



JANUARY 2026
VOL. 11, NO. 7

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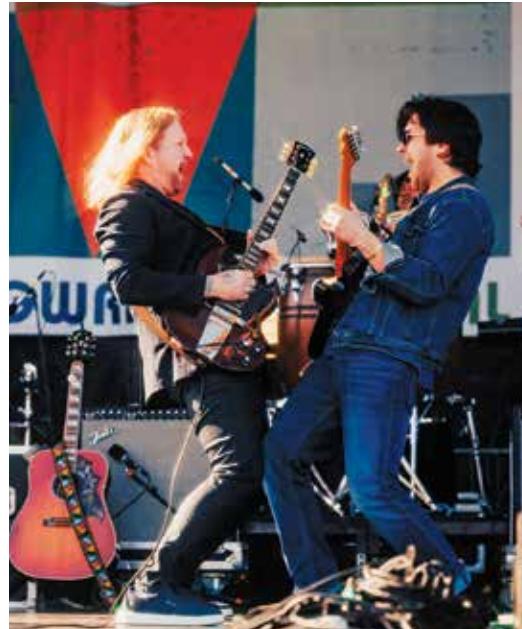
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The 17th Annual 30A Songwriters Festival Brings Top-Notch Talent and Music Lovers from Around the Globe

BY WILL ESTELL

If you consider yourself a fan of great music and the talented songwriters who make the music you love come to life, you definitely want to make plans to attend the 17th Annual 30A Songwriters Festival. Ranked as one of the top three songwriter festivals in the entire country, there are plenty of reasons to make this your first musical event of the new year: over 125 reasons in fact—and that's just the number of artists playing it!

The renowned festival of music and fun celebrates its 17th year, January 16 - 19, 2026, with four days of performances, including two days of headliners on presenting sponsor Grand Boulevard's main stage in beautiful Miramar Beach. The winter weekend of music and fun is celebrated by music lovers around the globe and somehow seems to get better



every single year. That's something I can attest to, as I attended the very first one! With performances at more than 30 venues, spanning over 30 miles of South Walton's beach communities, this year's festival offers something for

everyone. Whether you're a fan of Americana, rock, folk, country or jazz, the popular festival brings some of the best songwriters to ever grace any stage: all converging on our beautiful, NWFL beaches.

This year's lineup is another

assortment of phenomenal artists, from Saturday's Grand Boulevard main stage headliners Paul McDonald & The Mourning Doves, I'm With Her, and 10,000 Maniacs to

SONGWRITERS
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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.

It's become quite common for me to see more and more patients shifting

TORTOISE
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The Bobby J Team



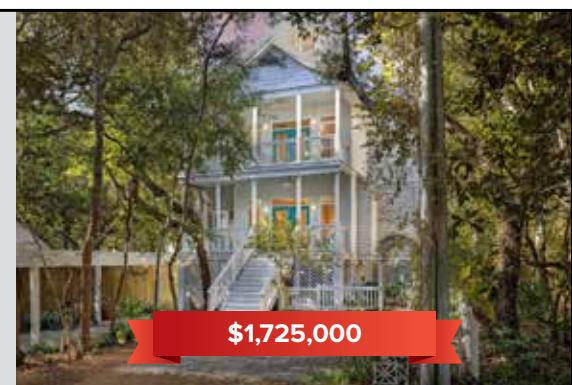
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 **Community**
SONGWRITERS
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Sunday's headliners, Nikki Lane, Toad The Wet Sprocket, and the iconic Mavis Staples. Additionally, 2026's lineup includes such well known lyrical masters as Abe Partridge, Charlie Starr of Blackberry Smoke, Benji Shanks, Shawn Mullins, Jeffrey Steele, Paul Thorn, David Ryan Harris, Murray Attaway, Dan Navarro, Brian White, Charlie Mars, Jesse Lynn Madera, and a plethora of both first timers and returning 30A SWF favorites.

When I asked multi-hitmaker and award-winning songwriter Jeffrey Steele what keeps him coming back to perform year-after-year, he said, "I always look forward to 30A Songwriter's Festival, not only as another opportunity to do what I love: singing and entertaining, but also seeing the fans and many of my writer friends I don't see often. Just catching up and hangin' at the beach."

Another returning favorite, Baton Rouge native CJ Solar tells me, "I've been going to 30A Songwriters Fest on and off since its first year. I drove over from Baton Rouge my senior year of

high school to see my hero Jeffrey Steele in person for the first time. Jump ahead and I've been invited to play the ASCAP stage a handful of times over the years and am so excited to be back again as a performer! There's nothing like starting the year off in my favorite part of Florida, doing my favorite thing: playing songs for people who love them!"

Since its inception in 2010, 30A Songwriter's Festival has grown year after year, and is one of many endeavors made possible by Walton County Cultural Arts Alliance (CAA), a remarkable organization that adds so much to Northwest Florida's coastal community through numerous artistic and philanthropic endeavors. 30A Songwriters Festival is co-produced by Russell Carter Artist Management who has been the driving force behind booking the talent since the festival began in 2010.

With 100% of the festival's net profits going toward supporting the CAA's mission to advance the arts in Walton County through education, leadership, advocacy, and the funding of special arts related programs within the community,

festival goers are not only having a great time, they are also making a positive difference in the lives of so many that CAA serves.

Festival Co-Producer Russell Carter, President of Russell Carter Artist Management, has good reason to be immensely proud of the festival he helped to create. Carter tells me, "This festival began as a small event and grew quickly into a premier one-of-a-kind showcase for world-class songwriters. Our goal was to curate a festival that presents the absolute best in touring songwriters and performers. We always want our audiences to experience musicians representing diverse genres of music – jazz, blues, country, folk, Americana and rock, with just two stipulations – they have to write their own music and they have to be really great at it!"

I asked Carter about some of the aspects of the 2026 festival that he's most excited about. He said, "We're excited to add a new headline show on Friday, January 16th at Seaside Amphitheater, featuring 2026 Grammy Nominee Margo Price with her full band. She will feature songs

from her catalog, including the just released deluxe album version of 'Hard Headed Woman.' We pride ourselves on supporting emerging artists on the verge of mainstream success. I highly encourage everyone to take this opportunity to see Nikki Lane and Paul McDonald & The Mourning Doves. Both have opening sets on the mainstage, as well as late night club sets at various 30A area venues, and both have critically acclaimed new albums and that are poised to break big, commercially, sooner than later."

Grab Your Festival Passes Fast!

Full weekend passes start at only \$395, premium seating VIP passes are just \$1,040, and Premiere VIP passes, with special front row seating at the Grand Boulevard Headliners Stage are only \$1,385. All of these ticket packages come in at quite the bargain considering you have the ability to see and hear so many remarkable songwriters across four days along the idyllic beach communities that have become a favorite vacation destination around the world.

For a full menu of perform-

ers, venues and showtimes, as well as grabbing those limited passes while you still can, visit: 30ASongwritersFestival.com and join us for the festival of music and fun!

Will Estell is a writer, editor, and multimedia consultant with more than 750 published features across travel, music, real estate, and automotive genres. He has conducted one-on-one interviews with a wide range of notable artists, including Kenny Chesney, Jimmy Buffett, Alan Jackson, Darius Rucker, Lyle Lovett, Amy Grant, Sara Evans, Brian Kelly, Styx, Eli Young Band, Drake White, and many others.

Will Estell is the chief creative officer of Estell Hussey Media and has co-founded 12 magazines from concept to launch, while also serving as editor for numerous additional titles. His newest media venture, HIM Magazine—a lifestyle publication for men—is slated to debut on newsstands nationwide in the third quarter of 2026.

Originally from rural Mississippi, Estell is a father of three who now lives in Destin and Navarre Beach with his wife, WEAR ABC 3 news anchor Laura Hussey-Estell. He is a longtime regular contributor to Life Media's family of publications.



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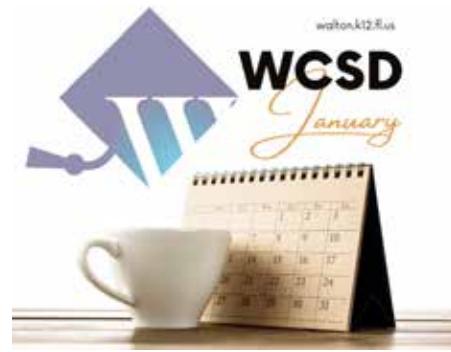
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Walton County School District: Reflecting on 2025, Looking Ahead to January

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 Teacher 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 Martin 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.**

Green Thumb Garden Club Celebrates Their 70th Anniversary

Green Thumb Garden Club, Inc. was founded on January 10, 1956, as the Green Thumb Garden Club of Santa Rosa Beach, FL. The Club was federated on February 3, 1959, and incorporated on May 21, 2019.

Green Thumb's key purpose is to stimulate interest in the beautification of Walton County, to further the education of our members and the

public in fields of gardening, horticulture, botany, floral design, environmental awareness, conservation of natural resources,

civic beautification, nature studies, and to instill in our youth the love of gardening and respect for the environment.

GTGC's generous members and the support received from the local community enable the annual award of multiple scholarships and support for other non-profit organizations in Walton County.

The January 21, 2026, monthly member meeting will be a celebration of

Green Thumb Garden Club's 70th Platinum anniversary. TV personality, meteorologist Chris Smith, is the guest speaker. Chris has decades of weather forecasting experience and recently founded Panhandle Weather.

The venue is Westwinds Conference Center, 4700 Westwinds Drive, Miramar Beach, FL 32550. Cost is \$30 (cash/check); \$32. (credit card). A special lunch is being planned, and attendees are requested to

wear party attire.

GTGC is a tax-exempt 501(c) (3) non-profit organization with 100+Members and growing! New members are always welcome. Please visit the Green Thumb Garden Club website to learn more about our charitable mission, how to join and details on meetings, activities, and events. The website address is greenthumbgardenclubinc.org or send an email to greenthumbgardenclubinc@gmail.com.



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Coastal Seniors January Updates

COASTAL SENIORS OF SOUTH WALTON

Exercise Classes – Angela Gibson will lead classes every Tuesday and Thursday at 10 a.m. at 70 Logan Lane, Grayton Beach. Cost is \$5 per class for CSSW members and \$10 for non-members. Sign up on the email list. If you are not already on the email list, call (850) 280-5342 or email coastalseniorsofsouthwalton@gmail.com

Core Class - Angela Gibson will lead a 30-minute core class every Tuesday at 9:15 a.m. Participants will be screened to meet the safety and health requirements of this class. A yoga mat and Pilates ring are used for this class. Cost is \$5 per class for CSSW members and \$10 for non-members. For information or screening, call (850) 280-5342 or email coastalseniorsofsouthwalton@gmail.com

Chair Yoga - Amy Lindsey with Santa Rosa Physical Therapy will lead a one hour Therapeutic Chair Yoga class

on Thursdays, January 8 and 15, and February 5 and 12 at 8:45 a.m. at 70 Logan Lane, Grayton Beach. Cost is \$5 per class for CSSW members and \$10 for non-members. Sign up on the email list. To be added to the email sign up list, call (850) 280-5342 or email coastalseniorsofsouthwalton@gmail.com

Art Classes – Watercolor Painting Class – Karen Peterson will teach classes on Fridays, January 23, 30, and February 6, 13 from 8:45 a.m. – Noon. Classes held at 70 Logan Lane in Grayton Beach. Note Cost Change: Cost is \$20 for CSSW members and \$40 for non-members. Registration is required as space is limited. To be added to the email sign up list, call (850) 280-

5342 or email coastalseniorsofsouthwalton@gmail.com. All supplies are included.

Pickleball - Beginner Pickleball 101 at Walton Sports Complex Courts on January 7 at 6:00 pm. PLEASE CHECK THE SITES LISTED BELOW FOR UPDATES. This beginner class is open to Walton County residents only. (Ages 18 and up) Registration is required. Register through the Parks and Rec Website at secure.rec1.com. Email Sandy Gulak at sowalpickleball@gmail.com for more information. Class is FREE and equipment is provided or use your own. Open play at Boys and Girls Club play every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday 9:30-12:30, from January 13 -

April 30. Beginners welcome. Come learn how to play. Demo paddles available. 6 indoor courts. Cost is \$5 per day plus \$35 waiver fee at initial registration. Please join the SolWal 30A Pickleball Association on Facebook for more information and weekly updates and check the CSSW calendar at www.coastalseniorsofsouthwalton.org.

Northwest Florida Health Council - Free Health Screenings on Thursday, January 8, from 8:45 to 11:30 a.m. at 70 Logan Lane, Grayton Beach.

Monthly Meeting - Friday, January 16 from 11 a.m. -1 p.m. The program and guest speaker will be announced at a later date. A light lunch will be served. Sign up by email coast-

alseniorsofsouthwalton@gmail.com.

Line Dancing Is Back with Sue Westpahl every Wednesday in January and February 4 and 11 from 3-4 p.m. at 70 Logan Lane, Grayton Beach. Registration required as space is limited. Call (850) 280-5342 or email coastalseniorsofsouthwalton@gmail.com

Seniors 50 years of age and up residing in or visiting Walton County are invited to join CSSW. Membership is \$30 for individuals, \$50 for family, and \$100 for businesses (your business will be listed on our home webpage and our Facebook page). You can become a member via email at coastalseniorsofsouthwalton@gmail.com, or on the website at www.coastalseniorsofsouthwalton.org. Also, follow us on Facebook at Coastal Seniors of South Walton. Coastal Seniors of South Walton, Inc. is a non-profit 501(C)(3) organization for active adults.

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SoWal Life
Published Monthly
Mailed FREE to the Communities
of 32459, 32461 and 32413
Circulation: 12,500 households
P.O. Box 1424
Santa Rosa Beach, FL 32459

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TORTOISE

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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 understand 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.

Evolving Tools for a New Year: Peptides, IV Nutrients & Hormone Support

Peptides are one of the most discussed emerging tools in modern integrative care. These naturally occurring amino acid chains act as subtle messengers, helping regulate inflammation, tissue repair, metabolic and hormonal signaling, and connections between the gut, brain, and immune system. Their goal isn't to override the body but rather to support pathways that have been strained by stress, aging, illness, or environmental demands.

Current research explores peptides' role in recovery, immune modulation, inflammation balance, gastrointestinal support, and healthy aging. Within my practice, peptides are chosen with careful consideration of each patient's history, medications, lab results, stress patterns, and goals. They are never used as a quick fix, but as a targeted support within a broader, thoughtful plan.

IV nutrient therapy provides another route for restoring balance. Delivering hydration, vitamins, and minerals directly into the bloodstream can be especially helpful for correcting deficiencies, supporting energy production, or aiding recovery after illness or exertion.

Hormone replacement therapy, when appropriate and medically supervised, can bring relief and stability during transitions such as perimenopause, andropause, or thyroid dysfunction. Balanced hormones can support cognitive clarity, metabolism, sleep, and overall well-being.

These advanced therapies are most effective not on their own, but when combined with a strong foundation.

The Nervous System: The Center of Regulation

No matter which therapies we use, everything ultimately returns to the nervous system. Stress, disrupted sleep, past 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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 Community

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*)



St. Andrew's Beach Mouse. FWC.

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*)



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 turtle. Wikipedia.

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 underwater 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 where they were born 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 moccasinshell. USFWS.

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 black-banded darters, eastern mosquitofish, guppies, and gulf darters.

ANIMALS

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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 non-stop 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, res-

ervations-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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 Community

A Shift Toward the One-Off at Captured Clothing 30A

Captured Clothing 30A has long been a familiar stop in Grayton Beach, but the shop continues to evolve in quiet, deliberate ways. Lately, that evolution has taken a clear direction: placing greater emphasis on custom work, limited pieces, and garments that don't follow a standard production path.

Some of the imagery featured on garments and throughout the space is personally selected by photographer and founder Chandler Williams. Years spent documenting landscapes, travel, and everyday moments have shaped a visual approach rooted in restraint and texture rather than trend. That sensibility carries into the clothing itself, influencing how pieces are designed, altered, and presented.

Alongside curated apparel, vintage finds, and leather goods, the shop has been intentionally increasing the number of custom and one-off pieces available at any given time. These items often appear in a rotating featured selection, highlighting garments that feel more experimental, personal, or process-driven than what's typically found online.

Some pieces exist only once.

Others may return in a familiar form—revisited through a similar image, silhouette, or material—but never reproduced exactly. A print might feel recognizable, a jacket cut might echo something seen before, yet each iteration carries subtle differences shaped by the moment it was made.

Rather than operating on strict restock cycles, the focus remains on allowing ideas to evolve naturally. If something resonates, it may be explored



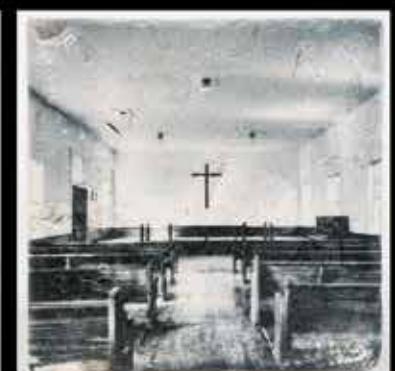
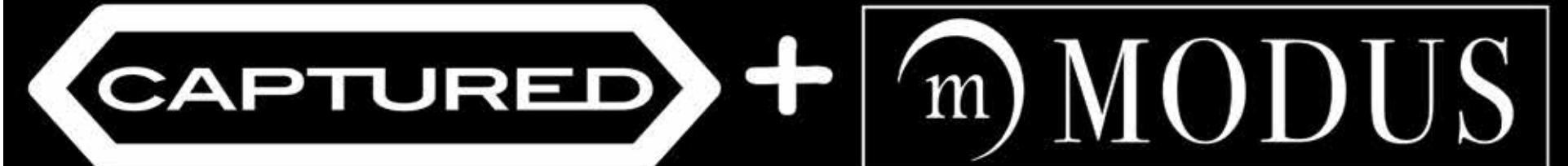
again. If not, it exists briefly and moves on. The result is a collection that feels alive, constantly shifting without chasing excess.

That same philosophy now carries into the store's online presence, where a dedicated featured section reflects what's happening in the space in real time. The selection changes often, and many pieces never repeat in

the same way.

In a place where creativity tends to show up quietly, Captured Clothing continues to move forward without forcing definition—balancing curation and creation, familiarity and surprise, and letting the work speak before the words ever do.

Captured Clothing 30A is located at 37 Logan Lane in Grayton Beach.



Winter Productivity: The Best Time to Tackle Big Home Projects



By KYLE SPARKS - OVATION PAINTING - BIG PROJECTS. BEAUTIFUL RESULTS. DONE RIGHT.

After the whirlwind of the holidays, January brings a quieter pace along the Emerald Coast. The guests have gone home, schedules settle, and life finally slows down. That calm stretch makes it the perfect time to tackle bigger home projects—the ones that are easy to put off when things get busy.

Interior painting often tops

that list. During the winter months, humidity drops and paint cures more evenly, producing a smooth, lasting finish. With fewer distractions, it's easier to focus on transforming entire spaces instead of piecemeal touch-ups. A full-home repaint now means you'll start the new year with clean walls, sharp trim, and rooms that feel refreshed and ready for daily life.

This is also an ideal time to address updates that make your home more comfortable for the year ahead. Whether it's finally giving attention to that high-traffic hallway, brightening a dark living room, or repainting a space you've been meaning to reclaim, winter offers the breathing room to make it happen without interruption.

For property managers and owners of vacation rentals, January's slower pace is an advantage, too. With fewer guests and open schedules, this is the perfect time to refresh interiors and prepare for the spring rush.

When it's cold outside, investing in your interior is one of the smartest ways to use the season. By the time warmer weather and busier days return, your home will already look and feel renewed.

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Award-Winning Gospel Group Legacy Five To Play Benefit Concert on January 30th

At Good News Church for Caring and Sharing of South Walton. Tickets are now on sale!

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.

General Admission tickets are \$20 with doors opening at 6:30 p.m. VIP tickets are \$100 and include preferred seating plus a 6 p.m. Meet & Greet,



with doors opening at 5:30 p.m. for VIP guests. Tickets are available online at <https://tinyurl.com/y4hfcw5>

"Caring & Sharing is a blessing to many in Walton County," said Jennifer Crawford, sponsor and long-time supporter. "Sharing a night of Dove Award-

winning Legacy Five music to raise funds seemed like a night of joy, and we are so thrilled to bring back this amazing opportunity to the community."

"Having Legacy Five come back for a fourth year to perform for our community is so exciting and all thanks to The

Crawford Family," said Carly Barnes, Executive Director of Caring & Sharing of South Walton. "All proceeds from the concert will directly enable us to meet the growing needs of our neighbors."

As Caring & Sharing of South Walton closes a year marked by unprecedented need, the organization remains committed to meeting the increasing demand for support. Starting 2026 with A Night of Hope will help ensure essential resources continue reaching the more than 1,100 families served each month. Businesses and individuals interested in making a meaningful impact are invited to join as event sponsors.

To learn more, contribute to the concert, volunteer, or donate directly to Caring & Sharing, visit www.servesowal.com.

Sponsorship opportunities are still available. Email Carly@caringandsharingsowal.org. All proceeds benefit Caring & Sharing of South Walton.

Caring and Sharing of South Walton provides crisis relief to our neighbors in need in Walton County through financial assistance, food, counseling, and case management. Founded in 1994, the organization serves over 700 local families each month. Caring & Sharing of South Walton also operates a Thrift Store. Sales in the Thrift Store help cover operating expenses and generate funds to help clients with food, prescriptions and utilities. Items for sale in the Thrift Store include clothing, housewares, bedding, furniture, electronics and books. For more information about Caring & Sharing of South Walton visit www.caringandsharing-sowal.org.

Attention pickleball fans: Registration is now open for THE PICKLE BALL, a new local tournament slated for March 7-8. Held at the Walton Sports Complex (behind Dune Lakes Elementary in Santa Rosa Beach), there are multiple men's, women's and mixed doubles age divisions. Proceeds benefit the Neurodiversity Resource of the Panhandle, a Santa Rosa Beach-based non-profit assisting Northwest Florida families with autism and similar diagnoses. Registration ends Saturday, Feb. 28, so don't delay and help us spread the word! Link: <https://swishtournaments.com/product/the-pickle-ball/>

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 Community

Money Matters: A Little Perspective Goes a Long Way

By CLINT GHARIB, AIF®, CFEd®

As so often is the case, history provides some valuable perspective and possible lessons. I've been advising clients for over 36 years and have lived through two of the worst bear markets and two of the biggest bull markets ever. I find it interesting that scars from bad experiences seem to leave deeper marks on our psyche than positive ones. Maybe this is why so many repeatedly make the mistake of thinking the next bear market will be like the last one, which has not been the case so far since they started tracking the S&P 500. Since the US market bottomed after the 2008 financial crisis, an ever-growing crowd of "market prognosticators" has warned at any hint of even the slightest trouble that a 2008 doomsday is around the corner. Since 2009, there have been continuous warnings of the next crash.

'Even a broken clock is right twice a day'

Remember in 2010, there was a 16% correction market



intraday lows. During the Euro debt crisis of 2011, meltdown S&P 500 lost roughly 17% and there were numerous headlines saying that it could be worse than 2008 crisis. Recall the 2013 bond selloff (a.k.a. taper tantrum) when bond traders panicked from Ben Bernanke's speech that "the Fed was going to stop buying bonds since the US was stronger now." In that Market Update, I said: *"analysts were misreading Mr. Bernanke's message and acting like he was going to sell bonds rather than just stop buying them."* The month-long double-digit selloff in 2014 produced daily headlines in the financial press asking if it was the start of next '08-like crash. Jump to Q1 2016,

when US stocks again sold off fast and furiously during the first 5 weeks of the year after the December 2015 rate hike of 0.25% saw double-digit declines fearing the fed was going to raise rates four times, yet only did one time in December of 0.25%. During Q4 2018, the S&P 500 dropped 19.7% from its peak. Post-Covid, we saw a 25% decline in 2020. All of these I mention dropped on fear, not necessarily on fundamental data. Each of them had its own overriding flavor but all of them shared 3 fears: rising inflation, interest rate changes and geopolitical tension. All of these were bear market corrections within a Bull Market Trend.

'History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes'

Fear (sentiment) drove the crowd and could not be calmed by positive data nor analysts' comments. Georgetown University Finance Professor, Reena Aggarwal called it a crisis of confidence. In hindsight, each time it was an emotional overreaction. As we enter 2026, I fully expect a profit-taking decline. History has shown us bear market corrections generally occur within Bull Market Trends, but like I've discussed, do not let sentiment dictate financial decisions. I believe we are in a new Bull Market Trend.

The S&P 500 Index is a widely recognized index including a representative sample of 500 leading companies in leading sectors of the U.S. economy. Indexes are unmanaged. Investors cannot invest directly into indexes. Past performance does not guarantee future results. All historical market data referenced above was obtained from S&P Global (www.spglobal.com)

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Thanks to Dog-Harmony, More Tails Are Wagging in Niceville

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 Bluewater 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 toward 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 hu-

mane 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

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

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 Bluewater 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 "influ-



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

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

DOG HARMONY

continued on page 22

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 Community

Where Hope Grows: A Story of Love, Legacy and Local Families

BY MARANDA SHAYE SMITH

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

When life takes an unexpected turn, Lauren's Legacy Pregnancy Center, right here in our area, stands ready to walk beside those facing uncertainty. Serving women and families across Walton and Okaloosa counties, the center provides free, confidential

services including pregnancy testing, ultrasounds, parenting programs, counseling and assistance connecting with community resources.

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

Rooted in Love and Legacy

Lauren's Legacy was founded in memory of a young woman whose life continues to touch others through her family's vision of

turning loss into purpose. Lauren was known for her compassionate heart and steadfast faith, someone who naturally reached out to help others in need. After her passing, her family turned their grief into purpose, creating a place that would carry on her spirit of love and service.

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

Impact That Matters

The past year has been one of remarkable growth and impact



for Lauren's Legacy. From January through September 2025, the center served 110 clients, provided 545 appointments, administered 75 pregnancy tests and 68 ultrasounds, and supported local families through 420 parenting classes. Each number represents a person—someone who found hope, encouragement and practical help when they needed it most.

A Night to Remember: Legacy Night 2025

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

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

Real Life Impact

Lauren's Legacy exists to meet people right where they are, offering steady, compassionate help when it's needed most. Access to free pregnancy tests, a no-cost ultrasound, one-on-one education about their options, and a

full suite of parenting classes are available free and confidential. When they complete the classes, they receive essential baby items such as car seats, diapers, strollers and clothes—giving them a real boost as they start this chapter.

All services are completely free and confidential, including pregnancy testing, ultrasounds, parenting classes and referrals for housing, medical and community resources. Anyone in need can call 850-880-6287 or visit the website to connect with someone who cares and schedule a confidential appointment.

How to Get Involved

Lauren's Legacy is a faith-based organization and operates entirely through the generosity of donors, volunteers and community partners. Whether through giving, volunteering or spreading awareness, every act of support helps this mission grow.

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

Together, we can continue to build a community where life is cherished and hope is shared. 16019 Hwy 331 Business, Suite 10, Freeport, 32439

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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 re-imagined 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."

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.

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

environments.

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

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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.



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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.

 Community

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.



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.

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.



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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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.

Emerald Coast Pools
17661 US-331
Freeport, FL 32439
(850) 880-6657

www.emeraldcoastpool.com

 Community

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 ECCAC'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.

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 programs 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, dedicated 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."

How to Help Make a Difference in a Child's Life

Until that day, the community can help by serving on the Board of Directors, volunteering, giving or advocating for the children. For more information, visit www.eccac.org, or call 850-400-3488. If abuse is suspected, report it by calling the anonymous Florida Abuse Hotline at 1-800-96-ABUSE.



You're invited to the
Emerald Coast Children's
Advocacy Center's

gala

golf

presented by Peggy & Jerry Swanson

Special Thanks to Our Title Sponsors:

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buy a table, team, sponsorship, or
donate if you can't attend.



eccc.org/gala-golf

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Sowal Comedy Fest Returns Valentine's Weekend

With 3 Nights, 3 Venues, and a New "Reserve Your Perfect View" Seating Experience

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.

After two straight years of sold-out crowds and sellout nights across the festival, early ticket purchase is strongly encouraged.

For the first time, every show offers reserved seating by selection, so guests can secure the spot that matches their night —

front-row energy, center-room immersion, or a quieter corner with friends.

HEADLINERS

2026 headliners include:

- **Peter Wong** (New York, NY) — featured on Comedy Central and Nate Bargatze's Natelands; returning for his third year.
- **Anjelica Scannura** (New York, NY) — Recently awarded Just For Laughs "New Face of Stand-Up" and the first Canadian woman to win the Boston Comedy Festival.
- **Carter Deems** (Atlanta, GA) — MTV's Wild 'N Out alum

with writing credits including Epic Rap Battles of History and Drop The Mic.

Shows run across all three nights with two showtimes (6:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m.) at each venue.

VENUE HIGHLIGHTS

SOWAL House — an intimate, welcoming room at the heart of South Walton's cultural scene, built for up-close stand-up.

Wild Olives — located at 30A's Greenway Station with a vibrant, stylish atmosphere, plus a full bar and food options available.

Distillery 98 — known for craft cocktails and a lively event

vibe, with tours, local art, and live programming.

A FESTIVAL WITH A PURPOSE

Support and sponsorships benefit the SOWAL Foundation (SOFO), a nonprofit dedicated to empowering and uplifting local creatives. In addition to the festival, SOFO hosts recurring programming at SOWAL House,

including film screenings, poetry gatherings, and art exhibitions/creative meetups, with special events held each month.

TICKETS AND DETAILS

Sowal Comedy Fest runs Thursday, Feb 12 — Saturday, Feb 14, 2026. Tickets are on sale now (purchase by date, venue, or headliner) at www.sowalcomedyfest.com.

"Dog Beach Party" is About to Make a Splash in South Walton!

Sarah Stewart (author of "Arlo's Day on 30A" and "Gigi's Shells") is excited for her latest publication, "Dog Beach Party." This whimsical tale of friendship, a little mischief, and ultimately sharing is set on the beaches of 30A in Walton County, Florida. A group of four-legged friends plan a beach party, but catastrophe strikes when the cats crash the party! Customary use is at the heart of this story. The dogs and cats that were fighting over the beach learn to share in the end. Can humans do the same? A new 30A classic! Local dogs

and cats were the models for the character illustrations, and each has their own profile in the back of the book. Books will be hitting shelves in South Walton in early 2026. Order your copy today at www.SarahStewart30A.com or text (850) 525-4800. Sarah hopes it has a "paws-itive" effect on our beach community!

Find more of Stewart's titles at The Hidden Lantern in Rosemary Beach, Sundog Books in Seaside, Zoo Gallery and The Studio Gallery in Grayton Beach and The Blue Giraffe in Inlet Beach.

ANIMALS

continued from page 6

Reticulated flatwoods salamander (Ambystoma bishop)



Reticulated flatwoods salamander. Wikipedia.

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 co-habiting 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 the 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.

Helen Petre is a retired USDA biologist and college biology professor. She spends her time volunteering, teaching, and writing science articles to share her interests with future generations.



SOWAL COMEDY FESTIVAL

Valentine's Weekend

THURS, FEB 12 - SAT, FEB 14

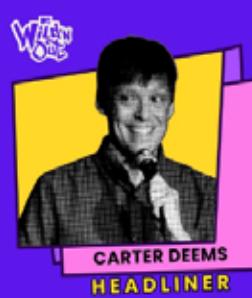
FEATURING



PETER WONG
HEADLINER



ANJELICA SCANNURA
HEADLINER



CARTER DEEMS
HEADLINER



BRIAN TUCKER



JASON HADDEN



ANNA BIANCO

...and many more!

VENUES



SOWAL HOUSE



WILD OLIVES



Distillery

98

www.sowalcomedyfest.com

A Veteran's Call to Serve Again:

Angel Force Brings Safety and Leadership to Local Schools

By MICHELLE RUSCHMAN

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



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

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

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

As a retired 21-year member

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

"Our veterans need a sense of purpose. We served our country, and many of us are asking, 'Now what?' We have unique skills and the ability to adapt and overcome in the most adverse situations. We've been trained to

be proactive and to see what bad guys look like with smiles on their faces. Being an Angel Guard can be the next chapter. I make sure each applicant is properly vetted, and they go through an extensive physical, emotional, and mental

screening to make sure we're putting the right vet at the right school. When they get in there, something amazing happens.

VETERAN'S CALL
continued on page 23

CELEBRATE RECOVERY STEP STUDY



starts
Feb. 6th Friday- 7:00 PM

"Real change happens in Step Study"

This Step Study provides a confidential, biblically based 12 step process to work through:

- Addictions
- Anxiety, Fear & Depression
- Codependency and Anger
- Past Trauma or Abuse
- Hurts, Habits, Hang-ups

Completing this 6 month Step Study is the pathway for becoming a leader in Celebrate Recovery. Your recovery can be someone else's hope!

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 **Discover Freedom**

 **Grow into Leadership**

 **Find Community**

 **outreach@newlifesrb.com**

REGISTER TODAY



<https://newlifesrb.churchcenter.com/registrations/events/3343943>



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 Center. 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,

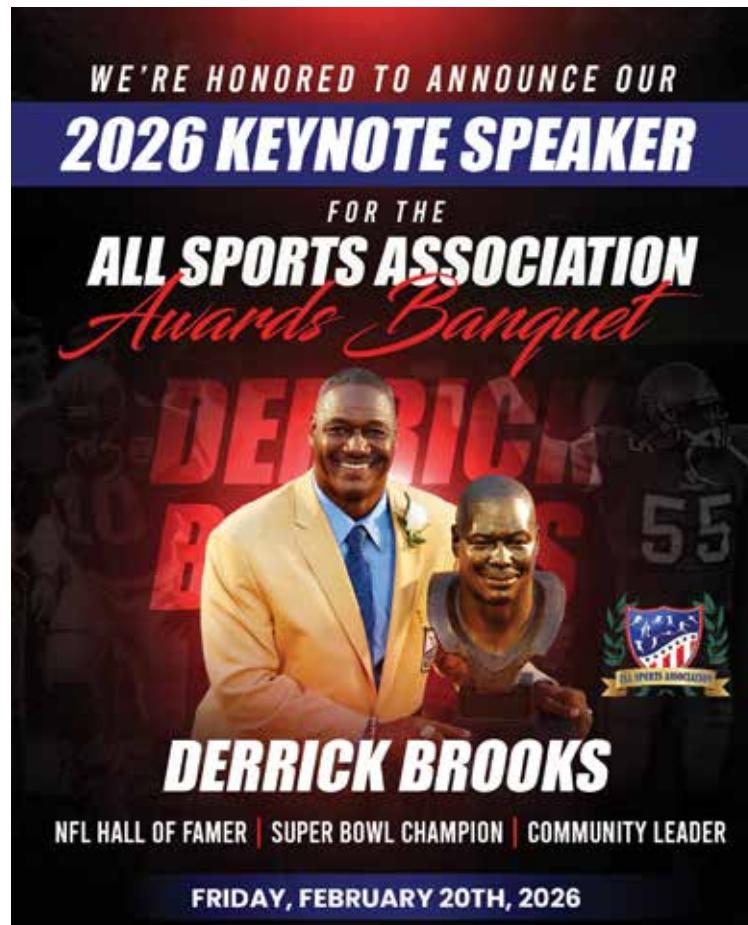
perseverance and success in sports and in life. In addition, you'll enjoy opportunities to network with local sports programs, sponsors and youth volunteers and also receive updates on upcoming ASA initiatives and the distribution of funds that support youth-focused sports and service organizations throughout 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 keynote 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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DOG HARMONY

continued from page 13

ence 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 pro-

gram 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.

Comedy Legend Yakov Smirnoff Brings Heart, Humor and Hope to Destin

TV and film star and comedy legend Yakov Smirnoff is coming to Destin 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, Yakov

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 in Destin 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.

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

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

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

Junior Captains (Ages 7–9): Young leaders take part in fun, hands-on exercises like group discussions, decision-making games, and interactive leadership challenges. The goal is to instill foundational habits of responsibility and expression.

ECTC Presents Agatha Christie's "Murder on The Orient Express" January 15 – February 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 includes



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,

Nonsense, 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 Mercure (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 (Nonsense) as Countess Andrenyi. Also, returning to the ECTC stage, Cara Chesney (The Glass Menagerie) appears as Mary Debenham, joined by Tommy Bergeron (Million Dollar 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.

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



Featuring an intimate showroom with excellent table seating, alcoholic & non-alcoholic beverages & plentiful, free parking.

"A LAUGH RIOT!"
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

"SPLENDIDLY FUNNY!"
The New York Times

"YAKOV, YOU ARE A NATIONAL TREASURE"
PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN

"HE'S STILL SLINGIN' IT, HE'S GOOD! HE STILL WRITES NEW MATERIAL!"
THE JOE ROGAN EXPERIENCE

LIVE at The Palms of Destin!

February 6th, 7th & 8th | 4pm & 7pm showtimes | 4201 Indian Bayou Trail, Destin
Reservations Required. Visit MAGICDestin.com or Yakov.com (scroll down on home page for Destin shows)

 Events

JANUARY HAPPENINGS IN SOUTH WALTON

Farmers Markets
Grand Blvd. Saturdays
9 a.m.-1 p.m.

Grayton Locals Market
 Thursdays 10 a.m.-2 p.m. at Hibiscus Guest House

Seaside Amphitheater Saturdays and Tuesdays 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

Peddlers Pavilion Sundays 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

Rosemary Beach at North Barrett Square Sundays 9 a.m.-1 p.m.


Biophilia Center Kids Craft Day Jan. 17

Join the Biophilia Center for a joyful celebration of art and imagination at Kids Craft Day from 9 a.m. to noon. Young artists will get hands-on with three fun, kid-friendly crafts, all guided by talented local artists. This event is designed for children ages 2-12, and each child must be accompanied by an adult. While adults won't receive their own craft supplies, they're encouraged to help and cheer on their little creators as they bring their artwork to life. Get tickets at <https://secure.qgiv.com/for/nokuseducation/event/biophiliaartfestivalkidscraftday>.

Hops For Hounds Jan. 18

Get ready to grab your leash and raise a glass! Dog-Harmony announced the sixth annual

Hops for Hounds dog walk and after party, happening from 1 to 3 p.m. at Props Brewery in Hammock Bay in Freeport. This paw-some event promises fun, furry friends, and craft beer for humans 21 and older. The day kicks off with a scenic, short stroll, followed by a lively after-party at Props Brewery featuring craft beer, live music, vendors, food trucks, and more. All proceeds from ticket sales and sponsorships will support Dog-Harmony and its efforts to help local pups and their families. To register, visit <https://dog-harmony.org/hops-for-hounds-2026>.

Coastal Branch Library Winter Program Jan. 21, Feb. 4, 11 & 18

Join the Coastal Branch Library for their beloved Winter Community Program, January 7 - March 4 at 10 a.m. Check out this year's lineup at waltonlibraries.com, or stop by the library for a brochure.

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.


Escape to Create: Live Performance & Artist Reception Jan. 25

Featuring groundbreaking artists presenting fresh new perspectives in art, music, poetry, and more, Escape To Create community events are a generous contribution from Seaside's distinguished Artists-in-Residence. Escape to Create 2026 will take place Jan. 7th - Feb. 25th! Ticket purchases support Escape to Create Residencies and Educational Outreach throughout Walton County. To learn more and view to full schedule, visit www.escape2create.org.

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/nokuseducation/event/biophiliaartfestivalkidscraftday>.

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

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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.dcwf.org/events/5th-annual-galentines-day-fundraiser>.

Hard Hats & High Heels Feb. 13

Habitat Walton County invites you to join them at the annual Hard Hats & High Heels, a women's empowerment luncheon bringing together a cross-



section of the Emerald Coast's professional, social, and philanthropic leaders. The Hard Hats & High Heels Luncheon takes place at The Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa from 11 a.m.-1 p.m.

Destin Charity Wine Auction Turns 21 and Goes Wild for Kids April 24-25

Patron packages to go on sale

January 12 online at dcwf.org/tickets

The 21st Annual Destin Charity Wine Auction presented by the Jumonville Family is set for April 24-25, 2026. Proceeds from the annual auction benefit children in need across Northwest Florida through Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation's (DCWAF) 16 partner children's charities. In 2025, the

foundation donated \$3.1 million following one of its most successful auctions to date.

A limited number of patron packages can be purchased starting Jan. 12 at dcwf.org/tickets. Sponsorship opportunities are also available by contacting DCWAF at info@dcwf.org.

The 2026 auction will feature an impressive lineup of celebrity chefs and internationally renowned vintners. Confirmed vintners include owners and winemakers from Allegrini, Cardinale and Lokoya, Domaine de la Clos Chapelle, Dossier, Doubleback, Forman, Jarvis Estate, Phifer Pavitt, Aaron Pott Wines, Revana Wine Portfolio, Thompson 31Fifty, VGS Chateau Potelle and more.

The weekend begins Friday, April 24, with the signature patron dinner experience, hosted in private homes and premier restaurants across the Emerald Coast. Each dinner pairs a nationally recognized chef with

world-class vintners.

The main event, the Destin Charity Wine Auction, begins at 1 p.m. Saturday, April 25, with the Reserve Tasting and Live Auction held under an air-conditioned tent at Grand Boulevard Sandestin Town Center. Guests will enjoy exceptional wines paired with cuisine from top local restaurants before a high-energy live auction featuring rare wines, luxury trips and one-of-a-kind items.

The Destin Charity Wine Auction is held in conjunction with the South Walton Beaches Wine and Food Festival, also taking place at Grand Boulevard the same weekend. The festival showcases hundreds of premium wines, spirits and culinary offerings, with proceeds benefiting DCWAF. More participating chefs and vintners will be announced in the coming months. Full details are available at dcwf.org.

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 chal-

lenges.

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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 Community

Santa Rosa Beach Community Church

Santa Rosa Beach Community Church will be celebrating its 75th birthday with an Open House on January 25, 2026, beginning at 10 a.m. with our worship celebration. We can't wait for you to be a part of this special occasion!

The Community Church

was formed in 1940 by a small group of people. The original chapel was built in 1950 by volunteers. This chapel is now used for El Shaddai, the Hispanic Community. They meet on Tuesday and Sunday nights. They are a vital part of our church with Pastor Reyes as

their pastor.

In the mid-40s, a hurricane came through this area and destroyed three churches: Baptist, Methodist, and Catholic. Instead of building three churches, one church emerged, and it is called Santa Rosa Beach Community Church. There have

been several Pastors through the years: Pastor Don Ulrich and Pastor Pete Hyde are the longest serving pastors.

Dr. Steve Squires, our Senior Pastor, came to us in 2020 from Chicago. He teaches several Bible Studies, writes blogs and magazine articles, and oversees the direction of our church with the help of the church board. He also finds time to teach a Bible Study at Brookdale, in addition to visiting his congregation. His sermon on Sunday inspires every age group. There is something for everyone.

Dr. Hilary (Scooter) Ward, the Associate Pastor and Minister of Music, is a man of many talents. He came to our church in 2016. In addition to leading and orchestrating the music, he also leads two ukulele groups that perform monthly at memory care facilities. He continues to teach others how to play the instrument. He is also a USAF veteran and has served on the board of Gulf Cemetery Association as Vice President for ten years.

Our pianist is Mark Krueger and the organist is Jan Rundquist.

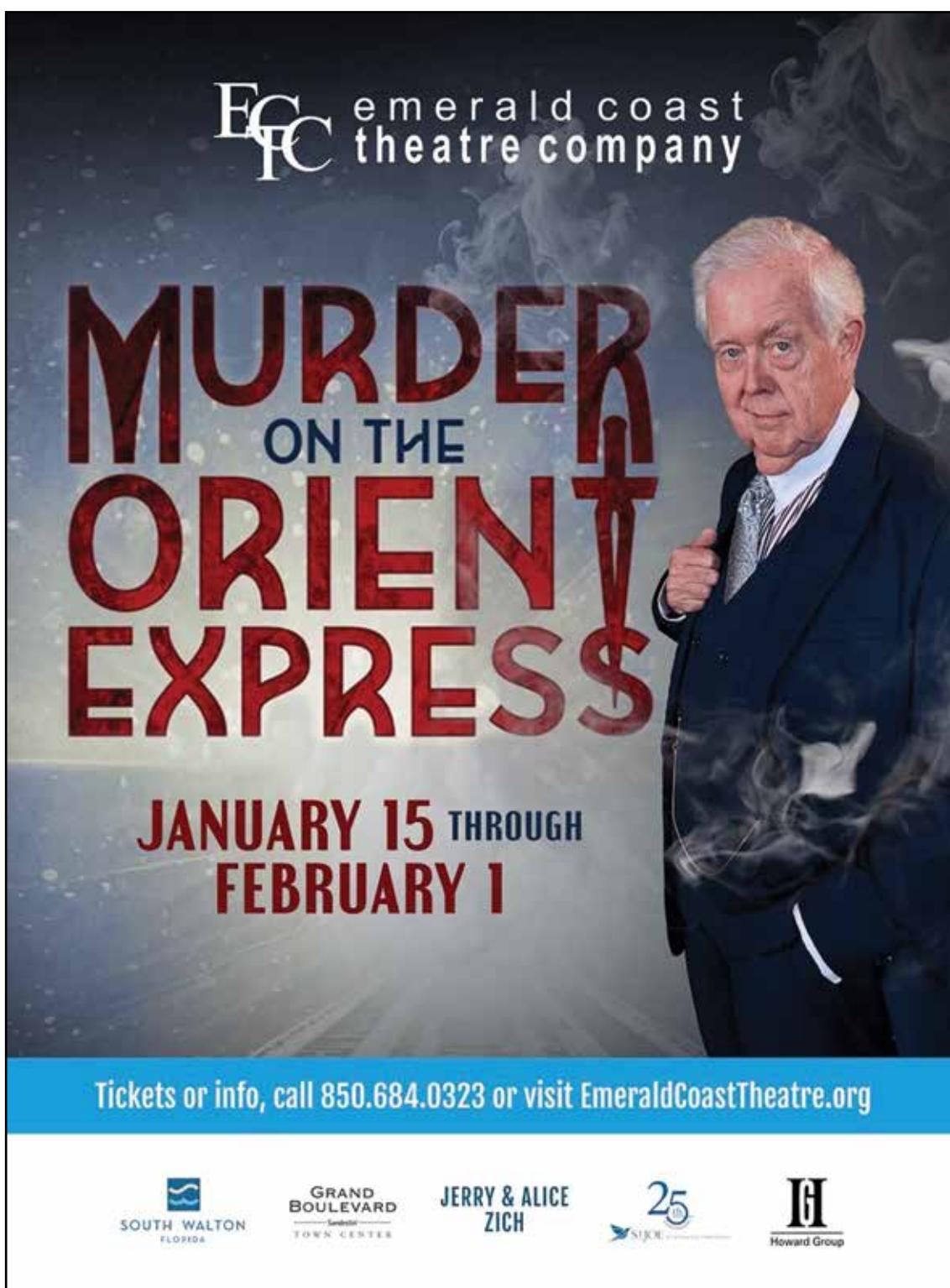
They continue to amaze our congregation with their beautiful music.

We also have a preschool under the direction of Ms Kim Boguskie, where young children between the ages of two and four are instructed in a faith-based Christian curriculum. Self-confidence is emphasized, making learning fun.

Let's join the fun on January 25th. There will be activities for the entire family. On Sunday, after church service at 10 a.m., there will be food trucks to feed the hungry. There will also be games such as corn hole. For the little ones, there will be access to the playground.

Inside, there will be a video presentation of the history of our Church from the past to the present. There will also be several stations throughout the church depicting the programs we participate in and support.

We will be celebrating God's blessings and grace upon our church. Looking in the rear-view mirror provides our road to the past, and looking ahead to see what God has in store for the future.



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Medicare: 6 Quick Tips



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 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 paying 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 network 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. Under-

standing 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 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 person-

alized 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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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 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 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 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 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 consultation and explore your options, contact Bluewater Plastic Sur-

gery today. As a board-certified plastic surgeon, my practice is dedicated exclusively to cosmetic surgery, and I have performed thousands of procedures over the last 25 years. My highest priorities are patient safety and superior results. With more

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

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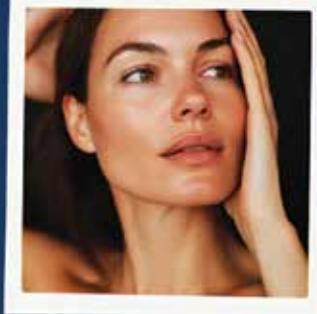
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Increase Your Life Experience and Impact in 2026



By STEPHENIE CRAIG

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 receives 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, and 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

1. 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."

2. 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, and energy level. Notice tears, urge to slam something, and 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.

3. Name your feelings. After collecting physical data, practice matching data to a feeling word. When you notice a tight jaw, hot body temperature, and a desire to slam something, that might

be anger. When you notice a tight chest, a pit in your stomach, and a 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.

4. 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

JOURNEY BRAVELY

continued on page 31

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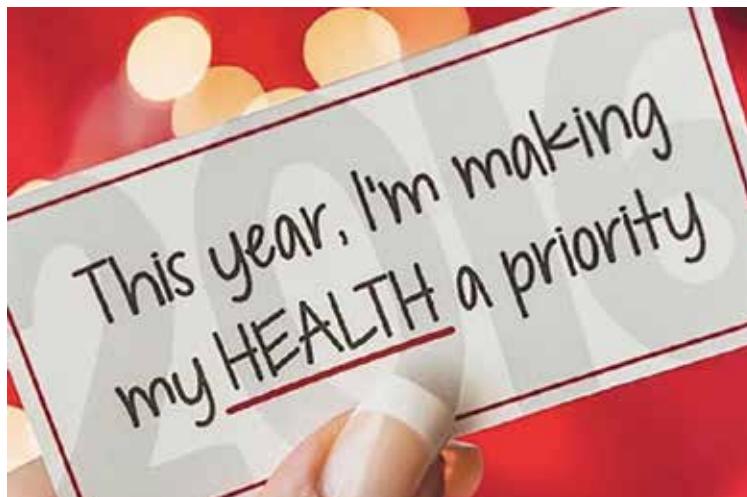
BY DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

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.

Proper thyroid function can supercharge weight loss, increase energy levels, as well as promote healthy hair growth and healthier skin. Plus optimizing thyroid

reduces cardiovascular risk. Why would you not?

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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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Book Review: The Compound Effect by Darren Hardy



REVIEWED BY MICHAEL MCNAMEE, 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, con-

sistent 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: 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, mea-

surable 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.

JOURNEY BRAVELY

continued from page 29

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”).

5. Transition from avoidance/numbing to healthy coping. Begin intentionally replacing

numbing strategies with healthy coping tools. With consistency and time, you will find your brain naturally gravitates to what you are doing most often, even if it is difficult at first.

6. Face life struggles head on. Once you become skilled at noticing, naming, and coping with feeling, return to the internal or external situation that evoked the feeling in the first place. From a place of calm, try understanding what the feeling was telling you and what meaningful action steps you will

take in order to participate in life and relationships from a healthier, intentional place.

Commit to growing emotional skills consistently over the next year and check

in next January to see how this practice has influenced your life. Access helpful worksheets on the Resources tab at Journeybravely.com, including “Comfortable and Uncomfortable Feelings,”

“Feelings Word List,” “Healthy vs. Unhealthy Coping Skills.” Connect with us along your journey for coaching and counseling at Journeybravely.com.

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 Wellness

New Year, New You: Skin Tips to Bring into 2026

By BRIDGET SULLIVAN, PA-C,
COASTAL SKIN CANCER SURGERY
AND DERMATOLOGY

The new year brings new

beginnings, fresh starts, and new year resolutions. Your skin is your largest organ of the body and your face is your walking

billboard. Healthy, glowing skin is not achieved through quick fixes, but through thoughtful habits that support skin function year-round.

Let 2026 be the year that you incorporate your skin health and wellness into your routine. Below are some simple tips to bring into the new year.

or superficial layer of skin. It's all about prevention and early detection!

5.) Lifestyle Habits: Adequate sleep allows the skin to repair itself, while a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and healthy fats supports skin from within. Also stress reduction through exercise, time with family and friends, and mindfulness can lead to decreased inflammation and flare up of certain skin conditions.

The key to your skin health and wellness is consistency and making small steps daily that turn into healthy habits. Just like diet and exercise, you will not see results over night but overtime being consistent will pay off and you will have beautiful, but more importantly, healthy skin. As you welcome 2026, commit to caring for your skin with patience and purpose. A "new you" begins with healthy habits—and your skin will reflect that dedication all year long.

I wish you and your loved ones a happy New Year and I hope that 2026 is the best one yet!



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Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast Earns Primary Stroke Center Certification

The hospital is recognized for its efforts to provide emergent care and critical elements to achieve long-term success in improving outcomes for stroke patients

The Joint Commission, in collaboration with the American Heart Association and American Stroke Association, has certified Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast as a Primary Stroke Center for meeting the unique and specialized needs of patients who have suffered a stroke.

Primary Stroke Centers maintain stroke-specific infrastructure — acute stroke teams, care protocols and patient support systems — that reduce complications, increase survival and recovery rates, and improve long-term outcomes and patient

satisfaction.

"When someone has a stroke, time is of the essence to ensure the best possible outcomes," said Trey Abshier, president and CEO of Sacred Heart Emerald Coast. "As the only hospital in Walton County, our team has taken important steps to provide access to life-saving care to everyone in our community and surrounding region."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, someone in the United States has a stroke every 40 seconds. Every 3 minutes and 14 seconds, someone dies due to a stroke. It is also a leading cause of serious long-term disability. In Walton County, nearly 5% of adults have had a stroke, which is more than 1% higher than the state level.¹ From 2021-2023,

nearly 650 people in Walton County were hospitalized due to a stroke.²

When someone suffers a stroke, there is a lack of blood flow to the brain, which deprives brain cells of oxygen. For every minute that passes while someone is having a stroke, 1.9 million brain cells are lost. That is why it's important to seek immediate medical attention if you or someone you know begins to experience stroke symptoms.

Patients who can benefit from a Primary Stroke Center include those suffering from:

- Ischemic strokes
- Large vessel occlusions
- Hemorrhagic strokes
- Strokes from unusual causes requiring specialized testing or interventional therapies

Ascension Sacred Heart

Emerald Coast is a full-service hospital with 24/7 emergency care for adults and children. Sacred Heart Health System was recently named a top 15 health system in the country for 2024 by Fortune and PINC AI. The hospital consistently ranks among the top hospitals in the county for patient safety, experience, and satisfaction.

It is a destination for specialty care including spine and joint replacement surgery, heart care, and cancer care. The hospital's Family Birth Place is recognized as one of the top maternity facilities in the country. To learn more visit ascension.org/EmeraldCoastFL.

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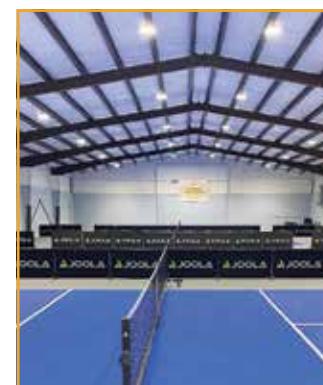
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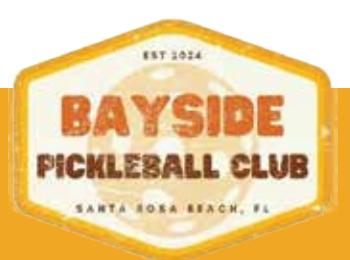
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The Christian Capitalist:

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 them, Lori also notes that the



Lori Joyner at Harvest House

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



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!

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

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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A Pastor's Ponderings: Impact



By PETE HYDE

This month is the celebration of Martin Luther King's Birthday. Banks, government offices, schools, and many churches will be closed for the holiday. 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 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 ques-

tions? 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 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

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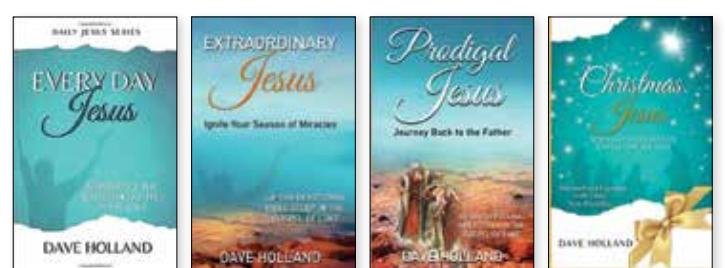
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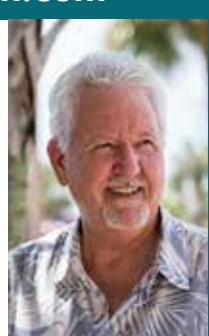


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dave Holland loves Jesus and has dedicated his life to sharing God's love. While studying at Gordon-Conwell Seminary and pastoring churches for almost forty years, he discovered Jesus is so much more than school and church—Jesus is life. Genuine faith is not about organizations, denominations, or personalities, but it is about discovering the depths of God's love and grace. Dave and his wife Jonie live in Destin, Florida. Contact Dave by email at davidvholland54@gmail.com.



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 Musing

The Best Work Benefit: The Gift of Friendships

BY KIRK MCCARLEY

My work as a career and leadership development coach delivers clients with varied wish lists. Many seek job opportunities that can yield greater financial reward. Others want a greater sense of purpose or the ability to have an impact. There are those yearning to better develop executive presence. Still more want to shift industries or a line of work.

And there are many other motivations.

Upon occasion, someone might share that they are seeking an environment where they can develop true comradeship and enjoy relationships with co-workers who share similar values. That got me to considering the difference in job satisfaction rates between employees who feel a connection with their workmates

vs. those who don't. My guess is it's significant.

What would be the characteristics of a workplace where employees have a sense of connection? For those environments where that does not exist, what needs to happen to bring that about?

I would venture that the first ingredient is a clear purpose and mission, simple and inarguable.



ESPN College Football Radio crew | l to r: Ivan Zuniga, Engineer; Owen Murphy, Producer; Kirk McCarley, Statistician; John Tobias, Spotter; Mike Couzens, Play-by-Play; Max Starks, Color Analyst.

One of the most enjoyable periods in my 31 years in local government was when that sort of culture existed.

In that example, the elected executive leader of our organization shared a clear vision: to strive for the county, in this instance, to champion economic development and deliver outstanding customer service. Clear, simple, and inarguable: an ambition that almost all can rally around. It was a rewarding time.

Second, strong work relationships will more likely exist when there are shared values. Is there a general agreement as to the difference between right and wrong? Do team members not only strive to adhere to ethical values, but also to conduct themselves in such a way that their behavior is viewed by others as upstanding? Do they prescribe to a spirit of "selflessness," adopting practices that are for the good of the whole, as opposed to the benefit of just a few?

Third, do team members not only know their roles, but how their jobs benefit the mission?

In my many years with ESPN Radio, we have typically functioned with a seven-member crew for the production of football. First, there is an Engineer. Their job is fundamental: making sure that the equipment is functioning and wired so that the audio is seamlessly broadcast to affiliate stations throughout the country. There is also a Producer, who assures that the production is in sync with the breaks for which the advertisers have invested significantly. That job queues who "announces" when. In addition, there is a Spotter who helps the broadcasters identify who makes a tackle, blocks a kick, or was injured. My role as a statistician is

to supply the broadcasters with up-to-date statistical information that is pertinent and aligns with what is being communicated on the airwaves.

Lastly, the broadcasters or "talent" is who listeners hear. Often, the talent consists of a sideline reporter, color analyst, and play by play. To me, a near perfect broadcast contains the basic elements of the communication of accurate information, a degree of "excitement" to stimulate listener interest, and the development of storylines that maintain that interest. A strong broadcast is like inviting the listener into the broadcast booth with us to become part of the conversation.

I consider it a privilege to work in this environment and to have built valuable friendships and connections with the team. That honor surpasses any of the other "benefits" that may be afforded by the corporate organization.

My hope for all is that your workplace is a venue that you enjoy for more reasons than it helps with paying bills. If it is not that now, I pray that either it

can become that, or you discover an environment that provides that enjoyment and satisfaction. Whether at work or at home, I encourage you to savor your relationships and seek to further build friendships in 2026.

A graduate of the University of North Texas, Kirk McCarley is a Certified Professional Coach as well as a Professional in Human Resources (PHR) and SHRM-CP Certified. He is also a Production Assistant for both college football and basketball for ESPN and leads group cycling classes as a Certified Spinning instructor. Contact kirk@theseedsowercoach.com, theseedsowercoach.com, or call (314) 677-8779.

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Sean of the South: It Was Late



BY SEAN DIETRICH

It was late. I pulled into the campus after seven o'clock to attend my last class of the semester. My last college class. Ever. It was a night class.

In America, most self-respecting people my age were finishing supper, settling down to watch "Wheel of Fortune." But I was in school.

I had been attending community college for 11 years. I had been taking a lot of night courses. Which meant that I had perfected the art of eating supper in my truck, on the way to class. I drove with my knees, ate with my hands, and controlled the radio with my big toe.

Supper often consisted of foil-wrapped tamales, purchased from Carmela, a middle-aged Mexican woman who visited our construction jobsites. Carmela traveled in a battered '84 Nissan Maxima that looked like a roving salvage yard.

Every time I'd buy a tamale, Carmela would pat my cheek and say, "Joo are very sweet boy, but joo need a bath, joo smell like goat butt."

So parked my truck. I rushed into class, smelling like the fundamentals of a horned barnyard animal.

Eleven years it had taken me to finish school. Me. A middle-school dropout. My formal education ended in seventh grade, after my father took his own life with a hunting rifle. I simply quit going to school. I was a rural child. It wasn't a big deal. Nobody seemed to care what rural dropouts did.

I got my first job hanging drywall at age 14. I started working in bars, playing music shortly thereafter. I had a lot of jobs. I hung gutter. I worked as an ice-cream-scoop. I was a telemarketer. I was a nobody. I was white

trash.

Until I enrolled in community college.

I enrolled as an adult, and my life changed. I became alumni at Okaloosa-Walton Community College.

I completed high-school equivalency courses. I finished the collegiate coursework. It took me eleven years. I worked hard. And I count every year I spent at OWCC as a blessing.

I don't care what you've heard, community college is the beating heart of America. Your big, fancy schools are well and good. But show me a community college, and I'll show you the vascular system of this nation.

America is not built on the shoulders of Harvard or Yale graduates. America's internal organs are made up of men and women who know the difference between good and bad tamales.

That night, our classroom consisted of a commercial plumber, an electrician's assistant, a few GIs, and a Hooters waitress who looked as though she had come directly from work. And me, a degenerate bar musician/tile-layer.

Our literature teacher ar-

rived. Soon, we were discussing what was known to our class as "TKAM." "To Kill a Mockingbird." And everyone in our classroom had something to say about TKAM.

Namely, because this book was not just literature to us. It was a taste of home. The book took place in Monroe County, Alabama. We were one-point-five counties away from Monroe County.

We all talked about deeper meanings within the book. We spoke of metaphors and hyperboles and allegories and a bunch of other five-dollar words nobody understood except the Hooters waitress. And it was a great night.

And when class was finished, our teacher got this tear-stained look in her eyes and said, "I'm going to miss you all."

She said, "A few of you are going to graduate this year, and I wanted to do something special for you to mark this occasion."

She invited the graduates to the front of the room. We all shyly walked forward. She gave us tiny potted begonias and greeting cards. She kissed our foreheads.

They don't kiss your foreheads

at Yale.

The Hooters waitress and I stood shoulder to shoulder. The teacher made a big deal about how we were all such important people. She told the Hooters waitress that she was going to be a big-time nurse someday. The waitress blushed.

Then the professor told the classroom that she believed I would become a writer one day. I wanted to bury my face from embarrassment.

But the old woman touched my cheek and said, "You are so beautiful, Sean. I know God is going to use your past to make a marvelous future." Then she kissed my forehead again.

If there was a dry eye in the classroom it belonged to a needle.

And anyway, this goat butt will forever be a proud community college graduate.

Publisher's Note: When this story takes place, Northwest Florida State College was known as Okaloosa-Walton Community College (OWCC). While the name has changed, the mission—and the life-changing impact of our local community college—remains the same.

Review for VKI Japanese Steakhouse

BY LEO ROSE

When my family and I walked into VKI Japanese Steakhouse, I could immediately hear the sizzling of the hibachi grills and the enthusiastic chatter of the families seated nearby. Approaching the host's stand, I took notice of the establishment's inviting atmosphere and aesthetics; soft music played overhead while I was visually met with warm, mango-colored walls and traditional wood paneling at the bar. Before the staff even addressed us, I knew I was going to enjoy my time here.

Sherry, one of the owner's

daughters, warmly greeted my family as we entered. She guided us to one of the multiple hibachi grills and introduced us to VKI's wide selection, recommending the shrimp tempura and pork gyoza as starters. We decided to try the pan-fried gyoza as well as an order of spicy tuna rolls as our appetizers, and since we had hibachi access, we all ordered food off the grill to see how the chef would perform: grilled chicken, scallops, shrimp, and filet mignon awaited us all that evening.

The service proved to be fast and effective as our appetizers were swiftly brought out. I chose



to try the gyoza first; six crispy dumplings filled with pork and veggies, fried to perfection. The crisp outer shell quickly gave way to the soft, savory interior and paired excellently with soy sauce. I just had to try the sushi next, as although I personally

am not much of a connoisseur of seafood, the presentation captured my attention and interest. I was immensely pleased by the cool tenderness of the tuna and accompanying spiciness, which was not at all overbearing... it was just right, regardless of one's spice tolerance.

We quickly followed our tasty appetizers with fresh iceberg salads adorned with tangy ginger dressing and hot bowls of miso soup; before the main course was served, we had already experienced a plethora of flavors and temperatures. Soon after, the hibachi chef Joko introduced

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VKI RESTAURANT

continued on page 38

 Dining/Entertainment

VKI RESTAURANT
continued from page 37

dente, the veggies were a wonderful blend of saltiness and savory umami. Then, grilled chicken and steak were added on top of my carbs. I had my fill of juicy chicken and succulent steak, both served with creamy yum-yum sauce and zesty ginger

sauce.

For dessert, we decided to try the fried ice cream, a typical delicacy of Japanese steak houses which VKI transforms into a perfect choice to share for the family: a large scoop of vanilla ice cream coated in a warm, crispy fried shell sliced four ways, topped with heavy whipped cream. The result was

a symphony of tastes and textures, offering the sensations of warm and cold, sweet and savory, soft and crispy; it was the perfect way to end the meal and satisfy us all.

VKI Japanese Steakhouse and Sushi Bar is a family-owned business that has been in Santa Rosa Beach for 12 years. For the sushi lovers out there, VKI offers

an extended menu of sushi and sashimi, including sushi appetizers, sushi entrees served with miso soup and a green salad, traditional hand rolls (cooked and raw), and over 40 chef's special rolls. Other offerings include Teriyaki, Tempura, Katsu, Japanese Noodles, Fried Rice, Lunch Bento Boxes, a variety of soups and salads, beer, wine,






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and sake; all of which is available for takeout order through DoorDash and Uber Eats. VKI Japanese Steakhouse is located at 4552 US Hwy 98 West in Santa Rosa Beach, next door to Louis Louis. They are open six days a week (closed Mondays) from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., serving lunch and dinner. For more information, call (850) 267-2555 and visit www.vkijapanesasantarosa.kwickmenu.com.



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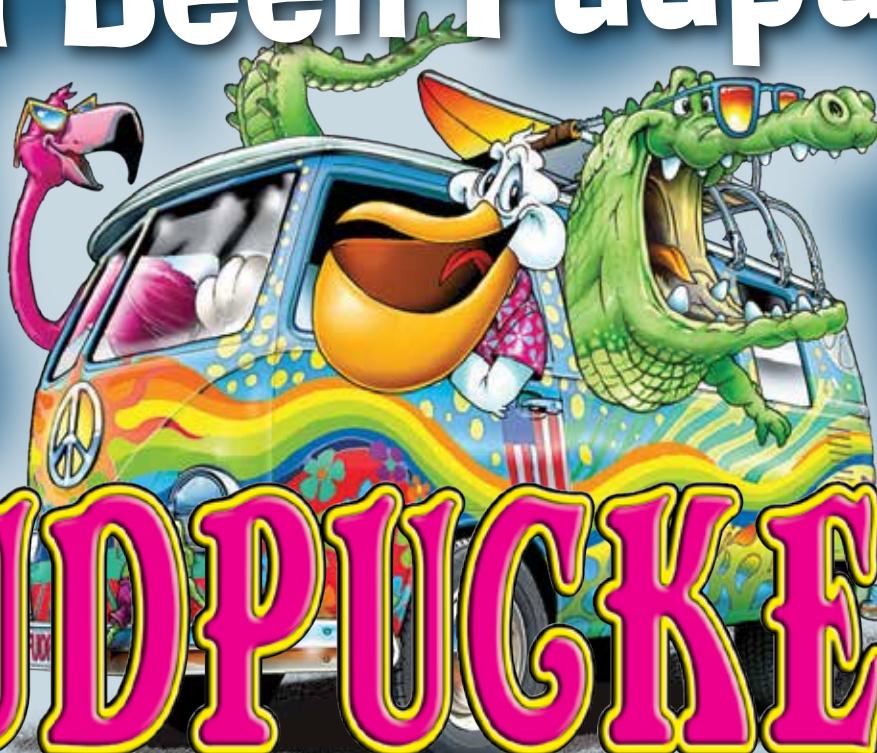
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South Walton Live Music Scene January 2026

Old Florida Fish House Weekdays

For over a decade, Old Florida Fish House has proudly featured local live music. Catch artists playing inside the coveted bar and lounge area, as well as in the large outdoor dining space situated among the palm and oak trees under the twinkling lights next to Eastern Lake throughout the week. Dueling pianos are every Thursday. Visit www.oldfloridafishhouse.com for more info.

FOOW Live Music Fridays and Sunday Brunch

Enjoy live music on Friday nights, as well as Sundays for Brunch, featuring bottomless mimosas at FOOW - Fish Out of Water. The Gulf front restaurant invites you to delicious dining paired with live music. Visit foow30a.com.

AJ's Grayton Brunch and Live Music

AJ's is the place to be to celebrate all things Sunday Funday in Grayton Beach! Recharge your weekend at our live music brunch with the talented Christon Birge Duo every Sunday at 12 p.m. for a delightful morning filled with delicious food, refreshing drinks, and engaging tunes. Have a mimosa or go all in with their famous Build Your Own Bloody Mary bar. Then enjoy live music from The Pickled Pickers 5-8 p.m. Join in the fun on Karaoke Night starting at 8 p.m. every Thursday night (also Prime Rib Night). Check ajsgrayton.com for live music throughout the week.

Shunk Gulley

Shunk Gulley is a premier location on 30A for live music,

bringing in artists from around the Gulf Coast and beyond. Whether you just want to relax to indie guitar players or upbeat party songs, the talented musicians know the vibe of the area. Visit www.shunkgulley.com.

Red Fish Taco

Live music is a central component of Red Fish Taco's festive atmosphere. Rock out to local and visiting musicians in their outdoor covered Garden Room. Check redfishtaco.com for featured musicians every day of the week.

The Bay

Come out to The Bay with family and friends every Wednesday night starting at 5 p.m. for dinner, cold drinks and a bonfire with various musicians on the beach of the Choctawhatchee Bay. It's a midweek tradition in

South Walton. Sunday Pickin' @ The Bay features The Sand Ole' Opry with Mike Whitty & Friends on stage from 4-8 p.m. Mike brings in new musicians to play every week. Check The Bay's Facebook or Instagram pages for details.

Americana Concerts in the Lodge at Camp Helen

Americana Concerts in the Lodge at Camp Helen State Park are back! The concert series will take place every other Saturday from January 10 - February 28. There will be limited seats available for each show. Doors open at 6 p.m. and the music begins at 6:30 p.m. Pick up your tickets at the Camp Helen park office Monday through Thursday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. \$20 cash for each concert! Ticket price includes park admission, drinks, and an assortment of snacks.

Jan. 24: | Dean Johanesen
Feb. 7: Rough & Tumble
Feb. 21: The Honey Badgers
Feb. 28: | Wyatt Espalin

Night Of Hope Concert Benefiting Caring & Sharing Jan. 30

Join Legacy Five, the Dove Award-winning Southern Gospel group, as they perform a special benefit concert on 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. Tickets are available online at www.tinyurl.com/y4hfcw5.

PCB Mardi Gras & Music Fest Jan. 30-31

In conjunction with the Krewe of Dominique Youx's great Mardi Gras at the Beach parade, the festival features entertainment for the whole family, including headliner Redferrin. Full lineup at: <https://www.visitpanamacitybeach.com/events/concerts-music-festivals/mardi-gras>.



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IDIDAHIKE 2026 Invites Local 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 Greek 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

IDIDAHIKE
continue on page 46



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 Music

Why 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 several 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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Sinfonia Gulf Coast Kicks Off 2026 with Tina Turner Tribute and Crescendo! 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 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, 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

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 programming 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.

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The Season of Maintenance: Why Small Actions Over Time Matter Most



BY DANICA LAFRAIRE,
ISH WINDOW CLEANING

January has a way of making people feel like they're already behind.

The holidays are over, routines are settling back in, and

suddenly we're surrounded by messages about transformation — new goals, new habits, new versions of ourselves. But most meaningful progress doesn't come from one big push at the start of the year. It comes from

something far less glamorous: maintenance.

Maintenance doesn't get much credit. It's quiet, repetitive, and often invisible. Yet it is what keeps homes comfortable, businesses running, bodies healthy, finances stable, and confidence intact. Small actions, taken consistently over time, don't just prevent problems — they build trust in ourselves and in the systems we rely on.

I see this principle every day in my work.

In window cleaning, maintenance is everything. Glass that is cared for regularly stays clear and intact for years. When it's ignored, small issues compound — mineral buildup, corrosion, permanent damage. Rarely is there one moment when things suddenly go wrong. More often, it is what wasn't done consistently that creates the problem.

That same truth shows up across our community.

Take Executive Air Cooling, Heating and Refrigeration, for example. Most people don't think about their HVAC system until it stops working — usually on the hottest or coldest day of the year. But regular maintenance is what prevents those emergencies. Industry data shows that well-maintained HVAC systems can operate up to 15% more efficiently and reduce overall repair costs by as much as 40% over the life of the system. Those savings aren't the result of one big repair — they're the result of small, proactive check-ins done consistently.

Physical fitness follows the same pattern. Places like Hard Body Fitness and HOTWORX aren't built on overnight results — they're built on routine. Showing up regularly, even when motivation dips, is what creates strength, endurance, and confidence over time. One intense workout doesn't change much. Consistency does.

Vision care works much the same way. Routine eye exams at Wells Vision and Laser Eye Care Center or Special-Eyes Vision Center help catch changes early, often before we notice them ourselves. Clear vision is not something we should only think about when it's gone; it is something we protect through

regular care.

Financial health may be where maintenance is most misunderstood. Firms like McGregor Financial Group help individuals and families focus on long-term strategy rather than quick wins. Wealth is rarely built in a single decision. It is built through steady planning, routine reviews, and thoughtful adjustments over time.

Dental care tells the same story. Practices like Mid Bay Dental and Sea Breeze Endodontics know that most major dental issues don't appear overnight. Routine care helps address small concerns before they turn into painful — and expensive — problems.

What all of these examples have in common is consistency.

Research on habit formation shows that small, repeatable behaviors become automatic over time — often after just a couple of months of consistency. As those habits take root, something else happens too: confidence grows. Psychologists call it self-efficacy — the belief that we can follow through, handle challenges, and trust ourselves to maintain what matters.

That confidence does not come from grand gestures. It comes from keeping promises to ourselves in small ways. Scheduling the maintenance. Showing up for the workouts. Booking the check-ups. Taking care of things before they break.

Personally, this season has reinforced that strength isn't always loud. Sometimes it looks like quietly doing the work — even when no one's watching, even when progress feels slow. Especially then.

January doesn't have to be about reinventing your life. It can be about recommitting to what already works. Maintaining what matters. Trusting that small actions, done consistently, create not only long-term savings — but long-term confidence.

Because over time, maintenance isn't just what keeps things running.

It is what helps us believe we can keep going.



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IDIDAHIKE

continue from page 41
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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,

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