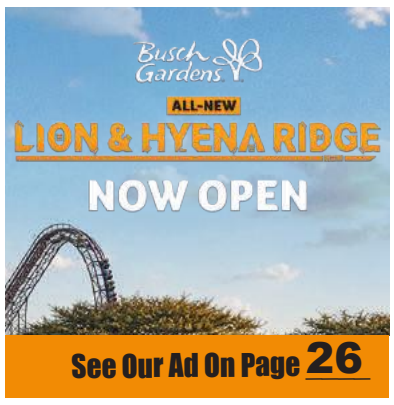


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FAMILY PROMISE HELPS FAMILIES BUILD A MORE STABLE FUTURE

By Dale Bliss



Family Promise of Hillsborough County helps families have a chance to find stability and hope.

When someone gives a promise of hope, it changes circumstances, thoughts and hearts. It may help give someone a whole new navigation in a new direction to a whole new path.

This is what Family Promise of Hillsborough County Inc. is all about.

Edwina Reddick, B.S. Mgmnt., executive director, said, "I have seen families walk through our doors feeling hopeless and uncertain about their future and leave not only with keys in their hands but with renewed hope."

She continued, "Through the support and resources provided by Family Promise, families begin to see that their circumstances can change. They leave knowing that their future can be brighter and more stable than it was when they first arrived."

Family Promise is a program that gives families with children of school age, no matter the structure of the family, and with less than livable incomes a place to go to receive prevention, diversion and stabilization services. It has been in existence since May 2014.

Families facing eviction can come to Family Promise to avoid being evicted. The program helps identify the disabling areas in the lives of families and what may have aided in the crisis and gives aid and solutions by connecting them with available resources that would help their specific circumstances.

After the crisis has been dealt with, Reddick and her dedicated staff do not stop. They continue the journey with the family through the Stabilization Services. This service is designed to help families gain strength in their foundation and meet other challenges they may be incurring. This may help the family reduce continued housing difficulties. The service is provided for up to a year, and in some circumstances longer if more support is needed.

"We do not simply create a plan for the family; we work with the family to create a plan that reflects their needs, their goals and their vision for a more stable future," Reddick explained.

Architecting a plan in this matter puts the family central in the process of reestablishing their circumstances.

With a stabilization coach, families can decide the 'key' areas, such as employment, housing, finances, how to budget, the need of transportation and child care, and other areas that need to be sorted out and dealt with that may affect stabilization long-term.

Family Promise is having its annual Christmas Cookie Sale on Saturday and Sunday, December 12-13, at New Hope Family Life Center, located at 121 N. Knights Ave., Brandon. The hours will be Saturday, 9-2 p.m., and Sunday, 9-1 p.m. During this time, there will be a Christmas Bazaar and a raffle.

For more information you may visit Family Promise of Hillsborough County at 201 E. Morgan St. in Brandon, go to www.familypromisefl.org, email executivedirectorfpgb@gmail.com or call 813-681-6170. You can also visit its Facebook page at www.facebook.com/familypromisefl.

A PLACE TO CALL HOME: SAVANNA THOMPSON RECEIVES HABITAT KEYS

Staff Report



Savanna Thompson celebrates receiving the keys to her new home in Windhorst Commons during a dedication ceremony with Habitat for Humanity and home sponsor Gensler.

After a lifetime of searching for a safe place that feels like home, Savanna Thompson received the keys to her own home Friday during a dedication ceremony with Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough and home sponsor Gensler.

Thompson works for the nonprofit ECHO of Brandon and has bounced around to more than 10 homes throughout her life. She described her childhood home as a place of fear and anxiety and said she has spent much of her life searching for security and comfort. Thompson has been living in a one-bedroom apartment that limits her ability to care for others and has been dealing with a bug infestation.

Now, with the help of Habitat and Gensler, Thompson is a homeowner at Windhorst Commons in Brandon. She hopes her new home will eventually allow her to become a licensed foster parent and provide children with the safety and stability she has long wished to give them.

"I'm so grateful for your hard work, time, and support to help me become a homeowner," said Thompson. "One of my deepest longings in life has been to provide a home to others. I want to open my home to children who need a safe place to land. You are helping make my dreams come true."

The home is the third of eight homes being built through Habitat of Tampa Bay Hillsborough's Pope Leo Village initiative, inspired by Pope Leo's commitment to serving others and encouraging people of all faiths to support affordable homeownership through volunteering and giving.

"Pope Leo Village is about the power of giving through time and resources and ultimately giving families the opportunity to build a better future," said Tina Forcier, CEO of Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough. "For Savanna, this home gives her the chance to extend the same generosity she has received to children in our community who need a family and a foundation of their own. We're grateful to Gensler for investing in Savanna's next chapter and in the children she will one day welcome into it."

This is the second Habitat home Gensler has sponsored, giving the firm another opportunity to put its belief in the power of design to work in the community.

"At Gensler, we think a lot about how the places we design affect people's everyday lives, and this is a really meaningful example of that," said Sarah Joubert, principal and managing director at Gensler. "We're proud to partner with Habitat and be part of creating a place where Savanna can feel a sense of belonging and have the space to pursue the future she envisions."

As a Habitat homeowner, Thompson contributed hundreds of hours of sweat equity, helping build her home and investing in her future. Windhorst Commons is Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough's 23-home neighborhood in Brandon, featuring hurricane-resilient construction. The remaining homes are expected to be completed by early 2027.

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Living in Victory Christian Church is a Bible-based congregation in Valrico, a place where the scriptures are honored, the presence of God is welcomed and ordinary people are changed. The church held a drive by prayer service for the community. See full story on Page 6.



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DENNIS RIESE BUILDS ONE-OF-A-KIND, CUSTOM ARCADE MACHINES

By Libby Hopkins



Dennis Riese, a resident of Valrico and the founder of Phantom Arcades, builds premium, fully custom arcades for homes, businesses and events. Built with high-end components, stunning artwork and thousands of games, each machine delivers an unforgettable experience.

Since 2015, Riese has built 51 custom cabinets for celebrity owners, including The Undertaker and Michelle McCool, Rhea Ripley and Buddy Matthews, AJ Styles, Lil Yachty, Nick Carter, Joey Fatone and JWoww. Every machine is hand-built locally and designed around its owner, and his build videos have more than 10 million views online.

"Phantom Arcades really started by accident," Riese said. "I built my first arcade as a hobby for myself. One day, I had some friends over, and one of them liked it so much that he asked if he could buy it from me. I sold it to him and figured I'd just build myself another one. A few weeks later, another friend saw the new arcade and wanted to buy that one. So, I sold it to him too and built another. That was when I started thinking that maybe I had something here."

By 2022, Phantom Arcades had grown to the point where Riese had a decision to make.

"I decided to take a chance on the business, leave New York City Transit after 14 years, sell our home on Long Island, and move my family to Florida," he said. "That was when I committed to Phantom Arcades full time. Looking back, it's pretty incredible to think that the entire business started because a friend came over to my house and wanted to buy something I had built as a hobby."

What Riese enjoys most about building arcades is that no two projects are exactly the same.

"I get to take a customer's ideas, whether it's their favorite games, sports teams, movies, music or something personal to them, and turn those ideas into an arcade that is completely unique to them," he said. "I also love what happens after the arcade leaves my shop. These machines become something families and friends gather around. Knowing that something I built can become part of the memories a family makes together is probably the most rewarding part of what I do."

Riese's biggest goal for Phantom Arcades is to continue growing the business to the point where he can start hiring employees and building a team around it.

"Right now, Phantom Arcades is essentially a one-person operation," he said. "I'm very proud of that, but I also know that if I want the company to continue growing, eventually I can't do everything myself. I'd love to reach the point where I can hire people, teach them how I build these machines and create jobs here in our local community."

Recently, Phantom Arcades was featured on The Price Is Right, where one of Riese's custom arcades was a prize on the show.

If you'd like to learn more about Phantom Arcades or have a custom machine made, you can visit Riese's website at https://phantomarcades.com/ or call 813-419-7979.

HIGH 5 INC.'S ANNUAL CASINO NIGHT IS AROUND THE CORNER

By Emily Harper





High 5 Inc. is hosting its annual Ice the Dice Casino Night fundraiser on Friday, November 20. This event is the nonprofit's largest fundraiser of the year and serves as a way to positively impact the community.

"Don't miss one of the most exciting nights of the year — come roll the dice and change lives," High 5 Inc. posted on social media.

High 5 Inc. serves over 25,000 individuals in the Brandon area. The organization is dedicated to making a positive impact through its five pillars in progress: learn to swim, special needs education, after-school care, sports and recreation and community partnerships.

"Every dollar raised helps open doors to lifesaving swim lessons, adaptive programs that foster independence for adults with special needs, supportive places for children to learn and grow in a safe after-school space and recreational opportunities that build confidence, friendships and lifelong skills," according to High 5 Inc.'s website.

The fundraiser will be held at The Regent, located at 6437 Watson Rd. in Riverview, from 7-11 p.m. The attire is 'We're Bringing Back the '80s,' encouraging participants to dress in their favorite 80s-inspired fashion.

Throughout the night, there will be a variety of casino games, a dance floor, a silent auction, open bar, unlimited food and other entertainment.

Tickets can be purchased on High 5 Inc.'s website for $75 per person. You must be 21 or older to attend, and tickets include an open bar, unlimited food and play money.

High 5 is offering sponsorship opportunities at different tier levels, which include event tickets, open bar, unlimited food, play money and marketing specials.

For additional information about Ice the Dice Casino Night tickets or sponsorships, visit High 5 Inc.'s website at https://high5inc.org/casino-night/.





A NEW MODEL FOR COMMUNITY: CENTERPOINT OPENS ITS CAMPUS TO TAMPA BAY HEAT

Staff Report



An innovative partnership between Centerpoint Church and Tampa Bay HEAT is creating new opportunities for families across the Greater Brandon area while offering a different model for how churches can use their facilities to serve the community throughout the week.

Tampa Bay HEAT, a homeschool community serving more than 3,000 students, officially expanded onto the Centerpoint Church campus in January. Since then, the partnership has continued to grow, both in the number of families served and in the shared vision for the property.

Centerpoint Lead Pastor Bryant Golden said the partnership reflects the church's longstanding desire to be connected to the community.

"We've always believed the church should be deeply connected to and invested in its community," Golden said. "We have buildings, classrooms, land and resources that could sit largely unused during portions of the week. We began asking what it could look like to leverage those resources in a way that serves families and our community seven days a week."

Tampa Bay HEAT provides homeschool families with educational opportunities, classes, activities, athletics and community. Since moving onto the Centerpoint campus, HEAT has experienced significant growth.

"It has been an incredible partnership," Golden said. "We share a commitment to families, to our community and to creating environments where people can thrive."

A growing number of HEAT families have also begun attending Centerpoint, further strengthening the connection between the two organizations.

Quail Run Coffee has added another element to the campus, with its coffee shop operating six days a week, including Sundays. The location provides families, students, church members and others with a place to meet, work and connect.

The partnership is also shaping the future of the campus. Centerpoint plans to begin construction on a new auditorium and community-focused lobby in early 2027, with completion targeted for early 2028. Its current auditorium will become a gymnasium, expanded classrooms and activity space serving HEAT students and Centerpoint ministries.

HEAT is also renovating a large cabin on the property into a library and meeting space.

"This really isn't about constructing another church building," Golden said. "It's about asking how we can use what we've been entrusted with to serve more people."

Centerpoint Church is located at 1720 S St Cloud Ave, Valrico. For more information, visit www.centerpointfl.org.

RACE FOR EDUCATION MOVES TO USF FOR FIFTH ANNUAL RUN

By Jane Owen

The Race for Education benefiting Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) will take place on the campus of University of South Florida (USF) on Saturday, November 7.

The fifth annual event is a partnership between the Hillsborough Education Foundation (HEF), HCPS and USF and is being held at USF for the first time. The funds that are generated beyond the cost of the event will support HEF's school and classroom grants.

AnnMarie Courtney, the director of partnership engagement for HCPS, said the Race for Education provides a meaningful opportunity for students, families and staff to come together while promoting physical health, mental well-being and a strong sense of community.

"The Race for Education creates a culture of wellness by demonstrating that being active can be enjoyable and inclusive. Whether participants run, jog or walk, everyone can take part at their own pace. The shared experience promotes connection, school spirit and healthy choices that can extend well beyond race day," Courtney said.

HEF President and CEO Anna Corman said she is thankful for the way the race brings people together to celebrate public schools.

"Seeing so many people come out and participate is a powerful reminder of how much our community values its schools and the students and educators within them. We are very excited to bring this year's Race for Education to a new location at the University of South Florida, giving our community a new setting to come together and celebrate public education," Corman said.

In 2025, just over 1,200 community members participated in the event. Corman and Courtney are grateful for the participants, the business sponsors for the event and the new partnership with USF.

Genna Custard, a Florida Virtual School teacher and former HCPS educator, is a participant who runs the race every year.

"Year after year, I come back to the HEF run because I will use any opportunity to give back to teachers. I know teachers are the core and heart of our schools. They pour into our students every day. On a personal note, I enjoy seeing my fitness progress year after year. I do 99 percent of my runs solo and this is an opportunity to cheer on friends and colleagues and just have fun!" Custard said.

The Race for Education includes a 5K and 1-mile walk/run. There is on-course entertainment from HCPS student groups. The 5K is timed, and the top age-group 5K finishers will receive awards. Finishers of both the 5K and 1-mile walk/run will receive a race shirt and finisher's medal.

USF is located at 4202 E. Fowler Ave. in Tampa. To register for the race, visit https://runsignup.com/race/fl/tampa/hef5k.

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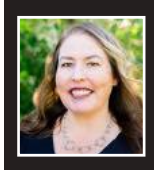


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Dated at Valrico, Florida this 15th day of October 2026.

SPOTLIGHT CHILDREN'S THEATRE HOSTS PRACTICALLY PERFECT TEA PARTY

By Libby Hopkins



Spotlight Children's Theatre is a nonprofit children's theatre program located in downtown Plant City. Spotlight was founded five years ago with the goal of creating a place where young people could experience theatre in an encouraging, educational environment while building creativity, confidence, and community at an affordable cost, or completely free. "We aim to award scholarships to at least 15 students per semester to our camps, classes, and workshops," said Carmen Keel, Director of Spotlight Children's Theatre. "What began as a small after school program with around 15 students has grown tremendously, and we now serve approximately 150 students through theatre classes, productions, workshops, private instruction, and our Junior and Senior Thespian programs."

The theatre's students range from young children experiencing theatre for the very first time to middle and high school students who are developing more advanced performance and technical theatre skills. "One of the things that is most important to me is that Spotlight remains a place where there is room for every child to grow, whether they dream of being center stage or discover that their favorite place is behind the scenes," Keel said. "We even welcome the community in for free Kid Karaoke during Plant City's Last Fridays."

On Oct. 17, the theatre will host its Practically Perfect Tea Party fundraiser with three seatings at 12:00 p.m., 3:00 p.m., and 6:00 p.m. Tickets are $25 for ages five and up and $10 for ages four and under. "We intentionally keep each seating small, with only 20 guests, so that it feels like a special and personal experience," Keel said. "Guests can expect a whimsical Mary Poppins-inspired afternoon with food, treats, crafts, entertainment, photo opportunities, and interaction with characters portrayed by members of our Mary Poppins Jr. cast. We want guests to feel like they have stepped into a little bit of the magic of the show. We hope to raise the funds we need to suit both our elementary cast and secondary cast shows. As well as helping us bring the magical world of Mary Poppins to life."

The Practically Perfect Tea Party is the primary fundraiser for the fall semester. The money raised will directly support the costumes, props, scenery, and other production expenses for Mary Poppins Jr. "Putting a full theatrical production on stage is expensive, especially for a nonprofit children's program, so the success of this fundraiser makes a meaningful difference in what we are able to provide for our students," Keel said. "I would love for people to know that supporting Spotlight isn't just about supporting a single production. It's about giving young people in our community a place to create, take risks, build confidence, make friends, and discover their capability."

To learn more, visit the theatre's website at https://spotlightpc.com or call 813-444-7938. The theatre is located at 115 West J Arden Mays Boulevard in Plant City.

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LOCAL CHURCH OFFERS DRIVE BY PRAYER SERVICE TO HELP RESTORE FAITH IN THE COMMUNITY

By Libby Hopkins



Living in Victory Christian Church is a Bible-based congregation in Valrico, a place where the scriptures are honored, the presence of God is welcomed and ordinary people are changed. This past September, the church held a Drive By Prayer service for the community.

Living in Victory Christian Church is a Bible-based congregation in Valrico, a place where the scriptures are honored, the presence of God is welcomed and ordinary people are changed. The church exists for one reason: to connect people to Jesus Christ. This happens through powerful, practical teaching of the word, through outreach that crosses our city and the nations and through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit into everyday lives.

This past September, the church held a Drive By Prayer service for the community.

"The idea for Drive By Prayer came from a desire to take prayer beyond the four walls of the church and make it accessible to anyone in our community," said Living in Victory Christian Church's Cynthia Ahmed. "We recognize that there are people all around us who are dealing with challenges, whether related to their families, health, finances, relationships, careers or simply the pressures of everyday life. Some may want prayer but may not feel comfortable walking into a church or may not know where to turn. Drive By Prayer was our way of saying, 'We are here for you, and we would be honored to pray with you.'"

During its recent event, members of Living in Victory Christian Church's ministry came together to welcome individuals from the community as they drove onto the church's property. People were able to remain in their vehicles, share their prayer requests and have someone personally pray with and encourage them.

"What made the event so meaningful was its simplicity," Ahmed said. "There was no requirement to attend a service or become a member of our church. It was simply an opportunity for us to serve people, show them the love of Christ and remind them that they are not alone."

"We had individuals who were genuinely grateful that someone was willing to stop, listen to what they were going through and pray specifically for them," Ahmed said. "For some, you could see how much it meant just to have someone care about their situation and stand in agreement with them in prayer. The experience also reminded us that there is a real need for opportunities like this in our community. People are looking for hope, connection and encouragement."

"Our hope was that every person who came through would leave feeling encouraged, strengthened and reminded that God sees them and cares about what they are facing," Ahmed said.

Visit its website at www.livcc.org. The church is located at 1603 Bloomingdale Ave. in Valrico.

VALRICO TEEN'S CITRUS RESEARCH EARNS $50,000 SCHOLARSHIP

Staff Report





Tanishka Aglave, 17, of Valrico has been awarded a $50,000 Davidson Fellows Scholarship for her science project, A Comprehensive Eco-friendly Strategy for Citrus Greening Disease Management. The Davidson Fellows Scholarship is one of the nation's most prestigious honors for students 18 and younger.

"To me, becoming a Davidson Fellow has been a dream, and receiving this award is truly an incredible honor and a prominent milestone in my journey," Aglave said. "It inspires me deeply to continue dedicating myself to research and scientific problems that fascinate me. It shows me that, no matter how big or small the question, I should continue researching and leveraging my interests in the biological sciences to address real-world problems and support communities."

As the daughter of a Florida citrus grower, Aglave witnessed firsthand the impact of citrus greening disease on farmers. For her project, she developed an environmentally friendly treatment combining a novel bactericide, localized thermal therapy and a computer vision application to measure disease severity. Her findings could provide farmers with a cost-effective approach to managing citrus greening disease while reducing reliance on conventional antibiotics.

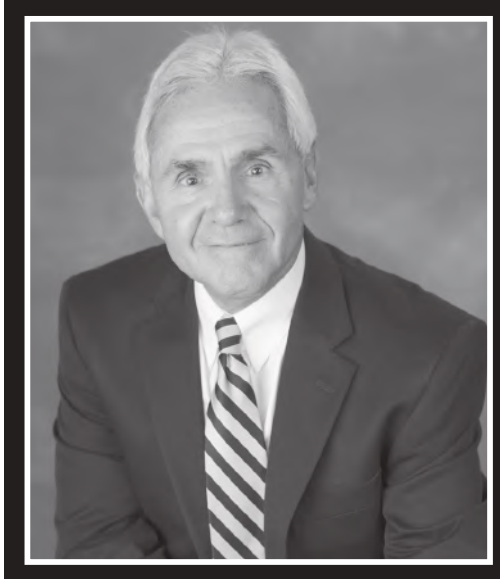
Aglave, a rising high school senior, hopes to use her passion for plant pathology and biology to pursue a career in biological sciences and develop solutions that benefit communities. She also works to expand climate literacy and research education for young students.

"The Davidson Fellows continue to demonstrate what young people can accomplish when curiosity, determination and innovation come together," said Bob Davidson, founder of the Davidson Institute. "The 2026 Fellows have pursued challenging questions and developed meaningful work with the potential to make a lasting difference in their fields and communities. We are proud to recognize their extraordinary achievements."

The Davidson Fellows Scholarship program offers college scholarships to students 18 or younger who have completed significant projects that have the potential to benefit society in the fields of science, technology, engineering, mathematics, literature and music.

Founded by Bob Davidson in 1999, the Davidson Institute recognizes, nurtures and supports profoundly intelligent young people and provides opportunities for them to develop their talents to make a positive difference. For more information about the 2026 Davidson Fellows, please visit www.davidsonfellows.org.

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FISHHAWK TURKEY TROT RETURNS THANKSGIVING MORNING FOR 18TH ANNUAL RUN

By Marie Gilmore

Thanksgiving morning in FishHawk will once again begin with running shoes, community spirit and a little friendly competition when the 18th annual FishHawk Turkey Trot takes place on Thursday, November 26.

The annual family-friendly event will begin at 5668 FishHawk Crossing Blvd. in Lithia and welcomes runners and walkers of all ages and abilities. Participants can choose from timed 5K and 10K races, an untimed 5K, a Fun Run and a Mini-Run.



Families and runners of all ages are expected to gather Thanksgiving morning for the 18th annual FishHawk Turkey Trot on November 26. The annual event benefits Seeds of Hope and its programs supporting local families experiencing food insecurity.

More than a race, the FishHawk Turkey Trot supports Seeds of Hope, a local nonprofit dedicated to helping provide food to individuals and families experiencing food insecurity. Proceeds from the event help fund Seeds of Hope's food distribution programs and provide groceries to local families throughout the year.



The tradition began in 2009 when Leda Eaton and her teenage children, Wesley and Allie, wanted to create a local Thanksgiving race that would give students an opportunity to earn volunteer hours while giving back to their community.

"There wasn't a local turkey trot, and I thought it'd be nice for families to have one close to FishHawk," Eaton said.

The event has grown significantly since then. Last year, more than 3,000 participants took part, while hundreds of volunteers help each year with registration, water stations, staging and other race-day activities.

Eaton said the event also helped open her eyes to the issue of food insecurity in the community and ultimately inspired the creation of Seeds of Hope.

The 2026 event will offer shirts while supplies last, with medals limited to the first 3,500 participants. Early packet pickup will be available on Wednesday, November 25, from 12 Noon-7 p.m. at the Palmetto Club, located at 17004 Dorman Rd. in Lithia. Race-day packet pickup begins at 6:30 a.m., with the timed 5K and 10K starting at 8 a.m. The untimed 5K begins at 8:15 a.m., followed by the Fun Run and Mini-Run at 9:15 a.m.

Race-day registration will also open at 6:30 a.m. in the FishHawk Publix parking lot. Organizers encourage participants to arrive about an hour before their scheduled race due to parking and event traffic.

Registration is available online through RunSignUp. Sponsorship opportunities are available by contacting sponsor@sohopefl.org. Questions about the event can be directed to admin@sohopefl.org. For more information, visit https://runsignup.com/race/donate/fl/lithia/fishhawkturkeytrot.

ECHO THRIFT HELPS PRESERVE A PIECE OF BRANDON'S HISTORY

Staff Report

What began as an item donated to ECHO Thrift has turned into an opportunity to preserve a piece of Brandon's history for generations to come.



ECHO Marketing Coordinator Kayla Vincent displays a handmade item created by Otis L. Brandon that was recently donated to ECHO Thrift and then donated to Preserving Brandon representative Karen Vaughn.

ECHO recently received an item at its thrift store that was handmade by Otis L. Brandon. Recognizing that the piece could have historical significance to the Brandon community, the ECHO team decided it deserved more than a place on a thrift store shelf.



ECHO reached out to the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce, which connected the organization with Preserving Brandon, a nonprofit dedicated to preserving, protecting and sharing Brandon's history.

That connection confirmed that the item was indeed tied to the Brandon family legacy.

According to Preserving Brandon, Otis L. Brandon was born on April 1, 1929, and was a descendant of James Henry Brandon, the fourth child of John Brandon (1809) and Martha Brown Carson (1813). James built what is now known as the Brandon Homestead, also associated with Stowers Funeral Home, on State Road 60 in 1876.

Rather than reselling the item, ECHO worked with Preserving Brandon to ensure the piece could be preserved and have its history shared with the community.

"We are so grateful for the opportunity to be part of this incredible connection," said Kayla Vincent, ECHO's marketing coordinator. "What could have simply been another item moving through our thrift store instead became an opportunity to return a piece of Brandon's history to the community. It is a wonderful example of what can happen when local organizations recognize an opportunity and work together."

Preserving Brandon has also partnered with the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library. When the new Brandon Library opens, the organization plans to have a dedicated display shelf where historical items like this one can be featured for the public.

The journey of this item highlights the importance of community connections.

"As ECHO approaches 40 years of serving Brandon, we are reminded that we are not only part of Brandon's present — we are part of its story," the organization said.

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Fall Festival, Bingo Night, Sip n Shop & More...

Compiled by Jenny Bennett
jbennett@ospreyobserver.com

Grace At Lithia Fall Festival

Grace at Lithia is hosting a Fall Festival on Sunday, October 18, starting at 12 Noon, in partnership with HCA Healthcare. The church will have lots of family activities, including inflatables, games, food trucks, costumes, an ambulance for the kids to explore and a really cute teddy bear health clinic where kids can take a teddy bear through a toy X-ray machine and receive a printout of the X-ray. Grace at Lithia is located at 5708 Lithia Pinecrest Rd. In Lithia.

St. Stephen Bingo Night

Come to bingo on Tuesday, October 27, in the St. Stephen Family Life Center, located at 10118 St. Stephen Circle in Riverview. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. Games start at 6:30 p.m.

Bingo is $20 per person, and there will be a concession stand with food, drinks and dessert available for purchase. Bring a packaged food item or a PB&J donation for the St. Vincent de Paul Society and receive and additional jackpot game for free.

The Community For Women group will also be displaying and selling tickets for its Raffle Bonanza Baskets. Come and see the wide variety of prizes available, including gifts and services. The raffle will be drawn on Wednesday, November 18.

Attendees must be 18 years of age or older to play bingo.

Holiday Sip n Shop

Please join the Women of Grace for food, fellowship and fun at its Holiday Sip n Shop Tea at Grace at Lithia on Saturday, November 7, from 11 a.m.-2 p.m. In addition to tea and treats, there will be a carefully curated selection of local, woman-owned vendors present and multiple vacation getaways to bid on in the silent auction. You won't want to miss this exciting community event. Tickets are $30 and must be purchased in advance by Saturday, October 31. Proceeds will go to Grace at Lithia's community outreach missions. To register, please visit its website at https://mygraceumc.churchcenter.com/registrations/events/3851829.



Osprey Heights Craft Fair

Osprey Heights Gracious Retirement Living, located at 2808 Lithia Pinecrest Rd. in Valrico, will be hosting a craft fair at its facility's activity center on Saturday, October 17, from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Residents will be selling a wide variety of unique handmade items and crafts. Come and find that perfect, one-of-a-kind holiday or birthday gift for the people you care about.

ECHO Hosts Music Bingo

ECHO of Brandon will bring an evening of music, fun and community connection to Voodoo Brewing Co. on Tuesday, November 17, for a special music bingo fundraiser benefiting ECHO's mission to bridge the gap between crisis and stability for neighbors in need.



Doors will open at 6 p.m., with the music bingo game beginning at 7 p.m. at Voodoo Brewing Co., located at 3432 SR 60 in Valrico. Music bingo combines the excitement of traditional bingo with the fun of recognizing favorite songs and artists. Guests can enjoy an entertaining night out while helping support ECHO's work providing emergency food, clothing and life-stabilizing resources to individuals and families throughout the community.

Visit www.echofl.org/music-bingo to register. Seats are limited and expected to fill quickly. Guests are encouraged to reserve their spots in advance.

Boo Bash Trick-or-treat

Dillard's department store at Brandon Exchange is hosting Boo Bash, an indoor trick-or-treating event for families, on Saturday, October 24, from 12 Noon-2 p.m. Along with trick-or-treating, there will be games and music from a DJ. Dillard's is located at 303 Brandon Town Center Dr. in Brandon. Come out dressed in your favorite costume and enjoy the fun.

FROM SORTING TO SALE DAY, GENTLE TOUCH ESTATE SALES CAN HELP

Staff Report



If you have never been involved in an estate sale, you may wonder how the process works, what happens to household belongings and whether you should hire a professional estate sale company. An estate sale is an organized way to sell personal property when a family is downsizing, relocating, settling an estate or going through another major life transition.

What Happens During an Estate Sale?

The estate sale process typically begins with a consultation. The estate sale company evaluates the home, discusses the family's goals and explains its services and fees.

Before preparation begins, the family identifies items that should not be sold, including important documents, photographs, personal information, medications and sentimental belongings.

Next, the estate sale company sorts and organizes the household contents. Furniture, kitchenware, clothing, tools, collectibles, artwork, jewelry, electronics and other items are displayed so shoppers can easily browse.

Pricing and Research

Estate sale pricing is based on factors such as condition, brand, age, rarity, demand and current resale value. Professional estate sale companies may research unusual or collectible items to help establish appropriate prices.

Advertising and Sale Day

On sale day, shoppers browse the home and purchase items through a designated checkout area. Policies regarding payment methods, discounts, negotiations and furniture pickup vary by company.

Most estate sale merchandise is sold as-is, so buyers should carefully inspect items before purchasing.

What Happens To Unsold Items?

Not everything necessarily sells during an estate sale. Depending on the family's wishes and the company's agreement, remaining items may be donated, removed by the family or otherwise handled according to the agreed plan.

Why Hire an Estate Sale Company?

A professional estate sale company can manage much of the work, including sorting, pricing, staging, advertising, conducting the sale and coordinating postsale services.

For families dealing with an estate or preparing to downsize, professional assistance can make an overwhelming process more organized and manageable.

If you're considering an estate sale, contact Gentle Touch Estate Sales at 813-812-0780 or visit https://gentletouchestatesales.com/ to learn more about its estate sale services and how it can help you navigate the process from preparation through completion.

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SMALL BUT MIGHTY HEROES SUPPORTS FAMILIES IN CRISIS

By Dale Bliss



Heroes come from all walks of life and are often recognized for the extraordinary things they do. But there is another kind of mighty hero — the children who face serious illnesses with courage and strength. For Tina Downing, founder of Small But Mighty Heroes, these children and their families have become the focus of her life's work.

Downing and her volunteers are dedicated to supporting young patients, their siblings and their families by offering encouragement, comfort and moments of happiness during difficult times.

Downing's journey began when she decided to invest 6 percent of her salary in helping local children with illnesses.

"A little blue-eyed boy with a love for Thomas the Train is what prompted me to start Small But Mighty Heroes," Downing explained.

Supporting this little "hero" would change her life forever.

"The images of what he endured are burned into my memory," she continued.

Seeing the reality of what cancer asks children and their families to endure, Downing knew she could not simply walk away.

"I could not walk away from that experience and simply return to life as it was," she said.

"I knew I had to do something with the love, the pain and the fire it left in me," she explained. "Blakely is forever a part of why I started. Every family we stand beside is why I keep going."

As Downing became more connected with children and families facing serious illnesses, she wanted to do more than offer support. She wanted to bring smiles and moments of joy during a time often filled with fear and uncertainty.



Downing began reaching out to families to learn what they needed. One of the organization's signature efforts is the Hero Box, a special package filled with gifts and comfort items for children battling cancer. Their siblings receive Sidekick Boxes to remind them that they, too, are an important part of the journey.

"This work has deepened my purpose and strengthened my determination to keep showing up," Downing said. "Every family deserves to know they do not have to carry this along. I want my sons to see that compassion is something we practice. We lead by example when we turn caring into action."

Founded in 2017, Small But Mighty Heroes serves families in Florida and Missouri. Volunteers can help prepare Hero Boxes, fundraise, participate in events and support the organization through community involvement.

For more information, visit smallbutmightyheroes.org, call 813-772-4584 or email info@smallbutmightyheroes.org.

BAY LIFE FALL FEST RETURNS WITH GAMES, CANDY AND FAMILY FUN

By Dale Bliss





With cool crisp mornings and afternoons mixed with warm sunshine and a slight tingling aroma of roasting marshmallows in the air while blanketed with golden shades of fall hues — crimson reds, bright golds, deep plums and goldens greens — you know that fall has taken its place for another year. It's the season of sweet and smooth caramel candied apples, warm piping cider, hot chocolate with peppermint sticks (or cinnamon, whichever you prefer) and those special, freshly baked recipes to welcome friends and family in for a visit.

Bay Life Church, located at 1017 Kingsway Rd. in Brandon, will be holding its annual Fall Fest on Sunday, October 25, from 4:30-7:30 p.m. for families throughout Hillsborough County. There will be games, a photo booth, music, candy and snacks. The theme this year will be Bill and Barb's Building Boot Camp and Family Quest, with a 'Playful Building-brick' look for an evening of family fun.

Stephen Strough, communications director, said, "At its heart, Fall Fest is simply a chance for our neighbors to come together and enjoy a great night out."

Strough continued, "It takes about 400 volunteers to put on Fall Fest every year. Running games, check-ins, the photo booth, the Family Quest and more. We still have spots to fill, and anyone interested can sign up at baylife.org/ffvolunteer."

"As communications director, I get to help tell the story of Fall Fest. The best part, though, is watching about 400 people from our Church family give up their evening to serve our neighbors. It's a great picture of what the church is supposed to be: a light and a source of hope in the community," Strough explained.

He continued, "I love the look on kids' faces when they walk onto campus and see everything lit up. The hundreds upon hundreds of pounds of candy, the laughter you hear all throughout the Family Quest, seeing our whole community come together for a great night. I also love the family photo booth."

Strough gets to take photos and videos of the major events throughout the year! He loves the family photo booth.

"I've gotten to watch so many of our families grow up over the years. Every family gets a free photo, and for some of them it's the only family picture they take all year," he said.

Bay Life Church will be accepting candy donations through October 25. Donations may be brought to the donation boxes in the lobby on Sunday morning during services or taken to the church offices during business hours.

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SIDNEY O'SULLIVAN GOES FROM BEVIS BRONCO TO TEACHER OF THE YEAR

By Libby Hopkins



Sidney O'Sullivan is a product of Hillsborough County Public Schools. She went to Bevis Elementary School as a student of Tricia Simonsen, who was her principal. She proceeded to Randall Middle School, Newsome High School and then earned her bachelor's in elementary education at the University of South Florida.

"I have been teaching for nine years, only ever working at Valrico Elementary School under the wonderful lead of Mrs. Simonsen," O'Sullivan said. "Besides being a teacher, I am mom to the best 5-year-old son, Connor, who also attends Valrico Elementary. I also sing live music on the weekends in our community at some local spots as well."

O'Sullivan loves working with her students and growing relationships with each child.

"Our classroom always feels like one big family full of love, acceptance and learning," she said. "It's inspiring to watch the 'magic' happen when these young minds grow. They teach me so much about resilience and how each and every one of them is capable of amazing things. It's a profession that certainly leaves your heart bursting."

O'Sullivan recently became Valrico Elementary's Teacher of the Year.

"I was in the middle of teaching a math lesson when administration, fellow colleagues and my entire family entered the room clapping and cheering with pom-poms and music," she said. "My son presented me with a certificate for 'Teacher of the Year,' and that's when Mrs. Simonsen made the announcement to the class that I had been nominated. It was very special to have all of my people there."

Simonsen couldn't be prouder of her former student and employee.

"As a principal, moments like this are truly special," Simonsen said. "Years ago, I had the privilege of serving as Sidney's principal throughout her elementary years at Bevis Elementary. Today, I am honored to continue serving as her principal while she thrives as an outstanding educator. Watching her journey come full circle, from a Bevis Bronco student to a Valrico Hawk teacher, has been incredibly rewarding. Her recognition as Valrico Teacher of the Year is a well-deserved reflection of her passion for teaching, commitment to students and dedication to our school community. Ms. O'Sullivan exemplifies the very best of our profession, and I'm so proud to celebrate this remarkable achievement with her."

O'Sullivan's students were extremely proud of their teacher as well.

"They were so sweet," she said. "They shared some very kind words and showered me with hugs and congratulations. Valrico Elementary is truly a special place to be. I may be biased, but the faculty, staff and administration here are like no other. I love being a Valrico Hawk."

Valrico Elementary is located at 609 S. Miller Rd. in Valrico. For more information about the school, visit www.hillsboroughschools.org/o/valrico.

NOVEMBERFEST CELEBRATES 55 YEARS OF COMMUNITY TRADITION

By Marie Gilmore





For 55 years, Novemberfest has brought families, friends and neighbors together for a weekend of rides, food, entertainment and fellowship. This year, Nativity Catholic Church and School will celebrate the longtime Brandon tradition from Friday, November 20 through Sunday, November 22.

Held on the grounds of Nativity Catholic Church and School at 705 E. Brandon Blvd., Novemberfest is a family-friendly carnival featuring amusement rides, food, games and live entertainment. Admission and parking are free, with rides, food and other activities available for purchase throughout the weekend.

The 2026 celebration will open Friday, November 20 at 4 p.m. and continue until midnight. Saturday's festivities will run from 11 a.m. until midnight, followed by Sunday's schedule from noon-9 p.m.

Entertainment will include Soul Circus Cowboys on Friday, adding live music to an evening filled with carnival attractions and activities.

For families planning to enjoy the rides, access is based on height rather than age. Ride tickets and wristbands can be purchased at kiosks or the Ride Kiosk Trailer located on the midway. Fairgoers can choose between a Ride Card, which can be loaded with the desired number of credits, or a $30 wristband.

Ride credits cost $1 each, and there is a one-time $2 activation fee when a Ride Card or wristband is first purchased. Ride availability and height requirements vary, and families can check individual ride requirements before attending.

Food will also be a major part of the Novemberfest experience, with a variety of options available for purchase throughout the festival.

Organizers note that all sales for ride vouchers, ride tickets, food vouchers, food tickets and games are final. There are no refunds or rain checks. Some rides may temporarily close because of inclement weather or lightning and will reopen when conditions are safe.

Florida Highway Patrol will be on site throughout the event to help ensure the safety of guests.

The 55th anniversary also provides an opportunity for local businesses, organizations and families to support Novemberfest through sponsorships. Sponsorships help make the event possible while supporting students at Nativity Catholic School and youth ministry programs at Nativity Catholic Church.

For sponsorship information, contact Therese Alonso at talonso@nativitycatholicchurch.org or 813-681-4608, ext. 2237.

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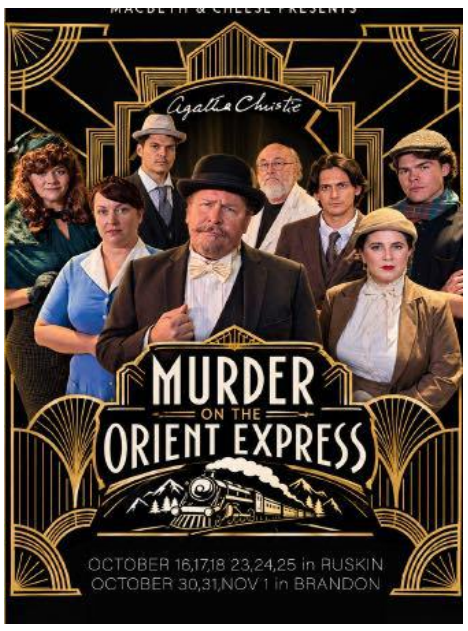
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A LEGENDARY WHODUNIT COMES TO RUSKIN AND BRANDON

Staff Report



Following its last production, *Murder, Denied,* an original murder mystery that kept audiences guessing, MacBeth & Cheese is returning to the scene of the crime. But this time, it's trading an original mystery for a legendary one.

MacBeth & Cheese invites you to climb aboard the world's most famous train for Agatha Christie's classic mystery, *Murder on the Orient Express,* adapted for the stage by Ken Ludwig and directed by Amy Windle. The production promises the suspense, wit, memorable characters and twists of Christie's famous mystery.

"Bringing *Murder on the Orient Express* to the stage has been an absolute joy. It has everything you want in a great night of theater — a fantastic cast of characters, plenty of laughs, a little glamour and, of course, a murder to solve," said Amy Windle, director and co-founder of MacBeth & Cheese. "We've had so much fun creating this world, and I can't wait for our audiences to climb aboard and experience it with us."

A luxurious train.

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Now, legendary detective Hercule Poirot must unravel a web of secrets, lies and hidden motives. With a train full of suspects and nowhere to escape, the question is ... can YOU solve the murder before Poirot does?

Experience *Murder on the Orient Express* this October with MacBeth & Cheese, your local all-volunteer community theater.

Performances begin on Friday, October 16, at the Firehouse Cultural Center, located at 101 First Ave. NE in Ruskin, with additional performances at Brandon Performing Arts, located at located at 225 E. Brandon Blvd. in Brandon, beginning on Friday, October 30.

Mystery. Suspense. Humor. And an ending you won't want spoiled!

See the complete performance schedule at https://macbethandcheese.com/.

MacBeth & Cheese — live theater that pulls you in and doesn't let go.

MacBeth & Cheese, a community theater company, presents productions in partnership with the Firehouse Cultural Center in Ruskin.

For more information about MacBeth & Cheese, visit https://macbethandcheese.com/, call 813-485-4341 or email info@macbethandcheese.com.

For tickets, upcoming performances and arts programming at the Firehouse Cultural Center, visit https://firehouseculturalcenter.org/ or call 813-645-7651.









PLAYERS, FAMILIES & FANS COME TOGETHER FOR SPECIAL SWINGS DAY

By Libby Hopkins

Special Swings is a baseball program designed for children and young adults with special needs. With the support of volunteer buddies, every player has the chance to hit, run the bases, make friends and enjoy being part of a team in a fun, safe and encouraging environment.

Every player is celebrated, every accomplishment matters and every smile is a home run. The event will have vendors on-site to add to the fun. Plus, all proceeds from the event will be donated to Special Olympics.

The free event takes place at Plant City Stadium on Saturday, October 17. Gates open at 8:30 a.m., and the opening ceremony will begin promptly at 10 a.m. Player registration is open to ages 8-21, and players are organized by age group. No previous baseball experience is required. With the help of volunteer buddies, coaches and local baseball supporters, each player will receive the encouragement and assistance needed to enjoy the game in a fun, safe and welcoming environment.

"The credit for the original vision really belongs to Ryan Gill and his family," said HCSO and Special Swings President Terry Pittinger. "The idea began developing in 2024-2025 as Ryan and his wife, Kaylie, spent a lot of time around baseball with their sons, Eli and Cutler, who played travel ball. Their family developed a real love for the game, and Ryan began thinking about how we could create that same baseball experience for children with special needs who may not otherwise have the opportunity to take the field."

The entire community is invited to attend and fill the stadium with encouragement. Families and fans from Plant City, Dover, Lithia, Valrico and surrounding communities are encouraged to come out, cheer for the players and help create the kind of atmosphere every athlete deserves to experience.

"My biggest hope is that every player leaves the stadium feeling like that day was truly for them," Pittinger said. "Success for us isn't a score on the scoreboard. It is seeing a player step onto the field who may never have had that opportunity before, hearing their name announced, watching them get a hit or cross home plate and seeing their family and an entire stadium cheering for them."

Special Swings is actively seeking both players and volunteers. Volunteers must be at least 18 years old to register. Buddies play an important role by helping support and encourage players throughout the day. Families may sign up with a buddy they know, or a buddy can be assigned.

"We also hope Special Swings becomes an annual Plant City tradition," Pittinger said. "Our goal is for this first event to establish something our community can continue building every year, bringing more players, families, volunteers and organizations together through baseball."

If you would like to register a play or be a volunteer for Special Swings, you can visit its Facebook page at www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61590230668954 or email Pittinger at info@specialswings.org. Plant City Stadium is located at 1810 S. Park Rd. in Plant City.

JUST RIDE BICYCLES BRINGS BIKE REPAIR SERVICE TO LOCAL RIDERS

By Sharon Still



Joe Kennedy has transitioned Just Ride Bicycles into a mobile repair service, offering reliable bicycle maintenance throughout the community.

After 15 years of serving local cyclists from a brick-and-mortar shop in the FishHawk and Riverview area, Just Ride Bicycles owner Joe Kennedy is taking his business on the road.

Kennedy recently closed his longtime storefront in River Springs Town Center on Boyette Road and transitioned Just Ride Bicycles into a mobile bicycle repair and service business. The move allows Kennedy to continue serving the customers who have supported the shop while offering a more convenient option for busy families and cyclists.

"As one chapter ends, ... another begins," Kennedy said.

For Kennedy, the transition is about meeting customers where they are.

He credits his wife, Tricia, with inspiring the move toward mobile service.

"Everyone is so busy, and if we can make life easier, then there is a value," Kennedy said.

The new mobile model currently offers bicycle pickup and drop-off service, with plans to expand to on-site repairs in the future. Kennedy eventually hopes to bring his tools directly to customers' homes, businesses or even cyclists who need assistance while out on the trail.

Services include flat repairs, tune-ups, adjustments and bicycle assembly for both traditional bicycles and e-bikes.

"It has been successful so far, as we are serving several repeat customers with whom we have built loyalty and trust," Kennedy said.

That loyalty has been built over 15 years of providing bicycle sales, repairs and personalized service to the local community. Just Ride Bicycles has served everyone from children and families to recreational riders and competitive cyclists, with customers often citing Kennedy's knowledgeable advice, fair pricing and timely service.

The mobile service is designed to continue that same personalized approach while eliminating the need for customers to transport their bicycles to a traditional shop.

Kennedy said the model can also help customers save both time and money.

"Everyone is looking to save time and money, and this type of concierge service is a way to offer that," he said.

Just Ride Bicycles serves customers throughout Brandon, Valrico, Lithia, Riverview, Sun City Center, FishHawk and surrounding communities.

Appointments can be scheduled online at www.justridebicycles.com or by calling 813-381-3907. Updates about mobile services are also available through Just Ride Bicycles on social media.



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COMMUNITY RALLIES AROUND TAMPA FIRE CAPTAIN BENNY

By Brian Bokor



Tampa Fire Rescue Captain Benjamin 'Benny' Bengter has spent 15 years answering calls for people who needed help. Now, as Benny continues a difficult recovery from a life-threatening medical emergency, firefighters and community members throughout Tampa Bay are answering the call for him.

First responders, their families, friends and residents packed Voodoo Brewing Co. in Valrico on September 13 for 'Beers for Benny,' a fundraiser organized to support Benny, his fiancée and their young daughter.

Voodoo Brewing Co. Valrico owner Chris Ciulla said two firefighters who work at the brewery approached him after telling him what had happened to Benny.

"I have two firefighters who work for us, and they told me about Benny and what happened to him," Ciulla said. "They asked if they could hold a fundraiser, and I said, 'Hey, you can have use of my place any night you need. We're going to raise as much money for the family as we can.'"

Ciulla's connection to the fire service made the decision especially personal.

"My dad is a retired fire chief in New York City, so anytime we can help a firefighter, it hits home for me," Ciulla said.

The gathering brought together members of Tampa Fire Rescue and Hillsborough County Fire Rescue, including Hillsborough County Fire Rescue Chief Jason Dougherty. Some knew Benny personally, while others came because a firefighter and his family needed their support.

Benny became critically ill while vacationing with his family in Hawaii. His mother, Irina Bengter, said an attack of pancreatitis progressed to shock, organ failure, abdominal compartment syndrome and sepsis. Doctors performed emergency surgery and spent weeks stabilizing him before he returned to Tampa.

Although Benny could not attend the fundraiser, his daughter and a friend sent him photographs and videos throughout the evening. Irina said he was excited by what he saw and deeply appreciative.

"Ben asked me to share his heartfelt gratitude and say thank you to everyone who has lifted him up in prayer, supported him financially, sent messages, made phone calls and shown their love and support in so many other ways," Irina said. "He is forever grateful to each and every one of you."

The event featured "Benny Strong" T-shirts, vendors, food and drink specials, raffles, a silent auction and a DJ. More than $20,000 worth of prizes were donated.

Tampa Fire Rescue Driver Engineer Benjamin Carlson, a longtime friend of Benny, helped organize the fundraiser with assistance from the Firemen's Benevolent Association of the City of Tampa. The two have known each other since paramedic school in 2011.

"Last night truly filled my heart," Carlson wrote. "It means the world to me and my family."

Benny followed his father and uncles into the fire service and has risen from driver engineer to captain at Tampa Fire Rescue Station 16.

The Firemen's Benevolent Association has established an online fundraiser to help with medical and recovery expenses.

WALK THE WALK PET CARE CELEBRATES A DECADE OF CARING

By Amanda Castillo



Walk the Walk Professional Pet Care owner Samantha Evenson celebrates 10 years of providing dependable, personalized pet care to local families.

When Samantha Evenson recognized a need for more reliable pet care in her community, she knew local pet owners needed someone they can count on. With encouragement from a friend, she started Walk the Walk Professional Pet Care ten years ago as a one person operation. Since then, she has grown it into a professional team that provides dependable pet care, and peace of mind for owners throughout our community.

The past decade has brought plenty of changes and challenges for Evenson, from working independently to building a team, but she remains proud that the business has stayed true to its original purpose. "We are really proud of what we have been able to accomplish the last ten years, and essentially, as much as we've grown, the heart of the business really hasn't changed."

That commitment to dependable, personalized care remains central to Walk the Walk Professional Pet Care. The business offers dog walking, pet sitting and in-home pet care throughout the community, helping pet owners feel confident their animals are in good hands when life gets busy.

For Evansen, the job is about more than caring for animals. One of the most rewarding parts is getting to know the pets and their owners, turning everyday visits into lasting relationships within the close knit community she serves.

That personal approach is reflected in the company's name. For Evensen, "Walk the Walk" means following through on the promise to provide dependable, quality care for every pet. " Our slogan is Walk the Walk. It's not just our name, it's how we do business. Walk the Walk is our promise to the community, because we are not just talking about giving quality service, we are truly living by that standard."

For Evenson, there is something special about knowing that every wagging tail and familiar face represents a relationship built on trust. Getting to know each pet and the people who love them has turned routine visits into lasting connections. It's those relationships that continue to shape Walk the Walk Professional Pet Care and make it more than just a service to the community.

To learn more about Walk the Walk Professional Pet Care, visit walkthrwalkppc.com or call 813-465-3082.





HALLOWEEN IS HIDING RIGHT IN PLANT CITY



DID YOU KNOW that one of the scariest Halloween experiences around is hiding right in Plant City?

Spooky season is officially here, and if you love Halloween, haunted houses, and that feeling of wondering whether you're brave enough to turn the next corner, there's a local attraction you need to know about.

Pemberton Haunted Acres
4802 W Knights Griffin Rd, Plant City, FL 33565

Pemberton Haunted Acres is a family-owned outdoor haunted attraction bringing a different kind of Halloween experience to the Plant City area.

At the center of the attraction is an approximately 5,000-square-foot haunted maze filled with handcrafted horror rooms, intense scare zones, immersive themed areas, and plenty of surprises waiting in the darkness.

And this isn't your typical walk-through Halloween display.

The experience is designed to put you right in the middle of the action. You'll make your way through dark passages, detailed horror scenes, themed rooms, and scare zones where you never quite know what—or who—is waiting around the next corner.

What makes Pemberton Haunted Acres even more interesting is that it's family-owned and locally created. A tremendous amount of work goes into building an attraction like this, from the sets and rooms to the characters, lighting, sound, and scares that bring everything to life.

So, if you're someone who counts down the days until October, watches scary movies all month, and believes Halloween should actually be SCARY, add this one to your spooky-season list.

You don't always have to drive hours away to find an incredible a experience.

Sometimes one of the best adventures is hiding right in your own backyard.

Now you know!

Have a local attraction, hidden gem, activity, restaurant, trail, park, or something else you think everyone should know about? Send it our way—it might just become the next edition of DID YOU KNOW?

YMCA CAMP CRISTINA UNVEILS NEW 30-FOOT CHALLENGE COURSE

By Marie Gilmore



Adventure is reaching new heights at YMCA Camp Cristina in Riverview with plans for a new 30-foot-high challenge course designed to bring climbing, teamwork, confidence-building and plenty of thrills to the community.

The new course will offer children, families, school groups, businesses and community organizations an opportunity to get outdoors, challenge themselves and experience YMCA Camp Cristina in a new way.

The centerpiece will be a 30-foot adventure tower featuring a climbing wall and elevated platform. From there, participants will navigate a series of high elements suspended above the ground, including platforms, cables, bridges and other obstacles designed to test balance, communication, problem-solving and courage.

The experience is intended to be about more than adrenaline.

Participants will have opportunities to work together, encourage one another and discover what they can accomplish outside their comfort zones.

"The goal isn't simply to see who can climb the highest or move through the course the fastest," according to the YMCA. "It's about creating experiences where people discover confidence in themselves and learn to trust the people around them."

The challenge course will add another attraction to the 65-acre YMCA Camp Cristina and create opportunities beyond traditional summer camp programming.

The YMCA envisions the course being used by families and YMCA members, school groups, teens, corporate teams, community organizations, birthday celebrations, retreats and leadership-development programs.

For businesses, the course could provide an opportunity for employees to participate in team-building activities while encouraging communication and collaboration. For families and young people, it can provide a supportive environment to face challenges, build confidence and celebrate accomplishments.

The project also reflects the YMCA's broader goal of making YMCA Camp Cristina a year-round destination.

Located in the heart of South Hillsborough, YMCA Camp Cristina has long provided opportunities for children and families to connect with nature, develop new skills and build relationships. The new challenge course will expand those opportunities with an elevated adventure experience.

YMCA Camp Cristina is located at 9840 Balm Riverview Rd. in Riverview.

For more information about YMCA Camp Cristina, its programs and upcoming opportunities, visit www.tampaymca.org/locations/ymca-camp-cristina or call 813-677-8400.

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RACE DIRECTORS TAKE ON OCULAR MELANOMA AT ALDERMAN'S FORD 5K

Staff Report

Who is ready to run for a cause? Join Bernadette Boyle and Linda O'Brien, the race directors for the ninth annual Your Next Step is the Cure 5K event on Saturday, December 5, at Alderman's Ford Conservation Park, located at 100 Alderman Ford Park Dr. in Plant City.

What began as a passion nine years ago to raise awareness has now expanded even further with the establishment of their official 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, strengthening their commitment to this mission for years to come. Proceeds from this year's event will benefit the uveal melanoma research at Moffitt Cancer Center and the laboratories of Dr. Keiran Smalley, Dr. Florian Karreth and Dr. Alex Jaeger, where groundbreaking discoveries are being made to better this disease and develop new treatment strategies.

The race supports awareness and research for ocular melanoma, a rare and aggressive cancer that affects just six out of every 1 million people each year. Though rare, its impact on patients and families is profound — and urgently in need of continued research and breakthroughs.

Their 'why': Bernadette and O'Brien have a vested interest in this disease. Bernadette lost her husband, Joe Boyle, to this dreaded cancer in January 2016, and O'Brien is still fighting with yearly scans and eye exams; O'Brien remains NED — no evidence of disease.

Their hopes for this year's event are simple, to surpass their past achievements! Since the inception of this event which began in 2017, they have donated over $100,000 for research. Of course, like every year, Bernadette and O'Brien hope to bring awareness to this rare and orphan disease and remind everyone of the importance of an annual dilated eye exam.

Joining them will be the research doctors from the Moffitt Cancer Center speaking about ocular melanoma and current research that is happening because of events like their Your Next Step is the Cure 5K. Together, attendees run not just for miles but for hope, innovation and lifesaving progress. Join them as they continue to make strides toward awareness, research and a cure.

To follow posts and updates, please visit their Facebook page at www.facebook.com/yournextstepisthecure5k and their Instagram page @yournextstepisthecure.

If you are interested in learning more about their event and/or sponsoring, you can email Bernadette and O'Brien at yournextstepisthecure@aol.com.

For registration for the race/walk and to donate, please visit https://runsignup.com/race/fl/plantcity/yournextstepisthecure.





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MOVE YOUR WAY, EARN A MEDAL: UF/IFAS VIRTUAL CHALLENGE

By Marie Gilmore



As the weather cools, it's the perfect time to join an easy, supportive way to become more active. Let's Walk Florida!, hosted by University of Florida (UF) Extension, is a statewide virtual educational program designed to help Floridians achieve and maintain health through physical activity. Let's Walk Florida! meets you where you are — both in terms of physical location and your current fitness level.

The statewide physical activity challenge runs from Monday, October 5, through Monday, November 23.

This program is designed for all fitness levels, and despite the name, you do not have to walk to participate. Any intentional physical activity counts, including swimming, biking, dancing, walking. Participants will be counting minutes of intentional physical activity, not steps.

Participants receive:

• Weekly Health eGuides delivered to your phone or email.

• Weekly educational sessions with UF Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) health educators.

• A virtual community to track your progress for accountability and support.

• Weekly physical activity challenges.

• A statewide tracking dashboard where participants can see progress.

• An official finisher medal and certificate of completion.

• Opportunities to win prizes.

Register to participate via Eventbrite at www.eventbrite.com/e/1999046640314.

There is a nominal fee of $15 to participate, and scholarships are available if needed.

For questions about the program, please contact Andrea Nikolai, UF/IFAS Extension Polk County Family and Consumer Sciences agent, at andreanikolai@ufl.edu or 863-519-1072.

UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) is the home of UF/IFAS Extension Family and Consumer Sciences, providing research-based education in nutrition and wellness, food safety, personal finance and more to improve Floridians' quality of life. With Let's Walk Florida!, the goal is simple: move more, wherever you are, and be part of a community of Floridians working toward better health together.

About UF/IFAS

The mission of the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) is to develop knowledge relevant to agricultural, human and natural resources and to make that knowledge available to sustain and enhance the quality of human life. With more than a dozen research facilities, 67 county Extension offices and award-winning students and faculty in the UF College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, UF/IFAS brings science-based solutions to the state's agricultural and natural resources industries, and all Florida residents.

DAVE'S PUMPKIN PATCH CONTINUES 28 YEAR TRADITION IN BRANDON

By Dale Bliss



There is something about the arrival of fall that brings a little extra excitement to the air. Cooler mornings, changing colors and the return of pumpkins, hay bales and fall decorations all signal that the season has arrived.

For families in Brandon, Valrico and FishHawk, one of those familiar signs of fall has been Dave's Pumpkin Patch, a local tradition that has been welcoming families for more than 25 years.

Located at 106 E. Lumsden Ave. at the northeast corner of Lumsden Road and Parsons Avenue in Brandon, Dave's Pumpkin Patch returns each October with pumpkins in a variety of shapes, sizes and colors. The family-owned business has supported local Brandon, Valrico and FishHawk PTAs since 1998.

Owner Dave Morrow got his start in the pumpkin business in 1996 when he helped his son sell pumpkins through school. Two years later, he opened his own pumpkin operation, creating a seasonal tradition that continues today.

"My most favorable part of the operation is seeing how the little kids react to all the pumpkins and how they make them smile," Morrow said.

The pumpkin selection includes pie pumpkins, mini pumpkins, jack-o'-lantern pumpkins, white pumpkins, blue pumpkins and gourds. Families can also find corn stalks, hay and straw bales and garden mums to add a little fall flair at home.

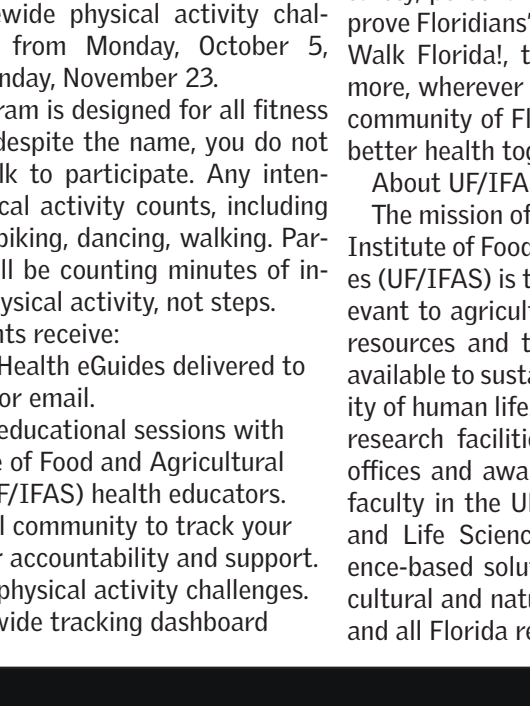
And for families looking to capture the season, the pumpkin lot offers plenty of opportunities for photos. Visitors are encouraged to bring their cameras and take pictures among the pumpkins and fall displays.

Every once in a while, Morrow also brings in some especially large pumpkins, including "Big Mac" pumpkins that can weigh 70-80 pounds.

Dave's Pumpkin Patch is scheduled to operate from now through Saturday, October 31. Hours are Monday through Friday, 1-8 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday, 9 a.m.-8 p.m. Pumpkins are listed as starting at $4.

Whether searching for the perfect pumpkin to carve, decorating the front porch or simply taking a family photo to mark the season, Dave's Pumpkin Patch continues to offer a familiar reminder that fall has arrived in Brandon.

For more information, visit https://daveschristmastreelot.com/ or call 813-843-8182.

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FORGOTTEN ANGELS GAINS COMMUNITY SUPPORT, PLANS FALL FUNDRAISERS

By Brian Bokor



Community leader visits, television coverage and donated time and supplies are supporting Forgotten Angels as the Valrico nonprofit advances its housing efforts and prepares for fall events.

Forgotten Angels provides housing, educational support and life-skills guidance for young people who have aged out of foster care, are at risk or are experiencing homelessness. Its family setting helps residents work toward stable, independent futures.

The nonprofit welcomed Florida House candidate Ryan Gill on August 19 and Florida State Representative Danny Alvarez Sr. on September 24. Mike Daigle of the Kiwanis Club of Greater Brandon attended both visits.

ABC Action News 28 anchor Deiah Riley also featured Forgotten Angels in her new 'Fostering Greatness' series. Airing every other Friday, the reports introduce young adults navigating life after foster care and seek to connect them with community members who can help them pursue their goals. Riley's visit highlighted the support provided by Forgotten Angels founder Cindy Tilley, executive director David Tyler and their team.

Alongside that growing visibility, donated supplies and volunteer work are helping Forgotten Angels maintain its campus and move housing projects forward. Approximately 30 Starlight Homes volunteers spent two hours cleaning and organizing outbuildings. Karen Adkins organized a household-product donation from Bristol Myers Squibb, supplying everyday essentials for the organization.

Forgotten Angels has completed renovations to its new girls' home on Pearson Road. At its Little Stearns Road campus, the nonprofit is converting a shed donated by the Kiwanis Club of Greater Brandon into living quarters. Home Depot contributed drywall for the conversion and planters for the property.

Music bingo night will take place on Tuesday, October 27, from 6-9 p.m. at Voodoo Brewing Co., located at 3432 SR 60 in Valrico. The Halloween-themed fundraiser features five music bingo games, raffle baskets and a 50/50 drawing. Costumes are encouraged but optional. General admission is $25; VIP tickets are $50 and include VIP seating and $20 in raffle tickets. Tickets are available at www.forgottenangelsflorida.org/event/music-bingo-night/.

A separate raffle offers a custom Harley-Davidson chopper built by Weems Motor Co. to recreate the motorcycle in David Mann's Dog Gone Hot Dog painting using authentic vintage custom parts. All proceeds benefit Forgotten Angels. Entries close on Saturday, October 31, at 9 p.m. Tickets are $25 each, or five for $100, 10 for $200 or 50 for $1,000. Enter at https://rafflecreator.com/pages/47938/weems-motor-co-harley-chopper.

Call 813-812-0120, visit www.forgottenangelsflorida.org or email ctilley@forgottenangelsflorida.org. Its campus is at 3604 Little Stearns Rd. in Valrico.







CIGAR CITY CINEMA BRINGS TAMPA'S GOLDEN AGE OF MOVIES TO LIFE

Staff Report



Long before streaming services and multiplexes, opera houses and movie palaces thrilled audiences with a revolutionary new form of entertainment: moving pictures.

Now open at the Henry B. Plant Museum, located at 401 W. Kennedy Blvd. in Tampa, Cigar City Cinema: Tampa Goes to the Movies, 1897-1936 explores the evolution of the city's moviegoing experience from the first short film exhibitions at the Tampa Bay Hotel Casino to the innovations in sound, camera techniques and social commentary that defined the inaugural decade of film screenings at Tampa Theatre.

The dawn of movie magic began in December 1897 when 2,000 people packed the opera house of the Tampa Bay Hotel Casino to see Biograph Company short films that appeared so lifelike audience members gasped. Cigar City Cinema gives modern audiences the opportunity to share this experience by viewing some of these early films.

"Opera houses and vaudeville theaters deserve primary credit for the spread of theatrical film presentations in Tampa and across the nation," said Dr. Charles McGraw Groh, museum director. "Short films took the place of individual songs or skits in variety shows at the turn of the century. It's not surprising, then, that filmmakers borrowed heavily from the best and worst traditions of vaudeville and minstrel shows, ranging from slapstick to blackface."

Soon, the Tampa Bay Hotel Casino introduced city residents to the first feature films, culminating in the sprawling epics of D.W. Griffith. Rare artifacts from the Museum of the Moving Image showcase the power of Griffith's film as propaganda.

The opening of Tampa Theatre in 1926 ushered in the golden age of Hollywood. The magnificent Wurlitzer organ and a full orchestra thrilled audiences in the final years of the silent film era. Cigar City Cinema guides visitors through the sound revolution and the reactions of local audiences.

Tampa Theatre will present a series of films that are featured in the exhibit. The series kicks off with a matinee screening of Dracula on Sunday, October 25. Future showings include Oscar-winning films Sunrise and Grand Hotel. The exhibit features a rotating film presentation, opening with King Kong.

The Cigar City Cinema exhibition is included with museum admission. For hours and visitor information, visit www.plantmuseum.com.

Cigar City Cinema is graciously underwritten by The Bank of Tampa, the Betsy and Steve Chambers Family Foundation, Cogent Bank, the Henry B. Plant Museum Society and Raymond James.

CHIPOTLE OPENS RESTAURANT WITH DRIVE-THRU PICKUP LANE

By Marie Gilmore



Fishhawk Ranch residents have a new spot for burritos and bowls. Chipotle Mexican Grill opened its newest restaurant on September 22 at 16509 Fishhawk Blvd. in Lithia, one of four locations the chain is opening across the Tampa Bay area this month.

Ramon Gomez, CTM of the FishHawk Ranch restaurant, came to the new store from Chipotle's Gibsonton location. He said the first days have been busy.

"The grand opening is going very well, and we are being welcomed by the community. We have had a great response and a very busy opening," Gomez said.

Like the other three new restaurants, the FishHawk location features a Chipotlane, a drive-through lane where customers can pick up orders placed through the Chipotle app or website without leaving their cars.

The chain opened a restaurant at 1185 S. Broad St. in Brooksville on September 16. Two more opened on September 29, one at 22820 State Rd. 54 in Lutz, near Land O' Lakes, and one at 16680 E. State Rd. 64 in Bradenton, in the northeast Lakewood Ranch area.

All four restaurants are open daily from 10:45 a.m.-10 p.m.

Diners can also try two limited-time items. Pollo asado is grilled chicken seasoned with garlic, Mexican spices and cilantro, finished with citrus and lime. Chili lime chips are tortilla chips seasoned with lime and chili peppers.

The restaurants also serve Chipotle's high protein menu, with items ranging from 15-81 grams of protein, including the Double High Protein Bowl, the High Protein-High Fiber Bowl and a High Protein Cup snack. A single chicken taco starts at $3.50. Family meals are available for groups eating at home.

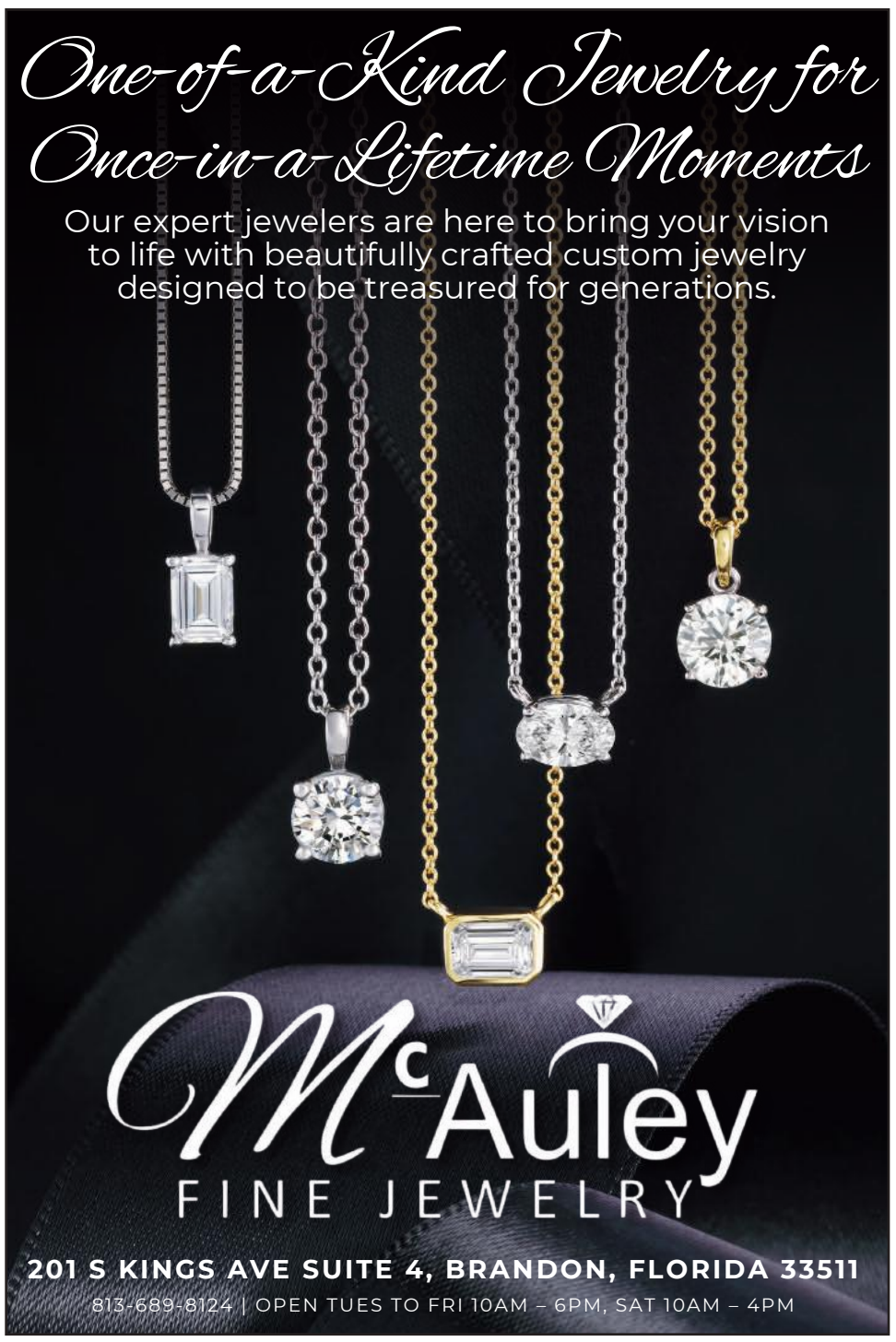
New members of the Chipotle Rewards program, which offers monthly free food drops and birthday rewards, receive free chips and guacamole with a purchase. Customers can enroll at https://chipotle.com/rewards.

The company is hiring about 30 employees at each of the four new restaurants. Benefits include a crew bonus that can equal an extra month's pay each year, a debt-free college degree program, English as a second language classes and access to mental health care for employees and their families.

Applications are available at https://chipotle.com/careers.

Local groups and organizations can also set up fundraisers through Chipotle to benefit community causes.





BROADWAY IN LAKELAND ANNOUNCES 2027 SEASON WITH THREE HIT SHOWS

Staff Report



Broadway fans can look forward to a new season of theater at the RP Funding Center in Lakeland, with three acclaimed productions scheduled for 2027.

The inaugural Broadway in Lakeland season will feature CLUE, HADESTOWN and The Who's TOMMY, offering audiences a mix of comedy, mythology and rock music.

Season subscriptions are now available, with packages starting at $145 for all three shows. Series price levels are $280 for Level One, $220 for Level Two and $145 for Level Three.

Subscribers receive guaranteed seats for each performance, access to the best available seats at subscription pricing, first options to upgrade seats and special ticket offers. Subscribers also have the opportunity to purchase tickets to select add-on performances before they go on sale to the general public.

The season opens with CLUE on January 31, 2027, at 7 p.m. Based on the popular 1985 movie and classic Hasbro board game, the production brings the familiar suspects and weapons to the stage for a comedic murder mystery. Six guests gather at Boddy Manor, where murder and blackmail lead to a night of twists, turns and unexpected revelations.

On March 2, 2027, at 7:30 p.m., HADESTOWN takes the stage. The Tony Award-winning musical, created by singer-songwriter Anaïs Mitchell and originally directed by Rachel Chavkin, weaves together the ancient stories of Orpheus and Eurydice and of Hades and Persephone. The production won eight Tony Awards in 2019, including Best Musical, as well as the 2020 Grammy Award for Best Musical Theater Album.

The season concludes on June 1, 2027, at 7 p.m. with The Who's TOMMY, a new production of the iconic rock opera created by The Who in 1969. Featuring songs including "Pinball Wizard," "I'm Free," "See Me, Feel Me" and "Sensation," the production follows Tommy Walker's extraordinary journey from troubled young man to pinball sensation.

Subscriptions can be purchased online at www.rpfundingcenter.com/broadway, by calling the RP Funding Center Box Office at 863-834-8111 or in person at 701 W. Lime St. The box office is open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays and Thursdays.

For ticket and ADA seating information, call 863-834-8100. Service fees may apply.

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HALLOWEEN, FALL FESTS, BOO BASH AND ANNUAL BLACK CAT 5K

Staff Report

Boo Bash Trick-or-treat

Dillard's department store at Brandon Exchange is hosting Boo Bash, an indoor trick-or-treating event for families, on Saturday, October 24, from 12 Noon-2 p.m. Along with trick-or-treating, there will be games and music from a DJ. Dillard's is located at 303 Brandon Town Center Dr. in Brandon. Come out dressed in your favorite costume and enjoy the fun.

Grace At Lithia, Fall Festival

Grace at Lithia church is hosting a Fall Festival on Sunday, October 18, starting at 12 Noon, in partnership with HCA Healthcare. It will have lots of family activities, including inflatables, games, food trucks, costumes, an ambulance for the kids to explore, and a really cute teddy bear health clinic where kids can take a teddy bear through a toy X-ray machine and receive a printout of the X-ray. Grace at Lithia is located at 5708 Lithia Pinecrest Rd. in Lithia.

Annual Black Cat 5K Fun Run Benefitting A Kitten Place

Animal lovers are invited to lace up their sneakers and make a lifesaving difference at the sixth annual Black Cat 5K Fun Run, presented by The Fuddy Fund and benefiting A Kitten Place, a local nonprofit rescue dedicated to saving homeless cats and kittens throughout the Tampa Bay area.

The untimed 5K fun run and 1-mile walk will take place on Saturday, October 24, in the Twin Lakes neighborhood at 3002 Beaver Pond Trail in Valrico, bringing together runners, walkers, families and animal lovers for a morning of fun while raising funds for cats in need.

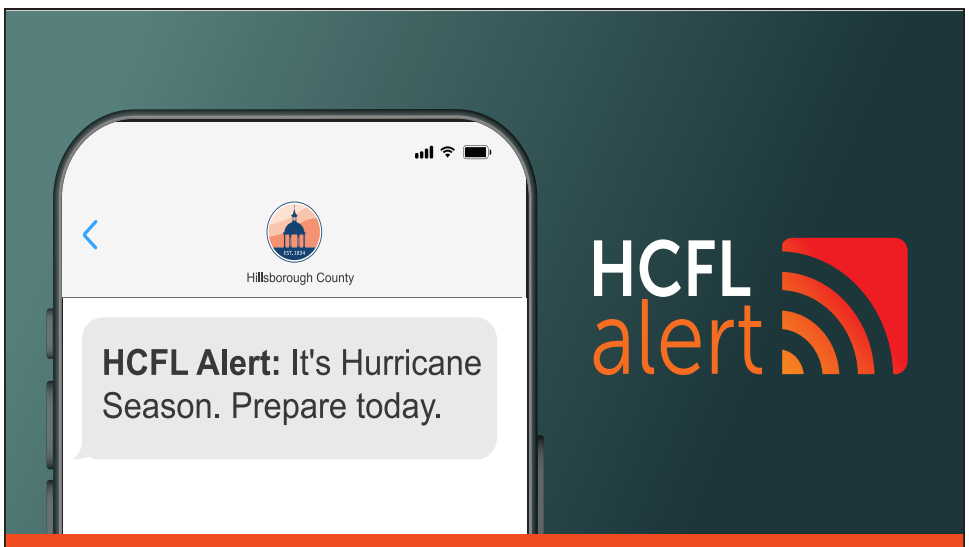


This year's event has an exciting new focus: fundraising through teams and individual participants. Organizers hope to expand the event's impact by encouraging supporters to create fundraising teams, invite friends and family to donate, and compete for fun prizes along the way. Registration is now open. For registration, fundraising information, sponsorship opportunities or more information about A Kitten Place, visit https://akittenplace.org/events/.

Haunted Woods Events At Hillsborough River State Park

Are you ready to face your worst nightmare? Haunted Woods at Hillsborough River State Park is where your nightmares become alive. As night falls, the woods come to life and turn into pure terror. Brave the Scare Trail — Beyond the Grave — where the undead are clocking in.

This is recommended for children over 12 years of age and will take place from 7-10 p.m. at Hillsborough River State Park, located at 15402 U.S. 301 in Thonotosassa, on Friday and Saturday, October 16-17. For a more family-friendly event, bring younger children to the Beyond the Grave Kids Trail event, which runs from 3-6 p.m. only. This is a cash-only event.



JEFF'S BAGEL RUN EXPANDS TO BLOOMINGDALE WITH LOCAL OWNERS

By Brian Bokor





For Rob Shuffield, opening Jeff's Bagel Run in Bloomingdale Square brings a longtime restaurant dream back to familiar ground. The 1990 Brandon High School graduate and his wife, Teresa Shuffield, celebrated the shop's grand opening on October 2, bringing scratch-made bagels, spreads and coffee to a community they already serve through their Nothing Bundt Cakes bakeries in Winthrop and Brandon.

Located at 875 E. Bloomingdale Ave. in Brandon, between Bealls and EOS Fitness, the new shop puts the couple close to the families and schools that drew Rob to Bloomingdale Square.

"From the moment we started preparing to open in Brandon, the community has been incredibly welcoming," co-founder Jeff Perera said.

Customers can watch staff mix and shape dough, then boil and bake bagels in small batches throughout the day. Fresh batches keep coming through the morning, with no toasters behind the counter.

"Fresh baked bagels don't need to be toasted," Perera said.

Spreads include savory roasted jalapeño and chive and onion, plus sweet cake batter and banana pudding. Hot coffee, iced lattes, cold brew, teas and refreshers round out the menu, whether customers stop for one bagel or pick up a box to share.

The rotating Bagel of the Day began with jalapeño and blueberry, two additional doughs Perera knew how to make. When those became regular offerings, customers still wanted a daily special, pushing the team to develop new varieties and bring back favorites.

Perera's bagel-making journey began after he lost his job in 2019. His wife, Danielle, encouraged him to make the bagels they struggled to find near their Central Florida home. He tested recipes until friends and neighbors began ordering.

The home project became Jeff's Bagel Run. The Pereras opened their first storefront in Ocoee in 2021, using the recipe developed in their kitchen.

The company reached 41 shops with the Bloomingdale and Cumming, Georgia, openings, with Plantation next on its expansion schedule.

"It's exciting to see how far the brand has come in a relatively short amount of time," Perera said.

Franchise owners and their teams receive extensive training to carry that approach into new shops. Technology alerts bakers when a flavor runs low, helping replenish the selection while keeping production on-site.

"Our system ensures bagels are made fresh and replenished as needed," Perera said.

For the Shuffields, fresh dough is familiar territory. Their restaurant career began long before Jeff's, and Rob's ownership ambitions started even earlier.

"I wanted to own a Beef 'O' Brady's franchise since I was in 10th grade," Rob said. "We would go there after our tennis matches in high school."

He carried that ambition to the University of Florida, where restaurant work introduced him to Teresa.

"I worked in restaurants to gain experience and met Teresa at UF," he said.

A CiCi's Pizza franchise owner recruited Rob from Don Pablo's and explained that ownership could be within reach. Rob and Teresa joined CiCi's to learn the business and qualify to open their own restaurant.

Three years later, they became owners. Rob was 29, and Teresa was 25. They later moved to Virginia, opening their first location there in 2001 and expanding to 10 over eight years before returning to Florida.

A fellow CiCi's owner introduced them to Nothing Bundt Cakes.

"Teresa and I signed up and opened our first location January 2016," Rob said.

They expect to open their 10th and 11th bakeries this October and November. Another business connection introduced them to bagels.

"My contractor told me he was building some Jeff's Bagel Runs and he wanted to pick my brain about opening his own," Rob said.

The brand's following encouraged them to explore it.

"Everyone in Orlando loves Jeff's, and so Teresa and I opened three this year," he said.

They opened in The Villages in April, Gainesville in July and now Bloomingdale. Rob sees a link between their scratch-made pizza kitchens and production at Jeff's.

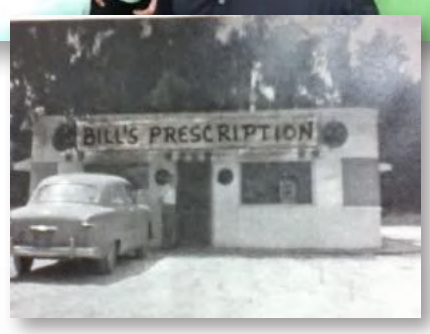
Jeff's Bagel Run is open daily from 6:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Visit www.jeffsbagelrun.com or call 656-272-5774 for information.



BILL'S PRESCRIPTION MARKS 70 YEARS WITH COMMUNITY CELEBRATION

By Marie Gilmore





When a local pharmacist Justo 'Bill' Noriega, opened a small drugstore on Brandon Boulevard in 1956, he could not have known it would one day care for four generations of the same families. Seventy years later, Bill's Prescription Center is still doing just that, and the family-owned pharmacy is inviting the community to celebrate.

The pharmacy will host a Community Wellness Celebration from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, November 7, at its location at 202 E. Brandon Blvd. in Brandon. The free event will bring together local health care providers, wellness businesses, longtime customers and neighbors for a day focused on health, education and connection.

Visitors can receive free health screenings, including blood pressure and glucose checks, as well as flu shots. Local health and wellness vendors will be on hand, along with giveaways, raffle prizes and family-friendly activities. The day will also include a special tribute to the pharmacy's founder and to the patients, employees, health care professionals and community members who have been part of its history.

Chelsea Noriega West, the founder's granddaughter and the daughter of the pharmacy's current owner, said her grandfather's philosophy of treating every patient like family remains at the heart of the business.

"My grandfather could never have imagined in 1956 that the small pharmacy he opened would become part of the lives of so many Brandon families," she said. "We have cared for grandparents, parents, children and now grandchildren of many of the same families who first walked through our doors decades ago."

Now a three-generation family business, Bill's Prescription Center has remained independent through seven decades of change in the health care industry. Noriega West said the anniversary is about more than the passage of time.

"It is a celebration of the people who have trusted us with their care, the dedicated staff members who have served generations of families and a community that has supported a local independent pharmacy," she said.

As health care continues to evolve, she added, the family hopes its story highlights the lasting value of accessible, personal, community-based care and the vital role local providers continue to play in the lives of Brandon residents.

For more information about the celebration, call Bill's Prescription Center at 813-277-8242.

VETERANS ART CENTER TO HOST 'RHYTHMS, RESILIENCE AND LAUGHTER' CONCERT

By Brian Bokor



As the Veterans Art Center Tampa Bay (VACTB) celebrates its 13th anniversary, the organization is taking its mission from the art gallery to the main stage.

On Sunday, November 15, from 1:30-5:15 p.m., VACTB invites the community to The Dallas Bull for a powerful concert event dedicated to expanding mental health programs for military personnel, veterans, first responders, and their families.

For over a decade, VACTB has served as a beacon of hope, utilizing alternative art therapies to foster mental health and facilitate healing. With a mission deeply rooted in suicide prevention, the organization has achieved significant milestones:

• Providing art therapy to over 3,025 individuals. Each of these individuals has embarked on a unique journey of self-discovery and healing through the therapeutic power of art.

• Preventing seven veteran suicides. This profound impact speaks directly to the critical need for our services and the tangible difference we are making in saving lives.

• Supporting over 29,005 children. By extending its reach to the families of its heroes, VACTB is nurturing resilience and providing crucial support to the next generation.

• Over 350 testimonials confirm its program's profound impact. Participants report a 90 percent reduction in suicidal ideation and a 75 percent increase in emotional well-being, from crisis to a place of lasting hope and resilience.

• A "To Those Served" Memorial Dedication at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg campus.

• Providing six major contracted exhibits. These exhibitions have served as powerful platforms to share the stories and artistic expressions of those VACTB serves with a wider audience, fostering understanding and connection.

"For our veterans, art isn't just a hobby; it's a lifeline," said Mack Macksam, founder and CEO of VACTB. "Partnering with the Soul Circus Cowboys at this legendary venue allows us to celebrate their incredible resilience. When 'I Stand' fills the room, it stands as an anthem for every hero we serve."

Event Highlights

The afternoon will feature a high-energy lineup designed to inspire and entertain, headlined by Billboard-charting Southern rock sensation Randy McNeeley and the Soul Circus Cowboys, alongside the comedic talents of Ginger Kelly. The event will be emceed by veteran radio personality and comedian Pat Largo. Activities include live music, comedy, a veteran art showcase and high-end silent auctions.

Supporting The Mission

VACTB aims secure over 300 RSVPs and raise $20,000 to bolster its 2027 programming.

"We are a community built on real stories," added Macksam. "We stand behind those who have given so much for this country, and we invite the Tampa Bay community to join us in proving that art and connection are the ultimate tools for healing."

The Dallas Bull is located at 3322 U.S. 301 N. in Tampa. For tickets, sponsorship information, and additional details, visit https://vactb.org/events-for-veterans-and-supporters.



MOMBIES BRING "THRILLER" BACK TO PARK SQUARE ON OCT. 25

By Marie Gilmore



The MOMbies of FishHawk are returning to Park Square for another evening of family-friendly Halloween fun, community spirit and support for breast cancer research. This year, the group of dancing moms hopes to put on its biggest show yet.



The festivities begin at 4 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 25, at Park Square Plaza, 16132 Churchview Dr., in Lithia. Before the main event, families can enjoy raffles and prizes, face painting, a kids' costume contest, photo booth pictures and other Halloween activities.

At 6:30 p.m., the MOMbies take the stage for their highly anticipated annual performance, a flash-mob-style routine set to Michael Jackson's 1982 hit "Thriller."

Whether they have seen the MOMbies before or are catching the show for the first time, attendees are encouraged to come dressed for the occasion and bring family, friends and neighbors.

The group was founded by FishHawk resident Andrea Young after she saw a viral video of the original MOMbies, a movement that began in Fairfield, Connecticut, in 2016. Inspired to bring the tradition to Florida, she launched the FishHawk chapter, which gave its first performance in 2023. The group has returned to Park Square every October since, turning the routine into a neighborhood Halloween tradition.

Young said 31 MOMbies are already training for this year's show.

"The performance is open to the public and we would love the community to come out and support this event and this important cause," she said.

Behind the costumes and choreography is a serious purpose. Their performances double as community fundraisers, with all proceeds donated to The Cancer Couch Foundation, which funds metastatic breast cancer research at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York. This year, every donation will be matched, doubling its impact.

In 2023, its first year, the group raised more than $7,000 for the cause.

Residents who want to support the cause before the big night have two more chances. The MOMbies will host music bingo at 6 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 15, at JF Kicks. They will also have a tent at FishHawk's fall festival on Saturday, Oct. 24, where visitors can stop by to meet the group.

To learn more about the group's mission and upcoming events, follow FishHawk MOMbies on Facebook and @fishhawk_mombies on Instagram.

EAST OF TAMPA HIGHLIGHTS COMMUNITY & BUSINESSES

By Marie Gilmore



After 13 years as an Army officer, John Plumstead made a decision that would take him from leading soldiers to leading businesses.

Plumstead served from Second Lieutenant to Major, taught at West Point and led soldiers in combat before taking off his uniform in 2022.

"I never went and got a job. Not one day of it," Plumstead said.

Instead, he continued building on a path he had already started while serving. Plumstead had been investing in real estate on active duty and, by the time he separated from the Army, was raising outside capital for self-storage investments.

Today, he has built a seven-figure business, closed more than $20 million in real estate deals and completed more than 100 residential flips.

His entrepreneurial philosophy is straightforward.

"Every business I own has the same two problems. It needs people, and it needs customers," he said. "I solved both for myself before I ever sold either one to anyone else."

Through Bravo Company Digital, Plumstead helps businesses address both.

The company provides full-time, college-educated professionals for roles ranging from sales development and bookkeeping to customer service, permitting, operations and executive assistance. It also provides lead-generation services through Meta advertising, outbound marketing and fractional CMO services.

Plumstead also founded East of Tampa, a hyperlocal media company focused on eastern Hillsborough County. The platform has grown to more than 5,000 newsletter subscribers, 18,000 social media followers and more than 2 million monthly content views, while supporting local businesses through advertising.

His other ventures include Gray Line Investments, a veteran-owned real estate company focused on self-storage and industrial properties, and Team Plumstead, the residential real estate team he operates with his wife, Danielle.

Outside of business, Plumstead remains focused on community and family. He coaches Pop Warner football and serves as Athletic Director for the FishHawk Spartans, where his wife also serves as league manager.

The Plumsteads are raising four sons in FishHawk after their children spent their early years living in 10 states over 10 years.

For Plumstead, the common thread connecting military service, entrepreneurship, coaching and fatherhood is intensity.

"Football. Building businesses. Competing. Anything that rewards intensity," he said. "I'm a high achiever, I tend to go all in, and I like that about myself."





PREVENTING DRUG ABUSE, PROTECTING OUR COMMUNITY

By State Attorney Suzy Lopez



"Two of the men I depended on the most are gone," Lisa Jo Burke said after losing both her son Brandon, and her husband, John, to fentanyl overdoses less than a year apart.

Her words capture the devastation substance abuse can leave behind. Addiction doesn't only affect the person using drugs. It can tear families apart.

October is National Substance Abuse Prevention Month, and tragedies like this are a reminder that prevention requires more than one approach. As prosecutors, our job is to hold people accountable when they break the law. But there is an important distinction between someone struggling with substance use disorder and someone who profits from selling dangerous drugs in our community.

Sometimes, the person standing in a courtroom is there because addiction has taken over their life. In those cases, jail alone may never solve the problem. For certain nonviolent offenders, drug treatment court gives them a chance to get help while still being held accountable.

It's not the easy way out. Participants are closely supervised and expected to prove that they are serious about changing their lives. When treatment works, communities become safer and fewer people reoffend.

That is very different from someone who profits by selling dangerous drugs. When a dealer puts fentanyl or other deadly substances into our community, the consequences can be devastating and irreversible. Florida law allows prosecutors to pursue first-degree murder charges when the drugs they sell cause someone's death. When a family loses a loved one that way, we will use every tool the law gives us to hold the responsible party accountable.

Susan S. Lopez
Office of the State Attorney
13th Judicial Circuit

The best outcome is always to prevent the loss in the first place. That starts at home. Talk to your children about the dangers of drugs. If someone you love is struggling, don't wait for an arrest or an overdose to take it seriously.

National Substance Abuse Prevention Month is a reminder that we all have a role. In our office, that means helping people break free from addiction and holding drug dealers accountable for preying on vulnerable people in our community.

The State Attorney's Office of the 13th Judicial circuit encompasses all of Hillsborough County, including the cities of Tampa, Temple Terrace and Plant City. The office staff consists of approximately 320 dedicated public servants including 130 prosecutors, as well as investigators, victim advocates and support staff. The office handles approximately 50,000 cases every year. To learn more about the organization or apply to become part of the team, visit www.sao13th.com.







SECOND CHANCES: LOCAL RESCUE SHARES STORIES OF TUCKER AND OAKLEY

Staff Report





A blind senior miniature horse and a young dog who nearly starved to death are the latest faces of Rescue Pets of Florida Inc., a nonprofit that rescues and rehabilitates animals in need and finds them safe, loving homes.

Now the organization is asking the community to help both of them take the next step.

Tucker, a 24-year-old miniature horse, was given to the rescue, which has committed to giving him a safe and comfortable place to live out his senior years. Though he is blind, Tucker still explores his surroundings, grazes and enjoys time with his caregivers.

"Tucker deserves the opportunity to enjoy his golden years in a place where he feels safe and loved," the rescue said in a statement. "We want to give him an environment where being blind doesn't limit his ability to simply be a horse."

Because Tucker cannot see, Rescue Pets of Florida is raising money to build him a secure enclosure where he can move around safely, rest, graze and learn his surroundings. Donations will help pay for fencing and gates, ground preparation, a sheltered resting area, feeding areas designed for his needs, safety improvements and ongoing maintenance.

The goal, the rescue said, is not just to build a fence but to create a predictable place Tucker can recognize and come to know as home.

Oakley's story began in far worse shape. When the retriever mix first arrived, he was starved nearly to death, with his ribs and bones plainly visible and his body severely weakened.

After medical care, proper nutrition and plenty of patience, Oakley, now 2 years old, has become a happy, goofy dog who seems determined to make up for the puppyhood he missed. The rescue describes him as a puppy at heart who loves attention, playtime and, above all, snacks.

Oakley is now ready for a forever home. The rescue is looking for a family that will give him affection, patience and the kind of life he should have had from the start.

Residents can help Tucker by donating money, materials or supplies, sharing his story on social media or connecting the rescue with businesses or contractors who can assist with the enclosure.

For more information about Tucker, adopting Oakley or other ways to help, visit rescuepetsofflorida.org.

PUBLIX SERVES BRINGS 40 VOLUNTEERS AND A $60,000 GIFT TO LOCAL FOOD BANK

Staff Report



More than 40 Publix associates and store managers from 12 area stores spent Sept. 22 volunteering at United Food Bank and Services in Plant City as part of the company's Publix Serves initiative.

The visit also came with a major boost for the food bank. Publix Super Markets Charities presented the organization with a $60,000 contribution to strengthen hunger-relief efforts across eastern Hillsborough County.

John Doran, executive director of Publix Super Markets Charities, joined associates and local store leaders for the presentation. Publix Super Markets Charities, the grocery chain's charitable foundation, supports organizations focused on hunger relief, education and other community needs.

Throughout the day, volunteers worked on a range of projects that keep the food bank running. They assembled Kids Weekend Bags for students at 26 local schools, sorted fresh produce and shelf-stable food, prepared beverage bags and handed out meal boxes to families. Others pitched in on behind-the-scenes tasks that help the organization carry out its mission.

The work touched nearly every part of the food bank's operation, from the warehouse floor to the distribution line.

The Kids Weekend Bags are designed to help students who may not have enough to eat at home when school meals are not available, such as over the weekend.

The impact reaches well beyond a single day. United Food Bank and Services serves about 15,000 people each month, and the Publix donation will help provide food and other essential resources to local children, families, seniors and veterans.

Since 1991, the nonprofit has served as a lifeline for individuals and families facing hunger and hardship. Its mission is to help people move from "a state of hunger" to self-sufficiency, empowerment and self-reliance.

Through its Feeding Our Community program, the food bank offers daily on-site food distribution along with targeted outreach in underserved neighborhoods.

Publix Serves is the company's volunteer program, which encourages associates to give back in the communities where they live and work.

The food bank relies on donations and volunteers to keep up with demand. Contributions, according to the organization, help do more than fill empty plates; they help create lasting change.

For more information or to donate, visit ufbpc.org or follow @UnitedFoodBankAndServices on social media.

SUNCOAST FOUNDATION INVESTS $327,000 IN HILLSBOROUGH EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Staff Report



Hillsborough Education Foundation (HEF) is proud to announce a charitable gift of $327,000 from the Suncoast Credit Union Foundation. The funds will support several of HEF's key programs, ensuring that students, teachers and schools throughout Hillsborough County receive the resources they need to thrive.

Through the Teaching Tools Resource Center, teachers can access essential classroom supplies at no cost, while the Transforming Early Literacy Initiative provides job-embedded coaching for early educators at 31 high-needs schools, helping young learners build strong foundations for future success. Suncoast Credit Union Foundation's support also helps fund School and Classroom Enrichment Grants that bring innovative learning opportunities to students, mentoring programs that provide students with guidance and encouragement and the CEOs in Schools initiative, which connects business leaders with public schools to deepen understanding and strengthen community partnerships.

"Suncoast Credit Union Foundation is a valued partner in expanding opportunities for students and educators across Hillsborough County," said Anna Corman, president and CEO of Hillsborough Education Foundation. "Their generous investment helps put essential resources in the hands of teachers, build strong foundations for our youngest learners and prepare students for success beyond high school. We are grateful for their continued commitment to public education and for investing alongside us in the success of our students, teachers and schools."

Suncoast Credit Union, Florida's largest credit union, founded the Suncoast Credit Union Foundation to promote the education, health and emotional well-being of children in the community. Each time a Suncoast member uses their debit or credit card, the credit union donates four cents to the foundation to fund local initiatives. Since its inception in 1990, the foundation has raised and donated more than $68 million.

"Founded by educators in 1934, Suncoast Credit Union has spent more than 90 years investing in teachers, students and schools," said Kevin Johnson, president and CEO of Suncoast Credit Union. "We're especially proud to help students across Hillsborough County thrive and reach their full potential."









WHO'S GOT YOUR VOTE?

BALLOT EXPLAINED: THREE AMENDMENTS AND THREE REFERENDUMS

By Marie Gilmore

Voters will decide three statewide constitutional amendments and three Hillsborough County questions in the November 3 General Election. Statewide amendments require at least 60 percent approval. County referendums require a simple majority.

Statewide Amendments

Amendment 1: A Bigger "Rainy Day Fund" for the State

Florida maintains a Budget Stabilization Fund to cover emergencies and budget shortfalls. The amendment would increase the amount that can be retained from 10 percent to 25 percent of the state's general revenue collections.

It would also require the Legislature to transfer the lesser of $750 million or the amount needed to reach 25 percent each year, unless specified conditions allow the transfer to be suspended. Lawmakers could continue withdrawing money for critical state needs.

A YES vote supports increasing the fund's maximum balance and requiring annual transfers.

A NO vote opposes the proposed changes.

Amendment 2: Property Tax Exemption for Certain Agricultural Equipment

This amendment would exempt certain tangible personal property from property taxes when located on agricultural land and used to produce agricultural products or for agritourism activities.

The property must be owned by the landowner or leaseholder. Examples include qualifying farm equipment, tools and machinery.

If approved, the exemption would apply beginning January 1, 2027.

A YES vote supports exempting qualifying agricultural and agritourism-related property from taxes.

A NO vote opposes the proposed exemption.



Amendment 3: Larger Homestead Exemption and Changes to Property Assessments

This amendment would make several changes to Florida's property tax system.

Larger homestead exemption: The exemption for non-school taxes would increase to $150,000 in 2027 and $250,000 in 2028, with adjustments for inflation beginning in 2029. It would not apply to school district taxes.

Local option: Counties and municipalities could increase the homestead exemption for their respective taxes up to the property's full assessed value. Special districts could do the same with voter approval.

New Florida residents: People who are not Florida residents as of December 31, 2026, would initially receive the existing homestead exemption when they qualify.

Lower assessment cap: The annual cap on increases in assessed value for non-homestead property would decrease from 10 percent to 5 percent. This does not apply to school district taxes.

Property tax spending: Counties and municipalities would be required to use property tax revenues for public safety, education, infrastructure, natural resources, bond debt service, employee retirement benefits, and government operations.

The amendment would take effect January 1, 2027.

A YES vote supports the proposed changes.

A NO vote opposes those changes.



Hillsborough County Referendums

Referendum 1: Should Voters Elect the School Superintendent?

Currently, the Hillsborough County School Board appoints the superintendent of Hillsborough County Public Schools. This referendum asks whether the superintendent should instead be elected by voters in a partisan election.

If approved, the change would take effect with the 2028 general election, with the superintendent serving a four-year term.

A YES vote supports electing the superintendent.

A NO vote keeps the superintendent appointed by the School Board.

Referendum 2: More County Commissioners, All Elected by District

Hillsborough County currently has seven county commissioners. This referendum would increase the number to nine and eventually to 11 when the county reaches a population of 2.5 million.

It also would require every commissioner to be elected from a single-member district, meaning only district voters would elect that commissioner.

A YES vote supports expanding the commission and making all seats district-based.

A NO vote leaves the current seven-member structure in place.

Referendum 3: Continue the Half-Cent Sales Tax for Schools

Hillsborough County voters approved a half-cent school capital outlay sales surtax in 2018. The tax is scheduled to expire in 2028.

This referendum asks whether to continue the half-cent sales tax for another 10 years beginning January 1, 2029. Revenue would fund air conditioning replacement and repairs, school construction and improvements, security enhancements and other maintenance needs.

A YES vote supports continuing the tax through 2038.

A NO vote allows the tax to expire as scheduled.



re-elect KAren Perez
for school board district 6

A PLAN TO MEET TODAY'S CHALLENGES

KAREN PEREZ' PRIORITIES FOR OUR SCHOOLS

- BUILD ON OUR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT GAINS
- CONTINUE TO FIGHT FOR HIGHER TEACHER PAY
- INVEST IN SCHOOL SAFETY
- RETAIN QUALITY TEACHERS
- FOCUS OUR LIMITED RESOURCES ON THE CLASSROOM

Karen's experience as Chair of the School Board, mother, business owner and mental health specialist, makes her uniquely prepared to face today's challenges.

- Elected to Hillsborough County School Board in 2018 and serves as Chair
- Owns a small business that works with children, families, and veterans on mental health issues
- Mother of three adult children, eight grandchildren and lives in New Tampa with Riley and Baxter, certified Therapy Dogs for comforting her clients
- Florida School Board Assoc. Member
- Serves on Value Adjustment Board
- Safe and Sound Leadership Council
- National Assoc. Social Workers Member
- Trilingual – English, Spanish and American Sign Language

/KarenPerezTampa | (813) 493-7705 | kperezhsb2004@aol.com

www.KeepKarenPerez.com

Political advertisement paid for and approved by Karen Perez, non-partisan, for Hillsborough County School Board District 6.

POLITICALLY SPEAKING

YOUR VOTE COUNTS

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Angie Nixon
www.angienixon.com



Neil J. Gillespie
www.neilgillespie4senate.blogspot.com

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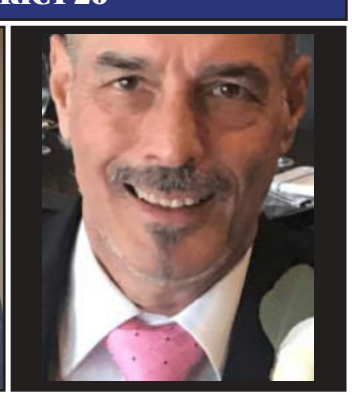
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www.brianlambertforcongress.com

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Gerald Baldi
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Daniel Alvarez
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Ashley Elizabeth Hermann
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Michael Owen
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Luther Keith Wilkins
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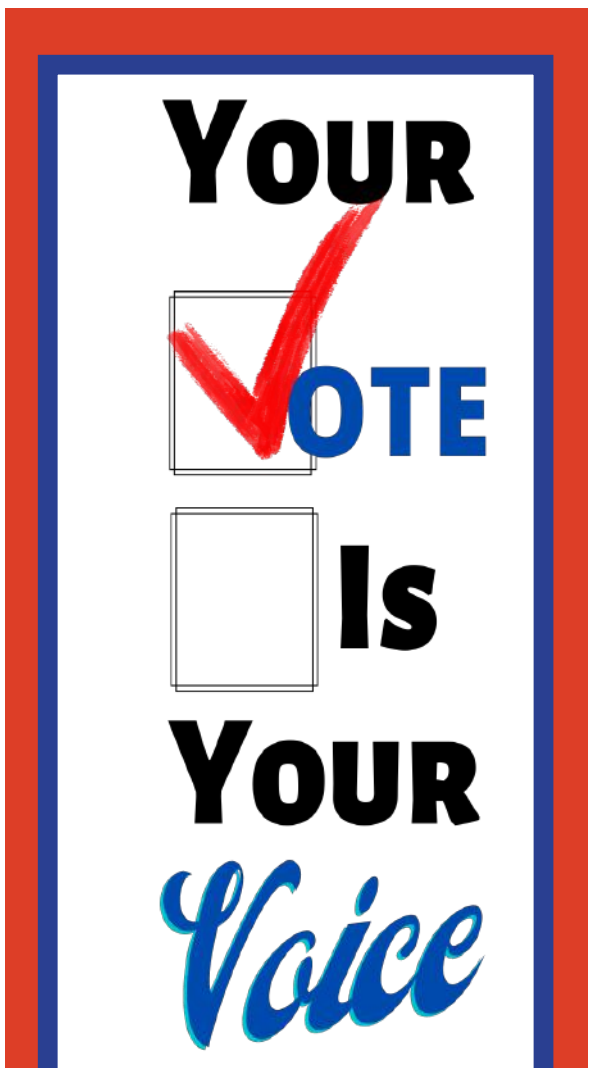
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Luiz F. Garcia
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Stacy Hahn
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Neil Manimala
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COUNTY COMMISSIONER DISTRICT 7



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www.joshuawostal.com



Aileen Rodriguez
www.voteaileen2026.com

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Brittany Lyssy
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Daniela Simic
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SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER DISTRICT 6



Kenneth Gay
www.votekennethgay.com



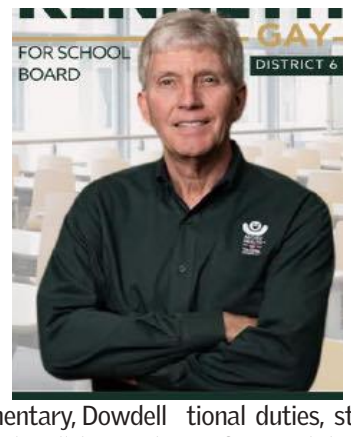
Karen Perez
www.keepkarenperez.com

YOUR VOTE COUNTS

WHO'S GOT YOUR VOTE?

KENNETH GAY
SCHOOL BOARD, DISTRICT 6

Staff Report



Kenneth 'Ken' Gay is seeking a seat on the Hillsborough County School Board, District 6, drawing on nearly four decades of experience in public education and a lifelong connection to the community he hopes to serve.

A fifth-generation Floridian, Gay was born and raised in Tampa Bay and is a graduate of Palm River Elementary, Dowdell Middle Magnet School and Hillsborough High School. He continued his education at Hillsborough College, the University of South Florida and Nova Southeastern University, earning two master's degrees and a doctorate in child and youth studies.

Gay devoted 39 years to Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) as an educator and administrator before retiring in 2022. He continues working with students through MORE HEALTH and mentors teachers entering the profession through alternative certification.

His decision to run, he said, is rooted in a desire to keep students at the center of school district decisions while supporting educators, strengthening family partnerships and ensuring taxpayer resources are used effectively.

Gay identifies student achievement as a central priority, emphasizing the importance of identifying learning gaps early, strengthening instruction and expanding opportunities that prepare students for college, military service, careers and life.

He also points to teacher recruitment and retention as essential to student success. His priorities include competitive compensation, reducing unnecessary paperwork and noninstructional duties, strengthening mentoring and professional development and giving educators meaningful input before decisions affect classrooms.

School safety and discipline are another focus. Drawing on his experience as an assistant principal, Gay supports clear behavior expectations, consistent enforcement of discipline policies, family involvement and partnerships with school resource officers.

Beyond education, Gay serves as clerk of session at First Presbyterian Church of Brandon and has volunteered with Tampa Bay Watch, helping restore marine habitat.

After a lifetime in Hillsborough County, Gay said he is seeking the District 6 seat to continue serving students, educators and families through experienced leadership, fiscal responsibility and a focus on stronger student outcomes. District 6 is a countywide seat, meaning all Hillsborough County voters can participate in the election. For more information, visit www.votekennethgay.com.

NEIL MANIMALA
COUNTY COMMISSIONER, DIST. 5

By Amanda Castillo



For Neil Manimala, Hillsborough County has been the backdrop to nearly every chapter of his life, from growing up in Valrico as the son of two healthcare workers, to building a career as a physician serving the local medical community and now raising a family of his own. Manimala's parents, both immigrants, worked in opposite hospitals while raising their family. His mother was a nurse and his father a respiratory therapist, an upbringing that cultivated his understanding of hard work, family, and service. Looking back on their journey, he sees it as a reflection of what they were able to build, "There is something to be said about the American dream."

That example eventually led Manimala into health care. After graduating from Hillsborough County public schools, he earned his Medical degree from the University of South Florida. Today, he's a board certified urologist caring for patients throughout Brandon, Riverview, Plant City and Sun City Center, and serves as the president of the Hillsborough County Medical Association.

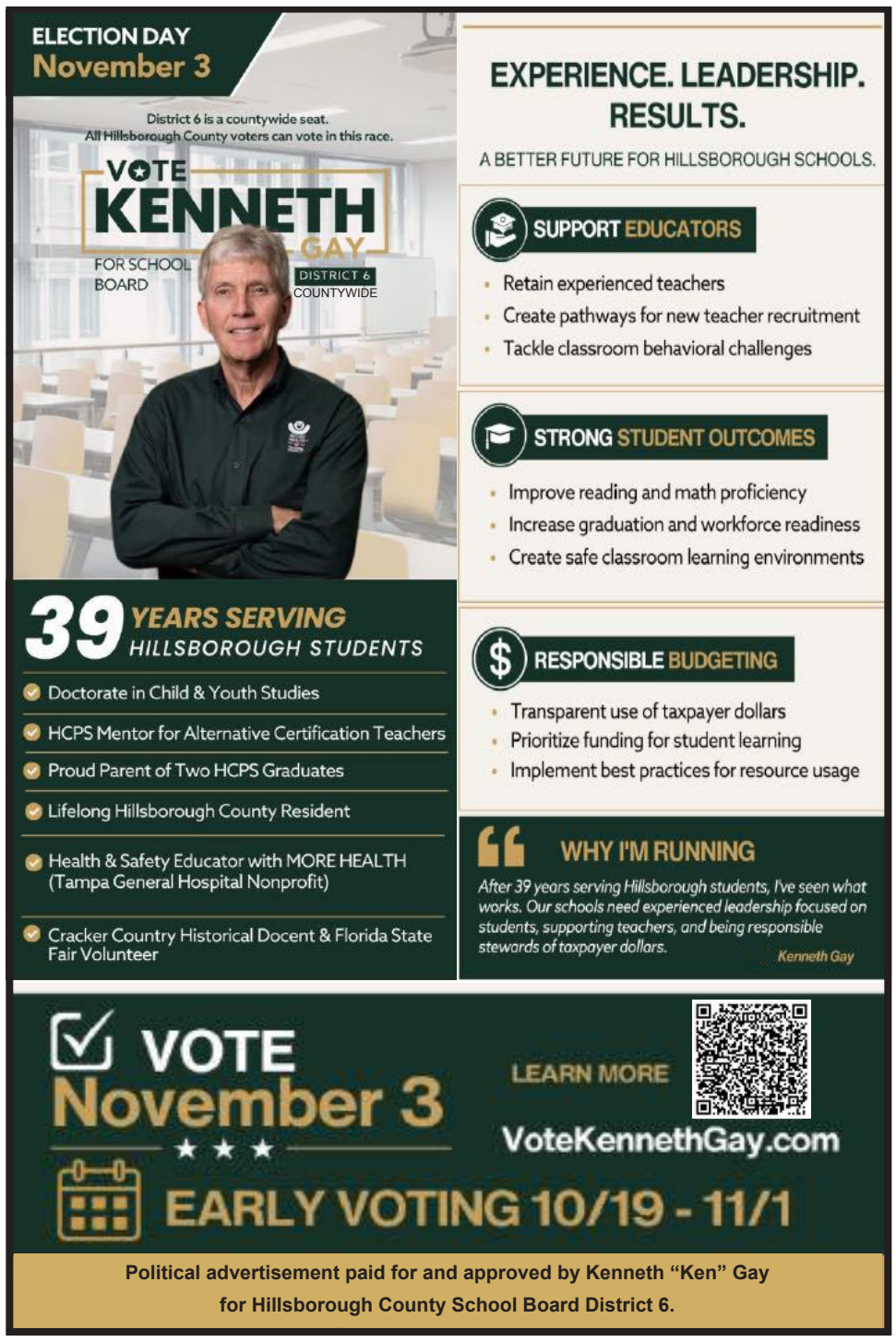
His connection to the community extends beyond his medical practice. Manimala has served on the county's Health Care Advisory Board and the Health Council of West Central Florida, experiences that have kept him connected to issues affecting Hillsborough County.

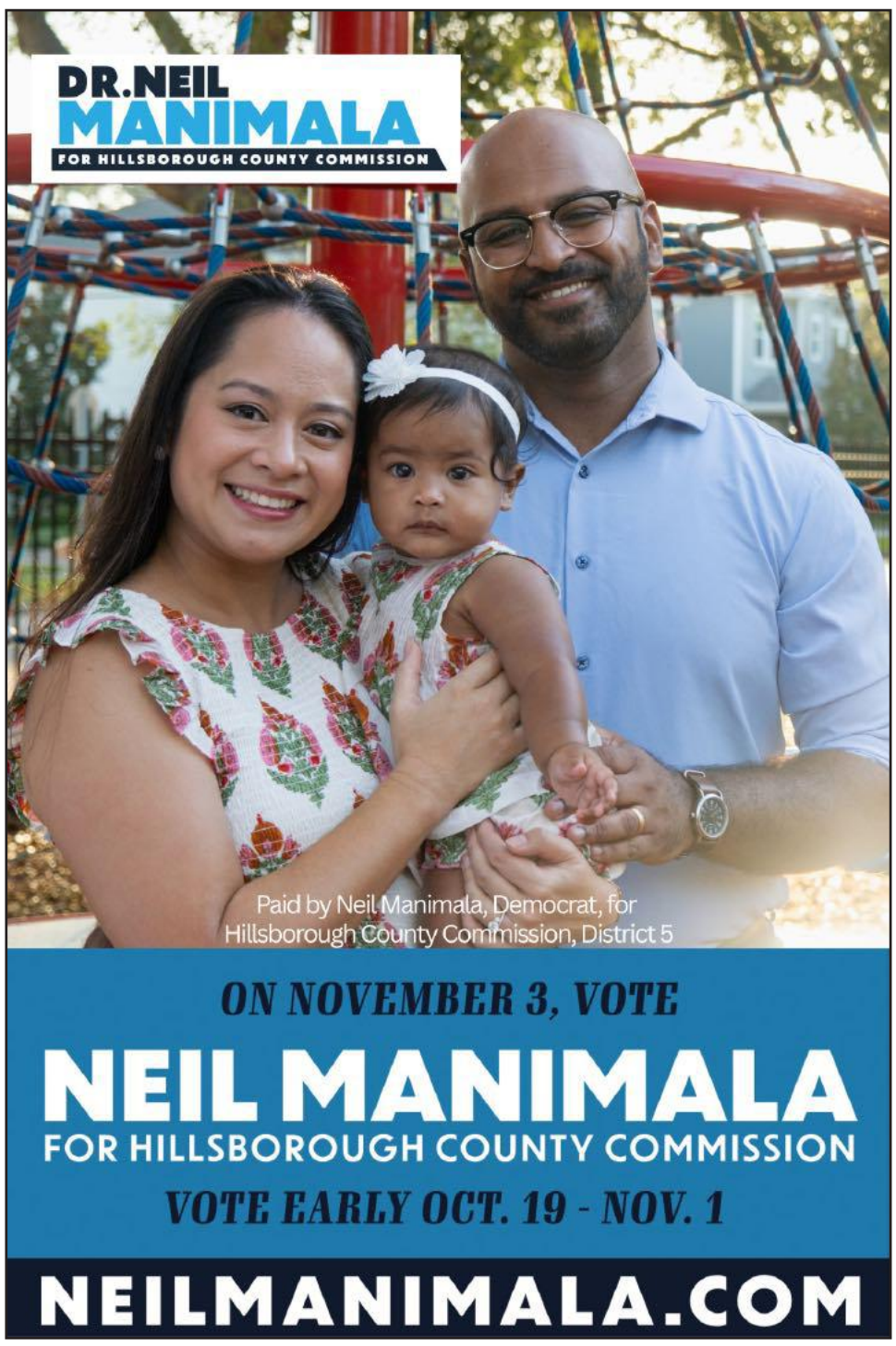
His background in medicine and community shaped Manimala's decision to pursue public service as he campaigns for Hillsborough County Commission, District 5. His campaign has outlined priorities including health care access, public safety and economic opportunity.

Since welcoming his daughter, Manimala's connection to Hillsborough County has taken on a new meaning. Becoming a father has sharpened his focus on the county's future and the community where his daughter will grow up. " I couldn't sit on the sidelines," he says, "I couldn't let my daughter be my age 36 years from now looking back at this generation and saying we didn't do enough."

His campaign is rooted not only in the place he has called home for his whole life, but also in his determination to help build a healthier, more equitable Hillsborough County for the next generation.

For more information about Manimala and his campaign, visit NeilManimala.com





POLITICALLY SPEAKING

KAREN PEREZ
SCHOOL BOARD, DISTRICT 6

By Amanda Castillo



Karen Perez's connection to Tampa began when she was 15 years old. In 1979, her mother moved her to Tampa to continue her education. What began as a move would eventually become the foundation for a life spent helping others find their own opportunities.

For Perez, education has never been just about a diploma. It is something she carries with her and believes needs to be shared with others.

"Education does not make us superior to others but helps us level the playing field," she said.

Today, Perez serves as chair of the Hillsborough County School Board and is running for reelection to the District 6 at-large seat. She was first elected to the school board in 2018 and reelected in 2022.

Prior to entering public service, Perez spent years working in social work and mental health. She earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees in social work from the University of South Florida and became a licensed clinical social worker. Throughout her career, Perez has worked closely with children, families and veterans, focusing on mental health and the challenges that shape people's lives.

That experience continues to shape the way Perez approaches her work on the school board. Her years in social work taught her to look beyond what is visible and to understand that there is often more to a person's circumstances than what others see.

"Every person has a story," Perez said, a perspective she has carried into her work with students, families and the community.

As she addresses challenges facing Hillsborough County Public Schools, Perez emphasizes the importance of understanding the people behind the issues, not just the issues themselves.

Perez is running for another term because she believes "there is still work to be done." For her, that work begins with listening to the people behind the issues and making sure their experiences are heard.

Now, Perez hopes that the work she leaves behind will continue after her time in public service ends. She wants students and families to know that their stories matter, their voices deserve to be heard and someone will advocate for them. The opportunity her mother once fought to give her became a lifelong commitment to opening doors for others.

STACY HAHN
COUNTY COMMISSIONER, DIST. 5

By Libby Hopkins



Stacy Hahn has called Hillsborough County home for 25 years.

"My husband, Jeff, and I raised our three sons here because we believe in this community and the opportunities it offers families," Hahn said. "For the past eight years, I've had the privilege of serving on the Hillsborough County School Board, overseeing one of the nation's largest school districts, managing a multibillion-dollar budget and working to protect taxpayer dollars while improving outcomes for students."

Throughout her service, she has listened, turned conversations into action and built partnerships that solve complex challenges. Before serving in elected office, she was professor at the University of South Florida.

"Public service has always been about giving back to the community that has given so much to my family, and I'm committed to continuing that service by helping Hillsborough County remain a place where families and businesses can thrive," Hahn said.

Hahn earned a reputation for fiscal responsibility, transparency and delivering high-quality outcomes for students. She is now running for County Commission, District 5, to bring the same disciplined, results-driven leadership to the community.

"I'm running for county commission to bring that same leadership, accountability and problem-solving approach to the decisions that will shape our community's future," Hahn said. "My priorities are straightforward: protect taxpayers, improve infrastructure, support law enforcement and first responders and ensure growth is planned responsibly so our quality of life is protected."

"Through initiatives like the Early Childhood Literacy Fair, Storytime Online, the Early Childhood Literacy Bus and community book distributions, we've helped thousands of children develop a love of reading before they enter the classroom," Hahn said.

"If elected, I want people to know they have a commissioner who is accessible, prepared, fiscally responsible and committed to making thoughtful decisions that strengthen our community for generations to come," she said. "When we work together, we create deeper, more lasting impacts."

To learn more about Hahn or become involved in her campaign, you can visit her website at www.votestacyhahn.com.



USPS OPERATION SANTA PROGRAM IS NOW ACCEPTING LETTERS

Staff Report

September 15 marked the start of the 114th year of USPS Operation Santa, and the U.S. Postal Service is now accepting holiday letters from children and families throughout the continental U.S., Hawaii and Puerto Rico.

Every year, thousands of families send letters to Santa at the North Pole. The beloved postal service program makes it possible for people to adopt and respond to these letters, fulfilling the holiday wishes of children and families across the country.

"The holidays are a time to celebrate the joy of the season. But for some, the simple act of exchanging even small gifts is out of reach," said Sheila Holman, vice president of marketing for the U.S. Postal Service. "For more than 100 years, USPS Operation Santa has given kindhearted people the opportunity to make dreams come true for thousands of children and their families through simple acts of kindness."

Submitted letters must follow the program guidelines found on www.uspsoperationsanta.com and be postmarked by Saturday, December 5, to be eligible for potential adoption and fulfillment — there is no guarantee that letters submitted to the program will be adopted.

Letters should be sent to Santa's official workshop address: Santa Claus 123 Elf Rd., North Pole, 88888.

Letter Adoption Registration to adopt letters starts on Monday, November 2, and people can register as individuals or groups. The letter adoption window opens on Monday, November 16, and registrants can adopt single or family letters to help brighten the holidays for those in need.

For more information on the program, history, important dates and how to participate as either a letter writer or adopter, visit www.uspsoperationsanta.com.

Please Note: The United States Postal Service is an independent federal establishment, mandated to be self-financing and to serve every American community through the affordable, reliable and secure delivery of mail and packages to more than 170 million addresses six and often seven days a week. Overseen by a bipartisan board of governors, the postal service is currently pursuing a transformation plan aimed at restoring long-term financial sustainability, improving service and maintaining the organization as one of America's most valued and trusted brands.

The postal service generally receives no tax dollars for operating expenses and relies on the sale of postage, products and services to fund its operations.

For more information about the Postal Service, visit usps.com and facts.usps.com.

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE OFFERS FOUR WEEKLY NETWORKING GROUPS

Staff Report



The Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce (BRCC) offers four weekly networking opportunities designed to help local professionals build relationships, exchange ideas and become more connected to the business community.

The chamber encourages members to view networking as an ongoing investment rather than a one-time interaction. Regular participation helps members build familiarity and trust that can lead to referrals, collaborations and new business opportunities.

"Showing up consistently gives members the opportunity to move beyond simply knowing someone's name or business," said Amber Aaron, president of the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce. "Our networking groups create an environment where members can build relationships, learn how they can support one another and become a trusted resource within our business community."

INSPIRE Networking Group meets on Mondays at 3 p.m. at First Citizens Bank, located at 10670 Palm River Rd. in Tampa, next to Topgolf. The faith-based group is led by Dave Lechuga of Florida Executive Realty and Mikey Blewett of Generations Church and incorporates faith, encouragement and relationship building.

RISE Networking Group meets on Thursdays at 8 a.m. at the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce office, located at 6437 Watson Rd., Lower Level, in Riverview. Attendees should enter from the back of the building. The group is led by Me'Lanie' Munusami of G-FORCE Parking Lot Striping of Tampa and John Plumstead of East of Tampa.

Networking@Noon EAST meets on Fridays at 12 Noon at JF Kicks Restaurant and Patio Bar, located at 3345 Lithia Pinecrest Rd. in Valrico. It is led by Michael May of All American Title and Troops in Contact and Yolonda Young of WeWed.

Networking@Noon WEST meets on Fridays at 12 Noon at Brandon Crossroads Bowl, located at 609 Crater Lane in Tampa. The group is led by Barb Smith Gray of Flutterby Media and Joseph Brace of Primerica Financial Services.

All four groups are free and open to BRCC members. Visitors interested in experiencing the chamber's networking community may attend each group up to two times.

For more information, visit the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce or call 813-689-1221.

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FLIGHT TO HONOR MISSION 12 ACCEPTING GUARDIAN APPLICATIONS

By Brad Stager



They're gearing up for Flight to Honor Polk Mission 12 to fly local military veterans to Washington, D.C., where they will spend a day visiting monuments and shrines dedicated to the historical sacrifices of their youth.

The airborne missions began in 2015 and give veterans a chance to visit the places where the nation honors those who have served in the armed forces and shaped its history as called upon to do so in times of war and peace.

The process of accepting applications from veterans who fly free of charge and guardians who accompany them on the daylong roundtrip journey that begins the morning of April 27, 2027, has begun. The flights take off from Lakeland Linder International Airport for the approximately two-hour journey early in the day and return that night. An orientation for participants is scheduled for April 25, 2027.

Priority for the flights is given to those dealing with severe medical conditions first, followed by veterans who served in World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

Designated guardians who volunteer to serve on the missions accompany the veterans during the honor mission. The guardians' purpose is to assist veterans with the travel and memorial sightseeing activities. If a guardian applicant is chosen to participate, a $500 donation to defray the cost of the mission will be requested. Guardians are assigned to a veteran in the order that applications are received.

The Flight to Honor missions are one way the Polk County Veterans Council fulfills its mission to support veterans and the military community.

"The Polk County Veterans Council is committed to recognizing and supporting Military Veterans," Gary Clark, chairman of the Polk County Veterans Council and a retired Air Force colonel, wrote in an email. "Flight to Honor #12 veteran participants will be largely Vietnam War and Vietnam Era veterans. Our goal is to show these veterans that their service was appreciated. The support we receive from the community attests to this goal not just in the Welcome Home celebration but also in the monetary donations received to fund the mission."

You can get the latest details about Flight to Honor Polk including an application and information about donating to support Mission 12 at https://polkveteranscouncil.com/.

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Valrico Edition October 2026 Vol. 23, Iss. 10



Edited by: Jenny Bennett

EYE ON BUSINESS

To Submit Business News & Press Releases Mail Attn: Business Editor, 2109 Lithia Pinecrest Rd., Valrico, FL 33596
Fax 657-4469 | Email: jbennett@ospreyobserver.com
Deadline: 15th of each month.

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To learn more, visit its website at www.humaneq.co.

Dementia And Alzheimer's Support Groups For Caregivers

Ambiance at Brandon understands the journey of caregiving for a loved one with memory loss and the importance of having support along the way. It offers dementia and Alzheimer's support groups for care partners and families in the community, providing connection, encouragement, education and understanding in a compassionate environment, focused on creating the best day possible. Meetings are held every third Tuesday at 6:30 p.m. and every fourth Wednesday at 2 p.m. Meetings are available in person and virtually. For additional information, call Jill at 813-607-6880. Ambiance at Brandon is located at 1320 Oakfield Dr. in Brandon.

Nova Furniture Opens

Nova Furniture is celebrating the grand opening of its new Brandon showroom with a three-day grand opening weekend celebration from Friday through Sunday, October 2-4, at 225 W. Brandon Blvd. in Brandon. Nova Furniture offers living room, bedroom and dining room furniture, mattresses, home accents and more, with a focus on quality furniture at affordable prices and an exceptional shopping experience.

The celebration officially begins Friday morning with the opening address and ribbon cutting at 9:30 a.m., followed by doors opening at 10 a.m. Throughout the weekend, guests can enjoy entertainment, family fun, food, face painting, giveaways and special in-store activities.

Preservation 1st Has Moved

Preservation 1st Financial Group LLC, which offers financial planning and insurance services, has moved to its new location at 3433 Lithia Pinecrest Rd., #357, in Valrico. Let it take the burden of retirement and estate planning off your mind. Call 813-627-0872 for your free consultation, and visit its website at www.preservation1st.com.

Gentle Touch Estate Sales

Gentle Touch Estate Sales has upcoming sales on Friday and Saturday, October 16-17 and 23-24. Visit its website at www.gentletouchestatesales.com for locations.

Annual Black Cat 5K Fun Run Benefitting A Kitten Place

Animal lovers are invited to lace up their sneakers and make a lifesaving difference at the sixth annual Black Cat 5K Fun Run, presented by The Fuddy Fund and benefiting A Kitten Place, a local nonprofit rescue dedicated to saving homeless cats and kittens throughout the Tampa Bay area.

The untimed 5K fun run and 1-mile walk will take place on Saturday, October 24, in the Twin Lakes neighborhood at 3002 Beaver Pond Trail in Valrico, bringing together runners, walkers, families and animal lovers for a morning of fun while raising funds for cats in need.

This year's event has an exciting new focus: fundraising through teams and individual participants. Organizers hope to expand the event's impact by encouraging supporters to create fundraising teams, invite friends and family to donate, and compete for fun prizes along the way. Registration is now open. For registration, fundraising information, sponsorship opportunities or more information about A Kitten Place, visit https://akittenplace.org/events/.



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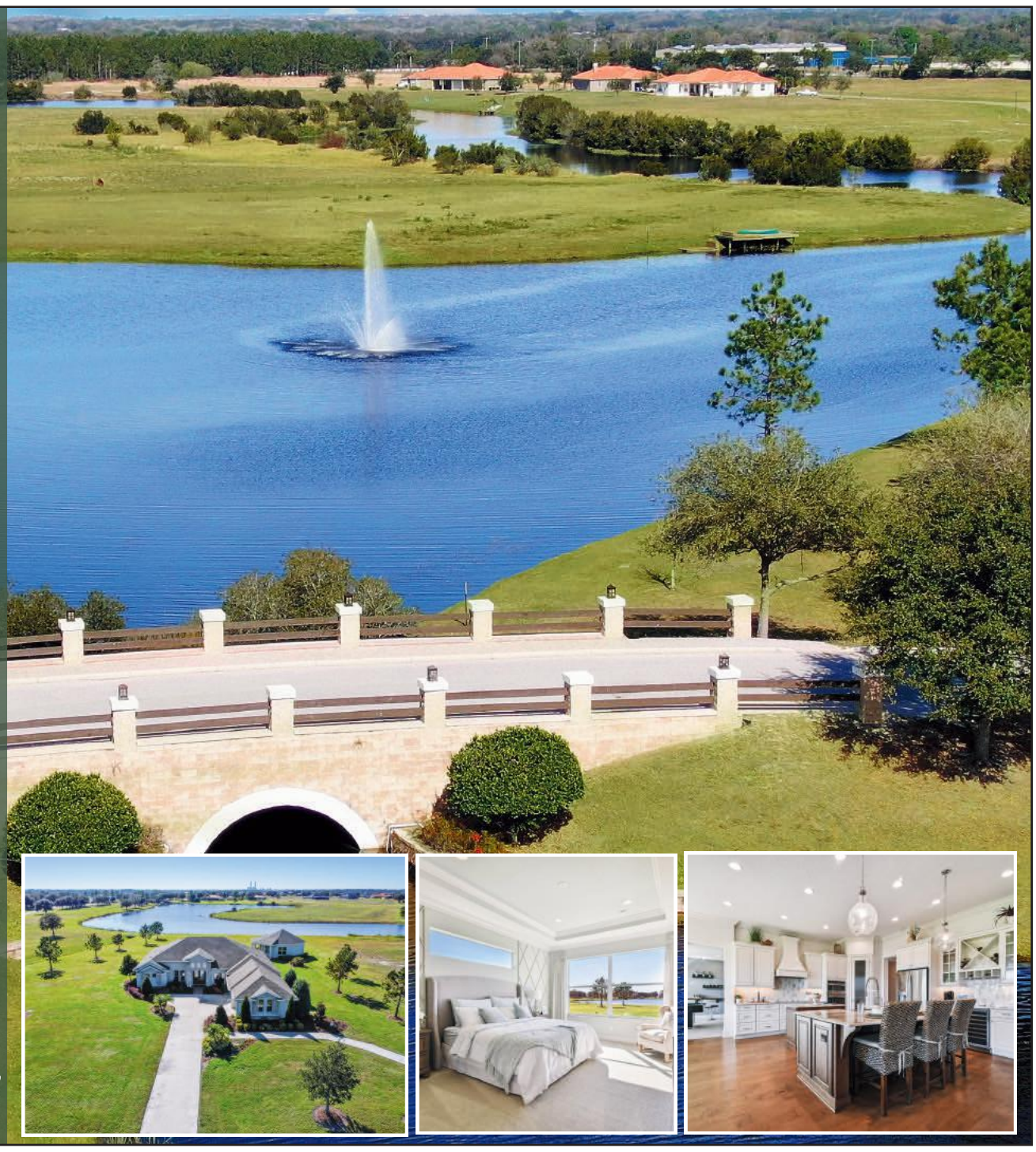
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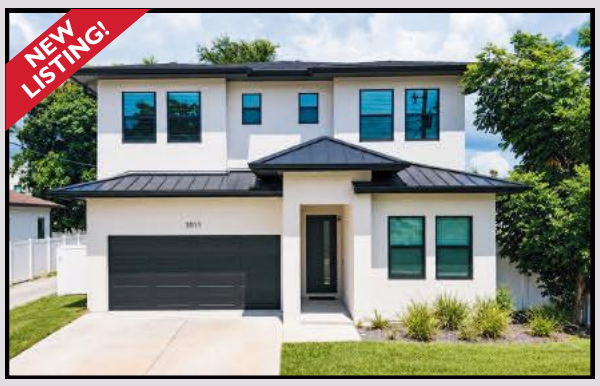
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