

DEC. 2025/JAN. 2026
VOL. 9. NO. 6

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When the Impossible Happens

BY GUEARY CLENDENING

How is it that geese fly south in the winter? Who gives them instructions for the trip? How can an ant carry 50 times its weight, the equivalent of a 180-pound man carrying a full-grown cow? It seems to me God is in the business of making the impossible happen!

In Luke's gospel, we are given the story of a young lady named Mary, who is visited by an angel; She's told she will give birth to the Son of God. It's found in Luke, chapter one, verse thirty-four through thirty-eight.

Mary asked the angel, "But how can I have a baby? I'm a virgin." The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; So the baby born to you will be holy, and He will be called the Son of God. What's more, your relative, Elizabeth, has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she is already in her sixth month, for nothing shall be impossible with God."



God's timing is always perfect! Elizabeth's pregnancy was used by God to encourage Mary to believe that God would fulfil His promise.

Another impossibility happened to me personally. On May 2, 2024, I made an appointment for my annual appointment with my cardiologist in Pensacola for May 8, 2025. During the first few

days of May, in the week before my appointment, I began to suffer extreme pain in my throat and chest. On the day of my appointment, I was sitting in my car preparing to leave, when the pain came back again. I sat there for a few minutes, and I decided to go to Crestview. If the pain lessened, I would drive on to Pensacola, but if

not, I would return home. Well, the pain decreased, so I started driving to Pensacola. I explained to the doctor what had happened. He took me up a flight of stairs. By the time we reached the third floor, the pain in my throat and chest exploded. Thank-

IMPOSSIBLE
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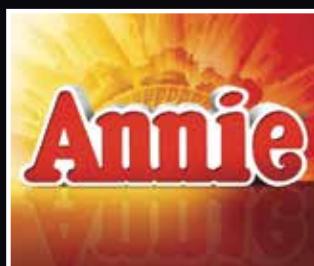


Grateful for a Year of Giving

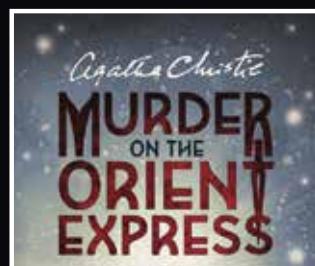
BY HEATHER BENNETT EYE

We want to recognize the compassion and tireless work the volunteers and organizers of our local food banks, churches, and nonprofits pour into addressing food insecurity by providing meals for our community. You provide more than meals; you provide dignity, hope, and comfort for families during their hardest moments. Your kindness strengthens our neighborhoods and reminds us that even in challenging times, generosity and care can make a profound difference.

YEAR OF GIVING
continued on page 2



Nov. 28 - Dec. 31



Jan. 15 - Feb. 1



Feb. 12 - March 1

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 **Community**
IMPOSSIBLE
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fully, the cardiologist's office was in the hospital. They immediately ordered a heart cath. The next morning, he said to me, "You had a ninety-five percent blockage in your main artery. You had a widow-maker and are a very lucky man."

Later, after thinking about

his words, I realized the entire episode was a lot more than just dumb luck. If I had not made that appointment a year ago, I would not have thought about going to Pensacola. God knew a year in advance what was coming, and because of that, I am alive today and writing this article. The impossible happened, God gave me a miracle!

Soon, I will be celebrating

the miracle God gave to Mary. The Son of God was born and came into the world to die for our sins. He lived a perfect life, something you and I cannot even dream of. And yet, a savior was born to a virgin. What God did in sending His Son was to empower Him to have the ability to forgive and remove the blockage and bondage of sin in our lives, so we can live in free-

dom now, and have life eternal forever!

If you haven't already done so, I encourage you to receive Christ now through prayer. He will hear you and remove the past, and give you a new beginning! "If the Son therefore shall make you free, you shall be free indeed." John 8:36.

May the joy of knowing God's Son make this Christmas

the greatest ever for you and your family, because receiving Jesus Christ into your life makes the impossible happen!

Merry Christmas!

Pastor Gueary Clendening is a retired minister with the Assemblies of God. He has ministered for over 50 years and resides in Valparaiso.

YEAR OF GIVING
continued from page 1

Food insecurity is not a distant issue. It affects families, neighbors, coworkers, and friends in Walton County. It's not always visible and can touch more lives than we realize. It can affect anyone – families working multiple jobs, seniors on fixed incomes, students, single parents, and those facing sudden illnesses, job loss or other hardships. It's a reminder that life can shift unexpectedly.

Caring and Sharing of South Walton fed 1,000 families in October, which was the largest number in their 30 years of operation. As of the end of October, Emerald Coast Food Rescue had distributed 2.35 million pounds of rescued food, which is a 23% increase compared to that time in 2024. Food for Thought is expecting a 20% increase in requests for support this holiday season, which is 140

more families in addition to the 700 they already serve.

When someone in our community struggles to access healthy food, it can affect their physical health, mental and emotional health, and overall well-being. Acknowledging that food insecurity exists close to home reminds us that compassion, awareness, and support matter. We are deeply grateful for the hearts of those serving others, and for the positive impact you continue to create. Thank you for all that you do. By standing together, we can help ensure that no one in our community faces hunger alone.

Please consider reaching out to an organization near you to see how you can serve our community through donating or volunteering.

Caring and Sharing of South Walton – 112 Lynn Drive, Santa Rosa Beach, (850) 267-2866: Food distributions are twice a month on Mondays,



Wednesdays and Fridays, 9 a.m. – 2 p.m.

Hearts & Hands Food Pantry by First Baptist Church of DeFuniak

Springs – Tri-County Building at 105 W Main Avenue, DeFuniak Springs, (850) 892-2722: Food distribution is every Friday 9 a.m. – 11 a.m.

First Methodist Church of DeFuniak

Springs – 88 Circle Drive, DeFuniak Springs, (850) 892-5332: Distributions are on the second and fourth Thursdays of the month, 9 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.

Food for Thought

– 2132 US-90, DeFuniak Springs, (850) 290-4056: Food distribution to students on the Free/Reduced Lunch Program

are Mondays, 4 p.m. – 6 p.m. at 132 Market Street, Santa Rosa Beach and Tuesdays, 8:30 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. at 2132 US Hwy 90 W DeFuniak Springs.

Helping Hands (Southwide Baptist)

– 1307 Coy Burgess Loop, DeFuniak Springs, (850) 892-3835: Food distribution is on Mondays, 12



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Holiday Events And Beyond

ECTC A Christmas Carol at Seaside Post Office Dec. 18-23

This holiday season, experience the magic of Charles Dickens' timeless classic like never before! Emerald Coast Theatre Company in collaboration with SEASIDE, proudly presents a forty-five-minute adaptation by Nathanael Fisher of A Christmas Carol. All performances are free to the public and begin at 11 a.m.

Baytowne Wednesday Night Concert Series - Holiday Edition + Visits with Santa Dec. 17

Find the holiday spirit at The Village of Baytowne Wharf as you tap your feet to some of your favorite sing-along classics. Enjoy a Holiday edition of the Wednesday Night Concert Series, 6-8 p.m., featuring visits with Santa. Bring your lawn chairs and blankets. Free and open to the public.

Grand Boulevard Horse-Drawn Carriage Rides, Music Review & Photos with Santa Dec. 18-23

Join the holiday celebrations at Grand Boulevard with a week of holiday cheer, featuring magical horse-drawn carriage rides through the Town Center, beautifully illuminated by the Coastal White Christmas lights and the stunning Festival of Trees display. Add to the festivities with a professional photo with Santa, and enjoy the lively sounds of the Emerald Coast Theatre Company's Holiday Musical Revue live on the fountain stage — a joyful soundtrack to your holiday experience.

Old Florida Fish House Brunch with Santa Dec. 20

Celebrate the season at Old Florida Fish House as they host a Brunch Buffet with Santa on Dec. 20 from 10 a.m. - 2 p.m. Reservations encouraged (850) 524-3045.

Louis Louis Ugly Sweater Party & Benefit Dec. 20

'Tis the Season! Louis Louis will host their Annual Ugly Sweater Party on Saturday, December 20, from 8 p.m. 'til late. Be prepared to get your groove on with DJ Michael Desicle! Bring one new, unwrapped gift for Toys 4 Tots to receive a drink ticket. Show up in your best Ugly Christmas Sweater to party in Santa Claus style!

New Year's Eve Celebrations Dec. 31

Alys Beach Noon Year's Eve Party 10 a.m.-12 p.m.

Stinky's Bait Shack Noon Year's Eve & Live Music 12-3 p.m.

Red Fish Taco Noon Year's Eve 12-3 p.m.

Seaside NYE Celebration 4-9 p.m.

Pescado New Year's Eve Soirée 4-6 p.m.

The Red Bar Jazz Band 5:30-9 p.m.

Baytowne Wharf New Year's Eve Countdown 6 p.m.

New Year's Eve at North



Year's Day at Ed Walline Public Beach Access. In-person sign-up starts at 11 a.m. at Shunk Gulley Oyster Bar on January 1, 2026, which will be followed by a costume contest at 12 p.m., and the Plunge itself at 1 p.m. Online registration is now open; check out the link here to sign up: <https://tinyurl.com/SWFD-PBP26>. Proceeds benefit SWFD Community Risk Reduction Programs like free CPR classes.

Cost of attendance for plunge participants will be \$20 per person and you receive a free event towel with your entry fee. Children 12 years old and under plunge for FREE, but they do not receive the event towel. After the plunge is over, join back at Shunk Gulley Oyster Bar to celebrate the start of the New Year.

Fore Her's Annual Pink Run 5K and Walk Set for Jan. 31st

Fore Her welcomes all "walks of life" to lace up and "pink out" on Saturday, January 31 at 8:30

Continued on next page

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 **Community**
EVENTS

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a.m. at the Village of Baytowne Wharf in Miramar Beach for their annual Pink Run 5K, presented by Emerald Coast Hospice Care, a signature event that raises funds to provide essential financial assistance to breast cancer patients undergoing treatment.

Whether racing to support a friend, walking to remember a loved one, strolling as a Survivor or simply for the love of a good race, all are welcome to join in the day's festivities. Registrants may walk or run the timed 5k Race.

The Survivors' Stroll immediately follows the 5K and is one of the more memorable parts of the Pink Run festivities, offering survivors a way to celebrate by

taking a stroll around the Village of Baytowne Wharf with fellow survivors.

After the race, participants can trade running shoes for dancing shoes at the official After Party complete with DJ, photo booth, a sampling of breakfast bites, prizes and more!

Early-Bird Registration for the 5K is \$50 now through January 5th and includes a free race T-shirt. (Registration is \$60 after



Save the Iconic 30A License Plate

If 3,000 plates aren't on the road by December 31, Florida will retire this plate forever—cutting critical funding for Scenic Walton's safety and beautification projects.

Scenic Walton, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that works to preserve and enhance the safety and natural beauty of Walton County, is the beneficiary of the iconic 30A/Scenic Walton charity license plate. This is likely your last chance to get one of these beautiful plates.

For every one of these plates on the road, Scenic Walton receives \$25/year of the specialty plate fees. Over 3,000 locals pre-ordered these tags to support safety and beautification projects right here at home, but not enough people have picked them up. If 3,000 plates aren't on cars by December 31st of

this year, the State will discontinue their plate. That means no more 30A tags, and Scenic Walton loses the funding that helps keep our community safe and beautiful.

Fun Facts:

- The plate can be ordered for any regular vehicle, golf cart, low-speed vehicle, trailer, or RV registered in the state of Florida!
- You can order it whether you are renewing your vehicle registration or not!
- It is quick and easy to order the plate for yourself. The entire online ordering process only takes a few minutes!
- It is just as quick and easy to order the plate as a gift for someone else. What a great Christmas present!

With projects like the pedestrian and cyclist underpass in Inlet Beach, multiple roadway landscaping projects, and their current initiative to get overhead utilities undergrounded throughout the county, Scenic Walton is truly making a difference, and they need your help to continue this game-changing work. If you already have the Scenic Walton 30A plate, you can keep it for ten years. But after December 31st, they will be retired forever. And they will no doubt become collector's items that only true locals have. So don't wait. If you believe in protecting the place we all love, go to any Florida tax collector's office or visit www.Scenic.org/waltonplates now to get your tag before it's too late.

January 6th plus the cost of a race T-shirt.) Also, Fore Her offers a discounted rate of \$45 for breast cancer survivors and the Survivors' Stroll is free of charge. Visit <https://PinkRunBenefiting-ForeHer.itsyourrace.com> to register. Additional race T-shirts will be available for purchase day of race while quantities last.

Sponsorships remain available for this high-profile event, with numerous opportunities for local businesses and services to create maximum exposure and reach. For more information and available sponsorship opportunities, visit foreher.org/pinkrun or email amy@foreher.org.

al Half Marathon + 5K Race Weekend with one of 30A's most eagerly anticipated events: Taste of the Race, presented by Publix and headlined by Rubiks Groove, a nationally acclaimed, character-driven musical act known for its "outside of the box" performances featuring iconic hits from the '80s, '90s, and '00s.

Experience the culinary talents of the Gulf Coast's top chefs and restaurants as they compete for prestigious awards including People's Choice, Judges' Choice, and Chef's Choice.

Proceeds from Taste of the Race support the SEASIDE SCHOOL FOUNDATION™.

To learn more and purchase tickets, visit RunSeasideFL.com.

Local chefs or restaurants interested in participating may contact Callie Cox at coxc@seasideschools.net.

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SCAN ME! 

Christmas Reflections on Lake DeFuniak

A small Southern town finds its glow again

BY KERRI PARKER

There's a moment — just as the sun slips behind historic buildings and mature trees — when Lake DeFuniak becomes a mirror. The century-old homes that curve around its shore soften into silhouette, and then suddenly, with the flick of a switch, Christmas Reflections comes to life. Tens of thousands of twinkling lights ripple across the water of one of only two nearly perfect spring-fed lakes in the world.

DeFuniak Springs was built for gatherings. The L&N railroad once delivered thinkers, teachers, and travelers to this very lakefront, where the Florida Chautauqua flourished in a flurry of lectures, concerts, and conversation. It was a hub of culture, a place where ideas arrived before the rest of the state caught up. Time moves on, as it does. The rails quieted. The world chased the beaches to the south — the sugar-white ones along the Gulf that made Walton County famous.

But here in the county seat, around this improbably round lake, the glow never faded — it simply waited.

Today, visitors are drifting back from across the Southeast — families who've heard that something special is happening here again — discovering what locals have quietly known all along: DeFuniak Springs is stirring.

Along Baldwin Avenue, old brick storefronts are waking up again, many with the careful confidence of a place rediscovering its footing. Chef Todd Misener, who recently opened Iron & Grape Italian Kitchen, has quietly elevated the town's culinary heartbeat. His scratch-made pasta and attention to detail draw locals and visitors alike, not with flash or fanfare, but with the steady rhythm of well-crafted meals and the kind of hospitality that doesn't announce itself. Nearby, other kitchens are quietly staking their claim: Southern comfort cooked with care, flavors that echo New Orleans, and fresh, inventive fare that makes even a quick meal feel like part of the evening's experience. It shows up in the clatter of plates, the murmur of familiar voices, and the soft glow of dining rooms. It feels less like a restaurant scene and more like a town remembering how good it is to linger around a table.

And for those who arrive from farther afield — and many do — the night has a way of convincing them to linger a little longer. Travelers who prefer something more tucked-away often find themselves settling into century-old homes now offered as guest stays. It isn't hard to stay the night here. In fact, it feels almost expected — as if Christmas Reflections was

meant to be savored slowly, long after the last lights shimmer across the water.

Just down the street, a historic theater has found its breath again, too. National recording artists slip into its intimate acoustics — drawn by the purity of a true listening room — thanks to songwriter Tim Jackson, a full-time resident championing live music as part of the town's very pulse.

These aren't manufactured attractions. They're the signs of a place remembering exactly who it is.

But the crown jewel — the reason families pack up thermoses of cocoa and make the drive — is Christmas Reflections.

The community has transformed its iconic lakefront into a glowing wonderland every holiday season. Through December nights, the breeze carries laughter from the horse-drawn carriage rides. Families stroll the mile-long promenade beneath archways of evergreen and light, the water throwing their reflection right back at them — a reminder that some moments can only happen here.

Every weekend in December,



Baldwin Avenue becomes the sort of scene casting directors scout for holiday films — carolers in the street, small-batch hot chocolate, shop windows frosted just enough to catch a sparkle. It's charming, yes — but never contrived. What's happening in this town isn't a revival — it's a return. A return to gathering for inspiration and connection.

If you're not here on a De-

ember night, standing on the edge of a perfect circle of spring water watching stars and Christmas lights mingle as one — well, you'll feel like you've missed something. Something rare.

And if you come once? You'll circle back.

Check the HWY331.com/my-calendar for event details.



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Walton County School District Celebrating Success and Looking Ahead to a Bright New Year

BY DR. JOSHUA BLEDSOE, PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER, WALTON COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

As we enter the final month of 2025, the Walton County School District is excited to highlight the incredible achievements and celebrations that made November a standout month across our campuses. From academic and artistic accomplishments to athletic excellence and major facility upgrades, our students and staff showcased the EPIC spirit that defines Walton County schools.

November began with one

of our most anticipated recognitions of the year: the announcement of each school's Teacher of the Year and Educational Support Professional of the Year. These honorees represent the Excellence, Professionalism, Innovation, and Collaboration that define our District. We invite families and community members to visit individual school websites and social media platforms to view photos of the winners and help celebrate these exceptional staff members.

Athletics also shone bright-

ly this month. In golf, Brody McCormick claimed the District Tournament Championship, an accomplishment that also earned him an individual spot at the Regional Tournament. Both the South Walton boys' and girls' golf teams advanced to Regionals as well, joined by individual qualifiers Aiden Anderson (WHS) and Haley Chapman and Isabella Dickens (FHS). Their hard work and perseverance throughout the season earned them well-deserved recognition at the regional level.

On the football field, all three district high schools advanced to the regional quarterfinals, marking a successful season for each program. South Walton High School carried its momentum even further, making an exciting run that concluded at the Regional Semifinals. Their teamwork and determination exemplified the competitive spirit we are proud to see in all our student-athletes.

In volleyball, South Walton High School continued to raise

HAPPY HOLIDAYS



Holiday Break:
12.22.25 - 1.6.26

Teachers Return: Jan 5th
Students Return: Jan 7th

from
Superintendent Hughes & the
Walton County School Board

the bar with an outstanding season that landed the Lady Seahawks in the State Semifinals. Their grit and passion throughout the year made this deep playoff run possible, and we congratulate them on this extraordinary achievement.

November also brought significant campus milestones. South Walton High School celebrated the ribbon-cutting of its new state-of-the-art stadium, providing students and athletes with a cutting-edge facility for years to come. The Magnet Innovation Center unveiled a major campus addition that is

as innovative as the faculty and staff who occupy its halls. At the same time, Emerald Coast Technical College revealed newly completed renovations to its Watersound campus. These enhancements highlight the district's commitment to expanding innovative learning opportunities and ensuring that students have access to exceptional educational environments.

Creativity shone as well through the accomplishments of Piper Wood from Freeport Middle School, who won the Art in the Capitol contest. Her work will be proudly displayed at the Florida State Capitol during the upcoming legislative session, beginning in January. This is a tremendous honor for a talented young artist.

Across the district, schools held heartfelt Veterans Day ceremonies, honoring the courage and sacrifice of the men and women who have served in our armed forces. We extend our sincere gratitude to our veterans for their service and for inspiring our students and families.

As we look ahead, December is a short but festive month. Christmas Break begins December 22, with teachers returning on January 5 and students back in class on January 7.

Stay connected with district news and celebrations by following us on Facebook, Instagram, and X, and by listening to our official podcast, EPIC Exchanges, available on Spotify and Apple Podcasts.

We wish all our families a joyful and restful holiday season!



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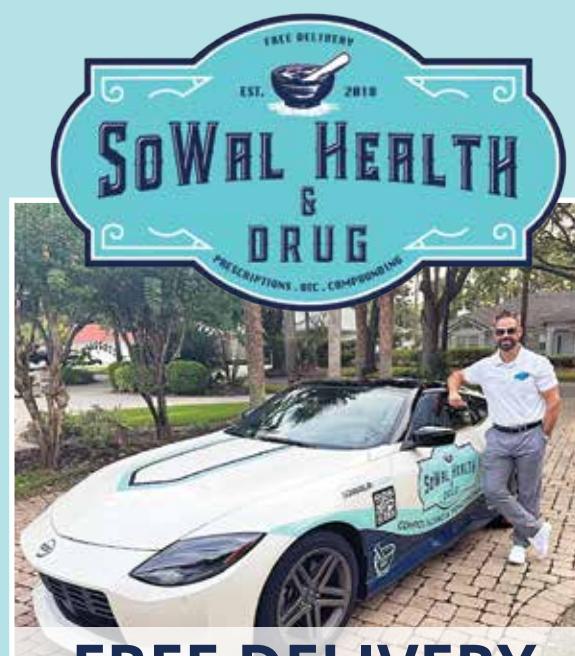
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PH7A LOT 134 ON GAZELLE COURT
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Forever Warriors Donates \$50,000 to Support United Way Emerald Coast's Mission United

United Way Emerald Coast (UWEC) is honored to receive a generous \$50,000 investment from Forever Warriors, powered by Step One Automotive Group, in support of Mission United, a program serving active-duty service members, veterans, reservists, and their families.

This funding comes at a critical time as recent challenges have created heightened needs across our community. In this first month of partnership, UWEC and Forever Warriors hosted a drive-through food distribution with the Hurlburt Field First Sergeants and allocated more than \$10,000 in emergency financial assistance to help military families cover essential expenses.

One recipient shared the impact of Mission United, stating, "We are profoundly grateful for their essential support. Their financial assistance came at a critical moment for an Airman who was grieving the loss of a family member and welcoming a new baby, all while being the sole provider for his three children and veteran partner. (This) aid provided a much-needed sense of security, allowing him to focus on his family; a testament to



your dedication to our military members."

Mission United connects mil-

itary-affiliated individuals with critical resources when other funding is unavailable. Support



PHOTOS BY: MISSION UNITED AND UNITED WAY EMERALD COAST.

has included emergency assistance, mental health services, housing support, and employment or career transition assistance. Since its launch in 2023, the program has served more than 5,000 service members and veterans across Okaloosa and Walton counties.

"We are deeply grateful to Forever Warriors for stepping forward when our military families need it most," said Kelly Jasen, President & CEO of United Way Emerald Coast. "This investment allows us to

meet urgent needs today while continuing to provide long-term stability and support through Mission United. It's a powerful example of the strength of our community."

To learn more about United Way Emerald Coast or get involved, visit www.united-way.org or follow @uwemeraldcoast on social media. Military members in need of support can also connect with United Way's Florida Veterans Support Line by dialing 2-1-1 and selecting option 5 or 1-844-MyFLVet.

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Where Hope Grows:

A Story of Love, Legacy and Local Families

By MARANDA SHAYE SMITH

Imagine just entering parenthood, facing the challenge of balancing a new baby with mounting bills and little support. Whether a pregnancy comes as a surprise or right on time, stepping into that moment can feel overwhelming. Questions, fears and practical needs often rise quickly—especially for those navigating the journey without a strong support system.

When life takes an unexpected turn, Lauren's Legacy Pregnancy Center, right here in our area, stands ready to walk beside those facing uncertainty. Serving women and families across Walton and Okaloosa counties, the center provides free, confidential services including pregnancy testing, ultrasounds, parenting programs, counseling and assistance connecting with community resources.

What began as a tribute of love and remembrance has grown into a cornerstone of compassion and care—meeting physical, emotional and spiritual needs at every step. Executive Director Stacey Reed describes it best, "This is a safe place for women to discuss their options and feel supported. Every story matters here."

Rooted in Love and Legacy

Lauren's Legacy was founded in memory of a young woman whose life continues to touch others through her family's vision of turning loss into purpose. Lauren was known for her compassionate heart and steadfast faith, someone who naturally reached out to help others in need. After her passing, her family turned their grief into purpose, creating



a place that would carry on her spirit of love and service.

Lauren's Legacy now stands as a reflection of who she was, offering hope and support to women and families facing some of life's most difficult moments, and that legacy lives on through every client who walks through the doors and every child whose life begins with love and support.

Impact That Matters

The past year has been one of remarkable growth and impact for Lauren's Legacy. From January through November 2025, the center served 127 clients, provid-

ed 686 appointments, administered 86 pregnancy tests and 78 ultrasounds, and supported local families through 535 parenting classes. Each number represents

a person—someone who found hope, encouragement and practical help when they needed it most.

Continued on page 11

A Night to Remember: Legacy Night 2025

In August, Lauren's Legacy hosted its first-ever Legacy Night, a celebration of life, community and hope. The evening raised an incredible \$217,000, thanks to the generosity of local sponsors, donors and volunteers who share the center's mission.

These funds will help the organization expand its reach, broaden its services, welcome more families, and continue meeting growing community needs.

Real Life Impact

Lauren's Legacy exists to meet people right where they are, offering steady, compassionate help when it's needed most. Access to free pregnancy tests, a no-cost ultrasound, one-on-one education about their options, and a full suite of parenting classes are available free and confidential. When they complete the classes, they receive essential baby items such as car seats, diapers, strollers and clothes—giving them a real boost as they start this chapter.

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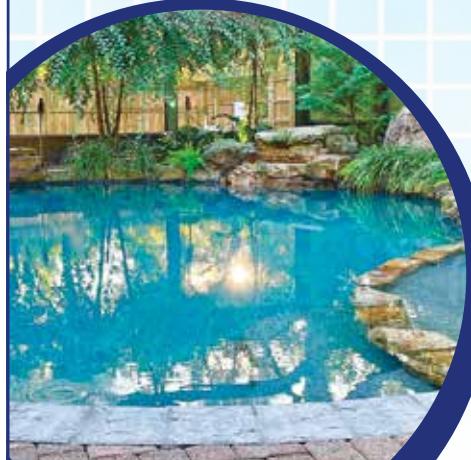
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9. Holiday Detox
10. One Month of Love

11. Student Season Pass

12. Partner Up for Health

All specials are included on the website through 12/25/25. Treat yourself and those you love. CRYO850 has served the Emerald Coast since 2019. Locally owned and operated, CRYO850 is building a community of health! “We look forward to seeing you soon! Happy Holidays and Merry Christmas!”

CRYO850 also offers individual services and discounted Punch Cards, Passes and Memberships along with discounts for Military, First Responders and Students under 25. www.cryo850.com

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December is the sweetest month of the year at Smallcakes Destin, where every day brings a new reason to indulge. Let Smallcakes do the holiday baking with your imagination—perfect for parties, office events, family gatherings, or simply treating yourself on Christmas morning. Their festive lineup includes cozy seasonal flavors like Peppermint Crunch, Chocolate Snowball, Salted Banana Pretzel, Eggnog Cheesecake, Hot Cocoa, Gingerbread and more, each one baked fresh daily and sure to bring winter-wonderland joy with every bite.

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Embrace Florida Kids Receives Community Investment Funding from United Way Emerald Coast

Embrace Florida Kids is proud to announce it has been selected as a United Way Emerald Coast funded partner agency for 2025-2026, making this the fourth consecutive year. Through the partnership, Embrace Florida Kids will receive funding for their Family Preservation program, helping families in Okaloosa and Walton counties access essential resources to strengthen their families and prevent separation.

"We're grateful to United Way Emerald Coast and Eglin Federal Credit Union for believing in our mission and investing in the future of our families," said Ramsey Lawrence, director of development and community relations, Embrace Florida Kids. "Because of their support, we're able to continue providing homes, healing and hope for families who need it most in Okaloosa and Walton counties."

United Way Emerald Coast awarded \$550,000 in commu-

nity grants to 25 organizations in Okaloosa and Walton counties whose missions align with healthy communities, youth opportunities and financial security. United Way Emerald Coast believes all communities across Okaloosa and Walton counties should be safe and thriving no matter their zip

code. Embrace Florida Kids' awarded funds are supported by United Way Emerald Coast donors and investments by Eglin Federal Credit Union.

Embrace Florida Kids was awarded \$20,000 toward their Family Preservation program. Family Preservation is a licensed and accredited program designed to strengthen and preserve families by teaching, challenging and helping families learn the skills they need to stay together and help each other grow successfully.

"We understand that family is the most fundamental influence on children. Our philosophy is

HOPE GROWS

continued from page 9

pregnancy testing, ultrasounds, parenting classes and referrals for housing, medical and community resources. Anyone in

entirely through the generosity of donors, volunteers and community partners. Whether through giving, volunteering or spreading awareness, every act of support helps this mission grow.



need can call 850-880-6287 or visit the website to connect with someone who cares and schedule a confidential appointment.

How to Get Involved

Lauren's Legacy is a faith-based organization and operates

To learn more, visit LaurensLegacy.net or call (850) 880-6287 to find out how you can help.

Together, we can continue to build a community where life is cherished and hope is shared.

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that it is usually best for children to be able to stay with their own families and for families to learn how to handle their own challenges in a healthy, loving way," said Blake Horne, president and CEO, Embrace Florida Kids. "We have more than a 95%

success rate in our Family Preservation program, which means families are staying together in lieu of their children entering the foster care system."

To learn more about Embrace Florida Kids, please visit embraceflkids.org/. For inqui-

ries about Family Preservation or other Embrace programs, contact Ramsey Lawrence at ramsey.lawrence@embraceflkids.org or (850) 533-9968.

To learn more about United Way Emerald Coast, please visit united-way.org/.

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A Veteran's Call to Serve Again:

Angel Force Brings Safety and Leadership to Local Schools

BY MICHELLE RUSCHMAN

One of the most important missions we have as a nation is to ensure that our children, teachers, administrators, and the support staff in our schools can focus on education without the distraction of feeling unsafe. Retired veteran Joshua Yirkovsky was inspired to start his private protection company, Angel Force Protection, and his nonprofit organization, Angel Force Foundation, when he saw firsthand what can happen when a school day is halted to deal with an intruder.

"In 2024, I was in the car lane waiting to pick up my kids from a private Christian school. I looked up to see a vagrant pulling on the doors, insisting to be let in, thinking it was the church. He was agitated and using foul language, and I could see the students and teachers through the door, clearly scared, trying to handle it on their own. With my sons being in there, I knew we needed a solution. That was the seed for Angel Force Protection and Angel Force Foundation."

The business and the foundation are two sides of the same coin. The business employs mil-



itary veterans to become Angel Guards, primarily for schools. The other focuses on providing children, their families, and educators with resources that are "dedicated to advancing school safety through proactive education and comprehensive initiatives." This includes programs like Future Leaders Academy and safety seminars. They also conduct fundraisers so schools have the resources to utilize the instruction and protective services they need to equip their students and staff.

"Schools don't have to use our services, but we do want them to have the option of having safety personnel on-site without worrying about where the backing is

coming from."

As a retired 21-year member of the U.S. Navy, Joshua recognized that veterans may leave the career, but the military training, the desire to protect, and the passion to serve are still part of their spirit. It's why they're so suited to protect the vulnerable.

"Our veterans need a sense of purpose. We served our country, and many of us are asking, 'Now what?' We have unique skills and the ability to adapt and overcome in the most adverse situations. We've been trained to be proactive and to see what bad guys look like with smiles on their faces. Being an Angel Guard can be the next chapter. I make sure each applicant is properly vetted, and they go through an extensive physical, emotional, and mental screening to make sure we're

putting the right vet at the right school. When they get in there, something amazing happens. They become someone the kids can rely on, and they become part of that school family. Having an Angel Guard in place frees SROs to be part of the community again, which continues to add another layer of protection for the village we're all a part of."

Not only is Joshua looking to secure the institutions that educate our children, but he wants the students who attend to have the skills to be effective citizens. Future Leaders Academy is his way of serving families, even after the child's school day is over. The lessons are age-appropriate, starting at the age of 7.

Junior Captains (Ages 7–9): Young leaders take part in fun, hands-on exercises like

group discussions, decision-making games, and interactive leadership challenges. The goal is to instill foundational habits of responsibility and expression.

Rising Stars (Ages 10–12): Participants explore leadership through goal-setting activities, debates, and group projects. They'll learn to manage conflict, collaborate effectively, and lead small teams.

Teen Trailblazers (Ages 13–15): Teens take on leadership roles, practice public speaking, and develop strategic thinking in team-based projects. Ideal for teens preparing for leadership in school and community roles.

Young Visionaries (Ages 16–18): This advanced group dives into case studies, community service projects, and mentorship experiences to refine leadership identity and prepare for future academic and career goals.

If you're interested in learning more about hiring Angel Force Protection or supporting Angel Force Foundation, go to www.angelfp.com and www.angelforcefoundation.org. Joshua Yirkovsky can also be reached by emailing info@angelfp.com or calling 904-436-3883.



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Warrick Dunn Charities Delivers Life-Changing Surprise for Habitat for Humanity Walton County Mom

A DeFuniak Springs single mom stepped into a new chapter of stability and hope thanks to Habitat for Humanity Walton County—then received an unforgettable surprise on moving day.

When first-time homeowner Samantha Brown arrived at her new home with her three children, she was greeted by FSU and Tampa Bay Buccaneers legend Warrick Dunn, whose nonprofit, Warrick Dunn Charities (WDC), has been changing the lives of single parents for more than 25 years.

Dunn's signature program, Homes for the Holidays (HFTH), partners with families who are already working hard to achieve homeownership. Instead of giving away homes, HFTH provides the extra support that makes long-term stability achievable—down payment assistance, fully furnished rooms, stocked pantries and a move-in-ready home.

Samantha's life-changing surprise included \$5,000 in down payment assistance and a home that was move-in ready; \$10,000 worth of new furnishings provided by Aaron's, the national rent-to-own retailer; and a fully stocked pantry and household essentials.

Her blessing adds to WDC's nationwide impact:

- 246 fully furnished Homes for the Holidays recipients
- 667 dependents served
- More than \$1.2 million in down payment assistance donated
- 31 markets reached across the country

Founded in honor of Dunn's late mother, Betty Smothers, the charity focuses on breaking the cycle of generational poverty through stability, education and wellness. WDC also operates the

Count on Your Future financial literacy program, Health Is Wealth wellness initiatives and scholarship opportunities for student volunteers.

A Milestone Moment for Habitat Walton County

Samantha's new home also marked a major achievement for Habitat for Humanity Walton County—the 75th Habitat home built locally and the completion of the organization's first-ever Habitat neighborhood!

"We are so proud to celebrate Samantha Brown and her three children as the newest Habitat homeowners and the completion of our 75th Habitat home. This home was special, because it was the last home in our first ever Habitat neighborhood," said Teresa Jones, CEO of Habitat for Humanity of Walton County. "This moment is a testament to faith, perseverance, and the power of partnerships like Warrick Dunn Charities that make dreams of homeownership a reality for hardworking families in our community. We are so thankful to Ryan Jumonville for bringing this wonderful organization to our area."

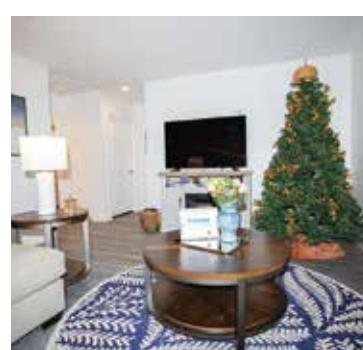
Habitat for Humanity Walton County, founded in 1996, has grown its impact steadily over nearly three decades:

- 75 homes completed for Walton County families
- 100% of every donated dollar goes directly to homebuilding
- Hundreds of local volunteers contribute annually
- Sweat equity model empowers families to invest in their homes and futures
- Affordable, no-interest mortgages help families achieve



long-term financial stability

The need is great. Many working families in Walton County currently spend more than 50% of their income on housing, making homeownership feel out of reach. Habitat's model provides a dignified, sustainable path forward. It partners with people in the community to help them build or improve a place they can call home. Habitat homeowners help build their own homes alongside volunteers and pay an affordable mortgage. With your support, Habitat homeowners achieve the strength, stability and independence they need to



build a better life for themselves and for their families.

A New Beginning for a Deserving Local Family

Samantha, an administrative professional with Ascension Sa-

cred Heart Medical Group, supports her family, which includes her 15-year-old son, 8-year-old son and 5-year-old daughter. After completing hundreds of hours of sweat equity, she finally held the keys to her own home—now made even more special by the generosity of WDC. Overjoyed, Samantha was surprised and excited for this new chapter in her family's story.

To learn about volunteer opportunities, homeownership programs or ways to give, visit Habitat for Humanity Walton County: waltoncountyhabitat.org; Warrick Dunn Charities: wdc.org.

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Book Review: The Body Keeps the Score

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL MCMANUS, MSW, LCSW

"The Body Keeps the Score"
by Bessel van der Kolk, M.D.,

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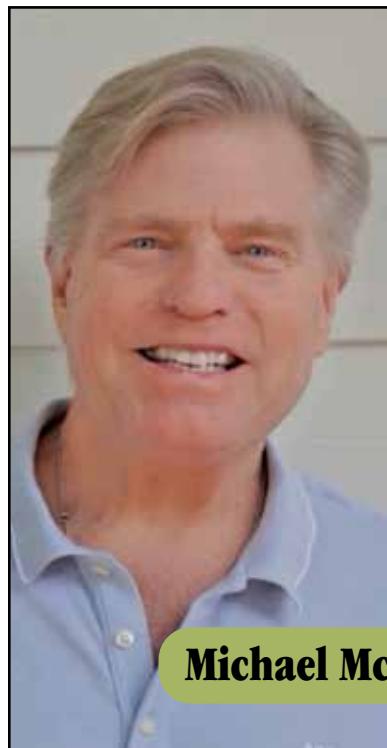


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Michael McManus LCSW

stands as a landmark exploration of trauma's enduring effects on the brain and body, presenting the results of several decades of clinical work and research in compelling, accessible prose. Van der Kolk's narrative is both scientific and deeply human, drawing the reader into stories of patients whose struggles illuminate the intricate ways trauma imprints itself physically as well as mentally. The book's central thesis is clear: traumatic experiences disconnect the mind from the body, yet the body continues to hold the raw sensations and survival instincts of those experiences, manifesting in lasting emotional and physical symptoms.

The author, recognized as a pioneer in trauma research, details how traditional "talk therapy" often fails to reach the deep, wordless injuries trauma inflicts.

Instead, van der Kolk blends neuroscience with body-orientated practices and ancient healing techniques, advocating for an integrative approach that offers hope for recovery—an approach that includes mindfulness, yoga, and innovative therapies geared toward restoring agency and

ownership of one's body.

Van der Kolk's writing, while occasionally technical, remains remarkably empathetic and articulate, allowing even readers without specialized knowledge to understand the science behind trauma and its somatic consequences. The case studies presented, including those related to childhood abuse, war, and post-pandemic anxiety, ensure the book resonates widely, revealing trauma's prevalence and impact across generations and communities.

Ultimately, "The Body Keeps the Score" is not just a medical text but a call for compassion in the treatment and understanding of trauma survivors. Its vivid storytelling and authoritative science make it essential reading for therapists, survivors, and anyone interested in the resilience and healing of the human spirit.

Michael McManus, LCSW, is a psychotherapist in private practice in Santa Rosa Beach, Florida. He and his wife, Angela, who's also a therapist, have lived in the area for approximately 40 years and raised four children together. They enjoy hiking, biking, yoga, reading, and cooking. For more information or to set an appointment, reach Michael by text or phone at (850) 837-0123 or at his website: Psychotherapy30A.com.

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Making Time for You: Why the Holidays Can Be the Perfect Season for Cosmetic Surgery



BY DR. CLARK,
BLUEWATER PLASTIC SURGERY

The holidays are filled with shopping, travel, and family gatherings. But, for many people along the Emerald Coast, this season also presents a unique opportunity: the chance to finally schedule a surgical procedure they've been considering. While it may seem counterintuitive to think about cosmetic surgery during the busiest time of year,



December often provides the ideal window for both recovery and renewal. For many of our patients at Bluewater Plastic Surgery, this season becomes the perfect moment to invest in themselves—something we see often as patients appreciate both the flexibility the holidays allow and the attentive, expert care we offer throughout recovery.

Built-In Recovery Time

Most cosmetic surgeries require at least a few days of rest and limited activity. The holiday season often includes built-in vacation days, office closures and school breaks. This natural downtime makes it easier to schedule procedures like breast augmentation, liposuction, tummy tucks or facelifts without missing significant work or family obligations. Many patients

find it comforting to recover while surrounded by supportive loved ones at home.

Starting the New Year with Confidence

January is naturally a season of fresh starts. For patients who undergo procedures in December, the new year often begins with renewed energy and confidence. Whether it's restoring body contours with liposuction, rejuvenating facial features with a facelift, or reclaiming pre-pregnancy shape with a mommy makeover, surgical solutions can provide dramatic, long-lasting results that align with new year goals.

Combining Procedures for Comprehensive Results

The holiday season is also a time when patients consider combining procedures. For example, pairing a tummy tuck with breast surgery in a mommy makeover can provide more balanced, transformative results while limiting recovery to a single period. Similarly, combining facial surgery with non-surgical treatments like injectables or medical-grade skincare can help maximize and maintain results.

Privacy and Discretion

Another benefit we value at Bluewater Plastic Surgery is discretion. With many friends and colleagues traveling or celebrating, it's easier to step back for a short period without raising questions. Many patients appreciate the opportunity to move forward discreetly during the season, knowing that holiday schedules naturally provide privacy. By the time normal routines resume in January, swelling and bruising have often subsided, leaving only the refreshed results. Choosing a board-certified plastic surgeon is essential in ensuring these procedures are performed safely, discreetly, and with exceptional outcomes, especially during a busy season.

To schedule a private consultation and explore your options, contact Bluewater Plastic Sur-

gery today. As a board-certified plastic surgeon, my practice is dedicated exclusively to cosmetic surgery, and I have performed thousands of procedures over the last 25 years. My surgical fo-

cus includes the face, breast, and body, allowing me to tailor procedures to each patient's goals with precision and experience. My highest priorities are patient safety and superior results. With

more than 300 five-star reviews, I let my patients' experiences speak for themselves.

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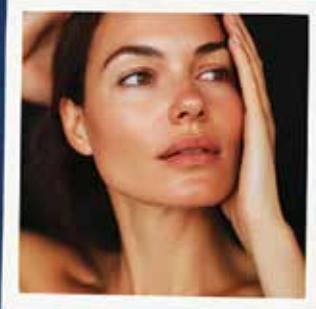
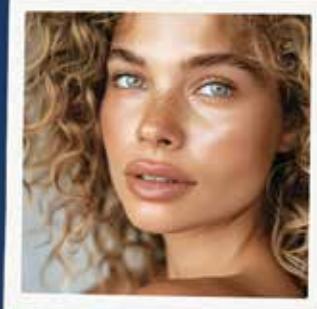
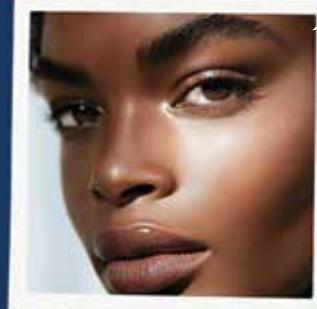
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 **Wellness**


By DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

Social media has a way of knowing when a woman has matured. As a woman enters her 40's, her social media accounts are flooded with advertisements touting magical remedies promising to make life bearable again. Night sweats? Solution. Hot flashes? Solution. Mental Fog? Weight Gain? Decreased libido? Solution. Solution. Solution. And, if you're

struggling, you'll click every link offering a way out. Before you know it, your bathroom counter is overflowing with wellness products and supplements. Just keeping track of it all becomes a daily challenge. Unfortunately, these products rarely treat the root of the problem—changing hormones. This is exactly what we do at the Hormone Restoration Center.

Hormone levels in women are constantly changing. Even women in their 20's and 30's can exhibit early signs of estrogen loss, and they often don't recognize the symptoms. Acne, irregular menstruation, fatigue and mood swings are just a few. As women approach perimenopause and menopause, their symptoms are dismissed

as "normal." Detailed hormone panels are rarely ordered by primary care doctors or OB-GYNs, and in reality, doctors receive very little training on hormones or menopause in medical school. Some report as little as one hour of formal instruction. At The Hormone Restoration Center, our mission is to provide the highest quality medical service with a level of personalized care not available anywhere else. Our highly skilled providers have extensive training in bioidentical hormone therapy and tailor treatments to each patient's individual needs. Bioidentical hormone therapy offers significant benefits for women, particularly those experiencing menopause or hormonal disruption. It effectively

alleviates common menopausal symptoms, enhances overall quality of life, and helps prevent long-term health complications.

Hormone therapy is highly effective in reducing menopause symptoms like hot flashes, night sweats, vaginal dryness, mood swings, irritability, and the dreaded "brain fog." These symptoms severely disrupt your daily life. Hormone therapy restores comfort quickly, often within weeks of starting treatment. Hormone therapy alleviates vaginal dryness and pain during intercourse, thereby improving sexual health. Hormone therapy also improves pelvic floor strength, thereby reducing leakage. Hormones are vital for maintaining bone density; hormone therapy reverses

osteoporosis and decreases your risk for fractures. This contribution to bone health reduces long-term disability associated with osteoporosis and increases mobility in later years.

The Hormone Restoration Clinic is the premiere hormone clinic in the region. We invite you to make an appointment with us at 850-837-1271 to schedule a consultation, so you can experience the benefits of hormone therapy for yourself. Forget making life bearable again. Make life spectacular!

January is Thyroid Awareness Month! Call 850-837-1271 to optimize your thyroid. Follow us on Facebook!



How to Subtract Fat From Your Body



KAY LEAMAN,
HEALTH ARCHITECT

There are four main things that help the body to store fat. The more we abuse them, the more the body responds in kind.

There is a plethora of ads aimed to help us rid ourselves of belly fat creating a billion dollar industry. These 'diets' bring success for the first six months or so, and then slowly the fat begins to

return and the cycle continues.

We know that it's lifestyle vs. diet that can remove the unwanted fat for the long term. Adequate water intake, quality sleep, managing stress, exercise and diet (calories in — calories out) should be our goal. However, understanding what causes the fat to accumulate is a critical component to achieving greater success.

The food we eat is either used as energy or stored as fat. When you get up in the morning, how do you feel? Do you feel refreshed and ready to go or sluggish and dragging? This is our first clue that something is 'off.'



#1 Food Preservatives

Preservatives are used to extend shelf life. Some of these are more toxic than others. They also make food more difficult to digest. These preservatives can lead to gas, bloating, heartburn, slow metabolism, fatigue, sluggishness, brain fog and a decreased sex drive.

One of the most disrupting is high fructose corn syrup (HFCS). The process in producing this chemical is important in understanding it. Because consumers have become aware of the dangers, companies have spent millions in order to 'rename it' so the consumer can remain unaware. There are even products that state they are high fructose corn syrup free when the label states otherwise and the fine line between these is legal!

Some of the new names being used are: maize syrup, glucose syrup, tapioca syrup, fruit fructose, crystalline fruit, HFCS, esoglucose, corn syrup and dahlia syrup.

The body needs energy to

survive. Our energy is stored in the mitochondria of the cell. There are 50 to 2,000 mitochondria in every cell. Within these cells, sugar is converted into glucose and O₂. This is turned into ATP and CO₂. The preservatives in foods prevent them from being properly digested, which means the calories are not able to be converted to energy; less energy for our brains, muscles, etc. When this process continues, the body goes into starvation mode. This teaches the body to take these calories and store them as fat. The body learns to survive by what we feed it.

Utilizing digestive enzymes can aid the body in better digestion. They can reduce gastric and bowel symptoms and increase the body's ability to convert food to energy rather than fat. By combining digestive enzymes with foods that contain less preservatives, we can aid our bodies to better utilize what we eat.

Continued on page 21



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By STEPHENIE CRAIG,
JOURNEY BRAVELY

2025 is rushing to a close. Maybe you find yourself over-scheduled and weighed down by your own expectations or those of others this month. Maybe your mind is busy with gift planning, meal planning and travel planning. What will your kids do while out of school? How will you manage time away from work? How will you navigate awkward and difficult relationships through the holidays? What will you wear? What pictures will you post? How will you love others well?

December is a brain-busy month. It's easy to fill the days forgetting to slow down, rest, and reflect on what 2025 has meant to you. Reflecting on what you have experienced and learned each year creates an opportunity for you to approach the next year with intentionality about living life according to your values. Here are some questions and instructions to guide personal reflection regarding the past year, the present, and what you want for 2026.

Create space – Set aside a couple of hours to work through these questions without distraction (including your phone).

Record reflections – Honestly and vulnerably record your answers so you can refer back to them throughout the year and review them at the end of next year.

Share it – Share your responses with one or two trusted people. Sharing intentions with others solidifies them internally and increases your chances of following through.

Live from it – Use the responses to these questions as a daily compass directing your next steps.

The Past Year

What did you accomplish personally and professionally that you feel really good about?

What challenges, struggles and fears did you work through?

Journey Bravely: 2025 Year End Reflection

What did you hope to accomplish or change but weren't able to? What kept you from doing so?

How are you different from 12 months ago? What did you learn? How did you grow?

How did you make a positive difference in the world around you?

What and who brought you the most joy?

What and who were the greatest stressors?

What did you tolerate this year?

What are you thankful for from the past year?

What are your top 3 insights?

The Present

Life is made up of multiple domains. Take time to check in with yourself by rating each of the following areas on a scale of 1-10:

Personal – How do you feel about yourself?

Physical – How are you taking care of your body (diet, exercise, rest, etc.)?

Financial – How is your financial situation (income, budget, spending, savings, giving, etc.)?

Spiritual – How satisfied are you with the way faith is integrated into your life?

Vocational – How do you feel about your work/career? Family – How are you doing as a partner and/or parent? Friends



– How do you feel about your social relationships?

Fun – How well are you creating time for enjoyment and recreation?

What 2-3 areas of life do you most want to improve in the next year? What steps will you take to make those improvements?

The Upcoming Year

If it were two years from now and you were living your best life, how would you know?

If it were two years from now and you weren't living your best life, what got in the way?

Who do you want to be by the end of the year? In what areas would you like to grow?

What 2-3 things if completed would generate feelings of pride and fulfillment at the end of the year?

What is one thing that if you

accomplished it next year would make all your other goals easier or unnecessary?

What do you want to start in the next year?

What do you want to stop in



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Sean of the South: **Christmas Cheer**



BY SEAN DIETRICH

I was 15 years old. I walked into the rural library. My father was freshly dead. I was a middle-school dropout. We were poor. It was Christmastime.

The small, public library was decorated for the holiday season. There was plastic holiday crapola everywhere. It was cold outside. I had no winter coat.

I stepped into the library with a blast of sleet and rain. I was wearing a T-shirt. My hair was soaked.



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"Where's your coat?" said the librarian.

"I don't have one."

"You don't have a coat?! It's 30 degrees outside!"

Shrug.

The librarian's name was Miss Terry. She was old enough to predate the Roosevelt administration. Her hair was cotton white. Her shoes were Reeboks. Her embroidered sweatshirt read: "Dear Santa, I can explain."

The library was a converted residential house. And I was a regular here.

"You can't go around without a coat," Miss Terry said. "You'll freeze."

Shrug Number Two.

I wandered to the fiction section. Fiction was all I was interested in. I read fiction each morning, afternoon, and night. It was escapism, I see that now. And I was a classic escapist. But

then, there were very few happy things in my life. Who wouldn't want to escape?

That day, I checked out two Louis L'Amour books, a few Dick Francis novels. When I brought my selection up to the counter, Miss Terry just looked at me with warm eyes.

"I have a book I want you to read," she said.

"You do?"

She placed a leather-bound book atop my stack of books. Written by Lucy Maud Montgomery.

"I think you'll appreciate this one."

"It looks like a girl book."

"Try to keep an open mind."

I took the books home, I read them the way I always read books. Ferociously. But when I read the Lucy Maud Montgomery book, time stood still. And my heart moved sideways in my chest. I had never read a book

with more tenderness.

When I returned to the library a week later, Miss Terry asked how I liked the book. I told her it was maybe the best book I ever read.

I returned my books, and checked out more. This time, she placed another book atop my stack. This one was written by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

I took the books home. I read them in a frenzy, just like before. But Laura Ingalls Wilder was immediately my favorite.

I brought the books back to the library.

"How did you like the book I gave you?" she asked.

"I read it twice."

She smiled.

Then it happened. After Miss Terry accepted my stack of books, in return, she gave me a gift-wrapped box. The box was wrapped in glittery red paper, with a green ribbon.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It's for you," she said.

"Is it another book?"

"Just open it."

I tore the paper. There was a coat inside. Warm and fluffy. I cried when I put it on.

"We can't have you catching a cold and getting sick," she said. "There are too many books left for you to read. You might even write one of your own someday."

I wiped my face. "One day I'm going to grow up and write a book," I told her. "And when I do, I'm going to write something about you, and how you gave me this coat."

She smiled and straightened the collar of my jacket. "You won't even remember me when you're all grown up."

Well.

I showed her.



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A Pastor's Ponderings: Christmas Light



BY REV. PETE HYDE

The night was cold and raw when he stepped out onto the balcony of the fifth-floor hotel room. A persistent, spitting rain added a chill to the biting breeze and the gloominess of the evening. The penetrating darkness of Mobile Bay stretched out before him. Irregular points of orange lights dotted the far shore of the Bay, a couple of miles in the distance. The eerie glow of the Mobile's lights blanketed the far shore of the bay with an iridescent mix of orange and white. The faint smell of burgers and fries drifted from the Burger King next to the hotel, adding a whole new dimension to the evening. The evening was not quiet. The constant traffic on I-10 filled the evening with tire noise and the rumble of diesel engines.

He shivered a little from the cold and damp but stayed on the balcony. This would be his only opportunity to have a break in the busyness for a while. The activities of the Christmas season had piled up again this year. What happened to not letting it



happen again this year?

His eyes tracked along the near and far shore. There were no Christmas lights or decorations to be seen. But then something caught his attention. Stretching across the bay was a double line of red lights disappearing into the far side of the bay. Coming from the far side of the bay was a double line of white lights. Like an unwrapped candy cane, the lights lazily curved their way across the bay on the long bay bridge. With an occasional break, the lights mostly moved in an unbroken line with no noticeable beginning or end. So there were Christmas lights after all on this cold, damp evening.

But where were they all going? Confined by the railings of the bridge with no recourse except to follow the crowd – go with the flow. No options to go in a different direction, just get in line and try not to get run over. He fantasized that they

were all singing Christmas carols and enjoying the season. But he knew that was just a wishful fantasy. Some were stewing over struggles at work or with family. Some were surely stressing over the upcoming travel and family visits. Some were grieving over a recent loss. Some were basking in the blessings of the season.

Down the highway, across the bridge they went. Leaving not only a string of red and white lights but a trail of thoughts, issues, smiles, tears, laughter and joy as they joined the crowd of strangers all on the same jour-

ney, but going in different directions.

Wherever your journey takes you this Christmas season, go, knowing the baby born in the manger goes with you. Whether there is a smile on your face in anticipation of the holiday or tears running down your cheeks, wishing it was all over, Jesus journeys with you. When you journey with Him, you will leave a trail of light for all to see. For that is what the season

is all about – THE LIGHT OF CHRIST!

He steps out of the cold and back into the warmth of the hotel room. His heart is refreshed in the anticipation of a couple of days away from the race. His soul is refreshed knowing that The Baby walks or runs through the season with him. Because it's all about HIM!

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



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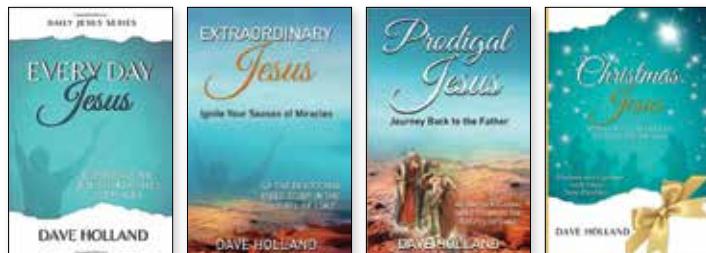
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Society of St. Vincent de Paul Saint Rita Conference, Saint Rita Catholic Church

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, Saint Rita Conference, is a voluntary ministry dedicated to serving those in need within our community. Inspired by the mission of St. Vincent de Paul, we strive to provide compassionate assistance, hope, and support to our neighbors in Santa Rosa Beach, Freeport, Destin and within the city limits of DeFuniak Springs.

Being a "Vincentian" (a Member) within The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is for those who hear a special calling by God. Members are more than volunteers; this is not merely something that we do, but

something that we are: "Vincentians".

As Vincentians, we put our faith into action. We love God, as St. Vincent said, "with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brow." The Vincentian vocation calls us to participate personally and directly in helping the needy by person-to-person contact and by the gift of our hearts and friendship, within the communal spirit of a Conference of lay persons each inspired by the same vocation.

We seek to respond to the call every Vincentian receives, to bring the love of Christ to

those in despair. We accomplish 40-50 home visits each week, helping our neighbors who are in need, regardless of religious affiliation.

One of the most beneficial ways we help our neighbors is through car donations. Reliable transportation is essential for individuals and families to access vital resources such as work, medical appointments, groceries, and other essential services. By assisting with transportation, we aim to promote independence, improve quality of life, and help people overcome barriers that keep them in poverty.

In the past year, we provid-



ed over \$335,000 in assistance, helping more than 1,600 people with car expenses, utility payments, and housing assistance.

Join us in making a difference — whether through volunteering, donations, or prayer.

Together, we can bring hope and kindness to those who need it most.

To learn more, please visit our website at nwfsvdp.com. Thank you, and God Bless.

Subscribing to Hope

By HEATHER BENNETT EYE

Some stories begin with conflict. Some begin with hope. This one begins with resilience.

Across the hills of Judea, the fields of Samaria, and the ancient villages of Israel, families wake each morning committed to revitalizing their land, to rebuilding their livelihoods and their future. Their hands craft olive oil from ancestral groves, mold clay inspired by scrip-

ture, and harvest ingredients from soil their ancestors tended. These are not factory-made goods. They are lifelines.

Many of these small businesses face constant economic strain, uncertainty, and challenges created by distance, politics, and shifting global markets. They continue to produce goods, not because it is easy, but because their work connects their identity, legacy, and surviv-

al. They are working to create job opportunities they can sustain.

Lev Haolam is based near Jerusalem in Israel. It's a global community dedicated to supporting these Israeli artisans, small businesses and farmers. It's not charity, but a partnership. When you join, your membership doesn't just allow you to receive beautiful products, you're stepping into a mission

to uplift families and strengthen communities across Israel.

A membership with Lev Haolam gives you access to their private community, exclusive content, and entry to the members-only shop featuring unique Israeli-made goods. You'll have the opportunity to order a monthly curated Surprise Box filled with hand crafted goods such as organic cosmetics, natural soaps, olive oil, spices, snacks,

works of art, Judaica, ceramics, jewelry, and teas. Each box includes stories of the families you are directly helping. You'll be able to follow their progress, and watch hope grow where there was once struggle.

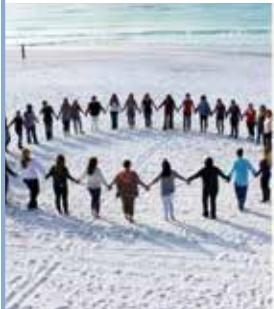
With over 300 producers supported, your membership ensures that Lev Haolam can help the most in need at any given moment, and rotate support among the artisans to significantly impact the lives of many underserved Israeli small businesses.

Lev Haolam has connected thousands of people with Israel for almost a decade and shipped over 1 million boxes worldwide. By visiting <https://t.levhaolam.com>, you can learn more about the membership options, and also learn more about the culture and history of Israel, and the producers who benefit from Lev Haolam members. You can also read reviews from other members and watch them unbox their purchases.

If you believe in supporting families by helping to give them the tools to continue self-reliance and grow their communities, then this mission was made for you. Become a member today and support family businesses. Let every box you receive tell the story of hope you're helping to build.

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Bookshelf: Light Slipping Through the Chaos

Light Slipping Through the Chaos, Finding the Real Story Behind Christmas is a fresh, heartfelt exploration of the real meaning of Christmas, skillfully penned by D.V. Holland.

Rooted in the biblical narrative of Luke 1-2, Holland invites readers to experience the Nativity story in a deeply human and spiritually resonant way. With his signature warmth and narrative clarity, he unpacks the fears, flaws, and faith of the people at the heart of the Christmas story—reminding us that light can

break through even the most chaotic seasons of life.

The book cover displays the central idea. Christ came down from eternity like a small meteorite landing on earth within the womb of a teenage girl in a small village. Subtly, his light grows fulfilling His bringing salvation to humanity.

The book blends devotional insight, historical context, and emotional storytelling in a way that's both accessible and profound. Holland has a gift for connecting the ancient world to



our modern one—making the timeless truths of Scripture feel

relevant, even urgent.

From Mary's teenage courage to Zechariah's silence, from angelic interruptions to divine delays, *Light Slipping Through the Chaos* offers a lens that is both honest and hope-filled. It's not just a Christmas book—it's an invitation to see how God works in the waiting, the wondering, and the wildness of real life.

Perfect for:

- Youth Group or small group Advent studies
- Family devotions

• Personal reflection during the holiday season

This is not the sugary, sanitized version of Christmas. It's the raw, real, God-breaking-in story we all need.

A powerful debut in the “G-Z Series – Luke 1-2,” this book is a timely reminder: the light of Christ still slips through the cracks of chaos, bringing clarity, hope, and peace.

This book can be purchased at Amazon.com, or his website at DaveHolland.org/books.

SUBTRACT FAT

continued from page 16

#2 Bad Gut Bacteria

There are 50-100 trillion bacteria in our gut with over 5,000 species. Our guts are bio-diverse and contain both good and bad bacteria.

The roles of this microbiome: to break down undigested food (carbohydrates), production and absorption of vitamins B's and K, processing of bile and sterols, strengthens the immune system, defends against infection from

bad bacteria, effects brain neurotransmitters (thinking, mood, autism), production of serotonin (low levels can cause depression and anxiety), and hormones that direct fat metabolism and storage.

The effects of when our gut bacteria are out of whack (more bad than good) can be obesity, bowel disease, cancer, brain issues, diabetes, liver disease, immune system issues as well as effects on the skin.

Disruption of this system includes high glycemic foods,

chemicals (preservatives and additives), pesticides, fake sugar, toxic metals, antibiotics used in food, irritating and spicy herbs and condiments, parasite tainted food, allergies to food, lack of vitamins and minerals, stress (cortisol), poor general health, and certain medications such as steroids and NSAIDS. Signs of this disruption are nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, gas, bloating, cramping, constipation, heartburn, irritable bowel syndrome, lactose intolerance, food sensitivities, drowsiness or fatigue af-

ter meals, depression, frequent illness (colds and flu), forgetfulness, sluggish thinking, weight gain and difficulty losing weight (excess body fat).

When there is an overgrowth of bad bacteria and yeast in the gut, sugars are broken down incorrectly and the signals for fat metabolism and storage are disrupted.

Add a probiotic every other day or daily to your diet. Science has shown that we don't need to replace all the bacteria. The two most important bacteria that

can survive the harsh stomach environment are lactobacillus, rhamnosus GG, LGG and bifidobacterium BB-12. These can also be stored at room temperature, making it easy to travel with or take to work.

These are the first two out of four things that allow body fat to accumulate. In the January issue, we will discuss Part II.

Have a fabulous Christmas season! Here's to health!

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 Dining

Beignets & Brew Grayton Beach: Spreading Sweetness

Beignets & Brew, the Florida-based café renowned for its made-to-order New Orleans-style beignets and specialty coffee creations, has officially opened its second Sweet Spot in Santa Rosa Beach, welcoming the community to even more sweetness and connection.

Beignets & Brew Grayton Beach soft-opened on Thurs-



day, November 13, and hosted its grand opening celebration on

Saturday, November 15, quickly becoming a local favorite for sweet treats and specialty coffee. The café is led by franchise partners Chris and Shannon Kramolis, marking Chris's second Sweet Spot with Beignets & Brew.

"As a local, it's incredibly exciting to bring Beignets & Brew to Grayton Beach and share a little sweetness with our communi-

ty," said Chris Kramolis. "We're thrilled to welcome neighbors, friends, and visitors into a place where everyone can find their sweet spot!"

The café offers fresh, made-to-order beignets, specialty coffee creations, and a cozy, Instagram-worthy space where guests can gather, relax, and enjoy sweet moments together. It's the

perfect place to catch up with friends, treat yourself, or simply savor a little sweetness any time of day.

Beignets & Brew Grayton Beach continues the brand's mission to create spaces for connection, comfort, and sweetness in every visit.

Recipe: Nana's Black Chocolate Coffee Cake

By LORI LEATH SMITH

From Venice Irene Cleckler Leath

For many, this time of year evokes childhood memories of holiday smells, tastes and favorite "eats." So, I want to offer one of my own—Nana's Chocolate Coffee Cake. Whenever I think of this cake, it reminds me of exciting holiday vacations with my Nana and Papa John in Rome, Ga. Nana always prepared this cake, a tradition at Thanksgiving and Christmas and it is, seemingly, very different from any cake I've ever had.

One of the fondest memories surrounding this cake is my cousin, Leta (a year younger than me), and I sneaking down the stairs and into the kitchen during the night to snatch another piece! We gave Nana fits over this (and other things, too!). After many, many years, I decided to make it this Thanksgiving. Many of the smells and sweet memories rolled back into my being and it was delightful. I want to pass this along to my children and grandchildren as well.

Keep in mind, this is an antique recipe with real old-fashioned ingredients—amateur

cook tested with success; but, to my knowledge, not Southern Living tested. I use the exact amounts below. But, for example, you can add more confectioner's sugar for the icing, my favorite part, if desired. It might be fun to double the icing recipe for more!)

I hope you enjoy this delight as much as we did and still do.

Cake:

8 tablespoons Cocoa
1/2 cup Butter unsalted
2 cups Granulated Sugar
2 cups All-Purpose Flour
1 1/2 teaspoon Baking Soda



1 cup Buttermilk
1 cup Boiling Water
1/2 teaspoon Salt
2 Eggs

Melt chocolate in boiling water. Add 1/2 cup of butter. Mix 2 cups of sugar, 1/2 teaspoon salt, 2 cups of flour and baking soda, and sift together. Beat chocolate

mixture and flour mixture together. Add milk and beat. Lastly, add the eggs, beating without separating.

Bake for 25 minutes at 375°. (I use two round cake pans, but you could make a sheet cake, too.)

Icing:

3 cups Confectioner's Sugar
1/2 cup Unsalted Softened Butter
2 teaspoons Vanilla
2 tablespoons strong brewed or instant Hot Coffee

Cream butter and sugar together. Add vanilla and coffee.

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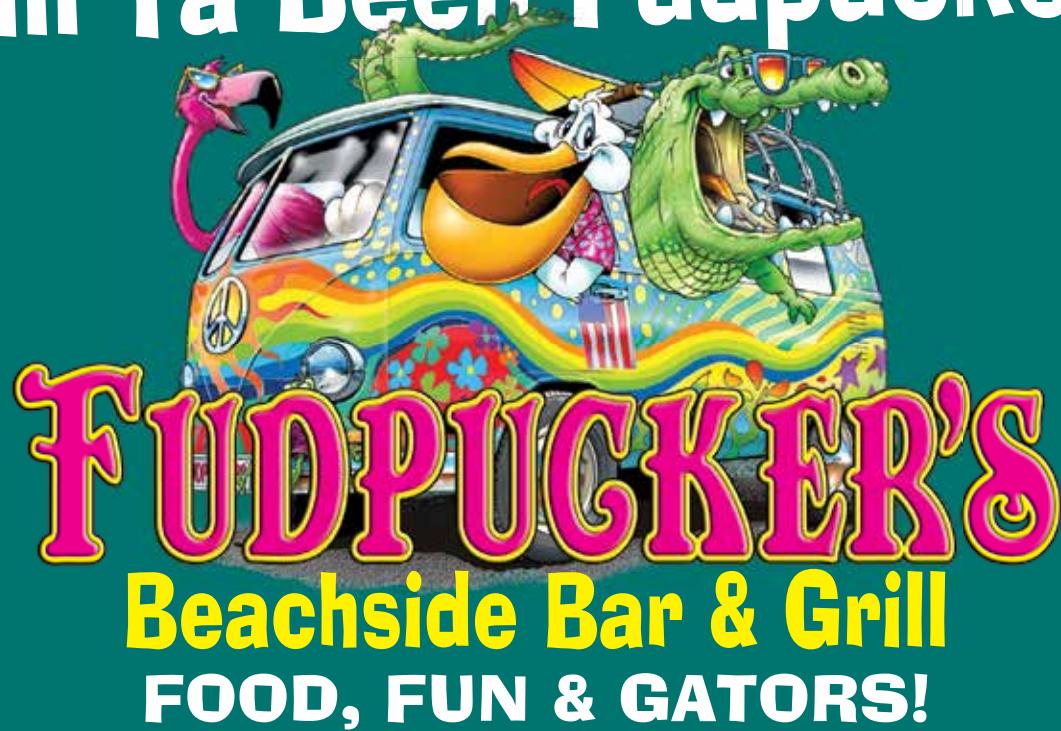
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 Arts & Music

Emerald Coast Theatre Company Presents The Holiday Classic "Annie" Nov. 28-Dec. 21

Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC) lights up the season with Annie, running Nov. 28-Dec. 21 at Grand Boulevard in Miramar Beach. Join Annie, Daddy Warbucks and the unforgettable Miss Hannigan in this beloved, feel-good musical filled with classics like "You're Never

Fully Dressed Without a Smile," "It's the Hard Knock Life," and "Tomorrow."

Directed by Nathanael Fisher, the show features choreography by Emily Bainbridge and Vincent Pellegrino, music direction by Martha Wingfield, and design work by Rebeca Lake,

Taylor Walker, Gavin Young and Cailey Mize, with additional production support from Ora Wolfgram, Carl Hendin and Bella Fisher.

The cast includes Evelyn Brooks and Lanier Hooper as Annie; Adam Du Plessis as Warbucks; Darla Briganti as

Miss Hannigan; Rachel Morse as Grace Farrell; Gavin Parmley as Rooster; and Martha Wingfield as Lily St. Regis, along with a talented ensemble and a large cast of Orphans. Bruce Collier portrays President Franklin D. Roosevelt, with Kingston Mixson as Child Actor Supervisor.

Performances take place at ECTC, 560 Grand Boulevard, Suite 200, with tickets priced \$30-\$65. ECTC's 2025-2026 season is supported by Grand Boulevard Town Center, St. Joe Community Foundation, South Walton, Howard Group and Jerry and Alice Zich.



Engage with ECTC on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube | (850) 684-0323 | emeraldcoasttheatre.org



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What sets it apart? Every performer is a true singer-songwriter, taking the stage with music they wrote themselves. Add in the setting — state-of-the-art listening rooms stretched along scenic Highway 30A, steps from sugar-white sand and emerald Gulf waters — and you have a festival experience like no

other.

Even better, it all supports a cause. Produced by the Cultural Arts Alliance of Walton County, 100% of net proceeds benefit local arts programs, helping keep creativity thriving in our community.

Expect Americana, blues, country, rock, folk, gospel, jazz, neo-soul and more — no genre walls here, just the best songwriters from across the country.

Discounted tickets available for a limited time. Grab yours, cue up the official 30ASWF playlist, and start planning your musical weekend now. Visit 30ASongwritersFestival.com for tickets and more information.

Creating Holiday Cheer With a Sprinkling of Music

We might not always notice it's there... but when envisioning our perfect winter holiday celebration, the picture is just not complete without music.

Not sure where to begin with setting up your holiday soundtrack? Let's gather some inspiration for how you can enhance the holiday atmosphere and create the perfect mood, whether it's a quiet night in or an extravagant party with as many friends and family as could fit in the room.

Bring Up The Energy

Got a party planned? Need to entertain the kids? Decorating the tree? Just gotta get up and dance? It's time to find a Spotify

Ambience and Nostalgia

Our childhood memories of the holidays are often fondly remembered when we hear a certain song, whether it is holiday-related or not. You might put together a playlist of music from the 'early days', or, if you're lucky enough, get the old vinyl player out of the attic and give it a spin. One of our students gives the example of 'Sleigh Ride' by Leroy Anderson, her favorite childhood song and one which her high school band played every year at the winter concert. Songs like these we can never get bored of, as they remind us of the childlike wonder and excitement of the holiday season.

To get all cozy, a YouTube



playlist of party music (or create your own!) and connect it up to your speakers or TV.

You can also make a game out of music. Kids will love a game of musical statues with holiday tunes like 'Jingle Bells' or 'Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree' (though you'll need plenty of space for it). A family sing-along or karaoke session may also be a popular choice.

To test your music knowledge, you might like to play a variation of 'guess the song' from one of the many websites on the internet. Remember the viral game 'Wordle' and its audio equivalent 'Heardle'? With this game, you must guess the song of the day from a short preview. There is now a Christmas music version which you can find here: <https://christmas.heardle-cades.com/>

video with a crackling fireplace is perfect to stream to the TV, and saves cleaning up the mess of a real fire. Soundscapes are very popular on YouTube to create the ultimate cozy atmosphere, for example this one with old-fashioned music muffled as though coming from another room, the sound of people chatting and a fireplace crackling. Lovely! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tfQCcnyUr0>

The Holiday Message

Portrait Of Parents With Children Wearing Festive Jumpers Sitting On Sofa In Lounge At Home On Christmas Day

Portrait Of Parents With Children Wearing Festive Jumpers Sitting On Sofa In Lounge At Home On Christmas Day

There are all kinds of religious tunes out there to take your pick from: peaceful Christian hymns

like Silent Night, upbeat contemporary versions like Canadian rock band Downhere's 'How Many Kings: Songs for Christmas' album, traditional Yiddish songs like 'Oy Chanukah' (with a wonderful classic rendition by the renowned Klezmer Conservatory Band) or even sweetly romantic synth-pop like Buzzy

Lee's 'Give You Everything'.

These are perfect for a family sing-along, or perhaps to make sitting around the dinner table all the more sentimental and filled with praise.

We hope you all have a fantastic holiday season and can't wait to see you all in the new year!

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Christian Capitalist Jason Becker: Entrepreneur and Pastor



BY RICH SANDERS

Jason Becker is the epitome of a Christian Capitalist. From small business owner to pastor of a church, to host of a podcast that has become a YouTube sensation, he brings God into his work every day.

Jason, his wife Danielle, and their three children moved to the Emerald Coast nearly ten years ago from metro Atlanta. As they settled into the SOWAL Life, they could tell that things were different here. Managing a diverse portfolio including real estate, equities and venture capital is enough to keep most business people fully occupied. "I love to find great entrepre-

neurs with great ideas," Jason says. For the Beckers, though, the "freedom that comes with entrepreneurship" allowed them to try something new and different.

Like most fathers of teenage children, Jason noticed the tendency of his kids to ignore or downplay the advice that he gave them. Unlike most dads, he would follow his child's eye roll or shrug with a simple rhetorical question: "Here's my advice, but what the hell do I know?" Jason turned this cynical comeback into a podcast focusing on real-life issues that now has nearly 30,000 subscribers on YouTube!

The path to successful podcaster wasn't linear, however, as Danielle and Jason worked tirelessly in her family's sanitation business near Atlanta for over a decade before the opportunity to sell it arose. As they dramatically grew that business, they worked to bring their faith into day-to-day operations. Jason notes that prayer and faith in the workplace allowed him to lead with "kindness, consideration,



and deliberation", resulting in programs like taking Christmas presents to families in need.

Like selling the business, the opportunity to work in minis-

try was unplanned. The Beckers attended a large church half an hour south of Atlanta. With time on his hands, Jason was focused on real estate investment and playing golf. When he started to notice all the people in need around him, though, "Jesus broke my golf game!" Jason took on greater roles in his church, then led the effort to plant a church in downtown Atlanta. As Jason negotiated with the potential landlord for their church location, he told Jason, "There's just one problem: I hate churches!"

The landlord rented the space to Jason anyway. Jason knew he was in the right place and successfully led that ministry's location for nearly five years.

Today, Jason uses his podcast to continue to spread the Good News. His guest to open Season Three of What the Hell Do I Know? is Meaghan Hampton, who shares lessons on how to biblically parent @soulcareforfamilies, challenging old norms like "spare the rod, spoil the child".

Jason recently appeared on the Christian Capitalist podcast, and you can listen to the entire episode on SOWAL Life's website. We are excited to share inspirational stories of hard work and generous giving to the poor and needy in the name of Jesus Christ, like Jason and Danielle Becker!

Rich Sanders is a pastor, small business owner, retired healthcare attorney and adjunct professor at Emory University, and former intelligence officer in the U.S. Navy. He and his wife, Rebekah, met at church in 1996, have been blessed with three children (James, William and Caroline) and live in Destin with their large golden retriever, Cowboy.



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 **Outdoors**

December on the Line: Where the Fish Are Biting on the Emerald Coast

As December's cooler temps settle in across the Emerald Coast, anglers shift their attention to inshore winter favorites—Flounder, Redfish and Speckled Trout—while also taking advantage of some underrated offshore opportunities unique to this time of year. Cold weather pushes many species

into tighter schools, making them easier to locate once you pattern their movements.

Flounder remain a top target through December. This month offers some of the best action of the year as they move between the Bay and the Gulf, staging on natural and artificial reefs to spawn. Because of their

flat shape, flounder stay tight to the bottom, often burrowing into the sand as they ambush prey. Look for them within 200 yards off the beach in 20–60 feet of water or around nearshore structure along Destin Pass and East Pass. Gulf Flounder and Southern Flounder are the most common; the larger female

Southern Flounder can reach up to 28 inches. One perk for anglers: if a flounder misses your bait, they often return for a second strike—so be patient.

Speckled Trout push into deeper, slower-moving water during the winter. Look for them around deep boat docks, bridges, bayou drop-offs, and deep channels in Choctawhatchee Bay and around Fort Walton Beach. Live shrimp, pinfish, and croakers on a Carolina rig work well, as do soft-plastic shrimp tails. A slow troll is an excellent way to locate a school; once you get a hit, switch to live bait to maximize your chances.



live shrimp, and sand fleas are top-tier baits. Their bite is notoriously subtle, so stay alert.

Black Drum also school up in winter and can be found around deep channels, bridges, and bay docks. Smaller drum are excellent table fare, while the larger “big uglies” offer fun, steady action on light tackle.

Dog-Harmony Receives Generous Q4 Donation from 100+ Women Who Care Emerald Coast

Dog-Harmony, Inc. is honored to announce that it has received a generous Q4 donation of \$18,800 from 100+ Women Who Care Emerald Coast, a philanthropic group dedicated to making a meaningful, local impact through collective giving.

This gift will directly support the expansion of Dog-Harmony’s evaluated Therapy Dog Teams across Okaloosa, Walton, and Bay Counties, allowing more children to benefit from the comfort, confidence, and emotional support these volunteer teams provide. Ther-

apy Dog Teams are essential for Dog-Harmony’s caring mission to provide literacy and wellness programs, including READING Paws, humane education classes, and visits with at-risk youth.

The donation will also help sustain current Therapy Dog Teams by supporting specialty insurance, handler and dog uniforms, training, and essential operational needs that keep the program running safely and effectively.

“We are deeply grateful to the members of 100+ Women Who Care Emerald Coast

for believing in our mission,” said Nancy Bown, Executive Director of Dog-Harmony. “Their generosity allows us to reach even more children with the healing presence of Therapy Dogs and helps ensure our teams can continue serving the community with excellence.”

Women interested in joining this incredible local giving circle and supporting local nonprofits can learn more at facebook.com/100WWCEC.

For more information on Dog-Harmony or to learn how to get involved as a volunteer, visit dog-harmony.org.

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Nearshore and Offshore Winter Notes:

Calmer winter days can offer excellent opportunities for Triggerfish (catch-and-release only in state waters this month), Vermilion Snapper, Blackfin Tuna, King Mackerel (on warm fronts), and Amberjack (season-dependent). Many anglers troll for Blackfin just outside the Pass or hit nearshore wrecks for winter bottom fishing. On the coldest days, keep an eye out for gin-clear water along the beach—perfect for sight-fishing bull reds.

Sheepshead, a cold-weather favorite, become increasingly active this month. Look for them around bridge pilings, jetties, docks, and rock piles—especially along the Destin Harbor and Brooks Bridge in Fort Walton Beach. Fiddler crabs,



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Wildlife in Fall

BY HELEN PETRE

Welcome to fall! It is time for us humans to break out the blankets and jackets, but what do our wild animals do to prepare? Fortunately, they have everything they need to stay warm. In fall, most animals start eating a lot. They need to add a layer of fat to keep them warm and provide energy to sustain them through the winter when there is little food.

The Florida black bear, *Ursus americanus* *floridanus*

The Florida black bear is the only bear in Florida. There are about 4,000 in all of Florida, but only about 120 in the western Panhandle, mostly on Eglin land. They prefer dense undergrowth in scrub oak ecosystems, swamps, and flatwoods. One was seen in Grayton Beach State Park recently, and it was not small. Should we be worried about large, dangerous animals while walking in the woods or on the beach? Probably not. As with all wildlife you encounter in their habitats, give them room and do not try to interact with them. If you are hiking in an area that is bear habitat, make noise. If the bear hears you, he will most likely move away from you.

Bears mate in the summer, but the eggs do not implant until November, and then, only if the female has gained enough weight. The cubs are born in January as tiny, helpless things weighing less than a pound. Females feed and protect them denned in the saw palmetto understory until spring.

Males are much larger than females, weighing about 350 pounds, while females weigh in around 200 pounds. Bears that eat garbage, pet and wildlife food are much larger because those foods are higher in calories than the normal diet of mostly plants and insects. Bears eat bees, wasps, and other insects, soft mast consisting of saw palmetto and holly berries, and hard mast, a variety of acorns and hickory nuts.

In fall, bears are eating about 20,000 calories a day in order to prepare for the winter when there is less food, and females are denned with offspring. That is as much as a normal person should eat in ten days, or the



caloric count of about eight pizzas. In fall, bears feed for about 18 hours a day, so the chance of seeing a bear is rather good in fall.

It is illegal to feed bears in Florida. Considering they are trying to gain weight in fall, if a bear finds your garbage, he will happily eat it. This is not good, for many reasons. Human garbage and dog food is not very nutritious for bears. Bears that are accustomed to eating your garbage and dog food lose their fear of humans and become aggressive if you do not have food for them. To prevent bears from wanting to be in your yard, keep garbage in the garage or lock your containers. Take in pet and bird feeders. Bears are usually solitary and quiet animals, but if they smell your tasty buffet, they will come to get it.

White-tailed deer *Odocoileus virginianus*

Deer are actually more dangerous than bears, not because they attack people, but because they tend to run out on the road right in front of moving vehicles. Deer feed along the edge of the highway, especially in fall, when they, like bears, are trying to fatten up. Males are about 115 pounds and have antlers, and females are about 90 pounds. White-tailed deer are edge species, choosing to browse low growing vegetation along an edge where they can see predators. This makes the side of highways and yards that back to woods, or the edge of fields,



Eastern Gray Squirrel *Sciurus carolinensis*

Even if you do not get out into the forest and see bears, you will see squirrels, busily collecting their favorite foods, acorns and hickory nuts, getting ready for the winter. The Eastern Gray Squirrel is our backyard squirrel, and has adapted to feeding from bird feeders, if available. These are our friends, as their habit of burying nuts leads to forest regeneration. If you are quiet, you can hear them chattering to each other as they search, bury and eat mast.

As we enjoy the cooler weather and fall colors, this is a good time to go out and walk in the woods or along the dunes at one of our parks. Our animal friends are busy preparing for winter, eating lots of calories and putting on an extra layer of fat to keep them warm in the coming cold. This is a great time to explore nature and learn how animals prepare for the lean season to come. Remember to give them space and let them show you how their world works.

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