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September 2026
Volume 23, Issue 9



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CELEBRATING 24 YEARS OF PUBLISHING POSITIVE COMMUNITY NEWS

TAMPA BEER BURROS BRING BIG SMILES TO SPECIAL EVENTS

By Libby Hopkins



Tampa Beer Burros brings a unique and unforgettable experience to your weddings, parties and special occasions with its charming, party-loving mini burros.

Tampa Beer Burro began with a simple mission, to bring joy and one-of-a-kind experiences to special occasions through its charming mini burros, along with its beloved mini cow, Tinker Belle, and pony, Dolly Parton.

"Our animals, like Snoop Donk and Martha Stewart, are more than just a fun addition to events; they create meaningful, lasting memories for guests of all ages," said owner Melissa Karnowski. "Beyond celebrations, we are proud to support our non-profit, Mini Friends Farm, where we provide opportunities for children and adults with disabilities to connect with animals in a safe, welcoming environment. Every booking helps us continue this meaningful, important work."

Tampa Beer Burros came to fruition by one phone call saying that a bride's mom would love a beer burro at their wedding at a local barn venue in Plant City.

"She was so animated and seemed to love mini donkeys as much as I do, and I can't say no to someone who needs donkeys in their special moment in time. I told her I would figure it out and make that happen for her," Karnowski said.

Karnowski's journey into the world of mini animals was a learning process, but when her son, Brandon, showcased his pig at the state fair, it was transformative.

"The pride he exuded while presenting his pig was a beacon, overshadowing his ASD diagnosis and highlighting his unique talents," Karnowski said. "Our farm is now home to a variety of rescued animals, each loved and cared for by the entire family. Our sons Tom and Jackson adore the alpacas; Brandon's favorite is the pony, Dolly Parton; Dylan has a special bond with the barn cats." Karnowski herself, of course, has a deep love for her mini donkeys.

A beer burro brings a unique and unforgettable touch to your event, offering a fun and interactive experience for guests.

"These adorable donkeys are natural conversation starters, adding charm and excitement to any celebration," Karnowski said. "We can't decide if kids or adults love them more."

Karnowski doesn't like to ask for help or money, but hay, feed, care and getting everything ready for their special friends to visit on field trips takes time and money.

"When God put this beer burro idea on my plate, I ran with it because I didn't have to ask for money; I got to celebrate with people on their special days, whether it was a wedding, birthday or a special occasion with Snoop Donk and Martha Stewart, and they make me smile every single day," Karnowski said. "I would take them everywhere with me if I could. Their personalities are huge. When they get booked, we will customize their looks to what the client would like to see. The donkeys can carry in their special baskets drinks, water or party favors."

To book, visit its website at <https://tampabeerburro.com/> or call 813-494-8916. Karnowski is currently booking into 2028, and beer burro packages start at \$700.

VILLAGE PLAYERS BRINGS ADDAMS FAMILY TO THE STAGE

Staff Report

They're creepy, they're kooky and this October they're moving into the James McCabe Theater.

The Village Players will present The Addams Family, the delightfully dark musical comedy based on the famously macabre Addams clan, beginning on Friday, October 2, in Valrico.

In this musical twist on the beloved characters, Wednesday Addams has grown up and fallen in love with a young man from a painfully normal family. There is just one problem: her parents don't know. When Wednesday convinces Gomez to keep the relationship a secret from Morticia, one very uncomfortable dinner brings the Addams families together under the same roof. Secrets come out, relationships unravel, ancestors refuse to stay dead and 'normal' quickly becomes a matter of opinion.

The Village Players production is directed by Lois Green and features Manny Velez as Gomez Addams, Chelsea Scourtes as Morticia Addams, Gabriella Reece as Wednesday Addams, Abby Mann as Alice Beineke, along with a large cast of familiar Village Players performers and newcomers.

Performances will be held at the historic James McCabe Theater, located at



Gabriella Reece will be Wednesday Addams in the Village Players production The Addams Family.



Tyler Creighton will be Pugsley Addams in the Village Players production The Addams Family.

506 5th St. in Valrico.

Evening performances are at 8 p.m. on Friday and Saturday, October 2-3, 9-10 and 16-17.

Matinee performances are at 3 p.m. on Sunday, October 4, 11 and 18.

The Village Players is a community theater organization based at the historic James McCabe Theater in Valrico. Through plays, musicals and educational opportunities, the organization provides a welcoming space for local performers, volunteers and audiences to participate in and enjoy live theater.

Tickets are \$23 for adults and \$20 for seniors and students and are available

now at <https://thevillageplayersvalrico.com/>. For more information, please visit the Village Players' website.

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(Far left) Local drummer Zack Hoening started drumming for the Newsome High School and UCF Marching Band when he was in college. He has competed in numerous drumming competitions and now performs at SeaWorld's new show, Monster Stomp and can be seen in shows at additional theme parks. See his full story on Page 7.

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ECHO HOSTS NEW GOOD MORNING GALA, FORMERLY EMPOWER BREAKFAST

Staff Report

ECHO is inviting community members, business leaders, supporters and neighbors to join its annual Good Morning Gala Fundraising Breakfast on Wednesday, October 14, at The Regent, located at 6437 Watson Rd. in Riverview. Formerly known as the ECHO Empower Breakfast, this signature fundraising event brings the community together to raise critical funds supporting ECHO's mission of ending hunger and providing life-stabilizing resources to neighbors in need.

The Good Morning Gala is an opportunity to enjoy breakfast while learning about the people and programs made possible through ECHO's work and the generosity of its supporters. Every penny raised through the event will directly support ECHO's vital life-stabilizing programs, helping provide emergency food, clothing, resource navigation, employment opportunities and other resources that help neighbors move toward greater stability.

Navigating Change. Support. Looking Forward.

This year's Good Morning Gala centers around one message: "Navigating change. Continuing support. Looking forward."

As ECHO continues to grow and adapt to meet the needs of the community, the organization remains committed to providing critical support to neighbors facing hunger and hardship. The Good Morning Gala offers an opportunity to reflect on the impact of ECHO's work, recognize the support of the community and look ahead to the future.



The event will bring together individuals, businesses, community leaders and ECHO supporters for a morning centered on generosity, connection and impact. Guests will hear inspiring stories from neighbors who have benefited from ECHO's programs and learn more about the organization's impact and vision for the future.

The event will feature: a delicious breakfast in a welcoming setting, inspiring stories from neighbors who have benefited from ECHO's programs, engaging speakers and updates on ECHO's impact, information about ECHO's programs and future goals, opportunities to connect with community members, business leaders and supporters and ways to become more involved in ECHO's mission.

Businesses and organizations are invited to support the Good Morning Gala through event sponsorship. Sponsorships help provide critical funding for ECHO's programs while offering businesses an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to the local community.

Sponsorship levels include Empowering Sponsor, Leading Sponsor, Sustaining Sponsor, Nourishing Sponsor, Encouraging Sponsor and Friend of ECHO Sponsor. Sponsors receive recognition through event marketing, social media promotion, and on-site visibility among community leaders, supporters and local businesses.

For sponsorship opportunities, to learn more and to RSVP and save your seat, visit www.echofl.org.

BRANDON TEEN EARNS AMERICAN HERITAGE GIRLS' HIGHEST HONOR

By Marie Gilmore

A Brandon teenager is being recognized for her leadership, community service and commitment to helping others after earning the highest honor available to girl members of American Heritage Girls (AHG).

Lilly Belle Nimmo, 17, has earned the prestigious Stars & Stripes Award, joining the American Heritage Girls Class of 2026 to receive the organization's highest recognition.

To earn the award, Nimmo completed a rigorous series of requirements. In addition to living out the American Heritage Girls Creed and Oath, she earned the Abigail Adams Level Award and 13 required Stars & Stripes Award Badges. She also held a troop leadership position for at least six months, wrote a Spiritual Walk Essay and AHG resume, received at least three letters of reference and passed a board of review.

A major component of the award was planning, developing and leading a service project requiring more than 100 hours of service.

Nimmo chose to support Hope for Her, a Brandon-based organization that provides a safe and welcoming place for women in need. For her project, she helped create a tranquil and beautiful environment designed to make visitors feel comfortable and supported.

"I had an intention of doing a crisis center project, and during my research, I found Hope for Her," Nimmo said. "I started volunteering with them in 2024 and continue to volunteer about three hours per week when I can."



Nimmo assists by sorting donations, organizing items and helping make the center inviting for the women who come through its doors.

She credits American Heritage Girls with helping her grow as both a leader and community volunteer.

"American Heritage Girls helped me become a well-rounded leader and gave me lots of experience in community service," she said.

Nimmo has also served as a troop hostess and event planner and has earned several leadership accolades, including Incubator of the Year in 2024 and 2025 and Winter Debate Champion in 2026. She is also a member of the National Society of High School Scholars and serves as secretary for the Hillsborough College Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society.

A member of Covenant Grace Baptist Church and American Heritage Girls Troop FL2323, Nimmo is active in the FISH homeschooling co-op and its Performing Arts Club. She also participates in competitive speech and debate and is locally employed.

A high school senior, Nimmo is dual enrolled at Hillsborough College and is pursuing a degree in political science.

Nimmo will be honored during a court of honor ceremony on Saturday, September 26, from 11 a.m.-1 p.m. at Hope for Her, located at 140 Yarbrough Rd. in Brandon.

She is the daughter of retired U.S. Air Force Col. Caleb Nimmo and Laura Nimmo of Brandon.



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HOPE FOR HER OFFERS FREE HEALTH AND WELLNESS CLASSES TO WOMEN IN THE COMMUNITY

By Libby Hopkins

Hope for Her is a safe place where women experiencing crisis and trauma find the strength, skills and support they need to rebuild their best lives.

As a Brandon nonprofit founded by women who've endured serious life challenges, Hope for Her knows firsthand that healing happens from within. This is why it works one-on-one with women to help restore their confidence and self-worth, remove barriers to safety and survival and rebuild critical life skills to thrive.

Hope for Her recently started offering free health and wellness classes on Monday nights at its facility. These classes are designed to encourage, equip and inspire women as they grow in their faith, relationships, health, life skills, and personal well-being.

"Hope for Her uses a holistic family support model built around five key areas of wellness: spiritual health, emotional and mental health, physical and nutritional health, relational and environmental health and financial health," said Cheryl Hickman, director of Hope for Her. "Every woman who comes to Hope for Her works alongside a member of our team to develop a personalized plan based on her unique circumstances and goals. The plan identifies immediate needs and goals for today, short-term goals for the next three months and long-term goals that reflect her vision for the future. Each goal connects to one or more of our five areas of wellness. Our Healthy Habits



classes are designed to complement this individualized support."

Each class is rooted in one or more of the five areas and provides practical education, encouragement,

resources and tools women can use to grow and make healthy changes in their everyday lives.

"Our goal is not simply to teach a class but to equip women with skills they can carry with them long after the class ends," Hickman said. "Our classes are free and open to all women in our community. We want Hope for Her to be a welcoming place where women can come to learn, connect, be encouraged and grow."

The classes have created opportunities for personal growth, practical learning and meaningful connection.

"Women are gaining tools they can apply to different areas of their lives while discovering that they don't have to grow alone," Hickman said. "One of the most encouraging outcomes has been the sense of community that develops among the women. They come eager to learn, share experiences, encourage one another and become better versions of themselves. There is something powerful about women creating a safe and supportive environment where everyone has permission to learn and grow."

Visit www.hopeforherfl.org or call 813-309-3357. Hope for Her is located at 140 Yarbrough Rd. in Brandon.

NEW PLAYGROUND BRINGS INCLUSIVE FUN TO MEDARD PARK

Staff Report



Families visiting Edward Medard Conservation Park in Plant City now have a new reason to play, climb and explore.

The new playground at the popular Hillsborough County conservation park is officially open, offering children of all abilities a colorful and accessible place to enjoy the outdoors. The playground is part of a larger \$900,000 park improvement project designed to enhance recreation opportunities while complementing the park's natural setting.

Located at 6140 Turkey Creek Rd. in Plant City, the playground features soft, synthetic turf; a rope-safe merry-go-round; and multilevel, ADA-inclusive climbing structures and slides. The design gives children opportunities to climb, move and play while providing accessible features for a wider range of ages and abilities.

The improvements are part of Hillsborough County's ongoing investment in Edward Medard Conservation Park, which surrounds a 700-acre reservoir and is one of the county's premier destinations for outdoor recreation.

Additional improvements include ren-

ovated bathrooms and a new volleyball court.

A musical walkway featuring a variety of outdoor instruments along a concrete path is also expected to be completed later this year, adding another interactive element for families visiting the park.

The playground provides a new activity for families enjoying the park's many existing attractions. Edward Medard features more than 3 miles of trails, a boardwalk and an observation tower overlooking the reservoir, fishing, kayaking and canoeing opportunities, an 18-hole disc golf course and two sand volleyball courts.

Children can also explore Sacred Hills, a nature play area designed to encourage climbing and outdoor discovery.

The park's natural surroundings provide plenty of opportunities to spot Florida wildlife, including birds, turtles, alligators and deer. Canoes and kayaks are available for rent, and the campground offers RV and tent camping for those wanting to extend their visit.

Edward Medard Conservation Park is open daily from 8 a.m.-7 p.m. Admission is \$2 per vehicle.

With the new playground now open and additional improvements on the way, families can enjoy even more ways to make Edward Medard a destination for outdoor adventure.

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A BETTER JOB FAIR CONNECTS JOB SEEKERS WITH LOCAL EMPLOYERS

Staff Report

Brandon-area residents looking for employment opportunities, career advancement or a fresh start in the workforce will have an opportunity to connect directly with local employers at an upcoming community job fair.

New Hope Church, Better Together and ECHO (Emergency Care Help Organization) are partnering to host A Better Job Fair on Tuesday, October 20, from 10 a.m.-1 p.m. at New Hope Church, located at 121 N. Knights Ave. in Brandon.

The free event is designed to connect local job seekers with employers who are actively hiring while also providing resources to help individuals overcome barriers to employment and build long-term financial stability.

Attendees will be able to meet with local employers, learn about available positions and career opportunities, participate in on-the-spot interviews and connect with employment resources and other community services.

The job fair is open to individuals seeking full-time or part-time employment, those interested in advancing their careers and people looking to reenter the workforce.

"Employment is a key step toward long-term stability, and we are committed to helping our neighbors overcome barriers and connect with opportunities that can



change their lives," said Dianne Horncastle, director of Opportunity at ECHO. "This partnership allows us to bring employers and job seekers together in one place, creating meaningful connections and helping individuals take the next step toward achieving their goals."

Better Together has partnered with communities across the country to help connect employers with dedicated job seekers and create pathways toward employment and economic stability.

Organizers said the Brandon event is intended to provide more than an opportunity to submit a resume. By bringing businesses and job seekers together in one location, the event will allow attendees to have direct conversations with employers, learn about potential career paths and take advantage of available workforce resources.

Local employers also are encouraged to participate in the event and meet qualified candidates from the community.

For more information about A Better Job Fair, visit Better Together's New Hope job fair page at <https://bettertogetherus.org/newhope> or text "JOBS" to 844-987-3949.



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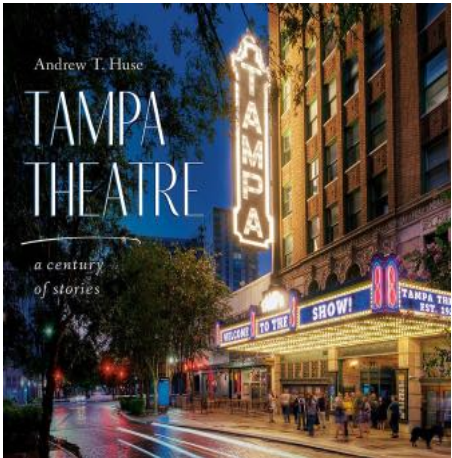
A CENTURY OF STORIES: NEW BOOK DETAILS 100 YEARS OF TAMPA THEATRE

Staff Report

As Tampa Theatre prepares to celebrate its 100th birthday next month, a new book by the late Tampa historian and author Andrew T. Huse chronicles the theater's complete story for the first time and examines the history of Tampa itself through the lens of the majestic movie palace. Tampa Theatre: A Century of Stories, published by University Press of Florida, will be released on Tuesday, September 22. The book retails for \$30 and is now available for preorder through Tampa Theatre's website. Copies also will be available for purchase at Tampa Theatre's 100th birthday celebration on Tuesday, October 15.

The 272-page hardcover volume traces the theater's history from its opening in 1926 through decades of changing tastes, changing technology and a changing movie industry, including the dark period 50 years ago when Tampa Theatre faced the very real possibility of disappearing completely. Huse's narrative follows the preservation efforts that gave the theater new life in the 1970s and brings the story forward to the present, where the restored landmark stands proudly as a nonprofit film and cultural center in the heart of downtown.

Along the way, Huse explores the building's elaborate, 'atmospheric' design and the work of architect John Ebersson, whose exotic, Mediterranean-inspired interior still draws gasps of awe from first-time visitors today. He also introduces readers to the people who have made the theater what it is, including many whose names never appeared



on the marquee. Huse conducted dozens of interviews with people who worked and volunteered behind the scenes over the years, including ushers, organists, moviemakers and managers.

Huse was particularly well suited to frame this epic story in such human terms. A longtime Tampa historian and former curator of Florida Studies at University of South Florida Libraries, he wrote extensively about the people, places and peculiarities that make Tampa Tampa. His books include *The Columbia Restaurant: Celebrating a Century of History, Culture, and Cuisine*; *From Saloons to Steak Houses: A History of Tampa*; and *The Cuban Sandwich: A History in Layers*. Huse died in 2025, making Tampa Theatre: A Century of Stories his final book.

- Two upcoming bookstore events:
- Oxford Exchange, located at 420 W. Kennedy Blvd. in Tampa, at 3 p.m. on Sunday, September 20. The event is presented by Oxford Exchange. Admission is \$5, which goes toward your book purchase. Tickets are available at www.eventbrite.com/e/1998909302533.
 - Tombolo Books, located at 2153 1st Ave. S. in St. Petersburg, at 7 p.m. on Wednesday, October 21. The event, presented by Tombolo Books, is free and open to the public. RSVP at www.eventbrite.com/e/1999540858534.
- For more information about Tampa Theatre's Centennial Celebration, visit the website at www.tampatheatre.org.

HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY MAKES PET ADOPTION SEARCH MORE ENGAGING

Staff Report

Hillsborough County's Pet Resource Center (PRC) has made major upgrades to its online kennel that thousands of people use each year when looking for a pet to adopt or foster.

The new online kennel gives residents a more colorful, engaging way to explore the pets looking for homes. Users can search and filter available pets, view more photos and learn additional details about each cat and dog to help find the right match. They can even look for lost pets that were taken to the shelter.

The new platform also provides a closer look at the work happening at PRC, including shelter statistics and reporting that give the community greater insight into the pets entering the shelter and the outcomes they receive.

Whether you're looking for an energetic dog, a playful kitten, or a companion with a little more life experience, the online kennel makes it simple to start your search from home.

Residents interested in adopting are encouraged to explore the new online kennel, browse available pets and visit PRC at 440 N. Falkenburg Rd. in Tampa to meet their potential new best friend. The online kennel's website is at <https://app-test.hillsboroughcounty.org/adopt/>. For more information about the Pet Resource Center, visit <https://hcfl.gov/departments/pet-resources>.



About Hillsborough County Pet Resource Center

The Hillsborough County Pet Resource Center is the county's only open-admission animal shelter, providing care and refuge for thousands of lost, abandoned and surrendered pets each year. PRC is committed to promoting responsible pet ownership through adoptions, lost-and-found services, low-cost spay/neuter programs, vaccinations and microchipping. All adoptions are on a first-come, first-served basis and must be completed in person at the shelter.

The center also partners with local rescues, fosters and volunteers to help pets find safe, loving homes. Through community outreach and lifesaving programs, PRC works to keep pets with their families whenever possible and reduce shelter intake. For more information, visit <https://hcfl.gov/pets>.

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RESIDENTS WEIGH PROPOSAL FOR COUNTY-OWNED GREENSPACE PROPERTY

By Brian Bokor

An unsolicited offer to purchase 11.85 acres of Hillsborough County-owned property surrounded by portions of Bloomingdale and Tevalo Hills brought local residents to Cimino Elementary School at the end of August to learn more about the proposal and provide feedback.

The property has not been sold. The unsolicited offer presented at the meeting is currently the only proposal before Hillsborough County.

The meeting was organized through District 4 Commissioner Christine Miller's office to give residents an opportunity to learn about the proposal, ask questions and share their perspectives.

County staff attending the meeting included Facilities Management & Real Estate Services Director John Muller, Real Estate Division Director Anne-Marie Lenton and Eric Watkins, manager for surplus property, along with Miller's aide, Casaundra Marion.

Miller did not attend because a separate zoning request involving the future Hawk Springs development is quasi-judicial and could eventually come before her for a vote.

The property includes a 75-acre stormwater pond and approximately 4.35 acres designated for park and recreational use. Hillsborough County has owned the property since 2003, and residents currently use portions of it as a walking trail.

Muller said the largely unimproved property is overgrown and that its continued public use presents maintenance and management considerations for the county.

Under the proposal, the property would be transferred to the applicant, with a new homeowners association responsible for owning and maintaining it.

Plans include approximately 700 feet of recreational walking path, fencing, gated entrances, trash cans and pet-waste stations. Another 1,100-foot section would be 15 feet wide and capable of accommodating emergency vehicles. The connection could also serve as an evacuation route during emergencies.

Public access would be protected through an easement, while the county would retain access to the stormwater pond and drainage easements. Plans also show a 2- to 4-inch water line crossing the property and a \$15,000 HOA maintenance reserve for the first five years.

The applicant is separately seeking to increase the future Hawk Springs development from 34 homes to 55 homes.



Emergency Access and Pedestrian Trail Exhibit

During the meeting, residents asked whether the proposed acquisition of the county property, including the emergency access and potential utility connection, was related to the request for additional homes.

The applicant disputed that characterization, maintaining that the emergency connection is something it would like to have rather than something required for Hawk Springs to proceed. It also said it has no desire to retain ownership of the property long-term.

Muller addressed questions about whether transferring the property could facilitate additional density.

"We have absolutely no problem putting restrictions on this sale," Muller said, explaining that restrictions could limit the property to park use and preserve public access. "We do not intend that the sale of this land be used to benefit for any increased density."

Oak Crest resident Richard Terry asked whether residents whose properties could be directly affected had received enough information.

"The stuff that's affecting their backyards — they had no idea this was even happening," Terry said.

Residents also asked questions about privacy, maintenance and public access.

"We don't want to be sitting here in two years and get a request to put 20 more homes there," Marion added.

Muller praised Miller's approach to gathering public feedback.

"The commissioner did an excellent job in saying, 'I want to hear from the community first, but we need to put a proposal on the table so you can comment on it.' And that's what we're here for," Muller said.

Attendees were asked to complete a county comment form about their proximity to the property, potential trail use and the proposed improvements. Responses will be reviewed by county staff and Miller's office.

Muller emphasized that the current offer is one possible option for the property. Oak Crest, multiple surrounding communities or another appropriate entity could present an alternative proposal.

LOCAL DRUMMER FOLLOWS PASSION TO SEAWORLD STAGE

By Libby Hopkins

Zack Hoening has loved drumming his entire life. He was part of the Newsome High School Marching Band and then became a part of the UCF Marching Band when he was in college. He has competed in numerous drumming competitions all across the state as well.

"I started my drumming journey in middle school through electives," Hoening said. "This led me to falling in love with drumming and to doing marching band in high school and other band activities outside of school."

He knew he wanted to keep drumming, even when he was told to have backup plan.

"Drumming was the only thing I felt passionate about, and I knew I wanted to pursue it as a career," Hoening said. "I got my bachelor's degree in music and, since I was already in Orlando, started trying out for an open call for drummer or percussionist at the local theme parks."

Hoening is currently a percussionist for a variety of theme parks including SeaWorld's new Halloween-themed show, Monster Stomp. The show takes place in the misty corners of Victorian-era London, where a fiend known only as Jack the Ripper walks the streets. Guests watch him take the stage in a way they've never seen before in this modern rock and rhythm spectacular. Guests will have to hold onto their seats as



Zack Hoening was part of the Newsome High School Marching Band and then became a part of the UCF Marching Band. He is currently a percussionist for SeaWorld's new show, Monster Stomp.



electrifying percussion, dancing and singing combine for a show that's as darkly entertaining as it is exhilarating.

"For this show, I'll actually be drumming on a coffin with knives," Hoening said. "We are still in the rehearsal stage of this show, but it's really interesting, and I can't wait to get out on stage and perform."

Hoening is extremely happy that he followed his heart and kept on drumming, even when the path was uncertain. He said every rehearsal, audition and performance has helped remind him

why he fell in love with percussion in the first place.

"From the moment I started drumming, I knew this was what I was supposed to do with my life," he said. "Being onstage and performing is the absolute best feeling in the world for me."

For Hoening, the opportunity to perform in a high-energy show like Monster Stomp is more than just another job; it is a chance to share his passion with audiences and prove that dedication can turn a childhood interest into a career. He hopes his story encourages others to stay committed to what they love.

"Don't ever give up on your dreams, and always follow your heart," Hoening said.

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Teen Huddles, Runway For A Reason, Town Hall & More...

Compiled by Jenny Bennett
jbennett@ospreyobserver.com

Impact Teen Huddles

The Impact Program is now offering Teen Huddles, a faith-based small group 'huddle' intended to help students understand God's word, ask honest questions and learn how to apply biblical truths to real-life situations. Students in sixth through 12th grade meet on the second and fourth Mondays of each month from 6:30-7:45 p.m. at 3115 Lithia Pinecrest Rd. in Valrico.

Runway For a Reason

Women of Hope at New Hope Church will host Runway for a Reason, a fashion show and luncheon benefiting ECHO, on Saturday, October 10, at 11:30 a.m. The event will take place in the New Hope Church Social Hall, located at 121 N. Knights Ave. in Brandon. The afternoon will bring together fashion, fellowship and giving back while supporting ECHO's mission to provide emergency food, clothing and life-stabilizing resources to neighbors in need. Guests will enjoy a luncheon and a fashion show featuring stylish looks from ECHO Thrift, showcasing clothing and accessories

for all seasons. The event will also feature an ECHO Thrift Pop-Up Mini Store, giving guests an opportunity to shop while supporting ECHO. Guests are asked to RSVP by Monday, October 5. Registration is available online at <https://findnewhope.ccbchurch.com/goto/forms/704/responses/new>.

Human Trafficking Town Hall

The Hillsborough County Commission on Human Trafficking is presenting a town hall on Human Trafficking on Tuesday, September 22, from 5-7 p.m. at the Children's Board, located at 1002 E. Palm Ave. in Tampa. Hear from survivor leaders, law enforcement, prosecutors and community partners and learn about how trafficking happens, the tactics used, warning signs, resources and how you can take action. Together, we can expose the truth and protect our community. Register today at www.eventbrite.com/e/1999398420498.

Gowns For Girls Pop-up Boutique

Gowns for Girls, a nonprofit which provides homecoming and prom dresses to high school girls for their high school dances, is hosting a homecoming pop-up boutique. The event will be held at King High School, located at 6815 N. 56th St. in Tampa, on Saturday, September 19 and 26, and Saturday, October 3 and 17, from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. High school students from across Hillsborough County can shop for free with their ID to find that perfect dress. To find out more about Gowns for Girls visit its website at www.gownsforgirls.org.



FIRST HIGH SCHOOL POWERLIFTING CLUB IS LEADING A MOVEMENT

By Marie Gilmore



Bell Creek Academy powerlifting coach and physical education teacher Taisha V. Hernández Zambrana works with student athletes as the school's new powerlifting club continues to grow.

Bell Creek Academy (BCA) in Riverview is helping put high school powerlifting on the map in Florida after launching what it says is the state's first organized high school powerlifting club.

The club was founded in January by BCA high school physical education teacher and coach Taisha V. Hernández Zambrana, who partnered with her own powerlifting coach, Leandro Muñoz, to introduce students to a sport that is well established in other states but has had limited organized presence at the high school level in Florida.

BCA, located at 13221 Boyette Rd., is currently the only Florida high school recognized as an official club under USA Powerlifting (USAPL). The club began with eight competitors who traveled to the USAPL Tampa Bay Open in April. Its roster has since more than doubled to 19 athletes, who are preparing to compete in the USAPL 813 Classic in Tampa this December.

For Hernández, powerlifting is about more than strength and competition.

"Powerlifting is about so much more than the numbers on the barbell," Hernán-

dez said. "It teaches these teenagers how to overcome self-doubt, build unshakeable confidence and find strength they never knew they had."

The club recently hosted its inaugural Lift-a-Thon to raise money for competition fees, uniforms and equipment for the 2026-27 season. With support from BCA faculty and staff, student volunteers, local vendors, powerlifting coaches and the USF Powerlifting Club, the event raised more than \$5,000.

The fundraiser also reflected Hernández's desire to connect the club with the broader community. Fifteen percent of the proceeds was donated to Hillsborough County Adaptive Sports programs, helping support local athletes, including para powerlifters.

The club is continuing to raise funds for athletes who qualify for the 2027 high school nationals in New York and the Miami International Fitness Expo in May 2027.

Hernández is also exploring the connection between athletics and academics. As a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, she is collaborating with a University of South Florida research team on a mixed-methods study examining self-efficacy among students participating in a high school powerlifting club.

She hopes the research will lead to peer-reviewed publications and a presentation at the SHAPE America conference next year, further demonstrating the impact powerlifting can have beyond the competition floor.



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LOCAL MOM, MATH TEACHER AND SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER

By Libby Hopkins

Wearing many hats comes easily to Brandon resident Rebecca McDonagh. She is a mom with two teenagers and a rescue dog, Foxy. She has been teaching for 18 years with Hillsborough County Schools and loves to travel, but it's what she does in her off time that has made her a social media influencer. On Instagram, she is @mathwithmissmcd, and her reels are hysterical.

"I actually started making content hoping to create a little side hustle; you may have heard teachers aren't exactly the highest-paid profession," McDonagh said. "It sort of slowly evolved into making silly videos instead of a serious business, which is great because this is way more fun."

The inspiration for her reels and videos comes from her real life.

"Luckily, real life gives me all the inspiration I need," she said. "My own interactions with my students, my kids and other people's stories give me plenty of material. My Teacher Hotline videos are what initially took off, and people still send me names to use all the time. I love how there's a part of so many people's experiences in my videos."

Making her videos and reel is cathartic to McDonagh.

"It's honestly just really fun and kind of takes the edge off what can sometimes be a



Rebecca McDonagh is a local mom, teacher and social media influencer. Her funny reels and videos she posts on her Instagram account, @mathwithmissmcd are inspired by her life.

stressful profession," she said. "I love hearing from my fellow teachers and moms about how something made them laugh or eased the chaos of the day,"

Being called a social media influencer is something that McDonagh takes in stride.

"I have a feeling that is a huge overstatement," McDonagh said with a laugh.

"I'm not really an influencer (unless it's influencing people to drink Diet Coke, and then I absolutely am) or a celebrity, but it is the best when people come up and introduce themselves and say they like something on my channel. I've met people in different states and even different countries who've seen one of the videos, and it's a blast chatting and hearing about their own experiences."

McDonagh loves her followers and loves how the community supports her as both a teacher and a social media personality.

"I'm so proud of how our community rallies around teachers," she said. "I've always felt so supported here working in our local schools and I'm proud to call this home. I recently published two math workbooks for fourth and fifth graders called Math to the Music, and it's been amazing hearing such great feedback from everyone."

BLOOMINGDALE CHESS CLUB BRINGS PLAYERS OF ALL AGES TOGETHER

By Libby Hopkins

Dugg Smith of Dover is originally from Columbus, Ohio, and his life-long love of chess began with a simple challenge from a friend. After losing a match, Smith was determined to learn more about the game and improve his skills. He checked out a book from the library and began studying the strategies, moves and patterns that make chess both challenging and rewarding.

"This was in the late 60s, and I was 10 years old," Smith said.

His interest grew even stronger in 1972 when American chess legend Bobby Fischer played Boris Spassky for the world title in Iceland. Smith and his buddy would get the newspaper each morning and review the results of the match together.

"Fischer lost the first game, forfeited the second game but completely outplayed Spassky the rest of the way to become the first American world champ," Smith said.

By then, Smith was playing on his junior high team.

"I continued playing through high school in league competitions," Smith said. "I was the chess club president as a senior. I played in rated tournaments all through junior and senior high school."

Smith started the Bloomingdale Chess Club in 2025, and it's registered with U.S Chess Association.

"We have been in existence for over a year now," Smith said. "We have a mix of older players and players as young as 5



years old that are just starting to learn the great game of chess. We don't charge to play or to participate in tournaments. We had our first tournament last month. We have players that are rated as high as 1,900 in the US Chess rating system, and many of our players participate in local US Chess-sanctioned tournaments."

Smith believes chess is a great tool for children

to develop life skills, such as critical thinking, planning, strategy, time management, memory development and problem-solving skills.

"Chess helps children in reading and mathematics as well," Smith said. "The social aspect of chess is really great. When a child makes a great move, his face lights up. Chess is fantastic in building self-esteem in children. I'm a very competitive person, so chess allows me to compete and also has the added benefit of keeping my mind sharp as I age."

The Bloomingdale Chess Club meets at the Bloomingdale Regional Public Library, located at 1906 Bloomingdale Ave. in Valrico, on Wednesday night from 6-8:45 p.m. every week.

If you would like to learn more about the Bloomingdale Chess Club or join the club, you can visit the club's Facebook page at www.facebook.com/bloomingdale.chess.club.

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OSPREY OBSERVER ENTERS 25TH YEAR WITH NEW HOME OFFICE LOCATION

Staff Report



The *Osprey Observer* is preparing to celebrate 25 years of publishing positive, hometown news while entering a new chapter with a move to a more flexible office.

The family-owned publication began printing in January 2002 as a single edition serving FishHawk. Today, the *Osprey Observer* publishes more than 70,000 direct-mailed newspapers each month across five editions: Bloomingdale/FishHawk, Riverview, Valrico, Brandon/Winthrop and its newest edition, SouthShore.

In September, the newspaper sold its longtime office on Lithia Pinecrest Road and opened a satellite office on Bloomingdale Avenue inside the EZ Choice Realty office located at 116 E. Bloomingdale Ave, Brandon, FL 33511.

The move reflects how the newspaper's staff and operations have evolved, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic.

"After the pandemic, most of our team took their positions home," said Editor and Publisher Marie Gilmore. "So now, with Zoom staff meetings and staff working anywhere in the state and beyond, we are able to work remotely."

While much of the *Osprey Observer's* staff now works remotely, the publication will maintain a physical office where readers, advertisers and community members can continue to connect with the newspaper.

The new office, located at 116 E. Blooming-

dale Ave. in Brandon, will be open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m.-1 p.m.

"We still want to be a hub where members of the community can drop off press releases, pick up papers and prizes and still feel connected," Gilmore said.

The new location provides the newspaper with a central place to maintain that personal connection while allowing the company to continue embracing the flexibility of a remote workforce.

For Gilmore, who founded the *Osprey Observer* in January 2002 along with husband Doug and a small team of dedicated staff, the changes represent both growth and a return to the publication's roots.

Over the past 25 years, the newspaper has grown from one community edition into a five-edition publication reaching tens of thousands of local households. Throughout that growth, its mission has remained focused on telling the stories of the people, organizations, businesses and events that make the community special.

As the *Osprey Observer* looks toward its next 25 years, its new office will serve as a reminder that while the way newspapers work continues to change, the importance of staying connected to the communities it serves has not.

For more informatino, visit the website www.ospreyobserver.com, email editor@ospreyobserver.com or call 813-657-2418.

SHOP, SIP AND DISCOVER AT VINTAGE MARKET DAYS THIS OCTOBER

Staff Report

The region's most popular shopping event grows again as it becomes one of your timeless traditions: Vintage Market Days of Greater Tampa returns from Friday through Sunday, October 16-18, at the Florida Strawberry Festival Fairgrounds' Grimes Building and As-



tin Pavilion, located at 2508 W. Oak Ave. in Plant City.

Vintage Market Days® is an upscale vintage-inspired indoor/outdoor market featuring original art, antiques, clothing, jewelry, handmade treasures, home décor, outdoor furnishings, consumable yummies, seasonal plantings and a little more. Vintage Market Days® events are so much more than a flea market. Each Vintage Market Days® event is a unique opportunity for vendors to display their talents and passions in creative venues.

Expanding this fall to a third building, this is the ultimate vintage shopping party — with clothing, home decor and furniture. Plus, it is packed with original art, repurposed treasures and handcrafted jewelry. You'll find everything you need if you're celebrating spooky season or getting ahead of the most wonderful time of the year from more than 100 vendors, all set to a live DJ soundtrack.

Enjoy food trucks with special treats and multiple photo ops as you shop. And snag a selfie at one of the photo walls for free reen-

try all weekend. Plus, some lucky shoppers will get swag bags each day.

Vintage Market Days doesn't just bring families and friends together for a weekend of fun experiences. This fall, it again supports the First United Methodist Youth Ministry through its bag check and porter service tips and close parking lot donations.

Bring your besties, shop local and discover unique finds you won't see anywhere else.

The Vintage Market Days' hours are 10 a.m.-4 p.m. (or 9:30 a.m. with prepurchased tickets) on Friday and Saturday and 11 a.m.-3 p.m. (or 10:30 a.m. with prepurchased tickets) on Sunday.

Tickets are available for half price online for a limited time, or \$12 at the gate. Kids 12 and under are free. For tickets and more information, visit www.vintagemarketdays.com/market/metro-tampa/.

About Vintage Market Days

Vintage Market Days is an upscale vintage and vintage-inspired indoor/outdoor market, featuring original art, antiques, clothing, jewelry, handmade treasures, home decor, outdoor furnishings, consumable yummies, seasonal plantings and a little more.

The market is a three-day event held two times a year in various communities throughout the United States. Each Vintage Market Days event is a unique opportunity for vendors to display their talents and passions in different venues throughout the country.

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ONE DAY CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE:
CEOs INVITED INTO CLASSROOMS

By Marie Gilmore

Tampa Bay business leaders are being invited to trade their offices for classrooms and experience firsthand the impact they can make on the future workforce through the 2026 CEOs in Schools: 1 Day of Change program.

The countywide volunteer initiative, presented by Vistra Communications and the Hillsborough Education Foundation in partnership with Hillsborough County Public Schools, encourages CEOs and other business leaders to spend a day immersed in the daily life of a local elementary school. This year's official volunteer day is Friday, November 6, though participants and their assigned principals may coordinate another date if needed.

The program was inspired by Vistra Communications CEO Brian Butler's longtime relationship with Mort Elementary School. Butler once spent an entire day shadowing former Principal Woodland Johnson, taking on a variety of responsibilities that included teaching, planning, serving lunch and more.

That firsthand experience gave Butler a deeper understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing public schools and inspired him to challenge other business leaders to do the same.

Since then, Vistra's relationship with Mort Elementary has continued to grow through employee volunteerism, student visits to the company's headquarters, teacher appreciation events and other school initiatives. The idea expanded into CEOs in Schools in



Tampa Bay business leaders will step into local classrooms on Nov. 6 as part of the 2026 CEOs in Schools.

2019, and Vistra partnered with the Hillsborough Education Foundation the following year to continue growing the initiative.

Today, nearly 150 Tampa Bay-area CEOs partici-

pate each year, gaining a unique perspective on the work of educators and the experiences of students while building relationships with the schools helping prepare tomorrow's workforce.

"Our schools are shaping tomorrow's community members, future workforce and leaders," said Hillsborough Education Foundation CEO Anna Corman. "We have a vested interest in their success."

Participants may greet students, read in classrooms, share their career experiences, attend leadership or planning meetings, tour school operations, have lunch with students or teachers and observe classrooms in action. Each visit is designed in collaboration with the school principal, giving participants an authentic 'day in the life' experience.

Superintendent Van Ayres praised the impact of the program, noting that even the smallest moments can make a meaningful difference in schools.

Business leaders interested in participating can reserve an available school online. Schools are matched with CEOs, who then work directly with the schools' principals to plan their visits.

For more information or to reserve a school, visit www.1dayofchange.com/ceos-inschools/.

EASTERN HILLS COMMUNITY BAND
BRINGS SUPERHEROES TO THE STAGE

Staff Report

Heroes come in all shapes and sizes — and this fall, the heroes are musicians.

The Eastern Hillsborough Community Band will bring an evening of music, adventure and some of the world's most iconic heroes to Brandon with its Superhero-Themed Fall Concert, featuring two performances in October.

Audiences can expect an entertaining program filled with music inspired by legendary heroes, beloved films and epic adventures. Featured selections include Superman, Spider-Man, Captain America, The Incredibles, The Lord of the Rings and The Sorcerer's Apprentice.

For Kayla Vincent, an alto saxophone player in her second season with the Eastern Hillsborough Community Band, the concert is especially meaningful.

"This is my second season with the band, and it has been a dream to play music featured in two of Disney's most iconic films, Fantasia and The Incredibles," Vincent said.

The fall concert follows an extraordinary summer for the band. Members recently traveled to Normandy, France, after being selected to perform during D-Day commemorations, an opportunity that marked a significant milestone and tremendous honor for the ensemble.

Founded in the spring of 2009 by Plant City resident Kim McKamey, who still performs with the group as a trumpet player, the Eastern Hillsborough Community Band



The Eastern Hillsborough Community Band, now with more than 100 members, will present its Superhero-Themed Fall Concert with performances in Brandon on October 8 and 9.

began rehearsing in a small church with approximately 10 members. Within a year, the growing ensemble moved to a larger facility in the Lithia area, with membership reaching nearly 50 musicians. The band also became a non-profit 501(c)(3) corporation.

Today, the band rehearses weekly in Brandon and has 101 members, ranging from amateur musicians to seasoned professionals, all united by a shared love of music. It was also recently nominated for Creative Loafing's Best of the Bay 2026 for Best Jazz Band, recognizing its contribution to the Tampa Bay music community.

The Eastern Hillsborough Community Band is dedicated to fostering a love of music, improving musicianship and enlightening, entertaining and inspiring audiences throughout the region. It also gives musicians opportunities to build friendships and camaraderie through their shared passion for performing.

From comic-book legends and Disney classics to epic fantasy, the Superhero-Themed Fall Concert promises an evening of music and adventure for all ages.

The band will perform on Thursday, October 8, at 7 p.m. at Generations Church, located at 2602 S. Kings Ave. in Brandon, and Friday, October 9, at 7 p.m. at Bay Life Church, located at 1017 Kingsway Rd. in Brandon.

For more on upcoming concerts and membership, visit <https://www.ehcb.org/>.

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T&J PAINTING GROWS WHILE KEEPING ITS FAMILY-OWNED TOUCH

By Libby Hopkins

T&J Painting, founded by Tony and Jen Friedrichsen, started with a simple mission: to help people feel good in the spaces where they live and work. As a family-owned painting company based in Brandon, it has been serving the community for more than a decade.

"Probably the biggest win at T&J Painting is that we have consistently seen growth our company by 60-70 percent year after year, with 2026 projecting to be the same, which is something Tony and I are incredibly proud of," said Jen, T&J's regional director of sales and marketing. "We have been able to bring in more leadership positions within the company, including an office manager, project coordinator and project manager. This allows us to provide the best customer service possible as we continue to navigate our tremendous growth."

Despite its growth, T&J Painting has kept its personal, family-owned approach. "We never want to become so big that our customers feel like just another number," Jen said. "Tony and I are still involved every day, and maintaining those customer relationships will always be important to us. Growth is exciting, but growing the right way matters most."

Jen, Tony and their team at T&J understand how Florida's climate can affect paint quality and longevity, from the in-



T&J Painting started with a simple mission, to help people feel good in the spaces where they live and work.

tense sun and humidity to the heavy rains that can wear down exterior surfaces over time. That local knowledge helps them recommend the right products, preparation methods and finishes for each home or business, so the final result looks great and lasts. T&J uses premium products and proven techniques to make sure their clients' finishes hold up season after season.

"Every job is planned with care and customized to meet your needs," Jen said. "Our goal is to deliver a clean, polished result that brings out the best in your property."

What sets T&J Painting apart is that it is not a franchise but rather a company built from the ground up by Tony and Jen.

"Tony is not someone who simply bought into a painting company and was handed a system and a name," Jen said. "My husband, business partner and best friend has been a painter for more than 30 years, and I have been around the painting industry for about 23 years. Our team is also incredibly important to us."

For the Friedrichsens, T&J Painting's success is closely tied to the community that has supported them along the way.

"Giving back to our community is something Tony and I are extremely passionate about," Jen said.

Visit www.tandjpaintingfl.com or call 813-723-9124. The company office is located at 330 Pauls Dr., Ste. 111, in Brandon.

THE VOICE FINALIST KENZIE WHEELER HEADLINES CONCERT IN VERO BEACH

Staff Report

Becoming a finalist in Season 20 of NBC's The Voice in 2021 put Kenzie Wheeler on the map as an up-and-coming American country music singer/songwriter. Wheeler calls Dover his home, but he is now most well-known for his country music roots, heartfelt performances and stage presence. He will be traveling across the state to visit Dignity Ranch, the new 30-acre property located at 801 154th Ave. in Vero Beach, to perform in an acoustic concert during a special event presented by The Source on Saturday, November 7. On that date, The Source plans to open the Dignity Ranch gates for the first time to the community at large to attend 'Hidden Faces, 2026, From Homeless to Home,' from 4-8 p.m.

The day begins with a tour of Dignity Ranch and a sampling of award-winning food from 4:00-5:15 p.m. and ends with a moving program from 6:30-8 p.m. under a giant tent. However, in between those hours, there will be activities happening throughout the campus for children and adults and professionally produced videos that will enlighten and educate all the visitors on what The Source is doing to eradicate homelessness in Indian River County, along with more unexpected experiences. The concert will be held from 5:15-6:15 p.m., just prior to the program, when Wheeler will play favorites from his album and singles as well as perform his newest single, "B.O.A.T.," released in July, and a soon-to-be released single that will be heard for the first time in public right in Vero Beach. He will also be on hand be-



fore the concert begins with his merchandise for purchase and autographs to sign.

Prior to his second-place finish on The Voice, Wheeler had already built an impressive resume, opening for country legends and rising stars, such as Charlie Daniels, Michael Ray and Craig Campbell.

Since The Voice, Wheeler has continued to reach new heights, including opening for Luke Bryan — an experience he considers one of the highlights of his career. He recently signed with Ruffnation/WAX Records and is actively writing and recording new music while continuing to bring his high-energy country show to venues, festivals and private events across the country.

Wheeler's performance history includes appearances at renowned venues, such as Ole Red, House of Blues, The Hard Rock and The Dallas Bull, along with headlining the Florida Strawberry Festival. With a growing catalog of original music, a powerful live presence and a proven track record of connecting with audiences,

Tickets are \$25 per person entry fee (children are free) at www.iamthesource.org/hiddenfaces and find the directions to Dignity Ranch and ongoing updates with exciting event details. Contact Jonathan Orozco, 772-564-0202 or by emailing him at jonathan.orozco@iamthesource.org. For more information, contact Beverly Paris of Paris Productions for The Source at parisproductionsvero@gmail.com or 772-563-8395.

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ALL ABOARD! INTERACTIVE TRAIN EXHIBIT OPENS AT GLAZER MUSEUM

Staff Report



Glazer Children's Museum and Suncoast Credit Union celebrated the grand opening of Suncoast Imagination Station, a new interactive train exhibit designed to inspire creativity, exploration and hands-on learning through the power of play.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony kicked off the new exhibit at Glazer Children's Museum, located at 110 W. Gasparilla Plaza in downtown Tampa.

The expansive train table features tracks winding through changeable landscapes filled with buildings, bridges and natural elements. Children can build, explore and create their own stories as the trains move through the exhibit. Recognizable Tampa landmarks add a local touch to the imaginative experience.

Designed with accessibility in mind, Suncoast Imagination Station wheelchair users, to participate in the experience. Crawl-through spaces and center cutouts encourage children to move through and interact with the exhibit in new ways, creating opportunities for discovery and shared play.

The exhibit is designed to offer more

than entertainment. As children navigate train tracks, tackle design challenges and create imaginative stories, they can develop spatial reasoning, fine motor skills, collaboration and creativity. The open-ended nature of the experience encourages young visitors to experiment, problem-solve and make sense of the world around them.

Suncoast Credit Union, which traces its roots back to 1934, when it was founded as Hillsborough County Teachers Credit Union, has a long history of supporting children and families throughout Florida. Through its foundation, the credit union has contributed more than \$63 million since 1990 to organizations and initiatives supporting children's health, education and emotional well-being.

The new exhibit also complements Glazer Children's Museum's mission of providing engaging, play-based learning experiences. With more than 35,000 square feet of interactive exhibits, the downtown Tampa museum encourages children and families to explore science, art, health and other subjects through purposeful play.

With Suncoast Imagination Station, families will soon have another opportunity to learn, imagine and create together — one train track at a time.

Glazer Children's Museum is located at 110 W. Gasparilla Plaza in Tampa. For more information, visit the website at <https://glazermuseum.org/>.

LOCAL BUSINESSES INVITED TO JOIN HOLIDAY VENDOR FAIR

Staff Report

Local businesses have an opportunity to get their products, services and holiday offerings in front of area shoppers at the Valrico Fish-Hawk Chamber of Commerce's annual Shop Local Holiday Vendor Fair.

The event is scheduled for Saturday, November 7, from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. at the Presbyterian Church of Bloomingdale, located at 710 E. Bloomingdale Ave. in Brandon. The festive event will bring together local businesses, families and holiday shoppers for an afternoon of shopping, entertainment and community connection.

This year's event chair, Mike Neill, is encouraging local businesses to take advantage of the opportunity to showcase what they offer during the busy holiday shopping season.

"The holidays are one of the best times to support local businesses," Neill said. "This event gives shoppers the chance to find one-of-a-kind gifts while meeting the people behind the businesses that help make our community thrive."

Vendor booths are available for \$40, with space limited and the fee nonrefundable. Businesses interested in participating are encouraged to register early through the "Events" section of the Valrico FishHawk Chamber of Commerce website at www.valricofishhawk.org.

The fair will feature a variety of vendors offering handcrafted items, holiday decor, boutique products, specialty foods, professional services and unique gift



ideas. The goal is to create an interactive experience rather than simply a traditional vendor market.

Businesses, including service-based companies, are encouraged to make their booths engaging by offering games, demonstrations, crafts, contests or other activities that encourage visitors to stop and interact.

"We love seeing vendors get creative," Neill said. "Whether it's a game, a craft, a contest or another interactive idea, those experiences help create lasting memories and meaningful conversations."

The popular Flamingo Decorating Contest will also return. Each vendor receives a flamingo to decorate in a creative holiday theme, with awards presented in several categories.

For shoppers, the event will include food, music, raffles, giveaways and family-friendly activities, along with opportunities to discover local businesses and holiday gifts.

"The Shop Local Holiday Vendor Fair is all about bringing people together," Neill said. "It's an opportunity to support small businesses, strengthen community relationships and kick off the holiday season in a fun and meaningful way."

Businesses interested in becoming vendors can contact Mike Neill by email at shoplocal@valricofishhawk.org.



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PREPARING FOR MEDICARE OPEN ENROLLMENT WITH MB INSURANCE

By Makenzie Atkins Noel

Choosing the right insurance plan is about more than finding a familiar name. Doctors, prescriptions, costs and coverage can all change from year to year, making an annual review an important part of protecting both health and finances. With Medicare's annual enrollment period (AEP) approaching, MB Insurance Solutions is helping local clients prepare for the changes ahead.

Owned by Michele Bartock, MB Insurance Solutions is an independent health and life insurance agency serving Florida. Bartock, who has lived in the community for over 20 years, specializes in supplements, Medicare Advantage, prescription plans and life insurance. As an independent agent, she has access to 12 organizations and more than 80 Medicare plans, allowing her to compare options rather than limiting clients to one plan.

Bartock also helps clients with under-65 health insurance, off-market plans and group health insurance for small businesses. Additional coverage options include dental, vision, hearing, life, accident, indemnity, cancer and heart/stroke plans, as well as long-term care and annuities.

With Medicare's AEP approaching, now is the time for beneficiaries to start reviewing their coverage for 2027. AEP runs from October 15 through December 7, giving Medicare beneficiaries a limited window to make changes to their plans.

That review is especially important because Medicare plans can change from year to year. Prescription drug plans may



Michele Bartock, owner of MB Insurance Solutions, helps clients navigate Medicare coverage and understand their options during Annual Enrollment Period.

change their formularies, deductibles and co-insurance, while out-of-pocket maximums can also increase. Bartock's goal is to compare the available options based on each client's doctors, medications and priorities so they can make an informed decision before the deadline.

"Every client has different needs, and I want them to understand their options rather than simply telling them what plan they should choose," said Bartock.

"When clients know they can call with questions throughout the year and have someone who knows their situation, that is what makes the difference."

As the end of the year approaches, Bartock wants Medicare beneficiaries to keep a few important things in mind. Some Medicare Advantage plans offer a Part B premium 'Give Back,' while individuals may also qualify for Medicaid or the Low-Income Subsidy based on their income and assets. She also cautions beneficiaries about unsolicited calls promising gift cards or food cards, noting that these benefits are only available to those who meet certain qualifications. For those who miss the annual enrollment period or are unhappy with a new Medicare Advantage plan, there may be another opportunity to make a change between January and March.

Outside of Medicare and Affordable Care Act plans, Bartok can also help clients with ancillary and small group plans. Visit online at www.medicareofflorida.com; call 813-553-3822, ext. 2; or mlbartock@gmail.com.

WRIGHT'S GOURMET PLANS FOR EXPANDED BAKERY IN BRANDON

By Brian Bokor



A South Tampa institution known for its signature sandwiches, cakes and pumpernickel bread is coming to Brandon.

Wright's Gourmet House plans to open an approximately 15,000-square-foot location at 328 Brandon Town Center Dr., near Brandon Exchange, in summer 2027. It will take over the building recently occupied by Abby Iron Doors and previously home to Peltz Shoes.

Plans call for a large, multipurpose location combining Wright's cafe with a bakery, espresso bar, gourmet market and expanded catering operation.

The menu is expected to include the breakfast selections, deli sandwiches, salads, cakes, pastries and cookies that have made Wright's a Tampa favorite for more than six decades. The new location will also offer grab-and-go meals, take-and-bake items, event desserts and Wright's-branded products.

Wright's opened in South Tampa in 1963 and built a devoted following for its oversized sandwiches, scratch-made cakes and longtime recipes. It remained in the Wright family until Caspers Co. purchased it from Jeff Mount, grandson of founders Marjorie and Pete Wright, in 2024.

Caspers Co. is owned by siblings Blake Casper and Allison Casper Ad-

ams, whose family was once Florida's largest McDonald's franchisee before selling its restaurants to McDonald's corporate in 2022. The siblings also own Oxford Commons, the hospitality company behind Oxford

Exchange and other Tampa restaurants.

Brandon was a familiar market for Caspers Co., which previously operated nine McDonald's restaurants in the area. After acquiring Wright's, the company moved carefully to ensure the restaurant's longtime recipes and quality could be maintained as it expanded.

The Brandon location is expected to employ about 100 people. As Wright's prepares to expand, Yesy Cruz, director of operations, has focused on developing its workforce, which has more than doubled since Caspers Co. acquired the restaurant.

Wright's opened its first satellite cafe at Tampa General Hospital's Davis Islands campus in February.

A second location of approximately 15,000 square feet is planned between Culver's and Cooper's Hawk along State Road 56 at Wiregrass Ranch in Wesley Chapel, with an anticipated summer 2028 opening.

Wright's original location is at 1200 S. Dale Mabry Highway in Tampa. For more information, visit www.wrightsgourmet.com or call 813-253-3838.

For Brandon-area customers, summer 2027 means a trip to South Tampa will no longer be necessary for a Wright's Beef Martini sandwich or a slice of its famous layer cake.



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SOUTH HILLSBOROUGH PIPELINE
MAKES SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS

By Maribel Medina

Tampa Bay Water’s contractor is making significant progress on the construction of the new South Hillsborough Pipeline that will deliver high-quality drinking water to Hillsborough County. The county needs additional drinking water by the end of 2028 so that communities from Brandon to south of Balm can flourish.

You can see the progress we’re making. Several major tunneling crossings are already complete, and additional work is underway at locations including State Road 60 and the Alafia River.



reported to navigation applications, like Waze and Google Maps, to help you plan your commute.

When the pipeline is in service in late 2028, it will supply drinking water that is vital to the public’s health and Hillsborough County’s economy. Hospitals, doctors’ offices, schools, fire and rescue, recreation centers, businesses and homes all require clean drinking water, and we remain steadfast in our commitment to providing this essential service to the community.

ment to providing this essential service to the community.

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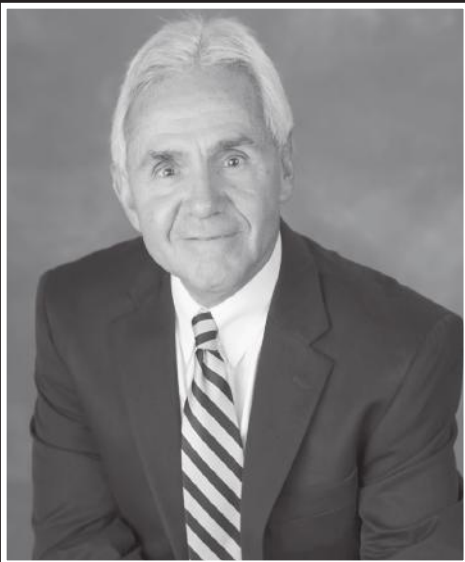
Stay up to date on detours and road closures by signing up for email alerts at <https://southhillsboroughpipeline.com/contact/>.

Use your navigation app to help plan your commute.

Support local businesses — all businesses along the route are open and accessible. Please continue to support your favorite businesses along the route as they cope with different traffic patterns.

Maribel Medina is planning and projects director for Tampa Bay Water, which supplies wholesale drinking water to Hillsborough County, Pasco County, Pinellas County, New Port Richey, St. Petersburg and Tampa.

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WINTHROP SHOWCASES SEVEN RESTAURANTS DURING FIRST RESTAURANT WEEK SEPT 17-27

By Jane Owen

From upscale dining to a patio bar, Winthrop, a master-planned community located in Riverview, has over a dozen restaurants, bars, bakeries and cafes. Family-owned and operated by its founders, John and Kay Sullivan, who live in the town center, Winthrop has small-town charm and a focus on fostering community.

Winthrop is hosting Winthrop Restaurant Week to showcase its restaurants to the community. The restaurant week is from Thursday, September 17, through Sunday, September 27. Participating restaurants include Acropolis Greek Taverna, Cappy's Pizzeria, Cali Brandon, Donovan's Meastery, Himes Breakfast House, Tutto Tavola and Longshots Sports Bar.

Each restaurant will have a special restaurant week menu. Restaurant guests can order from a restaurant's regular menu, but they will have items to choose from that are unique for restaurant week. Some restaurants will have a prix fixe restaurant week menu, allowing guests to order an appetizer, a main entree and a dessert for a set price. Other restaurants will feature items on the menu that are only available during restaurant week.

Of the seven restaurants being showcased, the longest-opened restaurant is Acropolis, which has been in Winthrop for 17 years. The newest restaurant is Longshots Sports Bar, which just opened.

Restaurant week organizer Sarah Sullivan



The owners of 7 Winthrop restaurants have teamed together to form the first restaurant week in September.

Xiong said it is the perfect time to try a restaurant for the first time or visit one that you know and love.

"Restaurant week is a special occasion to highlight the amazing restaurants at Winthrop. We're particularly proud that we have so many family-run and locally run businesses and restaurants," Xiong said.

"It's been done and been very successful in larger cities, but this is definitely a first in Riverview. We're really excited to see the ground swell and see how it works out this year. It can grow. But, unless you start, you don't know," Sullivan said.

The community growth from the event is already happening because of the connections being made between the restaurants.

"The restaurants are coming together in a collaborative way. It is already building a strong sense of community amongst the business owners," Xiong said.

Tutto Tavola owner Luigi Cavallaro said he is looking forward to the event. Tutto Tavola opened in Winthrop in January.

"It's a great way to showcase Winthrop restaurants. It's going to be a great event," Cavallaro said. "I love being in Winthrop because of the community. It's like a little village of its own," he added.

Sign up for the Winthrop newsletter at <https://winthropfl.com/> and follow @WinthropFL to participate in the many giveaways happening. Visit WinthropFL.com/RestaurantWeek for more information.

VITALITY RESPITE OFFERS SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES LIVING WITH DEMENTIA

By Dale Bliss

Caring for a loved one with dementia can be challenging, emotional and exhausting. Recognizing the need to support both individuals experiencing memory loss and the caregivers who care for them, St. Andrew's United Methodist Church in Brandon offers Vitality Respite Center.

Vitality Respite provides a safe, loving environment where adults with mild to moderate memory loss can socialize, participate in activities and enjoy time with others while their caregivers receive a much-needed break.

The ministry began at St. Andrew's on September 24, 2024, and is led by Program Director Teresa Hartney, who understands the demands of caregiving firsthand. Hartney cared for her husband, mother and mother-in-law and said her personal experience inspired her commitment to the program.

"That's why I do this," Hartney said. "This is designed for caregivers to give them a break."

Vitality Respite is offered on Tuesdays from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. and provides guests with social activities, brain-stimulating games, music, art and a wholesome lunch. The goal is to nurture a sense of worth and dignity while helping guests remain socially connected and engaged.

"We are in our third year and are blessed to have wonderful volunteers to carry



out this endeavor," Hartney said.

Volunteers from both the church and the surrounding community help operate the program. Training is provided for those interested in volunteering.

The program follows

the national Respite for All model, which brings volunteers together to create welcoming weekday programs for people living with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias while providing caregivers with time to shop, run errands, meet a friend or simply rest.

In addition to respite services, St. Andrew's is beginning a Caregivers Support Group on the first Tuesday of each month at 10 a.m., which began on September 1. Meetings will be held in the church library, Disciples' Hall, Room 422, with a virtual meeting option available.

"Caring for a loved one with cognitive impairment can feel overwhelming, but you don't have to walk the journey alone," organizers said.

Vitality Respite Center is a ministry of St. Andrew's United Methodist Church made possible through a grant from the Brookdale Foundation.

For more information about Vitality Respite, contact Hartney at 813-689-6849, Ext. 5, or email vitality@saumc.net. The church is located at 3315 S. Bryan Rd. in Brandon.



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CAMPBELL'S DAIRYLAND GETS NEW OWNERS, KEEPS ITS BRANDON ROOTS

By Marie Gilmore

For more than three decades, Campbell's Dairyland has been a gathering place for Brandon families looking for a good meal, a milkshake, an ice cream cone and a little taste of nostalgia.

Now, the restaurant at 200 S. Parsons Ave., has a new owner, but customers can expect much of what they love to remain exactly the same.

Dairy Joy, a family-owned Florida ice cream business with roots dating back to 1958, has acquired Campbell's Dairyland and is bringing the Brandon restaurant into its family of businesses. The new owners, Chris and Karrie Mueller, are not changing the Campbell's Dairyland name or the restaurant's identity.

Instead, the Muellers, who also own South Tampa's Xtreme Juice and Dairy Joy locations along with Rodeo Whip in Deland, plan to build on the legacy that has made Campbell's Dairyland a longtime community favorite.

"We're excited to bring Campbell's into the Dairy Joy and Rodeo Whip family," the Mueller's said. "Campbell's Dairyland is still Campbell's Dairyland — just with the Muellers helping carry its story into the future."

Campbell's Dairyland has a history nearly as rich as its menu. Founder Boyd Campbell began by selling chili dogs at local events, using a five-generation-old family chili recipe. In 1985, Boyd and his wife, Pam Campbell, purchased an ice cream business formerly known as Dairy



The Mueller family.



Isle and began serving chili dogs alongside ice cream.

The business became Campbell's Dairyland in 1993. In 1998, the Campbells sold the restaurant to their daughters, Jill Paules and Leesa Lee, who continued the family business with their husbands, Jay Paules and James Lee. James passed away in 2025.

The restaurant faced one of its biggest challenges in November 2002, when a fire caused approximately \$250,000 in damage. After eight months and eight days, Campbell's Dairyland reopened.

Campbell's Dairyland is known for sandwiches, burgers, hot dogs, salads, seafood, battered vegetables and more than 30 milkshake flavors, along with its extensive ice cream menu. The restaurant also features indoor and outdoor seating, a drive-thru and a small outdoor play area.

Dairy Joy has been serving generations of Florida families since 1958 and currently operates locations in South Tampa, Seminole and Jacksonville. The Muellers have three children and have made preserving the nostalgic character of Dairy Joy a priority.

For longtime customers, the message is simple: Campbell's Dairyland is still Campbell's Dairyland — just with Dairy Joy helping carry its story into the future.

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HIGH 5 WELCOMES REICH, MCINTOSH TO LEAD GROWING AQUATICS PROGRAMS

By Emily Harper

High 5 Inc. is embracing a new chapter for its Aquatics program and is excited to introduce its new team members to the organization. Danielle Reich, director of Aquatics, and Jonathan McIntosh, head coach of Blue Wave Swim Team, are both eager to be a part of an organization that values community and water safety.

Reich's love for swimming developed at the age of 13. She began swimming at her local YMCA and eventually swam competitively for Durant High School. A few years after graduating, she worked at Watermelon Swim, where her passion for teaching swimmers grew.

"One of the most important parts of being involved in Aquatics for me is knowing that what we do can have a real impact on a swimmer's confidence, independence and safety in and around the water. Water safety is my number one priority for every swimmer, regardless of their age or ability," said Reich.

Now, as the director of Aquatics, Reich is especially passionate about expanding High 5's adaptive Aquatics opportunities for both children and adults with special abilities. As a parent of a child with special abilities, it is important to her to develop a program to teach foundational water-safety and swimming skills tailored to each individual's needs.

"I want to continue building on the strong foundation that High 5 already has while creating clear opportunities for swimmers



of all ages and abilities to learn, progress, stay involved and develop a lifelong relationship with the water. Most importantly, I want wa-

ter safety to remain at the heart of everything we do," said Reich. McIntosh has over two decades of experience in the sport of swimming. He started the sport when he was just 4 years old, has competed at high levels and ultimately became a collegiate swimmer at Notre Dame College.

During his collegiate career, he served as a three-time team captain and led his team to three Mountain East Conference Championships while setting numerous individual and relay school records.

As a coach, McIntosh believes that success is measured by more than times and medals. His mission is to continue building an environment known for exceptional coaching, athlete development and a strong sense of community in which every athlete is excited to be a part of.

"My vision is to build more than successful swimmers; it is to develop disciplined, resilient young people who understand that excellence is earned through consistency, accountability and service to something greater than themselves. If we create a culture where athletes are challenged, supported and taught why the work matters, the results in the pool will follow, and those lessons will remain long after they leave it," said McIntosh.

EPIC SURF GRAND OPENING BRINGS LOCAL COUPLE'S VISION TO LIFE

By Brian Bokor

After years of planning, construction and anticipation, Epic Surf officially celebrated its grand opening at Heroes Paradise, welcoming guests to Florida's first Epic Surf deep-water standing wave. For owners Tim and Julie Pennenga, the ribbon cutting marked the realization of a vision to create more than just a surfing attraction, offering beginners and experienced surfers alike the opportunity to experience the thrill of riding a wave.

The grand opening gave guests a chance to experience that vision firsthand. Families gathered on the spacious deck overlooking the wave as music played, instructors worked with first-time surfers and applause regularly broke out when riders found their balance. Just as noticeable was the staff. From the moment guests arrived, employees were professional, respectful and welcoming, an atmosphere that continued throughout the facility.

Having followed the project since a hard-hat tour in January, when the attraction was still largely a concrete shell, I wanted to find out what many first-time visitors were probably wondering: Could someone who had never surfed really learn to do this?

Watching the instructors carve back and forth across the wave, I assumed they had years of experience. Instead, several had learned only months earlier. Julie said learning the attractions is part of the job for her team, helping employees understand what guests are experiencing rather than simply telling them what to do.

That approach became obvious once I stepped into the water.

My first two attempts ended face-first. Each time, however, an instructor explained what I had done wrong, offered another tip and encouraged me to get back on the board.

One instructor explained that beginners often hurt themselves by concentrating too hard on balancing. To get riders out of their own heads, instructors ask questions such as, "What's your favorite color?" or "What's your favorite sport?" In one case, they handed a struggling surfer toy lightsabers and had him pretend to duel while riding. Once he stopped thinking about balancing, he found it.

Julie said that learning curve is one reason



EPIC SURF

Epic Surf's sessions last an hour.

"If you only give

them 30 minutes, they're not going to get it. They're going to be discouraged," she said. Even experienced ocean surfers, she added, can spend much of their first session adjusting to the wave. "That last 10 or five minutes, that's when they get it."

By my fifth ride, I understood exactly what she meant. Something clicked. I found my balance, stayed on the wave and heard applause from the deck above.

My first thought was simple: "Wow ... I just did that!"

Julie sees that reaction regularly. Once riders begin figuring it out, she said, "They get addicted. They want to do it. They want to do it again."

Epic Surf is located at Heroes Paradise, 733 Knowles Road in Brandon. For information or reservations, visit www.heroesparadise.com/epicsurfusa or call 1-833-543-7637.

The finished attraction also represents the end of a difficult road for the Pennengas. When asked what proved most challenging in bringing Epic Surf to Heroes Paradise, Julie's answer wasn't construction or permitting.

"Getting the business loan," she said.

With so few comparable attractions for lenders to evaluate, financing a concept this unusual required finding people willing to believe in what Tim and Julie were building.

By the time I headed toward the exit, however, what impressed me nearly as much as the wave was the culture they had created around it. The staff consistently addressed guests respectfully, offered encouragement after falls and celebrated successes. I felt welcomed when I arrived, welcomed while learning and welcomed again when I left.

Tim shook my hand and offered one final invitation: "Don't make yourself a stranger." Julie and their son, Dylan, were nearby, also thanking guests and saying goodbye.

After the experience I had at Epic Surf, I don't plan to.

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DANCING FOR JOY CELEBRATES FAITH, COMMUNITY AND THE ART OF DANCE

By Dale Bliss



A seasoned dancer with true joy for the art, April Joy McLane enjoys sharing her love for the art of dance. McLane has been dancing for the last four and one-half decades, and she never tires of sharing the enrichment that comes from dance.

McLane, with her daughter, Kate, opened Dancing for Joy in 2010.

"I opened a dance studio because I care tremendously about people and I want people to be part of the community as well as my love for dance," McLane explained.

The seasoned dance studio owner has been teaching for 28 years.

Dance, McLane explained, has helped her through many circumstances that she has met in her life.

"It built confidence, resilience, courage as well as teamwork," she continued.

McLane is a Christian and believes in prayer. She offers devotions and lessons in character to the students to build confidence, resilience, courage and teamwork. You can find this Scripture on her website: "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden," (Matthew 5:14).

Dancing for Joy is a studio where stu-

dents can explore their wonderment and expand their knowledge for active art. Per its mission statement, Dancing for Joy's dance instructors "strive to ignite their light through dance."

McLane has approximately 20 teachers. They start and/or end classes with prayer. Following God's word is important to her.

She said, with emphasis, "God is the boss!" She gave a reminder that "God covers us and calls us to grow, to shine, to serve, to dance with purpose."

In addition to dancing classes, McLane offers help with homework, devotions, snacks games and more for students at the school. Recently offered is transportation through Not Your Mother's Taxi. Also, every month, a new challenge is offered.

Dancing for Joy is considered a counter-culture dance school. Forms of dance taught at the studio are praise, ballet, jazz, tap, acro, the Christian version of hip-hop and, yes, trapeze.

McLane offers classes at schools, day cares and churches.

Dancing for Joy is located at 11691 Boyette Rd. in Riverview in the Goolsby Pointe Shopping Center. Registration is now open for the 2026-27 season, which is starting soon. For more information or to register, visit www.dancingforjoy1.com.



ACEING AUTISM BRINGS INCLUSIVE TENNIS CLINICS TO APOLLO BEACH

Staff Report

Families in the Apollo Beach area will soon have a new opportunity to connect, build skills and enjoy the sport of tennis through an inclusive program designed for children and teens with autism.

Experienced Autism Alliance (EAA) is partnering with ACEing Autism to bring weekly tennis clinics to Apollo Beach Racquet Club this fall. The six-week program will take place on Saturdays from Saturday, October 10, through Saturday, November 14, and is designed to provide participants with a welcoming environment where they can learn tennis skills, participate in games and build confidence.

Clinics will be divided by age. Children ages 5-13 will participate from 11 a.m.-12 p.m., while participants ages 14 and older will have a clinic from 12 Noon-1 p.m. The program will be held at Apollo Beach Racquet Club, located at 6520 Richies Way in Apollo Beach.

The program costs \$120, with an early-bird discount available for families who register by Thursday, September 10. The code, Early30, provides \$30 off the registration fee.

ACEing Autism also offers scholarship opportunities to help make its programs accessible to families regardless of financial circumstances. Funding



options include Self-Determination Funding or Scholarship Accounts and the ACEing Autism Scholarship.

Founded in 2008 in Boston, ACEing Autism has grown into a nationwide program serving more than 6,000 children with autism at approximately 200 locations.

Its programs are tailored to the individual needs of each participant and use tennis as a way to promote connection, confidence and community.

The Apollo Beach program will also provide opportunities for community members to volunteer. Volunteers will help teach tennis skills, lead games and encourage participants. No previous tennis or autism experience is required, and training will be provided.

Volunteers can participate alongside friends, gain leadership and teamwork experience and make a difference in the lives of local children and teens.

Families interested in registering for the Apollo Beach program can learn more about ACEing Autism and available scholarship opportunities at <https://aceingautism.org/>.

Questions about the Apollo Beach program can also be directed to apollobeach@aceingautism.org.



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DRURY PLAZA HOTEL BRANDON CELEBRATES GRAND OPENING

The Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce (BRCC) joined community leaders, Chamber members, guests and representatives of Drury Plaza Hotel Tampa Brandon to celebrate the hotel's grand opening with an official ribbon-cutting ceremony. The celebration offered attendees an opportunity to tour the new property, enjoy a light lunch, network with members of the local business community and learn more about the hotel and the amenities it brings to the Tampa Bay area.

BRCC President Amber Aaron welcomed those in attendance and thanked the community for coming together to support one of the chamber's newest members. Aaron then introduced Drury Plaza Hotel Tampa Brandon general manager Ian Gallagher, who shared remarks about Drury Hotels and the company's newest Florida location.

Opened on May 28, Drury Plaza Hotel Tampa Brandon marks an important milestone for the company as the first Drury Plaza Hotel in the Tampa Bay area and Drury's seventh hotel in Florida. Conveniently located off I-75, the hotel provides easy access to downtown Tampa, Tampa International Airport, Port Tampa Bay, Brandon Exchange and many of the region's popular attractions



Staff Report

and destinations, including Busch Gardens, the Tampa Riverwalk, Raymond James Stadium and the Tampa Convention Center.

The new hotel features 210 guest rooms and suites and a variety of amenities for business and leisure travelers. Guests can enjoy complimentary hot breakfast, Drury's signature 5:30 Kickback, free Wi-Fi and parking, an outdoor pool and spa, fitness and business centers and on-site dining at The Kitchen + Bar.

Following the official cutting of the ribbon, Aaron presented a special proclamation on behalf of the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce, officially declaring August 20, 2026, 'Drury Plaza Hotel Tampa Brandon Day' in recognition of the hotel's grand opening and investment in the local community.

The Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce congratulates Gallagher and the entire Drury Plaza Hotel Tampa Brandon team on this exciting milestone and welcomes them to the Brandon Riverview business community.

P.F. CHANG'S BRING COMFORT TO HOSPITALIZED CHILDREN IN SEPT

Staff Report

Families dining at P.F. Chang's in Brandon have an opportunity this month to help bring comfort and happiness to children facing hospital stays.

P.F. Chang's has launched its inaugural Spirit of the Zodiac giving initiative, inspired by the Chinese zodiac. The first campaign, Year of the Fire Horse: Spirit of Strength, will benefit Starlight Children's Foundation, a national nonprofit that provides programs and experiences for children during medical care.

The Brandon P.F. Chang's is located at 827 Brandon Town Center Dr. and is participating in the monthlong campaign, which runs through Wednesday, September 30, while supplies last.

At the center of the campaign is Bao, a limited-edition horse plushie inspired by the strength, courage and resilience associated with the Fire Horse. Guests can purchase Bao for \$10 during a dine-in visit at participating P.F. Chang's restaurants.

For every Bao purchased, P.F. Chang's will donate an identical plushie to Starlight Children's Foundation for distribution to children through its network of more than 800 children's hospitals nationwide. The company will donate up to 20,000 plushies through the campaign.

Guests also can support the effort by rounding up their restaurant checks or making an in-restaurant donation of \$10 or more to Starlight. The campaign has a goal of raising



\$500,000 to support Starlight's work with children and families.

Those who purchase Bao or make an eligible \$10 or more donation will

receive an offer for a complimentary eligible appetizer with the purchase of an entrée during a future dine-in visit. The offer is valid through Saturday, October 31.

The campaign will extend beyond September. In October, P.F. Chang's and Starlight representatives will visit hospitals for in-hospital catering and plush deliveries, bringing the Spirit of Strength directly to children and families.

The Bao story also will continue outside the restaurant through a new children's book written by author Jenny Liao and illustrated by Adriane Tsai. Expected to be published later this month, the digital story follows Bao through themes of courage, kindness, comfort and hope.

Starlight Children's Foundation provides programs including toy deliveries, hospital gowns, gaming stations and other activities designed to help children feel more comfortable, engaged and connected during medical care.

P.F. Chang's encourages Brandon-area residents to participate by visiting the local restaurant throughout September and helping Bao deliver a little extra comfort to children during challenging hospital stays.

For more information or to find a P.F. Chang's location near you, visit www.pfchangs.com/offers/spirit-of-the-zodiac.

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FROM SPELLS TO SCARE ZONES: GUIDE TO FUN AREA EVENTS FOR ALL

By Jenny Bennett



Mickey's Not-So-Scary Halloween Party

Get your favorite costume ready and come and collect candies and treats while Magic Kingdom park thrills and chills you with eerie entertainment, delightful attractions and some beloved Disney characters in Mickey's Not-So-Scary Halloween Party. Watch three sinister sisters bewitch and bedazzle in the Hocus Pocus Villain Spelltacular, boogie down with friends from Disney Junior shows at Disney Moonlight Melodies and finish the evening watching Disney's Not-So-Spooky-Spectacular, a wickedly wild fireworks display hosted by Jack Skellington. This frightfully fun experience runs on select nights through Saturday, October 31. Tickets can be purchased at <https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/>; please review the dress code and costume guidelines before attending.

Howl-O-Scream At Busch Gardens

Busch Gardens' Howl-O-Scream returns in full force, taking over the entire park with haunted houses, scare zones, sinister shows and more. Unspeakable horror lives in every dark corner, including on Busch Gardens' pulse-pounding thrill rides. Howl-O-Scream is bringing fear to the next level, and once you're in there's nothing you can do about it. This event is intended for mature audiences



and contains adult content; costumes are not allowed. Tickets can be purchased at <https://buschgardenstampa.com/>. The event runs on select nights until Saturday, October 31.

Friends Of The Tampa Riverwalk Trick Or Treat

The free Riverwalk Trick or Treat event returns on Saturday, October 24, from 4-9 p.m. Dress up in a costume and then trick-or-treat along the Tampa Riverwalk and enjoy the family-friendly fun activities. There will be over 50 stations to enjoy throughout the route with trick-or-treat bags available from Catanchobee Park, located at 601 Old Water St. in Tampa, while supplies last. There will also be a costume contest at Catanchobee Park at 5 p.m. and a movie on the lawn starting at 7:15 p.m.

Creatures Of The Night At ZooTampa

Join Tampa Bay's number one family Halloween event, Creatures of the Night, at ZooTampa for a night of eerie family frights. Ghouls and goblins of all ages can enjoy howling outdoor experiences, spooky characters, creepy culinary treats and much more. This year's event features a colossal adventure, Mesozoic Mayhem, Tickets are available at <https://zootampa.org/>.



Haunted Woods Events At Hillsborough River State Park

Are you ready to face your worst nightmare? Haunted Woods at Hillsborough River State Park is where your nightmares become alive. As night falls, the woods come to life and turn into pure terror. Brave the Scare Trail — Beyond the Grave — where the undead are clocking in. This is recommended for children over 12 years of age and will take place from 7-10 p.m. at Hillsborough River State Park, located at 15402 U.S. 301 in Thonotosassa, on Friday and Saturday, October 16-17. For a more family-friendly event, bring younger children to the Beyond the Grave Kids Trail event, which runs from 3-6 p.m. only. This is a cash-only event.

Tall Tales Of Old Florida

Explore Tampa's 19th-century living history museum, Cracker Country, by lantern at night in its Tall Tales of Old Florida event. Along the way, storytellers will spin wild yarns about Florida's unexplained oddities, including skunk apes, misbehaving trains, cow-hunting giants and more. A little bit scary, a little bit funny and always family-friendly. After your tour, enjoy a festive snack and drink, which are included in your admission. Tall Tales of Old Florida will be held at Cracker Country on the Florida State Fairgrounds, located at 4800 U.S. 301 in Tampa, on Saturday, October 24, from 7-10:30 p.m. Visit www.crackercountry.org to purchase your tickets



(advance purchase is required) and select the start time of your tour, which will last about an hour. This event is not recommended for children under 6 years of age.

Boo Bash Bingo

Boo Bash Bingo returns to New Hope Church on Thursday, October 29, starting with light bites at 6 p.m., followed by bingo at 6:45 p.m. Dress up in your favorite Halloween costume (if you want to) and join Brandon Juniors for a fun night of 10 rounds of bingo, in which you can win your choice from a selection of designer handbags, including Kate Spade, Michael Kors, Coach and more. Along with bingo, there will be raffle baskets, silent auction items and a 50/50 drawing. Contact treasurebjwc3509@gmail.com.

A Night At The Museum

For 15 years, A Night at the Museum has brought the community together for a family-friendly Halloween celebration at the Tampa Bay History Center. This year's event will take place on Saturday, October 24, from 2-6:30 p.m. at the Tampa Bay History Center, located at 801 Water St. in Tampa. With 15 trick-or-treat stations to explore, photo opportunities with favorite characters, a costume contest and hands-on activities. Timed entry begins at 2 p.m., with tickets available in 15-minute intervals through 5 p.m. The celebration continues until 6:30 p.m., Visit its website at <https://tampabay-historycenter.org/> to purchase tickets.



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BUCCANEERS AND MOSAIC EXTEND TACKLING HUNGER PARTNERSHIP

Staff Report



The extension will also support the continuation of the game day Tackling Hunger fueled by Mosaic program, helping address food insecurity throughout the Buccaneers regular season. Additional fund-

The Mosaic Company and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers recently celebrated the extension of their partnership during a ceremonial event at Raymond James Stadium. The Tackling Hunger fueled by Mosaic partnership enables Feeding Tampa Bay, a member of the Feeding America network, to build and operate school pantries in communities with the greatest need.

"Mosaic has been an outstanding partner for the past five years, helping us turn a shared commitment into real impact across the Tampa Bay community," said Tampa Bay Buccaneers chief commercial officer Atul Khosla. "Through Tackling Hunger fueled by Mosaic, we have surpassed expectations, delivered meaningful support to families in need and built powerful momentum in the fight against food insecurity. We are excited to keep pushing that work forward together."

Since joining forces in 2021, the Buccaneers and The Mosaic Company have provided more than 780,000 meals and supported over 5,500 families through donations and access to food pantries. Through the partnership, both organizations will continue to combat food insecurity in Tampa Bay, supporting school pantry locations at Robinson, Lamb, Broward and Pinecrest elementary schools.

ing will allow participating pantries to expand their reach through cooking classes and nutrition education programs.

Since 2021, the program has raised over \$500,000 to address food insecurity in the community. A recent event featured a \$50,000 check presentation to the Hillsborough Education Foundation, with funds designated for school pantry locations opened through the organizations' partnership. The foundation will distribute \$10,000 to each school food pantry at Robinson, Lamb, Broward and Pinecrest elementary schools, with Robinson also supporting students and families at Turkey Creek Middle School. The remaining \$10,000 will support the foundation's mission of providing high-quality educational opportunities for students across Hillsborough County.

"Through our partnership with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Feeding Tampa Bay, we've helped expand access to nutritious food for thousands of local families. Providing reliable access to healthy meals is something we care deeply about because it aligns closely to our mission — to help the world grow the food it needs," said Bruce Bodine, president and CEO of the Mosaic Company. "We're proud of what we've accomplished together over the past five years, and we're excited to extend this partnership in the fight against hunger across Tampa Bay."

CIRQUE DREAMS HOLIDAZE RETURNS TO RP FUNDING FOR ONE NIGHT

Staff Report



Cirque Dreams Holidaze will captivate audiences in Lakeland this holiday season with a brilliantly breathtaking holiday spectacular for the entire family. As the original cirque holiday theatrical event, this nationally acclaimed annual tradition wraps a Broadway-style production around awe-inspiring contemporary circus arts.

On Christmas Eve, young Clara returns home only to learn that a snowstorm may keep her family from joining her. Just as loneliness begins to settle in, two whimsical singers appear and whisk her away into Holidaze, a fantastical world full of color, wonder and breathtaking circus acts. As she journeys through this magical realm, Clara becomes part of the adventure, forming unexpected friendships and discovering her own courage.

Reimagined for 2026, Cirque Dreams Holidaze features a world-renowned cast of performers. The ensemble includes aerial circus acts, sleight-of-hand jugglers, fun-loving skippers, eye-popping acrobatics and much more. With new music including beloved holiday favorites sung live, new sets, sparkling scenery and stunning costumes, guests from children to seniors will be on the edge of their seats as holiday characters come to life on the most magical of nights.

Both critics and audiences alike agree that Cirque Dreams Holidaze is a show for all ages to enjoy where families can make unforgettable memories together.

Cirque Dreams Holidaze will perform one show at RP Funding Center, located at

701 W. Lime St. in Lakeland, on Thursday, November 19, at 7 p.m. Tickets are available at the RP Funding Center Box Office or by calling 863-834-8111. Groups of 10 or more may reserve tickets by contacting group.sales@vstarentertainment.com. For more information, visit www.cirquedreams.com.

Follow @CirqueDreams and #cirquedreamsholidaze on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok.

About Cirque Dreams

The Cirque Dreams franchise is a globally recognized entertainment brand that has produced a wide array of live stage performances for Broadway, casinos, theme parks, resorts, cruise lines and theatrical venues worldwide. Since 1993, millions of people have experienced Cirque Dreams productions across the globe. Combining the world's finest contemporary circus artists with dynamic choreography and whimsical storytelling, Cirque Dreams productions have captured the hearts and imaginations of both audiences and critics alike. The Cirque Dreams franchise is produced by VStar Entertainment Group, a leading entertainment company acquired in 2018 by Cirque du Soleil Entertainment Group. VStar has entertained millions of families with more than 40,000 live performances across 50-plus countries.

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TRICK OR TREAT STREET RETURNS FOR FAMILY HALLOWEEN FUN

Staff Report

Halloween will take over Riverview High School on Saturday, October 24, when the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce hosts its annual Trick or Treat Street, bringing local businesses and thousands of area families together for an evening of festive fun.

The free community event will take place from 5-8 p.m. at Riverview High School, located at 11311 Boyette Rd. in Riverview. Families are invited to come dressed in their Halloween best and enjoy trick-or-treating, food, games and activities designed for children of all ages.

One of the highlights of Trick or Treat Street is the opportunity for children to visit decorated booths hosted by local businesses and collect candy along the way. Participating businesses are encouraged to get creative with their displays, wear costumes and create memorable experiences for families.

In addition to trick-or-treating, the event will feature food trucks, a foam party and bounce houses, giving families plenty of ways to enjoy the evening beyond collecting candy.

For Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce members, the event also provides an opportunity to connect directly with local residents and introduce their businesses to potential customers in a fun, relaxed setting.

"Don't just advertise to the communi-



ty — be part of the community" is the message behind the chamber's invitation to businesses to participate.

Businesses can reserve a vendor booth and decorate their space for Halloween while handing out candy to visiting children. Booth participation is \$65 for chamber members and \$100 for non-members. Craft vendor spaces are \$75 for members and \$100 for nonmembers, while food vendor spaces are \$75 for members and \$100 for nonmembers.

The event is sponsored by A League of Their Own Riverview.

Whether families come for the costumes, candy, bounce houses, foam party or simply the chance to enjoy an evening together, Trick or Treat Street offers a festive way to celebrate Halloween while supporting and connecting with local businesses.

Admission to Trick or Treat Street is free for the community.

For businesses, the chamber encourages early registration to secure a booth and join one of its largest community events of the year.

YOGA INSTRUCTOR HELPS PEOPLE RECONNECT, REDUCE STRESS AND FIND PEACE

By Mylena C. Ferman

Jaclyn Peterson, owner of Ascend with Jaclyn, aims to help people reduce stress and burnout through yoga. Peterson leads trauma-sensitive yoga classes throughout the Greater Tampa Bay area and works with local businesses.

Her goal is to teach employees how yoga practices can provide an outlet to trauma and better work-life practices.

"Yoga is for everybody, you know?" Peterson said. "No matter your physical state, ... there is some type of yoga you can do."

Many people have anecdotally claimed yoga to be a great stress reducer.

However, a study done in India earlier this year found that stock market investors who participated in a 30-day yoga intervention reported a reduction in perceived stress. Another yoga study, conducted in 2024, found that the yoga participants showed improved executive function, working memory and processing speed.

Peterson would likely agree with such findings. She claimed those who participated in her yoga classes reported similar benefits, including better sleep, feelings of calm, raised focus levels and less chronic pain. Trauma sensitive yoga can also have an additional benefit of allowing people to feel in control of their own body again.

"When people have experienced trauma,



... they walk away with a diminished sense of self and a lot of times they may not even be aware that they don't trust themselves to

make decisions," she said.

Peterson practiced yoga after surviving an abusive marriage and moving out of state.

"The practice helped me reconnect with myself and slowly begin to rebuild my identity and rebuild my self-worth," Peterson said.

Currently, Peterson hosts a weekly chair yoga

class at the Florida Blue Center in Sarasota. She aims to do more business-to-business work with employee wellness programs and give back to the community with Community Wellness Programs.

"It helps bring a balance and a sense of peace that they need in their lives, as well," Peterson said. "That's really my goal, to help people find that peace and to activate that parasympathetic nervous system."

For more information about Ascend with Jaclyn, please visit <https://ascendwithjaclyn.com/>, follow its Instagram (@ascendwithjaclyn) or follow its Ascend with Jaclyn Facebook page. Those interested in having Peterson host a class may contact her through the contact page on her website or via email at ascendwithjaclyn@gmail.com.

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VENDORS INVITED TO JOIN BRCC HEALTH & WELLNESS FAIR

Staff Report

Local health and wellness businesses have an opportunity to put their services in front of families and community members at the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce's Community Health & Wellness Fair on Sunday, November 1.

Sponsored by AdventHealth, the family-friendly event will be held from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. at Oh So Rustic, located at 788 W. Lumsden Rd. in Brandon. The fair is designed to connect residents with local health providers,

wellness businesses and community organizations while providing an engaging day of activities, education and resources.

The chamber is encouraging businesses and organizations in the health and wellness industry to participate as vendors and take advantage of the opportunity to build relationships with potential customers.

The event will feature interactive activities, on-site health screenings, sports demonstrations, live entertainment and food trucks. With a variety of activities planned, organizers expect the fair to attract families, individuals and community members interested in learning more about ways to improve their health and well-being.

For vendors, the event offers a chance to showcase products and services, answer questions, share expertise and build brand awareness in a face-to-face setting.

Businesses specializing in health care, fitness, nutrition, preventive care, mental well-

ness and holistic services are encouraged to participate. Community organizations and other businesses that support healthy lifestyles are also invited to join the event.

"Whether you specialize in health care, fitness, nutrition, mental wellness, preventative care or holistic services, your participation helps strengthen a healthier Brandon-Riverview community," the

chamber noted.

Vendor space is \$50 for Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce members and \$75 for nonmembers. Businesses interested in taking their involvement further can also choose from several sponsorship opportunities.

The Physically Fit Sponsor level is \$250, the Total Wellness Sponsor level is \$500 and the Better Health Sponsor level is \$1,000. Sponsorship opportunities provide businesses with an additional way to gain visibility while supporting an event focused on community health.

Vendor and sponsorship registration is open through Friday, October 30.

The Community Health & Wellness Fair is an opportunity for local businesses to do more than promote their services. It provides a chance to become part of a community-wide effort to educate, inspire and connect residents with resources that can help them live healthier lives.



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AdventHealth

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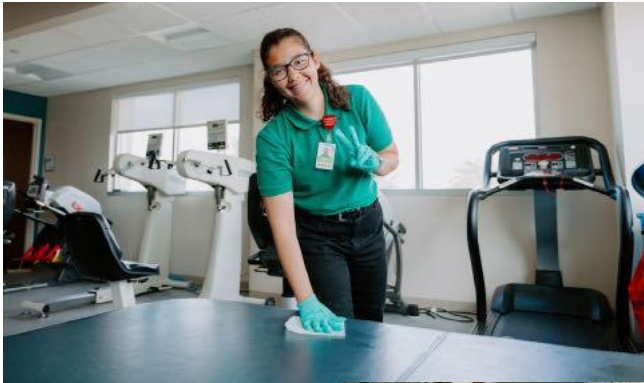
Brandon Sunday Market
788 W Lumsden Rd, Brandon

Venue Sponsor




QUEST CONNECTS BUSINESSES WITH JOB SEEKERS WITH DISABILITIES

Staff Report



journey to independence," said John R. Gill, president and CEO at Quest. "Every new business partner opens a door to financial stability and personal fulfillment for people with developmental disabilities — helping them live a full life."

Employment Services

Nonprofit Quest Inc. is accepting applications for Employment Services, which assists companies facing staffing shortages in the Tampa area by connecting them to job seekers with developmental disabilities.

Through the program, Quest introduces businesses to prescreened individuals who can fill workforce gaps for up to eight weeks, during which the nonprofit covers payroll costs, liability and workers' compensation. Businesses are provided with a career coach and employment specialist for additional support and have the option to permanently hire participants after the program cycle.

Since Employment Services launched in the Tampa region in January, Quest has worked with multiple organizations — including retirement community Colliers at St. Pete and retailers PGA Superstore and Burlington — to provide meaningful job opportunities to more than 40 people. The assistance meets a major need, with 81 percent of those with developmental disabilities being unemployed.

"At Quest, we know that professional development is a foundational step in the



supports companies of any size and across all industries. For more information about how to apply, visit the website <https://questinc.org/employment-services-for-business-partners/>.

About Quest Inc.

For over 60 years, Quest Inc. has transformed the lives of thousands of adults and children with developmental disabilities through a range of services proven to increase capabilities and quality of life. From the humble beginnings of a single location serving eight individuals to currently over 20 locations, serving over 800 individuals each day in Orlando and Tampa, Quest continues to help those with developmental disabilities experience a full life.

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KENNEDY SPACE CENTER OFFERS FREE KIDS' ADMISSION THIS MONTH

Staff Report

Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex is offering free, one-day admission to kids ages 3-11 throughout the month as part of Future Voyagers Month. With the purchase of at least one adult admission, guests can receive up to three complimentary children's tickets.

Guests will also have another way to save this fall with the extension of the Celebrating USA 250 offer through Sunday, October 4. In honor of America's 250th anniversary, guests can save \$17.76 on one-day admission tickets. The Celebrating USA 250 offer cannot be combined with the Future Voyagers Month offer and cannot be applied to an annual pass.

Recognized as one of TripAdvisor's top three U.S. attractions for two consecutive years, Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex allows Future Voyagers to "Discover Something Real" through flight flown artifacts, engaging exhibits, displays featuring space suits covered in moon dust, interactive experiences designed to replicate space flight and more. The youngest guests will also enjoy Planet Play, an immersive indoor play area where guests can walk on Saturn's rings and slide through an asteroid field.

Young space explorers can also enjoy new additions to the visitor complex experience, including the all-new Fraggles Rock: A Space-y Adventure, an exciting live stage show that brings Jim Henson's Emmy



Award-winning Fraggles face-to-face with NASA's real-life space explorers. Also a favorite, The Gantry at LC-39 tells the story of NASA's symbiotic relationship between nature and technology and its mission to protect Earth through space exploration.

Admission is available for advance purchase online at www.kennedyspacecenter.com/info/tickets, by calling reservations at 855-433-4210 or by visiting will call. Blackout dates may apply, including launch viewing and special events.

Go beyond imagination and into something real at Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex. Named the No. 1 U.S. Attraction by TripAdvisor's 2025 Travelers' Choice Awards, Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex gets visitors up close to real flight flown artifacts, meet a veteran NASA astronaut, feel the rumble of a rocket launch, and so much more. Just 45 minutes from Orlando, Fla., Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex opens daily at 9 a.m. with closing times varying by season.

The popular two-day ticket, which can be used for up to six months from purchase and averages a cost of \$45 per day, is now available for \$91 per adult and \$81 per child. Single-day admission is \$77 per adult; \$67 per child. For more information, call 877-313-2610 or visit www.KennedySpaceCenter.com.

NEW HORIZONS PREPARES FOR ANNUAL BBQ AND SILENT AUCTION

Staff Report

New Horizons Group Homes will bring together residents, families, friends and community supporters on Saturday, November 7, for its annual BBQ and Silent Auction, the organization's largest fundraiser of the year.

The event will take place from 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. at Central Baptist Christian School's gymnasium, located at 402 E. Windhorst Rd. in Brandon. Tickets are \$20 and include a pulled-pork sandwich, macaroni and cheese, baked beans, cake, iced tea and water. BubbaQue's will cater the meal, while D.J. Henry Kirk will provide entertainment.

The event also will feature a silent auction with a variety of items designed to fit a range of budgets, along with a drawing for one or two additional prizes. Drawing tickets will be \$5 each or five for \$20.

Organizers encourage attendees to purchase or reserve tickets by Sunday, November 1, to help provide an accurate count for the catered meal. Tickets are available through New Horizons board members, Wayne Rees or the New Horizons office, located at 109 E. Clay Ave. in Brandon. Walk-ins also are welcome. Those who would like to pick up tickets at the door can call New Horizons at 813-571-2690.

Community members and businesses also are encouraged to become sponsors of the event by sending a check to the New Horizons office and indicating that it is for the barbecue.

New Horizons Group Homes was founded in 1992 after parents, teachers and friends



connected with the Special Ministries Department at First Baptist Church Brandon identified a need for long-term residential opportunities for adults with develop-

mental disabilities.

The organization opened its first home, the Mary Lou Creamer Home, in 1999 with six female residents. A second home, the Alice Storms Home, opened in 2002 for men, followed by the Peter and Brenda Watkins Home in 2017.

Today, New Horizons provides a family-oriented, Christian living environment for adults with special abilities. Its person-centered program supports residents in pursuing individual goals based on their personal choices and needs while encouraging independence, dignity and participation in the community.

Residents remain active through employment and day programs, bowling, church and other activities. The organization's homes are licensed as assisted living facilities, and funding comes from resident payments, Medicaid Waiver services for qualified residents, donations and fundraising.

The annual BBQ and Silent Auction helps provide important financial support for New Horizons while giving the community an opportunity to gather and celebrate the organization's residents and mission.

For more information or to reserve tickets, call New Horizons at 813-571-2690. To learn more about New Horizons, visit www.newhorizonshomes.org.



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YOUR COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER

BY SPORTS EDITOR Nick Nahas

HIGH SCHOOL VARSITY
PREVIEW

FOOTBALL

DURANT COUGARS SEEK FIVE STRAIGHT DISTRICT TITLES



The Cougars have dominated district competition, going undefeated four straight seasons. They are seeking their fifth straight title in the 2026 campaign in a brand-new district.

Durant had an impressive showing in week one against King, winning 49-7. They hope to carry the momentum into district play. Durant has made the playoffs in every season since Clayton Varnum took over the program in February 2021. The six-year head man wants his team to maintain the standard set forth by the previous teams.

Varnum has a good mix of young and veteran players. The team returns two starters on offense and six on defense. He likes their discipline, work ethic and coachability. He said that his players like to be coached hard, so he and his coaching staff don't have to worry about hurting feelings. Everybody is on the same page and willing to do whatever it takes to win.

Junior running back Maurice Kenne is expected to have a good year and receive the bulk of the carries. Junior receiver King Rivera will be a weapon in the passing game. Senior captain defensive back and Western Carolina commit Kairee Barnum, junior defensive end Mason Newton

and senior outside linebacker Dexter Snyder will lead the defense.

Senior Sam Themar will return for his second season with the Cougars as QB-1. Varnum said that he brings athleticism and running power to the position and has a lively arm. He said that Themar is a smart kid, commands the huddle and controls his assignments well at the line of scrimmage. The coaching staff trust him to get them in the correct sets.

Durant's goals remain the same — win the district and compete in the playoffs. They are in a new district that poses different challenges. They will have to compete with new foes, such as Lennard and Plant City, while facing familiar opponents like Newsome and Riverview. With Sumner and Plant as nondistrict opponents as well, it makes for a very difficult schedule overall. The Cougars face three straight district opponents to end the season. Varnum and his team won't back down no matter how difficult the competition is, and they will compete for yet another district title.

"I just want our guys to enjoy what we're doing," said Varnum. "We want them to work hard and enjoy the moment, and hope that the hard work will pay off for them and we'll have another good year."

SCHEDULE

8/21 vs. King
8/28 @ Strawberry Crest
9/4 @ Kathleen
9/10 @ Sumner
9/18 vs. Plant

9/25 vs. Riverview
10/2 vs. Spoto
10/9 @ Lennard
10/16 vs. Newsome
10/23 @ Plant City

ROSTER

#	NAME	POS	GR	#	NAME	POS	GR
1	Kairee Barnum	DB, SS	Sr.	35	Raul Lopez	DB	Sr.
2	Dexter Snyder	WR, OLB	Sr.	36	Eric Reyes	K	Sr.
3	Mason Newton	TE, TE	Jr.	40	Cayden Baker	LB	Jr.
4	Benjamin Hodnett	RB	Sr.	42	Zion Foster	RB	Fr.
5	Noah Patell	WR	Jr.	44	Jeremiah Stanley	LB	So.
6	Sam Themar	QB	Sr.	45	Conor Freebourn	LB	So.
7	Micah Dixon	RB, OLB	Jr.	50	Seth Bobos	OL, G	Sr.
8	King Rivera	WR, CB	Jr.	51	Garret Benson	OL	Jr.
9	Maurice Kenne	RB, OLB	Jr.	52	Colin Keen	OL, T	Sr.
10	Gabriel Gibson	TE, MLB	Jr.	53	Sean Arias	OL, G	Sr.
11	Mason Barringer	WR, SS	So.	56	Lynken West	DL	Fr.
12	Malachi Kennick	DL	Sr.	57	Peyton Bronson	DL	So.
14	Jaylen Ward	QB	Fr.	62	Cole Keen	OL	Jr.
15	Keaton Davis	WR	Jr.	63	Luke Santangelo	DL	Jr.
20	Colby Holcomb	DB	Jr.	68	Kaemon Nemeth	DL	So.
21	Kamryn Peavy	DB	Sr.	71	Rick Zarzoza	DL	Jr.
22	Mikey Anderson	RB	So.	74	Joshua Rabel	T, NG	Jr.
23	Dontario Shoats	SS	Jr.	77	Luke Stutler	OL, C	So.
24	Om Patel	DL	Sr.	78	Tyler Arias	OL	So.
25	Machi Mack	LB, OLB	Sr.	80	Sergio Garcia	DB	Fr.
26	Darnell Nash	DB	Jr.	85	Darkevious Nash	WR	Fr.
27	Caleb Griffith	DB	Jr.	88	Price Bush	WR	Fr.
32	Adam Eskew	RB	Jr.	89	Bentley Edwards	LB	Fr.
33	Demetrius Shoats	WR	So.	97	Kylei Woodson	DT	So.

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Dated at Valrico, Florida this 15th day of September 2026

HIGH SCHOOL VARSITY
PREVIEW

FOOTBALL

BY SPORTS EDITOR Nick Nahas

STRAWBERRY CREST CHARGERS PUSH FOR A PLAYOFF RUN



Strawberry Crest has had one particular goal in mind the last several seasons — make the playoffs. The last two seasons they came up one game short of that goal.

The Chargers have been very consistent under eight-year Head Coach Phillip Prior, finishing at or above .500. The one thing the team hasn't done during his tenure is make the playoffs. They won six games the previous two seasons but will have to win one more to get over the hump this season. They had started strong the last two seasons, but Prior wants his team to finish the year stronger. The team's motto is "Earn it."

Prior has another young team, with only two players with varsity experience on offense and four on defense. He said it will take time for these players to get the experience and reps under their belts, and they will go through some growing pains throughout the season. He thinks that his defense will be the strength of the team, relying on the seniors that know what the schemes are and how to execute them. He also thinks that his offense will be explosive this year. He likes that his team is hungry, that they work hard and are extremely coachable.

Sophomore quarterback ZIjohn Stallworth takes over the offense. Prior said that Stallworth does a lot of things well. He has the ability to extend plays with his legs, can run with the ball and has a lot of arm talent. It's his first season playing varsity football, elevated from their JV system last year. He will only get better as he gains experience

and matures as a player throughout the season.

In the past, Strawberry Crest has had the heavy running game in their offensive arsenal. They will utilize senior running backs Tre Feliciano and Roosevelt Miller. Sophomore receiver Santana Sheppard scored a touchdown in the Preseason Classic. Senior receiver Ezra Brantley will be an explosive player for them. Senior linebacker Brice Robinson was the team's leading tackler last season and has a nose for the football. He will also play some offense and is the punter for the Chargers.

Strawberry Crest has an extremely tough schedule, especially to start this season. The first two games are at home against Sumner and Durant. Prior and his team are embracing the difficult early schedule, thinking that the experience will pay dividends at the back end of the year. They end the season against Lennard. Steinbrenner, Alonso and Palm Harbor University are their district opponents. The Chargers will most likely have to win their district to go to the playoffs.

"I looked to see as this team continues to grow, that we are playing our best football as we get into district play and we start thinking about playoffs," said Prior. "I think that every season has challenges, and we have some weak spots, but we need some guys to step up. I'm just excited about what this team has the potential to be, so we need to put in that work to make that potential become reality."

SCHEDULE

- 8/21 vs. Sumner

8/28 vs. Durant

9/10 @ King

9/18 @ Blake

9/25 vs. Steinbrenner
- 10/2 vs. East Bay

10/9 @ Alonso

10/16 @ Plant City

10/23 vs. Palm Harbor U

10/30 @ Lennard

ROSTER

#	NAME	POS	GR	22 Brice Robinson	LB	Sr.
1	ZIjohn Stallworth	QB	So.	23 Jayden Brown	DL	So.
2	Ezra Brantley	DB, WR	Sr.	24 Tucker Wilhite	DB	Jr.
3	Bryton Lawson	DB	Sr.	25 Grady Prior	DB	Jr.
4	Roosevelt Miller	RB	Sr.	26 Luis Alvizuris	DB	Sr.
5	Omari Brown	LB, RB	Sr.	29 Landon Shirey	K	So.
6	Santana Sheppard	WR	So.	30 Jonas Hassenpflug	K	Jr.
7	Lyric Bagnato	QB, LB	Jr.	33 Morris Harris	LB	So.
8	Joe Borchard	DB	Sr.	40 Josiah Blaxton	DL	Jr.
9	Bama Spicer	LB	Sr.	42 Jackson Mauck	LB	So.
10	Devin Simeral	WR	Sr.	44 Dylan Yeager	DL, FB	Jr.
11	Gene Lopez	WR, DB	Jr.	51 Dylan Mauck	OL	Sr.
12	Dom Abram	WR	So.	53 Jerah LaHue	OL	Sr.
13	Aaron Parker	WR	Jr.	55 Brady Heist	DL	Jr.
14	Luis Lopez	DB	Sr.	64 Carter Passmore	DL	Jr.
15	Nolan Catlin	LB	Sr.	65 Dylan West	OL	Jr.
16	Tre Feliciano	RB	Sr.	72 Brody Mesa	OL	Jr.
17	Wyatt Schramm	LB	So.	74 King Yeotan	OL	So.
18	Brayden Whitmore	DL	Jr.	75 Levi Johnson	OL	Jr.
19	Devin Emin	WR	So.	76 Landon Futch	OL	So.
20	Danny Thompson	LB, DL	So.	84 Jake Von Ancken	TE	Jr.

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School of Rock Valrico Now Open

Angela and Dave Ward are the owners of the new School of Rock Valrico. Offers music lessons and group rehearsals for all skill levels, with classes starting as early as age 4 up to adults.

For those interested in browsing classes or programs at the new location, check out www.schoolof-rock.com for more information.



School of Rock Valrico, located at 3244 Lithia Pinecrest Rd., Ste. 104, celebrates its grand opening with a ribbon cutting.



Fitness Forge Celebrates its opening with a Ribbon Cutting with the Valrico FishHawk Chamber of Commerce.

joining the Valrico/FishHawk Chamber of Commerce with a ribbon cutting at the gym, which is located at 13456 Boyette Rd. in River-view. Visit its website at www.fitness-forge2025.com or call 813-654-1313 for more information.

ECHO Named Gold Winner For Non-Profit Organization

ECHO (Emergency Care Help Organization) is proud to announce that it has been named a Gold Winner for Non-Profit Organization in the 2026 Tampa Bay Times Best of the Best awards.

This recognition celebrates organizations throughout the Tampa Bay area that stand out for their service, impact and commitment to the communities they serve. Being selected as a Gold Winner is a tremendous honor for ECHO and reflects the dedication of its staff, volunteers, donors and community partners.

"This recognition is a reflection of our entire ECHO family," said Iris S. Thurman, CEO of ECHO. "Our staff, volunteers,

donors and community partners make it possible for us to continue showing up for our neighbors. We are incredibly grateful to everyone who supports our mission and helped make this recognition possible."

Fitness Forge Celebrates Ribbon-Cutting

Fitness Forge is a local gym which offers semiprivate personal training that conducts customized workouts for each individual's goals and expectations. Local owners Brett Daven and Taylor Green have created a fun yet productive community that strives for success both externally and internally. Fitness Forge celebrated



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Visit its website at www.fredastaire.com/brandon to find out more about the dance classes offered.



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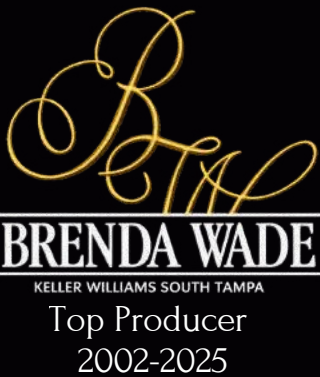


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