, and training opportunities that inspire creativity, confidence, and community in young performers that carries far beyond the stage.

ECTC would also like to extend a heartfelt thank you to the generous outpour from our sponsors and supporters who are making this inaugural event possible: Alice and Jerry Zich, Jim and Tammy Pierce, Chancely Design Architecture, Seaside Sport, McGill Escrow & Title, Shades Bar & Grill, The Agency, Cafe Thirty-A, Jennifer Crawford with Own at the Beach, Keller Williams, and Dave and Jo Menary.

Sponsorship opportunities and team registrations are still available, and community support is already helping make this inaugural tournament one of the standout celebrations of the summer.

BIG BIRTHDAY

continued from page 1

spots for friends and families looking to enjoy great food, cold drinks and holiday fun.

At Props Brewery Hammock Bay, visitors can enjoy live music from Martin Lane Music, featuring a crowd-pleasing mix of classic rock and '90s country. Bring lawn chairs, grab dinner from local food trucks and enjoy an evening of music and community before the fireworks begin. Even better, the City of Freeport's fireworks display can be viewed from the brewery, creating another festive option for those looking to celebrate with friends and neighbors.

The centerpiece of Freeport's Independence Day celebration begins at 6 p.m. with the City of Freeport's annual 4th of July Parade.

The parade will start at the Freeport Learning Center and travel approximately 2½ miles before concluding at the Freeport Regional Sports Complex. The route leaves the school area via Kylea Laird Drive, travels to State Road 20, turns west along Highway 20 and continues to County Road 83A before ending at the sports complex.

One of the best parts of the parade is its community spirit. Individuals, businesses, organizations, clubs, churches and community groups are encouraged to participate. Entries may include floats, antique vehicles, golf carts, motorcycles, trucks, tractors, horses, bicycles and walking or marching groups. Parade participants will assemble at the Freeport Learning Center football field between 4 and 5 p.m. on July 4, with the parade beginning promptly at 6 p.m.

Those interested in participating must complete an application, liability form and parade requirements paperwork by 5 p.m. June 26. Applications are available at Freeport City Hall, located at 112 U.S. Hwy. 20 West. Participants are asked to submit only one entry per application, and entries will be notified once approved.

If you plan to attend, note that State Road 20 along the parade route will close at approximately 5:45 p.m. and reopen once the parade has passed.

Following the parade, the celebration continues at the Freeport Regional Sports Complex, located at 563 Hammock Trail East. Food trucks, community activities and family-friendly entertainment will lead up to the evening's grand finale—a spectacular fireworks show that promises to light up the Freeport sky.

More Than a Birthday

This year's Independence Day celebration carries extra meaning as communities across America begin commemorating the nation's 250th birthday.

In Freeport, that celebration comes to life through neighbors decorating bicycles, local businesses hosting events, families gathering along the parade route and friends watching fireworks together under the summer sky. In our community, this a vibrant expression of our shared heritage and community spirit, connecting us all and fostering a sense of belonging and unity.

As Freeport continues to grow and welcome new residents, this year's celebration serves as a reminder that the traditions and sense of community that make our city special remain as strong as ever. While America celebrates 250 years of history, Freeport will be celebrating the way it knows best—with hometown pride, friendly faces and a true community spirit.

After all, while America's birthday may be big, Freeport will celebrate it in true small-town style.

For parade route maps, event updates and additional information, visit the City of Freeport's website at www.freeportflorida.gov.

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