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March 2026
Volume 25, Issue 3
24 YEARS Osprey OBSERVER POSITIVE NEWS
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See Our Summer Camp Guide Section Two

CELEBRATING 24 YEARS OF PUBLISHING POSITIVE COMMUNITY NEWS

EVENT MARKS 35TH ANNIVERSARY OF DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM

Staff Report





The Veterans Council of Hillsborough County and the Waterman-Twining Chapter of the Air & Space Forces Association are joining together to commemorate the 35th anniversary of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm at 10 a.m. on Friday, March 6. The event will be at the Veterans Memorial Park & Rear Admiral LeRoy Collins, Jr. Veterans Museum, located at 3602 N. U.S. 301 in Tampa.

In recognition of those who served in the Persian Gulf conflict from August 1990 to February 1991, the inaugural event will feature:

• The MacDill Air Force Base Honor Guard, managed by the 6th Force Support Squadron.

• Keynote speaker retired United States Air Force Lt. Gen. David Deptula, an aerospace expert and principal attack planner for the Operation Desert Storm coalition air campaign.

• Awards to local Gulf War veterans of the United States Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marines, Navy and Special Operations.

•Free refreshments and fellowship following the ceremony.

Special Gulf War Veteran Awards will be presented during the 35th anniversary Gulf War Commemoration event.

The event is free and open to the public in the amphitheater at Veterans Memorial Park.

For more information on Hillsborough County's Veterans Memorial Park & Museum, visit https://hcfl.gov/departments/veteran-community-services or call 813-635-8316.

The Veterans Memorial Park & Rear Admiral LeRoy Collins, Jr. Veterans Museum was established to provide a centralized location to which all citizens and visitors could memorialize and honor the veterans of all eras. The park also serves as a location for regional ceremonies on Veterans Day, Memorial Day and Patriot Day, along with a variety of other organized events. It has a reputation as a well-designed location for reading, reflection, meditation, picnicking, gathering as a family and/or walking/jogging its many paths, and it has fitness stations along the trail of the Bypass Canal.

Learn more about volunteering at the museum at https://hcfl.gov/locations/veterans-memorial-park-and-museum.

The park has 14 war memorials, which currently include: Iraq, Afghanistan, Korea, Vietnam, World War I, World War II, Spanish American, Fallen Heroes and Committed Forces.

Additionally, to watch a Stitches of Duty video, filmed at the memorial park, visit www.youtube.com.

WARM YOUR HEART AND YOUR APPETITE AT SEEDS OF HOPE'S SOUP FOR THE SOUL FUNDRAISER

By Marie Gilmore



A bowl of soup can do more than warm the body — it can change lives. On Sunday, March 29, Seeds of Hope will host its annual Soup for the Soul fundraiser, a student-led community event dedicated to fighting childhood hunger in the local area.



The ticketed event will take place at Presbyterian Church of Bloomingdale, located at 710 E. Bloomingdale Ave. in Brandon. Guests will enjoy unlimited soup prepared by local celebrity chefs and restaurants, along with salad, fresh bread, beverages and dessert — all for $25 per person. There is a limit of 200 guests with open seating from 5-7 p.m. Soup for the Soul directly benefits Seeds of Hope's Backpacks of Hope program, which provides more than 170 backpacks of food each week to elementary students and their families facing food insecurity. The program is supported by student volunteers from Barrington Middle School, who pack food weekly and play a leading role in organizing and running the event.

What makes Soup for the Soul especially meaningful is that students serve as the hosts, waiters and event staff, gaining valuable leadership experience while learning firsthand the importance of giving back. Organizers said guests often leave inspired by the students' enthusiasm and commitment to helping others.

Community members and businesses are also invited to support the event through sponsorships. Sponsorship levels range from $100-$500 and help fund anywhere from 10-50 weekend food backpacks for students in need. In addition, Seeds of Hope is seeking gift basket donations valued at $50 or more for raffle prizes, which help generate additional funds while promoting local businesses.

"This is truly a feel-good event," said Leda Eaton, president of Seeds of Hope. "Guests enjoy great food, support local students and make a direct impact on hunger right here in our community."

Tickets are available now, and organizers encourage residents to act quickly due to limited capacity. For more information about tickets, sponsorships or donations, contact admin@sohopefl.org or visit Seeds of Hope's website at https://sohopefl.org/.

It's a night of comfort food with a powerful purpose — one that promises to warm both hearts and souls.

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APOLLO BEACH HOSTS FLORIDA BIRDING AND NATURE FESTIVAL

By Libby Hopkins



Florida Birding and Nature Festival returns to Apollo Beach from Thursday through Sunday, April 9-12.

Nature lovers and bird enthusiasts will come together from Thursday through Sunday, April 9-12, in Apollo Beach for the annual Florida Birding and Nature Festival. This four-day event will feature field trips, boat excursions, seminars by experts, nationally renowned keynote speakers and a free nature expo.

"Previously scheduled to coincide with the peak of fall migration, it now coincides with the peak of spring migration," said Ann Paul of the festival. "More than 180 species have been observed during previous festivals, and the new dates are expected to be even more productive for birders."

Most of the festival's activities will be held at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) Suncoast Youth Conservation Center in Apollo Beach.

Organizers decided to move the festival to April after Hurricanes Helene and Milton caused widespread damage and disrupted lives along Florida's west coast in 2024. The festival is sponsored by Tampa Electric Company, the FWC's Suncoast Youth Conservation Center and Hillsborough County's Conservation and Environmental Lands Management/Environmental Lands Acquisition and Protection Program. "We invite the community to come celebrate the wonders of the birds, wildlife, and natural lands that we enjoy in West Central Florida," Paul said.

The field trips, led by knowledgeable guides and, in some cases, the managers of the nature habitats visited, include walking, wagon, boat and kayak trips and bus tours of Central Florida birding hot spots. Some field trips explore sites normally not open to the public.

"Destinations include Egmont Key, the Cross Bar Ranch in Spring Hill, Cockroach Bay Aquatic Preserve, Fort DeSoto Park, Coffeepot Bayou, the Alafia Bank Bird Sanctuary and the Lower Green Swamp Nature Preserve," Paul said. "The keynote talks will be held at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Sun City Center and include a buffet dinner."

Friday evening's keynote speaker will be Leslie Kemp Pool, an associate professor at Rollins College and the author of Saving Florida: Women's Fight for the Environment in the Twentieth Century.

Saturday evening's speaker will be Hilary Flower.

"It explores the success of the endangered Everglades kite, which learned to forage for invasive snails," Paul said. "The raptor has expanded its range into Central Florida, and Flower also will lead a field trip to Lake Tohopekaliga, where it is commonly seen."

A free Nature Expo on Friday, April 10, and Saturday, April 11, at the Suncoast Youth Conservation Center will feature displays from numerous environmental organizations and nature-related businesses. Visit www.floridabirdingandnaturefestival.org.

BRANDON COIN CLUB CELEBRATES 20 YEARS WITH SPRING COIN SHOW

By Brian Bokor



The Brandon Coin Club will host its Spring Coin Show on Saturday, April 11, from 9 a.m.-3 p.m. at St. Andrew's United Methodist Church, 3315 S. Bryan Rd. in Brandon. Admission and parking are free.

The club has hosted regular coin shows in the Brandon area for years, helping keep the local collecting community active and engaged in the hobby.



"The Brandon Coin Club has been hosting regular coin shows for almost 20 years, with a brief two-year break during COVID," said Derek Spalding, bourse chairman of the Brandon Coin Club.

"We are grateful for the hospitality of St Andrew's United Methodist Church letting us use their facilities two years in a row for our shows," Spalding said.

The event will feature more than 40 dealer tables offering coins and collectibles for collectors of all experience levels. Professional coin grader ICG will be in attendance, and attendees can participate in free door prizes.

A highlight of the show is the raffle of a GSA Carson City Morgan silver dollar, a highly sought-after 19th-century coin prized by collectors.

"The Morgan being raffled has a special place in our hearts," Spalding said. "Its significance comes from the remarkable condition of the coins and the coveted Carson City mint mark, which together make it one of the most desirable and story-rich Morgan dollars a collector can own."

Beyond the raffle, Spalding said the hobby itself is seeing renewed growth, particularly among younger collectors.

"We are seeing growth in coin collecting as a whole primarily driven by digital mediums," he said, noting that private marketplace apps are drawing younger collectors and families into the hobby.

For those who have inherited coins, he recommends organizing them by denomination and year before bringing them to the show.

"Organize the collection if it's not already. By denomination and years are a good start," he said, adding that while valuable coins do surface, many inherited pieces are common and worth modest amounts.

As discussions occasionally surface about eliminating the penny, Spalding said such headlines can temporarily influence the market.

"At some point, that will die down, and the cents that have always been collected will continue to shine, such as the 1909-S VDB Lincoln cent," he said, noting that billions of pennies remain in circulation and will continue to do so for decades.

"It's really a fun day to meet new people and see some interesting coins," he said.

The doors open at 9 a.m., and the event runs until 3 p.m. Contact Spalding at dspalding2015@gmail.com.

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BURNS WINS SUPERINTENDENT'S WINTER BREAK READING CHALLENGE

By Jane Owen



Burns Middle School was presented $500 for books for its media center on January 26 after winning the Superintendent's Winter Break Reading Challenge.

On January 26, the first day of 'Celebrate Literacy Week, Florida!', Burns Middle School was awarded as being one of three winners in the district of the Superintendent's Winter Break Reading Challenge. They earned a Reader Leader trophy, a Benny the Bean plushy from the online reading motivation platform Beanstack, and $500 for new library books.

Superintendent Van Ayres expressed gratitude for Burns Middle School's accomplishment.

"I am incredibly proud of the students at Burns Middle School for being named a winner of the Superintendent's Winter Break Reading Challenge. Their commitment to reading over the winter break shows a true love of learning and a dedication that extends beyond the classroom. Congratulations to these students, their families and their teachers for making literacy a priority and for representing our district so well," Ayres said.

The other two winners of the challenge were Lincoln Elementary Magnet School and Jefferson High School.

Celebrate Literacy Week, Florida! took place from January 26-30. It is designed to raise awareness about the importance of reading and to inspire Florida's students and families to make reading part of their daily routines.

Burns Middle School media specialist Jeanette Stratton was thrilled with the recognition for her students. Stratton is proud of her students and plans to use the $500 for popular books, like graphic novels, manga, mysteries and romance.

"I am super proud of my students for taking the time to log their reading over break, and extremely proud of the literacy teachers at Burns who have encouraged the use of Beanstack in their classrooms. Without their support, none of this would have happened," Stratton said.

Hillsborough County Public School students logged nearly half a million minutes of reading over the winter break. Compared to the 2024-25 winter break, there was a 5 percent increase in the number of schools participating in the Winter Break Challenge, a 244 percent increase in the number of students participating in the Winter Break Challenge and a 330 percent increase in the number of minutes reading during the Winter Break Challenge.

To learn more about Beanstack, visit www.beanstack.com. Celebrate Literacy Week, Florida! is part of Just Read, Florida!, a statewide initiative. To learn more, visit www.fldoe.org/academics/standards/just-read-fl/.

HIGH SCHOOL JUNIOR EARNS GOLD AWARD WITH THE S.H.E.A. PROJECT

Staff Report



Bloomingdale High School junior Shea Polley has earned the Girl Scout Gold Award — the Girl Scouts of the USA's highest honor — through The S.H.E.A. Project, an initiative rooted in sea turtles, healing, empowerment and awareness. By blending her passion for marine life with a desire to uplift others, Polley created a meaningful project that brought comfort, creativity and conservation education to children and families served by the Children's Cancer Center.

A member of Girl Scout Troop 33018, Polley is a third-generation Girl Scout and a third-generation Gold Award recipient, continuing a family legacy of leadership and service. Her project focused on children in survivorship and their siblings, offering moments of joy while teaching lessons that extend far beyond the classroom.

At the heart of The S.H.E.A. Project were 81 sea-turtle-themed 'Shell Buddy Boxes,' each thoughtfully assembled to encourage and comfort young recipients. Every box included a soft stuffed turtle, pop-its, cozy socks, coloring pages, crayons and handwritten notes designed to spark smiles and provide reassurance during difficult days.

In addition to delivering the boxes, Polley led hands-on workshops at the Children's Cancer Center, where children created sea turtle ornaments, bracelets and. During these sessions, she shared information about the seven species of sea turtles and introduced simple conservation actions, such as reducing plastic use and keeping beaches clean, empowering children to make a difference for wildlife.

Polley personally dedicated 150 hours to the project. She was supported by a 26-member volunteer team known as the Clutch Crew, who contributed an additional 262 hours, bringing the total to 412 service hours. Together, they organized donations, assembled supplies and delivered each Shell Buddy Box with care.

Her leadership also extended to advocacy. Polley submitted a proclamation request to Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis seeking recognition of April 12 as Florida Sea Turtle Day. Financial support from a Jane Goodall Institute Roots & Shoots grant and a Gulf Youth Ambassador stipend enabled her to invest more than $4,000 into the initiative.

"It feels amazing knowing what I created with the S.H.E.A. project brought smiles to healing children and more attention to protecting sea turtles," said Polley.

Through The S.H.E.A. Project, Polley demonstrated how one young leader — guided by compassion and purpose — can create waves of healing and awareness that touch both hearts and oceans.



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CR-V GETS WORTHY ALL-TERRAIN EDITION!

By Nitish Rele



Introduced over three decades ago, it has been the best-selling crossover for the last 28 years as well as the top Honda seller since 2017. The Honda Comfortable Runabout Vehicle, or CR-V, as everyone knows it, gets an all-new TrailSport edition. After creating a record with over 400,000 sales in 2024 and last year, we would not be surprised if that number increases drastically again.

CR-V AWD (TrailSport)
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Website: www.honda.com

Under the hood of the sixth-gen CR-V hybrid sits a 2.0-liter direct-injection, four-cylinder turbocharged engine that puts out a healthy 204 horsepower and 247 pounds-feet of torque. It is paired with dual electric motors and a lithium-ion battery pack for substantial fuel savings. Its continuous variable transmission shifts effortlessly and quietly. The suspension, handled by a MacPherson strut front and multilink rear, does an admirable job of soaking up potholes and other road unevenness. Conveying tremendous on-center feel and effective feedback is an electric-power rack-and-pinion steering system. Enhanced low-speed traction management serves to aid in navigating bumpy terrain. Drive modes include normal, eco, sport and snow.

The CR-V gains a pleasing and attractive, all-new Ash Green metallic exterior color. Horizontal LED headlights flank a black mesh grille with a silver skid garnish. TrailSport badges can be found in the SUV's front and rear, on the front seat backrests and on the floor mats. Step inside the cozy and roomy cabin (103.5 cubic feet of passenger space) and the driver will face a bigger 10.2-inch digital cluster and a 9-inch infotainment screen. Standard for 2026 are a phone charger, Android Auto and Apple CarPlay, all wireless. Extending across the dashboard is a honeycomb mesh with disguised silver air vents. Looking to haul cargo? Just fold the 60/40 seat down with levers in the tailgate. Orange ambient lights throughout and orange stitching on the black seats are a fine touch. The 10-way heated driver and four-way front-passenger power seats, 320-watt audio with eight speakers, push-button start, dual auto AC, tilt/telescopic steering column, hands-free power liftgate/moonroof and sunglass holder come at no extra cost.

Standard safety features include dual front, side and knee airbags, side curtain airbags with a rollover system, vehicle stability assist, traction control, four-wheel antilock brakes with electronic brake distribution and brake assist, three-point seatbelts, front/rear crumple zones, front-seat active head restraints, a tire pressure monitor system and daytime running lights, as well as Honda Sensing, which includes adaptive cruise control, a blind-spot/cross-traffic monitor, collision mitigation brakes, lane keep assist, forward collision and lane departure warnings, traffic jam assist and front/rear park sensors.

If you are looking to traverse rough ground in a compact SUV, then the TrailSport model is a smart and right pick. It is roomy, comfortable, good-looking, practical, fuel-efficient (we earned over 38 combined mpg) and now snazzy with this all-new trim added to the CR-V lineup.



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STAYING ONE STEP AHEAD OF SCAMMERS

By State Attorney Suzy Lopez



State Attorney Suzy Lopez.

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

Scammers are constantly finding new ways to steal personal and financial information. Keeping up with those threats can feel overwhelming, and being aware is half the battle. That's why the first week of March is dedicated to starting a conversation to keep consumers safe. National Consumer Protection Week (NCPW) is dedicated to having conversations about scams, fraud and consumer rights.

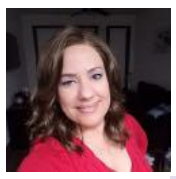
This year's focus is on how to spot and report scams, and how to recover if you become a victim. Scammers and fraudsters often share the same goal of accessing your money or sensitive information. The difference is in how they operate. Scams trick you into willingly giving out money or your personal information, while fraud involves gaining unauthorized access to your assets or accounts.

According to the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, there was a significant increase in scam activity in our area last year. In 2025, scammers impersonating law enforcement and other government agencies stole more than $1 million from local residents. Victims were told they had outstanding warrants, had missed jury duty or had urgent account issues and were pressured to pay immediately. Other common schemes included fake PayPal alerts and social media scams designed to appear legitimate.

What steps can you take protect yourself? The Federal Trade Commission recommends blocking unwanted calls and texts to reduce the chances of scammers reaching you in the first place. If you do answer an unknown call, text or email, never share your personal or financial information if you did not initiate the contact. Scammers will often pressure you to act immediately. Take a moment, slow down and talk with someone you trust before making any moves. Remember, honest organizations will not call, text or email you to ask for personal information, like your social security number.

If you believe you have been scammed, report it immediately to local law enforcement and the Federal Trade Commission. If you gave out personal or account information, change your passwords and monitor your credit. If you sent money, contact the service you used to pay the scammers and see if it can reverse the transaction. My office works closely with our law enforcement partners to hold offenders accountable and protect residents in our community. Staying informed and reporting scammers are some of the most powerful tools we have to keep ourselves safe.

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



"I'M SPENDING IT ALL IN RETIREMENT" DO I STILL NEED AN ESTATE PLAN?

By Laurie E. Ohall, Florida Board-certified Elder Law Attorney



If you're a senior or a boomer, you might be wondering, "If I'm planning to have a blast with my savings during retirement, do I need to bother with an estate plan?" It's a question many ask when they decide to enjoy their hard-earned money while they can. But as any experienced estate planning attorney will tell you, yes, you absolutely still need an estate plan. Let's talk about why an estate plan does a lot more than just handle the cash you leave behind.

It's Not Just About Your Savings

Estate planning isn't just for dividing up what's in your bank account. It's about making sure that if you can't make decisions for yourself, there's a plan in place. Without it, your spouse could hit roadblocks while trying to talk to banks, or your children could get stuck if there's a medical emergency and the doctors need a family member's say-so.

Making the Tough Decisions Easier

What if you get really sick and can't tell the doctors what you want? That's where having an estate plan is a lifesaver. It lets your family step in and make those hard choices quickly, without getting tied up with the courts or government red tape.

What About the House?

Owning a house is pretty common, right? But when you're not here anymore, that house has to go to someone. Without a plan, figuring out what to do with your house, especially if it's gone up in value, can be a nightmare for your children. They could end up in the middle of a long, expensive court process or arguing among themselves about what you would have wanted and your intentions for the property.

An estate plan is like leaving a guidebook for your family; it tells everyone what you want for yourself (if you are incapable of making financial and health care decisions) and who you want to get what you own. That way, you can rest easy knowing you're not leaving your loved ones with a bunch of problems to sort out.

Laurie Ohall is a Florida board-certified elder law attorney practicing in Brandon, Florida. She has been practicing law for 30 years and her practice is focused on estate planning, elder law planning and probate. Ohall is licensed to practice law in Florida and Ohio.

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RECORD NUMBERS FOR BLOOMINGDALE HIGH SCHOOL'S ANNUAL RUNNING OF THE BULLS 5K RACE

By Jane Owen



Bloomingdale Senior High School's ninth annual Running of the Bulls took place on January 17. A record number of 354 community members participated in the event, with hundreds more in attendance spectating and volunteering. Participants included runners and walkers from all over the area, current students, Bloomingdale High School alumni, Bloomingdale Principal Dr. Rodriguez, school board member Lynn Gray and Superintendent Van Ayres.

The Running of the Bulls includes a 5K and a half-mile distance. The event supports Bloomingdale's Rajun' Bull Band and provides two scholarships for Bloomingdale High School seniors, which will be presented at the Senior Awards Banquet in May.

Jordan Fraze, Bloomingdale High School director of bands, expressed his gratitude for the longtime support from the community for the event and band program.

"I am so grateful for all of the community members who participated in and supported our 5K. Seeing familiar faces return year after year to support the Bloomingdale Band truly makes our race special. We also saw many new faces this year, marking a record number of participants for the Running of the Bulls," Fraze said.

Bloomingdale alum Christine Robbins, class of 1995, has run the 5K for eight years.

"I love the opportunity to return to campus as an alum and as a parent to support the music dept. It's like a big reunion, only very early in the morning. You never know who will be there — a current friend, my former dance students, my kids' friends or my high school classmates. This year was the first year I didn't win for class of 1995, since Alana crossed the finish line ahead of me," Robbins said.

The Running of the Bulls is made possible by local business sponsorships, and this year's event had the largest support yet with 39 businesses donating. The 2026 title sponsors were Acropolis Greek Taverna Riverview, The Jeep Depot and Reed & Reed.

Malik Millet, Bloomingdale class of 2022, won the 5K with a time of 16:41. Natalie Donovan, a Bloomingdale High School senior, was the overall female winner with a time of 21:45.

To find out other ways to give to Bloomingdale's Rajun' Bull Band, please contact Fraze at jordan.fraze@hcps.net or visit www.bloomingdaleband.com.





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SYLVIA THOMAS OFFERS SUPPORT FOR LOCAL ADOPTIVE AND FOSTER FAMILIES

By Emily Harper



For the past 25 years, Sylvia Thomas Center has kept "forever" in forever families, by supporting adoptive and foster families in Hillsborough County. Over the years, the center has impacted the lives of over 6,000 families in our area and each year actively touches 500-600 families.

Sylvia Thomas Center provides assistance through case management, support groups, training, respite activities, and advocacy. This ensures families in the area are supported with their needs.

There are support groups for both parents and children. For parents, Sylvia Thomas offers a group called Parents Empowering Parents Talk. Here, virtually, on the 3rd Thursday of each month, adoptive or foster parents chat with one another about their experiences, providing fellowship and guidance.

On February 23rd, the organization started a book club for their parents. In the months of February, March, and April, parents will dissect the book, The Simple Guide To Understanding Shame in Children, as another way of connecting adoptive parents. Following the conclusion, parents have the opportunity to join the next book club in June.

"We find that the best thing that we can do is connect adoptive parents with other adoptive parents," said the CEO, Mary Ann Kershaw.

As for the children, they meet on the 3rd or 4th Thursday of each month to converse with others their age who share similar journeys. Here, they are served pizza while making crafts and doing other interactive activities. Ages 5-10 have a group named Forever Friends Kids Club, 11-15 have Tween Squad, and 16-17 have Teen Scene.

In addition, coming up on March 16th, Sylvia Thomas Center is having a 'Community Service Day' for ages 14-17. On this day, teens, who are in need of community service hours, are invited to come do volunteer work.

Sylvia Thomas Center is always accepting donations to support the families and the lives of their children. The office is located at 500 Lithia Pinecrest Rd, and its website is www.sylviathomascenter.org.

A LIFE OF SERVICE: NARAN PATEL MARKS 40 YEARS AS A LION

By McKenzie Brown



Naran Patel, serving our community for 40 years.

For more than 40 years, one dedicated Lion, Naran Patel, has lived out the spirit of service through membership in the world's largest humanitarian organization. With a global reach spanning 205 countries, Lions Clubs International members, called Lions, serve wherever help is needed, from hospitals and senior centers to communities shaken by hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes and famine. Backed by 1.35 million members and 45,000 clubs worldwide, the work is vast, practical and deeply human.

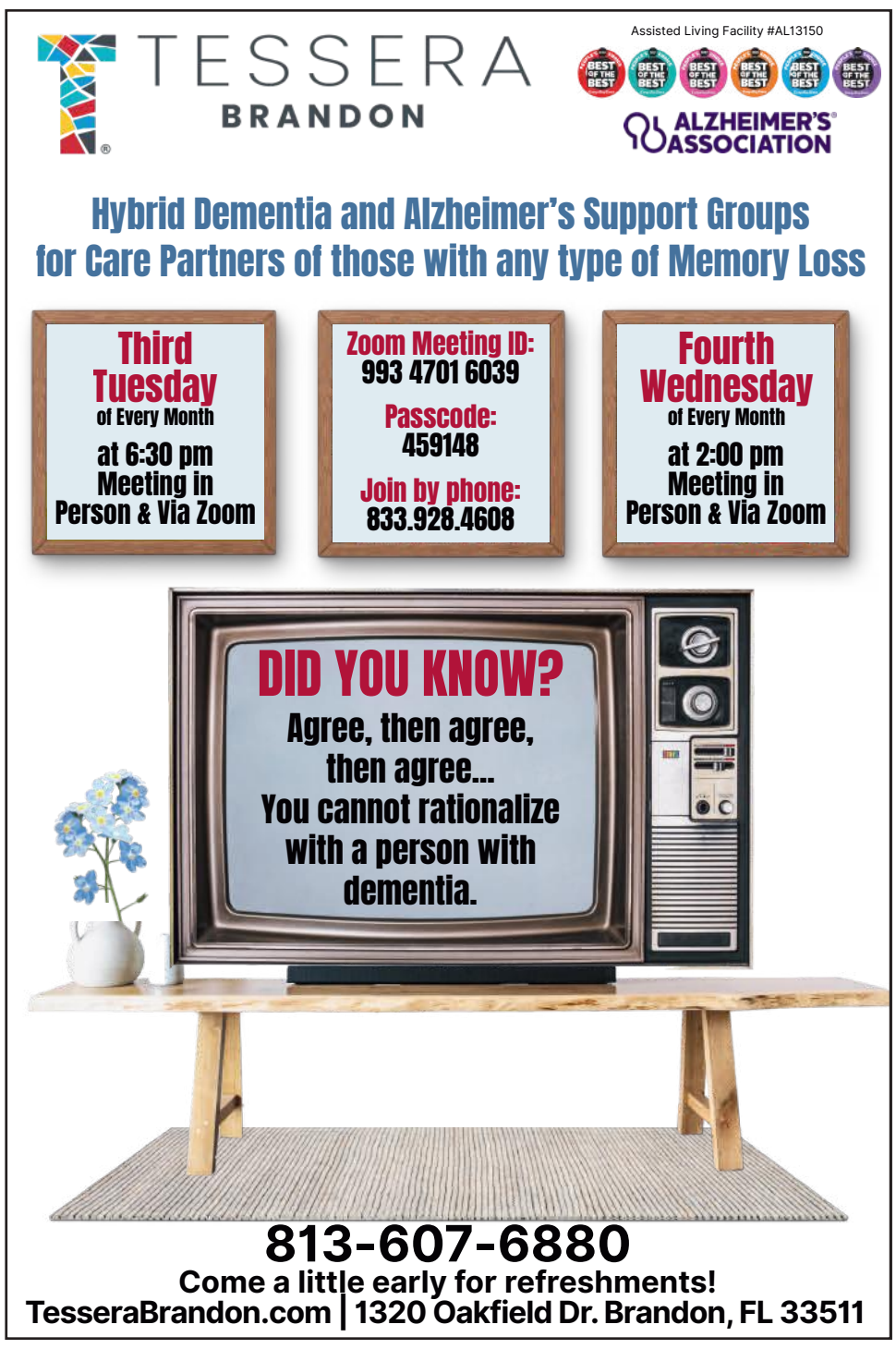
A major focus of Lions' service is vision. Through vision programs and eye screenings in local schools, Lions help children see the board and seniors read the page. They provide eye exams and free glasses to those in need while also addressing hearing loss and working to prevent diabetes in order to protect eyesight in the long term. Lions raise donations from the public with a simple promise: that 100 percent of the funds raised are returned to the public through service. Beyond health, Lions promote peace by encouraging youth creativity and reflection through the annual Peace Poster Contest. And this only scratches the surface. When seniors need support or a neighbor needs a hand, Lions are there, ready to serve wherever and whenever help is needed.

For Patel, this lifelong commitment began in 1972, when he joined the Woodridge Lions Club in Woodridge, Illinois, invited by a local friend. His first challenge was a joyful one: building a Lions float for the village parade. With the help of his three young sons, he designed a memorable float and matching Lions costumes, turning service into a family affair. Years later, his dedication took him on a 600-plus-mile bike ride from the Grand Canyon to Nogales, Mexico, raising over $5,000 for Arizona Lions by stopping at local clubs along the way.

His service also became a way to honor love and loss. Ten years ago, after the passing of Patel's wife, Hansa, a fellow Lion with the Rincon Lions Club in Tucson, Arizona, he donated the entire contents of their home in her honor, raising over $3,000 for humanitarian projects.

Today, he is proud to serve with the Fishhawk Lions Club as a Lions Tamer, a role his wife once held as well. The invitation stands open to the community to visit and attend a meeting.

Fishhawk Lions Club meetings take place on the first Wednesday of each month at 7 p.m. at Grace Community Church, located at 5708 Lithia Pinecrest Rd. in Lithia.







SMALL BUT MIGHTY HEROES HOSTS DANCING FOR HEROES GALA

Staff Report



Small But Mighty Heroes (SBMH) proudly announces its annual Dancing For Heroes Gala, taking place on March 27, 2026, from 6-10 p.m. at The Regent, located at 6437 Watson Rd. in Riverview.

Dancing For Heroes is the signature awareness and fundraising initiative supporting SBMH's trauma-informed emotional and mental health programs for children impacted by pediatric cancer, their siblings and their parents. SBMH exists to support these families, fostering healing, resilience and hope through diagnosis, treatment and loss.

The gala is more than a performance event — it is an evening of storytelling, tribute and community unity. Local leaders and community 'celebrity' dancers train in Latin and ballroom styles and perform in honor of a child currently in treatment or a survivor, or in memory of a fallen hero. Each dance represents a family's journey and serves as a powerful reminder that no one fights alone.

Funds raised during the evening directly support SBMH's year-round trauma-informed programming, including:

- Emotional and mental health support initiatives.
- Grief and bereavement programming for parents and siblings.
- Community-based healing and connection programs.
- Ongoing resources for families navigating pediatric cancer.

Tickets, donations and sponsorship opportunities are available at https://givebutter.com/c/blsntu.

Community members, corporate partners and local leaders are invited to attend and stand in support of families facing pediatric cancer.

Together, we dance for the heroes — and for the families who carry their light forward.

For additional information, please visit the ticket link above or connect with Small But Mighty Heroes online.

Dancing For Heroes is a trauma-informed movement and grief-support program created to serve families impacted by pediatric cancer. Through structured Latin and ballroom dance sessions, the program provides parents, siblings and caregivers with a safe space for emotional expression, peer connection, stress reduction and healing through embodied movement. The initiative addresses the often-overlooked mental health impacts of childhood cancer, including anticipatory grief, caregiver burnout, isolation and bereavement.

Together, the program and gala create a full-circle model of impact:

- The program provides direct healing and mental health support.
- The gala amplifies awareness, builds community engagement and generates the resources necessary to sustain and expand services. For more information, visit the website www.smallbutmightyheroes.org.









BLOOMINGDALE HIGH SCHOOL DRUMLINE KICKS OFF HILLSBOROUGH DAY AT THE CAPITOL

By Jane Owen



The Bloomingdale High School Drumline at Hillsborough Day at the Capitol.

On January 28, community leaders and business owners from Hillsborough County invaded the state's capital. Hillsborough Day at the Capitol is a day when people from Hillsborough County set sail for Tallahassee to share the heritage of the county and connect with lawmakers.

This year, for the first time, Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) kicked off the event with pomp and circumstance. Bloomingdale Senior High School's drumline played and represented the music programs of Hillsborough County schools.

School board member Patti Rendon said Hillsborough Day at the Capitol was exciting.

"It was an incredible day for our community. I was excited watching Bloomingdale High School band perform. They put on an impressive performance," Rendon said.

Rendon was thankful that Lt. Gov. Jay Collins and State Representative Danny Alveraz took time to visit with Bloomingdale's students after their performance. They were there to collaborate on issues that matter to Hillsborough County. Spending time with the students was part of that.

Jordan Fraze, Bloomingdale's band director, said it was an honor for Bloomingdale to be selected to represent Hillsborough County's music education programs.

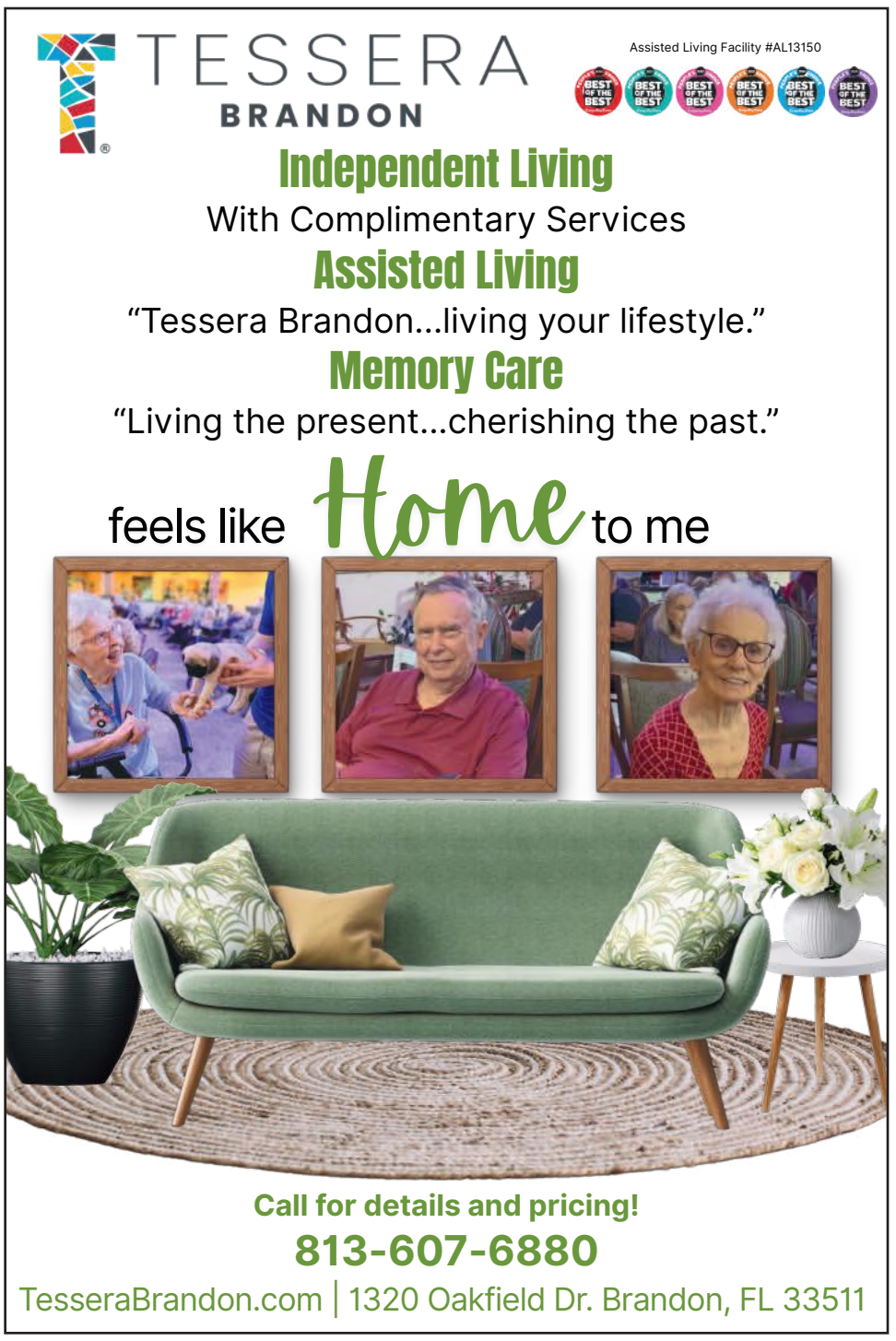
"The students walked away from this event with a feeling of pride knowing that they represented their school and county well through their performance," Fraze said.

Jon Sever, supervisor of secondary music education for HCPS, said Bloomingdale students left a powerful impression on everyone.

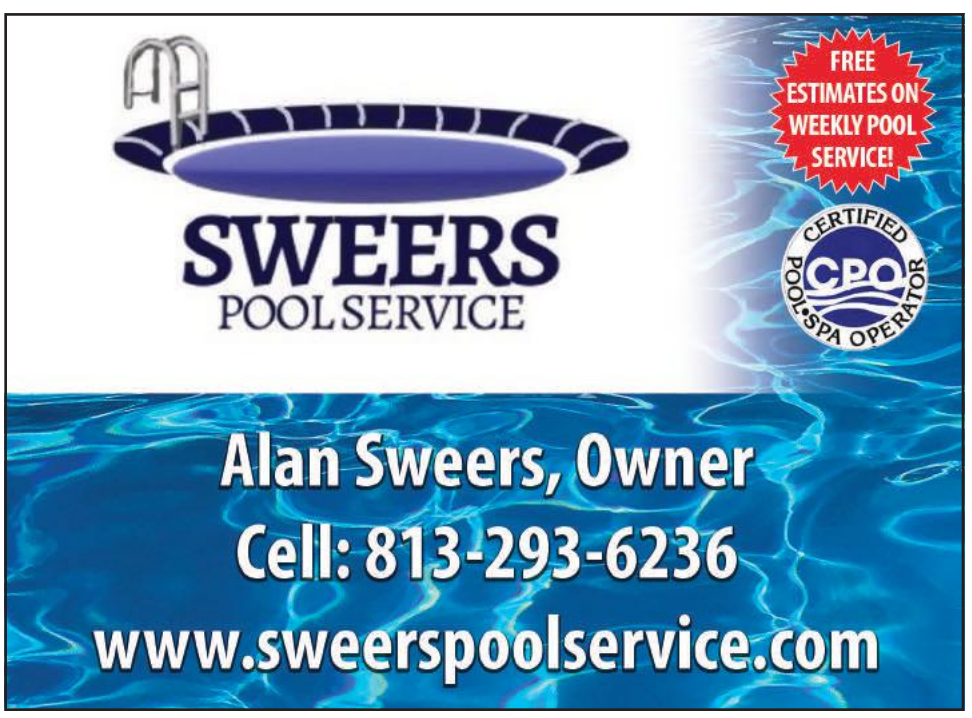
"The Bloomingdale High School Drumline delivered an outstanding performance, showcasing not only their remarkable musicianship but also the pride, discipline and excellence of Hillsborough County and Hillsborough County schools," Sever said.

The students shined on Capitol Day, and HCPS made their trip impactful.

The day before the event, Bloomingdale's students were able to visit Florida State University (FSU). They observed a rehearsal for the FSU Symphonic Band, took a tour of campus and attended a masterclass given by the marching chief's Big 8 Drumline. They learned practice techniques at FSU to further their musicianship.









TEA WITH A TWIST: FAMILY PROMISE LAUNCHES EVENT TO SUPPORT FAMILIES

Staff Report



Family Promise of Hillsborough County will host its first-ever fundraising gala, Tea With a Twist, on Saturday, March 28, from 2-5 p.m. at New Hope Church. Designed as a stylish yet meaningful afternoon, the event blends tea, fashion and community connection while raising critical funds for families experiencing homelessness in Hillsborough County.

The inaugural gala marks a milestone for Family Promise of Hillsborough County, an organization dedicated to empowering homeless and low-income families with children to achieve lasting independence. Unlike a traditional evening gala, Tea With a Twist offers a relaxed daytime setting featuring tea and refreshments, raffles and the event's standout attraction — a men's fashion show that promises a fun and unexpected spin on the classic tea party.

Organizers said the event is about more than elegance and entertainment. As the organization's first official fundraiser, the gala serves as a call to action for the community to rally around families in need.

"We believe that no child should have to sleep in a car or on the street," said Edwina Reddick, executive director of Family Promise Hillsborough. "This event is about raising awareness, building community and inspiring generosity."

All proceeds from the gala will directly support Family Promise's programs, which provide shelter, case management and supportive services to help families regain stability and move toward permanent housing. Funds raised will assist families across Hillsborough County as they work to overcome financial crises and housing instability.

The event is open to the public, and both individual tickets and sponsorship opportunities are available. Those unable to attend can still support the mission through online donations, which are tax-deductible. Family Promise of Hillsborough County Inc. is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

Community members are encouraged to attend, sponsor or donate and to help spread the word by following Family Promise on social media. Updates and additional information can be found on Instagram @familypromiseofhi, on Facebook at www.facebook.com/familypromisefl and on Twitter @FamilyPromise1.

Tickets, sponsorship details and donation options are available at the website www.familypromisefl.org/.



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INNOVATION WITH GUARDRAILS: OUR APPROACH TO AI

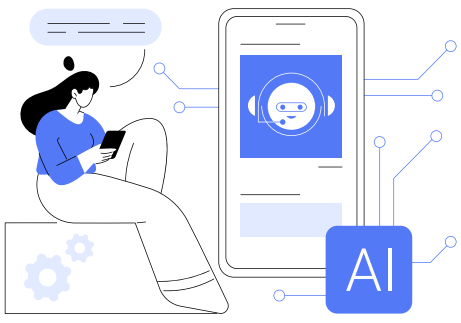
By Superintendent Van Ayres



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

Artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping every part of our lives, and education is no exception. Everywhere you turn, AI is sparking new ideas, new possibilities and important conversations about the future of learning.

AI and other emerging technologies are here to stay. As a public school system serving more than 200,000 students, we have a responsibility to approach this moment with both enthusiasm and caution. That means taking the time to understand the technology, evaluating tools carefully and putting strong guardrails in place to protect students and support teachers. Clear policies, meaningful training and an unwavering commitment to privacy and safety will guide every decision we make.



But let me be equally clear: AI will not replace the heart of our schools.

It will not replace the teacher who notices a student's frustration before a single word is spoken.

It will not replace the counselor who offers reassurance and direction.

It will not replace the principal who knows every student by name and celebrates their success.

AI will not be used to make highstakes decisions about students. We will not allow it to override a teacher's professional judgment and will not adopt any tool that compromises student data, increases screen time or detracts from meaningful instruction.

AI is a tool, nothing more. When used responsibly and thoughtfully, it can streamline administrative tasks, support lesson planning and give teachers back something incredibly valuable: time. Time to connect, to inspire and to teach.

Education will always be human work. Technology should enhance that work, not redefine it.

FRIENDS OF THE POOR WALK: FAMILY FUN TO SUPPORT NEIGHBORS IN NEED

Staff Report



The first annual St. Vincent de Paul (SVdP) Friends of the Poor Walk will raise much-needed financial assistance for families in the Brandon, Valrico, Riverview, Gibsonton and Ruskin areas. The walk takes place on Saturday, March 28, at St. Stephen Catholic Church in Riverview. Families and friends of all ages are welcome to register to participate in the walk to show their support for people in need. In addition to the walk, the event will include games, raffles and food vendors.

The nonprofit organization raises and distributes aid that alleviates suffering, including financial assistance for rent and utilities, food pantries, thrift stores and personal attention as volunteers meet with and listen to neighbors to help guide them.

Last year, over 2,000 families were helped with shelter, utilities and critical household needs with the organization distributing over $620,000.

While the event takes place on the campus of St. Stephen, the Friends of the Poor Walk supports an even wider footprint of the community. The St. Vincent de Paul East Hillsborough County District is made up of volunteers from SVdP conferences located at St. Anne, Prince of Peace, St. Stephen and Nativity Catholic churches. All conferences are run entirely by volunteers who promote the dignity of their neighbors, serving everyone regardless of creed, color or national origin.

"We are looking forward to this being a family fun event that will grow for future years to come," said Denise Essex, president of the SVdP St. Stephen Conference. She added, "All money raised from walker registration, donations and sponsorships will go back into the community to help our neighbors."

Learn more about the event and register to walk or sponsor at https://svdpfopwalkehd.org/. Sponsors and food vendors wishing to support the event onsite can email fopwalkehd@gmail.com.

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SUN COAST SCHOLARSHIP FOUNDATION TO HOST GOLF TOURNAMENT BENEFITING LOCAL NONPROFIT FORGOTTEN ANGELS

By Libby Hopkins



The Sun Coast Scholarship Foundation, a new nonprofit, is committed to enhancing access to quality education for students facing financial challenges. Through its scholarship programs, it aims to empower students by providing them with financial resources to pursue higher education, thus enabling them to achieve their academic aspirations and contribute positively to their communities.

The Sun Coast Scholarship Foundation was born from a shared dream between Dr. Sterling and Rosa Jasper, two first-generation college graduates who experienced firsthand the transformative power of education, mentorship and opportunity.

"With every degree earned, career milestone reached, and door opened, we knew our success was never meant to end with us, it was meant to begin with others," said Dr. Sterling Jasper.

Recently relocated to the Tampa area, the Jaspers bring with them decades of experience as a business owner and social worker respectfully. Their years of public service has allowed them to witness firsthand the challenges faced by at-risk teens striving to build a brighter future.

"Motivated by these experiences, we have launched our new nonprofit organization, dedicated to helping youth transition successfully into college, careers and adulthood," Dr. Sterling Jasper said.

To kick off its mission, the organization will host a celebrity golf tournament on Friday, June 19, at River Hills Country Club, located at 3943 New River Hills Parkway in Valrico.

"All proceeds will benefit Forgotten Angels of Florida, an organization whose mission closely aligns with ours," Dr. Sterling Jasper said, "mentoring and guiding teens who often feel overlooked as they enter adulthood."

Forgotten Angels is a nonprofit which operates more as a family to benefit children aging out of the foster care system, young adults who have aged out, at-risk teens and recently released incarcerated youths.

The Jaspers hope to bring awareness to their nonprofit and the work they are doing.

"Our vision is to create a legacy of opportunity, one that doesn't stop at scholarship awards but stretches into careers, leadership and lives filled with purpose," Jasper said. "Through education, mentorship and selfless service, we are committed to uplifting the next generation so they, too, can rise and reach back."

Visit www.thesuncoastscholarshipfoundation.org. The foundation is located at 867 W. Bloomingdale Ave., #6104, in Brandon.

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ALIGN RIGHT REALTY RIVERVIEW AND SUNCOAST SEEKING NEW AGENTS

By Madeline Gardner



In the market to grow your Tampa Bay real estate career with the help of a professional and dedicated brokerage? Align Right Realty is currently looking for both newly-licensed and seasoned agents to join its team, and prospective candidates are invited to apply for work on a part-time or full-time basis. All applicants will be interviewed by Align Right Realty's Riverview and Suncoast Broker, Lisa Tackus.

". . . as the broker owner, I like to meet with everybody, which is also a unique thing [as] a lot of brokerages may just have a trainer or a recruiter do the interviews and [the applicants] mostly don't ever get to meet the broker," said Tackus. "I pride myself that that's something for the last almost seven years that I've continued to do."

Once welcomed to the team, Align Right Realty offers training sessions, available both in-person at the Riverview and Suncoast offices, as well as over Zoom. The program first begins with core training, which breaks down how to run a real estate business, and then a prospecting tier, which explains how to earn a business. The third tier concentrates on the social media and technology necessary to innovate and manage a real estate business. Roughly every month, Tackus also hosts a development series, which includes visits from business brokers and commercial real estate experts.

"We're here to provide primarily their training, their technology, their marketing, their branding, and most important, the culture to help them run their business and meet the highest potential that they want to go," said Tackus.

Realtors affiliated with Align Right Realty have access to partnerships with local chamber members, plumbers, roofers, home inspection companies, and tax attorneys. Agents are also granted 24/7 access to the brokerage's resources, from copiers to open house signs and balloons. And the brokerage fosters camaraderie between agents by hosting potlucks, bowling outings, and monthly coffee meet-ups. Tackus ensures her agents receive all the attention and assistance they require to manage successful businesses.

". . . they have the opportunity to earn 100% of their commission here but also get all the support they need," said Tackus. ". . . we've created an environment where you can get the most resources and earn the most money, and that's something that we're going to continue to do and grow this year."

If interested, prospective applicants should call the Riverview office at 563-5995 or email admin@alignrightriverview.com. The Align Right Realty Riverview office is located at 11962 Balm Riverview Rd. in Riverview, and the Suncoast office is located at 410 S Ware Blvd, suite 310 in Tampa.

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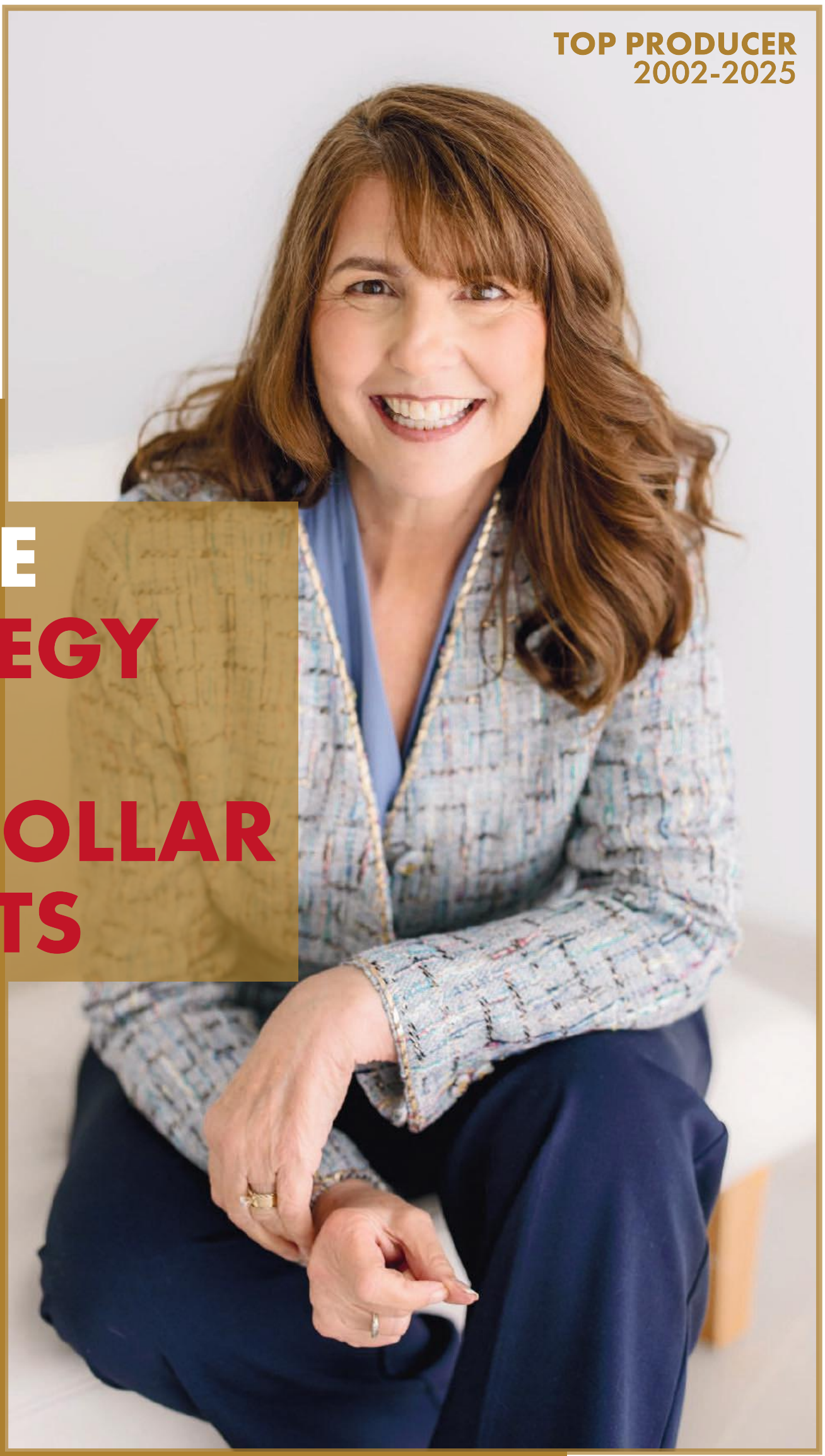
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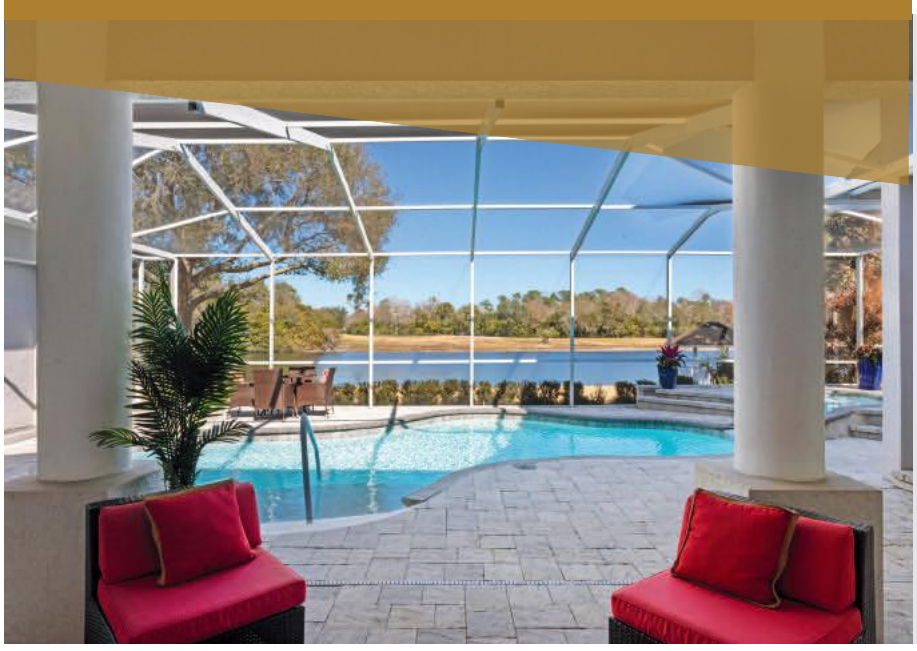
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TAMPA THEATRE PLANS $30 MILLION UPDATE TO 100-YEAR-OLD LANDMARK

Staff Report



Tampa Theatre today announced significant progress on its transformative Second Century Campaign: an ambitious, $30 million capital initiative to restore, enhance and expand one of Tampa's most beloved cultural institutions as it approaches its centennial on Thursday, October 15. The campaign, which is focused on preservation, education and enhanced patron experiences, will ensure that Tampa Theatre continues to thrive as a vibrant hub for arts, entertainment and community engagement well into its next 100 years.

As part of the first phase of the campaign, which totals $24.5 million, Tampa Theatre will fully and authentically restore the historic Duncan Auditorium to its original grandeur. To complete this work, the Duncan Auditorium will be closed from Tuesday, March 10, through the end of September for infrastructure upgrades, restoration of the decorative paint and plaster and preservation of its original fixtures and furnishings.

Other priorities for the first phase include:

• Opening the John T. Taylor Screening Room, a 43-seat microcinema adjoining the historic lobby, creating an intimate space for first-run films and ensuring that film fans will have access to Tampa Theatre even as the historic auditorium undergoes restoration.

• Renovating underutilized space on the Florida Avenue side of the building to create a new, 2-story education wing that will house permanent classrooms and archival storage for year-round learning opportunities in partnership with the University of South Florida, the University of Tampa and other academic and community partners.

"The Second Century Campaign is more than a capital effort, it's a transformational investment in our community's cultural legacy," said John Bell, president and CEO of Tampa Theatre. "By authentically restoring the historic Duncan Auditorium and expanding our capabilities through new spaces, we're confident that Tampa Theatre will continue to educate, entertain, enlighten and unite people for generations to come."

Thanks to the generosity of the community and leadership gifts from Bank of America; Celia and Jim Ferman, in memory of Martha Ferman; Bonnie S. Sonnenfeld; and John T. Taylor, the campaign is currently more than 93 percent of the way toward its first-phase goal. Significant public funding has been provided by the City of Tampa Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA), and this project is sponsored in part by the Florida Department of State's Division of Historical Resources, the State of Florida and the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners.

For more on the campaign, visit the website at www.tampatheatre.org.

LOCAL BAR-B-CLEAN RECOGNIZED WITH 'EMERGING FRANCHISE' AWARD

By Emily Harper



Bar-B-Clean Tampa Bay recently was acknowledged with the 'Emerging Franchise' award. Additionally in 2025, the company was recognized as the number one location in the country for the month of December, reflecting their dedication to high-quality service.

"For our company, these accomplishments represent more than growth — they signal that customers and partners value a professional, structured approach to protecting and maintaining their outdoor cooking investments," said owner Jamie Wolf.

Bar-B-Clean has been serving the Tampa Bay, Clearwater, and St. Petersburg communities since 2025 as a full-service grill care company. This veteran-owned business specializes in cleaning, repairs, sales, installations and preventative maintenance. This includes ceramic grills, smokers, pellet grills and regular grills.

Their team currently consists of seven trained professionals who are devoted to delivering consistent premium service along with exceptional customer satisfaction. This is achieved by providing detail-driven services focused on safety and performance.

They assist homeowners, realtors and property managers to ensure clean grills to protect the investment and health of their clients. They ensure that local families enjoy meals on a grill free of grease buildup and harmful contaminants that can lead to carcinogen exposure.

"We are committed to sustainable, long-term growth while maintaining the high standards, professionalism and consistency that define our brand," said Wolf.

Furthermore, Bar-B-Clean offers a membership known as 'GrillWell+' to better enhance long-term grill care. Through this program, members can expect scheduled cleanings, performance checks and preventative maintenance to preserve their grills year-round.

"We differentiate ourselves through specialization, precision and consistency. Grill care isn't an add-on for us — it's our core expertise," stated Wolf when asked how Bar-B-Clean sets itself apart.

Bar-B-Clean believes that "a clean grill is a healthy grill." It emphasizes reliability and respect for customers, and it is committed to educating clients on proper grill care. Its overall goal is to deliver exceptional service and create peace of mind along with confidence for grill owners.

More in-depth information about its services can be found on Bar-B-Clean Tampa Bay's website, along with appointment information, at its website www.bar-b-clean.com/tampabay/.

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SWIMMERS BRAVE COLD WATER TO HONOR HEROES AT FROGMAN SWIM

By Brad Stager



The annual Tampa Bay Frogman Swim is a powerful tribute and fundraiser for the Naval Special Warfare (NSW) community, aiming to build national awareness for Navy SEALs and provide unwavering, tangible support to the Navy SEAL Foundation (NSF).

The NSF is the principal benevolent organization for NSW families, offering immediate and ongoing assistance, including educational programs, financial aid, tragedy assistance and transition support.

The swim is held in January, when the water temperature of Tampa Bay hovers around 60 degrees. It is a deliberate, challenging endurance event, a small physical and mental reminder of the immense hardships endured by these elite warriors. The rigorous open-water swim tests participants' limits, mirroring the relentless dedication and perseverance that defines the NSW ethos while encouraging a broader audience to recognize the profound sacrifices that are made and to support the cause through generous donations.

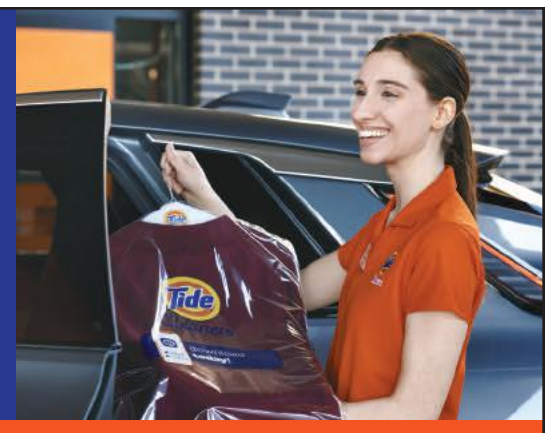
The 3.4-mile swim charts a course from Gandy Beach in Pinellas County to the shore of South Tampa and goes through unpredictable open-water conditions, such as strong currents, variable temperatures, and chop. Thus, participating swimmers are expected to have experience in open water or endurance swimming as well as good cardiovascular fitness.

Despite gale-force winds and a small craft advisory preventing the planned bay crossing in this year's event, swimmers still managed to complete a 2-mile protected course. The event hosted over 75 Gold Star family members and achieved an expected record fundraising amount, with the final tally yet to be announced.

Sandy Wirtz is a Gold Star mother whose son, Scott, was killed in Syria in 2019 while conducting special operations. She said the Navy SEAL Foundation and the Frogman Swim have been important in her life since that tragic event.

"I've met so many Gold Star moms, and it's so wonderful we share this camaraderie," she said in a video posted to the NSF Facebook page. "I'm here not only to honor my son but to honor the sons of the other Gold Star moms."

Planning is underway for next year's swim, with an anticipated January date to be determined. General registration for the 2027 Tampa Bay Frogman Swim opens on Thursday, August 6, and demand for open slots is expected to be heavy. An earlier registration date of Sunday, June 28, is available for individuals committing to a significant fundraising goal of $2,500. For more information, visit the organization website at www.tampabayfrogman.com.







FUELFEST LAUNCHES SECOND TAMPA SHOW AT THE FLORIDA STATE FAIRGROUNDS ON MARCH 28

Staff Report





Cody Walker founder of Reach Out WorldWide (ROWW).

Following record-setting shows in South Florida since 2022, FuelFest is set to open gates for its second annual show at the Florida State Fairgrounds, located at 4800 U.S. 301 N. in Tampa, on Saturday, March 28. Gates for the event are open to the public from 1-8 p.m. Admission tickets start at $35 per person, and kids 12 and under are free.

Now in its eighth year of hosting events globally at Los Angeles and San Francisco, California; Dallas, Texas; West Palm Beach; New Jersey; Chicago, Illinois; Arizona; Tokyo, Japan; and Qatar, the long-awaited return to Tampa is almost here. FuelFest blends enthusiasts' passion for the automotive world with appearances by Fast & Furious franchise stars Tyrese Gibson and Cody Walker and live-action drifting featuring professional drivers, a live concert by MAYDAY! on the SPARQ Festival Stage, a record-setting car show, automotive culture, dozens of custom exhibits, car reveals and more.

This year, the show will feature more than 800 top custom, exotic, rare and exclusive cars and trucks, plus drift ride-alongs by pro drivers, Fast & Furious screen-used movie cars and various interactive fan racing activities and attractions. The Fitment Industries drift pits are open access, allowing fans to get up close to their favorite race cars and see what these amazing machines are all about. FuelFest also features the all-new popular showcase area, C4 Energy Taste of Tokyo, giving fans a Japanese underground car meet vibe with a variety of cars you're likely to see lurking in the streets of Tokyo. Fans can register their car in the People's Choice Paddock, a limited, fan-judged section where the best cars compete to be crowned People's Choice on the festival stage.

Event sponsors and custom exhibits include Gazoo Racing, SPARQ, Meguiar's, C4 Energy, Fitment Industries, Liqui Moly, XComp Tires, the U.S. Marines, 303/Stabil, O'Reilly and more to be announced.

A portion of the event's proceeds benefit Reach Out WorldWide (ROWW), the nonprofit charity founded by Paul Walker and continued by his brother, Cody Walker. Founded in 2010, the organization was created by the late actor and producer after a massive earthquake devastated Haiti, with the inspiration to organize a relief team that responded to the disaster.

Event information, car registration and tickets can be found now at https://fuelfest.com/, as well as on social media channels, including Facebook, Instagram and TikTok.

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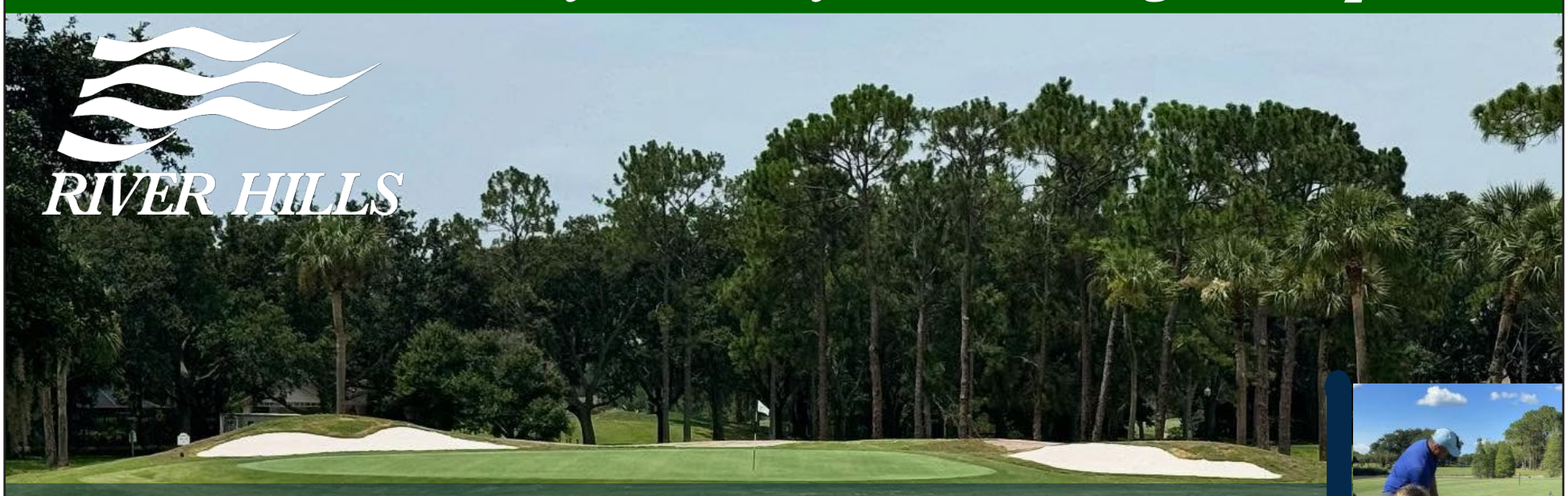
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TROOP 61'S PJ ZELATIS EARNS EAGLE WITH PROJECT AT PALEO PRESERVE

By Taylor Wells



Troop 61 Scout Panos Zelatis, known by everyone as PJ, recently earned a great honor — Eagle Scout, the highest rank of the Scouting BSA — and his achievement was awarded and finalized on February 20 with an Eagle court of honor at Presbyterian Church of Bloomingdale, his troop's meeting place.

For his Eagle Scout project, PJ worked alongside 24 others, including fellow Scouts, leaders, and friends, to repair walls and outside picnic tables at the Paleo Preserve Fossil Museum in Ruskin. They sanded and painted two walls white to make the space look cleaner and fresher and fixed up tables that had old, peeling paint.

"I chose the Paleo Preserve Fossil Museum after reaching out to several local nonprofits. When I researched the museum, it really stood out to me," PJ said. "It's a place where school groups come to learn about Florida's paleontology and get hands-on experience digging in their fossil pit. I liked the fact that my project would help improve a place that educates kids."

PJ's Scouting journey began in 2014 with Cub Scout Pack 632, and in 2018 he crossed over to the Boy Scouts. He has earned all four religious medals as part of the P.R.A.Y. program, earned 37 merit badges, hiked 971 miles with the Troop 61 Hiking Crew, completed 70 service hours, camped for 84 nights, and been a troop historian, quartermaster, patrol leader, assistant senior patrol leader and instructor/hiking lead, among many more accomplishments.

PJ said he especially enjoyed learning how to navigate the outdoors and use a map and compass, set up camp, cook outdoors and handle things on his own. But best of all were his hiking and backpacking trips, where he formed strong friendships and made some of his favorite memories.

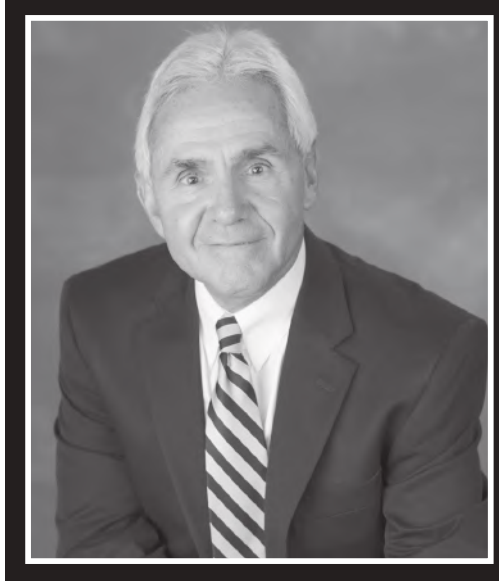
"When I achieved the rank of Eagle Scout, it was an incredible feeling," he said. "It was meaningful because I had set that goal for myself as a Cub Scout. There were moments along the way that were challenging, but reaching Eagle showed me that sticking with something and not giving up really pays off. I was proud of the accomplishment, but I was also grateful for the leaders, friends and family who supported me throughout the journey."

With his court of honor complete, PJ now aims to not only succeed in college and build a strong career but to also live up to the responsibility of being an Eagle Scout. He is currently a freshman at the University of Central Florida, majoring in chemistry.

"I want to continue leading by example, giving back to my community, and making choices that reflect the values Scouting has taught me," PJ said.







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UF CROC DOCS: WOMEN LEADING CONSERVATION IN THE EVERGLADES

Staff Report



University of Florida Croc Docs Wildlife Research Laboratory manager Duwa Ansari.

In chest-deep waters, on midnight airboat runs and along remote Everglades roads, women scientists are carrying out some of Florida's most demanding conservation work. They capture alligators, track invasive pythons and protect fragile ecosystems few people ever see.

They are the UF Croc Docs.

At the University of Florida Croc Docs Wildlife Research Lab, women make up half of the research team — a notable shift in a field where women still represent less than 30% of scientists globally, according to UNESCO. Their work is reshaping both conservation science and perceptions of who belongs in it.

Much of that work unfolds after dark. On moonlit airboat runs through the Everglades, researchers Alexis Pupo and Bryna Daykin conduct routine alligator health checks, carefully capturing and measuring animals before releasing them back into the water. The process may repeat a dozen times before sunrise.

"These are the kinds of moments you don't imagine for yourself in high school," said Pupo, a South Florida native who once questioned whether a science career was realistic. "Now I get to help conserve the wildlife I grew up with."

When daylight comes, attention often turns to one of the Everglades' greatest invasive threats: Burmese pythons. Wildlife ecologist Melissa Miller and biologist Michelle Bassis lead efforts to reduce python populations using radio and GPS telemetry, drones and thermal cameras. By tracking tagged male "scout snakes," researchers locate breeding females and remove multiple snakes at once, reducing impacts on native wildlife.

Night surveys extend onto South Florida roads, where field biologist Patricia Rodriguez-Gonzalez and intern Gabriella De La Fe document invasive reptiles and amphibians as part of the lab's regional monitoring program. The data they collect helps wildlife managers respond quickly to emerging threats.

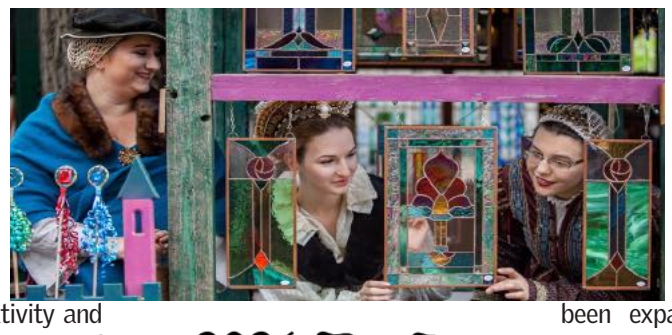
Croc Docs research also reaches beyond Florida. Wildlife ecologist Venetia Briggs-Gonzalez leads long-running international conservation projects in Belize and serves on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Crocodile Specialist Group, helping guide global protection efforts.

Behind the scenes, laboratory manager Duwa Ansari keeps operations running smoothly, while other women on the team contribute through wildlife management research, photography, filmmaking and emerging technologies like AI-powered smart traps.

Together, the UF Croc Docs represent the full spectrum of modern conservation science — and a future where skill, passion and dedication define who leads the work.

ADVENTURE, PIRATES AND MAGIC TAKE CENTER STAGE AT THE 2026 BAY AREA RENAISSANCE FESTIVAL

Staff Report



The Bay Area Renaissance Festival returns in 2026 with an expanded lineup of immersive attractions designed to deliver more adventure, creativity and excitement for guests of all ages. Now in its 48th year, the beloved seasonal tradition is introducing three all-new and enhanced experiences that add action, imagination and swashbuckling fun throughout the festival village.

One of the most anticipated additions is the Knights Ninja Challenge, a free, high-energy obstacle course that blends medieval valor with modern athleticism. Festivalgoers are invited to test their strength, speed and balance as they dash, duck and climb through a series of physical challenges. Designed for friendly competition and spectator excitement alike, the course brings a fast-paced, interactive element that adds a new level of energy to the grounds.

Also making its debut this season is Buccaneer Bay, a pirate-themed port filled with music, crafts and seaside revelry. The lively area features a themed pirate bar, a dedicated performance stage offering entertainment throughout the day and hands-on activities for younger adventurers, including a spyglass craft station. Festival organizers said additional family-friendly elements and treats will be added as the season continues, further expanding the bustling coastal hideaway.

Returning by popular demand, the Wicked Wand Workshop has been expanded for 2026. Guests can once again design and decorate a free custom wand using colorful paints, glittering accents and whimsical charms. The much-loved Wand Testing Ceremony also returns, giving each creator a playful, magical reveal. With added space and enhanced decor, the experience offers even more room for imagination and creativity.

Together, these new and enhanced attractions make 2026 one of the most dynamic seasons yet for the festival. With obstacle-course heroics, pirate adventures and hands-on, magical crafting, visitors will find plenty of new reasons to explore the village and create lasting memories.

The Bay Area Renaissance Festival takes place at 12838 Auton Rd. in Dade City, running during weekends from now through Sunday, March 29, from 10 a.m.-6 p.m., rain or shine. The festival features themed weekends, jousting, live performances and artisan vendors. Discounted tickets are available at participating Circle K locations, with coupons offered at participating Papa John's locations. For more information, visit https://bayarearenfest.com/ or follow @bayarearenfest on social media.



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TROOP BRINGS ART TO UNDERSERVED FAMILIES WITH SERVICE PROJECT

Staff Report

Girl Scout Troop 33530, part of the Fossil Valley Service Unit of Girl Scouts of West Central Florida (GSWCF), has completed a meaningful community service project focused on increasing access to arts and crafts for children in underserved communities across Hillsborough County.



Girl Scout Troop 33530 ssembled Children's Art Bags to encourage creativity.



Led by troop leaders Jennifer C. Loader-Wohl and Melody Gershkoff, the Girl Scouts identified a need among families living below the poverty level, including those experiencing housing instability, who often lack access to basic art supplies at home. In response, the troop designed and assembled Children's Art Bags to encourage creativity, family bonding and confidence through hands-on art activities.

To date, the troop has created 180 Children's Art Bags, which are being distributed through the Hillsborough County Children's Board Family Resource Centers at six locations throughout the county. The bags include age-appropriate craft kits; younger children receive a paper windmill craft with colored pencils, while older children receive a wooden-boat kit with paint supplies. Each project allows children to create, keep and take pride in their own artwork.

The project was designed to support child development by promoting creativity, fine motor skills, focus, language development and confidence. It also provides families an opportunity to spend quality time together while creating art with materials they may not otherwise have access to.

This project was completed as part of the troop's leadership and service efforts and is being submitted for consideration for a Girl Scout Bronze Award, the highest honor a Junior Girl Scout can earn. Regardless of award status, the project reflects the Girl Scout mission of making the world a better place through service and community engagement.

Community members interested in learning more about the project or supporting future efforts are encouraged to contact the troop leader directly.

DURANT THEATRE TO PERFORM "A CHRISTMAS CAROL" AT STATE FESTIVAL

Staff Report







For the first time in school history, Durant High School's theatre department has been selected to perform its one-act production of A Christmas Carol at the Florida State Thespian Festival. Before heading to Tampa to showcase their talents on the state stage, the students are inviting the community to a special benefit performance.

The free performance, dubbed "Christmas in March," will take place on Friday, March 13,, at 7 p.m. in the Durant High School Auditorium. While admission is free, the theatre department will be accepting donations to help cover unexpected costs, including re-renting costumes and festival-related expenses.

"This is a huge milestone for our students and our program," said Steve Arment, Durant's drama teacher. "We are excited to share the show with the community before representing our school at the state level."

The Florida State Thespian Festival begins March 18 in downtown Tampa. Durant's theatre students hope this send-off performance not only entertains but also highlights the dedication and hard work they've put into the production.

Arment added that the students are thrilled to bring the timeless story of A Christmas Carol to life and gain recognition for their efforts at a statewide festival.

Community members are encouraged to attend, enjoy the show, and support the students as they take this next exciting step in their theatrical journey.

Durant High is located at 4748 Cougar Path, Plant City, FL 33567. For tickets and information, visit the theatre website at www.durantdrama.ludus.com/



52ND SUN 'N FUN AEROSPACE EXPO PROMISES HIGH-FLYING FUN AND FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT

Staff Report



Aviation enthusiasts and families alike are gearing up for the 52nd SUN 'n FUN Aerospace Expo, set for April 14–19, 2026, at Lakeland Linder International Airport. Recognized as one of the world's largest aviation events, the week-long expo promises high-flying excitement with daily and nightly airshows, educational forums, on-site camping, and live entertainment.

This year's event features a special extended Night Airshow on Wednesday, April 15, and a milestone 50th-anniversary celebration of the Red, White & Blue aerobatic team. Attendees can also take part in camping options, including early arrival sites starting April 11. Registration for camping opens April 7, 2026.

Adding a special touch to the opening night festivities, eight honorable World War II veterans will be honored during the Opening Night Concert on Tuesday, April 14, at the Warbird Ramp. The evening kicks off at 5 PM with performances by Angie K, Thomas Mac, and headliner Cooper Alan. This patriotic tribute is included with daily admission, ensuring every visitor can join the salute to America's heroes.

The expo continues the Franklin family's legacy of showmanship, led today by Kyle Franklin, a third-generation pilot and professional wingwalker. Franklin's career spans more than 25 years and includes jaw-dropping acts like comedy flying, motorcycle-to-airplane transfers, and thematic performances such as Pirated Skies and Dracula. Together with his wife, Liz, Kyle continues to push the boundaries of airshow entertainment while honoring his family's decades-long tradition.

EarlyBird tickets are $45 for daily general admission and $170 for weekly, rising to $50 and $180 respectively at the gate. Youth tickets (13–17) are $20 daily/$70 weekly, while children 12 and under are free. Parking is $20 onsite and available online in advance for $10. For more information on schedules, performers, and ticketing, visit the official SUN 'n FUN website at www.flysnf.org.

With thrilling performances, educational experiences, and unforgettable night shows, SUN 'n FUN 2026 promises to be an aviation event not to be missed.

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A TIMELESS CLASSIC TAKES FLIGHT: SWAN LAKE COMES TO RP FUNDING

Staff Report



World Ballet Company is set to enchant audiences with the return of its breathtaking production of Swan Lake, one of the most beloved and enduring ballets of all time. As part of the company's national tour during the second half of the 2025-26 season, the performance will take place on March 25 at 7 p.m. at the RP Funding Center in Lakeland, one of more than 80 stops across the country.

This production offers audiences a rare and unforgettable experience: a live orchestra performing Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's iconic score in real time. Far more than accompaniment, the sweeping music is a masterwork in its own right, rich with emotion and technical complexity. Performed live, it heightens the drama onstage, creating a fully immersive experience where music and movement exist in perfect harmony.

Now in its fourth full season, World Ballet Company has quickly established itself as one of the nation's leading touring ballet companies. Dedicated to making ballet accessible and engaging, the company performs in more than 180 cities each year across over 40 states, bringing cinematic staging and reimagined classics to audiences large and small.

"We believe ballet is for everyone, and the response from audiences nationwide has been incredible," said producer Gulya Hartwick, who co-founded the company with Sasha Gorskaya. "Swan Lake is arguably the most iconic ballet ever created, and we're thrilled to bring this majestic production to your town."

The production features choreography by Nadezhda Kalinina, based on the original staging by Marius Petipa. Audiences will be captivated by more than 150 hand-sewn costumes; richly detailed, hand-painted sets created using centuries-old theatrical techniques; and stunning projection and multimedia visuals.

A timeless tale of love, betrayal and transformation, Swan Lake follows Prince Siegfried and Odette, a princess cursed to live as a swan by day. With unforgettable moments, such as the Dance of the Little Swans and the spellbinding Black Swan's 32 fouettés, the ballet remains one of the most technically demanding and emotionally powerful works in classical dance.

Tickets range from $58.55-$135.35 and are on sale now at the website at www.rpfunding.com.

LOCALLY OWNED SOUTHERN CONSTRUCTION CELEBRATES A DECADE OF BUILDING TRUST

By Olivia Clark



Southern Construction reached a milestone in November 2025, marking 10 years in business and a decade of service within the construction and restoration industry. Since its founding in 2015, the company has grown into a trusted contractor serving residential and commercial clients throughout the region.

Over the past 10 years, Southern Construction has expanded its capabilities to include both general construction and comprehensive restoration services. Its work ranges from residential and commercial construction projects to emergency response following water, fire, mold and storm-related damage. The company maintains proper state licensing and industry certifications, allowing it to manage complex projects while meeting safety and quality standards.

"Reaching 10 years is a significant milestone — proof that our steady hard work has built a trusted, sustainable company," said Blair Johnson, president of Southern Construction. "It's a proud moment for our team and partners, showing we deliver consistently and that our relationships with clients and the community truly matter."

Several milestones over the decade helped shape the company's direction and growth. One notable moment was Southern Construction's feature on HGTV's *100 Day Dream Home,* which showcased its craftsmanship to a national audience. The company also played a critical role in restoration efforts following Hurricanes Ian, Milton and Helene, expanding its emergency response capabilities to better serve both residential and commercial property owners.

"Responding to Hurricanes Ian, Milton and Helene expanded our restoration capabilities so we could better serve residential and commercial clients when they needed us most," Johnson said.

As Southern Construction enters its second decade, the company is focused on strengthening its internal operations while preparing for future growth. Investments in workforce development and emergency planning remain key priorities.

"What excites us most about the future is developing our team at Southern Construction," Johnson said. "We are investing in workforce training to deliver higher-quality, more efficient projects. Expanding our emergency response plans deepens our partnerships with clients and the community, allowing us to take on bigger challenges and make a lasting regional impact."

With a decade of experience behind it, Southern Construction continues building on a foundation of reliability, adaptability and community-focused service.

For more information, visit the website at www.southernconstruction.net.

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BRANDON TEEN ALANI JACKSON IS A LOCAL ARTIST ON THE RISE

By Libby Hopkins

Alani Jackson of Brandon has become an award-winning artist at the age 15. She recently won first place in the State (Division 1 – Drawing) at the National Beta State Convention for her pieces Between Breath and Becoming. Her artwork was featured in the Emerging Artists Showcase at the Temple Terrace Arts and Craft Festival. After posting her winning piece on TikTok, it received over 1.4 million views and 451,000 likes. Alani creates under the name "Drawn by Jadore," and is quickly emerging as a young artist to watch. "My art is very colorful, detailed, and intriguing," Jackson said. "I often search Pinterest for portrait ideas and draw faces I find captivating. I am usually drawn to images with vibrant, high-contrast colors. I'm fascinated by the way photographers use lighting to create depth and aura."



Alanie Jackson began teaching herself to draw at age 12.

Portraits inspire Jackson the most because they tell powerful stories without using words. "Art is a way to quiet my brain and immerse myself in the creative process," Jackson said. "When I'm drawing, I turn my music up on my sound bar, drown out the noise, and fully focus. My favorite part is adding the finishing touches, but it's the eyes that draw people in."

Jackson is a sophomore student at Florida College Academy. She currently holds a 4.4 GPA. She began teaching herself to draw at age 12 using YouTube tutorials and now specializes in highly realistic portrait art known for its seamless blending, vibrant colors, and striking depth. "I've been drawing for as long as I can remember, but I started taking my art seriously in 2023," Jackson said. "As I practiced more and saw the impact my art was having, I realized this was something I truly loved and wanted to continue. I mainly use alcohol markers, colored pencils, and white gel pens. I enjoy blending different mediums together because it adds depth, dimension, and vibrancy to my work."

Her family is proud of all she has accomplished at such a young age. "When Alani first started, she wasn't as confident in her drawings, but she persisted," said her mother, Kenyatta Morrison. "I'm incredibly proud of Alani. Watching her grow as an artist and gain confidence in her artistic abilities has been amazing. Her discipline, creativity, and attention to detail really stand out, and it's rewarding to see her hard work being recognized at such a high level."

Alani and her mother hope that her art will inspire others. "We hope her story encourages other young artists to believe in their talent, stay consistent, and never be afraid to share their creativity with the world," Morrison said. "I truly believe the gifts we possess are not just for us - they are meant to be shared. Through her art, Alani has found her voice and inspired more than 1.5 million people worldwide.."

Visit TikTok and Instagram pages at @drawnbyjadore7 (Tik Tok) and @drawnbyjadore (Instagram).

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Impact's Got Talent, Egg Drop, Raptor Center Fundraiser & More...

Compiled by Jenny Bennett
jbennett@ospreyobserver.com



Your Next Career Opportunity Awaits

Job seekers in the area have a reason to celebrate! ECHO, in partnership with New Hope Church and Better Together, is hosting a community job fair on March 31 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., designed to connect talent with opportunity. This event promises a unique experience that goes beyond the typical job fair. Attendees will have the chance for face-to-face interviews with hiring managers from reputable companies, while also accessing valuable resources to advance their careers. Whether you're searching for your first job, looking to make a career change, or seeking new opportunities, this event is tailored for you. Employers are also encouraged to register and showcase their companies to a motivated pool of candidates.

To registervisit: bettertogetherus.org/events/brandon-fl-job-fair-hosted-by-new-hope-church/. New Hope Church is located at 121 N Knights Ave., in Brandon.

Impact's Got Talent

Impact Program is now seeking talented students to audition for its annual Impact's Got Talent, scheduled for Friday, April 24, 630 p.m. at Fellowship Baptist Church, with the Grand Prize Winner receiving $250. Auditions are open for grades K-12, including vocalists, actors, dancers (solo, duets & groups), musicians, and anything else that sounds fun and entertaining. All acts MUST be under 3 minutes. Auditions will be held on Sunday, March 29, 1-5 p.m., at Dance Quest International, 853 Lithia Pinecrest Rd, Brandon. To schedule your audition, contact Jennifer Crum at crummiej2@gmail.com or 863-661-3236. All ticket sales benefit the IMPACT Program, promoting healthy lifestyles and relationships to teens, parents, teachers and other youth leaders through classroom education. Visit online at www.whatisimpact.com.

Easter Egg Drop And Family Fun

Hope for the Community, the outreach ministry of Living in Victory Christian Church, will host a FREE community Easter Egg Drop on Saturday, April 4, 2026 from 10am-3pm at 1603 Bloomingdale Ave., in Valrico. The event will include a helicopter egg drop for children, carnival rides, games, giveaways, food, community vendors, and more for the entire family. This event is free and open to the community.

East Hillsborough Democratic Club Meeting

The East Hillsborough Democratic Club welcomes all like minded individuals to its March 10 meeting being held at the Brandon Crossroads Bowl, 609 Crater Lane in Tampa. The meeting begins at 6:30 PM with meet & greet at 6 PM. You will meet local candidates at most meetings. For more information go the the website https://easthillsboroughdems.org email Drew@DrewVaugh.com or call (813)645-6324.

Raptor Center Of Tampa Bay Fundraiser

Join Raptor Center of Tampa Bay for its annual fundraiser at Three Bulls Tavern & Brewery on Saturday, March 14, from 1-4 p.m. You will get to meet the people of the raptor center, animal ambassadors and learn about the ways it is trying to save the environment. Three Bulls is donating 15 percent of sales to the Raptor Center of Tampa Bay and will match the donation, so please come out and enjoy great food and drinks and learn about the rehabilitation center in your area and how you can help. To learn more, visit www.raptorcenteroftampabay.org. Three Bulls Tavern & Brewery is located at 4330 Bell Shoals Rd. in Valrico.

Men Of Valor Conference

New Hope Church is inviting churches and men from across the region to gather for the Men of Valor T3 Conference, a one-day men's event focused on spiritual growth, brotherhood and bold faith, on Saturday, March 7, from 8:30 a.m.-1:15 p.m. Check-in begins at 8 a.m.

The theme for 2026, T3 — 'Test. Transform. Triumph.' — draws from the powerful biblical significance of '40,' seasons throughout Scripture where God tests faith, brings transformation and prepares His people for victory. New Hope Church is located at 213 N. Knights Ave. in Brandon. For tickets and more information, visit https://menofvalor2026.rsvpify.com/.

03.07 40
T3
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March Meeting Of The Democratic Women's Club

The Democratic Women's Club invites all likeminded individuals to the March 3 meeting at Riverview Public library, located at 9951 Balm Riverview Rd., in Riverview. Come at 6p.m.for meet & greet, stay for the meeting at 6:30p.m. The guest speakers are Kimberly Overman, Democratic candidate for US House Florida District 15 and Jan Schneider, Democratic candidate for US House Florida District 16. Get to know your candidates. For more, visit sedwcinfo@gmail.com or call or text (813)503-8639.

Shred-A-Thon

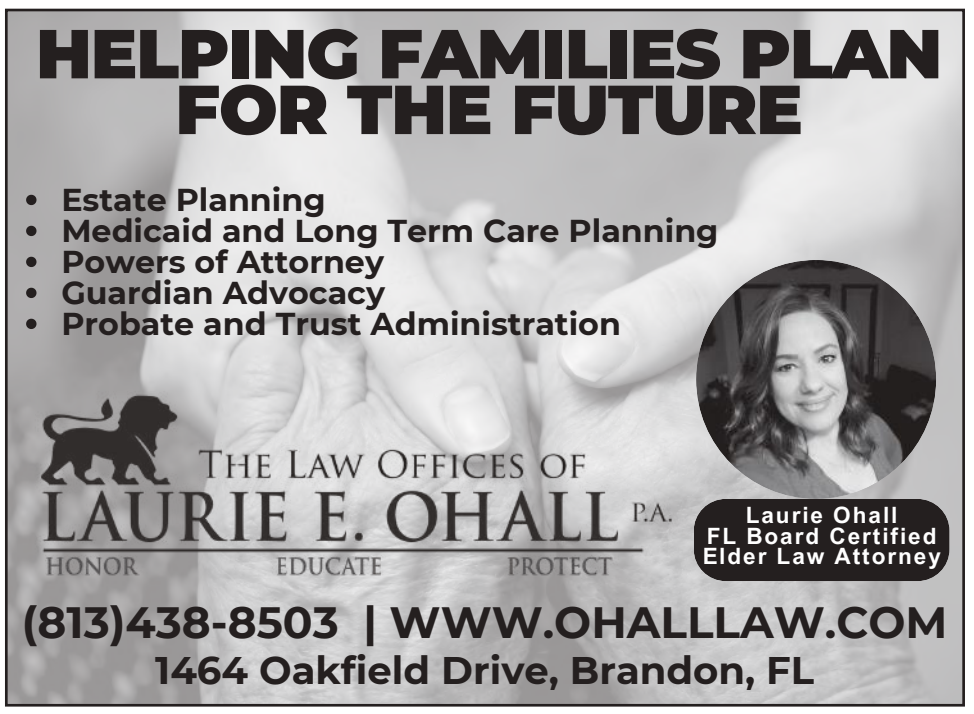
Bring your confidential documents for shredding in a safe and secure manor to Bloomingdale Golfers Club located at 4113 Great Golfers Place, in Valrico on Saturday, March 28. The free community Shred-a-thon will take place from 9-11a.m. and is sponsored by realtor, Mary West, contact her at mary.West@kw.com or call 813 763 9378. Please do not try and shred metal, lighters, trash or heavy plastics.

Music Bingo Fundraisers

Get ready for two evenings of fun and excitement at Bullfrog Creek Brewing, located at 3632 Lithia Pinecrest Rd., in Lithia. Enjoy a variety of musical genres as you play five games of music bingo. Kappa Upsilon Chapter of Kappa Delta Phi will present their event on March 6, starting promptly at 7p.m. Cards will be sold starting at 6:30p.m. Come early to secure your table and to purchase cards, this is a first come first served event. Raffle baskets and a 50/50 raffle will also be available.

On March 26, starting at 6:30p.m. the event is sponsored by Giddings Law Group and will benefit Seeds of Hope and Presbyterian Church of Bloomingdale. As well as bingo there will be raffle prizes and silent auctions.









HILLSBOROUGH AGENCIES HELP RESIDENTS FIGHT FRAUD

By Brad Stager



Hillsborough County is a fast-rising slice of the American pie, but beneath the prosperity a shadow economy of con artists exists, preying on residents' personal data and financial holdings. Against this threat, awareness and preparation can serve as defenses.

The jury duty scam targets the citizen's fear of the law, involving a phone call or text that lies about missing jury duty. There's a demand for immediate payment, often in the form of a gift card or wire transfer. According to Hillsborough County Sheriff Chad Chronister, that's a red flag for fraud.

"Legitimate courts will never ask for sensitive information or payment over the phone," he said in an official Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office YouTube video. "If you receive a call or a message about jury duty, take a moment to verify its authenticity."

You can verify the matter by calling the Hillsborough County Clerk of Court and Comptroller's Office at 813-276-8100, never using the number provided by the caller.

The hot real estate market means property is as good as gold, and criminals steal it by filing false documents that transfer a home to them. To be vigilant, a property owner should enroll in the fraud alert system offered by the Hillsborough County Clerk of Court and Comptroller's Office. This notification system provides an instant warning of office-related activity regarding their property. You can learn more about the property fraud alert service and register online at https://hillsclerk.com/.

Scams targeting human emotion are where the fraudster poses as a desperate grandchild, a lawyer or a cop and calls with a catastrophic tale of a fabricated crisis. They demand immediate, secret cash to resolve a disaster. It is an exploitation of the powerful obligation to family for quick, easy money. If a family member calls with an emergency, ask them a question only they would know the answer to, or simply call them back on a number you know is theirs.

Similarly, the romance scam involves a virtual life of faked intimacy, with the scammer inventing a financial emergency and begging the victim for money, promising a reunion that hinges on a timely bank transfer.

The essential rule for navigating the danger of fraud is virtually written in stone: Verify, don't trust. Never send money, gift cards or personal information based on a voice that called you, or a contact that appears randomly on a screen.

BRANDON ROTARY OPENS SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL SENIORS, AWARDS NEARLY $25,000

Staff Report



Photo Credit Linda Chion

Rotary Club members recognize 2025 scholarship recipients.

High school seniors across the Greater Brandon area are encouraged to apply for the Brandon Rotary Club Charity Fund Annual Scholarship, with applications due by 5 p.m. on Friday, April 10.

The scholarship program, established by the Rotary Club of Brandon, supports students who live in Brandon or attend high school within the Brandon area. In 2025, the charity fund awarded approximately $25,000 in scholarships to graduating seniors, continuing a long-standing commitment to education, leadership and community service.

Multiple scholarships are available to students who meet eligibility requirements, including residency within the defined Brandon-area boundaries, graduation as a current high school senior, a minimum 3.0 unweighted GPA, documented community service hours and acceptance into an accredited two or four-year college or university.

True to Rotary's mission, service is at the heart of the selection process. Applications are scored primarily on service to school and community, along with a student statement, a recommendation from a community service organization and academic achievement. An optional section allows applicants to be considered for the Sharon S. Sellers Memorial Scholarship, which emphasizes giving back to both community and country.

"All of our scholarship recipients demonstrate a strong commitment to service and leadership," said Chuck Burgess, CEO of High 5 Inc. "These students are already making a difference locally, and we're proud to help support their next steps."

Applications are reviewed by a committee of at least five individuals, which may include Rotarians, educators and charity fund board members. Final selections are made by the committee, and scholarship recipients will be notified directly.

Applicants must submit a single PDF document that includes the completed application, a verified community service time sheet, an official transcript and discipline record, proof of college acceptance and a letter of recommendation from a community service organization. Incomplete or late applications will not be considered. Paper submissions are not accepted.

All applications must be emailed to brccf.scholarship@gmail.com by the deadline.

Scholarship awards will be presented at a future ceremony at the Rivard-Simmons Rotary Event Center, with funds paid directly to recipients' college or university financial aid departments.

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Don't leave it to chance. If you want to make sure your assets are distributed according to your wishes when you pass away, it's important to review your beneficiary designations regularly.

Major changes to tax laws or major life events such as marriage, divorce, birth, adoption or a death in the family could mean a change is needed.

Why is it important to designate beneficiaries?

Designating beneficiaries is one of the easiest and most direct ways for you to pass along your assets to the people and/or organizations that mean the most to you. Beneficiary designations may also help avoid probating your assets upon your death.

We can work with you and your estate-planning team to ensure your account registrations and beneficiary designations support your wishes.

Questions you should consider before making or updating your beneficiary designations include:

- Who are my current primary and contingent beneficiaries?
- Do my current beneficiary designations reflect my wishes?
- Do I have any accounts without beneficiary designations that I want to update?
- Have I discussed any beneficiary special needs and the legal and tax consequences of my beneficiary designations with my estate-planning team?
- Are there any default beneficiary designations I need to be aware of contained in my retirement account's custodial agreement, insurance policy or annuity contract, or 529 plan prospectus?

I would be happy to sit down with you to discuss your current beneficiaries and potential next steps.

Edward Jones, its employees and financial advisors are not estate planners and cannot provide tax or legal advice. You should consult your estate-planning attorney or qualified tax advisor regarding your situation.

Please call or stop by today to schedule an appointment.



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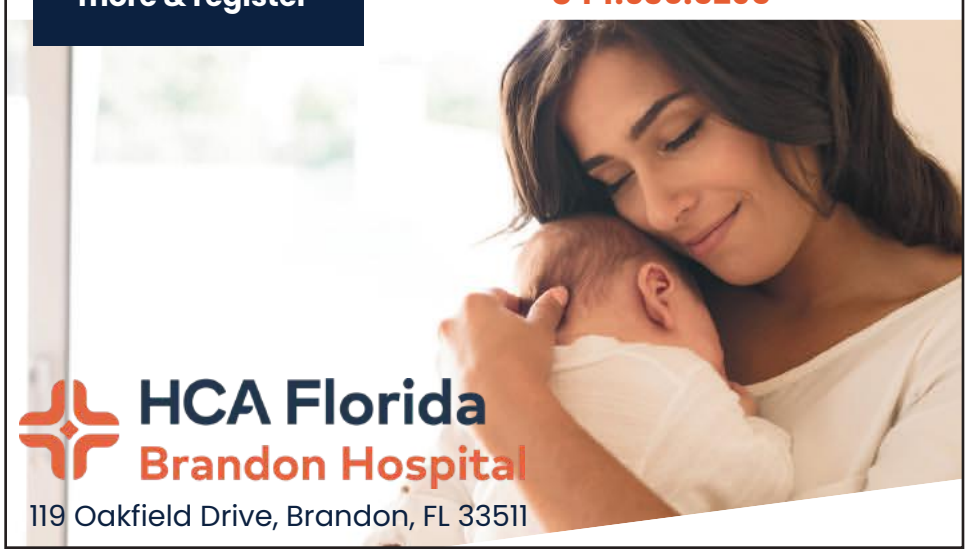
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TAMPA BAY CHAMBER BRINGS HOME NATIONAL ABILENE AWARD FOR MILITARY SUPPORT DURING HURRICANE RESPONSE

Staff Report



The Tampa Bay Chamber, South Tampa Chamber, Tampa Bay Defense Alliance, and the MacDill Support Group are proud to announce that the Tampa Bay region has been awarded the 2024 Abilene Trophy, recognizing the nation's most outstanding community support to an Air Mobility Command (AMC) base. The award was officially announced by the Abilene Military Affairs Committee in partnership with AMC and Air Force Reserve Command Public Affairs offices.

In the announcement, Abilene AMC Civic Leader Sam Nichols said, "For over eighty-five years, the broad-based communities in the greater Tampa area have delivered continuous support to meet the needs of Wing and Area Military families. Following Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton their incredible collaboration demonstrated their outstanding commitment to MacDill Air Force Base, its mission, their airmen, and families."

This prestigious award honors Tampa Bay's decades-long commitment to the Airmen and their families at MacDill Air Force Base including extraordinary collaboration in 2024 through AirFest, education initiatives, workforce programs, and an unprecedented community response following Hurricanes Helene and Milton.

The partnering organizations expressed collective pride in the recognition.

"We are honored to receive the Abilene Trophy, a testament to our community's longstanding commitment to MacDill Air Force Base and the families who call Military Bay, USA home," said Dr. Bob Rohrlack, President and CEO of the Tampa Bay Chamber. "This award celebrates the strength of our partnerships throughout Tampa Bay and the dedication of our business and civic leaders who consistently step forward in support of our military."

"The Abilene Trophy honors communities that demonstrate exceptional, sustained support for their Air Mobility Command base. Tampa Bay's partnership with MacDill Air Force Base is part of who we are, and we are proud to see that commitment recognized. For more than eight decades, our community has stood beside the men and women of MacDill, supporting their mission, their families, and their vital role in our nation's defense," said Kelly Flannery, President and Chief Executive Officer, of the South Tampa Chamber.

"TBDA expresses our sincere appreciation to the Abilene Military Affairs Committee for their selection of Tampa Bay as the recipient of the 2024 Abilene Trophy," Maj Gen (ret) Larry Martin, president of TBDA, said. "For decades, the Tampa Bay Region has demonstrated its enduring commitment to our military members, their families and the air mobility mission, but never so much as before and after the devastation of 2024's hurricanes Helene and Milton."

For more information, visit the website www.tampabaychamber.com.

PAMELLA LEE PHOTOGRAPHY CAPTURES MORE THAN JUST MEMORIES FOR HER CLIENTS

By Libby Hopkins

PamElla Winslow, a local photographer and the owner of PamElla Lee Photography, has the ability to catch some of the most amazing moments in people's lives.



PamElla Winslow loves being able to capture the fun and core memories of her clients. She is a photographer and the owner of PamElla Lee Photography.



"My journey began as an amateur photographer just wanting to take better pictures for my growing church," Winslow said. "As I supplied more photographs of events and staff for slideshows and marketing material, people began to ask if I would also make family portraits as well. From there, my photography business began."

As she learned more about photography, she realized she wanted to learn more to further her photography career, so she returned to school to complete her Bachelor of Fine Arts in digital photography.

"I finished my BFA at the age of 52 from The Art Institute of Tampa and launched in 2016," Winslow said. "Attaining my degree was actually the beginning of lifelong learning and growth to continue bringing technical excellence to my work. I've not stopped running and I've never looked back; maybe glanced in the 'rear-view mirror,' but no regrets."

Winslow has received awards for her photography from the American Advertising Federation of Tampa Bay and is a member of Professional Photographers of America, the American Advertising Federation, the Society for Photographic Education and the American Society of Media Photographers. Her photos have also appeared in Tampa Bay Business & Wealth magazine.

What Winslow loves most about being a photographer is working with her clients and catching the fun or core memories in the photos she takes of them.

"I have always been a people person and love to capture genuine expressions, whether formally posed or candid, editorial images," Winslow said. "The most important thing to me is the experience my clients have when working with me to produce their pictorial story. Most are not comfortable in front of the camera, so it is important to me to put everyone at ease while participating in a session."

Keeping things local is important to Winslow as well.

"Being a local business owner in our community it extremely important to me," Winslow said. "My clients are part of this community, and they allow me to be part of their most precious moments. They allow me capture more than just memories."

If you would like to learn more about PamElla Lee Photography or hire her for your next event, you can visit her website at www.pamellalee.net or call 813-372-7916.

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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. $459,900



This nearly new townhome outshines others! You'll find several reasons, but it starts with added sunlight, literally; end units like this get more windows thanks to having only 1 side up against a neighbor! It's a 3/2.5/2 with 1,860 SF in Madison Village, a small community in SE Tampa. $325,000

Just sold in FishHawk! Size, surroundings & some of the best schools in Florida drew my buyer clients to this home in FishHawk West. It's a 2,660-SF 5/3.5/2 just a short walk from Stowers Elementary, & they know how much their child will love it here. I negotiated a new roof for them for added value. $450,000



Pending sale FishHawk! In Encore, the 55-plus haven with resort-style amenities, here's the advantage of a minimal-maintenance villa! From roof & yard to exclusive club & community events, your comfort is covered in this well-appointed 2/2/2 with an extra room that makes the most of 1,600 SF. $350,000



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SUMMER CAMPS 2026







Special Section, More Inside!

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SUMMER 2026: DISCOVER THE BEST LOCAL CAMPS FOR LEARNING, ADVENTURE AND FUN



Spring is almost here, and summer is just around the corner — which means now is the perfect time to start planning a season full of discovery, creativity and fun. To help families get a head start, the Osprey Observer team has once again rounded up the best local programs for our annual Summer Camp Guide, a special pullout section designed to connect students with unforgettable summer opportunities across the community.

From performing arts and STEM to sports, outdoor adventures and enrichment programs, this year's guide highlights camps for nearly every interest and age group. Budding performers can take center stage at Music Showcase and the Florida Academy of Performing Arts, where children immerse themselves in acting, singing and dance through themed musical theater camps. Young artists can also explore dance, theater and music through the Patel Conservatory, which offers more than 100 camps and classes taught by working professionals. Music lovers won't want to miss School of Rock, featuring genre-themed camps for ages 7–18, or Center For Dance Arts, known for its wide range of dance instruction and award-winning competition teams.

For hands-on creativity, AR Workshop provides engaging DIY camps that build confidence and imagination, while Camp Mirage keeps kids moving with action-packed mornings full of creativity and play.

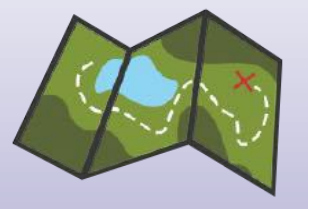
Families looking for outdoor or traditional camp experiences will find plenty of options, including Cedarkirk Camp & Conference Center, Circle F Dude Ranch and Busch Gardens Tampa Bay, which blends thrilling rides with animal encounters and education. Horse lovers can saddle up at TLC's Gypsy Haven, while sports-minded campers can stay active through Fellowship Church sports camps or daily adventures at High 5 Inc..

Academic and STEM-focused families will appreciate enrichment options from Mathnasium, Skill Samurai and Code Wiz, while Kids 'R' Kids Circa FishHawk delivers themed camps that blend learning with fun. With more than 25 locations, YMCA of Tampa Bay also offers something for every camper, from arts and gymnastics to zip-lining and pool time.

Be sure to explore the full Summer Camp Guide for dates, pricing and registration details — and don't forget to enter our Summer Camp Sweepstakes, where one lucky family will win a free week of camp. With so many outstanding options, Summer 2026 is shaping up to be one to remember.

Families are encouraged to register early, as many camps fill quickly and offer early-bird discounts, scholarships or flexible scheduling options. Summer camps provide more than entertainment — they help children build confidence, friendships and lifelong skills while giving parents peace of mind. Whether your child wants to explore a new passion or deepen an existing one, this guide is your go-to resource for planning a summer filled with growth, joy and memorable experiences close to home.









SUMMER CAMPS 2026



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DANCE, THEATER AND MUSIC PROGRAMS OFFERED AT STRAZ CENTER THIS SUMMER

By Olivia Clark



Registration for the 2026 Summer Camps and Classes is now open at the Patel Conservatory, the accredited performing arts school at the Straz Center for the Performing Arts in downtown Tampa. The Summer session runs Monday, June 1 through Friday, July 31, and the programs in dance, theater and music are carried out for students aged 3 through adult.

Each summer, the conservatory opens its doors to those who want a first experience in the arts and to those who desire more advanced, preprofessional training. Families from across the Tampa Bay area enroll in the programs, which offer both creative enrichment and more formalized skill development during the summer months. Classes are conducted by working artists and experienced instructors in a professional performing arts environment.

They can take dance courses in the Next Generation Ballet Summer Intensive, which has five, three-, and two-week sessions for ages 11 through college, and dorm housing is provided for older students. Younger dancers can join the Junior Intensive and other camps appropriate for their age, designed to enhance their technique, strength, and performance quality.

These students will get the chance to rehearse and perform in fully staged productions like Seussical, Jr. and Aladdin KIDS in which they will get acting, singing and stage movement experience. There are other specialty camps for fundamental acting skills and Shakespeare, and older students have the chance to audition for the Broadway Intensive production of Catch Me If You Can.

Music offerings include jazz, choral and chamber intensives, a singer-songwriter camp, and a number of workshops focusing on particular instruments. Younger students also learn about composition, rhythm and collaboration through weekly camps like The Science of Music and World Drumming and Storytelling.

Tuition rates differ for each program, with most week-long camps costing $475 and multiweek intensive programs charged at higher rates depending on the length of the program. There are scholarships with the financial aid priority deadline being Friday, February 28. Auditions or placements are required for some programs before registration, and early enrollment is recommended since enrollment is limited.

For a complete schedule or to register, go to www.patelconservatory.asapconnected.com or www.patelconservatory.org. For more information, call 222-1040 or email admissions@strazcenter.org.

CEDARKIRK BLENDS FAITH, ADVENTURE AND LEADERSHIP FOR SUMMER 2026

By Olivia Clark



Tucked away on 170 wooded acres along the Alafia River, Cedarkirk Camp and Conference Center continues its longstanding tradition of offering a place apart for children and teens to grow in faith and community. Owned by the Presbyteries of Tampa Bay and Peace River, Cedarkirk has served the region since 1971 and welcomes more than 1,000 campers each summer.

While its residential camps remain a cornerstone of the ministry, Cedarkirk is placing added emphasis on its growing day camp program. Mandy Goff, Program Director, said the camp launched day camp two years ago and saw participation more than double in its second year. In response to family needs, Cedarkirk has added early drop-off from 8-8:30 a.m. and late pick-up from 5-5:30 p.m. for an additional fee.

"We are really trying to focus on our day camp program and make it affordable for families in this area," said Goff.

Day camp serves students who have completed kindergarten through fifth grade. Cedarkirk is also piloting a small middle school day camp during the final week of summer, Monday, July 27 to Friday, July 31, with limited space available. Residential camps continue to run Sunday to Friday for students who have completed third through 12th grade, while Explorer Camp provides a two-night introduction to overnight camp for children who have completed first through third grade.

Goff explained that a typical day camp day begins at 9 a.m., with drop-off beginning at 8:30 a.m. Campers join residential campers for morning songs before rotating through scheduled activity blocks that include zip lining, canoeing on the river, climbing the rock wall, arts and crafts and hiking. Campers swim daily, weather permitting, and share family-style lunches together. Each afternoon concludes with Bible study, worship and snack before pickup from 4:30-5 p.m.

Goff said creating community is central to the experience. Technology is not permitted, encouraging campers to build friendships, engage with nature and participate in shared traditions such as group songs and family-style meals. With approximately 30 summer staff members and small day camp groups of 12-14 campers per session, Cedarkirk continues to prioritize connection, outdoor adventure and spiritual growth.

Llearn more or register at www.cedarkirk.campbrainregistration.com.

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MATHNASIUM
The Math Learning Center



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A LOOK INTO HIGH 5'S SUMMER CAMP PROGRAM FOR AGES 5-12

By Emily Harper



High 5 Inc. is a multipurpose facility committed to positively impacting the community. Located in Brandon, High 5's programs are divided into five pillars: learn to swim, special needs education, after-school care, sports and recreation and community partnerships.

From Monday, June 1, through Friday, August 7, High 5 offers summer camp for ages 5-12. This weekly program is Monday through Friday, 7 a.m.-6 p.m., for the main campus, and Monday through Thursday, 7 a.m.-6 p.m., for the off-site campus at Bevis Elementary School.



A typical day at the main summer camp consists of a wide variety of engaging activities. During the day, campers rotate through swimming, outdoor sports, gym games, playground time, arts and crafts, hands-on S.T.E.M experiences and Gamers Grotto (a supervised and age-appropriate video game room). The off-site location's camp is similar in structure, minus the pool. However, it does offer water activities on some days of the camp.

"What truly sets our camp apart is the experience we're able to provide on our beautiful, expansive campus and the wide range of activities we offer. Our programming is thoughtfully designed to balance fun with learning, physical activity with creativity and structure with exploration," said Jada Spano, vice president of operations.

Families can expect a safe and fun environment where children play and learn while making lifelong summer memories. High 5's experienced staff creates a welcoming atmosphere, keeping safety as their top priority.

"We focus on creating a safe, inclusive and supportive environment where every child feels valued and encouraged to grow," said Spano.

One of the most anticipated moments of camp is the 'World's Largest Swim Lesson'. Happening on Thursday, June 25, this global event promotes water safety and drowning prevention.

Spano stated, "Our campers love being part of something so meaningful and memorable, and families appreciate the important life-saving skills it reinforces."

Registration for the summer camp is now open on the website at www.high-5inc.org/camp. The main campus camp costs $175 per week, with a one-time $40 registration fee for the summer, while the off-site camp is $90 per week.

MATHNASIUM BRANDON CAMPS KEEP SKILLS SHARP DURING SUMMER BREAK

By Libby Hopkins



Summer is a season full of possibilities, longer days, new experiences and the perfect opportunity for kids to grow in confidence. It's also a powerful time to strengthen math skills in a way that feels positive, engaging and stress-free. At Mathnasium, summer learning doesn't pause; it accelerates, giving students the chance to build skills, explore new ideas and feel proud of their progress.

"Summer is one of the most powerful times for growth," said Mathnasium owner Becky McDaniels. "Without the pressure of school, kids have the space to truly understand math, and that's where Mathnasium shines. It's all about momentum and meeting students exactly where they are, strengthening skills and building confidence so they return to school prepared and proud of themselves. After 12-plus years with Mathnasium, it never gets old hearing students tell us after the first nine weeks how excited they are about their success and the confidence to raise their hand on day one."

While some students use summer to reinforce essential skills, others are ready to push ahead, and younger learners are just beginning to form the foundations that will support future success. Mathnasium supports students at every stage of learning, from building foundations to tackling advanced challenges.



At Mathnasium, summer learning is never one-size-fits-all. Every student begins with a personalized assessment that identifies strengths, gaps and learning styles. From there, McDaniels and her team create an individualized learning plan tailored specifically to each child. Students who need extra support receive targeted instruction to rebuild confidence and close learning gaps. Students who are on track keep their skills sharp and steady. Advanced learners are challenged with deeper concepts that keep them engaged and motivated. And its youngest 'Great Foundations' students develop number sense, problem-solving skills and a love of math that sets them up for long-term success.

Summer is also the ideal time to get ahead without pressure. Mathnasium sessions are engaging, encouraging and flexible, making it easy to balance learning with vacations, camps and family time.

"We're proud to be a Step Up for Students provider, making personalized math learning accessible for more families," added McDaniels. Learn more about Summer Camps at www.mathnasium.com/math-centers/brandon or call 813-655-6284. Mathnasium is located at 1048 E. Bloomingdale Ave. in Valrico.





SUMMER CAMPS 2026



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FLORIDA ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS OFFERS FUN MUSICAL SUMMER CAMPS

By Libby Hopkins

The Florida Academy of Performing Arts (FAOPA) is a local nonprofit organization that was established to support the performing arts through programs at the academy and in the Brandon community.



FAOPA is committed to providing extraordinary theater experiences that educate, challenge and inspire students and their surrounding communities. FAOPA fosters self-discovery, creativity, confidence, group responsibility and pride in accomplishment.

"FAOPA celebrates the professional artistic disciplines of music, dance and the visual arts," said Danielle Sanchez, academy director of FAOPA. "We strive to be a model of excellence in theatre for all our audiences."

FAOPA and Music Showcase have offered summer camps, day camps and musical theater camps for many years.

"The day camps consist of singing, dancing, arts and crafts, intro into theater through improv," Sanchez said. "Our musical theater camps are for all ages and skill levels. We offer a variety of shows throughout the summer. Students work on choreography, blocking, stage direction and character development. Throughout the process, we watch students grow in confidence and self-esteem as they become blooming actors on the stage."

FAOPA is currently working on the camps they will be offering this summer to the community.

"We will offer musical theater camps and day camps," Sanchez said. "Our musical theater camps are two weeks long. Day camps are one week long. We have our middle school/high school groups that meet in the afternoon/evening."

The cost for musical theater camp is $295 plus a service fee. Day camps are from 9 a.m.-1 p.m. for half day and from 9 a.m.-5 p.m. for whole day. Day camp is for kindergartners through age 10, and the cost is $230 plus service fee.

"Parents love our musical theater camps," Sanchez said. "They love watching where their student starts and end up as well as seeing the difference. They love to watch their children grow in self-esteem and find the confidence to stand on the stage with their peers in the show. ."

If you would like to learn more about FAOPA and the camps it will be offering this summer, you can visit its website at www.faopa.org/ or call 813-490-ARTS (2787). FAOPA is located at 402 Oakfield Dr. in Brandon.

TEN WEEKS OF FUN AWAIT FAMILIES AT TAMPA YMCA SUMMER CAMPS

By Olivia Clark



Summer will arrive soon, and the Tampa Metropolitan Area YMCA is getting ready for another season of adventure, learning, and friendship. Registration is now open for Summer Camp at Campo Family YMCA, Spurlino Family YMCA, and North Brandon Family YMCA. Campers ages 6-15 can enjoy 10 weeks of fun activities in a safe and organized setting.

Each location offers a unique mix of Signature Camp and specialty options. Signature Camp allows kids to rotate through activities such as swimming, STEM projects, arts and crafts, outdoor education, and team-building games. Counselors support campers throughout daily activities designed to build confidence, promote friendships, and keep campers active during the summer.

Campo Family YMCA in Valrico features specialty camps that include sports, creative arts, and teen leadership programs. Spurlino Family YMCA in Riverview offers many athletic and enrichment camps, along with popular options for teens. North Brandon Family YMCA in Seffner provides sports, drama, gymnastics, and adaptive camps, ensuring families can find a program that fits their child's interests and abilities.

Teens have new opportunities this year, with three unique experiences tailored for ages 13-15. Programs focused on leadership, such as Junior Lifeguard Camp and Counselor in Training, help participants build responsibility, communication skills, and hands-on experience that lasts beyond summer. The Junior Teen Camp program introduces participants to outdoor exploration, basic archery, scenic trails, and lake adventures while fostering confidence and creativity.

Families can enhance the regular 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. camp day with optional add-ons, which vary by location. These may include swim lessons, open swim, sports, high ropes, horseback riding, and gymnastics. During registration, families can choose available add-ons specific to their YMCA. A nonrefundable deposit of $10 per week, per camper is due at registration, with separate deposits for specific teen leadership programs.

Tampa YMCA camps are ACA-accredited, which means they have gone through a thorough review by the American Camp Association focusing on health, safety, and program quality standards. This distinction places Tampa YMCA camps among a select group of accredited day camps in Florida.

Registration is available online at the website www.tampaymca.org, where families can view session weeks and age group details. Sessions fill up quickly.



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CIRCLE F DUDE RANCH CELEBRATES 75 YEARS OF ADVENTURE AND TRADITION

By Kelly Wise Valdes



Circle F Dude Ranch Camp is excited to celebrate its 75th year, marking a milestone for the Lake Wales camp that has welcomed generations of young people. Camp Director Benjamin Moss said the camp's longevity comes from staying true to its mission while adapting to the needs of each new generation.

"Circle F has remained special because it has always stayed true to its purpose — helping young people grow in confidence, character, and independence — while thoughtfully evolving with each generation," Moss said. "Since 1952, families have trusted us to provide a place where kids can unplug, build real friendships and discover who they are beyond screens and schedules."

During the summer, Circle F welcomes about 200 campers per session, evenly split between boys and girls. Campers spend their days immersed in activities such as horseback riding, waterfront programs, arts, team and individual sports, ax throwing, paintball, boating and climbing towers.

The camp sits on 500 acres of southern live oak forest surrounding a spring-fed private lake, creating a scenic backdrop for exploration and adventure.

Many of Circle F's traditions have remained unchanged, Moss said, including opening and closing campfires, cabin living, horseback riding and more. "Those moments connect today's campers with generations who sat around the same fire before them," he said.

Moss said climbing, adventure sports, leadership pathways and more intentional skill development have helped shape the modern Circle F. "The balance between tradition and innovation is what defines modern Circle F, honoring our roots while preparing campers for the world ahead," he said.

Circle F will host an open house in May to give families a firsthand look at camp life. Moss said visitors can expect tours, staff introductions and opportunities to explore activity areas. "Visitors will tour cabins and activity areas, meet our leadership team and staff, see programs in action, and get a real sense of daily life at Circle F."

For more information, visit the website at www.CircleFDudeRanchCamp.com or call 863-676-4113.





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CAMP CRISTINA OFFERS ADVENTURE & LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT ALL SUMMER

By Olivia Clark





At Camp Cristina in Riverview, the summer is set for exploration, skill enhancement and outdoor fun. Registrations are now open for the camp's 10-week summer program designed to offer hands-on and natural confidence-inspiring experience.

Signature Camp at Camp Cristina features a rotating line-up of activities for children that take place all day long and include swimming, STEM projects, arts and crafts, outdoor education and team-building games. Campers are closely monitored and grouped according to age, with counselors providing guidance in a structured environment where children can remain physically active and mentally stimulated.

Camp Cristina has a variety of specialty camps for older campers with particular interests. In Horse Camp, participants learn the basics of grooming, go on trail rides, and gain confidence working with horses. Swim Camp focuses on water safety and swim instruction with certified staff to help campers build skills in and around the water. Lifeguard Camp offers aquatics leadership skills, teamwork, and hands-on training that generates responsibility and prepares young adults for future certification opportunities.

Campers can also take part in Adventure Camp, which includes activities like archery, exploring the lake, and team challenges that promote cooperation and problem-solving. The Counselors in Training and Junior Lifeguards programs offer leadership skills, communication skills, and hands-on training in a nurturing environment focusing on growth and responsibility.

Thus, families can add on to the traditional camp day, which runs from Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., with weekly add-ons such as swim lessons, gymnastics and extended care. Add-ons vary according to the age group and availability and can be chosen during registration. There is a nonrefundable deposit at registration and a separate deposit for select teen leadership programs.

Camp Cristina is one of the Tampa YMCA's ACA-accredited camps, which is reflected in the national standards for safety, staff training, and program quality. This places the camp among the few day camps in Florida, meeting the standards set by the American Camp Association.

For further information or to register, go online to https://www.tampaymca.org/letscamp or the Tampa YMCA registration portal. Families are advised to register their children at the earliest opportunity to avoid missing out on available sessions.

ULTIMATE SUMMER WITH BUSCH GARDENS TAMPA BAY CAMPS

Staff Report



Your search for summer plans is over. Families looking ahead to summer camp 2026 will find a wide range of engaging, educational and adventure-filled options at Busch Gardens Tampa Bay, where camps are designed for animal lovers, thrill seekers and curious minds of all ages.

Busch Gardens summer camps offer children and teens the chance to unplug and connect with animals, nature and one another in a dynamic, hands-on environment. Campers explore wildlife, learn about conservation and animal care, enjoy thrilling rides and shows, and build friendships that often last long after summer ends. These experiences are not only fun, but also meaningful, helping campers grow in confidence, curiosity and teamwork.

Busch Gardens' summer programs are led by carefully selected, highly trained professionals who know how to balance education with excitement. The park offers a variety of educational summer day camps for students from kindergarten through 12th grade, with sessions tailored to different age groups and interests. Campers enjoy close-up animal encounters, behind-the-scenes experiences, themed games and crafts, age-appropriate rides, live shows, and interactive learning activities. Each camper also receives souvenir keepsakes, including a camp T-shirt and water bottle, along with opportunities to return to the park after camp hours.

For older students seeking a deeper adventure, overnight resident camps provide a one-of-a-kind sleepaway experience. Based in a secure on-site lodge, these all-inclusive camps immerse rising seventh through 12th graders in a blend of wildlife education and adrenaline-pumping attractions. Campers gain exclusive access to animal care areas, interact with park professionals, and experience the park in ways not available to regular guests.

Busch Gardens camps are accredited by the American Camping Association, offering parents added confidence in program quality, safety and staff training. Priority access to attractions, enriching educational content and unforgettable behind-the-scenes moments consistently place these camps among the top summer programs in the region.

With options ranging from early elementary students to teens—and even specialized programs for those exploring future careers—Busch Gardens Tampa Bay continues to be a standout destination for summer camp 2026 registration opportunities. Register at www. buschgardens.com.









& ACTIVITY GUIDE



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IMPACT TEEN SUMMER STAFF PROGRAM INSPIRES HEALTHY CHOICES

Staff Report



This summer, teens across Hillsborough County will have the chance to make a real difference through Teen Impact Summer Staff.

Teen Impact Summer Staff is made up of 20–35 students who travel to middle and high school youth-based organizations to perform a powerful, skit-based presentation. Their message focuses on avoiding high-risk behaviors and choosing a healthy lifestyle. What makes this program unique is that it is student-led. Teens speak to other teens in a way that feels honest and relatable. When students see people their own age choosing positive paths, it helps them understand that risk avoidance is possible. The goal is to inspire young people to build healthy relationships and make smart choices that lead to a strong and positive future.

Angie Kagey, Executive Director of IMPACT, explained, "We are the prevention arm, encouraging teens to make healthy choices, before other intervention may be required." Since 1998, the organization has served the Hillsborough County community with the mission to educate, equip, empower and support students, parents and teachers in the area of sexual risk avoidance and healthy relationships. Over the years, IMPACT has reached thousands of families through school programs, summer staff presentations and community events.

Teen Impact Summer Staff is also a great opportunity for students who need community service hours for the Bright Futures Scholarship Program. Students entering ninth grade in the fall or older are invited to apply. During the eight-week summer program, each participant earns approximately 100 community service hours while building leadership skills, confidence and public speaking experience.

The program begins June 1 and runs through July 24. The first week students train to prepare them to present the skits and speak in front of audiences. After training, presentation days are Monday through Thursday, with every other Friday offering an optional fun activity. The application deadline is Friday, March 27. Applications can be found at www.whatisimpact.com/students. Completed applications should be emailed to Joy Miller at jmiller@whatisimpact.com.

CENTER FOR DANCE ARTS PLANS TO STEAL THE SPOTLIGHT THIS SEASON

By Mylena C. Ferman



This March, the Center For Dance Arts' VIP Team gets to showcase their skills at the first mandatory competition of the season! Located in Brandon, the dance studio provides students with a safe place to grow as both dancers and people.

"I think it's important that we teach them not just the importance of dance," Christi Furgason, assistant director and studio manager of the Center For Dance Arts, said, "but how dance can shape you as a person in the outside world."

The VIP Team is the Center For Dance Arts' competitive dance team. Each season, the VIP Team learns new routines to compete against other studios. There are four regional competitions and a national competition, with various optional competitions that the dancers are not required to attend.

"We want to go for first [place], but it's also about the experience," Furgason said, "and making sure they grow not just in dance but also in life."

Once a week, the VIP Team has a class focused on team building and social skills. Activities can include team scavenger hunts, where everyone must be included or risk losing all earned clues and restarting, or obstacle courses guided by a peer on the sidelines.

"Afterwards, we come together, and we're like, 'OK, so what worked and what didn't?'" Furgason said.

Those who want a taste of the spotlight can join the Center For Dance Arts on Thursday, March 12, for a bingo night at Bullfrog Creek Brewing Co. The fundraiser is open to anyone looking to support the dancers. The doors open at 6:30 p.m., with bingo beginning at 7 p.m.

This season, the VIP Team boasts about 15 dancers, primarily between ages 9-14 years old.

While auditions for this season's competition team have passed, auditions for next season's VIP competition team are currently set for Friday, May 15. The audition schedule for ages 4-11 is 5:30-7 p.m., and those ages 12-18 audition from 7-8:30 p.m.

For more information about the Center for Dance Arts, please visit www.mycfda.com, call 813-657-1500, follow its social media pages on Instagram @cfdaofficial or Facebook at www.facebook.com/center-4dancearts/.

Music & Theater Summer Camps

The Florida Academy of Performing Arts



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SUMMER CAMPS 2026

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CEDARKIRK, CIRCLE F DUDE, PATEL, MATHNASIUM AND MORE....

Compiled By Jenny Bennett

Cedarkirk Camp & Conference Center

Cedarkirk Camp & Conference Center, located on 170 acres of woodlands, wetlands and uplands near the Alafia River, will have summer overnight and day camps starting on Sunday, June 7, and finishing on Friday, July 31. Campers can sign up for a week or the whole summer. Day camp is available for campers who have completed kindergarten up to those who have completed fifth grade and is priced at $230 per week. Day campers must bring their own lunch. Overnight camp is available for campers who have completed first through 12th grade and starts at $555. Cedarkirk is located at 1920 Streetman Dr. in Lithia and can be reached at 813-685-4224. For more information and to register, visit www.cedarkirk.org.

Circle F Dude Ranch

Circle F Dude Ranch, located in Lake Wales, welcomes boys and girls from all over the United States and the world for one to three-week sleepaway camp sessions. Kids range in age from 6-16. Circle F fosters grit, growth and a love for the outdoors. With the perfect blend of Western flair and classic camp fun, it gives kids the kind of summer they'll never forget. Visit Circle F Dude Ranch for an open house on May 9, from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. meet the leadership team, try activities and learn about summers on the ranch, RSVP at admin.gazeboevents.com. For more and to sign up, visit www.circlefduderanchcamp.com.

Mathnasium

Summer is the perfect time for kids to grow in confidence and strengthen math skills without pressure. At Mathnasium, summer learning accelerates with personalized plans designed for every stage — from building foundations to tackling advanced challenges. Students receive targeted support, stay sharp or move ahead while enjoying engaging, flexible sessions that fit busy summer schedules. Parents often see gains not just in skills but also in confidence and attitude. This summer, help your child return to school prepared, motivated and excited about math. To find a location near you, please visit www.mathnasium.com.

The Patel Conservatory

The Straz Center's Patel Conservatory offers arts education courses and programs in dance, theater and music, with 100-plus camps and classes available. Students are instructed by passionate, working artists with a taste array of professional performance experience and exemplary curriculum vitae. Running from Monday, June 1, to Friday, July 31, full and half-day camps are available weekly for ages 4-18. The cost varies depending on the camp; financial aid and scholarships are available. Visit the website at www.patelconservatory.org or call 813-222-1040. Open Houses are scheduled for Sat., March 7, from 9-10 a.m. and Thurs,, May 14, from 5-6 p.m.

Busch Gardens

For more than 25 years, Busch Gardens Tampa Bay has provided children with inspiring, exciting and educational experiences through some of the best Tampa summer camp options. There are a wide variety of summer day camp options to fit your child's grade level and interests. One of the reasons to choose Busch Gardens as your summer camp include it being accredited by the American Camping Association, meaning parents can trust that the camp meets high standards for safety, staff training and program quality. Also, campers get to enjoy the adrenaline rush of rides as well as the unique opportunity to meet animals up close. Beyond the fun, campers experience activities that are both enriching and educational, providing a well-rounded experience.

For schedules, details and registration information, visit the park website at www.buschgardens.com.

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& ACTIVITY GUIDE





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ROCK SCHOOL, HORSE CAMP, BUSCH GARDENS, SKILLS & MORE...

Compiled By Jenny Bennett

Camp Mirage

Camp Mirage is an activity-based summer camp built around movement, creativity and hands-on fun. Its promise is simple — campers will go home tired, a little dirty, smiling and excited to come back the next day. It offers half-day camps for grades K and up, running from 9 a.m.-12 Noon, with before and after-care available from 7:30 a.m.- 5:30 p.m. Weekly tuition ranges from $125-$185 depending on age group, a membership discount program is available which provides 10 percent off tuition and a reduced rate for before and after care. Camp Mirage is located at 2913 John Moore Rd. in Brandon. Visit www.campmiragebrandon.com or call 813-825-2234.

Fellowship Church

Fellowship Church, located at 15326 FishHawk Blvd., in Lithia will be holding a weekly sports summer camp from Monday, June 1, through Thursday, July 23. Camp will be Mondays through Thursdays from 9 a.m.-12:30 p.m. and will cost $150, with a sibling discount available. Campers must bring drinks and a snack, as well as wear sports attire; a camp shirt will be provided. Visit its website at www.fellowship.church or call 813-655-7431.

Music Showcase And The Florida Academy Of Performing Arts

Music Showcase and the Florida Academy of Performing Arts (FAOPA) will host their annual summer camp this summer starting on Monday, June 1. Campers will be immersed in acting, singing, dancing and more throughout the summer. In Musical Theater Camp, campers will learn about working collaboratively, the art of stage character, voice projection, props and working with a set, with productions for all ages and skill levels. FAOPA's day camp will include activities to explore instruments, acting, singing and art, with themed weeks like Harry Potter, Wicked, superheroes and more. Free early drop-off, free late pickup, scholarships and sibling discounts. Music Showcase is located at 402 Oakfield Dr. in Brandon. Visit www.faopa.org.

Skill Samurai

Skill Samurai's STEM Camps give students hands-on experience with today's most exciting technologies. Campers explore Minecraft and Roblox through creative game design, learn responsible content creation in YouTube Studio and discover the fundamentals of artificial intelligence. Designed for curious minds, these camps build problem-solving, creativity and confidence in a fun, supportive environment. Perfect for beginners and experienced students alike, Skill Samurai helps children turn interest in technology into real-world skills that last a lifetime locally. Visit www.skillsamurai.com/fl-brandon/camps or call 813-761-2832

TLC's Gypsy Haven Riding Camps

Come and learn about horse riding and grooming at TLC's Gypsy Haven's summer camp, which offers hands-on experience and education. Camps run from Tuesday-Thursday from 9a.m. - 2p.m. from Tuesday, June 2, through Thursday, June 25, and Tuesday, July 7, through Thursday, July 30. Group lessons are also available on Fridays and Saturdays. Visit the website at www.tlcsfarms.com or call Tammi on 813-842-4236 for information. TLC's Gypsy Haven is located at 4325 Keysville Rd. in Lithia.

School of Rock Valrico

Let your budding musicians join School of Rock this summer for a variety of music-themed camps, including Taylor Swift and Classic Rock Rewind. There are different themes for different age groups, with camps suitable for ages 7-18. Camps are available for full or half days, with the earliest available drop-off being at 8:45 a.m.

School of Rock is located at 3244 Lithia Pinecrest Rd., #104, in Valrico. Visit www.schoolofrock.com/locations/valrico or call 813-397-8828.







SUMMER CAMPS 2026

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YMCA, CODE WIZ, AR WORKSHOP, VIBE CAMP, HIGH 5 INC. & MORE

Compiled By Jenny Bennett

High 5 Inc.

Brandon's High 5 Inc. is inviting students to embark on an exciting and adventurous journey where your child will experience the thrill of summer camp. Daily activities will include pool time, outdoor play, field games, arts and crafts and more, including field trips.

Camp is offered Monday through Friday from 7 a.m.-6 p.m. at High 5 Inc., located at 405 Beverly Blvd. in Brandon. Campers can sign up for individual weeks or throughout the entire summer. Visit www.high5inc.org or call 813-689-0908.



YMCA Summer Camp

With over 25 different summer camp options throughout the Tampa YMCA area, there's something for every camper to enjoy. From art and gymnastics to zip-lining and splashing in its pools, the Y is the ultimate summer destination with friends, fun and adventure. Summer camps start on Monday, June 2, and run all summer. Register at www.tampaymca.org/letscamp.

Code Wiz

Code Wiz, located at 16132 Churchview Dr., Ste. 105, in Lithia, teaches coding and robotics to children, its camps are hands-on, student-driven and designed to foster curiosity and independence. Campers are encouraged to explore, problem-solve and create at their own pace, with guidance from coaches to support their individual learning journeys. Camps will run throughout the summer and are available for mornings, afternoons or full days. Visit online at www. codewiz.com/fishhawk-fl.

Kids 'R' Kids

Looking for a summer camp that combines fun, education, and adventure? Look no further! Kids 'R' Kids Learning Academies has created the perfect summer escape for kids to learn, grow and explore in a safe and exciting environment. Camp VIBE involves a new theme designed to empower campers through amusing activities, fascinating field trips, timely lessons in teamwork and so much more. Campers will have their eyes opened to limitless possibilities and their minds focused to ignite their passions. Let them catch the VIBE of summer! Kids 'R' Kids is located at 5815 Kids Crossing Dr. in Lithia. For more information, visit its website at www.kidsrkids.com/circa-fishhawk/programs/summer-camp.

AR Workshop

AR Workshop is a craft studio offering hands-on classes for campers ages 5-17. The hands-on classes are designed to inspire creativity, confidence and fun in a supportive studio environment. Both full and half-day camps are available at its location in Valrico at 1046 Bloomingdale Ave. Visit its website at www.arworkshop.com/brandon for more information and to register.

Center For Dance Arts

The Center For Dance Arts offers dance instruction in various genres, from beginner to advanced levels, for students ages 2-18. It is also the home of an award-winning competition team. It will be offering summer camp; visit its website at www.mycfda.com or call 813-657-1500 for more information and to register. The Center For Dance Arts is located at 929 E. Brandon Blvd. in Brandon.

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& ACTIVITY GUIDE



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GALACTICOASTER BLASTS OFF AT LEGOLAND FLORIDA WITH FIRST-EVER INDOOR FAMILY COASTER

Staff Report

Families are invited to suit up and blast off as Galacticoaster launches at LEGOLAND Florida Resort, marking the debut of the park's newest space-themed land and its first indoor roller coaster since opening in 2011.



Guests design their own LEGO spacecraft before blasting off on Galacticoaster, the first indoor family coaster at LEGOLAND Florida Theme Park,

Billed as the Ultimate Indoor Family Coaster, Galacticoaster combines storytelling, interactivity and cutting-edge ride technology to deliver a one-of-a-kind LEGO space adventure designed for guests of all ages. The attraction officially opened in February.

As part of the celebration, guests were able to collect a free, exclusive Galacticoaster Grand Opening First Flight Pop Badge while supplies lasted.

The adventure begins well before launch. Upon entering the queue, guests are immersed in a cinematic LEGO space mission, reporting to the Briefing Room, where Chief Engineer Biff Dipper — a larger-than-life robotic minifigure — delivers mission instructions filled with humor and classic LEGO personality. The preshow experience welcomes recruits to Galaxy Command and builds anticipation as launch approaches.

Before blast-off, riders design their own spacecraft using interactive touchscreens, choosing from nose, tail, wing and special-feature options to create one of more than 625 possible combinations. Each custom creation is stored on an RFID wristband and appears throughout the ride, allowing guests to soar through the LEGO Galaxy in the very ship they designed.

Once airborne, Galacticoaster reaches speeds of up to 40 mph as it rockets through an intergalactic LEGO solar system filled with synchronized lighting, special effects and surprise appearances from classic LEGO Space characters, including the attraction's first-ever animatronic minifigure.

LEGOLAND Florida Theme Park is part of LEGOLAND Florida Resort, which also includes Peppa Pig Theme Park Florida, SEA LIFE Florida and LEGOLAND Water Park, Designed for children ages 2-12. For tickets and times, visit www.legoland.com.



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Christian Voice



Grace Notes

Short, But Oh So Sweet
By Debora Coty

At 5'1", I'm generally considered a shortie. They always make me stand in front for group photos because everybody else can easily be seen over my head. I dutifully hem each pair of pants I buy. I gape through the armpit of the man in front of me at church to see the stage.

I didn't have much say about my stature, but since my mother is the tallest of four sisters at 5-feet even, I never stood a chance of standing tall.

I have a soft spot for all things short. Including my awesome 5'6 husband.

So, I was delighted when I recently ran across the shortest Psalm in the Bible. Yep, the 117th Psalm is only two verses long! But strong, vibrant verses they are – the perfect example that short can be extremely powerful. That's Communication 101 for us writers: write tight. Say what you mean and say it succinctly.

Yep, short can pack an incredible punch.

"Praise the LORD, all nations; Laud Him, all peoples! For His lovingkindness toward us, and the truth of the LORD is everlasting. Praise the LORD!" (Psalm 117 in its entirety)

See what I mean? This short but oh, so sweet Psalm explodes with the combustibility of Truth that the Almighty's love blessings for us are eternal and truly worthy of our praise! And that's all we really need to know right there. Bottom line. Close book.

The same power is present in short prayers too. Some think the more they drone on covering all possible bases, the more pious Yahweh will see them and perhaps push them to the front of the line. Nah.

A real prayer is a cry from the heart that bypasses all the fluff and communicates directly with the heart of God. Even if it takes only thirty seconds to cut right to the chase, we can be assured that, "the earnest prayer of a righteous person has great power and wonderful results" (James 5:16 NLT).

If our intent is seeking God's presence and His peace – His supernatural peace that surpasses all understanding (Philippians 4:7) – short frequent prayers keep our heavenly Father's presence, wisdom, and guidance constant.

And that makes it possible to make prayer a lifestyle rather than an event.

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.

SOMETIMES WE NEED A TEAR-OUT AND REFIT



"A chain is no stronger than its weakest link." – A 19th century proverb.

"Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins maybe wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord," (Acts 3:19).

Our ongoing home restoration journey continues to be rewarding, challenging, fun, beautiful — and sometimes confounding. Sometimes things come along that catch us off guard.

One characteristic that tipped me in favor of this house was just how decrepit it was! That meant we weren't patching things up; we were tearing them out and starting over. So, brand-new plumbing, electrical, fittings, fixtures, appliances, heat and air — and more.

Sure, old houses cost more to heat and cool, but when our gas hit $1,000 in December 2025 and then more in January, I called in the experts. What we found is the "weakest link" proverb in action. You can't join a new unit to old, damaged, perforated, crushed, crimped, poorly insulated, out-of-date ductwork and expect it to work. There were even open runs dumping heat directly into the crawl space!

So, we opted for a total tear-out, and we now have properly designed ducts specifically calibrated to match the specs on the compressor.

The whole fiasco reminds me the best solutions are systemic not topical. Like new tires on a car versus fixing the alignment that destroyed the old ones. Or a statin for cholesterol but continuing the junk-food diet. Or going to church once in a while without ever becoming a disciple of Jesus.

Sometimes we must look under the surface and address the need for a radical tear-out and refit rather than attach something new and shiny on the outside and expect things to change.

My question is, "What's the weakest link in our lives we need to bring to God and ask for a radical refit?" It may be costly up front, but new life and peace and joy and celebration and new possibilities turn out to be exactly what we are looking for.

Then, as Peter said to the crowd in Jerusalem, "Times of refreshing will come from the Lord." Gotta love a good refreshing.

— 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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COUNTY HONORS STANDOUT FALL SPORTS STUDENT ATHLETES IN AWARDS CEREMONY

By Nick Nahas



Newsome High School star swimmer Tyler Stargardt earned the Henry Hicks Memorial Award for Outstanding Swimmer.



The Newsome High School football team won a team GPA award at the fall sports awards.



Bloomingdale High School's Keely Finan earned the Henry Hicks Memorial Award for Outstanding Swimmer.

Hillsborough County Public Schools honored fall sports student athletes for individual awards and team GPA awards at its Fall Sports Awards in January.

Newsome Football (3.4 GPA), Newsome Boys Cross Country (3.7 GPA), Bloomingdale Girls Cross Country (3.9 GPA), Strawberry Crest Boys Swimming (3.9 GPA) and Lennard Girls Swimming (3.9 GPA) were all given team GPA awards.

Newsome High School star swimmer Tyler Stargardt earned the Henry Hicks Memorial Award for Outstanding Swimmer. He lettered all four years at Newsome and was a team captain. At the 2025 4A FHSAA State Finals, he placed fourth in the 100 butterfly and fifth in the 200 individual medley. This season, Stargardt won both events at the county championship, breaking the county championship records in each. He currently holds three school records at Newsome (50 freestyle, 100 butterfly and 200 individual medley) and has been named Newsome's Male Swimmer of the Year in all four years of his high school career.

"This award means something special for two reasons," said Stargardt. "First, just seeing all the other names of people who have received this award and having my name next to the best swimmers in the county of all time is remarkable. Second, some of my hardest practice and fastest meets were at the Bobby Hicks pool (the pool named after Henry Hicks). So, it feels like a complete circle. I worked hard, swam hard and got rewarded all with Henry Hicks in mind."

Stargardt has committed to the United States Air Force Academy, where he will continue his swimming career while pursuing a degree in engineering.

"I just want to thank my friends, coaches and family for supporting me through my four-year high school journey that allowed me to earn this award," said Stargardt.

Bloomingdale High School's Keely Finan earned the Henry Hicks Memorial Award for Outstanding Swimmer. She lettered for three years in girls swimming and competed at the 4A FHSAA State Championship, where she placed sixth in diving and qualified for the 200 freestyle relay as the anchor.

"I was honestly shocked and extremely grateful," said Finan. "When I first joined swimming and diving, I didn't expect much because I started the sport as a sophomore to try something new and have fun. To receive this award as a senior feels incredibly meaningful because it shows how far I've come."

Finan was also a state qualifier in both 2023 and 2024. She served as the team's diving captain and was named Athlete of the Week multiple times during her career. She plans to attend the University of Florida, where she will major in biology.

"I am very thankful for my coaches, past and present, who have believed in me no matter what and pushed me to keep improving," she said. "I'm also grateful for my teammates who made the sport so meaningful. This award motivates me to carry the lessons I learned from swimming and diving into everything I do moving forward."







GET THE DIRT:
WINTER LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE

BY LYNN BARBER, URBAN HORTICULTURE AGENT





Winter here can last for several months. In West-Central Florida, however, we are very fortunate compared to other areas in the country. Now, normally, is a great time to go outside and garden. It has been quite chilly, aka COLD, in the mornings. Frosts and freezes occur occasionally in Central Florida.

Gardening tips for the next few months:

Plant Vegetables: For March and April, plant beans, cantaloupe, okra, southern peas and sweet potato. For more information, go to https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/vh021, where you can view the Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide.

Mulch: Cool weather is always a great time to add mulch to your landscape beds if it is less than 3 inches deep. Mulch regulates soil temperature, adds organic value, inhibits weeds and retains soil moisture. Pine bark, pine straw/needles, eucalyptus, melaleuca and leaves are good options.

Manage Weeds: You can cover weeds with newspapers to smother them or use an environmentally friendly weed killer.

Prune: Check the 'Calendar' for what plants can be pruned and when. Pruning trains plants to grow in a certain direction, improves health by removing diseased stems, increases flowering and causes more abundant foliage.

Pests — Biting, Sucking and Chewing: The first step is to properly identify the insect to be sure it is a pest versus a beneficial insect. If you must, use the least toxic product. Spot treat plants as needed, not the entire landscape.

Inefficient Irrigation: Do you have broken irrigation heads, plants blocking the spray pattern or a rain shut-off device that does not work? Is your water bill for more than 20,000 gallons of water per month? If yes, call Will Stone at 813-744-5519, ext. 54133. He may be able to help you decrease your water usage.

Rewards of Winter Landscape Maintenance: You are outside, productive and enjoying nature.

Contact: labarber@ufl.edu.

ROTARY SPOTLIGHT:
ACTIVITIES, MEETINGS & MORE

Staff Report

FishHawk-Riverview Rotary Club

The FishHawk-Riverview Rotary Club continues to bring meaningful programs and community connection to its weekly meetings.

It was honored to welcome Dawn Myers, who shared valuable insights and inspired discussion among our members. Her message reminded the club members of how important it is to stay engaged, informed and committed to service.

The club also looks forward to hearing from Rachel Lane of Graze Academy, who will be sharing more about her organization's work and impact in our community. Supporting local initiatives and learning about innovative programs like Graze Academy is part of how Rotary strengthens partnerships and creates opportunity.

In celebration of St. Patrick's Day, Christopher Jones will be leading a festive and engaging program that reflects the fellowship and spirit that make Rotary so special. It's always a joy to blend tradition, community and service.

Between the laughter, the planning, the community projects and the moments of 'Who volunteered me for that?' — something powerful is happening.

"We are shaping our community. We are shaping young leaders. We are shaping hope," said the FishHawk-Riverview Rotary Club.

As always, it remains committed to 'service above self' and invites community members to visit and learn more about how Rotary makes a difference locally and globally.

Rotary Club of Brandon Kicks Off a Busy Start to the Year

January and February mark the busiest — and most rewarding — months for the Rotary Club of Brandon. During this stretch, members rally together to host the club's two largest annual fundraisers: the Bill Harper Honorary Golf Tournament and the highly anticipated Wild Game Dinner.

These cornerstone events are more than just traditions; they are the driving force behind the club's charitable impact. Together, they typically generate more than $100,000, funding community initiatives, local nonprofit support and scholarships for deserving students.

What makes these events truly special is the full participation of the club's membership. Rotarians volunteer side by side, strengthening friendships while working toward a shared mission of service. The energy, camaraderie and commitment on display each year reflect the heart of the Rotary motto: service above self.

With another season of fundraising underway, the Rotary Club of Brandon looks forward to continuing its legacy of giving back and making a meaningful difference in the community.

If you are interested in joining, please text Debbie Meegan at 813-601-2315.







BLOOMINGDALE CHEERLEADING CLAIMS BACK-TO-BACK NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

By Nick Nahas



The Bloomingdale High School cheerleading squad won their second straight national title at the 2026 UCA National High School Cheerleading Championship (NHSCC) in February in Orlando.

"My reaction when we won nationals was just pure joy," said senior captain Peyton Ostendorf. "Getting to hug and celebrate with my teammates knowing how hard we all worked, it just felt like everything we talked about for months finally fell into place."

The NHSCC is regarded as one of the largest and most competitive cheer events in the country. Hundreds of schools across the country compete at Disney's ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex in the prestigious three-day tournament. Bloomingdale claimed its first national championship last season. The squad, which has 19 athletes, also won its first FHSAA state championship since 2011 in January in Lakeland. The 2026 national title and second-place finish for their game day routine, capped off a season for the record books.

"Winning the national championship means the judges were able to see and really appreciate the show we put on," said senior captain Chloe Bayless. "Everything feels validated, the countless hours, laughs, sweat, tears. All of the hardship was rewarded. It's a check mark on the goal we have been chasing since June, and it is such an amazing feeling. Knowing the behind-the-scenes makes this win all the better, it means the world."

Head Coach Tracy DiPrima couldn't be more proud of her team and what they accomplished this season. They practiced four to five times a week since June. She said the team had a lot of new faces, with only eight seniors, and faced a lot of adversity. Despite winning the national championship last season, they came up a little bit short for the state championship. This motivated the team to come back strong this year and win both.

"There were big expectations this year," said DiPrima. "The seniors and upperclassman kind of led the way and set the standard. They had to overcome a lot this season; this was a very hard routine, we had a lot of new faces and we had some group struggle at the beginning. To watch them overcome that was rewarding. They are great kids. It did not come easy; they worked really hard for this."

The program will have tryouts again in June as they start their bid for a third straight national title. They will miss the eight seniors that will graduate. Six of them have been with the team for four years.

"The love and dedication of the entire program of Bloomingdale cheer has built me into the athlete and person I am today, as I know it has also for the other 19 girls I was blessed to share the mat with," said Ostendorf. "It truly was such an incredible four years and amazing senior season."

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