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YOUR COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER
January 2026
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22 YEARS Osprey Observer Your Community Newspaper POSITIVE NEWS
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YEAR IN REVIEW
Pages 30-34

CELEBRATING 24 YEARS OF PUBLISHING POSITIVE COMMUNITY NEWS

NEWSOME TAKES HOME BEST MARCHING BAND IN 2ND PARADE OF LIGHTS

By Brian Bokor



Hope for Her and PCAT each received $5,000 from the proceeds of the 2nd Brandon Parade of Lights.

The Brandon Parade of Lights wrapped up its second year with a celebration and awards ceremony held Thursday, December 18, at The Regent in Riverview, recognizing parade participants, volunteers and community partners following another successful holiday event.



The annual parade drew an estimated 10,000 spectators along its route and featured 2,861 participants representing 115 floats, underscoring the rapid growth of the event in just its second year.

Melissa Canfield, parade chairperson, used the ceremony to put those numbers into perspective.

"2,861. What is that? That is the amount of participants that we had this year in the parade," Canfield said. "What does that consist of? 112 floats."

"Those entries included the parade's grand marshal, *10 Tampa Bay News* anchor Caitlin Lockerbie, along with five local high school marching bands, five local Gasparilla krewes, 38 local businesses and 24 local nonprofit organizations. Participation also extended to the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, Hillsborough County Fire Department, county commissioners, school board members — including the superintendent — as well as local officials, beauty queens, dance studios and youth teams. The parade also featured holiday favorites, including, of course, Santa and Mrs. Claus."

Reflecting on the scope of the event, Canfield added, "It's absolutely amazing how many people were involved in this."

Led by grand marshal Caitlin Lockerbie of *10 Tampa Bay News*, the parade traveled from South Lakewood Drive along Oakfield Drive, crossing Kings Avenue and ending at Vonderburg Drive. High school marching bands from Armwood, Bloomingdale, Brandon, Newsome and Riverview helped set the tone, while thousands of spectators lined the route to watch floats from businesses, nonprofits, performance groups and community organizations.

Awards were a major focus of the evening,

Story continued on Page 19

LITHIA BOY SCOUT TROOP 665 HONORS VETERANS AT BAY PINES CEMETERY

By Olivia Clark

Troop 665 of Lithia participated in the annual Wreaths Across America observance at Bay Pines National Cemetery on Saturday, December 13. Rising before sun,the Boy Scouts dedicated their morning to a powerful ceremony of service and remembrance.



A Scout from Troop 665 stands at attention after placing a wreath in honor of a veteran during the annual ceremony.

Upon arriving, the Scouts assisted with unloading wreaths from Wreaths Across America trucks and arranging boxes throughout the cemetery for volunteers.

Once the event commenced, Troop 665 members spread out across the grounds, placing wreaths at the gravesites of veterans. Each Scout paused to read the veteran's name aloud before standing at attention and rendering a hand salute as a sign of respect.



Participation in the observance has become a longstanding tradition for the troop.

"It is a yearly tradition that the troop does," said Robert Teagle, Scoutmaster, Troop 665. "We sell wreaths as a fundraiser, and it reminds the boys of the service members."

Following the wreath placement, a ceremony was held to honor members of the United States Armed Forces. The Scouts joined members of the Civil Air Patrol in escorting both active duty and retired veterans as wreaths were placed to represent each military branch. The final wreath was laid by the troop's Senior Patrol Leader in honor of prisoners of war and those missing in action.

Bay Pines National Cemetery holds special significance due to its multi-generational history.

"There are veterans buried here from World War I, World War II, Vietnam, and Korea," Teagle stated. "It helps the Scouts understand not only the contributions of our current service members and veterans but also the sacrifices made by their families. This is a multi-generational cemetery."

Troop 665 has been participating in Wreaths Across America for about five years. Teagle mentioned that the experience leaves a lasting impression on the Scouts.

"They come away thankful for the service of the men and women who served," Teagle said. "Bay Pines holds a very strict veteran ceremony, and it gives them perspective."

Teagle said the event reflects the values emphasized within the troop.

"Respect, honor and service are core values we teach," Teagle said. "This experience reinforces the importance of remembering and honoring those who served."

IN THIS ISSUE:

HUSTLE HARD RUNNING.....PG 3
MOTORING TAMPA BAY.....PG 5
FL. STRAWBERRY FEST.....PG 9
STUDENT SUCCESS.....PG 17
EYE ON BUSINESS.....PGS 25

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Congressman Vern Buchanan announced the recipients of the 16th Congressional District Fire and Rescue and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Awards. Sun City Center Emergency Squad received the Dedication and Professionalism Award. See Full Story On Page 26.



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SECOND CHANCES: PET RESOURCES FOUNDATION GIVES EVERY ANIMAL HOPE

By Logan Walz

The Hillsborough County Pet Resources Foundation, an open-admission shelter, continues its mission to care for animals in need through adoption services, volunteer programs and community support initiatives. Board secretary Chelsea Waldeck, CVA, explained, "As an open-admission shelter, we take in every animal that needs help, no matter the breed, age or condition. Our goal is always to give each pet the best chance at a safe and healthy life."



Kilo, a 3-year-old American Staffordshire, was neutered and is ready to go as he waits for his forever home.

The foundation requires adopters to be at least 18 years old and present identification. Upon entering the shelter, visitors speak with customer service staff before touring the kennels. Those interested in a specific dog or cat bring the animal's kennel card to staff, who then provide information and arrange a meet and greet. Animals already spayed or neutered, vaccinated and microchipped are considered ready to go and may be adopted the same day. Pets still awaiting procedures may be preadopted and picked up once their medical care is complete. Stray animals have a required hold period that varies based on whether they arrived with identification.

The Hillsborough Pet Resources Foundation offers a wide range of volunteer opportunities for individuals 16 years or older. Volunteers assist with dog and cat care, customer service, laundry, dishes and the veterinary services department. The shelter's foster program provides additional support options, including daytime outings, weekend sleepovers and longer-term fostering for pets experiencing kennel stress or medical issues. Applications and training are available online.

During the holiday season, donations of blankets help keep animals warm during colder nights, while soft treats, catnip, harnesses, leashes and toys are always useful. Food donations support the shelter's pet food pantry, which assists owners experiencing financial hardship and helps keep pets in their homes. In preparation for kitten season, the shelter collects kitten formula, warming discs, playpens and mother and kitten food.

As an open-admission shelter, the Hillsborough Pet Resources Foundation faces ongoing challenges related to space and capacity. Despite this, it maintains a 94 percent live outcome rate and does not euthanize for space. The shelter's veterinary team provides on-site care, and rescue partners assist with cases needing specialized support. Enrichment programs, playgroups and individualized care plans help animals experiencing stress or behavioral concerns.

One memorable adoption involved Max, a dogo Argentino who struggled medically and behaviorally but ultimately found a successful placement after months of care. Stories like Max's reflect the foundation's dedication to every animal in need.

For more information, visit https://hcprfoundation.org/ or call 813-586-1988.

HOW HUSTLE HARD RUNNING CO HELPS ATHLETES THRIVE

By McKenzie Brown

Hustle Hard Running Co was created based on a simple belief: When athletes are coached the right way, they are capable of doing more than they could ever imagine. For Sarah Sexton, founder and head coach, she believes, "Coaching is what God called me to do. I love helping athletes realize they're capable of more than they think, especially through running, which has a way of building confidence quickly when it's taught well."



The Hustle Hard Running Co athletes are showing us what they are made of, day in and day out.

Running plays a central role in that mission. When taught accurately, it builds confidence quickly, offering athletes clear proof of growth through strength, speed and consistency. Hustle Hard Running Co was designed to meet athletes exactly where they are, whether they're brand-new to running or ready to compete. The goal has always been to create a youth-centered environment with multiple entry points: beginner run clubs, competitive track teams, small-group speed training and individualized coaching.

With 19 years of experience in coaching youth and high school athletes, Sexton brings a broad background in track and field, cross country, multisport speed development and youth soccer. Her coaching philosophy is grounded in long-term athlete development, healthy movement patterns and age-appropriate training that prioritizes both performance and well-being. Supported by certifications through USATF, RRCA, NFHS, CPR/AED and yoga, her approach blends science, experience and care. She loves what she does and does it with passion.

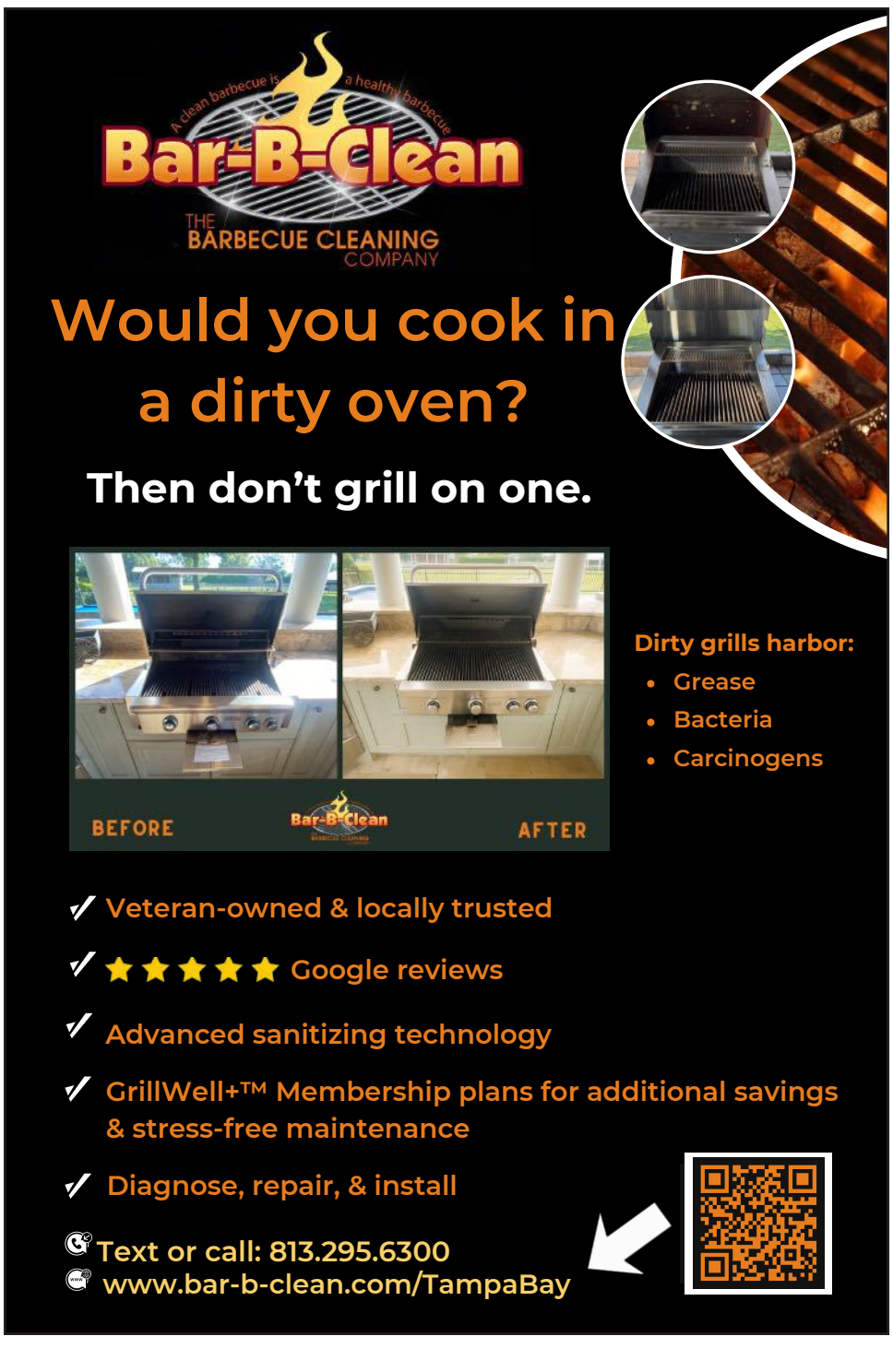
Sexton said, "I started Hustle Hard Running Co to create a youth-centered running environment where athletes could find the right entry point for them, whether that's a beginner run club, a competitive track team, small-group speed training or individualized coaching. Our track program begins in January, and watching athletes discover their strengths, commit to the process and grow into confident runners and competitors is what makes me stay."

What sets Hustle Hard Running Co apart is its commitment to proven systems. Training is intentional and purposeful, focused on helping athletes become stronger, faster and more confident — without shortcuts, gimmicks or unnecessary hype. Every program emphasizes sound mechanics, smart progression and consistency over time.

Athletes train through three core formats. Private one-on-one coaching offers fully customized sessions for targeted development. Small-group speed and agility training combines individualized feedback with a motivating, competitive atmosphere. The track and field program, which begins each January, provides both competitive and beginner pathways, allowing athletes to grow into confident runners and teammates at their own pace.

Contact the Sexton at 744-571-0093 or email hustlehardrunningco@gmail.com.





ZOOTAMPA IS 'FUREVER' HOME FOR TWO RESCUED RED FOXES

Staff Report

ZooTampa at Lowry Park is a little fuzzier now as two rescued red foxes settle into their new forever home at the zoo.

The foxes, named Sadie and Seth, were among over 250 animals saved from deplorable conditions at the Grand River Fur Exchange in Ashtabula County, Ohio, earlier in 2025. The Humane Society of the United States led the rescue operation after the facility's owner passed away, leaving the animals in dire circumstances.



Sadie



Seth

Upon arrival in November, Sadie and Seth underwent comprehensive health evaluations and a quarantine period under the supervision of the zoo's Animal Health and Animal Care teams. The zoo's Florida team spent time daily with the duo, establishing a relationship with both. Seth, the male, exhibits a classic reddish coat, while Sadie, the female, has a pearl-colored coat, giving her a striking black appearance.

The playful pair have since been introduced to their new habitat in the Florida Wilds area of the zoo, adjacent to the Roaring Springs ride. They have been observed actively exploring their surroundings and engaging playfully with each other.

"Both Sadie and Seth are healthy and adjusting well to their new environment," said Chris Massaro, senior vice president and chief zoological officer at ZooTampa. "We are committed to providing a safe and enriching home for these animals, especially after the traumatic experiences they endured."

Red foxes are known for their acute hearing, capable of detecting high-frequency sounds even underground, which aids in hunting small prey, such as rabbits and rodents. They employ a hunting technique that involves crouching low to blend with their surroundings before leaping to capture their target.

SHINE BRIGHT GALA LAUNCHES NEW CHAPTER FOR CONFIDENCE & LEADERSHIP FOUNDATION

By McKenzie Brown



The Confidence & Leadership Foundation, a local 501(c)(3) nonprofit located in Lithia that is dedicated to empowering young people through self-confidence and leadership programs, hosted its first annual Shine Bright Gala at River Hills Country Club in November. Nearly 100 guests attended, and the evening exceeded fundraising expectations, ensuring more programs for local youth in the coming year.



Founded under the Girls & Boys With Confidence umbrella, the foundation offers free confidence-building workshops, scholarships and leadership programs to students in Title I schools and underserved communities.

"Our goal has always been to make confidence and leadership training accessible to every child — no matter their circumstances," said Nancy Lemon, founder of the Confidence & Leadership Foundation.

Susan Giffin, president of the foundation, added, "Seeing our community show up and give so generously was incredibly moving. It proves that people believe in investing in the next generation of leaders."

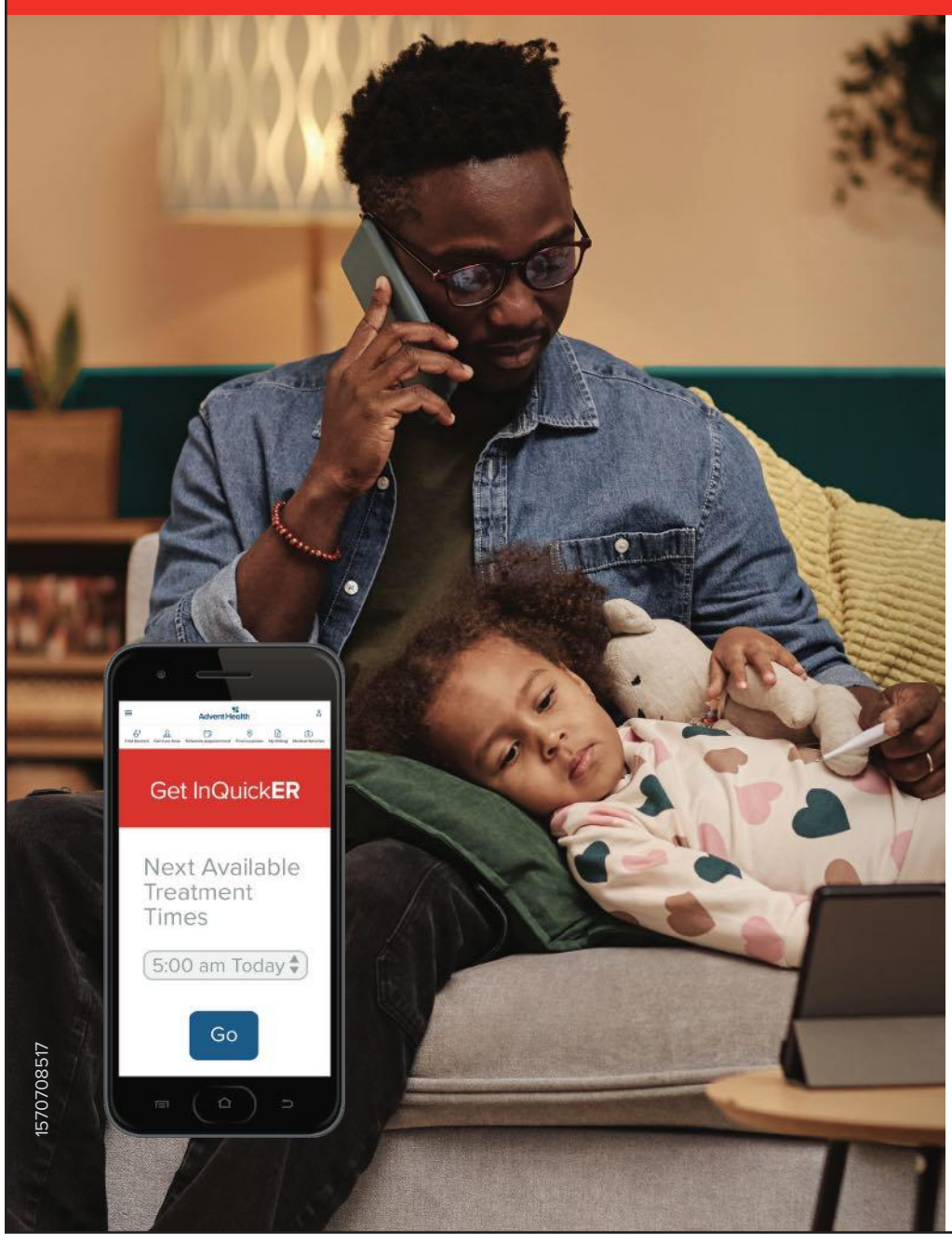
The gala featured dinner, music, live auctions and meaningful conversations between guests, board members and young participants whose lives have been touched by the foundation's programs. The event's success will directly support expanding free programming in local schools, helping even more children discover their potential.

Plans are already underway for next year's Shine Bright Gala, promising an even larger and more inspiring evening. Meanwhile, the foundation's next community event, 'Ladies Giving Back,' is scheduled for April 23, 2026, at their camp location (10540 Browning Rd. in Lithia), inviting local women to connect, give back and celebrate community. Registration details are available on their website.

At its heart, the Confidence & Leadership Foundation is on a simple mission: to help every young person build self-confidence, cultivate positive character and uncover their leadership potential.

For more information, to volunteer or to support the Foundation's programs, visit www.girlswithconfidence.com/confidence_leadership_foundation.

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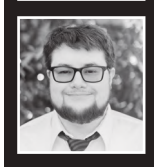
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MANAGING EDITOR
Marie Gilmore
813-657-2418
editor@ospreyobserver.com



BILLING MANAGER
Terry Vassalotti
813-657-2418
terry@ospreyobserver.com



NEWS REPORTER
Taylor Wells
813-657-2418
twells@ospreyobserver.com



DELIVERY MANAGER
Bill Andrew
813-657-2418
bandrew@ospreyobserver.com



ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR
Libby Hopkins
813-657-2418
libby@ospreyobserver.com



CUSTOMER SERVICE
Jenny Bennett
813-657-2418
jbennett@ospreyobserver.com

GRAPHICS MANAGER - **Kathi Hayes** - *khayes@ospreyobserver.com*

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SPLENDID TX 500h F SPORT FITS NICELY IN THE LEXUS LINEUP

By Nitish Rele



The extended-body Lexus RX-L may have been consigned to the dustbin of history, but its replacement, TX, has been making waves since its debut last year. Larger and bigger in all respects than its predecessor, our TX 500h F Sport version was packed with all the luxury and tech accoutrements expected of a high-end SUV from the upmarket division of the Japanese carmaker.

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Under the hood of the massive TX hybrid with its unique DIRECT4 all-wheel drive (which provides immediate electric control for all four wheels) sits a 2.4-liter inline four-cylinder turbo engine blasting off 366 horsepower and 406 pounds-feet of torque. Two electric motors in front and rear along with a 1.4-kWh capacity nickel-metal hydride battery enable substantial fuel savings. Getting power to the ground is a slick-shifting, six-speed auto gearbox. An independent MacPherson strut front and multilink rear suspension soaks obstacles with proficiency, sure-footedness and confidence. The electric power steering is precise and linear, conveying exactly what the Lexus is doing at all times. Behind the wheels hide large brake disc rotors, 15.7 inches at the front and 13.3 inches at the rear. Apart from normal, there are eco, sport and custom modes. Looking to haul a sailboat or some other cargo? No worries, you can tow up to 5,000 pounds. And it is suitably quick, sprints from 0 to 60 mph in 6.1 seconds and tops out at 112 mph.

A colossal Lexus unified spindle grille links up with reverse L-shaped bi-LED headlamps and the edge of the hood to portray a robust appearance. The 149-cubic-foot passenger capacity cabin is cozy with plenty of head and leg room space for five adults. In front of the driver sits a 12.3-inch digital gauge cluster, while infotainment controls can be managed via a 14-inch touch screen display positioned above the dashboard. The driver and front passenger are cocooned by supportive 10-way power heated/cooled seats. The same features are shared by the second-row captain's chairs, while the third-row seat folds flat via lever in the cargo hold. Square cup holders throughout the cabin carry a distinct look.

Included are dual front airbags, side curtain airbags, front knee airbags, four-wheel antilock brakes, stability and traction controls, a panoramic view monitor, blind-spot and rear cross-traffic alerts, smart-stop technology, front/rear parking assists, daytime running lights and a tire pressure monitoring system. Also at no extra cost is the Lexus Safety Sense 3.0, a pre-collision system to detect pedestrians; lane departure alert with steer assist; smart beam headlamps; and dynamic cruise control.

As you become more familiar with the boxy body of the TX, you realize that this superb blend of power and sophistication is a fitting substitute for the now-forgotten RX-L. You would be smart to check it out if you are looking to buy an extravagant SUV packed with tech-laden traits.

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CUB SCOUT PACK 637: 30 YEARS OF SCOUTING, SERVICE AND SHAPING TOMORROW'S LEADERS IN LITHIA

Staff Report



As February brings the spirit of Scouting Anniversary Month, the Lithia community celebrates a milestone in local youth development. Cub Scout Pack 637, serving families in the FishHawk and Lithia area since 1995, marks its 30th year of inspiring young minds through leadership, outdoor adventure and community service. For three decades, the pack has helped shape confident, capable and compassionate youth.

Scouting Anniversary Month commemorates the founding of the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) on February 8, 1910. Packs and troops nationwide reflect on the organization's mission to prepare young people for life, with observances such as Scout Sunday, Scout Sabbath and Scout Jumu'ah honoring faith traditions that strengthen Scouting's moral foundation.

Since 2004, Pack 637 has offered Cub Scouting programs for boys and girls from kindergarten through fifth grade, teaching essential life skills, encouraging outdoor exploration and fostering leadership.

"We in Pack 637 strive to develop the next generation of leaders through our fun and engaging program where we instill the values found in the Scout Oath and Scout Law," said Alex Perschall, Cubmaster of Pack 637. "We do this through a robust outdoor program, service to the community and skill development, like first aid and knot tying. We welcome all elementary-aged children and their families to join us in finding their next adventure."

The pack's activities are grounded in the Scout Oath and Law, emphasizing duty to God and country, helping others and striving to remain physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight.

"Our goal as Scout leaders and parents is to create lifelong memories, values and experiences that ripple beyond our pack to strengthen the entire community," said Kurt Gardner, pack committee chair. "By focusing on delivering the best program for the most Scouts, we make the most of every parent's limited time to turn those opportunities into lasting impact."

Over the years, Pack 637 Scouts have contributed countless hours to community service, including food drives, veteran memorial ceremonies, environmental cleanups and park beautification projects.

"Scouting is about service before self," Perschall explained. "When our scouts put others first — whether by helping a neighbor, cleaning a trail or simply being kind — they learn that real leadership begins with giving back."

"For our family, Scouting has been transformative," said parent Rayan Elajouz,

To learn more about joining Cub Scout Pack 637, visit www.facebook.com/fhpack637.

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EARLY EXPLORERS PRESCHOOL ENTERS NEW CHAPTER UNDER NEW OWNERSHIP IN VALRICO

By Logan Walz



Early Explorers Preschool in Valrico is entering a new phase of growth and enhancement under its new ownership. The school is focused on strengthening its classroom quality and creating an improved educational experience for both students and families.

Early Explorers offers full-time care and early learning programs for children ages 6 weeks through 5 years, including infants, toddlers, preschool and VPK. The preschool provides free VPK and accepts School Readiness, expanding access for local families. In addition to early childhood programs, the school offers before and after-school care, as well as break camps for school-age children. Its before and after-school program currently serves Valrico, Buckhorn and Brooker elementary schools.

Located in a quiet and safe residential neighborhood at 1520 Brentwood Hills Blvd. in Valrico, Early Explorers provides a comfortable and welcoming setting for young learners. The preschool's staff is composed of experienced teachers and caregivers who have spent many years supporting early childhood development. Early Explorers is also enrolled in the Child Care Food Program and the Hillsborough Infant & Toddler Initiative, reflecting its commitment to high-quality nutrition and developmental support.

Under its new ownership, the school's primary goal is to elevate its quality across every area of operation. This includes enhanced classroom environments, strengthened instructional practices and an increased focus on family engagement and student success. The preschool aims to continue building a positive and consistent learning atmosphere where children can grow academically, socially and emotionally.

Early Explorers is currently accepting new students. Families are welcome to schedule a tour to learn more about the programs, meet the staff and see the classrooms firsthand.

For more information or to set up an appointment, call 813-684-1622.

FISHHAWK SPARTANS YOUTH PROGRAM CONTINUES TO GROW ON AND OFF THE FIELD

By Olivia Clark



Phil Wallace, FishHawk Spartans track and field coach, with an athlete after a successful meet.

FishHawk Spartans continues to grow as a youth sports organization serving boys in FishHawk, Lithia and surrounding communities through tackle football, '300 Boyz' 7v7 football and a track and field club. The program is based at the FishHawk Sports Complex and draws athletes from across Central Florida, according to Danielle Plumstead, operations manager.

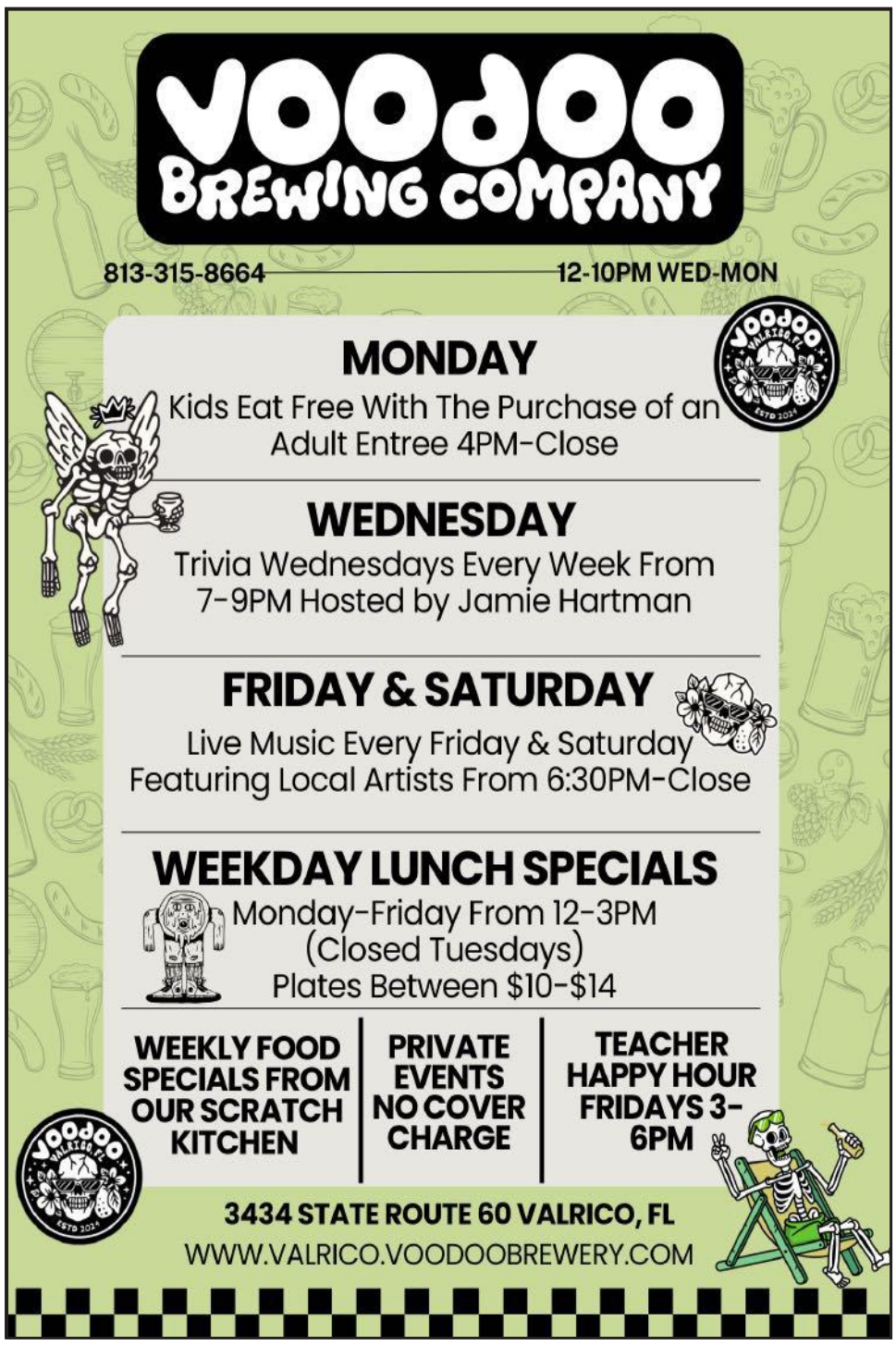
Plumstead said 290 athletes registered for Sunday tryouts, reflecting continued interest in the program and its development-focused approach. FishHawk Spartans was founded by Christian Beiter, who started the organization to create opportunities for local youth. Program leaders also work to ensure a family's financial situation does not prevent a child from participating, and the organization continues seeking community sponsors to support athletes.

For football and 7v7, FishHawk Spartans primarily serves boys in age divisions from 8U through 18U. The 300 Boyz 7v7 program is a competitive option with tryouts and tournament play, with an estimated 140-150 athletes participating. Practices are held at the FishHawk Sports Complex on Monday and Wednesday, beginning on January 5, 2026.

FishHawk Spartans' track and field club, coached by Phil Wallace, provides training and competition for athletes, including younger participants. Plumstead said the track program had 35 athletes in 2025 and is expected to double that this season. Conditioning begins in November 2026 and is offered at no cost for athletes who want to try it before the official season begins in January. The first meet is scheduled for March 2026. Wallace also offers a $100 conditioning option for athletes who want training support for other sports without competing in meets.

The organization has also celebrated on-field success. During the tackle season, five teams reached the playoffs, four advanced to Super Bowls and two won championships. In track, six athletes qualified for the Junior Olympics in Houston, Texas, with two finishing in the top eight to earn All-American honors.

For additional information about FishHawk Spartans programs, contact Plumstead by email at 08dmmoss@gmail.com, visit www.fishhawkspartans.com or follow FishHawk Spartans on Facebook and Instagram.





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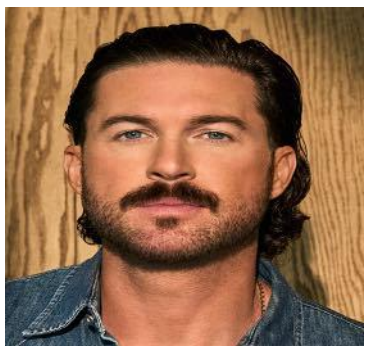
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JOAN JETT, ALABAMA AND DIERKS BENTLEY HEADLINE A 'STILL GROWING' FLORIDA STRAWBERRY FESTIVAL IN 2026

Staff Report









The Florida Strawberry Festival® is turning up the volume for its 91st year, unveiling a star-studded entertainment lineup that reflects the event's 2026 theme, "Still Growing." From country legends and rock icons to chart-topping Christian artists and R&B superstars, BerryFest26 promises one of the most dynamic musical offerings in Festival history.

Headlining the Wish Farms Soundstage are major crowd favorites including Alabama, Dierks Bentley, Brantley Gilbert, Riley Green, The Offspring, Joan Jett & The Blackhearts, and the powerhouse R&B collaboration Legends of Love featuring Brian McKnight, Ginuwine and Ruben Studdard. These popular acts highlight how the Festival continues to grow in scale, reach and entertainment appeal while staying rooted in its deep agricultural and community traditions.

The theme "Still Growing" reflects the Festival's ongoing evolution — from record-setting attendance and expanding attractions to continued celebration of Plant City's iconic strawberry industry. That growth is evident in both the diversity and caliber of this year's performers, offering something for every generation of Festival-goers.

"As we unveil our headline entertainment for BerryFest26, I am beyond excited to say this year's theme perfectly captures the energy and anticipation surrounding our incredible lineup," said Florida Strawberry Festival® President Kyle Robinson.

"With such amazing performances in store, this year's Festival is sure to be one for the books.

We've worked hard to create an event that celebrates not just our community's love for strawberries, but also our shared passion for music, fun, and tradition. Get ready- 'The Stage Is Set!,' and we can't wait to see you there!"



Among the most anticipated performances is Joan Jett & The Blackhearts, who will deliver the Festival's closing-night concert on March 8, 2026. Known for timeless hits including "I Love Rock 'n' Roll," "Bad Reputation," and "Crimson and Clover," Jett will cap off BerryFest26 with a high-energy finale.

Another standout is Legends of Love, bringing together the smooth vocals and chart-topping careers of Brian McKnight, Ginuwine and Ruben Studdard for a soulful R&B showcase that adds fresh range and star power to the lineup.

"Announcing both Legends of Love and Joan Jett is truly special for us," said Florida Strawberry Festival President Kyle Robinson. "These artists bring two distinct musical experiences, yet both deliver the kind of talent and excitement our guests love. Legends of Love adds a soulful new dimension to the lineup, and Joan Jett closing out the Festival ensures an unforgettable finale. We're thrilled to welcome them both to BerryFest26."

Advance tickets for gate admission and headline entertainment are available online, through the Festival's mobile app, by phone at 813-754-1996, or in person at the Amscot Main Ticket Office located at 2209 W. Oak Avenue in Plant City. Tickets can also be purchased at www.flstrawberryfestival.com

The 2026 Florida Strawberry Festival will take place February 26 through March 8 in Plant City. The 11-day community celebration draws more than 600,000 visitors annually, featuring headline entertainment, youth livestock shows, commercial exhibits and its famous strawberry shortcake — a tradition more than nine decades strong and, true to its theme, still growing.

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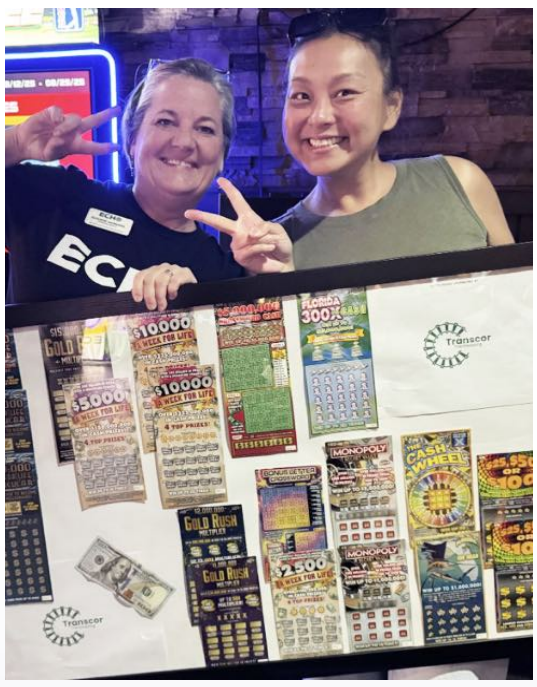
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MUSIC BINGO FUNDRAISER WILL SUPPORT EMERGENCY SUPPORT PROGRAMS THROUGH ECHO

By Lily Belcher



Voodoo Brewing Co. is hosting a music bingo night fundraiser for a good cause: to help ECHO support the community.

On February 10, the Valrico brewery will open its doors to customers, bingo fans and generous community members to help drum up support for the Emergency Care Help Organization, or ECHO.

ECHO, which was founded in 1987, helps neighbors going through food insecurity or those who need clothing or are looking for a new job. The organization is planning to open its third resource center in Thonotosassa at the end of 2026 or early 2027.

Kayla Vincent is the marketing coordinator with ECHO. She said the goal is to raise as much money as possible and get support from the community for the non profit's programs.

"[The money raised] will be distributed between our food, clothing and job coaches for our back to work program," Vincent said. "So it'll get distributed a little bit everywhere."

ECHO's food pantry and clothing rooms service the Brandon and Riverview areas. People who are in a crisis situation can get temporary help from the locations. The one-on-one job coaching is another opportunity for the community to access local resources, including assessing skills, resume help and learning interview skills.

All of ECHO's services are offered to members of the community who are in need for free and the group aims to reach people across Eastern Hillsborough County.

This is the organization's second time hosting a music bingo fundraiser at Voodoo Brewing Co. They had their first music bingo event in November 2025 and hope to host the fundraiser twice a year.

"We have a lot of need in our community and we need to rile the troops and help our neighbors in this time of need," Vincent said.

Music bingo will span across genres and decades and include some live tunes.

Tickets can be bought in advance.

The doors will open at 6 pm for music bingo and the first game will start at 7 pm.

Voodoo Brewing Co. is located off Highway 60 in Valrico. For more information about ECHO or its music bingo fundraiser, call 813-856-7232.

LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL: MARDI GRAS 2026 SET FOR BUSCH GARDENS TAMPA BAY

Staff Report



Busch Gardens Tampa Bay will once again transform into a slice of New Orleans as its popular Mardi Gras celebration returns in 2026, running on select dates from January 24 through March 1.

Included with regular park admission, the seasonal event invites guests to let the good times roll with Cajun-inspired cuisine, festive parades, live music and family-friendly entertainment woven throughout the park. The celebration is part of Busch Gardens' broader 2026 lineup of special events, offering visitors another reason to plan a winter or early spring visit.

Food takes center stage during Mardi Gras, with themed culinary offerings inspired by the flavors of the French Quarter. Guests can enjoy classic favorites such as Po' Boys, Étouffée and King Cake Beignets, along with specialty cocktails crafted exclusively for the event. Food and beverage sampler lanyards are typically available for purchase, allowing visitors to sample multiple dishes and drinks throughout the day.

Entertainment adds to the festive atmosphere, featuring Mardi Gras-style parades with colorful floats, lively characters and strings of beads tossed to cheering crowds. Live bands and musicians perform throughout the event dates, bringing authentic sounds that capture the spirit of the celebration.

Families visiting during the early weeks of the festival can also take advantage of Kids' Weekends, scheduled from January 24 through February 8. These weekends include additional family-focused activities and appearances by popular Sesame Street characters, making the event accessible and engaging for guests of all ages.

Busch Gardens encourages visitors to check the park's official website as the event approaches to confirm specific dates, hours and entertainment schedules, as offerings may vary by day.

Beyond Mardi Gras, Busch Gardens Tampa Bay continues to stand out as one of Florida's premier theme parks, combining world-class thrill rides, award-winning roller coasters and one of North America's largest zoos, home to more than 200 animal species. From adrenaline-pumping attractions like Iron Gwazi and Cheetah Hunt® to immersive animal encounters and seasonal favorites such as Howl-O-Scream® and Christmas Town™, the park offers something new with every visit.

With food, music and celebration included with admission, Mardi Gras 2026 promises to be a highlight of the season at Busch Gardens Tampa Bay.

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BUCHANAN HONORS 19 VETERANS WITH CONGRESSIONAL COMMENDATION

Staff Report



In December, Congressman Vern Buchanan announced the honorees of the 3rd Annual Congressional Veteran Commendation ceremony. Buchanan established the awards to honor the wartime sacrifices and peacetime community involvement of veterans residing in Florida's 16th Congressional District which is home to more than 64,000 Veterans.

"I established these awards to recognize our local heroes who have valiantly served both our country in uniform and our community," said Buchanan. "While we will never be able to fully repay the honorees for their selfless sacrifices, I hope the Congressional Veteran Commendation helps express how grateful our community truly is for their service."

Buchanan has a strong record of fighting for veterans and military families. In December 2021, a Buchanan measure to reduce military training accidents following the death of Bradenton soldier Nicolas Panipinto was enacted into law. In February 2025, Buchanan introduced the Veterans Mental Health Crisis Referral Enhancement Act (H.R. 1290), which directs the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a three-year pilot program to refer veterans experiencing mental health crises to approved non-Veterans Affairs mental health care providers, ensuring timely access to competent care. Buchanan also reintroduced the Veterans Overmedication and Suicide Prevention Act (H.R. 136) this Congress, which requires the VA to study the link between addictive opioids and the alarmingly high rate of suicides among veterans.

An independent panel chose the following 19 veterans for their service:

Nelson Betancourt U.S. Army.
Benny Blackshire U.S. Army-Vietnam
Jeffery Camp U.S. Army & Army National Guard Iraq and Afghanistan Wars
Jack Carter U.S. Marine Corps Vietnam and Gulf Wars
Charles Conover Jr. U.S. Army
Ronald Cousineau U.S. Air Force
Emily Farkas U.S. Air Force Iraq and Afghanistan Wars
Ferris Garrett Jr. U.S. Air Force Vietnam.
William Greer U.S. Air Force
Brian Hammer U.S. Army Iraq and Afghanistan Wars
Nathaniel Hawthorne U.S. Navy Iraq
Roberta Jordan U.S. Army
Robert Lucas II U.S. Army
Danny Melton U.S. Marine Corps
MaryAnn Rowe Michigan Army National Guard Iraq
Richard Steinestel U.S. Navy Vietnam
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Paul Wheat Jr. U.S. Army Vietnam
Edward Wudarsky Jr. U.S. Army Vietnam

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FROM VALRICO ROOTS TO TRUSTED POOL CARE: SWEERS POOL SERVICE DELIVERS QUALITY & DEPENDABILITY

By McKenzie Brown

Sweers Pool Service is a locally owned business dedicated to keeping pools safe, clean, and enjoyable for families throughout Hillsborough County. Founded by Valrico native Alan Sweers, the company is built on the belief that every pool is different—and deserves individualized care based on its specific needs.



Sweers owner Alan Sweers

Serving communities including Lithia, Valrico, Brandon, Riverview, Bloomingdale, and FishHawk, Sweers Pool Service offers reliable weekday service with a strong focus on water safety, consistency, and customer education. Alan and his team work closely with pool owners to help them understand proper pool care, ensuring long-term health of both the pool and the people who use it.

Sweers Pool Service provides a full range of professional maintenance services, including comprehensive water testing to balance pH, chlorine, and alkalinity levels. Regular skimming and vacuuming remove surface debris and clean the pool floor, while brushing walls and steps helps prevent algae buildup and keeps pools looking their best. The team also cleans and inspects filters to maintain optimal circulation, along with routine equipment inspections of pumps and heaters to ensure everything runs efficiently.

Alan Sweers' passion for pool care started early. He began cleaning pools in his early 20s, working in the industry for five years. Pool service was his first job, and it laid the foundation for a strong work ethic and hands-on expertise. After later working as a bartender and server, Alan found himself at a crossroads during the 2020 shutdowns. Looking for a new direction, he returned to what he knew best—pool service—with a renewed purpose.

Determined to serve his community, Alan attended "pool school," earned his certification as a Certified Pool Operator, and officially launched Sweers Pool Service in 2021. Today, his business continues to grow, driven by experience, integrity, and a genuine commitment to quality service. Sweers likes to go by the slogan, "I'm not the cheapest, I'm not the most expensive, but I am the best."

For dependable, knowledgeable pool care, Sweers Pool Service stands by its promise to deliver the best—every pool, every visit. They serve Hillsborough County, Florida with weekday service available. To schedule an appointment, call 813-293-6236 or email them at sweerspoolservice@gmail.com.

ONE HOPE UNITED OPENS FIRST HOPE HOUSE IN RIVERVIEW FOR FLORIDA FOSTER YOUTH

Staff Report

One Hope United proudly announced the opening of its first Hope House in Riverview yesterday, marking the organization's 10th Hope House in Florida and furthering its commitment to providing youth in foster care with the stability and support they deserve. Each home serves four teens aged 13-17, many of whom are high acuity, in a family-like setting that focuses on healing and personal growth.



Representatives of One Hope United celebrate the opening of its 10th house for foster youth in Riverview.

Community members, local partners, and media attended today's open house celebration to tour the new Hope House and meet the team behind this transformative model of care. The event also drew support from Michele Rayner of the Florida House of Representatives; Terri Balliet, CEO of Children's Network of Hillsborough County; and Michael Rogenmoser from Representative Alvarez's office, who were present to recognize the significance of expanding this model of care in Hillsborough County.

"I've worked a lot in the foster care system. My mother was also a social worker, and this was what she cared most about: making sure kids were protected. She believed that even if a child started off with a hand that wasn't so great, they deserved the resources and support to build a better one. When I learned there was a Hope House in Pinellas Park and now in Riverview, I knew I wanted to do anything I could to be helpful," said Michele Rayner, Florida House of Representatives.

Hope Houses stand apart by focusing on:

A true home environment: Caring Hope House foster parents live with the youth, providing the structure and stability of a family setting. Youth care workers—who are closer in age—offer mentorship, academic support, and life skills training.

Therapeutic healing: On-site therapists help youth understand their trauma, identify triggers, and develop healthy coping mechanisms through creative outlets like music, art, and gardening.

Empowerment and future preparation: Teens make meaningful choices about their personal space, goals, and daily lives. They also receive hands-on support in essential skills such as resume building, job applications, and financial literacy.

About One Hope United

One Hope United (OHU) is a nonprofit providing early childhood education, child and family services, behavioral and mental health resources, and residential programs for 130 years. OHU proudly serves over 10,000 children and families each year across Illinois and Florida. Through evidence-based and trauma-informed practices, OHU empowers children and families to see and create a future where, regardless of their past, they can reach their full potential. Learn more at onehopeunited.org

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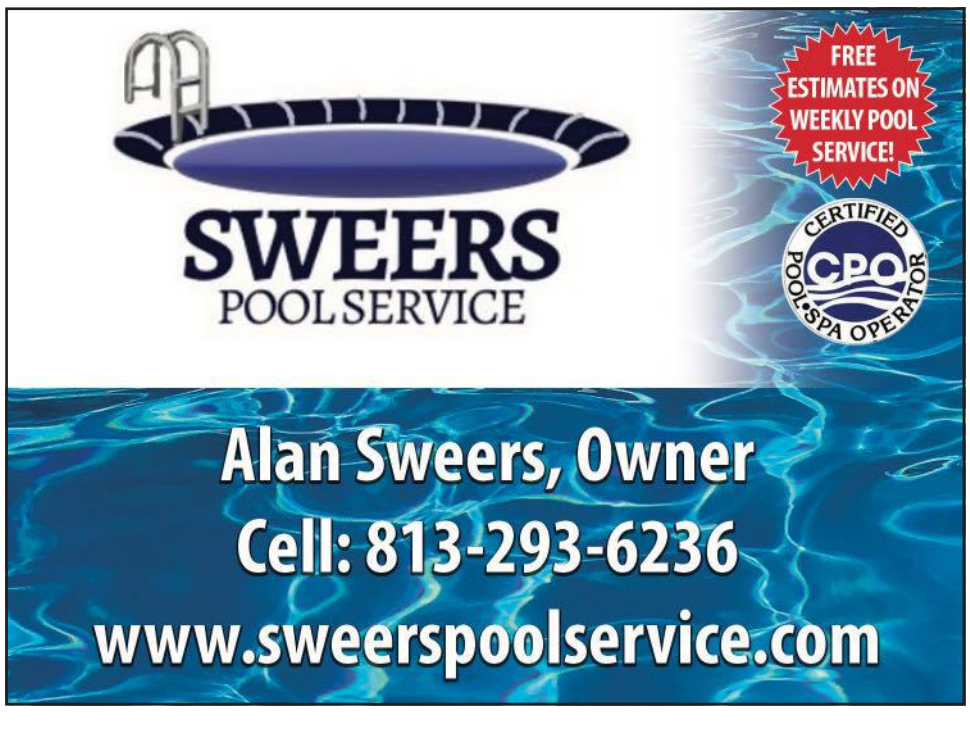


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Four national training trips this year — because growth never stops.
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Trunk or Treat event! We loved celebrating with our community and hope you'll join us again next year for all the fun.



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Every year in May, our team steps away from real estate and steps into service. This year's RED Day brought us to Feeding Tampa Bay—a mission especially meaningful to our team.



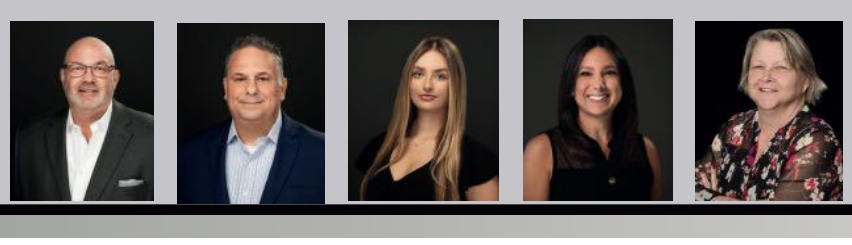
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CARDINAL ROOFING: 30 YEARS OF HONEST, FAMILY-RUN LOCAL COMPANY

By Libby Hopkins

Cardinal Roofing is a roofing contractor company built on customer referrals and an honest work ethic. Its quality craftsmanship and small-town service are at the core of its business, which it has been providing for 30 years.



Cardinal Roofing is a third-generation roofing contractor company built on customer referrals and an honest work ethic. It has been a part of the Brandon community for 30 years.



"We are here to stay, heavily involved in our community and provide our customers with honest, affordable roofing services," said co-owner Bridget Wilson.

Cardinal roofing was started by Wilson's father, Roger, in 1995. He grew up learning roofing from his father, James Harrison Jenkins.

"He learned with his five brothers, who all had at least one son," Wilson said. "My father only had two daughters, and the story goes. When I was born, my mother was worried my dad would be disappointed that as I wasn't a boy. My father's response was, 'There is nothing I can't do with my daughters that my brothers can do with their sons.' My sister and I both proved the point. I am the president of Cardinal Roofing, and my sister has her own medical clinic, Trinity Wellness on Lithia Pinecrest."

Cardinal Roofing started as a second-generation contractor company and is now third generation.

"It's available for my own children, if they wish, but first they have to pursue their own dreams before making the decision if this is the future they want for themselves," Wilson said. "It's the same courtesy my parents gave to me and my sister.

What makes Cardinal Roofing different from other roofing companies in the area is that it is completely transparent with its customers.

"Our price is our price," Wilson said. "We don't do add on pricing to make our prices seem lower than they are."

Cardinal Roofing has been a part of the Brandon community for 30 years.

"We are proud of our business and honest to a fault," Wilson said. "We support our community and invest in our veterans and students of our area. We treat everyone as if they were family and give real advice, and we don't take advantage of anyone. We educate our customers and take the fear out of roofing, which is not common knowledge for most people."

Keeping things local is especially important to Wilson and the team at Cardinal Roofing.

"Our community is the center of my heart," Wilson said. "I do most of my shopping and purchases with local businesses just like mine. Going to The Green Boutique, using JF Kicks for events and just keeping our money within the local area is very important to me."

If you would like to learn more about Cardinal Roofing or its services, you can visit its website at www.cardinalroofingfl.com or call 813-689-7663. Its office is located at 1312 Orangewalk Dr. in Brandon.

LAZYDAYS EMPLOYEE FOUNDATION GIVES $300,000 GIFT TO A KID'S PLACE ACTIVITY CENTER

Staff Report



Representatives from the Lazydays Employee Foundation present $300,000 to A Kid's Place.

A partnership built on compassion, commitment and community reached a milestone this week as A Kid's Place announced a final gift of $300,000 from the Lazydays Employee Foundation, bringing the employees' total support over 16 years to an extraordinary $1.4 million.

A Kid's Place, which opened in 2009 as a unique residential foster care community designed to keep siblings together, has been supported by Lazydays since the project's earliest days. Even before the first home was built, employees of Lazydays RV pledged to sponsor one of the five houses on the campus.

Through voluntary payroll deductions and internal fundraisers, they raised $350,000 to build the Lazydays House, a warm, family-style home that has since sheltered hundreds of brothers and sisters during some of the hardest moments of their young lives.

In November, A Kid's Place leaders gathered with members of the Lazydays Employee Foundation to accept the foundation's final donation — funds that will help complete a new activity center where children will be able to play, learn, gather and heal together. Staff said the gift will help ensure the space becomes a joyful centerpiece on the nonprofit's 5-acre, cul-de-sac-style campus.

In addition to their financial support over the years, Lazydays employees have also delivered snacks, essentials and gifts for the children — another example of the hands-on generosity that has defined the partnership.

During the presentation, Dana Philp, inaugural president of the Lazydays Employee Foundation, shared a quote from Lazydays RV co-founder Don Wallace that captured the emotion of the moment: "To make a rope, it takes a lot of individual strings."

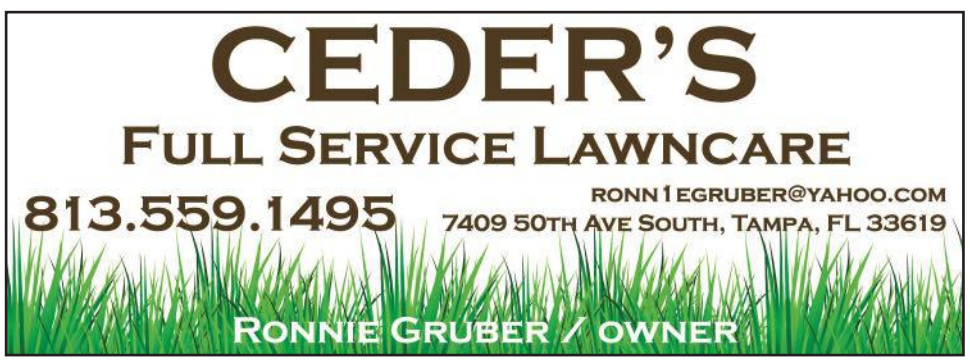
Though Wallace could not attend, his words reflected the spirit of a foundation built entirely by employees — run by volunteers, funded by staff payroll deductions and fueled by a shared desire to change children's lives. Since forming their nonprofit in 2005, Lazydays employees have worked to ensure every dollar raised goes directly toward helping at-risk youth.

Since opening, A Kid's Place has cared for more than 150 abused, neglected and underprivileged children.

For more information about A Kid's Place, visit https://akidsplacetb.org/.









RELAY FOR LIFE RETURNS WITH OVERNIGHT TRIBUTE ON MARCH 7

Staff Report



The American Cancer Society (ACS) has announced that the 2026 Relay For Life of Greater Tampa Bay will return to Raymond James Stadium on Saturday, March 7, from 4 p.m. to 5 a.m., continuing one of the region's most meaningful annual traditions. Ultimate Medical Academy (UMA) has been named the presenting sponsor for the overnight event, which brings together survivors, caregivers, families, schools and businesses in the fight against cancer.

Relay For Life is known as a family-centered, community-driven experience that celebrates cancer survivors, honors caregivers, remembers loved ones and rallies the community to fight back against every cancer. Tampa Bay has emerged as a national leader in the movement, finishing third in the nation last year and earning recognition as the 2025 ACS Southeast Region's Relay For Life Event of the Year for its community impact, volunteer engagement and fundraising success.

The 2025 event demonstrated the strength of local support, with 206 teams, 3,265 participants and more than 100 Tampa Bay-area schools taking part. Together, they raised $632,040 to support survivors, families and lifesaving cancer research. Organizers are now building on that momentum for 2026, with 121 teams already registered, more than 1,000 participants committed and more than $150,000 raised toward a $650,000 goal.

"Relay For Life is where Tampa Bay comes together for hope," said Shelly Hollingsworth, Relay For Life of Greater Tampa Bay Executive Ambassador Chair. "It's not just an event - it's families camping out overnight, students showing up in huge numbers, survivors taking a victory lap, caregivers receiving the recognition they deserve, and an entire community lighting the stadium with luminarias for love and remembrance. We're grateful to Ultimate Medical Academy for stepping forward to help elevate this lifesaving movement across Tampa Bay."

The overnight event will once again feature Relay For Life's four signature elements: a Survivor Celebration, Caregiver Celebration, Luminaria Ceremony and the Fight Back Together call to action.

Ultimate Medical Academy, an accredited nonprofit educational institution focused on training healthcare professionals, said its sponsorship reflects a shared commitment to compassion and service. "We are honored to serve as the Presenting Sponsor for the 2026 Relay For Life of Greater Tampa Bay," said April Neumann, EVP of Workforce Transformation at UMA. "Our learners enter the healthcare field to make a difference in people's lives, and Relay represents that same spirit of compassion and service. We're proud to stand with the American Cancer Society and with every family touched by cancer."

Community members are encouraged to participate by forming teams or registering at relayforlife.org/tampabayfl.





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HIMES BREAKFAST HOUSE LAUNCHES FRANCHISE PROGRAM DESIGNED FOR LIFESTYLE-FRIENDLY OWNERSHIP

Staff Report



Himes Breakfast House, a Florida-born breakfast and brunch concept, celebrated for its made-from-scratch classics and guest-first hospitality, has officially launched its franchise program. The opportunity gives entrepreneurs a chance to bring a proven, profitable model to their communities — and to own a business that works around their lives, not the other way around.

Founded in 2021 by husband-and-wife team John and Jess Christen, Himes has quickly become a go-to destination across the Tampa Bay area for flavorful, Southern-inspired breakfast, brunch and lunch. Built on decades of multiunit restaurant experience, the concept combines operational efficiency, accessible start-up costs and a family-first culture to create an ownership model that prioritizes both profitability and balance.

"Deciding to franchise Himes was inspired by family and opportunity," said co-founder John. "Early in my career, I was given the chance to take over the legacy Shells Seafood brand with the guidance of my parents and their industry peers. That experience shaped me — and now my passion is to create that same path for ambitious entrepreneurs: to give them the tools, guidance and support to build something meaningful."

Himes provides franchisees with an approachable entry into restaurant ownership backed by comprehensive support, from site selection and buildout to training, marketing and ongoing operations. With a streamlined kitchen, limited hours and daytime-only schedule, franchisees benefit from simplified staffing and genuine work-life balance — a rarity in the restaurant world.

"The real secret to Himes isn't just our food — it's our people," said Jess. "We envision our future franchisees as part of the family. With our systems, tools and support, they can build a neighborhood favorite where guests feel welcome and team members feel valued."

As Himes expands throughout Florida and beyond, the brand continues to champion a business model that blends heart, hospitality and opportunity — one plate at a time.

To learn more about franchising opportunities with Himes Breakfast House, visit https://himesfranchise.com/.

Today, Himes operates three locations across the Greater Tampa Bay area, each rooted in community and built on a culture of warmth and connection.

Himes locations operate six days a week from 7 a.m.-2 p.m., offering a streamlined model that prioritizes simplicity, efficiency, and genuine work-life balance.

COMMUNITY SPIRIT SHINES IN BRENDA WADE TEAM'S DAYS OF GRATEFULNESS TRADITION

By Kelly Wise Valdes



Brenda Wade
SIGNATURE REALTY ASSOCIATES

The Brenda Wade Real Estate Team successfully celebrated its annual Days of Gratefulness campaign, a tradition that has grown into a community-wide event highlighting gratitude, generosity and local partnerships.

Brenda Wade is a top-producing real estate agent and the team leader of the Brenda Wade Real Estate Team based in Valrico. According to Wade, the campaign began modestly, partnering with a handful of local businesses. Over the past 12 years, more sponsors joined in, eager to show appreciation to the same community they serve.

"We started small with a few local businesses and found others who reached out to join us in showing gratitude to this great community," said Wade. "It's easy because we have a tightly focused market and our customers are their customers."

The giveaways have become a hallmark of the campaign.

"We have given away so many prizes through the years," said Wade. "We have had schoolteachers, new moms, families and others that are struggling get a boost at Christmas."

To further the excitement, the team added a final day with a larger prize.

"We added the last day as a way to build the anticipation for the final giveaway," said Wade. "It keeps everyone cheering for each other as winners are announced, as they know there is a pot of gold at the end. So fun to be a part of the excitement."

Sponsors play a central role in the campaign, with local businesses: Rumble Boxing FishHawk, Karma Yoga & Fitness, Keel Farms, Burn Boot Camp Brandon, The Stein & Vine, Cold Stone Creamery Valrico, Bullfrog Creek Brewing Co., Toffee to Go, BIN + BOARD, Rick's Custom Meats, The Green Boutique, AR Workshop Brandon, All American Title, Complete Choice Insurance, United Mutual Funding Corp, In The Pink, the Osprey Observer, Raining Berries Brandon, Nothing Bundt Cakes Riverview, Orangetheory Fitness Lithia, Zach's Pressure Washing, RobZFitness and Paradise Parties Co.

"We love all of our sponsors. We are grateful to spotlight them as we give back to our customers and share businesses we love with clients that we appreciate," said Wade. "It's a win all the way around."

"To live, work and play in a community is a blessing. Our business includes my entire family and many close friends. I am so thrilled to have the life that I have and to be able to give back in a community that means so much to me and my entire team," said Wade.

For more information about the Brenda Wade Team, visit https://brendawade.com/ or follow on Facebook @BrendaWadeTeam.

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By Superintendent Van Ayres



A Letter From The SUPERINTENDENT of Hillsborough County Public Schools
Van Ayres

As we begin a new semester and a new year, I'm reminded of what makes Hillsborough County Public Schools strong: the determination of our students, the unwavering dedication of our employees and a community that believes every child deserves an exceptional education.

Across the nation, public education is transforming to open doors to new opportunities for today's students and tomorrow's leaders. Here in Hillsborough County, we see this moment as a chance to innovate, grow and strengthen what we do best, empowering every student to succeed. Through every change, one thing remains unwavering: our commitment to keeping students at the center of all we do.

When I visit campuses, I see so much to be excited about. Classrooms buzzing with creativity. Labs full of handson learning. Career training spaces where students are gaining realworld skills and earning industry credentials. Everywhere I go, students are pushing themselves, lifting one another up and discovering talents they didn't even know they had. And behind them are the incredible teachers, principals and staff who encourage, inspire and support them every single day.

In this school district, we stay grounded in what matters: great instruction, welcoming schools and the supports students need to thrive. We're committed to high expectations and to creating pathways that prepare students for bright futures — whether that's college, a career or military service.

And we're not alone in doing this work. Families, volunteers, mentors, business partners and neighbors across Hillsborough County are stepping up to help students succeed. Their energy and generosity make our schools stronger, and we're grateful for every bit of support they give.

As we look ahead to the new year, I want to thank every student, family and employee for the hard work and heart you have brought to this school year. Together, we will continue moving forward — focused, determined and united around what matters most: student success.

On behalf of Hillsborough County Public Schools, I wish you a happy, healthy and successful new year.

To learn more about the programs, resources and pathways we offer all students, visit www.hillsboroughschools.org.

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LACE UP TO SUPPORT BLOOMINGDALE NINTH ANNUAL RUNNING OF THE BULLS

By Jane Owen

Now is the time to make plans to get a healthy start to 2026! Sign up to run or walk Bloomingdale High School's ninth annual Running of the Bulls 5K on January 17, 2026; you will not only start the year off well, but you will also support the school and students.



The start line. of the 2025 Running of the Bulls.

The Running of the Bulls benefits Bloomingdale High School's band and guard programs and provides two scholarships to Bloomingdale High School seniors.

The outpouring of support from the community, corporate sponsors, alumni, students and school staff is tremendous. Title sponsors for the 2026 event are Acropolis Greek Taverna, Riverview; The Jeep Depot; and Reed & Reed.

Bloomingdale High School counselor Amanda Raschke participates yearly and said the event is more than just a race. It is an unwavering community coming together to support the school and band program.

"The atmosphere is electric, filled with cheering students, our talented drumline and fellow runners who make the entire event exciting. I love that there are several opportunities to see my coworkers, students and friends along the course, where we can high-five, encourage or razz each other along the way," Raschke said.

Band director Jordan Fraze runs the race and is grateful for the direct impact the 5K has on the program. The profit from the 2026 race will be used to replace brass instruments (mellophones and baritones), which can cost between $2,000-$3,000 per instrument.

"I run the 5K because I love the sense of community it brings. It's amazing to run alongside everyone and join those who support the band program at Bloomingdale High School," Fraze said.

Participants can run or walk a 5K or half-mile distance. The 5K starts at 8 a.m., finishes on the track and utilizes the sidewalks, road and parking lots on Bloomingdale's campus. The half-mile is two loops around the track. Bloomingdale's drumline performs. All finishers receive medals. The race is timed by Bay City Timing, and the winners of each age group receive placement medals.

To register, visit https://runsignup.com/race/fl/valrico/runningofthebulls5kfl. For more information, email bloomingdalebulls5k@gmail.com.







PARADE WINNERS....CON'T FROM PAGE 1

By Brian Bokor

recognizing creativity and community spirit among parade participants.

"So, the first category we will present is the most festive floats," said award presenter Dawn Myers. "We considered how unique of a theme this group had, and how wonderfully and beautifully lighting their float was." Amani Med Spa received the Most Festive award.



Parade chair Melissa Canfield presents Ryan Reed of Reed & Reed with a special award.

The Most Original award was presented to Krewe of Girls and Pearls. In presenting the honor, Dawn Myers praised the group's creativity and execution.

"We felt like we had never really even thought about this theme being a Christmas parade, or a Parade of Lights parade. The outfits that their people wore were on point and on theme. And they had almost what looked like a live volcano on their float. So the most original goes to the Krewe of the Girls in Pearls," Myers said.

The Crowd Choice award was presented to Krewe of the Rising Phoenix. In announcing the winner, Dawn Myers said, "The judges were all very, very impressed with not only the costumes, but also the music."

Dance Quest earned the Judges' Choice award. "This group had a fantastic float. It was beautifully decorated. They had amazing costumes. And they had a fantastic performance," Myers said. "Because they checked all the boxes, we had to give this to the judges' choice for Dance Quest."

Additional award winners included Masonic Lodge Desoto for Most Community Spirit, Newsome High School for Best Band, and TC Drums for Best Performance.

Charitable giving was also a central focus of the evening. Organizers presented $5,000 checks to Hope for Her and PCAT (Parents and Children Advancing Together Literacy Ministries), recognizing both organizations as beneficiaries of this year's parade proceeds.

The charities were selected in partnership with the Valrico Fishhawk Chamber of Commerce and the newly merged Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce, continuing the Brandon Parade of Lights' commitment to supporting local nonprofits alongside celebrating the holiday season.

Canfield thanked the many volunteers, sponsors and participants who made both the event and its charitable impact possible. She noted that an estimated 50 volunteers helped support parade operations, adding, "Thank you for allowing me to be a small part of this parade."

The celebration also marked a transition in leadership, as Melissa Canfield formally passed the Brandon Parade of Lights chairperson duties to Erica Jourdain of Flower Me Tampa, who was announced as the 2026 parade chairperson. Organizers thanked Canfield for her leadership during the parade's second year and welcomed Jourdain as planning begins for the next chapter of the event. Organizers confirmed that the next Brandon Parade of Lights will be held on Saturday, December 12, 2026.

Now entering its third year, the Brandon Parade of Lights continues to establish itself as a signature holiday tradition — celebrating creativity, community spirit and meaningful local impact while bringing families, businesses and neighbors together during the holiday season.

HARTMANN CELEBRATES 60TH WITH FIVE GENERATIONS OF WOMEN AND A LEGACY OF GIVING

By Jane Owen

Osprey Observer advertising representative Melissa Hartmann, who has been part of the Osprey family for nine years, celebrated a milestone this October — her 60th birthday. Clients, friends and loved ones honored her for her dedication, kindness and steadfast friendship.



Five generations: Alice Katherine, 6 months with mother Gabrielle, grandmother Whitney, great-grandmother Melissa and great-great-grandmother Barbara.

One moment stood out above all others: a special breakfast shared by Hartmann, her mom, daughter, granddaughter and great-granddaughter. Few families are blessed with five living generations, and even fewer can gather together at one table. For Hartmann, sitting side by side with five decades of women in her family was a reminder of the strength and continuity that have carried them through so many changes over the years.

The tradition began several years ago when Hartmann's daughter, Whitney Laurion, organized their first multigenerational birthday breakfast. This year held extra meaning — it was baby Alice Katherine's first time joining the circle of women who came before her.

"I always love breakfast with our family, but this one was super special with Alice there," Hartmann said. "She was the perfect angel and was happily passed around to each of us to get some love."

Although life keeps each branch of the family busy — living in different towns, juggling work and responsibilities — they remain devoted to showing up for one another.

"Family is very important to me," Hartmann said. "My family is the kind that is always there for you — whether it's a soccer game or you're in the hospital, we will always show up."

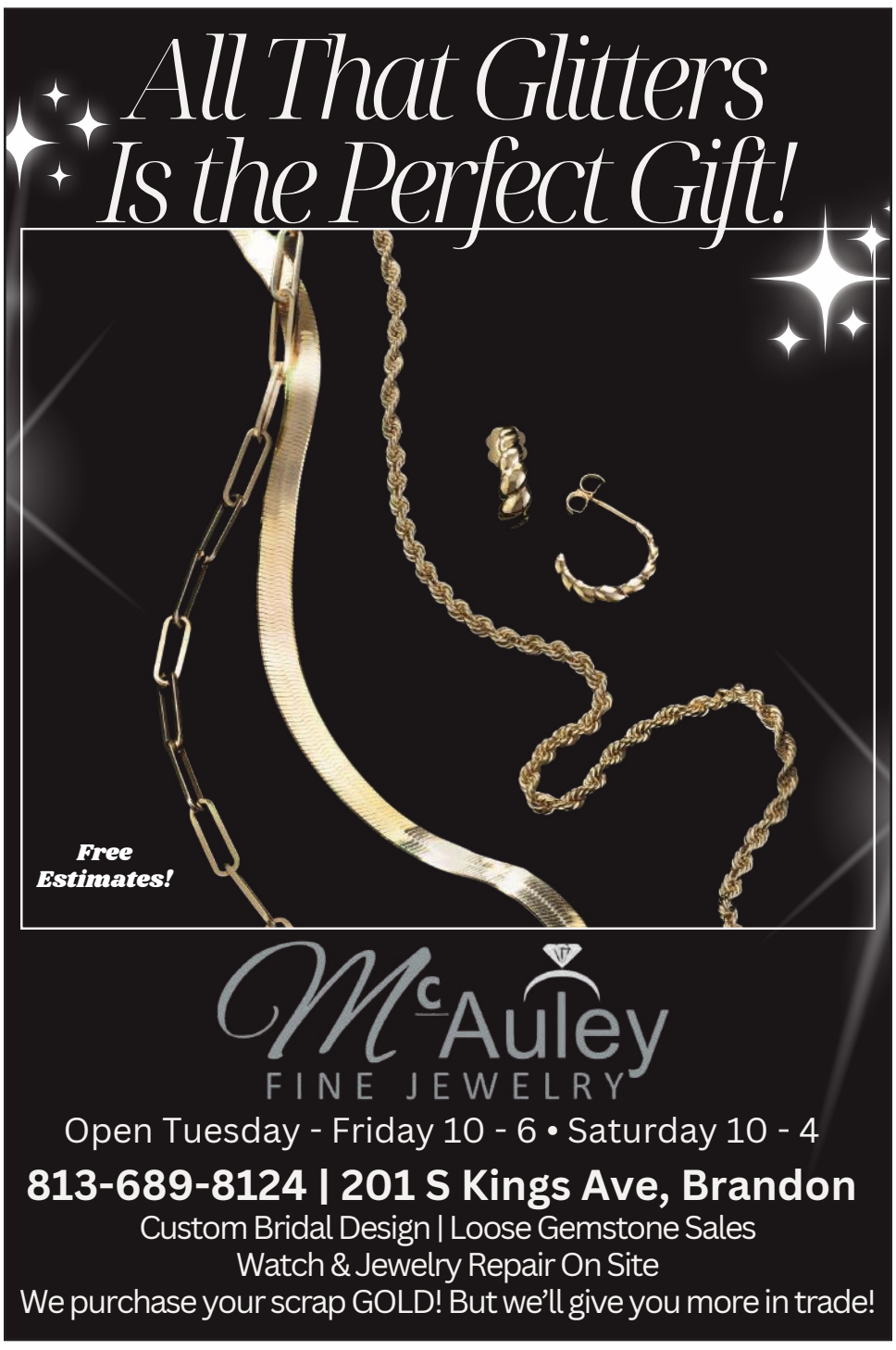
The roots of this closeness run deep. Five-generation photos began in 1985 when Hartmann's grandmother, Barbara Repko, was still living, and the tradition has endured through decades of change, celebrations and challenges. What has never changed is their shared belief that family comes first.

Just as meaningful is the family's shared spirit of giving. Hartmann's mom is a devoted supporter of veterans and shops all year long so children in need can receive Christmas gifts. Hartmann is a board member at Mary & Martha House. Whitney shops for teens at A Kid's Place at Christmas.. And Gabrielle, before welcoming Alice, spent her free time singing for seniors rather than hanging out with friends.

These acts of service reflect a defining thread woven through all five generations — each one carries a giving heart.

The commitment extends to the men in the family as well, including Hartmann's son, Mark, and to every way Hartmann continues to support and uplift the local community.

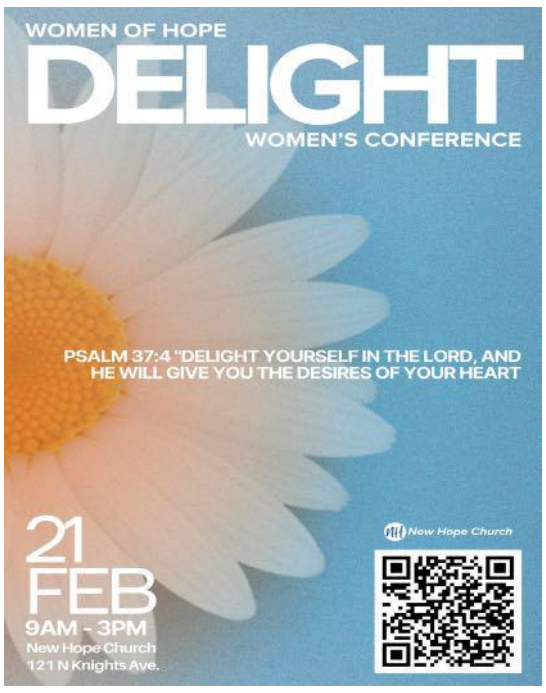






Women of Hope Conference, Spanish Teachers Needed & More....

Compiled by Jenny Bennett
jbennett@ospreyobserver.com



DELIGHT — Women Of Hope Conference

Take delight in the Lord — and discover the joy of resting in His presence. Join with New Hope Church's Women of Hope for DELIGHT, the 2026 Women of Hope Conference, at the church on February 21, 2026, from 9 a.m.-3 p.m.

This one-day gathering brings women together from across the church and community for worship, encouragement and connection. Experience powerful teaching, heartfelt worship and inspiring breakout sessions designed to help you deepen your faith and rediscover joy in every season. Tickets include a conference T-shirt and lunch.

New Hope Church is located at 213 N. Knights Ave. in Brandon. Register at https://delightwomensconference.rsvpify.com/.

Conversational Spanish Teacher Wanted

Do you enjoy sharing your love of the Spanish language? Center 4Life Learning is looking for a volunteer Spanish teacher to lead engaging, conversational classes for adult learners. This is a wonderful opportunity to make a difference, meet new people and share your knowledge in a welcoming, supportive environment. Its 2026 Winter Semester will begin on the week of January 26, 2026, with 90-minute classes once a week for six weeks on the campus of the United Methodist Church of Sun City Center, located at 1971 Haverford Ave. in Sun City Center. The student class limit is 10. Materials will be provided. If you are interested, please contact Sue Holter, Center 4Life Learning manager, at 813-634-8607 or center4life@sccumc.com.

The Democratic Women's Club Of Southeast Hillsborough County

The Democratic Woman's Club invites all like-minded individuals to its January 2026 meeting starting at 6:30 p.m., with meet and greet beginning at 6 p.m. The guest speakers are Karen Perez, a candidate for reelection to the Hillsborough County School Board, and Michael Kostis, statewide organizer for the Florida Coalition for Higher Education in Prisons. Come and get to know the people that represent you. For more information, please email sedwcinfo@gmail.com or call 813-503-8639. The meeting will be held at the Riverview Public Library, located at 9951 Balm Riverview Rd. in Riverview.



Saint Leo University Earns Top Rankings In 2025 Military Times Best For Vets: Colleges

Saint Leo University has once again been recognized as a national leader in serving military-affiliated students, earning top placements across multiple categories in the 2025 Military Times Best for Vets: Colleges rankings. The university improved its standing in every category from 2024, reflecting its ongoing commitment to active-duty service members, veterans and military families.

"Saint Leo's mission has always been rooted in service, and it is an honor to be recognized for our continued commitment to those who serve our country," said Dr. Jim Burkee, university president. "We are proud to provide our student-veterans with flexible learning options, outstanding support and an educational community that believes deeply in their success."

More information about the 2025 rankings can be found on the Military Times Best for Vets website at https://bestforvets.militarytimes.com/colleges.

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LOCAL SCOUT ATTEMPTS TO ACHIEVE GOAL OF ALL 141 MERIT BADGES

By Jane Owen

Bloomingdale High School senior Jacob Townes is working to achieve all 141 merit badges from Scouting America (formerly called Boy Scouts of America). Scouting America was founded in 1910. In the last 115 years, only 1 percent of Scouts (less than 1,000) have earned all of the badges. What makes that statistic even more impressive is that the organization started with only 14 badges and continues to add badges every year.



Jacob Townes with his dad and Scout master, Scott Townes.



Approximately 6 percent of all Scouts earn the Eagle Scout rank, the highest rank attainable. To be an Eagle Scout, a Scout must earn a minimum of 21 merit badges. Townes will achieve the Eagle Scout rank in January 2026.

Townes started in scouts when he was 11 and began focusing on merit badges in high school. His goal of earning all of the merit badges must be completed by July 2026, when he turns 18 and ages out of the program. He has 21 more to earn. His favorite badges have been water-based badges. He believes the hardest left are the snow badge, because it doesn't snow in Florida, and the bugle badge, because of the difficulty to master playing a bugle.

"I don't have doubts that I can do it. I just need to focus and get it done," Townes said.

Townes is inspired by his dad, who is his current Scout master, and a little bit of bragging rights.

"My dad influenced me to do more. I started doing more and I started loving it. Then, I realized I had the most merit badges in the troop. So, I kept pushing," Townes said.

To other Scouts working on badges, Townes' best advice is to stay focused and work on them regularly.

"Certain badges are going to be easier than others because some of them have time restraints. Work on it for an hour every so often. It doesn't have to be every day, but you have to be focused," Townes said.

Townes loves the leadership skills he has gained from Scouts. Not surprisingly, Townes is a stand-out student, finishing high school while taking multiple Advanced Placement (AP) classes. He intends to earn a psychology degree in college.

Townes is part of Boys Troop 610, which meets at St. Stephen Catholic Church, located at 10118 St. Stephen Circle in Riverview. For more information about Scouting America, visit www.scouting.org.

VOODOO BREWING VALRICO RAISES $10,000 FOR SMALL BUT MIGHTY HEROES

By Brian Bokor



Voodoo Brewing Co. Valrico's 2026 featured charity partner, Cindy Tilley of Forgotten Angels, with Chris Ciulla and the Clauses.

Voodoo Brewing Co. Valrico marked its one-year anniversary by presenting a $10,000 donation to its 2025 charity partner, Small But Mighty Heroes, during a celebration held on December 7.

The donation capped a weekend of anniversary events held from December 5-7 at the brewery's Valrico location at 3434 E. SR 60.

Owner Chris Ciulla announced the donation during the event, noting that the funds were raised through multiple fundraising events with support from the brewery's Founders Club and the chamber of commerce.

"We managed to raise a little over $9,000 for the year that we rounded up to $10,000 to give to Small But Mighty, and it comes from our Voodoo Valrico Founders Club fund. Our Founders Club helped us out with this, and we've had a lot of support from the chamber of commerce, so I'd like to say thank you, our community, for supporting us and supporting Small But Mighty Heroes," he said.

"Overall, we've done about $20,000 for various charities. We support Durant High School, we've donated a lot of food this year and we've done a lot of events for the community as well," Ciulla said.

Small But Mighty Heroes founder Tina Downing addressed attendees and highlighted the organization's mission.

"All of you guys have helped to make this possible for organizations, and the community is a huge part of what we do. We provide tailored support for children battling cancer, siblings and their parents," Downing said.

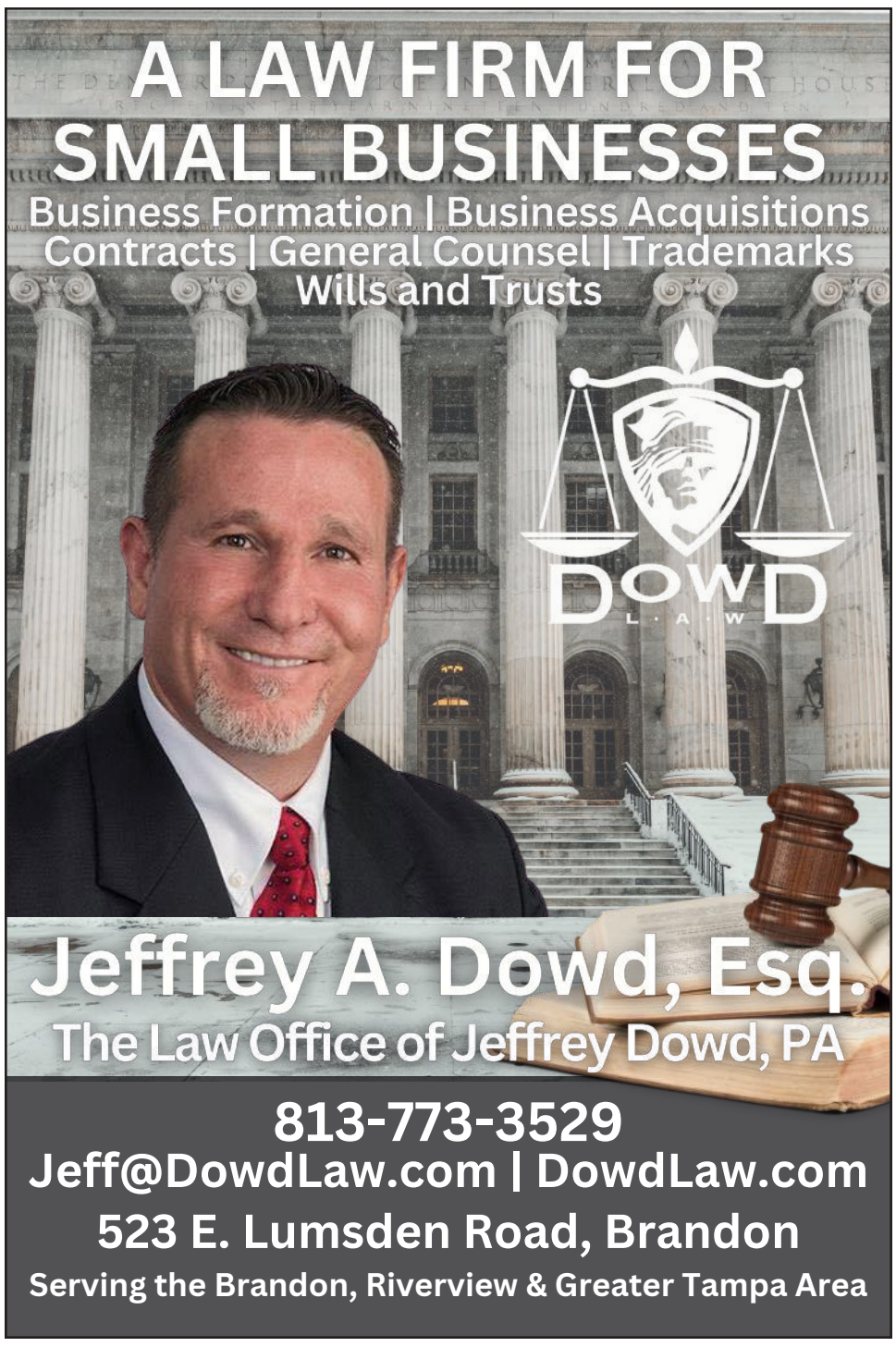
She also referenced holiday-related initiatives supported through the organization.

"The toy drive that we are having here as well, those toys will go to help make their Christmas special," she said. The toy drive will be held on December 20 and was sponsored by several local area businesses.

Santa and Mrs. Claus were also on-site during the celebration, posing for photos with attendees.

Ciulla was then joined by Cindy Tilley of Forgotten Angels to announce the organization as Voodoo Brewing Co. Valrico's charity partner for 2026.

"I chose [Forgotten Angels] because they're really giving people and because they also give a lot back to the community. We're going to host a lot of events here for them this year, so follow the Facebook page. If you want to be part of the giving, come show up at these events," he said.





LOCAL VETERAN INSTALLED AS PRESIDENT OF AMERICAN GOLD STAR MOTHERS

By Jane Owen

Annette Kirk, an Army veteran and Valrico resident, is the 2025-26 national president of American Gold Star Mothers. American Gold Star Mothers is a national nonprofit organization of mothers whose sons and daughters died while serving in the U.S. Armed Forces.



Annette Kirk with her son, Army Pfc. Paul Cuzzupe II, who was killed by an improvised explosive device on August 8, 2010, in Afghanistan.

The mission of the organization is to find strength in the fellowship of other Gold Star mothers who strive to keep the memory of their sons and daughters alive by working to help veterans, those currently serving in the military, their families and their communities.

Kirk connected with American Gold Star Mothers soon after her son, Army Pfc. Paul Cuzzupe II, a combat medic, was killed by an improvised explosive device on August 8, 2010, in Afghanistan. Kirk began volunteering with the Tampa Bay chapter in 2013.

Kirk, an active member of the Hillsborough County Veterans Council, chaired the committees to build the Gulf War Memorial and the Afghanistan Memorial at Veterans Memorial Park in Tampa.

The Hillsborough County Veterans Council awards local high school JROTC students certificates for their outstanding leadership abilities. Kirk hands out the certificates at Armwood High School. Paul attended Armwood and was in the JROTC there.

As one of her initiatives, Kirk is bringing the program to the national Gold Star Mothers organization.

"Soon the members of Gold Star Mothers will be able to hand out certificates to their local JROTC students in the name of American Gold Star Mothers, promoting youth, leadership, patriotism and overall Americanism, which is following in our mission," Kirk said.

Gold Star Mothers Department of Florida/ Puerto Rico President Lorrie Fleming said Kirk is an outstanding national president because she has great leadership skills and a big heart for the Gold Star moms and veterans.

"She is someone who is very passionate about our country and the service we do for our veterans. When she is at an event, I know she is representing her son and all of our children," Fleming said.

As national president, Kirk is focused on service and growth. Her motto for the year is "Grow with grace," a nod to founder Grace Darling Seibold and for members to give themselves grace.

"We grow to serve in honor of our children," Kirk said. "It is because of Paul that I am here, and I try to make him proud."

For more information about American Gold Star Mothers, visit www.americangoldstarmothers.org/.

'BUTTERFLY EFFECT' PROJECT EMPOWERS YOUTH TO STAND AGAINST HATE

Staff Report

Gabbie Noyes, an 11th grade Girl Scout from Troop 33101 (Lourdes M. Reyes, troop leader) and a student at Riverview High School, has taken on one of the most meaningful topics of our time — combating antisemitism through education — with her Girl Scout Gold Award project, The Butterfly Effect.



Riverview's Gabbie Noyes earned her Girl Scout Gold Award with The Butterfly Effect project.

Noyes, who is deeply connected to her troop and known for her leadership and compassion, is one of 'my girls,' a testament to her longtime dedication to Girl Scouts and service.

The project aims to teach younger generations how to recognize and respond to antisemitism while honoring the memory of Holocaust victims through empathy, awareness and action. Inspired by the idea that small actions can create big change, The Butterfly Effect encourages youth to stand up against hate and become Upstanders in their communities.

About the Project

The centerpiece of Noyes' project is an interactive and educational display.

In October, Noyes hosted 'Spreading the Butterfly Effect' at the Florida Holocaust Museum in St. Petersburg. The event featured an educational program for children ages 7-12 that explored antisemitism as a form of bullying, empowering kids to be Upstanders while learning Holocaust history. After the workshop, attendees visited the museum's new butterfly garden to reflect on how even small acts of understanding can reduce the spread of hate.

"My goal for The Butterfly Effect is to help younger generations understand what antisemitism is — and how they can prevent it through empathy, education and action," said Noyes. "When we learn from history, we make it less likely to repeat."

Online and Community Outreach

The project continues to reach audiences through its Instagram page, @thebutterflyeffect10723, which shares educational content, event highlights and resources from the Florida Holocaust Museum and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL).

A companion website, https://thebutterflyeffect79.wixsite.com/the-butterfly-effect, provides additional materials, Holocaust history, and links to partner organizations including www.adl.org and www.standuptojewishhate.org.

The Girl Scout Gold Award is the highest honor a Girl Scout can earn. It recognizes girls in grades nine through 12 who lead sustainable, measurable projects that create lasting change in their communities. Gold Award projects require a minimum of 80 hours of planning and implementation.

Support the Movement

To learn more about The Butterfly Effect and how to take action against antisemitism, visit www.thefhm.org/event/spreading-the-butterfly-effect, follow @thebutterflyeffect10723 or join @StandUpToJewishHate | #StandUpToJewishHate.

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Regular readers know I usually give free ad space here to groups or events that improve our community. Call me with your ideas! — Ann Marie

May I help you this year? Here's what I did for others last year!



SELLERS
Listing, advertising & selling homes is the largest portion of my business. This custom builder's brand-new, 3,450-SF home with pool, dock & boat lift on a protected cove in Apollo Beach was my highest-priced contract of the year. It sold in March for $1,925,000.



BUYERS
My market knowledge is a key reason buyers ask me to help them navigate & negotiate such a significant step. In this case, the out-of-state couple choosing River Hills Country Club included a mortgage lender with her own high standards. Sold in June for $535,000.



BOTH-SIDERS
I offer client incentives in several scenarios, especially if you buy & sell with me! In River-view's Shadow Run, selling this home with 6,650 SF under roof wasn't easy, but the owner still got my best discount after buying with me in 2024. Sold in August for $670,000.

EXPERIENCE
I became a Realtor in 1984, & clients rely on my long experience. As the market slowed in late 2024, I suggested retiring sellers of this 3,050-SF pool home in FishHawk's Eagle Ridge might try a fresh approach in the spring of 2025. I sold it in June for $805,000.



SERVICE
I'm often willing to do much more than most agents! Loyal clients across the county in Citrus Park needed help on a long list of items after a buyer inspection. My husband did a lot for free, then handled hiring & paying for the rest to get it sold in June for $625,000.



INTEGRITY
I've built my reputation on trust in a field where it's not always found. In Boyette Springs, a new agent & buyers with no integrity bailed out on these seller clients at the last second. We had to halt a move-out & start marketing over again. We did & sold in May for $470,000.





MARKETING
Agents who sell less have less money to spend marketing your property. I can afford to cast a wide net in advertising & pay for extras such as aerial photos, which helped to find the buyers for this home on Riverview's Lake Kenda. Sold in June for $525,000.



NETWORKING
Relationships with other agents can make a difference for clients. A close associate for 20 years knew when he had found the right buyers for this listing of mine in Triple Creek & he worked with me for a deal the sellers could accept. Sold in August for $770,000.



UNDERSTANDING
Real estate is about people, not just busi-ness! Sometimes those people express needs beyond holding out for the best possible price. In FishHawk's Garden District, that led to this lovely home selling for much less than its first contract price. Sold in August for $438,000.

NEW CONSTRUCTION
In new communities, many buyers go straight to corporate builders without realizing they can protect themselves & even save money by having their own agent. In Wimauma's West Lake, I helped a buyer get this 1,825-SF home for a sale that closed in July at $324,900.



RENT MANAGEMENT
I've managed dozens of rental homes over many years, frequently helping tenants as well as the landlords when it's time to buy or sell. In Belmont south of Riverview, out-of-state owners finally had their fill of hurricane impacts & sold this property in May for $429,000.



REFERRALS
If you're not selling or buying in the new year but you know someone who is, please consider referring them to me! I can make it worthwhile for you, too, as I have with family of the folks who bought this home in Diamond Hill Golf & Country Club. Sold in April for $415,000.





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Edited by: Jenny Bennett

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FLORIDA STRAWBERRY FESTIVAL
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Local Assistant Helps Seniors Stay Independent

Kathy Bass, owner of Helping Hands Assistant LLC, is a personal assistant dedicated to helping individuals and businesses stay organized, efficient and stress-free. With years of experience in supporting private clients and companies of all sizes, she has built a reputation as the 'go-to gal' for making life run a little smoother.

Her specialty is supporting seniors, providing the extra set of hands they need to maintain independence and peace of mind. Whether it's accompanying clients to appointments, running errands, organizing their homes or assisting with day-to-day tasks that have become challenging, she offers dependable, personalized help with a warm, patient approach.

For more information or to schedule assistance, please contact Bass at 863-409-9890 or kathy75cole05@verizon.net.



Kathy Bass is the owner of Helping Hands Assistant LLC, and you go-to gal for the things you do not have time to do.

Tropical Smoothie Opens Location On Highway 60

Tropical Smoothie Cafe is a fast-casual restaurant that is best known for made-to-order smoothies — ranging from fruity and refreshing to protein-packed or indulgent blends. It also serves a full food menu, including wraps, sandwiches, flatbreads, salads and bowls, and provides catering options. The newest local Tropical Smoothie Cafe recently opened on State Road 60, across from Valrico Commons and in front of LA Fitness. The grand opening was in October. It is located at 2018 E. SR 60 in Valrico. Its hours are Monday through Friday, 7 a.m.-10 p.m.; Saturday, 8 a.m.-10 p.m.; and Sunday, 8 a.m.-9 p.m. Call 813-430-0690 or visit www.tropicalsmoothiecafe.com.



Freedom Plaza Owner is J.D. Power's Most Awarded Senior Living Provider

J.D. Power announced the results of its 2025 U.S. Senior Living Satisfaction Study, and Freedom Plaza's management company, LCS, has been recognized for the seventh consecutive year as No. 1 in resident satisfaction among independent senior living communities. The J.D. Power 2025 U.S. Senior Living Satisfaction Study recognized LCS for excellence in independent living, which also included achieving No. 1 in all six factors of resident satisfaction: dining, community building/grounds, resident apartment/living unit, price paid for services received, community staff, and resident activities. The consecutive awards make LCS the most awarded independent senior living company in the history of the J.D. Power U.S. Senior Living Satisfaction Study.



Cooley Law School Holds Fall Honors Convocation

In November, Cooley Law School's Tampa Bay campus recognized students in the Michaelmas Term for their achievements during an honors convocation.

Katelyn Hearn, Darrin Robinson and Tory Sanders were each presented with the Leadership Achievement Award, which acknowledges those students who have consistently, comprehensively and effectively provided leadership in a variety of capacities. The award is intended to be the culmination of the recipient's participation in leadership activities at Cooley.



New Location for Party Planet

Party Planet is a locally owned party and balloon decor store that's been creating unforgettable celebrations in the area for over 10 years. Party Planet opened in October 2015 and has moved to a new location. It offers custom printing, custom balloon bouquets, arches and installations, along with a wide selection of themed party supplies, backdrops and rentals. Whether you're planning a birthday, wedding or corporate event, owners Patrick and Christine Broadnax and their team will help you design the perfect setup with professional-quality balloons and personalized service. Party Planet is located at 939 Oakfield Dr. in Brandon. It hours are Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m.-7 p.m., and Sunday, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Call 813-324-7325 or visit its social media pages at www.facebook.com/partyplanetbrandon and/or www.instagram.com/partyplanetbrandon.



BUCHANAN ANNOUNCES 2025 FIRE AND RESCUE/EMS AWARD WINNERS

Staff Report





Sun City Center Emergency Squad received the Dedication and Professionalism Award

Congressman Vern Buchanan announced the recipients of the 16th Congressional District Fire and Rescue and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Awards. Buchanan established the awards to give special recognition to fire and rescue and EMS personnel who have provided distinguished service to his constituents in 2025.

"As first responders, fire departments and EMS teams are summoned on short notice to serve their communities," said Buchanan. "Oftentimes, they arrive at scenes of great adversity and trauma, to which they reliably bring strength and composure. I believe these awards are a fitting tribute to our first responders and a reminder of the important role they play in our communities."

This year's award recipients were selected by an independent committee comprised of a cross section of current and retired fire and rescue personnel living in the district.

Buchanan presented awards to the following Hillsborough County fire and rescue and EMS personnel:

Dedication and Professionalism Award: Hillsborough County Fire Rescue: Company Fire Captain Ralph Mascaro Sun City Center Emergency Squad

Preservation of Life Award: Hillsborough County Fire Rescue: Firefighter/Paramedic Jacob Campbell, Fire Captain Clifford Davis, Firefighter/Paramedic Anna Inman, and Firefighter Maurice Swan

Unit Citation: Tampa General Hospital Aeromed: Pilot Stu O'Shannon, Flight Nurse Alisha Burnett, Flight Paramedic Chuck Nelson, Flight Paramedic Orientee Luis Vazquez, Pilot Mark Boudreau, Flight Nurse Rob Freas, and Flight Paramedic Kelly Curren

Career Service Award: Hillsborough County Fire Rescue: Battalion Chief Jeff Martin

In total, 125 Area First Responders and 4 Civilians Recognized for Distinguished Service. Visit https://buchanan.house.gov/.

CRIME STOPPERS TURNS ANONYMOUS TIPS INTO ARRESTS

By Denise Sansosti



This year alone, citizens' tips into Crime Stoppers of Tampa Bay have resulted in 81 arrests, 112 cases cleared and 303 charges with over $26,000 in rewards. None of this would be possible without anonymous community tips.

"Our law enforcement does an excellent job, but they can't be everywhere. Sometimes they need the community's help to solve a crime," said Kelly B. McLaren, executive director.

Crime Stoppers began in 1976 after a fatal shooting in New Mexico. Six weeks later, the police had no leads. The investigating detective contacted a local television station for a reenactment, and a special telephone number was promoted so that people could call without mentioning their name. A tip was called in, and in under 72 hours the murder was solved. This was the beginning of Crime Stoppers.

Over the years, Crime Stoppers has grown into an international network of 800 affiliated and accredited chapters worldwide. Crime Stoppers of Tampa Bay was established in 1988 and currently services Hillsborough and Pasco counties.

According to McLaren, the biggest misconception the community has is not understanding that all tips are 100 percent anonymous and every piece of information is important.

"Crime Stoppers does not follow the same statutes and guidelines as law enforcement, enabling it to protect your identification through the entire process," said McLaren. "Crime Stoppers works; everyone has a right to feel safe."

Tips can be verbal, videos, pictures or documents through the tip line, website or mobile application. Submissions are then given an identification number and code specific to the case in order to check the ongoing status. If your tip leads to an arrest, you are eligible for a cash reward of up to $5,000.

For 37 years, Crime Stoppers of Tampa Bay has been a private nonprofit program funded solely through private donations, fundraising and the Crime Stoppers Trust Fund. No tax dollars are used.

To support your local Crime Stoppers program and help make Hillsborough and Pasco counties safer for everyone, the annual Clays Against Crime sporting challenge is on February 6, 2026, at Tampa Bay Sporting Clays. You can also make a donation to sponsor a local law enforcement team.

For more on Crime Stoppers, unsolved cases, or to submit a tip, contact 1-800-873-TIPS or www.crimestopperstb.com.

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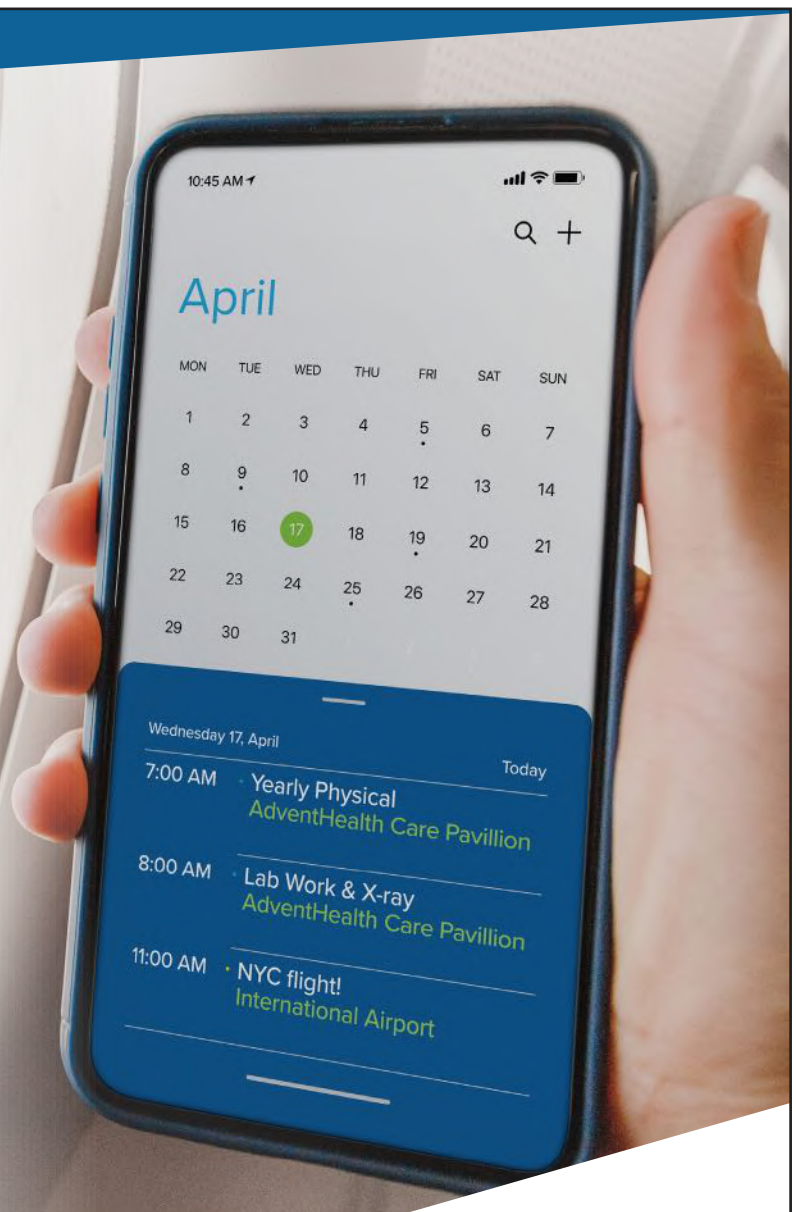
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LOCAL VETERINARIAN DONATES $10,000 TO ROTARY'S CAMP FLORIDA

Staff Report



Kimberly Tyson, DVM, has donated $10,000 to Rotary's Camp Florida.

Kimberly Tyson, DVM, a lifelong Brandon resident, veterinarian and devoted community leader, has donated $10,000 to Rotary's Camp Florida, a nonprofit camp serving children and adults with special needs. The donation was made in Riverview and represents one of the largest individual contributions to the camp this year.

Dr. Tyson was born and raised in Brandon and has remained deeply rooted in the community for over 20 years. She is a USF undergraduate alumna and a University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine graduate, and now she serves as the medical director of Paisley Paws Veterinary Clinic. She joined the FishHawk-Riverview Rotary Club in 2008 and has served as secretary, service chair and president, and she has chaired or co-chaired many community service committees.

The decision to make this gift began when Dr. Tyson volunteered at a Rotary work project on the camp's Brandon campus. There, she gained firsthand knowledge about the costly year-round operations and maintenance that are required to keep the facility safe, accessible and fully functional for campers with a wide spectrum of disabilities.

"I didn't realize how large the operations and maintenance needs truly were," Dr. Tyson said. "Once I understood the scale, I knew I needed to make a meaningful contribution. Rotary's Camp Florida gives children the chance to be outdoors, to belong and to simply have fun in a space designed for their abilities. That experience is priceless."

Her gift is part of a much greater philanthropic vision. After realizing how many nonprofits scramble for reliable funding, Dr. Tyson created The Hummingbird Foundation — a platform she founded to support a broader scope of charitable organizations in the community. Through the foundation and her veterinary practice alike, she has been a great supporter of animal welfare. Paisley Paws regularly teams up with rescue groups and helps other hospitals invest in community-based animal health efforts.

For Dr. Tyson, Rotary's Camp Florida remains a core cause. As a Rotarian, she believes strongly in ensuring that club dollars and member support return to the community in visible, meaningful ways.

"Donors and volunteers are most powerful when they unite behind a shared mission," she said. "This camp embodies that mission — providing a place where every camper, regardless of their challenges, gets to participate and feel included."

About Rotary's Camp Florida

Rotary's Camp Florida is a 21-acre, fully accessible, ACA-accredited camp serving children and adults with disabilities. Situated in Brandon, the camp partners with nonprofit organizations across the state, offering barrier-free outdoor experiences, adaptive facilities and programs promoting independence, friendship and inclusion. For more information regarding donations or volunteer opportunities, please visit https://rotaryscampflorida.org/.



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CONGREGATION DELIVERS 45 TURKEYS, LAUNCHES FUND IN MEMORY MEMBER

Staff Report

Congregation Beth Shalom of Brandon will deliver 45 turkeys and 100 cans of cranberry sauce to the food bank at Brandon Christian Church on Friday morning, continuing a long tradition of helping feed local families during the Thanksgiving season. Volunteers will meet at the temple at 8:30 a.m. to load the donated food into pickup trucks before presenting it to food bank leaders for distribution.



A truckload of turkeys from Congregation Beth Shalom arrives at the Brandon Christian Church food bank to support its Thanksgiving distribution.

The effort came together quickly after Meral Ginsburg, who has long coordinated partnerships between Beth Shalom, Brandon Christian Church and Our Faith Family Church, alerted the congregation that the food bank was facing a severe shortage.

"More people are needing help than ever before," she told Neil Spindel, who immediately put out a call for donations.

The project also carries a special meaning this year. The fundraiser brought in more money than needed for the Thanksgiving drive, prompting Beth Shalom to create a new charitable initiative honoring longtime congregant Stephen Michael Feldman, who passed away two years ago. Feldman was deeply committed to food relief and was a driving force behind the congregation's partnership with the Brandon Christian Church food bank.

The new Stephen Michael Feldman Hunger Relief Fund will convert the remaining Thanksgiving donations into an ongoing source of support for the food bank and other local hunger-relief efforts. The volunteer-run fund will direct 100 percent of contributions toward food and essential health and hygiene items for families in need.

"This first delivery of turkeys will be the inaugural activity of the new fund," Spindel said. "We're excited to continue raising money so that we can make regular donations throughout the year in Steve's memory."

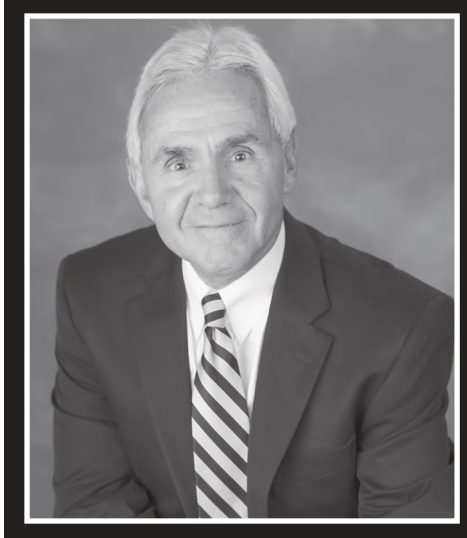
The three congregations — Beth Shalom, Brandon Christian Church and Our Faith Family Church, which operates within Beth Shalom's facility — have worked closely together for years to support the food bank. With this year's expanded effort, Beth Shalom hopes to strengthen that partnership even further.

"After suffering a stroke, a gentleman came to us seeking help with daily meals. He was overwhelmed, uncertain about the holiday ahead. Today, he left with everything needed for a complete Thanksgiving dinner," said Pastor Edd Kostelnick of Our Faith Family Church.

For information on donating to the Stephen Michael Feldman Hunger Relief Fund, email admin@bethshalombrandon.org.

Congregation Beth Shalom of Brandon is a warm, inclusive Reform synagogue serving the Greater Brandon area. The temple is located at 706 Bryan Rd. in Brandon and can be reached at 813-681-6547 or https://bethshalombrandon.org/.

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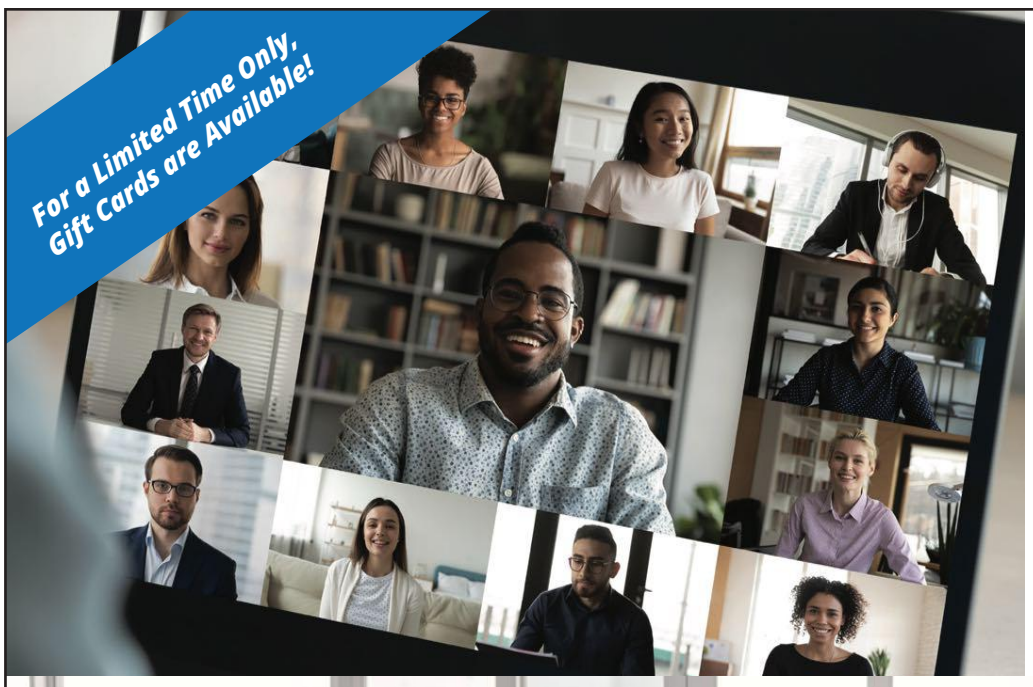
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NINETEEN-YEAR-OLD ANDREA ROMINE BEGINS REAL ESTATE CAREER AT KELLER WILLIAMS VALRICO

Staff Report



Andrea Romine, a 19-year-old real estate professional with Keller Williams, is proud to announce the launch of her real estate career in the local market after relocating from Ohio to Florida. New to the area but driven by ambition and a strong support system, Romine is building her business around two core missions: serving as a trusted Ohio-to-Florida relocation connector and inspiring young people to start their real estate careers early — without the need for a traditional four-year degree.

A Dedicated Ohio-to-Florida Relocation Connector

Having personally made the move from Ohio to Florida, Romine understands the emotions, logistics and timing that come with relocating. She is positioning herself as a go-to Ohio-to-Florida moving agent, helping clients seamlessly sell their homes in Ohio and purchase their next home in Florida — or make the move in reverse.

Romine has built strong relationships with a network of trusted referral associates throughout Ohio, allowing her clients to feel confident in knowing their transaction is handled by experienced professionals on both ends. By acting as the central point of contact, she simplifies the process, reduces stress and ensures continuity from start to finish.

"Relocating doesn't have to feel overwhelming," said Romine. "My goal is to be the connector — someone who understands both markets and can guide clients through every step, whether they're heading to Florida or moving back home to Ohio."

Starting Early: A Message to Future Real Estate Professionals

Romine's second focus is encouraging high school students and young adults who are interested in real estate to start now. She is passionate about showing that a successful career in real estate does not require a college or trade school degree — only discipline, strong work ethic and clear goals.

"Real estate is one of the few careers where you can get licensed right after high school and immediately start building your future," Romine said. "If you have big goals later in life, you might as well start now."

Through Keller Williams, Romine has access to industry-leading training, coaching and mentorship, including classroom-style learning and team-based support. She credits Keller Williams for providing the education and guidance that allows new agents — especially young professionals — to grow with confidence and professionalism.

Romaine is with The Ans Group- Keller Williams Suburban Tampa located at 2350 E. State Rd 60. Valrico. Visit theansgroup.kw.com or call (740) 974-8837.

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Year In Review – Updates On Our Top Stories From 2025

FORMER NEWSOME ATHLETE MAKES NFL DEBUT, KICKS GAME-WINNING FIELD GOAL

By Nick Nahas

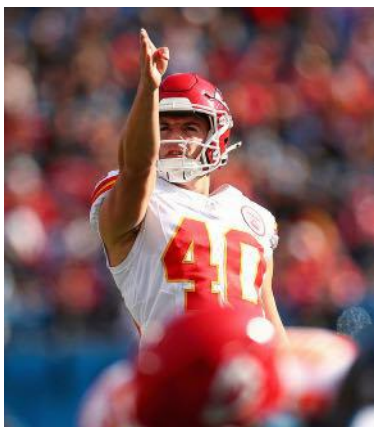
Spencer Shrader signed with the Indianapolis Colts for the 2025 season. He was the starting kicker until he suffered a season-ending injury during a game against the Las Vegas Raiders in October. He tore two ligaments in his right knee — the ACL and MCL. Shrader is still on the Colts team, but he has not played since the injury.

"I'm just disappointed for him," Colts Head Coach Shane Steichen said. "He was having a hell of a season, so we'll be with him to support him through this time."

Original Story Printed In January 2025.

Former Newsome High School football player Spencer Shrader is living out many people's dreams of playing in the NFL.

Shrader went undrafted in the recent NFL draft but signed as a free agent with the Indianapolis Colts on their practice squad. He was elevated to the active roster for the first game of the season and made all three extra-point attempts. He later joined the New York Jets, where he played one game and converted both field goal attempts. His journey continued when the Kansas City Chiefs offered him a roster spot after their starting kicker, Harrison Butker, was injured.



Photos courtesy of the Kansas City Chiefs.
Spencer Schrader lines up to make a kick against the Buffalo Bills.



Kansas City Chiefs teammate Travis Kelce hugs Spencer Schrader after he makes the game-winning kick against the Carolina Panthers.

Shrader played in two games with the Chiefs, converting all three field goals and all six extra points. He also kicked the game-winning field goal against the Carolina Panthers on November 24, 2024.

A Lithia resident, Shrader played one year of football at Newsome High School and also starred in tennis and soccer. After graduating, he played a year of semiprofessional soccer in Brazil and Canada in 2018. Despite several soccer scholarship offers, he chose to walk on as a kicker at the University of South Florida. He played four years with the Bulls, earning a scholarships, before transferring to Notre Dame.

The NFL was not always his main goal. Shrader is an entrepreneur and owns an investment property in South Bend, Indiana.

Shrader said he is grateful for the opportunity but does not define fulfillment by football alone.

Shrader later injured his hamstring in practice and was placed on injured reserve. With his injury and Butker's return, his future remains uncertain.

"For me, as an undrafted free-agent rookie, it's very much unknown what the next steps will be."

MAJOR INTERSECTION OVERHAUL BEGINS ON U.S. 301 AND GIBSONTON DRIVE, EXPECT DELAYS FOR 140 DAYS

By Brian Bokor



Crews have installed a new concrete roadway surface at U.S. 301 and Gibsonton Drive and have paved all travel lanes from Whitt Road to Rivercrest Drive in Riverview. The new intersection now provides two left-turn lanes from westbound Boyette Road onto southbound U.S. 301. Over the coming months, crews will finalize the installation of new highway lighting, traffic signals and pavement markings throughout the project limits. No major road closures or detours are planned for the duration of this project. Construction activities are expected to be completed by spring 2026.

Original Story Printed In April 2025.

The Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) began a major intersection improvement project on U.S. 301 last week that is expected to take approximately 140 days to complete.

FDOT's contractor, Ajax Paving Industries of Florida, is replacing the asphalt pavement at the U.S. 301 and Gibsonton Drive/Boyette Road intersection with concrete. Ajax will also repave U.S. 301 from Whitt Road to Rivercrest Drive.

During construction, motorists will need to detour around the closure using Riverview Drive, U.S. 41 and Symmes Road. Drivers traveling east of the intersection may use Rhodine Road, Balm Riverview Road, McMullen Road or Boyette Road as alternate routes. Access for businesses, residents and emergency vehicles will be maintained throughout the project.

When completed, the improved intersection will feature two left-turn lanes from westbound Boyette Road onto southbound U.S. 301, two through lanes from westbound Boyette Road across U.S. 301, and one right-turn lane from westbound Boyette Road onto northbound U.S. 301.

"We're going to close Gibsonton Drive just west of U.S. 301, so if you're traveling off I-75, you can get off the exit, but you will not be able to cross over U.S. 301. We are also reducing some of the travel lanes on U.S. 301. There'll be only two northbound and two southbound open," said Carson.

Once work on the western side of the intersection and southbound U.S. 301 lanes is complete, construction will shift to the eastern half of the intersection and northbound lanes. The project is expected to be completed near the end of July.

For more information or to sign up for traffic alerts, visit www.fdottampabay.com or call 813-975-6204.

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Year In Review – Updates On Our Top Stories From 2025

IMPORTANT PUBLIC MEETINGS COMING FOR SOUTH COUNTY PIPELINE PROJECT

By Brian Bokor





According to Brandon Moore, APR, public communications manager at Tampa Bay Water:

Construction for the South Hillsborough Pipeline started at FishHawk Creek and at the intersection of Kings and Bloomingdale avenues.

Construction will ramp up in 2026 and occur simultaneously in multiple locations over the next three years for the pipeline in service by 2028.

Seventeen tunneling locations will minimize traffic impacts, reduce utility conflicts and reduce environmental impacts.

Residents can receive project updates, by signing up for the email list at https://southhillsboroughpipeline.com/.

Original Story Printed In February 2025.

To meet long-term water needs, Tampa Bay Water is building a new South Hillsborough Pipeline that will deliver up to 65 million gallons per day of additional drinking water to the rapidly growing southern Hillsborough County service area.

The 26-mile pipeline will include pipes up to 60 inches in diameter and carries a total project cost of $505.7 million, with up to $84 million funded by Hillsborough County. Construction is expected to begin as early as fall 2025, with completion anticipated in spring 2029. The pipeline is expected to be placed into service by late 2028.

The pipeline will begin at Tampa Bay Water's Tampa Bay Regional Surface Water Treatment Plant in Brandon, connect to Hillsborough County's Lithia Water Treatment Plant, and end at the county's new connection point at Balm Riverview and Balm roads. Once completed, it will provide system redundancy between the Brandon and Lithia water treatment plants.

Tampa Bay Water is hosting several community meetings along the pipeline route to share information and answer questions. Residents are encouraged to review the project map and attend the meeting closest to their home or business. Those living along the route will receive invitation postcards indicating which meeting to attend.

Each meeting will begin at 6:30 p.m. with an open house featuring maps and informational displays, followed by a formal presentation at 7 p.m. and a question-and-answer session.

Engineering consultants evaluated 10 possible routes using 13 selection criteria, including public inconvenience, safety, environmental impacts, permitting and cost, narrowing the options to three preferred routes.

Sam Flowers, construction manager of Garney Construction, said, "To expedite the project, crews are working Monday through Saturday, 7 a.m.-5 p.m.

Some night work is planned to reduce impacts on local businesses, with rolling three-block street closures used during construction.

VALRICO COMMUNITY PLAN READY TO PRESENT

By Marie Gilmore



In 2025, the Valrico Community Plan went before the Planning Commission on April 14 and the board of county commissioners on August 14 and then November 13, on which the plan was adopted by the board. The effective date of the language is January 1, 2026, and will be posted on the Plan Hillsborough website shortly following.

The project website (https://planhillsborough.org/planvalrico/) has highlighted the draft community plan, nonadopted background report and concept map documents. The "plan amendment" button will take you to a folder with all the information for the Valrico plan amendment. Public hearing videos are at the bottom of the webpage.

The project page will be updated with the final documents following the effective date of the community plan. Please check back early January for updated information.

Original Story Printed In February 2025.

County planners have been working with community members, advocates and homeowners association boards to create the Valrico Community Plan. In March 2023, the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners requested staff initiate the process to develop the plan.

A community plan is an extension and refinement of the county's comprehensive plan. While the comprehensive plan provides broad, countywide guidance, a community plan is more detailed and focuses on specific issues raised by local stakeholders. The Valrico Community Plan is being developed through a process that involves the community at each phase and highlights the area's special and unique characteristics.

The scope of the study includes creating a community-wide vision, establishing community goals, developing strategies to achieve those goals and producing a community concept map.

Valrico by the numbers shows the importance of the effort. In 2022, Valrico was home to approximately 50,000 residents, 18,000 residences and 2,000 jobs. Thirty-one percent of the population is between the ages of 45 and 64.

The study will result in the Valrico Community Plan, which will be presented to the Board of County Commissioners for consideration. Adoption of the plan could lead to amendments to the Hillsborough County Comprehensive Plan and/or the Land Development Code, though any final policy changes remain at the discretion of the board.

Plan manager Jay Collins added, "The Valrico Community Plan will only be part of the Unincorporated Hillsborough County Comprehensive Plan. The Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) did not direct staff to work on the Land Development Code. If adopted by the BOCC, the Valrico Community Plan will be the 23rd adopted Community Plan in Unincorporated Hillsborough County.

VFor maps and information, visit https://planhillsborough.org/planvalrico/



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HABITAT HILLSBOROUGH RECEIVES $147,000 DONATION TOWARD AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Staff Report



Habitat for Humanity of Hillsborough County has confirmed that Hector Ortero-Reyes and his family are now living in their new home, and they were excited to spend their first holiday season in it. The Habitat home was completed in July, and a dedication ceremony was held for it on August 26.

Original Story Printed In March 2025.

With rising construction costs impacting the housing industry, Habitat for Humanity of Hillsborough County recently received a generous donation supporting its mission to help local residents achieve homeownership. Global architecture and design firm Gensler's Tampa office presented a check for $147,500 to the nonprofit, which will go toward completing a Habitat home for local resident Hector Ortero-Reyes and his family.

"As we navigate a changing industry, our commitment to providing affordable housing has not wavered. We're grateful for community partners, like Gensler Tampa, who share in our commitment and donate their time, talent and treasure toward making homeownership a reality for so many," said Tina Forcier, CEO at Habitat Hillsborough.

Following the presentation, Gensler Tampa staff volunteered on-site, helping paint and install doors and trim on the three-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath townhome, as well as nearby Habitat townhomes. Habitat Hillsborough homeowners qualify through the organization's homeownership program, which requires contributing at least 300 hours of "sweat equity" toward construction alongside Habitat volunteers.

Otero-Reyes, who lives with his wife and two young children and is expected to receive the keys to his new home later this year, expressed gratitude for the volunteers who are helping his family achieve long-term stability.

"It is amazing seeing people being generous with their time and money, and not expecting anything in return," said Otero-Reyes. "Owning a home is an investment in our future. I'm happy that my kids will have their own rooms and a safe place to play outdoors."

"We recognize that Habitat does more than build homes; it builds strong communities that foster a sense of belonging," said Sarah Joubert, principal and co-managing director of Gensler's Tampa office.

Habitat for Humanity of Hillsborough County is located at 8247 N. Florida Ave. in Tampa. For more information, visit www.habitathillsborough.org..

HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY SEEKS TO IMPROVE FISHHAWK SPORTS COMPLEX

By Nick Nahas



Photos courtesy of Hillsborough County Parks & Recreation.

A $2.1 million expansion, which included a land swap with developer Newland Communities.



The complex originally featured 12 fields, eight dedicated to baseball and softball and four multipurpose fields for soccer, cheerleading, football and lacrosse.

According to Chris Kiddy, CYSA, athletics manager of the Parks and Recreation Department, Hillsborough County and its partners have made meaningful progress at the FishHawk Sports Complex. The batting cages at the softball fields have been fully rebuilt, and several field areas with heavy wear have been resodded to improve playability. The team has also worked closely with both the softball and baseball leagues to better coordinate schedules and maximize field use, ensuring all programs continue to have balanced access.

In addition, staff have worked diligently to repair storm-related damage and restore the facility to its prestorm condition.

The team is pleased with the progress and remains committed to maintaining and improving the complex.

Original Story Printed In May 2025.

Hillsborough County is seeking resident input through a survey to help shape the future of baseball and softball at the FishHawk Sports Complex. Feedback will guide improvements to facilities, services, and overall community needs.

"The survey was created to help us better understand the community's needs at FishHawk Sports Complex, one of our busiest athletic sites in Hillsborough County," said Chris Kiddy, athletics manager for Hillsborough County Parks & Recreation.

Established in May 2008, the FishHawk Sports Complex is the only county complex where all sports operate under a single organization — the FishHawk Youth Sports Association. The complex initially featured 12 fields, eight for baseball and softball and four multipurpose fields for soccer, cheerleading, football, and lacrosse.

High demand led residents to advocate for more space and parking, resulting in a $2.1 million expansion in 2011, including a land swap with developer Newland Communities. In 2017, four new multipurpose fields and 200 additional parking spaces were added, and in 2022, two synthetic turf fields were installed — one for baseball and one for football, soccer, and lacrosse.

Today, more than 2,000 athletes, ages 5-19, participate annually, making FishHawk the largest sports complex in Southern Hillsborough County and the second largest in the county overall, after the Ed Radice Sports Complex.



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Year In Review – Updates On Our Top Stories From 2025

USF MOVES FORWARD WITH PLANS FOR PROJECT FEATURING HOUSING, RESEARCH FACILITY, RESTAURANTS AND MORE

Staff Report



The Florida Board of Governors, which oversees the State University System, has unanimously approved University of South Florida's planned Fletcher district. The first phase of the project is estimated to cost $268 million and span 908,000 square feet, according to Board of Governors documents. The first phase is planned to start this spring and be completed by July 2028.

Original Story Printed In October 2025.

The University of South Florida (USF) Board of Trustees has approved plans to transform the university's former 138-acre golf course into a mixed-use destination called the Fletcher District. The project will feature housing, restaurants, retail, a hotel and conference center, an academic research facility, and recreational space, creating a hub that supports USF's strategic vision.

="The Fletcher District will be transformational for the University of South Florida and will help to further elevate and drive economic development in the Tampa Bay region," said USF President Rhea Law. "We are creating a dynamic destination to live, work, learn and play that provides exciting new opportunities to bring together members of the USF and surrounding communities."

=The first phase covers roughly 27 acres north of Fletcher Avenue and east of North 46th Street. It will be developed as a public-private partnership, with USF entering a master development agreement with ACE Fletcher LLC. Each project component will operate under separate ground subleases with private developers, while the university retains land ownership. The district is expected to foster innovation and strengthen ties with nearby areas.

Phase one estimates include:

Student housing: About 700 beds and 335,000 square feet.

Multifamily housing: Approximately 150 units and 160,000 square feet.

Hotel and conference center: 150 rooms and 78,000 square feet.

Restaurants and retail: 60,000 square feet, with four to six restaurants.

USF academic research building: Roughly 350,000 square feet, final size dependent on funding, supporting the university's mission and expanding its academic footprint.

The project is pending Florida Board of Governors approval, expected in November. If approved, construction could begin in fall 2026, with phase one opening by fall 2028. More information is available at www.usf.edu/facilities/notices/fletcher/index.aspx

A KID'S PLACE BREAKS GROUND ON 12,000-SQUARE-FOOT ACTIVITY CENTER

By Marie Gilmore



A Kid's Place celebrated the groundbreaking of its new 12,000-square-foot activity center.



According to Samantha Mellen, development director at A Kid's Place Tampa Bay, $6 million of the $8 million goal for the new activity center has been raised, and construction is very close to starting. It is in the final checklist phase to receive its civil permit. Construction is estimated to begin in early January, and it is projected that the activity center will be completed in a year.

Original Story Printed In June 2025.

What began as a vision from Dottie Berger MacKinnon to create a group foster home in Eastern Hillsborough County that would keep siblings together has grown into a thriving 13-acre campus — and it continues to expand.

This April, A Kid's Place celebrated a major milestone with the groundbreaking of the MacKinnon Family Activity Center, a 12,000-square-foot facility designed to enhance services and experiences for the children in its care. The center will feature an expanded indoor gathering space for birthdays, holidays, and other celebrations, as well as rooms for therapy, family visitation, arts and crafts, and vocational training. It will also include an educational computer lab and dedicated areas for the 'Stepping Stones' program, which helps youth ages 13 and up develop independent living skills. Outdoor features include a basketball court, courtyard, swimming pool, and exercise room.

Leaders, board members, staff, volunteers, donors, and community officials attended the groundbreaking, which included presentations, refreshments, and campus tours.

"This is so heartwarming," said Sandy MacKinnon, husband of founder Dottie. "Sheriff David Gee wanted a place to take kids that deputies could bring kids day or night where they could have love and affection and the caring that they so desperately need."

Hillsborough County has also supported the organization's growth. Myers attended the event, noting the county's contribution of $900,000. "Today is special, and these children are looking for the same hope and opportunity as us, and the county contributed $900,000 to help. And this is what it's all about, we invest in our communities," she said.

Founded in 2009, A Kid's Place serves children removed from their homes due to abuse, neglect, or abandonment. The 60-bed campus cares for children from birth to 17, as well as young adults ages 18-22 aging out of foster care, helping more than 1,700 children and 753 families.. For more information, visit akidsplacetb.org..

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FLORIDA STATE PARKS RENEW THE '2025 CAPTURE ... THE REAL FLORIDA PHOTO CONTEST'

By Michaela Galligan



Deb Skinner captured the Myakka River landscape in her grand-prize-winning photo.

The 2025 photo contest received numerous, awe-inspiring submissions from talented photographers, which made judging become a difficult task. Winners were chosen for these five categories: Wildlife, Landscapes, Waterscapes, Park Adventures and Historic Encounters. A grand prize winner, a runner-up, a people's choice recipient, and two finalists were selected for each category, and their names and photos are viewable at https://www.floridastateparks.org/photo-contest-2025. The photo contest will return for 2026, with the submission portal opening in November 2026, so be sure to start shooting your favorite photos.

Original Story Printed In August 2025.

The Florida State Parks have launched the '2025 Capture ... the Real Florida Photo Contest,' an annual competition encouraging photographers to capture the beauty of Florida's state parks, with prizes providing added incentive.

Florida boasts 195 state parks, from Pensacola to Key West, offering countless opportunities to photograph stunning landscapes. The contest was created to engage the public and celebrate the parks through personal, creative expression.

"The annual contest invites visitors to showcase what makes Florida's state parks special," said Nikki Clifton, deputy press secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, "from natural landscapes and wildlife to recreational opportunities and cultural resources."

Contestants must submit original photos by Monday, September 1. Judging and semifinalist voting will occur from September through October, with winners announced shortly after. Entries must include the park name and a brief description and are judged on originality, composition, and how well they reflect the spirit of 'the Real Florida.'

The contest features categories for professionals, hobbyists, students, and mobile devices, giving participants multiple opportunities to win. Prizes include B&H Photo gift cards, Florida State Parks annual passes, paddleboards, and hammocks. Awards include a first-place grand prize package, a runner-up package, and a people's choice prize package.

"By sharing their work, photographers help inspire others to explore and support Florida's state parks," Clifton said.

Visit https://photocontest.floridastateparks.org/contest7 which also features a gallery of past winners.

FLORIDA BIRDING AND BUTTERFLY COMPETITION 'WINGS OVER FLORIDA' SOARS TO NEW HEIGHTS

By Paige Carbon



Paige Carbon reported on December 22 that as of that day, she was at 87 birds for her Florida bird count. During the weekend before then, she visited Cockroach Bay Preserve, Bahia Beach Nature Preserve, Apollo Beach Nature Preserve and Circle B Bar Reserve, and over the course of three days she was able to up her count from 75 to 87.

"There are still 10 more days in the year and plenty of time to get to my goal of 100. Happy birding!" she said.

Original Story Printed September 2025.

Wings Over Florida is an annual program that awards participants certificates for tracking bird and butterfly observations in Florida from January 1 to December 31 each year. The free program is open to all ages, with multiple certificates available for milestones, including Big Year certificates, which recognize the number of species observed in a single calendar year. The best part is that you don't need much to get started, and birds and butterflies can be found almost anywhere.

The program is managed by the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, with support from the Florida Department of Transportation and the Fish and Wildlife Foundation of Florida. Originally focused on birds, butterfly counts were later added. Some rules apply: non-native birds cannot be counted, and while participants don't need to be Florida residents, all observations must occur in Florida.

In Hillsborough County, there are roughly 21 Great Florida Birding Trails, including Balm-Boyette Scrub Nature Preserve, Cockroach Bay Nature Preserve, and Little Manatee River State Park. Backyard birding is also an easy way to start. New birders are encouraged to visit a local park, go with a friend, or join a guided walk. The Tampa Audubon Society hosts monthly guided events and often loans binoculars. Hillsborough County Parks and Preserves highlights some of the best birdwatching spots, and the annual Hillsborough Hiking Spree includes guided walks at many of these sites.

By participating, you become a citizen scientist helping track trends in bird and butterfly populations. In return, you receive a personalized certificate, with the featured species changing each year. Certificates start at 25 bird or 10 butterfly sightings, with additional Big Year awards. Last year, my best Big Year recorded 95 birds; this year, my goal is 100.

For more, visit https://floridabirdingtrail.com/wings-over-florida/..

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WINTER JAM RETURNS WITH CHRIS TOMLIN, MATTHEW WEST AND MORE

Staff Report



The Winter Jam Tour, founded and produced by NewSong and promoted in partnership with TPR., returns to Tampa's Benchmark International Arena on January 10, 2026, with an all-star lineup and a renewed mission to unite fans through powerful music. Known as Christian music's largest annual tour, Winter Jam 2026 will feature performances by Chris Tomlin, Matthew West, Katy Nichole, Hulvey, Disciple, Emerson Day and NewSong, along with speaker Zane Black.

Fans can arrive early for the Pre-Jam Party, featuring Jeremy Rosado, Heath Brothers and Cliff Preston.

"We are in a moment in our country, ... one of revival and awakening that is being sparked by young people. Each night of Winter Jam is an opportunity to experience how God is continuing to move and use this generation," shared Tomlin. "Let's come together as the people of God, singing the praises of God, in the presence of God."

Known for its 'no ticket required' approach, Winter Jam continues its long-standing tradition of affordability and accessibility, with admission being only a $15 donation at the door. Fans can also join Jam Nation for free and get early admission, exclusive merchandise and opportunities to connect directly with artists during select Q&A sessions.

Since its founding more than 30 years ago, Winter Jam has grown into one of the most influential tours in Christian music, consistently ranking among Pollstar's Top 100 Tours and drawing hundreds of thousands of fans each year. The tour's unique model — no tickets, one affordable donation — reflects its heart for accessibility and ministry.

Fans can find full tour information, city-specific details and Jam Nation registration at https://jamtour.com/.

Advanced parking passes are available at www.parkwhiz.com. Visit www.benchmarkintlarena.com or call 813-301-2500 for more information.

About Winter Jam

Founded over two decades ago by NewSong, Winter Jam remains committed to its mission of presenting the gospel through music in an accessible and affordable way. The tour has ranked among Pollstar's top tours numerous times, continuing to reach audiences nationwide.

FOUNDATION HOSTS PADDLES FOR A PURPOSE FOR JOHN

Staff Report



On January 10, 2026, a group of volunteers are coming together as a pickleball community to support one of our own — John Evensen.

John spent his adult life serving others as a dedicated police officer, and after years of service he fulfilled his dream of retiring and joined the Angel Foundation FL's pickleball family as an avid and healthy player. Sadly, a medical complication led to two strokes, leaving John paralyzed from the waist down with significantly diminished eyesight. As you can imagine, his recovery and daily needs are tremendous. A family friend recently helped by enlarging his shower, but he still requires a specialized wheelchair, a lift system above his bed and assistance with ongoing medical expenses.

The Angel Foundation FL is hosting fundraising pickleball tournament, Paddles for a Purpose - Rally for John, not only to play the game that foundation members love but also to make a meaningful difference for John. In addition to players, the Angel Foundation FL is seeking donations and sponsorships to ensure the event's success.

Donations and sponsorships for the Evensen family can be made through the Angel Foundation FL, and it will ensure all proceeds go directly to their support. Your donation is tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law. The Angel Foundation FL is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization, and your contribution is greatly appreciated.

The foundation also needs items for raffle baskets if you have anything you would like to donate.

The Paddles for a Purpose fundraiser will start at 8 a.m. and be held at High 5 Inc., located at 405 Beverly Blvd. in Brandon. The cost is $55 per player.

For sponsorship opportunities, visit https://angelfoundationfl.networkforgood.com/events/92372. The deadline for sponsors to get their names on T-shirts is Wednesday, December 31.

For any questions regarding the tournament, sponsorships or donations, please contact Debbi Figlewski at 813-263-0932 or Michele Rudacille at 813-956-8098.









CABIN CREEK HOMEMADE SOAPS: PURE INGREDIENTS, HONEST CRAFTSMANSHIP

By McKenzie Brown



Cabin Creek Homemade Soaps founder Brooke Krencik, age 14, and her mom, Jessica Foster, started making their own soaps.

Cabin Creek Homemade Soaps began with a goal that a lot of people can get behind — removing unnecessary chemicals from everyday routines and replacing them with something cleaner and more trustworthy. Founder Brooke Krencik, age 14, and her mom, Jessica Foster, started making their own soaps after realizing how many products were filled with ingredients they didn't feel great using. What started as a personal switch for her family turned into a genuine passion for creating simple, natural products that make a real difference. Once she saw the results at home, she felt inspired to offer that same level of purity and care to others.

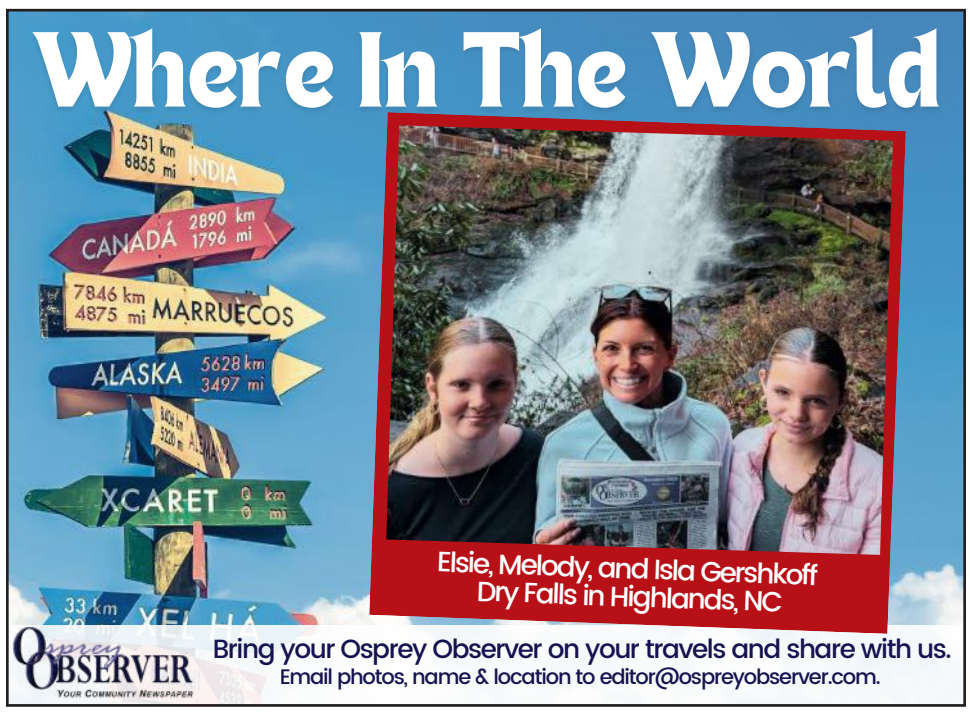
Every Cabin Creek soap bar is 100 percent natural, handmade and made with organic ingredients. They're crafted to be gentle but effective, leaving skin feeling hydrated, balanced and soft instead of stripped or irritated. Because they're designed for both face and body, the soaps fit easily into any daily routine and turn basic cleansing into a small, refreshing moment of self-care.

The brand offers a variety of bars with different skin benefits, so there's something for almost every skin type. Options include acne-fighting, detoxifying, pore-tightening, moisturizing, cleansing, firming, blemish control and antiaging effects. Each bar is made with ingredients meant to support healthy skin without relying on harsh additives.

Cabin Creek has several customer favorites that stand out. The Cabin Creek Rustic Remedy Soap is known for its comforting, earthy feel and is great for everyday use. The Cabin Creek Clear Detox Soap focuses on drawing out impurities and leaving the skin feeling clean and refreshed. For something more soothing, the Cabin Creek Honey & Oat Rejuvenating Soap blends real honey and organic oats for a calming, lightly exfoliating and moisturizing experience.

Overall, Cabin Creek Homemade Soaps stays true to its origins — creating products that are simple, natural and made with genuine care. For anyone looking to upgrade their skincare routine with something clean, thoughtful and effective, these handmade bars offer a trustworthy option. For further questions, send Cabin Creek a message at oldcountrycottage28@gmail.com.











GET THE DIRT:
SPICE UP YOUR HOLIDAYS

BY LYNN BARBER, URBAN HORTICULTURE AGENT







More holidays are upon us. Some favorite spices include rosemary, sage and marjoram.

Rosemary is a fragrant herb that is easy to grow and works well in your landscape and kitchen. It can be used fresh or dried in recipes containing meats, breads and vegetables. Rosemary adds great flavor to a skewer for the barbecue. It's attractive in the landscape and is drought-tolerant, thriving on well-drained soil and at least six hours of sun. Don't water too often — less is better than more.

Sage thrives in full sun and well-drained soil. It is drought-tolerant once established but can't tolerate wet or poorly drained soils, which may lead to root rot. This perennial herb is a low-maintenance plant that can be pruned to maintain shape and encourage bushier growth. Salvia officinalis, or common sage, is used to flavor meats (pork, poultry), stuffings for turkey, sauces and soups. It can be fried until crispy or infused into butter for pasta, potatoes and squash.

Marjoram has a delicate, sweet and slightly piney flavor. Most people use it to enhance poultry, pork, fish and delicate vegetables, like green beans, carrots and squash. This spice compliments tomato sauces, soups and salads. Many people add fresh marjoram at the end of cooking to preserve the subtle flavor.

Contact Lynn Barber directly at labarber@ufl.edu.

ROTARY SPOTLIGHT:
ACTIVITIES, MEETINGS & MORE

Staff Report

34th Annual Bill Harper Classic Golf Tournament

Rotary Club of Brandon is kicking off 2026 with two major fundraising events aimed at supporting local charities and providing scholarships for college-bound students.

The first event, the 34th Annual Bill Harper Classic Golf Tournament, is scheduled for January 15, 2026, at Buckhorn Golf and Country Club. Those interested in participating or learning more can contact Brett Briggs at 813-240-5380.

2026 Wild Game Dinner

Next on the calendar is the 2026 Wild Game Dinner, set for February 27, 2026, at the Hillsborough County Fairgrounds. Attendees will enjoy an all-you-can-eat wild game feast, an open bar, a wall-of-guns raffle, a cornhole tournament, and a 50/50 drawing.

Tickets, sponsorship details, and additional information are available at www.BrandonWildGame.com, or by reaching out to any Rotary Club of Brandon member.

If you are interested in finding out more about Rotary or how to join this amazing club, text Debbie Meegan at 813-601-2315 or join us for lunch on Tuesdays at noon at the Rivard Simmons Rotary Event Center located at 3007 S. Kings Avenue. Brandon

January Speakers For FishHawk/Riverview Rotary Club

The FishHawk/Riverview Rotary Club continues its community programming with several meetings and events planned through December and January. The club will hold a Club Assembly on December 15 and a White Elephant Gift Exchange in December. January programs include Liz Anderson, Director of Development for the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay, on January 5; Hillsborough County Chief Deputy Joe Mauier on January 12; and a Honduras Trip recap highlighting recent international service work on January 26.

You can also join the club on Mondays from 12 Noon–1 p.m. at Gasparilla Pizzeria & Growlers, 1028 E Bloomingdale Ave, Valrico, FL 33596, or on Thursdays from 5–6:30 p.m. at the Shrimp Boat, 1020 Bloomingdale Ave, Valrico, FL 33596. For more information, contact Betty Huth at betty@hbphoto.com.



ASSOC. CHAPTER HONORS THE DEVIL'S BRIGADE AT MENTON EVENT

By David Miller



Members of Special Forces Association Chapter LX gathered on December 4 for an evening of remembrance, gratitude and fellowship during the annual Menton Day Celebration. Hosted at Team House Tampa, the event brought together U.S. Army Special Forces veterans, Canadian partners and members of the community to honor the deactivation of the 1st Special Service Force (FSSF) on December 5, 1944, in Menton, France.

But Menton Day is far more than a commemoration of a date. It is a recognition of a fighting formation whose courage, ingenuity and sacrifice fundamentally reshaped the concept of special operations and laid the foundation for the modern Green Beret and Canadian SOF heritage.

Formed in 1942 as a binational U.S.-Canadian force, the 1st Special Service Force, soon nicknamed the Devil's Brigade by German troops, was tasked with missions no other unit had the training or audacity to attempt. Operating in extreme environments, advancing against fortified mountain defenses and conducting relentless night raids, the FSSF repeatedly succeeded where conventional forces could not.

Their legendary assault on Monte La Difensa in Italy, scaling sheer cliffs under darkness to seize a position considered unassailable, demonstrated a fusion of endurance, tactical innovation and fearlessness that stunned Allied commanders. At Anzio, Italy, their aggressive patrolling and silent infiltration of enemy lines instilled such fear that German soldiers referred to them as "Die Schwarzen Teufel" — The Black Devils.

The Devil's Brigade became the prototype for modern special forces in both the United States and Canada. Their seamless binational integration set the early standard for today's allied SOF partnerships, while their independence as small teams operating behind enemy lines foreshadowed the 12-man ODA structure used by Green Berets today. Their demanding training in demolitions, mountaineering, amphibious operations, winter warfare and close combat shaped the broad skillset now expected of special forces soldiers

In keeping with longstanding tradition, attendees wore their berets, carried a knife of choice and brought the iconic canteen cup, symbols of field service, shared hardship and the brotherhood that defines the special forces community.

Special Forces Association Team House in Tampa is open to all veterans Wednesday through Sunday from 3-10 p.m.

COUNTY CAMPAIGN HIGHLIGHTS SAFETY OF COUNTY DRINKING WATER

By Brian Bokor

Hillsborough County Water Resources is encouraging residents to learn more about their local drinking water through its ongoing 'Quality on Tap' public awareness effort, which spotlights the science and infrastructure behind every gallon delivered to homes across the county.



Each day, the department provides more than 73 million gallons of drinking water to over 725,000 residents in unincorporated Hillsborough County. All water is treated and monitored to meet or exceed state and federal standards, with extensive year-round testing to ensure safety and reliability.

In 2024, county staff collected more than 7,600 water samples and conducted over 33,500 laboratory tests, with thousands more performed by the county's certified environmental laboratory as part of ongoing quality control. According to the department, tap water remains one of the most affordable options for residents at approximately $4.10 per 1,000 gallons, a fraction of the cost of bottled water and a more environmentally responsible choice.

Hillsborough County Water Resources operates four water treatment plants, five wastewater treatment plants, a bio-solids facility and multiple field support locations. Trained water professionals oversee the system 24 hours a day, maintaining infrastructure, protecting public health and supporting long-term water reliability for a fast-growing region.

While Tampa Bay Water serves as the regional wholesale supplier for Hillsborough, Pinellas, and Pasco counties, Hillsborough County Water Resources is responsible for treating, testing and delivering drinking water directly to residents. Tampa Bay Water is also advancing a major Southern Hillsborough County pipeline expansion that will move up to 65 million gallons of drinking water per day to support projected population growth. Construction activity related to this regional project is already creating local traffic impacts and is expected to continue through its anticipated completion in 2028.

Most *Osprey Observer* readers are served by the county's south-central community public water system, which covers large portions of Central and Southeastern unincorporated Hillsborough County, including Brandon, Riverview, Apollo Beach and surrounding communities.

The county operates 11 community public water systems, each with its own annual water quality report. The 2024 reports, published in 2025, are the most current and include testing results and information required by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which mandates monitoring for more than 80 regulated contaminants. Residents can identify their specific water system using the lookup tool on the county's website. Printed reports may be requested by calling 813-246-3146.









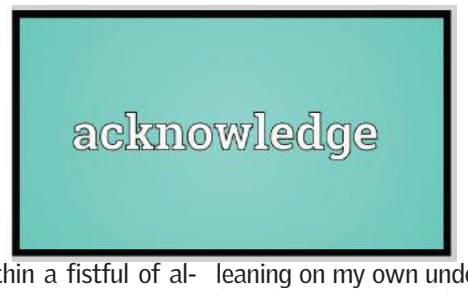
Christian Voice



Grace Notes

Word for the Year

By Debora Coty



Each January, many people choose a word for the upcoming year—a single word that symbolizes their New Year's quest. A focus. An aspiration. A goal. You might even say a resolution encased within a fistful of alphabet letters.

An easily post-able, portable, proverbial reminder of what we deem most important to personally achieve during the next 365 days.

I decided to choose a word this year too. So I asked Papa God for wisdom about my focal word. Several flitted through my mind, but none seemed quite right. Then I looked up. My eyes focused on the contrail of an airplane slashing the blue morning sky with a straight, white line disappearing into cloud cover, its final destination hidden from view.

Acknowledge, a still, small voice whispered to my heart. And a familiar Scripture flashed before my mind's eye: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways a c k n owl e d g e him, and he will make your paths straight," (Proverbs 3:5-6, NIV).

I could sure use a straight path. But in order to find one, the Word of God says I need to do three things: Trust in the Lord with all my heart. Stop leaning on my own understanding, which is based on my personal experiences and perceptions and colored by my pain.

Acknowledge Him in all my ways. Know God first (the root of 'knowledge'). Then take action based on that knowledge.

Action + knowledge = acknowledge. Of course. That's my word. And my quest for this year: To actively lean on His understanding, not mine, by delving deeper into His Word, which will allow me to discern His will; to base my actions on that knowledge and trust Him with my whole heart.

This will result in a straight path. Even though I can't see where the path ends, it's the trail I want to be on. Like that contrail. So how about you, my friend?

Are you up for the challenge of choosing your life focal word for the upcoming year? New year. New adventures. New blessings. After all, the sky's the limit!

Debora M. Coty is an inspirational speaker and award-winning author of over 40 books, including the bestselling Too Blessed to be Stressed series. Visit with Debora anytime at www.DeboraCoty.com.

HOLIDAY DECORATIONS: ORNAMENTAL OR SACRAMENTAL?



This column may be born on Christmas, but it works for the new year too. I will start with a quiz. Ready? Looking at this photograph, what is the most compelling decorative element?

The handmade quilt? Or the beautiful tree in the corner? Is it the collection of lace snowflakes? Maybe the poinsettias in the hearth?

They are all good answers, but the response I'm thinking of is our dog, Max! An artfully placed golden retriever enhances any holiday scene. Actually, he just plopped down after walking through. When I photographed our last house for sale, someone asked why I put Max in so many pictures. I didn't; he just shows up, and he's pretty stealth about it.

But, other than being decorative, Max is real — and I think that is the most compelling thing. Holiday decorations — other than the occasional 'live' tree — are only real to the extent the symbolism they carry points to truth rather than make-believe.

Symbolism is fine, but it only holds life if it is rooted in life. Absent spiritual truth and our connection to the heart of God, a manger scene and a heavenly host are about as real as the plastic Santa on the front lawn — maybe less so because at least Santa oils the wheels of commerce.

I believe that the emptiness that is so pervasive in our world is amplified to the extent that the manger scene, the baby Jesus, the lights on the house and the Christmas symbols we display have no meaningful connection to that Holy Night, the Living God, a personal Jesus and the very real introduction of hope and promise and redemption into this world.

Nostalgia alone does not cannot answer the deep yearning people have for a restored relationship with the Creator and for spiritual healing.

If the only holiday decoration that seems real to you is the golden retriever, then understand this: Because of Jesus — Wonderful Counselor, Beautiful Savior, Prince of Peace — the decorations are no longer merely ornamental, they will become sacramental.

May it be so. — DEREK



Derek Maul has written for many news outlets, including the Tampa Tribune, The United Methodist News Service, All Pro Dad, FOCUS Magazine, Newsweek, USA Today, The Christian Science Monitor, Presbyterians Today, Guideposts, Chicken Soup for the Soul and many other publications. Read Derek Maul's daily blog posts at www.derekmaul.wordpress.com.

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