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LOCAL WINS $15,000 GRAND PRIZE IN LONGHORN'S STEAK MASTER SERIES

Staff Report





After months of intense competition, Wimauma resident Jesse Montalva from the Riverview LongHorn Steakhouse has reached elite grilling status, taking first place in LongHorn Steakhouse's Steak Master Series — a national competition that lets grill masters from across the country put their skills to the test. This was his second time competing as a finalist, having achieved fourth place in his first appearance in the first-ever Steak Master Series competition in 2016. Among the 3,000 competitors who participated in the rigorous series, Montalva came back to win it all.

"The competition was more intense than it was in 2016, with more participants and a greater focus on steak execution. The questions were tougher as well," said Montalva. "My manager pushed me to keep going, and I trained harder, so I'm happy I made it."

Montalva's winnings include a $15,000 grand prize and the title of Steak Master Series Champion. He bested six other finalists in the championship round held during a one-day grill-off in Orlando to become the ninth-ever winner of the competition. A team member at the LongHorn Steakhouse in Riverview, Montalva has worked for the company for 25 years.

"It feels incredible to be the 2026 Steak Master Series Champion," said Montalva about winning the competition. "I wanted this so badly, so to bring the trophy home to Riverview and put my name out there is an amazing feeling. I still can't believe I won."

The six remaining finalists were also honored for their grilling prowess: Second place: Aidyn LoVetro from Wilmington, North Carolina. Third place: Carlos Henning from Nashville, Tennessee. Fourth-place tie: Chuck Harrel from Rocky River, Ohio; Trenton Carver from Columbia, South Carolina; Diego Uribi from Phoenix, Arizona; and Shaka Craigwell from Mays Landing, New Jersey.

This marks the ninth year of LongHorn Steakhouse's Steak Master Series, which recognizes LongHorn's commitment to food quality while also celebrating the skill and expertise of grill cooks, or 'Grill Masters,' across the brand's 615 restaurants nationwide.

For more or to see the award-winning chef in action, visit the Riverview Longhorn at 12974 South U.S. Hwy 301 or visit the website at www.longhornsteakhouse.com.

HGTV'S HOMETOWN DREAM TEAM CELEBRATES SIXTH SEASON SUCCESS

By Libby Hopkins

Brian and Mika Kleinschmidt of Riverview met in high school chorus class, but they didn't become a couple until years later after high school. Mika spent a decade working in the fitness industry helping clients achieve their personal goals, while Brian went to attend the University of Central Florida, where he spent his spring breaks and weekends volunteering for Habitat for Humanity. He fell in love with building homes as he gained lots of hands-on experience as well. After graduation he started flipping homes on his own.



Brian and Mika Kleinschmidt are HGTV reality TV stars and local real estate business owners.

The 2008 housing crash made a way for Brian and Mika's paths to cross. Since the housing crash left Brian unable to flip homes, he started opening a chain of fitness clubs. This led to him connecting Mika and them becoming a couple, and a romance and business were born. While Mika was becoming one of the top realtors in the area, Brian had the itch to get his hands dirty again with construction.

"Life has been amazing and we have done so much since we were in the fitness industry," Brian said.

The couple just wrapped up season six of their HGTV show, *100 Day Dream Home*. Mika is also a mentor on the HGTV show *Battle on the Beach*, which premiered in June. Additionally, the couple has a local realty company, Dirt 2 Design.

"We built this together from the ground up," Mika said. "We are local realtors in the area, and we do a ton of projects with our local community. Most of the things we do are not on TV."

At Dirt 2 Design, their 'Dream–Design–Build–Start' approach brings their clients' entire real estate journey together in one seamless experience. Whether it's helping them buy or sell in the Tampa Bay area, designing spaces that reflect their vision or building custom homes with trusted local partners, the Kleinschmidts are with their clients every step of the way.



"With a personalized approach, strong local connections and a commitment to exceptional service, we make it easy to turn your ideas into reality and confidently take the next step," Brian said. "We have a team of us servicing the Tampa Bay area. We love what we do locally for our clients."

If you would like to learn more about Dirt 2 Design, you can visit the website at https://dirt2design.com/ or call 813-400-3910. Stay tuned for more exciting things from this powerhouse couple.

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Riverview's St. Joseph's Hospital-South hosted a two-day career camp this summer for students entering the ninth or 10th grade in the 2026-2027 school year. See full story on Page 3.



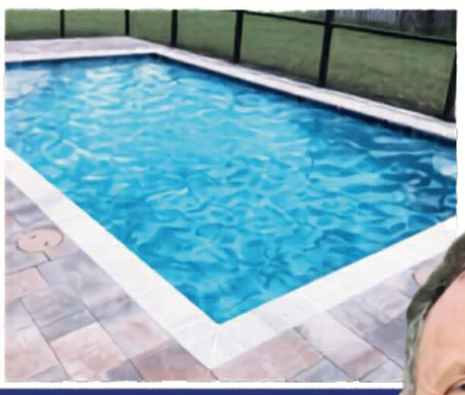
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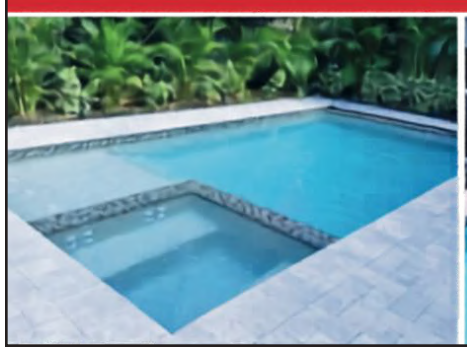
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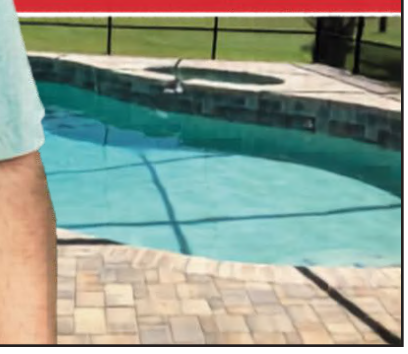
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ST. JOSEPH'S HOSPITAL-SOUTH HOSTS CAREER CAMP FOR MEDICAL FIELD EXPLORATION

Staff Report





Riverview's St. Joseph's Hospital-South hosted a two-day career camp this summer for students entering the ninth or 10th grade in the 2026-2027 school year. The camp gave students opportunities to learn hands-on about different hospital careers. St. Joseph's Hospital-South campers toured hospital departments, received presentations from hospital staff and participated in interactive classes.

Department tours and presentation highlights included surgery, nursing simulation, pet therapy, rehabilitation, radiology, maternity, respiratory therapy, laboratory/phlebotomy, pharmacy, physician careers, pediatrics/child life and nutrition/dietitian.

The St. Joseph's Hospital-South camp is part of a series of career camps across the BayCare Health System this summer in an effort to inspire the next generation of health care workers.

Lucy Thurmond, who will be a ninth grader this school year at Sumner High School, said she wanted to attend the career camp because she is interested in a career in the maternity field.

"I think this (camp) was a great experience and opportunity for people who have not been around a hospital before to see what it could be like," Lucy said.

Lucy added that she was excited to learn that there are multiple maternity areas that she could do besides labor and delivery.

"I can do Mom & Baby, the NICU — there are lots of other things," she said.

This was the first year that the camps came to St. Joseph's Hospital-South.

Melissa Menke, St. Joseph's Hospital's clinical professional practice manager and one of the camp organizers and coordinators, said the expansion to St. Joseph's Hospital-South was because of substantial community demand.

"We've been trying to expand our outreach and bring more young people into our facilities and expose them to health care careers," Menke said. "We wanted to give more students in the geographical regions and communities across our system the opportunity to participate."

For those interested in the St. Joseph's Hospital-South Career Camp in the summer of 2027, look for a registration announcement on the St. Joseph's Hospital-South Facebook page (www.facebook.com/stjosephssouth/) starting in March 2027. Those interested can also email stjosephscareercamp@baycare.org for further information.

BETH ISRAEL WELCOMES NEW RABBI, BEGINS NEW CHAPTER IN SUN CITY

By Chloe Wagner



The Beth Israel Jewish Congregation of Sun City Center has welcomed its new full-time rabbi, Adam Ruditsky, and his wife, Catherine, ahead of Rabbi Ruditsky's first Sabbath service on Friday, July 3. And, the congregation is also celebrating a rebranding as Beth Israel.

The Sabbath service will begin at 7:30 p.m. and will be held at Beth Israel in the Beth Israel Sanctuary, located at 1115 E. Del Webb Blvd. in Sun City Center. All members of the public are welcome to attend, and refreshments will be served following the service. Beth Israel is associated with the Union for Reform Judaism.

Ruditsky is Beth Israel's permanent rabbi following the previous interim rabbi, Phil Cohen. Ruditsky will serve as the congregation's second full-time rabbi.

Ruditsky's path to rabbi work was unconventional, not entering the field of religious work until he was in his early 40s. He started out as a hospital chaplain, serving those of all faiths, then transitioned into serving those in end-of-life care.

He went to rabbinical school at the Academy of Jewish Religion in Los Angeles, California, in 2020 and became certified by the Neshama Association of Jewish Chaplains. During his early rabbinical years, Ruditsky dedicated his time to working as a rabbi for Jewish homes and care facilities for the elderly.

"I'm very, if you will, comfortable and I understand the older community, from 60 up to geriatric," Ruditsky said.

Ruditsky has most recently served as a rabbi for a multigenerational synagogue in Plano, Texas. It was in Texas that he found Beth Israel and instantly connected.

"As I began looking for a new community, I wasn't even aware that synagogues like Beth Israel existed, meaning synagogues and retirement communities," Ruditsky said. "I was looking at different synagogues when I found Beth Israel. It just was a match."

Ruditsky said he feels that Beth Israel perfectly matches where he is at with his rabbinical work.

"It was for where I'm at as a rabbi. The importance of congregational work but also the importance of working with the older generation in a Jewish community," he said.

Ruditsky is excited to begin a new chapter of stability for the synagogue after the loss of Rabbi Carla Freedman, with Rabbi Phillip Cohen becoming the interim rabbi. He is motivated to not only lead but also create a community for all.

"For me, synagogue is just not religious; it's about building shared community experience," Ruditsky said. "Given everything that's going on in the Jewish world in general, I believe having a like-minded community where people can come, Jew or non-Jew; find support and common concerns; and address some of these issues where we are today is very important."

For more information on services, events and programs, visit https://jcscc.org/.



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PATRIOTIC ORGANIZATION HAS A WAY TO RING IN AMERICA'S 250TH YEAR

By Brad Stager



as starched Uncle Sam stovepipe hats and red, white and blue shoestrings, to pyrotechnic displays, Americans are finding ways to celebrate the nation's 250th birthday with style and flourish.

As the country celebrates with a revolutionary spirit on Saturday, July 4, along with the sound of fireworks popping, there will also be bells pealing.

The Military Order of the World Wars (MOWW), a nonpartisan band of uniformed services veterans, is promoting an app that can be downloaded and used individually or with a group of like-minded patriots to ring at high noon local time on Independence Day, recalling the emergence of the United States into the light of history 250 years prior and the historical events that followed in the nation's first quarter-millennium of existence.

The Freedom Bells Ceremony app operates as a digital tool forged by the MOWW for the 250th anniversary on July 4. It is designed to orchestrate a synchronized countdown to 12 Noon local time, when bells are intended to toll, as physical bells if available, or digitally via the app in unison.

Beyond the timing and countdown aspects, the app also serves as a repository for curated historical readings, patriotic music selections and moments of reflection to guide user activities. To engage with the webpage-based app, visit https://freedombells.org/.

As for the MOWW, its activities revolve around promoting patriotism, and since 1919 it has marched collectively under the banner of "It is nobler to serve than to be served," which speaks to the heart of the organization's manifesto. MOWW is involved in outreach and providing opportunities through youth and public safety groups, ROTC and JROTC programs as well as local veteran service organizations and civic groups.

As the organization's leader, known as its commander in chief (CINC), retired U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. David J. Worley, summarizes in an Instagram outreach video, "Together, we're building leaders, honoring service and strengthening communities."

More information about MOWW can be found at https://moww.org/.

MOWW's Sun City Center chapter meets monthly, and you can get more details at its Facebook group page, MOWW SCC.

PELICAN PLAYERS PRESENTS *LET'S MURDER MARSHA* JULY 24-26

Staff Report



Photo credit Kevin Steinke

Let's Murder Marsha cast members, from left to right: Peter Geller, Julie Ramsey, Bob Horvath, Donna Fiore, James Williams, Donna Gantvoort and Jeanne Naish.

Riotous comedy and hilarious mishaps will keep the audience laughing from start to finish in *Let's Murder Marsha,* a giddy romp through the paranoid reality of Marsha Gilmore, a housewife addicted to mystery novels.

When she overhears something she shouldn't, Marsha rushes around frantically trying to figure out how to keep from getting bumped off. The plot becomes increasingly hilarious as the play continues, with misunderstandings galore, nutty characters and a cat-and-mouse game between two factions with wildly different motives.

Let's Murder Marsha is a fast, playful farce built on secrets, chaos and big laughs," said director Kevin Steinke and assistant director Gwen Brown. "As directors, we're leaning into the momentum and letting the comedy sparkle."

Michele Horvath is the stage manager.

The part of Marsha will be played by Donna Fiore; Bianca by Dawna Gantvoort; Persis Devore by Julie Ramsey; Tobias Gilmore by Bob Horvath; Virgil Baxter by James Williams; Lynette by Jeanne Naish; and Ben Quade by Peter Geller.

Audiences from Sun City Center and all surrounding communities will have four opportunities to see the play: Friday, July 24, at 6:30 p.m.; Saturday, July 25, at 1:30 and 6:30 p.m.; and Sunday, July 26, at 1:30 p.m. Doors open 30 minutes before curtain.

Tickets are on sale at the Kings Point Box Office from 8:30 a.m.-4 p.m., Monday through Friday. Evening performances are $18; $15 for the matinee. Tickets will also be sold at the door for each show; no credit cards will be accepted at the door, and correct change is appreciated. Reserved, cabaret-style seating plus open bleacher seating are available. Bring your own drinks and snacks.

All performances will be at the Kings Point Veterans Theater in the North Clubhouse, located at 1900 Clubhouse Dr. in Sun City Center.

Founded in 1981, the Pelican Players Community Theater, a 501(c)(3) organization run by volunteers, aims to promote the dramatic arts through the staging of productions and educational activities. All profits go toward the Pelican Players Scholarship Fund, handled by Community Foundation Tampa Bay, benefiting local students pursuing the arts.

For more information about the Pelican Players, visit www.pelicanplayerssc.org.

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Marie Gilmore
813-657-2418
editor@ospreyobserver.com


BILLING MANAGER
Terry Vassalotti
813-657-2418
terry@ospreyobserver.com


NEWS REPORTER
Taylor Wells
813-657-2418
twells@ospreyobserver.com


DELIVERY MANAGER
Bill Andrew
813-657-2418
bandrew@ospreyobserver.com


ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR
Libby Hopkins
813-657-2418
libby@ospreyobserver.com


CUSTOMER SERVICE
Jenny Bennett
813-657-2418
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GRAPHICS MANAGER - **Kathi Hayes** - *khayes@ospreyobserver.com*

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VETERAN LAUNCHES CHOO-CHOO LEARNERS, A NEW EARLY LEARNING PROGRAM

By Libby Hopkins



Tampa Bay veteran and entrepreneur Rosa E. Rivera is launching Choo-Choo Learners, a new early learning program designed to help children ages 3-6 build confidence, creativity, literacy, communication skills and kindergarten readiness through storytelling, music, movement and hands-on learning.

Developed by Rivera's woman-owned company, Choo-Choo Animation Studio in Gibsonton, Choo-Choo Learners is a curriculum-based educational system built around the philosophy: "Print. Press play. Learn."

The program was created to provide families and educators with a complete learning solution in one place. Each package includes educational videos, printable materials, storybooks, original music, worksheets, crafts, hands-on activities and guided lesson plans, eliminating the need to search for resources from multiple sources.

"As a mom, creator and educator, I know how hard it can be to find quality learning resources without spending hours planning and piecing everything together," Rivera said. "Our goal is simple: 'Print. Press play. Learn.' We want families and educators to have everything they need in one place so they can spend less time preparing and more time learning together."

The curriculum is based on research-backed early childhood learning principles and supports multiple learning styles through repetition, visual storytelling, music, movement and interactive play. Lessons are designed to strengthen literacy, early math skills, communication, fine motor development, creativity, problem-solving and social-emotional growth.

A unique feature of Choo-Choo Learners is that all content was created in-house by Choo-Choo Animation Studio. Every animated character, song, book, worksheet and activity is original intellectual property developed specifically for early childhood education.

At the center of the program are Monkey & Banana, characters first introduced through the studio's Learning with Monkey & Banana educational series. The series has reached viewers in more than 32 countries and helped build the studio's growing library of educational content. The characters now serve as the stars of the new Jungle School with Monkey & Banana series, which forms the foundation of many Choo-Choo Learners lessons and activities.

"Children learn best when they feel emotionally connected to what they're learning," Rivera said. "We wanted to create something joyful, supportive and meaningful during some of their most important developmental years."

In addition to paid curriculum packages, Choo-Choo Learners offers free educational resources and printable materials for teachers, homeschool families and community organizations. For more information, visit www.choochooanimationstudio.com.

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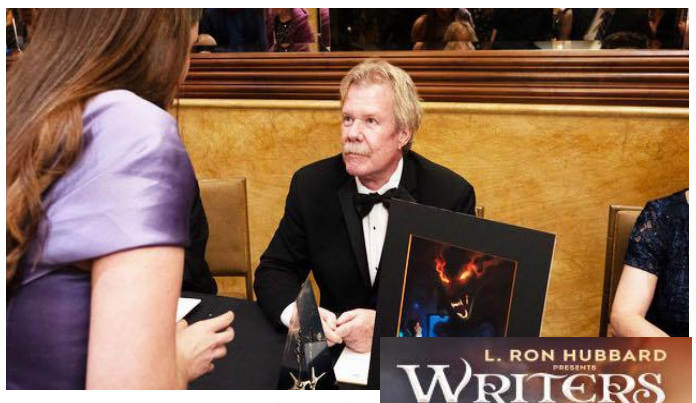
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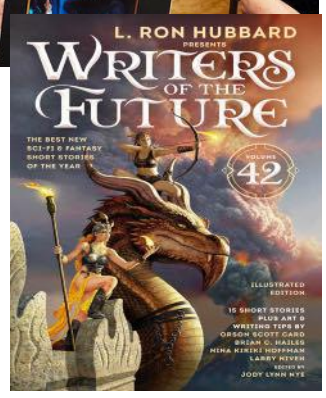
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AWARD-WINNING FLORIDA AUTHOR ENCOURAGES WRITERS TO CHASE DREAMS

By Zofia Osterman





For many aspiring authors, the hardest part of becoming a published writer is taking the first step. Award-winning Florida author Mark McWaters hopes to inspire others to do just that after earning international recognition for his short story "Ghost Dog."

McWaters, of Mount Dora, recently visited Books-A-Million in Brandon for a book signing celebrating the publication of *L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of the Future Volume 42*, an anthology featuring his award-winning story. Readers had the opportunity to meet the author, have books signed and hear about the journey that led to his success.

"I want writers to write, and I want writers to enter this competition because it doesn't cost to enter," said McWaters, Writers of the Future Contest winner.

McWaters explained that many writers hesitate to submit their work because they fear rejection, but taking that chance is part of becoming an author.

"It takes courage to show people your work and literally ask them for their opinion," said McWaters. "Keep writing. Never stop. And submit your work! You'll never get published if you don't take the first steps."

Although McWaters has been writing since grade school, he spent years as an award-winning advertising copywriter and creative director before seriously pursuing fiction about 12 years ago. Since then, he has completed four novels, with three currently available to readers and published an anthology of short stories. He credits reading throughout his life and joining the Florida Writers Association and a local critique group with helping him develop as a fiction writer.

The inspiration for "Ghost Dog" came from his West Highland white terrier, Bentley, who sleeps beneath his desk while he writes. While reading submission guidelines for a horror writing contest, McWaters realized haunted houses, dolls and castles were common in fiction, but haunted dogs were not. Around the same time, Bentley woke him one morning by barking at mysterious scratching sounds inside his home, sparking the idea for the story. Unlike many horror tales, "Ghost Dog" also offers readers a hopeful ending.

The Writers of the Future Contest, now in its 43rd year, recognizes emerging science fiction and fantasy writers from around the world and has helped launch the careers of hundreds of published authors.

For more information about McWaters and his books, visit www.markmcwaters.com. To learn more about the Writers of the Future Contest, visit https://writersofthefuture.com/.

YORK INNOVATION ACADEMY UNVEILS MURAL INSPIRED BY NATURE

By McKenzie Brown



Welcome to Dorothy C. York Innovation Academy, a Hillsborough County public school and Magnet IB campus with a strong emphasis on STEAM integration. Here, learning extends beyond traditional instruction to prepare students for real-world experiences.

While many people associate STEM solely with robotics, coding and technology, our philosophy recognizes that it is about weaving together science, technology, engineering and mathematics into everyday lessons so students can make meaningful, practical connections. Unlike some programs that omit the arts component, out approach deliberately integrates the 'A' in STEAM, ensuring that creativity and expression play a vital role alongside analytical thinking. Thanks to the dedication, collaboration, and teamwork of our teachers, York has developed a comprehensive STEAM program that reaches students from prekindergarten through eighth grade.

Over the past two years, we have enhanced this program through generous donations of pollinating flowers from the Florida Wildflower Foundation (www.flawildflowers.org). These contributions have allowed us to expand our campus habitats, teach students about pollinators and native plants and highlight their importance within local ecosystems.

In 2025, we were honored when Rose Kinane of the Florida Wildflower Association selected York as one of only five schools to receive an original ceramic art piece from eco-artist Xavier Cortada (https://cortada-foundation.org/). This opportunity inspired further academic and artistic exploration. Our art teachers, Yessica Gilford, Tia Jesson and William Talenti, encouraged students to draw inspiration from nature, much like Cortada's work across Florida. With support from our PTSA, which funded materials through a multiteacher grant, students explored artistic techniques using clay, paint, and glaze.

Cortada also spoke with our PYP and MYP students, enriching their understanding of both art and environmental stewardship. Students then created their own eco-inspired sculptures, learning about three-dimensional forms, texture and observation of the natural world. These pieces were ultimately incorporated into a meaningful mural honoring our butterfly way station, which provides essential resources for butterflies and other pollinators while bringing together art, science and environmental awareness in a lasting way.

One of the most meaningful aspects of the project is the opportunity it provided for students to become active contributors to something lasting and impactful. Each student artist added a unique ceramic piece to the mural, demonstrating how individual creativity can contribute to a larger shared vision.

If you have any additional questions, contact Jerry Turner at jerry.turner@hcps.net or Dorothy C. York Innovation Academy at 813-533- 2400.

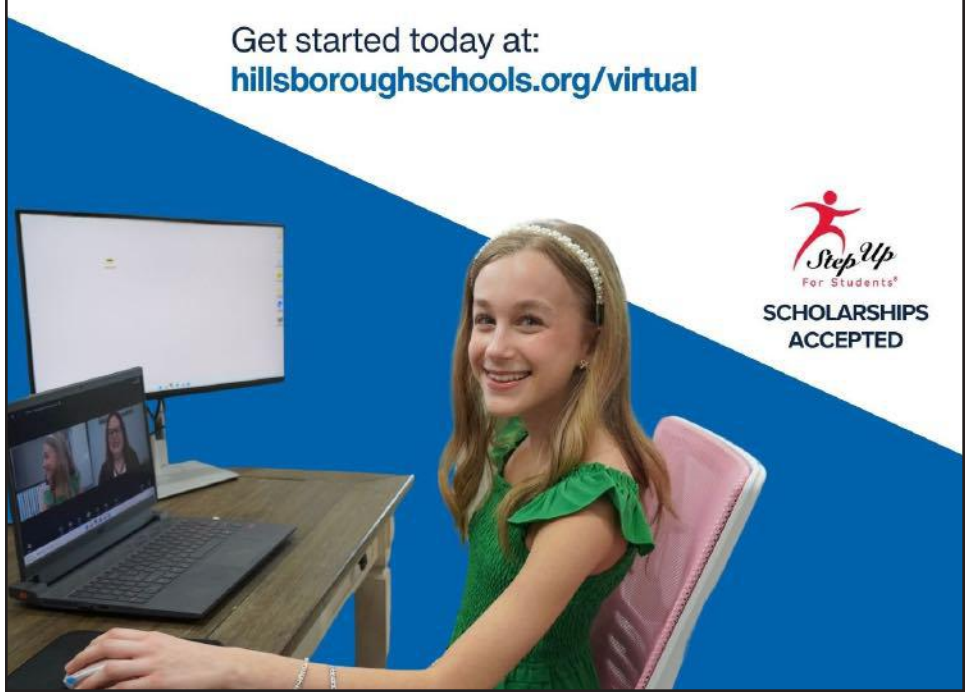
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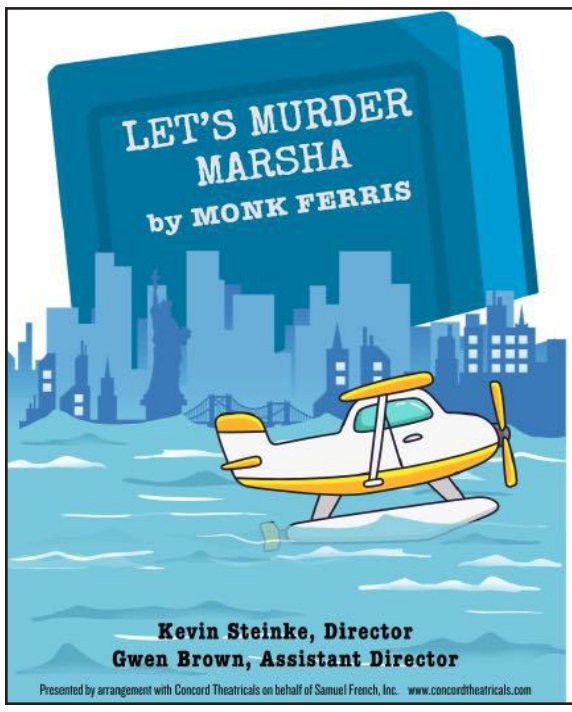
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COLD DRINKS, HOT MYTHS: UF EXPERT CUTS THROUGH SUMMER HYDRATION HYPE

Staff Report



As summer temperatures rise, many people reach for trendy hydration drinks promising better energy and cooling effects. But according to Laura Acosta, an instructional associate professor of food science and human nutrition at the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS), many of the claims surrounding popular hydration products are exaggerated.

One common myth is that electrolyte-enhanced beverages are necessary for daily hydration. Acosta explains that electrolytes help regulate fluid balance, nerve function and muscle contractions, but most people performing routine daily activities do not need added electrolytes. However, those exercising for more than 60-90 minutes, especially in hot conditions, may benefit from replenishing electrolytes lost through sweat.

Another misconception is that alkaline water hydrates better than regular water. Alkaline water has a higher pH than standard drinking water and is often marketed as superior for hydration. Acosta notes that the human body tightly regulates its pH regardless of what is consumed, and there is no strong evidence that alkaline water improves hydration in healthy individuals.

Hydration powders are also gaining popularity. These products typically contain electrolytes, carbohydrates and sometimes caffeine or vitamins. While they can help replace fluids and electrolytes during prolonged exercise or heavy sweating, Acosta says they are usually unnecessary for everyday hydration and may add excess sodium or sugar to the diet.

Many people also believe caffeinated beverages cause dehydration. While caffeine can slightly increase urine output, the fluid consumed in coffee, tea and similar drinks generally offsets that effect. Research shows little difference in hydration status between water and caffeinated beverages for regular caffeine consumers. Still, Acosta recommends that caffeinated drinks complement, not replace, water intake.

Acosta also addressed the growing trend of "prehydration," or drinking fluids before feeling thirsty. She explained that thirst is not an immediate signal, and by the time it occurs, the body may already be mildly dehydrated. This is particularly important during prolonged exercise, hot or humid weather, or periods of heavy sweating, when even a small loss of body fluids can affect performance and well-being.

For athletes, outdoor workers and anyone planning to spend extended time in the heat, Acosta recommends beginning activities well hydrated and continuing to drink fluids regularly. Having a cup or two of water before heading outdoors and taking hydration breaks throughout the day can help prevent dehydration and support overall health during the summer months.

PLUMBING YOU CAN COUNT ON, FROM A FAMILY YOU CAN TRUST, CROFTON'S

By Makenzie Atkins Noel



Randy and Delight Crofton built the business on trust and craftsmanship — now their children April and Jon are carrying on that legacy.

Finding a plumber is easy. Finding one you can actually trust with your home, your time and your money is a different story. With more than 35 years of experience, Crofton's Plumbing & Drain Solutions has spent decades earning that trust one job at a time.

As a full-service residential and commercial plumbing company serving Sun City Center, Riverview, Wimauma and the surrounding communities, Crofton's offers a comprehensive range of solutions. Services include repiping, water heater installation and repair, kitchen and bathroom remodels, sewer line repairs and 24/7 emergency services. Every job is backed by a one-year parts and labor guarantee and approached with the same commitment to fast response times, transparency and a client-first standard.

"We treat our customers the way we would want our own family treated: with respect, transparency, and urgency," said Randy Crofton, owner of Crofton's Plumbing & Drain Solutions. "Our goal isn't just to fix the issue. It's to create a positive experience from start to finish."

The foundation of that reputation was laid in the 1980s, when founder Randy Crofton began learning the trade alongside his father. Over the course of more than 35 years, Randy Crofton developed a standard of craftsmanship rooted in honesty and dedication. His wife and business partner, Delight Crofton, has played an integral role in the company's operations, billing and overall direction. Together, they built a business on a principle that has never wavered: Do the job right, treat people with respect and stand behind your work.

That legacy is now carried forward by the next generation. Their daughter, April, serves as chief administrative officer, overseeing the business operations that keep the company running efficiently, while their son, Jon, leads the technical side as director of field operations. Their combined leadership ensures the values Randy and Delight Crofton established remain at the center of every service call.

Crofton's Plumbing & Drain Solutions is not just a company built on experience. It is a company built on relationships, and for homeowners and businesses across Riverview, Sun City Center, Wimauma, and beyond, that commitment is what sets it apart.

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ROUGH RIDERS MUSEUM RECEIVES BLUE STAR MUSEUM DESIGNATION

By Zofia Osterman



A new national designation is bringing attention to one of Tampa's most historic sites while offering military families a meaningful way to connect with local history. The Tampa Rough Riders Museum in Ybor City has officially been designated a Blue Star Museum, joining a nationwide initiative that provides free admission to active-duty military personnel and their families from Armed Forces Day through Labor Day.

Located at 601 N. 19th St. in Tampa, the Tampa Rough Riders Museum is housed inside the headquarters of the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry Regiment Rough Riders Inc. The museum preserves the legacy of President Theodore Roosevelt and the Rough Riders while educating visitors about Tampa's role in the Spanish-American War.

The Blue Star Museums program is a partnership between the National Endowment for the Arts and Blue Star Families working with museums across the country to support military families through educational and cultural opportunities. The Tampa Rough Riders Museum joins other participating institutions in Tampa, including the Tampa Bay History Center, Museum of Science and Industry, Tampa Museum of Art and Florida Museum of Photographic Arts.

Col. Billy Hogan, Tampa Rough Riders past president, said the Blue Star designation reflects the museum's appreciation for those currently serving the nation.

"A Blue Star Museum is one which is open for free for active-duty military and their families from Armed Forces Day until Labor Day," said Hogan. "It is a small way to give back to those who are currently serving our country."

The Tampa-based nonprofit organization was founded 48 years ago to honor and preserve the history of Roosevelt and the First U.S. Volunteer Cavalry Regiment. Tampa served as the assembly and embarkation site for U.S. military forces during 1898 as troops prepared to depart for Cuba.

"Our organization was specifically created 48 years ago to honor and preserve the memory of the unique accomplishments of our 26th president, Teddy Roosevelt, and his 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry Regiment," said Hogan.

The museum continues that mission through exhibits, artifacts and research focused on the soldiers who served during the era. Its current exhibit, Preparing for War, remains open through Monday, June 29. Beginning Tuesday, June 30, visitors may explore the Combat Operations in Cuba exhibit, commemorating the battles fought during early July 1898.

Free guided tours are available Monday to Friday from 11 a.m.-3 p.m. by appointment. For more information, call 813-248-1898, email office@tamparoughriders.org or visit www.tamparoughriders.org.

PROGRAM CONNECTS STUDENTS TO HIGH-DEMAND CAREERS

By Zofia Osterman



As graduation season arrives, many students are exploring alternatives to traditional four-year college degrees. A workforce development initiative called CertUp is helping Hillsborough County residents prepare for high-demand careers through accelerated training programs that lead directly to employment opportunities.

Created through a partnership between Hillsborough College, the Tampa Bay Economic Development Council and local employers, CertUp promotes career focused programs in fields such as welding, auto collision technology, emergency medical services and electrical linework. Program leaders report a 100 percent job placement rate and an average starting salary of approximately $62,000 for graduates.

According to recent surveys, 63 percent of Americans believe a college degree is not worth the cost, leading more students to consider alternative pathways into the workforce.

Craig Richard, CEO and president of the Tampa Bay Economic Development Council, said the program helps connect residents with careers that offer strong earning potential without requiring a bachelor's degree.

"CertUp helps address workforce shortages by highlighting high-demand career opportunities that don't require a four-year degree," said Richard. "These jobs often offer great benefits, good job security and opportunities for advancement and greater earnings."

Industries across the Tampa Bay region continue to seek skilled workers, particularly in health care, cybersecurity, welding and auto collision repair. Richard noted that demand for welders alone is expected to grow significantly over the next several years as experienced workers retire and regional growth fuels new construction and manufacturing projects.

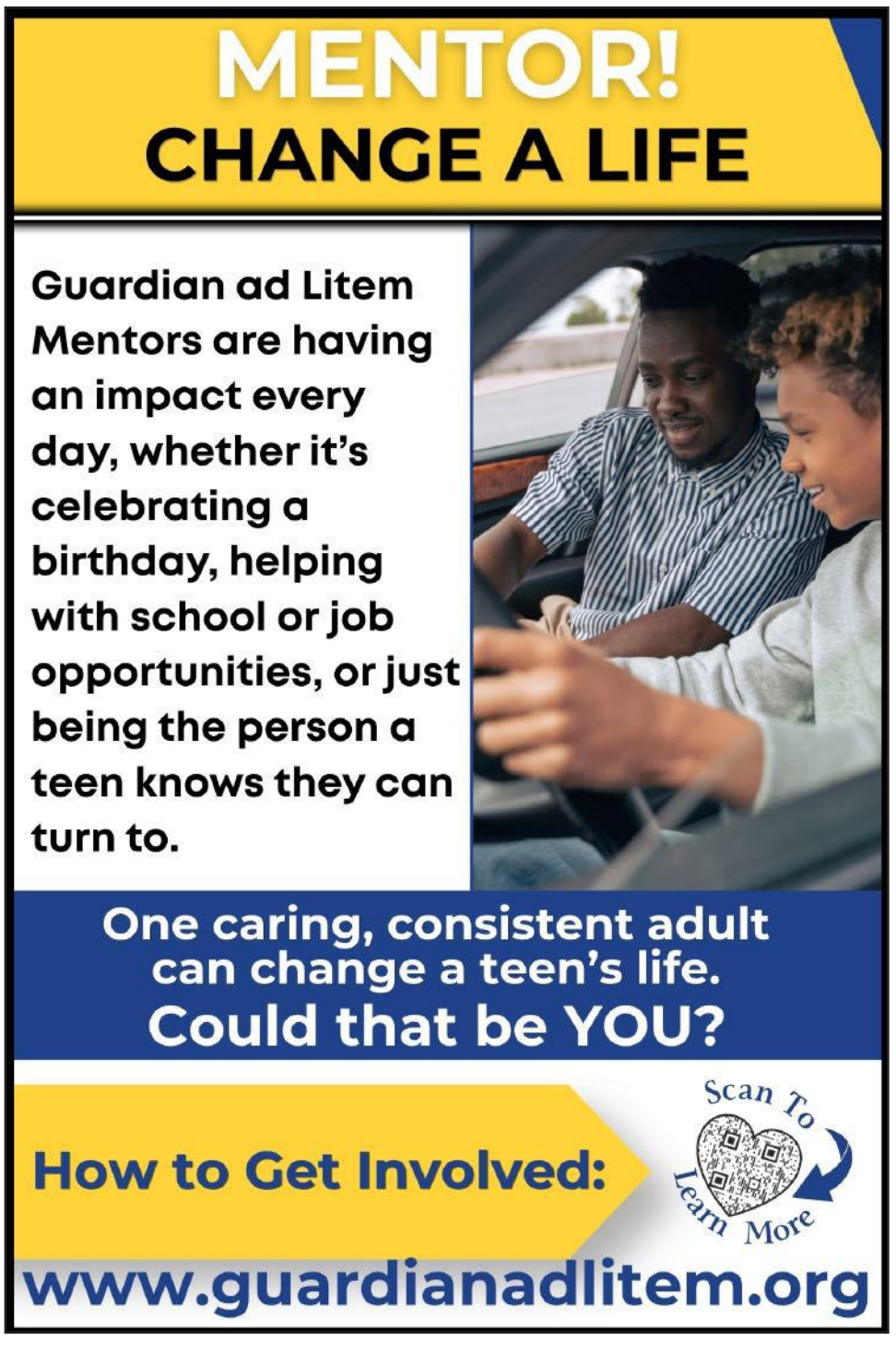
The hands-on training provided through Hillsborough College prepares students to enter the workforce quickly. Students in the Auto Collision Technology Technician program work on real vehicles while learning industry-standard repair and painting techniques.

Local employers are already seeing the benefits of the program.

"We've had a relationship with Hillsborough College for years and have hired many graduates from this program," said Joe Schlueter, vice president of fixed operations for Morgan Auto Group. "These graduates come to us ready to build upon those skills and quickly integrate into our organization."

Schlueter added that career advancement opportunities are substantial within the industry, with experienced technicians earning well into six figures and demand for qualified workers staying strong nationwide. For more information about CertUp and Hillsborough College workforce programs, visit https://certuptampa.com/.





BILINGUAL LEGAL TEAM AT RJS LAW GROUP SERVES TAMPA AND BEYOND

By Mylena C. Ferman



RJS Law Group (RJS) has served Ruskin and Tampa's English and Spanish-speaking clients with legal representation since 2002.

The law group consists of three main lawyers: Brandon Kolb, who primarily handles traffic defense; Ana Salinas, who oversees personal injury cases, probate cases, trust-related cases and wills; and Rolando Santiago, founder and managing partner of RJS, who works on real estate, business law and personal injury cases. All RJS employees are natively fluent in both English and Spanish.

"We have a large client base of people who are first-generation immigrants and so their English is extremely limited. To discuss technical issues can be challenging. It is not challenging for us," Santiago said.

Their expertise in taking on cases for Spanish speakers has earned them a reputation locally and internationally. RJS has taken on numerous personal injury litigation cases, including in Argentina, Honduras, El Salvador and Japan.

"It's fun, you know?" Santiago said about the international cases. "It's fun to be able to help folks, to have the knowledge to be able to help when they thought there was no justice available to them."

In addition to her local work, Salinas helps coordinate RJS' international cases and is a licensed attorney in Honduras.

"We focus on the person-to-person," Santiago explained, "...We are a firm where clients can get ahold of the attorney, can get ahold of the paralegal."

Humanity is at the core of RJS' business practices.

"We get results for the clients because of the staff. Everybody here is knowledgeable," Santiago said.

According to its website, RJS also takes general civil litigation, workers' compensation and immigration law cases. The cost of the services varies. Most services charge an hourly rate that typically ranges from $400-$800. Other services have a base or flat fee. For example, will kits have a flat fee of $750, basic trusts have a base fee of $3,500 and traffic defense is approximately $300 per infraction.

To learn more about RJS Law Group, visit its website at https://rjslawgroup.com/, email at info@rjslawgroup.com or call 813-641-0010. RJS Law Group is open from Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m.-6 p.m., and by appointment on weekends. It is located at 306 N. U.S. 41 in Ruskin.

27NORTH REALTY BUILDS ITS BRAND ON CONFIDENCE, CLARITY AND CARE

By Kelly Wise Valdes



27 North Realty's Shawna and broker/owner Gregg Calvert.

In a fast-moving Tampa Bay real estate market, 27North Realty has carved out a reputation built on something simple but increasingly rare: putting people before transactions.

"We believe people are looking for something different than they were even a few years ago," said broker/owner Gregg Calvert. "They want honest advice, local expertise and someone who will tell them the truth, even when it's not the easiest conversation."

Calvert said that philosophy is the foundation of 27North Realty, where agents are encouraged to prioritize relationships over commissions.

"Clients continue to choose us because they know we genuinely care about the outcome, not just the sale," said Calvert.

That approach is reflected in the company's guiding phrase, 'navigate home,' which Calvert described as a commitment to clarity and care throughout the buying or selling process.

"Buying or selling a home can feel overwhelming," he said. "'Navigate home' means helping people understand their options so they can make confident decisions."

Guidance often includes educating clients on flood zones, insurance costs, waterfront considerations, builder contracts, HOA rules and longterm financial implications.

"We want our clients to feel informed, prepared and supported every step of the way," Calvert said.

As Tampa Bay continues to grow, Calvert said buyers are becoming more intentional.

"The days of making rushed decisions are largely behind us," he said.

Buyers are weighing value, insurance costs and lifestyle more carefully. Waterfront sellers, meanwhile, are focusing on presentation and pricing as competition increases.

"SouthShore attracts families who want more space, newer homes and a strong sense of connection," he said.

Calvert's promise to "outwork, out-prepare and out-care" shows up in ways that rarely appear on a closing statement.

"We've coordinated contractors, inspections, estate sales, moving companies, attorneys, title issues and repairs long before a home ever reaches the market," he said.

For newcomers to Florida, the team spends time explaining communities, schools, flood zones and lifestyle differences.

"We want them to choose the right community, not just the right house," he said.

"Real estate is ultimately about people," he said. "Homes matter because of the lives that happen inside them. Our goal is to help people navigate those moments with confidence, clarity and care."

For more information visit www.27northrealty.com or call 813-645-4663. 27North Realty's office is located at 6138 N. U.S. 41 in Apollo Beach.





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BONNET SPRINGS PARK OFFERS ULTIMATE SCREEN-FREE ESCAPE

By Srishti Tripathi



Summer in Central Florida isn't just about avoiding the heat; lately, it's become a full-on showdown with screen time. Kids are glued to devices in states of perpetual scrolling, while parents search for ways to pull them back into the real world. Honestly, it's tough. Devices are always around, and let's face it, sometimes they're easier than suggesting another backyard adventure. Still, plenty of families want something different. That's where Bonnet Springs Park jumps in, giving folks a genuine chance to get outside and remember what summer is supposed to feel like.

The park was designed with curiosity in mind, creating a kind of old-school playground with a modern twist. Every path, every shady boardwalk, and every interactive exhibit in the nature center feels like an open invitation to explore. The playground sprawls across the grounds, and it's not your standard swings-and-slide setup; it's a place that inspires kids, and, honestly, adults too, to run, climb, and imagine new worlds.

That active energy keeps rolling all season long. Bonnet Springs Park keeps a steady stream of family-friendly events and community-driven activities planned all the way through June and July. Families looking to cool off can head to the park's splash-ready waters for the "Summer at the Spring" interactive play mornings on Wednesday, June 24. Car enthusiasts can roll out to the monthly "Cars & Coffee" meet-ups outside the Florida Children's Museum on the second Saturday of the month, while those looking for evening fun can catch the "Sunset Dance Series," featuring a live swing dancing night on Thursday, June 18 and salsa on Thursday, July 23.

Best of all, most of these programs cost absolutely nothing. The park wants everyone to feel welcome, so local families can build golden summer memories without worrying about ticket prices.

If you're tired of negotiating device time or need that push to reclaim a classic, hands-on summer, it is time to pack up the car. Located just outside of downtown Lakeland at 400 Bonnet Springs Blvd, Bonnet Springs Park is the ultimate place to plot your next outdoor adventure. To check park hours, view a full calendar of June and July events, or plan your perfect screen-free weekend, visit their official website at www.bonnetspringspark.com.

FLORIDA POLY TIPS OFF WOMEN'S BASKETBALL WITH HEAD COACH

Staff Report



Nikki Jessee has been named the first head coach of Florida Polytechnic University's women's basketball program.

Florida Polytechnic University has named Nikki Jessee as the first head coach of its women's basketball program, adding another experienced leader as the University continues to build Florida Poly Athletics.

Jessee brings extensive experience in college basketball and a track record of building successful programs. The Lakeland native joined Florida Poly earlier this year as an academic success coach and said the opportunity to help launch women's basketball was one she had been eager for.

"I started here because I knew we were going to start athletics, so I was hoping that something would open up," Jessee said. "I've been in college athletics, specifically basketball, my whole life, and it was intriguing to start something literally from ground zero."

Before arriving at Florida Poly, Jessee led successful women's basketball programs at Warner and Saint Leo universities and helped turn around teams at Lynn University and Martin Methodist College.

Derek Lower, Florida Poly's athletic director, said Jessee is a strong fit in establishing the university's new program.

"Nikki is a phenomenal coach with a proven record of building up programs and creating championship-caliber teams," Lower said. "She has a strong focus on student success and building relationships with every member of her team."

Jessee said working on campus before stepping into the coaching role gave her a stronger understanding of what makes Florida Poly unique and the kind of student athlete who will thrive at the university.

"I'm thankful because my time as a success coach helped me understand it is a different type of university," she said. "When we say high academics and STEM university, we really mean it."

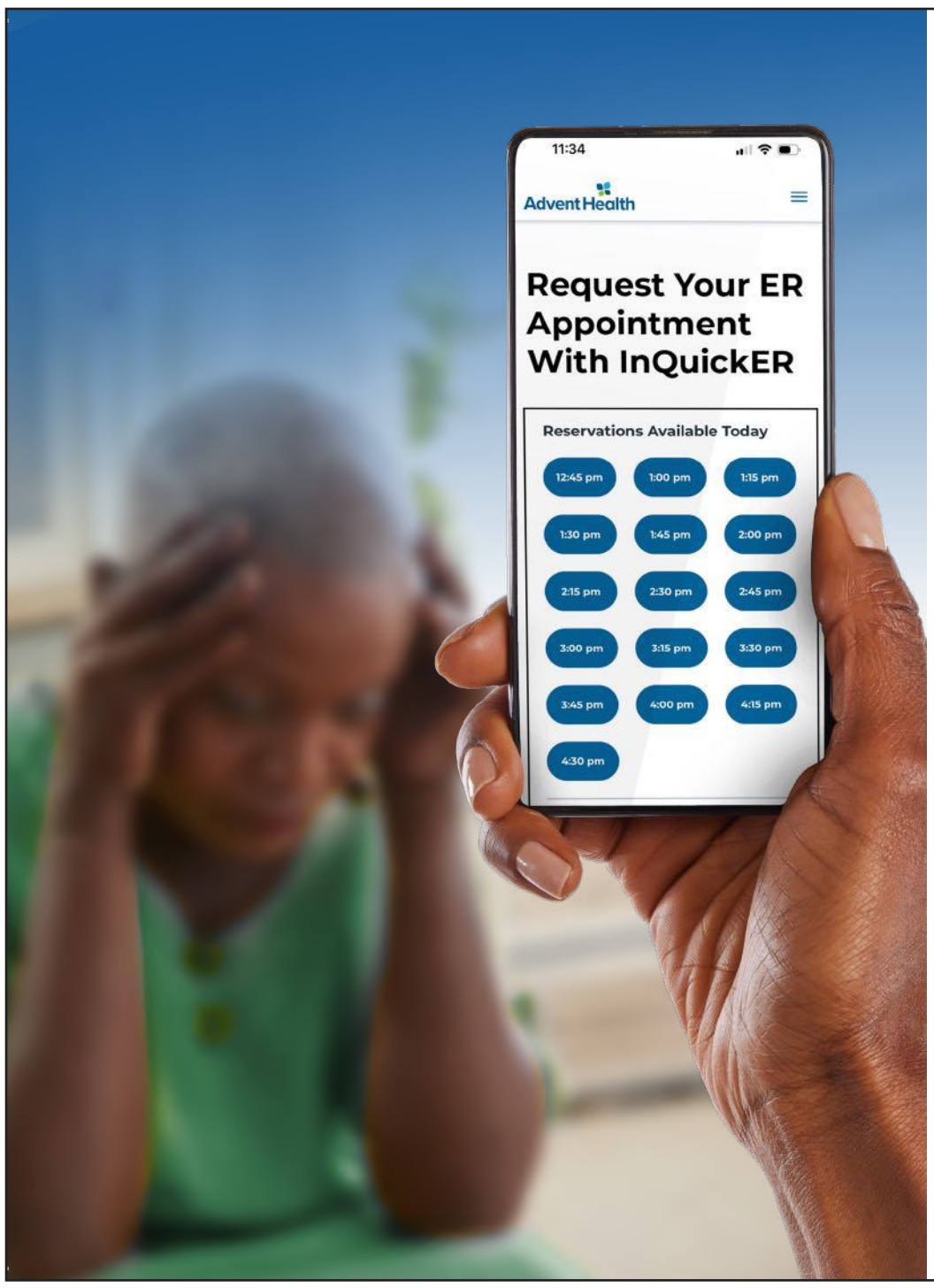
That academic focus is already shaping her recruiting approach. Jessee said she looks first at whether prospective players are the right fit for Florida Poly's rigorous STEM environment, then at how they can contribute on the court.

"The first thing I ask when I get information on a player or I see someone with potential is what are they interested in studying," Jessee said. "We can't just take anybody; I want to make sure they can also make it academically."

Recruiting is already underway, and Jessee said she is encouraged by the early response. As the team forms, she will focus on establishing standards early and cultivating a culture of excellence and responsibility.

"If you're not good off the court, you're not going to be good on the court," she said. "How you do anything is how you do everything."

For the most recent university news, visit https://floridapoly.edu/news/.



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ROTARY'S CAMP FLORIDA NAMES ELEANOR SAUNDERS AS NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

By Libby Hopkins



Eleanor Saunders will become the new Director of Rotary's Camp Florida on July 13 of this year. Saunders is a Brandon resident, a Rotarian and the former Executive Director of E.C.H.O. of Brandon.



Rotary's Camp Florida has been a part of the Brandon community since the 1950's. It was originally a camp used by the United Methodist Church, but in 1991, Rotary's Camp Florida was incorporated to acquire, operate, and maintain a year-round camp facility for children with special medical needs. The property on which Rotary's Camp Florida sits was purchased on December 26, 1991, and extensively remodeled. As the church camp was built in the 1950s, it was not designed for special-needs children. "It a local hidden gem and I don't want it to be hidden anymore," said Rotary's Camp Florida's new director, Eleanor Saunders.

Saunders is a Brandon resident, a Rotarian and the former Executive Director of E.C.H.O. of Brandon. She begins her new journey as the camp's director on July 13. "I was at E.C.H.O. for 11 years and I prayed very hard about taking the first step for the position at Rotary's Camp Florida," Saunders said. "The first step was submitting my resume and from that point it all seemed to fall into place."

The mission of Rotary's Camp Florida is to provide a safe, fun space to learn, grow, and play for groups whose members need supportive accommodations. "Rotary's Camp Florida is a 21-acre ADA-compliant campsite, and I can't wait to start promoting the camp's mission to the community and beyond," Saunders said. "It is a place that has so much potential and I love helping local nonprofit organizations realign and grow."

Rotary's Camp Florida welcomes non-profit and for-profit organizations for celebrations, team building, planning meetings, corporate retreats, or workshops. Throughout the 21-acre campus, guests can enjoy peaceful seating areas, lakeside views, and outdoor spaces for teambuilding exercises and other activities. The camp's facilities can be rented for the day, the weekend or for week-long camps. "I love that the camp has something for everyone," Saunders said. "My hope for the camp is that it will become very well known in the local market as an option for retreats and events and that earned revenue will full support our campers, so kids with special needs can come to camp without money being a concern. They can just come to camp and be a kid."

If you would like to learn more about Rotary's Camp Florida or if you are interested in renting the camp for an event. You can visit the camp's website at https://rotaryscampflorida.org or call 813-654-4042. The camp is located at 1915 Camp Florida Rd. in Brandon.

ALL ABOARD FOR SUMMER FUN AT THE FLORIDA RAILROAD MUSEUM

By Ella Baroni



Looking for a unique summer adventure close to home? The Florida Railroad Museum in Parrish offers visitors the opportunity to experience Florida's rich railroad heritage through historic train excursions, exhibits and special events.

Known as the museum "where you ride the exhibits," the Florida Railroad Museum allows guests to board vintage railcars and travel through the scenic countryside of rural Manatee County while learning about the important role railroads played in shaping Florida's history.

Founded with the mission of preserving the state's railroad heritage, the nonprofit museum operates on a six-mile stretch of track between Parrish and Willow. The rail line, originally built by the Seaboard Air Line Railroad in the early 1900s, was the first railroad route through Manatee County.

Each weekend, visitors can enjoy diesel-powered excursions aboard a variety of open-air, open-window and air-conditioned railcars. The trains are operated entirely by museum volunteers who contribute thousands of hours annually to maintain and preserve the collection.

In addition to regular excursions, the museum hosts a variety of special events throughout the year. Summer offerings include themed train rides and the popular Murder Mystery Dinner Train, which combines dining with interactive entertainment. Seasonal favorites return later in the year, including the Pumpkin Patch Express in the fall and the highly anticipated North Pole Express during the holiday season. The Christmas-themed attraction has become a cherished tradition for many local families.

Visitors can also explore the museum's gift shop, model railroad display and exhibits showcasing railroad artifacts. In Willow, a replica Seaboard Air Line station provides passengers with an opportunity to step off the train and experience a piece of Florida railroad history firsthand.

Named Tripadvisor's top attraction in Parrish, the museum also offers annual memberships starting at $45 and welcomes volunteers interested in helping preserve railroad history. Opportunities range from serving as a car host to assisting with train operations and restoration projects.

The Florida Railroad Museum is located at 12210 83rd St. E. in Parrish. The ticket office, gift shop and model railroad are open Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., while train excursions operate on weekends. For schedules, ticket information and upcoming events, visit www.frrm.org or call 941-776-0906.

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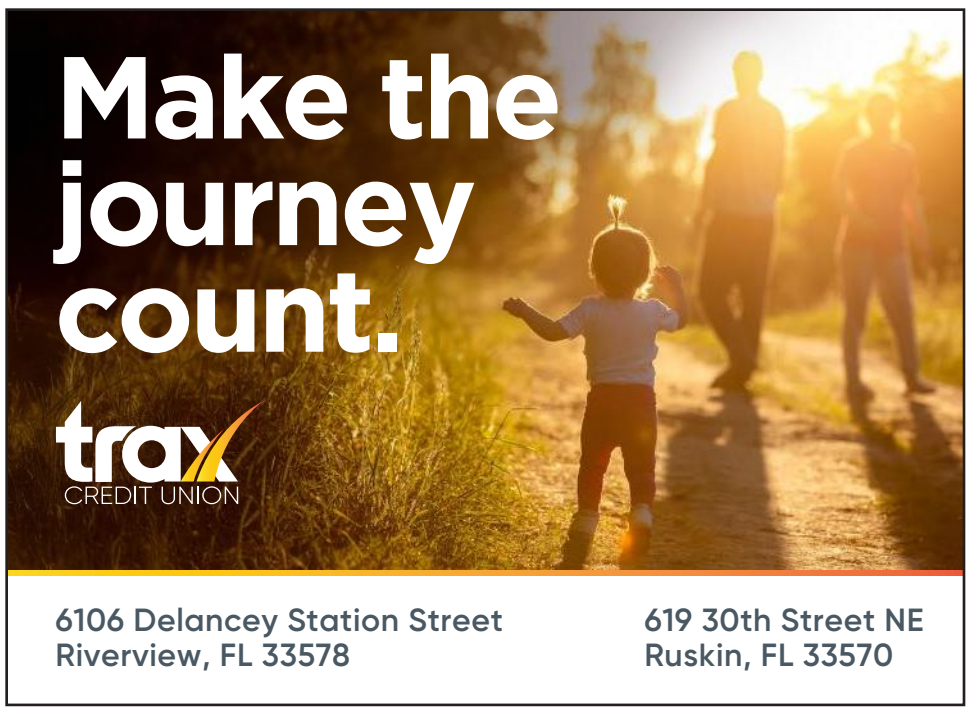

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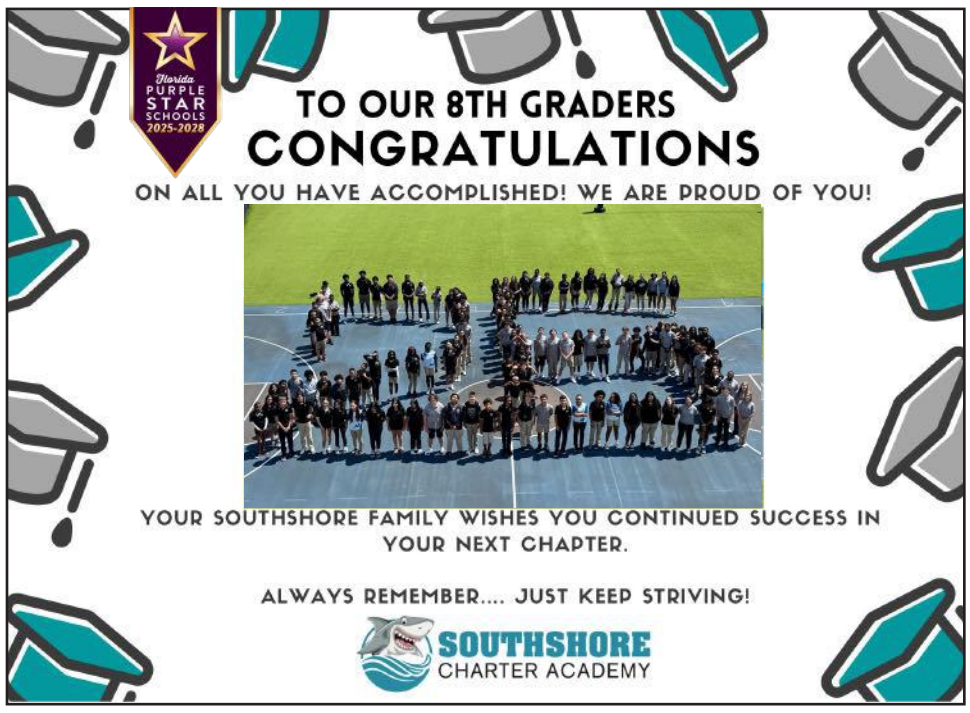

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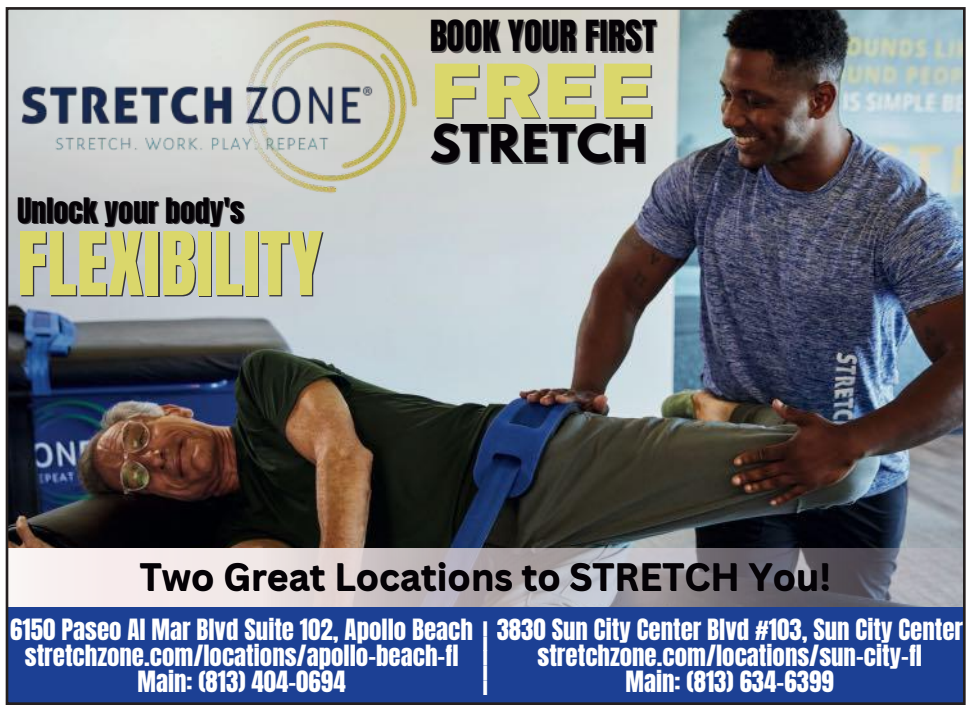
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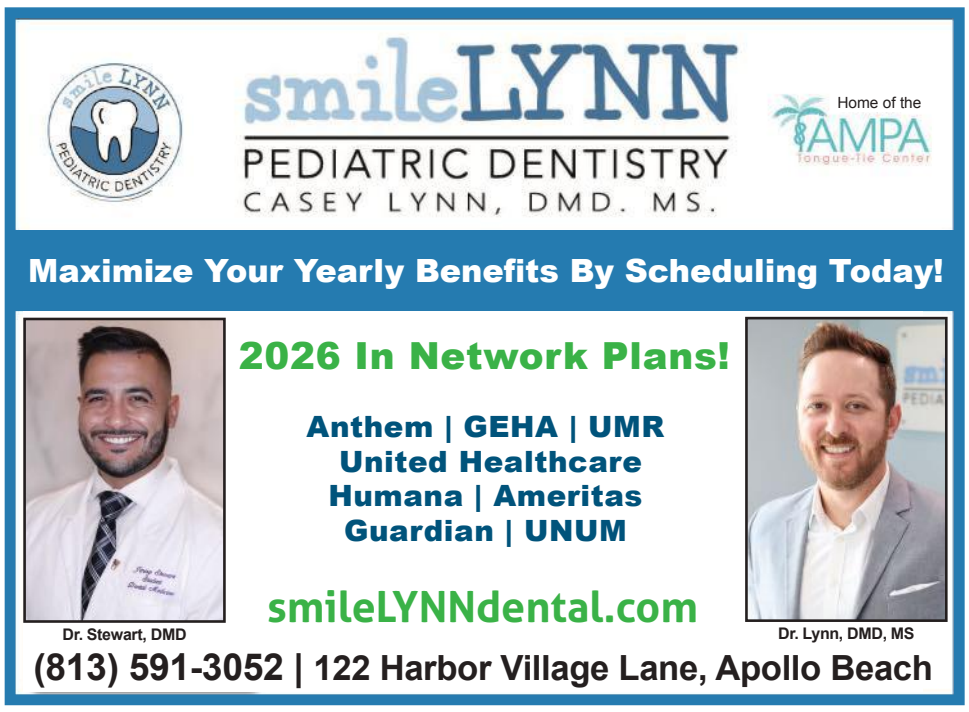






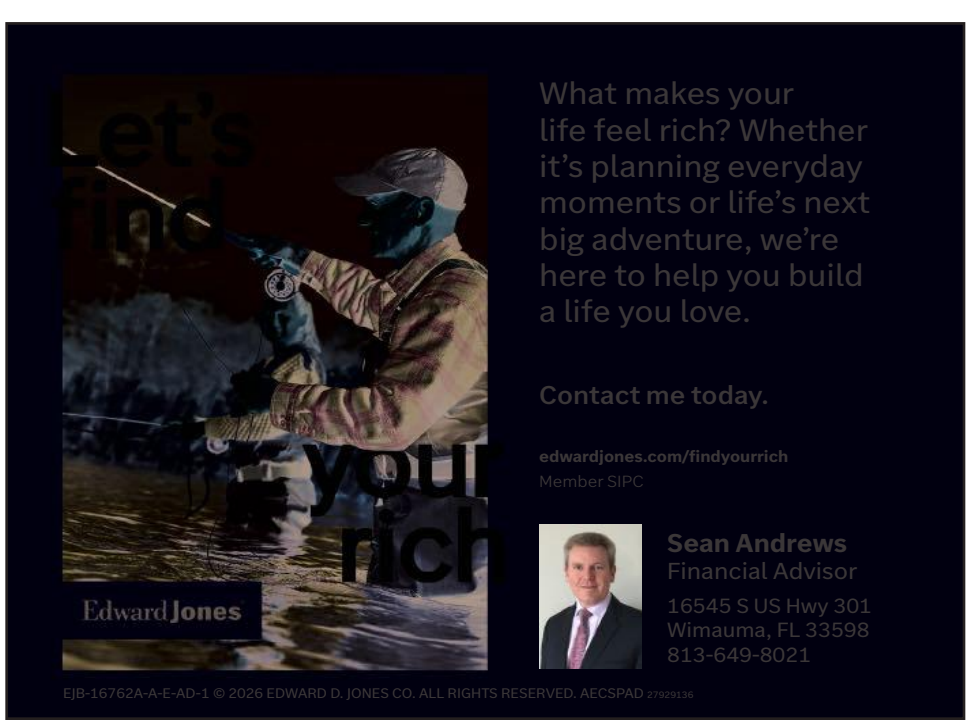












THREE USF FACULTY TO BE INDUCTED INTO FL INVENTORS HALL OF FAME

Staff Report



The Florida Inventors Hall of Fame announced that three distinguished University of South Florida faculty innovators are among the 2026 class of inductees. Dr. Mark Frankle, Dr. Patrick Hwu and Donald Keck are receiving the prestigious honor for their groundbreaking research and contributions to science and society.

"The University of South Florida is proud to serve as the home of the Florida Inventors Hall of Fame," said USF President Moez Limayem. "The 2026 inductees represent the very best in Florida-connected innovation. Their achievements remind us that research, entrepreneurship and invention have the power to improve lives, strengthen industries and shape the future."

Dr. Frankle, the chief of shoulder and elbow surgery at the Florida Orthopaedic Institute and a clinical professor in the USF Health Morsani College of Medicine, is an internationally recognized orthopedic surgeon, inventor and medical device innovator.

"It is incredibly meaningful to see reverse shoulder arthroplasty recognized by the Florida Inventors Hall of Fame as an invention that has changed lives," Dr. Frankle said. "The goal was always to restore function and relieve pain for patients who had limited options. I am proud that this work developed here in Florida."

Dr. Hwu is the president and chief executive officer of Moffitt Cancer Center and a professor of oncologic sciences in the USF Health Morsani College of Medicine. He is an internationally recognized physician-scientist and pioneering innovator in cancer immunotherapy. Dr. Hwu is best known for foundational work in developing chimeric receptor genes that led to modern CART-cell therapies.

Dr. Hwu holds more than 10 U.S. patents, and he has authored more than 300 scientific publications.

Keck, a professor in USF's Institute for Advanced Discovery & Innovation, is a pioneering physicist whose work revolutionized global communications and laid the foundation for the modern internet. As a member of Corning's Optical Waveguide Project team, Keck co-invented low-loss optical fiber in 1970, transforming fiber optics from a scientific concept into a practical, scalable technology for long-distance communication.

The 2026 class of inventors will be formally inducted on Friday, November 6, at the annual Induction Ceremony and Fundraising Gala in Tampa.

KEEP TAMPA BAY GROWS GREENER FUTURE WITH VOLUNTEERS & TREES

By Ella Baroni



For more than three decades, Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful has demonstrated that meaningful environmental change begins at the local level, empowering residents to improve their communities through volunteerism, education and hands-on conservation projects.

Founded in 1989, the nonprofit organization has become a leading force for environmental stewardship throughout Hillsborough County, engaging thousands of volunteers each year in community cleanups, tree plantings, sustainability initiatives and educational programs. Its mission is simple: inspire individuals to take an active role in creating a cleaner, greener and more resilient Tampa Bay.

One of the organization's latest efforts took place in May when Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful partnered with United Airlines and the Arbor Day Foundation to plant 15 trees at Skyway Park in Tampa. The project was designed to address several environmental challenges facing urban areas, including poor air quality, extreme heat, limited shade and a lack of green space.

The newly planted trees will provide long-term benefits to the community, helping reduce temperatures, improve air quality, manage stormwater runoff and enhance habitat for local wildlife. The initiative also supports efforts to rebuild tree canopy lost to storms, development and other environmental stressors.

"Projects like this are about investing in our communities and creating spaces where people can thrive," said Kristina Moreta, executive director of Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful. "With help from United Airlines and the Arbor Day Foundation, we are able to bring more shade, beauty and environmental benefits to neighborhoods that need it most."

The tree-planting project is part of a broader collaboration between Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful, the Arbor Day Foundation and corporate partners committed to strengthening urban forests and increasing climate resilience across the region.

The Arbor Day Foundation, a global nonprofit organization that has helped plant more than 500 million trees in communities and forests around the world, worked alongside local volunteers to make the Skyway Park project possible.

The recent effort is just one example of Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful's ongoing work. The organization also manages community cleanup events, Adopt-A-Road programs, hurricane preparedness and recovery initiatives, shoreline restoration projects and environmental education opportunities. Earlier this month, the nonprofit launched another major initiative to plant 100 trees at MacDill 48 Park.

As Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful continues expanding its reach, the message remains clear: when community members come together, even small actions can grow into a movement that benefits Tampa Bay for generations to come.

To get involved and learn more about opportunities, visit the website at www.keeptampabaybeautiful.org.







HOKUS POKUS LIVE! AT TAMPA THEATRE, PREPARE TO BE SPELLBOUND

By Abigail Dumas



This fall, get ready for a night of wickedly good fun as the beloved Sanderson Sisters take the stage like you've never seen them before. On Tuesday, November 3, at 8 p.m., the historic Tampa Theatre will host *Hokus Pokus Live!,* a theatrical parody of everyone's favorite Halloween classic.

This 18-plus camp retelling will be performed by a star-studded cast of drag royalty, including Jujubee, Sapphira Cristal and Ginger Minj of *RuPaul's Drag Race* as the three witches and Landon Cider of *Dragula* as Billy the zombie. The show follows the iconic three witches as they are resurrected for a night of chaos and comedy. In true Sanderson Sister fashion, the witches are ready to hex, enchant and attack unsuspecting victims in their quest for beauty and immortality. The production includes original songs and glamorous costumes, while serving tribute to the original 1993 movie.

The Tampa Theatre has historically offered diverse programming and celebrated queer art, being the annual host of the Tampa International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival since 1990. Additionally, the venue often shows films directed by or starring LGBTQ+ individuals. *Hokus Pokus Live!* is one of the most high-profile drag shows ever hosted by the theater with it being a highly anticipated event by many.

The Tampa Theatre previously hosted the 2025 production of *Hokus Pokus Live!* last October during its first tour, and tickets sold out completely. The show was well received by theatergoers in both America and Canada, prompting the cast to tour again. Excitingly, the final performance of this year's tour will be here in Tampa as the cast and crew wrap up their second season on the road.

Tickets are on sale now and can be purchased at the Tampa Theatre's physical box office, located at 711 N. Franklin St., in Tampa, or online at https://tampatheatre.org/. Standard tickets range from $23.50-$73, while VIP Meet and Greet packages start at $69 and go up to $99 plus fees and taxes. For those who love anything fun, campy and a little spooky, *Hokus Pokus Live!* is the perfect pick. Grab your broomsticks, gather your coven and prepare for a bewitching night at the Tampa Theatre.

80 CLUBS AND COUNTING: FLVS CONNECTS ONLINE LEARNERS

By Srishti Tripathi



Florida Virtual School students, families, and club sponsors gather face-to-face at the Hilton Orlando on May 14 to showcase academic, performance, and leadership milestones during the annual FLVS Club Awards event. (Photo courtesy of Florida Virtual School.)

Most people probably imagine online learning as a lonely experience, just a student and a computer, far from everyone else. But Florida Virtual School (FLVS) keeps proving that idea wrong. FLVS has created an online environment that feels very much like a real, thriving community. You can really see this in action every year at the FLVS Club Awards. Last month, students from all over Florida, including the Southeast Hillsborough County area, came together in Orlando for the big event.

On May 14, the Hilton Orlando buzzed with excitement as more than 150 students (from kindergarten all the way through 12th grade), along with their families and club sponsors, gathered for the celebration. This was one of those rare chances for students who usually connect online to finally shake hands, exchange stories and show off all the projects and skills they've poured their hearts into during the school year.

The Club Awards afternoon didn't disappoint. The room was alive with energy as students put on dance routines, cheerleading performances and theater scenes. The energy shifted when American Sign Language students took the stage to interpret songs live, a moment that clearly stuck with everyone in the audience. It wasn't just about the arts, either. The FLVS Future Farmers of America (FFA) chapter kicked off the event, and the senior class of 2026 officers delivered an original skit that captured the ups and downs of their virtual high school journey. If you wandered around, you could catch a mock debate, browse a photography showcase and check out projects from the Science National Honor Society.

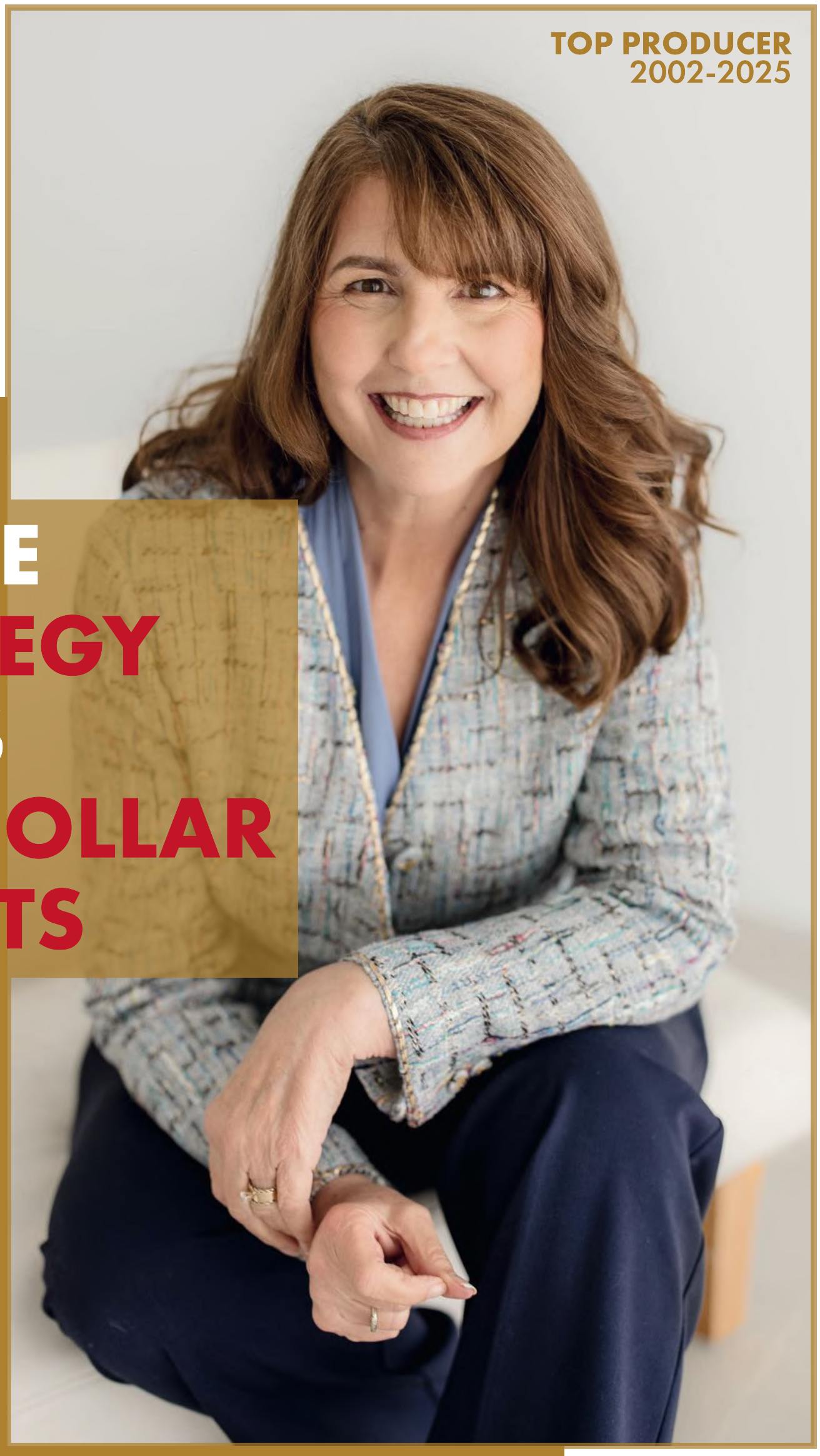
If you're a family in Riverview or Hillsborough County and you want your child to have these kinds of experiences, there's plenty to choose from. FLVS currently runs more than 80 clubs and activities, such as the Spanish Honor Society and groups focused on robotics, creative writing and specific interests that appeal to all kinds of students. The FLVS Foundation supports these clubs, and although most meetings happen online, the school organizes in-person events throughout the year, so students have a chance to turn virtual friendships into real ones.

Summer is around the corner, and for a lot of local families, the Club Awards are a reminder that education doesn't have to mean being stuck inside a traditional classroom. FLVS keeps blending the flexibility of digital learning with those classic, unforgettable moments you'd expect from any school experience. If you want to find out more or check out the clubs for yourself, head over to www.flvs.net. There's a whole new community waiting for you.

Visit its website or call 800-374-1430. For student activities and extracurricular information, visit www.flvs.net/clubs.



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Air Patrol Charter, Celebrate The 4th, Free Hot Meals For Seniors & More....

Compiled by Jenny Bennett
jbennett@ospreyobserver.com



Wimauma Civil Air Patrol Squadron Receives Official Charter

The Wimauma Civil Air Patrol (CAP) Squadron is proud to announce that it has received its official charter from Civil Air Patrol National Headquarters, formalizing its status as an active unit.

"This charter represents a major milestone for our team," said Lt. Col. Dave Mullins, commander of the Wimauma CAP Squadron. "It validates the hard work of our founding members and opens the door for expanded opportunities to support local emergency management, provide valuable STEM education to our youth and enhance character development in our cadets."

The Wimauma CAP Squadron operates under the Florida Wing and is actively recruiting both adult volunteers and cadets ages 12-18. The squadron meets on Wednesdays from 6-8:30 p.m. at the Wimauma Airport, located at 6505 SR 674 in Wimauma. The unit focuses on three primary missions: emergency services (search and rescue, disaster relief), aerospace education and cadet programs.

For more information about joining the Wimauma CAP Squadron or to learn about upcoming events, visit www.gocivilairpatrol.com or contact the squadron directly at 813-699-9120.

Celebrate The Fourth Of July At Ruskin Memorial VFW Post 6287

Ruskin Memorial VFW Post 6287 is gearing up for what promises to be one of the most memorable events yet: a grand Fourth of July celebration marking 250 years of American independence. On Independence Day, the VFW Post invites its members, fellow veterans and their families and friends to join in at its location at 5120 N. U.S. 41 in Apollo Beach. Expect live entertainment throughout the day, delicious burgers, brats and more, all in a patriotic atmosphere that honors our nation's birthday and those who defend its freedoms.

In a world that moves fast, Post 6287 reminds us of what matters: honoring sacrifice, fostering community and standing strong for the values that make America exceptional. Whether you're a veteran looking for connection, a family wanting to show support, or a neighbor seeking good company and great events, our doors are open.

Come celebrate with Ruskin Memorial VFW Post 6287 this Fourth of July and see why, after 80 years, it continues to thrive as a cornerstone of service and patriotism in SouthShore. For more information on events, membership or how to get involved, visit https://vfw6287.org/ or call 813-645-2935.

Free Hot Meals For Seniors

The United Methodist Church of Sun City Center invites local seniors to enjoy a free, healthy, hot meal every Monday from 12 Noon-1 p.m. Lunches are served in the Life Enrichment Center, located at 1971 Haverford Ave. in Sun City Center. No reservations are required, and all seniors are welcome to attend. The weekly lunch program offers not only a nutritious meal but also an opportunity for fellowship and community connection. Guests are encouraged to bring a friend and enjoy a welcoming atmosphere.

For more information, please contact the United Methodist Church of Sun City Center at 813-634-2539.



American Legion Post 246 Donates Flag Holders To Lennard JROTC Class

American Legion Post 246 completed construction of three flag and guidon holders for the Lennard JROTC class. JROTC Commander Lt. Col. David Dietz approached American Legion Post 246 for help with funding the flag stands, which would be the central feature of the unit's proposed Wall of Honor. However, Post 246 not only voted to fund the project but also went a step further and actually built it.

Two members of American Legion Post 246, Sergeant-at-Arms Ken Holt and Jeff Michaelsen, used the Sawdust Engineers workshop, receiving much advice and moral support from the members of that club. Michaelsen created the plans for the boxes. After a bit of trial and error, he and Holt finished the requested two boxes. Discovering they had enough material remaining, they constructed a third flag holder especially designed to display the U.S. and state flags.

Jewish Genealogy Presentation

Bruce Hadburg, president of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Tampa Bay, will speak on Searching Our Jewish Roots on Sunday, July 12, at 2 p.m. in Beth Israel's sanctuary, located at 1115 E. Del Webb Blvd. in Sun City Center. This presentation, which is open to the public, is for those with Ashkenazi, Sephardic and Mizrachi backgrounds — anyone who wants to search their Jewish roots. Genealogical searches have been especially difficult for Jewish people due to name changes/spellings, European towns that no longer exist and the destruction of records by the Nazis. For more information on this event, contact Ricki at president@jcscc.org.

BIG BEND ROAD PROJECT AIMS TO EASE CONGESTION IN SOUTH HILLSBOROUGH

By Brian Bokor



Hillsborough County Florida

Big Bend Road Project Location Map
US 41 to Covington Garden Drive
CIP 69647000 / 69692000

Hillsborough County is moving forward with plans to widen a key section of Big Bend Road in South Hillsborough County, a $25.2 million project designed to improve traffic flow, increase capacity and enhance safety along one of the area's busiest corridors.

To help keep pace with that growth, Hillsborough County is moving forward with plans to widen approximately three-quarters of a mile of Big Bend Road between U.S. 41 and Covington Garden Drive, a project expected to cost about $25.2 million.

The project will transform the existing four-lane divided roadway into a six-lane urban corridor designed to improve traffic flow, increase capacity and enhance safety.

County officials designed the project to ease congestion and improve mobility along a corridor that has experienced significant growth in recent years.

Improvements include widening the roadway from four lanes to six lanes, adding curb and gutter systems, a closed drainage network, improved stormwater infrastructure and a landscaped median ranging from 11-36 feet wide.

Drivers will also see a new traffic signal and southbound left-turn lane at Kings Lake Drive and Old Big Bend Road.

Another major change will occur at the intersection of Big Bend Road and Covington Garden Drive. Under the current design, Old Big Bend Road will no longer connect directly through the intersection. Instead, the intersection will be converted into a three-leg configuration intended to improve traffic operations and reduce conflict points.

The project also includes 10-foot-wide sidewalks on both sides of Big Bend Road, enhanced pedestrian crossings and approximately one-quarter mile of new concrete trail along Waterset Boulevard. The trail will connect the Scenic Drive Trailhead to the future sidewalk network along Big Bend Road.

The improvements come as South Hillsborough continues to add new homes, businesses and commercial development, bringing more vehicles onto roads originally built for a much smaller population.

Big Bend Road serves as a key connection between U.S. 41, Interstate 75 and some of the county's fastest-growing communities, making transportation improvements along the corridor a priority for local leaders.

Funding is expected to come from a combination of Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) funding, impact fees, grants, county matching funds and development-related contributions. More than $12 million of the project's funding is expected to come from FDOT.

The project remains in the design phase. Design completion is anticipated in 2026, with procurement expected to conclude in 2027. Construction is currently projected to be completed by mid-2029.

For more information, residents can contact Hillsborough County Public Works at 813-635-5400.





SUMMER: A GREAT TIME TO DREAM BIGGER



Summertime often brings a change of pace for families affected by autism. School routines pause, calendars may become a little less hectic and many parents begin looking for ways to keep their children engaged, learning and growing.

As parents, we are constantly surrounded by advice. Friends, family members, professionals, social media and even strangers often have opinions about what we should be doing. While advice can be helpful, it's important to remember that nobody knows your child, and your family, better than you do.

You are the expert on your child.

This summer, instead of focusing on what your child 'should' be doing, consider what you would like to empower them to accomplish next. What strengths can you build on? What interests bring them joy? What goals are meaningful for your family?

Maybe your child has a talent that deserves more attention. Perhaps they love music, art, technology, animals, swimming, cooking or building things. Maybe they have a hobby that lights them up and gives them confidence. Summer can be the perfect opportunity to explore those interests and help them grow.

For some families, growth may look different. For example, my personal focus for my 21-year-old son this summer is on life skills, communication, social opportunities and creating more opportunities for independence. And sometimes, what a child needs most is rest. After a long school year filled with demands and expectations, summer can be a chance to recharge and reset.

The goal isn't perfection. The goal is to make progress.

Small steps often lead to big accomplishments over time. Celebrate the victories, no matter how small they may seem. A new skill, a new friendship, trying a new activity and gaining confidence in something they once found difficult are all wins worth celebrating.

At Experienced Autism Alliance, we encourage families to focus on possibilities rather than limitations. Every child has unique strengths, gifts and potential waiting to be discovered.

This summer, dream a little bigger, follow your child's lead and remember that growth looks different for everyone. The journey is not about comparing your child to others; it's about helping them become the best version of themselves.



THE GOLD BAR SCAM: STEALING FROM SENIORS



A growing fraud trend across Florida is costing seniors their life savings. Recent cases locally highlight a sophisticated scam in which criminals convince victims to liquidate their assets, purchase gold bars and hand them over to couriers posing as government agents.

One of the most notable cases involved an 80-year-old Bradenton veteran who lost his entire $1.4 million life savings. Detectives later connected the scheme to a nationwide fraud operation that stole more than $6 million from victims across the country.

The scam typically begins with a phone call, email, text message or computer pop-up warning that the victim's identity has been compromised. The caller often claims to be from a federal agency such as U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the U.S. Marshals Service, the FBI or another government entity.

The criminal then creates a crisis. The victim is told that their Social Security number has been linked to criminal activity, their bank accounts are under attack or that an arrest warrant has been issued in their name. To make the story believable, the scammer may provide a fake badge number, a case number, official-looking documents and even transfer calls between multiple 'agents.'

Once fear and trust have been established, the victim is instructed to withdraw money from retirement accounts, savings accounts or investment funds and convert those funds into physical gold bars. The scammers claim the gold is needed to protect the victim's assets or assist with a confidential government investigation.

The final step is the courier. A person arrives at the victim's home or a designated location to collect the gold. By the time the victim realizes the truth, the gold is gone and nearly impossible to recover.

Remember:

• No legitimate government agency, law enforcement organization or financial institution will ever instruct you to purchase gold, withdraw cash or surrender valuables as part of an investigation.

• If you receive such a request, stop communication immediately and contact local law enforcement or a trusted family member before taking any action.

If you have any other questions or concerns, please contact me, Master Deputy Jeff Merry, Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, at 813-242-5515.

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SEVEN SENIORS EARN SCHOLARSHIPS FOR K-12 PERFECT ATTENDANCE

Staff Report



Seven Hillsborough County Public Schools seniors were recognized at the June 2 School Board meeting for achieving perfect attendance from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Seven Hillsborough County Public Schools seniors were recently recognized for an extraordinary accomplishment that few students achieve: maintaining perfect attendance from kindergarten through 12th grade.

The students were honored during the Hillsborough County School Board meeting on June 2, where district leaders celebrated their dedication, perseverance and commitment to education over the course of 13 consecutive school years.

To further recognize the achievement, Suncoast Credit Union presented each student with a $500 scholarship.

The students earning the distinction of perfect attendance throughout their entire K-12 educational journey are Julius Montalvo of Gaither High School; Nathan Jorden and Noah Jorden of Lennard High School; Amanda Harris of Newsome High School; Darius Donaldson-Dunphy of Plant City High School; and Matthew Mason and Sadie Jones of Sickles High School.

Perfect attendance requires students to be present every school day for more than a decade, despite illnesses, family obligations, transportation challenges and other circumstances that can interrupt school attendance. District officials noted that the achievement reflects not only the students' commitment but also the support of parents and guardians who prioritized education and helped ensure their children were in class each day.

"I am incredibly proud of these students and commend the consistency and commitment they have shown throughout their education," said Superintendent Van Ayres. "Their dedication speaks volumes about their character and will serve them well in the future. I also want to congratulate their families for providing the support that helped them succeed and thank Suncoast Credit Union for recognizing these students in such a meaningful way."

School leaders said regular attendance is one of the strongest indicators of academic success, helping students stay engaged in learning, build relationships with teachers and peers, and develop habits that prepare them for college, careers and life beyond graduation.

As these seven students prepare to begin the next chapter of their lives, they leave behind a remarkable record of reliability and determination that sets them apart among their graduating classmates. Their achievement serves as an example of the value of consistency, responsibility and commitment to personal goals.

FROM HOMETOWN PUZZLES TO GLOBAL ENTERTAINMENT EMPIRE

By Libby Hopkins

In 2017, father-and-son team Jeffrey and Blake Stone were proudly showing off their very first business venture in Brandon, a single escape room facility hand-built inside a converted law office. Today, the Stone family has transformed that local passion project into an international entertainment powerhouse, anchoring a massive global escape room franchise and introducing cutting-edge British virtual reality technology to the United States.



The GAME OVER Escape Rooms brand has expanded to more than 34 countries worldwide.

The Stone family is the owner of several GAME OVER Escape Rooms throughout Brandon and Tampa.

"Our family's rapid ascent showcases a masterclass in business scaling, shifting from localized, handcrafted experiences to high-tech, multinational partnerships," said Jeffery Stone. "When Legends Escape Rooms first opened its doors on Brandon Boulevard, it was a deeply personal affair. Our family spent six months meticulously building every puzzle by hand. Our initial rooms leaned heavily on family heritage and immersive storytelling."

That focus on premium quality paid off massively; their popular Dungeon VII room reached international critical acclaim when it received the Best Overall In-Person Escape Room of the Year award in 2021 from the industry site ESCAPETHEROOMers.

To aggressively scale their business, the Stone family partnered with GAME OVER Escape Rooms, a global industry titan originally founded in Athens, Greece.

"Transitioning our operations to serve as official flagship showrooms, we opened high-tech corporate locations across the area," Jeffery Stone said. "The upgrades brought premium electronic automation, movie-set-quality detailing and world-renowned room themes, like Lost City of Atlantis, Money Heist, Haunted Mansion, and Philosopher Stone."

The GAME OVER Escape Rooms brand has expanded to more than 34 countries worldwide. Because of their proven operational expertise, the Stone family now helps facilitate North American franchise opportunities for the GAME OVER corporation, guiding the next generation of entertainment entrepreneurs across the continent.

"In addition to conquering physical escape rooms, we have officially pivoted into the future of immersive tech," Jeffery Stone said. "Our family has partnered with VRXtra, a premier virtual reality gaming company from the United Kingdom that has taken the British entertainment sector by storm."

In a massive win for the local economy, the Stones have just launched the first-ever VRXtra location outside of the United Kingdom right here in the Tampa Bay area. Located at 317 N. Dale Mabry Highway in Tampa, the state-of-the-art facility sits in the booming Midtown district.

If you would like to learn more about GAME OVER Escape Rooms or visit https://tampa.escapegameover.us/en.



MOSAIC AND COUNTY WORK TO RECLAIM 4,300 ACRES AT FOUR CORNERS PHOSPHATE MINE SITE FOR FUTURE RECREATION USE

By Brian Bokor



Treehouses were built and placed by volunteers at Mosaic.



Laura Morris, Mosaic Company, gives a tour of Four Corners.



Four Corners offers 4,300 acres of lowland and wetland.

When most people visit places like Alafia River State Park or Edward Medard Conservation Park, they likely don't realize they are standing on land that was once mined for phosphate. Across Southeastern Hillsborough County, a similar transformation is underway as The Mosaic Company works to restore thousands of acres of former mining property into wetlands, wildlife habitat and conservation land.

During a recent media tour of the Four Corners/Lonesome Project, Mosaic representatives provided an inside look at the lengthy process required to reclaim land after mining operations end. The restoration effort encompasses approximately 4,000 acres of preservation, enhancement and reclamation areas near County Road 39 and State Road 674, east of Wimauma and south of Lithia. While mining itself may last only a portion of a property's history, reclamation can continue for decades as restored lands are monitored and evaluated against regulatory performance standards.

Long before mining begins, companies must submit detailed reclamation plans showing regulators what the property will look like once mining is complete. According to Jackie Barron, Senior Manager of Stakeholder Relations & Advocacy Communications for The Mosaic Company, restoration is built into the process from the beginning. "Before we ever touch or turn over a single piece of dirt, here's what it's going to look like when we're all said and done," Barron said. Since 1975, Florida law has required every acre of mined land to be reclaimed.

Modern reclamation standards require far more than simply planting vegetation after mining concludes. Laura Morris, Superintendent of Reclamation Compliance for The Mosaic Company, explained that today's requirements stem from regulations designed to ensure mined lands are restored rather than abandoned. "The rule came in 1975 and said, okay, you can't just mine it and leave it open cut," Morris said. Today, reclamation projects must meet strict standards involving wetlands, native vegetation, wildlife habitat and long-term ecological performance.

"For every wetland acre that is impacted for mining, you have to put back the same acres," Morris said. "We have to put back 10 percent more." Even areas that appear healthy and support wildlife may not satisfy every requirement established during the permitting process. At one point during the tour, Morris pointed toward a thriving section of habitat and remarked, "That beautiful patch that you guys were taking pictures of ... that would not be releasable." According to Morris, reclamation is measured by environmental performance rather than appearance, requiring years of monitoring before land can be released from regulatory oversight.

The timeline itself is one of the most surprising aspects of the project. According to Mosaic officials, portions of the current land donation effort are still being completed nearly three decades after the original agreement was reached. "So we're 30 years in ... 30 years. That's a long time," Morris said. The long-term nature of the project reflects the time required to establish functioning wetlands, mature forests and sustainable wildlife habitat.

Chuck Pons, Reclamation Compliance Specialist for The Mosaic Company, said the project includes approximately 4,000 acres of preservation, enhancement and reclamation areas.

"When you put the preservation, enhancement and reclamation, it's around 4,000 acres," Pons said. The acreage includes wetlands, uplands, pine habitat and wildlife corridors that are already supporting native species and helping reconnect large areas of conservation land throughout Southeastern Hillsborough County.

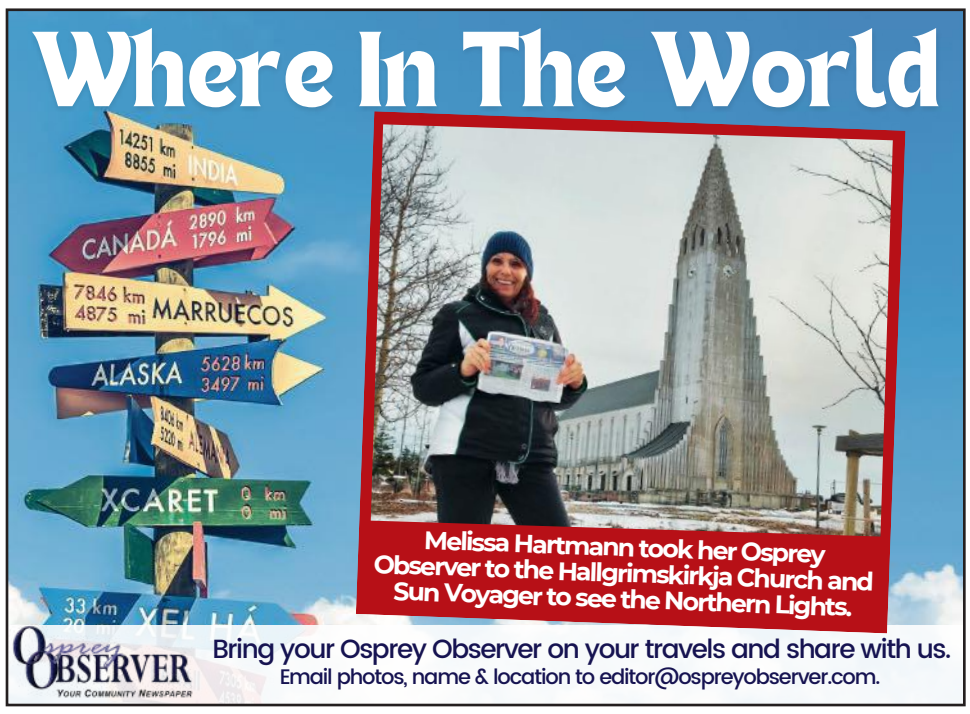
Even after vegetation becomes established, the work continues. "Then you have to maintain basically every year," Morris said. And perhaps the simplest explanation for why reclamation takes so long came while discussing forest recovery: "Trees don't grow overnight," Morris said.

For Pons, seeing the finished product provides a unique sense of accomplishment. "My finished products, I'm a little more proud of than neighborhood, neighborhood, neighborhoods," he said.

Many Hillsborough County residents already enjoy reclaimed phosphate lands without realizing it, including parks and conservation areas that were once active mining sites before undergoing similar restoration efforts.

"There are areas that you drive by all the time that you don't know that were mined and reclaimed," Morris said.

That may ultimately be the goal of reclamation itself. When the work is successful, the mining disappears from view, leaving behind wetlands, forests, wildlife habitat and public lands that can serve future generations long after the phosphate has been removed.









$1.6 BILLION ONE WATER PROJECT MOVES FORWARD IN S. HILLSBOROUGH

By Brian Bokor





Hillsborough County officials officially broke ground on the One Water South Wastewater Conveyance and Treatment Project on April 24, marking a major milestone in the county's $1.6 billion One Water infrastructure initiative.

The project centers on construction of a 200-acre Advanced Wastewater Treatment Plant near the Southeast County Landfill in Lithia. County officials said the facility is designed to support South Hillsborough's long-term wastewater and reclaimed water needs through at least 2050.

The One Water Program serves the county's rapidly growing south-central service area, including Apollo Beach, Brandon, Gibsonton, Riverview, Ruskin, Sun City Center, Valrico and Wimauma.

County leaders described the One Water Program as a long-range strategy focused on resiliency, sustainability and future growth. The 'One Water' concept treats drinking water, wastewater, reclaimed water and stormwater as one interconnected system designed to protect resources while supporting regional development.

The wastewater conveyance and treatment project itself is estimated at approximately $1.2 billion. The project includes the advanced treatment facility, the Balm Road Super Pump Station and more than 20 miles of wastewater and reclaimed water pipelines. The broader $1.6 billion capital program also includes additional long-term drinking water and reclaimed water improvements throughout South Hillsborough County.

By 2030, the Lithia facility is expected to process 24 million gallons of wastewater per day, with designs already in place to eventually expand capacity to 30 million gallons per day.

"What's going to be built is a 30 million gallon per day advanced wastewater treatment plant, some of the most advanced technology that's out there, for purposes of providing adequate treatment capacity for our growing community," said George Cassady, assistant county administrator for public utilities.



The project also includes the Balm Road Super Pump Station, which can move up to 56 million gallons of wastewater per day to the new facility. The station features a 5-million-gallon emergency storage tank designed to improve long-term system resiliency.

Pipeline construction is another major component of the project, including 10 miles of wastewater pipeline and 13 miles of reclaimed water pipeline ranging from 42-48 inches in diameter. Officials said reclaimed water infrastructure is critical because it reduces dependence on drinking water supplies while improving environmental sustainability and future water reliability.

Much of the large-scale utility construction residents are currently seeing throughout South Hillsborough, including pipeline staging, trenching operations and roadway utility work, is tied to multiple major infrastructure projects happening simultaneously across the region.

While Tampa Bay Water's 26-mile South Hillsborough Pipeline project and Hillsborough County's One Water Wastewater Program are separate initiatives, the two projects are closely connected and designed to work together to support continued growth across Riverview, Brandon, Ruskin, Valrico and surrounding communities.

The project is being delivered through a progressive design-build partnership between Garney Construction and Hazen & Sawyer, along with partners Ardurra, Stantec and Wade Trim.

"What makes this project stand out is that it goes beyond simply adding treatment capacity," said Eric Wagner, director of southeast plant operations at Garney. "At a time when growing communities are looking for more sustainable ways to plan ahead, Hillsborough County is setting a strong example through its long-term investment in infrastructure."

County leaders said the investment is necessary as South Hillsborough continues experiencing rapid residential and commercial expansion.

"We are developing homes here, but we didn't have the infrastructure before," said Hillsborough County Commissioner Christine Miller. "And so, as the people continue to push outside of the city, we have to provide the resources for them."

While pipeline work began in fall 2025, the April 2026 groundbreaking launched vertical construction for the treatment facility and pump station. Phase one is expected to be completed in 2028, with full buildout anticipated by 2030.

Officials said existing customers should not notice interruptions to daily water or wastewater service during construction.

"The beauty of this program is that customers will not see a change in their service," Cassady said. "This will just provide additional resilient capacity for now and in the future."

Drivers may notice construction activity near County Road 672 and east of U.S. 301, though county officials said efforts are being made to minimize traffic disruptions during construction.

Once complete, the One Water Program is expected to become one of the most important infrastructure systems supporting long-term growth and resiliency throughout South Hillsborough County.



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4TH PARADE RETURNS WITH NEW LOCATION AND EXPANDED FUNFEST

By Olivia Clark



A community tradition is returning this year as the Greater Brandon July 4th Parade celebrates its 69th year with a new location and a lineup of activities designed for families. Hosted by the Greater Brandon Action Network (GBAN), the parade will take place on Saturday, July 4, at the Hillsborough County Fairgrounds, located at 215 Sydney Washer Rd. in Dover. Following the parade, guests can enjoy a community Funfest featuring free admission, free parking and activities for all ages.

This year's event holds special significance, as the nation is celebrating the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Organizers are encouraging residents from Brandon and surrounding communities to gather and commemorate the milestone while continuing a local tradition that has brought families together for generations.

According to Lisa Rodriguez, GBAN president and parade chair, the event was moved from its traditional Brandon route due to extensive Tampa Bay Water construction projects impacting major roadways throughout the area.

"We moved our location this year due to all the watermain line construction and detours cutting through our Brandon roads in order to get more water to South County," said Rodriguez.

After exploring multiple options, organizers found a new home at the Hillsborough County Fairgrounds, where the additional space created an opportunity to expand the celebration beyond the parade itself.

"After meeting with the fairgrounds staff and seeing all the space available to us, we decided to add the Funfest to follow the parade," said Rodriguez.

Attendees can look forward to a variety of attractions throughout the day, including children's activities, food trucks, vendors, a live band, a DJ, a dunk tank and community contests. Guests will also have the opportunity to participate in watermelon and cherry pie eating contests as well as a chili cook-off, with prizes awarded throughout the event.

GBAN, a nonprofit organization, was established to ensure the continuation of Brandon's annual Independence Day parade tradition after leadership transitioned from The Community Roundtable Board of Trustees. Since then, the organization has remained committed to creating a family-friendly event that celebrates both community pride and patriotism.

"This year marks a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to celebrate America's 250th birthday," said Rodriguez. "Put on your red, white and blue and join us for a festive day."

The Greater Brandon July 4th Parade and Funfest will conclude at 6 p.m. For more information, visit www.greaterbrandonactionnetwork.com or email july4thparade@greaterbrandonactionnetwork.com.



FOURTH OF JULY: MORE THAN A PARADE



A 1980s Fourth of July parade on the corner of Moon Avenue and Brandon Boulevard.

There is something about a Fourth of July morning in Brandon that feels familiar in a way that is hard to explain until you've lived it. Before the heat settles in and before the fireworks later that night, the town quietly transforms. Folding chairs begin appearing along the sidewalks, children wave small flags too big for their hands, and neighbors who may not have seen each other in months greet one another like no time has passed at all.

The Brandon Fourth of July Parade has been part of this community for more than 60 years, with some accounts placing its origins back to the late 1950s. What began as a small hometown celebration, created by local volunteers who simply wanted to bring people together, has grown into one of the most cherished Independence Day traditions in Hillsborough County.

Over the decades, the parade has evolved. Routes have shifted, organizations have changed and leadership has passed from one group of community volunteers to another. Yet through all of it, the spirit has remained the same. This is not just an event; it is a reflection of Brandon itself.

Even when the parade was paused or reimagined in recent years, the community's response made something clear: This tradition matters. And when it returned in full, so did the crowds, lining the streets with the same pride and excitement that generations before them once knew.

What makes this parade so enduring is not only the floats, the marching bands or the candy tossed to waiting children. It is the continuity.

In a world that changes quickly, Brandon's Fourth of July parade remains one of those rare traditions that holds steady. It reminds us that history is not only something we study; it is something we live, together, year after year, right here at home.

As we look ahead to America's 250th anniversary, this small-town parade feels even more meaningful.

It is a reminder that the story of this country is not only written in grand places but also in communities like ours, where tradition is carried forward not because it has to be but because we choose to keep showing up.

This year's parade, set to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, will take place at a new location at the Hillsborough County Fairgrounds in Dover at 215 Sydney Washer Rd., beginning at 10 a.m.





TRIPLE CREEK RADIO CONTROL AIRCRAFT CLUB



Photo by Phillip Brown Jr.

Hey Riverview... DID YOU KNOW there's a hidden gem where pilots take to the skies without ever leaving the ground?

Tucked away off Balm Boyette Road is the Triple Creek Radio Control Aircraft Club (Triple Creek RC Field), one of the coolest places in our community that many people drive right past without ever realizing it's there!

This incredible flying field is home to hobbyists who fly everything from realistic warbirds and aerobatic stunt planes to giant-scale aircraft and helicopters. Watching these talented pilots is like seeing a real airshow on a smaller scale—and the precision and skill involved is truly impressive.

Whether you've been flying RC aircraft for years or you're simply curious about the hobby, the club welcomes visitors who want to stop by and watch the action. It's a great family outing, and kids especially love seeing these amazing model airplanes perform loops, rolls, and incredible aerial maneuvers.

Thinking about getting into the hobby? Club members are known for being friendly, knowledgeable, and always happy to talk about their aircraft and answer questions from newcomers.

Triple Creek RC Field-12705 Balm Boyette Rd. Riverview.

When can you visit?

The field is generally active throughout the week, but weekend mornings—especially Saturdays and Sundays—are usually the busiest times, making them the perfect opportunity to see dozens of aircraft in the air and meet local pilots.

So next time you're looking for something unique to do around Riverview, grab the family and check out one of our area's best-kept secrets. You might just discover your next favorite hobby!

Have you ever visited the Triple Creek RC Field? Let me know—I always love discovering the hidden gems that make our community so special! Have a hidden gem you'd like to see featured, email me at thekeringroup@gmail.com

For more on Triple Creek Radio Club, visit www.triplecreekrc.com.

THRIFTY DEPOT IN BRANDON OFFERS QUALITY ITEMS AT RESALE PRICES

By Jane Owen



Thrifty Depot is located at 723 W. Lumsden Rd. It is open Monday through Friday, 4:30-8:30 p.m., and on Saturday, 10 a.m.-8:30 p.m.

Bargain shoppers and anyone on a tight budget should check out Thrifty Depot in Brandon. Located near O'Brien's Irish Pub and Grill in the Oak Park Plaza on Lumsden Road, Thrifty Depot offer amazing deals on clothing, collectibles, housewares, toys, jewelry and more. The inventory changes often and includes both gently used items from garage and estate sales and new items purchased from liquidation pallets from local stores.

The owners, Gil Brenn and Doris Maggiore, are a son-and-mom team who live in Brandon and Valrico, respectively. They previously had a store in Tampa but decided to move their shop closer to home.

"Choosing this location was because it is close to home in our community," Brenn said.

Brenn and Maggiore love the hunt of finding good items. On early Saturday mornings, they go together to garage sales and estate sales in the area. They also regularly pick up pallets of liquidation items from stores like Target.



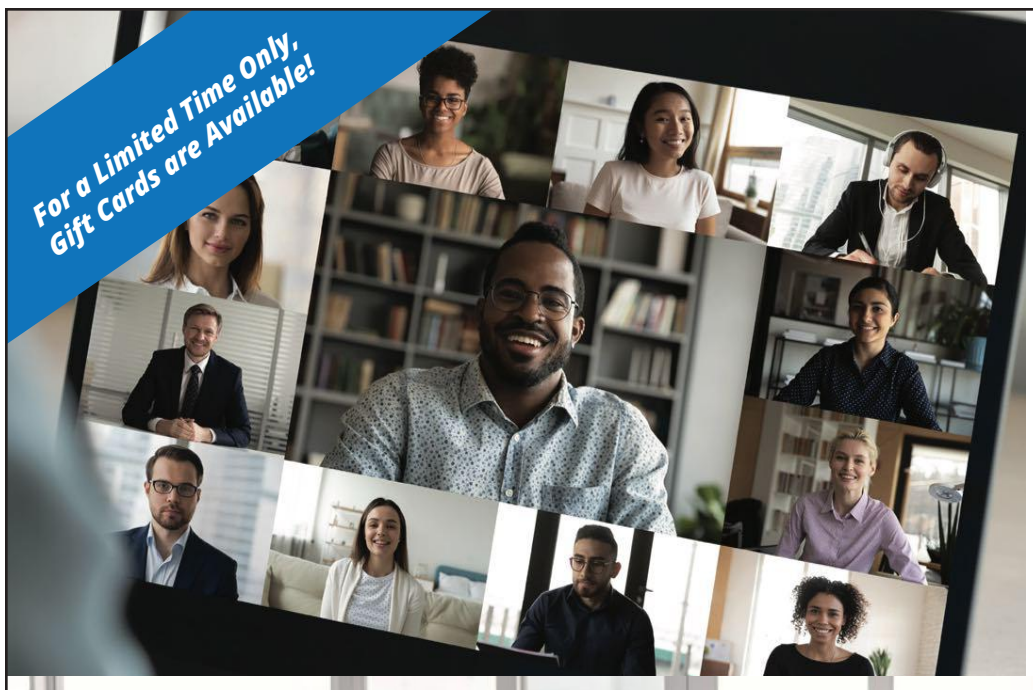
When asked what they love most about having a thrift store, the answer came quickly.

"We like people. We love the people that come in. It's fun to see what items people buy, and sometimes the most unusual items go quick. But we love getting to know people and the items they are looking for," Brenn said.

In addition to new items from liquidation sales, Thrifty Depot carries new jewelry, new military challenge coins and patches, new music equipment and 3D-printed art from a local artist. They have a nice selection of CDs, DVDs and records as well.

Veterans receive a 15 percent discount, and seniors receive a 10 percent discount.

Thrifty Depot is located at 723 W. Lumsden Rd. It is open Monday through Friday, 4:30-8:30 p.m., and on Saturday, 10 a.m.-8:30 p.m. For more information, visit https://thriftydepot.com/ or call 813-315-8210.





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AMERICAN LEGION POST 246'S HANDICAP CHAIRLIFT PROJECT IS COMPLETE

Staff Report



American Legion Post 246 member John Weaver smiles as he tests the chairlift newly installed behind the stage of Sun City Center Community Hall.

American Legion Post 246 announces the completion and installation of a chairlift in the community hall.

The chairlift project was based on a suggestion by American Legion Post 246 member John Weaver, who saw the struggle that honored veterans had when navigating the steps to the stage and realized there was a need to help handicapped/disabled individuals up to the stage while lessening the chance for injury.

Weaver, a retired Air Force master sergeant with 26 years of service working in transport, air freight and logistics, proposed the idea of the chairlift idea to the American Legion executive board, which approved the project.

With the support of Post Commander Paul Wheat and Post Sergeant-at-Arms Ken Holt, he contacted contractors for bids, sought funding for the project and followed the progress.

The result is a lift that provides handicapped individuals with a safe and dignified means of appearing on the stage.

The chairlift is dedicated to the memory of William 'Bill' Hodges, a member of American Legion Post 246. Funding for the chairlift was provided by the Sun City Center Charitable Foundation Inc., the Barbara Allen Fund, American Legion Post 246 and the Sun City Center Community Association Inc.

Wheat personally invites all veterans and their family members to visit his Legion family, which meets on the third Friday of each month at 9:30 a.m. and has a social coffee with comrades at 9 a.m. in Room 3 of the Sun City Center Community Hall, located at 1910 S. Pebble Beach Blvd. in Sun City Center.

To contact American Legion Post 246, call 813-485-5055.

LIEUTENANT GOV. JAY COLLINS ANNOUNCES OPERATION F3

Staff Report



Lt. Gov. Jay Collins (Photo / X)

Recently, decorated Green Beret, Lieutenant Gov. and gubernatorial candidate Jay Collins announced 'Operation F3, Florida Families First: Education on Florida's Terms' in Tampa.

"Florida's families need a governor who truly understands the classrooms, the challenges and the dreams of Florida's children," said Jay Collins. "Florida doesn't need more Washington-style bureaucracy. We need bold, practical leadership rooted in our values, and that's exactly what I'll deliver as your next governor."

Jay Collins emphasized the importance of building an education system on Florida's terms, respecting parental rights and ensuring Florida's education is practical, not bureaucratic.

Operation Florida Families First has three main pillars: 1. Cybersecurity and Protecting Our Kids: We cannot put our children's education solely in the hands of artificial intelligence. There must be humans in the education and security loops. As governor, Jay Collins will direct immediate investments into cybersecurity, training and partnerships with Florida's world-class defense and technology sectors.

2. Rejecting One-size-fits-all Bureaucracy: Children must have the option to customize their education tailored to their career goals, whether they choose to go to college, learn a trade or join the military. Every child is unique and our education system should reflect that. However, giving each child an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is a bureaucratic nightmare. 3. Trade Opportunities and Agricultural Training: Florida is home to many industries, including agriculture. Our education must prepare students for good-paying jobs and make all industries accessible to them.

Jay Collins was joined by Second Lady Layla Collins and Bernadette Pello, president and co-founder of Livingstone Academy, who shared their firsthand experience in education policy to support Jay Collins' approach. They emphasized the importance of integrating workforce education and ensuring each student has the ability to customize their education. See the biographies of the guest speakers below:

Layla Collins, Second Lady, State of Florida: Layla Collins has had a storied career in the United States Army which began in 1994 and spanned over two decades. Layla Collins served in multiple SOF units with a wide range of focus. Layla Collins was selected to be a core member of a Special Actions Team that evaluated security protocol at the highest levels of our government. She collaborated to develop curriculum and courses to train and educate other service members on sensitive skills and best practices. Working within the SOF community allowed

Layla Collins is the proud wife of Jay Collins, and mom of two precious boys, Gabe and Colt. Bernadette Pello, President and Co-founder, Livingstone Academy

Jay Collins is a 23-year veteran of the U.S. Army Special Forces, having served in combat around the world defending our nation. He currently serves as Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' lieutenant governor. For more information, visit www.jayforflorida.com.

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She is involved in our community and volunteers for deserving causes. A Hillsborough County native, Sara is married with two children and is an elder at her church.

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SUMMER FEEDING PROGRAM PROVIDES FREE MEALS AT 150 SITES ACROSS COUNTY

Staff Report



Hillsborough County Public Schools is once again helping ensure children have access to nutritious meals during the summer months through its annual Summer Feeding Program, which offers free breakfasts, lunches and snacks at more than 150 locations throughout the county.

The program started June 1 at HOST sites, with additional locations opening as summer programs get underway. Available to all children and teens ages 18 and younger, the meals are offered at no cost regardless of school enrollment status, and no registration is required.

District officials say the program is designed to bridge the gap for families who rely on school meals during the academic year. By providing convenient access to healthy food options throughout the summer, the district hopes to support student well-being while school is out of session.

At weekday on-site meal locations, children must be present to receive meals, and all food must be consumed on-site during designated serving times. Community members visiting school-based meal sites are asked to check in at the school's front office before proceeding to the cafeteria or designated serving area.

Families can find nearby meal locations and serving schedules by visiting the website at www.SummerBreakSpot.org and entering their address. Many participating sites also offer activities, enrichment programs or recreational opportunities in addition to meals, depending on the location.

In addition to daily meal service, HCPS is offering a weekly seven-day meal box pickup option at the South County Career Center in Ruskin. The grab-and-go program runs through July 22 and is designed to provide greater flexibility for families who may not be able to visit meal sites each day.

Meal boxes can be picked up every Wednesday between 8 a.m. and 1 p.m. at the South County Career Center, located at 2810 John Sherman Way. Unlike on-site meal locations, children do not need to be present for pickup, and meals do not need to be consumed on-site.

Each meal box includes seven days' worth of breakfast and lunch meals, along with a gallon of milk, helping families keep children nourished throughout the week.

The Summer Feeding Program is part of Florida's Summer BreakSpot initiative, which provides free meals and snacks to children and teens across the state. District leaders encourage families to take advantage of the program to help ensure children remain healthy, active and ready to learn when school resumes in the fall.

BUCHANAN ANNOUNCES 2026 SERVICE ACADEMY APPOINTMENTS

Staff Report



Recently, Congressman Vern Buchanan announced that 16 of the students he nominated have received an appointment to a U.S. Service Academy.

"I would like to congratulate these exceptional young men and women on earning appointments to our nation's prestigious U.S. Service Academies," said Buchanan. "This achievement reflects their hard work, leadership, character and commitment to serving our country. It is a tremendous honor for these students, their families, their mentors and our entire community. I wish them continued success as they begin this important journey in service to our nation."

Each year, members of the U.S. House and Senate nominate high school seniors in their districts and states for admission to the U.S. Air Force, Merchant Marine, Military and Naval academies. Applicants who meet strict qualifications are interviewed and recommended by a nonpartisan Service Academy Board appointed by the congressman. The U.S. Coast Guard Academy does not require a nomination to be accepted.

The following students nominated by Buchanan received an academy appointment for the fall:

Hillsborough County:

• Caine Cokkinias, Newsome High School, appointed to the U.S. Military Academy.

• Reid Freda, Lakeland Christian High School, appointed to the U.S. Air Force Academy.

• Tyler Stargardt, Newsome High School, appointed to the U.S. Air Force Academy.

• Hunter Wilk, Newsome High School, appointed to the U.S. Military Academy.

• Caitlin Nguyen, Riverview High School, appointed to the U.S. Merchant Marines Academy.

• Micah Pubillones, homeschooled, appointed to the U.S. Air Force Academy.

• John Wheaton, Newsome High School, appointed to the U.S. Merchant Marines Academy.

• Rory Jones, Newsome High School, appointed to the U.S. Naval Academy.

• Lazariyah Rashae Aranda, Naval Academy Prep School, appointed to the U.S. Naval Academy.

• Levi Ward, Georgia Military College, appointed to the U.S. Air Force Academy.

The U.S. Service Academies are four-year post-secondary institutions that combine educational excellence with military officer training. Students accepted to the academies receive a free four-year education in return for a commitment to serve five years in the active-duty military after graduation.





FIND FOOD, FUN AND CULTURE IN HISTORIC SEMINOLE HEIGHTS

By Jamie Lu



Seminole Heights is a historic district in central Tampa characterized by its 20th century bungalow homes. Full of cafes, restaurants and eclectic shops, Seminole Heights ranks among America's best places to spend a slow Sunday, according to online www.Calgary.com.

The neighborhood was established in the 1910s through the work of pioneer real estate developer T. Roy Young. Over time, the area grew in popularity and size, with the Sulphur Springs Traction Line connecting the suburbs to downtown Tampa.

Today, Seminole Heights is bounded on the west by Florida Avenue, on the north by Hanna Avenue, on the east by Interstate 275 and on the south by Osborne Avenue. It is separated into three neighborhoods: Old Seminole Heights, South Seminole Heights and Southeast Seminole Heights. The district is flourishing with places to dine and shop while still maintaining its old-timey charm. The streets are paved with brick and lined by palm and shady oak trees. Calgary.com says "daily life there feels easier, slower, and more connected."

Visitors of Seminole Heights can admire the low-pitched roofs and wide front porches of the neighborhood's colorful bungalows, best suited for Tampa's subtropical climate. Some of these buildings are part of the United States National Register and the local Tampa Historic District, meaning they will be preserved for generations to come. Visitors can also stop by food spots like Bo's Ice Cream, a locally-owned staple of the community since 1954, Front Porch Grille, a restaurant located in a 1898 Victorian house or The Rooster and the Till, a four-time Michelin Bib Gourmand Award recipient.

The Seminole Sunday Market, which takes place every second Sunday of the month, is one of the more popular events hosted by the district. Visitors can spend time listening to live music while perusing the stalls of over 70 local vendors of goods ranging from fresh produce to artisanal crafts.

And as the afternoon fades away, the vibrant nightlife of the neighborhood comes alive. Those interested in the Heights' diverse brewery and distillery scene can visit 82ºW Distilling — the first craft distillery built in Tampa's city limits — or Angry Chair Brewing, popular for its unique atmosphere and creative stouts.

The Southeast Seminole Heights Civic Association, the South Seminole Heights Civic Association and the Old Seminole Heights Neighborhood Association work to keep the community of Seminole Heights active, informed and close-knit. This sense of solidarity is what helped Seminole Heights preserve its historic beauty against the encroachment of highway infrastructure in the 1960s and the 1980s.

Visit https://seseminoleheights.com/, https://www.sshca.org/, or https://www.oldseminoleheights.org/.

SESCO CEMENT OPENS NEW IMPORT TERMINAL AT PORT TAMPA BAY

By Brian Bokor



SESCO Cement officially opened its new cement import terminal at Port Redwing in Gibsonton, marking a major investment in Tampa Bay's construction supply chain and regional infrastructure network.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony was held Tuesday, June 9, at 6035 Diana Toledo Almeida Road and included SESCO Cement leadership, Port Tampa Bay officials, State Representative Michael Owen, and representatives from the construction and maritime industries.

The 14-acre facility includes nearly 100,000 tons of storage capacity and is expected to become the largest cement terminal in Florida upon full build-out, creating a major new gateway for construction materials serving one of the nation's fastest-growing states.

The terminal features what the company describes as the largest wheel-mounted cement ship unloader currently in operation, along with an advanced mobile conveyor system designed to efficiently move materials from ships to storage and distribution networks.

SESCO Cement CEO Rick Van Eyk said the project represents years of investment, engineering, and collaboration.

"As a key partner in the region's construction and infrastructure supply chain, SESCO Cement plays an important role in supporting continued growth across West Central Florida and reinforcing Tampa's increasing importance as a gateway for global construction materials," Van Eyk said.

The terminal is strategically positioned to serve Florida's major construction markets through maritime shipping lanes, interstate highways, and rail networks. SESCO expects to move significant volumes of cement, supplementary cementitious materials, and aggregates through the facility.

A custom-designed ship unloader arrived in Tampa earlier this year following a 25-day voyage and was assembled locally after nearly two years of engineering and design work.

"Port Tampa Bay is proud to welcome SESCO Cement as an operating partner," said Raul Alfonso, executive vice president and chief commercial officer for Port Tampa Bay. "This terminal strengthens our position as a key hub for construction materials and underscores the vital role Port Tampa Bay plays in supporting infrastructure needs for Florida's more than 23 million residents."

SESCO Cement, established in 2014, operates a network of cement terminals serving construction, manufacturing, and distribution customers across the United States.

Port Tampa Bay is Florida's largest seaport by tonnage and land area and serves as a critical gateway for construction materials, energy products, and international trade.

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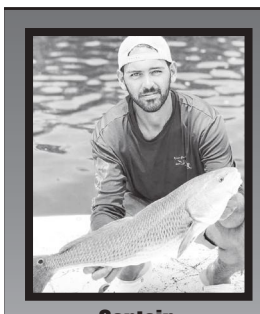
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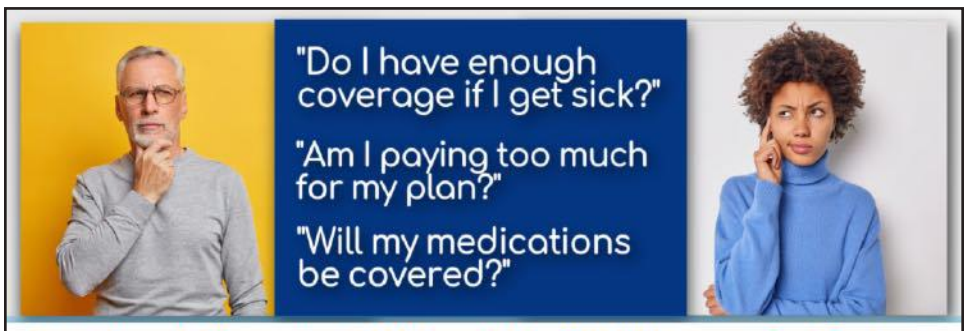
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OH SO RUSTIC MARKET KICKS OFF VIBRANT SUMMER SEASON

By Srishti Tripathi



As the summer heat rolls into Florida, many local activities begin to wind down. But at La Viva Plaza, the community energy is just warming up. The Brandon Sunday Market is officially launching its highly anticipated summer season, offering residents a vibrant, local escape every second Sunday of each month from 10 a.m.-2 p.m.

Organized entirely by Oh So Rustic, a beloved brick-and-mortar home decor store located right on the market site at 788 W. Lumsden Rd. in Brandon, the event has become a staple for local shopping. While some might question launching a market series in the middle of a brutal Sunshine State summer, the organizers view it as business as usual.

"During our almost 10 years of existence, we have always operated in the summer," the organizers shared. "We have many full-time vendors; it's also a good time for relatively new vendors to gain some experience, and frankly the weather is not much different in July than it is in September. It's Florida, baby!"

The market provides a crucial platform for small businesses. Vendor and food truck spots are intentionally kept accessible at just $40, which helps keep the marketplace dynamic. While summer can occasionally see a slight dip in sheer numbers, it opens the door for fresh faces.

"Summer does seem to bring out some new and original vendors of all types," the organizers noted, ensuring that attendees will always find something unique.

Beyond the unique artisan crafts and delicious food truck eats, what truly sets this event apart is its deep, grassroots connection to the neighborhood. In a landscape often dominated by third-party event coordinators, this market is proudly homegrown.

"We are not one of the many out-of-area 'vendor management companies,'" the owners emphasized.

Instead, they described the gathering as "a market by the people for the people" wholly focused on fostering a genuine local connection.

For those planning to attend the upcoming dates on July 12 and August 9, the atmosphere promises to be incredibly lively. The market features free admission, pet-friendly walking paths, interactive booths and live entertainment courtesy of Music By Robbie.

"Our vendors are dancing in the aisles when they're not selling merch," the owners added. "It is Brandon's market and we are honored to be a part of it."

TAKING EDUCATION NEXT LEVEL WITH STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS

By Jamie Lu



Studying abroad — that is, pursuing educational opportunities in a foreign country — can be a valuable and exciting experience for college students of all fields and interests. Here are some reasons why studying abroad can be useful, as well as strategies on how to make your study abroad trip more affordable and specific to your goals.

While studying abroad, students tend to live with or among locals and other travelers of many unique backgrounds. They are exposed to new foods, transportation systems, cultures, customs and ways of living. Therefore, studying abroad can expand a student's knowledge about the world while also developing their ability to connect with diverse groups of people.

Living far away from home also helps students become more independent by teaching them to problem-solve and manage their own well-being while being far away from home. While the transition can seem challenging or intimidating, stepping out of one's comfort zone in early adulthood is necessary for gaining life experience and developing discipline and strength of character.

Studying abroad comes with professional advantages as well. Some students study abroad to earn course credit towards their degree. Others study abroad to explore personal interests, learn a new language or become familiar with different education systems. Making connections with professionals abroad can also expand a student's future career or graduate school prospects.

Studying abroad offers a wide range of benefits, so it's important to choose the program that is the best fit for you.

When choosing the right study abroad program, it's important to consider several factors. These include what you want to accomplish by studying abroad as well as your personal health and financial capabilities.

There are many different types of programs offered by higher education institutions, including exchange programs, internship programs and faculty-led programs. Some are centralized at an educational institution, while others may require travel around one or more countries.

Furthermore, some schools and third-party organizations offer study abroad programs for visiting students, so your options aren't limited to the school that you attend.

The time at which a program takes place is also important, especially cost-wise. Programs that take place during the fall and spring semesters tend to be more expensive because they are several months long.

Students should also consult their college advisors to determine what course credits their chosen study abroad program will offer and whether those credits count toward any degree requirements.

Finally, students should also keep in mind the area they will be staying in. Consider whether you prefer somewhere busier, like the city, or somewhere more remote.

Ultimately, the best way to make studying abroad more affordable is by choosing the right program. To learn more about studying abroad, visit www.isepstudyabroad.org.

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CONGRATULATIONS TO AREA HIGH SCHOOL VALEDICTORIANS & SALUTATORIANS

Compiled by Taylor Wells



Valedictorian
Mariel Custodio
Bell Creek Academy
GPA 8.98
Plans to Attend
University of Florida



Salutatorian
Sofia Acebedo Ciro
Bell Creek Academy
GPA 8.36
Plans to Attend
Columbia University



Valedictorian
Samantha Perkins
East Bay High School
GPA of 7.29
Plans to Attend
Kansas State University



Salutatorian
Shane Hollywood
East Bay High School
GPA of 7.27
Plans to Attend
University of South
Florida



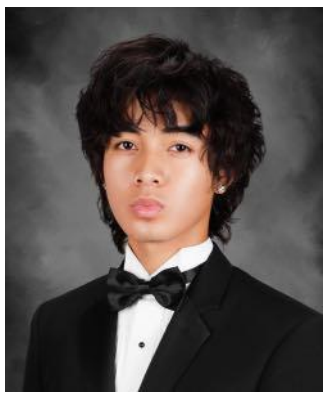
Valedictorian
Hao Tran
Lennard High School
(Traditional):
GPA 8.58
University of Florida or
Georgia Tech



Salutatorian
Nicolas Salas
Lennard High School
(Traditional):
GPA of 8.10
Plans to Attend
Yale University



Valedictorian
Izabel Wiltz
Lennard High School
(Collegiate Academy):
GPA of 8.39
University of South
Florida Honors College



Second Highest GPA
Gabriel Raymond Cacho
Lennard High School
(Collegiate Academy):
GPA of 7.95
University of
Florida



Valedictorian
Daniella Portillo-Sorto
Riverview High School:
GPA of 8.36
Still deciding on a
college to attend



Salutatorian
Amanda Rojas
Riverview High School:
GPA of 8.10
Plans to Attend
University of Central
Florida



Valedictorian
Hazuki Donna Sykes
Sumner High School
GPA of 8.89
Still deciding on a college
to attend



Salutatorian
Alexis Samantha Burdwise
Sumner High School
GPA of 8.00
Still deciding on a college
to attend







PRESERVING HISTORY: BURGIN & BROWN HELPS CONSERVE ART COLLECTIONS

By Libby Hopkins



Burgin & Brown Conservation of Paintings team.



Burgin & Brown Conservation of Paintings is a painting and frame conservation organization that restores and preserves the integrity of fine art. The business was founded 35 years ago as Burgin Conservation of Paintings by Beverly Burgin. Over the decades, it grew to care for numerous large collections and cherished family heirlooms.

"I met Beverly in September 2020 when she was seeking an apprentice to eventually succeed her," said Heather Brown. "Drawing on my background in science and a lifelong passion for art, I began a dedicated apprenticeship to master the specialized skills and techniques required for the restoration and preservation of fine art and frames."

In 2023, Brown retired from her teaching career to focus exclusively on conservation.

"After serving as a developing partner, I have now assumed ownership of the business," Brown said. "To mark this new chapter, the firm has been renamed Burgin & Brown Conservation of Paintings. Beverly remains an integral part of the practice, staying on as a consultant as we continue to work on collections together. We look forward to continuing to provide expert care for your artwork."

Burgin & Brown has a partnership with the Florida National Guard and does restoration on its historical artwork.

"Our partnership with the Florida National Guard and Alison Simpson, command historian, Florida National Guard, began in 2018," Brown said. "Since then, the National Guard has budgeted annual funds for an eight-year project to conserve its Historical Art Collection. Beverly Burgin was initially selected for this project, and I had the privilege of working on several pieces in the collection during my apprenticeship with her. When I took over the business, the contract continued under our current name, Burgin & Brown Conservation of Paintings. As June marks the conclusion of this eight-year period, we are proud to share that we have conserved 22 paintings, as well as a painted eagle and shield for Cooper Hall at Camp Blanding, serving armories throughout the state."

Over the years, the ladies' restoration work has included notable historical homes and fine art collections, such as the May-Stringer House Museum in Brooksville, the Flagler College art collection in St. Augustine and the Antilles Trading Company Pirate Museum and

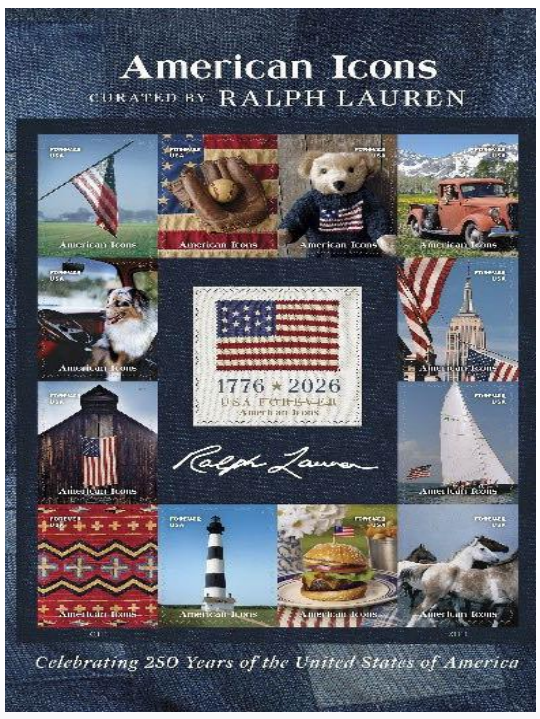
Store in Cocoa Village.

"This region of Florida is rich in history and currently experiencing significant growth, bringing exciting new opportunities to the area," Brown said. "I thoroughly enjoy working with local clients and businesses, and as a woman-owned small business, I find this work both a privilege and a rewarding challenge."

If you would like to learn more about Burgin & Brown Conservation of Paintings, you can visit its website at https://burginandbrown.com/ or call 813-541-6345. Their office is located at 17224 Star Banks St. in Wimauma.

USPS HONORS NATION'S 250TH WITH RALPH LAUREN STAMPS

Staff Report



The U.S. Postal Service has announced a special commemorative stamp collection to celebrate the nation's 250th anniversary in 2026, marking the first time an individual has been invited to curate an entire official USPS stamp issuance.

Titled American Icons, the collection features 13 Forever stamps selected by legendary fashion designer Ralph Lauren. The stamps highlight images that reflect the values, traditions and symbols that have shaped the United States over the past two and a half centuries.

Lauren, who received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2025, is known worldwide for creating a brand rooted in American heritage and culture. Born in the Bronx in 1939, he built his business from humble beginnings, selling neckties from a single drawer in New York City's Empire State Building before developing one of the world's most recognizable lifestyle brands.

The American Icons collection includes photographs drawn from Lauren's personal archive and imagery that has inspired him throughout his career. Featured designs include the American flag, a baseball glove once used by Jackie Robinson, a weathered pickup truck, a faithful dog, the Empire State Building, a traditional barn, a Diné (Navajo) blanket woven by artist Naiomi Glasses, a teddy bear, a lighthouse, a hamburger, a racing sailboat and wild horses.

At the center of the pane is a 13th stamp featuring a knitted American flag design inspired by Lauren's iconic flag sweater and bearing the dates "1776 to 2026." The pane's surrounding text celebrates 250 years of the United States and identifies the collection as curated by Ralph Lauren.

In addition to the commemorative set, USPS will release a 2026 U.S. Flag Mail Use Stamp featuring a detailed photograph of Lauren's knitted flag design. The definitive stamp will be available in panes, booklets and coils for everyday mail use.

The stamps will be formally dedicated during a ceremony on June 9 at New York City's historic James A. Farley Post Office Building. USPS officials say the collection honors the shared values and enduring spirit that have united Americans since the nation's founding.

The American Icons stamps will be sold in panes of 13 and, as Forever stamps, will always be valid for the current First-Class Mail 1-ounce rate.

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FOUR FAMILIES MOVE IN AT HABITAT'S WINDHORST COMMONS

Staff Report



Megan Grufman celebrates with her children, David and Melanie.



Devan Mitchell and her son, Stephen, stand outside their new home in Windhorst Commons.



Natalie Sanchez and her daughter, Sariah, tour their new Habitat for Humanity home.

For four Hillsborough County families, the dream of homeownership has become a reality thanks to Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough and a network of community partners dedicated to addressing the region's affordable housing crisis.

During a series of home dedication ceremonies this spring, four mothers and their children received the keys to new homes in Windhorst Commons, Habitat's 23-home affordable housing community in Brandon. Each family arrived with a different story, but all shared a common challenge: rising housing costs that made stable homeownership seem increasingly out of reach.

For Megan Grufman, a single mother of two, the dedication marked the end of years spent living in overcrowded conditions with extended family. After rent prices made independent housing unaffordable, Grufman and her children moved in with her parents. Grufman shared a room with her 11-year-old son, David, while her 17-year-old daughter, Melanie, slept in a makeshift space in her grandmother's room.

Now, the family has a home of their own thanks to Habitat's 2025 Real Estate Build, sponsored by the Suncoast Tampa Association of REALTORS®.

"There were so many times I didn't know how we would ever get ahead or have a place of our own," Grufman said during her dedication ceremony.

Just days earlier, Devan Mitchell and her 15-year-old son, Stephen, celebrated a similar milestone. The billing specialist had spent years navigating rising rents and maintenance issues in rental housing while trying to provide stability for her family.



Paris Johnson celebrates with her children, Galaxy and Deavi, at their Habitat home in Brandon.

"This home means everything to us," Mitchell said. "It means stability, safety and hope for my son and me."

Mitchell's home was made possible through a partnership between Hillsborough County and Habitat for Humanity. The county invested $1.4 million toward construction costs and materials for homes in Windhorst Commons, along with an additional $600,000 for infrastructure improvements including roads, utilities and sewer lines.

The need for affordable housing has also affected families like Natalie Sanchez and her 6-year-old daughter, Sariah. As a remote retention specialist, Sanchez spent years balancing work and motherhood while struggling with the financial pressures of escalating rental costs.

Through Habitat's affordable homeownership program and support from home sponsor Central Bank, Sanchez now has an affordable mortgage and a permanent place to raise her daughter.

The family's dedication ceremony marked one of the earliest milestones in the development of Windhorst Commons, which was specifically designed to provide affordable, disaster-resilient housing for working families and veterans.

For Paris Johnson and her children, Galaxy and Deavi, homeownership means something beyond financial stability — it means permanence.

Johnson, a billing and funding specialist, had watched her rent climb by more than $600 per month since 2019. Despite the financial strain, she worked through Habitat's homeownership program, completing financial education courses and hundreds of hours of required sweat equity.

"We've always made every rental feel like home," Johnson said. "But this is the first time we can truly settle in without worrying about having to leave."

Her home was sponsored by Ajax Paving, whose volunteers joined Habitat supporters in celebrating the family's achievement.

Habitat homeowners purchase their homes through affordable mortgages designed to fit family budgets.

In exchange, participants complete financial education courses and contribute sweat equity hours, often helping build not only their own homes but those of future neighbors as well.

According to Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough CEO Tina Forcier, the impact of homeownership extends far beyond the walls of a house.

"A home changes everything for a family," Forcier said. "From a child's confidence in school to a parent's peace of mind, affordable homeownership creates opportunities that can last for generations."

Windhorst Commons is being developed as a hurricane-resilient neighborhood featuring homes equipped with storm shutters and built to withstand Florida's challenging weather conditions. The community will eventually include 23 homes.

As construction continues through early 2027, additional families will join the growing neighborhood, each bringing their own story of perseverance and determination. For more, visit HabitatHillsborough.org.





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Steller Notary Services Celebrates Two-year Anniversary With A Ribbon Cutting

Stellar Notary Services is a nationwide mobile and online notary company deeply rooted in service to the community. It works with clients across multiple industries including legal, real estate, construction and business services, helping people navigate important documents and major life moments with professionalism, care and reliability. It is especially passionate about remote online notarization (RON) because it allows fast, efficient and reliable notary services to people anywhere in the world. This year, Stellar Notary Services is proudly celebrating its two-year anniversary with a ribbon-cutting ceremony from the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce. Steller Notary Services is located at 11232 Boyette Rd., Ste. 1144, in Riverview. For additional information about the services it performs, visit its website at https://stellarnotaryservices.net or call 833-403-5601.

Rosemary Real Estate Team At Flip Side Realty By Design

Rosemary Leist specializes in 55-plus residential home sales and lives locally in Sun City Center. She has an extensive professional background in the legal/regulatory arena which has led to valuable skills in the art of negotiation. Having practiced real estate in Florida, Tennessee and Washington, D.C., she has acquired a unique balance of southern charm and northeastern tenacity. As an ordained minister, her core beliefs provide a solid foundation of integrity and trust. She looks forward to earning your business.

To contact Leist, call 301-399-4332. For more information, visit https://rosemaryrealestateteam.com/.

Celebrate America's Birthday At Council Growers Garden Center

The Council Growers Garden Center, located at 3226 24th St. SE in Ruskin, is helping you to celebrate America's 250th birthday by giving you 'council cash.' For every $76 you spend between Wednesday, July 1, and Saturday, July 11, it will give you a $17 voucher to use at a future date. The voucher is good for a wide variety of items, including green goods, hardscape items and pottery.

Explore By Del Webb North River Ranch

PulteGroup officially celebrated the grand opening of Explore by Del Webb North River Ranch, the first Explore by Del Webb community in Florida and only the third Explore community nationwide. The grand opening celebration for the 413-acre, 901-homesite community took place on May 30 at the community's location, 11435 Emberstone Circle in Parrish. Located within the award-winning North River Ranch master planned community, Explore by Del Webb introduces a new approach to resort-style living centered on wellness, social connection and everyday convenience. The brand blends modern luxury with wellness-inspired amenities and lifestyle programming. The only gated community within North River Ranch, Explore by Del Webb offers high-end finishes, such as tile roofs, paver driveways and more.

Breathe Easy Seminar

Moffitt Cancer Center will present its Breathe Easy Seminar on Wednesday, July 8, from 1:30-2:30 p.m. at the United Methodist Church of Sun City Center, located at 1971 Haverford Ave. in Sun City Center. Come and learn how caring for your lungs today can help protect your health tomorrow. Participate in an important conversation to learn about lung cancer, about lung health and how early detection saves lives.

You may preregister for your lung screening on-site if you qualify. Please reach out to chloe.byrd@moffitt.org or call 813-745-2050 with any questions.



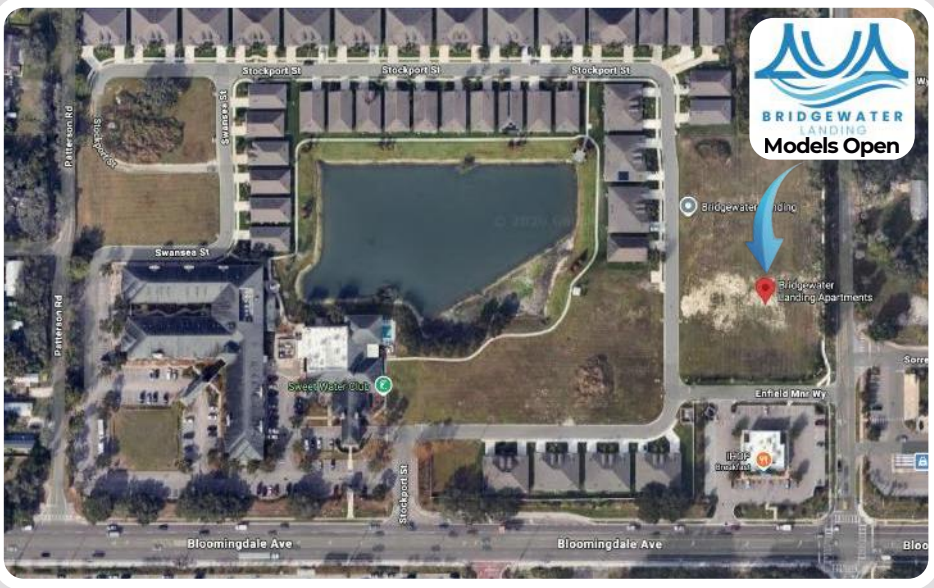
Los Rumberos Performance In Sun City Center

Were you a fan of Santana? Does listening to their music bring back fun memories? The music of Los Rumberos is reminiscent of Santana with their blend of flamenco, Latin, and Mediterranean music. Los Rumberos will be presenting their vibrant music, passion and artistry of musicians and dancers on Saturday, August 1, at 7 p.m. at the Sun City Center Community Hall, located at 1910 S. Pebble Beach Blvd. in Sun City. Doors will open at 6:30 p.m.

Tickets for this event, which is sponsored by Beth Israel, may be purchased online at https://givebutter.com/los-rumberos-pvjdjx. Advanced tickets will also be on sale at 945 N. Course Lane in Sun City Center, from 10 a.m.-12 Noon on Tuesdays and Fridays on the following dates: July 14, 17, 21, 24 and 28. Tickets are $20 in advance, or $25 at the door. For more information, contact Walt at fundraising1@jcscc.org.







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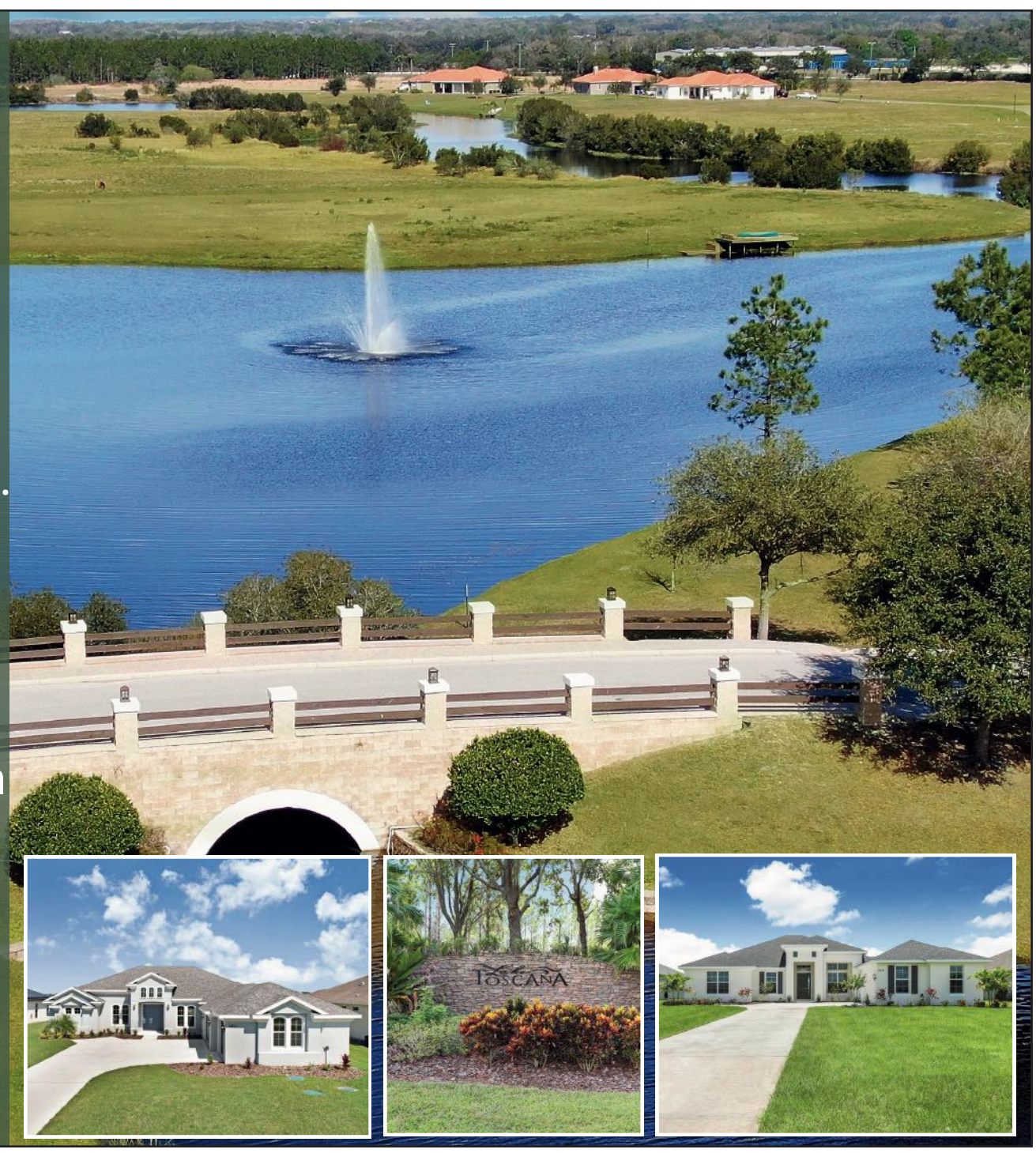
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STRAIGHT FROM THE SHORE

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SHAWNA'S MONTHLY MARKET UPDATE

June in Apollo Beach means opportunity. Inventory remains higher across South Shore, giving buyers more choices and stronger negotiating power than we've seen in years. The homes receiving showings and offers are the ones priced correctly from the start. Buyers are taking their time, comparing options, and making thoughtful decisions. Sellers who understand today's market are still moving successfully. If you've been waiting for the right moment to buy or sell, the data says opportunity exists on both sides of the transaction. Let's talk.

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5704 TYBEE ISLAND DRIVE
APOLLO BEACH, FL 33572

List Price: $1,479,000 ACTIVE
4 Bed | 3 Bath | 2,733 Sq Ft
Waterfront Pool Home



7328 MILESTONE DRIVE
APOLLO BEACH, FL 33572

List Price: $419,900 ACTIVE
4 Bed / 2 Bath | 2,007 SqFt



6408 MAYRA SHORES LANE
APOLLO BEACH, FL 33572

List Price: $649,000 ACTIVE
5 Bed / 3 Full Bath | 2 Half Bath | 3,222 SqFt
Waterfront View | Rooftop Terrace



2002 E VIEW DRIVE
SUN CITY CENTER, FL 33573

List Price: $479,000 ACTIVE
3 Bed / 2 Bath | 2,037 SqFt
Office | Lake View



AGENT SPOTLIGHT

With 3.5 years of real estate experience, Kia Louis-Jones is dedicated to helping buyers, sellers, and relocating clients achieve their goals. She and her family are major foodies, so don't be surprised if she has a restaurant recommendation ready before you even ask. A Florida native with a business background, Kia combines local market expertise with personalized, genuine service to create a smooth and rewarding experience for everyone she works with.

Whether you're buying your first home, selling the one you've outgrown, or relocating to the Tampa Bay area from somewhere new, Kia brings the kind of local knowledge and steady guidance that makes a big decision feel a little easier. At 27North Realty, that's the standard.

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