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The Ripple Effect of a Great Teacher

Bree O'Donnell inspires students through discovery, mentors fellow educators and now stands among Florida's top five teachers.

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

Every once in a while, a story comes along that's really bigger than the headline. This is one of those stories.

Yes, Walton County educator Bree O'Donnell has been named one of five finalists for Florida's 2027 Teacher of the Year—an exceptional accomplishment all on its own. Chosen from more than 180,000 public school teachers and 74 District Teachers of the Year across Florida, O'Donnell now stands among the state's top five educators.

But what struck me most wasn't the award. It's what the award represents. As someone who spends a great deal of time highlighting the people, businesses and organizations that make a difference in our area communities, I find myself asking a simple question: What is Walton County doing right?

The answer, I believe, can be found in educators such as Bree O'Donnell. A fourth-grade math and science



teacher at Dune Lakes Elementary School, O'Donnell is well-known for creating classrooms where students don't simply sit and listen. They move. They explore. They experiment. They inquire. They learn by doing.

Her students have tracked data with sidewalk chalk, tested gravity through hands-on experiments and participated

in interactive scavenger hunts that transform learning into discovery. Instead of relying solely on textbooks, she creates opportunities for students to experience concepts first-hand. That's not only the kind of teaching that sparks curiosity, but also the kind that students remember.

What I love most about Bree's story is that her success

isn't built around awards or titles. It's built around helping students see learning as something exciting rather than something they have to do. She creates opportunities for children to be curious, engaged and confident in their abilities—qualities that often last far beyond a single school year.

What makes O'Donnell's recognition even more impressive is that her impact extends far beyond her own classroom. She recently helped develop Walton County's districtwide fourth-grade science and mathematics pacing guides, helping ensure consistency and excellence for students across the county. She also leads her Professional Learning Community, where teachers collaborate, analyze student data and share best practices. Under her leadership, that team has been recognized as a model for the

GREAT TEACHER

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Meet the New 'Dog:

Coach Johns Brings Three Decades of Coaching Triumphs to Freeport High

BY CHRISTOPHER MANSON

The first thing I ask Bobby Johns—Freeport High School's new athletic director and head football coach since April—is, "How's your summer going so far?"

"It's almost over, thank goodness," he says, adding, "It's been good. We've had great attendance, and it's gone smoother than I expected. Most of the kids have been here every day, which makes it easier to do what you gotta do."

COACH JOHNS

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Community

GREAT TEACHER

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entire district. In other words, she’s not just helping students succeed—she’s helping teachers succeed, too.

Florida Education Commissioner Anastasios Kamoutsas praised O’Donnell for demonstrating “an unwavering commitment to student achievement and a relentless focus on continuous improvement.”

Walton County Superintendent Russell Hughes, also Florida’s 2024 Superintendent of the Year, described her as an educator who motivates students, uplifts colleagues and plays a vital role in her school community.

Those are impressive words; but perhaps the greatest measure of a teacher isn’t found in awards, accolades or rankings. It’s found years later when a former student remembers a lesson and gains confidence, because

someone believed in them, or chooses a path because a teacher helped them discover what was possible or where their hidden talent lies. That’s the true ripple effect of great teaching.

One proud parent shared that their child advanced three levels in math under O’Donnell’s instruction at Dune Lakes Elementary, describing her as the kind of teacher who helps students believe in themselves while achieving remarkable academic growth.

While O’Donnell’s recognition places her among Florida’s elite educators, it also shines a spotlight on the quality of education taking place throughout Walton County. And perhaps that’s what makes this story so special.

Yes, it is about one exceptional teacher. But it is also about the students she inspires, the colleagues she mentors and the community that supports edu-



cational excellence. It is about a school district that has now produced two Florida Teacher of the Year finalists in the past three years. In 2025, Paxton School science and aerospace teacher Heather Stewart was named one of Florida’s Teacher of the Year finalists. Now, in 2027, Dune Lakes Elementary’s Bree O’Donnell has earned the

same distinction.

They say lightning doesn’t strike twice in the same place. Walton County just proved otherwise. At first glance, some might call it coincidence. But at some point, success like this stops looking like coincidence and starts looking like culture.

Two Florida Teacher of the Year finalists in three years. A

superintendent who was named Florida’s 2024 Superintendent of the Year. Exceptional educators, engaged school leaders and a community that values education. Together, they tell the story of a district committed to helping students succeed.

This year, O’Donnell stands as the only educator from Florida’s Panhandle among the five statewide finalists. That’s a remarkable achievement for her, for Dune Lakes Elementary and for Walton County.

Behind every successful student is a teacher who cared enough to make a difference. And behind every great teacher is a community that values the work they do. Congratulations, Bree O’Donnell. Thank you for representing Walton County so well and for reminding us that some of the most important work happening in our community takes place every day inside a classroom.

COACH JOHNS

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Johns retired from coaching at Wewahitchka High School in 2024, but it didn’t take much to entice his return.

“I wanted to get back into coaching, and I wanted to be at a good school with a decent foundation where I wouldn’t have to start from scratch,” he says. “This is the second best school district in the state. The job had everything I was looking for.”

He spent a couple of years

around the area—a couple in Vernon, as well as Milton and Blountstown.

“I’m a small-town guy,” says Johns. “I remember when Freeport was very small. I coached against them in the early 2000s when they had about 400 kids. It’s growing, but it still has that small-town feel.”

Johns says the biggest challenge for the 2026-27 season is “the competition we have to play. We’re sitting at 700 kids, and most of the teams in our district are double that.” It’s a situation he’s familiar with af-



ter seven years of coaching at Wewahitchka, where he dealt with as few as 20 students.

“It is what it is. Our job is to be successful in spite of that. We’re thin in some spots, especially on the offensive line, so we need to keep those guys healthy throughout the year.”

Johns says there’s nothing lacking in the Freeport athletic program and credits his predecessor for bringing in wrestling, flag football and beach volleyball.

“We’ve almost got too many sports now. I hope to build on that and offer some stability. Make my mark on the athletic department, building on what’s already here.”

His overall vision for Bulldogs football is “to find a way to take the next step, to play in the postseason. That’s the initial goal. We’re not at that point yet where we’re a legitimate ‘threat’ to people.”

“We just want to be relevant, where people know we’re here

and we’re going to be prepared. And that they’ll have to prepare for us when they play us.”

Johns and wife Chevon celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary this month. She’s a teacher at Freeport, and the couple have 32 years of education experience between them. They are the parents of a 37-year-old son and a 24-year-old daughter, and they recently welcomed their first grandson.

“And I have 12 rescue dogs and four cats,” he says. “We don’t have room, but we keep taking them!”

The Bulldogs’ first game is set for Friday, Aug. 14, on the road. The first home game is Sept. 11—“played at the old stadium in Freeport,” says Johns. A multimillion-dollar athletic facility is in the process of being built on the high school campus.

Johns praises all of the seniors on his team, notably quarterback Carter Nunes, who just verbally committed to the University of West Alabama.

“He’s one of the best quarterbacks in the Panhandle, and he’s gonna have a great season.”

Football huzzahs aside, Johns says his most cherished accomplishment in three decades of athletic experience was winning nine state weightlifting championships at five different schools. Pretty impressive, considering



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P.O. Box 1424
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Publisher/Executive Editor
Lori Leath Smith
Lori@LifeMediaGrp.com

Director, Advertising Sales
Scott Miller
Scott@LifeMediaGrp.com

Art Director
Kim Harper

Advertising Account Manager
Michaela Heshler
Michaela@LifeMediaGrp.com

Writers
Dr. Karen DeVore
Mimy Kincaid
Trish LeClere
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A New Heart, A New Beginning: Walton County Community Celebrates Miracle for 8-Year-Old Sadie Long

By TRISH LeCLERE

Less than 3 months ago, eight-year-old Sadie was enjoying a normal sunny Spring day at Van R. Butler Elementary School when she fainted. Life changed in an instant.

Sadie was rushed for emergency medical care. What began with a trip to Panama City quickly escalated to Sacred Heart Pensacola before she was airlifted to a pediatric cardiac center in Orlando.

There, doctors delivered devastating news. Sadie had been diagnosed with a rare genetic heart condition that can cause dangerous heart rhythm disturbances and progressive heart failure. To protect her from sudden cardiac arrest, surgeons implanted an internal defibrillator. While the device could save her life in an emergency, it was not a permanent solution.

Eventually, it became clear that Sadie's only hope was a heart transplant. Arrangements were made for Sadie to meet



with the transplant team at UF Shands in Gainesville. What followed were many tests and monitoring to determine if she was a candidate for the transplant list. She was. Due to the seriousness of her heart failure, she was placed on the list as a priority transplant, Status 1A.

No one knows when the perfect heart will arrive. So, Sadie was confined to the hospital to wait. Her environment had to be sterile, so that she would be



healthy when the day came.

Sadie's mother, Rose, never left her daughter's bedside. While she lived in hospital rooms hundreds of miles from home, Sadie's sister remained in Walton County surrounded by family, friends, classmates, and a community eager to help shoulder the burden.

Those who know Rose describe her as one of the kindest people they've ever met—a devoted mother whose deep faith

and quiet strength have carried her family through unimaginable circumstances.

Then came the morning that changed everything. It was sister Harper's 10th birthday. While she was celebrating here in Santa Rosa Beach, Rose was sitting beside Sadie's hospital bed, still dressed in sweatpants and a T-shirt, gently waking her daughter for morning medication when there was a knock at the hospital room door.

Expecting a nurse, she instead found three of Sadie's cardiologists. One of them looked at her and asked, "Have you heard the news?" Then came the words every transplant family longs to hear. "We've accepted a heart on her behalf."

After the doctors left, mother and daughter sat together absorbing what they had just heard. "I looked at her and said, 'They found your heart,'" Rose wrote. The two cried tears of joy before calling the people they loved most to share the

life-changing news.

Yet even in one of the happiest moments of her life, Rose's thoughts turned to another mother. "My heart soared for the possibility that tomorrow Sadie will go through surgery and have her angel heart," she wrote. "But I won't lie—the mother in me grieves with the mother on the other side of this. I'm very aware that in order for this miracle to come to us, someone else had to make the choice to have their child be an organ donor. My heart stays with that family."

Her words are a poignant reminder that every transplant carries two stories—one of heartbreaking loss and another of extraordinary hope. Though understandably nervous, Sadie faced surgery with remarkable courage. "I'm nervous because it's surgery," she told her mother. "But, I'm also very excited and ready to have my new heart."

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 Community


When the Gut Speaks First: **Understanding the Back-to-School Stomachache**

By DR. KAREN DEVORE

The first week of school has arrived. The backpacks are packed, the lunches are made, and after one last search for a missing shoe, everyone heads out the door. Then, just as

you're reaching for the car keys, your child quietly says, "My stomach hurts."

For many parents and caregivers, this scene is as much a part of the back-to-school season as shopping for school sup-



plies and navigating busy car lines.

The child who seemed perfectly healthy all summer suddenly doesn't want breakfast, complains of a stomachache before school, or makes repeated trips to the bathroom. Naturally, families wonder: Are they getting sick?

Sometimes they are. But sometimes, the stomach is simply the first place the body speaks.

The brain and digestive system are in constant communication through what scientists call the gut-brain axis. When children experience change, whether it's a new teacher, new classmates, academic expectations, a disrupted routine, or the excitement and uncertainty that naturally come with a new school year, the digestive system may respond before children have the words to describe what they're feeling.

Sometimes, the gut speaks first. That can look like stomachaches, nausea, constipation, diarrhea, changes in appetite, or even changes in bowel habits. The question isn't whether these symptoms are real; it's why they're happening.

One of the most helpful things parents and caregivers can do is look for patterns rather than focusing on a single episode.

Does the stomachache happen only before school? Does it improve later in the day? Does it appear before a test, after a difficult interaction with friends, or on Sunday evenings before the week begins?

Patterns like these may suggest the nervous system is play-

ing a role, but they don't rule out an underlying medical condition. Pain that wakes a child from sleep, is accompanied by fever, persistent vomiting, blood in the stool, unexplained weight loss, poor growth, or continues regardless of the situation deserves prompt medical evaluation.

Rather than asking only, "Where does it hurt?" it can also be helpful to ask: "When does it happen?" "What was happening just beforehand?" "Has anything changed recently?"

Sometimes those questions provide clues that the symptom alone cannot.

Today's children navigate full schedules, academic expectations, extracurricular activities, changing friendships, and a constant stream of information. While these experiences are a normal part of growing up, they can place greater demands on a developing nervous system. For some children, those demands may show up in the digestive tract long before they have the words to explain what they're experiencing.

What Can Parents and Caregivers Do?

If a child says, "My stomach hurts," and otherwise appears well, the first response doesn't always have to be finding the medicine cabinet. Instead, create a few minutes of calm.

Turn off the television or music. Set aside phones and other screens. Sit together quietly. Offer a reassuring hug, hold their hand, or simply be present. Children often take emotional cues

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NatureView:

Maybe the Florida You've Been Looking for Still Exists

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

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

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

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

NatureView feels different.

Surrounded by preserved natural land and thoughtfully designed with community in



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

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

time together without needing to leave the community.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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Donna Johns:

A Commissioner Who Chose Service Over Spotlight

In an era when politics often rewards the loudest voices, Donna Johns has taken a different path.

She doesn't measure success by headlines or social media arguments. She measures it by projects completed, constituents helped, and decisions made with the long-term interests of Walton County in mind.

A lifelong believer in service,

agement, and leadership. She believes good decisions begin with understanding the issues—not simply reacting to them.

That preparation has shaped her approach on the Board.

She has consistently supported investments that improve quality of life across Walton County: new parks and playgrounds, ADA-accessible recreational facilities, enhanced lighting, public safety improvements, and community spaces that families can enjoy for generations. While elected to represent District 4, she has repeatedly voted to support worthwhile projects throughout the county because she believes every community deserves to thrive.

Donna has also shown she is willing to cast difficult votes when she believes they are in the county's best interest. She has opposed developments she believed were incompatible with Walton County's character, supported measures to protect residents from inappropriate growth, and has never hesitated to vote "no" when she believed a proposal threatened the quality of life residents cherish.

Her philosophy is simple: growth should be responsible, government should be accountable, and every tax dollar should be treated with respect.

Constituents often find Donna at community meetings, ribbon cuttings, workshops, neighborhood discussions, or simply listening. She understands that being a county commissioner is far more than attending board meetings. It means studying complex issues, meeting with county staff, responding to residents, balancing competing interests, and making decisions that will shape the county long after today's headlines are forgotten.

Perhaps what best defines Donna Johns is not a single vote or project, but her perspective

on public service.

She believes leadership is not about creating the world she wants. It is about helping create a better future for everyone.

That means listening before speaking.

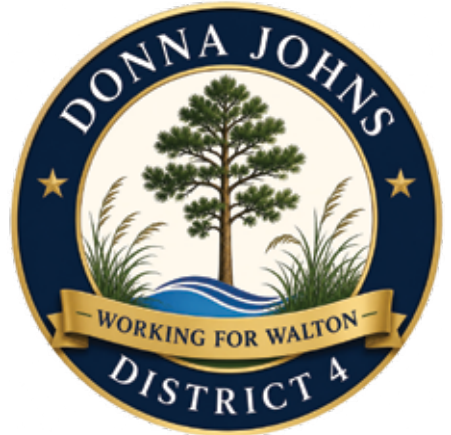
Learning before deciding.

Working before taking credit.

In a political climate often defined by division, Donna Johns has chosen a quieter path—one rooted in preparation, integrity, and service.

For her, public office has never been about holding a title.

It has always been about honoring the trust placed in her by the people of Walton County.



Donna first took an oath to defend the Constitution while serving in the United States Air Force. Years later, she took another oath as Walton County Commissioner for District 4. Though the uniforms changed, the commitment remained the same: serve with integrity, protect the public trust, and put people before politics.

Since taking office in 2022, Donna has approached county government as a student first. She completed extensive training through the Florida Association of Counties, earning certifications in county government, ethics, planning, budgeting, infrastructure, emergency man-

As your District 4 County Commissioner, I voted:

☒ NO to Blackstone	☒ YES to E-Bike Regulations
☒ NO to 30A Surf Club	☒ YES to Neighborhood Plans
☒ NO to High Density Townhomes	☒ YES to an Olympic Pool in DFS
☒ NO to Data Centers	☒ YES to Citizen Workshops
☒ NO to Monster Homes	☒ YES to more Lifeguards
☒ NO to Ghost Chairs	☒ YES to Senior Centers
☒ YES to more Green Space	☒ YES to LSV Pull Over Pads
☒ YES to more Ballfields	☒ YES to Stormwater Improvements
☒ YES to more Public Beach	☒ YES to Protecting Wetlands
	☒ YES to Coastal Dune Lake protections

The decisions made at the County level impact your quality of life, your economy, your environment, and your future. I believe those decisions should be made by someone who is prepared, informed, and committed to continuous learning.

Vote

AUGUST 18

to KEEP ME WORKING for you

I am ready to continue serving Walton County with the knowledge, experience, and dedication this position requires.

You deserve nothing less.



Donna Johns

WALTON COUNTY COMMISSIONER





Freeport Highway 331 Gateway Project Receives \$100K FDOT Grant



BY KERRI PARKER

The award builds on years of planning to create a beautiful and welcoming entrance into the growing Walton County community.

Every community has a first impression. For Freeport, that first impression is about to become a little greener.

The City of Freeport has been awarded a \$100,000 Florida Department of Transportation Highway Beautification Grant, doubling the funding available for its U.S. Highway 331 Gateway Landscape Project. The improvements will enhance the northern entrance to the city with landscaping designed to improve roadway aesthetics, support stormwater management, and create a welcoming sense of arrival.



The project has been years in the making. Freeport partnered with Scenic Walton to develop the original gateway

landscape plan, while Anchor CEI provided engineering services and submitted the grant application to FDOT on the City's behalf.

"The City of Freeport adopted 331 Corridor Standards several years ago that emphasize thoughtful landscaping along the corridor," said Planning Director Latilda Hughes Neel. "We are pleased the Beautification Grant

was approved and look forward to installing a project that will enhance the northern gateway into the City of Freeport and create an attractive visual of community pride for our citizens and visitors."

For anyone who has crossed the Clyde B. Wells Bridge into South Walton, the power of a well-designed gateway is familiar. Now, Freeport is creating its own front door along Highway 331, one that reflects the pride and character of a city that continues to grow while investing in the details that make people feel welcome.

SOF Missions Celebrates 10 Years of Impact at Diamond Gala

Shield of Faith (SOF) Missions will celebrate a decade of serving our nation's warriors at its 10th Annual Emerald Coast

Gala—The Diamond Gala—on Aug. 29, 2026, at the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Convention Center.

Marking 10 years of unwavering commitment to active-duty service members, veterans and first responders, this milestone event promises to be the organization's most memorable gala yet.

SOF Missions is dedicated to combating the devastating epidemic of suicide among our warriors by providing comprehensive care that addresses psychological, physical, social and spiritual well-being. Through its Be Resilient Clinics and Warrior Retreats held locally at EXOS at Andrews Institute, the organization has provided more than \$10.7 million in support to more than 4,000 warriors nationwide. These programs deliver personalized, coordinated care at no cost to participants, ensuring those in need receive the support necessary to heal and thrive.

The Diamond Gala will be an evening of inspiration, celebration and purpose. Guests

will experience an unforgettable evening featuring dinner and dessert service, a distinguished guest speaker, performances by First Dance Ballroom Studio and the Bow Tied Music Quartet, dancing, silent auction experiences, and powerful stories highlighting the impact made possible through community support over the past decade.

Proceeds from the gala directly support SOF Missions' warrior care programs, helping ensure that financial barriers never prevent a warrior from receiving life-changing assistance.

The 10th Annual Diamond Gala is more than a celebration of the past—it is an investment in the future.

A moment to honor how far we've come.

A moment to stand beside those we serve.

And a moment to invest boldly in the future of warrior care.

Whether you are a longtime supporter or new to the SOF



Missions community, you are invited to join us for an evening of elegance, a decade of impact and a legacy in the making. Sponsorship opportunities are also available for individuals and businesses looking to make an even greater difference in the lives of our nation's heroes.

Tickets: \$150 per person

Includes dinner, dessert and one complimentary drink.

To purchase tickets or learn more about sponsorship opportunities, **visit www.sofmissions.org/gala.**



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Jessica Laird: Leading with Experience. Serving with Integrity. Delivering Results.

Jessica Carter Laird is a dedicated public servant, community leader, and Republican candidate for Walton County Tax Collector. Jessica is a resident of DeFuniak Springs and a Walton County native with a deep commitment to serving the community she proudly calls home. With nearly two decades of service in the Tax Collector's Office and a strong understanding of local government operations, Jessica is dedicated to ensuring the office works efficiently, transparently, and in the best interest of the people.

Jessica holds a Certified Public Manager certification from Florida State University and is a Certified Supervisory Manager. She also serves as Co-Chair of the Northwest Florida Tax Collector Coalition and Chair of the Florida Tax Collectors Resiliency Coalition (emergency preparedness, response and recovery), reflecting her leadership and commitment at both the local and state levels. Additionally, Jessica was instrumental in advocating for and supporting changes to Florida Administrative Rules regarding title and registration processes to ensure that individuals must provide

valid legal presence documentation to title a vehicle in the State of Florida.

Jessica has been married to her husband, Eric Laird, for 27 years, and together they have raised two sons, Mason and Noah. Her roots in Walton County, along with her commitment to family and community, shape her values of hard work, integrity, and service.

As a candidate for Walton County Tax Collector, Jessica's campaign is focused on three key priorities:

Expand Access to Services Without Growing Government

Jessica believes taxpayers deserve convenient, accessible, and modern services without unnecessary government expansion. She is committed to streamlining operations to make services faster and more efficient while expanding user-friendly online options and secure digital access for residents.

She believes government should adapt to the needs of the people, not require people to



adapt to government. Residents should not be forced to navigate unnecessary barriers such as appointment-only systems for routine transactions, requirements to travel to specific locations for basic services, or frequent office closures for obscure holidays that limit public access. Jessica will focus on maximizing service availability, reducing wait times, and ensuring taxpayers can access the services they need when and where they need them.

As part of this effort, Jessica will explore the installation of secure self-service kiosks in high-traffic locations throughout Walton County, allowing residents to complete common

transactions quickly and conveniently without having to visit a Tax Collector's office. By bringing services closer to where people live, work, and shop, these kiosks can improve accessibility while maintaining fiscal responsibility and avoiding the cost of expanding government facilities.

Through innovation, efficiency, and customer-focused service, Jessica will make government more accessible while remaining a responsible steward of taxpayer dollars.

Protect the Community Through Secure, Accountable Service

Safeguarding the community is at the core of Jessica's mission. She will ensure all transactions are secure and accurate, implement strong protections against fraud and waste, maintain transparent financial processes that build public trust, and work in coordination with the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles to ensure only individuals who meet all legal eligibility requirements are issued driver licenses.

Jessica's leadership in strengthening Florida's title and registration requirements demonstrates her commitment to protecting the integrity of government systems and ensuring compliance with state law.

Build a Culture of Excellence

Jessica is dedicated to fostering a professional, results-driven environment within the Tax Collector's Office. She will prioritize efficient and responsive operations, invest in employee development, promote accountability at every level, and ensure responsible stewardship of taxpayer dollars. Her goal is to create a culture where excellence is expected, innovation is encouraged, and customer service is always the priority.

With her experience, leadership, and clear vision for the future, **Jessica Carter Laird is ready to lead the Walton County Tax Collector's Office with integrity, accountability, and service.**

Jessica Carter Laird — Results-Driven Servant Leader. Experienced. Proven. Ready to Serve.

JESSICA CARTER

LAIIRD

FOR



WALTON COUNTY

TAX COLLECTOR

Paid political advertisement paid for and approved by Jessica Laird, Republican, for Walton County Tax Collector.



Community

Your Home Needs Whole-Home Surge Protection

By TED SHOOP

Florida homeowners know that summer isn't just about sunshine and beaches—it's also peak season for sudden storms, lightning strikes and power fluctuations that can occur without warning. In regions like the Panhandle and along the Gulf

Coast, frequent thunderstorms create a high-risk environment for electrical surges that can damage sensitive electronics, HVAC systems, security equipment and smart-home devices. While a standard power strip might protect a single device, it won't shield your entire home



long-term repair or replacement costs.

My family recently hired an electrician to install a Square D Surge Arrest in our Hammock Bay home. The peace of mind was worth the approximately \$250 cost, and the device comes with a three- to five-year equipment warranty covering up to \$75,000 in damage, depending on the size of the unit selected. If preferred, you can also eliminate many of the surge strips throughout your home.

Ted Shoop is a seasoned Realtor with eXp Realty who provides expert advice and guidance to those selling, buying or maintaining a home.

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Ted@MyBeachAndBayHomes.com

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Scan code to view 27+/- waterfront acres available in Freeport on FL State Hwy 20:

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

from the kind of voltage spike caused by a nearby lightning strike or utility grid switching.

A whole-home surge protector, professionally installed at your electrical panel, acts as a first line of defense by diverting excess voltage before it enters your circuits. This is especially critical for modern homes packed with high-value electronics and interconnected systems—from Wi-Fi routers and entertainment centers to refrigerators, washing machines and programmable thermostats. Over time, even small, undetected surges can degrade com-

ponents, shortening the lifespan of appliances and increasing



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POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENT PAID FOR AND APPROVED BY BRIAN MCBROOM REPUBLICAN FOR WALTON COUNTY TAX COLLECTOR.

A New First Impression for Freeport

For many visitors, their first impression of our area is Freeport. Traveling through Walton County, their first glimpse of Freeport comes along U.S. Highway 331, one of our region's busiest corridors and a gateway connecting communities from north to south. I've always been of the belief that first impressions matter—whether it's your home's front door or the entrance to your community.

Community leaders have long recognized the opportunity to create a more welcoming entrance to the city while enhancing the appearance, function and character of one of its most traveled roadways. Now, that vision is moving closer to reality. The city of Freeport recently received a \$100,000 Florida Department of Transportation (DOT) Highway Beautification Grant for its **U.S. 331 Gateway Landscape Project**, effectively doubling the funding available for the initiative and providing new momentum for improvements designed to enhance the corridor.

The project will create a more attractive northern gateway into Freeport while improving roadway aesthetics, enhancing storm water management and incorporating landscape features designed to naturally calm traffic. Beyond beautification, supporters say the project reflects a broader commitment to creating a stronger sense of place as Freeport continues to grow.

Working behind the scenes for months, **Scenic Walton** has worked alongside city planning staff to help identify the project, develop the initial design through its Walton Safe & Beautiful Program and encourage the city to pursue additional state funding.

In fact, the Freeport project is one of several recent milestones Scenic Walton is celebrating throughout Walton County as collaborative efforts continue to advance community beautification, resilient infrastructure and scenic preservation.

Among the most significant developments is the advancement of funding for an Opinion of Probable Cause into Walton County's proposed 2026-27 budget. The study represents the first step toward developing



a countywide underground utilities implementation plan.

If approved, the study will evaluate the scope and implementation of a countywide initiative to underground overhead utilities. Advocates say the effort could strengthen hurricane resilience, improve electric reliability, enhance public safety, preserve scenic beauty and support long-term economic development throughout Walton County.

Scenic Walton also recognized the many residents who voiced their support for underground utilities during Walton County's Strategic Planning process and commended the South Walton Community Council for helping encourage community engagement.

Momentum is also continuing in South Walton, where the 30A West Gateway Landscape Project has advanced into the proposed budget for the Walton County Tourist Development Council (TDC).

Scenic Walton is pursuing the project in partnership with Friends of Scenic 30-A to create an attractive western gateway to Scenic Highway 30A while adding entry signage at both ends of 30A recognizing it as both a Florida Scenic Highway and a Federal Scenic Byway. Notably, the project remains the only capital improvement project included in the proposed TDC budget.

"These projects may look different on the surface, but they all share the same purpose: protecting what makes Walton County special while investing in its future," said Leigh Moore, Executive Director of Scenic Walton. "Whether we're advocating for underground utilities, helping communities secure beautification funding, or enhancing our scenic corridors, each of these initiatives improves quality of



life while preserving the character that makes Walton County such a remarkable place. We're grateful to our community partners, local governments, and residents who continue working alongside us to move these important projects forward."

Scenic Walton extended its appreciation to the Freeport

City Council, Planning Director Latilda Hughes-Neel, AICP, Sean Daly and Ruppert Landscape, the Florida DOT and the St. Joe Community Foundation, which funded the Walton Safe & Beautiful Program.

Together, these milestones demonstrate growing momentum for resilient infrastruc-

ture, scenic preservation and thoughtful community development throughout Walton County. For Freeport residents, the U.S. 331 Gateway Landscape Project represents more than landscaping. It is an investment in community pride, a stronger first impression for visitors and a reflection of the partnerships helping shape the future of Walton County.

Scenic Walton is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving, protecting and enhancing the scenic beauty, safety and quality of life in Walton County. Through strategic partnerships and community advocacy, the organization advances initiatives that support thoughtful growth, including corridor landscaping, utility undergrounding, pedestrian and cyclist infrastructure and high standards for context-sensitive development.

Proven Choice. Proven Leader.

*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

PAID POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENT MADE INDEPENDENTLY OF ANY CANDIDATE AND EXPRESSES MY ADVOCACY FOR BRIAN MCBROOM. THIS ENDORSEMENT IS PAID FOR BY RHONDA SKIPPER (ADDRESS PROTECTED). THIS ADVERTISEMENT WAS NOT APPROVED BY ANY CANDIDATE.

 Community

From Seacrest Beach to the White House: Lulu's Story Changes America

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

Two years ago, our community witnessed something that few who were there will ever forget.

On June 7, 2024, what began as a beautiful summer afternoon at Seacrest Beach turned into one of the most extraordinary stories of courage, faith and humanity our area has ever experienced. (See July 2024 issue of MyDestinLife.com for original article: <https://destin.lifemediagrp.com/the-miracle-at-seacrest-beach-america-responds/>)

A shark attacked 15-year-old Lulu Gribbin as she swam in the Gulf. Within moments, complete strangers rushed into the water. A beach attendant, vacationing families, physicians, nurses, an EMT, a former lifeguard and countless others worked together to save her life before South Walton Fire District crews, Walton County Sheriff's deputies and emergency medical personnel arrived.

When we first shared Rick

Karle's powerful story, "The Miracle at Seacrest Beach: America Responds," we weren't simply reporting on a tragedy. We were celebrating the remarkable people God placed on that beach that day. As one physician later reflected, "When we come together, great things can happen."

Now, that miracle has led to something even bigger.

Recently, President Donald Trump signed Lulu's Law, federal legislation that will allow shark attacks to become eligible for Wireless Emergency Alerts—the same emergency notification system used for Amber Alerts and severe weather. The goal is simple: if a confirmed shark attack occurs, emergency officials can quickly notify people nearby before another family unknowingly enters the water.

The legislation, sponsored by U.S. Alabama Sen. Katie Britt, is named for Lulu, who was one of three people bitten during a string of shark attacks along the Florida Panhandle that day.

Lulu lost her left hand and part of her right leg in the attack and has spent the time since advocating for better safety measures to help protect others.

The idea grew from a heart-breaking reality. About 90 minutes before Lulu was attacked off Seacrest Beach, another swimmer had been bitten just a few miles away. Had beachgoers throughout the area known about that first attack, Lulu's family has often said, the outcome might have been very different.

Today, Lulu has become much more than a survivor. She has become an advocate, sharing her story across the country and encouraging lawmakers to improve beach safety.

In addition to helping inspire Lulu's Law at both the state and federal levels, she and her family established the Lulu Strong Foundation, which works to improve the accessibility, performance and affordability of advanced prosthetics, virtual reality therapy and other



PHOTO: LULU STRONG (INSTAGRAM)

life-changing technologies for individuals with limb differences.

Her resilience has drawn national attention. In 2025, Southern Living named Lulu its "Southerner of the Year," recognizing not only her advocacy efforts, but also the remarkable way she has embraced life after the attack. Today, she is an accomplished adaptive golfer and water skier who continues to inspire others while still enjoying life as a teenager.

While Florida has not created its own statewide shark alert system, the new federal law directs the Federal Communications Commission to establish

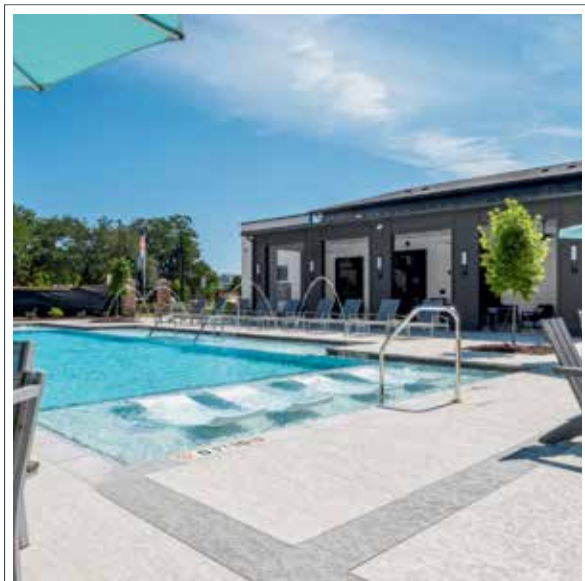
rules allowing state and local emergency officials to use Wireless Emergency Alerts after confirmed shark attacks.

For those of us along the Emerald Coast, this legislation is deeply personal.

We remember the helicopters overhead. We remember praying for Lulu and the other victims. We remember the countless heroes who stepped forward without hesitation. And we remember a frightened teenage girl who whispered just one sentence after surgery: "I made it."

Today, because of her courage and determination, Lulu's story is helping protect beachgoers not only here on the Emerald Coast, but across America's coastlines.

Publisher's Note: We believed then that God was working through ordinary people to save Lulu's life. Today, her story continues to save lives in a different way—by changing how America responds when every second counts.



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THE WATERS
AT FREEPORT

Jim Bagby Says Walton County Needs Steady Leadership, Not More Politics

For Jim Bagby, the decision to run for Walton County Commissioner wasn't about adding another title to a long résumé. It was about answering what he believes has always been his calling: serving others.

"Public service is in my DNA," Bagby says without hesitation. "Whether I was wearing the uniform overseas or working here in Walton County, my mission has always been the same: leave the community better than I found it."

That commitment began when he enlisted in the U.S. Army at 18 years old. After earning an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point, he was commissioned as an Army officer and spent the next 24 years leading soldiers in assignments around the world. His military career concluded as Chief of the Joint Support Element at Hurlburt Field's 505th Command and Control Wing before he retired in 2003.

Military service, he says,

shaped everything that followed.

"The Army taught me that leadership isn't about making headlines. It's about earning trust, solving problems, and taking responsibility when it matters most."

Following his retirement, Bagby and his wife, Jennie, chose to make the Emerald Coast their permanent home. For more than two decades, he has remained deeply involved in Walton County, serving as Executive Director of Visit South Walton, General Manager of One Seagrove Place, Town Manager of Rosemary Beach for more than 10 years, and most recently as District Director for Congressman Matt Gaetz.

Those experiences, Bagby says, gave him a front-row seat to both Walton County's incredible growth and its growing challenges.

"We've been blessed with opportunity, but growth without planning isn't success," he says. "Our responsibility is to protect what makes Walton County spe-



cial while making smart decisions for future generations."

Among his top priorities is addressing what he sees as unchecked overdevelopment through thoughtful, long-term planning. He believes the county's land development code should be modernized to reflect today's realities while preserving the character that has drawn families and businesses to Walton County.

Bagby also wants greater transparency and consistency in how development decisions are made, ensuring residents have confidence that rules are enforced fairly and public input is respected.

Environmental stewardship remains another cornerstone of

his campaign. Protecting Walton County's waterways, preserving environmentally sensitive lands, and maintaining strong land-use standards, he says, are essential to preserving residents' quality of life.

But perhaps the issue he speaks about most passionately is restoring stability to county government.

"In the last 18 years, Walton County has gone through many changes," Bagby notes. "Our county needs consistent leadership that empowers good people instead of constantly changing direction."

His commitment to the community extends well beyond government service. Bagby has served on the boards of the Walton County Taxpayer Association, South Walton Republican Club, and Walton Area Chamber of Commerce. He received the Chamber's Carter Leadership and Community Service Award, chaired the Veterans Florida Board of Directors, served four terms on the Des-

tin City Council, and remains active at Resurrection Catholic Church as both a Lector and Eucharistic Minister.

For Bagby, each role reflects the same guiding principle.

"Service doesn't end when you take off the uniform," he says. "You keep showing up, listening, and working for your neighbors. That's the standard I've tried to live by my entire life."

As Walton County continues to grow, Bagby believes the community stands at an important crossroads. He says the choices made today will determine whether the county preserves the qualities that residents cherish while preparing responsibly for tomorrow.

"I've spent my life leading organizations, building consensus, and serving this community," Bagby says. "I'm running because Walton County deserves steady leadership, transparent government, and someone who will put the community first every single day."

"PUBLIC SERVICE IS IN MY DNA..."

Jim Bagby

- ★ **Military Veteran.**
- ★ **A Conservative Leader You Can Trust.**
- ★ **Over 20 Years of Service in Walton County.**

EARLY VOTING BEGINS AUGUST 8TH, 2026
ELECTION DAY: AUGUST 18TH, 2026

Paid for by Jim Bagby, Republican For Walton County Commissioner, District 4



JIM FOR WALTON COUNTY COMMISSIONER

BAGBY

jimbagby4walton.com

Events

Events Around Town

Connect Over Coffee: DeFuniak
July 28 | 8:15 a.m. | Eagle Springs Golf & Recreation Center

Build new business connections and strengthen existing relationships during this casual morning networking event hosted by the Walton Area Chamber. Open to Chamber members and anyone looking to expand their professional network in North Walton.

Meet & Greet Breakfast with Local Candidates
July 29 | 7:30-9:30 a.m. | Destiny Worship Center | Freeport

Residents and business leaders are invited to hear directly from local candidates in a respectful, community-focused setting. Attendees will have the opportunity to ask questions and engage in meaningful conversations about the future of the community. The event is designed to be informative, welcoming and nonpartisan.

Camp Girl Power
July 29 | 9 a.m.-2 p.m. | Freeport Community Center | 112 U.S. Highway 20 W., Freeport
Aug. 3 | 9 a.m.-2 p.m. | Grand Boulevard Town Center | 625 Grand Blvd., Miramar Beach
Aug. 4 | 9 a.m.-2 p.m. | Walton County Fairgrounds | 790 N. Ninth St., DeFuniak Springs
Aug. 5 | 9 a.m.-2 p.m. | Walton County Fairgrounds | 790 N. Ninth St., DeFuniak Springs
Children’s Volunteer Health

Network and the Cultural Arts Alliance of Walton County present the second annual Camp Girl Power, a free summer experience for girls entering third through fifth grades. Activities include yoga, art, music, wellness activities, games and creative expression in an uplifting environment.

The camps are free, but registration is required and space is limited.
CulturalArtsAlliance.com | 850-622-5970

ty celebration features free backpacks, water slides, food, drinks and family-friendly activities to help students prepare for the new school year.

Taste of England at Horse Power Pavilion
Aug. 1 | 6-9 p.m. | Horse Power Pavilion | 4657 U.S. Highway 20 W., Freeport

Enjoy an evening of British-inspired food, music and fun featuring Hamilton’s Bistro, Kate the Great British American and Fred’s Fish & Chips.

Summerfest at the Biophilia Center
Aug. 1 | 9 a.m.-2 p.m. | E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center | Freeport

Enjoy a day of family-friendly fun featuring animal encounters, food trucks, games, raffles, water activities, a bounce house and more. Proceeds benefit the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center.

Back-to-School Splash Bash
Aug. 1 | 3-6 p.m. | Wee Care Park | 512 Walton Road, DeFuniak Springs

Hosted by the Walton County Sheriff’s Office School Resource Division, this annual communi-

UNDERWATER: The Living Sea Experience
Aug. 5 | 7:30-8:30 p.m. | Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park | Fort Walton Beach

Experience an immersive after-hours yoga session inside Gulfarium’s Living Sea Aquarium. Surrounded by marine life, guests will enjoy a slow-flow yoga practice followed by a spectacular view of The Boardwalk’s Okaloosa Island fireworks display.
Ages 12 and older.
go.gulfarium.com/underwater

Continued on page 16

THE ALICE
A GATHERING PLACE

Presents

PEARLS & PROSECCO Handbag Bingo

THE ALICE | DESTIN
Saturday August 8 | 2:00 PM

An elevated afternoon of bingo, bubbly, and designer handbags benefitting

THE GROUND UP PROJECT INC.

General Admission \$100
Includes light bites, 2 drink tickets, and 10 bingo cards (1 per round).

VIP Admission \$150
Includes all General Admission benefits plus: 1 extra drink ticket, 2 raffle tickets, 1 Grand Finale card, VIP recognition, and table service.

Lunch sponsor
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M&D PRESSURE WASHING
EGLIN FEDERAL CREDIT UNION
KRUEGER WELLNESS INSTITUTE

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 bin-

go 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.

Because autism doesn’t end at 18.

The need for support, opportunities and community doesn’t end either.

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.

Local, professional photographer specializing in families, weddings, and events. My passion lies in creating lasting memories through photographs, and I cherish the opportunity to be part of such meaningful moments!

BEST IN DESTIN
2024

BEST of THE EMERALD COAST
2024

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HAPPENINGS AROUND FREEPORT

2026 EVENTS

JULY

29

Meet & Greet Breakfast with Local Candidates
7:30 am | Destiny Worship Center | Freeport

Camp Girl Power
9 am | Freeport Community Center | Freeport

AUGUST

01

Summerfest at the Biophilia Center
9 am | E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center | Freeport

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

Estelle Grengs Live Painting
10 am | North Bay Mercantile | Freeport

WCSO Back-to-School Splash Bash
3 pm | Wee Care Park | DeFuniak Springs

Duchess - Live Music
5 pm | The Windmills of Hammock Bay | Freeport

Taste of England at Horse Power Pavilion
6 pm | Horse Power Pavilion | Freeport

02

Puppies & Pilates with Aly Gray
10 am | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport

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

05

Chessport
6 pm | Freeport Public Library | Freeport

UNDERWATER: The Living Sea Experience
7:30 pm | Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park | FWB

07

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

08

Pilates with Dolphins
7:30 am | Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park | FWB

08 Continued

Back-to-School Kids Party
Props Craft Brewery | Freeport

13

Generate Business Leads Group
8 am | Walton Area Chamber | SRB

Nothing But Networking at Knife's Edge Cafe
at Bob Hope Village
11:30 am | Bob Hope Village | Shalimar

15

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

18

Lunch N Learn: RNR Property Solutions; "How To
Get Mailbox Money In Real Estate"
11:30 am | The Chamber Conference Room | FWB

22

The Bubble Festival
12 pm | Props Brewery Hammock Bay | Freeport

Live Music with Purple Monkey
3 pm | The Oar House Pub & Oyster Bar | Freeport

23

Roman Street in Concert
3 pm | Christ the King Episcopal Church | SRB

27

Lunch & Learn: Letting Go to Level Up
11 am | Walton Area Chamber | SRB

Pairing & Sharing Wine Dinner
6 pm | Rosemary Beach Town Hall | Rosemary Beach

28

Wine & Fries: Golden Hour for Good
6 pm | The Alice | Destin

29

Sacred Harp Musical Conversation
1 pm | Christ the King Episcopal Church | SRB

FARMERS MARKETS

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

Hammock Bay
1st & 3rd Saturdays | 4 - 8 pm
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
Fridays | 3 pm
Freeport Public Library | Freeport

Creative Craft Collective
Saturdays | 10 am
Freeport Public Library | Freeport



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Events

EVENTS

continued from page 14

Back-to-School Kids Party
Aug. 8 | Props Craft Brewery | 799 Great Hammock Bend, Freeport

Celebrate the start of a new school year with family-friendly activities, games and fun at Props Craft Brewery in Hammock Bay.

Pilates with Dolphins
Aug. 8 | 7:30 a.m. | Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park | Fort Walton Beach

Start your morning with a one-of-a-kind fitness experience overlooking Gulfarium's Dolphin Oasis. Led by certified instructor Desiree, this all-levels Pilates class allows participants to strengthen, stretch and recharge while Atlantic bottlenose dolphins swim nearby.
Ages 12 and older.
go.gulfarium.com/pilates

PAWS Brunch Fundraiser: Stars, Stripes & Second Chances
Aug. 9 | 11 a.m.-2 p.m. | The Alice | Destin

Support the Panhandle Animal Welfare Society during an elevated brunch benefiting local shelter animals. Guests are encouraged to wear patriotic red, white and blue while enjoying brunch, a silent auction and more. Sponsorship opportunities are available.

paws-shelter.org
For sponsorship information:
mollys@paws-shelter.org

Generate Business Leads Group
Aug. 13 | 8-9 a.m. | Walton Area Chamber | 63 S. Centre Trail, Santa Rosa Beach

Connect with fellow professionals, exchange referrals and build valuable business relationships during this Chamber networking event. Bring business cards and be prepared to make meaningful connections.

Chamber Ambassador Meeting
Aug. 13 | 9-10 a.m. | Walton Area Chamber | 63 S. Centre Trail, Santa Rosa Beach

Learn how to become more involved with the Walton Area Chamber while helping welcome new members, support events and strengthen the local business community.

The Great Bay Scallop Search
Aug. 17 | 10 a.m. | Choctawhatchee Bay

Join Destin-Fort Walton Beach Natural Resources, Florida Sea Grant and Luther's Pontoon Rentals for a citizen science event monitoring scallop populations in Choctawhatchee Bay. Participants will survey designated areas and collect valuable

environmental data.
Registration required.

Roman Street in Concert
Aug. 23 | 3 p.m. | Christ the King Episcopal Church | 480 N. County Highway 393, Santa Rosa Beach

Acclaimed guitar duo brothers Noah and Josh Thompson blend classical, gypsy jazz, Latin, contemporary jazz and nuevo flamenco influences in a captivating live performance that kicks off the fall concert series.
Free and open to the public.
christthekingfl.org

Lunch & Learn: Letting Go to Level Up
Aug. 27 | 11 a.m.-1 p.m. | Walton Area Chamber | 63 S. Centre Trail, Santa Rosa Beach

Dr. Dustin Judd of YOGO Spine Co. shares practical insights on releasing habits, relationships and limiting beliefs that may be holding back personal and professional growth.

Pairing & Sharing Wine Dinner
Aug. 27 | 6 p.m. | Rosemary Beach Town Hall | Rosemary Beach

Enjoy an elegant evening of fine wine and cuisine benefiting Caring & Sharing of South Walton. Guests will enjoy a multi-course dinner by Swiftly Catered paired with wines from Napa

Valley's Jessup Cellars.
Tickets: \$250 per person | \$2,000 reserved table
caringandsharingsowal.org

Wine & Fries: Golden Hour for Good
Aug. 28 | 6-9 p.m. | The Alice | Destin

Ronald McDonald House Charities of Northwest Florida's signature fundraiser returns with waterfront views, wine, local brews, McDonald's famous French fries, live entertainment and auctions. Proceeds help families stay close to children receiving medical treatment.
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Sacred Harp Musical Conversation
Aug. 29 | 1 p.m. | Christ the King Episcopal Church | 480 N. County Highway 393, Santa Rosa Beach

Learn about the history and development of Sacred Harp music, a traditional American art form, during a presentation by Joanna Ellis. Guests will also enjoy a practical introduction to shape-note singing led by Kristin Wendland.
Free and open to the public.

christthekingfl.org
Emerald Coast Community Singers: Celebration of American Music
Sept. 13 | 3 p.m. | Christ the King Episcopal Church | 480 N. County Highway 393, Santa Rosa Beach

Celebrate America's musical heritage while commemorating the 25th anniversary of 9/11 and the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. The concert will feature works by Samuel Barber, Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, William Dawson and Duke Ellington, along with traditional American and patriotic songs. Audience participation is encouraged.
Free and open to the public.
christthekingfl.org

Fore Her Golf Outing
Sept. 25 | Check-in: 8 a.m. | Announcements: 8:45 a.m. | Tee-off: 9 a.m. | The Links Golf Club at Sandestin

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The Next BIG Thing 2026

Registration and Speaker Applications Open

Speaker Application Deadline: Aug. 10, 2026
| Conference Date: Oct. 26, 2026 | Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa

Registration is now open for the Walton Area Chamber of Commerce’s The Next BIG Thing 2026, returning Oct. 26, 2026, at the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa. Presented by Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast and Eglin Federal Credit Union, the premier one-day conference will feature three professional development tracks: Leadership Development, Entrepreneurship and Women in Business.

Attendees can expect inspiring keynote speakers, TED-style breakout sessions and valuable networking opportunities designed to provide practical insights, fresh perspectives and meaningful connections to help elevate careers and businesses. Early-bird registration is available through Sept. 1.

The Chamber is also accepting speaker applications through Aug. 10. Organizers are seeking dynamic professionals with expertise in Leadership Development, Entrepreneurship and Women in Business who can



share proven strategies, innovative ideas and inspiring stories that help others grow, lead and succeed.

If you have a message worth sharing, this is an opportunity to take the stage at one of the Emerald Coast’s premier business conferences.

Questions: Gabrielle@waltonareachamber.com

For registration and speaker application information, visit WaltonAreaChamber.com.

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Hide It, Lock It, Take It

Doing Your Part for National Vehicle Theft Prevention Month



BY TED TOEDTE, CPS, CRIME PREVENTION SPECIALIST, WCSO

It only takes a minute. You run into the store for a gallon of milk, leaving the car running with the AC on to fight off the Florida summer heat, doors unlocked “just this once.” You walk back out to an empty parking spot. By the time you realize what happened, the car, and whatever was inside it, is already gone.

August is the final peak month of summer travel, and with it comes heightened national attention on property and vehicle crime. The National

Crime Prevention Council and NHTSA use this month to spotlight a simple, seasonal problem: with more people traveling, more cars sitting in driveways and parking lots, and more valuables left in plain sight, vehicle theft and break-ins tend to climb. The good news is that most of it is preventable.

Vehicle thefts nationally have actually fallen for two straight years, largely thanks to better anti-theft technology and closer cooperation between automakers and law enforcement. But the crime hasn't disappeared, and one part of it is creeping back up: catalytic converter theft, which had dropped sharply, is rebounding in some cities as precious metal prices climb again. A converter can be cut out from underneath a parked car in under two minutes.

Here at home, WCSO's message hasn't changed in years, and it still works: hide it, lock it, take it. Deputies say the overwhelming majority of the car burglaries they respond to involve a vehicle that was left un-

locked, with something valuable sitting on the seat. It's an easy crime to prevent and an easy one to become a victim of if you skip the basics.

What Our Local Data Shows

A five-year look at our own case data backs up the national trend: reported auto thefts in Walton County fell from 67 in 2021 to 27 in 2025, a decline of roughly 60 percent. That's real progress, and it lines up with what NICB is seeing nationwide.

The more useful finding is where these crimes are happening. Over the last five years, 56 percent of all reported auto thefts in Walton County occurred at a residence or apartment, and another 10 percent happened in a parking lot or garage, together accounting for two out of every three incidents. Roadway thefts were a distant third at 12 percent. In other words, this isn't primarily a retail-lot or highway problem; it's a driveway, carport and apartment-complex problem.

CPTED for Apartments and Parking Lots

Because residential and multifamily properties account for most of the thefts we see, this is exactly where Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) makes the biggest difference.

WCSO's Crime Prevention Division offers free CPTED assessments for apartment complexes, HOAs and parking lots. A walkthrough looks at lighting



“The overwhelming majority of the car burglaries we respond to involve a vehicle that was left unlocked, with something valuable sitting on the seat.”

car here and simply drive away. In one stretch in September 2024, Flock alerts led deputies to three separate stolen vehicles in just over 24 hours, resulting in five arrests. If you already have a compatible camera, you can add it through the Flock Safety Community portal to help extend that coverage even further.

Businesses, HOAs and community groups can also help spread the word. WCSO's Crime Prevention Unit has “Hide It, Lock It, Take It” rack cards and metal yard signs available at no cost for any business, apartment complex or neighborhood that wants to help reinforce this message locally. Reach out to us to request a supply for your lobby, clubhouse or parking area. You can call 850-892-8111 or email crimeprevention@waltonso.org.

None of these steps take more than a few minutes, but together they make Freeport a harder target for the crimes of opportunity that drive most vehicle theft. Do your part this month: hide it, lock it, take it.

Ted Toedte is a Crime Prevention Specialist and certified CPTED practitioner with the Walton County Sheriff's Office, with more than 30 years of law enforcement experience in Florida and California.

Vehicle Theft Prevention Checklist

- Hide it: Never leave purses, electronics, or packages visible on a seat, put them in the trunk before you arrive, not after you park.
- Lock it: Lock every door, every time, even in your own driveway. Most car burglaries in Walton County involve an unlocked vehicle.
- Take it: Never leave keys or a fob in the car, even “just

for a minute.”

- Park in well-lit areas and, where possible, off the street or behind a fence.

- Consider a steering wheel lock, kill switch, or GPS tracker for added protection.

- If you drive a hybrid or truck, ask a local shop about a catalytic converter shield, theft of these is rising again.



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COACH JOHNS

continued from page 2

he has hundreds of wins to his credit and numerous Final Four appearances.

Johns holds family and faith high among his life's passions.



His relationship with God informs all of his decisions. He is protective of his family and his pets.

"My wife, my daughter and my son have basically built their entire lives around my career," he says. "Not every coach has

that support system—picking up and moving. Doing whatever it takes for me to have success."

Johns promoted the "Freeport Coaches Show" heavily on his Facebook account the week I spoke with him. The program appears weekly on the Freeport

High Touchdown Club website and live from wherever Johns and company happen to land that week. For the July 14 show, it was Freeport's Sip Studio.



SADIE LONG

continued from page 3

On July 13, surgeons successfully transplanted Sadie's new heart. While the surgery marked a life-changing milestone, it was also the beginning of a long road to recovery. The months ahead will include rehabilitation, medications to prevent rejection, countless follow-up appointments, and ongoing medical care.

Throughout every step of this journey, Sadie's family has been embraced by an outpouring of love from neighbors, classmates, teachers, Community Church of Santa Rosa Beach, and people across Walton County. Prayer chains have

stretched throughout the community, reminding them they are not walking this road alone.

For many, Sadie's story has become a powerful testament to faith, perseverance, modern medicine, and the extraordinary gift of organ donation.

Today, because one family made the courageous decision to give the gift of life during their darkest hour, another



little girl has been given the chance to grow up.

As Sadie begins this new chapter with a new heart, her family asks for continued prayers—not only for her healing, but also for the anonymous donor family whose unimaginable loss made this miracle possible.

Some stories remind us how fragile life can be. Others remind us how precious it is. Sadie's story is both.

To receive updates on Sadie's recovery or make a donation to support her family during this journey, visit: SupportNow: <https://www.supportnow.org/long-family>.

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Summer Freshwater Fishing on the Panhandle



BY HELEN PETRE

Florida is the fishing capital of the world, and the panhan-

dle offers an incredible diversity of fishing experiences. Our emerald green, clear water, and white sand beaches provide a productive surf fishing experience, and our fresh and brackish water offer land and kayak fishing. Then, of course there is offshore redfish, which is the life experience we all dream about.

Thankfully, though, you do not need a boat to surf fish or freshwater fish. Surf fishing for pompano is fun in spring, but as beaches get crowded and hot, freshwater fishing offers an alternative that requires little more than a pole and bait and is cooler and quieter.

One of a child's most mem-



Male redear sunfish guarding eggs. Wikipedia.

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orable experiences is often that first fish catch. It is an experience that can lead to a lifetime of conservation and sportsmanship and teach skill, independence, achievement and respect for nature. Kids who learn to fish, and adults who learn skills, are self-confident and dependable. Now is a great time for a family fishing experience.

What Will You Catch?

Largemouth bass (*Micropterus salmoides*)

Largemouth bass is the most popular gamefish in North America, and Florida's freshwater fish. Bass is everyone's favorite warm water fish. Bass are really fun to catch because they put up a good fight. Largemouth bass spawn in spring, and are easier to catch then, but summer is still a good time to catch them in lakes, rivers, and ponds. They prefer vegetated shorelines and live for ten years in the wild.

Bass are carnivores. In the wild, they eat fish, mollusks, and insects. The best live bait is a golden shiner hooked through the lips with a large hook (2 to #5). Use a medium rod with 14-to-20-pound test line. If using artificial bait, plastic worms work well.

Adult bass are apex predators, but young are prey for herons, larger bass, and catfish.

Catch bass in the Choc-tawhatchee River, accessible from Ebro, and the backwater lakes that surround the river, or fish in Holmes Creek, a spring fed tributary of the river. Bass are plentiful in the Yellow River, which flows southwest from Alabama.

Bluegill (*Lepomis macrochirus*)

Besides bass, the Panhandle is an exciting place to fish for sunfish, bluegill (or bream, or brim) are the most common summer sunfish. They are fun to catch and great to eat. These are panfish with vertical stripes. Bluegill live in rivers, streams, springs, and lakes. They spawn in summer, building nests in shallow water on sandy bottoms. Nests are in groups of about 35; a collection of shallow, scooped out areas all together in one area. The male makes the nest, invites the female to lay her eggs, and fertilizes them. Then the father to be guards the eggs until they hatch, in a week or so.

Bluegill eat mostly insects, but worms are the most successful bait. Use a small #6 hook with a split shot sinker about six inches up the line.

Another Panfish: Redear Sunfish

Redear sunfish are popular sportfish, sometimes called shellcrackers. They look like bluegill, but are slightly larger, and have a distinctive red mark on the gill cover. At home in warm water of lakes, streams, and ponds, redear sunfish live in the vegetated areas near logs, often in groups. In warm weather, they sometimes congregate around lily pads.

Redear favorite foods are snails, clams, and mussels, hence the name shellcracker. Redear crush the shell, eat the meat, and spit out the shell fragments.

Males make nests in groups, in somewhat deeper water than bluegill, lure in females, and induce them to lay eggs by making

Continued on page 28

SS United States Nears Final Voyage as World's Largest Artificial Reef

After more than 50 years of retirement and several unsuccessful attempts at restoration, America's fastest ocean liner is preparing for one final record-breaking voyage—not across the Atlantic, but beneath the Gulf waters off Destin-Fort Walton Beach.

The historic SS United States is one step closer to beginning that next chapter. Okaloosa County officials recently announced that environmental remediation of the legendary vessel is complete. The ship remains docked in Mobile, Alabama, awaiting final approvals from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Environmental Protection Agency before deployment as the world's largest artificial reef.

For many local residents, the announcement marks another milestone in a project they have followed closely since Okaloosa County purchased the ship in 2024. What began as an ambitious vision to preserve an Amer-

ican icon has become one of the most unique environmental and tourism projects in the nation.

Launched in 1952, the SS United States carried four U.S. presidents, Hollywood celebrities, military personnel and countless travelers during her years at sea. More than seven decades later, she still holds the trans-Atlantic speed record, a title no passenger ship has ever surpassed.

Rather than allowing the vessel to be scrapped, Okaloosa County chose a different path.

The Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners approved the purchase on Oct. 1, 2024. After nearly 30 years docked in Philadelphia, the ship departed on Feb. 19, 2025, arriving in Mobile on March 3, 2025, where extensive environmental remediation began. That work was completed in May 2026, bringing the project significantly closer to deployment.

The approximately \$13 million effort is funded through

tourism development revenues and partner contributions. Funding covers the ship's purchase, towing, environmental preparation, deployment and support for a future land-based museum dedicated to preserving its history.

Partners include Visit Pensacola, the Coastal Conservation Association, Yamaha Rightwaters, the Fish & Wildlife Foundation of Florida, Force Blue, NAUI Worldwide, the Explorers Club and Diver's Alert Network. Scientists from Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution will conduct long-term research documenting how an entirely new reef ecosystem develops on the vessel from day one.

Once deployed, the SS United States will become the crown jewel of one of the nation's most successful artificial reef programs. Since the 1970s, Okaloosa County has deployed 48 large vessels and developed nearly 600 artificial reefs in Gulf waters.



SS United States Update (Photos taken May 2026)

County officials expect the ship to generate significant tourism benefits as divers from around the world travel to experience the historic vessel. The project is also expected to support local hotels, restaurants, charter operators, retailers and

other businesses throughout the region.

Equally important are the environmental benefits. Prepared under strict federal and state standards, the vessel will create

Continued on page 26



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Six Rescued Horses Find Hope and Healing at Alaqua Animal Refuge

Six horses are getting a second chance thanks to the team at Alaqua Animal Refuge, where they are now receiving specialized care, nourishment and rehabilitation after being surrendered during a recent investigation in Holmes County.

For years, Life Media has shared stories of Alaqua's extraordinary work rescuing, rehabilitating and advocating for animals throughout Northwest Florida. This latest rescue is another example of the Refuge's unwavering commitment to providing hope and healing when animals need it most.

Investigators found the horses confined to a barren dirt paddock with little to no forage available. A veterinarian and an FDACS Division of Animal Industry inspector confirmed severe malnutrition. Investigators also documented untreated skin conditions and a lack of appropriate veterinary care.

Now safely at Alaqua, all six horses are receiving comprehensive veterinary treatment, carefully managed nutritional rehabilitation, and individualized care plans designed to give each horse the best possible chance of recovery. It will require months of oversight

as they regain their strength. "These horses didn't simply lose weight," said Laurie Hood, founder and CEO of Alaqua Animal Refuge. "Three of them were literally at the lowest body condition score possible, an indication of critical, life-threatening emaciation. Recovering from prolonged starvation is an incredibly delicate process. It requires specialized veterinary care, carefully monitored feeding protocols, medications, diagnostics, and months of rehabilitation. Every decision we make is focused on giving these horses the greatest opportunity to survive and heal."

During the intake process, Alaqua staff made a remarkable discovery. One of the horses, Sumatra Traveler, was identified as a registered Florida Cracker Horse, one of the state's rare heritage breeds descended from the horses brought to Florida by Spanish explorers more than 500 years ago. Florida Cracker Horses helped shape the state's ranching history and are recognized today as Florida's official heritage horse. Only a limited number remain, making Traveler not only a survivor of cruelty, but also a living piece of Florida's history.



While Traveler represents an important piece of Florida history, Hood emphasized that every horse in the rescue is equally deserving of care and compassion.

The rescue highlights the vital role Alaqua continues to play throughout Northwest Florida, responding to animals in crisis and providing lifesaving intervention when needed. From disaster response and cruelty investigations to rehabilitation and adoption efforts, Alaqua remains a beacon of hope for animals across the region.

The road to recovery for these six horses will be long, re-

quiring ongoing veterinary treatment, specialized nutrition, medications, hoof care and daily rehabilitation.

Cases like this are among the most challenging and expensive rescues Alaqua undertakes. While the legal system determines accountability, the immediate responsibility for providing lifesaving care falls to organizations like Alaqua and the community that stands beside them. "In recent months, our team has responded to an unprecedented number of cruelty cases,"

Hood said. "Each time we say yes, we do so because these animals have nowhere else to turn. But, every rescue stretches our resources further."

She continued, "We never want cost to be the reason we can't help an animal in desperate need. The generosity of our community has made these rescues possible, and today we're asking for that support once again. Without continued donations, it becomes increasingly difficult to say yes to the next call for help. These horses deserve every chance to recover,

and together, we can give them that chance."

Donations made to support this rescue will help provide emergency veterinary care, specialized nutritional rehabilitation, medications and diagnostics, farrier services, hay, feed, and daily care, long-term rehabilitation for all six horses.

As Freeport Life readers know from many previous stories, Alaqua's mission extends far beyond rescue. The organization serves as a nationally recognized leader in animal welfare, education and advocacy, touching thousands of lives each year while creating brighter futures for animals in need.

Donate through Alaqua Animal Refuge's Holmes County Horse Rescue Fund: <https://secure.qgiv.com/for/holmes-countyhorsecruelty>, online at www.alaqua.org, by calling the Refuge directly, or by mailing a contribution to Alaqua Animal Refuge, 155 Dugas Way, Freeport, FL 32439. Every gift, regardless of size, helps ensure Alaqua can continue responding when animals have nowhere else to go.



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Acute Rehabilitation Versus Skilled Nursing Rehabilitation: What's the Difference?

By TERESA HALVERSON, BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT/COMMUNITY RELATIONS DIRECTOR

You Had a Hospital Stay—Now What?

Leaving the hospital is an important milestone, but recovery often continues long after discharge. Whether you're recovering from surgery, illness, injury, or a medical event, the right rehabilitation program can help you regain strength, restore independence, and return safely to the activities you enjoy. Choosing the right rehabilitation setting can make all the difference in your journey back to health.

While both acute (hospital based) rehabilitation and skilled nursing rehabilitation facilities provide therapy and nursing/medical care, they differ in the intensity of services, patient requirements and expected outcomes.

Skilled Nursing and Rehabilitation facilities are often most appropriate for people who:

- Need continued recovery after hospitalization or surgery
- Require more nursing care such as wound care management, medication administration and management, and/or monitoring of chronic health conditions.
- Benefit from therapy but may not be able to tolerate several hours of intensive therapy each day.
- Need additional time to build strength and confidence prior to returning home.

Common reasons for admission include:

- Joint replacement recovery
- Cardiac or pulmonary conditions
- Infections requiring on-going care
- General weakness after illness
- Fractures or falls
- Deconditioning following an extended hospital stay

What are the key differences between acute hospital-based rehabilitation and skilled nursing rehabilitation?

Key Features: Acute Rehabilitation

- Patients must participate in three hours of therapy per day, five to seven days per week (all disciplines)

- Care is overseen by a rehabilitation physician and an interdisciplinary team.

- Patients must be medically stable but able to tolerate intensive therapy.

- Common diagnoses include stroke, spinal cord injury, traumatic brain injury, major orthopedic surgeries, and complex neurological conditions.

Key Features: Skilled Nursing Rehabilitation

- Physical, occupational, and speech therapy are provided, typically one to three hours per day, depending on patient needs and abilities.

- 24-hour skilled nursing care.

- Dedicated Medical Director and On-site Extenders (PA, NP)

- Patients who cannot yet tolerate intensive rehabilitation can still receive therapy while continuing medical recovery.

- Ideal for patients recovering from hospitalization, surgery, illness, or injury who need ongoing nursing support and rehabilitation.

- Average length of stay varies from a few days to several months, depending on progress and goals.

- Daily Clinical Interdisciplinary Team Oversight

- Physician oversight to include Primary Physician, Physiatry, Cardio, Nephrology and Respiratory therapy.

Skilled Nursing Rehabilitation is Usually Best For:

Patients who need rehabilitation but also require ongoing nursing care, medication management, wound care, IV therapy, or a slower-paced recovery program.

Why Choose Skilled Nursing Rehabilitation Over Acute Rehabilitation?

While acute inpatient rehabilitation is an excellent option for some patients, many individuals achieve better outcomes in a skilled nursing rehabilitation setting because it offers a balance of therapy, nursing care, and recovery time. Acute rehabilitation requires patients to participate in three hours of therapy every day. Many seniors and medically complex patients simply are not ready for that level of intensity.

The right rehabilitation setting depends on a patient's medical condition, functional abilities,

endurance, and recovery goals. While hospital-based rehabilitation offers intensive therapy for those who can tolerate it, skilled nursing rehabilitation provides a valuable bridge between the hospital and home, allowing patients to regain strength, independence, and confidence at a pace that meets their individual needs.

Better Choice for Frail Older Adults

Many seniors recovering from hospitalization need:

- Assistance with daily activities
- Fall prevention
- Nutritional support
- Strength and balance training
- Smooth transition back home with follow-up

The goal of skilled nursing

rehabilitation is not only to improve strength and mobility but also to prepare patients and families for a successful discharge home through:

- Home safety assessments
- Caregiver education
- Equipment recommendations
- Medication teaching
- Community resource coordination

Continued on page 25



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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 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, packaged 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.

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REHABILITATION

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The Bottom Line

Acute rehabilitation is ideal for patients who are medically stable and capable of participating in intensive therapy several hours each day. Skilled nursing rehabilitation is often the better choice for patients who need a combination of rehabilitation,

skilled nursing care, medical oversight, and a recovery pace tailored to their individual needs. Acute rehabilitation is ideal for patients who are medically stable and capable of participating in intensive therapy several hours each day. Skilled nursing rehabilitation is often the better choice for patients who need a combination of rehabilitation, skilled nursing care, medical

oversight, and a recovery pace tailored to their individual needs. For many older adults recovering from surgery, illness, injury, or hospitalization, skilled nursing rehabilitation offers the right balance of healing, therapy, and support to maximize recovery and safely return home. At facilities such as The Manor at Blue Water Bay, patients benefit from skilled nursing care,

personalized rehabilitation programs, and coordinated medical services designed to support a successful recovery and safe return home. If you or a loved one is recovering from a hospital stay, surgery, illness, or injury, we're here to help. Our dedicated team provides skilled nursing care, rehabilitation services, and personalized support designed to help

patients regain strength, independence, and confidence. Contact us today to learn more about how we can help you recover and return home safely.

The Manor at Blue Water Bay | 1500 N. White Point Rd. | Niceville 850-897-5592 | manoratbwb.com | wecare@manoratbwb.com

THE GUT SPEAKS

continued from page 4

from the adults around them, and a calm presence can be incredibly grounding. Encourage slow breathing. A simple technique such as box breathing can help calm the nervous system: inhale through the nose for four seconds, hold for four, exhale gently for four, and pause for four before repeating. Younger children may enjoy imagining they're smelling a flower on the inhale and slowly blowing out birthday candles on the exhale. Offer a few small sips of water and allow the moment to slow down. These simple steps aren't

meant to replace medical care. They create an opportunity to observe whether symptoms begin to settle while helping children reconnect with their bodies. If stomachaches have happened around previous school years, don't wait until the first difficult morning to talk about them. A relaxed conversation a few days before school starts can go a long way. Ask open-ended questions: "What are you most excited about this year?" "Is there anything you're a little nervous about?" "I remember your tummy bothering you before school last year. How are you feeling about going back?" Sometimes children don't

know exactly what's bothering them until they're given a safe space to think about it. If this has been a recurring pattern, consider letting your child's teacher or school staff know ahead of time. A little extra reassurance or simply having another trusted adult aware of the situation can make the transition easier. Supporting the whole child also means supporting healthy daily habits. Consistent sleep, balanced meals with protein and fiber, regular movement, outdoor play, hydration, and opportunities for meaningful conversation all help children adapt more effectively to change. Not every stomachache is related to the nervous system, and

it's important not to assume it is. If stomachaches become frequent, interfere with school or daily life, or are accompanied by concerning symptoms, reach out to your child's pediatrician. They know your child's medical history and can help determine whether additional evaluation or treatment is needed. Perhaps the most important takeaway is this: Symptoms are information. Rather than asking only, "How do we make this go away?" it can be equally valuable to ask, "What might this symptom be trying to tell us?" Sometimes the answer lies in the digestive system. Sometimes it's the nervous system adapting to change. Often, it's a combi-

nation of several factors. As another school year begins, remember that children don't always have the words to explain what's happening inside. Sometimes the gut speaks first. When families respond with curiosity instead of assumptions, they become better equipped to recognize when a child simply needs reassurance, when they may need a little extra support, and when it's time to partner with their pediatrician. Because every symptom has a story, and sometimes, listening is the first step toward understanding it.



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 Business

Pure Water in Your Home

By MARTA ROSE-THORPE,
WWW.ASUPERIORMECHANICAL.COM

A Superior Mechanical is a 24-year-old Veteran-owned business, now serving Bay, Walton and Okaloosa Counties. For the first 23 years we focused on Air Conditioning, keeping our customers Cool as a Cucumber! Now as you know, in our current economic climate, many service companies are getting bought out by larger corporations; we've been made our fair share of offers. Companies have

a choice: to either sell out or expand, and we decided to expand. I sometimes call us One of the Last Local Mom & Pops.

Late last year, we started adding services: Plumbing and Electrical. We started expanding our reach, and we now serve Destin, Niceville, Fort Walton Beach... and we continue to head west. We wanted to be our customer's One-Stop Service Shop. So, when we really started thinking about Whole Home Systems, two more things kept coming

up: Clean Air and Clean Water. Last year, we entered the world of IAQ, also known as Indoor Air Quality. This is particularly important for family members with allergies or asthma. We can come to your home or business and add Air Scrubbers, which remove pollutants in the air and reduce allergens and irritants. These activated carbon filters also help neutralize odors from pets, cooking and smoke. We started to realize all the interest in IAQ, which led us to diving



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ing into the Pure Water space two months ago. So now we offer Water Purification Solutions such as Reverse Osmosis, which uses a semi-permeable membrane to remove impurities and contaminants from the water. Reverse Osmosis is commonly used for drinking water, desalination, water treatment in industrial processes, and F&B production.

What is the importance of Water Purification? First, Health, because its removing harmful pathogens and contaminants. We use a water softening process to remove hard chemicals from the water, namely calcium and magnesium; this also improves taste and odor of water. Hard water can lead to scale build-up which leads to problems with plumbing and problems with your appliances including dishwasher and washing machine. Softening the water feels silkier on the skin, is better for skin and hair, and you can actually use less soap, shampoo and laundry detergent.

The primary source of water for Walton County is the Upper Floridian Aquifer; the primary source of water for Bay County

is Deer Point Lake. What we're looking for is not more than one part per million (PPM) of any of these common toxins that are in these waters: Chlorine, Lead and Copper. Environmental runoff and water treatment processes can add contaminants to water like Aluminum, Barium, Radium and Nitrate. In the warmer waters of summertime, Blue-Green Algae and Cyanotoxins are frequently found in the water and can produce toxins affecting the liver and nervous system.

Currently, A Superior Mechanical is offering a **FREE WATER ASSESSMENT** for your home or office. Just call our office at (850) 258-3225 to set your appointment, and we'll come out, totally free of charge, and check your water. If you have particulates in your water, we have numerous solutions to remove them, and we can discuss that. We're here for you and are happy to be your One-Stop Service Shop, and part of your Whole Home Wellness System.

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SSUS

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vital habitat for marine life, including grouper, snapper, tuna, mahi-mahi, marlin, sea turtles and countless other species that support a healthy Gulf ecosystem.

For those concerned about preserving history, county leaders emphasize that the project does exactly that. Rather than disappearing into a scrapyard, the SS United States will continue telling her story beneath the Gulf as a thriving artificial reef while a future museum shares

her remarkable legacy with visitors from around the world.

For a ship that once connected continents, her final voyage will connect history, conservation and tourism in a way few projects ever have. Soon, the world's fastest ocean liner will begin her slowest journey—settling beneath the Gulf and becoming home to thousands of marine creatures while inspiring future generations of divers, anglers, scientists and visitors.

For updates on the project, visit destinfwb.com/explore/eco-tourism/ssus.

Donna Johns:

A Commissioner Who Chose Service Over Spotlight

In an era when politics often rewards the loudest voices, Donna Johns has taken a different path.

She doesn't measure success by headlines or social media arguments. She measures it by projects completed, constituents helped, and decisions made with the long-term interests of Walton County in mind.

A lifelong believer in service, Donna first took an oath to defend the Constitution while serving in the United States Air

County: new parks and playgrounds, ADA-accessible recreational facilities, enhanced lighting, public safety improvements, and community spaces that families can enjoy for generations. While elected to represent District 4, she has repeatedly voted to support worthwhile projects throughout the county because she believes every community deserves to thrive.

Donna has also shown she is willing to cast difficult votes when she believes they are in the

county's best interest. She has opposed developments she believed were incompatible with Walton County's character, supported measures to protect residents from inappropriate growth, and has never hesitated to vote "no" when she believed a proposal threatened the quality of life residents cherish.

Her philosophy is simple: growth should be responsible, government should be accountable, and every tax dollar should be treated with respect.

Constituents often find Donna at community meetings, ribbon cuttings, workshops, neighborhood discussions, or simply listening. She understands that being a county commissioner is far more than attending board meetings. It means studying complex issues, meeting with county staff, responding to residents, balancing competing interests, and making decisions that will shape the county long after today's headlines are forgotten.

Perhaps what best defines

Donna Johns is not a single vote or project, but her perspective on public service.

That means listening before speaking.

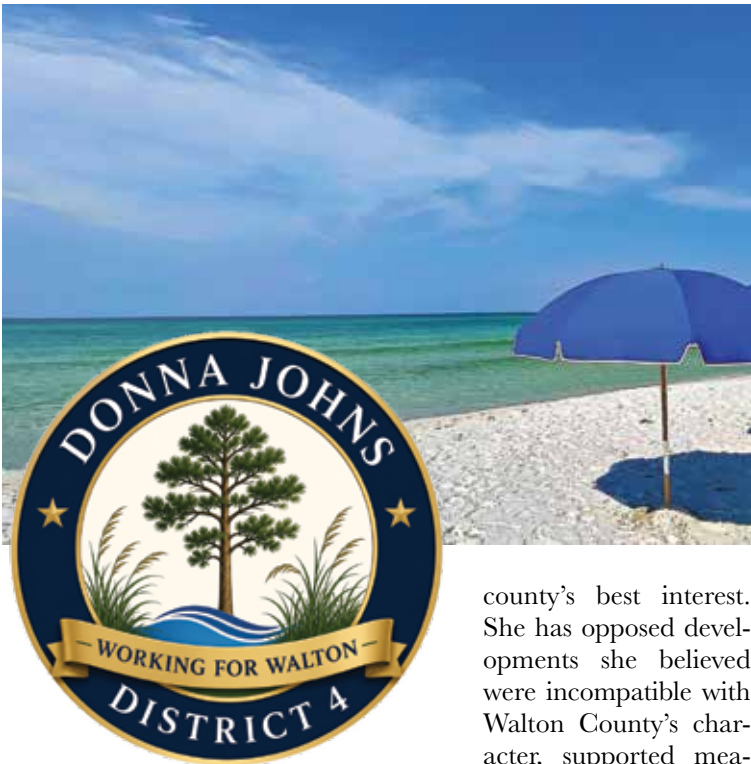
Learning before deciding.

Working before taking credit.

In a political climate often defined by division, Donna Johns has chosen a quieter path—one rooted in preparation, integrity, and service.

For her, public office has never been about holding a title.

It has always been about honoring the trust placed in her by the people of Walton County.



Force. Years later, she took another oath as Walton County Commissioner for District 4. Though the uniforms changed, the commitment remained the same: serve with integrity, protect the public trust, and put people before politics.

Since taking office in 2022, Donna has approached county government as a student first. She completed extensive training through the Florida Association of Counties, earning certifications in county government, ethics, planning, budgeting, infrastructure, emergency management, and leadership. She believes good decisions begin with understanding the issues—not simply reacting to them.

That preparation has shaped her approach on the Board.

She has consistently supported investments that improve quality of life across Walton

I've invested countless hours in professional development through the Florida Association of Counties, completing:

- Certified County Commissioner Program
- Advanced County Commissioner Program - Levels I, II & III
- County Government Education Program
- Legacy Leadership Program

Through these programs, I've gained valuable knowledge in areas such as:

- Land Use & Development
- Planning & Zoning
- Infrastructure
- Grant Management
- Governmental Operations
- Ethics & Accountability
- Stormwater Management
- Florida Law

The decisions made at the County level impact your quality of life, your economy, your environment, and your future. I believe those decisions should be made by someone who is prepared, informed, and committed to continuous learning.

Vote
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I am ready to continue serving Walton County with the knowledge, experience, and dedication this position requires.

You deserve nothing less.



Donna Johns
WALTON COUNTY COMMISSIONER





A Pastor's Ponderings: When the Seasons Change



BY PASTOR SAM BROWN,
CROSSPOINT CHURCH FREEPORT

There is something about August that makes us pause. Maybe it's the first day of school. The excitement of Friday night football. New teachers, new routines, and calendars that suddenly fill up again after a slower summer.

For many families, August feels like a fresh start. And with every fresh start comes a ques-

tion: What kind of season do I want this to be?

Most of us don't just want fuller calendars. We want fuller lives. We want stronger marriages. We want our kids to grow into people of character. We want friendships that matter. We want peace instead of constant pressure. We want purpose that goes deeper than simply making it through another week.

The Bible tells us that God is in the business of making things new. Not just new schedules or new opportunities, but new hearts. Throughout Scripture, God often met people in seasons of transition. Abraham left everything familiar. Ruth stepped into an uncertain future. The disciples dropped their nets to follow Jesus. Again and again, God used a new season to invite people into a new relationship

with Him.

Maybe He still does. Maybe that's why you're reading this. Perhaps this fall isn't just about getting back into a routine. Perhaps it's an invitation to reconnect with the God who created you and loves you more than you can imagine. At Crosspoint Church, that's what we're praying for—not only for our church family, but for every family in Freeport.

This fall is a new season for us as well. While we eagerly await the completion of our permanent campus here in Freeport, we'll be gathering each Sunday at Freeport High School. We couldn't be more excited. Not because we're meeting in a school, but because it reminds us that the church has never been defined by its address. It's always been about people en-

countering Jesus and finding hope together. Whether you've attended church your whole life, walked away years ago, or have never been to church at all, you are welcome. No pressure to have all the answers. Just a place to come as you are and see who Jesus is. Our hope is that you'll find authentic friendships, practical biblical teaching, a place where your children are loved and invested in, and a community that's committed to making a real difference in Freeport. Because we believe our community deserves more than another busy season. It deserves hope.

As you prepare backpacks, organize calendars, and look ahead to everything this fall will bring, don't forget to make room for what matters most. Jesus once said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteous-

ness, and all these things will be given to you as well." That's still good news today!

If you're looking for a church to call home, or you're simply curious about faith, we'd love to meet you. Join us Sundays at 9:30 a.m. at Freeport High School as we continue waiting with anticipation for the day we open the doors of our future permanent campus. Until then, we're grateful for the opportunity to gather in the heart of our community and point people to the One who never changes.

Wherever this season finds you, our prayer is simple: That this wouldn't just be a new school year. It would be the beginning of a new story that God wants to write in your life.

FISHING

continued from page 10

a popping sound. The female produces thousands of eggs, and then moves on to find an-

other male, while the male fertilizes and fans the eggs to remove sediment and provide oxygen for a week until hatch. First year growth is about five inches. After that, fish grow about an inch a year.

Redear are caught most often on worms, small shrimp, or jig heads, with small hooks (6 to #10). Use small spinning rods with two-to-four-pound test. Redear are good fighting, good eating fish.

Warmouth (*L. gulosus*)

Warmouth are like other panfish, but they have a red eye and a large mouth. There are dark lines radiating from the eye that look like war paint, hence the name. Warmouth swim in swampy, still, darker water than other sunfish. They spawn all summer building solitary nests next to submerged objects. Warmouth eat crayfish, insects, and fish, mostly in the morning. They are ambush predators, hiding in vegetation and then aggressively attacking prey. They appear to sleep at night.

The same baits and lures work for warmouth as for other sunfish, just in muddy waters.

Channel Catfish (*Ictalurus punctatus*)

Catfish are hard pulling fish that live deeper in lakes and are active after sunset. Chicken and beef liver, and worms are good baits because catfish smell to find food in the dark lake bottoms. Catfish have taste buds all



Warmouth. Wikipedia.

over their bodies to help them locate food, but they do not eat decaying materials or detritus. They eat crayfish and mollusks.

Males become darker, with dark lips, and a swollen head, while females become lighter during the summer spawning season.

Adults are 20 inches long. Meat is white, crisp, tender, and tasty. Catfish are for eating. Fish on the bottom with a sturdy #2 to #4 hook, and a heavy split shot sinker. FWC stocks catfish in Juniper Lake, Walton County.

Where to Fish?

Sunfish are in any year-round rivers, streams, backwaters, and ponds, with larger fish in larger water bodies. The Yellow and Choctawhatchee Rivers are sure to please. Fish where tributaries enter the larger rivers, especially Holmes Creek, a spring fed tributary of the Choctawhatchee. Sunfish love cover. Anywhere around logs, stumps, vegetation, or stuff in the water is where they are.

Juniper Lake, in Walton County, is periodically stocked with catfish and bass, bream, and crappie. Bass may be a bit



farther out in colder water in summer, and catfish are on the bottom.

Simon Horaist, owner of Dixie's Yards and More in DeFuniak Springs (above), caught this four and half pound large-mouth on Juniper Lake in May.

Florida summers are hot, but the fish still bite. Opportunities for freshwater fishing abound. This is the perfect time for family fun, but teaching children to fish is more than fun. It is an education in patience, skill, and achievement. You are making memories, but you are also developing an appreciation for nature and encouraging responsibility for protection of the environment. Family fishing produces self-confident, persistent, capable, analytical people. Go outside and enjoy the Florida Panhandle.

Helen Petre is a retired biologist. Any ideas or suggestions for articles about nature, wild things, and science, please email: petrehelen@gmail.com.

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Sean of the South: Ball Games



BY SEAN DIETRICH

I remember going to a ball game with my old man. I remember the smells. Stale beer, human sweat, and the odor of unnaturally pink hotdogs that turned your bowels into stone.

I remember before the game, things got very quiet. All 30-odd thousand people rose. The throngs of stadium chairs creaking sounded like the world was splitting.

Everyone's dad put down his non-evangelical beverage, SLOWLY, careful not to spill. Thousands of American grandpas removed lit cigars and balanced them, with surgical-like care, onto armrests.

The anthem was played.

Back in those days, the anthem was handled differently than it is today. Back then, guest artists did not take the mound, wearing asymmetric haircuts and crotch-revealing trousers. Neither did singers demonstrate 10 minutes of vocal gymnastics

until their anthem performance resembled a febrile seizure.

No. Back then the organ played. And everybody sang.

We used to be a nation of singers. Remember that? Singing was just normal for us. Our childhood classrooms had upright console pianos, and our teachers knew how to play them. Mrs. Moore would bang out "My Country 'Tis of Thee" before each class. Mrs. Smith played "This Land is Your Land" every Friday after the Pledge.

Well, that was a long time ago.

Recently, I attended a modern baseball game. It was a very different experience. My wife and I ordered \$34 nachos from a kiosk, and the cashier asked whether I wanted to leave a 25-percent tip. Beers were \$18 apiece.

During the game, a huge LED timer runs between pitches so TV producers can fit in more commercials on broadcasts. The bases are now bigger, the distance between bases is now shorter. They're changing our game.

But none of that bothered me. Not really. A Major League park is what it is. Get over it. At a ball game, you get what you get, and you don't pitch a fit.

What I was most interested in, truthfully, was the anthem. I was curious about it. I won-



dered: Do people still sing together the way they did 40 years ago?

After all, our world is nothing like it was. Our current world, for example, is almost devoid of classroom pianos. In 1938 the New York Times reported that 5.8 million pianos were sold in America each year. Whereas last year we barely sold 30,000.

So anyway, the moment of truth arrived. The announcer asked everyone to rise for the anthem.

People stood. Chairs creaked. Dads placed beers beneath seats. People who were vaping expelled a final blast and hid their devices from security.

Everyone looked at the flag. The music began.

And...

Everyone knew the words. Everyone sang. The stadium sounded like it was going to crumble beneath the volume of mass singing.

The boy next to me held his hat over his heart, singing so loudly the vein in his head showed. The old man beside the

boy was singing even louder.

But when the song finished, the people were not. In fact, the crowd was only just getting warmed up. They kept cheering. For whole minutes, they cheered.

Fists pumped into the air. People were hugging. A flag waved on the mega-tron screen. The sound of unified voices was

engulfing. Fighter jets flew overhead. Fireworks. People were amazingly, wholeheartedly, demonstratively together. Even if only for a few seconds in time.

And in that beautiful moment of oneness, that moment of palpable joy, do you know something?

Nobody seemed to care about Cracker Barrel's sign.

Back-to-school savings start now: Smart ways to get ahead

It may still be summer, but back-to-school season will be here before you know it. Getting a head start now can help you avoid last-minute stress and keep more money in your pocket.

Start with a simple plan

Take a few minutes to list what you'll actually need this school year. From supplies and clothes to tech and activity fees, having a list helps you stay focused and avoid impulse buys.

Shop early (and plan for tax-free savings)

You don't have to buy everything at once, and spreading purchases out over the summer can ease the financial pressure. The Back-to-School Sales Tax Holiday runs July 20 through Aug. 20. This gives you a full month to shop for qualifying items like clothing, school supplies and certain electronics tax-free. Visit:

bit.ly/florida-back-to-school for more details.

Take inventory at home

Before you shop, check what you already have. You might be surprised how many supplies like backpacks, binders and calculators can be reused or refreshed instead of replaced.

Set a budget and stick to it

Decide how much you want to spend overall and break it down by category. Giving every dollar a purpose helps you stay in control and avoid overspending as the season picks up.

Use your tools to stay on track

Mobile banking, alerts and budgeting tools can make it easy to monitor spending as you go. A quick spending check-in can help you stay within your budget and adjust if needed.

Consider applying for an Eglin FCU Mastercard®

With rates as low as 7.9% APR, no annual fee, no balance transfer fee, no cash advance fee and no international transaction fee, stress less and be ready to tap and go! Learn more at eglinfcu.org/Mastercard.

Getting ahead of back-to-school shopping isn't just about saving money – it's about creating a smoother, more stress-free start to the school year. **Start early, spend smart and get ready to make the most of those tax-free savings!**



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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.

As another school year begins, families focus on schedules, homework, sports, and after-school activities. One of the greatest challenges facing parents today extends far beyond academics which is "helping children stay engaged in a world dominated by screens". Smartphones, tablets, social media, streaming entertainment, and online gaming have become constant companions for many young people. While technology certainly offers valuable educational tools, excessive screen time can gradually replace face-to-face interaction, creative thinking, patience, and meaningful human connection.

Private music lessons offer a refreshing alternative.

Unlike the fast-paced rewards of digital entertainment, learning an instrument or developing one's voice requires focus, perseverance, and consistent practice. These experiences strengthen attention spans, improve memory, and encourage problem-solving skills that extend well beyond the music studio. Every lesson becomes an opportunity for a student to build confidence one accomplishment at a time.

One of the biggest differences



between online gaming and music education is the "quality of human interaction". Many children spend hours connecting with friends and strangers via headsets. Although online games can involve teamwork, the relationships often remain anonymous and temporary. In contrast, private lessons create genuine mentorship between teacher and student. A teacher celebrates successes, provides encouragement through challenges, and guides each student according to their individual learning style and goals.

This personal connection helps children develop trust, communication skills, accountability, and self-confidence which are qualities that cannot be downloaded through an app.

Music also provides opportunities to step into the real world

through recitals, performances, and community events. Standing before an audience teaches courage, preparation, and resilience. They experience the satisfaction of sharing something beautiful with family, friends, and neighbors while becoming part of a supportive musical community.

These experiences replace isolation with belonging.

Scientific research continues to reveal that learning music simultaneously stimulates multiple regions of the brain. Reading music, listening carefully, coordinating hand movements, maintaining rhythm, and expressing emotion all work together to strengthen the brain's pathways. Rather than providing the instant gratification common with digital entertainment, music develops the brain through sustained concentration and repetition. In many ways, private lessons help "rewire" the digital brain by restoring the ability to: focus deeply, think creatively, and remain engaged with challenging tasks. A student learns to complete projects by becoming a "Finisher."

Back-to-school season is the perfect time for parents to establish routines that encourage lifelong success. Just as homework, sports practices, and healthy meals become regular habits, weekly private music lessons can become a consistent part of family life. The structure of scheduled lessons teaches responsibility while giving students a creative outlet that balances out the demands of school and technology.

The goal is not to eliminate screens entirely but to create healthy balance. Every hour spent preparing for a recital, mastering a favorite song, or working alongside a dedicated



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Continued on next page

ECTC Announces Blockbuster Season 14

September 10, 2026 – May 23, 2027

Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC) has unveiled its highly anticipated Season 14, featuring a lineup of Tony Award-winning musicals, gripping dramas, holiday entertainment and a magical regional premiere. Running Sept. 10, 2026, through May 23, 2027, the season promises unforgettable stories that inspire, entertain and bring audiences together.

Leading the season is the Tony Award-winning *Come From Away*, the remarkable true story of 7,000 airline passengers stranded in a small Canadian town following the events of Sept. 11. The production celebrates compassion, resilience and the power of community.

Audiences will then buckle up for *The 39 Steps*, Alfred Hitchcock’s fast-paced thriller that blends suspense, comedy and nonstop adventure.

For the holidays, ECTC presents *Million Dollar Quartet Christmas*, a festive spin on the popular musical featuring legendary rock ‘n’ roll icons reunited for a high-energy celebration filled with seasonal favorites and classic hits.

The new year begins with *9 to 5: The Musical*, the hit stage adaptation inspired by the beloved film and featuring music and lyrics by Dolly Parton. The crowd-pleasing production celebrates ambition, friendship and workplace empowerment.



Continuing the season is *Dear Jack, Dear Louise*, a heartfelt play inspired by a true World War II love story that unfolds through letters exchanged across the Atlantic.

Closing the season is the regional premiere of Disney’s *Frozen*, bringing the beloved modern classic to life on stage in a spectacular production designed to delight audiences of all ages.

Season 14 offers something for everyone, from first-time theatergoers and families to longtime patrons seeking memorable nights out. ECTC’s VIP program enhances the experience with early access to preferred seating, exclusive events, cast meet-and-greets and behind-the-scenes opportunities. “This is one of the most exciting seasons we’ve ever put on our stage,” said Nathanael Fisher, ECTC’s Producing Artistic

Director. “From the scale of these productions to the stories we’re telling, everything about Season 14 is designed to raise the bar for what audiences experience at ECTC.”

Performances will be held at ECTC, located at 560 Grand Blvd., Suite 200, Miramar Beach.

For tickets, VIP memberships, sponsorship opportunities, donations or more information, call (850) 684-0323 or visit emeraldcoasttheatre.org. Follow ECTC on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.

MUSIC LESSONS

continued from previous page

teacher is an investment in skills that will last a lifetime.

This school year, consider trading a little screen time for stage time. The confidence, friendship, discipline, creativity, and joy that grow through private music lessons will remain and continue to enrich a child’s life, long after the latest game or device has been forgotten. These are sometimes called “Life Lessons” by music teachers.

Studio Opens on Monday, August 3rd

Since 2011, Studio 237 Music Lessons has been teaching students of all ages 6 and up. Our staff of teachers are ready to help you discover, develop, and advance your musical skills on piano, voice, guitar (electric, acoustic, bass), ukulele, drums and even on shofar! The Studio opens on Monday, August 3rd and students may begin lessons ASAP. Call Ray or Lisa Cyr at 850.231.3199, visit our website at www.Studio237Music.com, schedule a visit of our studio and/or to meet a teacher.



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