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SOWAL Life

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Closing the Digital Divide, Building Futures

Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast Impact Area Youth

By LORI LEATH SMITH

For families in our Destin and surrounding area, opportunity increasingly hinges on access — to technology, to mentorship and to safe, supportive spaces where young people can learn and grow. Recently, the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast made a significant stride in strengthening that access for local youth across Okaloosa County.

The organization recently distributed 250 refurbished laptops to club kids and their families throughout Okaloosa, Walton and Escambia counties, directly benefiting students from Fort Walton Beach and surrounding communities. The two-day initiative was made possible through a partnership with Derrick Brooks Charities, AT&T and Compudopt, with laptops awarded to families based on demonstrated need.

In today's world, educa-



tion, communication and opportunity increasingly depend on technology. These devices help level the playing field for students in Fort Walton Beach and beyond. "Tonight, you could see what opportunity looks like on a child's face. For many of our club kids, this is the first laptop that's truly theirs — not

one borrowed from a school, library or relative," said Shervin Rassa, CEO of Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast. "From the earliest grades through high school, a device at home is now essential to keep up with assignments, connect safely and explore what's possible."

In addition to the laptops,

eligible families may qualify for up to one year of free AT&T Fiber internet service through Compudopt, ensuring students can fully utilize their devices for on-line learning, homework and skill-building at home.

CLOSING
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Bring Hope Now:

Local Nonprofit Aims to Solve Youth Mental Health Crisis

By PEGGY BROCKMAN

Imagine receiving a call from your child's school: your middle-schooler, diagnosed with ADD, lost his temper and screamed, "I wish I were dead." Because the staff knows you, they give you the option to take him to the emergency room yourself, instead of calling law enforcement.

You arrive at the ER, but there's no child psychologist. The ER doctor decides to send your child—seven hours away—to a facility in

BRING HOPE
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 **Community**

CLOSING

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A Regional Impact with a Fort Walton Beach Hub

While the laptop distribution addresses immediate academic needs, it represents just one part of the Clubs' broader mission — much of which is anchored in Fort Walton Beach, where programs serving youth from across the area are based.

That mission was recently highlighted during the grand reopening of the Jacobe Turner Teen Center in Fort Walton Beach, a central resource for teens from Destin, Fort Walton Beach and surrounding communities. The newly renovated center honors Jacobe Turner, a former club member and 2019 Youth of the Year whose legacy continues to inspire young peo-

ple throughout the region.

Inside the center, teens participate in leadership development, academic support and enrichment programs including Passport to Manhood, Smart Girls, robotics and career-readiness initiatives — gaining practical life skills alongside confidence and connection.

“Our clubs provide more than after-school care,” Rassa said. “They provide consistency, mentorship and a place where kids know they matter. That’s especially important for families balancing work, school and rising costs of living in our area.”

The renovation was supported by Florida Power & Light and the All Sports Association, Inc., helping expand services for teens across Okaloosa County.

Destin Event, Countywide Impact

Supporting these programs requires strong community involvement, and one of the most anticipated fundraisers of the year — hosted in Destin — directly benefits youth throughout the region.

The 7th Annual Shrimp & Grits Festival, benefiting the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast, will take place Saturday, Feb. 28, 2026, at the Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Village in Destin. The event draws supporters from Destin, Fort Walton Beach and beyond for an evening of food, music and purpose.

Guests will enjoy unlimited shrimp and grits tastings as area chefs compete for Best Shrimp & Grits on the Emerald Coast, along with craft beverages and live entertainment. This year’s

festival will feature a performance by rising country artist Erin Kinsey.

“Every year, the Shrimp & Grits Festival grows in impact, bringing our community together over great food, great music and an even greater mission,” said Rassa. “This year’s move to the Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Village in Destin and the addition of Erin Kinsey mark an exciting new chapter. Every ticket purchased directly supports the futures of the thousands of Club kids we serve across the region. It’s a fun night with a meaningful impact.”

Proceeds from the festival support Boys & Girls Club programs serving Destin, Fort Walton Beach, Crestview, Pensacola, South Walton and DeFuniak Springs, ensuring local youth have access to academic support,

leadership opportunities and positive role models during critical after-school hours.

If You Go: 7th Annual Shrimp & Grits Festival

Benefiting Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast

Saturday, Feb. 28, 2026 | 4–7:30 p.m. | Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Village, 4323 Commons Drive W, Destin.

Tickets: General Admission: \$100 (unlimited tastings and drink tickets). VIP: \$175 (early entry 3–4 p.m., VIP lounge, exclusive culinary experiences and premium concert seating).

Tickets & Information: zeffy.com/en-US/ticketing/7th-annual-shrimp-and-grits-festival.

Sponsorships & Restaurant Participation: cmayes@bgcec.com.

BRING HOPE

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Orlando for evaluation. You object. Emotions rise. The doctor blames you and asks you to leave. Your child is transported anyway, placed in a holding area with wooden slab beds and other children in crisis, screaming. He’s terrified.

Three days later, a tele-psychiatrist finds your child isn’t a threat and should be released. But when you return from a brief trip home, you discover your child was already transferred to an inpatient facility in Pensacola—without your consent. He must now remain for another three days, all while you

watch helplessly.

This is the true story a mother shared with me after a recent Bring Hope Now presentation. Though a few years have passed and improvements have been made—such as the addition of Mobile Response Teams that now evaluate students on campus—children in crisis in our area still face long waits in local ERs and may be transported hours away due to a lack of local facilities.

This is exactly why we founded Bring Hope Now.

A Growing Crisis

In 2019, two community leaders—David Triana, founder of United for a Good Cause,

and myself, Peggy Brockman—joined forces to address a terrifying trend: Northwest Florida, particularly Okaloosa County, had one of the fastest-growing youth suicide rates in the state.

We set out to bring hope through a national peer-to-peer suicide prevention program in local schools. Eglin Federal Credit Union kickstarted our mission with a \$50,000 donation. With support from Superintendent Marcus Chambers and the Okaloosa County School Board, the program launched in 2020. By the end of 2022, every school in the district had the program in place. It became a model of success.

In 2024, Bring Hope Now

officially separated from Unity for a Good Cause to pursue broader goals. We expanded into the military community with “Hope on the Line,” a peer-led suicide prevention initiative for active-duty personnel. But another pressing need was calling us: a lack of local youth mental health facilities.

By the Numbers: Why Local Help Matters

The data is staggering. In the 2022–2023 school year, 376 children under 18 in Okaloosa and Walton Counties were involuntarily Baker Acted. Of those, 76% were first-time cases, and 92 were repeat cases.

Statewide, 87% of youth

Baker Acts are due to suicidality: 46% had suicidal thoughts, 28% had a plan, and 10% had made an attempt.

Children are typically taken to a local ER, where they wait for an inpatient bed to open in Pensacola or Panama City. Some wait days. If extended treatment is needed, they’re sent even farther—to Jacksonville

Continued on page 13



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Events Around the Beach

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.

Mardi Gras Celebration Feb. 17

The annual AJ's Grayton Beach Mardi Gras Celebration begins at 3 p.m. on Fat Tuesday. The party kicks off with a delicious Crawfish Boil followed by live music with Dikki Du & Zydeco Krewe at 4 p.m., bringing the vibrant sounds of Louisiana right to AJ's! Enjoy Cajun favorites including Crawfish, Gumbo, Étouffée, Jambalaya, and Red Beans. Sip on Hurricane drink specials to keep the celebration going and \$5 Big Draft Beers to quench your thirst. Come eat, drink, and

dance with AJ's this Fat Tuesday!

The 30A Wine Festival Feb. 18-22

The 30A Wine Festival, underwritten by The Alys Foundation, returns to the beautiful community of Alys Beach. Cleanse your palate and prepare for five days of exquisite wines, delectable dishes, and beautiful surroundings. The festival showcases renowned distillers, vintners, and culinary favorites over four days of celebration – a series of events and workshops where wine enthusiasts and bourbon lovers alike relish in the festivities within the captivating town of Alys Beach. Visit 30awinefestival.com for more details on the festival events, tickets, participants and more.

Sandestin Gumbo Festival Feb. 20-21

The event is a beloved local winter tradition in South Walton. Featuring gumbo tasting throughout The Village, as well as a bloody mary competition and live music. This year's event is promising to serve up fun



for everyone. The event begins with a kick-off party the 20th at 5 O'Clock Somewhere Bar & Grille, with the main event from 1-4 p.m. at The Village the 21st. Visit sandestingumbofestival.com for tickets and details. Event will happen rain or shine.

Tea Fore Her March 1

Gather your friends and join Fore Her at noon for Tea Fore Her at The Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort and Spa. Enjoy lunch and tea with great company while raising funds for breast cancer patients along

the Emerald Coast. During the event there will be a photo booth, silent auction, lunch, wine pull and more. Big hats encouraged for a chance to win "Best Hat" prize. Tickets can be purchased online at www.foreher.org/event-details/tea-foreher-2.

Book Carnaval | Festival del Libro at Grand Boulevard March 7

Join fellow book-lovers in Grand Boulevard in Grand Park from 10 a.m.-1 p.m. for Book Carnaval / Festival del Libro,

a vibrant celebration of books, community, and creativity! Free and open to all ages. Bring a book to swap. Bring a friend to brag. Wear your best carnival costume! There will be free books, costume parade, arts & crafts, yummy treats and tons of other literary adventures!

ECCAC Gala & Golf Weekend March 7-8

The Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center will host its 28th annual signature Gala &

Continued on next page



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Community

EVENTS

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Golf Weekend on March 7–8, bringing the community together to support children in need. The Gala takes place Saturday, March 7, at 5:30 p.m. at the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa and includes dinner, music, a wine pull and live auction led by DawnMarie Kotonis, “The Gavel Girl,” with former ECCAC client Isabella Rose as the featured speaker. The weekend continues Sunday, March 8, with a noon shotgun-start Golf Tournament at Kelly Plantation Golf Club. Proceeds benefit ECCAC’s mission to provide free services to child victims of abuse. Gala and golf reservations are available at eccac.org. For details, contact Kate McDougall at 530-341-0802 or kate@eccac.org.

CVHN Soirée on the Bay March 13

Enjoy a lavish gathering with fine wine, food and spirits at Soiree On The Bay: Act V, an elevated weekend benefiting Children’s Volunteer Health Network honoring 20 incredible years of care, compassion, and

community impact. This weekend is presented by the Dugas family and will take place on their stunning family estate overlooking the Choctawhatchee Bay in Santa Rosa Beach. Details and tickets at givebutter.com/c/SoireeontheBayACTV.

Caring and Sharing Spring Fashion Show March 29

Join Caring and Sharing for their Spring Fashion Show presented by Emerald Coast Hospice at the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa.

During the event, guests will enjoy a fashion show, lunch, a complimentary welcome drink, a silent auction, music, a photo booth, and more! Volunteers and supporters of the organization will walk the runway modeling items donated to the Caring & Sharing Thrift Store.

These items will be for sale after the Fashion Show at our popular pop-up boutique curated specifically for this event!

We are pleased to offer individual tickets, as well as the ability to reserve a table for eight or ten guests.

Tickets: caringandsharingsowal.org.

Sponsorship opportunities



are available. If your business is interested in sponsoring or donating an item to the silent auction, email Carly@caringandsharingsowal.org.

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

The 21st Annual Destin Charity Wine Auction presented by the Jumonville Family

benefits 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.

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 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 dcwaf.org.

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www.OldFloridaFishHouse.com

Emerald Coast Boat & Lifestyle Show March 6-8

“Growth!” That is how Scott Burt of the Emerald Coast Boat & Lifestyle Show described this year’s event, which returns to Panama City Beach March 6th-8th.

Boating, fishing, and outdoor enthusiasts, as well as those who love living the Coastal Lifestyle, will notice the show’s growth, with dealers expanding their footprints and showcasing new brands and models. The Grand Lawn portion of the show will feature 50% more boats this year than in previous years, as Ashley Marine will join longtime Grand Lawn dealers Marine-Max and Grander Marine.

Also joining the show this year is Bill Cramer Chevrolet GMC as the Official Truck of the 2026 Emerald Coast Boat and Lifestyle Show. The local dealer will be featuring Chevrolet and GMC trucks at Aaron Bessant Park for those who will need a new tow vehicle to match their new boat purchase.

Guests at the show will also notice the growth at the show’s venue, Aaron Bessant Park. The

70-acre, meticulously maintained green space has added a new 4,800-square-foot pavilion, new fencing, enhanced landscaping, and a new lighting and sound system.

“The park has never looked better,” said Burt. “The city has done a great job with all the new enhancements, and I know they will be well received by those coming to the show.”

Again this year, the top dealers in the Southeast will display more than 400 boats, which is more than 40 million dollars’ worth of bay boats, pontoons, cruisers, personal watercraft, and center consoles, from 17’ to those well over 40 feet, along with the latest marine electronics and innovations.

This on-site collection of dealers and manufacturers allows buyers to compare boats side by side while taking advantage of the best discounts and incentives available exclusively at the show.

In addition to boats, a curated lineup of Coastal Lifestyle exhibitors and vendors



will showcase the best of Gulf Coast living. Boating accessories, fishing, paddle boarding, kayaking, biking, electric carts, product demonstrations, seminars, beach furniture, coastal artists, condo and beach house furnishing, kids’ activities, live music, food trucks, craft beer, and cocktails are all part of the show.

Parking for the show is always free at the adjacent Pier Park. The show will once again honor military members and first responders on Sunday. For

the most up-to-date information on the show, including dealers, brands, exhibitors, and vendors, or to purchase tickets in advance to ‘skip the line,’ visit Emerald-CoastBoatShow.com.

Show Dates & Time:

Friday March 6 “Red Carpet Opening Day” 10 a.m. to Sunset

Saturday, March 7 “Locals Day” 10 a.m. to Sunset

Sunday, March 8 “Military Appreciation Day” 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

* Active and Retired service members enter free with Valid ID (Sunday Only)

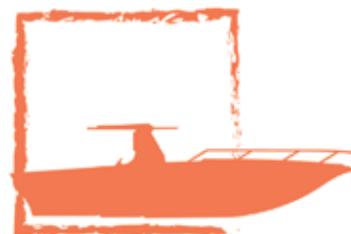
Ticket Prices:

Pre-Sale Online Only (1 Day Pass - Valid until March 5th): \$15

General Admission (1 Day Pass): \$20

Platinum Admission (3 Day Pass): \$35

Kids (12 and under): Free



TICKETS



EMERALD COAST BOAT & LIFESTYLE SHOW

MARCH 6-8

AARON BESSANT PARK



Community



Training for the Long Run: A Smarter Way to Think About Your Health

BY DR. KAREN DEVORE, TORTOISE CLINIC

If you've ever laced up your shoes for a long walk, a run, or even just committed to showing up for yourself day after day, you already understand something

fundamental about health: real progress takes time.

In my work, I see it constantly—people who are frustrated, exhausted, and overwhelmed because they've tried everything. The detox teas. The extreme




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cleanses. The 30-day challenges promising a brand-new body and life by next month. And when those promises inevitably fall short, they blame themselves.

Here's the truth I want you to hear clearly: your body is not the problem. The problem is the belief that wellness should be fast, dramatic, and immediate.

Health doesn't work that way. It never has.

The Myth of the Quick Fix

We live in a culture that celebrates instant results. Faster internet. Overnight shipping. Before-and-after photos that suggest transformation can, and should, happen in weeks. It's no wonder people feel discouraged when their own bodies don't keep up with those expectations.

But your body is not a machine you can reboot. It is a living, adaptive system shaped by years of stress, habits, hormones, sleep patterns, relationships, injuries, and emotions. Expecting it to "snap back" after a few weeks of effort is not just unrealistic, it's unfair.

Fads and trends often work briefly because they shock the system. They rely on restrictions, extremes, or novelty. And while they may produce short-term changes, they rarely create lasting health. Once the trend ends, as it always does, the symptoms return, sometimes louder than before.

Why Slow and Steady Actually Works

When I say wellness is a marathon, I don't mean it has to be miserable or exhausting. Quite the opposite. Sustainable health

is built through consistent, manageable choices that your body can integrate over time.

Think about how trust is built in a relationship. It's not created by grand gestures alone. It's built through reliability. Showing up. Listening. Responding with care. Your body works the same way.

When you nourish yourself regularly, move in ways that feel supportive, address stress gently, and prioritize sleep, your nervous system begins to relax. Hormones rebalance. Digestion improves. Pain softens. Energy returns, not all at once, but gradually, reliably.

This is not flashy progress. It's quiet. And it's powerful.

Real Life Doesn't Happen in Perfect Conditions

One of the biggest reasons people abandon their wellness efforts is because they believe they've "fallen off the wagon." Life happens—a busy week, a sick child, a stressful deadline, a holiday meal—and suddenly it feels like everything is ruined.

But a marathon isn't lost because you slow down for water. Or because you stumble. Or because one mile feels harder than the last. You keep going.

Health is not about perfection. It's about resilience and return—coming back to yourself again and again without punishment or shame.

The Body Responds to Patience

I've watched patients experience profound change not because they did more, but be-



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Continued on page 14

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Community

Walton County Launches Geocaching Program

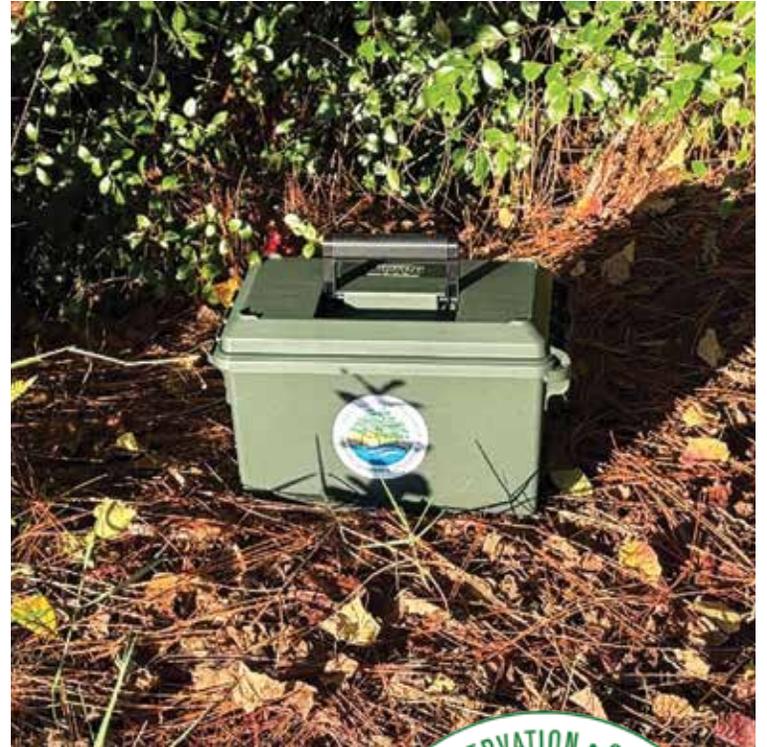
Walton County has decided to launch a Geocaching program. What, you might ask, is Geocaching? It is a kind of real-life treasure hunt and adventure is the key! Geocaching is an outdoor activity where people use a GPS device or smartphone to find hidden containers, called geocaches or simply caches, at specific coordinates. There are more than three million active cache sites worldwide and now Walton County has decided to join in the adventure. <https://youtu.be/jr2WsUm5GSc>

Most caches are small, waterproof containers that hold a logbook and sometimes a pen or pencil. Some larger caches, like big plastic containers or ammo boxes, may also include small items or trinkets you can trade. These objects are usually more sentimental than valuable, but they add a fun element to the adventure.

Many caches are on trails or in areas not normally explored. ADA accessible caches are also available.

Geocaching Rules & Etiquette:

- Sign the logbook with your username and date
- Be respectful of others using the park
- Trade items responsibly—no food, and family-friendly items only
- Log and move trackable items according to their mission
- Return caches exactly as found
- Log your find online without spoilers
- Stay on marked trails and protect natural areas



- Cache In, Trash Out—help keep our parks clean
- Geocache at your own risk; Walton County is not responsible for interactions with nature or wildlife

How to Get Started:

- Sign up at Geocaching.com (free accounts can access all county-maintained caches)
- Most county parks now have caches, including ADA-accessible options
- Visit username WaltonCountyParks on Geocaching.com to see our caches
- Visit MyWaltonFL.gov

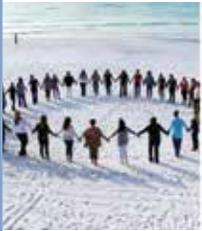
for more information on caches and events

Get outside, explore Walton County Parks, and start your geocaching adventure!

Visit this link to learn more: <https://youtu.be/jr2WsUm5GSc>

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

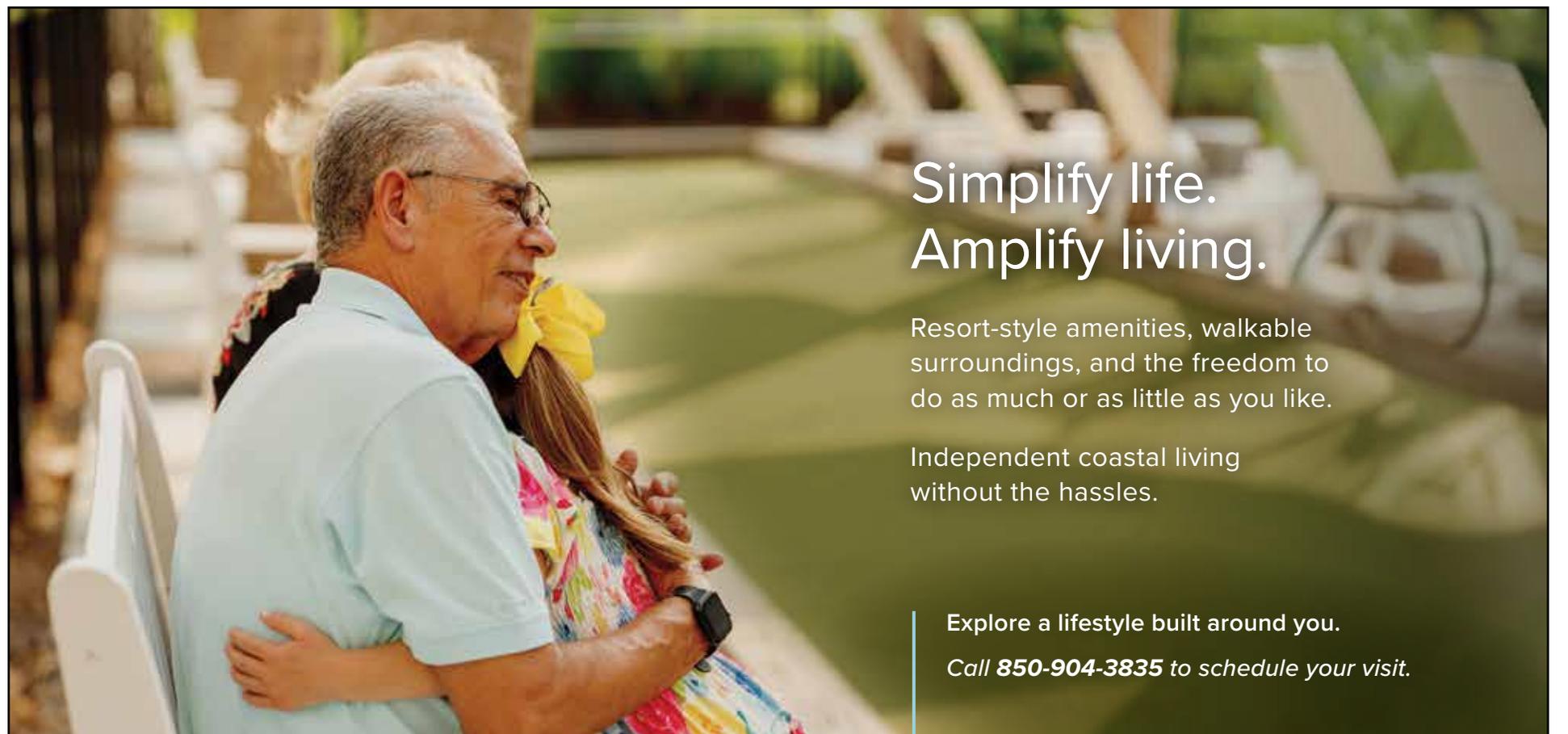
“You can do as much or as little as you want,” a member says as she waves to a neighbor. “It’s like living in a resort — but it feels like home.”

And maybe that’s the truest throughline here.

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

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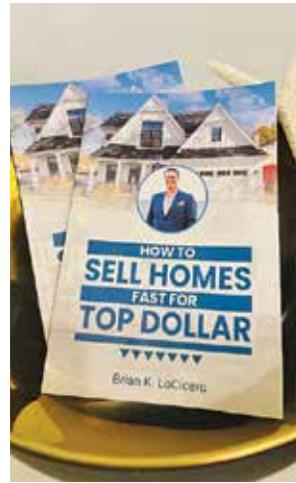
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WatersoundFountains.com

 Community

Trends & Treasures!



Big Hair, Bold Lips, Serious Chemistry Pure & Couture

At Pure & Couture, February is all about turning up the attraction. This Valentine's season, skip the predictable gifts and give something unforgettable: confidence, transformation and a little wow factor. From hand-tied hair extensions and custom color to styling, makeup, spray tanning and facials, Pure & Couture specializes in looks that feel fresh, modern and completely you. And when Mardi Gras season calls for bold glam and celebration-ready confidence, this is the place to prep for parties, parades and nights out. Add therapeutic and medical massage, kinesiology and wellness-focused services, and suddenly self-care becomes the ultimate love language. The Pure & Couture team works with men, women and couples of all ages — helping everyone look and feel their best long after Valentine's Day.

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

(850) 424-3935 | [facebook.com/PureandCouture](https://www.facebook.com/PureandCouture)
pureandcouture.com

Monogrammed, Madly in Love Frill Seekers Gifts and Personalized Fabulous Finds

February is the month for thoughtful gestures — the kind that feel personal, intentional and timeless. Enter the monogram—a Southern staple that never goes out of style. From Valentine's surprises and newlywed keepsakes to baby gifts,

new homes and beach-house traditions, personalized pieces remain love letters you can keep. Monograms have made statements for centuries, from ancient rulers and Renaissance artists to Victorian society and modern Southern living. Today, they beautifully celebrate love stories and family legacies — and even shine during Mardi Gras season for hosts who enjoy adding personal flair to party notes and hostess gifts. Gold leaf-trimmed deluxe notepads featuring a classic Kensington monogram or gold, wearable cuffs make meaningful Valentine's gifts that keep the romance flowing all year long. When it comes to meaningful details that never go out of style, Frill Seekers delivers personalization with heart.

Shop online at FrillSeekersGifts.com or stop by the motherland of all things monogrammed.

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

(850) 460-2700 | [Facebook.com/FrillSeekersGifts](https://www.facebook.com/FrillSeekersGifts)
frillseekersgifts.com

Diamonds Are Forever — Especially in February Beyond Measure Fine Jewelry

February is full of moments worth savoring — and maybe even popping the question. At Beyond Measure Fine Jewelry, romance takes center stage with breathtaking pieces designed to celebrate love stories big and small.

Located in City Market, the showroom features exquisite di-

amond, gemstone and precious metal jewelry — from statement rings and delicate necklaces to bracelets and earrings that sparkle with meaning. Each piece is thoughtfully selected or custom-designed to reflect the moments that matter most.

Owner Ashleigh Woolly is known for her passion for custom designs, especially engagement rings and wedding bands. “It is truly special to help people celebrate one of the biggest moments of their lives,” Woolly said. Whether you're planning a proposal, marking an anniversary or simply saying “I love you,” Beyond Measure offers a one-on-one jewelry experience that feels as special as the moment itself.

(850) 424-7011 | [Facebook.com/beyondmeasurejewelers](https://www.facebook.com/beyondmeasurejewelers)
beyondmeasurejewelry.com

Love at First Bite — All Month Long Smallcakes Destin

This February, celebrate love in every delicious form at Smallcakes of Destin. From chocolate-covered strawberries to custom cupcakes and cakes with edible logos and images, every treat is designed to feel personal, playful and unforgettable. And because February doesn't stop at Valentine's Day, the celebration continues with Mardi Gras King Cakes — baked fresh in traditional styles or filled with favorites like cream cheese, Bavarian cream, pecan praline, strawberry and apple. Smallcakes specializes in custom cakes, gourmet and holiday cupcakes, wedding and birthday cakes, housemade ice cream and even “pup cakes”

for four-legged Valentines. Daily offerings include 13 signature cupcake flavors, four specialty flavors, 12 ice cream flavors, plus jumbo cookies, brownies, cupcakes-in-a-jar and more. Not sure where to start? A 12-pack of assorted mini cupcakes is the perfect way to sample the love all month long.

Call ahead for pre-orders, DoorDash or curbside pickup.

Hours: Monday–Saturday, 11 a.m.–7 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m.–4 p.m.

(850) 842-9002 | [SmallcakesDestin.com](https://www.SmallcakesDestin.com) | [Follow @SmallCakesofDestin](https://www.instagram.com/SmallCakesofDestin)

Freeze the Moment — Feel the Benefits Together CRYO850 Performance and Recovery Center

This Valentine's season, skip the ordinary date night and try something cooler. CRYO850 Performance and Recovery Center is offering couples a limited-time 2-for-1 cryotherapy special, now through Valentine's Day. More couples are discovering that wellness is the ultimate love language. In just two to three minutes, cryotherapy helps reduce inflammation, ease joint and muscle pain, boost energy, improve sleep and enhance mental clarity — benefits that feel even better when shared. New to cryotherapy? Owner Amy Milligan personally guides each session, making the experience comfortable, safe and surprisingly fun. From athletes and busy professionals to parents and weekend warriors, cryotherapy offers powerful, drug-free benefits for both body and mind.

This February, turn self-care into couple care and experience the advantages of the Igloo — together.

(850) 279-4145 | cryo850.com

Love Where You Live — and Profit from It Brian LoCicero, REALTOR®

February often sparks fresh starts — and for many homeowners, that means thinking seriously about selling. If love is in the air, let it extend to your bottom line. Luxury REALTOR® Brian K. LoCicero is sharing insider strategies designed to help sellers get top dollar in any market.

Brian's popular book reveals proven tactics used by the most successful home sellers — strategies that shorten time on market while maximizing value. These are the same methods Brian has used to help sell thousands of homes across Northwest Florida.

“In this book, I've provided an effective guide for you to have the most successful real estate transaction possible,” Brian said. “We hired Brian to help us navigate 30A's tough real estate market,” said client A. Albright. “Because of his efforts and strategies that he details in his book, we quickly sold our Destin home and bought a 30A beachfront home, below asking price.”

Ready to fall in love with your selling results?

Email Brian@BeOnTheCoast.com or call.

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97.5%: WCSD Closes Gap to No. 1

Walton County School District ranks No. 2 in the state of Florida for graduation rate, posting a 97.5% graduation rate - just 0.1 percentage points behind the No. 1 district statewide. The district also saw a 0.1% increase over last year's graduation data.

While the numbers are impressive, they matter most because of what they represent: students completing high school prepared for what comes next. Walton County graduates are stepping confidently into col-

lege, technical programs, military service and the workforce with the skills, certifications and experiences needed to succeed. This success is the result of intentional planning, strong instruction and a districtwide commitment to student outcomes. The district also celebrates school counselors this month and their pivotal role in guiding students' paths toward a diploma.

Though February is the shortest month on the calendar, it is busy with celebrations and

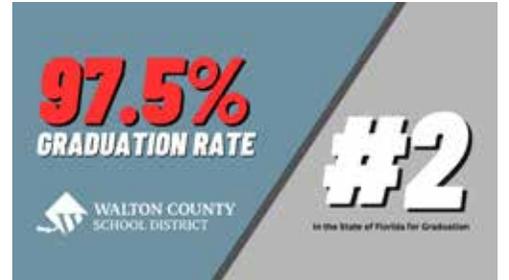
recognitions:

- Black History Month
- Career and Technical Education Month
- National School Counseling Week (Feb. 2-7)
- National FBLA Week (Future Business Leaders of America) (Feb. 2-7)
- School Resource Officer Appreciation Day
- National FFA Week (Future Farmers of America) (Feb. 15-22)

Walton County School District is committed to Preparing

the Whole Child for a Life of Success, ensuring that no matter the goal, students are ready to take the next step after receiving their diploma. During the 2023-24 school year, WCSD students earned more than 2,500 industry certifications.

Student safety remains the district's top priority. Walton County School District is grateful for its partnership with the



Walton County Sheriff's Office and we celebrate the committed deputies who walk our campuses daily with the mission of keeping students safe on the path to EPIC.

South Walton County Tax-Aide Program

Free Federal Income Tax Preparation Available in South Walton County

Free Federal income tax preparation is being offered in South Walton County for low to middle-income families and individuals, with special attention to senior citizens. Tax Preparation service will be available from Feb. 3 through April 14, 2026, at A Simple Faith Church in Santa Rosa Beach, 360 WRM Circle

Blvd in the Blue Mountain Beach Industrial Park, north of Hwy 98.

Taxpayers must make appointments online at tinyurl.com/yryzb5mt or by calling (850) 275-9104.

The site will be open Tuesdays and Thursdays from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., with last appointments at 3 p.m. Tax-Aide is also available

in DeFuniak Springs. Call (850) 892-8746 for an appointment.

AARP Tax-Aide is a nationwide service, with information available at other nearby locations at https://www.aarp.org/money/taxes/aarp_taxaide/locations.html.

This service is sponsored by the AARP Foundation and the

IRS. There are no age restrictions and AARP membership is not required.

Taxpayers need to bring their 2024 tax return, Social Security cards for taxpayer(s) and all dependents, picture IDs, and all tax documents received. Bring checking or savings account information if direct deposit of refunds

or direct debit of amounts due is desired. If applicable, bring Identity Protection PIN (IP PIN) for each individual. Taxpayers who wish to itemize deductions must bring appropriate information. Note that complicated tax returns involving rental properties, cryptocurrencies, inventories, depreciation, etc. cannot be prepared.

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 Community

Know Your Neighbor: **Zoran Subotich**

The Person Behind the Music, the Moments, and the Magic

By LORI SMITH

I'll admit it — when I first sat down to write this, I smiled. Once upon a time, before publishing deadlines and page counts, I was a DJ myself. I know the rush of reading a room, the quiet pressure of timing it just right, the invisible responsibility of holding a moment in your hands and not dropping it.

So, when I say that Zoran Subotich gets it, I mean that in the deepest, most professional, been-there way.

For more than 30 years, Zoran has been the steady heartbeat behind thousands of celebrations across the Emerald Coast — from barefoot beach weddings on 30A and Destin to elegant military galas, mitzvahs, milestone birthdays and reunions that people still talk about a decade later. Four counties. Thousands of events. And somehow — no missed cues, no awkward silences, no stressed brides.

That doesn't happen by accident.



Zoran doesn't just plan parties. He engineers memories.

Through his company, Celebrations By The Sea, Zoran offers a truly full-service approach — the kind that allows couples and families to relax and stay present in the moment while he quietly handles the flow behind the scenes. His services include:

- DJ and professional emcee services
- Full event planning and coordination
- Licensed wedding and event officiating
- Ceremony and reception direction
- Lighting and atmosphere design
- Timeline creation and flow management
- Multilingual hosting and announcements

All of it is tailored. All of it intentional. And all of it delivered with a calm confidence that makes even the most complex events feel effortless.

Why Locals Love Him

Ask around Destin, Fort Walton Beach, Miramar Beach or along 30A, and you'll hear the same things again and again.

Zoran shows up early. He stays calm under pressure. He listens — really listens.

Locals trust him because he doesn't force a formula. He reads the room, adapts in real time, and keeps the focus where it belongs — on the people, not the

production. Brides feel at ease. Families relax. Guests stay engaged. The event flows naturally, without feeling overproduced or rushed.

Another reason locals love Zoran? Range.

His background spans far beyond weddings and private events. Zoran is a former radio professional, trained actor, multilingual host, crisis intervention specialist, and even a black belt — a combination that gives him rare command, empathy and intuition. His résumé includes television credits on MTV's Road Rules and Prison Break, experiences that sharpened his ability to perform under pressure and connect with audiences of every kind.

That versatility allows him to move seamlessly from a beachfront ceremony at sunrise to a formal military banquet or multigenerational family celebration — always reading the energy of the room before the first guest even arrives.

And perhaps most importantly, he treats every event — big or small — like it matters. Because to the people there, it does.

That mindset has earned Zoran decades of loyalty, word-of-mouth referrals and, most recently, recognition as "Best of Business Rate 2025" for Wedding Services in Fort Walton Beach, an award based on verified reviews and consistent excellence.

This year, that heart for meaningful moments took on even deeper purpose.

Zoran and Celebrations By The Sea partnered with Wish Upon a Wedding, a nonprofit that grants weddings to couples facing terminal illness. On August 18, 2025, Zoran helped make Taylor and Ivan's wedding wish a reality — proof that for him, making moments matter isn't just business. It's deeply personal.

Based in Fort Walton Beach, Zoran serves the full Gulf Coast with a hands-on, full-service approach that has made Celebrations By The Sea a trusted name for locals, military families and destination couples alike.

"Excellence is our standard, but joy is our mission," Zoran says — and honestly, that says it all.

Not everyone knows how to make a moment matter.

Zoran does — every single time.

For more information, visit celebrationsbythesea.com, call (850) 217-5710, or follow @celebrationsbythesea and @wishuponawedding.



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CelebrationsbytheSea.com

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BRING HOPE

continued from page 2

or Orlando—hours from family and support systems. Many families can't even afford to retrieve their children afterward.

What if that child were yours?

According to Florida Health Charts, 168 people in Okaloosa and Walton Counties went to an emergency room for self-harm injuries in 2023. Shockingly, 121 of them—72%—were children ages 5 to 19. Yes, even as young as five.

From the 2023 Florida Youth Survey:

- 22% of students said they almost always felt symptoms of stress, anxiety, or depression.
- 46% said these emotions stopped them from doing daily activities.
- 19% had seriously considered self-harm.
- Encouragingly, 31% sought help.

But we need more resources. And we need them here.

The Mission Ahead

With strong leadership from

Board Chair Kathy Houchins and a growing board of community advocates, Bring Hope Now's next mission is clear: establish a youth mental health treatment facility for Okaloosa and Walton Counties.

We're currently seeking a facility or land to build a welcoming, home-like inpatient center. Until that becomes a reality, we continue to train community members through QPR Gatekeeper Training—equipping everyday citizens with the tools to recognize suicide warning signs and how to respond.

We also aim to launch a local loss survivor program to support families who've lost loved ones to suicide.

A Community That Cares

We believe in this mission because we've lived it. I've personally experienced the pain of a suicide attempt and subsequent residential treatment with a grandson. I know what families are facing.

Bring Hope Now is not just one organization—it's a movement of people, volunteers, educators, parents, and advocates committed to changing the story for our youth.



We're looking for sponsors, volunteers, and in-kind support. Do you know a family who's lost a loved one to suicide? To get involved or learn more, visit www.BringHopeNow.com.

Mark your Calendar Now. The 2026 Annual Bring Hope Dragon Boat Race & Festival Will Be April 25th. It's not only a fundraiser—it's a celebration of resilience and community. We're looking for sponsors, racing teams, raffle and auction items, volunteers, and in-kind support. Do you know a family who's lost a loved one to suicide? We'd be honored to include a sign in their memory at the event. To get involved or learn more, visit www.BringHopeNow.com.

It may take a village to raise a child—but it takes a whole community to save one.

Innovation Takes Flight



South Walton Mosquito District (SWMD) proudly announces its recent recognition at T-Mobile's 2025 4th Annual Innovate Awards in Orlando, where industry leaders were honored for groundbreaking achievements in innovation and community impact. SWMD received the event's highest distinction—the Malcolm Gladwell Tipping Point Award—along with a \$30,000 charitable donation.

SWMD earned this honor for introducing the Panhandle's first-ever drone-powered mosquito control program, powered by T-Mobile 5G technology. This innovative initiative has reduced treat-

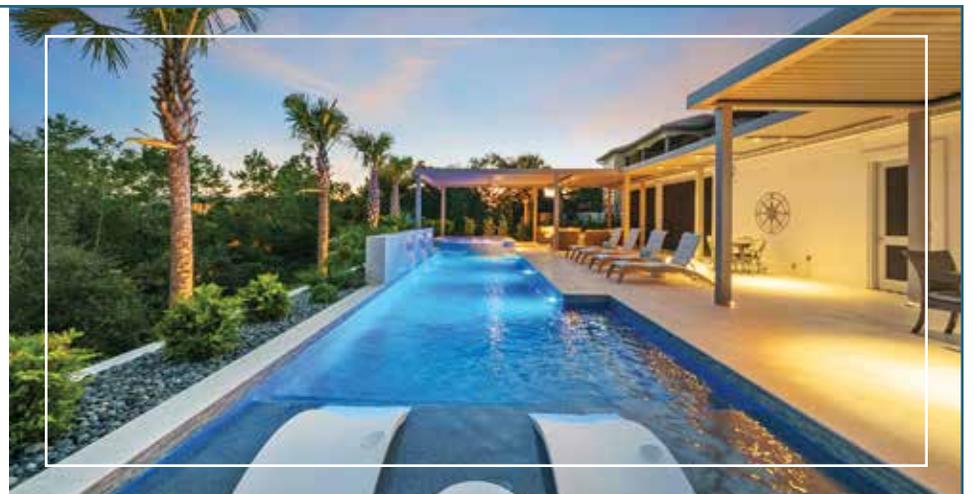
ment times by 75%, optimized resource allocation through advanced mapping systems, and set a new benchmark for sustainable public health practices. By integrating drones, data, and reliable connectivity, SWMD has redefined mosquito control—protecting communities more efficiently while demonstrating how small government agencies can leverage innovation to serve the public and preserve the environment.

To learn more about SWMD, its drone program or other services, follow SWMD on social media and visit www.southwaltonmosquito-control.org.



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Book Review: Good Morning, Monster: A Psychotherapist's Delight in Raw Recovery Stories

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL McMANUS, MSW, LCSW

As a licensed therapist with over four decades in psychotherapy, Catherine Gildiner's "Good Morning, Monster" feels like a professional homecoming. This collection of five extended case studies—framed as "heroic stories of emotional recovery"—captures the gritty beauty of long-term therapy in ways few

books do. Gildiner, a seasoned clinician herself, turns clinical encounters into compelling narratives that resonate deeply with therapists craving transparent, relational accounts.

Each chapter traces a client's multi-year arc, from devastating intake to transformative follow-up.

• One grapples with a tyrannical mother's verbal venom

("Good morning, monster!"), internalized as self-loathing.

• Another navigates cult deprogramming after decades of indoctrination.

• Stories span physical paralysis from psychosomatic roots, Munchausen-by-proxy survival, and more.

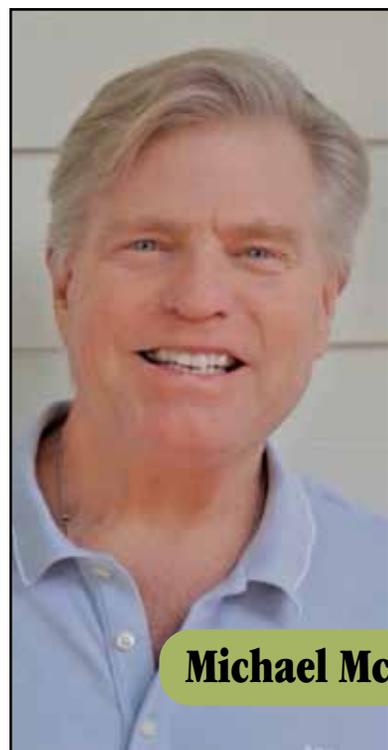
These aren't tidy vignettes; they're messy, real journeys mirroring the nonlinear paths we see daily.



strengths overwhelm; ethical storytelling empowers clients' legacies without exploitation.

If you've ever ached for realistic portrayals of depth work—beyond pop-psych soundbites—this delivers.

Michael McManus LCSW is a psychotherapist in private practice in Santa Rosa Beach, Florida. Michael and his wife Angela, who is also a therapist, have raised four children. They enjoy exploring, cooking, reading, yoga, hiking, biking trying out the restaurants around town and traveling to visit their kids scattered around the country. Michael can be reached by phone or text at (850) 837-0123 or website: psychotherapy30A.com



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Michael McManus LCSW

Themes That Hit Home

Gildiner spotlights core psychotherapy truths:

• Attachment wounds: Childhood neglect and abuse echo in adult bodies and bonds.

• Intergenerational cycles: Trauma's ripple effects demand generational reckoning.

• Therapist humanity: She owns countertransference stumbles and strategic pivots, demystifying our role.

For me, this validates the slow repetition of relational repair—rewiring neural pathways through lived safety.

What elevates this for fellow clinicians is Gildiner's candor on process. She dissects intake decisions, technique shifts (from psychodynamic probing to somatic attunement), and ethical ano-

nymization. No jargon barriers obscure the work; instead, scenes reveal how theory lives in the room. Her admission of blind spots—moments when her own filters clouded empathy—spurs reflection on our use-of-self. It's a masterclass in endurance: therapy as marathon, not sprint, yielding hope amid entrenched pain.

Gildiner's prose sings—cinematic dialogue, wry humor amid horror, literary flair without artifice. Harrowing details (a client's ritualistic self-harm; another's hallucinatory gurus) balance with triumphs, like reclaimed autonomy. At 350 pages, it's brisk yet profound, accessible for trainees or veterans.

Extreme cases dominate, potentially sidelining "everyday" therapy's quiet wins. Subtle Canadian context adds flavor but limits universal transfer. Still,

TRAINING

continued from page 6

cause they did less—less forcing, less self-criticism, less urgency. They learned to listen instead of override. To adjust instead of quit. To trust that small improvements compound over time.

And they do.

A little better sleep leads to better energy. Better energy leads to gentler movement. Gentler movement supports hormone balance. Hormone balance improves mood and focus. Suddenly, the person who felt stuck begins to feel capable again.

That's how marathons are won. Not by sprinting at the start, but by pacing wisely.

Redefining Success

What if success wasn't measured by how fast you change, but by how well you sustain? What if progress meant fewer crashes, quicker recovery, and a deeper sense of connection to your body?

Wellness is not a finish line you cross. It's a relationship you build.

So, if you're feeling discouraged, tired of trends, or tempted by the next "miracle" solution, pause. Take a breath. Ask yourself not what will fix you fastest, but what will support you longest.

Your body is in this for the long haul. And when you meet it with patience, consistency, and care, it will carry you farther than any shortcut ever could.

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New To Medicare?



BY CHRISTIAN REGALADO

I dedicate this month's article to those of you who will be newly eligible for Medicare in 2026. I hope you find it helpful!

If you've been anticipating your own transition to the Medicare program, you may have already noticed that there are a lot of moving parts, and figuring out what to do can be confusing. So let's break it down.

First of all, you want to know about your initial enrollment period. Assuming you are not

is offered with a monthly premium. For most people, in 2026, the Part B premium is \$202.90, which will be automatically deducted from SSA benefits if you collect them, or paid directly by you if you are not. For those with higher incomes based on a two-year look back, the Part B premium will vary and can be as high as \$689.90 (and \$91.00 for Part D prescription coverage) per month. This is known as the Income Related Monthly Adjustment Amount, or IRMAA.

Step two, you're going to decide whether you'd prefer to stick with Traditional Medicare (Parts A and B) and then add a Medicare Supplement Plan and a Prescription Drug Plan (Part D) to help offset the rest, or switch to a Medicare Advantage Plan, which is a commercial health plan designed specifically for Medicare beneficiaries.

Original Medicare with an

viders, without the concern of needing prior authorization or having an insurance company deny a claim. However, Supplement Plans have an extra premium between \$100 and \$225 per month, depending on which plan and carrier you choose, and they do not include a Prescription Drug Plan. You will need to add a PDP along with it. If you don't, you will be charged a lifetime penalty when you later decide to add an Advantage Plan or PDP. This penalty is 1% for every month you did not have a PDP after starting your Medicare Part B.

If you choose an Advantage Plan, the government essentially pays your Medicare benefits

to the insurance company to manage your health care, and in turn, the Advantage Plan is required to offer benefits that meet a minimum standard. Historically, many have offered extra perks as well, including a Prescription Drug Plan. Advantage Plans work very much like an employer's group insurance. You will need to decide if you want an HMO or a PPO and will need to stay within your plan's network. This is the most affordable option as they usually have \$0 premiums, and many even include a Part B Giveback, which will actually pay back a portion of your Medicare Part B premium. Different carriers will have different provider networks

and PDP drug formularies, so it is important to choose the right plan according to your needs.

What most influences people when it comes to choosing which Supplement and PDP plan or Advantage plan will work best is typically a combination of one's anticipated health care needs, doctor network flexibility or preferences, and budget. Talk to your local broker to get more details and see which plan may work best for you.

Everyone is different and has individualized needs, so getting a free consultation from a certified Medicare broker is valuable. Reach out anytime! Email Christian@evergreenhealthins.com or call (850) 687 7606.



intending to remain on your employer's group plan and you're not already collecting Social Security benefits, beginning three months before your birth month when you turn 65, you can enroll for Medicare Parts A and B through the Social Security Administration. These days, this is best accomplished online at ssa.gov. Technically, you can wait as long as three months past your 65th birthday to enroll without penalty, but get it done early.

If you've worked at least 40 quarters in your lifetime, you're automatically provided Medicare. This includes two parts (Medicare Parts A and B). Medicare Part A has no premium and covers hospital-related fees with various deductibles. Medicare Part B covers 80% of physicians and other outpatient fees, and it

added Supplement Plan (Medigap) will be your strongest insurance option. During your initial enrollment into Medicare, you have guaranteed issuance into a Supplement Plan within the first six months of enrolling in Part B. This means that you do not need to pass underwriting before purchasing a Supplement Plan. If you decide after those six months to purchase a Supplement Plan, you will need to pass medical underwriting to be accepted. A Supplement Plan will allow you to see any provider in the country that accepts Medicare, and most of the costs that Original Medicare does not cover will be covered by your Supplement Plan. The reason many choose a Supplement Plan over an Advantage Plan is the flexibility to see more pro-

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 Wellness

Where Has The Love Gone?



BY DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

Sitting on opposite ends of the couch wondering if they were still in love. Same house, same couch, same bed, same routine, but where is the love, the fun, the passion? It seems like years since they've been intimate.

She doesn't seem interested anymore. He's tried so many times he just doesn't ask anymore. She always seems angry

about this or that. Complaining about things that shouldn't even matter; but, apparently they matter a lot. Complaining about not sleeping or waking up all night and always being tired. Is she just tired of him? It's like there's no way to make her happy anymore.

He doesn't seem interested anymore. When was the last time he came on to me? I can't even remember the last date we went on. We never spend time together. He's always asleep on the couch and we never talk anymore. If I still love him, why don't I have any desire? I thought marriage was supposed to get easier.

Does this sound familiar? It should. It's the story we hear from patients all the time. No libido, never feeling rested, just surviving each day so you can get home and crash, the weight



gain, the irritability. And why is everyone getting so annoying?

It's amazing what hormones are responsible for. Everyone seems to think testosterone = mean and muscles and estrogen = emotional overload. That's so far from the truth. It's hard to describe, but I might say, testosterone = fearless desire to engage in life, and estrogen = the emotional awareness to enjoy every moment.

Forget the health benefits of hormones today, and there are tons. Let's talk about how it changes your life.

Imagine peacefully drifting off to sleep and waking after

eight hours feeling fresh and rested. Not even an ounce of tired. None. I'm talking ready to hop out of bed with a list of tasks to accomplish and looking forward to accomplishing every single one. You can't wait to get out of bed excited for the day. Sounds impossible.

Imagine actually taking the steps toward a goal instead of just having some hazy snippets of a daydream where you don't really know what you want, where you would go or what you would do, because it seems like you will never get there anyway.

Imagine your spouse approaching you with that look in his eye and you smile, because you've been waiting for him all day.

That's just a taste of what hormones do. I used to feel like you. I got treated 12 years ago. It changed my life. I felt alive. I slept. I was happy. I wasn't afraid of life. So, I quit my job and left over 20 years of traditional medicine. Why? So, I could help you feel better, too.

We take a comprehensive approach. We listen. We review. We create. We design. And we personalize it all to you. You're not broken—and you're not alone. I can't wait to see you feeling better. You really have no clue what you're missing. It's so exciting. Just call us. It's really not expensive to completely change your life. Call The Hormone Restoration Center at 850-837-1271.





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An Inner Voice Makeover



BY STEPHENIE CRAIG

Do you ever look back at the way you used to be with judgement? Maybe you are embarrassed about the way you used to look or act in childhood. Perhaps you shame yourself for previous relationships. Maybe you feel angry at yourself about how you handled your work life. Perhaps you are hard on yourself for past mistakes.

It's easy to be unkind and judgmental toward yourself from your present place of knowledge and understanding. However, what would it be like to consider what those earlier versions of yourself knew when they were making decisions? What did your 8-year-old self know when you were deciding how to manage growing up in your family of origin? What did your 15-year-old self know when you chose who to date? What did your 20-year-old version of yourself know when you were choosing a career? In most cases, these earlier versions of yourself were making decisions that made sense at the time with the current developmental information and understanding.

Rather than being unkind to yourself, consider that every version of you that came before the current version was an important part of your journey to the present. Each of these parts of yourself made decisions and have been working hard for years trying to protect you and to get you to today. While the life strategies of these parts of you may not have always panned out positively, they were trying to help you to cope and to survive. What might it look and feel like to shift from being mean to yourself to talking to yourself like someone you love deeply like a child or a dear friend? How would your words and approach be different?

Your words and tone create cycles with lasting impact. Often, the negative voice in your head originated from a critical parent or other authority figure who did not know how to be kind to

themselves. When you learn to honor and speak kindly to yourself, it creates a natural result of you speaking kindly to others. Similarly, when you are critical and shaming of yourself, you are more likely in times of stress and hurt to speak unkindly to others resulting in you becoming the unkind voice in someone else's head. And beyond human relationship, the unkind voice in your head often unhelpfully gets attributed to God, creating an impatient and angry idea about how God sees you when in reality, you are deeply loved and valued.

So, how do you shift your inner voice from judgement to kindness?

7 Ways to Talk to Yourself with Kindness

Notice when you are being harsh with yourself. "I'm not being very kind to myself in this moment."

Seek the source of the

voice. "Where is this judgement coming from? Am I talking to myself the way someone talked to me when I was younger? When do I first remember talking to myself in this way?"

Acknowledge earlier parts of self. "I see you, 8-year-old me. What can you show me about your concerns and your strategies for getting my needs met?"

Validate earlier versions of yourself with grace. "I can see that you started trying to be perfect at a young age in order to get approval and I can understand why you needed to do that at the time. I can also see why you sometimes still want to do that now."

Show appreciation to earlier versions of self. "I really appreciate that you have been trying to help me along in life by trying to be perfect."

Talk to earlier versions of self like you would talk to someone you love. "I un-



I care for you and I will help you figure out some different ways to feel okay."

Develop an ongoing friendship with earlier versions of self. "I am here and will be here for you every day to talk you through the hard moments."

While this approach may seem a bit unusual, incorporating loving, kindness into your inner voice creates a positive impact on how you feel about yourself, how you treat others, and how you understand your spiritual life. You love others better when you know how loved and valued you are. Connect with us along your journey for counseling and coaching support at Journeybravely.com.

derstand that you started trying to be perfect as a way to survive. I am here now and I see you and

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Sean of the South: Dogs



BY SEAN DIETRICH

My truck cab was filled with three barking dogs and one idiot. The dogs were in the backseat. The idiot was behind the wheel.

“Sit down!” the idiot kept saying.

But my dogs do not sit when I drive. They never sit. They dutifully explore their space when the vehicle is underway.

To the untrained eye my dogs appear to be acting disobediently. But that’s not it. Really, they are just looking for food.

They are always looking for food. They even look for food in places where there has never been any food, such as my bathroom. In a pinch, they will even resort to eating non-food items such as my reading glasses, my sandals, sheetrock, etc.

But they particularly go crazy when in my truck because they know the odds of finding abandoned food here are exponential. Thus, they are constantly on the lookout for expired Corn Nuts, old pistachio shells, or a petrified French fry predating the Reagan administration.

So we finally arrived at the dog park. I turned them loose. They ran. They chased squirrels. They wrestled. They hunted around for any threatening or suspicious objects so they could sniff them, bark at them,

then pee on them.

And then, basically, all the dogs in the dog park just stood around. That’s all the dogs do there. They play for short bursts, then they stand around and look at their owners.

“Why do dogs just stand around at dog parks?” one dog owner asked the group of us dog owners who were also, as it happens, just standing around.

Another dog owner said, “I drove forty-five minutes to get here, just so my dog could stand around.”



One of the other dog owners remarked, “You ever wonder what would happen if dog and human roles were reversed? What if DOGS took US to human parks? Would we go to the bathroom in front of each other?”

We all just looked at him.

And, of course, at dog parks, dogs sniff each other’s rears. I don’t know why dogs do this. This behavior has always perplexed me. They are not picky about whose butts they sniff. They’ll sniff any butt you give them.

I’ve read that rear-sniffing is a

primal greeting of sorts wherein complex pheromone scents are exchanged. But I think it’s something dogs do because they like nasty things.

I have been owned by 13 dogs in my lifetime. And I have learned that dogs are not above wallowing in stinky objects. I have seen my dogs roll themselves in everything from cat feces to armadillo remains.

And one time when I was in a major city—this is a true story—walking my bloodhound

after hours, we were near the dumpsters. It had been a long night. I had just given a speech and I was tired, so I wasn’t paying attention.

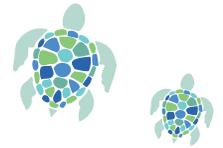
When I got back to the hotel, the clerk looked at me and said, “Sir, there’s something in your dog’s mouth.”

“Drop it, Thelma Lou!” I said.

It turned out to be—remember I am not kidding—a retired breast implant. The thing hit the floor.

The clerk and I stared at the prosthesis and, in a moment I will never forget, the clerk said flatly, “Double D.”

I’m running out of room here, but I’ll close by saying, the more I learn about people, the more I like my dogs.



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Musing



A Pastor's Ponderings: This is the Day

BY REV. PETE HYDE

He stands before a large, empty, stark white canvas with paints and brushes at the ready. It is time to create. With the skill of a master artist, he begins to paint. He starts with a pure blue and brushes the top of the canvas. He smiles as if gaining strength and inspiration from the first few brush strokes. With a sense of mission, he changes brushes and colors and is now fully immersed in His task. Hues of reds, yellows, oranges, browns and greens begin to fill

the canvas with so much color it would take away the breath of all who would see. Grays and browns and whites break the rainbow of colors and add contrast and a depth of beauty that only a master could portray. Across the azure blue, he sweeps strands of grey and white. He steps back for a moment to look upon his creation. It seems the painting goes on forever and flows off the edges of the canvas and fills his entire field of vision. But something was missing. Even though it was brilliant, it was just a lifeless canvas. Yes, it was pretty and inspiring, but it was a flat picture. Something else was needed.

He raises His hand and speaks life into the canvas. The grey strands of clouds streak across the pure, blue sky driven by a crisp north wind. The reds, yellows, oranges, greens

and browns come to life as the wind rustles through the leaves. The sun, breaking through the blotchy clouds, makes the colors in the valley contrast between subdued shadows and brilliant exclamation points of color. The grey, black and white cliffs towering hundreds of feet above the valley floor frame each section of color. A lull in the wind allows the sounds of the river below to echo through valley. The rain of the day before brings forth the smells of fallen leaves. The smell of smoke from a fireplace somewhere lingers in the air and adds to the magic of the scene.

The couple stood on the overlook. Little was said. Pictures were taken. The moments and company of each other and presence of the Master Artist were all that was needed. As they drove the winding

roads, the leaves of infinite color swirled around them. With each break in the tree line the beauty of the living canvas brought new images and inspiration. "This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!"

Psalm 104:31-34 says: "May the glory of the Lord endure forever; may the Lord rejoice in his works, who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke! I will sing to the Lord as

long as I live. I will sing praise to my God while I have being. May my meditation be pleasing to him for I rejoice in the Lord."

This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

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



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Lee Curtis: Banker, Real Estate Agent & Christian Capitalist



By RICH SANDERS

Lee Curtis always knew she wanted to work with people and money. After graduating from the University of Alabama (like our daughter Caroline, Lee was in the Kappa Delta sorority), she began work in banking and is now an entrepreneur and real estate agent in Destin.

As a banker, Lee had the opportunity to work with all kinds of people, including Christian Capitalists who owned their own businesses. “We love our small business owners. And you can tell those that work faith into their business. They tend to have people that stay around longer, people who were great leaders. It just kind of trickles down from the top.”

Lee also got to see stories of giving when she worked in banking. She could see the faith of her customers through their bank accounts. “They would bless others when they had a tax cut, or an extra amount, or a lump sum fell out of the sky for whatever reason, a lot of people would take the initiative to pass that on to their employees or put it back into the business to help grow the business.”

As a mother, Lee has tried to instill the spiritual discipline of giving in her son James, who is now fourteen. “It’s just keeping the envelopes of spend, give and save. Then you can decide what proportions every month you want to put into those. I give him some ideas or percentages, but whenever he gets money for his birthday or for Christmas... we look at that. It’s now evolved to an electronic envelope.”

One of the principles of the Christian Capitalist movement is that we are blessed when we bless others, and Lee gets it. “My book club does the book called One Word every year. One year my word was ‘give’, and that was the year that Hurricane Michael

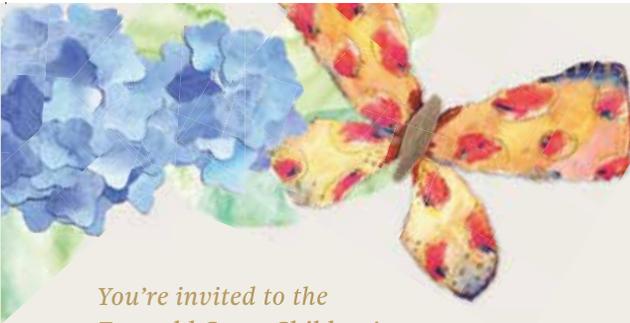
hit Panama City. Everybody in this community rallied around Panama City. I struggled, and I prayed [about how much to give], and I finally decided on this amount... and it was a lot more than I planned on, but I thought ‘I can do this right now—this is the max, and I’m not going to think anymore or be afraid’. And I’m not kidding, the day I decided to give that money, my credit card company called and said: ‘We’ve made a mistake on your payments, and you’re getting a refund.’ And do you know it was almost the exact same amount that I had donated? And I was just in awe and was like, ‘That is the Lord at work!’”

Lee reflects on that story, and she concludes: “I firmly believe that Jesus is the voice of love.”

Lee 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 Lee Curtis!

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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Dining

Forty Years at the Table

How Bud & Alley's grew from a surf-town dream into Seaside's enduring gathering place

BY ZANDRA WOLFGRAM

At Bud & Alley's Waterfront Restaurant, the ritual is familiar. The sun lowers toward the Gulf, glasses are raised and a bell rings from above, marking another day shared. For 40 years, that simple moment has defined Bud & Alley's — not just as a

restaurant, but as a place where Seaside gathers.

Founded by Dave Rauschkolb and Scott Witcoski, two 24-year-old surfing buddies with more enthusiasm than experience, Bud & Alley's opened at a time when Seaside itself was just beginning to take shape.

Few could have predicted that a casual beachfront restaurant in a town with barely a dozen houses would become one of Northwest Florida's most enduring culinary landmarks.

The name itself reflected the founders' lighthearted approach. Witcoski named the



PHOTO CREDIT MICHAEL BOONIN



Dave Rauschkolb

restaurant after his cat, Alley, and Seaside founder Robert Davis' dachshund, Bud — a playful beginning that hinted at the welcoming spirit to come. From the outset, Bud & Alley's was designed to feel approachable, unpretentious and deeply rooted in its surroundings.

As Seaside grew, Bud & Alley's grew with it. What began as a simple Gulf-front restaurant evolved thoughtfully over time, helping pioneer the farm- and sea-to-table movement along Scenic Highway 30A while maintaining its relaxed, come-as-you-are feel. Fresh regional seafood, carefully sourced ingredients and consistent quality earned the restaurant a loyal following that now spans generations.

"For me, this milestone is really about gratitude," Rauschkolb said. "I'm thankful for our dedicated staff, past and present, whose talent and commitment define this place every day. I'm grateful to my founding partner, Scott, to my wife, Carol, and our daughters for their constant support, and especially to the generations of loyal patrons who have gathered here with their families — and now their grandchildren. Bud & Alley's has always been about good food, good people and times."

Today, Bud & Alley's continues to serve as a central gathering place. The Taco Bar and The Pizza Bar now operate un-

der the same roof as the original Bud & Alley's, allowing guests to move easily between concepts while remaining connected to the same sense of place. Whether stopping in for tacos, wood-fired pizza or a sunset toast, visitors experience a seamless extension of the Bud & Alley's ethos.

Beyond daily dining, Bud & Alley's has become known for its role in community traditions. Signature events — from wine dinners and New Year's Eve celebrations to music-filled evenings tied to the 30A Songwriters Festival — help define the social rhythm of Seaside, many while supporting local nonprofits and causes.

Over the years, Bud & Alley's has been recognized with numerous awards and accolades, including Florida Trend magazine's Golden Spoon Hall of Fame Award; designation as one of the Top 20 Restaurants in Florida; Coastal Living magazine's Best Rooftop Bars; Emerald Coast Magazine's Best Place to See the Sunset; and Visit South Walton's Perfect in South Walton Awards for Best Seafood Menu and Best Sunset View, among others. In 2024, Bud & Alley's was named to Southern Living's "17 Most Legendary Restaurants in Florida" list.

As part of its 40th anniversary, Bud & Alley's is marking the milestone with a redesigned website and a special anniversary logo featuring a golden banner. A public celebration is planned for the spring.

Four decades on, as the sun dips low and the bell rings once more, Bud & Alley's remains what it has always been — a place to gather, to celebrate and to return to, again and again.

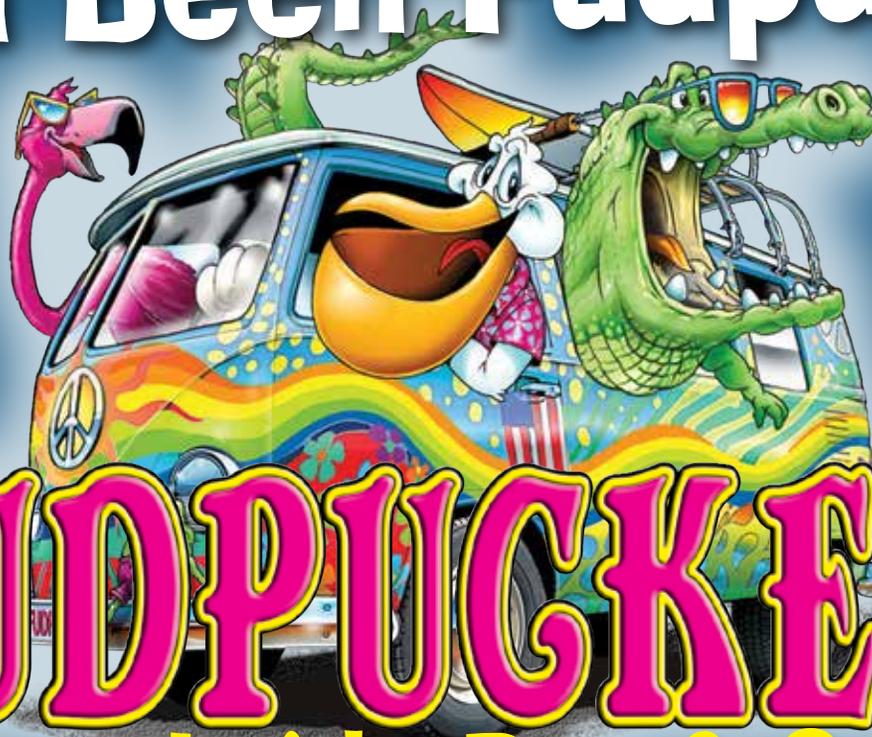
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 Arts & Music

9,514 Miles: Local Artist's Long Walks Help Raise Awareness

On a bright, brisk Florida day at the Conservation Park in Panama City Beach, Tammy Marinuzzi's stride is purposeful as she makes her way along uneven pine-lined trails, a chilly breeze lightly teasing treetops. Daily walks like this—in many different places—have become an important part of her life over the past ten years. Marinuzzi, an artist and educator, is well known for her widely exhibited ceramic work, in turn both whimsical and evocative. She's also been a beloved art professor at Gulf Coast State College for nearly two decades, with further educational experience that includes time teaching at the University of Florida, the Skopart Foundation in Greece and the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry, India. These facets of her practice—pottery and education—along with a particularly formative period spent in India, led her to begin a project of great personal significance in 2015: Pondi Walk. Pondi Walk has been a journey of nearly 10,000 miles over the past ten years, and it's very near completion. In addition to a symbolic finish at 9,514 miles,



the project will culminate with a solo exhibition at The Light Room in Panama City, Florida, opening February 21 2026.

Marinuzzi's journey began, as they say, with a single step over 20 years ago when she temporarily relocated to Pondicherry, India, to teach at Golden Bridge Pottery. Her interactions with local and village potters led her to a better understanding of the challenges disadvantaged young women face in the region, including child marriage. As Marinuzzi dug deeper, she discovered that

impoverished women were further hindered in their efforts to build better futures due to their daily water-carrying obligations. "I started researching, and I came to find out a girl might walk some three to eight miles a day to get water," she explains. "Because of these responsibilities, they may not be able to go to school or finish their education." Marinuzzi recalls a story she's heard of an organization that, to overcome these very real limitations, sent teachers to the wells to educate the girls while they waited for water. Her research, and stories like this one, as well as her personal experience in Pondicherry, got Marinuzzi thinking about ways

she could call attention to these circumstances.

"Here I am, an educator, a potter, a woman—I'm all these things, but my destiny has been different," she says. "This is how it started. The walking is a metaphor for thinking about women globally, it's an opportunity to take an hour to pause during my day, and reflect on the women globally who must walk daily—often without access to the things I take for granted—basic needs such as water, food, and education."

As she was developing the concept of Pondi Walk, Marinuzzi resolved to walk the equivalent of the distance between her home in Northwest Florida and Pondicherry, in Southern India. "Pondi Walk began as a personal journey—both literal and reflective—but it has since evolved into something larger," says Marinuzzi. In the last ten years, she's covered over 9,000 miles, averaging 951 a year, with only a few hundred left to go before she reaches her goal. Along the way, she's taken photographs, creating a visual walking journal, a body of work that both documents physical locations but also serves as a reflection of her contemplative mindset. It's work from this documentary approach that will be

on show at The Light Room in 2026. Over the years, Pondi Walk has also created numerous opportunities for social engagement, from community-oriented projects to workshops, public lectures, and exhibits, all "designed to inspire awareness and action," explains Marinuzzi.

Additionally, the artist is using her walking as a way to raise funds for a nonprofit in Southern India, Shanti Bhavan Children's Project, a school in Tamil Nadu that provides an education for one child per family from villages experiencing extreme poverty. "Initially, I had hoped to return to India to reconnect with the children of Thuvaramanai, a small pottery caste village in Southern India, and explore how I might support their futures," says Marinuzzi. However, though her commitments as an artist, educator, and mother prevented her physical return, her continued research led her to Shanti Bhavan as an alternate avenue in need of support; she found their mission closely aligned with her own goals for this project. Since its founding in 1997, this organization has provided possibilities for children who would otherwise be most vulnerable—in the case of girls, their efforts have reduced child marriage rates, but for both boys and girls, they've helped drive a small-scale shift away from generational poverty. Shanti Bhavan's support offers a rare opportunity to break the cycles that prevent upward mobility.

Currently, Marinuzzi is seeking sponsors for every 100 miles of the walk in an effort to raise one dollar per mile, with donations to go to further Shanti Bhavan's efforts in Southern India. Her goal is to raise \$9,514, which can cover all costs associated with sending a girl to school at Shanti Bhavan for five years.

For more on Marinuzzi's project, including a selection of images from her walking journal and details on her upcoming show at The Light Room, follow her on Instagram @pondiwalk. Those interested in sponsoring Marinuzzi's project or donating to Shanti Bhavan should contact Tammy Marinuzzi at tmarinuzzi@gmail.com.

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Top 10 Love Songs

February celebrates Valentine's Day and love in all its forms: romantic, passionate, tender, and timeless. Few things capture those emotions quite like music. Over the years, certain songs have become synonymous with Valentine's Day because of their heartfelt lyrics, unforgettable melodies, and emotional depth. Here are the top 10 love songs and what makes each one truly special.

1. "All of Me" – John Legend

This modern classic is a raw and honest declaration of unconditional love. With simple pi-

5. "My Heart Will Go On" – Celine Dion

Forever linked to the film Titanic, this song is about love that transcends time and loss. Celine Dion's soaring vocals convey deep emotion, making it a powerful reminder that true love never fades.

6. "I Will Always Love You" – Whitney Houston

This song is often associated with heartbreak, but at its core, it is a profound expression of selfless love. Whitney Houston's unmatched vocal performance elevates the song into an emotional masterpiece that still

of this song adds depth and vulnerability to its lyrics. It's about unwavering support and standing by someone no matter what, making it a powerful expression of true, enduring love.

Why These Songs Endure

What makes these love songs special is their ability to express

universal emotions. They speak of devotion, longing, commitment, and hope feelings that never go out of style. Whether classic or contemporary, each song offers a soundtrack for love.

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ano accompaniment and deeply personal lyrics, "All of Me" resonates because it embraces imperfections and vulnerability, making it a favorite for weddings and Valentine's playlists alike.

2. "At Last" – Etta James

Few songs capture the feeling of love finally fulfilled like "At Last." Etta James's powerful, soulful vocals paired with lush orchestration make this song a timeless anthem for enduring romance.

3. "Can't Help Falling in Love" – Elvis Presley

This gentle ballad remains one of the most iconic love songs ever written. Its simple message—that love is inevitable combined with Elvis's warm delivery gives it an innocence that continues to charm listeners across generations.

4. "Thinking Out Loud" – Ed Sheeran

Ed Sheeran's promise of lifelong devotion has made this song a modern Valentine's staple. Its lyrics imagine love that grows stronger with time, which resonates deeply with couples dreaming of a shared future.

moves listeners decades later.

7. "Let's Stay Together" – Al Green

Smooth, soulful, and optimistic, this song celebrates commitment and sticking together through life's ups and downs. Al Green's warm vocals and groovy rhythm make it a perfect Valentine's Day choice for couples who value lasting love.

8. "Something" – The Beatles

Written by George Harrison, "Something" stands out for its sincerity and understated beauty. Frank Sinatra once called it one of the greatest love songs ever written, and its gentle melody continues to prove why.

9. "Endless Love" – Diana Ross & Lionel Richie

A duet that defines romance, "Endless Love" captures the magic of two voices blending into one emotional message. Its lyrics express devotion, unity, and a love without limits which are perfect themes for Valentine's Day.

10. "Make You Feel My Love" – Adele

Adele's soulful interpretation



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This year's special guest is internationally renowned and iconic big band **Pink Martini**, the "little orchestra" that's wowed audiences around the globe with a dazzling blend of jazz, classical, and old-school pop sung in more than 25 languages. Founded by pianist Thomas Lauderdale, Pink Martini is known for its playful, cosmopolitan style and vibrant, genre-bending performances. As part of Sinfonia's 20th anniversary celebration, Pink Martini will be accompanied by the full **Sinfonia Gulf Coast orchestra**. This marks the first time the orchestra has performed at Crescendo!

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Arts & Music

MKAF 30th Anniversary of Concerts in the Village

Celebrate three decades of music under the stars as the Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation (MKAF) marks the 30th anniversary of its beloved Concerts in the Village series. The area's first live outdoor concert series returns Thursday evenings from April 9 through June 11, 2026, at the MKAF Dugas Pavilion in Destin.

This 10-concert, family-friendly series features premier regional and national artists and top tribute bands performing everything from classic rock, rhythm and blues, and disco to yacht rock and modern pop favorites.

The season opens April 9 with Smash Mouth, followed by Black Jacket Symphony recreating Van Halen's 1984. Other highlights include Yacht Rock Schooner, Rumours ATL (Fleetwood Mac tribute), Brass Transit: The Music of Chicago, The Turnstiles: A Tribute to Billy Joel, Boogie Wonder Band, The Molly Ringwalds, The Return: A Beatles Tribute performing Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, and a season finale with A1A: The Official Jimmy Buffett Tribute Band.

"We are thrilled to celebrate 30 years of Concerts in the Village with one of our most

dynamic and diverse lineups yet," said MKAF CEO Demetrius Fuller. "When you purchase a concert ticket, you are supporting our mission to bring arts education and engagement programs to thousands across Northwest Florida. We invite everyone to join us this season for unforgettable nights of



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music and community."

Gates open at 6 p.m., with concerts beginning at 7 p.m. Attendees are encouraged to bring lawn chairs and picnics, or enjoy food and beverages available for purchase from featured restaurants and food trucks.

General admission is \$40 per adult (including processing fees), with discounts available for active-duty military with ID. Children 12 and under are free. Tickets are available at MKAF.org/events.

A limited number of VIP tables, seating eight guests for the entire season, are available. For availability or sponsorship information, call (850) 650-2226 or email info@mkaf.org.

MKAF members receive early entry, free admission to every concert, and discounts to other MKAF events. Learn more at MKAF.org.

Concert lineup is subject to change. All sales are final. Pets, drones, and tables larger than two feet are not permitted. Children 17 and under must

be accompanied by a parent or guardian.

The 2026 Concerts in the Village schedule:

- Thursday, April 9 | Smash Mouth
- Thursday, April 16 | Black Jacket Symphony: The Music of Van Halen
- Thursday, April 23 | Yacht Rock Schooner
- Thursday, April 30 | Rumours ATL
- Thursday, May 7 | Brass Transit: The Musical Legacy of Chicago
- Thursday, May 14 | Turnstile: The Music of Billy Joel
- Thursday, May 21 | Boogie Wonder Band
- Thursday, May 28 | The Molly Ringwalds
- Thursday, June 4 | The Return: A Beatles Tribute
- Thursday, June 11 | A1A: The Official Jimmy Buffett Tribute Band



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Coastal Dune Lakes at State Parks

BY HELEN PETRE

Our special part of the panhandle is famous for beaches, 30A, and dune lakes. While tourism makes up most of our economy, we benefit from state forests and parks which preserve our special environments. Part of that is our coastal dune lakes, all of which are threatened by coastal development and all that comes with it, yet some lakes are preserved by our land use choices.

Coastal dune lakes are permanent lakes that form inland of dunes. There are hundreds of dune lakes all over the world. Walton County has 19, or maybe 15, based on different classifications.

Walton County's dune lakes are tannin-stained, which makes the water look brown due to organic matter in the lake. It does not negatively affect the water quality. Tannin means "crushed oak bark." The tannin in the lakes is from the surrounding oak trees. Tannin is used for tanning animal skins.

Dune lakes are shallow (between 0.9 and 2.4 meters), and irregularly shaped. Most of our dune lakes have an intermittent connection with saltwater, or an outflow, which allows for water exchange, and results in an estuarine environment with a mixture of salt and fresh water, or brackish water. Some of our lakes have outflows that flow into other lakes, or storm water drainage ditches, or the outfalls do not exist because of alterations for development. Many of our lakes have outflows that flow through constructed tunnels under 30A. The lakes in our state parks retain their natural outflows. Each lake is different, and all are treasures to preserve.

All of our lakes are fed by groundwater. Characteristics of lakes vary based on the size and shape of their basins, outflow channels, and the surrounding land use, but the water in the lakes always resembles groundwater, because water tends to flow out of the lakes more than into them from the Gulf.

Groundwater levels are close to the ground surface, even during dry seasons. The sand and gravel aquifer brings groundwater from high points in Alabama to our coast, so water tends to flow, only a few feet below the surface, from north to

south, and empty into the Gulf, or close to it, in springs or dune lakes. The groundwater flow is unconfined and recharged from rainwater as well as river water from the north. Since groundwater flows south, the lakes drain freshwater into the Gulf. Waves and tides, and especially storm events, can move saltwater into the lakes, but the water in the lakes still remains more characteristically fresh than salt.

Dune Lakes From East To West

Lake Powell is the largest and farthest east of our dune lakes. The outflow is in Bay County, while the lake is in both Walton and Bay Counties, at Camp Helen State Park. The outfall is open often, and it is amazing. Lake Powell is about a half a mile walk from the Camp Helen parking lot, either on a beach trail or through the woods.

Camp Creek Lake is surrounded by dense residential development and a golf course. The lake flows under 30A to connect to the Gulf. Access is limited except by walking along the beach or living in a community with access.

Deer Lake is part of Deer Lake State Park. A culvert passes under 30A connecting it to the Gulf.

Tresca Lake is the smallest dune lake. The outflow is permanently closed due to residential development, however, water overflows into Deer Lake.

Eastern Lake is on both sides of 30A and surrounded by residential and commercial development.

Western, Northeast, Western, and Grayton Lakes are connected bodies of water. They have one outflow at Grayton Lake, which tends to open with high rainfall events. Western Lake is in Grayton Beach State Park.

Alligator Lake is on both sides of 30A, with a culvert connecting the two sides.

Little Redfish Lake and Big Redfish Lake are surrounded by dense residential development and are on both sides of 30A. Both have no public access other than walking along a beach.

Drapers Lake is an elongated lake surrounded by dense residential development. There



PHOTO COURTESY FLORIDA STATE PARKS
Grayton Beach State Park

is no public access other than walking from a beach access.

Oyster Lake is surrounded by residential development. There is no public access. The outflow is under 30A.

Allen Lake overflows through a storm water ditch to Oyster Lake. Allen Lake is north of 30A. There is no public access.

Stallworth Lake is surrounded by residential development. There is no public access except to walk along the beach from Topsail.

Topsail Hill Preserve State Park

No Name Lake, Camp-

bell Lake, and Morris Lake and are within Topsail Hill Preserve State Park, with its pine forests and freshwater wetlands. Lakes within Topsail Hill Preserve State Park are accessible only by foot, or tram within the park.

These three lakes are least impacted by development because they are in the park and require effort to reach.

Fuller Lake is on the western edge of Topsail Hill Preserve State Park and overflows into Morris Lake. Fuller Lake is inside the Coffin Nature Preserve. The only access is through the nature preserve.

Preserving our lakes

Most of our dune lakes are within residential communities. The people that live there surely want to keep the lakes pristine and natural, but it is difficult to develop land around water resources without altering them. Since the lakes naturally overflow into the Gulf, houses built around them must be built so they are not impacted by the outflow. People living in the communities must be conscious of the effects of fertilizer, pesticides and land use.

The lakes that are accessible to the public and are within our state parks are preserved and semi wild. Although many people walk to the outflows, especially at Camp Helen, they are often in awe, and unaware of what they are seeing. It is an ecosystem specially preserved for all of us, but a bit of a secret for those who know what it is. I am grateful that we have preserved these dune lakes, and not altered them, within our parks. When you visit the parks and see the outflows, remember what you are experiencing is something you most likely will not see anywhere else, and it is only due to the decisions we make about our land use and development that future generations can experience this.

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