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Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center Celebrates 25 Years of Helping Children Heal

BY KAY PHELAN

For a quarter of a century, the Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center (ECCAC) has been dedicated to providing hope, healing and justice to child abuse victims and their families in Florida's Okaloosa and Walton Counties. ECCAC has two centers—the Pierce Family Children's Advocacy Center in DeFuniak Springs and the Julie Sacco Porterfield Children's Advocacy Center in Niceville. ECCAC is an accredited part of the National Children's Advocacy Center non-profit organization. There are 900 Centers across the country, with 28 of them located in Florida.

How ECCAC Works

The centers don't house children, but instead provide many needed services 24/7 in a child-friendly environment where children can safely tell their stories. Along with EC-



CAC's staff and volunteers, both of our local centers house a multidisciplinary team of child protection representatives from the Florida Department of Children and Families, Child Protection Team, State Attorney's Office, local law enforcement and licensed mental health counselors. In

ECCAC's 25-year history, over 33,000 children have received more than 200,000 services at no cost.

The single most important hallmark of ECCAC's process is the fact that the impacted child, dealing with the immediate trauma and stress of their situation, can tell their story in one room, just one time. They do not have to repeat it numerous times at different places to different people. In other words, all pertinent parties that can help the child victim are all there at the centers at the same time. Once the child tells their story, action is immediately taken as required for that particular case. It is estimated that for every child ECCAC helps in the two counties, there are two children out there who are not helped due to lack of reporting to authorities.

ECCAC
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The New Year's Evolution:

How Modern Integrative Medicine Is Redefining Wellness

BY DR. KAREN DEVORE,
TORTOISE CLINIC

January is a natural invitation to reevaluate how we care for ourselves—not just in terms of resolutions, but in how we want to feel as we move through a new year. More rested. More resilient. More focused. More capable of adapting to life's changes without feeling depleted by them.

WELLNESS
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 **Community**
ECCAC

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The Progress to Help Children Continues

The Niceville center was the first to open 25 years ago. With Jim and Tammy Pierce's major financial support in 2015, the second center in DeFuniak Springs was made possible. The Pierce Family Children's Advocacy Center became a reality and opened on April 8, 2016. This enabled a major increase in the number of children who can be helped. As well, with prevention being key to making a difference for children, many support programs have been instituted over the years, such as Child Safety Matters, which has advocates who have taught awareness pro-



DeFuniak Springs Center in Walton County.

grams to over 17,000 students in both counties. Also, through another grant program, 2 1/2 years ago ECCAC implemented its CARES program, a preventative family-oriented initiative with a

myriad of services designed to be the bridge to keeping children in safe and supported homes and out of the judicial child welfare system. CARES stands for Community Awareness, Advocacy, Resources, Education and Support.

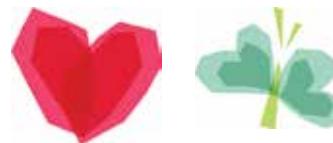

Leadership and the Community Make A Difference

Julie Sacco Porterfield, ECCAC's CEO has been heading up the organization since the very beginning. Her dedication and diligence have been significantly responsible for ECCAC's success and continuing commitment to help area children.

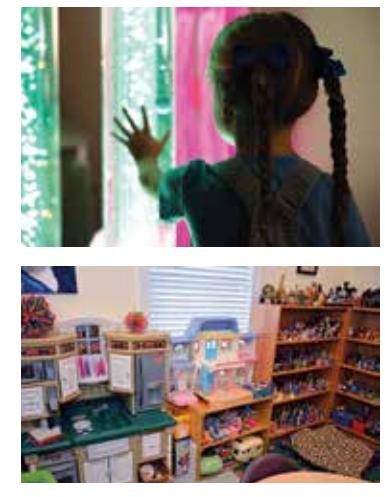
Porterfield commented, "Twenty-five years ago, we stood on the front porch to open the Niceville Center. Our dedicated team members made a promise to our community to protect the most vulnerable in our community. This would not have been possible were it not for our incredible agency partners, our Board of Directors, generous donors, ded-



Niceville Center in Okaloosa County.



icated volunteers and our caring community." She further added, "One day we will hang that "Closed for Business" sign – not in defeat, but in triumph, because every child will be living free from abuse, abandonment and neglect. Children deserve absolutely no less. We will continue to build a better, healthier future by ending child abuse, one child at a time."



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Events Around the Beach

Habitat for Humanity Pup-Up Benefit Jan. 24

Join Habitat for Humanity for the first-ever Pup-Up supporting their friends at Road Dogg Rescue. Beginning at 10 a.m. on January 25th, head to the Habitat Restore in Santa Rosa Beach to support your local furry friends.

Driven by the vision that everyone needs a decent place to live, Habitat for Humanity of Walton County was founded in 1996. To donate, volunteer, get your company involved, or inquire about applying for Habitat homeownership, please visit WaltonCountyHabitat.org.

Night Of Hope Concert Benefiting Caring & Sharing Jan. 30

Tickets are now on sale for a special benefit concert featuring Legacy Five, the Dove Award-winning Southern Gospel group, performing Friday, January 30 at 7 p.m. at Good News Church. The event is brought to the community by The Crawford Family, with 100% of event proceeds benefiting Caring &

Sharing of South Walton.

Renowned for their rich four- and five-part harmonies, Legacy Five brings together five uniquely gifted vocalists whose artistry has earned the group national acclaim. Their return to Walton County marks their fourth performance benefiting Caring & Sharing, promising an inspiring evening of music and community impact.

Tickets: www.tinyurl.com/y4hfcwu5.

Biophilia Center Sips & Scenes Jan. 31

Join the Biophilia Center for a fun and inspiring celebration of art as you tap into your creative side! An adults-only event (18+), Sips at Scenes begins at 11 a.m. This experience features a guided craft led by a talented local artist. A Biophilia Animal Ambassador will make a special appearance during the activity to spark creativity and help inspire your masterpiece. An additional up-close animal encounter is also available as an add-on with your ticket. Guests must be 21 or older

to enjoy alcoholic beverages. BYOB is encouraged, and participants 21+ will enjoy bottomless mimosas included with their ticket. Tickets: <https://secure.qgiv.com/for/nokuseeduction/event/biophiliaartfestivalkidsraftday>.

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 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.

Visit <https://PinkRunBenefitingForeHer.itsyourrace.com> to register.

Sponsorships remain available for this high-profile event. For more information and available sponsorship opportunities, visit foreher.org/pinkrun or email [Amy@foreher.org](mailto:amy@foreher.org).

Nick's Seafood Annual Bonfire Feb. 7

They'll be firing up the biggest bonfire in the county and throwing the kind of party only Nick's can get away starting at 5 p.m. DJ Viper opens and closes, and the Velcro Pygmies are rolling in to crank the night into full rock-and-roll mode. There will be food service inside of the restaurant, an ATM, and a cash bar located on premises. Additional parking will be located west of the restaurant. Expect big fire, loud music, cold drinks, and a lot of good-natured coastal debauchery on the

bay. Bring your crew. Bring your stories. Leave the quiet nights at home.

DCWAF Annual Galentine's Fundraiser Feb. 7

DCWAF's Galentine's Day Fundraiser is turning five, and we're going all out to honor the queens in our community that come together to give back! Hosted in Destin at the home of Candis Wilson, Galentine's brings influential women in the community together to support one another while raising money for programs designed to empower young girls through DCWAF's 16 partner children's charities and beyond. All individuals and businesses affiliated with the production of this event are female owned and operated. The cards have been dealt, and every Queen deserves her moment during this fun day of giving. More info/tickets: <https://www.dcwaf.org/events/5th-annual-galentines-day-fundraiser>.

Continued on next page



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New Year!*

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 **Community**
EVENTS*continued from page 3***Sowal Comedy Fest
Feb. 12-14**

SOWAL Comedy Fest (formerly Sand Up Comedy Fest) returns Thursday, February 12 through Saturday, February 14, 2026, bringing three days of sharp, big-city stand-up to South Walton over Valentine's weekend — an ideal date-weekend escape built around intimate rooms, capped attendance, and unforgettable nights out.

Headliners include Peter Wong (New York, NY) Anjelica Scannura (New York, NY) and Carter Deems (Atlanta, GA). Venus include SOWAL House Wild Olives and Distillery 98.

Early ticket purchase is encouraged. Tickets are on sale now (purchase by date, venue, or headliner) at www.sowalcomedyfest.com.

**Taste of the Race at
SEASIDE® Lyceum
Feb. 13**

Get ready for an unforget-

table evening as SEASIDE SCHOOL™ kicks off its annual 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.

Hats & High Heels Luncheon takes place at The Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa from 11 a.m.-1 p.m.

**Baytowne Annual Mardi
Gras Parade Feb. 15!**

Mardi Gras is bigger and better than ever at The Village of Baytowne Wharf! The Village streets will be filled with unique and colorful floats, golf carts, vehicles and costumed dogs along with their humans. Mardi Gras music will fill the air as parade participants and four-pawed friends shower parade-goers with a barrage of beads, moon pies and other trinkets.

For more information, visit baytownewharf.com.

TV/Film Star & Comedy Legend Yakov Smirnoff is coming to Destin to perform his most up-close & personal shows ever!

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**Comedy Legend Yakov
Smirnoff Brings Heart,
Humor and Hope to Town**

TV and film star and comedy legend Yakov Smirnoff is coming to town to perform his most up-close and personal shows ever. From his first appearance on The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson to his most recent return with Jimmy Fallon, Yakov's career has truly stood the test of time.

A beloved regular on the hit TV comedy Night Court, Smirnoff has also appeared in films alongside Tom Hanks, Meryl Streep, Robin Williams, Jack Nicholson and Richard Pryor. He is set to join Mark Wahlberg in a brand-new feature film scheduled for worldwide release in late 2026.

Yakov's incredible journey began in 1977 when he left his homeland in the former Soviet Union to pursue the American dream. His charming, insightful perspective as a newcomer to America quickly resonated with audiences, propelling him to the top of the comedy world and leading to success on both the big screen and television. His PBS television special Happily Ever After was named "Best Special" in both 2016 and 2017, and he has had the rare honor of performing for four U.S. presidents.

More than just jokes, Ya-

kov Smirnoff's comedy is a journey of heart, humor and hope. His storytelling blends innocence with wisdom, absurdity with insight, and laughter with humanity, appealing to families, couples and anyone seeking clean, timeless comedy with genuine meaning.

Yakov will perform on Feb. 6, 7 and 8, with 4 and 7 p.m. showtimes at The Palms of Destin Resort. The venue features an intimate showroom with excellent table seating, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, and plentiful free parking. The Palms is also home to a year-round house show produced by Hollywood-based entertainment producer Bart Rockett,

featuring never-before-seen magic, illusions and hilarious comedy ventriloquism. While written for adults, the show is family-friendly and regularly enjoyed by children as well.

Tickets for Yakov Smirnoff's performances, as well as other shows at The Palms, are available at MagicDestin.com. Scroll down on the home page to find Yakov's link or explore additional performances. Reservations may also be made by emailing the box office at MagicTicketAgent@gmail.com.

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eccac.org/gala-golf



EMERALD COAST POOLS
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Nestled in the heart of Walton County, Emerald Coast Pools & Outdoor Living has established itself as a cornerstone of the Freeport and Destin communities. Specializing in high-end custom concrete (gunite) and fiberglass pools, the company has spent years transforming ordinary backyards into luxurious aquatic retreats. As the region experiences rapid growth in 2026, the company remains a trusted partner for homeowners seeking to blend the natural beauty of the “Emerald Coast” with personalized outdoor living spaces.

LEADERSHIP AND VISION

The company is owned and operated by Timothy (Tim) Nobles Jr., a dedicated professional whose commitment to craftsmanship is the driving force behind the brand’s success. Under his leadership, Emerald Coast Pools has prioritized a “quality over quantity” approach, ensuring that every project—from sleek infinity pools overlooking the Gulf to serene lagoon-style retreats—reflects the unique vision of the homeowner.

With over 25 years of collective experience in the industry, Tim and his team are known for navigating the complex logistics of coastal construction, including stringent HOA requirements and Walton County permitting processes. This local expertise allows them to deliver projects on time and within budget, a rare feat in the competitive Florida construction market.

SERVICE BEYOND CONSTRUCTION

Emerald Coast Pools & Outdoor Living is more than just a pool builder; it is a full-service outdoor lifestyle company. Their offerings include:

- Custom Design: Utilizing advanced finishes like Pebble Tec for natural aesthetics and durability.
- Comprehensive Renovations: Transforming outdated or damaged pools into modern, efficient spaces.



- Outdoor Amenities: Expanding the “living room” to the outdoors with custom kitchens, fire pits, putting greens, and high-quality fencing.

A PILLAR OF THE COMMUNITY

In Freeport and the surrounding Destin area, small businesses like Emerald Coast Pools are considered the “lifeblood” of the community. The company’s dedication to the region is evident in its responsive customer service—often providing same-day replies to clients years after a project is completed. By focusing on individualized, dedicated service that larger corporations cannot match, Tim Nobles and his team have built a reputation for honesty and reliability.

Whether they are supporting local teachers on World Teacher’s Day or helping a family design their first “beach home” focal point, Emerald Coast Pools & Outdoor Living remains committed to the families of Northwest Florida. For those in Freeport looking to invest in a lifetime of outdoor experiences, the company continues to prove that they are not just building pools—they are building the heart of the home.

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 **Community**
WELLNESS
continued from page 2

It's become quite common for me to see more and more patients shifting from simply treating illness to supporting everyday function and long-term vitality. They want to sleep more deeply, recover more efficiently, think more clearly, move through hormonal transitions with confidence, and under-

stand how food, environment, and genetics influence their health. This reflects a growing recognition that real wellness is less about chasing symptoms and more about supporting the body's natural ability to regulate and restore.

At the heart of that regulation is communication between the nervous system, hormones, immune function, and metabolism. When these systems

communicate clearly, the body adapts with remarkable precision. When that communication becomes disrupted, however, we start to feel "off," even if we can't pinpoint exactly why.

Integrative medicine aims to restore this clarity. It blends foundational practices such as nutrition, acupuncture, herbal medicine, medical massage, and lifestyle therapeutics with modern clinical tools including

IV nutrients, hormone support, advanced testing, targeted supplementation, and, when appropriate, peptides. None of these replace conventional medicine; rather, they deepen and complement it, allowing us to treat both root causes and overall function.



trauma, or chronic inflammation can keep the nervous system in a heightened state, affecting mood, hormones, digestion, immunity, and pain perception.

I always begin with a comprehensive evaluation including history, lifestyle, symptoms, and both conventional and specialty lab testing to understand the patterns at play. From there, treatment may include acupuncture or neuro-acupuncture, medical massage, tailored herbal formulations, nutritional support, or breath and lifestyle practices aimed at restoring regulation.

When the nervous system is supported, peptides, IV nutrients, and hormone therapy gain a clearer path to work. Without that foundation, progress is often slower or less sustainable.

A Thoughtful Approach to the Year Ahead

Optimization is not instantaneous; it unfolds gradually. The smallest physiological shifts such as better sleep, steadier energy, fewer inflammatory flares are often the signs that regulation is returning. They build upon one another, creating resilience in ways that feel both subtle and profound.

For over 30 years, the Tortoise Clinic has brought together Eastern tradition and Western science to support our community's well-being. Our mission remains unchanged to offer thoughtful, individualized care rooted in safety, evidence, and respect for the body's natural intelligence.

As we move into a new year, consider that meaningful transformation doesn't require dramatic reinvention. It begins with understanding your body's needs, supporting its communication pathways, and allowing small shifts to create meaningful change over time because your wellness is a marathon, not a sprint.



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IDIDAHIKE 2026 Invites Miramar Beach Residents to Fall in Love with Florida's Wild Side

For locals accustomed to sugar-white sand, emerald water and harbor sunsets, one of Northwest Florida's most extraordinary natural landscapes lies just inland — and closer than many realize. This Valentine's Day, locals are invited to explore that wilder side of Florida during IDIDAHIKE 2026, hosted by the Choctawhatchee Chapter of the Florida Trail Association.

Set for **Saturday, Feb. 14, 2026**, the annual event brings hikers, families and outdoor enthusiasts together for a day of guided exploration through the

Nokuse Land Conservancy, a protected expanse of more than 55,000 acres of longleaf pine forests, wetlands and wildlife habitat stretching across Walton and Okaloosa counties.

For those who spend most days on the water, IDIDAHIKE offers a refreshing change of scenery — an opportunity to step off the beach and into an inland landscape that plays a vital role in conservation efforts statewide.

A Regional Treasure with Statewide Importance

Nokuse — a Creek word



meaning "bear" — is a cornerstone of the Florida Wildlife Corridor, providing critical habitat for Florida black bears, gopher tortoises and countless other native species. Its preserved landscape safeguards ecosystems that once dominated the Southeast and are now increasingly rare.

Winding through Nokuse is the Florida National Scenic Trail, one of only 11 national scenic trails in the country. Nearly 28 miles of the trail pass through the preserve and are maintained by dedicated volunteers from the Florida Trail Association, including members of the Choctawhatchee Chapter who live and work throughout Okaloosa and Walton counties.

IDIDAHIKE highlights this regional gem with four curated hikes designed to showcase Nokuse's diverse environments

— from open pine flatwoods and shaded forest corridors to wetlands and elevated boardwalks. Along the way, participants may spot deer, migratory birds and signs of the wildlife that give the preserve its name.

"These hikes help people understand why protecting places like Nokuse matters," organizers say. "It's about conservation, stewardship and ensuring future generations can experience Florida the way it once was."

Education, Conservation and a Day Well Spent

A key feature of IDIDAHIKE 2026 is access to the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center in Freeport, operated by the Nokuse Education Foundation. Named for the late world-renowned biologist and conservationist Edward O. Wilson, the center serves as a hub for environmental education, scientific research and community engagement.

Open to IDIDAHIKE participants on Saturday afternoon, the Biophilia Center features interactive exhibits, nature-based learning programs and outdoor spaces designed to connect visitors of all ages to the surrounding preserve. For Destin families, it offers an educational complement to the day's hikes — and a deeper look at conservation work happening right here in Northwest Florida.

Community, Connection and Valentine's Day on the Trail

While the trail itself is at the heart of the event, IDIDAHIKE is designed as a welcoming community gathering. Educational speakers will share insights into local ecosystems, while food trucks and gathering areas provide space for hikers to relax, refuel and connect.

With its playful Valentine's Day and "bear" themes, IDIDAHIKE welcomes couples, families, friend groups and solo hikers alike, offering a meaningful way to celebrate the holiday through shared experiences in nature.

Make It a Weekend Escape

For those looking to turn the event into a weekend adventure, overnight camping is available Friday, Feb. 13, and Saturday, Feb. 14, at Pine Log Wildlife Management Area in Bay County near Youngstown, just north of Panama City. A limited number of 40 campsites will be offered, providing a peaceful overnight experience under the stars — all within easy driving distance of Destin.

For more information, visit floridatrail.org. To register for the hike, visit floridatrail.org/ididahike.

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A New Way to Live in Retirement

Before the first streaks of sunrise settle over Inlet Beach, one member is already at the gym — stretching, lifting, moving with a quiet determination. “I wake up at 4:30,” he says with a shrug, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. “I work out, head back for breakfast, and then I decide: golf simulator... or swimming?”

He smiles. “I feel better than I have in years.”

Across the community, the day opens at its own gentle tempo. A woman clips a leash on her dog and walks toward one of the community’s dog-friendly outdoor areas, grateful for the easy routine they’ve settled into. Not long ago, she was living with her daughter in Alys Beach, watching Watersound Fountains being built across the highway. She never imagined it would one day be home.

“I thought, Those places aren’t for me,” she admits.

But when her daughter insisted she come take a look, everything shifted — the bright, thoughtfully designed apartments, the welcoming outdoor



spaces for her dog, the light, the openness, the surprising sense of possibility.

“After the first week,” she says, “there was no going back.”

The beauty of a morning here is that everyone’s version looks a little different. Some head to the balance studio for physical therapy. Others meet friends on the walking trails that curl through Watersound and 30A. Some hop on a bike. Some linger over coffee. Each person finds their own pace.

By mid-morning, the community hums with activity. One member laughs as she lists her schedule: “Today I had, back-to-back: physical therapy, a fitness class, book club, then happy hour.” She shakes her head, still amused. “It’s just kind of nonstop here.”

And yet, it’s never rushed. Life simply unfolds — with options around every corner.

For many, the choice to move to Watersound Fountains was about proximity. After years in



Georgia, far from children and grandchildren, one couple realized they wanted the holidays, the milestones, and the simple weekends back. Now their son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter live minutes away. “We do more now,” they say. “Especially with family so close.”

Afternoons often stretch into easy hours. Neighbors meet in the W Lounge. Others gather around the open hearth pizza oven, where flatbreads are rolled out right in front of them. On Fridays, The Mark dining room becomes the community’s favorite tradition — a dressed-up, reservations-only dinner with filet, snapper, grouper, and the kind of conversations people look forward to all week.

There’s always movement, always laughter, always someone waving from a walkway or

calling out a hello — the kind of natural, everyday community that makes a place feel alive.

What surprises many is not how much there is to do, but how effortless daily life feels here. The physical therapist is downstairs. The gym is steps away. The trails are safe and beautifully maintained. The beaches and local favorites are just a short drive. Every day can unfold at its own pace.

“You can do as much or as little as you want,” a member says as she waves to a neighbor. “It’s like living in a resort — but it feels like home.”

And maybe that’s the truest throughline here.

Occasionally, one member’s daughter will call and say, “Come home — come stay some.” And she’ll laugh and reply, “But I am home. This is my home.”

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Trends & Treasures!



Confidence Looks Good on You

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A new year is the perfect time to refresh your look — and at Pure & Couture Salon, confidence is always in style. Known for its personalized approach to beauty and self-care, the salon offers a full range of hair, makeup and wellness services designed to help clients look and feel their best.

Owner Adrienne Brackett and her team of experienced stylists and makeup artists take time to truly listen, creating looks that reflect each client's personality, lifestyle and goals. From vibrant color and precision cuts to hand-tied hair extensions, Pure & Couture focuses on healthy, beautiful hair at every stage. The salon also carries professional-grade products, including Oribe's Renewal Remedies Treatment, to support stronger, longer and healthier hair at home.

Beyond hair, clients can enjoy makeup services, spray tans, pampering facials and therapeutic offerings that elevate the beauty experience into total self-care. Every visit is about building a relationship — not just a style.

With convenient curbside pickup and online ordering available, Pure & Couture makes it easy to invest in yourself. Step into the new year feeling polished, confident and completely you.

Sister location: Pure Collective Salon, 600 Grand Blvd., Suite 102.

(850) 424-3935 | facebook.com/PureandCouture
pureandcouture.com

Sweeten the Year, One Cupcake at a Time

Smallcakes Destin

A new year calls for fresh flavors, bright colors and a little indulgence — and Smallcakes delivers cupcake heaven in every bite. Known for its made-from-scratch treats and playful creativity, this beloved bakery turns

everyday moments into sweet celebrations.

From classic favorites to bold, seasonal creations, Smallcakes offers an ever-changing lineup of cupcakes topped with swirls of colorful, crave-worthy frosting. With daily signature flavors, rotating specialties and house-made ice cream, there's always something new to discover. Hosting a party or celebrating a milestone? Smallcakes specializes in custom and holiday cupcakes, birthday and wedding cakes, edible logos and images — and even "pup cakes" so furry friends don't miss out on the fun.

Beyond cupcakes, the menu is packed with irresistible options including jumbo cookies, gourmet popcorn, brownies, cookie cakes and cupcakes-in-a-jar. Can't choose just one? A box of assorted mini cupcakes lets you sample the best of everything.

Perfect for parties, gifting or just treating yourself, Smallcakes adds a pop of color and joy to the year ahead. Because life is sweeter when dessert comes first. And who doesn't like a gift of sweets?

Call ahead for pre-orders, DoorDash or curbside pickup! Hours: Mon. through Sat., 11 a.m. – 7 p.m.; Sun. 11 a.m. – 4 p.m.

(850) 842-9002 | Follow @SmallCakesofDestin
SmallcakesDestin.com

Put Pen to Paper in Style

Frill Seekers Gifts & Personalized Fabulous Finds

In a world of quick texts and instant replies, a handwritten note stands out — and Frill Seekers Gifts makes it unforgettable. This new year, say it beautifully with custom stationery that turns everyday words into keepsakes.

From thank-you notes and notecards to personalized stationery, calling cards and monogrammed notepads, Frill Seekers helps you plan ahead for life's meaningful moments. Birthday

thank-yous, words of encouragement, baby announcements, save-the-dates and wedding invitations all become more special when they're thoughtfully designed and written by hand.

The team at Frill Seekers believes stationery is an art form — one that reflects your personality, style and sentiment. Whether you prefer classic elegance, modern flair or playful charm, they'll help you create pieces that feel uniquely yours while staying within your budget.

Your invitation or announcement is often the first impression of a celebration. Schedule a private design appointment or stop by to explore their stunning selection of personalized stationery, invitations and custom paper goods. When you slow down a little and take the time to write, it's always worth sending.

Open Monday-Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturdays 10 a.m.-2 p.m.

(850) 460-2700 | facebook.com/FrillSeekersGifts
frillseekersgifts.com

Where Timeless Love Meets Sparkle

Beyond Measure Fine Jewelry

For those who believe fine jewelry should be as meaningful as it is beautiful, Beyond Measure Fine Jewelry delivers an experience that truly lives up to its name. Specializing in exceptional diamonds, gemstones and precious metals, the boutique showroom shines with exquisite bracelets, rings, necklaces and earrings — each piece thoughtfully selected or custom designed.

Owner and designer Ashleigh Woolly is especially passionate about creating engagement rings and wedding bands, working closely with couples to bring their love stories to life. "It is truly special to help people celebrate one of the biggest moments of their lives," Woolly shared. Over the past year, Beyond Measure has had the honor of designing hundreds of custom pieces, each

one as unique as the milestone it represents.

Whether your style leans classic, modern or completely one-of-a-kind, a visit to Beyond Measure promises inspiration at every turn. From heirloom-worthy designs to bespoke creations, this is where craftsmanship, elegance and heartfelt moments come together.

2026 design consultations are now being booked for a personalized, one-on-one jewelry experience — where every detail is crafted beyond measure.

(850) 424-7011 | Facebook.com/beyondmeasurejewelers
beyondmeasurejewelry.com

Unlock Your Best Home Sale Yet

Brian K. Locicero, REALTOR® | BeOnTheCoast.com

Thinking about selling? Local REALTOR® Brian K. Locicero has helped thousands of homeowners do it faster, smoother and for top dollar — and now he's sharing the same proven strategies in his popular book. Inside, readers will find practical, easy-to-use tips on pricing, staging, timing, negotiation and understanding today's market so sellers can walk confidently into their next move.

Brian's goal is simple: empower sellers with the knowledge to make the smartest decisions possible. "I've provided an effective guide to ensure the most successful transaction possible," he says. And his track record proves it. One Destin homeowner shared, "Because of Brian's efforts, we quickly sold our home and purchased a 30A beachfront property below asking price."

From maximizing curb appeal to winning in multiple-offer situations, Brian's expertise gives sellers a true edge. If you're ready to sell smarter — not harder — this guide is the place to start. Destin Life readers can get it FREE by calling the number below.

(850) 739-3800 | BeOnTheCoast.com

Wellness That Works in 2026

CRYO850 Performance & Recovery Center

For locals ready to move better, feel better and recover faster in the new year, CRYO850 Performance & Recovery Center offers a modern, science-backed approach to wellness and recovery — all under one roof. CRYO850 is a go-to destination for pain relief, inflammation reduction, improved sleep, enhanced mood and faster recovery from workouts, injuries or the demands of everyday life. Athletes, busy professionals and active adults alike visit CRYO850 to stay strong, mobile and energized year-round.

One of the center's most popular services is whole-body cryotherapy, which uses cold exposure to calm inflammation, support immune health and accelerate recovery. Many clients pair cryotherapy with red light therapy to promote cellular repair, circulation and skin health, or with compression therapy to ease muscle soreness and improve lymphatic flow.

CRYO850 also offers infrared and cocoon sauna therapies for detoxification and relaxation, EMS muscle stimulation training for strength and efficiency, and cognitive and vision training to sharpen focus and reaction time. Esthetic services such as CRYO facials, along with therapeutic and sports massage, round out your wellness experience.

With flexible options (discounted Punch Cards, Passes and Memberships along with discounts for Military, First Responders and Students under 25) and individualized care, CRYO850 helps you reset, recover and thrive in 2026.

(850) 279-4145 | facebook.com/CRYO850
www.cryo850.com





Walton County School District: Reflecting on 2025, Looking Ahead to January

As we say goodbye to 2025, the Walton County School District reflects on a year marked by *Keeping the Charge* through Excellence, Professionalism, Innovation, and Collaboration. The district celebrated achievements that reinforced a shared vision: preparing students for real-world success while fostering a culture of EPIC.

January marks the begin-

ning of the new year, a time for moments of appreciation and reflection. School Board Appreciation Month recognizes the service and leadership of the Walton County School Board, whose guidance helps shape the district's direction and priorities. The district also looks forward to celebrating excellence in education with the announcement of the 2025 Walton County Teach-

er of the Year on January 15 at 6 p.m. This annual recognition honors an outstanding educator whose passion, leadership, and commitment have made a lasting impact on students and school communities. We also celebrate the Educational Support Professional of the Year.

January is also a time for remembrance and purpose. Schools will observe the Mar-

tin Luther King Jr. Day Holiday, honoring Dr. King's legacy of service, equality, and unity—principles that continue to guide learning and leadership throughout Walton County. **There will be no school on MLK Day, January 19.**



New Life Church Offers Celebrate Recovery Program Starting in February

New Life Church is offering a Celebrate Recovery Step Study beginning Friday, February 6 at 7 p.m. Celebrate Recovery is a confidential recovery and support program sponsored by New Life Church, open to anyone looking for help with life's challenges.

This six-month Step Study provides a safe, small-group setting for people dealing with issues such as addiction, anxiety, anger, depression, codependency, relationship struggles, or past trauma. The program focuses on personal growth, accountability, and practical tools for long-term

change.

Participants are welcome to arrive early at 5:30 p.m. for a free meal and to attend a large group meeting before the Step Study groups begin. Attendance at the meal and large group is optional.

"This program is for anyone

who wants support and a fresh start," said Cherie Anderson, ministry leader. "You don't have to have it all together or do this alone."

The Step Study meets weekly on Fridays at New Life Church. The cost to participate is \$15, which includes all materials.

To register or learn more, visit: <https://newlifesrb.church-center.com/registrations/events/3343943> or email outreach@newlifesrb.com.



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Thanks to Dog-Harmony, More Tails Are Wagging

By CHRISTIE SOLOMON

Where the therapy dogs' wagging tails go, you'll find Niceville students learning empathy toward animals and each other, and patients are healing faster with smiles. Dog-Harmony, a 501(c)(3) affiliate of Intermountain Therapy Animals (ITA), evaluates and manages therapy dog teams in Bay, Walton, and Okaloosa counties in Northwest Florida.

Dog-Harmony currently coordinates 12 volunteer therapy dog teams that serve public and nonprofit organizations in the Niceville area through animal-assisted interactions, including the R.E.A.D.ing Paws program. Partners include Blue-water Elementary School, James E. Plew Elementary School, Addie R. Lewis School (Valparaiso), Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center, Niceville Public Library, and HCA Florida Twin Cities Hospital.

Dog-Harmony is dedicated to reducing the shelter dog population through ongoing, community-focused, humane education and therapy dog programs that enrich the human-animal bond.

What is Humane Education?

"Humane education [is] designed to cultivate compassion for humans, animals, and/or the environment." The Animal Legal Defense Fund states that the field "exists to foster creative and critical thinking skills within people, which enable them to make benevolent choices and enhance respect for the natural world and its inhabitants."

Access to humane education programming for children is critical as they begin developing empathy skills and humane attitudes.

The Role of Therapy Dogs in Humane Education

Therapy dog teams, consisting of an evaluated therapy dog and handler, support Dog-Harmony's humane education and responsible dog care programs for children and families, helping them practice what they learn. At the end of November, 4,250 children in Okaloosa and Walton counties had attended Dog-Harmony's humane education programs in 2025.

Studies have shown that humane education programs improve children's empathy to-

ward animals and, in turn, each other.

A study of 257 students, aged 10 to 17, who participated in The Marine Humane Society's after-school humane education programs between the Fall of 2014 and the Spring of 2018, revealed that the students' evaluation scores improved for both treatment of animals and empathy (attitudes towards other people) after completing the eight-week program.

A 2021 study of 110 third-grade students in Hong Kong found that class-based, animal-assisted humane education increased cognitive competence and empathy and reduced hyperactivity among participants. The researchers also identified three central qualitative themes from the study: "enhancement of self-control, promotion of humane attitude, and improvement of reading skills."

Published in 2023, the results of an academic-year-long study of 605 first-grade students in six schools across four cities in eastern China revealed that the animal and nature content of the country's humane education program, "Caring for Life," increased the students' affective and cognitive empathy scores. Affective empathy, associated with altruistic and prosocial behaviors in children, is the ability to share others' emotions, whereas cognitive empathy is the ability to understand them.

R.E.A.D.ing Paws Program

In addition to empathy,

therapy dogs can also encourage a love of reading. Dog-Harmony is an affiliate of ITA's R.E.A.D.ing Paws (Reading Education Assistance Dogs) program, an initiative designed to help children build confidence and improve their literacy skills with the help of trained therapy dogs and their handlers. Evaluated therapy dog teams interested in participating in this program are required to take the R.E.A.D.ing Paws workshop and undergo (human) background checks before being put into service.

The Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI) states, "Children have reported liking the animal and enjoying reading to them, increasing their motivation to read... Pets are not judgmental, they do not laugh [or] criticize, and allow children to read at their own pace. Dogs can reduce the stress reactions of children performing a stressful task."

In the Twin Cities area, Dog-Harmony currently manages 3 R.E.A.D.ing Paws therapy dog teams that visit Blue-water Bay Elementary School, Addie R. Lewis School, James E. Plew Elementary School, and Niceville Public Library.

Therapy Dogs in Health Settings

In addition to social and emotional learning and literacy benefits for children in schools,



interactions with therapy dogs can actively reduce stress and anxiety in medical and at-risk youth advocacy settings. Therapy dogs can improve human mental and physiological health through acceptance, physical comfort, mental stimulation, socialization, and entertainment through animal-assisted interactions.

According to HABRI, animal-assisted interactions have been shown to positively "influence levels of blood pressure, heart rate, [and] hormones correlated with well-being, including cortisol, oxytocin, β-endorphin, prolactin, phenylacetic acid and dopamine."

Ways to Get Involved

Dog-Harmony founder, Nancy Bown, a Certified Professional Dog Trainer-Knowledge Assessed (CPDT-KA), knows that the continued growth of the organization's therapy dog program relies on volunteers and the generosity of corporate sponsors and individual donors.

"We are always looking for new volunteers to make this program successful," says Bown. "We need both new therapy dog teams and team support volunteers without dogs."

Compassionate support volunteers help coordinate therapy dog visits in hospitals and support Dog-Harmony teams in the community. This support volunteer role provides an opportunity to shadow current therapy dog teams and offers insights into a potential future team role paired with an evaluated therapy dog.

To learn more about Dog-Harmony, request a therapy dog visit, or become a volunteer, please visit www.dog-harmony.org.



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Preparing Students for Any Future: **Celebrating 30 Years of Excellence at THE SEASIDE SCHOOL™**

This year marks 30 years of excellence for The Seaside School, a public charter school system recognized throughout South Walton for academic achievement, strong relationships, and a future-focused approach to education. Serving students in grades 5–12 through Seaside Neighborhood School and Seacoast Collegiate High School, The Seaside School has built a reputation for preparing students not only for college, but for life.

At the foundation of The Seaside School's success is a deep understanding of how adolescents learn, grow, and develop confidence. Across both campuses, students engage in rigorous academics while developing durable life skills including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, adaptability, leadership, and problem-solving that equip them for any path they choose.

At Seaside Neighborhood School (grades 5–8), students experience a learning environment

intentionally designed for adolescents. Small cohorts, strong teacher-student relationships, and engaging, interdisciplinary instruction help students feel safe, known, and academically confident during these critical years. SNS is known for its focus on literacy, numeracy, inquiry-based learning, and the arts, while also providing leadership and mentorship opportunities that empower students to find their voice.

Community engagement is central to the SNS experience. Through arts programming, mentorship, service leadership, and community-based projects, students learn responsibility, empathy, and civic engagement, developing a strong sense of purpose and belonging while contributing meaningfully to the world around them.

This strong academic and developmental foundation carries seamlessly into Seacoast Collegiate High School (grades 9–12), where students experience a reimagined high school model



that blends traditional student life with advanced academic opportunity. Students participate in athletics, arts, debate, leadership programs, clubs, and school traditions while also accessing dual enrollment and career-aligned pathways.

Ranked in the Top 2% of Florida public schools, Seacoast students benefit from highly qualified, relationship-driven educators, daily tutoring, and personalized academic and college planning. Many graduate, having earned up to 60 tuition-free college credits, often completing an Associate's Degree before

high school graduation, saving families an average of \$30,000 in college tuition.

Seacoast student voices reflect the impact of this model. Fernanda Leyva shared, "I'm grateful for every single person and opportunity—everyone here is an advocate for me."

Sullivan Stubley noted, "Seaside prepares me through its accelerated tracks."

And Kincső Tischler emphasized the strength of relationships, saying, "The faculty genuinely cares about my well-being, and I have a special relationship with my counselors."

Seacoast's impact continues to grow through its expansion at the Northwest Florida State College South Walton Center campus, where the high school now operates within a new, state-of-the-art facility featuring an Innovation Lab, advanced technology and engineering spaces,

and collaborative learning environments. Students engage with industry-standard tools while exploring fields such as engineering, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, design, business, healthcare, and the arts—all without leaving South Walton.

As a tuition-free public charter school, enrollment at The Seaside School is completed through an annual lottery. Families interested in Seaside Neighborhood School or Seacoast Collegiate High School are encouraged to apply during the current application window from January 9th to February 13th.

With 30 years of proven results, a strong foundation of trust, and a bold vision for the future, The Seaside School continues to set the standard for innovative, student-centered public education, supporting students from early adolescence through college readiness and beyond.

Families must apply before February 13 to be considered in the open lottery. For more information, visit SeasideSchools.net.

30 Years of Excellence

**LOTTERY APPLICATION
OPENS JANUARY 9
FOR THE 2026-2027 SCHOOL YEAR
GRADES 5-12**



Scan the QR code or visit SeasideSchools.net to learn more and apply. The lottery application is open from January 9th to February 13th.



SEACOAST
COLLEGIATE HIGH SCHOOL



Top 5 Reasons to Apply

1 **30 Years of Excellence & Proven Academic Results**
For 30 years, The Seaside School has delivered consistent academic excellence. Ranked in the Top 2% in Florida, our students graduate confident, prepared, and ready for what's next.

2 **Exceptional, Highly Qualified Educators**
Students learn from experienced, credentialed, relationship-driven educators who know them well, hold high expectations, and support their academic, social, and emotional growth.

3 **Personalized Support in a Safe, Close-Knit Community**
Small cohorts, daily tutoring, individualized academic and college planning, and strong student-adult relationships ensure every student is known, supported, and challenged.

4 **Education Beyond Textbooks – Experiences That Build Confidence**
Students grow through leadership, athletics, arts, and real-world experiences. Programs include AI, STEM, cybersecurity, robotics, Rock Band, Theatre, Debate, service leadership, mentorship, and dozens of clubs and sports—building confidence, resilience, teamwork, and voice.

5 **Dual Enrollment, Certifications & Flexible Pathways for the Future**
Students can earn up to 60 tuition-free college credits through dual enrollment at Northwest Florida State College, often completing an Associate's Degree and saving families an average of \$30,000. Along the way, students earn industry certifications (AI, cybersecurity, CAD, Fusion 360), the Florida Seal of Biliteracy, and develop durable life skills—critical thinking, adaptability, and problem-solving—preparing them for any path they choose.

 **Wellness**

Book Review: The Compound Effect by Darren Hardy



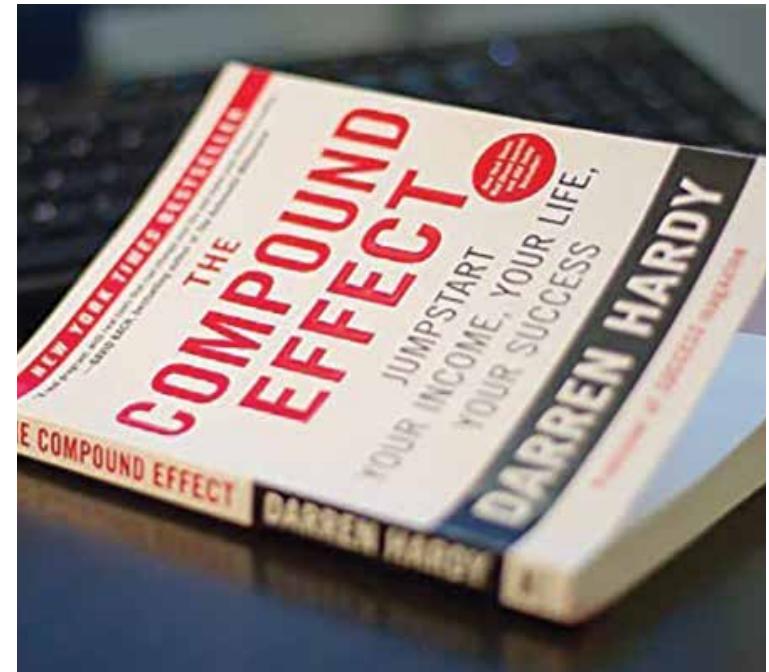
REVIEWED BY MICHAEL McMANUS, MSW, LCSW

"The Compound Effect: Jumpstart Your Income, Your Life, Your Success" by Darren Hardy is a straightforward, no-nonsense guide to personal development that distills a powerful truth: success isn't born from dramatic overhauls or overnight breakthroughs, but from the cumulative impact of small, consistent choices made day after day. As the former

publisher of SUCCESS magazine, Hardy draws on interviews with high achievers, personal anecdotes, and practical insights to argue that the "compound effect" – the principle of reaping massive rewards from tiny, smart actions repeated over time – is the hidden engine behind extraordinary results in health, wealth, relationships, and career.

What makes this book stand out in a crowded self-help genre is its refreshing rejection of hype. There's no promise of quick fixes, magic formulas, or lottery-like windfalls. Instead, Hardy emphasizes discipline, accountability, and patience, reminding readers that the same compounding principle works in reverse for negative habits, leading to gradual decline if ignored. The writing is engaging and conversational, packed with relatable stories (like the three friends whose lives diverge based on minor daily differences) and analogies (e.g., a penny doubling daily reaching over \$10 million in 31 days). It's motivational without being overly preachy.

I love this book because I can refer it to clients who will use it to make small pivotal changes in their life, which can turn into major life changes



over time. The core message is timeless and evidence-based, echoing principles from classics like Atomic Habits but with Hardy's unique spin from mentoring millionaires. It's concise (under 200 pages), making it an easy read that punches above its weight in inspiration. I particularly appreciated the focus on tracking behaviors – a simple yet transformative habit that forces awareness and progress.

Weaknesses: Some readers might find the anecdotes a bit repetitive or the tone occasionally boastful (Hardy name-drops

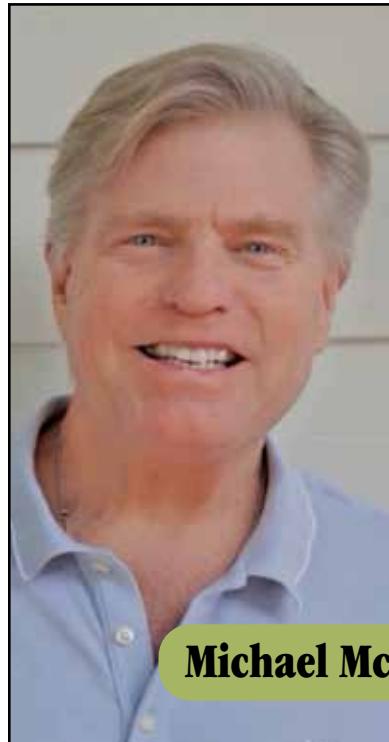
successful contacts frequently). It also leans heavily toward business and financial success, with less depth on creative or non-material goals. Still, these are minor quibbles in an otherwise solid, motivating read.

Overall rating: 4.5/5. This book is essential for anyone feeling stuck or overwhelmed by big goals – it shifts your mindset to celebrate the "unsexy" daily grind that truly builds lasting success. If you're tired of motivational fluff and ready for practical wisdom, The Compound Effect delivers. It's not revolutionary, but it's profoundly reinforcing, and applying its ideas can genuinely change your trajectory.

Darren Hardy's The Compound Effect breaks down success into a predictable, measurable process: Small, smart choices plus Consistency plus Time equals Radical Difference. Over months and years, these steps addressed in the book compound into transformative success, proving that anyone can achieve extraordinary results without innate genius – just disciplined, repeated action.

Michael McManus MSW, LCSW is a psychotherapist in private practice in Santa Rosa Beach he along with his wife Angela raised four children here in Santa Rosa Beach and enjoy swimming, biking, hiking, reading, yoga, cooking and spending time with our children.

Michael can be reached by text or phone at 1-850-837-0123 to discuss setting up an appointment. Or visit his website at Psychotherapy30A.com.



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New Year, New You: Setting Realistic Aesthetic Goals



BY DR. CLARK, BLUEWATER PLASTIC SURGERY

As the holiday season winds down, many of us begin to reflect on the year behind us and set intentions for the one ahead. While health and wellness resolutions are common in January, more patients are also choosing to include aesthetic goals as part of their personal care and confidence-building journey. At Bluewater Plastic Surgery, we

maintain a youthful appearance in a professional setting or align their outward appearance with the vibrancy they feel inside. When your motivation comes from self-respect rather than comparison or pressure, the experience is far more rewarding.

Setting the right goals is equally important. Success doesn't come from doing everything at once—it comes from choosing steps that fit your lifestyle, health, budget, and timeline. Some patients start with subtle enhancements such as a refreshed skincare regimen or trying Botox for the first time. Others are ready to address a single feature that has bothered them for years or explore a larger transformation. During your consultation, we take time to discuss what's realistic, what options make sense, what timing looks like, and whether surgery

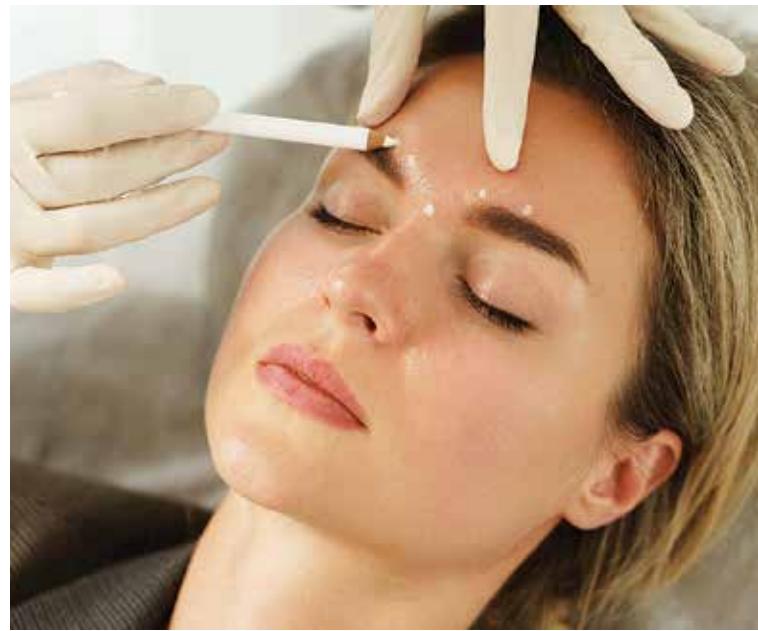
care can support a larger commitment to confidence, wellness, and self-care in the year ahead. At Bluewater Plastic Surgery, we approach every patient's goals with education, safety, discretion, and thoughtful guidance at the forefront.

To schedule a private consul-

tation and explore your options, contact Bluewater Plastic Surgery 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 highest priorities are patient safety and

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

Call 850.530.6064 or visit bluewaterplasticsurgery.com for more information or to make an appointment.



believe in setting realistic, safe, and empowering goals—not for vanity, but for the meaningful impact that feeling good in your own skin can have on every aspect of life.

Whether you're considering a procedure for the first time or looking to refresh your routine, the new year is a wonderful moment to reset, refocus, and approach your aesthetic goals with clarity.

A fresh start begins with reflection. Before making any decisions, it helps to pause and consider why you're seeking a change. Some patients want to feel more confident in their bodies, while others hope to reverse changes from aging, pregnancy, or weight loss. Many want to

or non-invasive treatments are the best fit. From injectables and skin-tightening to procedures like a facelift or tummy tuck, every plan is customized.

Timing itself is a powerful part of the process. If you have an event, milestone, or vacation coming up, we help you work backward to create the right timeline for healing and results. Many people choose the quieter winter months for procedures that require downtime so they can welcome spring and summer feeling refreshed and confident.

You've spent the year caring for others—now may be the perfect time to invest in yourself. Whether it's a subtle boost or a transformative change, aesthetic

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 **Wellness**

Time to Get the Plump Out

Aren't You Done Eating Yet?



BY DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

It's almost over! Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years. If you are anything like me, you'll be five pounds heavier with stairs harder than usual. Eating is such a social event and Thanksgiving starts the social smorgasbord. One scoop of everything followed by seconds of

the good stuff. A few cookies left on the sheet, a bit of potatoes in the pan, one lonely slice of pie? And work on those left overs just before bed. I can hear Amanda asking, "Aren't you done eating yet?" as I'm bringing some scraps to bed.

Well, once the holidays are over, it's the time to hear it. I love you all, but you're plumping out. It's the time to get life under control and start working towards the same goal we all have. Eat better, get active, lose weight, feel better. It sounds so easy. Change is hard, but The Hormone Restoration Center can help you achieve your goals.

It's not all about weight loss, but it's a good start. Weight loss has multiple causes, so any solution needs to be customized to



you. That is what we do so well. After providing a comprehensive consultation, discussing symptoms and reviewing labs, we give our recommendation and provide a range of options for the best path to success.

Most important, and often forgotten, is hormone optimization. If your estrogen is out of whack or your thyroid is not optimal, you will never lose weight. Unfortunately, traditional medicine does not look at

labs properly and that's why you will always hear, "Everything's normal." It's not.

Optimizing hormones can significantly reduce weight. It also routinely improves sleep, mood, libido and energy while eliminating fatigue, brain fog, hair loss and sexual dysfunction.

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tions to your needs ensuring you maximize every ounce of effort you put in.

Myth-Busting: Debunking Common Misconceptions

"Weight loss medications don't require lifestyle changes."

Truth: For us, the easy part is losing the weight. The hard part is keeping it off. Ultimately, no matter what we do to help you get the weight off, you will be destined to gain the weight back until you develop healthy habits to keep the weight off.

Luckily for you, at The Hormone Restoration Center we can do the heavy lifting for you. We will get you on track and headed in the right direction. Once your weight loss starts, energy increases, and mood improves, the hard stuff just gets easier.

Join our family here at The Hormone Restoration Center; we'll support you every step of the way. Together, we will create a personalized plan that aligns with your goals and helps you embrace a healthier, happier you.

Reach out to us today at 850-837-1271 and let's kickstart your New Year with a new approach to weight loss and wellness!



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By STEPHENIE CRAIG,
JOURNEY BRAVELY

When did you last experience a big, uncomfortable feeling you did not manage well? Maybe you experienced rejection and felt deeply sad. Maybe someone treated you poorly and you felt intense anger. Perhaps you made a mistake and you felt shame. How did you behave when you experienced the feeling? Were you unkind to yourself? Did you behave poorly and then blame others? Did you drink or scroll to numb out? Did you break something?

Feelings come and go throughout each day and yet most of us do not have a sense of confidence about managing uncomfortable feelings. In

his book, *Dealing with Feeling*, Marc Brackett, PhD, founding director of Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence shares that only 10% of the American population receive any education about how to understand or manage feelings. In my experience meeting with people for 25 years, about 9 out of 10 people entering therapy do not understand how to identify or work through uncomfortable feelings.

Most of us are engaging in avoidance or numbing strategies such as drinking, other substance use, scrolling, shopping, gambling, controlling others, over scheduling, among others to keep from facing uncomfortable feelings. Avoidance produces a cycle of emotional dysregulation that negatively impacts relationships, life performance, and overall health. In short, not knowing how to identify and manage your feelings well is likely reducing your quality of life and your positive impact in the

world.

So, if you want to grow in emotional maturity to increase your positive experience and impact in life, what do you do?

6 Ways to Learn How to Manage Your Feelings Well

Reflect and set intention.

How are you managing feelings? Take notes about how you and others are experiencing your emotional highs and lows. Note if you have been ashamed or received negative feedback regarding your emotional expression. Create 1-2 goals about how you would like to improve your handling of feelings. "I would like to know how to use 3-4 healthy strategies to manage feelings."

Cultivate physical emotional curiosity.

Notice your body's signals about what you are feeling. Notice sensations in your stomach, chest, face, head, and extremities. Notice body temperature, muscle tension, en-

ergy level. Notice tears, urge to slam something, exhaustion level. Your physical body gives you signals to help you determine what specific feeling you are experiencing. Listen closely to your body rather than ignoring physical signals.

Name your feelings.

After collecting physical data, practice matching data to a feeling word. When you notice tight jaw, hot body temperature, and desire to slam something, that might be anger. When you notice tight chest, pit in your stomach, and fast heart rate, that might be anxiety. Try recording your common feelings and list physical sensations that go with each feeling. Continue recording over time until you feel confident your list reflects your emotional experience.

Evaluate emotional coping tools.

Name/record avoidance/numbing strategies, and record trends of when and how you use them. "I start drinking



around 4 and continue until bedtime to take the edge off." "I start scrolling when I'm stressed and bored and am logging 5 hours per day." Begin practicing healthy coping strategies that regulate emotional highs and lows creating space to return to a feeling from a calm state to process its meaning for your life. Try taking a walk, voice or regular journaling, talking to a trusted person, deep breathing exercises, fitness activities, creative pursuits, getting into nature, and nervous system regulation tools (search "vagal toning exercises").



BY CHRISTIAN REGALADO

If this title got your attention, I highly recommend you read each of these tips below. Your medical care coverage is extremely important to understand in order to both save you money and take care of your health. Here are 6 important tips:

Know Your Coverage:

This sounds basic, but it can be tricky. This is because Medicare is divided into several parts: Part A covers hospital stays, Part B covers medical services, Part C combines Parts A and B (known as Medicare Advantage), and Part D provides prescription drug coverage. Supplement plans are an alternative

Medicare: 6 Quick Tips

to Part C for a higher premium. They are widely accepted and will cover many or most of the out-of-pocket costs when using Parts A and B. If you chose an Advantage Plan, be sure to keep

track of the services and treatments covered under your plan to ensure you make the most of your benefits. This is easy to do, you just may need to learn how. We are here to help.

Know Your Costs:

Medicare Part A has no premium. The Part B premium just increased to \$202.90 for 2026. If you buy a supplement plan, you pay an extra premium to know

that when you need coverage, you will have many options for care and low out-of-pocket expenses. However, you are pay-

Continued on page 28

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BY SEAN DIETRICH

A lot has changed in a year. The entire world has changed. Many will tell you that 2025 has been full of bad stuff—the media, for example.

Tune in to the news. You will see footage of explosions, nuclear weapons, and random acts of reality TV. But if you look deeper, you'll see good peeking through the surface.

For starters, on September 12, Betty Kellenberger made history by becoming the oldest woman to complete a thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail.

Betty began her hike, amazingly, almost immediately after knee replacement surgery. She traversed muddy bogs, snow, cold rain, and impossible rocks.

After completing her hike she told reporters, "I decided the Lord must love rocks because He made so many of them."

Betty Kellenberger is 80 years old.

Also, Americans are making true progress in the fight against technological slavery. As of December, 35 U.S. states and Washington, D.C., have enacted laws effectively banning student cellphone usage in classrooms.

Now, if only we could get Congress to ban speakerphone calls in supermarkets.

Also, this year, Japan elected its first female prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, shattering a centuries-old glass ceiling.

Takaichi is turning out to be a real go-getter, saying she sleeps two hours per night, "four hours at the longest." Her first words in office were: "I will abandon

the idea of a 'work-life balance'—I will work, work, work, work and work."

Takaichi's husband has likewise pledged to abandon the "work-life balance idea" and commits to playing significantly more golf.

Herculean advances in gene therapy, optogenetics, and wireless retinal prosthetic implants are already partially restoring vision in some.

The PRIMA subretinal implant is a two-part device consisting of a small camera,

than it's been in decades. A lot lower, actually.

The U.S. homicide rate, in only one year, has dropped by 20 percent. There have also been significant drops in committed crimes, such as rape, robbery, aggravated assault, vehicle theft, burglary, and pop-country rap.

In ecological news, a recent study of Yellowstone National Park revealed that the migration of 5,000 bison across the park's grasslands is successfully restoring ancient patterns, reshaping the landscape to pre-civilization conditions. A feat which, 20 years ago, ecologists would have told you was impossible, after which they would've told you to refill their veggie beers.

I could go on and on.

Heart attack deaths dropped by nearly 90 percent since 1970.

Green sea turtles were removed from the endangered species list—global population has increased by 30 percent.

Misty Combs, a Kentucky

registered nurse, saved a drunk raccoon by administering CPR.

A new therapy is capable of slowing Huntington's disease. For the first time in history, treatments have slowed progression by nearly 75 percent.

After almost 20 years off the air, "Reading Rainbow" is back on television.

Nine Guam kingfishers—previously extinct birds—were released into the wild. The species has not been seen since 1988.

The Antarctic hole in the ozone layer has shrunk to its smallest size in three decades.

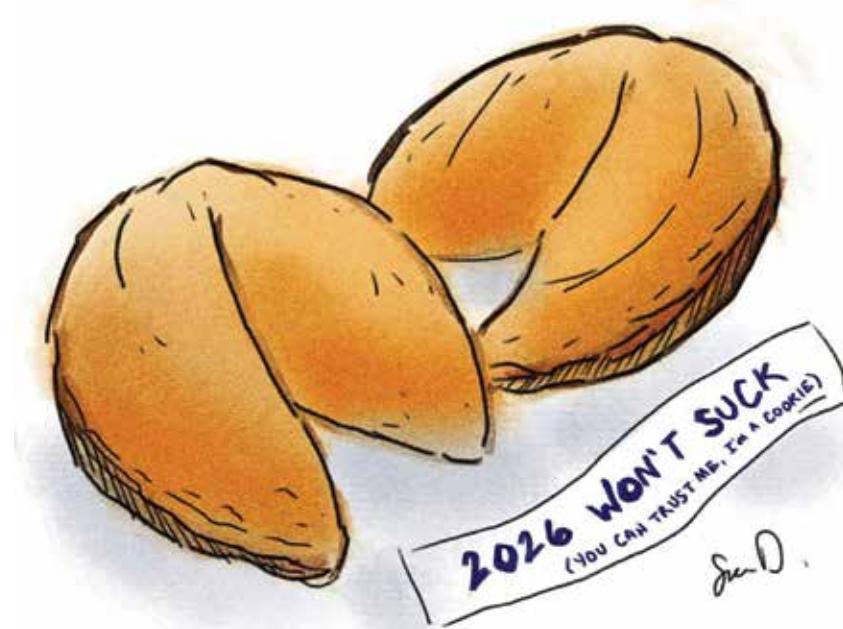
A doctor in London discovered a way to successfully treat brain cancer in infants.

Advances in finding a cure for HIV were made by Melbourne scientists who found a groundbreaking way to force the virus out of hiding.

So a lot has happened, as I say. But if you ask me, the best news of this past year isn't found in the headlines. Neither is it found in all the amazing advances, nor the wondrous beauty humanity is capable of. To me, the best news of 2025 is that you're still here.

I love you dearly, whoever you are.

Happy 2026.



The world also got its first American Pope, Robert Francis Prevost. Pope Leo XIV was born in Chicago, raised in Dolton, Illinois, and he roots for the White Sox. Unfortunately, there is a conflict of interest inasmuch as God is a Braves fan.

Either way, Pope "Bob" is a regular guy. That's why people love him. He watches movies. Makes jokes. And shortly before participating in a holy ceremony in the Sistine Chapel, the Pope was seen by several cardinals—really—playing Wordle on his phone.

The Pope told reporters, "I use a different word for Wordle every day, so there's no set starting word."

This past year also saw major medical breakthroughs. Particularly in the treatment of blindness.

mounted on a pair of smart-glasses, capturing images and instantaneously projecting them via infrared light to a wireless chip embedded within the eye.

And, in case you were wondering, violent crime is lower

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A Pastor's Ponderings: Impact

By PETE HYDE

This month is the celebration

of Martin Luther King's Birth-day. Banks, government offic-

es, schools, and many churches will be closed for the holiday.

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There will be parades, marches, and speeches from Washington, D.C. to the smallest towns in the country. We will remember the impact of this young man. No, not all agreed with his positions, methods, and politics. Many in my father's generation had little use for Martin Luther King. My father's learned prejudice kept him from seeing any good that could come from a black minister who stood on his beliefs and sought to change the status quo and the direction of American society. Martin Luther King "had a dream." He understood the calling that was placed on his life to make a difference. He died trying to fulfill that call. I am sure my faithful readers will differ on the impact MLK made. But I am also sure that everyone can agree that he made an impact. His dream and witness changed this country.

I speak, teach, and write a lot about making an impact. When



Master? Will they see a life reconciled between what you say and what you say you believe, with the way you live?

You see, God calls each of us to impact the world in which we live, no matter how large or small. He calls us to His service, to be His witnesses, yes, even to the ends of the earth, but also to our spouses, children and extended families. He calls to be His witnesses to the cashier at the convenience store, to those in recovery, to those who struggle to make ends meet and put food on the table for their families, to those with whom we disagree, to those who live a lifestyle that is outside the boundaries of our beliefs, to those who disagree with us religiously, theologically and politically.

Yes, we all have good days and bad. Our impact and witness are better some days than others. But are we striving to change the world one witness at a time to the best of our ability? If so, we are making an impact, the result of which we may never see. So here's to trying our best to impact our small circles of influence with the loving witness of what God has done in our lives.

Will you be famous? Probably not. Will you make a difference in someone's life? Most certainly!! What kind of witness will it be? What kind of impact will you make?

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



I see the impact a famous person makes on society, whether for good or for bad, I almost always reflect on the impact I am making. Will I ever be famous? No! Will I make a difference? I hope so!!

Ask yourself the same questions? Will you be famous? Maybe some of you are or were, but most of us will not be. Will you make a difference? Yes!! Each of us will. The life you live will make a difference for better or for worse in the lives of those with whom you have a relationship and the lives of those whom you see even just in passing each and every day. Will they see in you a sense of calling from the

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The Christian Capitalist:

Lori Joyner and Harvest House—Caring for Neighbors in Need

By RICH SANDERS

Lori Joyner fills her days managing hundreds of pounds of groceries, groups of volunteers and dozens of people in need. As Executive Director of the Harvest House in Destin, she is responsible for caring for the poor and needy in Okaloosa County and helping them survive and thrive.

Lori and her family moved to Destin over twenty years ago as a result of divine intervention. "Throughout my walk in life, I surrendered my life to the Lord Jesus and said, 'Lord, whatever you want me to do, I will do for you. And I didn't take that lightly.' After Lori thought about the move for three consecutive days and "just surrendered everything," and moved to Destin!

After meeting the founder of Harvest House, Jerry Ogle, she fell in love with it and became the Executive Director—three days later! As small business owners, Lori and her husband are great examples of Christian Capitalists, as that business helps her work so diligently on behalf of the poor and needy in our community.

Harvest House has been operating for over forty years, making it one of the oldest Christian non-profit charities on the Emerald Coast. Serving over four hundred families a month today, things keep getting busier. During the government shutdown in the Fall of 2025, demand for assistance spiked, in particular for food after funding for food stamps stalled. Lori and her group of volunteers took it in stride and continued to meet the needs of the people of Okaloosa County.

Harvest House provides all manner of support to those in need, including financial assistance with utilities. While many of the families regularly visit



Lori Joyner at Harvest House



them, Lori also notes that the group of people seeking assistance continues to change and fluctuate with economic conditions... and with the seasons.

The holidays are a very busy time at Harvest House, when hundreds of Thanksgiving and Christmas bags are provided to those in need to help them enjoy the festivities that so many people take for granted. Because many Harvest House clients have seasonal jobs that leave them short on funds and food during the winter months, this

is the time of year when Harvest House really leans on the community for support.

This is a particularly challenging time for Harvest House, since it was recently forced to change locations and lost its thrift store, therefore its income, in the process. Lori welcomes any current canned goods, unopened packaged food or toiletry items, and Harvest House is open every weekday for pickup or delivery. Locals get it: grits are one of the most popular items that people request at the Harvest House!

Lori 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 Lori Joyner!

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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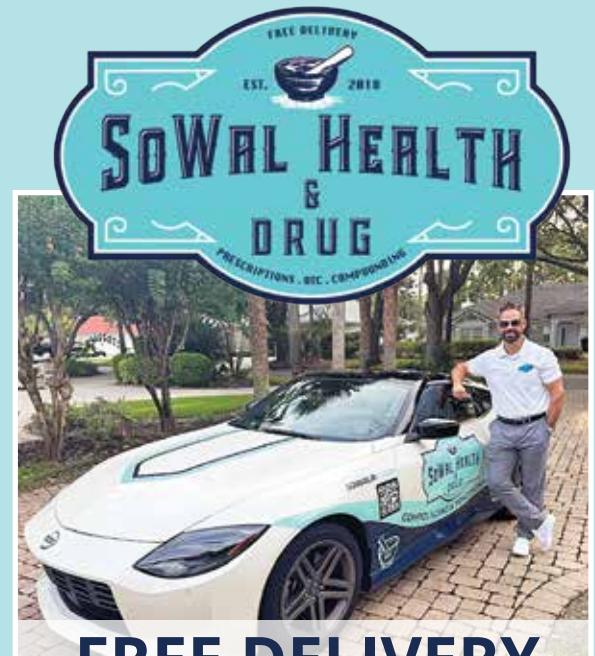
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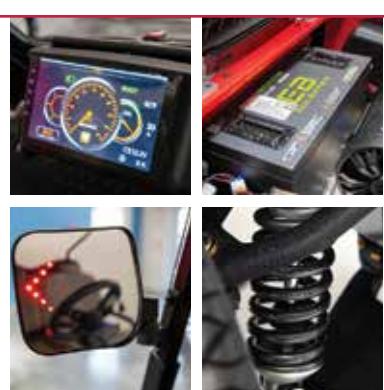
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Derrick Brooks to Headline 2026 All Sports Association Banquet

Get ready for an inspiring evening of recognition, community and athletic excellence as the All Sports Association (ASA) hosts its 2026 Annual Awards Banquet on Friday, February 20, 5:30 p.m. at the Destin / Fort Walton Beach Convention Cen-

ter. The banquet promises to bring together athletes, community leaders, coaches and sponsors in Northwest Florida for an evening to remember.

A Star-Studded Keynote

This year's keynote speaker

is NFL Hall of Famer Derrick Brooks — Super-Bowl champion, defensive powerhouse and committed community leader. With 11 Pro Bowl selections, nine All-Pro honors and induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2014, Brooks brings not

only elite athletic credibility, but a passion for service and character.

You can expect a formal awards dinner celebrating the top athletes, coaches and civic partners of 2025–2026, with honors presented to individuals who excelled not only on the field, but also in the classroom and the community. Brooks' keynote address will offer powerful insights on leadership, perseverance and success in sports and in life. In addition, you'll enjoy opportunities to network with local sports programs, sponsors and youth volunteers and also receive updates on upcoming ASA initiatives and the distribution of funds that support youth-focused sports and service organizations throughout the region.

The ASA Mission

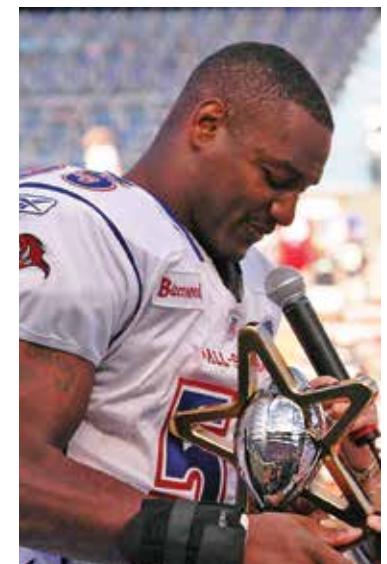
The All Sports Association was founded in 1970 under the leadership of Colonel Al Byrne, with the first banquet held at the Holiday Inn on Okaloosa Island. From those modest beginnings, ASA's membership of volunteers has grown to raise funds and provide time-based service to support youth sports and community programs across the Emerald Coast.

Funded primarily through the awards banquet and an annual golf tournament, the organization channels its proceeds to local non-profits including the Boys & Girls Club of the Emerald Coast, Special Olympics Florida-Okaloosa, the Eleanor J. Johnson Youth Center and Okaloosa Walton FCA.

At the heart of the ASA's recognition program lies a simple, yet powerful, standard: the athletes honored must excel not only in their sport but also in their academics and community involvement. Through the banquet and associated awards, ASA underscores the belief that true excellence includes character, responsibility and service.

Recipients are those who maintain strong grades, are active in their schools and volunteer in the community — reflecting ASA's full mission to boost youth, sport and citizenship alike.

Over the years, ASA's banquet has hosted renowned key-



note speakers who bring experience, inspiration and perspective to the local stage among them Herschel Walker, Bo Jackson, Tim Tebow, Nick Saban, Urban Meyer, Chad Hennings and several others. From professional athletes to community champions, these voices have helped elevate the banquet beyond mere awards to a moment of collective motivation and connection.

For athletes, coaches, volunteers and sponsors in our region, the ASA banquet is more than a gala—it's a celebration of the values we prize: teamwork, dedication, citizenship and community investment. It brings together high school and youth sports programs, local businesses, civic leaders and families under one roof to honor triumphs and galvanize support for what's next.

With Derrick Brooks as this year's keynote, the event carries added prestige and excitement—offering both young athletes and the wider community a chance to hear from someone who not only mastered football, but leveraged his platform for impact.

Want to Help?

Those interested in sponsorships, table reservations or event participation can visit the ASA website: www.allsportsassociation.com.

Join on February 20, 2026, as we celebrate champions in sport, service and character — and help invest in the bright future of youth athletics right here on the Emerald Coast.

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2026 Seaside School™ Race Weekend Returns Feb. 12–15 with Races, Flavor and Community Spirit

One of the Emerald Coast's most anticipated winter traditions is gearing up for another memorable year as the 2026 Seaside School™ Half Marathon + 5K Race Weekend returns Feb. 12–15, 2026. With race registration now officially open, runners, families and supporters are invited to be part of a high-energy weekend where scenic beauty, community connection and a meaningful mission come together along 30A.

More than just a race, Seaside School™ Race Weekend is the school's largest annual fundraiser, with every mile run directly supporting classroom technology, academic programs and teacher initiatives that impact students across Walton County. Each year, the event sells out, drawing participants from across the Southeast who come for the views and stay for the cause.

"This weekend truly captures the spirit of our community," organizers said. "From runners and volunteers to chefs, sponsors and spectators, everyone plays a role in supporting education while celebrating everything that makes Seaside special."

A Weekend Packed with Events

Festivities begin with early packet pickup at Seacoast Collegiate High School, 109 Greenway Trail in Santa Rosa Beach, from 4 to 7 p.m. Thursday and Friday, Feb. 12–13, and from 8 to 11 a.m. Saturday, Feb. 14. Runners can also enjoy the Race Expo and official packet pickup from noon to 4 p.m. Saturday at Seaside Neighborhood School, 10 Smolian Circle.

Race day arrives Sunday, Feb. 15, with the Half Marathon starting at 7 a.m. CST, followed by the 5K at 7:30 a.m. Participants will wind through Seaside's iconic streets and along picturesque stretches of 30A, cheered on by spectators and volunteers who help make the event a true community celebration.

Registration is open now, and spots are expected to fill quickly. To register, visit www.runseasidefl.com.

Taste of the Race: A Culinary Kickoff

Race Weekend officially kicks



off Friday night with Taste of the Race, one of 30A's most anticipated culinary events. Set for 6 to 9 p.m. Friday, Feb. 13, at the iconic SEASIDE® Lyceum, the 21-and-up, rain-or-shine event brings together top Gulf Coast chefs and restaurants for an evening of friendly competition and unforgettable flavors.

Guests will enjoy tastings from more than a dozen acclaimed chefs, paired with complimentary fine wine, craft cocktails and local brews, all set to live entertainment and a festive Race Weekend atmosphere. Chefs will compete for People's Choice, Judges' Choice and

Chef's Choice awards, making the night as exciting as it is delicious.

Tickets for Taste of the Race are on sale now in limited quantities, with Early Bird pricing available through Dec. 31 and new couples pricing options for added savings. Tickets can be purchased at runsignup.com/TicketEvent/TOTR2026/Register.

Rubiks Groove Brings the Party

Adding to the excitement, nationally acclaimed party band Rubiks Groove will take over Taste of the Race with a

high-energy throwback show featuring the biggest hits of the 80s, 90s and 2000s. Known for full-costume characters and nonstop crowd interaction, the band promises to transform the Lyceum into a flashback dance floor and keep the celebration going all night long.

Opportunities to Support and Sponsor

Businesses and community partners are also invited to get involved by sponsoring Race Weekend. Sponsorship offers meaningful visibility before thousands of runners, families and spectators while directly

supporting educational excellence at Seaside School™.

"As our largest fundraiser, Race Weekend fuels innovation in the classroom and supports the teachers who make a difference every day," organizers said. "Sponsors play a vital role in that impact."

With races, music, food and a mission that matters, the 2026 Seaside School™ Race Weekend promises four days of unforgettable moments. Whether you're running, cheering, tasting or sponsoring, this February tradition offers a powerful way to celebrate community while investing in the future.



The 24th annual running of the
**SEASIDE SCHOOL
HALF MARATHON + 5K**

is back on Sunday, February 15, 2026, in beautiful Seaside, Florida.

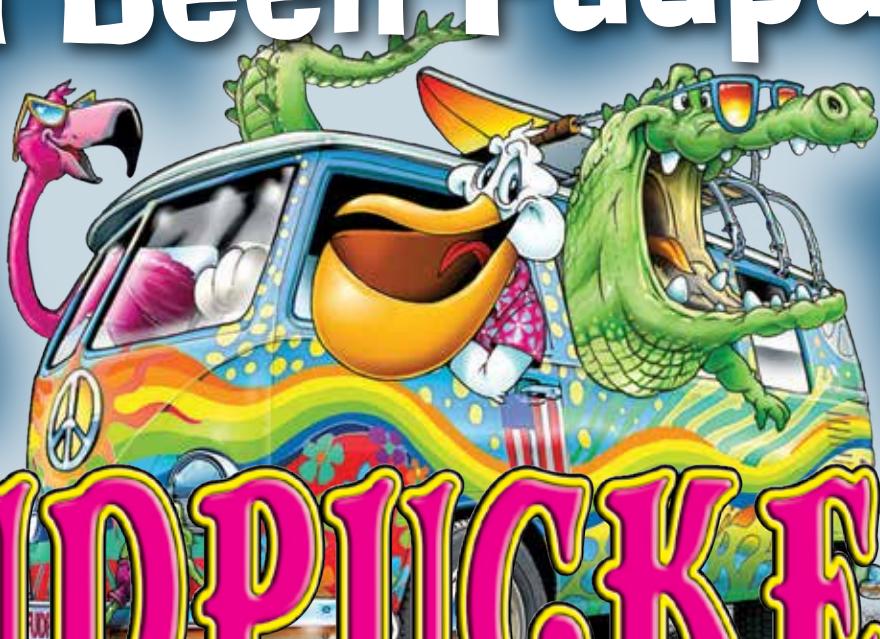
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ECTC Presents Agatha Christie's "Murder on The Orient Express" Jan. 15–Feb. 1

Mystery, intrigue, and suspense take center stage as Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC) presents Ken Ludwig's adaptation of Agatha Christie's novel, *Murder on the Orient Express*, running January 15 through February 1 at its theatre at Grand Boulevard in Miramar Beach.

A lavish train ride through Europe is derailed when a shocking murder is discovered onboard the famed Orient Express. With the train stranded by snow, legendary detective Hercule Poirot must uncover the truth before the killer strikes again. Featuring a cast of unforgettable, fan favorite characters, razor-sharp dialogue, and Christie's signature twists, this iconic mystery will keep audiences trying to crack the case until the final reveal.

"Murder on the Orient Express is the perfect way to kick off the new year at ECTC," said Nathanael Fisher, Producing Artistic Director. "It is suspenseful, atmospheric, and a richly layered experience that invites the audience to play detective alongside one of our fan favorite actors, Bruce Collier, as detective Poirot."

The creative team for *Murder on the Orient Express* in-



cludes Director Scott Hayes, Dialect Coach Ginny Kopf, Managing Director Trenton Bainbridge, Scenic Designer Rebeca Lake, Lighting Designer Matteo Morris, Costume Designer Taylor Walker, Sound Engineer Gavin Young, Properties and Stage Manager Ora Wolfgram, Master Carpenter Carl Hendin, and Production Assistant Bella Fisher.

The talented cast features Emerald Coast Theatre Company fan favorites Bruce Collier (Annie, All Is Calm, Voices

of Valor, and more) as Hercule Poirot, alongside Darla Briganti (Annie, Beautiful, Nunsense, and more) as Princess Dragomiroff. The ensemble also includes Jason Hedden (The Play That Goes Wrong, The Odd Couple, Popcorn Falls) as Monsieur Bouc, Hayes Mercur (Legally Blonde, The Play That Goes Wrong) as Colonel Arbuthnot, Kindra Steenerson (Miss Abigail's Guide to Dating, Mating, and Marriage) as Helen Hubbard, and Karly Johnson (Nunsense) as Countess Andrenyi. Also, returning to the ECTC stage, Cara Chesney (The Glass Menagerie) appears as Mary Debenham, joined by Tommy Bergeron (Million Dol-

lar Quartet) as Hector MacQueen, Charlie Meeks (Baskerville) as Michel the Conductor, and Rebeca Lake (Baskerville, Little Shop of Horrors) as Greta Ohlsson.

Performances will be held at ECTC, 560 Grand Boulevard, Suite 200, Miramar Beach. ECTC's 2025–2026 season is made possible with generous support from Grand Boulevard Town Center, St. Joe Community Foundation, Visit South Walton, Howard Group and Jerry and Alice Zich.

To learn more, call (850) 684-0323 or visit emeraldcoasttheatre.org. Engage with ECTC on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

The poster features the Emerald Coast Theatre Company logo at the top. Below it, the title 'MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS' is written in large, bold, red letters. To the right of the text is a portrait of Bruce Collier as Hercule Poirot, wearing a dark suit and holding a cigar. The bottom of the poster includes the performance dates 'JANUARY 15 THROUGH FEBRUARY 1' and the ticket information 'Tickets or info, call 850.684.0323 or visit EmeraldCoastTheatre.org'.

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January Is the Perfect Time to Begin Music Lessons

As the calendar turns to January, many people feel a renewed sense of motivation and possibility. The start of a new year naturally encourages fresh goals and positive habits, making January an ideal time to begin music lessons. Whether you're a parent considering lessons for your child or an adult finally ready to pursue a long-held musical dream, January offers sev-

eral unique advantages that can set you up for long-term success.

One of the biggest benefits of starting music lessons in January is the mindset that comes with the new year. After the reflective pause of the holidays, people often feel more focused and ready to commit to structured routines. Music study thrives on consistency, and January is a time when schedules tend

to stabilize. With holiday travel over and fewer disruptions, it's easier to establish a regular practice schedule and weekly lesson time, which are essential for steady progress.

January also provides a clean slate for goal-setting. Beginning lessons at the start of the year allows students to set clear, achievable musical goals and track their progress over

the coming months. For children, this might mean mastering basic technique or preparing for a recital later in the year. For adults, it could be learning to read music, playing favorite songs, or gaining the confidence to perform for others. Starting in January makes it natural to measure improvement as the year unfolds, which can be highly motivating.

Another advantage is the extended runway before busy seasons arrive. Students who start lessons in January have months to build strong foundational skills before spring and summer activities fill the calendar. This early start helps prevent the rushed feeling that can occur when lessons begin closer to recital season or the school year's end. By the time performances, exams, or ensembles come around, January starters often feel more confident and prepared.

From a practical perspective, January can also be a quieter time at music studios and schools. After the holiday rush, teachers often have greater availability and flexibility in their schedules. This can mean more choice in lesson times



and, in some cases, a more personalized learning experience. Teachers may also have more time to focus on goal-setting and long-term planning with new students.

Finally, beginning music lessons in January supports overall well-being during the winter months. Learning music provides a creative outlet that can boost mood, reduce stress, and bring a sense of accomplishment especially valuable during shorter, colder days. Having a positive, engaging activity to look forward to each week can make winter feel more productive and enjoyable.

In short, January combines motivation, structure, and opportunity in a way few other months can. By starting music lessons at the beginning of the year, students give themselves the gift of progress, creativity, and growth that can last well beyond January and well into the future.

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Crescendo! 2026: A Cultural & Culinary Extravaganza

Sinfonia Gulf Coast has announced the lineup for its highly anticipated annual fundraiser, Crescendo! A Cultural & Culinary Extravaganza, a three-day celebration blending world-class music, fine dining and community philanthropy. Set for Jan. 23, Feb. 27 and March 1, 2026, Crescendo! is expected to be a highlight of the Northwest Florida social season.

The festivities begin Friday, Jan. 23, at 11 a.m. with the Crescendo! Kick Off Lunch in the Juniper Ballroom at Hotel Effie in Miramar Beach. Dubbed Bubbles, Bourbon + More, the stylish afternoon offers high

takes place Sunday, March 1, at 3 p.m. in the Magnolia Ballroom at Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort. The afternoon extravaganza celebrates the culinary and cultural arts with premium wines and spirits, live and silent auctions, and an unforgettable musical performance.

Headlining the event is internationally renowned ensemble Pink Martini, performing live with the full Sinfonia Gulf Coast orchestra as part of the organization's 20th anniversary season. Known for its genre-blending sound that spans jazz, classical and vintage pop — often sung in more than 25 languages — Pink

said Sinfonia Music & Artistic Director Demetrius Fuller. "It's an intentional fusion of culture, community and philanthropy that directly supports our music education and outreach programs across Northwest Florida."

Proceeds from Crescendo! benefit Sinfonia Gulf Coast's

extensive education and community engagement initiatives, including musicians in schools, free orchestra concerts, student transportation, the Sinfonia Youth Orchestra, partnerships with Florida State University, Carnegie Hall's Link Up concerts, the Paint the Music initiative and Arts in Medicine pro-

gramming with Sacred Heart Hospital.

Tickets are now on sale at SinfoniaGulfCoast.org or by calling the box office at (850) 460-8800. Sponsorship opportunities are available by contacting Klara Mikolai at kmikolai@sinfoniagulfcoast.org.



tea-inspired vibes with lunch, champagne, wine and bourbon craft cocktails, a live DJ, and a curated fashion experience featuring Balmain. Guests will also enjoy an exclusive shopping experience in the Balmain Lounge. Tickets are \$175 per person and include lunch, beverages and gratuities. Early reservations are encouraged, as the event typically sells out.

Crescendo! weekend continues Friday, Feb. 27, at 6 p.m. with a series of intimate Vintner Dinners hosted in private homes and elegant venues throughout the Emerald Coast. These curated evenings pair acclaimed local and national chefs with prestigious wineries for a multi-course culinary experience. Participating vineyards include Opus One Winery, Promontory, Groth Estates, AXR, Reynolds Family Winery, Mondavi Sisters Wine and others, with additional culinary talent announcements forthcoming. Vintner Dinner tickets are \$500 per person and include all food, wine and gratuities.

The centerpiece of the weekend, the Crescendo! Main Event,



Martini has captivated audiences around the world. This marks the first time Sinfonia's orchestra has performed at Crescendo!.

Main Event guests will enjoy reserved table seating, hors d'oeuvres, an elegant seated late lunch and an all-inclusive afternoon of music, food and wine. Tickets are \$225 per person, with tables of 10 available.

"Crescendo! is unlike any other annual event we produce,"



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FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2026

Multiple intimate dinners in stunning homes and venues with a private chef & world class wines. Limited tickets available



MAIN EVENT!

SUNDAY, MARCH 1, 2026

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A New Year's Resolution for HOAs: Upgrade Internet Infrastructure

BY DON CARTER,
SECURE VISION

January is a season of reflection and fresh starts. While individuals set personal resolutions, HOAs and condo boards can make their own: commit to better internet for the year ahead.

Why start with internet? Because it's often the single most common resident complaint. When speeds lag or outages occur, frustration spreads quickly. Reliable connectivity isn't just a convenience anymore—it's the backbone of daily life. Remote work, virtual learning, telehealth, streaming, gaming, and even smart appliances all depend on it. For communities along the Emerald Coast, where



residents and vacationers often live side by side, reliable internet is what makes life run smoothly.

The first step is reviewing existing contracts with service providers. Many boards are locked into agreements that renew automatically without much oversight. These contracts may not reflect current usage

patterns, population growth, or the increasing number of connected devices per household. A new year is the perfect time to renegotiate, explore competitive options, or add performance clauses that hold providers accountable.

The second step is evaluating infrastructure itself. Communi-

ties built more than a decade ago may have wiring or equipment that simply wasn't designed for modern use. Even with ample bandwidth purchased from a provider, outdated routers and switches can bottleneck performance. Upgrading to fiber backbones and enterprise-grade hardware transforms the resident experience overnight.

A third resolution: plan for the future, not just today. It's tempting to "fix the immediate problem," but forward-thinking boards anticipate growth. Families are adding more devices every year. Smart systems are becoming standard. What feels like "plenty" of bandwidth today may be insufficient tomorrow. By planning now, boards save

money and avoid disruptive retrofits later.

The payoff is significant. Reliable internet reduces resident complaints, supports property values, and positions communities as modern and desirable places to live. It also reflects well on board leadership when members proactively solve problems before they escalate.

Make reliable connectivity part of your community's resolutions this year. Secure Vision can review your current systems, highlight areas for improvement, and design a roadmap to keep your residents connected and satisfied in 2026 and beyond. Call us today at 251-216-9434. Visit www.secvis.com.

MEDICARE

continued from previous page

ing a guaranteed \$1.5k-\$3.5K extra each year in premiums for this peace of mind. You will also need to add a Prescription Drug Plan, which can be an additional premium. However, another major advantage is that you don't have to worry about an insurance carrier denying a

claim. You are still on Original Medicare with the government, and they are not known to deny claims from your doctor.

Those who choose an Advantage plan may have \$0 or low premiums, but need to understand their deductibles, copayments, coinsurance, and of course, max out-of-pocket expenses. Many HMO and PPO plans have become available

that will give back a portion of the Part B premium. These are known as "Giveback Plans" This can result in some significant savings.

Know Your Network:

I honestly can't emphasize this part enough. When it comes to Advantage plans, don't be fooled into switching plans without first reviewing the net-

work of care providers. Knowing which doctors, specialists, hospitals, and pharmacies are in-network can significantly impact your out-of-pocket expenses, as well as how often you will use their services. If you decide to change Medicare Advantage plans, be sure you are comfortable with the network of providers that will be covered under your new plan. Most providers accept Original Medicare. If you decide on a Supplement Plan, you just need to make sure the provider accepts Medicare.

Know the Benefits:

Each Medicare plan offers different benefits beyond basic coverage. Some plans (Medicare Advantage) include additional perks like dental, vision, hearing, fitness programs, and even transportation services. Understanding these extra benefits can significantly enhance your overall healthcare experience. For instance, Part B Giveback, OTC Allowance, and access to specific wellness programs or health services tailored to the community are all extra perks worth knowing about. Take advantage of these offerings to optimize your Medicare plan.

Know Your Enrollment Dates and Your Local Independent Broker:

Knowing both of these is honestly very important. The

Annual Enrollment Period for changing PDPs and Medicare Advantage plans is October 15th to December 7th each year. The Open Enrollment Period for Medicare Advantage is January 1st through March 31st each year. If you missed AEP or want to change your Medicare Advantage Plan for any reason, you can do a one-time change during this period.

A knowledgeable independent broker can provide personalized guidance, answer your questions, and help you explore various Medicare options available specifically to the area. We understand the local healthcare landscape and can assist in finding a plan that aligns with your unique needs and preferences. Whenever you have a question about your coverage, you know exactly who to call and don't have to worry about some random operator giving you biased or inaccurate information. We are not bound to any specific carrier and can therefore educate you on most/if not all of your options. Plus, since brokers are commission-based, this is a no-cost service for you.

I hope you learned something here, but I'm sure you still have plenty of questions. Not to worry, we are just a phone call or email away to help. Reach out anytime! Email christian@evergreenhealthins.com or call (850) 687 7606.

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Our Endangered Animals

BY HELEN PETRE

Our home here in the Panhandle is a paradise of animals and plants, perfect weather, dune lakes, pine savannahs, springs and creeks, and miles of beach. Our parks and wildlife management areas are teaming with life. Our highways are full of traffic, tourists, and not much wildlife, other than the occasional deer during the rut. We are building residential and commercial projects faster than our endangered animals can escape.

Here are the names and habitats of some of our endangered species. They share our paradise. They were here first. If you see them, please protect them. The fact that they are endangered means you probably will not see them.

St. Andrew's Beach Mouse (Peromyscus Polionotus Peninsularis)



The St. Andrew's beach mouse is a subspecies of beach mouse (P. polionotus). It lives in the dunes in Gulf and Bay Counties. The St. Andrew's Beach Mouse is six inches long with a two-inch white tail. Beach mice eat invertebrates and seeds from dune plants. They are monogamous and sexually mature at 30 days. Females have four pups after a gestation of 23 days. They are ready to breed again in 24 hours.

With that great breeding record, it seems like they should

not be endangered, but they are federally endangered due to beach development, destruction of dunes, and fragmentation of their habitat. Other threats include predation from cats, foxes, coyotes, and raccoons.

Choctawhatchee Beach Mouse (P. Polionotus Allophrys)



Another subspecies of beach mouse, the Choctawhatchee Beach Mouse, is also federally endangered. Like all beach mice, they eat seeds and fruit of dune plants and forage at night. The Choctawhatchee Beach Mouse lives in Bay, Walton, and Okaloosa Counties.

Leatherback Sea Turtle (Dermochelys Coriacea)

Leatherback sea turtles are federally endangered. They live 45 years, are seven feet long and weigh 2,000 pounds. They are the largest turtles on Earth, and they have been for 100 million years. Tyrannosaurus rex walked the Earth about 66 million years ago. Leatherbacks have a leathery, bluish, flexible carapace, in contrast to other turtles with hard shells. They can dive 4,200 feet down and stay under water for 85 minutes.

Leatherbacks take the longest migration between breeding and feeding of any turtle species, an average of 3,700 miles. They mate in the ocean. The females come ashore, some right



here on our beaches, and lay about 80 eggs. The temperature of the nest determines the sex of the offspring. At 85 degrees F, half are male, half are female. At warmer temperatures they are females, at colder temperatures males. Females return to the beach they were born on to lay eggs. Males spend their entire lives at sea.

One in a thousand hatchlings reaches adulthood. Turtles die when they ingest plastic bags which they mistake for jellyfish. Some dead turtles have been found with as much as 11 pounds of plastic in their stomachs.

Gulf Moccasinshell (Medionidus Penicillatus)

Gulf moccasinshells are two inch long, oval shaped, greenish, thin, river mussels. Like all mussels, they filter feed, consuming plankton and detritus, or dead stuff. Since mussels take in whatever is in the water and use the nutrients for food, they take in pesticides and chemicals, which are a significant threat. Gulf moccasinshells are federally endangered. They live in the Ecofina Creek, which is spring fed and empties into Deer Point Lake, north of Panama City. Deer Point Lake is the water supply for Bay County.

Male mussels release sperm into the water, and females take the sperm into their shells,

where eggs are fertilized. Like all mussels, the glochidia, or larva, attach to the gills of fish, where they live for a while, until they are mature. Host fish are blackbanded darters, eastern mosquitofish, guppies, and gulf darters.

Reticulated Flatwoods Salamander (Ambystoma Bishop)

Reticulated flatwoods salamanders are burrowing, or mole, salamanders. They live in seasonally wet savannahs, such as longleaf and wiregrass. Adults burrow into the litter. In October, they lay eggs in ephemeral wetlands with emergent vegetation, a habitat which is pretty rare in October, our dry season. Besides that, emergent vegetation occurs only after summer burns. The eggs hatch only if there is water, and the hatchlings require water for

three months. That means October through January. It does not rain much between October and January. That is also the time when the forest service does its winter burns. Things do not look good for this confused salamander.

These are just a few of the most endangered organisms cohabiting with us in our paradise. We cannot make it rain, but there are things we can do to keep our habitat fit for our endangered animals. Please be kind and protect them by reducing use of plastic, recycling, putting trash in trash receptacles, staying on trails, keeping the beach flat, and reducing fertilizer and pesticide use. I am grateful to share my world with these amazing creatures. I hope my grandchildren will be able to enjoy them, too.

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