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YOUR COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER

February 2026
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24 YEARS Osprey OBSERVER Your Community Newspaper POSITIVE NEWS

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SEE OUR AD ON PAGE 11

CELEBRATING 24 YEARS OF PUBLISHING POSITIVE COMMUNITY NEWS

BRIDGEWATER LANDING OPENS LEASING FOR NEWEST 55-PLUS APARTMENT HOMES

By Marie Gilmore



Bridgewater Landing Apartments is now leasing in Riverview, offering a new 55+ active adult community with resort-style amenities.

Bridgewater Landing Apartments is now leasing in Riverview, welcoming residents to the area's newest 55-plus active adult apartment community thoughtfully designed for comfort, connection and carefree living.

Designed exclusively for independent adults 55 and better, Bridgewater Landing features one- and two-bedroom residences ranging from approximately 703 to 1,170 square feet. Rental rates currently begin at $1,700 per month for one-bedroom, one-bath apartments and range up to $2,435 per month for spacious two-bedroom, two-bath homes, depending on the floor-plan size and location within the building. Residents may choose from 10 unique floor plans to suit a variety of lifestyles and space needs.

Each apartment is designed with everyday ease and refined living in mind. Homes include private, modern kitchens with quartz countertops; high-end LG appliances; luxury vinyl flooring; soaring 9-foot, 6-inch ceilings; and full-size, in-unit washers and dryers. Many residences also feature private patios or balconies overlooking landscaped courtyards or a lake — a rare amenity in Riverview — allowing residents to enjoy Florida's sunshine and fresh air from the comfort of home. Water, Wi-Fi with 60 cable channels and in-unit laundry are included.

Bridgewater Landing offers a truly maintenance-free lifestyle, complemented by an array of amenities that encourage active, social living. Residents can enjoy access to the Sweet Water Club, an exclusive, on-property clubhouse offering wellness-focused fitness classes, creative experiences, social events and group outings. Additional amenities of the Sweet Water Club include a fitness center and resort-style pool.

The fully accessible buildings include elevator access and wheelchair-friendly apartments. Bridgewater Landing Apartments is also pet-friendly. A dedicated pet park is underway, providing space for residents and their four-legged companions to enjoy. The community also boasts a walking trail, outdoor gathering spaces, barbecue and picnic areas, a courtyard and on-site management and maintenance.

Conveniently located steps from shopping and dining at the Winthrop Town Centre, Bridgewater Landing places everything residents need close to home. The property is located at 5790 Stockport St. in Riverview — on Bloomingdale Avenue, directly across from the Winthrop Town Centre — making it easy to meet friends for a meal, run errands or enjoy nearby outdoor spaces.

Now open in its first building, Bridgewater Landing Apartments will ultimately include 168 units and complete the larger Bridgewater Landing active adult community of single-family homes and duplexes. The apartments are owned by Bridges Land and Development and were built by local homebuilder Sunrise Homes, which has been developing communities exclusively in Hillsborough County since 1983. Among those communities are the single-family homes in Bridgewater Landing.

Leasing offices are open Monday-Friday from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. and Saturday from 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Email leasing@bridgewaterlandings.com or calling 813-934-2204.

COMMUNITY BREAKS GROUND ON ADAPTED HOME FOR ARMY VETERAN

By Brian Bokor

Community members, veterans and local supporters gathered on January 10 at Newsome High School to celebrate a new Homes For Our Troops (HFOT) build in Lithia. The ceremony marked the beginning of a custom home that will be donated to Army Sgt. 1st Class Aaron Cornelius, who was severely injured while serving in Iraq.



Community members, veterans and local supporters gather Jan. 10 at Newsome High School to celebrate the start of a Homes For Our Troops build in Lithia for Army Sgt. 1st Class Aaron Cornelius, a blinded Iraq War veteran

The home is being built through Homes For Our Troops, a national nonprofit that builds and donates specially adapted, mortgage-free homes for severely injured post-9/11 veterans. The custom home is being constructed by Elizabeth Evans Custom Homes. For Cornelius, the project represents more than a place to live; it represents safety, independence and stability after years of navigating a world not designed for someone who is blind.



"There's always a possibility of hurting yourself on something because it's not made for your disability," Cornelius said during his remarks.

Cornelius enlisted in the U.S. Army at 19, motivated by a desire to support his young family and continue a strong family tradition of military service. He was married for 14 years and said he met his wife while living in California, though she was born and raised in Sarasota. Cornelius is the father of five daughters.

"My outstanding youngest one is here with me, still standing by me," he said. "She's actually my official caregiver as well, doing outstanding things for me."

During his third deployment to Iraq in 2008, Cornelius was serving as a platoon sergeant when an improvised explosive device detonated beneath him, causing catastrophic injuries that left him blind. While still recovering from those injuries back home, he suffered another devastating loss.

"She was given some wrong medicine from a doctor and died in her sleep," Cornelius said of his wife. "So, that was on top of everything I'd been going through. So, me and my youngest here came together."

Despite these immense personal trials, Cornelius refused to be defined by them. As he adapted to permanent vision loss, Cornelius leaned on family support and discovered an unexpected outlet through music. What began as therapy became a passion, and he now works locally as a disc jockey. He also became a certified massage therapist, "because they said I probably couldn't do it — but I did it anyway," he said, and an active participant in the Wounded Warrior Project, through which he surfs, bikes and sails.

Living in a traditional home not designed for someone who is blind presents daily challenges. HFOT homes are built with more than 40 major special adaptations and ex-

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Queena Vuong, known to many as the "Bloomingdale Library Survivor," continues her journey of perseverance and healing more than 17 years after a life-altering attack, supported by her family, faith and ongoing therapy. See full Story on Page 4.



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ANNUAL BILL CAREY SPORTING CLAY TOURNAMENT RETURNS ON MARCH 28

Staff Report



Shoot for a cause at the 14th annual Bill Carey Sporting Clay Tournament on Saturday, March 28, at FishHawk Sporting Clays in Lithia.

The 14th annual Bill Carey Sporting Clay Tournament will return to FishHawk Sporting Clays on Saturday, March 28, bringing together sportsmen, community leaders and supporters of local youth for a day of competition, camaraderie and cause-driven impact.

Benefiting the Carey Family Brandon Club, the annual event supports programs serving children and teens through the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Tampa Bay. The tournament runs from 8 a.m.-1 p.m. at FishHawk Sporting Clays, located at 13505 Hobson Simmons Rd. in Lithia.

Participants can expect an expanded clay shoot tournament on a larger course, followed by a barbecue lunch provided by BubbaQue's. The day will also feature raffle drawings with prizes including firearms, sporting goods, gift cards and more. Organizers say the event is designed to be both fun and meaningful, offering attendees the chance to enjoy a premier sporting experience while making a difference in the lives of local youth.

Registration for the tournament officially opened in January. Participants can register teams, purchase raffle tickets and explore sponsorship opportunities online at www.bgctampa.org/billcarey-clayshoot.

"Shooting events like this allow our community to come together in support of the kids we serve at the Carey Family Brandon Club," said Jamie McWade, director of events for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Tampa Bay. "It's an exciting day that directly impacts the programs and opportunities available to our club members."

The tournament schedule includes an 8 a.m. start time, with lunch served at 11:30 a.m. Sponsorship packages and raffle tickets will also be available for individuals and businesses looking to increase their support.

The event comes as the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Tampa Bay celebrates 100 years of impact across the region. Since the Rotary Club of Tampa established the West Tampa Boys Club in 1926, the organization has expanded alongside the communities it serves, eventually merging with the former Boys & Girls Clubs of the Suncoast to better serve youth throughout Tampa Bay. Throughout a century of growth and change, the organization's mission has remained the same: ensuring every child has a place to belong and a path to a brighter future.

For more information about the tournament, sponsorship opportunities or registration, contact McWade at jmcwade@bgctampa.org or by phone at 813-769-7528.

UP BEFORE DAWN: ZORAN PAVIC KEEPS THE REGENT RUNNING

By Kelly Wise Valdes



Zoran Pavic stands inside The Regent, where his behind-the-scenes work keeps the venue running seamlessly for weddings, and galas.

Long before the sun rises over The Regent event venue in Riverview, one staff member is already moving through the quiet halls, preparing the building for another full day of community events. For more than 15 years, facilities team member Zoran Pavic has been one of the venue's most dependable and recognizable faces — a steady presence whose work helps keep one of the region's busiest event centers running smoothly.

Pavic, originally from Bosnia and Herzegovina, came to the Tampa Bay area in 1998, bringing with him a background in plumbing and electrical work. That experience shaped the path that eventually led him to The Regent.

"He did plumbing and electrical in his home country and was able to find work doing those things here, which led him into facility maintenance working for Sodexo, who had the contract for HCC and the Regent when it was built," said Shannon Keil, president and CEO of The Regent.

Pavic officially joined The Regent's staff in 2009, and since then colleagues said his reliability and upbeat attitude have become part of the venue's identity.

"My boss, Shannon, is the best," said Pavic. "Communication is good, and together we fix things and make it work good for clients and the community."

His days start early — often before dawn.

"We are busy and have a lot of people at events. I get here at 5:30 a.m. and get rooms ready for the events of that day, sometimes do minor maintenance and check to make sure things are working and ready for event," said Pavic. "I sometimes go home and come back for the events at night. I take care of the needs of the event and clean up, then come back the next day to do it again."

Over the years, Pavic has witnessed countless moments inside the venue's walls, from milestone celebrations to solemn ceremonies. One event stands out.

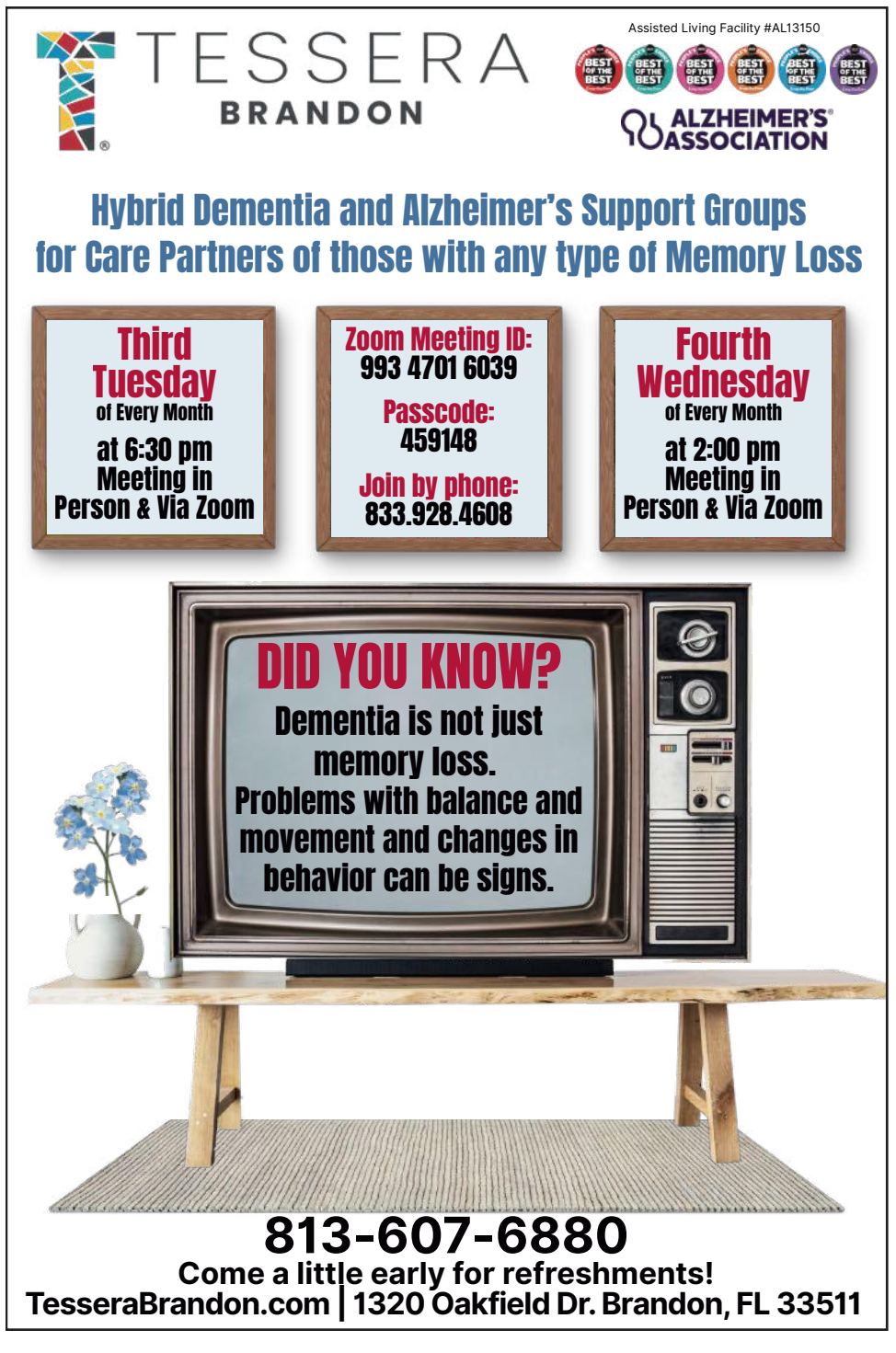
"We are part of special moments for families, students and members of the community," said Pavic. "One of my favorites is the Menton Dinner for Black Dagger Hunt Club, an organization for Gold Star families and wounded veterans. We hang a 40 ft. flag that was jumped from Normandy and have a 98-year-old Rosie the Riveter who comes every year. I like to listen to the speakers and see them recognize the soldiers who have been injured."

To those who work alongside him, Pavic's presence is more than operational support — it's a source of calm and consistency. Outside of work, Pavic keeps his priorities simple: spending time with his family, grandkids, wife and dogs.

"I really enjoy time with my family, and a really good bourbon!" he said.

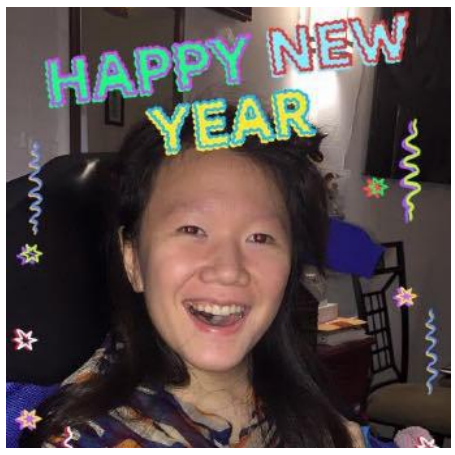
The Regent is located at 6437 Watson Rd. in Riverview. For more information, visit www.experiencetheregent.com or call 813-571-2494.





QUEENA INSPIRES WHILE FACING HER JOURNEY OF HEALING

By Libby Hopkins



Queena Vuong is the survivor of an attack at the Bloomingdale Regional Public Library back in 2008.

Queena Vuong has overcome many health obstacles since her attack at the Bloomingdale Regional Public Library more than 17 years ago. She's battled some tough obstacles. It hasn't been easy, but her fight goes on every day, as miracles continue to take place in her. Many have followed her story over the years and have come to know her as the 'Bloomingdale Library Survivor.'

"In moments of hardship, it can be difficult to recognize the strength still lives within us," said Queena's mother, Vanna Nguyen. "Yet, when we remain open to others, to love, and to possibility, we create space for healing and inspiration to grow."

After Queena's attack, it was the compassion and steadfast presence of those around her that carried her family forward. Over time, that support became a reminder that healing is not meant to be a solitary journey.

"It is something we walk through together," Nguyen said. "When we allow ourselves inspired, we find the courage to keep going, to recognize beauty even in uncertainty, and to reflect hope back into the world."

December 2025 marked 17th anniversary of Queena's discharge after seven months in the hospital and rehabilitation. Her journey continues to be one of perseverance, faith and quiet strength.

"Over the past year, Queena's overall health has remained stable, and we're grateful for that consistency," Nguyen said. "She does occasionally experience a brief mini seizure in the mornings, but otherwise her medical team feels she's doing well."

In her physical therapy at Stay In Step, Queena has seen meaningful signs of engagement.

"She shows increased awareness, often smiling in response to voices, and appears more relaxed during movement exercises," Nguyen said. "Although she still requires full assistance for cycling and walking-based activities, the comfort and responsiveness she shows during sessions are encouraging steps forward."

"She is able to respond to yes/no and simple daily-living questions using gestures and vocalizations," Nguyen said.

Looking ahead, Queena would love to return to both water therapy and oxygen therapy. "These therapies have been beneficial for her in the past, but they are private-pay and extremely expensive," Nguyen said. "As a family, we're hoping to raise additional funds to help cover these costs so she can resume the treatments she enjoys and benefits from. One of Queena's biggest wishes is to visit Disney again. She hopes that an organization might be able to sponsor a future trip for her. Being able to experience Disney would bring her so much joy and would be a truly special moment for her and our family."

If you would like to learn more about Queena's journey or donate to her rehabilitation, you can visit her website at https://joinqueena.com.

FOREVER GREEN LAWN AND PEST CONTROL GROWS ON FOUR DECADES OF CUSTOMIZED, QUALITY CARE

By Makenzie Atkins Noel



Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control combines decades of knowledge to provide a service that is focused on delivering reliable results customers can trust.

Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control is a family-owned lawn care company built on experience, consistency, and a refusal to cut corners.

Operating for more than 40 years as a family-run business, Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control was founded with a straightforward philosophy: do the job the right way, or don't do it at all. That commitment to quality remains at the core of everything the company does today.

Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control serves customers throughout Manatee, Pinellas, and Hillsborough counties, with offices located across the region to better support the communities it serves. The company offers comprehensive care, including lawn treatments, tree and shrub care and pest control.

Experience-driven care is a defining part of Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control's process. With more than four decades of industry knowledge behind the business, the company relies on customized fertilizer blends developed through firsthand experience. These blends are based on an understanding of what works, allowing Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control to avoid generic, one-size-fits-all treatments. The result is a more customized approach focused on producing noticeable and sustainable results for each customer.

"I started this company because I saw too many jobs being done halfway," said Mike Compton, owner of Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control. "We do it the right way or we don't do it at all, which is why I've spent 45 years perfecting our fertilizer blends based on what actually works for each customer."

Supporting that philosophy is a team of licensed and knowledgeable technicians who bring professionalism and consistency to every property they service. Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control places a strong emphasis on proper training, attention to detail and following established processes to ensure lawns, trees, and shrubs receive the care they need to thrive over time.

Founded on higher expectations and long-term results, Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control has grown steadily while remaining true to its family-owned roots.

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2026 HYUNDAI PALISADE IS ROOMIER AND TRENDIER

By Nitish Rele



Bigger, cooler and, yes, better than its predecessor, the second-generation Hyundai Palisade has been completely overhauled for 2026. The midsize SUV grows in nearly every direction — length increases by 2.5 inches, wheelbase by 2.7, height by 0.6 and width by 0.2 — translating into improved leg, head and shoulder room for second- and third-row passengers.

PALISADE (CALLIGRAPHY, HTRAC AWD)
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Price as tested: $58,905
Weight: 4,872 pounds
www.hyundai.com

Under the hood, the previous 3.8-liter engine is replaced by a 3.3-liter V6 producing 287 horsepower and 260 pound-feet of torque. The smooth eight-speed automatic transmission with paddle shifters returns, paired with normal, sport and smart drive modes, plus new terrain settings for mud, sand and snow. Towing capacity remains 5,000 pounds. A retuned suspension featuring a MacPherson strut front and multilink rear, along with motor-driven rack-and-pinion steering, delivers confident handling. Added sound-damping materials reduce road and wind noise.

The Palisade's bold exterior features vertical LED headlights and daytime running lights framing a horizontal light bar, set against an oversized black grille with silver accents. The upright lighting theme continues at the rear, reinforcing the vehicle's boxy yet upscale look.

Inside, the spacious cabin offers 161.9 cubic feet of room and dual 12.3-inch displays integrated into a curved screen. New features include a front and rear dash camera and a UV sterilization tray for phones or keys. A 14-speaker Bose sound system replaces the previous Harmon Kardon setup, while a conveniently placed wireless charger improves usability.

The Calligraphy trim stands out with Nappa leather seating, heated and cooled power front seats, a suede headliner, three-zone climate control, a dual-pane sunroof, a digital rearview mirror and a head-up display. Wireless Android Auto and Apple CarPlay are standard for 2026.

Hyundai SmartSense safety technology comes standard. With new hybrid and XRT PRO trims, the redesigned Palisade continues to raise the bar for family-friendly SUVs.

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TEEN-OWNED TIDY TAILS PROVIDES AFFORDABLE PET WASTE REMOVAL ACROSS VALRICO COMMUNITY

By Olivia Clark



Ben Lammon, owner of Tidy Tails, provides pet waste removal services for Valrico-area homeowners.

Tidy Tails is a teen-owned and operated pet waste removal service serving Valrico and surrounding SouthShore communities, including Brandon, Riverview, FishHawk, Lithia, Boyette and Bloomingdale. The business launched in December 2024 and is owned and operated by Ben Lammon, a 16-year-old student athlete who manages a growing service route while continuing his education.

Pet waste can pose challenges for households with busy schedules or multiple dogs. Tidy Tails offers routine backyard cleanup services designed to help homeowners maintain cleaner, safer outdoor spaces. Services include scheduled waste removal, proper disposal and clear communication with customers before and after each visit.

Lammon takes additional steps to ensure safety and accountability during each service. Customers receive a text message upon completion, along with a photo confirming that gates are securely closed before he leaves the property. This attention to detail has become a key reason many clients choose recurring service.

Customer reviews frequently describe Tidy Tails as professional, reliable and thorough. Several Valrico-area clients have noted that Lammon walks the yard more than once to ensure no waste is missed. Others have highlighted his respectful demeanor and consideration for pets, property and household routines.

Tidy Tails offers simple pricing options for weekly backyard cleanup services paid monthly. Rates begin at $16 per visit for one dog, $19 per visit for two dogs and $22 or more per visit for households with three or more dogs. One-time cleanup services are also available, with pricing provided on-site based on yard size and conditions.

In addition to convenience, regular pet waste removal can help reduce health and environmental risks. According to information shared by Lammon, dog waste can contain bacteria and parasites that linger in soil, attract pests and wash into storm drains during heavy rain, potentially impacting local water sources and outdoor play areas.

Despite the recent arrival of larger pet waste removal franchises in the area, Tidy Tails continues to grow through neighborhood referrals and by expanding service within its existing route. Lammon said his goal is to build a strong local customer base before graduating, focusing on dependable service and community trust.

To schedule service, call or text 813-419-0535 or visit https://tidytailsfl.com or on Facebook by searching 'Tidy Tails FL.'

COLLEGE BOARD APPROVES MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING WITH TAMPA BAY RAYS

Staff Report



Standing at the podium is Dr. Ken Atwater, college president. Behind him on the left is Greg Celestan, chairman of the Hillsborough College District Board of Trustees. On Atwater's right is Ken Babby, Tampa Bay Rays CEO.

The Hillsborough College District Board of Trustees voted unanimously this week to approve a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Tampa Bay Rays, allowing the college to explore a potential partnership tied to the redevelopment of a new ballpark on a portion of its Dale Mabry campus.

Board Chairman Greg Celestan said the vote reflects a shared vision for long-term community impact that extends beyond professional sports.

"This is about so much more than a ballpark," Celestan said. "It's about economic development, opportunity for our students and creating something meaningful that benefits Tampa Bay for generations. Welcoming the Rays home to this site while creating a live, work, play and learn district is an extraordinary opportunity, and we're ready to help get this project in motion."

Under the agreement, Hillsborough College would continue operating on the Dale Mabry campus throughout any planning or construction phases. Instruction and student services would remain uninterrupted, with temporary on-campus facilities utilized as needed to ensure academic continuity. Long-term plans call for the development of new academic buildings and the reconfiguration of existing spaces to integrate into a shared, mixed-use campus environment.

Hillsborough College President Dr. Ken Atwater described the proposal as a transformational opportunity centered on enhancing the student experience.

"A project of this scale and vision creates new pathways for learning, workforce development, internships and career-connected education," Atwater said. "By reimagining the Dale Mabry campus within a dynamic, mixed-use district, we are strengthening our role as an economic and civic anchor while expanding opportunity for our students, faculty and staff."

College officials emphasized that the MOU does not obligate Hillsborough College to move forward with the project. The agreement allows the institution to explore feasibility and collaboration while preserving the board's authority to terminate the MOU at any time.

Hillsborough College serves more than 46,000 students annually across five campuses throughout Tampa Bay, offering associate and baccalaureate degrees as well as certificates and diplomas at approved levels. The college is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC).

For more information about Hillsborough College, visit www.hcfl.edu.

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COMMUNITY SHOOTERS AIM TO MAKE DIFFERENCE AT ANGEL FOUNDATION SPORTING CLAYS CLASSIC

Staff Report

The Angel Foundation FL is proud to host its fourth annual Sporting Clays Classic on Saturday, February 21, at FishHawk Sporting Clays.

This exciting event brings together supporters with the foundation's welcome breakfast, catered by Fresh Original Foods/Chick-N-Bones, and its awards luncheon, catered by Glory Days Grill. Shooters will enjoy a great morning on the course along with course contests, gun raffles, 50/50 raffle and raffles for exciting prices. Each shooter will also receive our special 'Player's Package' which also includes eye and ear protection and ammo for the tournament.



Representatives from Reed & Reed and Roof X join fellow sponsors in supporting the Angel Foundation FL's fourth annual Sporting Clays at FishHawk Sporting Clays.



CEO Liz Brewer shared, "We are thankful for our Eagle Eye Sponsors, Chadwell Supply, Reed & Reed and Roof X. Also, our High Master Sponsor, Rivard Buick GMC; Sharpshooter Sponsor, PCL Construction; and Brandon Legal Group. It is because of their financial support we are able to host first-class events for our community and raise funds to serve our families in the year ahead to keep them on the road to self-sufficiency when experiencing a life-threatening illness or catastrophic event."

This year, the Angel Foundation FL celebrates 20 years of serving families in our community who are in crisis by matching them with businesses to meet their practical needs as well as providing financial support. The foundation does not give them a 'hand out' but rather holds their hands through their darkest hours, giving them help and hope when they need it the most. For more information or to request assistance, visit https://angelfoundationfl.com/.

You can still register to participate in this event as a sponsor, a foursome or an individual player at the website www.angelfoundationfl.com/. The deadline is Friday, February 13.

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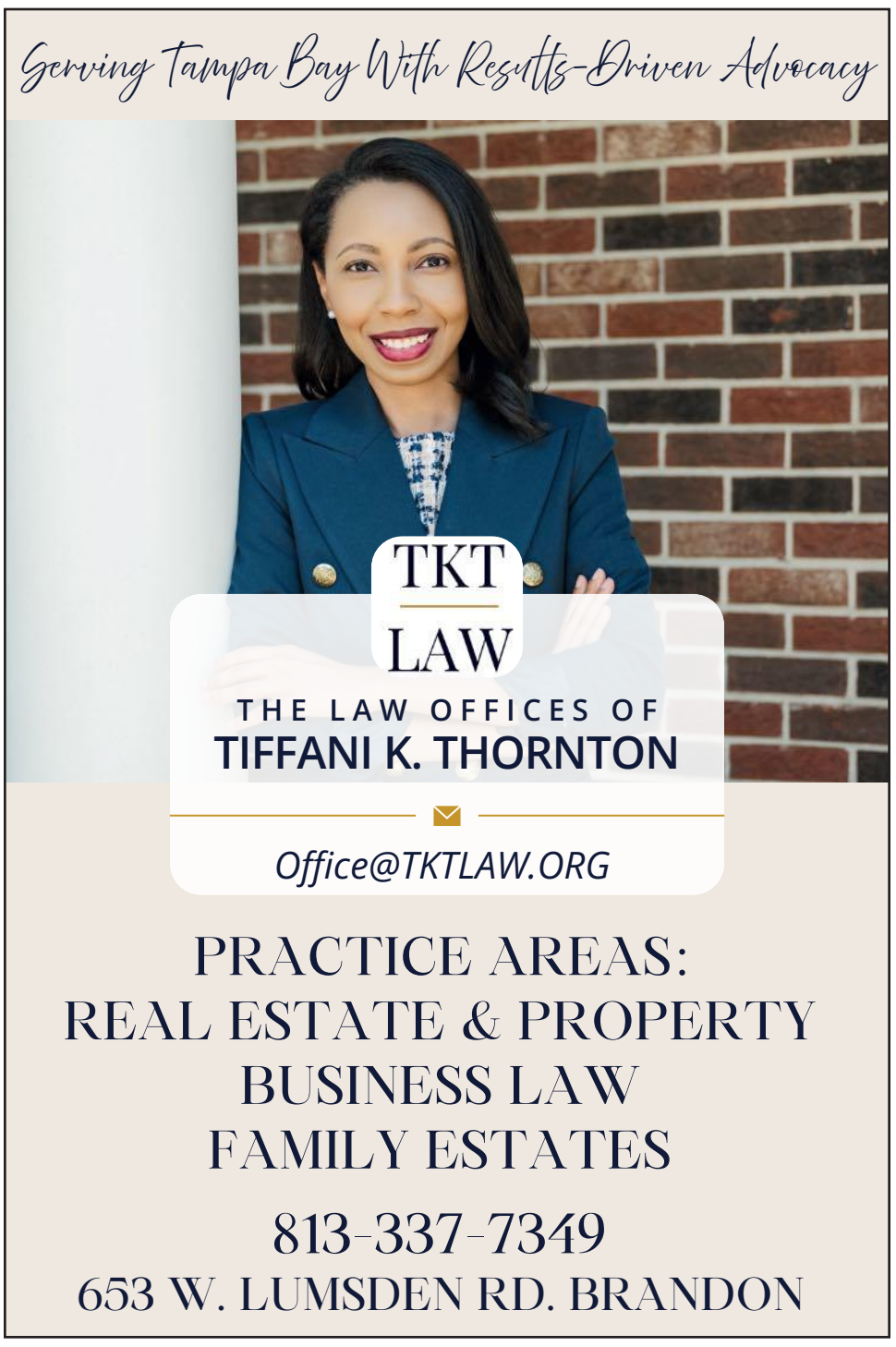
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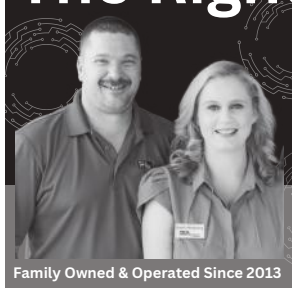
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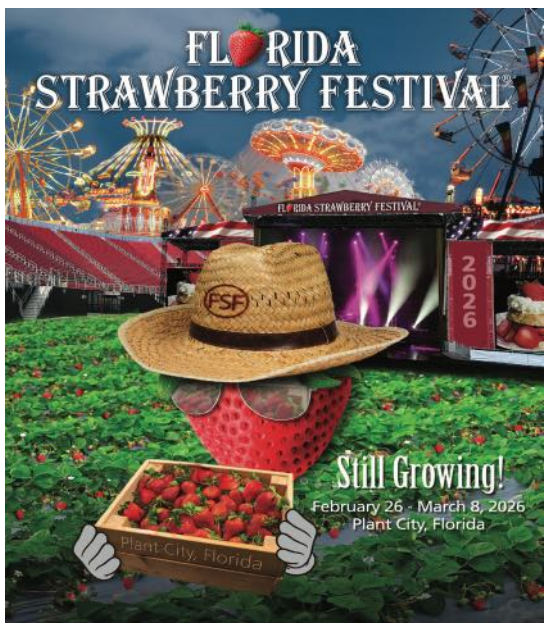
QUEEN AND COURT SELECTED FOR 91ST FLORIDA STRAWBERRY FESTIVAL

Staff Report





Layla Rothman was crowned queen of the 91st Annual Florida Strawberry Festival Queen's Scholarship Pageant. She is joined by First Maid Marley Mueller and court members Cadence Cape, Addison Griffin, and Addison Pope.



Layla Rothman was crowned queen of the 91st annual Florida Strawberry Festival Queen's Scholarship Pageant, held on the evening of January 17 on the festival grounds. Layla Rothman was selected from a competitive field of 32 contestants. Marley Mueller was named first maid, with court members Cadence Cape, Addison Griffin, and Addison Pope rounding out the royal court.

Brooke Browning was named Miss Congeniality, an honor voted on by fellow contestants and awarded to the participant who best exemplifies kindness, sportsmanship and camaraderie throughout the competition. Browning is a junior at Strawberry Crest High School.

"Words cannot describe how incredibly blessed I am to have this opportunity to serve a community that has been nothing but gracious to me my entire life," said Layla Rothman. "I have dreamed of being able to represent the Florida Strawberry Festival and make every single person who walks into those festival gates feel seen and cared for. God has been with me throughout this entire journey, and I pray He will continue to shine through me. Thank you so much, everyone, for the unwavering support — I couldn't be more excited for BerryFest26!"

Layla Rothman is the daughter of Mark and Rebecca Rothman and a senior at Plant City High School. Among her awards and accolades, she is dual enrolled at Hillsborough Community College, ranked in the top 7 percent of her class and is a member of the National Honor Society.

The Florida Strawberry Festival Queen's Scholarship Pageant is sponsored by the Plant City Lions Club. The competition includes five components: a personal interview, on-stage speaking, casual wear, evening wear and an impromptu question.

"The Queen's Pageant remains one of the most meaningful traditions of the Florida Strawberry Festival, and this year's contestants set a remarkable standard," said Florida Strawberry Festival President Kyle Robinson. "Each young lady displayed impressive talent, confidence and poise, making the selection process especially difficult. We are honored to welcome our new queen and court and are confident these five young ladies will represent the festival with pride and professionalism throughout their year of service."

Throughout the year, the queen and her court will make more than 80 appearances, representing the Florida Strawberry Festival and the Plant City community at various local and regional events. The festival serves as their home base, where they will meet visitors and participate in a variety of activities during the 11-day celebration.

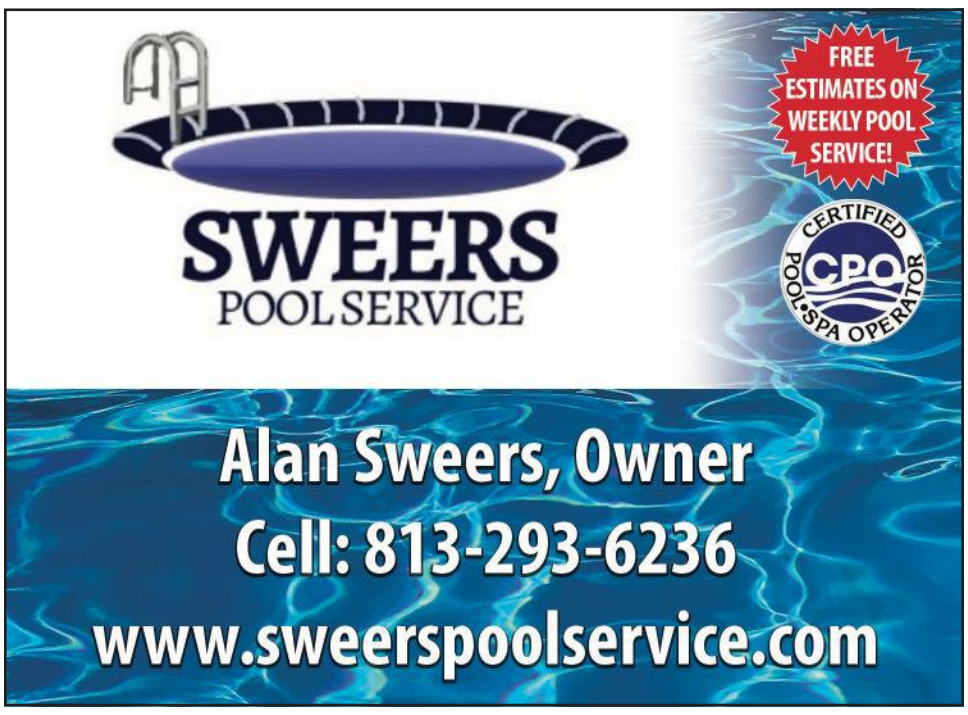
The 91st annual Florida Strawberry Festival will take place from Thursday, February 26, through Sunday, March 8, in Plant City. Festival hours are 10 a.m.-11 p.m. daily and will feature a wide variety of entertainment, exhibits, food, livestock shows, rides, games and competitions. Headline entertainment on the Wish Farms Soundstage includes Alabama, Jo Dee Messina, Jamey Johnson, Lonestar, Ty Myers, Riley Green featuring Hannah McFarland, The Oak Ridge Boys, Legends of Love, Sandi Patty, Lauren Daigle, Forrest Frank, The Offspring, Joan Jett & The Blackhearts and more.

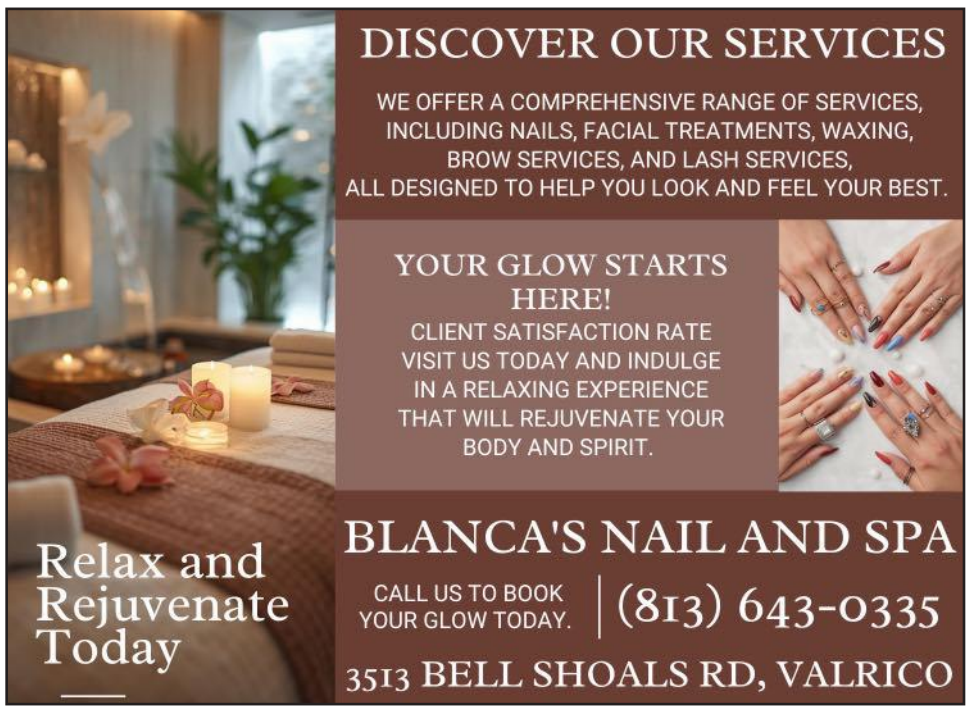
"We are also incredibly grateful to the Plant City Lions Club for their hard work and dedication," Robinson added. "Their organization plays a vital role in creating an event that is exceptional year after year, and their commitment to this tradition does not go unnoticed."

About the Florida Strawberry Festival

The Florida Strawberry Festival is a time-honored tradition in Eastern Hillsborough County celebrating the strawberry harvest with agricultural showcases, live entertainment, and community festivities. Each year, the festival attracts more than 650,000 visitors to Plant City for 11 days of fun, food and entertainment. For more information, visit https://flstrawberryfestival.com/ and follow the Festival on Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok and YouTube (#BerryFest26).







THREE LOCAL EDUCATORS HONORED AT 2026 EDUCATION AWARDS

Staff Report



Adrian Sarmiento
Morgan High



Jennifer Giannone
Newsome High



Che Counce
Symmes Elementary

Hillsborough County educators were honored on a recent Thursday night as part of the 2026 Excellence in Education Awards, a signature celebration recognizing the individuals who represent the very best of public education across the district.

Presented by Hillsborough Education Foundation (HEF) in partnership with Hillsborough County Public Schools, the annual awards ceremony took place on January 22 at Morsani Hall at the Straz Center for the Performing Arts. This year's theme, 'Hillsborough's Treasures,' highlighted educators and support staff whose dedication, leadership and commitment continue to shape student success.

Among the honorees were three local finalists for the Ida S. Baker Diversity Educator of the Year Award: Che Counce, an Access Points teacher at Symmes Elementary School; Adrian Sarmiento, workforce program advisor at Morgan High School; and Jennifer Giannone, an AVID academic teacher at Newsome High School. Each was recognized onstage for outstanding efforts to foster inclusion, equity and opportunity for students across Hillsborough County.

The three educators were selected from a highly competitive pool of 690 nominations submitted by students, families, colleagues and community members. In total, 13 finalists were honored during the evening across three categories: Instructional Support Employee of the Year, Ida S. Baker Diversity Educator of the Year and Teacher of the Year.

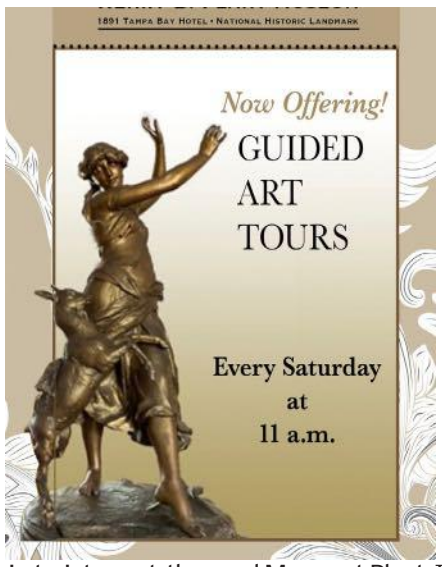
"This year's finalists represent the true treasures of Hillsborough County's public schools," said Anna Corman, president and CEO of Hillsborough Education Foundation. "Their commitment to students, colleagues and families creates a lasting impact well beyond the classroom, and we are proud to recognize the difference they make every day."

The Excellence in Education Awards serve as one of the district's most visible celebrations of public education, shining a spotlight on the educators and staff members whose work helps students thrive academically, socially and emotionally.

For more information about Hillsborough Education Foundation and its programs, visit the website directly at https://educationfoundation.com/.

HENRY B. PLANT MUSEUM OFFERS FREE GUIDED ART TOURS FOCUSING ON THE MUSEUM'S GILDED AGE ARTWORKS

By Libby Hopkins



Since 1933, the Tampa Bay Hotel has been home to the Henry B. Plant Museum and The University of Tampa. The building, renamed Plant Hall, was declared a National Historic Landmark in recognition of its role as a military headquarters during the Spanish-American War. The Henry B. Plant Museum holds the distinction of accreditation by the American Alliance of Museums.

The museum's mission is to interpret the Tampa Bay Hotel and the experiences of the diverse individuals who contributed to its success. The museum awakens thought and transports visitors to another era through exhibits and innovative programs. Original furnishings and artifacts and a dynamic self-guided audio tour immerse visitors in the opulence of a Gilded Age seasonal resort hotel.

"There is a wide range of Gilded Age artworks on view, spanning paintings, sculpture and furniture," said the museum's membership and museum relations manager, Jill D'Anna. "Many of the works reflect the craftsmanship, materials and artistic trends of the period, offering visitors a glimpse into the art that defined the era."

Opened by railroad and shipping magnate Henry B. Plant, the Tampa Bay Hotel faced an uncertain future following his death in 1899. The City of Tampa purchased the property in 1905, and it continued to operate as a hotel until 1932.

The following year, the city established the Tampa Municipal Museum in the south wing of the first floor to preserve the legacy of the Tampa Bay Hotel. The remainder of the building, as well as the property, became home to The University of Tampa.

The museum houses original hotel furnishings and art objects from Europe and Asia collected by Henry and Margaret Plant. In 1974, the Tampa Municipal Museum became the Henry B. Plant Museum, commemorating Henry Plant's contribution to the development of the Cigar City and the creation of Florida's tourist economy.

"The museum now offers guided art tours every Saturday at 11 a.m. and are completely free with paid museum admission," D'Anna said. "During the tour, guests can expect to see a diverse selection of works from our collection, including traditional paintings and sculpture, as well as furniture and decorative objects."

D'Anna hopes the tours help spread awareness about the importance of conservation and restoration while also showcasing the diversity of objects within the museum's collection.

For more about Henry B. Plant Museum, visit the website at www.plantmuseum.com or call 813-254-1891. The museum is located at 401 W. Kennedy Blvd. in downtown Tampa.



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WORSHIP PASTOR SWIMS FROM 37 YARDS TO AMAZON'S NO. 1 SPOT

By Olivia Clark

Pastor Jason Millsaps, worship pastor at Bell Shoals Church, is drawing attention beyond the altar this month after his debut memoir, *From 37 Yards to Kona*, climbed to No. 1 on Amazon in triathlon book categories.

The book was released on January 6 and reached No. 1 in both triathlon books and Kindle triathlon. Pastor Millsaps said it also ranked among the top new releases in multiple sports training categories and has earned dozens of five-star reviews. The memoir includes endorsements from Mike Reilly, known as the 'Voice of IRONMAN'; James Lawrence, also known as the 'Iron Cowboy'; and professional triathlete Meredith Kessler.

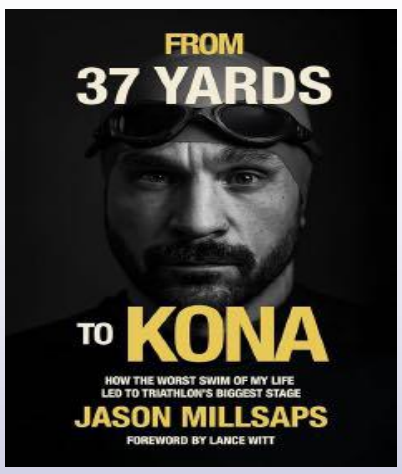
A Valrico resident since 2014, Pastor Millsaps said the book follows his journey from 2012, when he could not swim more than 37 yards without stopping, to competing at the IRONMAN World Championships in Kona, Hawaii, in 2024 and Nice, France, in 2025. He pursued the goal while continuing his ministry work, supporting his family and recovering from two back surgeries.

Pastor Millsaps said the turning point came when he recognized how far his health had slipped and decided it was time to change.

"I feel like every one of us has our 37 yards in something, something that just seems impossible," Pastor Millsaps said. "In ministry and life, God doesn't always remove obstacles. He simply shows us what is possible when you refuse to quit."



Pastor Jason Millsaps, worship pastor at Bell Shoals Church, recently released his debut memoir, From 37 Yards to Kona.



Pastor Millsaps said the process was built on consistent effort and showing up even on difficult days. After more than a year of training, he completed his first full-distance IRONMAN at IRONMAN Arizona in November 2013. Since then, he has finished 16 full-distance IRONMAN races.

Pastor Millsaps has also expanded into coaching. He is a certified USA Triathlon coach and launched 121 Tri Coaching, a name inspired by Hebrews 12:1 and its message to "run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

Readers can search for *From 37 Yards to Kona: How the Worst Swim of My Life* Led to Triathlon's Biggest Stage on Amazon.



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2707 N WOODROW AVE #2


2727 COLEWOOD LN


2821 HOLLY BLUFF CT


2829 52ND AVE S


3107 RED LION DR


3115 BENT CREEK DR


3125 S MILLER RD


3146 BEAVER POND TRL

3203 BEAVER POND TRL

3212 JOHN MOORE RD

3218 STONEBRIDGE TRL

3280 MANGROVE POINT DR

3301 RIVER WOODS DR

3809 BARBARA LEE CV

3817 COLD CREEK DR

3914 TURKEY OAK DR

3934 CEDAR CAY CIR

4002 W BAY TO BAY BLVD

4008 GREENMARK LN

4114 W INMAN AVE

4424 TEVALO DR

4439 DEVINSHIRE FIELDS LOOP

5208 CANDLER VIEW DR

5249 MOON SHELL DR

5309 ALAFIA FALLS DR

5314 ALAFIA FALLS DR

5318 CANDLER VIEW DR

5342 98TH AVE E

5407 TWIN CREEKS DR

5411 STARLING RIDGE DR

5608 FREESTONE CIR

6007 BURROWING OWL PL

6011 HAMMOCK HILL AVE

6021 FLATWOODS MANOR CIR

6030 SANDHILL RIDGE DR

6112 IBISPARK DR

6115 SHADOWLAKE DR

6120 WATERCOLOR DR

6359 JOURNEY WAY

6644 PAR CT

9931 BAY DR

10015 REMINGTON DR

10108 GOLDEN WONDER LN

10130 PADDOCK OAKS DR

10208 POPS CT

10212 HOLLAND RD

10222 EVENING TRAIL DR

10262 KEY DEER WAY

10282 KEY DEER WAY

11139 WINTHROP LAKE DR

11143 WINTHROP LAKE DR

11162 SPRING POINT CIR

11205 LARK LANDING CT

11229 HAWKS FERN DR

11308 GREAT NECK RD

11309 GRAND PARK AVE

11350 HAWKS FERN DR

11457 CAMBRAY CREEK LOOP

12102 HAZEN AVE

12402 CREEK EDGE DR

12846 TALLOWOOD DR

12902 BROOKSIDE MOSS DR

13111 BAHIA GRASS LN

13121 EARLY RUN LN

13146 HOMESTEAD LN

13163 PASTURE VIEW LOOP

13621 CIRCA CROSSING DR

15625 HAWKS CREST LOOP

15740 STARLING WATER DR

15810 STARLING WATER DR

15817 SORAWATER DR

16421 66TH LN E

17112 FALCONRIDGE RD

17616 BRIGHT WHEAT DR

17721 BRIGHT WHEAT DR

17838 MISSION OAK DR

19462 PADDOCK VIEW DR

31147 WHINSENTON DR

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GTE FINANCIAL'S FAMILY MOTOR FEST DRAWS 8,000 IN RECORD YEAR

By Brian Bokor

GTE Financial's nationally recognized Family Motor Fest returned for its third and largest year yet, drawing an estimated 8,000 attendees and showcasing more than 2,500 vehicles at The Motor Enclave on November 22, 2025. The event marked the first time the popular festival was hosted at the motorsports destination and was free and open to the community.



The Motor Enclave Founder/CEO Brad Oleshansky (L) with Isaac Baker - Finishing Touch Auto Spa

Family Motor Fest has become one of GTE Financial's signature community events, combining a love of cars with a mission to support education. The festival serves as the credit union's largest annual fundraiser benefiting the GTE Scholarship Program, which has awarded more than $1 million to local students over the past 12 years. The scholarship supports students who demonstrate academic achievement, leadership and a strong commitment to community involvement.

"Receiving the GTE Financial Scholarship changed everything for me," said Lleyton Dayes, a University of Florida student and scholarship recipient. "It helped relieve the financial stress of college and showed me that my community believes in my potential. Events like Family Motor Fest make those opportunities possible for students like me."

This year's expanded venue allowed for a broader range of attractions and experiences. Guests lined up throughout the day for autocross thrill rides, where professional drivers delivered high-speed precision laps in performance vehicles. The Enclave Race Lab Challenge, a racing simulator competition, drew enthusiastic participation as attendees competed for the fastest lap. Professional-driven, off-road thrill rides also gave visitors a chance to experience dirt, rocks and steep terrain on The Motor Enclave's exclusive off-road course.

"Family Motor Fest continues to be one of our most exciting traditions," said Brian Best, president and CEO of GTE Financial. "It's a celebration of cars, community and education."

Event organizers said the festival's continued growth reflects both community support and its expanding educational mission.

In addition to motorsports activities, Family Motor Fest featured live entertainment, food vendors and a dedicated family zone with Jeep rally runs, pinewood derby races and interactive games for children. Car enthusiasts from across the region displayed their vehicles, and, in keeping with GTE Financial's community-first approach, no registration fee was charged for participants.

"At GTE, we were excited to offer this event totally free to the public and not charge a registration fee for vehicle showcases," said Scott Works, vice president of marketing at GTE Financial. "This is a fun way we give back to Tampa Bay."

While the event was free to attend, the GTE Scholarship Program is sustained through the generous support of corporate sponsorships and private donations. Additional funding is generated through on-site vendor partnerships.

"Hosting Family Motor Fest at The Motor Enclave was an incredible experience," said Chas Ostezan, chief revenue officer of The Motor Enclave. "Seeing thousands of families and car enthusiasts come together showcased exactly what this venue was built for."

For more information, visit the website at, visit https://themotorenclave.com/.

COUNTY OPENS APPLICATIONS FOR ACTION BOARD SCHOLARSHIPS WITH UP TO $5,000 FOR ELIGIBLE STUDENTS

Staff Report



Hillsborough County is now accepting applications for its Community Action Board (CAB) Scholarship, a need-based program designed to help local students continue their education beyond high school.

The application window opened on January 12 and will close on Friday, March 20, or when capacity is reached, whichever comes first.

Achieving a higher education is an important life choice for young people and their families. The Hillsborough County Social Services department, in partnership with the Hillsborough County Community Action Board, is committed to helping eligible students reach this milestone by offering scholarships of up to $5,000 funded through the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) program.

The number of scholarships and the amount awarded depend on available grant funding. Scholarships are awarded on a first-come, first-served basis to eligible applicants who submit complete applications with all required documentation.

CAB Scholarship funds may be used at trade schools, community colleges or four-year universities to help offset tuition and related educational expenses, allowing students to focus on their academic goals rather than financial barriers.

As part of the application process, students are required to describe their academic status using the following prompts:

High school/GED applications: Explain why they should be selected for the scholarship by discussing academic strengths and areas for growth, career goals and any personal or financial circumstances that may affect their ability to pursue higher education.

Currently enrolled college students: Describe their most meaningful achievements since entering college and how the achievements relate to their field of study and future career goals. Explain how this scholarship will support both financial and nonfinancial needs while pursuing postsecondary education.

Students should review https://form.jotform.com/252883805886171 and Federal Poverty Guidelines (https://hcfl.gov/residents/human-services/financial-assistance/determine-eligibility) before applying. Call 813-272-5220 or email for info to socialservicescsbg@hcfl.gov for any questions.

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HUMAN TRAFFICKING AWARENESS TRAINING EMPHASIZES PREVENTION AND VIGILANCE

By Olivia Clark

Hillsborough County Florida Health Care Services

HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY COMMISSION ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human trafficking often looks different than what is portrayed in movies or on social media, according to advocates from the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay, who recently led a community awareness training focused on prevention and education.

Stephanie Barona, human trafficking care coordinator at the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay, explained that trafficking involves one person exerting control over another through "force, fraud or coercion" for the purpose of exploitation. She emphasized that this control is not always obvious and can take many forms.

"Human trafficking is basically when one person exercises control over another person," Barona said. "This person cannot simply walk away."

Barona noted that trafficking can involve labor or sexual exploitation but stressed that community members do not need to be experts to help prevent it. Awareness of common warning signs is often the first step.

Shayla Gonzalez, sexual assault services and mental health ambassador at the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay, encouraged residents to rethink common assumptions about what trafficking looks like.

"There is no perfect picture of what this crime looks like," Gonzalez said. "A lot of times we think of a white van scenario, but in actuality, this is something that is happening within our own city limits."

According to Gonzalez and Barona, potential indicators may include individuals who appear fearful or unable to speak for themselves, lack access to personal identification, have limited control over money or transportation or are closely monitored by another person. While these signs do not always indicate trafficking, advocates said they are worth noting.

Gonzalez explained that traffickers often rely on manipulation rather than physical force.

"They are master manipulators," she said, adding that traffickers may take advantage of trust, emotional connections or financial dependence to maintain control.

The training emphasized that community members should never attempt to intervene directly. Instead, attendees were encouraged to trust their instincts, document their concerns and report suspicious situations to the appropriate authorities.

"If you feel like something is going on, it's better to report it," Barona said. "It's better to say something and it be nothing than to say nothing and it be something."

Both speakers stressed that education plays a key role in prevention and that awareness should extend beyond Human Trafficking Awareness Month.

Residents seeking information, support or referrals can contact the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay's 24-hour helpline by dialing 211.

NEWSOME MARCHING BAND PERFORMS AT SUGAR BOWL PARADE

By Emily Harper





In December 2025, the Newsome High School Marching Band had the opportunity to showcase their talent in the Allstate Sugar Bowl New Year's Eve Parade in New Orleans, Louisiana. With the marching band being highly competitive at their level, it struck the interest of the parade.

In November 2024, the director of the band was notified about this opportunity. The audition process consisted of sending their game-day performance, in which they were officially offered a spot.

The Allstate Sugar Bowl New Year's Parade occurred on December 31, 2025, in the French Quarter. This parade was held the day before the big game between Ole Miss and Georgia football to create anticipation. Newsome, along with 11 other bands traveling from other East Coast, states took part in this celebration.

Two-thirds of the band, 87 students, traveled to New Orleans for the performance. The band felt confident going into the experience, as they had just ended football season. Throughout the season, the band had worked tirelessly on perfecting their sounds and tones.

The day before the parade, the band performed a standstill performance in Jackson Square. During their 15-minute allotted time, the band showcased their game-day performance.

On the day of the parade, Newsome marched after the Ole Miss University Marching Band. In this performance, they played the sound of "Cold Hearted," by Paula Abdul. This song was one of the students' favorites, and it was a big hit with the spectators as well.

Unaware of the competition among the bands, Newsome won Best Music and Best Marching, along with second place in the parade overall.

"I wanted to do an experience trip where we performed for the sake of performing, not for the sake of trying to win a trophy. Because of that, the kids had a really good time, and interestingly, by having a really good time and being able to relax and sell their performance, they still did really well competitively," said John Davis, Newsome's director of bands..



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GETTING YOUR CHILD READY FOR KINDERGARTEN (OR PRE-K)

By Superintendent Van Ayres



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

If you've got a little one heading into prekindergarten or kindergarten, you're probably feeling a mix of pride, excitement and maybe a little nervous. That's normal. Here's the truth: being 'ready' doesn't mean your child needs to be reading early or sitting still for long stretches. It means they're building the everyday skills that help them walk into school feeling confident and capable.

Here are a few practical ways to get started without turning your home into a classroom.

Focus on independence. Practice the basics: opening snack containers, washing hands, using the restroom, putting on a backpack and cleaning up after themselves. These small skills make a big difference in a busy classroom.

Lock in a routine. A steady bedtime and morning routine will set your child up for success and it will make your first week smoother, too. If your schedule has been flexible, start shifting to a school-night routine a couple of weeks early.

Help them handle big feelings. New places come with new emotions. Talk through what school might look like and give them a plan, such as, "If you miss home, tell your teacher," or "If you need help, raise your hand." Kids do better when they know what to do.

Read every day and keep it simple. Even 10 minutes counts. Let your child choose books. Ask questions about the pictures. Talk about the story. Point out letters and words on signs and packages. You're building language and confidence, not giving a test.

Practice getting along with others. Taking turns, listening, sharing space and using respectful words matter just as much as counting and colors. Time at the park, story time at the library or playing with neighbors all help.

Keep your message positive. Kids pick up on our tone. If we talk about school as a safe place to learn, make friends and try new things, they'll walk in with more confidence.

One last thing: every child develops at their own pace. If your child feels supported, encouraged and excited to learn, you're on the right track. We're looking forward to welcoming your family and we'll be ready for them on day one.

To learn more about Hillsborough County Public Schools' early learning programs, visit https://hcpsready.com/.

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'COWBOYS WHO CARE' — STOWERS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL'S 100TH DAY OF SCHOOL CELEBRATION

By Emily Harper



Stowers Elementary School leveraged itself as a platform to support local charities for its celebration of the 100th day of school. In this fundraiser, students and their parents were notified about their grade's specific charity and item donations.

Starting on the return from winter break, January 6-23, families brought in items to assist local nonprofits. The common goal was 100 items from each grade level by the 100th day of school.

The teachers made it a goal to support charities that they connect with. For example, third and fifth grade students collected items for First Ladies Farm & Sanctuary. The students were excited to donate to this nonprofit because many ride their bikes past the farm and play with the animals. This gave the students extra motivation to donate since they were familiar with the charity's efforts.

"I'm incredibly proud of our students and community for coming together with such heart to support local charities through the Cowboys Who Care 100-Day Collection," expressed Principal Cochrane.

Kindergarten and fourth grade collected donations for FishHawk TNR Animal Rescue. This local nonprofit, as stated on its website, is a "foster-based animal rescue and community cat advocacy."

The kindergarteners' families were instructed to bring in dog and cat food, treats or toys, while the fourth graders were in charge of Kong dog treats or cat litter. In total, the two grades collected 183 items to care for animals in rescue.

First graders focused their efforts on A Kid's Place. A Kid's Place serves the Tampa Bay area by providing "a safe, loving, and nurturing home for foster children," as stated on its website. With their generous donations, the first grade families brought in a total of 110 items.

Second graders contributed breakfast bars and Pop-Tarts to Seeds of Hope. As a result, 154 items were donated to help support local families.

Lastly, third and fifth graders prioritized First Ladies Farm & Sanctuary for the fundraiser. This charity "rescues cats and domestic poultry, providing love, care, and a safe haven," as explained on its website.

The third grade class was advised to bring dry dog/cat food or Dawn dish soap, while the fifth grade class was instructed to bring antibacterial soap or small dog/cat treats. Their combined efforts resulted in a remarkable 261 items.

NEWSOME, ARMWOOD AND SOUTH COUNTY CAREER CENTER LEAD GRADUATION GAINS

Staff Report



Hillsborough County Public Schools' (HCPS) record-setting graduation rate for the 2024-25 academic year was fueled by standout performances at campuses across the district, including exceptional results at Newsome High School, South County Career Center and Armwood High School.

The district announced on Tuesday that its graduation rate climbed to 90.9 percent, the highest in HCPS history and a 2.9 percentage-point increase from the previous year. District leaders said the success reflects a focused effort to expand academic support, monitor student progress and ensure every senior has a clear pathway to a diploma.

Newsome High School once again ranked among the district's top-performing campuses, posting a 98.6 percent graduation rate. School leaders credited strong academic expectations, student engagement and family partnerships for helping nearly all seniors complete their high school journey on time.

Significant improvement was also seen at South County Career Center, which recorded a 17.4 percentage-point increase in its graduation rate — one of the largest gains in the district. Officials said the increase highlights the impact of career-focused education combined with targeted academic support, helping students stay engaged while preparing for the workforce or postsecondary training.

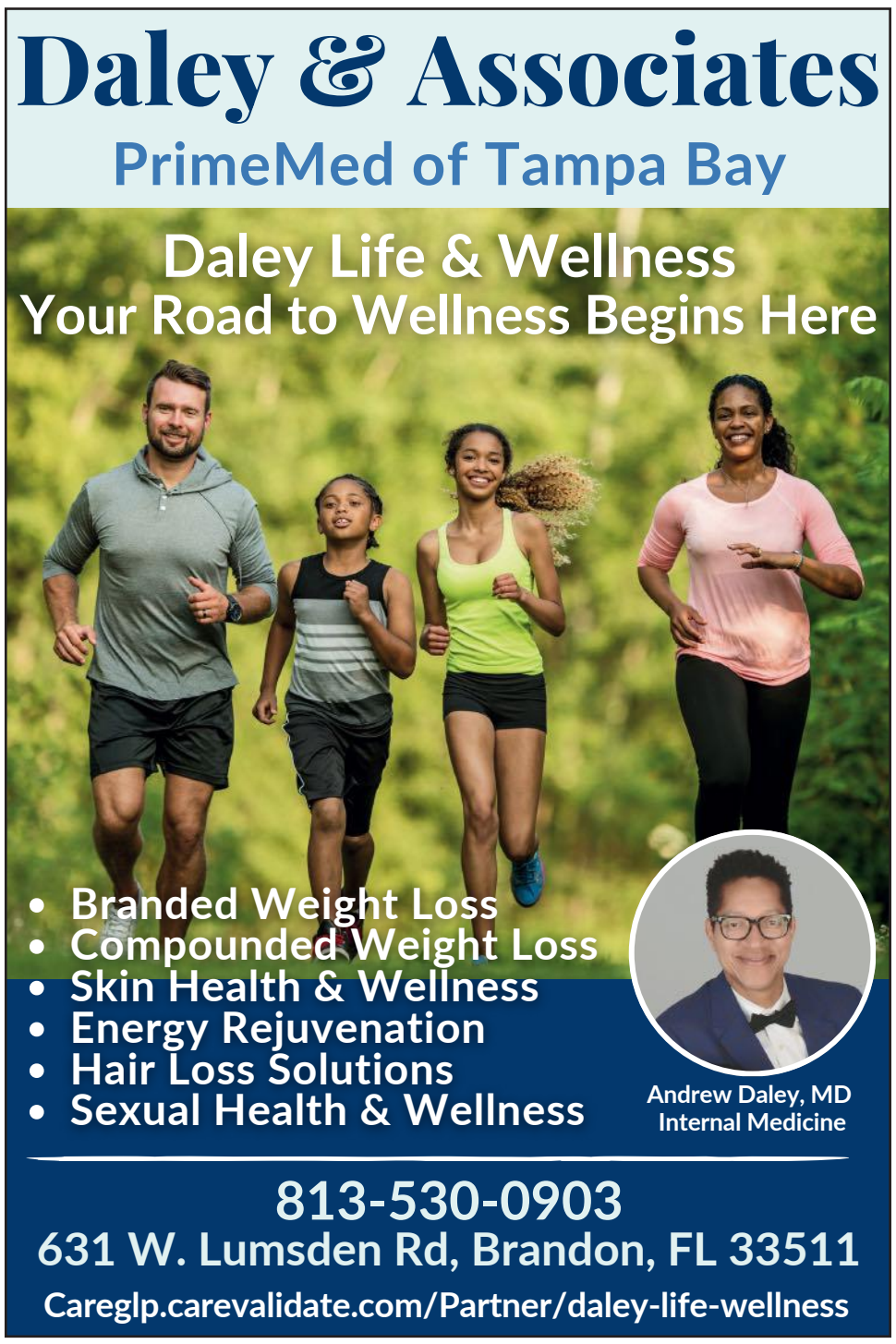
Armwood High School was another bright spot, achieving a 7.6 percent increase in its graduation rate over the previous year. District leaders praised the school's staff for identifying students in need of additional support and connecting them with resources such as credit recovery, tutoring and graduation planning.

Superintendent Van Ayres said the success at these schools illustrates the district's broader strategy of meeting students where they are.

"Whether it's a high-performing traditional high school like Newsome, a career-focused campus like South County or a comprehensive high school like Armwood, the common thread is a commitment to student success," Ayres said. "These gains mean more students are crossing the stage and stepping into their futures."

Districtwide strategies contributing to the improved outcomes include free test preparation and testing opportunities, junior and senior academic checks, credit recovery programs, summer learning and the Graduation Advancement Program. The district's Graduation Task Force also continues to meet monthly to track individual student progress and address barriers such as attendance, housing instability and family communication.

Officials said the achievements at Newsome, South County Career Center and Armwood demonstrate how targeted support and dedicated educators can make a measurable difference in student outcomes.





HOMES FOR TROOPS CON'T FROM PAGE 1

By Brian Bokor

ceed ADA standards, incorporating open floor plans, widened hallways and doorways and accessibility features designed to reduce fall risk and restore independence.

"Rails along the walls that help me guide myself around the home, so I'm not tripping and falling over things," Cornelius said.

Bathrooms, where falls are most common, were a major focus of the design. The integrated guidance features will allow him to move through the space safely.

In the kitchen, features were selected to minimize burns, spills and heavy lifting. The home will include an induction cooktop that automatically shuts off when cookware is removed.

"It's not going to turn on unless I try to cook something, and when I take it off, it turns off," Cornelius said. "Cool safety features."

A pot filler near the cooktop will eliminate the need to carry heavy containers of water across the room.

"They talk about how cool is that, so I don't have to carry water around," he added.

HFOT homes are typically four-bedroom, two-bath, energy-efficient builds measuring just over 2,800 square feet designed to support family life while keeping long-term utility costs manageable."This place is huge," Cornelius joked. "I'm going to have to put a clapper on my guide dog."

Security, particularly at night, was one of the most important considerations in the home's design.

"The whole thing for me is safety," Cornelius said. "It sounds kind of weird, but at night, when you're blind, you hear everything." He added, "No one should feel unsafe in their own home."

Voice-activated technology throughout the home will allow him to open, close and lock windows without moving through the house, providing greater control and peace of mind.

Cornelius chose to build in Florida to remain close to family, particularly his daughter Gabby. Finding a suitable lot near his current home in Bradenton proved difficult due to extensive wetlands that limit buildable land for an HFOT project.

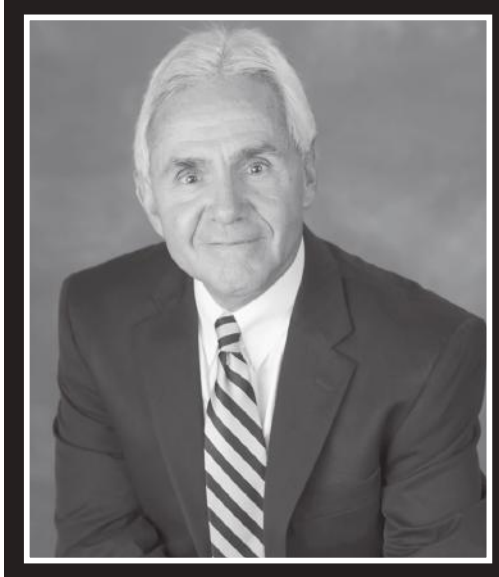
Instead, he selected a lot in Lithia on the same street as close friend and fellow HFOT veteran Rusty Carter, who received his adapted home in August 2024.

Retired Army Brig. Gen. Tom Landwermeyer, president and CEO of Homes For Our Troops, said the organization's mission is centered on restoring independence for veterans whose injuries make everyday life challenging in traditional homes.

"These veterans need assistance with many of the little things most of us take for granted every day," Landwermeyer said. "Those challenges add up and take a tremendous amount of time and energy."

Construction on Cornelius' home will continue over the coming months. When completed, the home will allow him to move through his own space safely and independently Those interested in volunteering or donating can visit www.hfotusa.org.

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Art Expo, Play Bridge, Women's Conference & More....

Compiled by Jenny Bennett
jbennett@ospreyobserver.com

DELIGHT — Women Of Hope Conference

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

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

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

A Kid's Place's Fostering Hope Gala

This Valentine's Day, skip the ordinary and be part of something truly special by supporting the children of A Kid's Place. The Vinoy Resort & Golf Club in St. Petersburg will provide an elegant backdrop where guests can look forward to an inspiring evening program featuring speakers with heartwarming stories, those whose lives have been touched by A Kid's Place. There will be live and silent auctions, delicious food and cocktails as well as dancing and other activities to enjoy. Your presence helps ensure that every child at A Kid's Place receives the love, care and stability that they deserve. Celebrate love in action and reserve your seats today at https://bit.ly/AKP2026Gala.

Jack Porter Receives Tour Of Osprey Observer Office.

Jack Porter, 11, of Lithia toured the Osprey Observer newspaper office, where he got a behind-the-scenes look at how each edition is made. A cover-to-cover reader, Jack said he loves learning how the paper comes together and keeping up with what's happening in his community.

"I wanted to know about how you do the paper and see what it takes to make the paper," said Porter. "I like to know what's happening in our community."

Art Expo To Raise Funds For Scholarships

The Women's Democratic Club is holding an Art Expo Fundraiser on February 22, at Painter's Union Hall located at 8840 US 301, in Riverview, in honor of a past member, Sandra Morehouse an artist herself. It invites you to attend this event, the money raised will support the club's scholarship fund. This one day event will showcase the talent of several artists in our community. There will be light appetizers, drinks and raffles. Cost is $20.00 at the event or go to the website https://sehillsboroughdwc.org For more information email sedwcinfo@gmail.com or call (813)967-1457.

Learn To Play Bridge

The Duplicate Bridge Association of Sun City Center is proud to announce that Kathy Smith, a Life Master bridge player and an American Contract Bridge League (ACBL) game director, is offering a series of classes of duplicate bridge for beginners, dubbed Easybridge. Classes are scheduled for Thursday, January 29, from 1-4 p.m. for 15 consecutive weeks in the Horizon Room in the Atrium Building, located at 947 N. Course Lane in Sun City Center. The first four weeks are complementary. The remaining classes are $4 for Sun City Center residents and $5 for non-SCC applicants. The classes are structured for a supportive and friendly environment. Sample dealer hands will be available to apply lessons learned.



Jack Porter takes a newspaper tour with Osprey Observer editor Marie Gilmore after his tour.

Registration is taken at kathjosmith@gmail.com.

Bloomingdale Senior High School Theatre Welcomes New Choreographer

Bloomingdale Senior High School Theatre is so excited to welcome Teddi Rollins as their choreographer. Rollins is a recent graduate with a degree in musical theater with a minor in professional education, and a concentration in juvenile justice, from the University of Tampa. Not only is Rollins a performer, but she is a life changer as well.

Democratic Women's Club Of Southeast Hillsborough County

The Democratic Women's Club of Southeast Hillsborough County club invites all like-minded individuals to join in the February meeting. The meeting will be held on Thursday, February 5, in rooms A and B of the Riverview Public Library, located at 9951 Balm Riverview Rd. in Riverview, and it begins at 6:30 p.m., with meet and greet at 6 p.m.

The speaker is ACLU representative Erica Henschel. For more information, email sedwcinfo@gmail or call 813-503-8639.

Lions Club Music Bingo

Join the Fishhawk Lions Club for a fun and exciting evening of music bingo at Bullfrog Creek Brewing Co. on Thursday, February 26, at 7 p.m. One hundred percent of the proceeds go to supporting the Fishhawk Lions Club's community service projects.

Bullfrog Creek Brewing Co. is located at 3632 Lithia Pinecrest Rd. in Valrico. Visit www.fishhawklionsclub.com for more.



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LICENSED ACUPUNCTURE PHYSICIAN OFFERS NATURAL RELIEF BEYOND PAIN

By Denise Sansosti

After six years of practicing acupuncture in Sarasota, Dr. Ashley Carlson has expanded her practice with the opening of a new office in Brandon, bringing her work closer to home.



Dr. Ashley Carlson now offers private one-to-one treatment and consultations in her Brandon office.

A licensed acupuncture physician and doctor of oriental medicine in the state of Florida, Dr. Carlson is also certified by the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine. Her path to medicine began at the University of South Florida, where she earned a bachelor's degree in biomedical science. While originally planning a career in pharmacy, her own health challenges shifted her direction.

"I was getting five to 10 migraines a month," Dr. Carlson shared. "I tried pharmaceuticals and injections, but I experienced strange side effects, and nothing really worked."

Seeking a more natural approach, acupuncture relieved her migraines and gave her a new calling. Dr. Carlson attended East West College of Natural Medicine, earning a bachelor's degree in health science and a master's degree in oriental medicine. She is currently completing her doctoral program with a focus on reproductive health, orthopedics and cancer care.

While pain relief is the most common reason patients seek acupuncture, Dr. Carlson emphasizes that its benefits extend far beyond that.

"Most people don't think about acupuncture for chronic conditions like insomnia, anxiety or digestive issues," she explained. "Many people are in so much pain they can't sleep, or their minds just won't shut off. Acupuncture helps balance the system so the body can rest and reset."

Becoming licensed in Florida requires four board certifications and extensive training. "We have to complete Western medicine boards, and we also have the Chinese herbal board," Dr. Carlson noted. "We still go through all of the anatomy and physiology classes required in Western medicine, plus we study Western and Eastern nutrition."

What she values most is seeing real change in her patients.

"Helping people regain quality of life is the most rewarding part," she said. "Watching someone recover mobility after a stroke or improve their speech through acupuncture is incredible. This medicine is minimally invasive and has virtually no side effects."

If you have a fear of needles, she also provides other traditional Chinese medicines, such as acupressure, cupping, moxibustion, tui na and Chinese herbs. To schedule an appointment, visit https://floatingspringsacu.com/ or call 813-535-0693.

TROOP 610'S MULCH SALE RETURNS, HELPING SCOUTS EARN WAY TO CAMP

Staff Report



Scouts BSA Troop 610 members load and deliver mulch as part of their annual fundraiser, helping earn funds for summer camp and troop activities.

Mulch season has officially arrived, and Scouts BSA Troop 610 is once again rolling up its sleeves to support its annual mulch fundraiser — an effort that helps fund summer camp, purchase equipment and support year-round Scouting activities.



The popular fundraiser, now live, has become a cornerstone for the Lithia-based troop, allowing Scouts to earn their way to camp while providing a convenient service for local residents. Each year, community members can order mulch and have it delivered directly to their homes, saving time, gas and heavy lifting.

Scout mom Caitlin Nguyen, who has been part of Troop 610 for seven years, said the fundraiser plays a major role in making Scouting opportunities accessible for families.

"The troop usually profits around $15,000 to $20,000 from this fundraiser," Nguyen said. "Last year, it paid about 80 percent of the cost for our troop to go to summer camp way up in North Carolina."

Mulch deliveries are scheduled for Saturday, March 7, to Apollo Beach, Brandon, Riverview and Valrico. Deliveries to Lithia (ZIP code: 33547) will take place on Saturday, March 14, weather permitting.

Orders must be received by Friday, February 20.

Residents can place orders online using a credit card by visiting https://tinyurl.com/troop610mulch.

Those ordering by mail should include their name, address, phone number, email address and gate code, if applicable.

Troop leaders said the fundraiser not only supports Scouting adventures like summer camp but also teaches Scouts responsibility, teamwork and the value of hard work.

For questions or additional information, contact Mike Nguyen by calling or texting 850-867-6032 or email troop610mulch@gmail.com.

Community support helps ensure Troop 610 continues providing meaningful outdoor and leadership experiences for local youth — one bag of mulch at a time.

Edward Jones
> edwardjones.com | Member SIPC

New Year's Financial Resolutions: Making Them Stick

As the calendar flips to a new year, millions of Americans pledge to improve their financial lives. But without a concrete plan, those well-intentioned resolutions often fade quickly.

Financial goals consistently top the list of New Year's resolutions. A 2025 CFP Board study shows that financial resolutions are prominent, with saving more money (45%) and reducing debt (32%) ranking among the top three goals.

Unfortunately, most resolutions don't last. A 2023 Forbes Health poll found that over half of people give up on resolutions by the four-month mark and only 1% make it the full year.

The challenge isn't a lack of desire for change. People may set the same resolution year after year, revealing a disconnect between intentions and action. Or it may be that they try to tackle too many goals at once, or aim higher than is realistic, setting themselves up for disappointment.

Set smart financial goals. Before crafting your action plan, consider which financial priorities matter most to you. If you need ideas, here are some areas where you may want focus in 2026:

• Regularly review your financial goals and track progress toward meeting them
• Increase your 401(k) contributions or max out your IRA and/or HSA contributions
• Pay down debt strategically and negotiate lower interest payments
• Build an emergency savings fund of six to 12 months
• Save more consistently

Be specific. Vague resolutions like "save more money" rarely succeed. Instead, it can help to make goals specific and measurable. For example, rather than making a resolution to "start an emergency fund," commit to a specific goal, such as, "I will put $100 a month into an emergency fund."

This shift from general to specific transforms wishful thinking into actionable steps. When goals are attainable, it's easier to track progress and stay motivated.

Find an accountability partner. Don't go it alone. Having someone to check in with can help you stay on track. This could be a spouse, friend or family member who shares similar goals.

Consider working with a financial advisor who can help you create a realistic plan, monitor your progress and adjust strategies as needed. A professional can provide expertise and accountability, making it easier to stay on track throughout the year.

Start small and build momentum. Rather than overhauling your entire financial life all at once, focus on one or two priority areas. Identify where the largest gap exists between your current situation and where you want to be, then concentrate your energy there.

Breaking larger goals into smaller, manageable actions makes them less overwhelming and more achievable. Each small win builds confidence and momentum for tackling the next challenge.

The new year offers a fresh start and renewed motivation to improve your financial health. With specific goals, a solid action plan and the right support system, this could be the year your financial resolutions finally stick.

This article was written by Edward Jones for use by your local Edward Jones Financial Advisor.
Edward Jones, Member SIPC



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FISHHAWK GIRL SCOUT EARNS SILVER AWARD PROTECTING BIRDS OF PREY

Staff Report

A FishHawk seventh grader is making a lasting impact on wildlife conservation — one raptor at a time.

Cadette Girl Scout Kayla Farrell, 12, of Girl Scout Troop 33006, recently earned the prestigious Girl Scout Silver Award for a comprehensive community education project focused on protecting birds of prey. A student at Randall Middle School, Kayla invested nearly 70 hours into her award-winning effort, which combined hands-on education, public outreach and lasting resources for the community.



Silver Award Girl Scout Kayla Farrell (middle) is pictured with Tampa Bay Raptor Rescue manager Barbara Walker and a volunteer.

The project was inspired close to home. Kayla's grandmother and a neighbor, both avid walkers in the FishHawk community, became fearful of their daily route due to raptors nesting along the path. Kayla's curiosity grew after discovering a barred owl living in her own yard and meeting a local master falconer who shared his expertise during a visit to her Girl Scout cookie stand.

Motivated to educate rather than alarm, Kayla designed a project to raise awareness about the importance of birds of prey, the threats they face and how residents can safely coexist with them. She partnered with Tampa Bay Raptor Rescue to develop a seven-page educational activity booklet and an animal ambassador scavenger hunt for visitors to the organization's raptor sanctuary at Moccasin Lake Nature Park in Clearwater.

On Sept. 13, 2025, Kayla delivered 650 customized educational booklets and bookmarks, along with a kestrel house she built, to Tampa Bay Raptor Rescue as part of her sustainability plan. She also created a 'Nest Fest: Protecting Birds of Prey' educational Facebook page, filmed a do-it-yourself kestrel house instructional video, and worked with local homeowners associations to share best practices for addressing raptors nesting in residential areas.

Kayla also hosted a hands-on educational table featuring live birds at Girl Scouts of West Central Florida's STEMapalooza event in April 2025. Her exhibit earned second place in the People's Choice Award category, reflecting strong public interest in her work.

"My favorite part was getting to interact with the birds and take pictures of them," Kayla said.

The Girl Scout Silver Award is the second-highest honor in Girl Scouting and the highest award a middle school Girl Scout can achieve. Fewer than 10 percent of eligible Girl Scouts earn the distinction. The award requires a minimum 50-hour project in which a Girl Scout identifies a community need, addresses its root cause and leads a sustainable solution.

Kayla's project has not only helped educate hundreds of park visitors and residents but also created lasting tools to promote understanding and protection of birds of prey throughout the Tampa Bay area.

UNDERDOGS EMERGE AS MONSTER JAM SEASON HEATS UP FOR TAMPA FINALS

Staff Report

Familiar stars are once again pacing the field on the road to Monster Jam World Finals XXV. Drivers like Ryan Anderson, Camden Murphy and Jon Zimmer Jr. sit atop the early leaderboards, but as engines roar and points tighten, new challengers are proving they belong in the championship conversation.



Tim Hall Jr., driver of Jurassic Attack, is among the biggest risers. Known as "The Cadillac Kid," Hall Jr. is only in his second full season, yet he's already turning heads. Last weekend in Tacoma, Washington, he captured two overall event championships and moved into third place in the Arena Championship Series West standings.

In the Stadium Championship Series East, Chris Koehler and Mayhem delivered consistent excellence. The second-generation driver earned a freestyle win in his first career start in St. Louis and currently sits third in points. After claiming Rookie of the Year honors, Koehler is building momentum that could propel him back to the main field at World Finals.

M.J. Solorio, behind the wheel of El Toro Loco, is also on the rise. His breakout moment came last year in Salt Lake City, when he went from alternate to podium finisher in the Two-wheel Skills Challenge. Now in his third season, he's second in Arena Championship Series East points and is fresh off a freestyle win in Baltimore.

Dalton Widner, piloting Shell Shock'ed in Stadium Championship Series West, has carried over the speed and consistency that made 2025 a banner year. Currently fourth in the standings, the Tennessee native continues to climb.

Veteran Tony Ochs in JCB DIGatron has also been strong, storming the Freestyle Mania Championship Series alongside teammate T.J. Tiffany and putting Team JCB in the top spot.

As anticipation builds for the 2026 Monster Jam season, all eyes will turn to Tampa Bay. Monster Jam World Finals XXV roar into Raymond James Stadium on Saturday and Sunday, February 28 and March 1, bringing racing, freestyle, skills challenges and fan-favorite trucks like Grave Digger and El Toro Loco.

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New Year, New You ... New Home?



EXCELLENCE & ELEGANCE surround you at this magnificent, custom-built, 5,000-SF home in FishHawk's Kestrel Ridge! On a cul-de-sac half-acre in the security-gated enclave, the property features an impressive pool & spa lanai with a panoramic view of conservation woods & water. An outdoor kitchen & gas fireplace flank the heated pool on a travertine-tiled deck; triple pocket sliders open it all for great entertaining. Details are just as dazzling inside, of course: coffered ceilings, crown molding, columns & arches, gorgeous granite, diagonal-tile floors & backsplashes, decorative listello, raised-panel wood cabinets, walk-in wine closet & so much more. New to market this month at $1,485,000.



EXPERIENCE ENCORE, FishHawk's 55+ haven with resort-style amenities, from the added advantage of a minimal-maintenance villa! From your roof to your landscaped lawn, from your high-speed Internet & premium TV to your exclusive club & community activities, you'll love living in this well-appointed home that makes the most of 1,600 SF. Up front there's an office (or guest room) in addition to the 2nd bedroom & bath, while in back the primary bed/bath suite is joined by a screened lanai as well as the rear-entry 2-car garage. Beyond the many facilities reserved for residents of Encore, you also have access to the range of pools, parks & more throughout FishHawk West. $350,000















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In Boyette Park, a tree-shaded, step-down park as part of your own fenced back yard gives this 2,180-SF 3/2/3 something extra! With a woodsy conservation view instead of a rear neighbor, this special spot is now a young family's playground but offers many creative possibilities. $475,000

A 3-year-new roof & debt-free solar panels for home & pool are the crowning values at this 1,834-SF 3/2/2 overlooking conservation land in Boyette Springs! You'll truly appreciate the low electric power bills, also helped by efficiencies of its 3-ton AC/heat pump & water heater both new in 2023. $450,000



Watch sunsets over a tree-lined pond from the screened, stone-pavered lanai behind this surprisingly large home in gated Magnolia Park! 3,600 SF total includes the 340-SF lanai, a 2-car garage 20% bigger than usual, downstairs living/dining/kitchen/office, upstairs family room, plus 3 beds & 2.5 baths. $439,900



A super-sized lanai under a cathedral ceiling makes the private pond view beyond this fenced back yard something special! Enjoy coming home to an 1,800-SF 4/3/2 far from the crowd with no rear neighbor & no through traffic in Riverview's Covewood community. Recent roof & LVP floors. $375,000





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The Say YES to You and Your Business Summit is a one-day immersive experience created for entrepreneurs and high-achieving professional women who are ready to release burnout, reclaim clarity and create harmony between their ambition and their well-being. Founded by Say YES to Your Life Coach Pearl Chiarenza, the summit focuses on helping women bridge the gap between professional achievement and personal fulfillment through mindset coaching, mental fitness tools and real-life strategies they can apply immediately. The event will take place at The Regent, located at 6437 Watson Rd. in Riverview, on Thursday, May 14. For more information, tickets and to see available sponsorship opportunities, visit https://sayyestoyousummit.com/.



Skoops Poop Celebrates First Year In Business

Skoops Poop, a locally owned and family-run dog waste removal company, recently celebrated its first year in business serving the Bloomingdale, FishHawk, Valrico and surrounding communities. In just 12 months, the company has grown from a small startup into the area's most recommended poop scoop service, a milestone the owner credits to an unwavering focus on quality, communication, and professionalism.

"Our business grew because neighbors talked to neighbors," Springer said. "When customers feel taken care of and know they can rely on you, they're happy to recommend you. That's been the foundation of everything we do."

For more information, visit its website at www.skoopspoop.com.



Hope And Harvest Continues To Expand Charcuterie Events

Stefanie Emrith is a FishHawk local and the founder of Hope & Harvest, a charcuterie and experiential events business proudly serving FishHawk and the surrounding communities. Over the past year, Hope & Harvest has successfully served the community through workshops, private celebrations, corporate gatherings and community pop-ups. As a locally owned and community-rooted business, it is continuing to expand its offerings in 2026 through new partnerships, themed events and local venue collaborations. Visit its website at www.hopeandharvestevents.com to find out more.



Cyndi Myers, owner of Cultivated Home Designs, uses a holistic approach to transforming homes.

Cultivated Home Design Uses Holistic Approach To Transforming Homes

Cyndi Myers, owner of Cultivated Home Designs and a new FishHawk resident, is an interior designer and energy healer who brings the two modalities together to help people harness the energy of their home and its surrounding environment to improve their overall well-being. A lifelong aficionado of interior design, Myers discovered during her two-and-a-half-year journey with leukemia the magic of energy healing and how the combination of the two altered her mindset and ultimately led to her remission from the disease. Contact Myers to begin your life-changing journey to boost your mind, body and spirit. You can reach her at 518-275-8536 or by email at cmyers768@gmail.com.

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MIC DROP TAMPA BUILDS CONFIDENCE, COMMUNITY FOR WOMEN IN BRANDON

Staff Report



Tampa's Mic Drop Club will host its next speaker session on Tuesday, February 17, 2026, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Bin & Board in Brandon.

A growing women-led speaker series is bringing confidence, connection and powerful storytelling to Brandon this February as Mic Drop Tampa hosts its next community event.

Mic Drop Club Tampa will hold a speaker session on Tuesday, February 17, from 11 a.m.-1 p.m. at bin + board, located at 807 W. Bloomingdale Ave. in Brandon. The event is open to women interested in public speaking, leadership development and personal growth, with RSVP required.

Mic Drop is part of a national organization that creates supportive spaces for women to practice public speaking, share ideas and amplify their voices. With the launch of its Tampa Bay chapter at the end of 2025, the organization has quickly gained momentum locally, attracting professionals, creatives and community leaders from across the region.

The Tampa chapter is hosted by Caitlin Gardner, a Brandon-area entrepreneur, professional speaker and owner of Blooming Communications. Gardner brings more than two decades of corporate experience to the role and said the mission of Mic Drop resonates deeply with women in Tampa Bay.

"After two decades in corporate America, I've seen firsthand how many women have incredible stories and expertise but hesitate to claim the mic," Gardner said. "The Mic Drop Club gives us a place to practice, connect and grow the confidence to share those stories boldly. Tampa is filled with powerhouse women who deserve to be heard — and this community is where that courage begins."

Mic Drop Club Tampa is part of Mic Drop Workshop, a global organization founded to help women become thought leaders through public speaking. With chapters in cities around the world, Mic Drop Club is redefining who is seen and heard on stages, in boardrooms and in leadership roles.

Each Mic Drop Tampa session is designed to be interactive and supportive. Attendees participate in speaking prompts, receive structured feedback and engage in personal growth exercises that build confidence both professionally and personally. The events foster a welcoming environment where women can practice speaking skills without judgment and build meaningful connections.

For women seeking confidence, community and a place to use their voice boldly, Mic Drop Tampa offers an opportunity to step into the spotlight.

For more information, contact Gardner and visit www.bloomingcomm.com

CONNECTING COMMUNITIES: 2026 NEIGHBORHOODS EXPO BRINGS COUNTY SERVICES TO RESIDENTS

Staff Report



Hillsborough County's neighborhoods are as diverse as the nearly 1.5 million people who call them home, stretching across 1,266 square miles from the rocky shores of Old Tampa Bay to the coastal prairie of the county's southern edge. On Saturday, February 28, residents from every corner of the county are invited to come together to celebrate that diversity at the 2026 annual Neighborhoods Expo.

Hosted by Hillsborough County Neighborhood Relations, the free event will take place from 9 a.m.-12 Noon at Feeding Tampa Bay's new facility, located at 3624 Causeway Blvd. in Tampa. Doors open at 9 a.m., with a welcome from the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners scheduled for 9:30 a.m.

Now in its 21st year, the Neighborhoods Expo has become a beloved civic tradition, offering residents a unique opportunity to connect directly with the county departments and agencies that help their communities thrive. This year's theme, 'Love Our Neighborhoods,' reflects a renewed focus on building strong relationships between residents and local government.

"This event is really about connection," said Stephanie Agliano, who directs the county's engagement efforts with residents. "We want people to feel comfortable asking questions, learning what resources are available, and understanding how county services support safe, healthy and engaged neighborhoods."

Throughout the morning, attendees can meet face-to-face with representatives from county departments ranging from public safety and code enforcement to permitting and neighborhood services. While the expo is not intended for conducting official business, staff will be on hand to provide guidance, answer questions and point residents in the right direction for follow-up assistance.

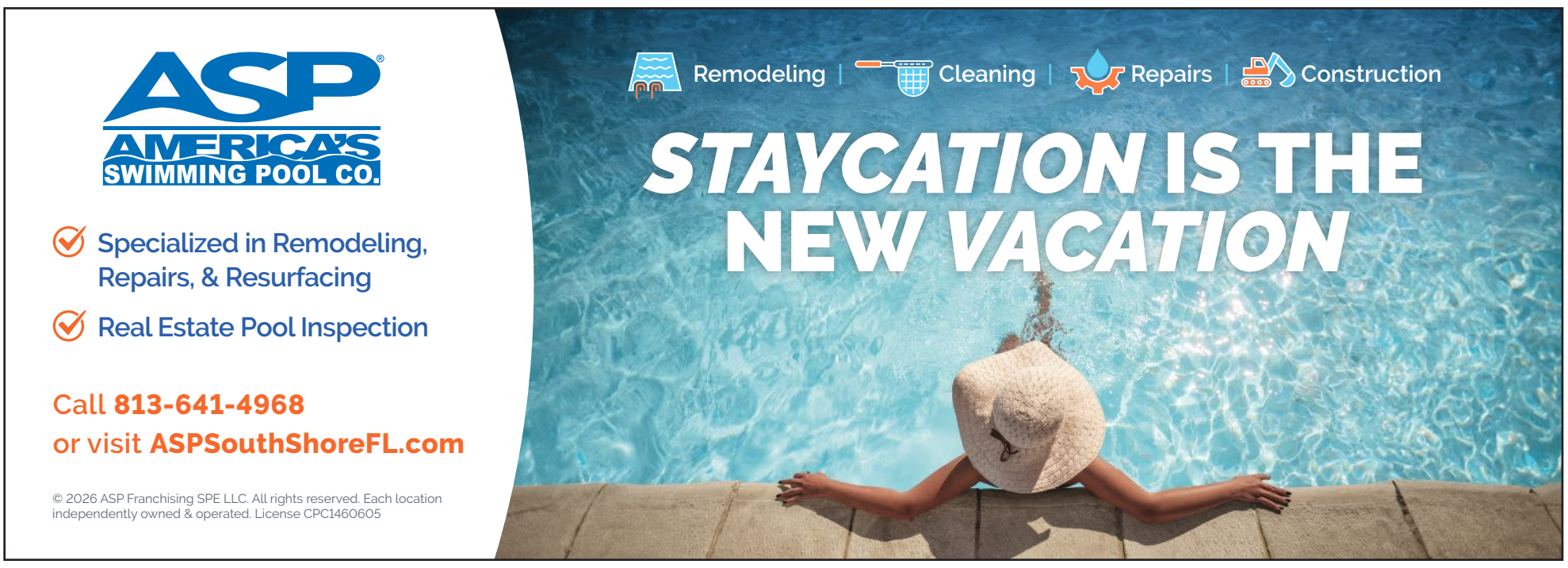
The event is designed for longtime neighborhood leaders and first-time attendees alike. Participants can expect informative conversations, hands-on learning and a welcoming atmosphere — along with a few giveaways to take home.

Registration is recommended to help organizers better understand the interests of attendees, but walk-ins are welcome. County officials encourage residents to spread the word and bring neighbors along.

For Hillsborough County, the Neighborhoods Expo is more than an event — it's a reminder that strong neighborhoods are built through shared knowledge, open communication and community pride. Residents interested in attending can register online and learn more at https://hcfl.gov/.







STATE ATTORNEY'S OFFICE ADDS VICTIM ADVOCATE TO PLANT CITY COURTHOUSE

By State Attorney Suzy Lopez



State Attorney Suzy Lopez.

For someone who has just been victimized, walking into a courthouse can feel intimidating and lonely. It doesn't have to. Justice works best when victims know they are supported every step of the way.

That is why I am proud to share some important news for our East Hillsborough community. The state attorney's office is expanding our Victim Assistance program to the Plant City Courthouse effective immediately. Beginning now, a trained victim advocate will be on-site every Friday from 8 a.m.-4 p.m. to help victims and their families navigate the court process and access the support they need.

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



This is more than a new office location. It is about meeting people where they are. By placing an advocate right inside the Plant City Courthouse, we are making sure help is closer and available when it is needed most.

The advocates serving Plant City are part of the same experienced team based in our downtown Tampa office. That means victims receive the same level of care and expertise no matter where their case is heard. These advocates do far more than explain court dates and paperwork. They help families understand what to expect and connect them with resources like counseling, shelters or clothing. Sometimes, survivors are just looking for someone to listen.

Our victim advocates are some of the most dedicated and compassionate people on our team. They remind victims that they are not alone in this process. We couldn't do our work as prosecutors without them.

If you or someone you know is a victim living in the east part of our county, you're invited to meet us at the Plant City courthouse. Call 813-574-6391 or visit https://hillsboroughsao.gov/victimtoolkit/ to learn more about the services our advocates provide.

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KAPPA DELTA PHI WELCOMES NEW VALRICO CHAPTER, KAPPA UPSILON

Staff Report



Members of Kappa Delta Phi's newly chartered Kappa Upsilon chapter gather during their installation ceremony held at the home of Lily Barney, PNP.

Kappa Delta Phi Sorority, Inc. has officially welcomed a new chapter to the Valrico community with the chartering of Kappa Upsilon, a social and civic sisterhood dedicated to service, friendship and community involvement.

The chartering and installation of officers for Kappa Upsilon took place on January 10, 2026, at the home of Lily Barney, PNP. The celebration continued with a dinner social hosted at the home of Terry Montefusco, marking the beginning of the chapter's presence in the area.

The installation ceremony was conducted by Cindy Broeker, PNP, of the Counseling Chapter Gamma Alpha Nu in Huntingburg, Indiana. Nancy Wimble, Gulf Coast Regional Director, served as Mistress of Ceremonies for the event.

The newly installed officers of Kappa Upsilon include:

Amy Carey Lee, Chairman of the Board
Geraldine Clark, President
Katie Lambert, Vice President
Terry Montefusco, Treasurer
Nancy Kelley, Secretary
Claudia Yake, Guard
Colleen Barney, Monitor

Additional charter members in attendance included Lily Barney, PNP; Flora Temoin; Aurea Vasquez; and Colleen Wimble.

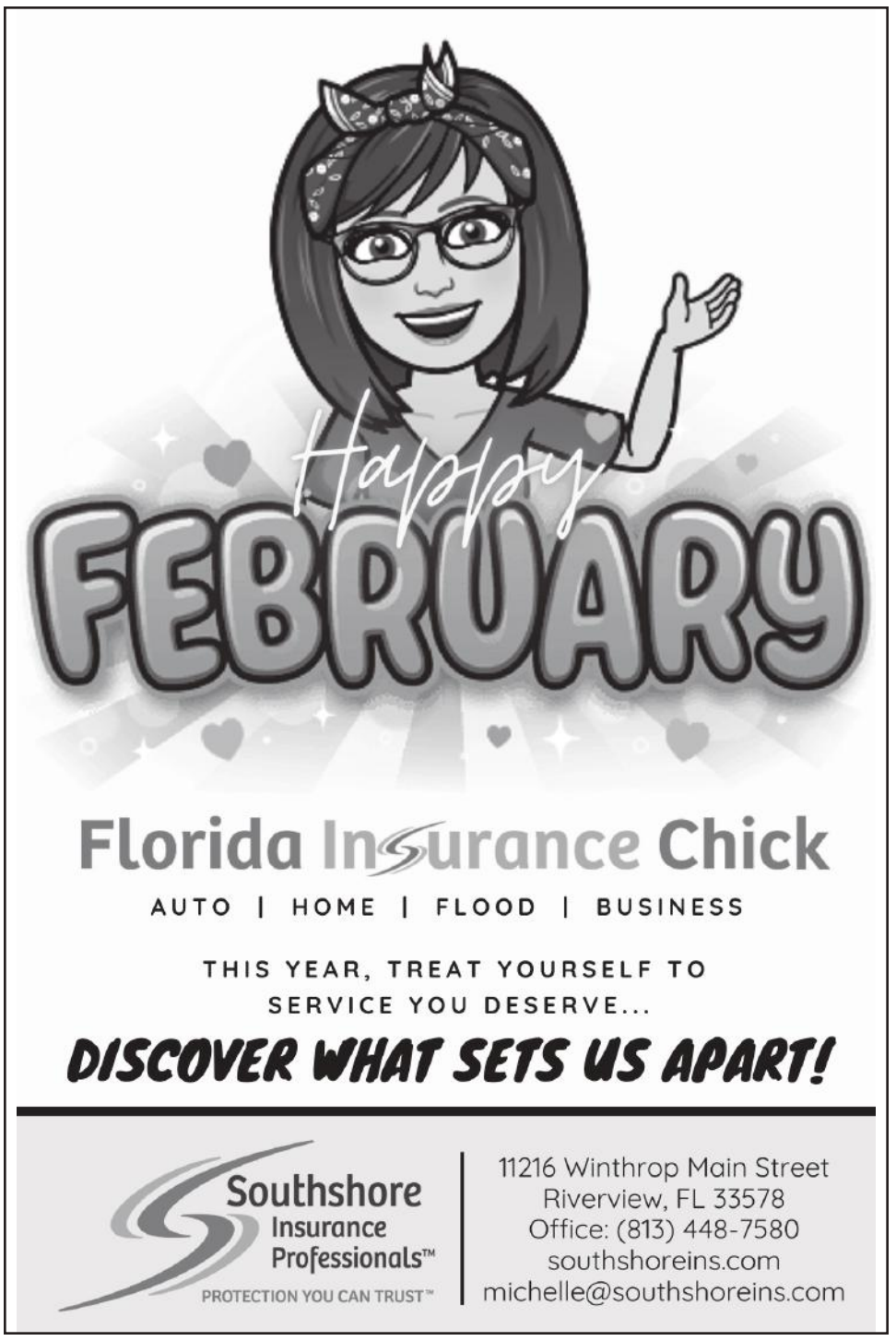
Kappa Upsilon has already begun making an impact in the community. The chapter kicked off the year by donating more than 26 bags and numerous garment boxes to AMVETS, supporting local veterans in need.

Looking ahead, the chapter has scheduled its first fundraising event to benefit the community. Music Bingo will be held on Friday, March 6, at Bullfrog Creek Brewing Company, located at 3632 Lithia Pinecrest Road in Valrico. Community members are invited to attend and support the cause while enjoying an evening of music and fun.

Kappa Delta Phi currently has two chapters serving the local area—Kappa Upsilon and Kappa Kappa—providing opportunities for women interested in civic engagement, community service and forming lasting friendships.

Women interested in learning more about Kappa Delta Phi, Kappa Upsilon, or membership opportunities may contact Katie Lambert, Vice President, by email at katiew.lambert@hotmail.com

Congratulations are extended to the members of Kappa Upsilon as they begin their journey of service and sisterhood in Valrico.



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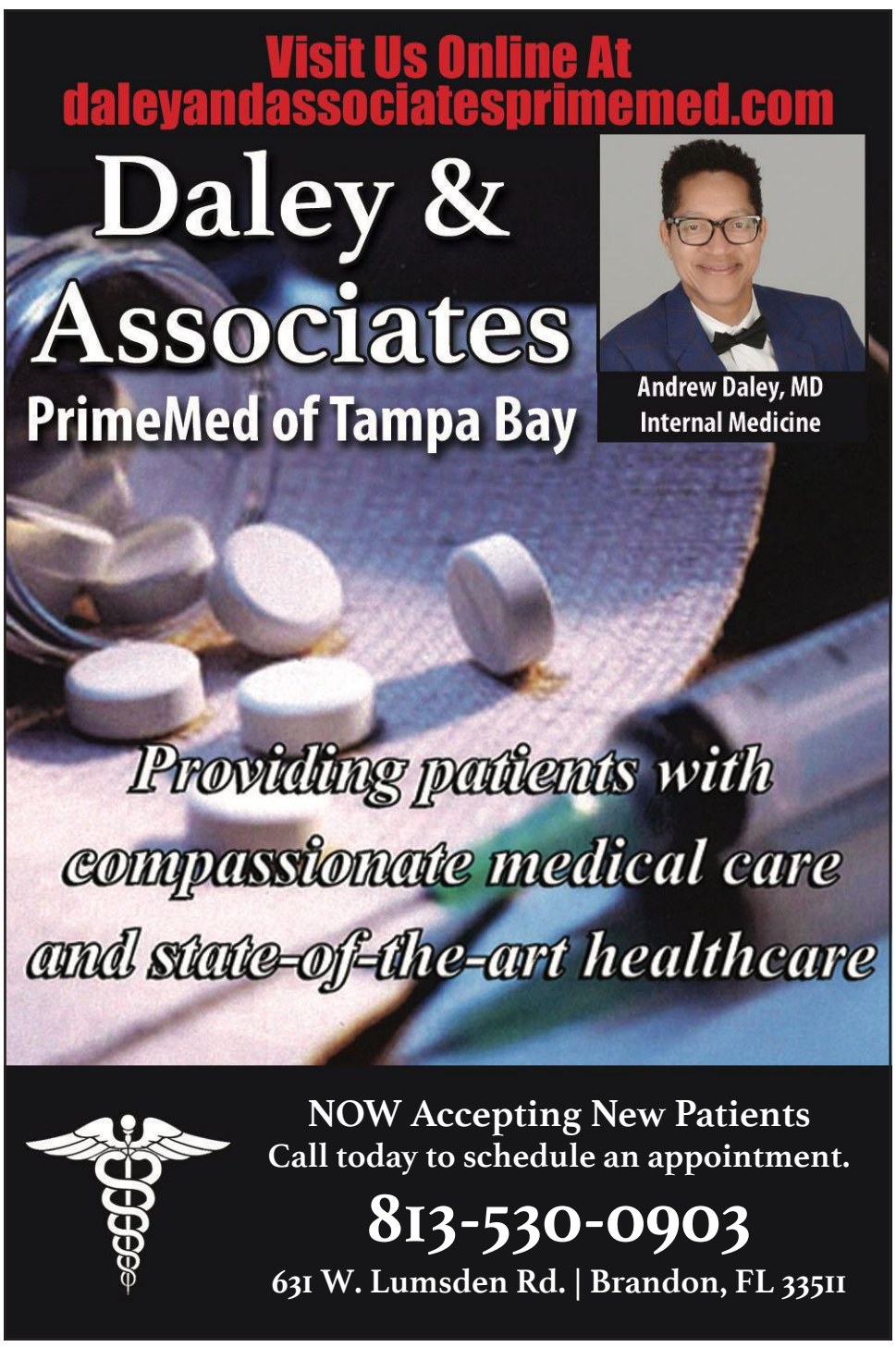
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CAMPO FAMILY YMCA OFFERS YEAR-ROUND ADULT SPORTS LEAGUES

By Nick Nahas



Photo courtesy of the Campo Family YMCA

Pickleball participants currently range in age from 12-68.

The Campo Family YMCA encourages adults of all ages to stay active and socialize through its AAA Adult Sports League programs. It offers sports such as volleyball, pickleball and basketball.

The basketball and volleyball leagues are open year-round and are available to adults 18 and older as well as 35 and older. Registration through the website for the winter season started on January 16. The link to register is https://tampaymca.org/campo-family-ymca/programs.

According to the YMCA website, the current adult eight-week pickleball league began on January 11 and runs through Sunday, March 1. It is a doubles league, so either sign up with a partner or one will be provided. There are beginner and intermediate levels. The following eight-week session begins on Sunday, April 12.

According to Senior Program Director Michelle Leahy, the league is open to participants of all ages. League divisions are established based on enrollment and participant skill levels to promote fair, competitive and enjoyable play. For the current season, the league includes both beginner and intermediate divisions. Participants currently range in age from 12-68. League sessions are offered seasonally, with start dates in January, April, August and October.

"Our pickleball league offers a meaningful opportunity to partake in physical activity while fostering intergenerational connections within the community," said Leahy. "Pickleball is an inclusive sport that accommodates a wide range of ages and skill levels, providing a welcoming and supportive environment for all participants."

The players have access to an open gym and don't have to have a YMCA membership to play; however, if you do have a membership, it is cheaper to participate. Volleyball and basketball cost $70 for members and $120 for nonmembers. Athletes are guaranteed at least eight games during a 10-week season, not counting playoff games. Jerseys and equipment are provided, and peers are in charge of coaching as well. Medals and trophies are awarded to the winning teams. Pickleball is $45 for members and $70 for nonmembers.

Regional Sports Director Zack Murphy, who is in charge of the basketball and volleyball adult sports programs at the Campo Family YMCA , said that most teams are composed of friends who want to join a team together, but single players without a team will be added to one with an open spot, or a team of free agents will be put together by the YMCA.

"Adult sports at the Campo YMCA are a great way to stay active, meet friends and have fun in a positive, competitive atmosphere," said Murphy.





COMMEMORATION OF JULIA MOSELEY HONORING LIMONA CEMETERY'S 150TH ANNIVERSARY

By Lori Collins, Ph.D.



Members of The Timberly Trust gather at Limona Cemetery to honor 150 years of community history and legacy.

As Limona Cemetery marks its 150th anniversary, the community is pausing to reflect on the people who shaped the area long before modern development transformed eastern Hillsborough County. Surrounded in the late 19th century by citrus groves, clear lakes and longleaf pine forests, Limona emerged as a small but enduring winter colony rooted in land, family and heritage.

One of the strongest symbols of that legacy is Limona Cemetery, among the oldest formal burial grounds in the region. Beneath its pines rest generations of farmers, educators, craftsmen and pioneers whose lives trace the transition of Florida's frontier into a settled community. Their stories are inseparable from the history of both Limona and Brandon.

Central to that history is the Moseley family. Julia Daniels Moseley (1849–1917) and her husband, Charles Scott Moseley (1828–1918), settled near Ten Mile Lake in 1882. After their first log home was lost to fire, they built the Moseley Homestead in 1886, later known as "The Nest." Located on a wooded property called Timberly, the homestead became a center of art, music, literature and intellectual life. Letters and journals written there remain among the most valuable firsthand accounts of pioneer life in Florida.

This anniversary year also honors the legacy of their granddaughter, Julia Winifred Moseley (1919–2020), whose granite memorial stone is dedicated at the cemetery. Born and raised at Timberly, she spent more than a century safeguarding her family's history and the natural environment surrounding it. A historian, archivist and preservationist, she devoted her life to protecting the Moseley Homestead, now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, while preserving thousands of documents, photographs, artworks and journals.

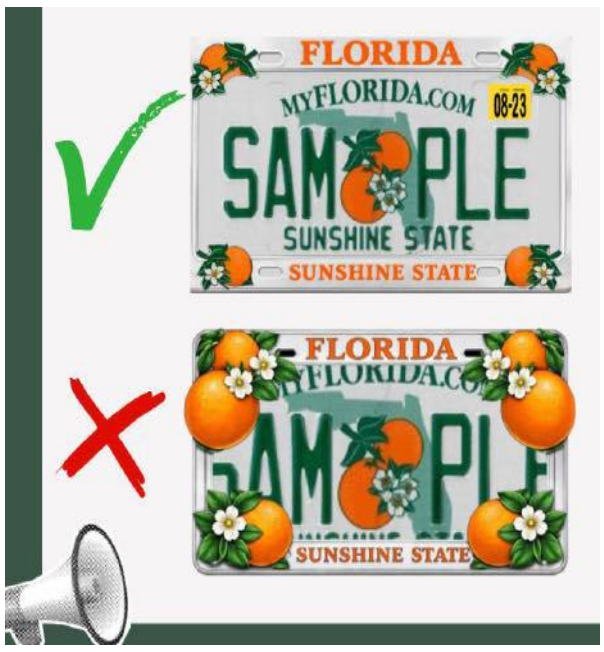
Her most enduring contribution may be Come to My Sunland, a published collection of her grandmother's frontier letters that ensured Julia Daniels Moseley's voice would not be lost to time. Through her advocacy for land and water stewardship, Julia Winifred Moseley also bore witness to — and often spoke out against — the rapid loss of Florida's natural landscapes.

Although her ashes remain at Timberly, her memorial at Limona Cemetery fulfills her wish to be honored alongside her ancestors. There, her stone stands as a bridge between Florida's pioneer past and its future.

The Timberly Trust continues to share the history of The Nest, its people and its relationship to the environment. For more information, visit moseleyhomestead.com.

FLORIDA CLARIFIES LICENSE PLATE FRAME LAW AFTER CONFUSION

By Brad Stager



Recent updates to Florida's motor vehicle laws have caused confusion among drivers and even some law enforcement agencies, particularly concerning the legality of license plate frames, those few inches of cheap plastic or metal that advertise car dealerships or promote personal messages and surround a vehicle's metal registration tag. State and local officials have intervened to provide necessary clarification.

The changes became effective October 1, 2025, with the intention of combatting toll road scofflaws who try to avoid paying a required fare and to be able to better identify motorists who crash and flee.

Law enforcement agencies throughout the state administered warnings at first, but when a South Florida man faced serious consequences after he was arrested by Davie Police because the first 'S' in 'Sunshine State' on the tag was covered by the frame, an official clarification was issued.

The arrest was ruled invalid after the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (FLHSMV) issued a memo to all law enforcement agencies to clarify matters. The key points are that frames are okay to use as long as they do not obscure the alphanumeric plate identifier (the license plate numbers and letters) or the decal located in the top right-hand corner (the registration sticker) which indicates all taxes and fees on the vehicle have been collected.

The FLHSMV explicitly noted that it does "not consider the information on the bottom to the plate to be a primary feature." Furthermore, a frame that "impinges on the information at the top of the plate is permissible, as long as law enforcement is able to identify the state that issued the license plate."

For local drivers, Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) announced its position on the agency's Facebook page: "License plate frames are okay as long as they don't block the plate number or decal. Covers, tinted shields, sprays or anything that makes a plate harder to read could lead to enforcement action. Before you drive, take a quick look at your tag and make sure it's clear," reads the December 30, 2025, post.

For those who fall outside of the guidelines, penalties for the second-degree misdemeanor can be severe, including fines up to $500 and/or 60 days in jail. To completely avoid potential issues, many drivers are choosing to remove their license plate frames.

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TAMPA BAY MISSION OF HOPE EXPANDS THROUGHOUT THE COMMUNITY

By Makenzie Atkins Noel



The new Brandon facility of Tampa Bay Mission of Hope serves as the only cold weather shelter in East Hillsborough County.

Tampa Bay Mission of Hope is a faith-based nonprofit organization providing critical support services to individuals and families across East Hillsborough County while helping them move toward long-term stability.

The organization is expanding in East Hillsborough County with the opening of a new building in Brandon, strengthening its ability to serve individuals and families facing crisis. The facility, located at 110 S. Parsons Ave., now operates as the Brandon Cold Weather Shelter in partnership with Hillsborough County Homeless Services. This location serves residents from Riverview, Valrico, Dover, Seffner and Plant City during severe cold weather and is currently the only cold weather emergency shelter operating in East County.

Alongside this expansion, Tampa Bay Mission of Hope is focused on addressing a growing need among women and children in the community.

"We are seeing a significant increase in the number of women and children seeking assistance, which has highlighted a growing gap in available resources within our community," said Dr. Reba Haley, founder and CEO of Tampa Bay Mission of Hope. "In response to this need, we are working toward opening Hope Haven, a dedicated shelter designed to provide safe, supportive and transitional housing for women and children facing homelessness, abuse and other crises."

The planned shelter aims to provide a safe and supportive environment through emergency and transitional housing, meals, clothing, case management, counseling support, life-skills training and connections to community resources, with dignity, faith and compassion at the core of its services.

Dr. Haley's professional background spans counseling, mediation, education and ministry. Dr. Haley serves as pastor of The Gathering Place, where she provides family and marriage support, prayer and weekly worship services. Under her leadership, Tampa Bay Mission of Hope offers a wide range of services, including counseling, mediation, substance abuse support, parenting classes, case management and more.

By expanding its services and facilities, Tampa Bay Mission of Hope remains committed to supporting families and individuals in crisis while fostering long-term stability and resilience in East Hillsborough County.

For more information or to donate, please visit www.tbmissionofhope.org or call 813-716-3996.

A SHOW-STOPPING SURPRISE: HILLSBOROUGH TEACHERS GET ACCESS TO NCL COSTUME CLOSET

By Kelly Wise Valdes



A Hillsborough County theater teacher looks through racks of donated costumes at Norwegian Cruise Line's Riverview warehouse.

Hillsborough County theater and dance teachers received an unexpected surprise when Norwegian Cruise Line opened its Riverview costume warehouse, offering educators the chance to select from thousands of professional garments and accessories.

Rachel Anderson, costume production coordinator at Norwegian Cruise Line, said the idea grew from a desire to support young performers. Anderson said she wants students to love dance and drama and hopes these costumes will help inspire students to continue with theater. For years, the company has donated retired costumes only to employees, but then Anderson had the idea to open it up to theater programs across Hillsborough County, where Norwegian's warehouse is located.

This year, teachers arriving at the warehouse found an expansive selection with more than 30 racks filled with costumes, including leather jackets, sequins, feathers, fur, dancewear and tap shoes.

Educators wasted no time selecting pieces for upcoming productions.

"Strawberry Crest High School's theater department, preparing for an upcoming performance of Aladdin, stocked up on shimmering pieces, while York PreK-8, launching its theater program, gathered a wide variety of essentials," said Debra Bellanti, director of public relations at Hillsborough County Public Schools. "She was very excited to be able to get some basics that she could use year-round, and they are also planning a production of Beauty and the Beast, so she grabbed a lot of costumes she thinks will work for that."

The process for teachers is straightforward. Laura Hobby, the K-12 art and theater supervisor, has formed a relationship with Norwegian, so it will contact her when it has costumes it wants to donate, and Hobby will notify all the Hillsborough County theater and dance departments of the time and date. This is expected to take place annually.

Organizers called the donation transformative for Hillsborough County schools' theater and arts departments. With more than tens of thousands of dollars in costumes and shoes generously donated to Hillsborough schools, the impact is enormous.

The warehouse is located at 6423 S. Falkenburg Rd. in Riverview. Anderson can be reached at raanderson@ncl.com or 645-240-5078.

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PATTICAKES FEATURED AT GOVERNOR'S LUNCHEON

By Logan Walz

PattiCakes Custom Cakes LLC has been selected to provide desserts for this year's Governor's Luncheon, held on opening day at the Florida State Fairgrounds. The opportunity marks a significant milestone for the locally owned business, which has grown steadily through word of mouth and custom orders over the past several years.



PattiCakes owner Patti Burnett.



Owner Patti Burnett said being chosen for the event was both exciting and meaningful.

"I was so honored to be asked," Burnett said. "I think it's a huge opportunity, and the visibility of having my brand featured for these honored guests will be priceless for the future growth of my business."

The opportunity came after an event coordinator with the Florida State Fair noticed one of Burnett's previous dessert table displays. After seeing her work, the coordinator reached out to ask if Burnett could create something similar on a much larger scale.

"There was a dessert table display that I had done for another client, which the event coordinator for the Florida State Fair happened to see," Burnett said. "She asked me if I could accomplish something like that on a much larger scale. I was shocked and honored by the request, but I know I can rise to the occasion."

To prepare for the high-profile luncheon, Burnett said she has been carefully planning and organizing to ensure everything runs smoothly.

"I have extra hands on deck, and I'm doing lots of strategic preparation and organizing to make sure everything is fresh and ready to go," she said.

Guests at the Governor's Luncheon can expect a large-scale dessert display featuring a variety of PattiCakes' specialty items.

"I will be doing a large-scale variety dessert table featuring an assortment of my specialty desserts," Burnett said.

PattiCakes Custom Cakes began as a small operation while Burnett stayed home with her children after leaving her teaching career. Over time, the business grew organically through consistent quality and customer satisfaction.

"When I left teaching to stay home with my children, my business began as me simply baking for friends and family," Burnett said. "PattiCakes has grown organically over the last seven to eight years through word of mouth, one satisfied customer at a time."

"I hope this accomplishment encourages readers to keep me in mind for their own events, no matter how big or small," she said.

For more information, visit her at address www.facebook.com/patticakescustomcake/, call 352-942-3455 or email directly patticakescustomcakes@gmail.com.

PITCH GROUP MARKS MILESTONE, REAL ESTATE PROS INVITED

By Olivia Clark



Real estate professionals gather at Three Bulls Tavern & Brewery on Bell Shoals Road for weekly Brandon/Valrico Real Estate Pitch Group meetings.

The Brandon/Valrico Real Estate Pitch Group, a free weekly meetup for real estate professionals, is marking a milestone year with record attendance and a renewed push to grow participation in the new year.

The group meets every Wednesday from 9:30-10:30 a.m. at Three Bulls Tavern & Brewery on Bell Shoals Road and is open to anyone involved in the home-selling industry, including realtors, brokers, builders, roofers, insurance professionals, title companies and other real-estate-related businesses. The meetings are designed to encourage collaboration, networking and the exchange of timely market information.

The group recently logged its largest turnout to date with 54 attendees. Participants representing a wide range of brokerages and service providers attend to pitch current listings, discuss price changes, promote open houses, share buyer wants and needs and highlight recent success stories.

"It's one of the reasons we're here. Sixteen years we're doing this now. I think we have the most successful pitch group anywhere," said Tim Ryan, an employee of Fidelity National Financial and founder of the Brandon/Valrico group.

Along with listings and buyer needs, professionals use the meetings to share real-world market experiences. One Realtor described a property that "went on the market before the hurricanes last year and it took 15 months to sell," eventually closing on December 29, 2024.

Guest speakers also provide practical guidance on marketing, pricing and client relationships. "Be out amongst the people, that's what is going to help you do great in this business," said Steve Moran, who spoke at the most recent networking event.

Ryan said the group meets every Wednesday for the next 48 weeks and is structured to ensure attendees leave with useful information.

"We want everyone to come here and pitch their listings, learn something and get a piece of information," he said.

Jim Gaffney and Mike Holmes assist with coordinating the meetings.

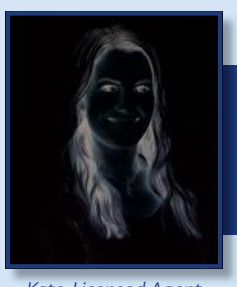
A state-of-the-industry address focused on the current market is planned for Wednesday, January 21. For more information, contact Ryan at tryan@fnf.com or 813-928-2862.

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CHAD'S PROMISE KEEPS VETERANS AND THEIR DOGS TOGETHER

By Libby Hopkins

Chad Landrey of Plant City served as a combat military police soldier in the Army National Guard from 2001-08. He was sent to Afghanistan in 2004 and stationed at Bagram Air Force Base. After he returned to the U.S., he worked as a police officer in Sebring, Lake Wales and Lakeland.



Chad's Promise in Plant City is a local nonprofit organization that offers free boarding for veterans' dogs while they receive medical or mental health treatment.

Landrey started his nonprofit, Chad's Promise in 2023 when he and his wife, Tracy, were getting calls from some of his veteran friends who had to go for inpatient treatment for mental/medical issues.

"They had no place else to take their dogs except the humane society," said Carol Tracey of Chad's Promise. "The Humane Society only keeps the dogs for about a week, then the dogs are adopted out or euthanized. Veterans weren't going for the help they needed for fear of losing their dog, oftentimes their best and only friend. Many have no family members to care for their pet while they are getting well."

Chad's Promise was born out of a deep-seated desire to make a difference in the lives of veterans and their furry companions. Chad's Promise is a free boarding facility for veterans' dogs while they receive medical or mental health treatment.

"The service is free for 30 days and includes food, veterinary care, grooming, daily exercise and the outdoor kennels that are sterilized two times a day," Tracey said. "The indoor kennels are in a temperature-controlled environment and are also cleaned daily."

Tracey became involved with Chad's Promise through Patriot Canine Services, which is the business the Landreys also operate at their facility.

"I had my dog Todd trained there because he was an unruly puppy and too strong for me to handle," Tracey said. "I also had my dog Lucy trained there to be a therapy dog so I can take her to the hospital to visit the veterans whose dogs we have. Lucy is finishing up her final training. She is a 15-month-old standard poodle."

Being involved with Chad's Promise is a very heartfelt experience for everyone at the organization.

"When we pick up a veteran's dog, it is very emotional for the veteran because they are going to be separated from their dog," Tracey said. "When the veteran is finished with their treatment, the reunions are the best! It is our goal to reunite them with their pet. Occasionally, the veteran is unable to care for their dog after treatment, so we find the dog a forever home."

If you'd like to learn more about Chad's Promise or donate to the organization, you can visit https://chadspromise.com/ or call 813-296-4906. Chad's Promise is located at 7314 W. Knights Griffin Rd. in Plant City.

BUSCH GARDENS TURNS BACK THE CLOCK WITH RETURN OF REAL MUSIC CONCERT SERIES

Staff Report



Busch Gardens Tampa Bay is turning up the volume once again with the return of its longest-running concert tradition, the Real Music Series. Now through Friday, February 20, the park will host a lineup of celebrated performers delivering timeless hits from the 1970s, '80s and '90s, offering guests a chance to relive the soundtrack of their lives six days a week.

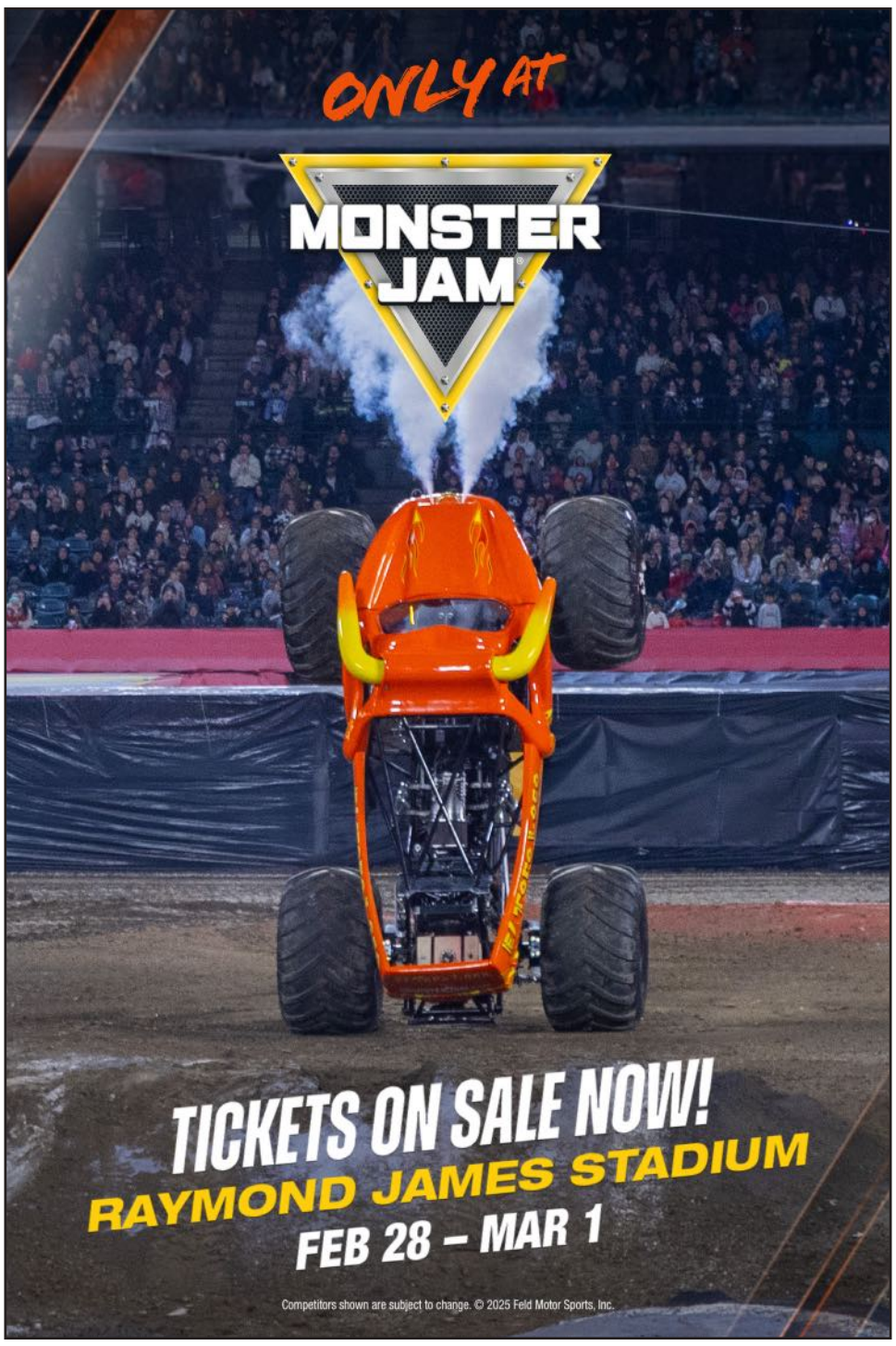
Held Monday through Friday with select Saturday performances, the Real Music Series features live concerts included with park admission. Guests can enjoy performances spanning classic rock, soul, pop, jazz and R&B, all presented by artists known for capturing the sound and spirit of legendary music icons. Shows take place at the Stanleyville Theater, making it easy for visitors to build live entertainment into their day at the park.

New this year, select Saturdays add extra excitement with special performances by iconic acts. Village People brought their high-energy hits to the stage on January 17, following a January 10 appearance by Blue Öyster Cult. These special concerts add a weekend highlight to the weekday-focused series.

The 2026 weekday lineup (all Monday through Friday) began in the week of January 5-9 with Martha Reeves and The Vandellas, followed by Blood, Sweat & Tears from January 12-16. Fans can catch Pablo Cruise and Their Hit Songs from January 19-23, and the Artimus Pyle Band honoring Ronnie Van Zant's Lynyrd Skynyrd from January 26-30. February opens with The Tommy Dorsey Orchestra from February 2-6, Revisiting Creedence from February 9-13 and concludes from February 16-20 with Magic Moments, featuring original singers Theo Peoples, Joe Coleman and Jerome Jackson performing classics from The Temptations, The Four Tops, The Platters and The Drifters.

Park officials said the Real Music Series is designed for guests of all ages, whether they are rediscovering favorite songs or hearing classic hits for the first time. With concerts included in admission, the series offers a value-added experience for families, couples and music lovers alike.

For showtimes and additional details, visit www.buschgardenstampa.com.





KNIGHTS, ARTISANS AND MERRIMENT AWAIT AT 2026 BAY AREA REN FEST

Staff Report



The clang of swords, the cheers of the crowd and the music of wandering minstrels will once again fill the air as the Bay Area Renaissance Festival returns for its 48th season in 2026. One of Florida's longest-running and most beloved cultural traditions, the festival invites guests to step back into a lively, 16th-century European village, brought to life on the scenic festival grounds in Dade City.

Running weekends from Saturday, February 14, through Sunday, March 29, the Bay Area Renaissance Festival will be open Saturdays and Sundays from 10 a.m.-6 p.m., rain or shine. Families, history enthusiasts and adventure seekers alike can expect a full day of immersive entertainment, food and interactive experiences that transport visitors to another era.

Since its debut decades ago in Largo, the festival has grown into a sprawling celebration featuring 15 stages of entertainment and an expanded roster of performers. Throughout the day, guests can enjoy live music, comedy, theatrical acts and daring feats of skill. A highlight for many is the action-packed jousting tournament, where armored knights clash in thrilling competitions before roaring crowds.

Beyond the entertainment, the festival is known for its impressive artisan marketplace, featuring more than 100 unique craftspeople. Shoppers can browse handcrafted jewelry, pottery, leather goods, costumes, woodwork, metal art, glass and other one-of-a-kind treasures. Each booth offers handmade wares, making the marketplace a destination for those seeking distinctive gifts and keepsakes.

The 2026 season also offers a variety of specialty experiences designed to deepen the immersion. Guests can participate in mead tastings, pub and cocktail crawls, themed teas, romance packages with front-row joust seating, brunch at the joust and even large-scale marriage and vow renewal ceremonies. Costumed characters roam the grounds, interacting with visitors and adding to the atmosphere of a bustling Renaissance village.

Located at 12838 Auton Rd. in Dade City, the festival grounds offer free parking and easy access for visitors from across the Tampa Bay area. With over 60,000 annual attendees, the Bay Area Renaissance Festival continues to be a vibrant celebration of history, creativity and community. Tickets and additional information are available at https://bayarearenfest.com/.

COUNTY'S CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT GRANT PROGRAM OPENS FOR LOCAL NONPROFITS

By Libby Hopkins



The Hillsborough County Arts Council's Cultural Development Grant Program is accepting applications for the 2027 fiscal year.

The Hillsborough County Art Council's Cultural Development Grant Program is accepting applications for the 2027 fiscal year. Applications will remain open until Friday, January 30, at 5 p.m., and the grant offers $25,000 maximum.

"This program offers general support to local cultural organizations that have as their primary mission the delivery of cultural programs serving a specific cultural discipline," said Kathy Collins of the Hillsborough County Art Council.

The Cultural Development Grant Program provides general program support to local cultural organizations with programming that not only serves diverse audiences but also reaches geographically diverse communities. It is the intent of the program to encourage the development of both cultural and administrative operations of these organizations.

"Funds provided through this grant program are also intended to enhance the organization's ability to attract new audiences and increase funding from other sources," Collins said.

An organization applying for a grant must have as its primary mission the delivery of cultural programs. Cultural disciplines encompass, but are not limited to, architecture, crafts, creative writing, dance, history, literature, media arts, music, photography, theater, traditional arts and visual arts, as well as the execution, exhibition or presentation of such allied cultural forms.

The Arts Council of Hillsborough County is committed to facilitating the participation in cultural programs by all individuals in Hillsborough County. The Arts Council encourages funding requests from cultural organizations with programming that not only serves diverse audiences but also reaches geographically diverse communities.

Cultural Development Grants are awarded on a competitive basis to nonprofit and tax-exempt, 501(c)(3) Florida corporations that meet the eligibility requirements and provide cultural programming in Hillsborough County. Funding is awarded for general program support based on overall quality of three categories: Access & Community Engagement, Artistic & Cultural Vitality and Organizational Capacity. The council anticipates total grant requests will exceed funds available; consequently, requests are generally not fully funded.

"All applications must be submitted in the online grant system by the January due date," Collins said. "Deadlines will not be extended, and partial or incomplete applications will be deemed ineligible. Board review and scoring of applications takes place on Tuesday, March 10, 2026, at 11 a.m."

For more, please visit the Hillsborough County Art Council's website directly at www.hillsborougharts.org.





TAMPA BAY FERRY MOVES CLOSER TO RELAUNCH WITH NEW VESSEL

By Brian Bokor

Plans to restore passenger ferry service across Tampa Bay advanced in early December 2025 when the Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority (PSTA) unanimously approved key elements of a restructured, long-term program linking downtown Tampa and downtown St. Petersburg.

The service, temporarily branded the Tampa Bay Ferry, is intended to replace the former Cross Bay Ferry, which ceased operations in April 2025 following contractual disputes with its previous operator. Officials said the new model is designed to address the financial and operational challenges that hampered the pilot service.

Under the newly approved plan, PSTA will oversee ferry operations and has selected Hubbard's Marina to operate the service through its subsidiary, Tampa Bay Sea Taxi Inc. The agreement establishes a five-year operating contract with an optional five-year extension, allowing for up to a decade of continuous service if performance benchmarks are met.

Unlike the prior arrangement, which relied on an out-of-state operator and leased vessels, the new model emphasizes local operators and publicly owned assets, an approach officials said will reduce costs and improve reliability.

PSTA has approved the purchase of a high-speed ferry currently operating in the San Francisco area for $1.5 million using federal grant funds. With transportation, refurbishment and upgrades, total investment is expected to reach approximately $2.5 million.

Built in 1994, the vessel will undergo major improvements before entering service, including installation of a refurbished engine scheduled for January, interior renovations, repainting, inspections and sea trials. Once delivered to Tampa Bay via the Panama Canal, the ferry will provide seating for up to 250 passengers, up from the previous service's 149-passenger capacity.

PSTA officials are also continuing to search for a second vessel to further increase capacity and reduce wait times during peak travel periods.

The relaunch is supported by a combination of federal funding and local government contributions. Tampa and St. Petersburg have each approved interlocal agreements committing up to $350,000 annually toward the service.

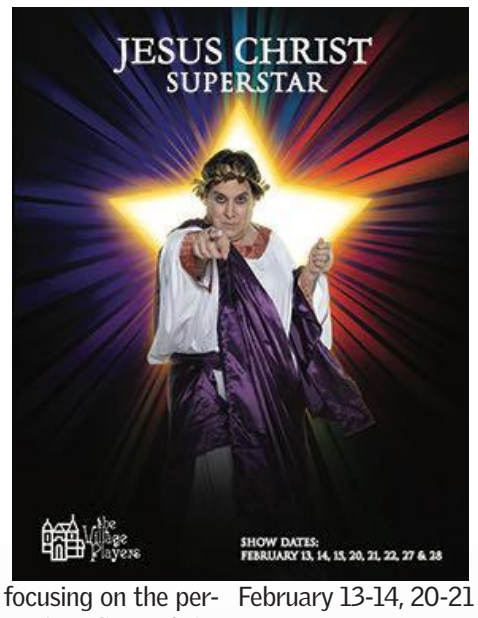
In addition, the U.S. Department of Transportation approved the transfer of nearly $5 million in federal grant funding from the Hillsborough Area Regional Transit Authority to PSTA to support vessel acquisition and startup costs.

Initial service is expected to operate from temporary docking facilities in both cities, with Tampa's dock remaining at the Tampa Convention Center. St. Petersburg plans to establish a temporary dock near the Vinoy Basin while pursuing a permanent facility near the Museum of History.

If final approvals from the Federal Transit Administration are secured and refurbishment proceeds as planned, officials expect the Tampa Bay Ferry to begin operations this spring or summer, with the potential for year-round service.

THE VILLAGE PLAYERS COMMUNITY THEATRE PRESENTS *JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR*

Staff Report



The Village Players is bringing one of the most powerful and enduring rock operas of all time to the stage with *Jesus Christ Superstar,* opening this February with a limited run at the historic James McCabe Theater in Valrico.

With music by Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyrics by Tim Rice, *Jesus Christ Superstar* tells the story of the final days of Jesus Christ through a modern, human lens, focusing on the personal struggles, doubts and conflicts of the people closest to Him. Featuring an iconic rock score and emotionally charged performances, the show explores faith, loyalty, ambition and betrayal in a way that remains strikingly relevant.

This production is directed by Domin Pazo, artistic director of The Village Players, who brings more than four decades of theatrical experience to the stage. Pazo has been with The Village Players for 39 years and has been working in theater for 45 years, with credits spanning television, radio, film and more than 200 stage productions. In addition to his work in community theater, he works for Disney during the day.

"This show asks big questions and doesn't offer easy answers," said Pazo. "It's intense, emotional and deeply human. I'm incredibly grateful to this cast and crew for their endless hard work, dedication and trust in telling this story."

Jesus Christ Superstar features a dynamic cast, powerful vocals and choreography that drives the story with urgency and emotional weight. This production continues The Village Players' tradition of presenting ambitious, high-quality musical theater while spotlighting local talent.

Performance dates:

• Evening performances, 8 p.m.: Friday and Saturday, February 13-14, 20-21 and 27-28.

• Matinees, 3 p.m.: Thursday, February 15 and 22.

Doors open at least 30 minutes before curtain time.

General admission tickets cost $23, and tickets for seniors, students and military cost $20. Tickets are available now at https://thevillageplayersvalrico.com/. Advance purchase is recommended, as performances are expected to sell out.

About The Village Players

The Village Players is a nonprofit, all-volunteer teaching theater performing at the James McCabe Theater, located at 506 N. 5th St. in Valrico. Dedicated to making theater accessible and affordable, The Village Players focuses on developing local talent of all ages while fostering a welcoming, creative community.

Bold, emotional and unforgettable, Jesus Christ Superstar is a theatrical experience that stays with you long after the final note. This is a production you won't want to miss.





MAGIC COMES TO THE FARM: WIZARDFEST SET FOR LIMITED RUN AT RAPRAGER FARMS

Staff Report

A new immersive festival celebrating magic, fantasy and family fun is coming to Raprager Farms this winter with the debut of its first-ever WizardFest.

The limited-time event begins on Friday, February 20, and will run on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays only, transforming the farm into a world of magic and mystery inspired by legendary wizards such as Gandalf, Harry and Merlin. Tickets for WizardFest are on sale now.



Children can enjoy hands-on attractions at WizardFest, including Fort Merlin and farm animal experiences.

WizardFest is designed to appeal to both fantasy fans and visitors who simply want to enjoy a unique seasonal attraction. Guests who purchase Wizard tickets will be able to take part in themed wizard classes, including Defense Against the Dark Arts, Monsters Class, Herbology, Potions, Broom Flying, Magic Class, Magical Crafting and Divination. An interactive Escape from Dark Wizards experience will challenge participants to work together to solve magical puzzles.

Nonmagic guests, known as 'wuggles,' are also welcome and will have access to all farm activities, which will be specially themed for the festival.

In addition to the magical programming, the event features more than two acres of attractions, including a 300-animal petting zoo and farm animal experience. Visitors can explore a 17,000-square-foot maze; slide down a 40-foot, second-story hay chute; jump into a corn pit; or play inside Fort Merlin, a 2,000-square-foot kids fort.

Additional attractions include a bounce pillow with tormentors, battle-axe throwing, a mechanical bull and a variety of games such as cornhole, Connect 4 and field chess. Entertainment and photo opportunities are located throughout the property, including a chance to take pictures with a full-sized dragon.

WizardFest will also debut all-new menus and specialty offerings. The SweetShop will feature gourmet fudge, coffee and cider donuts, while other food stands will offer ice cream, kettle corn and additional treats. The Lemonade Stand will serve fresh-squeezed lemonade, cinnamon roasted nuts and sno cones. Adult guests can visit The Packing House Bar, which will offer beer, wine and batch cocktails, including special wizard-themed drinks.

Optional add-on activities include face painting, unicorn rides and gem mining, available for an additional fee.

Raprager Family Farms is located at 16907 Boy Scout Road in Odessa. Call (813) 922-2799 or visit the farms website at https://rapragerfamilyfarms.com.

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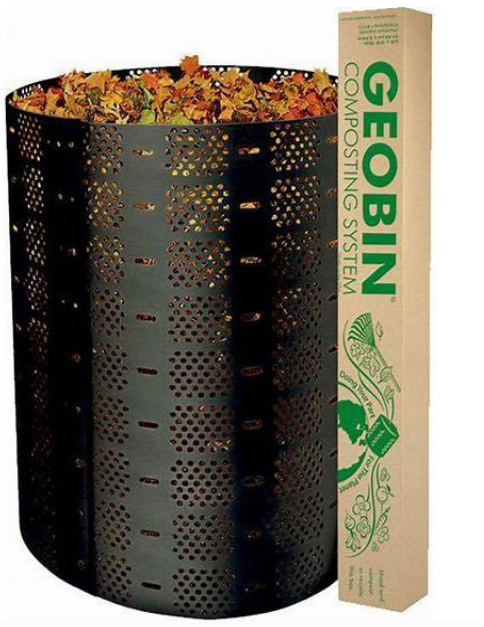
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GET THE DIRT:

2026 TRIPLE WORKSHOPS: COMPOST, MICROIRRIGATION AND RAINWATER HARVESTING

BY LYNN BARBER, URBAN HORTICULTURE AGENT



If you have not previously attended these workshops at the Hillsborough County Extension Service, we hope you will. Make plans to register and spend the first Saturday morning, February through November, by attending our composting, microirrigation and rainwater harvesting workshops at our office in Seffner. Hillsborough County residents can attend one time only and receive one set of items per household. Preregistration is required.

Compost Happens: Learn how to turn trash into treasure. This workshop teaches attendees to recycle kitchen and yard waste while creating a rich soil amendment. Compost adds nutrients to the soil and retains moisture in the root zone, where it can be used by plants. Instead of hauling your yard waste to the curb, compost it on-site. By attending, you will receive a compost bin, bucket and thermometer.

Microirrigation: This teaches you how to have a healthy and attractive landscape while conserving water. Tips on installing and using microirrigation are presented. By attending, you will receive a microirrigation kit. Check our website for two other micro workshops: patio and vegetable.

Rainwater Harvesting: Receive a drilled and spigoted 50 to 55-gallon plastic, food-grade barrel. We will teach you how and where to install your barrel. Collecting rainwater for ornamental plant irrigation reduces erosion and stormwater runoff. Barrels are stored outside, so you may want to bring a blanket to put under the barrel.

By attending one, two or all three workshops, you will expand your environmental conservation education and have fun while learning something new. The cost to attend is $10 per household, per workshop. For additional information and to register, go to the Hillsborough County Extension Calendar of Events at https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/events/?location=hillsborough. Some rules apply, and they are listed on our website.

For more gardening information, please contact our office at 813-744-5519 or visit us at 5339 County Rd. 579 in Seffner, where you can walk through the Bette S. Walker Discovery Garden and see Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ in action. Hope to see you soon.

Contact at Lynn Barber, extension agent, at labarber@ufl.edu.

KTBB INVITES RESIDENTS TO PROTECT PARKS, ROADS AND WATERWAYS

By Olivia Clark



Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful offers opportunities such as Adopt-A-Road, hosted clean-ups and educational outreach to support local environmental stewardship.

Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful is a Tampa-based nonprofit that has worked since 1989 to reduce litter, improve public spaces and inspire environmental stewardship across Hillsborough County. Founded by community members concerned about pollution and neighborhood cleanliness, the organization promotes a culture of environmental protection through volunteer service and education, offering residents opportunities to make a direct and lasting impact.

Throughout the year, Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful organizes community cleanups and beautification projects across beaches, parks, roadways and waterways. Signature events include the After Gasparilla Cleanup, Great Port Cleanup, Hillsborough River Coastal Cleanup and World Oceans Day activities. In addition to large-scale events, individuals, families and small groups can plan self-led cleanups. Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful assists by coordinating locations, providing free cleanup supplies and managing trash disposal so volunteers can focus on service.

For those interested in a long-term commitment, Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful administers the Adopt-A-Road Program for Hillsborough County and the City of Tampa. The program allows individuals, businesses and community organizations to adopt roadways, parks, beaches or shorelines and maintain them through regular cleanups. Tree and bench dedication options are also available to honor loved ones while contributing to public spaces.

The organization supports greener neighborhoods through tree planting and landscaping initiatives that encourage sustainability and environmental awareness. Its education program offers free presentations and an age-appropriate curriculum for schools, community groups and businesses, covering topics such as litter prevention, conservation and responsible environmental practices. Students can earn service hours by volunteering and may qualify for leadership opportunities, internships and scholarships offered through the organization.

Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful is funded through community support, including individual donations, event sponsorships, partnerships and fundraising efforts. These resources allow the nonprofit to keep programs accessible while ensuring that support remains local and focused on Tampa Bay communities.

Residents interested in volunteering, sponsoring or learning more can visit online at www.keeptampabaybeautiful.org.

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FLORIDA STATE FAIR TO MARK AMERICA'S 250TH ANNIVERSARY WITH PATRIOTIC 2026 THEME

Staff Report

The Florida State Fair is preparing to shine brighter than ever in 2026 as it celebrates America's 250th birthday with a patriotic theme, festive entertainment and a limited-time advance ticket deal.

Fair officials announced this week that the 2026 Florida State Fair will be themed "America's Sunniest Celebration," a tribute to 250 years of American history infused with Florida flair. The annual 12-day event will take place Feb. 5–16, 2026, at the Florida State Fairgrounds in Tampa, running through Presidents Day.



Crowds enjoy the sights and attractions at the Florida State Fairgrounds in Tampa. The 2026 Florida State Fair will run Feb. 5–16 and feature the patriotic theme "America's Sunniest Celebration" in honor of the nation's 250th birthday.

Billed as part of the nationwide America250 celebration, the 2026 fair is being promoted as a milestone event filled with classic fair traditions, deep-fried favorites, dazzling fireworks, live entertainment and agricultural showcases, alongside special nods to the nation's past.

"Celebrating 250 years of America is something truly special, and we're excited to mark the occasion with a fair that honors both our nation's history and Florida's unique roots," said Cheryl Flood, chief executive officer of the Florida State Fair. "'America's Sunniest Celebration' is more than just a theme, it's a chance to bring people together, shine a light on our state's rich agricultural traditions and create new memories with family and friends. We can't wait to welcome everyone back to the fairgrounds for a celebration that's as bright as Florida itself."

In addition to unveiling the theme, fair officials announced a one-day-only advance ticket flash sale scheduled for Oct. 1. During the sale, admission tickets will be available for $5 from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., or while supplies last, with no additional fees. Officials say the discounted tickets represent the lowest admission price available for the 2026 fair and offer savings of up to $11 compared to gate prices.

Parking will also be offered at a flash sale price of $5, limited to one per transaction.

Looking ahead, officials said the 2026 fair will feature agricultural events and exhibits, a journey through time at the fair's living history museum, and a mix of classic and new fan-favorite foods.

Tickets can only be purchased online through the Florida State Fair website www.floridastatefair.com.

CARDINAL ROOFING ANNOUNCES 12TH ANNUAL CHARITY CLAY SHOOT IN LITHIA

By Olivia Clark

Cardinal Roofing will host its 12th annual Cardinal Roofing Charity Clay Shoot on Friday, February 13, at FishHawk Sporting Clays, located at 13505 Hobson Simmons Rd. in Lithia. Sign-in begins at 11:30 a.m. for a day of sporting clays, food and fundraising in support of charitable causes tied to veterans and missing persons.



Shooters participate in a previous Cardinal Roofing Charity Clay Shoot at FishHawk Sporting Clays in Lithia.

The annual sporting clays event has been a signature fundraiser for Cardinal Roofing for more than a decade. For many years, proceeds from the event supported Honor Flights, reflecting the company's long-standing commitment to honoring veterans. In recent years, the focus has shifted to benefit 'We Are The Essentials For The Missing.'

We Are The Essentials For The Missing is a nonprofit organization made up of former law enforcement officers and military service members who conduct search and recovery investigations for missing persons. The organization recently became an official 501(c)(3) nonprofit, allowing donations and rewards for solved cases to help offset the costs associated with investigations and specialized equipment. The group's mission is to provide answers and closure to families searching for missing loved ones.

This year's charity clay shoot has a fundraising goal of $20,000. Participants may register as individual shooters for $250 or as a four-person team for $800. Sponsorship opportunities are also available, including an Essential Sponsor level for $2,000, station sponsorships for $100 and vendor-only or add-on options for $225.

Cardinal Roofing is a third-generation, family-owned roofing contractor that has served the community for decades. Founded in 1995, the locally owned company remains actively involved in the areas where its owners and employees live and work, supporting a variety of charitable initiatives throughout the year.

Bridget Jenkins Wilson, president of Cardinal Roofing, plays a leading role in the company's philanthropic efforts. Wilson chairs and organizes the annual charity clay shoot and works alongside co-owners Roger Jenkins and Chad Curchin to continue the family-owned business and its commitment to community involvement.

To register or learn more about the event, visit www.girlroofer.com. Additional information about Cardinal Roofing is available at www.cardinalroofingfl.com or by calling 813-689-7663 (ROOF).

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Christian Voice



Grace Notes

Mercy Me

By Debora Coty

My rescue pooch, Laz, taught me a spiritual lesson one evening.

It started as basic hunger. Laz watched me scarf down some succulent beef stir fry for dinner. I slipped a piece of beef under the table. He was happily surprised. And very thankful.

Little Laz jumped up on my leg, begging shamelessly for another bite. Again, I yielded, because I love him and enjoy giving him good things. He leapt toward the sliver of meat like a lion attacking an antelope on the Serengeti plain.

Suddenly, greed overtook the 8-pound terrier, and he became a 50-pound terror, clawing his way up my leg, lunging for my plate. Because of my previous kindness, he thought he deserved whatever I had. He was entitled to it. My stir fry now belonged to him.

As I shoved the wiggling mass of rapacity outside so we could peacefully finish dinner, I realized Laz was demonstrating the three levels of how we receive God's mercy.

Level 1: Gratitude. We're humbled, delighted and thankful for the Lord's unexpected mercy in the form of that unmerited blessing we received. Lamentations 3:22-23 (NLT) plays out: "The unfailing love of the LORD never ends ... Great is his faithfulness, his mercies begin afresh each day."

Level 2: Greed. The pleasure of the blessing suddenly morphs into the overwhelming desire for more. We don't just want more, we need more. We simply can't live without more. What we've been given just isn't enough. So, we claw, connive and attempt to convince the source of our blessing that we deserve more. If He won't give it willingly, we'll try to take it.

Level 3: Entitlement. We'll whine, wheedle, even snatch more of that blessing out of His hand. After all, we deserve it. Because of our elevated station as a child of God (even though we didn't work to attain it), we perceive that whatever is His also belongs to us.

We totally forget the generous promise of Lamentations 3: His mercy, His grace, His blessings are new every morning. We don't have to stockpile them. Or clutch them to our chests and hoard them in a selfish frenzy. Or consume them quickly so no one can take them away.

Our faithful Father is gracious enough to offer us new mercies over and over again. Every single morning!

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

SNOW STORM OR SNOW JOB?

Save me, Lord,
from lying lips
and from deceitful
tongues. Psalm 120:2



To all those who are shocked about the coming winter storm, please note that it is in fact winter. I only point this out in response to the worst-case scenario headlines and "Snowmageddon" references competing for "look at me" readership.

We seem to be so desperate for attention, to acquire clicks and likes and hits and shares, we exhaust all possible five-alarm alerts long before anything actually happens. We so badly want to be noticed that we resort to anything to get people to look our way. When they do we have little of substance to say.

What baffles me about all the hyperbole and bluster and flat-out lying is that the truth is usually more interesting. If only we take the trouble to find it.

I visited a movie set and it looked like the main street of a town. Signs and window displays invited us into shops, a hotel, a bar, even a church. Yet if you walk to the end and look around there is nothing there. It's all facade with no depth or substance or content.

I am concerned that we our lives looking at the signs and the windows and the ads but we fail to take the trouble to read for content, or look on the inside. We are in a "pay no attention to the man behind the curtain" moment in the world right now.

We have to become more interested in truth. We have to look beyond the cardboard cutouts and the hype and the strobe lights and the smoke on the stage.

We were issued with some pretty good brains when we were born, most of us have gone to school, and basic research is not that hard of a task if we are motivated.

So what's stopping us? Aren't we tired of the hype, the politics, the deception, the misinformation, the headlines that lead nowhere and the facades in front of empty spaces?

Snow storm or snow job – we really need to be more discerning consumers of information – DEREK



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



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