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'Time Is': Remembering Bruce Cheves

By LORI LEATH MILLER

The boats returned to the docks at A.J.'s Seafood & Oyster Bar just as they had thousands of times before. Captains tied off lines. Friends gathered along the harbor. Members of the fishing community exchanged hugs, stories, memories and some tried-n-true AJ's barbecue. But this time, something was missing.

For the first time in more than four decades, the familiar voice that had become synonymous with the Destin Fishing Rodeo was not there to greet them.

On May 30, family, friends, anglers and longtime Rodeo supporters gathered at A.J.'s to celebrate the life of Bruce Cheves, the beloved Destin Fishing Rodeo weighmaster who passed away April 30 following a battle with cancer. As the sun began to set over the Destin Harbor and boats set out, the community came together to honor a man whose voice, humor and larger-than-life personality helped define generations of fishing memories.

For many, Bruce wasn't



PHOTO KIRK AUSBURN

simply the Rodeo's weighmaster. He was the Rodeo.

The evening served not only as a celebration of Bruce's life, but also as a reflection of the deep connections he built throughout our communities. Family members expressed gratitude to A.J.'s Seafood & Oyster Bar for its hospitality and support, to the crew of the American Spirit Party Boat for providing a meaningful burial at sea and to Father Mike Hesse for offering heartfelt prayers and words of comfort during the ceremony.

Throughout the evening, friends and family shared sto-

ries, laughter and memories that reflected the impact Bruce had on generations of captains, anglers and residents. The gathering drew a large crowd from across the fishing community, a testament to how deeply Bruce was loved and respected.

For those who attended, the evening felt fitting for a man who spent much of his life bringing people together. In many ways, the celebration reflected the same sense of community that Bruce helped create throughout his decades at the Destin Fishing Rodeo.

The Voice of the Destin Fishing Rodeo

Born Feb. 21, 1951, in Monterey, Ca., Bruce grew up surrounded by coastal waters and developed a lifelong love for fishing and the sea.

That passion eventually brought him to Northwest Florida in 1977. After arriving in Crestview, he found his way to Kelly Docks and immersed himself in the traditions and culture of Destin's fishing fleet.

Guided by local captains and inspired by the words of Capt. Bruce Marler — "If you pay attention, you will learn something every day." — Bruce devoted himself to learning every aspect of the sport, from weather patterns and moon phases to the instincts and knowledge passed down through generations of Gulf fishermen.

In 1984, Bruce began working alongside legendary Rodeo weighmaster Bill Sherman, learning the art and pre-

BRUCE CHEVES

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Ten Years Later:

How a Dream, a Turtle and Local Support Started It All

By LORI LEATH MILLER

Ten years ago, many South Walton residents could still remember when Highway 30A felt more like a scenic backroad than a nationally recognized brand. Growth was already underway, but the area still carried the slower rhythm and small-town familiarity locals cherished. Summers were busy, but the quieter months still belonged to the teachers, fishermen, artists, restaurant owners and entrepreneurs who formed the backbone of the

TEN YEARS

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 Community

TEN YEARS

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community before much of the country fully discovered it.

Then came 2016.

That was the year newspaper man Dave White arrived from New England carrying a simple, but ambitious, dream: to create a publication devoted entirely to the people, stories and spirit of South Walton.

Like so many who now call this area home, Dave's connection to the Emerald Coast actually began years earlier during visits with friends Ray and Lisa Cyr, owners of Studio 237 Music School in Santa Rosa Beach. They introduced him to the charm, beauty and strong sense of community found throughout South Walton. What started as admiration soon became something more — a desire to move here permanently and become part of the community itself. And he did.

Ray helped introduce Dave to local business owners and community leaders while Dave shared the vision for an all-positive publication centered on storytelling, connection and, most importantly for local business owners, direct-mail distribution.

But a brand was still needed that truly reflected the local lifestyle. That inspiration came through South Walton resident and the paper's first-year editor Sarah Stewart. She suggested the now-iconic sea-glass blues and greens, a turtle "mascot" and logo, and a tagline that instantly separated locals from tourists: "Locals get it," which,

to be clear, they did. And still do.

And just like that, SoWal Life was born.

The concept was simple — deliver the publication directly to mailboxes and fill it with stories locals actually cared about: community happenings, events, arts, local personalities, hometown heroes and positive news. Nationally known author Sean Dietrich came aboard alongside monthly columns such as the now longtime faith-based column, A Pastor's Ponderings. With no established playbook, the small team juggled ad sales, last-minute content submissions, production challenges and tight deadlines while working to prove the concept month after month. The vibe was less "breaking news" and more "Hey, did you hear about this?" As SoWal Life continued gaining momentum and reader support, a second SoWal Life edition was launched to expand the publication's reach to Miramar Beach. The strong response confirmed what Dave White and the team had believed from the beginning: people were hungry for positive, community-focused local media that celebrated the place they called home.

The Next Chapter

What started as one community newspaper soon became something much bigger.

In 2018, publisher Lori Leath Smith became a partner in launching Destin Life, bringing the same all-positive, community-centered concept into the Destin market. The response was immediate and enthusiastic.



PHOTO CREDIT: SAVVY LEIGH PHOTO

(Left to Right) Paul Willms, Sales; Sarah Stewart; Scott Miller; Lori Leath Miller; Dave White; Lisa and Ray Cyr; Grace Ann Russell, Sales; and Denise David, Sales. Not pictured: Jamie Zimchek, Editor Sowel Life and PCB Life; John Tower, Accounting; Dawna Shackley, Sowel Life Graphic Designer; Kim Harper, Life Media Art Director.



The momentum continued with the launch of Bay Life in 2019. Through another business partnership, Lori and Scott Miller introduced the publication to the Bluewater Bay community, followed shortly thereafter by a second Bay Life edition serving Niceville and Valparaiso. Growth continued across the Emerald Coast with the addition of PCB Life in Panama City Beach, FWB Life in Fort Walton Beach and the newest publication, Freeport Life.

As the family of publications expanded, Scott recognized the need for a stronger umbrella brand to unite the growing network. Together, they established Life Media Group, creating a cohesive identity for what had become a thriving collection of community-focused media outlets.

Today, Life Media Group encompasses eight all-positive community newspapers, digital platforms and specialty publications serving readers across the

Emerald Coast. The organization is supported by a dedicated team of 13 staff members, along with a talented network of writers, photographers, designers, contributors and community partners who help bring each publication to life every month.

While each publication maintains its own unique hometown personality, the mission has remained the same from the beginning: celebrate local people, support local businesses, strengthen community connection and shine a light on the positive stories happening all around us every day.

"Readers have embraced the publications as their own," says Dave. "Many say they read the papers cover-to-cover each month for local events, uplifting stories and hometown happenings often difficult to find elsewhere. Others intentionally support businesses they discover inside the pages."

Life Media direct-mails and distributes more than 87,000 hyper-local copies monthly throughout the Emerald Coast while also reaching thousands more readers digitally through websites, e-newsletters and social media platforms.

More than newspapers, Life Media has always been about connection — and interaction. We love hearing from our readers, receiving story ideas, celebrating accomplishments, spot-

lighting businesses and learning about the people and organizations making a difference throughout our communities. Some of our readers and advertising partners have been with us since the very beginning, and for that loyalty and support, we are deeply grateful.

The Next Decade

As Life Media moves into its next decade, the mission remains unchanged: sharing positive stories and celebrating the faith, family, businesses and community spirit that make our area so special.

WE'LL CONTINUE providing a trusted community voice while offering affordable, effective promotion through the powerful combination of direct-mail print and digital marketing.

WE'LL CONTINUE connecting readers through engaging editorial, websites, e-newsletters, social media, events and community involvement throughout the region.

Most importantly, WE'LL CONTINUE believing positive news still matters.

What began with one dream, one turtle and one small newspaper in South Walton has grown into something far greater than anyone imagined 10 years ago.

And we're just getting started.

Cheers to 10 Years!

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Community

EVENTS

continued from page 3

Fish Out of Water Father's Day & Live Music June 21

Treat dad to dinner this Father's Day at Fish Out of Water (FOOW), the signature on-site restaurant of WaterColor Inn in WaterColor. Served from 4-10 p.m., enjoy prime rib, half-price draft beer, and quality family time. Live music from

Brett Stafford Smith from 6-9 p.m.

A Taste of Peru at Watersound Fountains June 25

Watersound Fountains, an exclusive resort-style 62+ Independent Living community, invites you to an exclusive tasting experience celebrating the culture of Peru. Beginning at 5 p.m., savor a thoughtfully curated

three-course meal as Chef Andrea Campoblanco showcases the rich flavors of her homeland. Seating is limited for this exclusive event. Call (850) 629-0376 to reserve your place by June 20.

CAA Come Play with Clay June 27

Unleash your inner artist at the Come Play with Clay workshop, a unique experience hosted by the Cultural Arts Alliance of

Walton County from 10 a.m.-12 p.m. at the CAA's Bayou Arts Center. June Project of the Month- Botanical Leaf Imprinted Platter. In this "open studio" style class, each participant will receive 2 lbs. of clay and the freedom to choose your own adventure—bring your own project ideas to life or create the featured project of the month with guidance from your instructor. Learn More and Register: https://www.culturalartsalliance.com/event-details/come-play-with-clay-with-sarah-bumanglag-6.

Rags to Riches Regatta June 27

The 29th edition of the annual Rags To Riches Regatta returns to Grayton Beach. Born on the beaches of Grayton Beach in 1981, the Rags to Riches Regatta is more than a race—it's a living piece of South Walton history. The small catamaran race is a tradition among SoWal sailors, families, friends, and

Grayton Beach lovers. Come out to watch the regatta take off from the shores of Grayton Beach as they race to Seagrove Beach and back to Grayton. Crooked Island Captain's Party June 26 at Chiringo Grayton 5-7:30 p.m. RACE DAY: Boats Transported onto the Beach by Official Permitted Vehicles 8-10 a.m. 29th Rags to Riches Regatta Race begins at 11 a.m.

Paper Bear Screenings at Seaside July 12 & 24

The Paper Bear invites the community on a heartfelt journey into the forests and coastal wilds of Northwest Florida at 7:30 p.m. Blending live-action storytelling with hand-drawn animation, the film follows a father and son as they venture into the woods to document real Florida black bears, sharing campfire stories, local history, and the magic of the natural world along the way. Visit thepaperbear.org.

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Rosemary Beach Star-Spangled Spectacular July 2:

A bike parade, block party, live music, fireworks and more! Celebrations begin at 7:30 a.m., fireworks at 9 p.m.



America Salutes - A Musical Celebration of 250 Years at Grand Boulevard July 2:

Presented by Emerald Coast Theater Company from 6-8 p.m.

Star-Spangled Food Truck Festival at Destin Commons July 3:

Celebrate with a diverse selection of international cuisine, live music, face painting, a photo booth, fireworks and a lively, family-friendly atmosphere 5-9 p.m., fireworks at 9 p.m.

Red, White & Baytowne July 4: Let freedom ring with a night full of live music, family fun, and all-American celebration beginning at 6 p.m. and cap off the night with fireworks at 9:15 p.m.!

Seaside Independence Day Celebration July 4: The day kicks off at 9 a.m. with the annual block party featuring the Emerald Coast Theatre Company performing Ragged Old Flag, the National Anthem, and a full patriotic performance. 10 a.m. Huck & Lilly; 11 a.m. Children's Patriotic Bike Parade; 11:30 a.m. Wlid Bill's Beach Dogs Hot Dog Eating Contest; 2-4 p.m. Live music in Krier Plaza; 7 p.m. Sinfonia Gulf Coast Patriotic Pops Concert; 8:30 p.m. Fireworks.

Alys Beach Donut Eating Contest & Celebration July 4: Celebrate with one of Alys Beach's sweetest traditions: the Donut Eating Contest sponsored by Charlie's Delights beginning at 9 a.m.

Alys Beach Concert & Fireworks July 4: The Five Star Funk Lounge concert begins at 7 p.m. with fireworks to follow at 9 p.m.

The Modern Men's Health Conversation



BY DR. KAREN DEVORE

June is Men's Health Month, and it's time to broaden the conversation around what men's health actually means.

For years, it was almost expected that men would only seek care when something became impossible to ignore such as when symptoms disrupted daily life or concern from others became unavoidable. That mindset is starting to shift.

More men are thinking about longevity, prevention, recovery, and performance. They're paying attention to sleep, nutrition, strength, and how their bodies function before a crisis happens. And that shift matters.

Because many of the issues men experience daily are common, closely tied to overall health, and often more manageable when addressed early.

I hear consistent themes from men across all stages of life and from the people who care about them.

"Why don't I feel like myself anymore?"

This concern rarely comes out directly. More often, it shows up as fatigue, low motivation, irritability, poor recovery, or unexplained weight gain.

While aging plays a role, what I often see is the cumulative effect of chronic stress, poor sleep, under-recovery, inconsistent nutrition, declining muscle mass, and sedentary work.

Modern life doesn't support physiology well. Many men are overstimulated, under-recovered, and running at a high level while quietly depleted. Over time, that catches up but the body is often highly responsive with consistent support.

"Why am I gaining weight around my stomach even though I'm trying?"

Abdominal weight gain isn't just cosmetic; it's often a metabolic signal.

As muscle declines and stress stays elevated, the body becomes more efficient at storing fat, especially around the midsection. Blood sugar becomes less stable, energy drops, recovery worsens, and cravings increase.

Many men feel like they're trying, but habits are often more inconsistent than they realize such as skipping meals, under-eating protein, relying on convenience foods, eating late, or cycling between restriction and overeating.

What works better is returning to fundamentals including



prioritizing protein, maintaining muscle, walking regularly, strength training, improving sleep, eating consistently, and supporting recovery.

The goal isn't perfection; it's consistency and long-term metabolic resilience.

"Why am I exhausted but still sleeping poorly?"

Sleep disruption has become so normalized that many underestimate its impact.

Sleep affects metabolism, recovery, mood, cognition, inflammation, and hormone regulation. Yet many men operate in a chronically sleep-deprived state relying on caffeine, late-night stimulation, alcohol, and inconsistent schedules while expecting optimal performance.

Sometimes the issue is sleep apnea. Sometimes it's chronic stress or years of running in "go mode" without real recovery. Improving sleep often changes far more than expected.

"Why do I feel more anxious, irritable, or mentally checked out?"

These symptoms are often rooted in physiology as much as psychology.

Brain fog, low motivation, irritability, and anxiety frequently reflect an overloaded system

including poor sleep, unstable blood sugar, chronic stress, and inflammation layered onto demanding lives.

Many men are balancing work, family, and responsibility while running on empty. This is where preventive care matters, not because every symptom is serious, but because early un-

derstanding can prevent years of unnecessary struggle.

"Why is this starting to matter more now?"

At some point, often in the late 30s, 40s, or 50s, health stops feeling theoretical. Energy changes become more noticeable, recovery slows, and small shifts become harder to ignore.

At the same time, many begin noticing changes in others like aging parents, friends facing health issues, or loved ones dealing with diagnoses that once felt distant.

What was once abstract becomes personal. For many men,

Continued on page 10

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 Community

Hurricane Safety Tips from Florida Power & Light

It is not a matter of if, but when the next hurricane will hit our state, which is why it's important to be proactive in planning for the six-month-long hurricane season.

Whether you're a longtime Floridian or new to the state, having a plan in place is the best way to stay safe this storm season. Below is a list of what you can do before, during and after a storm.

What is a Hurricane Emergency Plan?

- Determine whether your home or business is located in a flood or evacuation zone and review local evacuation routes.
- Determine your backup power source or make arrangements to relocate if a storm warning is issued.
- The Division of Emergency Management recommends



that drivers keep their gas tanks at least half full throughout hurricane season. Electric vehicle (EV) owners should aim to maintain a charge between 50% and 80% at all times.

- Reach out to your local emergency management office if you or anyone you know has special medical needs, in case of evacuations. Apply for our Medically Essential Service designation if someone in your home relies on electric-powered equipment.

What Should a Hurricane Emergency Kit Contain?

- Build an emergency kit with non-perishable food, bottled water, flashlights, batteries, medications, and a first-aid kit. Don't forget phone chargers, power banks, and a waterproof container for important documents.
- Don't forget information such as include insurance policies, health cards, birth certificates, Social Security cards, a list of emergency contacts, and a recent copy of your FPL bill.

How to Prepare Your Home for a Hurricane?

- Install approved hurricane shutters over windows and doors or using alternate covering such as plywood.
- Move patio furniture and outdoor items indoors, fasten doors and windows, and cover valuables and furniture with plastic and move away from windows.
- Turn off and unplug un-

necessary electronics, including pool equipment, and set your refrigerator and freezer to their coldest settings to keep food fresh longer during an outage.

- DO NOT attempt to trim trees or vegetation near overhead power lines yourself – only hire qualified professionals to trim trees and other vegetation near power lines.
- Visit FPL.com/trees for more information on our tree trimming policies.

- Look up and note the location of power lines before you begin working on a ladder. Be sure that any ladders or scaffolds are far enough away so that you – and the ends of the tools you're using – don't come within 10 feet of power lines.

What are Important Safety Steps After a Hurricane?

- If you're planning to use a portable generator, read and follow all the manufacturer's instructions. Be sure to set it up outside – not in your home or garage – and connect appli-

ances directly to it. Do not wire your generator directly to your home's breaker or fuse box, as the power you generate may flow back into power lines and cause injuries.

- Stay far away from and do not touch any downed power lines or flooded and debris-laden areas that may be hiding downed power lines.

How Can Floridians Stay Informed After a Storm?

- Bookmark FPL.com and save 1-800-4-OUTAGE (1-800-468-8243) to your cell phone to report and check the status of your restoration.
- Stay informed by following your local news and @insideFPL for updates on storm conditions and heed warnings.
- FPL works year-round to be ready for severe weather and urges customers to prepare by making safety a priority this storm season. For more tips, visit FPL.com/storm.




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Walton County Launches Expanded Beach Tram Service with Inaugural Ride to State Parks

Walton County has launched an expanded Beach Tram service connecting visitors to Grayton Beach State Park and Topsail Hill Preserve State Park.

Walton County Tourism is again offering complimentary day-use entry to Grayton Beach State Park and Topsail Hill Preserve State Park from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day, and getting there is easier with the Beach Tram service.

This free tram service is designed to reduce vehicle traffic and parking pressure near the parks, supporting Walton County's commitment to preserving the natural ecosystems that make our community special. Riders will always know what to expect before they arrive, as the tram operates in coordination with state park capacity limits to ensure visitors are informed of park availability before boarding.

With the addition of state park access, the Beach Tram network expands public beach access for visitors and residents through routes operating from



two facilities:

393 Municipal Parking Facility (1668 S County Hwy 393, Santa Rosa Beach), Operating daily from 10 a.m. – 7 p.m.

Ed Walline Express: Ride directly to Ed Walline RBA. Departs every 10 minutes

Dune Allen Local: Stops include: Topsail Hill Preserve State Park, Dune Allen RBA, and Fort Panic RBA. Departs every 30 minutes

Grayton Municipal Parking Facility (1505 County Hwy. 283 S, Santa Rosa Beach)

Grayton Express: Ride directly to Bets "Beachmama" Haynes Regional Beach Access. Departs every 10 minutes. Daily from 6 a.m. – 9:45 p.m.

Blue Mountain Local: Stops include: Blue Mountain

RBA, Gulfview Heights RBA and 393 MPF. Departs every 30 minutes. Runs from 10 a.m. – 7 p.m.

Grayton Beach State Park Express: Ride directly to Grayton Beach State Park

Departs every 30 minutes. Runs from 10 a.m. – 7 p.m.

For route schedules and additional information, please contact Beach Operations at (850) 267-4578 or visit WaltonTransportation.com.

For more information about the Complimentary Day-Use Admission to Topsail Hill Preserve and Grayton Beach State Parks, please visit walton-countyfltourism.com/press/wct-offers-complimentary-day-use-admission-topsail-hill-preserve-grayton-beach-state-parks.

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Community

Sea Turtle Nesting Season Has Returned!

BY GRACE ANN RUSSELL

The month of May marked the return of many long-awaited events for South Walton; the end of school year, gentler breezes and a warmer gulf. Amidst the excitement of all-things-summer was the start of sea turtle nesting season. The season runs from May 1 through October 31 along Florida's Gulf Coast, and local volunteers are already preparing for another season of education, awareness, and conservation

For the volunteers at Friends of South Walton Sea Turtles (FOSWST), nesting season is much more than a date on the calendar. It is months of community outreach, school education programs, beach ambassador efforts, and reminders to both locals and visitors that even the smallest actions can make a difference for these threatened marine animals.

Founded in 2015, FOSWST is an all-volunteer nonprofit organization dedicated to sea turtle conservation through awareness and education. While

South Walton Turtle Watch monitors and protects nests, FOSWST focuses on helping the public understand how human behavior impacts nesting turtles and hatchlings.

One of the organization's most recognizable messages is the phrase "Clean. Dark. Flat." Beachgoers are encouraged to remove trash and beach equipment before leaving for the night, keep beachfront lighting low and turtle-friendly, and flatten holes or sandcastles that could become obstacles for nesting turtles or hatchlings trying to reach the water.

These efforts matter. Female loggerhead, green, and leatherback sea turtles return to Florida beaches each year to lay their eggs, often depositing more than 100 eggs in a single nest. Yet survival remains difficult. Experts estimate that only about one in 1,000 hatchlings survives to adulthood.

Artificial lighting remains one of the greatest threats during nesting season. Hatchlings instinctively move toward



the brightest horizon — historically the reflection of moonlight on the Gulf. Today, bright condo lights, flash photography, and beachfront activity can disorient them, sending them inland instead of toward the water.

That is why local education efforts have become so important in South Walton. Through beach ambassador programs, school visits, public events, and informational materials distributed throughout the community, FOSWST continues to build

awareness one conversation at a time.

Protecting sea turtles starts with community awareness, and every small act of stewardship helps give the next generation of hatchlings a fighting chance. Theo the Turtle, a plush stuffed animal created to inspire conservation awareness, donates a portion of every purchase to Friends of South Walton Sea Turtles. Theo's mission is to help sustain the sea turtle population along the Gulf Coast by

encouraging children to connect with marine life in a tangible way.

You can find Theo in various shops along highway 30A, as well as surrounding area's. Theo's mission is a small example of how education, heightened awareness, and community engagement each play a vital role in achieving one common goal- protecting our precious marine life right here in the heart of Walton County.

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Walton County Offers Day-Use Entry to Grayton Beach State Park and Topsail Hill Preserve State Park

Walton County is once again offering complimentary day-use entry to Grayton Beach State Park and Topsail Hill Preserve State Park from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day.

Walton County Tourism is covering day-use fees to highlight the amenities and variety of eco-tourism experiences available in South Walton. This year marks the 12th year of admission coverage for Topsail Hill Preserve State Park and the 10th for Grayton Beach State Park.

"Walton County's state parks offer a unique way to experience our destination, bringing together our beaches, trails and coastal dune lakes in one place," said Matt Algarin, tourism director for Walton County. "This program creates additional opportunity for visitors and residents to explore and enjoy everything these parks have to offer."

Enhanced access to the parks will be available this year via Walton County Tourism's Beach Tram. This service provides a convenient and eco-friendly way to enjoy the parks without worrying about parking, helps reduce traffic congestion and protects the natural surroundings along the way. More information about tram routes and schedules will be posted on WaltonTransportation.com when available. "We are incredibly thankful for our partnership with the state parks and to Rep. Shane Abbott who worked diligently with us and at the state level to expand access," Algarin said.

Free entry to the two parks is available during regular hours, typically 8 a.m. to sunset. This year's program began on Memorial Day weekend, May 22, and runs through Labor Day, Monday, Sept. 7.

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Calling All Snowbirds: A New Way to Enjoy the 30A Lifestyle

Along Florida's Panhandle coast, the seasons feel a little different. Winter mornings arrive with soft sunlight and cool breezes off the Gulf. Afternoons stretch into easy walks, long lunches, and time outdoors. It's the kind of place people return to year after year — especially those who know the magic of 30A.

For many seasonal residents, the question has never been whether to return, but how to make those months feel more refreshing and restorative.

At Watersound Fountains, a retirement community in Inlet Beach, more returning residents are discovering a new way to enjoy the coast. Instead of managing a second home or coordinating short-term rentals, they're choosing seasonal retirement living — a simpler, more flexible way to spend the months they love most along the Panhandle.

Here, the focus is on enjoying the lifestyle without the usual responsibilities that come with homeownership. No insurance

policies to track. No property taxes to manage. No upkeep waiting after a storm or a long stretch away.

Instead, days open up naturally.

Mornings might begin with coffee as sunlight fills the windows. Some residents start the day in the fitness center or by the pool. Others prefer a walk through the surrounding protected forest or a quiet breakfast with neighbors before deciding what the day will hold.

Wellness classes, social gatherings, and chef-prepared dining offer easy ways to stay active and connected. And with the beaches, shops, and restaurants of 30A just a short drive away, there's always something to explore.

But what many people appreciate most is the sense of ease.

Life here is designed to remove the background worries that can follow a second home. Maintenance is handled. Daily



details are taken care of. Support is available if needed. Residents are free to focus on the things that drew them to the coast in the first place — fresh air, time with friends, and the simple pleasure of being near the water.

Watersound Fountains recently introduced a Seasonal Commitment Plan, created specifically with snowbirds in mind. The program allows residents to enjoy the community during the months they love most while maintaining flexibility throughout the year.



For some, it's a chance to escape colder climates without the burden of managing another property. For others, it's a way to stay close to family or return to a place they've loved visiting for years.

Whatever the reason, the appeal is simple: more time enjoying the Panhandle lifestyle, with fewer responsibilities behind the scenes.

And once people experience

it, many find themselves wondering why they waited so long.

Watersound Fountains Retirement Living is located at 65 Origins Parkway in Inlet Beach.

To learn more about seasonal retirement living near 30A or ask about the Seasonal Commitment Plan, call (850) 904-3835 or visit WatersoundFountains.com.

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 Community

Alaqua Gives Rescued Beagles a Second Chance

National Rescue Effort Reaches Northwest Florida

By LORI LEATH MILLER

A heartbreaking national animal rescue effort is now reaching Northwest Florida, where dozens of rescued laboratory beagles are beginning new lives only a short drive from Destin.

This month, Alaqua Animal Refuge in Freeport welcomed 20 rescued beagles from Ridgman Farms, a Wisconsin breeding and research facility that supplied dogs for laboratory testing. The group includes senior dogs as well as several believed to be pregnant, all now beginning an entirely different chapter of life.

The dogs are part of a much larger nationwide rescue operation involving approximately 1,500 beagles being relocated to shelters, rescues and foster programs across the country. Animal welfare organizations report hundreds of dogs may still remain at the facility as discussions continue regarding their future placement and care.

The large-scale rescue effort



has drawn national attention and united numerous organizations, including the Center for Humane Economy, Big Dog Ranch Rescue, Beagle Freedom Project and the Dane County Humane Society.

For many of the dogs arriving at Alaqua, everyday experiences are completely new. “These beautiful dogs have never experienced life outside of a cage,” said Laurie Hood, founder of Alaqua Animal Refuge and Florida state director for Animal Wellness

Action. “They were born specifically for science — to be bred, poked and prodded, confined and used over and over again.”

According to Alaqua staff, some of the beagles had never walked on grass, rested on soft bedding or experienced normal routines most pets take for granted. Rescue workers say several dogs initially appeared hesitant around affection and unfamiliar human interaction as they adjusted to their new surroundings.

Among the rescued dogs is a

14-year-old beagle believed to have spent its entire life inside the breeding operation. Despite their difficult beginnings, staff members say signs of hope appeared almost immediately. “When the doors opened, literally they’re all standing and their tails are wagging, and they’re just happy to be alive,” Hood said. “I don’t think there was a dry eye in the whole house.”

Several of the rescued beagles are expected to give birth soon either at Alaqua or in foster homes equipped for neonatal care. Either way, they will be cared for in safe, compassionate environments rather than research confinement.

For residents throughout Destin and surrounding Okaloosa County communities, the rescue effort offers an opportunity to support a meaningful cause happening right here in Northwest Florida. Alaqua officials say community support will help provide veterinary treat-

ment, rehabilitation, transportation and long-term care for the rescued animals.

The refuge is also encouraging families to consider fostering, volunteering, donating or eventually adopting. Future adopters, the organization says, will need patience and understanding as many of the dogs continue learning basic trust and adjusting to life beyond confinement.

While the rescued beagles’ difficult past has sparked emotional reaction nationwide, their arrival in Freeport also highlights the role local organizations continue playing in large-scale national rescue efforts. “These dogs are experiencing life for the first time,” Hood said. “Our responsibility is to ensure their next chapter is safe, compassionate and filled with dignity.”



MODERN MEN

continued from page 5

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Champions at Last: South Walton High School Baseball Captures Florida 3A State Title

BY LORI MILLER

History has been made for our Seahawks!

In dramatic walk-off fashion, the South Walton High School baseball team captured the Florida Class 3A State Championship this season — delivering one of the most exciting finishes in 2026 Florida high school baseball and bringing home the program’s first-ever state baseball title.

The championship victory came in unforgettable style as South Walton executed a perfectly timed suicide squeeze in the bottom of the seventh inning to defeat North Broward Prep 6-5 in the FHSAA state finals. The thrilling finish quickly drew statewide and national attention across sports media and baseball platforms.

For Walton County, the title represents far more than just a win on the scoreboard. It marks the culmination of years of dedication, coaching, player development and community support

surrounding one of the area’s rising athletic programs.

The Seahawks’ championship roster also reflects the increasingly high level of talent emerging from Northwest Florida. Among the standout athletes leading the historic run is Coleman Borthwick, a nationally recognized Auburn baseball commit regarded as one of the top two-way prospects in the country.

Borthwick, who plays both on the mound and in the field, has garnered attention for his powerful bat, commanding pitching presence and elite size and athleticism. Recruiting outlets have ranked him among the top players in the Class of 2026, with fastball velocities reportedly reaching the mid-90s.

South Walton also celebrated another Auburn connection this season as Parker Granse announced his commitment to play baseball for Auburn University, further highlighting the caliber of athletes coming through the Seahawks program.



In fact, the Seahawks’ championship roster featured one of the deepest collections of college baseball talent in Northwest Florida in recent memory. In addition to Auburn commits Coleman Borthwick and Parker Granse, South Walton’s roster included Virginia commit Griffin Loy, Mississippi State commit Denton Lord, Florida

State commits Lyndan Flanary and Braxton Varnes, South Alabama commit Vaughn Howard, Georgia Southern commit Frank Wells and Georgia Tech commit Charlie Willcox — underscoring the remarkable level of talent that fueled the historic state-title run.

As celebrations continue across South Walton, the cham-

pionship is already being viewed as a defining moment not only for the school but also for local athletics as a whole.

For the players, coaches, parents, families and fans who believed this day could come, the Seahawks are now officially state champions.

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FOX & Friends Brings National Spotlight to Our Area

By “DOC” DOUG STAUFFER

Before sunrise touched the emerald waters of the Gulf, excitement had already begun in our area. Long lines wrapped around Fudpucker’s Beachside Bar & Grill as people gathered hours before dawn to welcome the nationally televised morning show FOX & Friends and one of its most recognizable personalities, Steve Doocy.

For many in attendance, the event was far more than a television broadcast. It became a celebration of community, patriotism, military pride, and the distinctive spirit that defines the Florida Panhandle.

The May 15 stop in our area was part of the show’s “For All America” road trip, celebrating America’s upcoming 250th anniversary. Yet, as cameras rolled live, it quickly became clear that the story was not just about a television show coming to town. It was about the energy of the people who arrived long before daylight, simply to be part of something memorable.

The crowd was jubilant from the start. Some arrived before 3

a.m., and by the time the broadcast began, the atmosphere inside and outside was electric. Red, white, and blue clothing filled the venue, while local families, veterans, community leaders, and supporters of the show packed every available space.

One of the highlights of the morning was watching Steve Doocy interact with the crowd. While many television personalities keep their distance once the cameras stop rolling, Doocy seemed to thrive on personal connections. Between live segments, he moved through the crowd, taking selfies, shaking hands, telling jokes, and making everyone feel included.

At one point, Doocy laughed about how many people mistakenly called him “Peter,” referencing his son, senior White House correspondent and fellow FOX host Peter Doocy. The audience loved it, and his humor immediately made the event feel personal rather than staged.

Perhaps the biggest crowd-pleasing moment came when Doocy decided to crowd

surf through the audience. After a single practice, he confidently launched himself into the cheering crowd, where people, including myself and Life Media’s own Scott Miller, held him above their heads during the live broadcast. The moment perfectly captured the morning’s relaxed, fun-loving atmosphere and instantly became one of the event’s most talked-about memories.

The 70th-anniversary celebration of Billy Bowlegs also added a distinctly local flavor to the broadcast. Pirates from the Krewe of Bowlegs arrived in full force, bringing their pirate ship, cannons, costumes, and enthusiasm. The pirate-themed entrance to Fudpucker’s became one of the show’s visual centerpieces and showcased the traditions that make the Emerald Coast unique.

For many locals, seeing our area highlighted on national television sparked a sense of pride. Throughout the morning, people received text messages and calls from friends and family across the country, each



saying they had seen our area live on television.

That may have been one of the most meaningful parts of the broadcast. Beyond the entertainment and excitement, the event reminded viewers nationwide that communities like our area still embody something deeply American — patriotism, hospitality, faith, military appre-

ciation, family values, and genuine friendliness. The Fort Walton Beach High School Stars Dance Team added excitement and energy to the early-morning broadcast as they lined the entrance to Fudpucker’s, waving pom-poms and cheering on the crowd. Despite the pre-dawn start, their enthusiasm helped create the electric atmosphere that defined the event. For three hours, our area became America’s front porch, and those present experienced far more than a television show. They experienced a celebration of community that many will not soon forget.



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 Community

What Happens When Steve Doocy Comes to Town?

When the cameras aren't rolling, a conversation about pirates, positive news, grandchildren and why America's stories still start locally

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

The first thing I learned about Steve Doocy is that he can carry on a full interview while jumping out of a vehicle, walking into Publix and searching for bottled water.

The second thing I learned is that despite spending decades on national television, the long-time FOX & Friends co-host is exactly what viewers see every morning: warm, approachable, genuinely curious and surprisingly funny.

I caught up with Doocy shortly after he landed in Northwest Florida as part of FOX & Friends' nationwide America 250 tour, which recently brought the popular morning show to Fudpucker's Beachside Bar & Grill in Destin.

Before discussing television, politics or ratings, we found ourselves talking about weather—specifically, what us locals affectionately call the “Destin Bubble.” After I explained our theory that somehow storms seem to part around Destin while sunshine magically appears, Doocy laughed. “That’s great. I love it,” he said. When I mentioned that some locals credit the Gulf’s unique weather patterns for helping create the phenomenon, he quickly

connected it to another local tradition. “Well, that’s why the pirates came, I guess,” he joked.

As it turns out, Doocy had already been reading up on the Billy Bowlegs Pirate Festival and was preparing to be escorted by pirate ship during his visit to Fort Walton Beach. That could only happen on the Emerald Coast.

While the FOX & Friends team travels extensively, Doocy said Destin stood out as a natural stop for the show’s America 250 tour, which highlights communities, businesses and traditions that helped shape the nation. “As we travel America for America 250, we’re trying to highlight all these amazing towns and amazing places,” Doocy said. “The Panhandle was just one of those places we haven’t been to for a while, and it’s one of those places where people have heard about it, they’ve wanted to visit it, and we thought, ‘We should go there.’”

Part of the appeal was the location itself. “Fudpucker’s is legendary,” he said with a laugh. “You’ve got gators, you’ve got pirates, you’ve got a lot of happy people who need coffee. That’s a pretty good recipe for first thing in the morning.”

It wasn’t his first visit to the

area. Long before arriving as a television host, Doocy first visited Destin as a college student making the trek from the University of Kansas in search of a Florida beach vacation. “It was the closest beach in Florida from Kansas,” he said.

Years later, he and his wife returned to explore the area as a potential second-home destination. “We absolutely loved it,” he told me. “We spent a couple of days looking around and thought it was just very, very nice.”

Like many visitors, he was particularly drawn to the communities along Scenic Highway 30A. During that trip, he even spent time exploring the area with former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who maintained a home in South Walton for many years. Had he purchased property back then, he joked, he probably would have quadrupled his investment by now.

The conversation eventually turned to food — not surprising considering Doocy and his wife, Kathy, have authored several cookbooks together. When asked about memorable local dining experiences, he immediately recalled enjoying smoked fish dip while watching the sunset at Bud & Alley’s in Sea-



side. “It’s another iconic place,” he said. “Everybody has to go there.”

As our conversation continued, one theme surfaced repeatedly: the power of local stories. Although Doocy works in national media, he believes the stories that resonate most with viewers are often rooted in hometown communities. “When I was a reporter in Washington, D.C., every national story was a local story,” he said.

In today’s media landscape, he argues that local storytelling might be more important than ever. “Every national story starts somewhere locally,” he said. “And thanks to social media and all the different platforms we have now, a local story can become a national story overnight.”

That philosophy is at the heart of what we do. As publishers of all-positive community newspapers across Northwest Florida, we often hear readers say they appreciate stories that celebrate people, businesses and communities making a difference. It turns out Doocy hears much of the same feedback from FOX & Friends viewers.

“I think people love the segments because they’re positive,” he said. “There’s a lot of news on, and a lot of it is not great news. What I hear when I travel around the country is that people appreciate hearing stories about communities, businesses and people doing good things.”

One recent example came after a Route 66 broadcast. Doocy recalled a woman approaching him after the series aired. “She said, ‘I just wanted to tell you how much I loved that series,’” he remembered. “‘There’s just not enough good news out

there.’” He paused and smiled while recounting the moment. “That’s a good report card.”

Those positive stories often create real-world impacts as well. Doocy shared how small businesses featured during FOX & Friends road trips sometimes see visitors arrive from across the country months or even years later. Recalling one Florida restaurant owner in particular, Doocy said one of the most rewarding aspects of the road trips is seeing the lasting impact on small businesses. “People would come in and say, ‘I saw you on TV,’” he said.

After more than three decades of commuting into New York television studios, Doocy said life on the road still brings a sense of adventure. “When you’re driving into New York every day for 30 years, you know exactly how it’s going to go,” he said. “Out here, you never know what’s going to happen. You’re going to meet interesting people, hear some great stories and probably have a few surprises along the way.” That unpredictability is part of what keeps the broadcasts fresh.

Doocy said one of the things he looks forward to most when the show travels is the enthusiasm of local viewers. “They’re so excited when we first walk in with the cameras rolling,” he said. “And the excitement really doesn’t diminish.”

That enthusiasm was amplified by FOX & Friends’ nationwide America’s 250 RV giveaway, which had generated enormous local interest. “Everybody wants to win it,” Doocy said. “I don’t blame them. It’s a really nice vehicle.”

Perhaps nowhere was Do-



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Continued on page 24

Where Floral Dreams Become Art

How a Sister's Bridal Shower Bloomed Into Couture Florals & Events

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

I knew Kristin Lockhart was talented long before I sat down to interview her.

I knew it the moment I walked into my wedding reception at The Alice in Destin and saw months of planning transformed into something even more beautiful than I had imagined. As a recent Couture Florals & Events bride, I had experienced the finished product firsthand. What I hadn't yet discovered was the story behind it.

That story begins long before weddings, floral installations and luxury events. Creativity has been part of Kristin's life for as long as she can remember. Long before she was designing celebrations along the Emerald Coast, she spent hours scrapbooking, turning simple photo albums into keepsakes filled with ribbon, embellishments and artistic details.

That creative spirit found a new outlet in 2012 when she designed an Alice in Wonderland-themed bridal shower for her sister. What began as a labor of love would eventually become the spark that launched **Couture Florals & Events**, now one of the area's premier wedding and event design companies.

At the time, Kristin had little experience with floral design beyond creating a few silk arrangements for family members. But for her sister's shower, she envisioned something extraordinary. The space was transformed into a whimsical tea party complete with moss-covered displays, trees, stacked teacups, tree stumps, squirrel accents and even a custom tea kettle cake. "When people walked in, they were amazed," Kristin recalled. "Throughout the event, so many people told me I had a natural talent and creative eye for this type of work."

More importantly, the experience awakened what would become her passion. "That truly sparked something in me," she said.

Kristin began exploring floral design more seriously, eventually working professionally with fresh florals while managing a floral department. As her skills and confidence grew, so did

her vision. In 2016, she launched Couture Florals & Events with a desire to create meaningful, elevated celebrations tailored to each client.

Today, what started as a shoestring startup has grown into a thriving business trusted by couples, wedding planners and event professionals throughout Northwest Florida. For Kristin, however, the attraction was never simply flowers. "I completely fell in love with the artistry, creativity and emotion behind transforming spaces and bringing people's visions to life," she said.

That blend of artistry and organization continues to shape her work today. While many people imagine floral design as a profession spent arranging beautiful blooms, Kristin says the reality is far more demanding. "People often think this job is just playing with flowers all day, but there is so much more that goes into what we do," she said. "Behind the beauty is an incredible amount of planning, logistics, problem-solving, physical labor, setup, execution and cleanup."

Over the years, she has learned to intentionally separate creative time from business time, allowing her to remain fully present when designing for clients. Even so, she believes artistry extends far beyond the flowers themselves, viewing each proposal as the first step in helping couples visualize the wedding or event of their dreams.

Like many entrepreneurs, Kristin faced uncertainty in the early years. One of the most difficult seasons came during the COVID-19 pandemic when weddings and events were postponed, rescheduled or canceled. "It was extremely difficult navigating the uncertainty while trying to protect and sustain a newer business at the time," she said. Still, she remained committed to the business she believed in. "There is always risk involved with entrepreneurship, but I truly believed in what I was building and continued pushing



they interact, communicate and naturally vibe together," she said. "You can truly feel the love they have for each other, and that often becomes the inspiration behind the overall design."

She believes unforgettable weddings are created through thoughtful layers of candlelight, texture, place settings and carefully curated design elements that create a complete guest experience. "The small, intentional details and, of course, the couple themselves, are what separate a beautiful wedding from a memorable one," she said. "The love, energy and connection a couple shares are what truly set the tone."

"I especially love when couples fully trust us in the process and allow us the artistic and creative freedom to bring their vision to life in a meaningful and elevated way."

As she described her design process, I found myself thinking back to my own wedding day. Months of planning suddenly became reality the moment I

stepped into our reception space. The florals did more than decorate the room — they helped tell mine and Scott's story.

What impressed me most was Kristin's ability to take fragments of ideas and transform them into a cohesive vision. Calla lilies, moss, driftwood and flowing amaranthus came together in ways I never would have imagined, creating a design that felt sophisticated, personal and completely authentic to us. It wasn't simply beautiful. It felt like us.

While trends continue to evolve, Kristin remains drawn to timeless elegance paired with natural texture and movement. Yet some of her greatest inspiration comes from the Emerald Coast itself. "What excites me most creatively about designing for clients in Destin is the atmosphere and natural beauty of our area," she said. "The emerald water, sugar-white sand and relaxed, yet elevated, atmo-

Continued on page 26



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 Community

CrossCountry3: Helping Veterans Rediscover Purpose Through Service

“The transformative effects of building resiliency are life changing.”
— Bruce Duty

In our community, military service is woven into the fabric of everyday life. From active-duty personnel at Eglin Air Force Base and Hurlburt Field to the thousands of veterans who call the Emerald Coast home, many have dedicated their lives to serving others. Yet, when military service ends, some find themselves searching for a renewed sense of purpose, identity and hope.

That need inspired the creation of CrossCountry3, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping veterans rediscover purpose by empowering them to serve others in the fight against human trafficking.

At its heart, CrossCountry3 exists because many veterans possess unique skills, leadership abilities and a deep desire to continue making a difference. After years of serving their country, some veterans struggle to find a renewed sense of purpose once military service ends. The organization believes every veteran has tremendous value and untapped potential that can continue to positively impact society.

CrossCountry3 was created to help bridge that gap. Rather than focusing solely on the challenges veterans face, the organization emphasizes opportunities

for transformational growth. By connecting veterans with meaningful missions that combat human trafficking, CrossCountry3 provides a pathway for them to use their strengths, experiences and commitment to service in ways that directly benefit vulnerable individuals and communities.

A key part of CrossCountry3's impact is the leadership and community engagement of its founder, Bruce Duty. Based locally, the organization serves a region with one of the nation's largest concentrations of military personnel, veterans and military families, including those connected to Eglin Air Force Base, Hurlburt Field and the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne).

Through years of relationship-building within the military and veteran community, Duty has helped create a mission that reflects the values of service, sacrifice and freedom deeply rooted throughout the Florida Panhandle. By fostering partnerships and encouraging veterans to engage in the fight against human trafficking, CrossCountry3 offers veterans a pathway to continue making a meaningful difference while helping protect some of society's most vulnerable individuals.

The organization's approach is built upon three core values: **faith, family and freedom.** Whether through workshops,



retreats or individual training, CrossCountry3 remains committed to helping veterans build resilience and discover renewed purpose.

Resilience training teaches veterans the importance of a positive self-identity, living with purpose and embracing a horizon of hope through serving the brokenhearted and vulnerable.

Faith serves as the foundation for hope and personal growth. CrossCountry3 encourages veterans to discover a deeper sense of purpose and meaning, helping them understand



their lives and experiences continue to have significant value.

Family represents the importance of relationships, connection and community. Veterans often miss the camaraderie and brotherhood they experienced during military service. CrossCountry3 fosters a supportive environment where veterans can build meaningful connections, strengthen families and encourage one another.

Freedom is both a principle and a mission. Veterans have dedicated portions of their lives protecting freedom, and CrossCountry3 extends that commitment by fighting human trafficking, one of the greatest assaults on human freedom. By engaging veterans in efforts that help protect and advocate for victims, the organization creates opportunities for continued service that align with the values many veterans have upheld throughout their lives.

Ultimately, CrossCountry3 exists because veterans deserve more than gratitude for their service — they deserve opportunities to continue living lives of significance and impact. By providing identity, meaning and hope through a mission-centered approach, the organization helps veterans write a new chapter of service.

In doing so, CrossCountry3 demonstrates that purpose does not end when military service concludes. Instead, it can evolve into a powerful force for good — helping veterans, families and victims of human trafficking move toward a future defined by hope, freedom and human dignity.

At CrossCountry3, building

resilience in the face of adversity and experiencing restoration physically, mentally and spiritually remain at the core of the mission.

For more information, visit crosscountry3.com.

Bruce Duty, Maj. (Ret.), U.S. Army, is the founder and president of CrossCountry3. A retired Army chaplain with more than 22 years of active-duty military service, Duty served with the 3rd Infantry Division, 2nd Infantry Division and 10th Mountain Division, including two combat deployments to Iraq.

Prior to becoming an Army chaplain, Duty served nearly nine years as an enlisted service member before earning both a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Divinity degree. He also served as a pastor in Missouri and Florida before answering the call to military chaplaincy during the Iraq War surge in 2007.

Throughout his military career, Duty received numerous honors, including the Bronze Star Medal, Meritorious Service Medal, Meritorious Unit Commendation, Iraqi Campaign Medal and additional military awards and decorations. He is also certified in Master Resilience Training, Pathfinder Resilience Training, ASIST Suicide Intervention Training, Strong Bonds Family Training and several military medical and leadership programs.

Today, Duty uses both his military and civilian experience to help individuals and organizations build resilience, overcome adversity and pursue restoration physically, mentally and spiritually. He remains passionate about faith, family, freedom and helping others discover hope and purpose through service. Duty resides in Niceville.

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Destin Private Tiki Helps Locals Rediscover Crab Island

Ask most locals about Crab Island and you'll usually hear one of two responses:

"I used to go all the time." Or: "It's been years."

Life gets busy. Boats get sold. Weekends fill up. Yet, Crab Island remains one of our area's most iconic destinations.

That's why **Destin Private Tiki's Crab Island Express** is attracting attention from both locals and visitors looking for a fun way to spend a few hours on the water.

Operating from Heron Har-

bor Marina, the locally owned company offers private tiki charters as well as shared excursions to Crab Island. Guests board a custom tiki boat, cruise through Destin Harbor and spend time enjoying the emerald-green waters and laid-back atmosphere that have made Crab Island famous.

For visitors, it's a memorable way to experience one of Destin's most popular attractions. For locals, it's a chance to revisit a favorite destination without planning an entire day on the water.



Private charters are also available for birthdays, reunions, bachelorette parties, family outings and other special occasions.

Another popular offering is the company's **Locals Only Unlimited Access Pass**, de-



signed specifically for area residents who want to spend more time enjoying the harbor and Crab Island throughout the season.

Whether introducing out-of-town guests to Crab Island for the first time or returning after years away, Destin Private Tiki offers a reminder of why so many people fell in love with Destin's waters in the first place.

Destin Private Tiki operates from Heron Harbor Marina, 314 Harbor Blvd. in Destin. For information or reservations, call (850) 424-1119, email DestinPrivateTiki@gmail.com or visit DestinPrivateTiki.com. Ask about the **Locals Only Unlimited Access Pass**.

Red Snapper Season Returns

Red snapper season is finally here, and 2026 is shaping up to be one of the best years in recent memory for Gulf Coast fishermen.

The federal red snapper season for federally permitted charter boats and head boats opened June 1 and will remain open through Oct. 26, giving anglers a 147-day season — the longest federal for-hire season since 2006. The season is 19 days longer than last year's federal season.

Florida's private recreational red snapper season opened May 22 and runs daily through July 31. Additional fishing opportunities begin Sept. 1, with a combination of daily openings, weekends and holiday periods extending through Jan. 4, 2027. Florida's 2026 season spans 140 days, making it the longest Gulf red snapper season since the state assumed management of the fishery.

For many families in our area, red snapper season is one of the most anticipated times of the year. Destin's charter fleet and private anglers alike look forward to harvesting one of the Gulf's most popular and best-tasting reef fish.

Current regulations for private recreational anglers include a two-fish daily bag limit and a 16-inch minimum size limit in Gulf waters. Anglers should always verify current regulations before heading offshore, as rules can change.

One area that often creates confusion is the difference between state and federal waters. In the Gulf, Florida state waters extend nine nautical miles off-



shore. Federal waters begin beyond that boundary. Depending on where you fish and what type of vessel you are fishing from, different seasons and regulations might apply.

Private recreational anglers may harvest red snapper in state waters during Florida's season and in federal waters when federal regulations allow. However, special rules apply when traveling through state waters with fish caught offshore.

State-licensed guide boats that do not carry a federal reef fish permit must follow state regulations and generally cannot harvest federally managed species such as red snapper in federal waters. A federal permit is required. Federally permitted charter boats and head boats operate under a separate set of federal regulations and may only harvest federally regulated species during federally established seasons.

The differing seasons exist largely because the needs of anglers vary. Charter operators typically prefer long, consecutive seasons that allow visitors to plan vacations and fishing trips well in advance. Many local, private boat owners, meanwhile, favor weekends and holiday openings that fit their work schedules.

Fortunately, improved data collection and management have

helped create longer fishing opportunities for everyone. State officials credit enhanced harvest tracking and Florida's management program for expanding angler access while maintaining conservation goals.

For anglers unsure of current regulations, the Fish Rules app remains one of the easiest tools available. Users can select salt-water or freshwater fishing, enter their location and instantly view current regulations for most species.

Whether you're heading offshore on a private boat or booking a trip with one of Destin's many charter captains, the 2026

season offers plenty of opportunities to enjoy one of the Gulf's signature fishing experiences.

Know Before You Go

Before heading offshore, anglers should verify current regulations, season dates and size limits, as rules can change throughout the year.

Helpful Resources:

- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission: www.MyFWC.com
- Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council: www.GulfCouncil.org
- NOAA Fisheries: www.Fisheries.NOAA.gov

- Fish Rules App: Available free for Apple and Android devices

2026 Gulf Red Snapper Regulations

- Private Recreational Season: May 22-July 31, plus additional fall and holiday openings beginning Sept. 1
- Federal Charter/Headboat Season: June 1-Oct. 26
- Daily Bag Limit: Two fish per person
- Minimum Size Limit: 16 inches total length

For the latest red snapper season dates and regulations, search "Red Snapper" at MyFWC.com.



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Community

BRUCE CHEVES

continued from page 1

cision of official fish weigh-ins long before digital scales became common. What began as an opportunity to help soon became a calling.

Over the next 42 years, Bruce transformed the role of weighmaster into something uniquely his own. With trademark sayings that became part of local folklore, he entertained crowds while preserving the traditions of one of our area's most cherished events. Generations of anglers can still hear his familiar introduction: "From guppies to Godzilla, caught in a bathtub or a battleship ... bring me a fish and I'll make you famous." And when it came time to officially record a catch, the harbor would fall silent as Bruce delivered the words that became his signature: "Time is!"

Throughout his career, Bruce announced more than 20 world-record catches, including an 8.9-pound pompano, a 39-pound red grouper and a 54-pound kitty mitchell. He also witnessed and announced every Destin Fishing Rodeo record catch since 1984, including a 70.2-pound grouper, a 111.6-pound amberjack and a massive 358.8-pound warsaw grouper.

Yet, statistics and records tell only part of the story. Bruce possessed a rare gift for mak-

ing every angler feel important, whether they brought in a world-class catch or a small fish caught by an excited child experiencing the Rodeo for the first time.

More Than a Weighmaster

Bruce was a storyteller, historian, mentor and ambassador for Destin's fishing heritage.

He loved sharing tales from local waters and adventures around the world. He encouraged young anglers, celebrated longtime captains and helped preserve the stories that shaped Destin into the "World's Luckiest Fishing Village."

Every Oct. 16 at 5 p.m., Bruce led a memorial ceremony at the Rodeo weigh-in barge behind A.J.'s to honor captains, anglers and friends who had passed away. The tradition became so meaningful that the City of Destin officially proclaimed Oct. 16 as Bruce Cheves Day in 2010.

His contributions extended far beyond the harbor. Bruce received the University of West Florida Presidential Medal of Honor for his decades of public service, philanthropy and dedication to preserving our area's maritime history.

To countless residents and visitors, however, his greatest contribution was something less



PHOTO AJ'S



PHOTO KIRK AUSBURN



PHOTO AJ'S



PHOTO KIRK AUSBURN

tangible. He made people feel welcome. Whether standing behind the scales, swapping stories on the docks or encouraging a young fisherman with a first catch, Bruce embodied the spirit of the fishing community.

While Bruce's voice became familiar to generations of Rodeo participants, those closest to him knew him simply as family and friend. He leaves behind his daughter, Brianna Cheves; sisters Sharon Ralston

and Linda Hughes (Bruce Bishop); nephews Franklin Vaughn (Stephanie), Tyler Dunn, Evan Dunn, Zack Dunn (Patricia) and Ian Dunn; niece Cat Grey and great-niece CJ, as well as many dear friends who became family over the years.

A lifetime auxiliary member of Crestview VFW Post 5450, Bruce often said the Destin Fishing Rodeo community was an extension of his family. The hundreds of anglers, captains, volunteers and friends who gath-

"From guppies to Godzilla, caught in a bathtub or a battleship... bring me a fish and I'll make you famous!"
- Bruce Cheves

ered to celebrate his life would likely have said the same about him.

A Community Reflects

Since news of Bruce's passing spread throughout our communities, tributes have poured in from friends, family members and fellow fishermen whose lives he touched over the decades.

Mary Anne Windes shared a favorite memory from 1998 when her son, Capt. Trey Windes, dressed as Bruce for Halloween. "We shopped for days trying to find the perfect belt and shorts as Trey wouldn't settle for 'close enough,'" Mary Anne recalled. "Bruce was tickled pink. Rest in peace, Bruce! We love you, man!"

Richard Drago found comfort in one of Bruce's most famous phrases. "I can imagine God, upon calling him home, said the same words we heard Bruce announce to the Rodeo crowd to mark the catch official: 'Time Is,'" he wrote. "We know you were a big enough catch for heaven's net to scoop you right up, my friend."

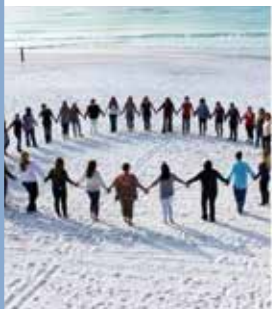
R.J. Shelley remembered meeting Bruce shortly after Hurricane Opal in 1995. "I was a snot-nosed kid running around the docks most of my younger years," she wrote. "I listened to countless stories and could listen for hours. Him and Ms. Helen Wren always kept a watchful eye on me."

Longtime friend Jim Robertson reflected on the dedication many never saw behind the scenes. "Many don't know of the many days over the many years that he stood in the rain, heat, worked around Hurricane Opal and performed with an unbelievable level of dedication to the Rodeo, the city and the sport he loved so much," Jim wrote. "Too many stories to share here, but I pray his legacy lives on."

Chester Kroeger recalled working with Bruce on a "Legends of Destin" T-shirt years ago featuring Bruce and the blue marlin he famously caught while traveling alone to Bimini

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Continued on next page

Reclaiming Your Edge: Precision Performance and Long-Term Health



DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

You're at the gym, pushing for that final set, but the explosive power just isn't there. Back at the office, you're staring at the same report for the tenth time, your focus drifting as a familiar cloud of irritability settles in. By 2:13 a.m., you're staring at the ceiling, heart racing, replaying the day's endless list while a thin layer of sweat cools on your skin.

It's easy to shrug this off as "just getting older," but this slow erosion of muscle, mood, and mental sharpness is often a biological decline, not an inevitable part of aging. While national health trends often highlight mental health and sleep during specific awareness months, maintaining your peak perfor-

mance is a year-round commitment to your biology.

Precision Performance, Not a Rollercoaster

At The Hormone Restoration Center, we use bioidentical pellets to optimize hormone levels so your body stops sabotaging your efforts. Unlike messy gels that can rub off on your family or weekly injections that cause emotional "spikes and crashes," pellets provide a steady, consistent release that mimics your body's natural rhythm.

How Pellet Therapy Restores Your Foundation:

- **Mental Focus & Resiliency:** Hormonal imbalance is frequently the hidden driver behind "brain fog" and a loss of your competitive edge. Pellets support GABA—the calming brain chemical—and keep serotonin steady, sharpening your focus and eliminating the irritability that can strain your professional and personal life.

- **Tactical Recovery & Sleep:** When testosterone is low, sleep becomes "fragile". Pellets help your body optimize melatonin



and lower nighttime cortisol so you aren't wide awake at 3 a.m. They stabilize your internal thermostat, meaning you wake up recharged rather than restless.

- **Muscle Retention & Physical Power:** Your physical foundation depends on testosterone as the primary driver of protein synthesis. Optimized levels prevent your body from breaking down muscle for energy, helping you regain the strength, lean muscle mass, and recovery speed you need to perform at your best.

- **Long-Term Preventive**

Health: Beyond immediate performance, optimization is an investment in your future. Maintaining healthy hormone levels has a protective effect on heart health and supports bone density, reducing the long-term risk of chronic decline.

The Path to Peak Optimization

We start with a thorough baseline evaluation, including blood testing of sex hormones and key metabolic markers. The insertion procedure is brief, performed right here in the office, and involves zero downtime.

Most men feel the "lifting

of the veil" within the first two weeks, with reliable peak performance by week six. We don't "set it and forget it"—we check labs after insertion to ensure your levels are dialed in perfectly for your specific goals.

A Practical Plan for Results

We combine hormone therapy with lifestyle guidance so the changes stick. Don't let another day pass feeling like a shadow of yourself. Whether you want to hit a new personal best or simply want the energy to be the man your family relies on, we are here to help.

Reclaim your vitality and get back in the game. Call The Hormone Restoration Center at (850) 837-1271 to schedule your consultation and blood work.

BRUCE CHEVES

continued from previous page

in heavy seas. "Bruce truly is a legend in this community and his legacy will live forever," Chester wrote.

For his nephew, Franklin Vaughn, the loss is both personal and deeply felt throughout the fishing community. "He was not only the weighmaster of the Rodeo, but a true icon of Destin," Franklin wrote. "He is what made the Rodeo what it is today — a place where anyone can be made famous from guppies to Godzilla. It didn't matter if you brought him a fish; he would weigh it, no questions asked. Destin will not be the same without him."

Marina Point native Zach Vagias remembered Bruce as part of the fabric of the harbor itself. "He wasn't just a weighmaster; he was an entertainer," Zach wrote. "The best decision the Destin Fishing Rodeo ever made was naming Bruce Cheves as

their weighmaster. He brought a color and personality it had needed for years."

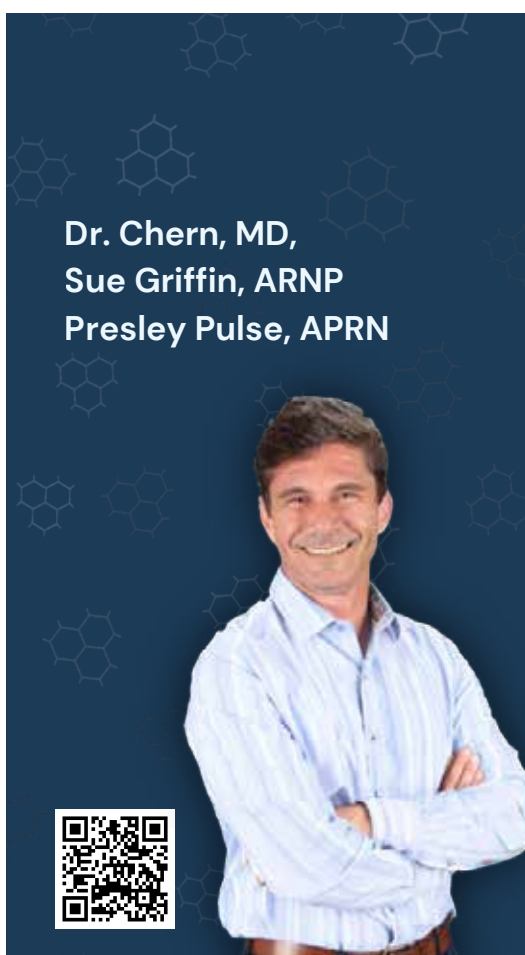
"Time Is"

The fishing community will undoubtedly continue gathering each October to remember the captains and anglers who have gone before them. This year, however, one more name will be added to that list.

The man who spent decades honoring others will now be remembered alongside them.

And somewhere in the hearts and memories of those standing along the docks, the familiar words that echoed across Destin Harbor for more than 40 years will remain forever: "Time is."

Publisher's Note: *Bruce's family has requested any donations be made to the Destin History & Fishing Museum to help establish a permanent tribute by renaming the Rodeo Room the "Bruce Cheves Rodeo Room."*



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 Wellness

Love Connection More Than Being Right



BY STEPHENIE CRAIG

Do you find yourself grumbling about people doing things the wrong way? If they would just do or see things the right way, which just happens to be your way, the world would be a much better place. If slow drivers would drive in the right lane, if your friend would understand your intentions and know you weren't trying to hurt them, if your family would load the dishwasher correctly, if people would vote the right way, if others would move through the world living the same way as you — the right way — the world would be right.

While it is important to clarify and live by your beliefs, not everyone is going to share your perspective, practices, faith, personality and preferences. In fact, even your closest people might prioritize and live differently

than you. You can choose to use energy judging, being frustrated with and trying to control or shame the behavior of others. Or, you can accept there are many ways to be a person and the only person you can control is yourself.

How people live is based on personality, personal strengths, upbringing, faith background, education, geographic location, social culture, mentoring relationships, personal mistakes and personal experiences. Once layered together, you find many expressions of being human, some of which create discomfort for you. Discomfort is, by nature, challenging and can motivate you to believe the solution is to change others to be more like you and admit you are right. In reality, interacting with people who are different from you is actually one of life's greatest growth tools.

When you encounter differences, you can judge, distance yourself, grumble or you can learn to seek curiosity, understanding, kind communication and acknowledgment of humanity in disagreement. Respecting differences does not mean abandoning your values. Instead, it means acknowledging that both you and the other



person can be lovable human beings while expressing values differently. It also means choosing between prioritizing being right or being meaningfully connected to others. I often tell couples in my office, "You can keep prioritizing being right and eventually split up, or you can loosen your grip on being right and prioritize curiosity about the other person's experience."

So, how do you loosen your grip on being seen as right and pursue understanding and connection while still living by your values?

7 Ways to Love Connection More Than You Love Being Right

1. Explore and clarify your own values. Think about how your values have been shaped, what your values are and what makes your values important to you. Reflect on how it feels when others respect your values versus when others minimize, shame or disrespect them.

2. Notice differences. Notice when you find yourself frustrated, irritated or judging someone who is living different-

ly from you. Notice any instincts to belittle others or assume negative things about the personhood of those doing things differently.

3. Remember what you can control and what you can't. You have been put in charge of managing your thoughts, feelings, behavior, choices and boundaries. You have not been given any control over others' thoughts, feelings, behavior, choices or boundaries. Try moving toward a deep acceptance of placing your energy where it belongs and letting go of trying to control others.

4. Reach for curiosity over judgment. Try asking genuine, curious questions seeking to understand how others have arrived at different conclusions about how they live. Seek to humbly grow and learn from these conversations rather than assuming you have everything figured out. Wisdom is found in being both a learner and a teacher.

5. Pursue mutual respect. Hold to your own values, which will sometimes mean you disagree. Try speaking openly and kindly about the difference.

Also, remember others embrace their values with as much conviction as you do. Respect their humanity as much as you would like them to respect yours in disagreement.

6. Evaluate your intentions. Discern when it's time to speak up about what you believe is right from a place of care, advocacy and love versus the urge to speak from a place of insecurity, self-righteousness or a need to be seen as right.

7. Lean into connection. Remember people need connection with God and others. Remember that God loves each person and does not fear value conflicts. Treat others with the love and patience God extends to you as you imperfectly navigate life.

Be honest and kind with yourself and others as you address patterns around being right and being connected. Learning to prioritize connection over being right can be both relationship- and life-changing. Connect with us along your journey for counseling and coaching at Journey-Bravely.com.

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Navigating Your Medicare Milestone: A Helpful Guide to Turning 65



By CHRISTIAN REGALADO

Turning 65 is a beautiful milestone, especially when you get to celebrate it right here along our stunning Emerald Coast. But as that big day approaches, your mailbox starts overflowing with glossy brochures, and your phone won't stop ringing with high-pressure offers. It can get overwhelming and difficult to know who to trust.

As an independent insurance broker based right here in Santa Rosa Beach, my goal is simply to cut through all that noise. Let's break down how Medicare actually works so you can step into this next chapter with complete confidence.

Before we look at specific plans, we need to talk about the foundation of your coverage: Original Medicare, which is managed by the federal government. It is divided into two main pieces.

First is Part A, your hospital insurance. For most folks who have worked and paid Medicare taxes for at least ten years, Part A won't cost you a dime in monthly premiums. It's there to help cover inpatient hospital stays, skilled nursing facilities, hospice, and some home health care. The second piece is Part B, your medical insurance. Part B does carry a monthly premium that can shift a bit each year and amounts vary based on income. For most people it is currently \$202.90. This is what handles your outpatient care including things like regular doctor visits, preventive checkups, lab work, and medical equipment.

Now, while Original Medicare covers a whole lot of ground, it isn't a complete safety net. It carries deductibles, and more importantly, it only covers 80 percent of your Part B medical expenses. There is no cap on that remaining 20 percent. If life

throws you a serious health curveball, that 20 percent can add up to a mountain of expenses before you know it. Plus, standard government Medicare doesn't include routine dental, vision, or prescription drug coverage.

To protect your savings, you generally have to choose between two very different paths: a Medicare Supplement or a Medicare Advantage plan.

The first path is a Medicare Supplement, often called Medigap. These plans are offered by private companies to step in and pay that remaining 20 percent of your outpatient costs. The biggest selling point here is total freedom. You can see any doctor, specialist, or hospital in the country including top-tier facilities right here in Florida, as long as they accept Medicare. There are no network restrictions and no jumping through hoops for prior authorizations. The trade-off? These plans have higher monthly premiums, and you will need to buy a separate Part D plan for your prescriptions.

The second path is Medicare Advantage, or Part C. Think of this as an "all-in-one" alternative. Private insurers contract with the government to manage your benefits, often bundling your medical, hospital, and prescription drug coverage together. Folks love these because they frequently feature very low, or even zero-dollar monthly premiums, alongside nice perks like routine dental, vision, hearing, and even gym memberships. However, you must stick to a specific network of doctors. Down here in NW Florida, these networks vary wildly. You might also need referrals or pre-approvals to see a specialist.

When it comes to Medicare, there is no such thing as one-size-fits-all. That is why working with a local independent broker matters. Unlike a captive agent who works for one specific insurance company, I work directly for you. My job isn't to push you toward one specific path; instead, I am here to help you navigate both options and find the absolute best, most competitive plan whether you decide on Medicare Advantage or a Medicare Supplement.

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sit down together, cross-reference your exact prescriptions, make sure your trusted local doctors

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Musing

Sean of the South: Letter from a 4th Grader – Dad



BY SEAN DIETRICH

I get a lot of letters from kids. Such as the letter that came yesterday, via snail mail. It was penned in a childish hand.

“My teacher reads your stories to our class sometimes and I wanted to know, can you write about me? If it’s not too much trouble for you to do?”

“I am in fourth grade. I don’t really have anything cool about me. I have red hair. But you can probably come up with something cool. My dad died this year the same way yours did, so my teacher said you are the same as me. It’s okay if you can’t write back.”

To the little boy who wrote to me: Red is the most prestigious hair color in the world. That is not an opinion.

Fifty years ago, experts estimated that redheads made up approximately 8 percent of the earth’s population. But the percentage of redheads sharply decreases each year.

This year, the percentage is at an all-time low. About 1 percent of the world’s population have red hair. Ours is the rarest hair color in the solar system. So welcome to the club, friend.

Our red hair is caused by a gene called the MC1R gene. Genes are microscopic very scientific things in the human body. They float around in your bloodstream, wearing little lab coats and carrying around tiny clipboards and pocket protectors.

A gene is something your parents carry around with them, all the time. Sort of like auto insurance, only more dependable.

So if both your parents had the MC1R gene, this means that you have a 25 percent chance of



being born with red hair.

Congratulations, your parents both had the MC1R gene. You’re a ginger. May God have mercy on your soul.

I got my red hair, personally, from my dad. My dad had the MC1R gene. He was a redhead. He came from a long line of redheads. Although when he got older, his hair became more auburn.

That’s something they don’t tell you about red hair. The pigment changes throughout your lifetime. In fact, red hair will never go gray. The pigment will only fade over time and appear white, or even blond. My hair has change shades thrice in my lifetime.

Of course, my father didn’t live long enough to find out what his hair would do.

My dad was very special. Everyone liked him. He was a

good man who loved baseball, old movies and jokes. He had a prodigious memory when it came to jokes. He had a million of them.

“Yesterday, I went to buy camo hunting pants, I couldn’t find any.”

“When life gives you melons, you might be dyslexic.”

“Adam was a Southern Baptist, because only a Baptist could stand next to a naked woman and be tempted by fruit.”

“What’s the difference between ignorance and apathy? I don’t know and I don’t care.”

My old man would have my little friends rolling on the ground. He was pretty great.

My dad coached our Little League team. He showed up to every practice with a World-War-II era duffel bag, filled with bats and balls and gloves. Our team was made up of a bunch of underprivileged kids. My fa-

ther sought these unfortunate boys out.

Daddy would recruit kids from the sticks, boys who came from families without squat. Each year, our team would hold fundraisers so that every underprivileged boy had a nice, brand new uniform. My father gave them all free baseball gloves and free bats for Christmas.

This kind of thing was important to my father because he, too, grew up underprivileged. He knew what it meant to have nothing.

Before every practice, my father would drive his Ford all over town, picking up youngsters from squalid homes that featured blue tarps on the rooftops.

We boys rode in the bed of his F-100, happy as larks. Afterward, we all ate ice cream from Dairy Queen. Daddy paid for the ice cream. Because that’s the kind of guy my paw was.

I’ll bet your dad was pretty great, too.

So don’t remember your father by the way he died. Don’t let your dad’s life be defined by the word “suicide.” Your father was much more than an ugly word. Your father was a great man.

Today, your father lives with God himself. Just like mine. Your daddy was awesome. He carried some pretty great genes, too. We know this to be true because he helped make you.



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A Pastor's Ponderings: **Fathers**



BY REV. PETE HYDE

They stood at opposite ends of a long dark hallway - one in his 70s and the other in his 40s. It was a tense meeting. They met once before when the younger was still a small child, but there were no memories, only questions tucked away in the younger one's mind and heart. The elder had wondered throughout his life what became of this young life he dropped off at the orphanage so many years before.

The meeting took place after much prayer and discussion. God had a hand in the arrangements for the meeting - the right contacts had been made, information was easy to acquire, and thousands of miles had been traveled easily. A language barrier

separated the two strangers but yet related men, which made the meeting even more difficult and tense. It was father and son meeting for the first time since the father gave up the younger for adoption at the age of two. Over the next few days, a relationship was built - not a deep one, but a relationship. Answers came that led to more questions. Given his life circumstances, the father did the best and loving thing for his son as a single parent with little prospect for being able to raise a child successfully.

A man stands at a graveside in the sweltering Oklahoma August heat. Only about ten people came to the service including family. Taps played in the distance. The firing squad squeezes off the 21 gun salute that pierces the quiet of the small town cemetery. He stands by the grave. Everyone is gone except his immediate family. He reflects on the life of his father - his adopted father. He was a strict man, a flawed man, a driven man. Being number one was his only option. The typical son things ran through his mind as he stood by the final resting place of the man who raised him - baseball games, golf, fish-



ing, camping, military life, anger, temper, drinking, the final months as this one who shared his life began to deteriorate.

He turns and gets in the car and seldom returns to the quiet of that place. It's been almost thirty years, but the hole in son's heart is still there. He knows in his mind and his training has taught him it won't go away. Perhaps he needs to return to that spot more often.

He now takes a few minutes to reflect on his role as a husband and father. He hopes he hasn't done irreparable damage to his children. He hopes he has been the husband he has worked so hard to be. He said and did the things he said he would never say and do from his childhood. He is sorry sometimes. He is so proud of how they turned out and how his children have han-

dled life. He knows he is blessed beyond measure to have a woman at his side God placed there specifically for him. He doesn't tell them enough. Now he is a grandpa and a whole new role opens up.

He sits in the quiet of the church sanctuary before anyone else is there, before the phone begins to ring, before the week's schedule begins to cloud his perspective. His Father is there - his Father in heaven. He has been blessed. No, life hasn't always been easy, and struggles are at the same time past, immediate and long range. But God's fatherly hand has been on his shoulder for a long time, even when he didn't acknowledge it. He pauses in these few quiet moments to give thanks on this Father's day to his heavenly father for the blessing, guidance

and protection granted to him throughout his years.

Regardless of your experience of or your relationship with your father, remember today the influence, touch and presence of your Heavenly Father before Father's Day buzzes off the calendar and is forgotten until next year. He is with you every day and that's all we really need to face whatever is before us.

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

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 Musing

Christian Capitalist: David Costa - Good to Golden



BY RICH SANDERS

David Costa, a Christian Capitalist and entrepreneur, brings joy to thousands of people every day through one of the most popular restaurants in the world: McDonald's! With 30,000 restaurants around the globe, Costa Enterprises owns and operates twenty-one of them all over Northwest Florida.

David's father began working on the idea of owning and operating a McDonald's while he was still on active duty as an Air Force officer and stationed at Eglin AFB. For nearly 30 years, David and his family have been dedicated to making the McDonald's experience a magical one for all their customers.

David's entrepreneurial spir-

it developed from an early age. When he was in middle school, he started a business that sold a hot commodity like the famous French Fries his restaurants now serve every day: candy!

As a man of deep faith, David now leads an organization of over 1,000 employees that cares about its community and is dedicated to giving back. The charitable arm of the organization, Costa Cares, has a mission to provide outstanding community service through various fundraising efforts, such as supporting local schools, partnering with churches, working with international and national charities, and offering any help or services that a community may need.

For example, over the past four years, Costa Cares has served breakfast to over 1,100 local student athletes and coaches at the All Sports Association's



Annual Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) Breakfast hosted at Northwest Florida State College.

"McCafé with a Cause" fits in line perfectly with the Christian Capitalist motto: "the more we make, the more we give!" For every McCafé coffee purchased on Mondays throughout the year, Costa donates 50 percent of their coffee proceeds to a differ-

ent local charity each month.

Recently, Costa also donated \$100,000 to create a playroom in the Studer Family Children's Hospital at Ascension Sacred Heart in Pensacola, offering children and families a place to unwind, relax, play, and have fun while their siblings or family members are being cared for in the hospital.

David and his wife, MJ, are preparing to open a landmark facility on the Emerald Coast this month.

The Costa Union Club in Niceville will include MJ's signature coffee shop, a podcast studio, meetings rooms and networking events. It is built on a simple idea: people don't need more information, they need the right space!

David plans to publish a book called Good to Golden later this year that will explore the leadership lessons that he has learned over the years with the goal of inspiring his managers to get "un-stuck" and all business professionals to do their best at work and in their personal lives.

David recently appeared on the Christian Capitalist podcast (recorded at the Union Club studio!), 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 David Costa!

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.

STEVE DOOCY

continued from page 14

Doocy's pride more evident than when discussing his son, Peter Doocy, now one of the most recognizable White House correspondents in America. When I asked how it feels watching his son follow in his footsteps, his voice immediately softened. "We're really proud of him," Doocy said. "In the beginning, we never pushed him into this business because it's a complicated industry. But he's worked hard, he's done a great job and it's exciting watching him succeed." At the time of our interview, Peter was traveling internationally with the president. Like any parent, Steve watches closely.

Like any grandparent, he was equally happy discussing his grandchildren. A grandfather for only a few years, he smiled while talking about his young grandchildren and admitted there is nothing quite like the experience.

For all the excitement surrounding national television, RV giveaways and coast-to-coast broadcasts, those moments may have revealed the most about who Steve Doocy really is. By the end of our conversation, I found myself hoping this wouldn't be

Steve Doocy's last visit to the Emerald Coast.

What was scheduled to be a short interview stretched into a much longer conversation about family, food, local communities, television and the stories that connect us. In a profession where interviews can sometimes feel rushed, scripted or transactional, our conversation felt more like catching up with an old friend who happened to have spent the last three decades on national television. It was one of the most enjoyable and genuinely pleasant interviews I've conducted. And I think he had fun, too!

Before ending our conversation, I asked if there was anything he wanted local readers to know. His answer was simple. "Thank you for the wonderful welcome and the great rollout," he said. "We really appreciate it."

By the end of our conversation, Doocy wasn't talking about ratings, television production or celebrity. He was talking about communities. About local businesses. About people gathering together. About stories worth telling. "Every story is local," he said.

And in a place like "our neck of the woods," that's a story worth telling.

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Gardening Through the Heat: A South Walton Summer Guide

If you've lived in South Walton long enough, you know summer gardening here is less about fighting the heat and more about learning to work with it. Between the salt air, sandy soil, afternoon storms, and relentless humidity, our gardens demand a different philosophy than what works farther north.

The good news? Some plants absolutely thrive here.

Summer in Walton County is the season for heat-loving color and resilient native textures. Vinca, pentas, lantana, salvia, and blue daze flourish when many traditional flowers surrender to the sun. These plants are not only durable but attract butterflies and pollinators, bringing movement and life into the landscape. UF/IFAS gardening experts consistently recommend heat-tolerant varieties for Florida summers, especially in coastal regions like ours.

For edible gardening, summer requires a mindset shift. Tomatoes and lettuce usually struggle once nighttime tem-



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peratures remain high. Instead, South Walton gardeners find success with okra, citrus trees, blueberries, blackberries and peaches. You might also try planting your herbs in containers which can be moved. Herbs love the sun in the spring but being able to move your herbs to the shade might give them a longer life than sitting in full sun in the summer.

One of the biggest mistakes locals make is overwatering. Sandy soil drains quickly, but



daily shallow watering weakens roots. Deep watering two or three times a week encourages stronger, more drought-resistant plants. Mulch also becomes essential this time of year. A thick layer of pine straw or bark helps lock moisture into the soil while protecting roots from extreme afternoon temperatures.

Container gardens are espe-

cially popular around 30A patios and porches, but they require strategic plant choices. Heat-tolerant combinations like bougainvillea, succulents, lantana, and trailing dichondra create dramatic summer color without constant maintenance. Larger pots also help retain moisture better than small decorative containers.

Of course, truly successful South Walton gardening starts with respecting the local environment. Native plants such as sea oats, dune sunflower, palmetto, yaupon holly and railroad vine evolved specifically for our coastal conditions. They tolerate salt spray, intense sun, and shifting sands while helping preserve the natural beauty of our dune ecosystem.

There's something grounding about tending a garden through a Florida summer. It teaches patience, adaptation, and restraint. Not every plant belongs here — but the ones that do reward us with abundance.

In many ways, gardening on the Gulf Coast mirrors life near the water itself: you stop resisting nature and learn to grow alongside.

For more local gardening tips, stop by Clay 30A at 4808 E County Hwy 30A, Santa Rosa Beach, FL 32459. Phone (850) 231-2150 for more information, or visit their website at Clay30A.com.



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Arts & Music

Summer on the Green at ECTC

BY CAMERON HUGHES

Summer is teeing up for an unforgettable day on the course as Emerald Coast Theatre Company hosts its first-ever Charity Golf Tournament on Monday, June 29 at Noon at the exclusive Burnt Pine Golf Club in Sandestin. Benefitting ECTC Youth Education Programs, this exciting inaugural event will bring together community leaders, local businesses, golf lovers, and supporters of the arts for an afternoon packed with great food, drinks, prizes, live entertainment and giving back to the next gen-

eration of performers.

Known as the crown jewel of Florida golf, Burnt Pine Golf Club offers a breathtaking course experience overlooking the Choctawhatchee Bay, featuring rolling fairways, stunning natural scenery, and one of the most sought-after private golf destinations in the region. Players will enjoy an elevated tournament experience from start to finish, including lunch provided by Firehouse Subs before play begins and post-tournament food included following the event.

Throughout the day, golfers can also enjoy complimentary beverages provided by Tito's Handmade Vodka, Birdie Cocktails, and Odd Pelican Beer Company while networking, competing, and supporting arts education along the Emerald Coast. Every player will receive one free mulligan, and excitement will build across the course with contests, prizes, and more throughout the tournament.

One of the biggest highlights of the day will be the Hole-In-One Challenge, where players will have the opportunity to win

a Rolex watch — provided by McCaskill & Company.

Proceeds from the tournament directly support Emerald Coast Theatre Company's Youth Education Programs, helping provide camps, classes, top teaching talent, scholarships, and training opportunities that inspire creativity, confidence, and community in young performers that carries far beyond the stage.

ECTC would also like to extend a heartfelt thank you to the generous outpour from our sponsors and supporters who

are making this inaugural event possible: Alice and Jerry Zich, Jim and Tammy Pierce, Chancely Design Architecture, Seaside Sport, McGill Escrow & Title, Shades Bar & Grill, The Agency, Cafe Thirty-A, Jennifer Crawford with Own at the Beach Keller Williams, and Dave and Jo Menary.

Sponsorship opportunities and team registrations are still available, and community support is already helping make this inaugural tournament one of the standout celebrations of the summer.



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FLORAL DREAMS

continued from page 15

sphere create a backdrop that is hard to replicate anywhere else.”

Perhaps the most rewarding part of her work comes when a couple sees the finished design for the first time. “When a bride genuinely gasps, becomes emotional or gives a heartfelt reaction to what I created for her, it makes every long hour and stressful moment completely worth it,” Kristin said. “I truly live for those moments.”

As **Couture Florals & Events** continues to grow, Kristin hopes to keep challenging herself creatively through larger installations, new design opportunities and unforgettable events. Recognition may come, but it has never been the goal.

When asked what she hopes couples remember long after the

flowers have faded, her answer is simple. “I want them to remember the experience,” she said. “If they look back on their wedding day and remember feeling completely taken care of and genuinely wowed by the end result, then I know we’ve done our job well.”

Having recently entrusted my own wedding to **Couture Florals & Events**, I left our interview with an even greater appreciation for what happens behind the scenes. The flowers were stunning. The designs were memorable. But what stayed with me most was exactly what Kristin hopes every client remembers: the feeling.

Long after the bouquets have faded and the candles have been extinguished, the memories remain. For Kristin, flowers are the medium, but creating lasting memories is the true art.

Natural Harmony: Music and the Beach

The rhythm of ocean waves, the warmth of the sun, and the gentle breeze rolling across the shoreline create a peaceful setting unlike any other. For many people, a beach vacation is more than a getaway, it is a chance to rest, reflect, and reconnect with themselves. Music often becomes the perfect companion during these moments, offering comfort, joy, and inspiration while lifting the spirit in ways words alone cannot describe.

Music and the beach share a natural harmony. The steady crash of waves resembles a calming rhythm, almost like nature's own melody. When

of sandy beaches, salty air, and carefree summer days. A single melody can transport someone back to a family vacation, a romantic sunset walk, or laughter shared with friends around a beach bonfire. Dancing and just having fun. In this way, music becomes part of the memory itself, preserving emotions that might otherwise fade with time.

For many vacationers, music provides healing and renewal. Modern life can be busy and overwhelming, filled with schedules, noise, and constant distractions. The beach naturally slows life down and music helps complete that experience. Listening

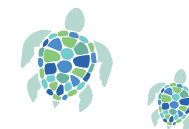
together, music and the beach create a powerful combination that comforts the heart and lifts the spirit.

In the end, a beach vacation is not only about escaping routine; it is about renewing the soul. Music becomes the soundtrack to that renewal, soothing worries, inspiring happiness, and

helping people treasure each moment beside the sea.

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favorite songs blend with the sounds of the sea, stress begins to fade away. Whether someone is listening through headphones while walking along the shoreline or hearing live soft acoustic music from a beachside café, music has the power to deepen feelings of peace and relaxation.

One reason music is so comforting during a beach vacation is because it connects deeply with emotions. Gentle melodies and uplifting lyrics can calm anxious thoughts and help people feel fully present in the moment. Live instrumental music, reggae rhythms, acoustic guitar songs, or tropical tunes often create feelings of warmth and freedom. As the sun sets over the water, music can turn an ordinary evening into a meaningful memory filled with gratitude and serenity.

Music also strengthens the emotional connection people feel with special places. Years later, hearing a certain song can instantly bring back memories

to soothing songs while watching waves roll onto the shore can quiet the mind and refresh the soul. It creates space to think clearly, dream again, and appreciate life's simple blessings.

Music can also energize and inspire beach adventures. Upbeat songs played during a morning jog on the sand or while paddleboarding across the water can fill people with motivation and happiness. Families dancing together near the shoreline or friends singing along during a sunset cruise often discover that music brings people closer together. It encourages laughter, movement, and shared joy that becomes part of the vacation experience.

Perhaps most importantly, music reminds people to feel deeply. The beach already awakens the senses with beautiful scenery and the endless motion of the ocean. Music adds another emotional layer, turning peaceful moments into unforgettable experiences. To-



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People Of South Walton

Sowing Seeds on the Emerald Coast: Chris Howse Brings a Mission to South Walton

By HEATHER BENNETT EYE

Some people find their way to South Walton by chance. For Chris Howse, it was love, though, he'd be the first to tell you it took a little faith to get here.

His wife, Jessica, put down roots in South Walton four years ago, building a career as a property manager, quickly becoming part of the fabric of the local community. Chris, meanwhile, was living in North Carolina. The two met through a dating app run by their church. Both are devout members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and marrying within their faith was important to them. Jessica asked him to come visit her, and a cross-country courtship later, he made the move south. He's now called South Walton home for the last year and a half. The two married in September, and are now expecting their first child, a baby boy.

Working remotely has allowed Chris the freedom to work

from anywhere, so he found the transition to South Walton easy. In his fundraising role, he works with high-net-worth donors, over the phone or by Zoom, flying out as needed. He also found he enjoys the likeminded people in our community. "It's super pro-liberty, pro-America here," said Chris. "I'm not used to that, and so it was just all too nice."

Earning a degree in Political Science from Brigham Young University, Chris has spent his career in civic engagement. For several years he worked as a field representative for Turning Point USA, traveling to college campuses across the country to promote free markets, constitutional principles, and active citizenship. In that role, he organized large events featuring nationally recognized voices like Charlie Kirk. Chris also organized a major pro-life event in Michigan in the lead-up to a statewide abortion referendum.

Today, Chris channels that same energy into children's

education and development. He fundraises for the Libertas Network, which oversees the widely known Tuttle Twins educational series. The books are used by homeschooling families and found in hundreds of schools and libraries across the country, introducing children to concepts like entrepreneurship, financial literacy, inflation, personal responsibility, civics, and American history.

"The Tuttle Twins gives us a chance to take back control of the education system and have millions of new children have their minds, which are still malleable as clay, believing in free markets, America and liberty, at a much younger age," stated Chris. "I'm passionate about helping equip the next generation."

Chris also fundraises for the Children's Entrepreneur Market program, an initiative that gives kids the chance to launch real small businesses in community event settings. "We partner with community events like

fairs and carnivals, downtown annual events that already have all of the traffic, and that way the kids get hundreds, if not thousands, of organic customers, and that's where all of the learning takes place," said Chris. "They're learning supply and demand, marketing, self-confidence, and work ethic all at once."

For Chris and Jessica, South Walton is now considered home, and as they prepare for the arrival of their son, and continue building their lives along the Emerald Coast, they're investing in the community around them. Chris is looking to get involved in local politics, and public speaking engagements with the local schools to give presentations on the Tuttle Twins and civics.



You can connect with Chris on LinkedIn at: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/chris-howse27/>. If you'd like to know more about Libertas, the Tuttle Twins, and the Kid's Market, please visit their website at: <https://libertas.org>.



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Mr. Nick Azzarita Wins HVAC From A Superior Mechanical

BY MARTA ROSE THORPE

A Superior Mechanical recently held its inaugural Veterans & First Responders Appreciation Lunch in Okaloosa County. “We were blown away by the attendance of Veterans from every branch and local First Responders,” shared Jimmy Thorpe, founder of this 24-year-old, veteran-owned business. The HVAC winner, Mr. Nick Azzarita, served 20 years in the US Air Force in the Korean War and in Vietnam. The following 20 years, he served as a math teacher



at Niceville High School. “To say this gentleman is humble is an understatement,” shared event organizer Marta Thorpe. “There couldn’t have been a nicer human being to win this.”

Thank you to event sponsors: Beachworx, Chelco, Blanken Financial Management, NHance Cabinet Makeovers, United Community Bank, One Beach Real Estate specializing in Homes For Heroes, Randy Wise Homes, Gulf Coast State College VBOC, and Okaloosa Vet Center. Also present at the event was the Chamber Choir

from Rocky Bayou Christian School, the Niceville High School ROTC, and a beautiful invocation by Pastor Dave Butler. “Big thanks to Jeff and Christi at the Niceville Community Center,” added Marta.

Save the date for the next Appreciation Lunch: Tuesday, October 20, 2026. For information on sponsoring, contact Marta Thorpe at (850) 814-3822. For general information visit us at ASuperiorMechanical.com.



Leadership Walton Class Leaves Lasting Impact at Westonwood Ranch

There’s a new addition at Westonwood Ranch — and it came with a generous dose of teamwork, compassion and community spirit.

The Walton Area Chamber of Commerce Leadership Walton Class of 2025-26 recently completed its annual class service project in support of Westonwood Ranch, building new goat shelters and climbing perches while also raising \$4,125 to help further the nonprofit’s mission.



Located in Freeport, Westonwood Ranch serves teens and young adults with autism and related developmental differences through a unique farm-based learning environment. The nonprofit offers a full-time day program, equine therapy, after-school activities and summer camps designed to help participants build confidence, independence and important life skills.

For members of Leadership Walton, the project became more than just a class assignment. It was an opportunity to step into hands-on service while

learning firsthand about the impact Westonwood Ranch is making in the lives of local families. “As a class, we are so thankful for the opportunity to make a meaningful community impact while learning more about the incredible work being done at Westonwood Ranch,” said Courtney Blackerby, Leadership Walton class president. “Their mission, heart and dedication to serving others is truly inspiring, and it has been an honor to support such an amazing nonprofit that is making a lasting difference in our community.”

The class spent time con-

structing shelters and play structures for the ranch’s goats — an important part of the ranch environment that helps create engaging, interactive experiences for participants. In addition to the physical improvements, the class presented Westonwood Ranch with a donation check totaling \$4,125.

Each year, Leadership Walton participants select a local

nonprofit to support through a collaborative class project. Past projects have included transforming office spaces for A Bed 4 Me and building a study room for the DeFuniak Springs Public Library.

Since 2000, Leadership Walton has helped develop emerging and established leaders across Northwest Florida, connecting professionals with opportunities

to grow their leadership skills while serving our community.

For the Class of 2025-26, the project at Westonwood Ranch reflected exactly what the program hopes to inspire — leadership rooted in service, teamwork and lasting local impact.

For more information, visit www.waltonareachamber.com/leadership-walton.

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