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The Art of Healing

Ten years after its founding, MKAF's groundbreaking Warrior Arts program continues to create connection, calm and community through creativity.

By ZANDRA WOLFGAM

A pen touches paper. A line becomes a curve, the curve becomes a pattern, and before long, a small square of paper has become something intricate, personal and entirely unexpected.

For participants in Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation's Warrior Arts program, however, what happens while creating the art can matter as much as the finished piece.

This year, MKAF celebrates the 10th anniversary of Warrior Arts, a groundbreaking component of its ArtsReach program founded in 2016 by Melanie Moore, MKAF's director of education and community engagement. Warrior Arts connects active-duty military service members, veterans and their families with the transformative power of art, particularly those living with traumatic brain injuries, post-traumatic stress and other visible and invisible injuries.

Through tailored work-



shops and art experiences, Warrior Arts uses creative expression as a therapeutic tool to promote mindfulness, resilience and connection while addressing some of the unique challenges military personnel and their families face. At its heart is a simple but powerful idea: Art can offer a pathway to communication, creative expression and recovery.

A Legacy of Access

The idea is deeply rooted in MKAF's history. Found-

ed in 1995, the nonprofit organization carries the name and spirit of Destin matriarch Mattie Kelly, a lifelong patron of the arts who wrote poetry, played piano and organ, composed music and supported cultural organizations. Kelly and her husband, Coleman, moved to Destin in 1935 and became prominent business owners and philanthropists in the growing fishing community.

Today, MKAF carries that legacy forward with a mis-

sion "to champion access to the arts for all in Northwest Florida." Its concerts, Festival of the Arts and other public programs help support ArtsReach, the foundation's community education umbrella serving K-12 students, children and adults with special needs, and the military community.

The numbers tell part of the story: ArtsReach now

WARRIOR ARTS

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Full Circle with Naomi Alvarado

By HEATHER BENNETT EYE

After a cancer diagnosis this past winter, local resident Naomi Alvarado found that the community she poured herself into was there to hold her up, and she learned what it meant to slow down.

In 2013, Naomi and her husband Chris, decided it was time to find somewhere quiet to live after welcoming their son Hayden into the world. They decided to move to Freeport, which was different than what they were used to south of the bay in Santa Rosa Beach. Back then, Freeport only had a co-op grocery

NAOMI ALVARADO

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Community

NAOMI ALVARADO

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store, a Dollar General, and two stop lights.

“Over time I just grew to love this little town,” said Naomi. “Our son has special needs, and just seeing the way that the town has embraced him, and how sweet everybody is with him, it’s just obviously meant a whole lot to us,” she added.

Naomi has done a lot over the years to support herself, her family and local communities. She was a freelance writer, contributing blogs to Destin 30A Moms and articles for VIE Magazine. She also spent time curating events for Southern Sound Music Alliance and booking shows for her husband Chris, a talented local musician. “Every few years, it’s like, oh, let’s do something else. Let’s just see what else kind of speaks to me,” she said. “That’s the fun of it, though. You don’t have to setting for one story in your life.”

There was one job that holds

a special place in her heart. In 2023, she became involved in the Freeport Merchants Association (FMA), which is like our chamber of commerce. It’s a network of local business in Freeport, or who service Freeport residents. The FMA has networking events, like evening socials and breakfast meetings, and it’s a great way to meet other business owners. “It’s my favorite thing I’ve done,” said Naomi. “Being a part of the community as it grows, has been a really special, unique experience.”

Naomi has been the events chair for the FMA for the last couple of years. But, this year she’s had to take a step back to focus on her health after her cancer diagnosis in February. For someone who describes herself as go, go, go, the slower pace has been an unexpected gift. “Nothing would have made me slow down other than this,” she said.

Looking back, Naomi says the warning signs were easy to



explain away. She was working out. That could have contributed to her weight loss or shoulder pain. It was one morning she woke up looking jaundiced, that she knew something was wrong, and Chris urged her to go to the hospital.

Within a couple of hours, an ultrasound revealed masses. Her liver was covered in tumors, and she was headed toward liver failure. “Things went from zero to 100 very quickly,” she said.

One of Naomi’s first worries was logistics. Would she have to travel for treatment, and what

would that mean for Hayden and Chris? Instead, she found excellent care close to home. She has nothing but praise for her team at Sacred Heart Hospital in Santa Rosa Beach. “Nobody’s super pumped about going to chemo,”

she said. “But the team there, it felt like a warm hug. This is a safe spot for me to be right now, and I can take this off my mental load for a couple of hours.”

Just as Naomi supported Freeport, support for her came full circle. Hammock Bay and the FMA held a fundraising event for Naomi and her family this spring. “The response from the community was just mind-blowing,” she said. “It made me feel like, okay, we’re going to be fine. We’re going to get through this. We got lucky that people have been so gener-

ous and supportive as they have been.”

In September, she was able to ring the bell for her last chemo treatment. Throughout the year, she has spent more time at home with Chris and her son. “Things feel different. They just feel a little more like you can appreciate them in a different way.”

Naomi’s advice is to always keep up with yearly checkups. “It has to be a non-negotiable, which is hard for women, especially moms. If you’re going to be on the phone to cancel the appointment, stay on the phone to reschedule, just so it doesn’t get lost in the mix.”

If anyone is going through a cancer diagnosis and needs someone to talk to, who knows what it’s like, Naomi, in her true giving fashion, is here to support you. “I’m always happy to be an ear or a shoulder if I can.”

If you’d like to reach out to Naomi, you can contact her at naomi.d.rogers@gmail.com.

WARRIOR ARTS

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presents more than 150 programs annually, reaches more than 25,000 participants each year and has served more than 420,000 people through more than 100 schools and partner agencies since 1995.

Moore joined MKAF in 2015 and created Warrior Arts the following year. Under her leadership, ArtsReach has

grown from a handful of outreach programs into a robust initiative reaching communities throughout Northwest Florida.

MKAF CEO Demetrius Fuller credits Moore with helping make outreach central to the foundation’s identity. “We’re so fortunate to have somebody of Melanie’s education and arts pedigree to lead the charge for us on outreach, which is essentially the product of Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation,” Fuller said.

When You “Tangle Up,” You Power Down

Warrior Arts has grown to more than 100 programs annually, incorporating visual art, painting, improv and other creative practices. One of its most successful offerings is Zentangle, an easy-to-learn method of creating images from structured patterns, or “tangles.”

Moore, a Certified Zentangle Teacher, describes the focused drawing process as an active form of meditation. “When you tangle up, you power down,” she said. “The act of focused drawing becomes a form of meditation and mind-

fulness that supports recovery and relaxation.” There are no mistakes — only “mis-tangles.” There is no prescribed finished product. Participants simply begin drawing, one line at a time. That low-pressure approach can be especially meaningful for people accustomed to high-stakes environments demanding precision and control. Moore has seen participants leave sessions calmer, carrying not only a finished piece of original art but a sense of accomplishment.

Few people understand that transformation better than re-

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Sunday, Oct. 25,
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Certified Zentangle Teachers Melanie Moore and Chief Charles Burkett demonstrate how simple lines and patterns can become an engaging mindfulness practice.

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Learn more at MKAF.org.



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The Vine Foundation: Removing Barriers, Restoring Hope

BY MICHELLE RUSCHMAN

For those who are trying to leave an abusive relationship, The Vine Foundation can be the first step to a new life. Founder Shannon Dwyer knows firsthand how difficult it can be to do it on your own. “I tried to leave my abuser five times over 10 years. So many people ask survivors, ‘Why didn’t you just leave?’ but it’s not that simple. In my situation, we were trauma-bonded. The abuse wasn’t the only part of our relationship. There were good times woven in and out of the abuse. For a time, we built a home together and had children together. You hold onto those precious moments with the hope he’ll finally change.”

Abuse can also be more subtle and go deeper over time. “Over the years we were together, my perception became distorted. He went to work and provided for our family, so I’d wonder why I wasn’t more grateful. Somehow, financial support became justification for how I was expected to tolerate being treated. I was made to feel

like I did not have the right to push back, question him, be angry about how he spoke to me, or expect better because, after all, he paid for everything.

“I think that is the part of this story I most want another woman to understand. Abuse does not have to begin at its worst for it to be abuse.

“You do not have to wait until someone punches you in the face before you are allowed to call what is happening to you physical abuse.

“Someone paying your bills does not purchase the right to control, degrade, intimidate, restrain, or frighten you.”

Separation from people you used to see regularly and the distance put between the victim and their loved ones are also signs that shouldn’t be ignored. “Every time I wanted to go out, he’d accuse me of cheating. It just became easier to stay home until I found myself isolated and alone. As a result, his voice was the only one I heard.”

What also makes it difficult for victims to “just leave” is that there are so many moving parts

they have to consider:

- If the car is under my abuser’s name, what will I use to leave?
- If I have no job and no access to the finances, how will I have the money to start a new life?
- If my abuser has an up-standing public persona, will anyone believe me?
- How do I leave with the least disruption to my children? What will this do to their friendships and ability to attend their school?
- How do I navigate the shame once this gets out?
- Is there a shelter I can go to that will have room for my kids and me? What will I be exposing them to once we get there?
- How will I retain a lawyer?

This is where The Vine Foundation can be a lifeline. “The goal of this foundation is to be able to ask, ‘What do you need RIGHT NOW so you can leave?’ and have the resources to remove any barrier. Is it rent, gas money, a job? We don’t want

those answers to be a hindrance from having a life that’s free from abuse.”

Shannon was in the process of making The Vine Foundation a 501(c)(3) nonprofit when she was in a head-on collision while visiting Ireland in May. Recovery has been long and painful, but she’s finally in a place where she can focus once again on making that goal a reality. “I’m so thankful to the people who have offered to help, but for now, I’m asking that any potential donations be set aside until I can legally accept these funds directly to the foundation.”

Shannon and her husband, Brendan, have been doing what they can until that day arrives. In addition to funding, volunteers are needed to provide the resources victims need to start a new life. As part of that effort, The Vine Foundation is bringing community partners together for its Visionary Luncheon on Oct. 24, 2026, at the Mingle



30A Event Room, 66 Gordonina Way, Suite 100, Santa Rosa Beach. The gathering is designed to unite professionals in legal services, counseling, housing, transportation, medical care, child care, employment, financial guidance, advocacy and other community partnerships. The goal is to build a network of resources that helps survivors overcome barriers and take the next steps toward a life free from abuse.

If you are someone who is in an abusive relationship or you love someone who is, Shannon

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Community



You're Not Supposed to Need a Holiday From Your Own Body

By DR. KAREN DEVORE

The turkey is not the only thing carrying tension this Thanksgiving.

Your shoulders have been somewhere near your ears since September. Your lower back has

opinions about the drive to see family. And the headache you hoped would disappear has invited itself to dinner.

But there are groceries to buy, deadlines to meet, and people counting on you. So you



reach for your usual remedy, say "I'm fine," and keep going.

Sound familiar?

Before you spend another holiday working around your body, consider giving it some attention. Acupuncture could be one way to begin.

When "Normal" Starts Costing You

You may have gotten very good at living with discomfort. You know which chair to avoid. How long you can stand before your back starts protesting. Which activities will leave your knees aching tomorrow.

Those adjustments can feel small until you realize how much of your day they control. Pain takes more than comfort. It takes concentration, patience, spontaneity, and sometimes the desire to participate at all.

That is why the conversation about acupuncture should begin with a question: What would you like to get back to doing?

Cooking without constantly leaning against the counter? Enjoying a walk after Thanksgiving dinner? Making the drive to see someone you love without dreading every mile?

Those are meaningful treatment goals.

Small Needles. Meaningful Possibilities.

Acupuncture involves placing very fine needles at selected points on the body. Rooted in traditional Eastern medicine, it is also the subject of modern research examining its effects on pain and the nervous system.

Some of the strongest evidence supports acupuncture for chronic lower back pain, neck

pain, and knee pain associated with osteoarthritis. For someone living with those conditions, relief may make everyday movement and activities more manageable.

Acupuncture may also help reduce the frequency of migraines and tension headaches. Imagine what fewer headache days could mean: fewer canceled plans, fewer afternoons spent distracted by discomfort, and more time available for your life.

Results vary. Acupuncture does not help everyone, and improvement may take multiple visits. But you deserve to know that another option exists.

Your Treatment Should Start With Your Story

A sore back does not tell us everything we need to know about you. When did it start? What makes it worse? What have you already tried? Are you sleeping comfortably? What are you avoiding because you are afraid it will hurt?

A thoughtful consultation connects your symptoms with the way you actually live.

Acupuncture fits within an integrative approach that considers your health history, current care, and personal goals. It can complement appropriate medical treatment, physical therapy, and movement.

We also recognize when symptoms need further evaluation. The goal is a plan that makes sense for you, with progress measured by changes you can notice in daily life.

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Why Wine? The Wine Experience From the Family Table to the Wedding at Cana



BY JOHN CHOQUER, CHATEAU
LA COEUR WINE

My journey with wine began around age five, gathered at our family table for Sunday dinner. My father would pour us children a few ounces to enjoy with our meal. In our home, wine was considered part of the food and fellowship, never something to consume in excess.

Today, my father is 97 years young. He still enjoys red wine daily, remains in excellent health, and has a remarkably sharp mind. He has always revered wine, often reminding us of Christ's first miracle and His words at the Last Supper: "Do this in remembrance of me." Those conversations planted the seeds of my lifelong fascination with wine.

For more than 16 years, I have been a vigneron—growing

wine grapes and making wine. Every vineyard, harvest, and bottle offers something new to discover. Through this column, I hope to share that excitement and invite you to explore wine's history, flavors, traditions, and place at the table.

In North America, wine is often viewed primarily as alcohol. Across much of Europe, it has traditionally been approached as a companion to food: something to savor with a meal, conversation, and family. Neither culture is uniform, of course, but the contrast invites a question: Why wine?

For Christians, that question carries a remarkable spiritual dimension. Consider Jesus' first recorded miracle, at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1-11). When the celebration ran short of wine, He transformed water into wine—an abundant gift that the wedding steward praised for its quality. Why begin His public signs at a wedding feast? The story suggests joy, hospitality, generosity, and transformation.

Wine appears again at one of Christianity's most sacred moments. At the Last Supper, Jesus shared the cup with His disciples and gave it profound mean-



ing, linking it to His blood of the covenant (Matthew 26:27-29). In Luke's account, He told them to remember Him when they shared the bread and cup (Luke 22:19-20). What had long accompanied ordinary meals became a symbol of sacrifice, remembrance, and hope.

Then came a promise: Jesus said He would not drink again of the fruit of the vine until He drank it anew in His Father's Kingdom (Matthew 26:29). Revelation describes the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7-9). The two passages

together evoke the beauty of a glorious celebration and fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Wine is not an invitation to excess, nor is drinking necessary to appreciate its meaning. It is a fruit of the vine shaped by soil, seasons, patience, and hu-

man hands. My hope is that this journey opens your mind to its extraordinary story—and a new appreciation for this gift of creation. Look to Future articles for in depth discovery into the many wonders of wine and how wine is the celebration of life.

5th Anniversary Block Party! Grab Your Passport and Explore the Neighborhood!

Make the most of the 111 Business Block Party's fifth anniversary celebration on Thursday, Nov. 12, from 3-7 p.m. with your very own 111 Neighborhood Passport! As you explore the participating businesses, collect a stamp or initial from each merchant for a chance to win local prizes! Participating businesses include **Pazzo Italiano, California Closets, Aesthetic Artistry, Play Studio, State Farm agent James Sater, Gasworks, The Window Treatment**

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Once you've visited all 11 businesses and collected your stamps, return your completed passport to the designated drawing station to enter for a chance to win! Prize drawings will take place hourly at 4, 5, 6 and 7 p.m. It's a fun way to discover local businesses, meet your neighbors, support the community and perhaps take home a prize!



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Community

Two Walton County Sheriff's Office Deputies Become Certified Drug Recognition Experts

BY COREY DOBRIDNIA, WCSO
A Walton County Sheriff's Office deputy made his first DUI arrest this month using skills he learned through new Drug Recognition Expert training.

A WCSO deputy stopped a car on Highway 98 in Miramar Beach after clocking it at 64 miles per hour in a 45.

The driver showed signs of impairment when the deputy spoke with him. He had slurred speech, glassy eyes, and struggled with simple instructions during field sobriety tests. He

also told the deputy he had smoked marijuana about five hours earlier.

After a breath sample of 0.049 g/210L, Field Training Officer Deputy Hampton Tardif, fresh out of Drug Recognition Expert training, completed a full drug influence evaluation. In Florida, DUI can be proven by a breath alco-



hol level of 0.08 g/210L or by showing that someone's normal faculties are impaired. Based on

the evaluation and the deputy's observations, the driver was arrested for Driving Under the Influence.

Deputy Tardif and Field Training Officer Benjamin Jacobs recently earned their Drug Recognition Expert certification through the International Association of Chiefs of Police. The program teaches deputies how to identify drug-related impairment and how to tell the difference between drug use and medical conditions. Jacobs ranked first in his class.

Sheriff Michael Adkinson

said this training strengthens the agency's efforts to keep impaired drivers off the road. "Drug impairment on our roadways is a real danger," Adkinson said. "Having more Drug Recognition Experts on our team helps us protect our community. We are proud of Deputies Jacobs and Tardif for completing this tough training."

The addition of two new Drug Recognition Experts gives deputies another tool to help keep Walton County's roads safe and to ensure impaired drivers are held accountable.

THE VINE

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wants to pass on some advice. "When it is safe to do so, call law enforcement when an incident occurs and document everything you possibly can. Take photos and save text messages, voicemails, emails, and screenshots. Write down dates, times, witnesses, and exactly what hap-

pened. Keep copies somewhere your abuser cannot access.

"In the moment, you may want to minimize what happened, protect them, avoid embarrassment, or convince yourself that you'll never need that documentation. But there may come a day when your safety, your children, or your ability to prove a pattern of abuse depends on having a record of

what actually happened.

"You are far more likely to wish you had documented and reported an incident than to wish you hadn't. Your future self may desperately need the evidence that your present self is afraid to create.

"I know how easy it is, when you are living inside of something, to move the line for what you'll tolerate. I moved that line

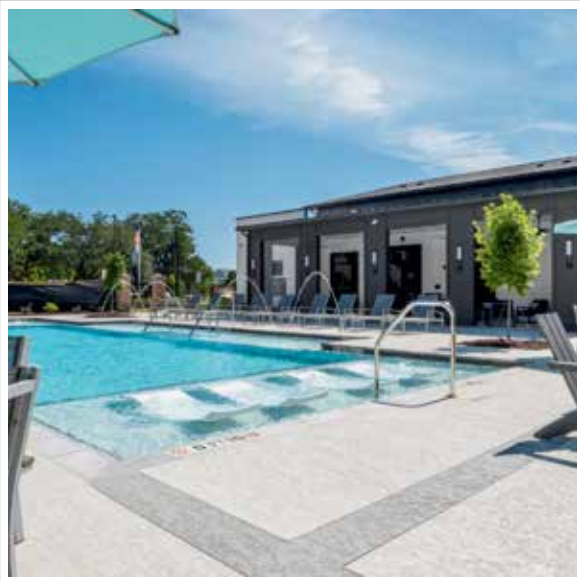
for years. Eventually, I realized I was no longer asking myself whether the relationship could be saved. I was asking myself whether staying in it could cost me my life."

The Vine Foundation also plans to expand its services to include men, recognizing that abuse affects men as well as women.

The best way to reach Shan-

non and The Vine Foundation is by calling 850-684-5653 or emailing admin@thevinefoundationnwfl.com. You can also go to Facebook at The Vine Foundation or to Instagram at [@thevinefoundationnwfl](https://www.instagram.com/thevinefoundationnwfl).

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



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THE WATERS
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Gasworks: Bringing Comfort, Style & Craftsmanship to the Florida Panhandle

For more than 11 years, Gasworks has been proudly locally owned and operated, serving homeowners, builders, designers and businesses throughout the Florida Panhandle. What began with a commitment to quality gas services has grown into a full-service company specializing in gas lines, fireplaces, outdoor kitchens and gas lighting.

At Gasworks, we believe the right gas system is about more than function—it's about creating spaces where people gather, relax, entertain and enjoy their homes. Whether you're building a new home, renovating an existing property or adding the finishing touches to an outdoor living space, our experienced team is here to help bring your vision to life.

Our expertise covers the complete process, from gas line installation and piping to the installation of beautiful, high-quality fireplaces, outdoor kitchens, and gas lighting. By offering these services under one



roof, we make it easier for our customers to create a cohesive, dependable, and beautifully finished project.

Designed for the Way You Live

The Florida Panhandle is known for its beautiful homes, coastal lifestyle, and incredible outdoor spaces. Gasworks helps homeowners take full advantage of that lifestyle with custom solutions designed for both in-

door comfort and outdoor entertaining.

A fireplace can transform a room into a warm and inviting gathering place. A professionally designed outdoor kitchen can turn a patio into an extension of your home. Gas lighting can add warmth, character, and timeless appeal to outdoor spaces. Behind it all, properly installed gas piping provides the dependable foundation that makes these features possible.

We understand that every property and every customer is different. That's why we take the time to listen, understand your goals, and provide solutions tailored to your home and lifestyle. Our approach combines quality products, knowledgeable service, attention to detail and local experience.

Your Local Gas & Outdoor Living Experts

After 11 years in business,

Gasworks has built its reputation one project and one customer at a time. We're proud to be part of the communities we serve and to work with the homeowners, contractors, and businesses who make the Florida Panhandle such a special place.

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Civic Pride in Walton County: How to Talk About Your Town

A favorite restaurant, a good cup of coffee and a few local recommendations can help someone discover a community worth getting to know.

BY KERRI PARKER

“Where should we eat?”
“Is there a good place to get coffee?”

“What should we do while we’re here?”

They are ordinary questions. But the answers can influence whether someone sticks around, walks into a local business or decides to come back. For someone unfamiliar with a town, a resident’s recommendation offers a place to start. It can lead to a memorable lunch, a conversation with a shop owner or an afternoon that turns out to be the best part of a trip.

The opposite can happen, too.

“There’s nothing to do here.” That answer can end someone’s interest before they have a chance to discover anything for themselves. A restaurant owner may be preparing a meal worth the drive. A merchant may be

organizing a block party. Volunteers may be opening a museum filled with stories that explain how the town came to be. There may be plenty worth discovering. The person asking just needs a little direction.

The Words That Travel with Someone

The way residents talk about a town becomes part of its reputation. Researchers studying communities and tourism recognize residents as place ambassadors whose conversations and online posts help shape how others understand a destination.

That happens in everyday life. At a gas station. In a comment on Facebook. When someone asks whether a town is worth a stop.

Every community has problems that deserve attention. Residents should be able to talk



honestly about what needs to improve. They can also make room for what is good and for the people working hard to make it better.

Sometimes those people are easy to overlook because their work has become familiar. The person tending flowers along a sidewalk. The family keeping a restaurant going. The volunteers planning something that gives neighbors a reason to get together.

A recommendation helps someone notice.

Know a Few Things Worth Sharing

Nobody needs to memorize a visitor’s guide. Start with a handful of places and experiences that can be recommended from the heart. A breakfast spot worth getting up for. A coffee shop where someone can settle in for a while. A favorite walk. A locally owned store with something unexpected. A gathering that welcomes newcomers.

Be specific. What should someone order? What makes the place special? What would a child enjoy? Is there something



nearby they could explore afterward?

“Try this place” is helpful. “Try this place, and here’s why” gives someone a reason to go.

And these conversations matter among residents, too. Someone who lives in South Walton may have never spent an afternoon in downtown DeFuniak Springs. Someone in North Walton may be unfamiliar with a local favorite in Freeport or along 30A.

There is more of Walton County to get to know, even for people who have lived here for years.

Give a Good Story Somewhere to Go

This is part of the purpose behind HWY 331: connecting the people who live, work and play in Walton County through stories that help them discover the community as a whole. A story about a local restaurant can answer the next “Where should we eat?” A farm video can give a family an idea for the weekend. A museum feature can introduce someone to a piece of history they have driven past for years.

Sharing those stories gives them a chance to reach the per-

son who needs that recommendation. Send one to a visiting friend. Tag someone who would enjoy the experience. Pass along an event that deserves a good crowd.

Walton County’s beaches may be someone’s introduction to the area. A resident’s recommendation can help them discover how much more there is to love. Their next good memory of this community might begin with something someone shares.

Keep These Local Recommendations Ready

When someone asks about your town, have a few favorites in mind:

A place to eat: Include a dish worth ordering.

A place for coffee: Somewhere to start the day or enjoy a conversation.

Something to do: A museum, farm, gallery, live performance or other local experience.

A place to get outside: A park, trail, lake or favorite walk.

A locally owned shop: Somewhere worth browsing and meeting the people behind the business.

Something for families: An outing children and adults can enjoy together.

An upcoming event: A reason to gather, stay longer or return.

One thing that makes your town special: A story, tradition or detail someone might otherwise miss.

Keep a few good answers ready. Your next recommendation could become someone else’s first good memory of your town.



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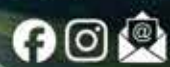
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Fall Into Freeport Fun!

Why More Homebuyers Are Choosing ARMs in Today's High-Rate Market

By TED SHOOP

Adjustable-rate mortgages (ARMs) are gaining fresh momentum as buyers look for relief from elevated fixed rates. An ARM is a loan in which the interest rate is fixed for an initial period (typically five years) and then changes annually for the life of the loan, based on market conditions. According to the October 2026 ICE Mortgage Monitor, ARMs recently accounted for more than 11% of rate locks — their highest share in nearly four years — while the Mortgage Bankers Association reported ARM applications reaching 10.5% of total activity, up sharply from 5.9% a year earlier.

The primary attraction is a lower starting payment. While 30-year fixed rates are hovering near 7.4% to 7.5%, many lenders and credit unions serving the Panhandle are currently advertising introductory 5/1 ARM rates in the mid-5% to low-6% range. That gap can meaningfully improve monthly affordability

for Freeport-area buyers. On a typical loan, the difference often translates into hundreds of dollars saved each month during the initial fixed period.

For many borrowers planning to move, refinance or sell before the fixed rates ease, taking temporary savings upfront is a smart move. Nationwide, there are now 3.1 million active ARMs, yet they still represent only about 5.6% of all mortgages.

For buyers stretched by today's housing costs, an ARM can open the door to a home sooner and keep early payments more manageable. It is wise to review adjustment caps, potential future payments and your own timeline with a trusted lender before deciding. In a market defined by higher fixed rates, the renewed interest in ARMs shows many Florida families are finding this flexible option a smart path forward.

Ted Shoop is a licensed REALTOR® with eXp Realty.

Bayfest Returns Nov. 7: Food, Fun and a Whole Lot of Freeport Spirit!

Get ready, Freeport! One of the community's favorite traditions is right around the corner as the 13th annual Freeport Bayfest returns Saturday, Nov. 7, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Freeport Regional Sports Complex, 563 Hammock Trail E., in Hammock Bay.

And there's plenty of fun on tap! This free, family-friendly festival celebrates the heart and spirit of Freeport, bringing neighbors, families, local businesses and visitors together for a day filled with entertainment, delicious food, shopping, games and activities for all ages. Little festivalgoers can get in on the excitement in the Kids Zone, while shoppers browse booths from artists and local vendors.

Come hungry and enjoy delicious offerings from food vendors, then experience the friendly competition of the popular Taste of the Bay Cook-Off, where local culinary talent takes center stage. It's a chance to celebrate some hometown cooking while cheering on the competitors!

Local businesses, artisans and food vendors interested in

participating are encouraged to explore vendor opportunities through the festival's official website.

Best of all, admission is free! Bring the kids, invite your neighbors and come celebrate everything that makes Freeport a wonderful place to call home.

For festival details, vendor information and updates, visit www.freeportbayfest.com.

Honoring Our Heroes: Veterans Day



Between the festivities, November also brings an important opportunity to pause and honor the brave men and women who have served our country. Wednesday, Nov. 11, is Veterans Day, a time to recognize the service, sacrifice and dedication of our nation's military veterans.

Freeport has traditionally observed the occasion with a Veterans Day Memorial Ceremony at Casey Park, adjacent to

Freeport City Hall. The park is home to the Freeport Veterans Memorial, a meaningful place of remembrance and reflection for residents and visitors alike.

The memorial includes special tributes such as the Freedom Flame, symbolizing enduring gratitude for those who have served, and The Grace Project, which recognizes the contributions of women in the armed forces.

Visit the Town Planters Society of Freeport Florida, Inc. Facebook page for additional information.

In observance of Veterans Day, Freeport City Hall and city administrative offices will be closed Wednesday, Nov. 11. Walton County schools will also be closed for the holiday.

Freeport Night Out Nov. 14: Shop Local, Give Back and Celebrate Community!

The celebration of community continues Saturday, Nov. 14, when the Freeport Merchants Association presents Freeport Night Out, a fun-filled afternoon and evening at The Windmills at Hammock Bay from 3 to 7 p.m.

Continued on page 13



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 Out & About

12th Annual Eggs on the Beach Competition Features Food, Fun and Fundraising at Seascape Towne Center

The 12th annual Eggs on the Beach Big Green Egg Cooking Competition returns to Seascape Towne Center in Miramar Beach on Nov. 7, featuring more than 20 cook teams competing for cash, prizes and coveted judges' trophies. This year's honorary judges include chefs, food influencers and culinary enthusiasts who will evaluate entries alongside festivalgoers.

The distinguished panel includes Beany Macgregor of Dirty Dick's Crab House, Jamielyn Arcega of Fonville Press, Joanna Davis of The 850 Foodie, Susan Benton of 30A Eats and Joshua Daugherty of Saltwater Restaurants. "We're excited to bring together this group of chefs and foodies to judge our 12th Annual Big Green Egg cooking competition," said Susan Kiley, co-owner of Bay Breeze Patio and event co-founder. "Whether you join us for the outdoor garden party atmosphere and mouthwatering bites or want to test your palate judging alongside culinary powerhouses, Eggs on the Beach is the place to be. This year's diverse group of judges ensures our cook teams not only compete on popularity but also on culinary merit with judges eval-



uating each bite based on flavor, creativity and presentation."

Meet the Judges

Chef Beany Macgregor, chef and partner of Dirty Dick's Crab House, brings international experience as a former corporate chef for Hard Rock Cafe and worldwide corporate executive chef for Planet Hollywood. An award-winning chef, he has judged prestigious culinary competitions and served as a celebrity chef at Washington, D.C.'s annual Mardi Gras Ball.

Chef Jamielyn Arcega, executive chef at Fonville Press and culinary adviser at Gulf Coast State College, brings experience spanning the Philippines and

New Orleans. Recognized as Best Up & Coming Chef by the American Culinary Federation, she champions sustainable food practices and locally sourced ingredients.

Joanna Davis, creator of The 850 Foodie, shares Northwest Florida's dining discoveries with more than 140,000 followers. She also contributes food and lifestyle features to Scarlett Magazine and Destin FM.

Susan Benton, founder of 30A Eats, returns as a judge after participating in one of the festival's earliest competitions. A food writer, cooking instructor and culinary competition judge, she was recognized among the Top 100 Gulf Coast Seafood Bloggers.

Joshua Daugherty, director of operations at Saltwater Restaurants, brings extensive hospitality experience and a passion for Northwest Florida's coastal cuisine, quality ingredients and culinary traditions.

Food, Fun and Giving Back

More than 20 teams, including backyard grillers, restaurants and nonprofits, will prepare creative bites featuring meats, seafood, vegetables and desserts cooked on Big Green Eggs. The versatile ceramic grills can sear steaks at high temperatures or slowly smoke meats to perfection. Attendees can sample entries and vote for their favorites.

Beverages will be available for purchase at the Tiki Bar. Angel's Envy returns with samples, games and prizes for guests 21 and older, plus a special Angel's Envy cooking category. Abita Brewery also returns, offering Upbeat Vodka Cocktail samples for guests 21 and older and providing beer for competing cook teams.

The festivities also include live music by Black Eyed Blonde duo Becca and Dan Collins, college football on Tiki Bar TVs and drawings for a MiniMax Big Green Egg, merchandise and gift certificates.

Proceeds benefit Fisher House of the Emerald Coast, which provides lodging for military families during medical treatment, and Food for Thought, which helps fight childhood food insecurity.

Discounted demonstration Big Green Eggs used during the competition are available for presale at 30% off retail.

Join the Fun Nov. 7

Taster tickets are \$60 in advance or \$70 on event day. Children 10 and younger are admitted free. Purchase tickets at EggsOnTheBeach.com or avoid online fees by paying with cash or check at Bay Breeze Patio, 32 Forest Shore Drive, Miramar Beach. For information, call 850-269-4666.

APPLY FOR THE TOURIST DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

APPLICATIONS FOR SEATS ON THE WALTON COUNTY TOURIST DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL WILL BE ACCEPTED THURSDAY, OCT. 1, UNTIL 5 P.M. CDT ON FRIDAY, OCT. 30

Currently, Tourist Development Council seats 4, 7, and 8 are open:

- **Seat 4** calls for a person who is involved in the tourism industry with an interest in tourism development and is the owner or operator of a tourist accommodation(s) in Walton County that is subject to the Tourist Development Tax.
- **Seats 7 and 8** call for a person who is involved in the tourism industry with a demonstrated interest in tourism development but is not the owner or operator of a tourist accommodation(s) in Walton County that is subject to the Tourist Development Tax.

These terms shall serve through Dec. 2030.

FOR THE LINK TO THE TDC APPLICATION, GUIDELINES AND CODE OF CONDUCT:

www.waltoncountytourism.com/tdc-application/

Submit applications online or send a hard copy by Oct. 30 to Walton County Tourism Visitor Center, located at 25777 U.S. Hwy. 331 South in Santa Rosa Beach

For more information, please contact Dana McDowell at
(850) 267-1216 or Dana@WCFLTourism.com
www.waltoncountytourism.com



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MIRAMAR BEACH, FLORIDA

Dinner, a Show and a Little Elton John Magic at Old Florida Fish House

BY PUBLISHER LORI MILLER

I've experienced this dinner and show at Old Florida Fish House, and let me tell you—it is an awesome night out! Amazing food, the music of Elton John and an evening that makes you want to sing along...what more could you ask for?

Still Standing: A Tribute to Elton John takes the restaurant's main stage Nov. 8 and

friends together, this is it! My recommendation? Make it the full dinner-and-show experience. Dinner ticket holders receive preferred seating closer to the stage and should arrive at 5 p.m. Start with Gulf Coast she-crab soup or a red romaine Caesar salad, then choose from three delicious-sounding entrées: prawn risotto with roasted acorn squash, fava beans

Plan to arrive between 6 and 6:30 p.m. If you'd like to enjoy dinner from the restaurant's regular menu first, reserve a table between 4:30 and 5 p.m. so you have plenty of time before the

music starts. Dining reservations are available through Resy.

I had such an amazing time, and I'm excited for you to experience it, too! Tickets are limited and nonrefundable, so visit

oldfloridafishhouse.com to get yours before they're gone. You'll also find schedules for other upcoming events and more information—all in one place!



Dec. 6, with each performance running from 6:30 to 9 p.m. If you're looking for a fun date night or an excuse to get your

and citrus beurre blanc; herb-and-garlic-roasted tri-tip with dauphinoise potatoes and pink peppercorn cognac cream; or chicken Florentine with creamy Pernod spinach, saffron capellini and balsamic-glazed asparagus. And save room for dessert—Key lime pie and a black-and-white petit four! The menu is subject to change.

Coming for the show only?

FREEPORT FUN

continued from previous page

Bring the whole family and get ready for live music, local vendors, food trucks, raffles and plenty of opportunities to connect with friends and neighbors while supporting the businesses that help make Freeport thrive.

This special gathering is about more than shopping and entertainment. It's a celebration of the people, businesses and organizations that give Freeport its welcoming, small-town character.

Even better, proceeds from the event will benefit Whole Outdoors and Westonwood Ranch, two organizations mak-

ing a positive difference in our community.

Local businesses, makers and vendors are also invited to participate, offering an opportunity to showcase their products and services while connecting with fellow residents.

So, bring your friends, bring the kids, discover a new favorite local business and enjoy an evening filled with community spirit. It's a wonderful way to support local entrepreneurs while helping two worthy organizations continue their work.

For additional information and vendor opportunities, visit the Freeport Merchants Association on Facebook.



Fall Events



Nov. 8 & Dec. 6



Nov. 26



Watch Parties!



October

- 31 SEC Football Watch Party
- 31 Halloween Costume Contest Party

November

- 7 SEC Football Watch Party
- 8 Still Standing: A Tribute to Elton John
- 14 SEC Football Watch Party
- 21 SEC Football Watch Party
- 26 Thanksgiving Grand Buffet

December

- 5 Christmas Wine Market
- 5 Breakfast with Santa Buffet
- 6 Still Standing: Elton John Tribute Show
- 12 Breakfast with Santa Buffet
- 19 Christmas Family Show
- 24 Christmas Eve Dinner
- 25 Christmas Day Dinner
- 31 NYE Dinner and Party

Weekly Events

Live Music Nightly, Featuring:

- Dueling Pianos Thursday through Saturday · Alex Napier Monday - Wednesday
- Brunch by the Lake with Live Music Saturday and Sunday
- Sunday Funday with the Will Thompson Band Sundays Now - Nov. 28



Visit OldFloridaFishHouse.com for schedules, tickets and more information

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 Out & About



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DECEMBER 3-20

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Don't Miss The Next BIG Thing 2026

Monday, Oct. 26 | Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa | Miramar Beach

Connect with professionals, entrepreneurs, executives and emerging leaders during this regional business and leadership conference. Hear innovative ideas, build connections and explore new opportunities. Vendor booths, sponsorship packages and early-bird tickets are available. For details, contact Gabrielle Hamilton at gabrielle@waltonareachamber.com. waltonareachamber.com/the-next-big-thing/

Vote for Your Best at 30A BBQ Festival

Friday, Nov. 6 | 5:30-8 p.m. | Grand Boulevard at Sandestin | Miramar Beach

The 30A BBQ Festival returns to celebrate The Sonder Project! A rain-or-shine event, enjoy all-you-can-eat barbecue, served up by the best grill masters along the Emerald Coast as they compete for the trophy for '30A's Best BBQ' voted by you! In between bites, enjoy live music by River Dan, a photo booth, a silent auction, and a variety of refreshments from local purveyors including craft brews from Grayton Beer Company, wine and water. Details and tickets at <https://www.bigtickets.com/events/the-sonder-project/30a-bbq-festival>.

It's Almost Emerald Coast Rodeo Time

Friday-Saturday, Nov. 6-7 | 5:30-9:30 p.m. | Northwest Florida State College | Niceville

Saddle up for two nights of thrilling rodeo action at the fourth annual Emerald Coast Rodeo! Named Best Rodeo in Its Division for 2025 by the Professional Cowboys Association, this family-friendly event brings professional cowboys and cowgirls to Niceville for exciting bull riding, barrel racing, roping and more. Little cowboys and cowgirls get in on the fun with mutton bustin' at 6:30 p.m., followed by professional rodeo competition at 7:30 p.m. Gates open at 5:30 p.m. Tickets are \$20 in advance or \$25 during rodeo week. Children younger than 3 are admitted free. Last year's event sold out, so advance tickets are encouraged! 100 College Blvd. E., Niceville. emeraldcoastrodeo.com

Honor Native American Heritage at the 38th Annual Thunderbird Intertribal Powwow

Nov. 6-8 | Twin Oaks Park (Mullet Festival Grounds) | Niceville

This three-day celebration features traditional dancing, drumming, storytelling, flute performances, authentic Native American crafts, cultural exhibits and food. Highlights include Friday's Children's Day from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., Saturday's dance competitions and evening Grand Entry, and Sunday's performances and competition awards. Held in recognition of National American Indian Heritage Month, this family-friendly event celebrates Native American heritage while promoting cultural understanding. Adalcoastrodeo.com



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With new treatments emerging in the fight against Alzheimer's and all other dementia, now is the time for hope.

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2026 Walk to End Alzheimer's
Grand Boulevard
600 Grand Blvd
Miramar Beach

Saturday, Nov. 7 | 9:30 a.m.
Join us at alz.org/walk

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ALZHEIMER'S ASSOCIATION

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 Edward Jones

2026 Local Presenting Sponsor
 Emerald Coast HOSPICE CARE

HAPPENINGS AROUND FREEPORT

2026 EVENTS

OCTOBER

24
Seaside Halloweener Derby & Costume Contest
10 am | Seaside Amphitheater | Seaside

26
The Next BIG Thing 2026
8 am | Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa | Miramar Beach



FEATURED SPEAKER
SHANTELE DEDICKE

30
Barktoberfest at Grand Boulevard
4:30 pm | Grand Park at Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

31
Baytowne Trick or Treat Street
6 pm | Village of Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach

NOVEMBER

05-08
Seeing Red Wine Festival
Various times | Seaside | SRB

06
Greater FWB Chamber First Friday Coffee
7 am | First Baptist Church | FWB

Greater FWB Chamber Lunch N Learn: Primerica Financial Services; "How Money Works, A Primer on Personal Finance"
11:30 am | FWB Chamber | FWB

30A BBQ Festival
5:30 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

06-07
Mountainfilm on Tour
Gates 5:45 pm; Films 7 pm | WaterColor | SRB

06-08
38th Annual Thunderbird Intertribal Powwow
Times vary | Twin Oaks Park (Mullet Festival Grounds) | Niceville

07
13th Annual Freeport Bayfest
9 am | Freeport Regional Sports Complex | 563 Hammock Trail E., Freeport

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

Walk to End Alzheimer's - Emerald Coast
Registration 9:30 am; Ceremony 10:30 am; Walk 10:45 am | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

07 Continued
Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

Eggs on the Beach
10 am | Seascape | Miramar Beach

Charity Car Show
10 am | Horse Power Pavilion | Freeport

09
Lunch N Learn; Celebrating Women in Military Service, Guest Speaker Dr. Elvira Chiccarelli
11:30 am | FWB Chamber | FWB

11
Celebrating All Veterans at Women Veterans Park
8:30 am (Arrive by 8 am) | Destin-FWB Convention Center & Women Veterans Park | Okaloosa Island

Freeport Veterans Day Memorial Ceremony
2 pm (Normally) | Casey Park, next to Freeport City Hall | Freeport

12
Greater FWB Chamber Nothing But Networking with Vibe Productions at The Place on Beal
11:30 am | The Place on Beal | FWB

13
10th Annual 100 Point Cult & Wine Dinner
5 pm | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport

14
Alaqua Animal Refuge Bluegrass Barn Jam & Fall Fest Presented by Café Thirty-A
11 am | Alaqua Animal Refuge | Freeport

Tacos & Tequila Under the Trees
12 pm | E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center | Freeport

Freeport Night Out - A Night of Community
3 pm | The Windmills at Hammock Bay | Freeport

Props Brewery - Martin Lane
6 pm | Props Brewery | Freeport

Sinfonia Gulf Coast Classical Connections feat. Howard Levy, Harmonica + Piano
7:30 pm | Destin High School | Destin



20
Lunch N Learn; Victory Health Coaching; "Holiday Harmony: Managing Stress, Food & Feelings"
11:30 am | FWB Chamber | FWB

Grand Boulevard Holiday Parade
6 pm | Grand Boulevard | Miramar Beach

21
Concealed Carry Weapons Class
10 am | Emerald Coast Indoor Shooting & Sport | Valparaiso

Rock Out Climbing Gym Thanksending
10 am | Rock Out Climbing Gym | Destin



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

Connect with Chamber members and local professionals while enjoying refreshments, networking and door prizes.

Freeport High School Senior Football Players Welcome Everyone to Bulldog Country

BY TRACY LOUTHAIN

One way to build community pride is by cheering for the hometown football team. And that's exactly what Freeport High School's billboards aim to achieve. Sponsored by Green Air, the sister billboards feature Freeport High School's senior football players, welcoming the community home to Bulldog Country and rallying support for Freeport High School athletics.

Freeport's new head football coach and athletic director, Bobby Johns, is an advocate for community involvement and local business support. "By creating a strong football and athletic program, it serves as a huge foundation and the roots of a community," said Coach Johns.

"It takes our principal, coaches, players—all committed to the community of Freeport. Whether you're a fan or a local business, the community is better when you have a valuable asset. We want the community

to know we have a great school with great leadership and great kids," continued Johns.

A veteran football coach, Johns is proving that hard work, getting physical and team culture all play an important role in creating a winning football team. With some nail-biting wins and losses under their belt, the Bulldogs' current standing of 3 wins and 4 losses indicates that there is more hard work ahead.

For the seniors, it's about more than just winning; it's personal. These final games represent the last time these students will play football together on the same team or at all. While the friendships may endure the test of time, these players know their days on the field are numbered. Therefore, there is no better time to get to know Freeport High School's varsity football seniors who are laying the foundation for generations to come. Here we share the names and positions of the faces that

grace the billboards welcoming you to Bulldog Country.

Freeport High School seniors — Varsity Offensive Line Billboard

(Located on Highway 331 just south of Highway 20; from left to right)

- Former team member Dylan Louthain 0 (RB)
- Talen McElyea 3 (RB/WR)
- Carter Nunes 14 (QB)
- Easton Parnell 78 (OL)
- Bryant Robbins 4 (WR)
- Anthony Guard 1 (WR/DB)

Freeport High School seniors — Varsity Defensive Line Billboard

(Located on Highway 20 heading east into Freeport, west of Highway 331; from left to right)

- Marlin Castillo 10 (SS)
- Ryland Willig 13 (SS)
- Jake Jenkins 54 (OL, DL)
- Braxton Durgin 8 (TE/DE)



- Carson Galpin 70 (G)
- Wade Digges 2 (LB)
- Mason Arnold 53 (DE)

who are unable to attend the games in person, Freeport High School football games as well as the Coach Bobby Johns Show are streamed live via Freeport High School Athletics YouTube channel (@FreeportHighSchoolAthletics). Go Bulldogs!

These football players are excited to rally support for the hometown team and invite the community to come out and cheer on the Bulldogs. For those

LARGEST SELECTION OF STREET LEGAL CARTS

EXCLUSIVE GIFT
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SEC Football Schedule

SEC	Oct 10	Oct 17	Oct 24	Oct 31	Nov 7	Nov 14	Nov 21	Nov 28
Alabama	UGA	@TENN	A&M	OPEN	@LSU	@VANDY	UTC	AUBURN
Arkansas	TENN	@VANDY	OPEN	MIZZOU	@AUB	S CAR	@TEX	LSU
Auburn	OPEN	@UGA	LSU	@OLE MISS	ARK	@MISS ST	SAMFORD	@BAMA
Florida	S CAR	@TEX	OPEN	UGA (ATL)	OKLA	@UK	VANDY	@FSU
Georgia	@BAMA	AUB	OPEN	FLA (ATL)	@OLE MISS	MIZZOU	@S CAR	GA TECH
Kentucky	LSU	@OKLA	VANDY	OPEN	@TENN	FLA	@MIZZOU	LOUISVILLE
LSU	@KU	MISS ST	@AUB	OPEN	BAMA	TEXAS	@TENN	@ARK
Ole Miss	@VANDY	MIZZOU	@TEXAS	AUB	UGA	@OKLA	WOFFORD	MISS ST
Miss St	OPEN	@LSU	OKLA	@TEX	VANDY	AUB	TENN TECH	@OLE MISS
Missouri	A&M	@OLE MISS	OPEN	@ARK	TEX	@UGA	KU	OKLA
Oklahoma	TEX (DAL)	KU	@MISS ST	S CAR	FLA	OLE MISS	A&M	MIZZOU
S Carolina	@FLA	OPEN	TENN	@OKLA	A&M	@ARK	UGA	@CLEMSON
Tennessee	@ARK	BAMA	@S CAR	OPEN	UK	@A&M	LSU	@VANDY
Tex A&M	@MIZZOU	CITADEL	@BAMA	OPEN	@S. CAR	TENN	@OKLA	TEX (11/27)
Texas	OKLA (DAL)	FLA	OLE MISS	MISS ST	@MIZZOU	@LSU	ARK	A&M (11/27)
Vanderbilt	OLE MISS	ARK	@KU	OPEN	@MISS ST	BAMA	@FLA	TENN



Best Places to Watch Your Favorite Team



By SCOTT MILLER
Football season is now in full swing. Whether you're strictly an SEC fan or College Football fan

across the board, an NFL die-hard or an armchair quarterback / Fantasy Football guru...
There's no better place to watch the action then here along The Emerald Coast. Some of the best sports bars and restaurants anywhere are right here in our own back yard. They're ready to welcome us in, serve up some really great food, cold beer and delicious specialty drinks, and make every game feel like a championship. Here are a few of my favorites. So, grab your crew, claim your spot and get in on the action—I'll see you there!



AJ's Grayton Beach
Gather your game-day crew and bring your team spirit to AJ's Grayton Beach, located just off Scenic 30A on DeFuniak Street. With three bars, a spacious din-

ing area and an inviting outdoor patio, this laid-back local favorite pairs football-season fun with seafood, oysters, burgers and sushi. Make Sunday a celebration with brunch and bottomless mimosas from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., plus live music to keep the weekend going. Getting an early start on the weekend? Happy hour runs Wednesday through Friday from 3 to 6 p.m., featuring \$5 house wines, \$5 Crown & Down drinks and \$5.50 24-ounce draft beers. From gathering for the game to enjoying a night out with friends, AJ's brings plenty

of food, music and fun to the lineup.
63 DeFuniak Street | Grayton Beach
850-231-4102
ajsggrayton.com

Old Florida Fish House
Football season is in full swing at Old Florida Fish House, where SEC Saturdays bring fans together for spirited watch parties, great food and plenty of game-day excitement! Located along Eastern Lake on Scenic 30A, this popular coastal dining destination is the perfect place to gather your crew, cheer on your favorite team and enjoy the action with fellow football fans. With its inviting atmosphere, delicious coastal cuisine and lively energy, Old Florida Fish House makes every game day feel like a celebration.

Mark your calendars for **SEC Football Watch Parties Nov. 7, 14 and 21**, and bring your team spirit! Whether you're rooting for your favorite SEC powerhouse or simply enjoying the camaraderie and excitement of college football, Old Florida Fish House offers a fun way to spend your Saturdays. And when the games are over, the entertainment continues with live music nightly, dueling pianos Thursday through Saturday and weekend brunch by the lake. It's a winning combination of football, food and fun!
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Go Fishing in Local Lakes!



BY HELEN PETRE

Fishing builds confidence, curiosity and respect for nature. You do not need much gear, but you do need a positive attitude. Sometimes you catch a fish. Sometimes you do not. Sometimes it does not matter. A fisherman learns critical life skills while fishing, successful or not. Every child should discover the outdoors, and every child should have a chance to fish. It is a learned skill. Someone has to teach you. Fishing is learning about fish and fish habitats, but it is also learning important life skills, like patience, perseverance and problem-solving.

I walk down to the lake in my neighborhood often to explore the shore, the frogs and turtles, the weeds that are host plants for butterflies and the native bees that pollinate the plants. It is rewarding, regenerating and positive. One Saturday late afternoon, it was exceptionally rewarding. I met up with a whole bunch of middle school boys fishing. The boys rode their bicycles, under their own muscle power, down to the lake carrying their poles and bait. No phones. No parents. No fear. There are snakes in the high grass around the lake. They knew that. They showed me spiders and damselflies. They showed me fish. They had no problem talking to some weird old lady who walks and bikes around the neighborhood looking for snakes and spiders.

While we were at the lake, they caught several largemouth bass. These fine fishermen are the next generation of anglers, and they are also the next generation of confident analysts and project managers. All fishermen start like this. Someone, probably their parents, teaches them to fish, and they learn more than how to fish. They learn independence, problem-solving and critical thinking. They can do it by themselves. They can decide what to use, where to cast and when to fish. Sometimes they learn patience and persistence, and sometimes they just learn that it is really nice to be out-



Liam Gurley



James Lapierre, with a really big largemouth



Nick Schafer

side. Being out on the grassy shore with all those living things is like entering a world that is all your own. People that do not do it never know. It is freedom, and these boys have parents who gave them freedom.

The boys were nice, excited, happy and confident, and they wanted to show me their catch. That is something to be proud of. I am proud of them and their parents. The daily bag limit is five, with only one over 16 inches. Youth under 16 do not need a license, and these boys fishing the lake in Owl's Head were all under 16. They could have easily caught more than five, but they were all just catching and releasing.

Largemouth Bass (Micropterus salmoides)

Largemouth bass are the most popular game fish in Florida freshwater, and these boys know all about them. Fishing along the shore, they caught one every time they cast. Their bait was soft plastic worms. They tried single-tail grubs, but the Senko wacky worms worked best.

Here are some of the boys with their afternoon catches. I hope to see them out here often. Something tells me I will.

Fishing News is brought to you by The Ships Chandler, a trusted name in Gulf Coast boating since 1980, serving Walton County in its Freeport location (17309 Highway 331

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It Was Right There on the Porch

Protecting Your Deliveries During the Busiest Shipping Season of the Year



BY TED TOEDTE, CPD, CRIME PREVENTION SPECIALIST, WCSO

The notification pops up on your phone at 1:14 in the afternoon. Delivered. Front porch. You're at work, and you figure it'll be fine until you get home.

At 1:40, a car rolls slowly down your street and stops in front of your house. Someone walks up the driveway, picks up the box,

and drives off. The whole thing takes less time than it took you to read this paragraph.

By the time you pull in, there's nothing on the porch but the doormat.

Package theft is one of the easiest crimes there is to commit, and November and December are its busiest months. SafeWise's 2025 package theft report estimates that more than 104 million packages were stolen nationwide during the period studied, a loss of roughly \$15 billion. The same report found that more than 30 percent of people had a package stolen in that year, with the typical stolen package worth about \$143.

Here's the number that bothers me most. According to Security.org, fewer than one in four package theft victims report it to local law enforcement. That means most of these thefts never land on anyone's radar. I'll come back to that.

The good news is that porch piracy is a crime of opportunity, and opportunity is something you control.

Start with the simplest fix. Don't let packages sit. Track your deliveries and get them inside as soon as you can. If you won't be home, ask a neighbor to grab them, and return the favor. Many retailers let you pick a delivery day, require a signature for higher-dollar items, or ship to a store or locker for pickup. If your employer allows it, have



packages sent to work. And if you shop online a lot, a lockable package box by the front door is money well spent.

Now look at your front door the way a thief would. That's the idea behind CPTED, (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design), and it's how we look at every home during our free security assessments. Can your porch be seen from the street and from your neighbors' windows? Or is it tucked behind overgrown shrubs where nobody would notice a stranger standing there? Trim the landscaping so the entrance is visible. Make sure the porch is well lit, because in November it's dark by suppertime, and a package dropped off at 4:30 can sit in the dark for hours. If you have a side entrance out of view from the street, tell the carriers to leave packages there instead.

A doorbell camera or porch camera is a strong deterrent, especially when it's easy to see. It won't stop every theft, but it gives deputies something to work with.

If your camera views the street, consider registering it with the Sheriff's Office at waltonso.org/camera. That lets investigators know a camera is there, so they can reach out and ask for footage if something happens nearby.

Apartment and condo residents deal with this on a bigger scale, with dozens of deliveries a day landing in breezeways and at mailroom doors. If you manage a community, a secure package room or locker system pays for itself quickly. Our team can look at where packages end up on your property and how to make that area more visible and better controlled, at no cost.

Now, back to reporting. If a package is stolen, report it, even if it was only worth twenty dollars. File with the seller or carrier to get your refund, then file with us at waltonso.org/online-reporting-system or by calling (850) 892-8111. If you have video, save it. People who steal packages rarely stop at one house, and a single report with a good camera clip can tie together a whole string of thefts across a neighborhood. If we don't hear about it, we can't connect it.

And if you see someone walking up to porches who doesn't belong there, or a car following a delivery truck through your neighborhood, call us. That isn't being nosy. That's being a good neighbor.

Those gifts are supposed to end up under your tree, not in somebody's trunk. Bring them in, light up the porch, and keep an eye on the house next door.

Ted Toedte is a crime prevention specialist with WCSO and has more than 30 years of law enforcement experience in Florida and California. He can be reached at toetheodore@waltonso.org. The Crime Prevention Division can be reached at crimeprevention@waltonso.org or (850) 892-8111. Learn more at waltonso.org.

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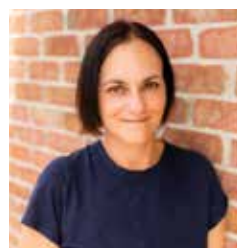


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The hiring of a lawyer is an important decision that should not be based solely upon advertisements. Before you decide, ask us to send you free written information about our qualifications and experience.

Same Mission, Broader Role: CBA Is Now the Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance Estuary Program

After 30 years of protecting local waters, the organization now helps connect conservation work across the Choctawhatchee watershed.

The Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance (CBA) has a new name and a larger job. The organization is now the Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance Estuary Program (CBAEP), a transition that adds regional coordination to the restoration, monitoring, research, and education work it has carried out since 1996.

For residents, the most important news is what stays the same. CBAEP will keep restoring oyster reefs and seagrass beds, monitoring water quality, and teaching local students through programs like Grasses in Classes. That hands-on work continues without interruption, led by the same team. “We’re not replacing CBA; we’re building on it,” said Executive Director Alison McDowell. “The work we’ve been doing isn’t going away. We’re still the same organization, with the same people and the same commitment to the watershed. What’s changing is that we have a bigger opportunity to bring people together, connect the work that’s already happening, and take on some of the bigger challenges facing the Choctawhatchee watershed.”

Building on Shared Groundwork

CBAEP builds on a strong foundation. Okaloosa County and other Choctawhatchee County Estuary Coalition members laid important groundwork, developing the region’s Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan and bringing partners together around a shared vision for the watershed. As the



program moves forward under CBA and Northwest Florida State College, it carries that foundation into its next phase, with a stable home to build on and room to grow across the entire watershed.

How to Get Involved

CBAEP still needs volunteers for restoration projects, oyster gardening, and community science, and donations still support work in local waterways and classrooms. Find volunteer opportunities and ways to give at basinalliance.org.



Explore, Learn & Give Back:

Dune Lake Walk
Nov. 2 | 9 a.m. | Topsail Hill Preserve State Park

Guided dune lake walk with Master Naturalist Bill Kuenstler.

Branch Library, Walton County

Learn about the area’s unique coastal dune lakes.

Deer Lake Restoration Walk
Nov. 4 | 9 a.m. | Deer Lake

Explore dune lake restoration projects during a guided walk.

Hunter Safety Classes
Nov. 10 & 17 | 10 a.m.-2 p.m.; Nov. 14 | 8 a.m.-2 p.m. | Bay County Range

Hunter safety instruction presented by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

Tram Stop 2

Join Master Gardener and Master Naturalist Bill Kuenstler. Held the third Monday monthly.

Guided Nature Hike
Nov. 3 | 10 a.m. | Eden Gardens State Park

Join a park ranger for a guided nature hike. Held the first Tuesday monthly.

Florida Trail Association Work Weekend
Nov. 6-9 | Sand Pond Campground | Ebro

Native Plant Walk
Nov. 16 | 9 a.m. | Topsail Hill Preserve State Park |

Caring Coach Food Outreach
Nov. 17 | 12:30 p.m. | St. Margaret Catholic Church | 247 U.S. Hwy. 331 N., DeFuniak Springs

Catholic Charities provides food assistance to anyone in need. Held the third Tuesday monthly.

Dune Lake Educational Talk
Nov. 3 | 1 p.m. | Coastal

- What’s New**
- Local governments, scientists, nonprofits, businesses, and volunteer groups all work to protect the Choctawhatchee’s bays, rivers, and coastal waters. As an estuary program, CBAEP now serves as the hub that connects them. The organization will:
- Coordinate projects among partners to reduce duplicated effort and stretch resources
 - Pursue more funding, including estuary-wide grants, to speed up restoration
 - Serve as a central point of contact for residents, partners, and funders
 - The transition also supports long-term goals for the region, including raising the watershed’s national profile and opening the door to additional federal and state resources for restoration.



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Wellness



BY CHRISTIAN REGALADO

It's that time of year again! If you get your health care through a Medicare Advantage plan, AEP is the Annual Enrollment Period (Oct. 15-Dec. 7) during which enrollees are able to change Advantage and prescription drug plans for 2027. If you are enrolled in one of these plans, you've probably received your Annual Notice of Change by now, in which your carrier informs you about changes being made to your plan or whether

Big 2027 Medicare Changes Are Coming

the plan you have will remain available next year. If your current plan is set to be discontinued next year, you have the opportunity to enroll in another Advantage plan or, if you prefer, you may go back to Original Medicare and enroll in a supplement plan without facing underwriting since your plan is being discontinued.

A lot of changes are happening in 2027! Much of the post-COVID Medicare funding has been reduced, and the cost of health care, including prescriptions, has increased. Insurance carriers are reducing benefits or no longer offering plans that are unprofitable. There will also be network changes, meaning changes to which doctors and hospitals accept Advantage plans. No one likes change, especially as we get older, but at

times we have no other choice. The plan you're on may have had benefits reduced, yet still may offer you the best value available. You can only know by comparing all of your options. This is not a year to assume you still have the best Medicare Advantage plan. I highly recommend comparing plans for 2027. This is where a certified broker can assist you.

In the past, I haven't put a lot of emphasis with my Medicare Advantage clients on hospital indemnity plans and/or dental plans, as Medicare Advantage had decent coverage. With the changes in medical deductibles, higher out-of-pocket costs and lower dental benefits, these ancillary plans will provide you with much more comprehensive coverage. I have spent a lot of time over the last few months

reviewing carriers in our area to find low-cost options. Give me a call or visit my website, www.30ahealthins.com, to review affordable extra coverage.

If you have a Medicare supplement plan, you don't need to do anything since these plans don't change. Your prescription drug plan, however, may change next year. Brokers are still not able to enroll you in a prescription drug plan, but as a courtesy, if you are a client, they can help guide you. Medicare.gov is also a great resource to compare PDP plans.

Individual insurance through the Marketplace open enrollment starts Nov. 1. For individuals with income below 400% of the federal poverty level, premium tax credits will still be available in 2027. If finding a low-deductible plan is over-

priced for you, consider opting for a high-deductible plan along with a low-cost indemnity plan. This combination can be a great option for comprehensive coverage at a lower cost. I work with many carriers and can help guide you.

If you have not done so already, call a broker and set up an appointment. I will be available Wednesday-Friday at the Walmart in Niceville, but I can also come visit you or meet over the phone. Having someone you can trust to navigate through next year's health care policy changes and choices will be truly valuable. Call me. I will be happy to be that person. I'm local and always available.

(850) 687-7606 | christian@30ahealthins.com

Better Sleep with Bioidentical Hormone Pellets

BY DR. RICHARD CHERN

Getting enough quality sleep is essential for physical health, emotional well-being, memory, and daily energy. Yet, sleep problems become increasingly common as men and women age, particularly when natural hormone levels begin to change. Bioidentical hormone therapy

(BHRT) helps improve sleep by addressing hormonal imbalances and symptoms that interfere with restful sleep.

Bioidentical hormones are designed to have a molecular structure identical or very similar to hormones naturally produced by the body. Depending on an individual's needs, hormone therapy

may involve estrogen, progesterone, testosterone, or a combination of hormones. Treatment should be individualized based on symptoms, medical history, laboratory blood testing, and an assessment of potential risks and benefits.

How Hormones Affect Sleep

Hormones play an important role in regulating the body's sleep-wake cycle. Changes in hormone levels can contribute to nighttime awakenings, difficulty falling asleep, reduced sleep quality, and daytime fatigue.

For women, declining estrogen and progesterone during perimenopause and menopause can contribute to hot flashes, night sweats, anxiety, and other symptoms that disrupt sleep. Estrogen therapy reduces hot flashes and night sweats, potentially allowing women to sleep more consistently. Progesterone may also have calming effects on the nervous system and has been studied for its potential influence on sleep.

Men can experience changes in testosterone levels as they age. Low testosterone may be associated with fatigue, changes in mood, reduced energy, and other symptoms that can affect overall sleep and quality of life. For men with clinically confirmed testosterone deficiency, testosterone replacement therapy improves certain symptoms and, in some cases, sleep-related quality of life.

An Individualized Approach

For individuals whose sleep



difficulties are related to changing hormone levels, properly managed hormone therapy may be one part of a comprehensive approach to better sleep. Combining appropriate medical treatment with healthy sleep habits, regular physical activity, stress management, and evaluation for sleep disorders can provide a more complete strategy for improving restorative sleep.

If you're ready to stop feeling like you're just getting by and start feeling like yourself again, schedule a consultation with The Hormone Restoration Center and call (850) 837-1271 to schedule a consultation. Together, we'll determine whether bioidentical hormone pellet therapy is the right solution to help you look, feel, and live your best.

Dr. Chern, MD,
Sue Griffin, ARNP
Presley Pulse, APRN





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BY TERESA HALVERSON,
BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT/
COMMUNITY RELATIONS
DIRECTOR

This Thanksgiving season, we celebrate the strength of the human spirit, the support of family, and the compassionate care that helps older adults take the next step toward recovery.



Thanksgiving is a time to reflect on what matters most: our health, our families, our independence, and the people who make a difference in our lives. The holiday season is filled with family gatherings, favorite traditions, and new opportunities to make lasting memories. For older adults recovering from an illness, injury, surgery, or hospitalization, this season can also be a reminder of how important the right care and support can be during life's unexpected challenges. As families prepare for upcoming celebrations, it is important to understand how post-acute hospital care and rehabilitation can help loved ones move forward on their recovery journey.

While leaving the hospital is an important milestone, recovery often continues long after discharge. Many patients need additional medical attention, nursing care, and rehabilitation before they can safely return home. This is where post-acute rehabilitation can make a meaningful difference.

Rebuilding Strength, One Step at a Time

Recovery looks different for everyone. Some patients may

need help with walking after surgery, while others may be rebuilding strength following a serious illness or learning new ways to manage daily activities after a stroke. Rehabilitation can help patients work towards these important goals.

Physical Therapy:
Rebuilding Strength and Mobility

Helps improve strength, balance, mobility, and coordination through individualized exercises and functional training. Individuals can work toward walking more safely, transferring in and

out of a chair, navigating their homes and reducing their risk of falling.

Occupational Therapy:
Regaining Independence in Activities of Daily Living (ADLs)

Focuses on everyday activities such as bathing, dressing/grooming, and other tasks that support independence in the home. Therapists may also recommend adaptive equipment and/or energy-conservation techniques to make daily life safer and more manageable.

Speech Therapy:
Supporting Communication and Swallowing

Speech Therapy helps individuals address difficulties with communication, memory-related skills, and swallowing when these abilities have been affected by an illness or medical condition. Speech Therapy can be especially important for individuals recovering from a stroke, and other neurological conditions.

Working together, along with skilled nursing services, these therapies can help patients work toward meaningful milestones and prepare for the next stage of recovery.

Giving Thanks for Recovery

Caring for Our Community-One Patient at a Time

At The Manor at Blue Water Bay, we are grateful for the opportunity to serve individuals and families in our communities during important moments in their lives.

Our in-patient and out-patient skilled nursing and rehabilitation services focus on individualized care, helping patients recover following hospitalization and work toward improved strength, function and independence.

We recognize that behind every patient is a personal story, a family that cares, and hope for what comes next.

This Thanksgiving season, we extend our gratitude to the patients who inspire us, the families who trust us, and the healthcare professionals who dedicate themselves to helping others.

If you or a loved one is preparing to leave the hospital, we

encourage you to ask the hospital team about post-acute care and where skilled nursing rehabilitation may be appropriate.

Because every step toward recovery is something to be thankful for.

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More Than a Smile: Why Oral Health Matters

By KAY LEAMAN, HEALTH ARCHITECT, CERTIFIED NUTRITION AND SKIN ADVISOR

The oral cavity, aka the mouth, is a crucial part of the body's health system. Most of us enjoy going to the dentist (a white lie). It is recommended to go every six months for a cleaning and checkup. The results of these checkups reveal how well we have done our part in keeping our mouths healthy.

Let's look at some facts:

We swallow about 140 billion bacteria daily, which seeds our gastrointestinal tract.

We carry around trillions of microscopic bugs that live in and on our bodies, including the skin,

gastrointestinal tract and mouth. The mouth is the primary entrance to the digestive system.

Our oral microbiome influences health and disease in many other body systems.

The mouth is home to the second most diverse population of microbes in the body, and the health of these microbes is linked to heart disease, joint health, diabetes and digestive disorders. Because of the world we live in and what we eat, our mouths are exposed to potentially harmful bacteria every day. If our mouths are healthy (microbes in good balance), they help us form a strong defense against infection and illness.

When our mouths aren't up

to par, they can allow potentially harmful bacteria into the bloodstream and are commonly associated with cavities, bad breath, gingivitis and periodontal disease. Note: Oral pathogens can colonize for life, leak into blood vessels and circulate throughout the body. This can result in many systemic diseases elsewhere in the body. Back in the day (way back), I was a Certified Dental Assistant with expanded duties. We would see patients who had been sent to us by their doctors to bring their oral cavities back to a healthy state. However, unless the patient takes responsibility for their part, their results will be short-lived.

Most of us know what we should be doing, but do we know

what we should be avoiding? Let's take a look:

- I recommend avoiding anti-bacterial toothpaste as well as those containing fluoride, as I believe these can disrupt the balance of our microbiome system.
- Mouthwashes can destroy our beneficial microbes.
- Work on not breathing through your mouth. Many of us unconsciously breathe through our mouths when we are wind-ed, stressed, etc.
- Begin moving to natural oral health products.
- Consume probiotic-rich foods: plain yogurt (unsweetened), sauerkraut, pickles that are naturally fermented, etc.

brush your gums as well as your teeth. Don't use a lot of pressure, as this can harm your gums and wear the tooth enamel. If you see blood when you floss, this is a sign that your gums need extra attention. Did you know that your teeth are not attached to bone but are attached via ligaments? If your gums remain in an unhealthy state, these ligaments can be destroyed, causing the need for extractions. AND, if you don't own a tongue scraper, you can pick one up at Walmart. You will be amazed at what hides in the spaces of your tongue. That is why dentists check your tongue, as it gives them clues into the health of your oral cavity. Start from the back of your tongue and scrape toward the tip. Another thing you can add during the day is a G-U-M brush. This will help remove food between the teeth and aid in keeping your gums clean between brushings.

We normally think of our smiles when it comes to our mouths. It's time to work at making your gut smile, too.

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Sean of the South: **The Chalkboard**



BY SEAN DIETRICH

We have this place in our kitchen. It's a wall. It used to be a door, some 102 years ago, when the house was built.

There used to be stairs outside this kitchen door, leading to the backyard. But the doorway has been sealed off. Now it's just a big blank space in our kitchen.

The wall is painted with black chalkboard paint. So it's basically a big blackboard, just like the kind you once used for working out algebra problems in front of your whole class.

We write things on this board.
My wife and I. The writings al-
ways change.

Usually you walk into the

kitchen, and you'll just happen to notice that someone has erased the old writing, and added something new.

My wife writes messages like, “Welcome home, you’ve been on the road for two weeks, we missed you!”

“The dogs say ‘We ‘ruff’ you, Daddy.”

“Happy birthday, Sean. I cannot imagine my life without you.”

Little messages. Little words. Small words. But words carry power. Words are not lightweight.

In the mornings, as I make the coffee, standing in the kitchen with a bad case of bedhead, I stare at this chalkboard. And sometimes, in my half-waking state, I get lost in the chalkboard text. Gazing into the black-and-whiteness of it all.

During the Thanksgiving season, my wife writes messages to—well—to God, I guess. She writes things she is thankful for.

And as the coffee percolates, I shuffle over to the chalkboard for deeper inspection. Then, I add my contribution to the lot.



The dogs see me squatting, writing with a small piece of chalk. Squatting, of course, puts me closer to their eye level. So, because I am hunching low, my dogs naturally assume I must have ham.

And they attack me.

Soon, I have lost my balance. I am now on the floor. Flat on my butt. With three dogs swarming, trying to muzzle their way past the other, as if to

say, "He's mine!" "No, no! He's mine!" "Get out of the way, everyone knows he's mine!"

Tails wagging. Butts wagging.
Lots of panting. Lots of licking.

All three of them are pressing their surgically cold noses on my bare skin. Each dog, wholly unashamed, devoid of ego. Fully vulnerable. Unconditionally honest with themselves, and with each other, in all regards. They are expressive, effusive, and rhapsodic with their demonstration of love. They love others like they've never been hurt.

And when I am thoroughly covered in dog saliva, which contains 98 percent water, a variation of proteins, enzymes, and other compounds, such as lysozyme and immunoglobulins, which aid digestion and have potent antimicrobial properties, I start to laugh privately.

I'm still looking at the chalkboard. I'm still holding the piece of chalk in my hands. And I'm thinking about my life. About my people. About my little family.

I'm looking at the white hairs

on the snouts of my dogs, and remembering when they were mere puppies, cradled in my arms.

I'm thinking of how many generations this 102-year-old house has seen—how many Thanksgivings, Christmases, birthdays, and how many funerals.

I'm thinking about how friends become our truest family. About how nothing in this world lasts forever except memories. About how thankful I am. About how my life has been guided by an unseen hand, steering me from self-destruction, guiding me toward real love.

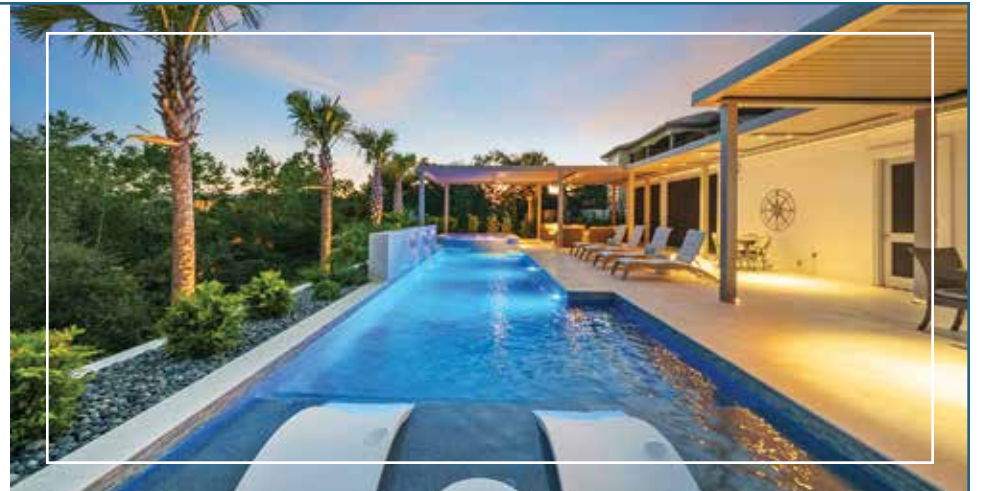
But mostly, I'm thinking about how it all went by so fast.

Sean Dietrich is a columnist, and novelist, known for his commentary on life in the American South. His work has appeared in Southern Living, The Tallahassee Democrat, Good Grit, South Magazine, Alabama Living, the Birmingham News, Thom Magazine, The Mobile Press Register and Life Media publications, and he has authored seven books.



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A Pastor's Ponderings: Beyond the Uniform

A Veterans Day Call to Purpose and Community

BY BRUCE R. DUTY, RETIRED
U.S. ARMY CHAPLAIN,
CROSSCOUNTRY3

As Veterans Day approaches, I find myself thinking about the remarkable men and women who have served our nation in uniform—and especially those who now call Walton County home. From the beaches of South Walton to Freeport, DeFuniak Springs and Paxton, veterans are woven into the fabric of our communities. They are our neighbors, business owners, teachers, coaches, pastors, parents and grandparents.

Their service deserves our gratitude. But perhaps Veterans Day should also remind us that our veterans still have much to

offer—and much worth hearing. Our region has a remarkable military heritage. Nearby Eglin Air Force Base and the Army's 7th Special Forces Group are reminders of those who continue to defend our nation. Many veterans have chosen to make Walton County their home, bringing with them extraordinary experience, leadership, courage, resilience, and a willingness to serve.

As a local retired Army chaplain, I understand something of that journey. My military career, including combat deployments to Iraq, allowed me to walk alongside remarkable soldiers and their families. Those experiences reinforced something I

have never forgotten: Military service changes you – ordinary men and women serving in extraordinary circumstances.

It teaches discipline, sacrifice, teamwork and the importance of the person standing beside you. It also provides something that can be surprisingly difficult to replace when the uniform comes off—a powerful sense of purpose and belonging.

When military service ends, the mission can suddenly seem less clear. The question quietly becomes, What is my mission now?

Recently, I traveled to Boise, Idaho, where I attended a Mission43 event featuring ac-



pating to contact me. Perhaps we begin with a simple gathering over coffee and see where it leads. This would not be a political rally or another ceremony filled with speeches, but an opportunity for veterans to speak, neighbors to listen and our community to grow stronger.

Veterans Day is certainly a time to remember and honor those who served. Yet, our responsibility extends beyond saying, "Thank you for your service." We should also be asking, How can we continue serving together? Walton County possesses an extraordinary reservoir of veteran experience, character, leadership and wisdom. Our challenge is not simply to celebrate it, but to engage it.

I firmly believe that retirement from military service does not mean retirement from significance. The uniform may hang in the closet, the rank may belong to our history and the deployments may be over. But the opportunity to lead, mentor, encourage and serve remains. Some of our greatest contributions may still lie ahead.

This Veterans Day, perhaps the greatest way we can honor our veterans is not merely to thank them for what they have done, but to invite them to help shape what our community can become. To my fellow veterans throughout Walton County: Your experiences matter. Your perspective matters. And your voice deserves to be heard.

The military teaches us that every mission eventually comes to an end. But a life of purpose does not.

Perhaps the most important question we can ask this Veterans Day is not simply, What have we done with our lives? It is, What is our mission now?

Sebastian Junger. His remarkable book, *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, explores our fundamental need for community, meaningful responsibility, and purpose.

During his presentation, Junger contrasted environments of high consequence and low consequence. Military service often places individuals in situations where their decisions and sacrifices have immediate significance. Returning to civilian life, where that same sense of responsibility may be less obvious, can be difficult.

Junger's message reinforced something I witnessed repeatedly as an Army chaplain: Veterans don't simply need appreciation. They need connection, purpose and opportunities to continue contributing.

One particularly meaningful suggestion Junger makes in *Tribe* involves communities creating opportunities for veterans to speak openly about their experiences. He encourages gatherings similar to town halls, where veterans can share what they witnessed, what they learned, and what they believe their fellow citizens should understand about military service and war.

I believe that is an idea worth pursuing right here in Walton County. Imagine bringing together veterans from different generations and branches of service—not simply to recognize their accomplishments, but to listen. Some might discuss combat, others the challenges of transitioning to civilian life or lessons learned about leadership, sacrifice, family and friendship. And perhaps some would simply appreciate being heard.

Through CrossCountry3, the nonprofit ministry I lead, I would like to explore hosting such a gathering. I invite Walton County veterans and family members interested in partici-

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!

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NatureView: A Place to Put Down Roots in Freeport

New homes, a thoughtful community and the natural beauty of the Emerald Coast come together in a new chapter for Freeport.

By MIMY KINCAID, CORPORATE MARKETING DIRECTOR, THE JAY ODOM GROUP

After the recent hurricane, our thoughts are with every family, business and neighbor across Walton County working through recovery. A storm can interrupt routines and leave people facing a long list of repairs and decisions. In moments like these, we are reminded that home is more than a building. It is also the people who check on one another, lend a hand and help a community find its footing again. We are grateful for the care and generosity shown throughout this area, and we wish every household still rebuilding safety, steady progress and support along the way.

That sense of connection is part of what we hope to build at NatureView. For anyone who was already considering a move, a new home may be one way to look toward the next chapter. It cannot undo what a storm has taken or promise a life without uncertainty, but it can offer the chance to choose a floor plan, explore new construction and imagine what home could look like in Freeport.

A New Chapter for Freeport Homebuyers

NatureView is a master-planned community in Freeport developed by The Jay Odom Group, the same local developer behind Hammock Bay. Planned for 792 homesites, NatureView brings together homes by two established builders, DSLD Homes and Holiday Builders. That gives buyers a range of floor plans, home sizes and price points to explore.

As of October 2026, DSLD Homes lists NatureView floor plans starting at \$289,990, with plans ranging from about 1,293 to more than 3,000 square feet. Holiday Builders advertises NatureView homes from the \$360,000s, with plans extending beyond 3,000 square feet. Current homes, incentives and pricing can change, so buyers should confirm the latest information before making plans.

For buyers who are already thinking about a move, new construction can also mean choosing a layout that fits the way they live today, with new home



systems and builder warranty coverage. Whether someone is looking for a first home, another bedroom, extra room to work from home or a different pace of life, the best place to start is with a conversation about what is currently available and what matters most to them.

More Than a Home

At NatureView, the neighborhood continues beyond the front door. Planned community features include a resort-style zero-entry pool, clubhouse, 24-hour fitness center and yoga studio, lighted pickleball courts, a basketball court, playgrounds, dog parks and peaceful pocket parks. A 1.3-mile nature trail with exercise stations offers another way to get outside and enjoy the setting.

An Ordinary Saturday

Picture an ordinary Saturday: a morning walk beneath the trees, coffee at home, a swim after lunch, then pickleball or an evening around the outdoor gathering spaces. The amenities are close to home, making it easier to spend time outside, meet neighbors and enjoy the little routines that make a place feel like your own.

Rooted in Nature and Community

One of NatureView's defining qualities is its setting near protected conservation lands, including the Nokuse Nature Preserve and property managed by the Northwest Florida Water Management District. The preserve and surrounding natural areas give the community a distinct connection to Northwest Florida's landscape. South Walton's beaches are about nine miles away, keeping the coast within reach while NatureView offers a quieter setting in Freeport.

Community care is also reflected in the NatureView Hero Homez program. The Jay Odom Group is partnering with DSLD Homes and Holiday Builders to donate five homes to selected local military families, Gold Star families and first responders. It is one way the people behind NatureView hope to give back to those who serve the Emerald Coast.

A Local Team to Help You Explore

Buyers do not have to sort through every builder, floor

plan, incentive and availability question on their own. The NatureView real estate team knows the community and its builders and can help buyers compare options, understand what is currently available and navigate the process from the first conversation through purchase. The agents can work directly with buyers and provide representation, while clearly explaining their affiliation with NatureView's developer and the brokerage relationship before moving forward.

To speak with the Nature-

View real estate team, call (850) 822-5005. Visit NatureViewFL.com to learn more and plan a visit.

NatureView was envisioned as a place where people can put down roots, enjoy Freeport's natural beauty and build lasting connections with their neighbors. As our community continues to move forward, we are thankful for the people who make this area feel like home. To everyone recovering from the recent storm, we are wishing you strength, support and brighter days ahead.

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Arts & Music

Gathering in the Garden is a Night of Purpose

By HEATHER BENNETT EYE

On November 14, 2026, Be-Generous will host their 9th Annual Gathering in the Garden from 6 to 8:30 p.m. at Drive the Coast located at 342 S County Hwy 393, Santa Rosa Beach. Doors will open at 5:00 p.m. for a social hour and silent auction. BeGenerous is a Christ cen-

tered 501©3 non-profit organi- zation created to rescue, restore and provide safe housing for women overcoming substance abuse disorder and/or sexual exploitation. They have been serving our community for 16 years, offering faith-based heal- ing and renewal. This annual fundraiser is a

beautiful way for our commu- nity to contribute to the success of the women and families Be-Generous serves. At Gathering in the Garden, you'll enjoy a dinner catered by a local chef, a live and silent auction, hear testimonies and experience live worship. Every ticket, spon- sorship and donation received

helps BeGenerous to continue their mission. If you are interested in donat- ing, sponsorship or volunteer- ing, please reach out to Casey Lynn Draughn at CDraughn@ BeGenerousInc.org. Be sure to scan the QR code to secure your tickets. Your generosity is great- ly appreciated and directly con-

tributes to restoring and rebuild- ing lives here in our community.



WARRIOR ARTS

continued from page 2

tired Army Chief Warrant Of- ficer 3 Charles Burkett. A 2004 helicopter crash left Burkett with a traumatic brain injury, extensive nerve damage and severely limited fine motor skills on his dominant right side. He incorporated Zentangle into his physical rehabilitation, first learning to write with his left hand and eventually retraining his right. Within months, he had regained 80% of his fine motor skills; by year's end, he had re- gained full control of his right arm, hand and fingers. In 2022, MKAF sponsored Burkett's training to become a Certified



Zentangle Teacher, allowing a veteran who experienced its benefits firsthand to teach other military members as a peer.

See Warrior Arts in Action

The public can experience that spirit of creativity and con- nection during MKAF's 31st annual Festival of the Arts, Oct. 24-25 at the Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Village in Destin. Throughout the weekend, vis- itors can stop by the Warrior Arts Tent, meet participants and instructors, view artwork created by veterans and service members and try tangling them- selves. On Saturday at 2 p.m., Moore and Burkett will take the Dugas Pavilion Stage for

"Tangle Time with Melanie & Chief," a live Zentangle demon- stration.

The free festival features more than 100 artists, live en- tertainment, demonstrations, children's activities, food and more. Proceeds support Arts- Reach. For MKAF, that creates a fitting circle: Come for the art. Discover what art can do. Then help make it accessible to some- one else. Attend the Festival, become a member, volunteer or make a gift. After all, your sup- port keeps the Arts FUNded.



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PROGRAMS

10-Year-Old Launches “The Post Room,” A Happy-Mail Club Inspired by a Lifelong Love of Real Mail

Since she was little, local resident Hunter Grace Bakker, known as HG, has been obsessed with checking the mail. Almost every day, she would head to the mailbox hoping there might be something interesting waiting inside. Most of the time, there wasn't. Instead, there were stacks of junk mail, advertisements and bills. For HG, that was always a little disappointing. So, at age 10, she decided to do something about it.

This month, she is launching The Post Room at House of Blueprint, a monthly happy-mail club built around one simple idea: there should be

along with a letter from HG. Every month will be different, and fittingly, the artist who helped inspire the idea will be the first featured.

Liza Snyder Art is the featured artist for the inaugural October mailing. Information about Snyder and her work will accompany her print, giving subscribers another way to discover and connect with a local artist. HG hopes future envelopes will introduce people near and far to artists, makers and creative people from the Emerald Coast while evolving around monthly themes, local inspiration, art and activities.

who in their life might need a little extra happy.

A Post Room subscription does not have to be for yourself. HG hopes people will send the club to grandparents, grandchildren, college students away from home, friends going through a difficult season, children who love receiving their own mail or simply someone who deserves a reason to smile when they walk to the mailbox. For \$12.99 per month, subscribers can join or cancel at any time, making it an easy gift for a month, a season or longer.

HG also hopes her business can show other children that

Continued on next page



something in the mailbox people are actually excited to open. “I think getting real mail is exciting,” HG says. “I want people to open their mailbox and find something that makes them happy.”

The idea began taking shape this summer during art camp with Santa Rosa Beach artist Liza Snyder. Snyder's colorful, joyful approach to art made an impression on HG and got her thinking about how much fun it would be to send art, notes and little surprises through the mail.

That idea became The Post Room. Each month, subscribers receive an envelope mailed from the Emerald Coast filled with art, paper goods and creative surprises. The inaugural October mailing includes a 5-by-7 art print from an artist, sticker, bookmark, postcard or recipe,

The October collection draws inspiration from monarch butterflies, honoring and remembering the people who came before us, zinnias and beautiful fall beach days along the Emerald Coast. November will turn toward togetherness, gratitude and family traditions, while December will focus on light, sparkle and simple ways to spread joy. HG is also getting a little help from her four-legged business partner, Barkley, the family's white Labrador and “Head of House” at House of Blueprint, who will make regular appearances in the monthly mailings.

While the concept is playful, HG has some very real goals for her business. She wants The Post Room to remind people to slow down, make things, write to one another and think about



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Why So Complicated?



By RICK MOORE

The Million Dollar Marching Band for the Alabama Crimson Tide was given its name back in 1922. A million dollars then would be worth over 20 million today. There are rumors that Mark Wahlberg is trying to reboot the “Six-million Dollar Man” into the Six-billion Dollar Man.” Even Dr. Evil had to recalculate from one million to a hundred billion after being frozen for a few years. Keep-

ing up with the times isn’t easy and it can be expensive. Try listening to an hour long podcast about artificial intelligence and smart homes and it can make you feel like your head will explode. Technology does constantly evolve, and that includes the audio/video market. Flagship amplifiers and speaker systems from top brands routinely cost ten times (or more) of what top-tier systems cost 30 years ago, even after adjusting for inflation. Not only has it become more expensive, it seems that technology has made our life more complicated instead of less complicated.

Although I have been involved with high-end professional technology for decades in television and radio, my home audio/video system has remained modest through the years. However, I do like good sounding speakers in my house.



Catrina and I had quit listening to the speakers on our TV a long time ago because the audio quality is less than half of what it used to be before video monitors had to be so flat. We also like listening to albums on our turntable. Although we enjoyed the benefits of having a separate sound system, it was too complicated. We had several remote controls in our living room. If we’re listening to music and

wanted to watch our TV, we turn off the stereo first, then turn on the Apple TV and then turn on the Samsung TV. That is unless we are watching an app that is only on the Samsung TV and not the Apple TV 4K. Oh, I forgot to mention, if we want to watch a program that is on cable TV, we reach behind the Samsung box and select the “B” button instead of the “A” button. Sound familiar?

Does it have to be so complicated?

My wife is patient, but she did threaten to throw the remote controls through the window if I didn’t come up with a simpler system. That’s where Branded International came in. Branded International specializes in high-end audio systems for home and business, but they also make playing movies and music simple. Now we just speak into the remote control and say “Play James Taylor” and a song from James Taylor begins to play. Or we can say “Play You’ve

Got A Friend” and that specific song will begin playing (Yes, my wife is still a huge James Taylor fan). Hit a button that says patio and the music is now playing on the patio. It just works. We can have one remote control and enjoy great sound. It doesn’t have to be complicated and it can sound great. Yes, custom installs can get very expensive, but that is why we went with Branded International. They use name brands from France, England, and Italy, for the best value for cutting edge technology when it comes to audio & video. Now, my wife Catrina is part of the custom installation industry representing Branded International on the Emerald Coast. Catrina is like the guy on the TV commercial who said, “I like it so much I bought the company.” I’m just glad she no longer wants to throw the remote controls out the window. Peace at last! Now, if I can only get one of those robotic lawnmowers to mow the lawn.

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“I could never go back to my old sound system.” - Pattie S.



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THE POST ROOM

continued from previous page

they do not have to wait until they are grown up to turn an idea into something real. The Post Room is supported by the team at House of Blueprint, the South Walton-based creative and media house founded by HG’s mother, Erin Bakker. “She has always loved checking the mail, and also been consistently disappointed by the fact that most of what shows up is junk mail and bills,” said Erin. “This summer, after spending time at art camp with local artist Liza Snyder, she became completely taken with the idea of ‘happy mail’ and decided she wanted to create something that would give people that feeling every single month.”

HG is involved in the actual work of the business, from developing monthly ideas and choosing creative elements to helping prepare the envelopes that go out to members. “What I love most is that this really is HG’s business,” Erin said. “The House of Blueprint team is helping her with the grown-up parts, but she is involved in the ideas, themes, contents, artist collaborations and the overall direction.”

For HG, it is part business,

part creative project and part mission to make the mailbox a little less disappointing. There is also a give-back component built into the club from the beginning. Ten percent of The Post Room proceeds will be donated to Caring & Sharing of South Walton, allowing each subscription to send a little happiness beyond the mailbox, too.

The first Post Room envelopes are scheduled to head out this month, and because membership is ongoing, subscribers can join at any time throughout the year. HG hopes eventually those envelopes travel far beyond South Walton. But, no matter where they land, each one will carry a little piece of the Emerald Coast with it. “I want people everywhere to get happy mail from the Emerald Coast,” she says.

For the little girl who spent years checking the mailbox hoping to find something special, The Post Room is her way of making sure somebody else does.

To join and for more information, visit www.houseofblueprint.com/thepostroom.



HOLIDAY

continued from page 4

About the Part That Makes You Nervous

Yes, acupuncture uses needles. They are much thinner than those used for injections. You may notice a brief pinch, pressure, or a dull ache. Your practitioner should explain the process, check your comfort, and respond to your feedback. Some people find the experience relaxing. During a season of constant demands, having

time devoted entirely to your care can feel welcome. Choose a licensed practitioner who uses sterile, single-use needles. Discuss your medications, medical conditions, and any pregnancy or bleeding concerns before treatment. You can arrive curious, skeptical, or nervous. Bring your questions.

Stop Saving Yourself for January

There is always a reason to postpone care. After the guests leave. After the shopping is finished. After the year ends.

Meanwhile, your life keeps happening. The family walk happens. The grandchildren get on the floor to play. Someone starts telling a story that makes everyone laugh until they cry. You deserve to experience those moments with as much comfort as possible. This November, give yourself something more useful than another promise to take care of yourself later. Start a conversation about what hurts, what you miss, and whether acupuncture could help. Everyone else is already on your list. Put yourself on it, too.

34th Annual Flutterby Arts Festival

Sunday, Nov. 8 | 10 a.m.-4 p.m. | The Pavilion at Watersound Town Center | 85 Origins Main St., Watersound

Spread your wings and celebrate creativity, community and the magical migration of the monarch butterfly at the 34th annual Flutterby Arts Festival! Presented by the Cultural Arts Alliance of Walton County, this beloved family tradition features hands-on arts and crafts, butterfly wing creation, face painting, live music, theater and dance performances, student art exhibits, carnival games, a monarch butterfly learning center and the always-popular butterfly parades. Explore the Holiday Artist Market featuring unique creations from local artists and makers, enjoy food trucks and take a stroll along the Watersound Monarch Art Trail. Admission is free and open to the public; some activities require tickets available for purchase on-site. culturalartsalliance.com/flutterby-arts-festival

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