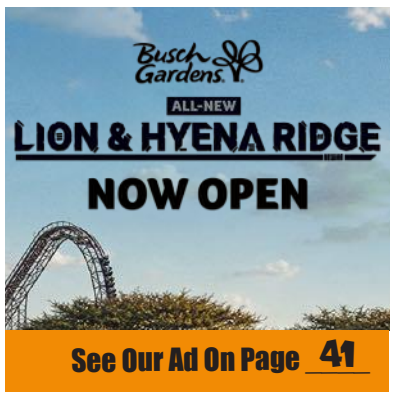


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RIVERVIEW'S EUGENIA GUTIERREZ MARKS 100 REMARKABLE YEARS

Staff Report

In 1926, U.S. Route 66 was officially established, A.A. Milne introduced the world to Winnie-the-Pooh and students took the very first Scholastic Aptitude Test. That same year, on July 26, a remarkable woman named Eugenia Gutierrez was born in San José, Costa Rica.



Eugenia Gutierrez, a Riverview resident who recently celebrated her 100th birthday, is pictured with her granddaughter, Lisa Meadows, and great-granddaughter during a special celebration hosted by Hillsborough County Adult Day Services.

Now a Riverview resident, Gutierrez recently celebrated her 100th birthday surrounded by family, friends and the staff who have become an extension of her family at Hillsborough County Adult Day Services. The Wimauma Senior Center hosted a festive Roaring Twenties-themed celebration complete with music, dancing and a fashion show featuring staff and members dressed in 1920s attire.

"Not in her dreams did she imagine that her birthday was going to be this type of event," said her daughter, Dora Huerta. "The Wimauma Senior Center has become her second home. She comes every day. She's very happy, and I'm very grateful."

Gutierrez's century-long journey has been defined by service to others. After studying nursing in Costa Rica, she became both a registered nurse and an obstetrics nurse, dedicating her career to caring for others. She immigrated to the United States in 1981, settling in Reno, Nevada, where she continued serving her community through a home health agency until retirement.

Five years ago, she moved to Riverview to be closer to Huerta, but her active lifestyle has never slowed down.

A woman of deep Christian faith, Gutierrez has always believed in helping those less fortunate. Throughout her life, she encouraged others to pursue nursing careers and volunteered through her church to assist families in need.

She also embraced healthy living and routinely took two-hour walks and remained a regular at the gym throughout her 60s, 70s and 80s.

Her adventurous spirit extended well beyond the gym. Gutierrez traveled throughout Central America and visited Mexico, Colombia, Canada and many parts of the United States before eventually making Florida her home.

Family has always been at the center of Gutierrez's life. She is the proud mother of six children and has played an active role in raising generations of her family. Today, her legacy includes 16 grandchildren, 32 great-grandchildren and seven great-great-grandchildren.

"It's an honor and a blessing to have her as a grandmother," said granddaughter Lisa Meadows. "It's a big milestone. One hundred is a big deal."

The birthday celebration also highlighted the important role Hillsborough County Adult Day Services plays in the lives of local seniors and their caregivers. The program provides comprehensive health, social, supportive and therapeutic services for functionally impaired seniors in community-based settings. Centers are located in Tampa, Brandon, Plant City and Wimauma.

For Gutierrez, however, the celebration was about much more than reaching the century mark. It honored a lifetime devoted to faith, family, compassion and caring for others — a legacy that continues to inspire everyone fortunate enough to know her.

ST. JOSEPH'S THERAPY CAT HONORED BY THE FLORIDA BAR

Staff Report

Bentley, St. Joseph's Hospital-South's pet therapy cat since spring 2025, was honored by the Florida Bar's Animal Law Section during an event in Orlando. Bentley received the 2026 Rikki Mitchell Memorial Animal Achievement Award.



From left to right, at the Animal Law Section's event: Devon Polo, St. Joseph's Hospitals volunteer resources director; Kathy Hofstad, Bentley's owner and handler, holding Bentley; and Kim Wallace, St. Joseph's Hospital-South's volunteer manager.

Since 2017, the section has chosen one animal annually to receive the award for providing exemplary service. Bentley is a hospital volunteer and provides pet therapy to patients, patients' loved ones, visitors, medical staff and team members at St. Joseph's Hospital-South in Riverview and the BayCare Outpatient Center near the hospital's campus.

The bar's Animal Law Section has been in existence for 10 years and works to improve laws relating to animals. According to the Animal Law Section's website (https://flabaranimals.org/), the organization promotes the study and understanding of laws, regulations and court decisions involving animals. The organization educates, advocates and organizes around animal issues and introduces animal-focused bills in Florida legislative sessions. Some of the bills introduced by the group in the 2026 legislative session focused on animal cruelty, veterinary medicine, handling of animals and testing of cosmetics on animals.

Bentley's award is named for a therapy dog named Rikki that in 2011 helped pass the nation's first law allowing therapy dogs to accompany child victims of sexual violence into criminal courtrooms to help them testify.

Bentley, a male Chinchilla Persian that just recently celebrated his 14th birthday, was featured in the Animal Law Section's newsletter.

"We were so thrilled, pleased and honored that Bentley was selected to win the Florida Bar award," said Riverview's Kathy Hofstad, Bentley's owner and handler. "It's a great testament to the importance of pet therapy and the value it adds to so many people."

Kim Wallace, St. Joseph's Hospital-South's volunteer manager, said the Animal Law Section learned about Bentley from reading social media posts and online articles originating from St. Joseph's Hospital-South.

"The committee is out of Tallahassee and nominated Bentley after reading our St. Joseph's Hospital-South pages. It was really cool that Bentley was chosen," she said. "I was very taken aback with the event we attended. It was a lot bigger than I thought it would be. We felt honored to be there. It was nice for Bentley and our hospital."

Read the *Osprey Observer* 2025 article about Bentley: www.ospreyobserver.com/2025/10/move-over-dogs-bentley-the-cat-joins-hospital-therapy-team/.

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COME MEET YOUR CANDIDATES AT THE 2026 CANDIDATE CONNECTION

Staff Report



The Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce is proud to present the 2026 Candidate Connection, formerly known as the Hob Nob, on Thursday, August 6, from 6-8 p.m. at The Regent, located at 6437 Watson Rd. in Riverview. This year's event, presented by Curry Law Group and powered by RSA Consulting Group, will also commemorate America's 250th birthday, providing a meaningful opportunity for civic engagement while celebrating our nation's history.

Candidate Connection is designed to connect voters with the individuals seeking to serve their communities. The event offers a welcoming, nonpartisan environment where attendees can meet candidates, visit sponsor and community organization booths, learn about local initiatives and public services and engage in meaningful conversations with neighbors and community leaders.

Guests will enjoy light refreshments while networking with local business professionals, elected officials and residents from across Hillsborough County. The event encourages informed civic participation by providing direct access to candidates representing a variety of local, county, state and federal offices.

For attendees seeking a more in-depth experience, VIP admission includes early entry from 5-6 p.m. and exclusive small-group conversations with participating candidates. These sessions provide an opportunity to hear directly from candidates about their visions, priorities and policy positions in a more personal setting.

Candidates currently scheduled to participate include Sara Peacock, judge candidate; Daniela Simic, Hillsborough County School Board; Sally Harris Williamson, Hillsborough County School Board, District 6; Nina McGucken Alvarez, circuit judge; Louie Aguila, judge candidate; Bob Henriquez, Hillsborough County property appraiser; Joshua Wostal, Hillsborough County Commission, District 7; Cindy Stuart, Hillsborough County Commission, District 7; Stacy Hahn, Hillsborough County Commission, District 5 (countywide); Brittany Lyssy, Hillsborough County School Board; Aileen Rodriguez, Hillsborough County Commission, District 7; Kevin Steele, U.S. Congress; and Bea Valenti, U.S. Congress.

Additional candidates may be announced prior to the event.

"Candidate Connection is one of our community's most important civic engagement events," said Amber Aaron, president and CEO of the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce. For ticket information and event details, visit www.centralhillsboroughchamber.com.

BELL CREEK GIRLS TEAM BOWLS ITS WAY INTO NATIONAL TOP 10

By Abigail Dumas



From l. to r., coach Bobby Reighard, Kendall Reighard (captain), Emma Pocalyko, Lexi Serniotti, Melanie Carter, coach Christina Reighard, Madisyn Kowal, Malanya Calo and Berlyn Kowal.

This past season the Bell Creek Academy girls bowling team celebrated a huge victory, placing seventh in the country at the High School Bowling Foundation National Championship in Columbus, Ohio, the highest the school has ever ranked and one of the top-10 finishes for any Florida high school ever. The historic win came after an already impressive season, with the girls capturing a district championship and finishing as Florida Class 1A state runner-ups.

The talented 2025-26 Bell Creek Academy girls bowling roster included Captain Kendall Reighard, who tied for 84th in the nation; Malayna Calo, who was the Florida Class 1A Girls Singles runner-up; Alexa 'Lexi' Serniotti, who placed sixth overall at the Florida Class 1A Girls Singles Championship; Melanie Carter; Emma Pocalyko; Madisyn Kowal; and Berlyn Kowal.

Head coach Bobby Reighard shared just how proud he is of the team not only for what they accomplished but also how they did it. "Finishing seventh in the nation and becoming the highest-finishing team in Bell Creek Academy history is certainly something we're proud of, but what makes me proudest is the way they represented our school," Reighard said.

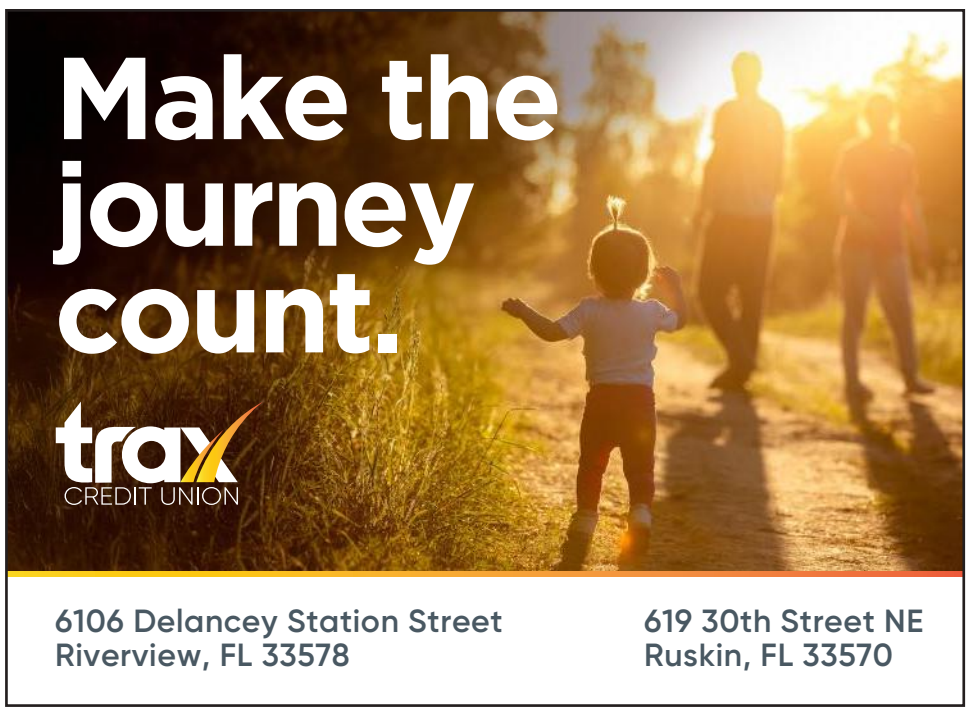
Reighard also expressed how rewarding it was as a coach seeing the team working together to overcome adversity, becoming stronger in the process and growing as young women. The team practiced together multiple times a week after school at Brandon Crossroads Bowl in Tampa to prepare.

In bowling, there's no room for error, every shot counts, especially at such a competitive national level. Such a high intensity environment would rattle most people, but not this team.

"One moment I'll always remember was watching the team continue to encourage one another regardless of the score. Every player celebrated a teammate's success just as much as her own. That kind of culture doesn't happen overnight; it's built through trust and shared experiences," said Reighard.

"Our seventh-place finish in the nation wasn't just a victory for Bell Creek Academy — it was something our entire community helped make possible. We're incredibly grateful to Acme Unconventional (a local business who stepped up as a community partner for the team) for believing in our program," said Reighard.

The Bell Creek Academy bowling team was founded in 2017 as a coed program. By 2021, the girls team was snagging district titles and individual accolades. And now, in 2026, they have finished their season as seventh in the nation.







AUTHOR TINA BLOUNT OPENS COACHING & COUNSELING PRACTICE

By Libby Hopkins



Tina Blount brings her new business, Be Blount Coaching & Counseling, to the Brandon community.

Tina Blount of Brandon wears many hats. She is a local pastor, author, podcaster, life coach, friend and icon to many in the community. She is currently wearing a new hat as a business owner. What started out as a podcast, called Be Blount, has now turned into Be Blount Coaching & Counseling.

"The Be Blount podcast actually started because of the people around me," she said. "As I spent time serving both the faith community and the business community, people would jokingly tell me, 'You are blunt in the best possible way.' What they meant was that I wasn't afraid to say the hard thing, but that I did it in a way that made people feel inspired and encouraged. After hearing that enough times, friends suggested that should start a podcast. They believed that I had something to say. Even though I communicate regularly as one of the pastors at ARISE Church, I resisted the idea for a while, but eventually I gave in."

Her weekly 10-minute podcast, Be Blount, which she originally planned to run for just three months, is now in its 11th season, with episodes running 20-30 minutes.

Be Blount was shaping up to be more than just a podcast.

"There was a broader need, and I felt called to meet it," she said. "Today, Be Blount is a people development company that helps individuals, leaders, teams and organizations grow in work, life and faith. I often say I show up for the growth and the gaps because I love helping people see what they're capable of before they see it themselves. At the heart of everything I do is a simple belief: When people discover who they are, they can step more confidently into what they were created to do. Our motto is 'be, then do.'"

Be Blount Coaching & Counseling has given Blount the opportunity to take a step back from ARISE Church and focus on her new business.

"I'm excited, and yet, it's bittersweet," she said. "I believe that God has a plan for each of us, and this is His plan for me in this season."

Blount loves what she is doing with Be Blount Coaching & Counseling and hopes her new endeavor gives them what they need to be successful.

"My hope for Be Blount is that it becomes a trusted resource for people who want to grow, whether they're leading a business, serving in a nonprofit, pastoring a church, launching a new venture, discovering their calling, a new job or simply trying to figure out what's next," she said. "One of the things I'm most passionate about is helping people see that there doesn't have to be a divide between ministry and the marketplace. I believe purpose and faith belongs in every boardroom, classroom, office, coffee shop and church."

To learn more about Be Blount Coaching & Counseling, visit www.tinablount.com or call 813-335-6828.

IN AN EMERGENCY, CLOSE CARE MATTERS

Staff Report



AdventHealth Riverview EMT Jared provides compassionate emergency care to patients when every second counts. His professionalism and reassuring presence reflect the hospital's commitment to delivering fast, high-quality care close to home for those facing urgent medical needs.

Emergency care and timely treatment matter when you have an illness or injury that needs immediate medical attention.

For three years, Kayla McDonald had episodes where her heart rate spiked to roughly 200 beats per minute. But every time she went to the emergency room, physicians said her heart wasn't the problem.

"The first time it happened in Panama City, they said I was too young for a heart condition. Without doing an EKG or anything, they just told me I was having a panic attack," said the 25-year-old. "The second time, they didn't take me seriously either. And after that, I felt bad even calling 911 or calling to ask for help."

That changed once McDonald moved to the Tampa Bay area. During another event in November 2025, emergency room physicians diagnosed her with supraventricular tachycardia (SVT), a common condition that causes fast, irregular heartbeats; chest pain; and lightheadedness.

The next time McDonald's SVT hit, she went to the emergency room at nearby AdventHealth Riverview and knew immediately that she'd found a health care home.

And that's where she went three times a week until she had a cardiac ablation to cure her SVT in May.

"They did everything they could for me very quickly and went the extra mile to fix my heart rhythm. They did their best to get me in and out immediately," she said. "It meant so much that they knew me. I got anxious with every episode, but they were very calming and caring. They never made me feel bad about coming in for help."

With AdventHealth, there are three ways to find complete care when you have a non-life-threatening illness or injury that still needs care fast. You can schedule a treatment time in the emergency room through InQuickER, request a virtual care visit with a physician or nurse practitioner or visit one of the AdventHealth Primary Care+ clinics located throughout the Tampa Bay area.

When you have an urgent illness or injury, AdventHealth Riverview, located at 9330 U.S. 301 in Riverview, is nearby with convenient emergency care. Find out more about its advanced emergency services at the website located at www.adventhealthriverview.com.

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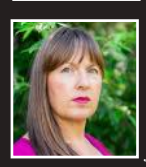

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EXPLORE GIRL SCOUT OPPORTUNITIES AT CAMP DOROTHY THOMAS EVENT

Staff Report



Girl Scouts of Fossil Valley is inviting local girls and their families to learn more about the opportunities available through Girl Scouts during a free Discover What's Within Information Event on Sunday, August 23, from 1-3 p.m. at Camp Dorothy Thomas, located at 16119 Boyette Rd. in Riverview.

The open house is designed for families interested in learning about Girl Scouts and the experiences, friendships and leadership opportunities available throughout the year. Attendees will have the chance to meet local troop leaders, ask questions about membership and explore how girls can become involved during the upcoming Girl Scout year.

"Girl Scouts is so much more than cookies and badges," said Jennifer Strom, Fossil Valley service unit recruiter and troop leader. "It's a place where girls can try something completely new, build confidence, make friendships, develop real-world skills and discover what they're capable of. We want local families to come see what Girl Scouts can look like for their girl."

Girl Scouts offers girls opportunities to build lasting friendships, participate in outdoor adventures, STEM activities, creative projects and community service, while developing leadership, confidence and problem-solving skills through hands-on experiences.

"Every girl has something special within her," Strom said. "Girl Scouts gives her the space, encouragement and opportunities to explore it."

Families attending the event can learn about local troops, membership options and the wide variety of programs available through Girl Scouts of Fossil Valley, which serves the community as part of Girl Scouts of West Central Florida.

The event is free and open to families interested in joining Girl Scouts. The annual Girl Scout membership year runs from October 1 through September 30.

To RSVP for the Discover What's Within Information Event, visit https://tinyurl.com/DiscoverWithin or the event registration form at https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfOLrVPQpkGj2K2VOONslcwUuatQMYq9FB7A5-_MiV1EcxKLQ/viewform. For more information about Girl Scouts, visit www.gswcf.org or search for Fossil Valley Girl Scouts on Facebook.

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GIRL SCOUTS INSPIRE CONSERVATION THROUGH SILVER AWARD PROJECTS

Staff Report





Girl Scout Cadette Troop 33521 is making a lasting impact on Florida's environment through two Silver Award conservation projects, with one troop member recently earning statewide recognition for her efforts to protect hermit crabs and educate others about coastal ecosystems.

Troop member Anabelle earned second place at the Girl Scouts of West Central Florida STEMapalooza competition for her interactive exhibit, Daffy's Great Adventure to a Healthy Habitat. The project teaches children and families about hermit crab conservation through hands-on activities centered around a simple but powerful message: "A shell on the beach is a home, not a souvenir."

Many beachgoers collect seashells without realizing hermit crabs depend on abandoned snail shells for protection throughout their lives. When shells are removed from Florida's beaches, the crabs often are forced to use unsafe objects such as bottle caps or plastic debris, putting their survival at risk.

Although she admitted public speaking was outside her comfort zone, Anabelle focused on ensuring every visitor left with one important lesson about hermit crab conservation. Her approach proved successful, as children continued gathering around her display asking questions long after the competition had officially ended.

Her passion earned her second place overall, but the project is far from finished.

Anabelle's project is one of two Silver Award initiatives underway by Troop 33521. The second, Oyster Oasis, teaches children and families about the importance of oysters, which naturally filter water, improve water quality and create habitat for hundreds of marine species. To support the project, troop members are creating Vertical Oyster Garden educational kits complete with activity books, puzzles, instructional materials and hands-on supplies to introduce students to oyster restoration and environmental stewardship.

To help complete both projects, Troop 33521 has launched an Amazon Wish List and is inviting the community to donate educational materials and supplies by August 15. Donations will help expand environmental education programs while inspiring the next generation of conservationists.

Visit the troop's Amazon Wish List at https://amazon.com/registries/gl/guest-view/3w23hzj6i984l.

TRUE HEROES CPR EQUIPS COMMUNITY WITH LIFESAVING SKILLS

By Jane Owen



Worldwide there are more than 135 million cardiovascular deaths each year, and the prevalence of coronary heart disease is increasing. According to the American Heart Association, only around 40 percent of people who experience an out of hospital cardiac arrest get the immediate help that they need before professional help arrives. Immediate CPR, or cardiopulmonary resuscitation, doubles and sometimes triples chances of survival after cardiac arrest.

True Heroes CPR, a Lithia-based company, is dedicated to empowering individuals with the knowledge and expertise needed to respond effectively in critical situations. True Heroes specializes in CPR training and offers basic life support (BLS), automated external defibrillator (AED), first aid and choking intervention training. Classes can be provided on-site at a workplace, at a home or at local venue that True Heroes coordinates.

True Heroes was founded by Jaime Heaverin with a mission to prepare others to help in emergency situations with their families, friends and community members. Heaverin's passion stems from a desire to protect her family. Her family of four includes her husband, Chris; daughter, Kassidy; and son, Aedan.

Kassidy was born in 2015, 24 weeks premature, with extensive medical conditions. Heaverin and Chris learned everything possible to support Kassidy thrive, including BLS measures and understanding how to clear choking hazards. In 2021, complications from COVID-19 required Chris to be on oxygen and medically retire from his job. Heaverin recognized that the more people trained to be ready to help her family, the better. But, also, the more people trained in life saving measures could have a significant impact on the community. She founded True Heroes CPR in 2024. Heaverin became a Red Cross faculty instructor in April. She is also an American Heart Association faculty instructor.

True Heroes CPR classes include instruction and certification at a fraction of the price of other companies. Heaverin's passion is for individuals to have the knowledge to assist in emergency situations.

"I want everyone to know these skills. One of my biggest fears is if something were to happen to myself — I want the people around me to know how to feel as skilled and confident as I am," Heaverin said.

Heaverin's desire to protect her family is saving lives in our community. With a smile, she will tell you about life saving moments from people who were certified through True Heroes CPR.

Kassidy and Chris are doing well. Chris is a True Heroes instructor. Kassidy and Aedan are often at classes.

For more information about True Heroes CPR, visit www.true-heroescpr.com, email trueheroescpr@gmail.com or call 813-702-2890.





LOCAL SWISHER3X'S WALMART DANCE VIDEOS TURN LOCAL MOMENTS INTO A 1.4 MILLION-FOLLOWER MOVEMENT

By Libby Hopkins









Most people head to Walmart with a shopping list. Swisher3x walks in with a mission.

The Tampa-based content creator, musician and dancer has become a viral sensation by transforming ordinary shopping trips into unforgettable moments of joy. Known for his energetic dance videos filmed in Walmart stores across the Tampa Bay area, Swisher3x invites shoppers and employees alike to join him in spontaneous dance routines that celebrate positivity, connection and community.

Born Paa-Gyesi Ansah, Swisher3x comes from a proud Ghanaian family and credits his heritage with helping shape his love of music, dance and bringing people together. While his family is from Ghana, he has made the Tampa Bay area his home, where he continues to grow both his music career and his online following.

His signature 'Vibe Movement' began in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. At a time when isolation and uncertainty had become part of everyday life, Swisher3x started dancing in New York City's Times Square with one goal in mind — reminding people that joy is contagious.

"My inspiration for music and dance is wanting to see the world in complete unity because division is taking over," he said.

That vision has remained at the heart of everything he creates.

Millions have now viewed his 'Walmart Vibes' videos, which capture authentic reactions from strangers who often go from surprised observers to enthusiastic dance partners. The videos have become a refreshing reminder that happiness can be found in the most unexpected places.

"What's special about dancing in the Walmarts is just the aspect of being able to see people from all walks of life meet up at one place to enjoy unity, enjoy positivity, enjoy love and feel like they're together," Swisher3x said. "Walmart was the perfect place to bring a lot of loving energy to. I hope to accomplish world peace globally."

Whether he's dancing down store aisles, greeting customers in parking lots or creating content at local events, Swisher3x encourages people to put away their worries, even if only for a few moments, and simply enjoy life.

His influence extends well beyond social media. An independent artist, Swisher3x blends Afrocentric, Caribbean pop, R&B, soul, hip-hop and rap into his music. He has released more than a dozen songs, including "Control Yourself" and "Lush and Lavish," and recently introduced his latest album, Swisher Note. He has also shared plans to continue developing his musical talents through education at Full Sail University in Orlando.

His growing career includes performing as a dancer during the Super Bowl LV halftime show, appearances on FOX 13 Tampa Bay and performances at community events and college campuses, such as Jacksonville State University.

Outside of music and content creation, Swisher3x is also a barber and producer, wearing many creative hats while remaining focused on his larger purpose.

He said his platform isn't just about creating viral videos; it's about changing lives through kindness, confidence and human connection.

In a world that often feels divided, Swisher3x hopes every dance, every smile and every shared moment can inspire people to see one another with a little more compassion.

Swisher3x has amassed an online audience of more than 1.8 million followers and subscribers across his social media platforms, with more than 1.4 million followers on TikTok alone and nearly 460,000 subscribers on YouTube.

To learn more about Swisher3x and follow his latest videos and music, visit his Facebook page at www.facebook.com/offthaboat.



CAMPAIGN TAKES SHAPE FOR COUNTY WOMEN VETERANS MONUMENT

By Brad Stager



A new Women Veterans Monument is slated to be included in the planned renovations of Hillsborough County's Veterans Memorial Park.

The goal of recognizing the contributions of women veterans at Hillsborough County's Veterans Memorial Park and Museum with a monument is within sight as a design has been selected and fundraising efforts continue.

In what has been a grassroots campaign of more than five years, the monument has gone from an idea to set the record straight about an aspect of America's military history that has often been ignored or diminished to an allotted space in the park and an approved design to create from. It is slated to be included in the park's planned renovations.

The selected design depicts a woman in a generic military uniform standing upon a black granite tri-base, flanked by a woman pilot and infantry soldier, with a figure of a young girl in the foreground.

For the organizers and the veterans they represent, it is more than a statue as it provides recognition for the women who served their country. They are joined in their effort by AMVETS Post 44 in Plant City, a kindred band of veterans who understand the cost of service. Post 44 hosts special fundraising events on behalf of the monument, such as a community yard sale on Saturday, August 8, from 8 a.m.-2 p.m.

Irene Rapoza, who is chair of the monument initiative said there has been a lot of progress with deciding on a design and procuring a place in the park, but there is still plenty of work to do and, with a projected cost of $100,000, funds to raise.

"We've come a long way from our original design of our monument," she wrote in an email. "We are still in our fundraising mode, but with AMVETS Post 44 partnership, we are about one-third of the way to our goal with many fundraisers on the horizon."

Rapoza also credited other local veterans groups and businesses for their assistance as well as County Commissioner Donna Cameron Cepeda, an Army veteran, for her political support. She encourages others to join their ranks as donors or community supporters as the project makes its way through bureaucratic and construction developments.

You can keep up with the group's fundraising and networking efforts via its Facebook page, Women Veterans Monument - Hillsborough County.

LEADERSHIP BRANDON COMPLETES PROJECT BENEFITING A KID'S PLACE

Staff Report



The Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce is proud to announce the completion of the Leadership Brandon Riverview Class of 2026 Legacy Project benefiting A Kid's Place, a local nonprofit organization dedicated to providing a safe, stable and nurturing home for children in foster care.

Each year, participants in the Leadership Brandon Riverview program select a community Legacy Project designed to make a lasting impact on a local nonprofit organization. As part of the program, class members spend time visiting and learning about several nonprofits throughout the community, hearing directly from organization leaders about the populations they serve, the challenges they face and the needs they hope to address.

After hearing the heartfelt mission and needs presented by A Kid's Place, the Leadership Class selected the organization as the recipient of this year's project. A Kid's Place provides a unique, homelike foster care environment where sibling groups can remain together while receiving the care, support and stability they need during difficult times in their lives.

One of the needs identified by the organization was the replacement of aging benches in the children's outdoor play area. The Leadership Brandon Riverview Class of 2026 immediately embraced the opportunity to help create a more welcoming and functional outdoor space for the children and families served by A Kid's Place.

To fund the project, the Leadership Class partnered with the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce to host the Leadership Brandon Riverview Cornhole Tournament. The tournament was a tremendous success thanks to the incredible support of sponsors, vendors, volunteers, participants and donors throughout the community. Event sponsors included Tampa Electric, Raulerson Castillo & Company – CPAs and Consultants, Sellers and Associates, Tampa Bay Harley-Davidson, SouthState Bank, Hungry Howie's, Suncoast Credit Union and RSA Consulting.

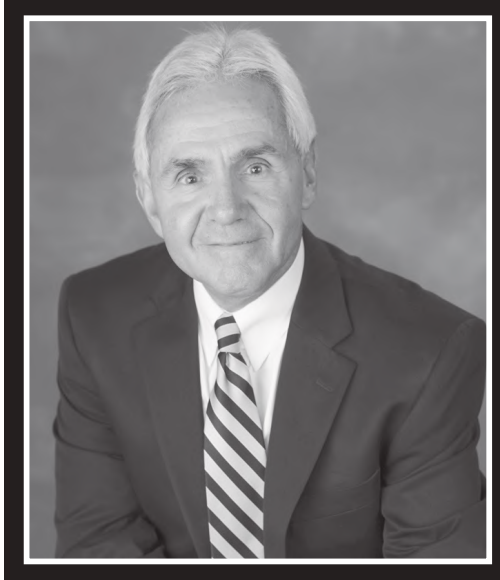
Additional excitement was provided by event vendors including LeAnne's Old Fashioned Cookies, Funnel & Funk, Champion Wellness Centers, Photo Booth Rental and More and Socially Funded.

"The Legacy Project is one of the most meaningful parts of the Leadership Brandon Riverview program because it allows participants to make a direct and lasting impact in our community," said Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce President Amber Aaron. "The Class of 2026 demonstrated tremendous heart, teamwork and dedication throughout this entire process, and we are incredibly proud of what they accomplished for A Kid's Place."

To learn more about A Kid's Place, visit https://akidsplacetb.org/.

For more information about Leadership Brandon Riverview and the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce, visit the www.centralhillsboroughchamber.com.

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PARADE OF LIGHTS PARTICIPANTS WILL BENEFIT TWO LOCAL NONPROFITS

Staff Report



The Brandon Parade of Lights is set to return on Saturday, December 12, inviting families, businesses, schools, nonprofits, churches and community organizations to come together for an evening of holiday tradition with a purpose. Stepping off at 5:30 p.m., the illuminated parade will travel approximately 1.3 miles, beginning at Lakewood Drive and Oakfield Drive and continuing along Oakfield Drive before concluding at Vonderburg Drive. The parade typically lasts about two hours and attracts thousands of spectators from all over the Tampa Bay area.

This year also marks a special milestone as Reed & Reed, a Brandon-based law firm, returns as the title sponsor for the third consecutive year, continuing its commitment to helping make the Brandon Parade of Lights one of the area's premier holiday events.

While the parade is known for its festive floats, marching bands, performers and holiday spirit, it is also recognized for something that sets it apart from many other holiday parades throughout the year, its commitment to giving back. Each year, the Brandon Parade of Lights asks its local chambers, the Brandon Riverview and Valrico FishHawk chambers of commerce, to each select one nonprofit who will then benefit from parade proceeds. The 2026 Community Impact Partners are MacDonald Training Center (https://macdonaldcenter.org/) and Easterseals Florida (https://florida.easterseals.com/), two organizations dedicated to improving lives through education, employment, independence and supportive services.

"From the very beginning, our vision has been to create more than a holiday parade," said the Brandon Parade of Lights Committee. "We wanted to build a community tradition that celebrates the season while also shining a light on organizations making a meaningful difference in people's lives. Every sponsor, participant, volunteer and spectator becomes part of that mission. We are excited to be able to support our local nonprofits as much as possible."

The committee is currently seeking additional parade participants to help make this year's event the biggest yet. Businesses, schools, civic organizations, nonprofits, churches, youth groups, clubs, performance teams and marching bands are encouraged to participate in this year's parade.

Sponsorship opportunities are also available for businesses looking to increase their community visibility while supporting an event that benefits local nonprofits. The deadline for both parade registrations and sponsorships is Saturday, October 31. With a limited number of parade entries available, early registration is encouraged.

For parade registration, sponsorship opportunities, merchandise, and event information, visit https://brandonparadeoflights.com/ and be sure to follow the Brandon Parade of Lights on Facebook and Instagram.

RETIRED ARMY PILOT HELPS FAMILIES TAKE FLIGHT INTO HOMEOWNERSHIP

By Zofia Osterman



After nearly three decades of service in the U.S. Army, retired Col. Bradley Osterman has traded flying helicopters for helping families achieve the dream of homeownership. As a loan officer with Cornerstone First Mortgage, Osterman brings the same dedication, precision and commitment that defined his military career to every client he serves.

During his 28-year Army career, Osterman flew helicopters with the elite 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, better known as the Night Stalkers. Reflecting on his years of service, he credits the military with shaping both his character and his approach to business.

"My military service taught me discipline, commitment and attention to detail," Osterman said. "In aviation, numbers matter, and the same is true in mortgage lending. It also taught me to look beyond the easy solution, solve difficult problems and keep working until the mission is accomplished."

His transition into the mortgage industry came thanks to another military veteran who recognized his strengths and encouraged him to pursue a new mission: helping families buy homes. After gaining valuable experience in the industry, Osterman joined Cornerstone First Mortgage because of its competitive lending products and flexibility to serve a wide range of borrowers.

For military families, Osterman offers more than mortgage expertise — he offers firsthand experience. Having completed more than 18 permanent changes of station during his Army career, he understands the unique challenges military families face when relocating, retiring or purchasing a home.

"My Family and I have lived that life," he said. "We know what military families are going through because we've been there ourselves."

A FishHawk resident for more than 15 years, Osterman is passionate about serving the community he proudly calls home. Whether assisting first-time homebuyers, military families, investors or those purchasing vacation homes, he provides personalized guidance and lending solutions tailored to each client's needs. Through Cornerstone First Mortgage, he is also licensed to lend in all 50 states, Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C., making him a valuable resource for military members relocating across the country.

Working primarily from his home office, Osterman meets clients wherever it is most convenient and offers a secure online mortgage portal for a smooth lending experience. Known on social media as 'The Mortgage Colonel,' he is committed to educating and connecting with the community both online and in person.

Contact Osterman at 813-582-7884, email bosterman@cfmtg.com or visit https://cfmtg.com/bosterman/.



BUFFALO SOLDIERS MONUMENT TO BE UNVEILED AT VETERANS PARK

Staff Report



Photo Courtesy of Hillsborough County
With The Regulars at Port Tampa - Ninth United States Calvary skirmishing through the pines - drawn by Frederic Remington.

The community is invited to take part in a historic and meaningful event as Veteran Community Services and Hillsborough County leaders dedicate the new Buffalo Soldiers Monument on Saturday, August 29, at 10 a.m. at Veterans Memorial Park & Rear Admiral LeRoy Collins, Jr. Veterans Museum, located at 3602 N. U.S. 301 in Tampa.

The ceremony will begin in the park's outdoor amphitheater and will be followed by the official unveiling of a large bronze monument honoring the legacy and service of the Buffalo Soldiers. The event is free and open to the public. Attendees will enjoy a memorable program featuring the National Association of Buffalo Soldiers & Troopers Motorcycle Club, Tampa Chapter; the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office Honor Guard and Mounted Patrol; and keynote remarks from retired Army Brig. Gen. Remo Butler. Following the unveiling, guests are invited to stay for light refreshments and fellowship. The park and its monuments will remain open until 5 p.m.

The Buffalo Soldiers trace their origins to 1866, when Congress authorized the creation of all-Black segregated units in the U.S. Army following the Civil War. Native American tribes are believed to have given these courageous troops the name 'Buffalo Soldiers' in recognition of their bravery and resilience. The soldiers played a vital role in protecting mail routes, building roads and other infrastructure, guarding national parks, providing border security and serving in numerous military campaigns.

The Buffalo Soldiers also have a unique connection to the Tampa Bay area. In 1898, members of these regiments camped on the outskirts of Tampa Heights while preparing for deployment to Cuba during the Spanish-American War. Although the final Buffalo Soldier units were disbanded in the 1950s following the desegregation of the U.S. military under President Harry S. Truman, their legacy continues to inspire generations. In 1992, President George H.W. Bush proclaimed the first National Buffalo Soldiers Day in recognition of their outstanding service and sacrifice.

Community members are encouraged to attend this special dedication and help celebrate the enduring legacy of these American heroes.

For more information, call Hillsborough County Veteran Community Services at 813-635-8316 or visit https://hcfl.gov/veterans.

TAMPA-FOUNDED MOVING COMPANY KEEPS TRAINING LOCAL

By Jenna Soules

As thousands of new residents continue to relocate to the Tampa Bay region each year, demand for professional moving services is growing alongside the area's population. With nearly 124,000 additional residents projected to move to the region by 2026, according to the Tampa Bay Economic Development Council, 2 College Brothers Moving and Storage is investing in a new training facility and expanded office space at its Clearwater headquarters to help meet the area's growing workforce and moving needs.



2 College Brothers Moving and Storage CEO Wade Swilkle.

Slated for completion in late July, with a grand opening in the fall, the new facility will feature a fully furnished, one-bedroom model home inside the company's office. Rather than learning solely in customers' homes, new movers will be able to practice real-world moving techniques in a controlled environment before handling a family's belongings.

"Our philosophy is simple," said 2 College Brothers Moving and Storage CEO Wade Swikle. "The first time a new employee experiences a home move should never be the first time they handle someone's heirloom furniture or baby grand piano. Customers deserve a team that has already developed those skills before they arrive."

Swikle went on to say the concept addresses one of the moving industry's biggest areas of growth, which is that right now new employees at moving companies nationwide gain their first hands-on experience while moving customers' most valuable possessions. However, now, inside the new interactive training apartment, employees will learn how to properly protect furniture, navigate tight spaces, safeguard floors and walls and work together as a professional moving team before entering a customer's home. The realistic setting allows trainers to coach employees through common moving scenarios without the pressure or risk of working inside a customer's residence.

In addition to the hands-on training facility, Swikle co-founded Titan Up Training, an online education platform that includes '2 College Brothers University.' It's designed to help moving companies develop more skilled, consistent teams while enhancing their branding and procedures. In addition, it teaches other companies nationwide professional moving techniques to avoid injuries or damaging customer items, as well as courses on employee conduct, professionalism, moving terms, safety and procedures. Structured training helps ensure movers arrive with experience, confidence and a consistent approach to customer service.

"We're growing because Tampa Bay is growing," said Swikle. "As more families choose to make this area home, it's our responsibility to make sure we have well-trained professionals ready to serve them."

To learn more about the program, go to https://2collegebrothers.com/.



FIRE RESCUE CHIEF DOUGHERTY NAMED FIRE CHIEF OF THE YEAR

Staff Report

The Florida Fire Chiefs' Association named Hillsborough County Fire Rescue (HCFR) Chief Jason Dougherty as Fire Chief of the Year during its annual conference this week in Punta Gorda.

The Florida Fire Chiefs' Association honor stated: "This distinction was established to recognize a truly outstanding fire chief whose acts and deeds in their profession, home, community and country, serve as an example and challenge for all other chief fire executives throughout Florida."



Honored for Leadership: Hillsborough County Fire Rescue Chief Jason Dougherty accepts the Fire Chief of the Year award at the Florida Fire Chiefs' Association annual conference in Punta Gorda. Dougherty was recognized for his outstanding leadership, dedication to public service, and contributions to advancing the fire service across Florida.

In December 2023, Dougherty was named the seventh Fire Chief in Hillsborough County's history. Hillsborough County Fire Rescue is one of the largest fire departments in the state.

This prestigious honor recognizes Dougherty's exceptional leadership, unwavering commitment to public service and dedication to advancing the fire service across Florida. Since taking the helm of HCFR, Dougherty has championed innovation, strengthened the organization, invested in firefighters and paramedics and remained focused on providing the highest level of service to the residents and visitors of Hillsborough County.

Dougherty began his career in 1999 in Thomasville, Georgia, and later served as training chief with Tampa Fire Rescue. He joined HCFR in 2016. Before becoming fire chief, he served as deputy chief of operations and deputy chief of administration for HCFR.

Dougherty holds a bachelor's degree in health science education from the University of Florida, a master's degree in organizational leadership from Waldorf University and is a graduate of the Fire Service Executive Development Institute. Dougherty holds the following certifications: Chief Fire Officer, Executive Fire Officer, Fire Safety Inspector, Fire Investigator, Fire Service Instructor III, Live Fire Training Instructor, Pump Operator, Fire Officer I and II and Hazardous Materials Technician.

NATIONAL PBS SERIES HOSTED BY MICHELLE VALENTINE FEATURES SOUTH COUNTY SITES

Staff Report



Love Eat Travel with Michelle Valentine, hosted and produced by seasoned traveler and speaker Michelle Valentine, uncovers the heart and soul of hidden gem locations in Pennsylvania, Louisiana and Florida. Valentine explores the history, culture and food to be found in each location, while introducing viewers to the passionate locals who bring these destinations to life.

Three episodes of Love Eat Travel with Michelle Valentine are available.

"Happy Valley, Pennsylvania" - 101

Valentine visits a traditional Amish farm to learn the art of cheese making; enjoys farm-to-table dining; explores Penn's Cave and Wildlife Park, where she takes a guided motorboat ride through the famous limestone cave and rides a safari bus through the wild animal encounter park; joins a local for a lesson in fly fishing; tours the historic Columbus Chapel and Boal Mansion museum; and joins in the dancing at the Grange country fair, celebrating its 149th year.

"St. Landry Parish, Louisiana" - 102

Valentine delves into the area's deep-rooted Creole and Cajun traditions and plays the rubboard in a jam session with a local Zydeco band, discovers the essential ingredients and techniques in a traditional gumbo, visits the Creole Heritage Folklife Center, learns how to create a traditional pecan praline gateau nana from a beloved French recipe and tours the sacred site of the Shrine of St. John Berchmans.

"SouthShore, Florida" - 103

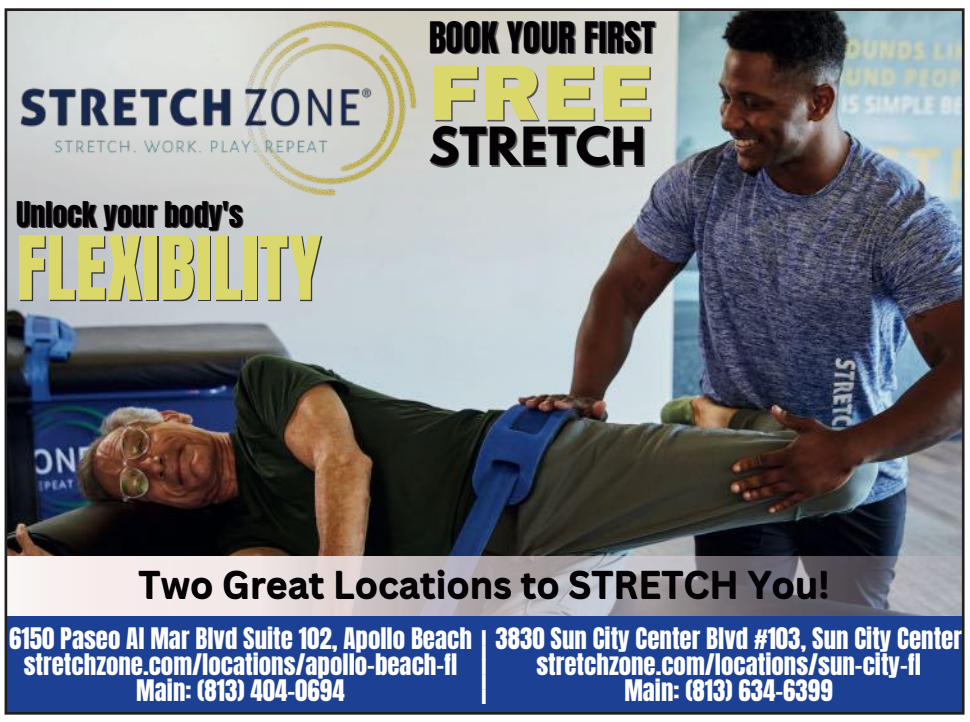
Valentine's journey begins at the TECO Manatee Viewing Center, a conservation facility protecting Florida's gentle giants; visits Elmira's Wildlife Sanctuary to meet Stanley, a rescued black bear who has captured the hearts of locals and visitors alike; tours the Paleo Preserve Fossil Museum to discover the history of Florida's ancient marine life; and enjoys a lively tour of the International Independent Showmen's Museum, which preserves the tradition of traveling carnivals and circus performers.

Love Eat Travel with Michelle Valentine is presented nationally by WTTW Chicago and distributed to public television stations by NETA (National Educational Telecommunications Association). The series is produced by Valentine and directed by Lawrence Bakerman, Apollo Beach residents.

"I'm thrilled to bring Love Eat Travel to public television viewers nationwide," said Valentine.

Love Eat Travel with Michelle Valentine is available to watch on PBS member stations across the United States and through select PBS streaming platforms. For more information and to find out where to watch, visit www.michellevalentine.tv.







COUNTY SENIORS BRING SPIRIT TO BRAIN AND BODY CHALLENGE

By Srishti Tripathi



Members of the Ruskin Senior Center "Monsters of Mayhem" team celebrate their first-place victory in the Dance Challenge during Hillsborough County Aging Services' annual Brain and Body Challenge.

More than 400 energetic seniors ages 50 and up came together for Hillsborough County Aging Services' annual Brain and Body Challenge, transforming the event into a playful showdown between superheroes and supervillains. The day was packed with high-energy activities, plenty of laughter and a strong sense of community pride.

This year's Challenge highlighted how older adults across the county continue embracing active, connected lifestyles. Aging Services emphasized that pairing physical movement with mental engagement supports overall wellness, sharpens cognitive skills and helps maintain daily vitality. The upbeat environment underscored how accessible, social activities can motivate seniors to stay active and involved.

"This was my first time attending, and I really enjoyed it. It was wonderful meeting new people and seeing the care and attention given to seniors," said Ruskin Senior Center resident Roman Delosseentos. "You can tell they truly look after their community. My favorite part of the day was playing basketball."

Participants arrived dressed as their favorite heroes and villains, setting the stage for friendly competition throughout the day. Seniors took on a World Cup-style penalty kick challenge and an NBA-inspired basketball free throw contest, showed off their best moves during a lively dance-off and tackled quiz-style mental games designed to boost memory, focus and problem-solving.

Top honors for team competitions went to: Progress Village Black Panthers, champions, Town 'N Country Crimson Avengers, second place, Plant City Spicy Strawberries, third place and The Dance Challenge champions were the Ruskin Monsters of Mayhem.

Individual winners also shined in soccer and basketball challenges, as well as in two timed brain competitions — color stacking and puzzle completion — with standout participants representing Progress Village, Oaks at Riverview, Ruskin, Brandon, Plant City and JL Young.

The success of this year's event was made possible thanks to the support of 15 dedicated sponsors.

By bringing together participants from multiple senior centers, the Brain and Body Challenge strengthened friendships, encouraged new connections and celebrated how community-driven wellness continues to empower older adults throughout Hillsborough County.

ROTARY CLUB OF BRANDON GIVES $25,000 IN SCHOOL SCHOLARSHIPS

By Libby Hopkins



Established in 1961, the Rotary Club of Brandon is part of a worldwide organization of business and community leaders who are dedicated to service, fellowship and making a positive difference close to home. For more than six decades, the club has brought together local professionals with a shared commitment to supporting Brandon and the surrounding area through charitable projects, community partnerships and programs that invest in the next generation.

The Rotary Club of Brandon was proud to award $25,000 in scholarships to 11 high school students from the Brandon community on June 2, including recipients of the Jacob E. Campoamor Memorial Scholarship and Sharon Sellers Memorial Scholarship.

"The Rotary Club of Brandon has presented scholarships to deserving high school seniors for as long as I can remember through the funds our club raises each year during our annual golf tournament and Wild Game Dinner," said Liz Brewer, club member and recent club president. "The students who were awarded the scholarships were from Bloomingdale, Durant, Armwood, Newsome, Strawberry Crest, Riverview and Christo Rey Tampa high schools."

The Brandon Rotary Charity Club Fund Board is made up of active Rotarians and the club's president-elect. Each year, the board carefully reviews the scholarship applications submitted by local students and determines award amounts, which can range from $1,000-$2,500 for individual recipients. The decisions are based on merit and take into consideration each student's grade-point average, involvement in community service, leadership, school activities and overall commitment to excellence in their studies. Through this process, the club looks beyond academics alone and recognizes students who have demonstrated character, perseverance and a desire to make a positive impact in their schools and communities.

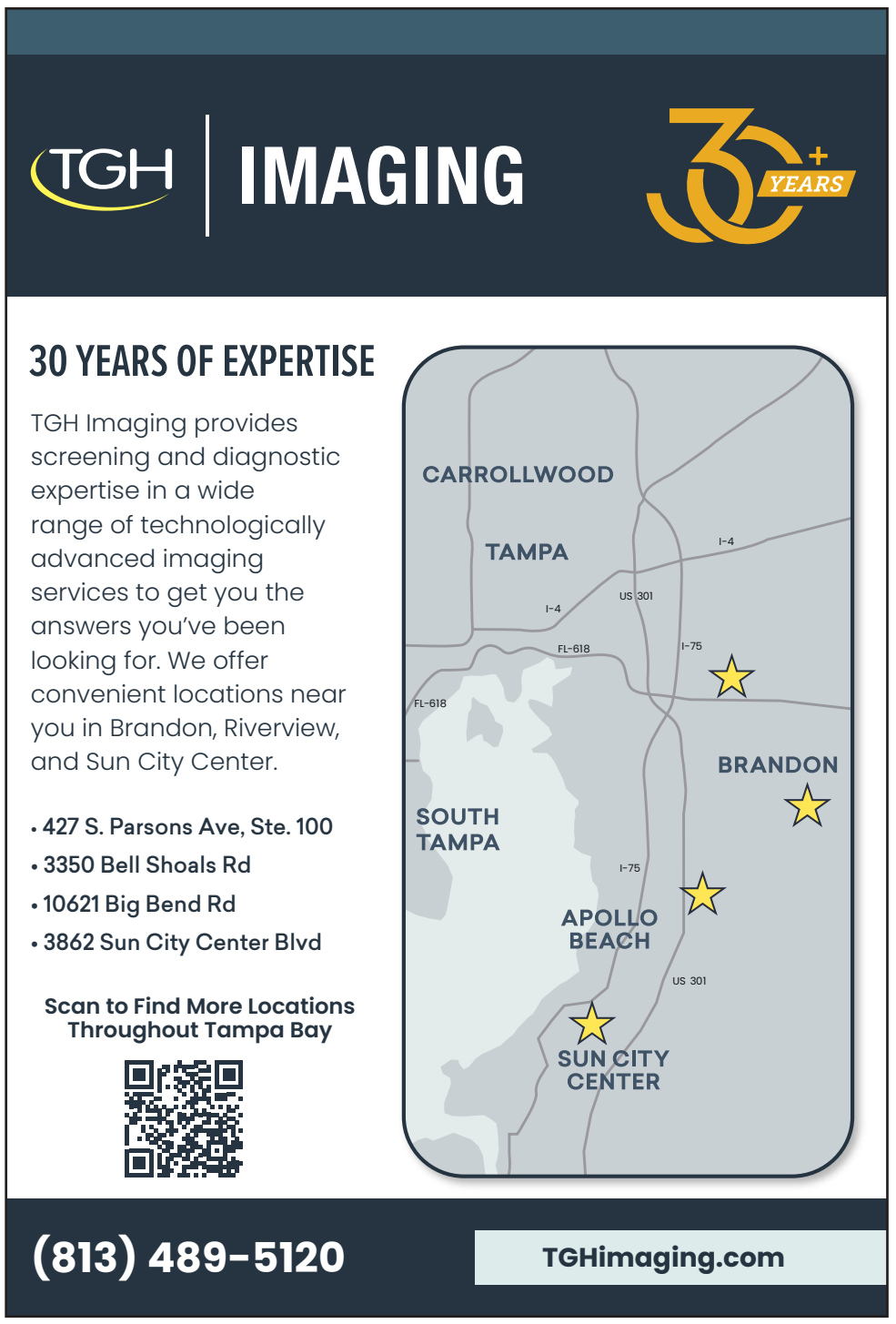
The universities that the scholarship recipients will be attending in the fall include the University of South Florida, the University of Florida, Princeton University, Auburn University, Alabama State University and Florida State University. These schools represent a wide range of academic opportunities, from major public universities in Florida to respected institutions outside the state, giving the students the chance to pursue their chosen fields of study while continuing to grow as leaders.

For the Rotary Club of Brandon, helping students take this next step is an investment not only in their education but also in the future of the community they represent.

"Our hope for these students is that these scholarships will help them as they begin their college journey to offset initial expenses they will incur and start them off on the right foot," Brewer said.

To learn more about the Rotary Club of Brandon, you can visit its website at https://brandonrotary.org/index.php.





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FAMILY FUN, BBQ AND HISTORY BENEFIT FOR BRANDON LANDMARK

Staff Report



The community is invited to celebrate Brandon's rich history while helping preserve one of its most treasured landmarks during the 2nd Annual Brandon's Legacy Labor Day Family Picnic, taking place on Monday, September 7, from 11 a.m.-2 p.m. at the Winthrop Barn Theatre.

Hosted by the Timberly Trust, the fundraiser supports the ongoing preservation of the historic Moseley Homestead, a 14-acre property located along State Road 60 in Brandon. Built in 1886 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the homestead is one of the area's oldest surviving historic sites and offers a glimpse into Brandon's early history.

The preservation effort honors the vision of longtime steward Julia Winifred Moseley, who passed away in 2020 at the age of 101. Following her wishes, the Timberly Trust and its volunteer trustees continue working to protect, manage and preserve the property for future generations.

The Labor Day celebration will feature something for the entire family, including a BubbaQue's barbecue lunch, strawberry shortcakes provided by the Florida Strawberry Growers Association, live music, children's crafts and games, raffles, a silent auction and a special presentation about the history and significance of the Moseley Homestead.

Admission is $20 in advance ($25 at the door) for adults, $10 for youth ages 6-16 and free for children age 5 and younger.

The event's presenting sponsors are Odiorne Insurance Agency and Auto-Owners Insurance.

In addition to welcoming attendees, the Timberly Trust is seeking event sponsors and donations for its silent auction and raffle. Sponsorship opportunities offer businesses community recognition, brand visibility and an opportunity to support the preservation of one of Brandon's most significant historic landmarks. All donations are tax-deductible and directly benefit the continued restoration and maintenance of the Moseley Homestead.

"The Labor Day picnic is a wonderful opportunity for families to enjoy great food, entertainment and community fellowship while helping preserve an irreplaceable piece of Brandon's history," organizers said. "Every ticket purchased, sponsorship secured and auction donation helps ensure the Moseley Homestead will continue to educate and inspire future generations."

For those looking for a meaningful way to celebrate Labor Day, the Brandon's Legacy Labor Day Family Picnic offers an opportunity to enjoy a day of family fun while supporting the preservation of a local treasure that has stood for nearly 140 years. For tickets, email timberlytrust@gmail.com or call 813-230-4680.

HONORARY MAYOR CAMPAIGN RAISES RECORD $169,643 FOR CHARITIES

Staff Report



2026 Honorary Mayor Steve Glaros stands alongside Deputy Mayor Chris Ciulla (right) after a record-setting East Hillsborough campaign that raised $169,643.99 for local charities.

East Hillsborough's 2026 Honorary Mayor campaign demonstrated the extraordinary impact that can result when community leadership, local businesses, volunteers and charitable organizations unite around a shared purpose. This year's race raised a record-setting $169,643.99, the largest collective total in the campaign's history, while recognizing two candidates whose efforts benefited five important local charities.

Steve Glaros was named the 2026 Honorary Mayor of East Hillsborough after raising $121,746.56, the highest amount ever raised by a single candidate. An attorney who has served Tampa Bay families for more than 20 years, Glaros built his campaign around advocacy, family values, and strengthening organizations that support children, families and animals. His campaign benefited High 5 Inc., which provides after-school programs, mentorship and safe opportunities for young people; the Impact Program, which equips youth through education, prevention, and character development; and Raining Cats and Dogs Shelter and Sanctuary, which provides compassionate care for animals while encouraging responsibility and community involvement.

Chris Ciulla earned the newly established title of deputy mayor after raising $47,897.43. A former corporate executive and the owner of VooDoo Brewing in Valrico, Ciulla has become an active supporter of small businesses, nonprofit organizations and community initiatives throughout East Hillsborough. His campaign supported Forgotten Angels and ECHO. Forgotten Angels assists young adults aging out of foster care by providing housing, life skills, employment preparation, education support, credit-building opportunities and consistent guidance. ECHO, the Emergency Care Help Organization, supports families facing hardship through food, clothing, household essentials, workforce development, financial counseling and programs designed to move neighbors from crisis toward long-term stability.

The campaign also marked the conclusion of Mike Brand's term as Honorary Mayor, welcoming him into the Honorary Mayor alumni community. More importantly, the race reflected the generosity of sponsors, volunteers, donors and residents who supported both campaigns. The accomplishments of Glaros and Ciulla prove that friendly competition can create lasting benefits for organizations serving the community's most vulnerable residents.

For more information about the race, please contact the Valrico FishHawk Chamber of Commerce at https://business.valricofishhawk.org/contact.







FATHER-DAUGHTER DUO CELEBRATES LEGACY CAREERS AT GTE FINANCIAL

Staff Report



At a time when long-term careers have become increasingly uncommon, GTE Financial is celebrating a story that spans generations. Assistant vice president of ATM and interactive systems Kenny Rywant recently reached an extraordinary milestone of 40 years with the credit union, while his daughter, Emily Childers, fraud analyst II, has built a career of her own with more than a decade of service. Together, they represent more than 50 years of combined commitment to GTE Financial, reflecting the organization's investment in its employees and the people it serves.

Rywant joined GTE Financial in 1986 after graduating from Florida State University and began his career in information technology. Over the past four decades, he has helped guide the credit union through significant technological advancements, including implementing shared branching capabilities that allow members to conduct transactions at participating credit unions nationwide.

"Looking back, I can't imagine working anywhere else," Rywant said. "GTE has become much more than a job. It's been my career, my community and, in many ways, my family."

Growing up watching her father's dedication to the organization, Childers saw firsthand the opportunities GTE Financial offered its employees. She joined the credit union more than 10 years ago and now serves as a fraud analyst, helping protect members and strengthen their financial security.

"I saw how happy my dad was at GTE, and I wanted to follow in his footsteps," Childers said. "His work ethic has always inspired me, and it's been incredibly special to build my own career at the same organization that's meant so much to our family."

Over the course of Rywant's career, GTE Financial has grown into one of Florida's largest credit unions, expanding its technology, products and member services while remaining committed to the people behind that success. For both Rywant and Childers, that commitment created opportunities to build meaningful careers while making a lasting difference for members and the communities they serve.

"Forty years with one organization is an incredible accomplishment, and seeing Kenny's commitment inspire Emily to build her own career here makes this story even more meaningful," said Chad Burney, senior vice president and chief information officer at GTE Financial. "Our employees are the heart of everything we do, and Kenny and Emily represent the culture we're proud to build — one where people can grow, serve their communities and create a lasting impact."

Today, GTE Financial serves more than 230,000 individuals and businesses across West Central Florida.

For more information about GTE Financial and its services, visit www.gtefinancial.org.

KIDS TAG ART PROGRAM TOPS $181,000 RAISED FOR ART EDUCATION

Staff Report



Tax Collector Nancy Millan presents the Tax Collector's Choice Award to Melina Fenton from Apollo Beach K-8.

The Hillsborough County Tax Collector's Office is proud to release its 2025-26 Kids Tag Art Summary Report, announcing that this year's program raised $38,632 for local schools — the largest single-year total in program history. A total of 66 Hillsborough County elementary schools participated this year, with each school receiving $585 to support its art programs.

Since Hillsborough County Tax Collector Nancy Millan brought the Kids Tag Art Program to Hillsborough County in 2021, it has raised more than $181,813 for art education across the county. This year's program also generated $5,043 in direct Kids Tag Art merchandise sales, with proceeds from every plate, key chain and mug sold going straight back to participating schools.

"These numbers tell the story of a community that believes in investing in its young artists," said Millan. "A total of 66 participating schools, more than $181,000 raised since we started this program and thousands of students who got to see their own artwork come to life — that's what Kids Tag Art is all about. We're proud to share this year's results and even prouder of what they mean for arts education in Hillsborough County."

The tax collector's office formally presented the year's fundraising results to the Hillsborough County School Board in May, recognizing the program's continued growth and impact districtwide.

Locally, this year, the Tax Collector's Choice Award was given to Melina Fenton from Apollo Beach K-8 School.

The top winners from all 66 participating schools were individually recognized at the program's awards ceremony this spring. A full list of this year's winning students and schools is available in the 2025-26 Kids Tag Art Summary Report.

The Kids Tag Art Program would not be possible without the generosity of this year's sponsors: Suncoast Credit Union (title sponsor), Dealer Tag Agency, Derrick Brooks Charities, Lauren's Kids, Florida West Coast Credit Union, J.P. Morgan Chase, Keith N. Fakhoury, Tampa Electric Company and The Florida Aquarium. The program is also made possible through the tax collector's office's continued partnership with Hillsborough County Public Schools and the Hillsborough Education Foundation.

Community members can continue to support Hillsborough County's young artists by purchasing a Kids Tag Art specialty license plate, key chain or mug through the tax collector's online store at www.hillstaxfl.gov/shop/. Schools interested in joining next year's program can email communityrelations@hillstaxfl.gov or call 813-635-5264.



MOM & DAUGHTER ADAPT FILM INTO PLAY AT TAMPA FRINGE

By Libby Hopkins





It all began 15 years ago when Valrico resident Arlene Jacobs' daughter, Jessica Jacobs, was obsessed with unicorns.

"I introduced her to a movie that was released in 1982 called The Last Unicorn, which I had loved as a teen," Arlene said. "Being the reader that she is, she immediately found the book and read it. The book is full of lyrics of songs but no music. One of them really spoke to her, so she wrote music for the song that is in the book, and she sent the music to the author, Peter S. Beagle."

Jessica told Beagle that she was in high school studying musical theatre at Blake High School.

"He wrote her back and sent her a copy of a script, a play version that he was working on," Arlene said. "Nothing much came of that play version. I think it was produced once, but she kept a copy of that script for 15 years."

For her daughter's 30th birthday, Arlene wrote to Beagle and reminded him of the exchange and asked him if they could have the rights to adapt his book and add original music.

"He said yes, and his representative sent over a contract. We started writing, and Jessica worked on the music," Arlene said. "We sent all of it to Mr. Beagle, and he approved. We are retelling the story using live actors, puppets and shadow puppets, with original music based on the lyrics that are in the 1969 book. So, the show is cast, and rehearsals have begun. It opens August 13 for two weekends only at Tampa Fringe."

The play is a work of love for the mother-daughter duo.

"It was the first story that made me question what being alive actually meant," said Jessica. "I grew up on the classic movie, and the theme song features a defiantly joyful declaration, 'I'm alive!'"

Arlene and Jessica hope the play appeals to those who are actively hurting.

"To those who are lost, to those who feel as if they can't find their people and to those who are still desperately waiting to see a unicorn in real life," Jessica said, "I hope they find comfort in a fairy tale for a little while, one that they can return to when they need a reminder of what defines a hero."

Performances of *The Last Unicorn* will be held at The Tampa Fringe Theater, located at the West Annex inside Kress Contemporary at 1624 E. Seventh Ave. in Tampa. The performance dates are Thursday through Sunday, August 13-16 and 20-23.

For ticket information and performance times, visit https://theatre.tampafringe.org/events/the-last-unicorn/.

ROTARY CLUB OF BRANDON WELCOMES NEW PRESIDENT RYAN REED

By Libby Hopkins



Newly installed Rotary Club of Brandon president Ryan Reed stands with Hillsborough County Tax Collector Nancy Millan.

This past June, the 2025-26 president of the Rotary Club of Brandon, Liz Brewer, installed the club's new incoming 2026-27 president, Ryan Reed, during a special gathering surrounded by the dedicated members who make up the heart of the Rotary Club of Brandon. The installation marked an important moment of transition for the club, honoring Brewer's year of service while welcoming Reed into a leadership role that will help guide the organization's continued commitment to service, fellowship and community impact.

"My year as president, the second woman in the 64-year history of the club, I might add, was amazing," Liz Brewer said. "I was so proud of how our members came together as a solid team and created fun opportunities for our members to fellowship, volunteered time and talents to raise over $160,000; and also, I worked closely with our treasurer and secretary to create systems to streamline the work of those we are leading as we are all 100 percent volunteers."

When looking for someone to lead the club in the future, the club begins its search for its next president two years out.

"Ryan became our incoming president to learn under the current president, as well as attended necessary trainings to prepare for this incredible responsibility and step into their role more knowledgeable about Rotary systems and processes, so everything is consistent from one club to another," Brewer said. "Ryan was a great choice, as he jumped in from the day he joined our club back in May of 2023 and became engaged in the work of the organization."

Reed is a community leader and philanthropist in his own right, and the club knew that he would be a great leader for them because he understands the needs of the community.

"My hope for this year ahead is simple," Reed said. "I want to keep doing the work that matters, to welcome new faces who'll carry this club forward long after I'm done, and to enjoy each other's company while we're at it. The friendships in the club are the quiet engine behind everything we accomplish. I am honored, excited and ready to get to work alongside our club members."

"Ryan will commit the time needed to be successful in this area, and, as immediate past president, it is my responsibility to assist Ryan in the year ahead," Brewer said.

To learn more about the Rotary Club of Brandon, visit its website online at www.brandonrotary.org/index.php.



VALRICO HEALTHY KIDS RUNNING SERIES IS AROUND THE CORNER

By Emily Harper



Healthy Kids Running Series was founded in 2009 and designed to motivate kids to be active while providing a fun environment. Through physical activity and creating a sense of community, this event helps foster healthier, empowered youth and promotes community among local families.

"This event is important to our community because it encourages children to develop healthy, active lifestyles while building confidence in a fun and supportive environment. Our program inspires kids to 'get up and go' by showing them that they are capable of achieving their goals, even if they are hesitant to run at first," said Meg Moore, community coordinator.

The Valrico program will be held at the Brandon Recreation Center, located off Sadie St. The races are scheduled for five consecutive Sundays on October 4, 11, 18, 25 and November 1. However, families can choose to either register their children for the full series or for a single day. When registering for the full series, each child will receive a T-shirt, a race bib for each week and a finisher medal.

At the races, kids ages 2-14 will run in age-appropriate distances. In addition, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, Hillsborough County Fire Rescue and HCA Florida Brandon Hospital in past years have brought their vehicles for kids to explore and discover new interests.

"The best part of this event is seeing the kids cross the finish line with big smiles on their faces and realizing what they just accomplished. I love seeing all of the kids feel that huge sense of pride," said Moore.

Healthy Kids Running Series is a nonprofit organization, meaning sponsorships are important for covering the overall expenses of the event. The funds help cover costs of facility rentals, race supplies and other resources needed to provide a fun and safe experience for the young runners. The organization is always looking for businesses within the community that would like to support the local youth. In appreciation of the generosity of these businesses, the event offers a variety of promotional opportunities based on the type of sponsorship, allowing companies to be recognized throughout the series.

For more information on registration and sponsorships, visit its website, https://healthykidsrunningseries.org/race-locations/valrico-fl/.

ROCK THE COSMOS AT MOSI'S UPCOMING LASER LIGHT SHOWS

By Abigail Dumas



This fall, get ready to jam out at MOSI's new wave of laser light shows, 'Rock the Cosmos.' The shows are hosted on select Fridays in the museum's Holloway Digital Dome Theatre, home to Saunders Planetarium — the second-largest planetarium in the country. Shows run from 6:30-8 p.m., with multiple performances each night. The high-tech lasers are set to soundtracks from various genres, including pop, rock, country and holiday. The light shows are designed for all ages and focus on creating an immersive experience that makes you feel like part of the show

The Saunders Planetarium first opened at MOSI on October 3, 1992, and underwent renovations during late 2024. The planetarium held its grand reopening in April 2025, dazzling guests with the brand-new Holloway Digital Dome Theatre. The space that once held only 46 people at a time could now seat over 330. The dome's main attraction by far is the 10,000-square-foot screen, which displays everything from star shows and movies to academic presentations. The dome and planetarium have become a must-see for MOSI guests with its innovative 8K image technology and custom lighting, projection, and sound systems. The theater is meant to inspire curiosity and awe, staying true to MOSI's goal of encouraging interactive learning and exploration.

The current series of concerts began in May with a Taylor Swift show that garnered much success, selling out completely. MOSI immediately expanded the concert series, adding shows that highlight both rock and pop legends, such as Queen, AC/DC, Pink Floyd and U2. There's also a Halloween show scheduled in October to celebrate the spooky season with the whole family. Every show starts with a 10-minute guided star tour led by a MOSI astronomer. The shows are run in a rotating lineup and change monthly. The schedule can be found directly on the MOSI events calendar on their website.

Tickets cost $10 for MOSI members and $13 for nonmembers. Tickets for the shows are nonrefundable and nontransferable. Tickets for each show are limited, so be sure to check https://mosi.org/ for more details on ticket availability for specific shows.

The Museum of Science and Innovation is located at 4801 E. Fowler Ave. in Tampa. So, get ready to vibe out to your favorite tunes under the brilliant lights of the Holloway Digital Dome Theatre this fall.







RARE MANATEE BIRTH HEADLINES RECORD SUMMER OF NEW ARRIVALS AT ZOOTAMPA

Staff Report



ZooTampa at Lowry Park is celebrating a summer baby boom, welcoming a growing list of animal births that are helping support conservation efforts for several endangered species.



The newest arrival is Beatrix, a female manatee calf born at the David A. Straz Jr. Manatee Critical Care Center. Born to Pneuma Thurman, a 1,230-pound rescued manatee, Beatrix is the first manatee calf born at the zoo in more than 10 years.

Pneuma Thurman was rescued on June 5 from the Manatee River after suffering injuries from a watercraft strike. Although she remains in critical condition and continues to receive specialized veterinary care, zoo officials report that mother and calf are bonding well. Beatrix weighed approximately 76 pounds at birth and is being closely monitored by the zoo's animal care and veterinary teams.

Across the zoo's Africa habitat, another conservation milestone arrived on July 3 with the birth of Liberty, a female eastern bongo calf. Weighing 38 pounds and standing about 2 feet tall at birth, Liberty is healthy and thriving alongside her mother.

The birth is especially significant because eastern bongos are critically endangered, with fewer than 100 believed to remain in the wild due to habitat loss and poaching. Liberty is the seventh eastern bongo calf born at ZooTampa since 2021, reinforcing the zoo's commitment to preserving the rare species.

Liberty joins an impressive list of other hoofstock births this year, including two additional bongo calves, two southern white rhinos, two impalas and two nyalas.

The zoo's bird team has also celebrated several successful hatchings this summer, including four critically endangered Bali mynah chicks, a species with fewer than 100 birds remaining in the wild. Other recent arrivals include three African spoonbill chicks and six green-naped lorikeet chicks.

ZooTampa at Lowry Park is a 63-acre nonprofit zoo that is home to more than 1,300 animals and is nationally recognized for its conservation work and Florida wildlife rescue programs.

For more information, visit the website at www.zootampa.org.

FOR KING + COUNTRY BRINGS A DRUMMER BOY CHRISTMAS TO TAMPA

Staff Report



Four-time Grammy Award-winning duo FOR KING + COUNTRY is bringing its beloved *A Drummer Boy Christmas* tour to Benchmark International Arena on Sunday, November 29, delivering an unforgettable evening of music, storytelling and celebration. Following the release of the band's brand-new Christmas album and theatrical film, Drummer Boy, brothers Joel and Luke Smallbone will once again invite audiences to experience one of the season's most cherished holiday traditions.

For fans who have made the tour an annual tradition, and those experiencing it for the very first time, A Drummer Boy Christmas offers an immersive holiday experience unlike any other. Combining breathtaking production, intimate storytelling and powerful performances, the evening celebrates the hope, joy and true meaning of Christmas through music that has become synonymous with the season.

"The most wonderful time of our year is always the one spent with you," shared Joel and Luke. "To celebrate the miracle of all miracles, God coming to earth and offering redemption and to experience that together with audiences across America makes this our favorite tour of the year. We can't wait to celebrate Christmas with you again."

Audiences can expect soaring performances of beloved Christmas favorites, including "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" and "Little Drummer Boy," alongside original holiday music and fan favorites from throughout the duo's celebrated career. The evening will also feature exclusive moments inspired by the band's new theatrical film, Drummer Boy, creating an even more immersive and memorable Christmas celebration.

Known for its cinematic production, heartfelt storytelling and world-class musicianship, A Drummer Boy Christmas has become one of the season's premier live events, drawing families and fans together for an evening centered on the hope and wonder of Christmas.

FOR KING + COUNTRY is one of the music industry's most respected and decorated duos. Brothers Joel and Luke have earned four Grammy Awards, 13 No. 1 hits and more than 3 billion career streams. Known for their dynamic live shows and global reach, the platinum-selling act has performed to sold-out crowds across the U.S., Australia and Europe. Their latest album, *What Are We Waiting For?*, debuted in the top 10 on the Billboard 200, following the success of Burn the Ships. What Are We Waiting For? showcases their signature blend of cinematic pop, soaring anthems, and messages of hope.

They will also return to the big screen when the Drummer Boy movie, a new holiday film from Angel Studios inspired by the beloved Christmas classic, opens in theaters nationwide on Friday, November 6. Learn more at www.forkingandcountry.com.



ROTARY CLUB DONATES $160K TO LOCAL CHARITIES IN THE BRANDON COMMUNITY

By Libby Hopkins



The Rotary Club of Brandon was proud to present $160,000 in charitable grants to their local nonprofit partners on June 16 during its weekly meeting.

The Rotary Club of Brandon was proud to present $160,000 in charitable grants to its local nonprofit partners on June 16 during its weekly meeting, marking a meaningful investment in organizations that serve families, youth, veterans, seniors and individuals in need throughout the Brandon community. The grants reflected the club's ongoing commitment to service above self and its dedication to strengthening the programs and resources that make a lasting difference close to home.

"The Rotary Club of Brandon is a service-oriented club formed in 1961 and is the longest running Rotary club in our area," said Liz Brewer, club member and past president. "We are made up from more than 50 community leaders who meet every Tuesday to enjoy fellowship and lunch. With giving hearts and a hard work ethic, together we have a variety of socials, service projects and two signature events we host each year, which, in turn, has given us the opportunity to donate these much-needed funds to local charities."

These funds were raised through the club's annual signature events, the Wild Game Dinner and Bill Harper Golf Tournament.

"This is possible thanks to our event chairs, Patrick Skidmore and Brett Briggs; our event committees; our sponsors; our volunteers; and the guests who came out in support of our work," Brewer said.

The Rotary Club of Brandon is one of the largest charitable service clubs in the community. Charities have the opportunity to submit their grant applications in the fall, and all applications are reviewed by the Brandon Rotary Club Charity Fund Board and presented to its club members in the spring.

"Our club members then vote through a ballot system on how much each charity will receive, and these checks are distributed at our last annual meeting in June of each year," Brewer said.

The local charities that received donations from the Rotary Club of Brandon include the Angel Foundation FL, ECHO, High 5 Inc., Hope for Her, Rotary's Camp Florida and Scouting America, and it also provided $27,000 to be used for our Rotary Senior Scholarship Program in 2027.

"This year's amount has exceeded the goals since our club formed and was due to the incredible work done by our event chairs and their committees which are made up of club members," Brewer said. "We all felt an incredible sense of pride knowing that our hard work was going to bless these local charities. Our goal for next year is $175,000."

To learn more about the Rotary Club of Brandon, you can visit its website at https://brandonrotary.org/index.php.

KIDS 'R' KIDS FISHHAWK EARNS TWO TOP NATIONAL HONORS FOR EXCELLENCE

By Ella Baroni



Kids 'R' Kids Learning Academy of Circa FishHawk is celebrating a remarkable achievement after receiving two of the organization's highest honors during the Kids 'R' Kids annual conference.

The academy earned both the June Vinson Award and the Platinum Award, recognizing outstanding leadership, educational quality and operational excellence. Receiving both honors in the same year is a rare accomplishment and reflects the dedication of the academy's leadership and staff to serving local families.

The June Vinson Award recognizes owners who demonstrate exceptional leadership while leading with a servant's heart. The award honors June Vinson, the mother of Kids 'R' Kids founder Pat Vinson, who helped establish the company when she and her son opened an in-home day care in 1961.

According to the organization, "June had this wonderful, compassionate spirit, and she is truly the pioneering force behind everything we have built here. June's profound impact on our company's foundations is immeasurable, as she selflessly poured her heart into nurturing both the staff and children under her care."

The award recognizes leaders who embody Vinson's values of humility, empathy and dedication through their daily commitment to supporting both their team and the community.

The Platinum Award is the highest internal quality recognition a Kids 'R' Kids academy can receive. Presented by the corporate franchise team, it is awarded only to schools that exceed rigorous standards in safety, curriculum, facility management and overall operational excellence.

"Keith Balot and myself are truly honored to acknowledge receipt of the June Vinson Award and the Platinum Award for outstanding business practices," said co-owner Ben Fernandes. "We sincerely appreciate the honor and remain committed to maintaining high standards of quality, safety, professionalism and excellence in the childcare industry. This achievement reflects the hard work, dedication and commitment of managers Telena Overstreet and Samantha Pratt, along with our entire staff, whose daily efforts make a positive difference in the lives of the children and families we serve."

Kids 'R' Kids Learning Academy of Circa FishHawk serves children from 6 weeks to 12 years old. The academy has built a reputation for providing a safe, engaging learning environment where children develop academically, socially and emotionally while building a strong foundation for lifelong success.

Kids 'R' Kids Learning Academy of Circa FishHawk is located at 5815 Kids Crossing Dr. in Lithia. For more information, call 813-654-7000 or visit the academy website at www.kidsrkids.com/circa-fishhawk.









ORANGE BLOSSOM ORAL SURGERY WELCOMES NEW SURGEON

By Christen Malice



Orange Blossom Oral Surgery is continuing its growth with the addition of Dr. Esther Oh, DDS, M.D., who joins the practice as it builds its long-standing commitment to compassionate, patient-centered care. Following the practice's expansion to two locations in 2024, Dr. Oh will serve patients at the Brandon office, located at 1402 Oakfield Dr., while Dr. Arina Doroshenko, DDS, M.D., owner of Orange Blossom Oral Surgery, will continue seeing patients at the Gibsonton location at 13127 Kings Lake Dr., Ste. 102, which opened in 2022.

Bringing more than 20 years of experience in oral and maxillofacial surgery, Dr. Oh is known for her calm, compassionate approach and dedication to helping patients feel informed, comfortable and confident throughout every stage of treatment. She provides the full scope of oral surgery services, including wisdom teeth removal, dental implant placement, bone grafting, tooth extractions and oral pathology.

"We're excited to welcome Dr. Oh to our team," said Dr. Doroshenko. "Every member of our team is chosen not only for their expertise but because they share the values that define Orange Blossom Oral Surgery. We believe the best outcomes begin by listening to our patients, understanding what matters most to them and helping them feel confident every step of the way. Dr. Oh embodies those values, and we're thrilled to have her on our team."

"I am honored to join a practice that has earned such a strong reputation for both clinical excellence and compassionate patient care," said Dr. Oh. "Oral surgery can feel overwhelming for many people, and I believe taking the time to listen, answer questions and help patients feel at ease is just as important as the procedure itself.."

Dr. Oh joins Dr. Arina Doroshenko, creating an all-female oral and maxillofacial surgery team. In a specialty where women make up only an estimated 10-12 percent of practicing oral and maxillofacial surgeons in the United States, the practice is proud to be part of a growing generation of female surgeons helping shape the future of the profession through exceptional clinical care, leadership and compassion.

As the practice looks ahead, it also honors the legacy of Dr. Felix Jimenez, who founded Brandon Oral & Maxillofacial Surgery and spent decades providing compassionate care to generations of patients in the Brandon community. Today, under the leadership of Dr. Arina Doroshenko, Orange Blossom Oral Surgery continues to build on that legacy, providing the same trusted care, clinical excellence, and personalized experience patients have come to expect at both its Brandon and Gibsonton locations.

Visit www.obosbrandon.com (Brandon) and www.oboralsurgery.com (Gibsonton).

METROLAGOONS PARTNERS WITH FLORIDA AVENUE BREWING CO.

Staff Report



Two Florida-born businesses are raising a glass and making a splash with a new collaboration that blends hometown flavor with family fun. MetroLagoons and Florida Avenue Brewing Co. have partnered to introduce a signature craft beer, Lagoon Lager.

Lagoon Lager is a bright, easy-drinking lager brewed for lagoon days. Crisp and refreshing with a clean finish and a subtle hint of tangerine, it's the perfect companion for sunshine, good times and days by the water. The 16-ounce craft beer is available exclusively at MetroLagoons for $7.

"We're excited to introduce Lagoon Lager to all MetroLagoons locations," said Scott Tolmach, vice president of food and beverage at MetroLagoons. "We're proud to partner with a fellow Tampa business to create a beer that reflects the MetroLagoons experience. With its light, crisp and refreshing flavor, Lagoon Lager is the perfect complement to a day at the lagoon, whether you're relaxing on the beach, celebrating with friends and family or simply enjoying the Florida sunshine."

Florida Avenue Brewing Co. was established in 2010 and named after its location on one of Tampa's most notable roads. From the beginning, the brewery has been dedicated to creating a memorable craft beer experience while representing the Sunshine State through its beers, hospitality and atmosphere.

"We're proud to partner with MetroLagoons to create a beer that encompasses everything people love about spending time in the Florida sunshine," said Anthony Derby, founder and CEO of Florida Avenue Brewing Co. "Lagoon Lager is brewed to complement days by the water and relaxing with friends and family. As two Florida-based brands, it's especially rewarding to bring this collaboration to life for our local community."

MetroLagoons has four locations across the state, including Brightwater Lagoon at 8630 Sunny Page Lane in North Fort Myers, Epperson Lagoon at 31885 Overpass Rd. in Wesley Chapel, Mirada Lagoon at 31461 Mirada Blvd. in San Antonio and Southshore Bay Lagoon at 16881 Lagoon Shore Blvd. in Wimauma.

For more information, visit the website at www.metrolagoons.com.

About Brightwater Lagoon

Brightwater Lagoon is one of four MetroLagoons locations in Florida and the first in Southwest Florida. Located in North Fort Myers, the lagoon features 6 acres of clear blue water surrounded by sandy beaches. Brightwater residents and guests can enjoy a resort-style swim-up bar, food trucks, live entertainment, a water slide, a floating obstacle course and more. Guests can purchase a Day Ticket with Splash Pass to experience the lagoon and upgrade their day with shaded rental spaces and water activities to create unforgettable experiences in the sunshine. To learn more, visit www.metrolagoons.com/brightwater-lagoon-fort-myers.

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Job change?

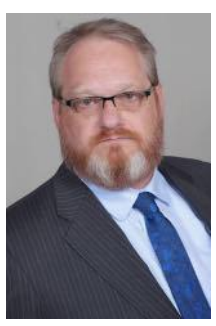
Whether retiring or changing jobs, you'll want to know your retirement account options.



There are four potential options for your 401(k) when leaving an employer:

- Leave it in your former employer's 401(k) plan, if allowed by the plan.
- Move it to your new employer's 401(k) plan, if you've changed employers and your new employer plan allows for it.
- Roll the account over to an individual retirement account (IRA).
- Cash it out, which is subject to potential tax consequences.

We can talk through your financial goals and find the option that works best for you.



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HUMANITY'S CLASSROOM: EMPOWERING PEOPLE ONE LESSON AT A TIME

By Libby Hopkins



Sherlyn Laurelli is the owner of Humanity's Classroom, which is her holistic coaching business.

Sherlyn Laurelli was born and raised in Plant City. She spent the majority of her professional life working as a teacher, then as a school counselor in Hillsborough County.

"I got into holistic coaching because I had some serious mental health struggles back in 2013," Laurelli said. "For a number of years, I was on a personal growth journey that taught me that human beings are very complex. We are a sum of all of our parts and healing requires nourishment of all of those parts. Being witness to the decline of the mental health since COVID, it motivated me to step out into doing coaching full-time, but I use the skills I learned in education on a daily basis."

Laurelli is the owner of Humanity's Classroom, which is her holistic coaching business.

"Humanity's classroom was created out of necessity," she said. "While we have had an online presence for over a year, I have recently stepped out in faith to build the business, outside of my imagination. Working with young people, I noticed that many of them, and their parents, struggled with the things that are part of our human nature. Topics like emotional regulation, relationships, coping skills, developing healthy habits and mindset were all a part of my daily work. Changes in how we live our daily lives have eliminated that space where older generations learned how to handle these topics in dealing with the struggles of their time. Being human is magical when armed with the right knowledge and skills."

Historically, wellness coaching has been associated with physical wellness. Laurelli's brand of wellness coaching serves body, mind and spirit along the symbiotic relationships between the three.

"A life well lived is one in which you are at peace with who you are and the life you have now so that you can feel safe in building the life you want for the future," Laurelli said. "My mission with Humanity's Classroom is to help people learn what it means to be human, to be the person they were created to be, to empower people one lesson at a time to know and grow. We opened for business at the beginning of July. As I continue to build the business, there will be many more offerings."

If you would like to learn more about Humanity's Classroom or attend one of Laurelli's workshops, you can visit her Facebook page at www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61577137838175 or email her at humanitysclassroom@outlook.com.

OFFICE OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT RECEIVES NATIONAL ACCREDITATION

Staff Report



The Hillsborough County Fire Rescue Office of Emergency Management recently received accreditation from the Emergency Management Accreditation Program Commission, recognizing the division for its preparedness, coordination and commitment to continuous improvement.

The Emergency Management Accreditation Program Commission honored Hillsborough County's Office of Emergency Management this month for achieving accreditation by documenting compliance with 73 industry-recognized standards and successfully completing a peer-review on-site assessment by a team of Emergency Management Accreditation Program-trained assessors.

The Hillsborough County Office of Emergency Management was evaluated on a number of procedures, planning and policies, including incident management, resource management, hazard mitigation, training, facilities, coordination and communications and warning.

The Emergency Management Accreditation Program Commission congratulatory letter to Hillsborough County states: "Accreditation recognizes a program's ability to bring together personnel, resources and communications from a variety of agencies and organizations in preparation for and in response to any type of disaster. We applaud Hillsborough County's leadership and congratulate you on your commitment to achieving accreditation. More importantly, we recognize the dedication to the safety and security of the residents that it represents."

The Office of Emergency Management is a division within Hillsborough County Fire Rescue.

Emergency Management Accreditation Program accreditation is a high honor awarded to emergency management programs and urban search and rescue task forces that demonstrate compliance with the Emergency Management Standard, certified by the American National Standards Institute. This achievement complies with the Emergency Management Accreditation Program's mission to build safer communities through credible standards of excellence.

Accreditation is achieved by a comprehensive evaluation process that includes self-assessment, documentation and peer review to confirm the program's alignment with the Emergency Management Standard, according to the Emergency Management Accreditation Program. The standard serves as a tool for those seeking to enhance their disaster preparedness and response systems. Accreditation is valid for five years. Programs must maintain compliance and undergo reassessments to retain their accredited status.

Emergency Management Accreditation Program is the sole accreditation process for emergency management programs and urban search and rescue task forces.

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REGISTRATION OPEN FOR 45TH TAMPA BAY ACTIVE LIFE GAMES

By Emily Harper



The registration process is underway for the Tampa Bay Active Life Games. Organized by Hillsborough County Parks & Recreation, this annual event is held to promote physical and mental fitness among adults ages 50 and older in the Tampa Bay area.

"Exercise is great for the body and mind and is particularly important as we age," said Todd Pratt, media relations strategist.

Over the span of two weeks, participants will compete in 17 activities through friendly competitions, including track and field and pickleball. In addition to the games' longstanding favorites, this year's event introduces two new activities, team bowling and 3-on-3 basketball.

"I am really excited to see how the new team events run. I love the idea of promoting teamwork and unity among all age groups for a common goal. I know these team events will also be a great way to give our participants a chance to make new friends," said Jackson Cabana, an assistant recreation program supervisor.

The competition's opening ceremony will take place on September 28 at Barksdale Senior Center. The games will conclude with the closing ceremony on Friday, October 9, at Northdale Recreation Center, celebrating the efforts and achievements of the competitors. Between these dates, the individual events will take place at several locations across the Tampa Bay area.

In addition to promoting a healthy lifestyle in the Tampa Bay area, this event also serves as a regional qualifier for the Florida Senior Games. This year, the Florida Senior Games will happen from Saturday, December 5, through Sunday, December 13, in Pasco County, uniting participants from across the state.

To participate in the games, each competitor is required to pay a $35 registration fee, which allows access to multiple events. Registration is open now and will remain open until Monday, September 7, for those interested in participating.

To register and learn more about the Tampa Bay Active Life Games, visit https://hcfl.gov/residents/seniors/recreation-and-meals/tampa-bay-active-life-games.

VOICE OF BLOOMINGDALE SPORTS RECOGNIZED WITH SERVICE AWARD

By Nick Nahas



David McCollum was awarded for his years of service to multiple sporting events, including soccer, football, flag football and basketball.

David McCullum has been volunteering for over 12 years at Bloomingdale High School as a public address announcer. He was dubbed the 'Voice of Bloomingdale Athletics' by Sara Bogue, former assistant principal of Athletics at the school and now Hillsborough County director of athletics for middle and high schools.

Bogue nominated McCollum for the Dorothy W. Brunson Special Service Award, which he was recognized for at the Florida Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association's (FIAAA) 48th annual Conference Awards Banquet and Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony. The event was held at the Embassy Suites by Hilton in Orlando on May 3.

"I nominated Dave for his dedication and selfless service to Bloomingdale High School," said Bogue. "For more than a decade, he has volunteered countless hours supporting our band and color guard, announcing football, soccer, basketball, flag football, track meets and countless other events. He is always the first to step in when help is needed, often solving problems behind the scenes to keep events running smoothly. Dave has become much more than a volunteer — he is the Voice of Bloomingdale and an irreplaceable part of the Bloomingdale community."

He was awarded for his years of service at multiple sporting events, including soccer, football, flag football and basketball.

"I enjoy announcing the senior nights for soccer, football, basketball and girls flag football, and the kids are excited for me to read off the scripts they write out acknowledging their achievements," said McCollum.

The PA announcer started volunteering in August 2014 with the girls soccer team and announced boys soccer at the same time, which he continues to this day.

He also announced for varsity football from August 2019 to present, girls flag football from March 2015 to present, junior varsity football from September 2015 to present and boys and girls basketball from November 2022 to present.

McCollum also announced a baseball game as a substitute for the main announcer in 2024 when asked by the head coach.

"I have no favorite sport to announce," said McCollum. "I do it for the student athletes, to make a memorable game day experience for all who play and attend athletic events at Bloomingdale Senior High School."

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Job change?

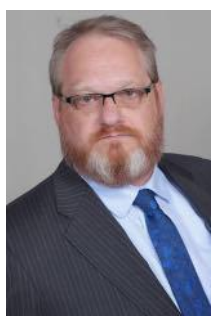
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ANGEL FOUNDATION CELEBRATES 20TH EVENING OF HOPE GALA

Staff Report



Angel Foundation FL is proud to announce its 20th annual Evening of Hope Gala, taking place on Friday, October 9, at The Regent, located at 6437 Watson Rd. in Riverview. This milestone event celebrates two decades of compassion, hope and community support while raising critical funds to assist local families facing life-threatening illnesses such as cancer and other catastrophic events that create unexpected financial hardship.

For the past 20 years, Angel Foundation FL has been a beacon of hope for families throughout Eastern Hillsborough County and the Greater Tampa Bay area. Through the generosity of donors, sponsors, volunteers and community partners, the foundation has provided financial assistance and compassionate support to families during some of life's most difficult moments, ensuring they can focus on healing instead of financial stress.

Guests will enjoy an elegant evening featuring a gourmet dinner, live entertainment, inspiring stories of hope, exciting live and silent auctions and special recognition of the individuals, businesses and community partners whose generosity has helped the foundation impact countless lives over the past two decades.

"This 20th anniversary is more than a celebration of our history — it's a celebration of every family we've had the privilege to serve and every supporter who has made our mission possible," said Liz Brewer, CEO of Angel Foundation FL and founder of the Foundation Angel Program. "Together, we continue to bring hope, healing and financial relief to families when they need it most. Every ticket purchased, every sponsorship secured and every donation made helps us continue lifting up families in crisis throughout our community."

Angel Foundation FL extends its sincere gratitude to its presenting sponsor, HCA Florida Brandon Hospital, for its continued support of the 20th annual Evening of Hope Gala.

Proceeds from the Evening of Hope Gala directly benefit Angel Foundation FL's programs, allowing the organization to continue providing emergency financial assistance and compassionate support to families facing life-threatening illnesses such as cancer and other catastrophic events that place an overwhelming financial burden on their households.

Tickets and sponsorship opportunities are now available. Community members, businesses, and organizations are invited to join this unforgettable evening of inspiration, celebration and generosity while helping ensure Angel Foundation FL can continue serving local families for generations to come.

For more information about Angel Foundation FL, visit https://angelfoundationfl.com/.

ADULT BASKETBALL LEAGUE AT CAMPO YMCA COMBINES FITNESS, COMPETITION AND COMMUNITY

By Olivia Clark

Whether someone is a former high school athlete, a weekend basketball enthusiast or simply looking for a new way to stay active, the Campo Family YMCA's Adult Basketball League offers an opportunity to get back on the court while building friendships and living a healthier lifestyle.



Players compete during a previous Campo Family YMCA Adult Basketball League game.

Registration is open for the league, which welcomes adults ages 18 and older. The summer season runs from now through Thursday, September 17, with games played on Wednesday or Thursday evenings. Players can register with a full team or sign up individually as free agents and be placed on a team.

According to Zach Murphy, regional sports director for the Tampa YMCA, the organization's commitment to serving the community continues to drive its adult sports programming.

"We continuously find inspiration through our mission to positively impact our community by providing quality programs which build a healthy spirit, mind and body," said Murphy.

The league is designed to provide an enjoyable experience for participants of every skill level. Whether someone played competitively years ago or has never participated in an organized basketball league, the YMCA strives to create an environment where everyone feels welcome.

"Adult sports at the Y are open to all players of different experience levels," said Murphy. "Whether you played competitively growing up, just like to have fun or want to try a new sport all together, there's a spot for you in our leagues."

Beyond the competition, Murphy said the league provides valuable opportunities for participants to improve their health while strengthening connections within the community.

"The main benefits of participating in an adult league are to stay fit, make new friends, develop existing relationships and lead a healthy lifestyle," said Murphy.

This season, the YMCA expects to field 20-24 teams across its adult sports offerings, including the 18-and-older basketball league, 35-and-older basketball league and adult volleyball league. At the conclusion of each season, the top teams compete in a playoff tournament, with champions receiving medals or trophies. Individual basketball players who lead the league in points, rebounds and three-pointers are also recognized with special awards.

For anyone considering joining but feeling uncertain, Murphy offers simple advice.

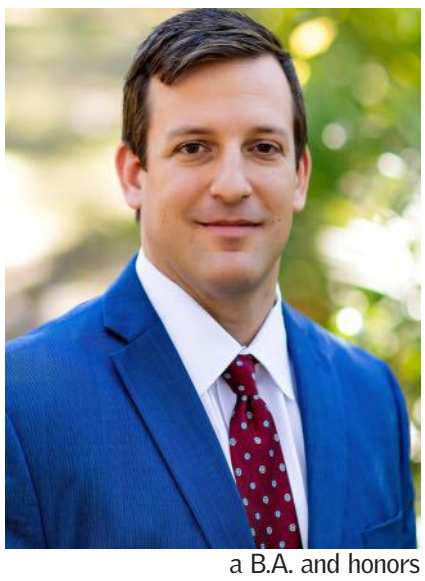
"There's only one way to find out if you'll enjoy something, and that's by diving right in," said Murphy. To learn more, visit www.tampaymca.org or call 813-684-1371.





MIKE BELTRAN
FLORIDA CONGRESS DISTRICT 14

Staff Report



Conservative Republican former State Representative Mike Beltran is running for Congress District 14 - a newly configured district that includes all of South and East Hillsborough, including Brandon, Riverview, Valrico, Lithia, Bloomingdale, Durant, Sun City Center, Apollo Beach, Ruskin, Wimauma, Balm, Gibsonton, Plant City, Dover, and Seffner as well as South and West Tampa.

For six years, Beltran served the people of Southern and Eastern Hillsborough County as their voice in Tallahassee. Beltran is a leader on issues related to the judiciary and constitution and is a fierce advocate for Hillsborough County. He was appointed by Governors Rick Scott and Ron DeSantis to the Judicial Nominating Commission for Florida's Thirteenth Circuit Court in Hillsborough County.

"I'm running for Congress to fight to defend the Constitution, preserve individual liberty, uphold the rule of law and preserve the American Dream for my sons' generation." Beltran is Pro-life, Pro-Trump, will be tough on violent crime and illegal immigration, and has promised to pursue a constitutional amendment to redress birth tourism and anchor babies. Beltran is endorsed by Gun Owners of America, over 20 current or former Florida State legislators, including Former Senate President Tom Lee, over a dozen local officials, including Commissioner Josh Wostal, over ten former judges or JNC members, over ten local Republican Club officials, four previous candidates for FL-14, four Trump lawyers, including a former Ambassador, and many veterans and high-ranking officers and law enforcement personnel, including two Generals and three Colonels.

Beltran is also an Eagle Scout and takes pride in this formative experience he had growing up. He attended the University of Pennsylvania and graduated in 2005 with a B.A. and honors in international relations, magna cum laude. He then went on to earn his law degree from Harvard Law School in 2008 before moving to Florida in 2010, where he served as a law clerk to a federal district judge. Beltran has been recognized as an Outstanding Young Florida Lawyer. He is still a practicing business attorney by trade, and he is happily married to his wife, Hope. The couple have two young sons, Michael and Ross.

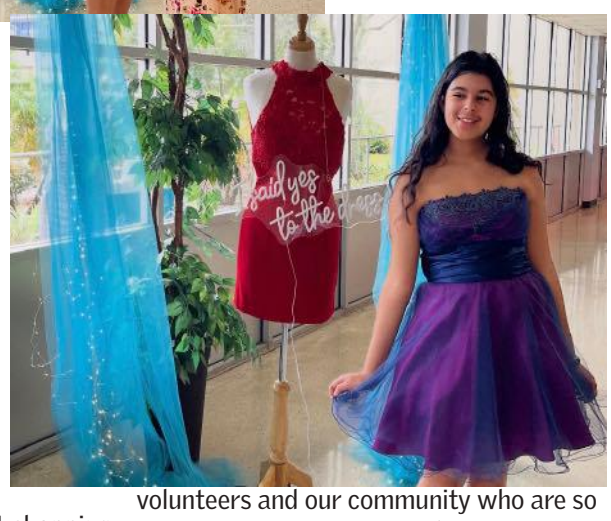
Beltran is pro-life, pro-Trump and has pledged to be tough on violent crime and illegal immigration while pursuing a constitutional amendment addressing birth tourism and "anchor babies." He has received more than 100 endorsements, including support from Gun Owners of America, Florida Family Action, the Republican Liberty Caucus, former Florida Senate President Tom Lee, Hillsborough County Commissioner Josh Wostal, numerous current and former state legislators, judges, veterans, law enforcement officials and local Republican leaders.

For more, visit Beltran's campaign website at www.beltranforcongress.com.

PROM DREAMS MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH GOWNS FOR GIRLS

By Ella Baroni





What started with helping one student has grown into a nonprofit that has served hundreds of students across the Tampa Bay area. Founded in 2019, Gowns for Girls provides free formal dresses to students who may not otherwise be able to afford homecoming, prom or other special events.

Founder Stephanie Brown was inspired to start the organization after meeting a middle school student who couldn't afford to attend her eighth grade dance. After taking the student shopping, Brown realized many other girls were likely facing the same situation and wanted to make sure cost wouldn't keep students from making memories.

Since then, Gowns for Girls has given away more than 200 dresses each homecoming season and over 400 gowns during prom season. The organization also provides dresses for ROTC military balls, works with local churches during the Tim Tebow Foundation's Night to Shine events and continues to support North Port High School with more than 100 gowns each year. After Hurricane Ian, volunteers also traveled to North Port to provide over 200 dresses to families affected by the storm. This year, the homecoming boutique dates are Saturday, September 19 and 26, as well as Saturday, October 3 and 17.

"We value all of our volunteers and our community who are so very generous to continue donating to our nonprofit," said Brown. "Without the wonderful support of everyone in the Tampa Bay area, we would not be able to help as many people as we have helped through the years."

Through the support of local donors and volunteers, Gowns for Girls continues to help students feel confident and included as they celebrate some of the biggest milestones of their high school years.

For more information visit the charity website at www.gownsforgirls.org or email at gownsforgirls.info@gmail.com.

INCREDIBLE ALL-STAR SEASON FOR BLOOMINGDALE 8U GIRLS FASTPITCH

By Emily Harper



Bloomingdale Youth Sports Association's (BYSA) 8U Girls All-Star Fastpitch Softball team was made up of 13 athletes. These players were selected from multiple recreational teams within the league to represent BYSA.

"The best part was watching a group of talented players from different teams come together so quickly. They put aside individual accomplishments, embraced their roles and became one team. Their energy, competitiveness, and support for one another made coaching them an incredible experience," said Manager Bryce Raub, reflecting on the 2026 All-Star season.

The All-Star season is short, so it was important to capitalize on each practice the team had together. As the team already had individual talent, coaches Bryce Raub, Jasmine Denton, Chris Cruz and Charles Hicks focused on building trust between teammates to reach their goals together. The team accomplished this by emphasizing communication, situational defense, quality at-bats, aggressive baserunning and playing confidently.

"We worked on building trust and making sure the girls believed in one another. They bought into the team-first mindset from day one, and that showed every time they stepped on the field," said Raub.

By coming together as a unified team, they finished runner-up at the Florida Babe Ruth Softball District 10 All-Star Tournament. This performance qualified them to compete in the state tournament held in Lake City.

At the state tournament, the players competed with determination and composure against some of Florida's strongest U8 All-Star teams, ultimately finishing third out of 15 teams.

"This group represented our league with tremendous pride, sportsmanship and heart. While we're proud of what they accomplished on the field, we're even more proud of the way they encouraged one another, competed with class and created lasting friendships along the way. We'd also like to thank our families and league for their support throughout the All-Star season. Their encouragement and commitment made this experience possible for these young athletes," said Raub.

COUNTY LIBRARIES OFFER FREE AUGUST PROGRAMS FOR ALL AGES

Staff Report



Join the Hillsborough County Public Library Cooperative (HCPLC) for engaging, entertaining and informative free programs for the entire family in August. The events listed below are only a sampling of the many scheduled. Find more listings under the "Events & Classes" tab at https://hcplc.org/. Registration is recommended.

For more information about these and the many other programs at your library, call 813-273-3652 or visit https://hcplc.org/.

Library Resources for Your Job Search for Teens

Thursday, August 20, 3:30-4:30 p.m., at Ruskin Branch Library, 26 Dickman Dr. SE in Ruskin.

Whether you are seeking your first job or developing professional skills, the library has resources that can help. Recommended for teens.

Canva for Work

Friday, August 14, 11 a.m.-12 Noon, at Riverview Public Library, 9951 Balm Riverview Rd. in Riverview.

Explore Canva, a free-to-use online graphic design tool to create social media posts, presentations, posters, videos, logos and more at your job. Recommended for adults.

Star Gazers – An Introduction to the Night Sky

Saturday, August 15, 11 a.m.-12 Noon, at Seffner-Mango Branch Library, 410 N. Kingsway Rd. in Seffner.

Join in for a night-time adventure and learn about the stars to create your own constellation. Be advised the room will be dark for a large portion of the program in order to see the constellations. Recommended for children

Public Speaking

Wednesday, August 19, 11 a.m.-12:30 p.m., at Brandon Regional Library, 619 Vonderburg Dr. in Brandon.

Practice public speaking skills in small group activities. Recommended for adults.

Library Resources for Your Job Search

Friday, August 21, 1-2 p.m., at Riverview Public Library, 9951 Balm Riverview Rd. in Riverview.

Join us to learn how to utilize HCPLC's career and job search features for career development. Recommended for adults.

Adults Going Back to Work

Monday, August 24, 3:30-4:30 p.m., at Ruskin Branch Library, 26 Dickman Dr. SE in Ruskin.

Learn how to write a resume and a cover letter before reentering the workforce. Practice highlighting how your experiences have helped you gain job skills to re-enter the workforce. Recommended for adults.

Go Bananas for Teen Musicals

Monday, August 31, 4-7 p.m., at Bloomingdale Regional Public Library, 1906 Bloomingdale Ave. in Valrico.

Shana Banana brings her guitar, percussion instruments and costumes to co-compose and perform a mini musical theater performance. Plus, at the end, everyone is invited to perform. Recommended for teens.

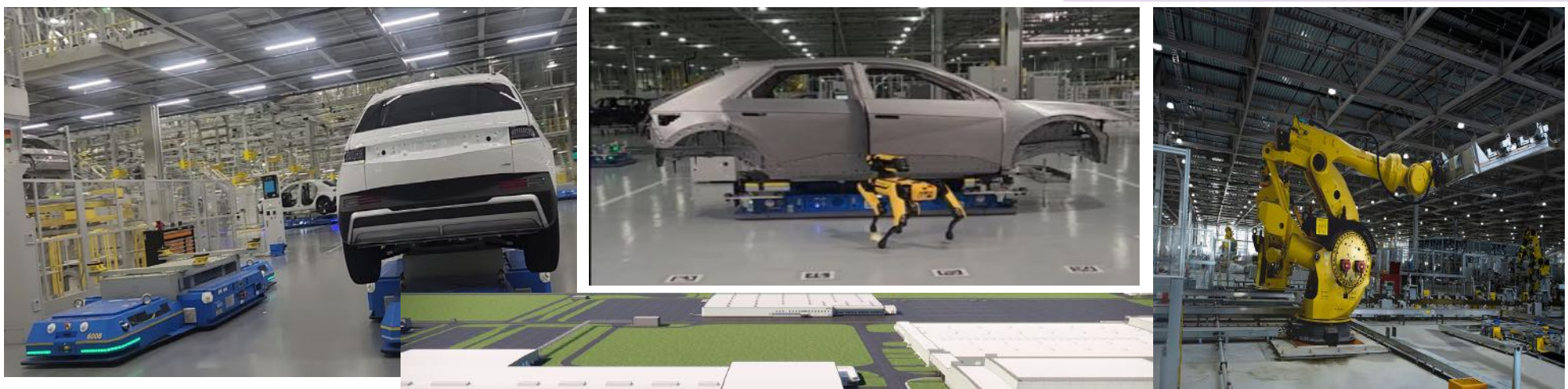






META PROS, ROBOTS WORK IN HARMONY AT HYUNDAI'S GEORGIA EV PLANT

By NITISH S. RELE – motoringflorida@gmail.com



Photos provided by Hyundai USA & Nitish Rele

Robots, Autonomous Guided Vehicles (AGVs) and Hyundai employees work together on the production line at the Hyundai Motor Group Metaplant America in Ellabell, Georgia. The state-of-the-art, $7.6 billion facility produces the all-electric IONIQ 5 and IONIQ 9, along with the Kia Sportage hybrid, and is expected to manufacture up to 500,000 vehicles annually while creating thousands of jobs. For more information, visit www.hyundaiusa.com.

As an automotive writer, we have seen our share of car manufacturing plants. But a recent visit to Hyundai Motor Group Metaplant America (HMGMA) in Georgia showed us that humans, alongside with robots and autonomous guided vehicles (AGVs), can work together in a factory setting. This scenario came to fruition at the 7.5 million-square-foot plant made up of 11 buildings and set on a 2,900-acre mega site in Ellabell, just 20 miles outside Savannah.

Since opening in October 2024, Hyundai has planned to build 500,000 vehicles each year at its first dedicated mass-production EV plant, a $7.6 billion investment (we are told it is the largest economic development project in the state's history). At present, HMGMA produces the five-seater IONIQ 5, the up-to-seven-seater IONIQ9 EVs and the Kia Sportage hybrid, with plans to produce up to 10 vehicles. The campus also includes HLBMA, a joint venture battery manufacturing plant with LG Energy Solution and five affiliates, Hyundai Mobis, Hyundai Glovis, Hyundai Transys, Hyundai Steel and Hyundai Material, plus 22 suppliers.

On-site, there are several XCIENT heavy-duty hydrogen fuel-cell electric trucks that transport vehicle parts. Here are some stats: there will be 8,500 jobs on-site by 2031; there are 1,623 employees at the Metaplant, called Meta Pros, earn an average of $58,000 salary; it has a 41-acre ecological park with trails/sport fields; and 2,000 solar panels covering the parking structures generate 5 percent of the plant's electricity needs. Also noteworthy is that 85 percent of Meta Pros are from Georgia and of those, 65 percent from the Greater Savannah area.

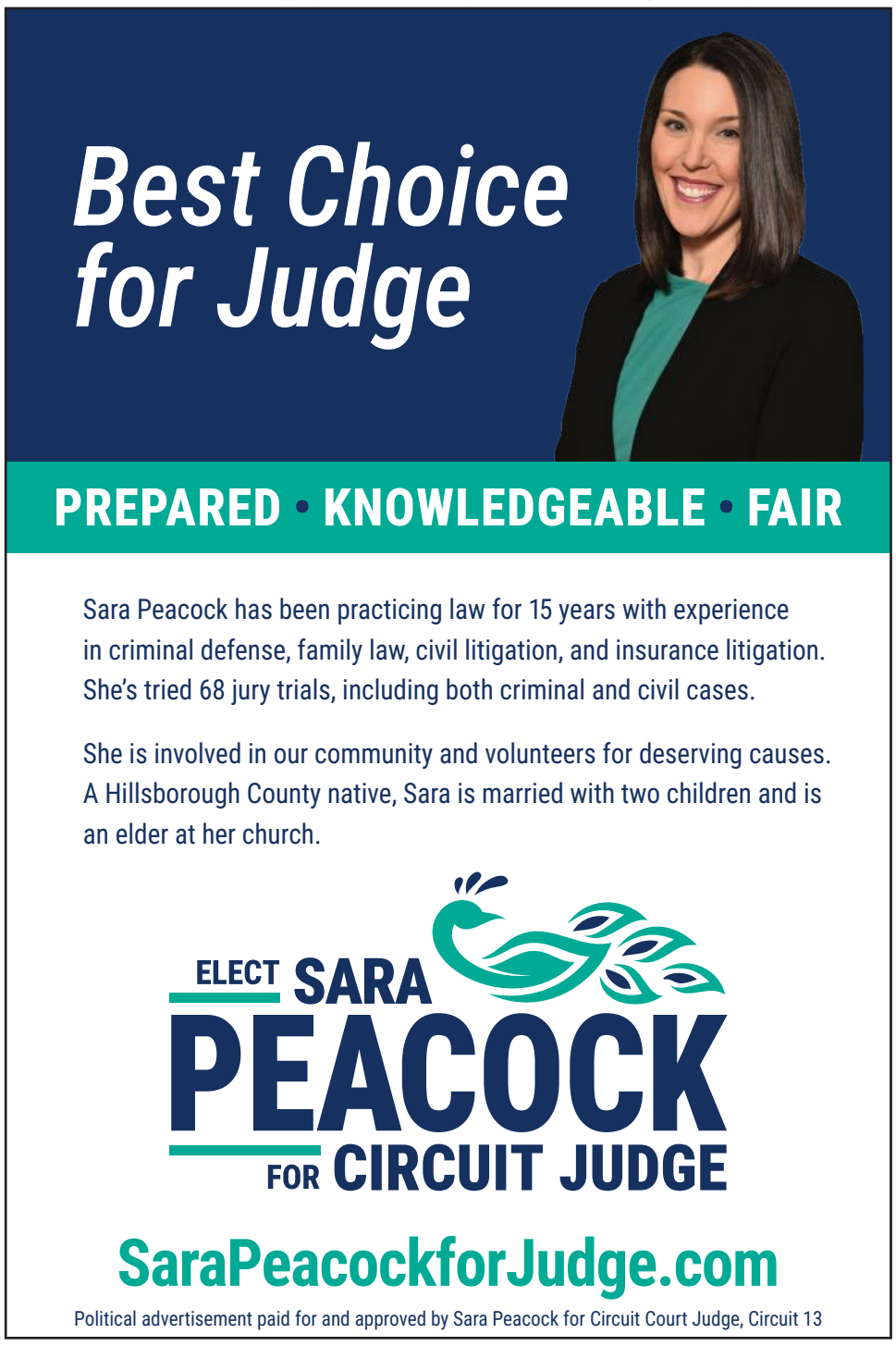
Apart from reducing the carbon footprint, Hyundai has been supporting health, safety and sustainability in Georgia for several years. Among the charities the carmaker supports are Hope on Wheels, Children's Hospital of Savannah and the Second Harvest of Coastal Georgia food bank.

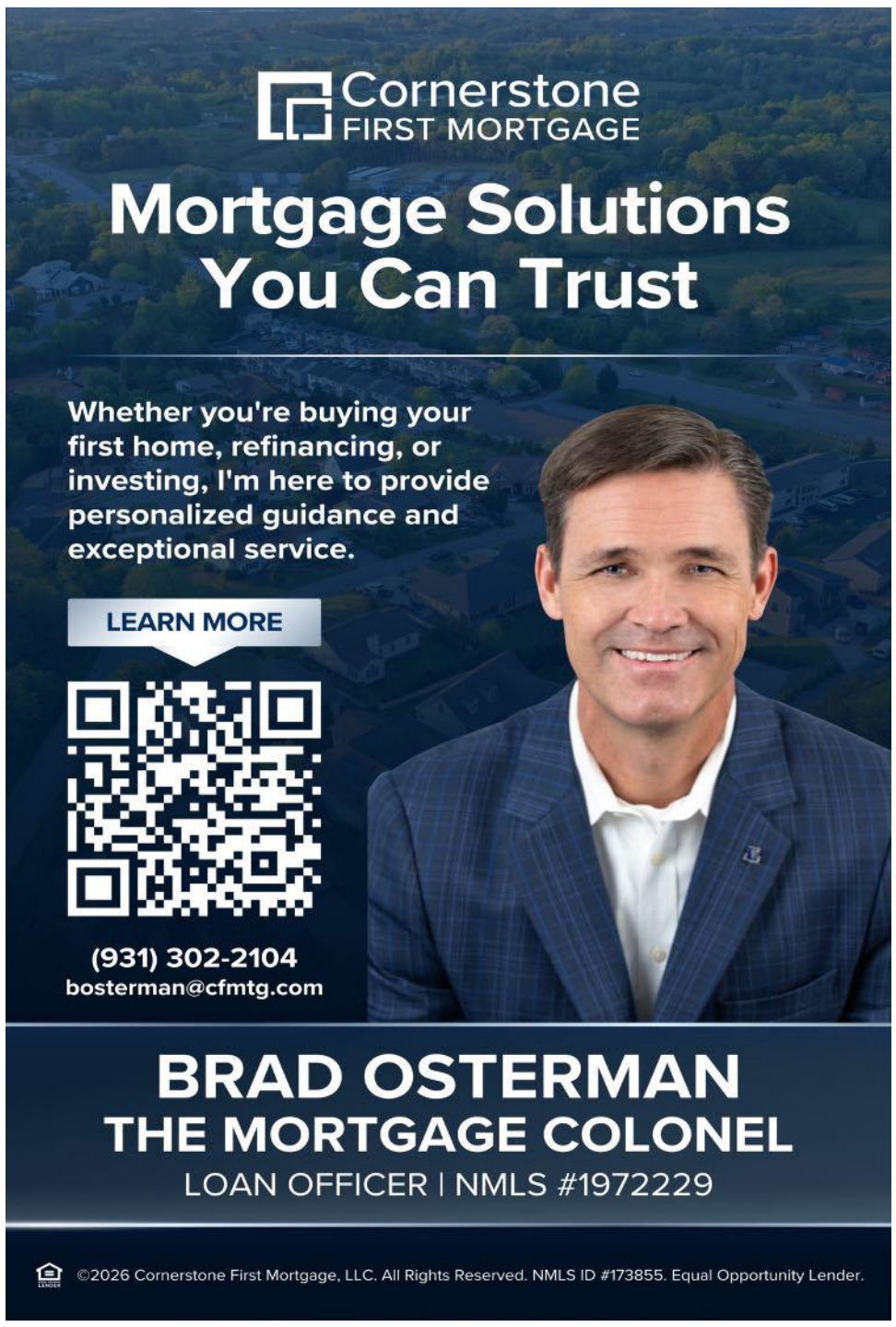
As Euisun Chung, executive chair of Hyundai Motor Group, said, "HMGMA not only represents the Hyundai Motor Group's advanced manufacturing capabilities and commitment to innovation but also our investment in relationships with our partners and communities right here in Georgia. With the rich history of craftsmanship and manufacturing in this community, together with the talented workforce at HMGMA we are building the future of mobility with America, in America."

Our immersive, hands-on experience of the plant began at the 89,000-square-foot Hyundai Mobility Training Center of Georgia, which has been developed and operated in partnership with the state. We worked on a simulated production line like a Meta Pro. Then, we went off to the plant where robots or rather robotic arms do the grunt work: weld, stamp and install components; and AGVs deliver parts directly to workstations while also lifting and transporting completed EVs to parking lots. And we cannot overlook those yellow spot dogs that conduct autonomous inspections of completed cars at the end of the production line for delivery to customers via rail. Also, Hyundai recently acquired Boston Dynamics whose AI-powered humanoid robots play a key role.

We also drove the IONIQ9 on a two-mile test track, which serves as a quality assurance exam that vehicles built at the plant must pass. Then it was off to Lowcountry in the IONIQ9 before ending up with the rugged IONIQ 5 XRT, perfect for negotiating off-road trails and paths.

For more information on Hyundai, visit www.hyundaiusa.com.





Black Cat 5K, CARE Bingo, Christmas Tree Presale & More...

Compiled by Jenny Bennett
jbennett@ospreyobserver.com

Annual Black Cat 5k Fun Run Benefitting A Kitten Place



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

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

This year's event has an exciting new focus: fundraising through teams and individual participants. Organizers hope to expand the event's impact by encouraging supporters to create fundraising teams, invite friends and family to donate, and compete for fun prizes along the way. Registration is now open, and early-bird pricing is available through Sunday, August 23. For registration, fundraising information, sponsorship opportunities or more information about A Kitten Place, visit https://akittenplace.org/events/.

CARE Bingo Fundraiser



Join Critter Adoption and Rescue Effort (CARE) at Sunset Bar & Grill at Little Harbor for a bingo fundraiser on Monday, August 10, starting at 7 p.m. Come early to save your table, buy your cards and order food and drinks. Reservations are recommended for parties of six or more, contact Sunset Bar & Grill directly at 813-607-2900 or through its website, www.sunsetgrillfl.com. Along with bingo, there will be raffle prizes and a 50/50 drawing. Sunset Bar & Grill is located at 602 Bahia Del Sol in Ruskin.

Christmas Tree & Wreath Pre-Sale

Nativity Youth Ministry and Mother Seton Council 6724 of the Knights of Columbus have launched their second annual Christmas Tree & Wreath Pre-Sale Fundraiser, with proceeds benefiting local charities and youth programs.

Advance orders are now being accepted for the better-quality Fraser fir Christmas trees and 28-inch decorated wreaths that were popular last year. Pickup begins on Black Friday, November 27, at Nativity Catholic Church's Novemberfest field, located at 705 E. Brandon Blvd. in Brandon.

This year's supply is limited to 205 trees and 100 wreaths. Orders can be placed at www.nativitychristmasstore.com; customers who order by August 31 will save $7 on a 6 to 7-foot tree, $8 on a 7 to 8-foot tree and $10 on an 8 to 9-foot tree.

South Bay Genealogical Society Meeting

The September South Bay Genealogical Society Meeting will be held at the South Hillsborough Elks Lodge No. 2672, located at 1630 S. U.S. 41 in Ruskin, on Tuesday, September 15. Beginning at 10:30 a.m., there will be an optional roundtable discussion, followed by a sit-down luncheon at 12 Noon. Following the luncheon at 1 p.m., the guest speaker will be Drew Smith, a favorite of everyone! Smith's presentation will be 'Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Genealogy.' The cost is $18 per person, which includes the meal and presentation. For reservations and meal choice, please call Vicki at 360-608-1647.

SouthBay Church Hosts Revival Night

Join South Bay Church, located at 13498 U.S. 301 S. in Riverview, for a powerful night of worship, prayer and a life-giving message as attendees seek God's presence together. It's going to be an amazing night for the community, and South Bay Church is excited to welcome guest speaker Chuck Ammons from Overflow Church. Dinner is available for purchase for $5 per person. Times are 5:30–6:30p.m. Food & Fellowship followed at 6:30–8:30p.m. by Worship & Message.

SUNCOAST FOUNDATION PROVIDES $7,500 TO PEPIN ACADEMIES

Staff Report



As students return to the classroom for the first day of school today, Pepin Academies is celebrating a $7,500 gift from the Suncoast Credit Union Foundation that will help ensure students with learning disabilities have access to the specialized therapeutic services they need to succeed throughout the new school year.

The grant will support Pepin Academies' therapeutic educational model, which integrates mental health counseling, speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, behavioral support and skilled nursing into the school day at no cost to families. These individualized services help students overcome barriers to learning while building the confidence, skills and independence they need for lifelong success.

For more than 25 years, this whole-child approach has delivered life-changing results. Across its Tampa, Riverview and New Port Richey campuses, Pepin Academies has achieved a 93 percent graduation rate, in addition to a 0.8 percent dropout rate — well below state, county and national averages for students with disabilities. To meet growing student needs, the school has expanded its therapeutic services team from 29 to 35 specialists in the past year.

"Behind every diploma is a student who refused to give up, and a team of people committed to helping them succeed," said Jeff Skowronek, executive director of Pepin Academies. "We're incredibly grateful to the Suncoast Credit Union Foundation for believing in our students and helping us continue this important work. Together, we're giving students the support they need to graduate, pursue meaningful careers and build independent lives."

Suncoast Credit Union, Florida's largest credit union, founded the Suncoast Credit Union Foundation to promote the education, health and emotional well-being of children in the communities it serves. Each time a Suncoast member uses a Suncoast debit or credit card, the credit union contributes 4 cents to the foundation, helping fund local nonprofit initiatives. Since its founding in 1990, the foundation has donated more than $63 million to organizations that improve the lives of children and families across Florida.

"At Suncoast Credit Union, we have helped the students in our communities for decades," said Jeff Kunberger, executive director of Suncoast Credit Union Foundations. "We take great pride in knowing our donation will assist students in overcoming barriers to learning and unlock opportunities for success." Pepin Academies has campuses in Tampa, Riverview and New Port Richey. For more information, visit https://pepinacademies.com/.



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PROTECTING OUR SCHOOLS BEGINS WITH ONE CONVERSATION

By State Attorney Suzy Lopez



As another school year begins, there is one conversation every parent should have with their child before the first bell rings: School threats are not a joke. One impulsive social media post can carry serious legal consequences.

It takes only a few seconds to post a message, send a photo or share a comment online. What some students think is funny or harmless can trigger a massive law enforcement response, disrupting an entire school. This behavior can terrify students, teachers and the entire community. In a world where we've all seen the devastating reality of school shootings, every threat must be treated as real until investigators determine otherwise.

Today's students communicate through countless apps and social media platforms, many of which parents may have never heard of. Some kids believe those conversations disappear or will never be seen by adults. We know that's not true. Threats are often reported by classmates, parents or the platforms themselves. Once they are, law enforcement acts quickly.

At the state attorney's office, we review these cases carefully, and the consequences can be serious. Florida law makes it a second-degree felony to make a written or electronic threat to kill, cause bodily harm, commit a mass shooting or carry out an act of terrorism. Even when a student claims they were 'just kidding,' they can still be arrested, spend the night in custody and face consequences that can affect their future.

These laws exist to protect our children. Every student deserves to feel safe walking into a classroom, and every parent deserves the peace of mind that comes with knowing threats will be taken seriously.

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

Before your child heads back to school, remind them that what they post online has real-world consequences. One impulsive message can change lives in an instant.

And if your child sees a threatening post or message, don't assume someone else has reported it.

Contact law enforcement immediately or submit a report through the FortifyFL app or at https://getfortifyfl.com/. Speaking up could prevent a tragedy.

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

AWARD-WINNING STRANDHILL PUBLIC INTRODUCES NEW BRUNCH MENU

By Emily Harper



Strandhill Public owner Rory Martin .



Strandhill Public is a locally owned restaurant that pays tribute to traditional Irish cuisine and the charm of an Irish pub. At this restaurant, you can expect great food, excellent cocktails and warm hospitality while being surrounded by Irish culture.

Owner Rory Martin is originally from a small coastal village in northwest Ireland called Strandhill. During his childhood, he spent his time surfing and learning the ropes of running a pub from his parents. In Strandhill, Martin lived above the family pub, owned by his parents.

He said, "The pub was truly an extension of our home."

When first moving to the United States, Martin worked at some of the busiest bars in New York City, New York. Over time, he decided to relocate and open a modern-day Irish pub in Tampa. Today, Martin's restaurant, Strandhill Public, honors his Irish roots and his hometown Strandhill.

"I am very proud of what Strandhill Public has become. I won the best burger, which is the Irish whiskey burger. I use Creekstone Farm, grass-fed beef, Dubliner cheddar, caramelized onions, bacon and an Irish whiskey BBQ sauce. I use two different styles of Irish whiskey to make the sauce: Paddy's Triple Distilled and Connemara Peated Irish Whiskey," said Martin, speaking about winning Tampa Bay's No. 1 Burger award.

In June, Strandhill Public introduced its new brunch menu, offered on Saturdays and Sundays. This brunch menu features dishes such as the Traditional Irish Breakfast, Smash That Breakfast Burger and Pistachio Chocolate Torte, along with a variety of spritz cocktails.

In addition to the restaurant's outstanding food, Strandhill Public has the largest selection of Irish whiskey in the state of Florida. Also, on Wednesdays guests can enjoy half-price bottles of wine.

Strandhill Public has two locations, one in Brandon, located at 10288 Causeway Blvd. in Tampa, and the other in Tampa Heights, located at 309 W. Palm Ave. in Tampa. To learn more about the restaurant and view its extensive menu, visit its website, https://strandhillpublic.com/.

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BYSA 12U XTREME MAKES HISTORY WITH SEASON & DISTRICT TITLE

By Emily Harper



The Bloomingdale Youth Sports Association's (BYSA) 12U Xtreme team began their spring season in January. Xtreme is an advanced softball program that allows teams from different facilities in the district to compete against each other.

On May 3, this team, coached by manager Edgardo Pagán and assistant coaches Jamie Radcliffe and Lauren Leto, won the Xtreme Championship, finishing an undefeated season with a record of 14-0.

"This wasn't just a good season. It was a special season, and every player, parent and coach should be proud of what we accomplished together," said Pagán.

Shortly after the Xtreme season ended, the All-Star team was formed and preparing for the District 10 Championships. This team was composed of both players from the Xtreme team and the recreational team to represent the association.

The athletes spent about four days a week practicing at the field. In addition, outside of practice, teammates held each other accountable by sharing their extra work in the team group chat.

The team's hard work and determination paid off, as they won the Florida Babe Ruth Softball District 10 Championship in Madeira Beach. By securing this win, they became the first 12U softball team at BYSA to move on to the state tournament since 2014. At the state tournament, the team won their first two games but lost their final game in single-elimination play.

Throughout the 26 spring season games, the Xtreme team that later evolved into the All-Star team had 165 hits, scored 236 runs and only allowed 94 runs.

"Those numbers don't happen by accident. They are the result of hard work, commitment, countless hours of practice and every player buying into what we were trying to accomplish as a team. Every hit, every run, every out and every win was earned. But what makes me the proudest isn't just the statistics; it's the heart this team showed all season. We competed, supported one another, overcame challenges and never stopped fighting," said Pagán.

ENSURING A STRONG START TO THE 2026–27 SCHOOL YEAR

By Superintendent Van Ayres



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

Attendance Matters from Day One.

As we prepare to welcome students back to school on Monday, August 10, 2026, we encourage every family to remember one important message: attendance matters from the very first day.

The start of a new school year brings excitement, opportunity, and a fresh beginning. It is also a critical time when students establish routines, build relationships with teachers and classmates, and begin the learning that will carry them throughout the year.

The first days of school are about much more than introductions. Teachers set expectations, create positive classroom cultures, review important procedures, and begin meaningful instruction. Students who are present from day one are better positioned to feel connected, confident, and ready to succeed.

Regular attendance is one of the strongest predictors of academic success. Research consistently shows that students who attend school regularly are more likely to achieve at higher levels, graduate on time, and be better prepared for college, careers, and life beyond the classroom.

Families play a vital role in helping students establish strong attendance habits. Simple steps such as setting consistent bedtimes, preparing school materials the night before, and planning for on-time arrival can help students begin each day ready to learn. Building these habits early not only supports academic success today but also helps students develop the responsibility, consistency, and routines that contribute to long-term success in school and beyond.

This year, we challenge every student and family to make attendance a priority. Whether your child is starting pre-kindergarten, transitioning to middle or high school, or returning for another year, showing up every day sends a powerful message about the importance of education and the value of every learning opportunity.

Together, we can make the 2026–27 school year a successful one. When students are present, engaged, and ready to learn, they are better equipped to reach their full potential.

We look forward to welcoming students back on Monday, August 10, ready to learn, connect, and thrive.



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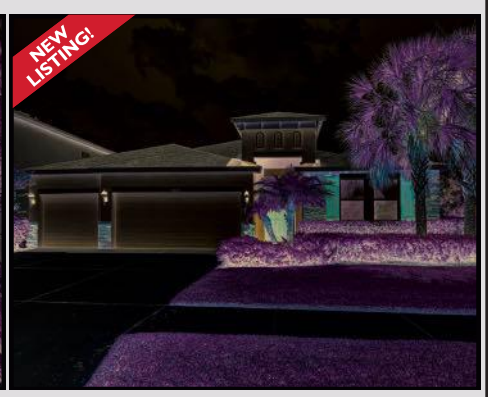
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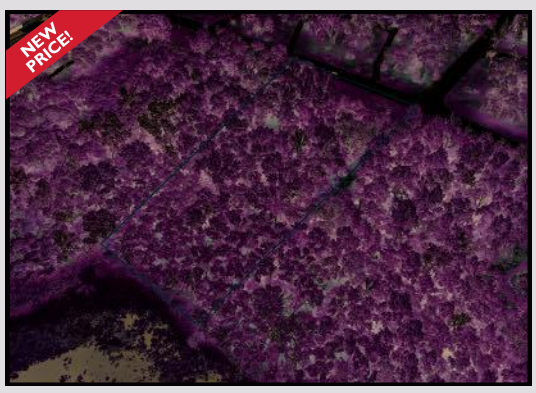
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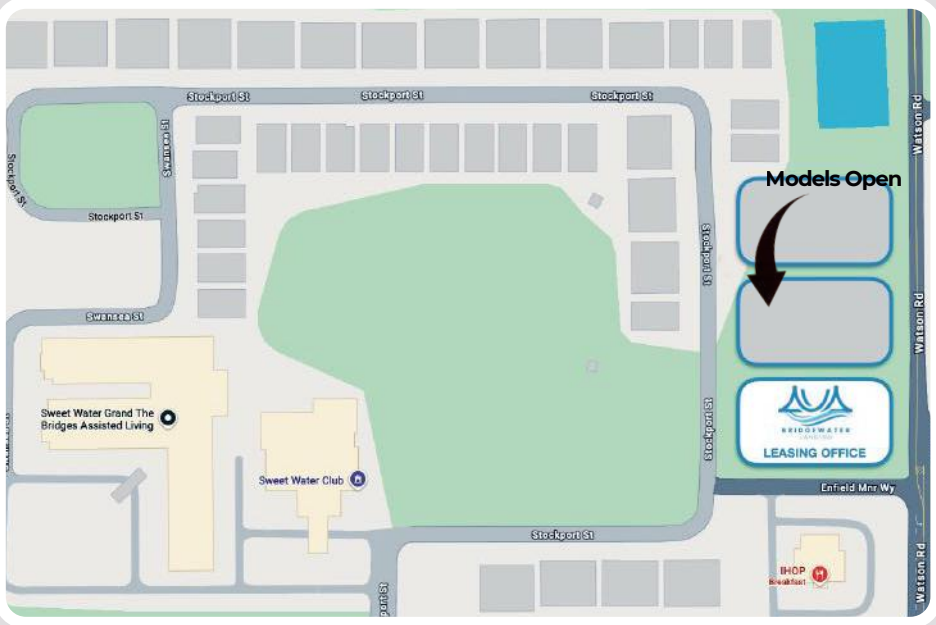
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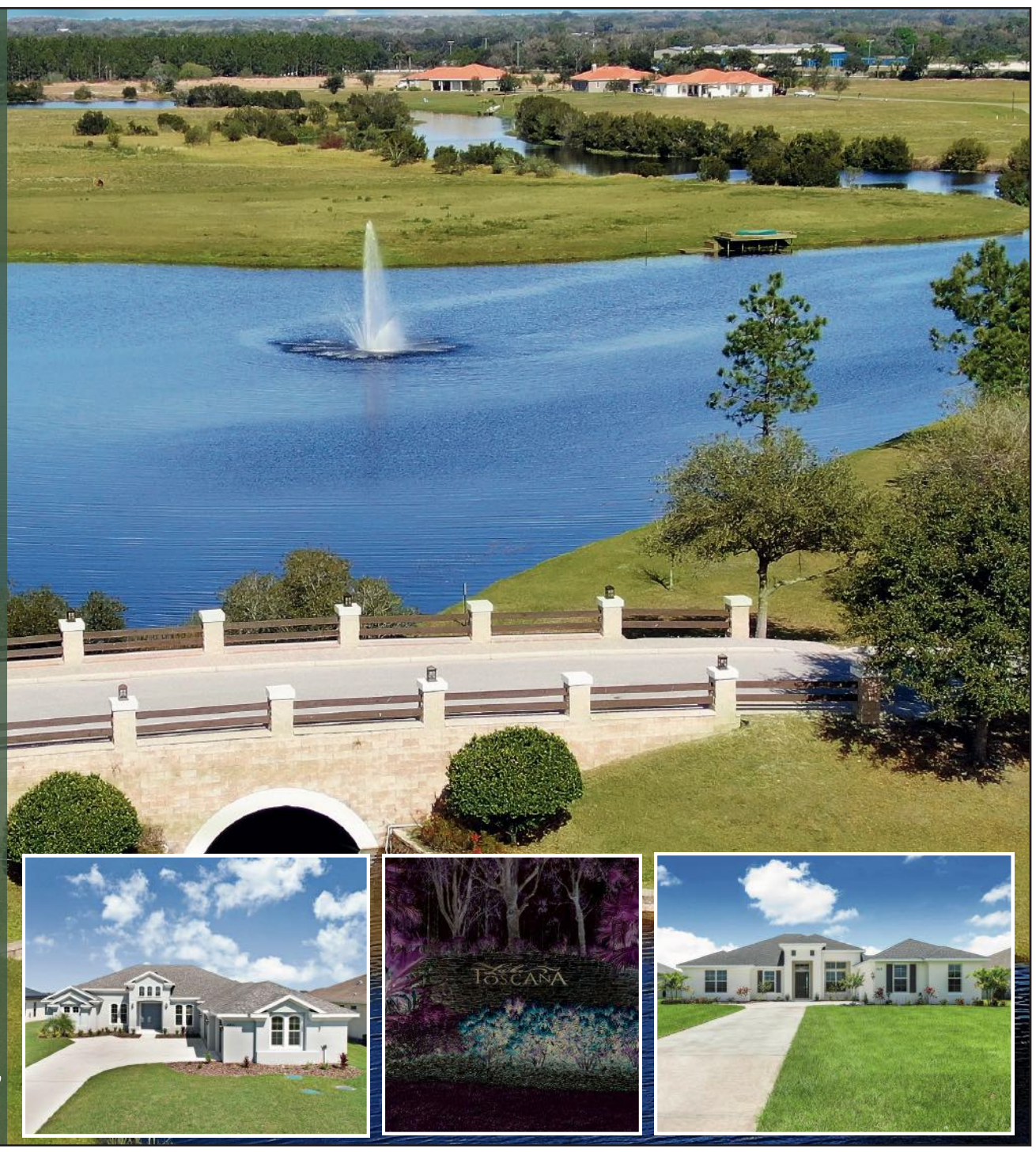
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August 2026 Vol. 24, Iss. 8

EYE ON BUSINESS



Edited by: Jenny Bennett

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Fax 657-4469 | Email: jbennett@ospreyobserver.com
Deadline: 15th of each month.

Vote Brittany Lyssy For Hillsborough County School Board On August 18



Brittany Lyssy is asking Hillsborough County voters for their support on Tuesday, August 18, as she campaigns for the Hillsborough County School Board. A mother of three, attorney and public policy professional, Lyssy is committed to strengthening reading and math, supporting and retaining excellent teachers, respecting parents' educational choices and ensuring responsible stewardship of taxpayer dollars. She believes every child deserves a quality education and the opportunity to graduate prepared for college, career and technical education, military service or the workforce. Learn more and support Brittany Lyssy by casting your vote on August 18.

Chill Cawfee & Quig's Kava Lounge Moves From Valrico To FishHawk

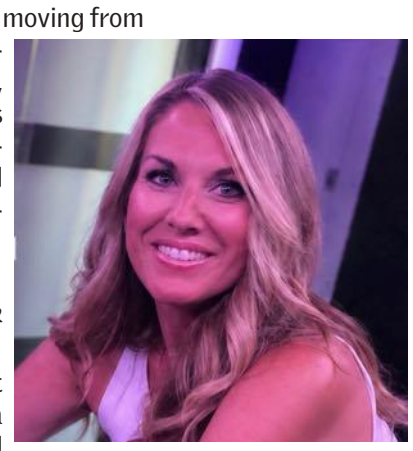
Chill Cawfee & Quig's Kava Lounge is a family-owned community gathering place designed to bring people together throughout the day. In the morning, guests can enjoy handcrafted coffee, espresso drinks and a welcoming cafe atmosphere. As the day transitions into evening, Quig's Kava Lounge provides a relaxing, alcohol-free social environment featuring premium kava beverages, community events and entertainment. Its goal is to create a place where friends, families, professionals, entrepreneurs and neighbors can connect, work, relax and build relationships. Whether you're looking for your morning coffee or a comfortable place to meet friends, enjoy live entertainment, participate in community events or simply unwind after a long day, Chill Cawfee & Quig's Kava Lounge offers a unique experience that combines hospitality, wellness and community under one roof.

Chill Cawfee is now located at 16741 FishHawk Blvd. in Lithia after moving from its Valrico location. For additional information, visit its websites at https://chillcawfee.com/ and https://quigskavalounge.com/.

Karma Yoga & Fitness

Amanda Vogt proudly acquired Karma Yoga & Fitness in July 2025 and has continued to grow the studio's vision of health, wellness and community. This April, she expanded with the opening of a second location, Karma Fitness, located just one block away at 13224 Boyette Rd. in Riverview. The expansion has allowed Karma to offer even more ways to move, including additional yoga classes, Pilates, barre, weight training, cycle classes, boxing, step and more. A newly expanded boutique shop also provides apparel, accessories and wellness essentials for members and guests. With two locations under one brand, clients can enjoy a complete wellness experience while staying connected to the supportive community that makes Karma so special.

To find out more about what is offered, visit its website at www.karmayogafitness.com.



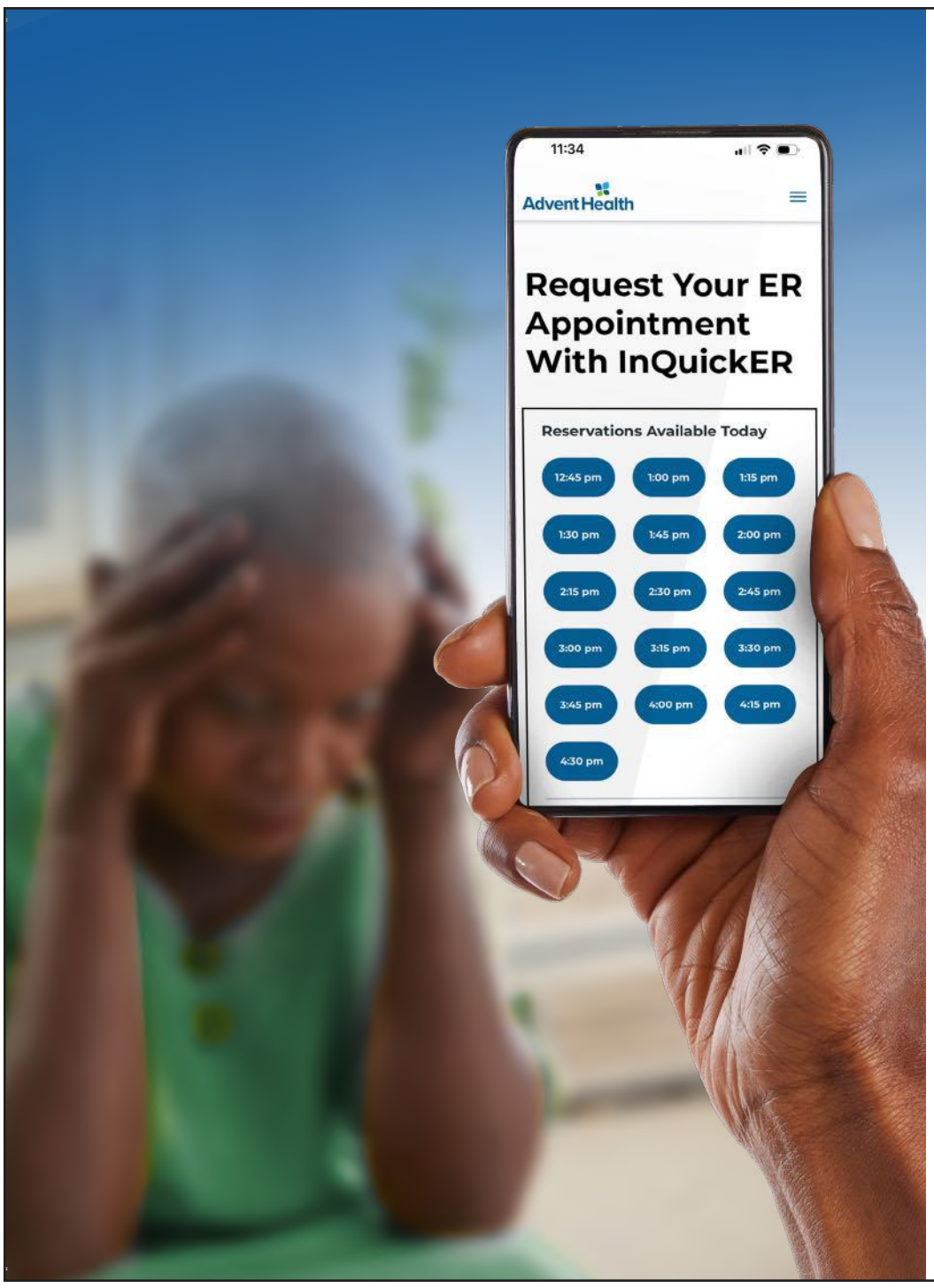
Align Right Realty Rebrands To Elevated Realty – Raising The Standard

Effective immediately, Align Right Realty brokerage proudly announces its rebrand to Elevated Realty – Raising the Standard. While its name is changing, the foundation of the company remains the same. Elevated Realty continues under the ownership and leadership of broker/owner Lisa Tackus, with the same trusted leadership and committed agents, unwavering commitment to excellence and dedication to serving customers and the Tampa Bay community. The rebrand reflects the company's continued growth and long-term vision while honoring the relationships built over the past seven years as a brokerage and more than 21 years of real estate experience. For more information, visit www.elevatedrealtyfl.com or contact Elevated Realty at 813-563-5995.

Meetup Group Cruise

Whether you're single, traveling solo, a couple, or coming with friends, this is a fantastic opportunity to enjoy an incredible Caribbean vacation while meeting great people along the way. Travel advisor Matthew Gordon of Cruise Planners - Venture Out Vacation has secured special group pricing and blocked staterooms just for Meetup members. This is a seven-night roundtrip Western Caribbean cruise from Saturday, October 17, through Saturday, October 24, starting from Tampa. Ports of call include Key West; Roatán, Honduras; Belize City, Belize; and Cozumel, Mexico. Plus, there are two relaxing days at sea to enjoy everything the spectacular Margaritaville at Sea Islander has to offer.

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GET THE DIRT:
GRASSES AS GIFT IDEAS FOR GARDENERS

BY LYNN BARBER, URBAN HORTICULTURE AGENT



As you well know, gardeners love receiving and gifting plants. There are several grasses you may want to consider. These include cordgrass, muhly grass, lovegrass, sea oats and wiregrass.

There are five native species of cordgrass (Spartina spp.) in Florida. Sand cordgrass is typical for landscapes. This plant should be installed in a large space where it can create a screen or hedge. It can be used at the back of a landscape bed with shorter plants in front. The flowering stalks are very attractive. Cordgrass can be difficult to maintain if used in a small area. Seed heads blow in the breeze and reseed.

Muhly grasses (Muhlenbergia spp.) are mostly used to accent home and commercial landscapes in addition to roadway median strips. Hairawn muhly grass (Muhlenbergia capillaris) is adaptable to nearly any landscape, is salt tolerant and flowers more when planted in a good amount of sunshine. This should be planted at the back of the landscape bed.

Lovegrass (Eragrostis spp.) consists of 11 species and is considered native to Florida. This genus includes annuals and perennials. Both produce significant numbers of seeds from spring through fall. This plant generally exists in open sunny areas. Prune after flowering is over, and save or gift the seeds to others.

Sea oats (Uniola paniculata). This is a salt-tolerant grass throughout our state. The plant stabilizes beach dunes using roots and runners and is federally protected. It cannot be disturbed or seeds collected without a permit. Sea oats can reach a height of 6 feet.

Wiregrasses (Aristida spp.) There are 18 different species of wiregrasses in Florida. Some are distinctive, but many are not. They are everywhere in Florida because it is adaptable to growing conditions and is generally available at native nurseries.

Contact labarber@ufl.edu

CRAIG BECKINGER RAISES $180K TO BECOME VISIONARY OF THE YEAR

By Kelly Wise Valdes



Craig Beckinger, founder and CEO of An ABC Event Inc., has been named the 2026 Blood Cancer United All Star Visionary of the Year after leading a 10-week campaign that raised more than $180,000 for blood cancer research and patient support. For Beckinger, a blood cancer survivor, the achievement carries deep personal meaning.

"Raising more than $180,000 means far more to me than reaching a fundraising goal," he said. "As a blood cancer survivor, every dollar represents hope for someone hearing the words, 'You have cancer.'"

Beckinger dedicated the campaign to the memory of Jill Jofko, his manager during his 2023 Visionary campaign. "Because of our community's generosity, we have the opportunity to link a Blood Cancer United-funded research portfolio in her memory," he said. "Knowing her legacy will continue helping future patients is one of the greatest gifts this campaign could have given."

His path to becoming a Visionary began years earlier. Beckinger said it started at a South Tampa Chamber of Commerce luncheon where he first heard about the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's work and knew immediately that he wanted to be involved.

In 2023, with an incredible team, Beckinger raised more than $157,000. Being invited back as an All Star in 2026 gave him another opportunity to serve, and together with the community he raised more than $180,000. In total, Beckinger raised an amazing $337,000 across two campaigns.

"If there's one thing I'm most proud of, it's not the amount we raised — it's the hope we created together," said Beckinger.

Beckinger's 2026 campaign featured a series of community events, from fashion shows and bingo fundraisers to raffles and popups. "Every event reached a different audience and brought new people into the mission," he said. The Grand Finale drew more than 300 attendees. "Looking around the room, I was overwhelmed with gratitude. Together, we didn't just raise money — we raised hope."

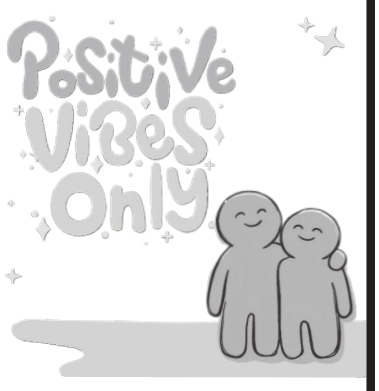
The campaign's intensity was one of its biggest challenges. "There simply weren't enough hours in the day," he said. Still, he learned that "people genuinely want to help when they're given the opportunity."

Beckinger credits innovation and partnerships for the campaign's success. "We focused on creating experiences that inspired participation," he said. "Innovation isn't just about finding new ways to raise money — it's about finding new ways to inspire people to care."

He said he measures success by impact, not titles. "You don't have to change the whole world — you just have to change someone's world," said Beckinger. "That's how I want to live my life — making a difference, one person at a time."

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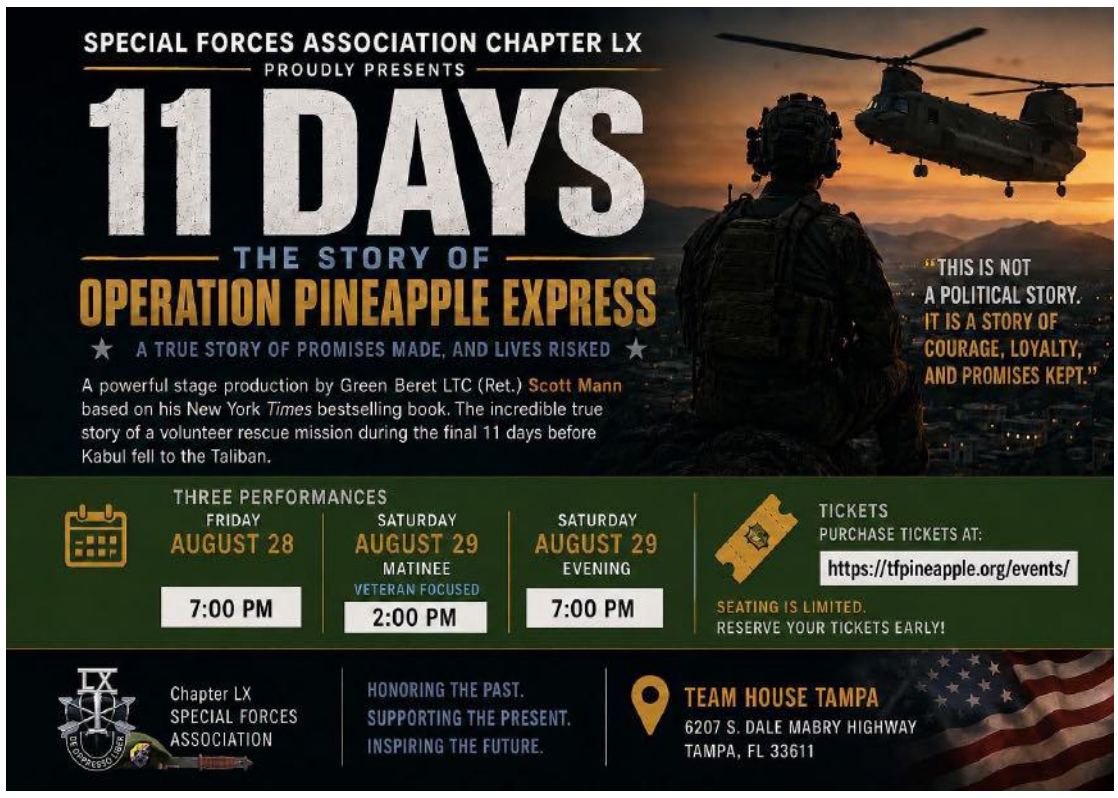
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'11 DAYS' BRINGS OPERATION PINEAPPLE EXPRESS TO TAMPA STAGE

By David L. Miller

Promises matter. For the men and women of the United States Special Forces, a promise made to a trusted ally is more than words. It is a sacred commitment. Few events in recent American military history tested that commitment more severely than the chaotic final days of the Afghanistan withdrawal in August 2021.

On Friday and Saturday, August 28 and 29, the Special Forces Association Chapter LX will bring that story to life by hosting three performances of the acclaimed stage production 11 Days: The Story of Operation Pineapple Express at the Team House Tampa, located at 6207 S. Dale Mabry Hwy. One performance will be held Friday evening, followed by two performances on Saturday, including a special matinee designed especially for veterans and military audiences.



The Story Behind The Play

Written and performed by retired Green Beret Lt. Col. Scott Mann, 11 Days is based on his New York Times bestselling book, Operation Pineapple Express. The production tells the true story of the extraordinary volunteer rescue effort undertaken by Special Operations veterans, intelligence professionals, civilians and Afghan partners during the final 11 days before Kabul fell to the Taliban.

Working from living rooms, kitchens and makeshift command centers across America, these volunteers coordinated around the clock to rescue Afghan commandos, interpreters and families who had faithfully served alongside American forces and now faced almost certain death.

The play is not political. It is deeply personal. It explores courage under impossible circumstances, the burden of leadership, the bonds forged in combat and the lifelong responsibility many veterans feel toward those with whom they served. Rather than debating policy, it tells the human story of promises kept despite overwhelming odds.

Following each performance, audiences will have an opportunity to participate in a discussion with members of the production team and veterans, providing additional insight into both the events themselves and their lasting impact.

Why Chapter LX Is Hosting This Event

The Special Forces Association exists to preserve the heritage, values and brotherhood of the Green Beret community while supporting veterans, active-duty Special Forces soldiers and their families.

Chapter LX has long believed that preserving history is one of its most important responsibilities. Future generations deserve to understand not only what America's Special Forces accomplished on distant battlefields, but also the character, loyalty and sacrifice that define those who wear the Green Beret. Hosting 11 Days fulfills that mission.

The play reminds us that military service does not always end when the mission officially concludes. For many veterans, the commitment to those they served beside continues long after the headlines fade.

More Than a Military Story

Although veterans will recognize many of the emotions portrayed on stage, this production is equally important for civilians.

Most Americans know only fragments of what occurred during the final evacuation from Afghanistan. News reports captured the crowds, the uncertainty and the tragedy at Abbey Gate, but they could not fully convey the courage, heartbreak and determination of those working desperately behind the scenes to save lives.

This performance offers audiences an opportunity to experience those events through the voices of the people who lived them.

It also serves as a bridge between the military and civilian communities. By hearing these stories firsthand, citizens gain a deeper appreciation for the cost of service and the enduring bonds that exist between American soldiers and the allies who stood beside them.

An Evening Worth Experiencing

Whether you served in uniform, have family members who did or simply wish to better understand one of the defining moments of recent American history, 11 Days: The Story of Operation Pineapple Express is an unforgettable experience.

Some stories entertain. Others educate. The best stories remind us who we are. This is one of those stories.

Seats are expected to fill quickly. Reserve your tickets early and join the Special Forces Association Chapter LX for this remarkable presentation of courage, loyalty, sacrifice and hope.

Performances are at 7 p.m. on August 28 and 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. on August 29. For ticket purchases, visit https://tfpineapple.org/events/.



ECHO WELCOMES IRIS S. THURMAN AS NEW CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Staff Report

ECHO (Emergency Care Help Organization) is proud to announce Iris S. Thurman as its new CEO, marking an exciting new chapter for the organization while reaffirming its unwavering commitment to serving neighbors in crisis throughout Eastern Hillsborough County.



Iris S. Thurman

As ECHO continues navigating change and continuing support, the organization's mission remains unchanged. For nearly four decades, ECHO has provided emergency food, clothing and life-stabilizing resources while helping individuals and families Bridge the Gap Between Crisis and Stability. Under Thurman's leadership, ECHO will continue building on this strong foundation by expanding community partnerships, strengthening programs and increasing its impact for the thousands of neighbors who rely on its services each year.

"ECHO's mission has always been about people," said Thurman. "I am honored to lead an organization that has served our community for nearly 40 years. Together with our dedicated staff, volunteers, donors and community partners, we will continue empowering neighbors in crisis by providing hope, resources and pathways to long-term stability."

An accomplished nonprofit executive, author, certified professional life coach, motivational speaker and founder, Thurman is dedicated to transforming lives through strategic leadership, emotional wellness and community impact.

A native of Miami, Thurman relocated to Tampa at the age of 10 with her mother and three siblings. As a divorced mother of four adult sons, she earned both a Bachelor of Arts in business management and a Master of Business Administration in health care management from the University of Phoenix, demonstrating the resilience and determination that continue to define her leadership.

As chief executive officer of ECHO, Thurman leads the organization's mission of empowering neighbors in crisis by providing emergency assistance and pathways to long-term stability for families throughout Hillsborough County. Her leadership focuses on strategic growth, community partnerships, organizational excellence and expanding ECHO's impact across the region.

In addition to her role at ECHO, Thurman is the founder of Urlinked Enterprises, LLC, doing business as IS Transformation Coaching, and Urlinked Charities Inc., home of the I AM ME Movement. Through these organizations, she equips individuals with the tools, resources and mindset needed to heal, grow and thrive. Her work spans emotional wellness, leadership development, youth empowerment, community engagement and transformational coaching.

While ECHO enters a new season of leadership, its promise to the community remains steadfast. Yesterday, today and tomorrow, ECHO will continue to provide compassionate support, essential resources and opportunities that help families move from crisis toward long-term stability.

For more information, visit the website at www.echofl.org.

AVELO AIRLINES ANNOUNCES FOUR NEW NONSTOP ROUTES

Staff Report

Avelo Airlines today announced four new routes from its Central Florida airports to Charlotte/Concord, North Carolina, and Aguadilla, Puerto Rico. Avelo is the only airline offering nonstop service on these routes.

Avelo will operate these routes using Boeing Next-Generation 737 aircraft. These exclusive routes expand Avelo's affordable, convenient and industry-leading reliable air service introduced to Central Florida in November 2021. Travelers can book at www.aveloair.com.

Avelo Airlines Founder and CEO Andrew Levy said, "We're excited to make it easier than ever for Florida travelers to experience everything the Charlotte region and Aguadilla have to offer with these new nonstop routes. Whether it's exploring the Queen City's vibrant food scene, growing business community or nearby mountain getaways, these routes provide a convenient and affordable way to visit one of the Southeast's fastest-growing destinations. At the same time, our new service from Lakeland to Aguadilla, Puerto Rico, gives Florida travelers another seamless option for reaching the Caribbean. Together, these new routes expand access, increase flexibility and continue our commitment to delivering low fares and a smooth, reliable travel experience."

Flight Dates and Frequency Information

Charlotte/Concord, North Carolina, via Concord-Padgett Regional Airport (USA) to:

• Orlando via Orlando International Airport (MCO) begins on Wednesday, November 18, with service four days per week on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays.

• Fort Myers via Southwest Florida International Airport (RSW) begins on Thursday, November 19, with twice-weekly service on Thursdays and Sundays.

• Tampa via Tampa International Airport (TPA) begins on Friday, November 20, with twice-weekly service on Mondays and Fridays.

Lakeland via Lakeland International Airport (LAL) to Aguadilla, Puerto Rico, via Rafael Hernández Airport (BQN) begins on Wednesday, November 18, with twice-weekly service on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

For more information, visit www.aveloair.com.

Avelo Airlines operates a major commercial base out of LAL, providing budget-friendly, nonstop flights connecting Central Florida to multiple destinations across the United States. As the exclusive commercial carrier at LAL, the airline provides a lower-stress alternative to the crowded nearby hubs in Tampa and Orlando. LAL Avelo offers point-to-point, nonstop service between LAL and several key cities: Atlanta, GA (ATL); Boston/Manchester, NH (MHT); Charlotte/Concord, NC (USA); Detroit, MI (DTW); Grand Rapids, MI (GRR); Nashville, TN (BNA); New Haven, CT (HVN); New York/Long Island, NY (ISP); Philadelphia, PA/Wilmington, DE (ILG); and San Juan, Puerto Rico (SJU). Avelo is located at Lakeland Linder International Airport at 3900 Don Emerson Dr. in Lakeland.

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GRAND OPENING OF NEW MACBETH & CHEESE PLAYHOUSE

By Srishti Tripathi



The Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce proudly celebrated the grand opening of the new MacBeth & Cheese Playhouse, marking an exciting new chapter for Brandon Performing Arts Inc. and the local arts community.

Chamber members, community leaders, supporters and guests gathered to celebrate the opening of the organization's expanded performance space, which will serve as a hub for live theater, entertainment and community engagement in the Brandon area.

Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce President Amber Aaron welcomed attendees and thanked everyone for joining the celebration before introducing MacBeth & Cheese Playhouse co-founders Camille 'C.J.' Hashem and Amy Windle. Hashem shared the organization's vision for its new home, emphasizing its commitment to creating immersive, accessible and memorable live theater experiences while expanding opportunities for local performers and audiences to connect through the arts.

Honorary Mayor of Brandon Riverview and Brandon Riverview Chamber Ambassador Abe Agosto of United Direct Lending presented a special proclamation officially declaring June 24 as MacBeth & Cheese Playhouse Day, recognizing the organization's contributions to the local arts and cultural community.

Brandon Performing Arts Inc., doing business as MacBeth & Cheese Playhouse, is an all-volunteer community theater dedicated to producing bold, engaging stage performances throughout the Tampa Bay area. Known for psychological thrillers, classic productions and original adaptations, the organization creates theatrical experiences designed to immerse audiences in every performance.

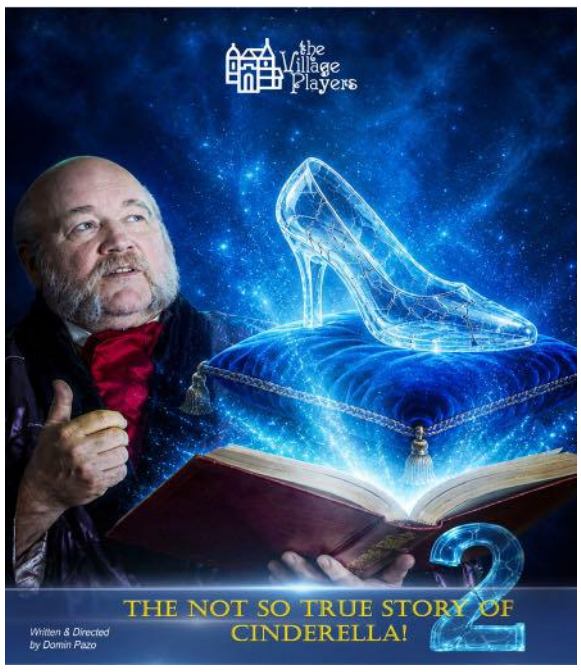
The newly opened venue represents an exciting expansion for the organization and will offer far more than live theater. In addition to stage productions, the space will host comedy shows, open-mic nights, acting classes, special events and other community-centered programming, creating an inclusive environment where creativity and connection can thrive.

"The arts play an important role in bringing communities together," said Aaron. "We are proud to celebrate MacBeth & Cheese Playhouse as they expand their impact in our community. Their passion for storytelling, creativity and creating meaningful experiences enriches the quality of life for residents throughout the Tampa Bay area."

For more information about MacBeth & Cheese Playhouse, upcoming performances, and community events, visit its website at https://macbethandcheese.com/ or follow it on social media. The playhouse is located at 225 E. Brandon Blvd. in Brandon and is building a calendar including comedy, plays and classes for the performing arts community.

THE VILLAGE PLAYERS BRING BACK *THE NOT-SO-TRUE STORY OF CINDERELLA* FOR FUNNY SEQUEL

By Erin Taylor



The Village Players theater is bringing audiences back to the kingdom this August with *The Not-So-True Story of Cinderella, Part 2,* a comedic sequel that proves happily ever after is often just the beginning of the trouble.

Directed by Domin Pazo, the production continues the 2023 story after the glass slipper fit and the ball was a hit. Cinderella may have found her prince, but trouble has a way of finding her. As new royal problems emerge and villains begin causing chaos, the kingdom discovers that happily ever after may require a lot more work than expected.

Newcomers are welcome to the kingdom's latest adventure, as the story stands on its own. Filled with offbeat humor, unexpected twists and plenty of royal drama, the show delivers another round of fairy-tale fun with a PG-13 edge.

"The audience really embraced the humor and energy of the first show," said Pazo. "We wanted to build on that by bringing back the characters people loved while raising the absurdity and the fun."

Performances will take place at the historic James McCabe Theater, located at 506 N. Fifth St. in Valrico. Built in 1915 and listed on Hillsborough County's Registry of Historic Places, the theater serves as the home of The Village Players and provides a unique setting for live community theater.

Performance dates:

- Evening performances at 8 p.m. on Friday and Saturday, August 7-8, 14-15 and 21-22.
- Matinee performances at 3 p.m. on Sunday, August 9 and 16.

Doors open at least 30 minutes before curtain.

Ticket Information

General admission tickets are $23. Seniors, students and military personnel receive discounted admission at $20. Tickets are available through TicketLeap at https://thevillageplayersvalrico.com/. For additional ticket information or box office inquiries, call 813-480-3147.

About The Village Players

The Village Players is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) community theater based in Valrico. The organization trains, rehearses and performs at the historic James McCabe Theater, a building constructed in 1915 and listed on the county's Registry of Historic Places.





EASTERSEALS HOSTS INCLUSIVE SUMMER CAMP FOR YOUNG LEARNERS

By Chloe Wagner



The Easterseals School for Limitless Learning is hosting its summer program designed for young neurodiverse learners and those with other disabilities in kindergarten through second grade.

The hands-on experience provides interactive STEAM-related (science, technology, engineering, arts, mathematics) activities for children to learn and grow in an inclusive, supportive environment.

Easterseals Florida has served individuals from all walks of life with all kinds of disabilities across Florida since 1948. This includes services such as workforce development, early intervention, autism services, mental health services and recreation and camps. The school, located in the Bloomingdale area, was founded in 2024.

Easterseals School for Limitless Learning's school administrator, Dr. Janine Stewart, heads both the school and the summer camp programs.

"The summer program was created in response to the need for meaningful, structured activities during the summer for special needs children," Dr. Stewart said.

According to Dr. Stewart, Hillsborough county faces a growing need for specialized education services, with 35,000 students, or 15 percent of the county population, needing individualized education programs.

"We believe every child deserves meaningful access to STEAM experiences, and we provide the individualized supports to help each camper succeed," Dr. Stewart said.

The program currently has 22 campers, but Dr. Stewart and the school have plans to expand the summer program to hopefully accommodate more students in the future.

Activities for the camp are thought fully planned out with the support for each child's various needs. It is designed to foster an environment in which the children feel safe, understood and successful. Some activities at the camp include sensory activities, themed crafts, STEM exploration, music and movement, story time, outdoor play, gross motor activities and imaginative play.

The most beloved tradition at camp are the Friday Water Days, where campers end their week with water-related festivities such as sensory friendly water play, sprinklers, splash activities and outdoor fun.

"Because our campers are neurodiverse, every child has different interests and sensory preferences. Some love messy sensory play, while others enjoy movement activities, music, building, or hands-on exploration," Dr. Stewart said. "We intentionally offer a variety of sensory rich experiences, so every camper has opportunities to engage in activities they enjoy."

Easterseals School for Limitless Learning is currently enrolling for its Early Learning and Lower Elementary programs.

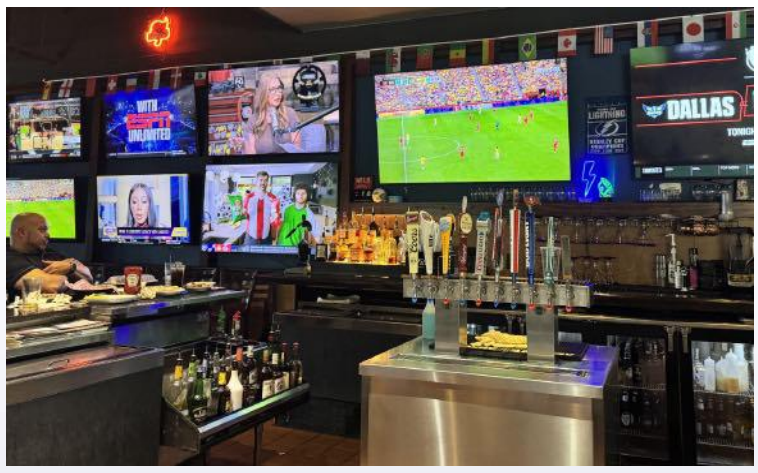
To learn more or to schedule a tour, visit https://florida.easterseals.com/ or contact Dr. Stewart at jstewart@esfl.org or 813-236-5589. Easterseals School for Limitless Learning is located in Valrico at 2460 Bloomingdale Ave., Ste. 170.

GLORY DAYS GRILL CELEBRATES 30 YEARS OF FOOD, FUN & COMMUNITY

By Libby Hopkins



For sports fans, families and anyone looking for a fun place to gather, Glory Days Grill & Sports House offers the perfect combination of made-in-house food, entertainment and community spirit.



Located in Brandon, Glory Days Grill & Sports House is known for its welcoming atmosphere and menu filled with fan favorites, including jumbo chicken wings served with a variety of flavorful sauces, hand-crafted burgers, fresh entrees and popular dishes like the Fabulous Fish Fry. The restaurant also features limited-time seasonal offerings designed to keep the menu exciting for returning guests.

"We just celebrated our 30th anniversary this past April," said Jen Ulmer, chief marketing officer for Glory Days. "We are going to celebrate all year round, and we are thrilled the community is joining us in our celebrations."

Glory Days Grill began in 1996 in Burke, Virginia, founded by Richard Danker, Robert Garner and Jeff Newman. In 2023, the Florida franchise, owned and operated by Bob Basham, co-founder of Outback Steakhouse, purchased the 22 Mid-Atlantic restaurants, bringing all Glory Days Grill locations together under one company with original co-founder Richard Danker.

Together, Basham and Danker are continuing to expand the brand throughout the Southeast while maintaining the restaurant's focus on quality food, sports and family-friendly entertainment.

"Still to this day our focus is offering a family-friendly experience that is welcoming of all ages, with a menu and entertainment options that appeal to a wide range of preferences," Ulmer said. "Just like when you host a watch party in your own living room, Glory Days Grill aims to provide a real, fun sports experience with our multitude of televisions broadcasting sports games and other entertainment."

Beyond serving up food and fun, Glory Days Grill is committed to supporting the communities it serves. Through local sponsorships and its Dining for Dollars program, the restaurant partners with organizations and groups throughout the area.

"We believe in giving back and fostering strong relationships with the neighborhoods we serve," Ulmer said.

The Brandon location supports local organizations including the Brandon Cowboys, Valrico High School, Armwood High School and North Brandon Little League. The restaurant also supports local heroes by offering a 10 percent discount and participates in charitable efforts benefiting programs such as Tunnels to Towers.

Whether guests are gathering to watch a big game, enjoying a family meal or celebrating with friends, Glory Days Grill continues to provide a place where the community can come together.

Glory Days Grill & Sports House of Brandon is located at 11310 Causeway Blvd. in Brandon. For more information, visit Glory Days Grill Brandon.

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SHERIFF'S OFFICE ARRESTS SOUTH COUNTY MAN IN CREDIT CARD SCAM

Staff Report



The Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, in partnership with the Manatee County Sheriff's Office, has dismantled a sophisticated credit card fraud operation.

In June, detectives were notified that a counterfeit credit card had been used to purchase fuel at a Wawa on East Hillsborough Avenue. It was determined that the original card's information had been stolen using a credit card skimming device.

As part of the investigation, detectives served a search warrant on July 8 at a residence on Flamingo Avenue in Apollo Beach.

During the search, detectives discovered a counterfeit credit card manufacturing and fraud operation and seized 154 counterfeit credit cards, dozens of credit card skimming devices, multiple ledgers documenting the operation and numerous electronic devices used to facilitate the production and use of counterfeit credit cards.

Detectives also found that the suspect attempted to destroy evidence by flushing a stack of counterfeit credit cards down a toilet. Detectives were able to recover the flushed cards, along with additional skimming devices.

Detectives arrested Juan Miguel Acosta Ramos, 32, charging him with:

•Trafficking in 50 or More Counterfeit Credit Cards.

•Possession of Credit Card Making Equipment.

• Possession of a Skimming Device.

• Tampering with Physical Evidence.

"Detectives uncovered a sophisticated criminal operation designed to steal from hardworking people and businesses on a large scale," said Sheriff Chad Chronister. "If you choose to profit by victimizing our community, know this: We will find you, dismantle your operation and make sure you face the full consequences of your crimes."

Detectives also seized a Ford F-250 used to facilitate the criminal enterprise.

Detectives believe dismantling this operation prevented potentially millions of dollars in additional fraudulent transactions throughout the Tampa Bay area.

This is an ongoing investigation, and any updates will be provided by the public affairs office.

FLORIDA POLY ATHLETICS SCORES AUBURNDALE PARTNERSHIP

Staff Report



Florida Polytechnic University and the City of Auburndale are partnering to provide home venues for the university's newly launched athletics program.

Florida Poly will now host practices, home games and special events for several sports at Lake Myrtle Sports Complex, Auburndale Softball Complex and the Auburndale Community Center. This arrangement was formalized through a three-year athletics facilities agreement that was approved by the Auburndale City Commission on July 20.

The collaboration comes at a critical time, as Florida Poly's soccer teams begin their inaugural seasons in August. They will be the first to call the facilities home.

"We are absolutely thrilled to establish home venues for our athletes as we launch our athletics program," said Derek Lower, the university's athletic director. "Our soccer teams are hitting the field in just a few weeks, and having access to quality facilities and dedicated locker room space gives our players a true home environment from day one."

The Auburndale Community Center will host men's and women's basketball practices, while the Auburndale Softball Complex will be home to softball practices. The expansive Lake Myrtle Sports Complex will be the primary venue for baseball and men's and women's soccer practices and home games. The site also will host men's and women's cross-country practices.

"This partnership creates an important foundation for student life as we launch Florida Poly Athletics," said Bryan Brooks, the university's vice president of student affairs, enrollment management and strategic communications. "Working directly with Auburndale will help us build a vibrant athletics culture that benefits our students and strengthens connections throughout our region."

Florida Poly teams will receive priority scheduling and facility access, including access to locker rooms at the Lake Myrtle soccer stadium and pregame field access. The agreement also provides athletics storage space and game-day amenities that will support the university's growing sports programs.

Florida Poly Athletics will launch with eight teams — baseball, men's and women's basketball, men's and women's cross-country, men's and women's soccer and softball.

Lake Myrtle Sports Complex will serve as a home venue for several Florida Polytechnic University athletics teams through a partnership with the City of Auburndale.





HISTORY AND SERVICE HONORED AT VIETNAM VETERANS ORGANIZATION

By Brad Stager



A Bell AH-1F Cobra helicopter on static display serves as gate guardian at the Veterans Memorial Park and Museum in Tampa, Florida.

The call to service they once heard in the hot, muggy landscape of Southeast Asia now echoes through Hillsborough County's densely humid air and has been answered by members of Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) Chapter 787 at its Veterans Memorial Park command and control center.

In the more than half-century since the official end of the Vietnam War in 1975, many who served in that conflict have organized into a national organization that advocates for all of those who defend the nation and to serve the communities in which they live.

VVA Chapter 787 is one of 29 chapters in Florida and has been active in local community engagement since its founding in 1988. While 'Vietnam' in the group's name indicates an era of military service to distinguish it from other veteran organizations, VVA members actively support the general veteran community in Hillsborough County as well as aspiring warriors in local high schools by mentoring local JROTC cadets and relating firsthand their historical experiences to students.

Tom Leavitt, the chapter's president, wrote in an email, "Participation in the JROTC award programs in all 29 schools within the county is a special time each year of supporting our wonderful cadets."

Leavitt, who was an Army medic in Vietnam, expressed respect for the young people he and his comrades have encountered in their outreach efforts.

"We have found them to be what our young people are really all about and we see their leadership skills as our future," he said.

Business meetings are held every fourth Thursday of each month at Veterans Memorial Park and the organization's calendar is full of activities that support the local veteran community. Chapter 787 is a presence at many local patriotic events, such as Patriot's Day observances and Veterans Day parades at James A. Haley VA Hospital, where it also hosts a pizza dinner every other month for families staying at the adjacent Fisher House. Conducting an annual Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans event is a significant occasion for the chapter that corrects the abandonment Vietnam veterans once endured when they came home from the war decades ago. It is held on or around National Vietnam War Veterans Day which is observed each March 29.

One invaluable resource for veterans and their families is Chapter 787's website at https://vva787.org/, where extensive information about programs and services can be found as well as details about the VVA.

LOCAL FAMILY OPENS FIRST BETTER BLEND LOCATION IN FLORIDA

By Jane Owen



Owners of the new Better Blend in Brandon, The Faustini family (Mike, Hillary, Skyleigh and Brody) on June 6, opening day.

The grand opening of Florida's first Better Blend location, Better Blend Brandon, was celebrated with fanfare on June 6. The celebration included free smoothie bowls for a year for the first 25 customers, half off smoothie bowls for the next 75 customers, free samples, a raffle for a food truck event, and a grand prize raffle with a total value of over $1,000.

Owners Mike and Hillary Faustini are long-time residents of Riverview. Hillary was born and raised in Brandon. Their reasons for bringing Better Blend to Florida are two-fold. Mike was searching for healthy low sugar, high protein food options as he was improving his health. Hillary was looking for a meaningful job that she could do while raising her kids, Skyleigh and Brody, and caring for her sister Hope who has Down Syndrome and is non-verbal autistic.

"I was looking for a healthier lifestyle and Hillary was looking for a job. We found Better Blend and we saw that it is a family run business, as well. That really resonated with us. We tried their products and we fell in love with them," Mike said.

"We have custody of my sister. It's important to me to take good care of her. When I was looking for a job, Mike was like, 'What can we do together that we will enjoy?' That's when we found Better Blend," Hillary said.

Better Blend smoothies are made with high-quality protein, organic stevia, zero added sugar, and 13 essential vitamins and minerals. The menu also includes acai bowls, protein bowls and snacks. Mike's current favorite menu item is the Acai Power Bowl. Hillary's is the Orange Creamsicle Blend.

Better Blend was founded by Issac Hamlin in 2018. A college rugby athlete, Hamlin was inspired to find a better way to fuel his game. He was in Brandon for opening weekend.

"Opening our first Florida location in Brandon is incredibly special for us, and it makes it even more meaningful to do it alongside the family. They genuinely care about their community and share our belief that small, everyday choices can make a big difference in people's lives," Hamlin said.

Better Blend Brandon offers catering, has a food truck for events, and is located at 955 E Brandon Blvd, Brandon, FL 33511. For more information and to see their menu, visit www.betterblend-smoothies-bowls.com.

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FINDING WHAT WORKS FOR YOUR FAMILY



If there's one thing I've learned as an autism mom, it's this: We are always learning.

Just when we think we have something figured out, our loved ones grow, their needs change and sometimes we find ourselves looking for new answers. As parents and caregivers, we all want the same thing: to help our loved ones with autism live the healthiest, happiest and most fulfilling life possible.

But there is no one-size-fits-all approach to autism.

As a mom to a 21-year-old son with profound autism, I know this firsthand. Over the years, my husband and I have tried different therapies, medications and treatments. Some have helped, some haven't and some worked for a season. We have learned to adjust, ask questions and remain open to trying something new when needed.

Progress doesn't always come in huge, life-changing moments. Sometimes it's better sleep, fewer difficult days, trying a new food, communicating a need, tolerating a haircut or enjoying a family outing. Those small wins matter. Celebrate them!

My biggest advice? Pay attention and keep track.

Write down changes you notice in sleep, behavior, communication, eating and daily routines. Take notes before appointments. Keep a list of questions because, if you're like me, half of them will disappear from your mind the second the doctor walks into the room. Don't be afraid to ask questions, request more information or seek a second opinion.

Your family may choose behavioral therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, medication or other treatments and supports. Another family may make completely different choices. That's OK.

Connecting with other autism families, both in person and online, can also be helpful.

Another parent's experience may introduce you to something you didn't know existed or simply give you a better question to ask. Just remember: Someone else's experience is information, not a guarantee.

When it comes to medical decisions, work with health care professionals.

You don't have to have all the answers today. Keep learning, keep advocating and keep finding what works best for YOUR loved one and YOUR family. That's what matters most.



THE HIDDEN DANGERS OF CRYPTO SCAMS

HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE
CHAD CHRONISTER, SHERIFF

As more Americans explore digital currency, scammers are increasingly targeting seniors. While cryptocurrency has legitimate uses, it has also become a preferred tool for criminals. One of the greatest risks comes from crypto kiosks — machines similar to ATMs that allow users to buy cryptocurrency with cash.

Crypto kiosks offer convenience but carry significant risks. Unlike traditional bank or credit card transactions, cryptocurrency transfers are irreversible. Once funds are sent, they cannot be recovered, making these kiosks a favorite tool of scammers. Many kiosks also charge transaction fees of 10 percent to 30 percent or more and provide few consumer protections.

Scammers commonly convince victims to withdraw cash and deposit it into a crypto kiosk by claiming they must 'protect' their bank account, pay taxes or fees, verify an account or claim a prize. By the time victims realize they've been deceived, their money is gone.

Recognizing this growing threat, Florida enacted Florida Bill 505, which establishes new consumer protections for crypto kiosks. The law increases oversight, requires stronger consumer disclosures and provides additional tools for law enforcement to investigate kiosk-related fraud.

The legislation was developed and presented to Senator Darryl Rouson and Representative Mike Owen. Through testimony from law enforcement about real-world crypto scams, Rouson and Owen successfully guided the bill through the Florida Legislature. Their efforts transformed heartbreaking stories into meaningful protections for Florida residents, particularly older adults.

To protect yourself:

- Never use a crypto kiosk because someone contacts you by phone, email, text or social media and tells you to.
- Treat any request to convert cash into cryptocurrency as a major warning sign.
- Speak with a trusted family member or financial advisor before making large or unfamiliar financial transactions.
- Report suspected crypto scams immediately to your local law enforcement agency.

Cryptocurrency itself is not the problem — criminals exploit unfamiliar technology to steal from unsuspecting victims. By understanding how crypto kiosk scams work and taking advantage of the protections created through Florida Bill 505, seniors and their families can reduce their risk of becoming victims.

Stay informed, stay skeptical and never let anyone rush you into making financial decisions.



Christian Voice



Grace Notes

Living With Predators

By Debora Coty

I seethed over the callous thief who'd scammed my vulnerable widowed friend out of a significant portion of her retirement fund. How could anyone intentionally maul others like that? My prayer walk quickly morphed into a rant as I called on the wrath of God to flash down and wreak vengeance on wretched people-predators.

Suddenly, my attention was drawn overhead by a pair of flesh-mauling carnivores hooting from an oak limb. My displaced anger turned toward the predator owls for ruthlessly capturing and consuming the sweet lil' baby squirrels and birdies in my yard.

Only they didn't look like deadly raptors at the moment. They were ... um, cuddling.

What??!?

I found it shocking that these deadly predators, in my estimation on the same shame-on-you scale as scammer human predators, could be sharing a sweet, tender moment. It was a side of them I never considered. I had mentally painted them all the same color — black — and never once thought that there might be a softer hue inside that was remotely redeemable.

It occurred to me that maybe predator owls are only following their ingrained natures to stay alive. Perhaps predator-people following their sinful natures are simply proving they need a savior.

And that's where we come in. We, the redeemed, Jesus-dependent, there-but-by-the-grace-of-God-go-I believers who know firsthand the path to salvation and are called to share the good news with the human raptors of our sin-wrecked world. Not condemn. Not hate. Not judge. (We'll let Papa God do that.)

It's not easy. It's never easy to intentionally defuse anger over injustice. To turn judgement over to the only true Judge. "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; ... who are you who judge your neighbor?" (James 4:12 NASB).

Because none is righteous. No, not one. (Romans 3:10). And judging isn't my job. Loving is. Gulp. I think I'm gonna have to dig a little deeper into my Savior's supernatural love if I'm to live with clawed, razor-beaked predators. And I don't mean just the kind with feathers.

What kind of predators do you have the most trouble living with, my friend?

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

GOD'S POWER IN OUR WEAKNESS



"But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." — 2 Corinthians 4:7.

Sometimes I feel the inspiration to write but the words just won't come — or at least not words that adequately get to the heart of what is on my mind. It's not so much 'writers' block' as it is understanding that some things exist on a plane where even the best words fall short.

The Apostle Paul experiences this in 2 Corinthians. His experience is very real, but the moment he starts writing he realizes it is going to sound inauthentic.

But then his thoughts coalesce and he lands beautifully in Chapter 12: "My grace," Paul references God, "is sufficient, ... for power is made perfect in weakness."

This is where I live as a teacher. I prepare, I pray, I outline notes, I stumble around trying to get an idea across — and then God moves in.

It happened with my men's group. I felt myself come to the end of my own understanding and then the following took clear shape.

"It's not that God trips us up, or engineers a place where we are floundering or lost or defeated, or intentionally makes our lives more difficult. It is more that we are invited to humble ourselves, to admit that we do not have the resources or the strength to pull things off by ourselves and to trust God. It is then that God works with us to create a path forward. Our best efforts and God's faithfulness together."

We were created to rely on one-another and to trust God. The 'I can do it myself' approach to life misses the point of our creation and our relationship to The Creator.

"But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me... for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." — 2 Corinthians 12.

I come to the end of myself, and the beginning of God — and then we move into tomorrow together.— Derek



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





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FROM EAST BAY TO TEAM USA: JOHNSTON WINS WORLD CHEER TITLE

By Emily Harper

Gage Johnston graduated from East Bay High School after transferring during his senior year to be part of the area's only coed cheer team. After high school, Johnston continued his cheerleading career at the University of Kentucky. As a collegiate cheerleader, he has experienced unforgettable moments, including cheering courtside during March Madness.





Gage Johnston representing Team USA in Sweden.

Johnston has been cheering for six years, and he said, "Being able to go out on a stage while everyone is only watching you is one of the biggest adrenaline rushes you can get. There's no better feeling than hearing the crowd after smacking a routine."

From June 5-7, Johnston competed with Team USA in Gothenburg, Sweden, at the 2026 FISU World University Championship. Team USA selected 20 student athletes from all across the country to represent the United States in the championship. At the event, Team USA competed against other student athletes from across the globe, allowing athletes to showcase their talent while representing their countries.

For Johnston, this was his first time cheering with Team USA.

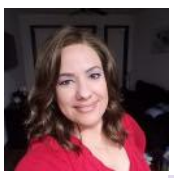
Reflecting on the tryout process, he said, "It was nerve-racking. When you do your tryout, the entire room stops to watch just you. When you try out, you're surrounded by some of the best athletes in the world. It makes you feel a crazy amount of pressure, but it's also super exciting."

In Sweden, he specifically competed in the Coed Premier division, which includes elite-level tumbling and partner stunts with a mix of male and female athletes. Their outstanding performance earned them the title of 2026 FISU World University Games champions.

While in Sweden, Johnston enjoyed experiencing Europe with the other teams.

He said, "It was so fun to get to see all new places and meet people from all over the world."

Looking back on the experience, Johnstonn said, "I'm excited to see what the future holds."



CARING FOR BOTH GENERATIONS: ESTATE PLANNING FOR THE SANDWICH GENERATION

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



Last month was National Sandwich Generation Month, recognizing the millions of adults who are raising children while also caring for aging parents. If that sounds familiar, you know how challenging it can be to balance the needs of both generations while putting your own needs aside. The good news is that thoughtful planning can ease much of that burden.

One of the biggest challenges is that a crisis involving either your children or your parents can happen without warning. Preparing in advance helps reduce stress and gives your family more options when difficult situations arise.

For your parents, a few essential legal documents can make all the difference. A durable power of attorney allows someone they trust to manage financial matters if they become unable to do so. A health care surrogate designation authorizes someone to make medical decisions and communicate with doctors on their behalf. An up-to-date will or trust ensures their wishes are clear and can simplify the administration of their estate. It is also wise to discuss long-term care planning, including Florida Medicaid eligibility, before a medical crisis forces rushed decisions.

Just as important is making sure your own estate plan is current. You are the one holding everything together, so your family also needs a plan if something happens to you. Make sure you have your own durable power of attorney and health care surrogate designation. If you have minor children, your will should nominate a guardian to care for them. A revocable trust may also provide an organized way to manage assets for your children while coordinating support for aging parents if needed.

Estate planning does not have to be completed all at once. Even taking the first step can provide tremendous peace of mind. By planning ahead, you can protect your parents, your children and yourself from unnecessary stress during already difficult times.

If you are caring for both aging parents and growing children, we would be happy to help you create a plan tailored to your family's needs. Please call the Law Offices of Laurie E. Ohall at 813-438-8503 to schedule a consultation.

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





HILLSBOROUGH EDUCATION FOUNDATION

Do you know almost half of Hillsborough's 220,000 students can't afford lunch, let alone the basics that others bring to school? Can you imagine the daily difficulties that creates in a classroom? Can you spare just a few dollars for pencils, folders, backpacks and other items these kids need? Please help before school resumes Monday, August 10! Learn more at EducationFoundation.com, home of the nonprofit Hillsborough Education Foundation. Thank you!

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



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