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WOMEN BUILD VOLUNTEERS RALLY BEHIND BRANDON NEIGHBORHOOD AND FUTURE HOMEOWNER

Staff Report

A total of 227 women business and community leaders from across Tampa Bay have joined Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough's 2026 Women Build, presented by Slide Insurance,raisingmore than $120,000 so far and showing the power of women coming together to help another woman become a homeowner.



Catrina Milbry and her two sons are excited to move into their new Habitat for Humanity home.

The 2026 Women Build Celebration at 1 Exotics highlighted the growing impact of this year's campaign and recognized the 19 teams leading fundraising and volunteer efforts. With fundraising continuing throughout the summer, organizers expect that total to climb as participants continue working to help local families achieve safe, stable housing.

"This year's Women Build showcases the incredible impact that women can make when they unite around a common goal," said Tina Forcier, CEO of Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough. "Every dollar raised and every volunteer hour invested brings hardworking families one step closer to a brighter future."

Women Build is one of Habitat of Tampa Bay Hillsborough's signature annual initiatives, bringing together community leaders through fundraising, advocacy, and hands-on construction. Volunteers raise funds and work alongside Habitat staff and homeowners.

Earlier this year, some of Tampa Bay's most influential professionals traded boardrooms for construction sites, helping build homes in Windhorst Commons, Habitat's new 23-home hurricane-hardened neighborhood in Brandon designed for working families and veterans.

This year's Women Build supports future Habitat homeowner Catrina Milbry, a mother of two sons who has spent much of her paycheck on rent, making it difficult to get ahead financially. She hopes to provide her children with a safe, stable place to thrive. Through Habitat's program, and with the support of volunteers and donors, that dream is becoming a reality. Like all Habitat homeowners, Milbry is contributing hundreds of hours of sweat equity as she prepares to purchase the family's home with a mortgage that fits their budget.

The 2026 Women Build campaign includes leaders from finance, technology, real estate, healthcare, nonprofit organizations, entrepreneurship, and other industries, reflecting broad community commitment to addressing affordable housing challenges in Hillsborough County.

The remaining homes in Windhorst Commons, including Catrina's, are expected to be completed by early 2027.

Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough builds and renovates homes in partnership with people in need of decent, affordable housing and has worked with local homeowners and the community on more than 650 homes since 1987. Habitat affiliates around the world have helped more than 62 million people build or improve the places they call home. For more information, visit HabitatHillsborough.org.

HCA HONORS FIRE RESCUE CREW FOR LIFESAVING CARE OF CADDIE SCHELLE

By Marie Gilmore

When Bloomingdale High School student Caddie Schelle collapsed during a summer golf practice after complaining of the "worst headache" of her life, few could have predicted the extraordinary chain of events that would follow. Thanks to the swift actions of Hillsborough County Fire Rescue's Rescue 7/A crew and the coordinated efforts of medical professionals, the teenager is alive today and continuing a remarkable recovery.



Members of Hillsborough County Fire Rescue's Rescue 7/A crew receive HCA Florida Brandon Hospital's LifeSaver's Award from Caddie Schelle and her family during EMS Week.

In recognition of their lifesaving efforts, HCA Florida Brandon Hospital honored the Rescue 7/A team with its prestigious LifeSaver's Award during a special EMS Week presentation in May.

Paramedics Jordan Diehm, K'Juan Donaldson, Jason Patterson and William Rodriguez, along with EMT Kwan Slydell, were recognized for their decisive response to Caddie's medical emergency. Their actions not only helped save a young life but also demonstrated the critical role first responders play in emergency healthcare.

When the crew arrived on scene, some bystanders believed Caddie's condition was the result of dehydration. However, the experienced emergency responders recognized signs that pointed to a much more serious neurological event. Trusting their training and instincts, they made the uncommon decision to activate a pediatric stroke alert while transporting her to Brandon Hospital.

That crucial call allowed the hospital's Comprehensive Stroke Center team to prepare in advance, ensuring specialists and critical resources were ready the moment Caddie arrived.

Doctors later discovered that Caddie had suffered a ruptured arteriovenous malformation, or AVM, resulting in a massive brain bleed. After being stabilized at Brandon Hospital, she was airlifted to receive emergency pediatric surgery.

"Calling a stroke alert for a child is extremely uncommon, but this crew trusted their instincts and acted quickly," said Nealy Kinnison, vice president of emergency services at Brandon Hospital. "Their rapid assessment and communication helped mobilize lifesaving stroke care before Caddie even arrived at the hospital."

For Caddie's mother, Kilene Schelle, the crew provided more than medical expertise. During one of the most frightening moments of her life, she found comfort in their professionalism and compassion.

"Not only were they caring for Caddie, they were caring for me too," she said. "Their calmness and confidence gave me hope in the scariest moments imaginable."

Despite undergoing multiple surgeries in the weeks that followed, Caddie has defied expectations. Today, she continues therapy and follow-up care while inspiring family, friends and the community with her resilience.

The recognition of Rescue 7/A serves as a powerful reminder that quick decisions, teamwork and compassion can make all the difference when seconds matter most.

IN THIS ISSUE:

SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS..... PG 3
TAMPA BAY RODEO..... PG 6
BANKSY AT STRAZ..... PG 14
VALEDICTORIANS..... PG 24
EYE ON BUSINESS.....PG 30

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Participants in Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough's 2026 Women Build gathered at the Women Build Celebration to recognize the campaign's fundraising success and the efforts of volunteers, sponsors and community leaders

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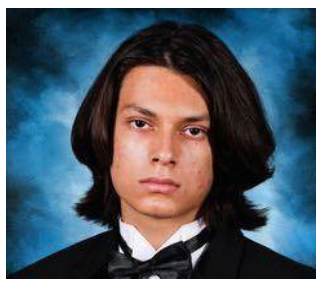
Staff Report



Nathan B. Simoneau
Bloomingdale High



Kaitlin Michelle McClellan
Newsome High



Eduardo J. Orrego
Riverview High

Forty-four Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) seniors have been named 2026 College-sponsored National Merit Scholarship winners, earning national recognition for their academic achievement and future promise, according to an announcement released by the National Merit Scholarship Corporation (NMSC).

Selected from a nationwide pool of high-achieving students, National Merit Scholars represent the top tier of graduating seniors across the country. The selection process includes outstanding academic records, high scores on the PSAT/NMSQT, strong SAT or ACT performance, extracurricular involvement and a rigorous application review.

National Merit Scholarships are awarded by the NMSC and sponsoring colleges and universities, providing financial support for undergraduate study while recognizing exceptional academic achievement. Officials of each sponsor college selected their scholarship winners from among the Finalists in the 2026 National Merit Scholarship Program who plan to attend their institution. These awards provide between $500 and $2,000 annually for up to four years of undergraduate study at the institution financing the scholarship. .

"We are incredibly proud of our students for earning this well-deserved national recognition," said Superintendent Van Ayres. "Their success reflects not only their hard work and determination but also the strength of the rigorous academic programs across Hillsborough County Public Schools. These programs are designed to challenge students, expand opportunities and prepare them for success in college, careers and life."

This year, 138 higher education institutions are sponsoring Merit Scholarship awards through the National Merit Scholarship Program, including 69 private and 69 public colleges and universities in 42 states and the District of Columbia.

Local HCPS 2026 College-sponsored National Merit Scholarship winners include:

Nathan B. Simoneau
Bloomingdale High School
National Merit University of Central Florida Scholarship
Probable career field: Computer Science

Kaitlin Michelle McClellan
Newsome High School
National Merit University of Florida Scholarship
Probable career field: Mechanical engineering

Eduardo J. Orrego
Riverview High School
National Merit University of Florida Scholarship
Probable career field: computer science

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

FIRE RESCUE HOSTS GRADUATION & PINNING FOR NEW FIREFIGHTERS

Staff Report







A former chef, a teacher, a medical therapist and retired military personnel recently represented the new Hillsborough County Fire Rescue (HCFR) class as part of the Recruit Class 2026-01 Graduation and Pinning Ceremony at Riverhills Church of God, located at 6310 E. Sligh Ave. in Tampa. A total of 37 new firefighters with varying backgrounds joined the HCFR ranks at the May 14 ceremony.

The new firefighters got their station and shift assignments during the ceremony, putting them in firehouses throughout Hillsborough County. Each also received the HCFR shield for their helmet.

All graduates began their assignments in the following week, ready to fight fires, respond to emergency calls and assist residents every day.

All the new firefighters joining HCFR have graduated from the Fire Academy and are certified emergency medical technicians (EMTs). For the past five weeks, this recruiting class has been through a Hillsborough-specific orientation to get them ready for their first days on the job.

HCFR has nearly 1,300 firefighters at 47 fire stations serving 1.1 million residents and 909 square miles of unincorporated Hillsborough County. HCFR responds to nearly 140,000 emergency calls annually, making it one of the top-performing fire rescue agencies in the Southeastern United States.

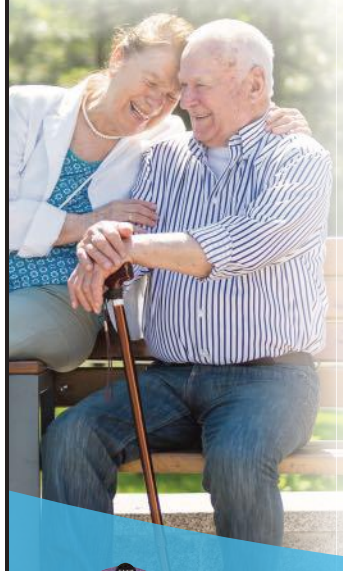


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NEARLY 1,500 GRADUATE FROM FLORIDA VIRTUAL HIGH SCHOOL

Staff Report



Nearly 1,500 students graduated from Florida Virtual High School (FVHS) on May 29, forming the largest graduating class in the school's history. More than half, 56 percent, earned academic distinction, achieving grade point averages above 3.5.

Approximately 8,000 students and families from 57 counties across the state attended the annual in-person commencement ceremony.

Among this year's graduates:

• 50 students earned the Cambridge Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE) Diploma.

• 18 students completed an associate of arts or associate of science degree through dual enrollment with Polk State College or Daytona State College.

• 641 students completed a total of 1,454 Advanced Placement (AP) courses over the past four years.

Students also earned academic distinctions based on grade-point average, including:

• 357 summa cum laude (4.000 and above).

• 181 magna cum laude (3.800-3.999).

• 289 cum laude (3.500-3.799).

In addition to academic achievements, 58 students completed more than 250 hours of community service, and four students exceeded 1,000 service hours during their high school careers.

"Students in this graduating class challenged themselves through advanced coursework, pursued individual goals, and contributed to their communities," said Suzanna Pacheco, award-winning principal of Florida Virtual High School. "They prepared, persisted and showed up consistently to reach this milestone."

A recording of the ceremony and photos from the event will be posted on the Class of 2026 graduation webpage at www.flvs.net/graduation.

About Florida Virtual School

At Florida Virtual School, students are at the center of every decision we make. As a fully accredited statewide public school district, FLVS offers tuition-free full-time and individual course online education for Florida students in grades K-12. FLVS provides a wide range of high-quality courses and a flexible, supportive learning environment led by certified online teachers. As a leader in online education, FLVS also partners with school districts to deliver digital learning solutions, including courses, platforms and training. To learn more, visit www.flvs.net.

BONNET SPRINGS PARK OFFERS ULTIMATE SCREEN-FREE ESCAPE

By Srishti Tripathi



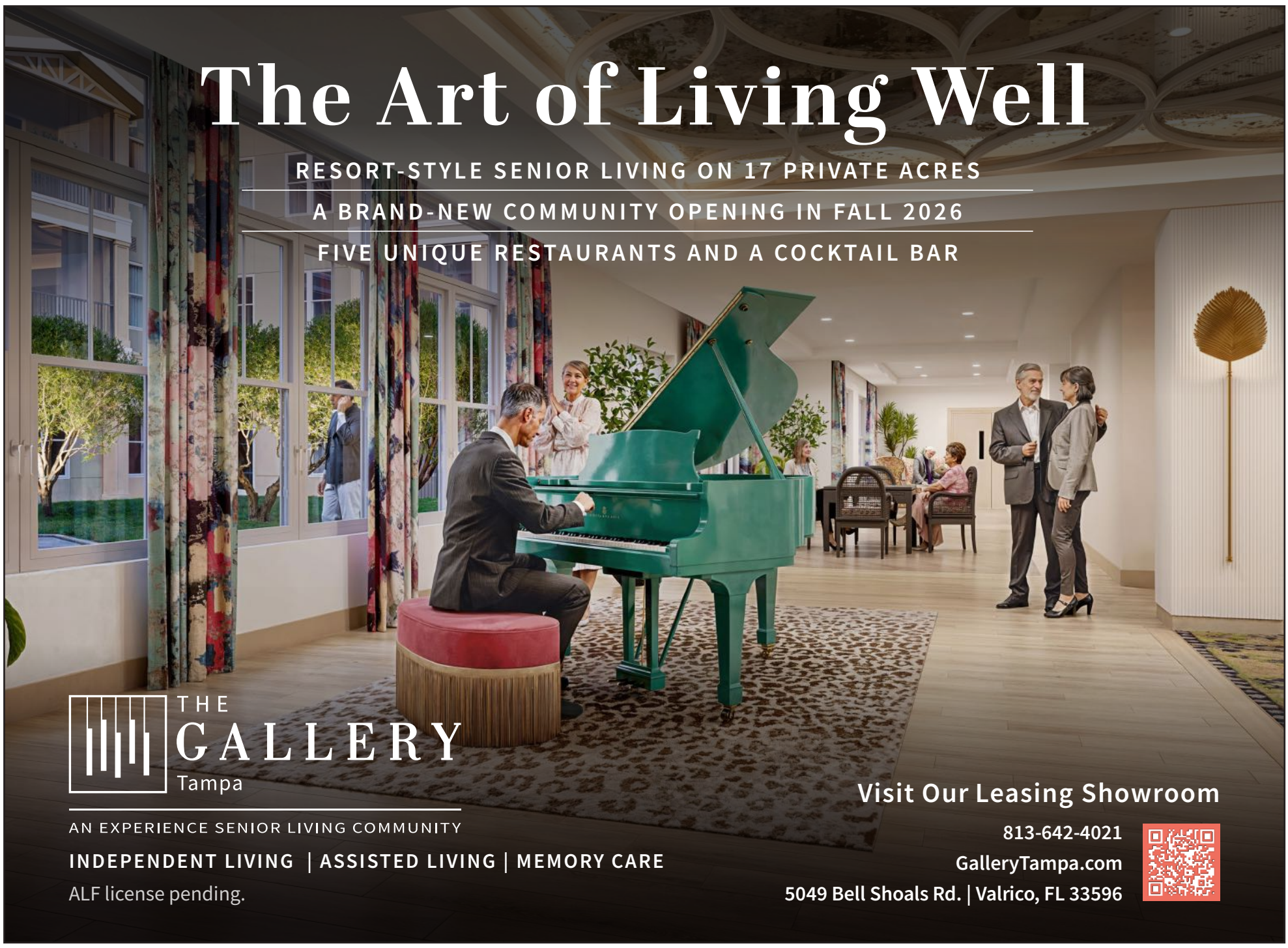
Summer in Central Florida isn't just about avoiding the heat; lately, it's become a full-on showdown with screen time. Kids are glued to devices in states of perpetual scrolling, while parents search for ways to pull them back into the real world. Honestly, it's tough. Devices are always around, and 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" meetups 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.



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.

SNIVELY JR. HONORS MARCHING BAND WITH EAGLE SCOUT SERVICE PROJECT

By Zofia Osterman



David Snively Jr. earned the rank of Eagle Scout after completing a project benefiting Newsome marching band.

For many students, marching band is more than music; it's a second family. That strong sense of community inspired Newsome High School student David Snively Jr. to complete an Eagle Scout service project designed to support the school's marching band and its new leadership.

Snively, a member of Scout Troop 61, Bloomingdale Presbyterian, earned the prestigious rank of Eagle Scout after leading a project that renovated and organized the marching band storage shed at Newsome High School. His work focused on improving safety and functionality by replacing unstable shelving, organizing supplies and covering a side entrance that allowed rainwater into the building.

The project came at an important time for the program as the band welcomed the new director of bands, John Owen Davis II.

"The marching band has always felt like a close community to me, and the new band director, Mr. Davis, needed help settling in," said David Snively Jr. "I wanted to give a hand to make it as easy as possible for the band to function under new leadership."

Before the project, the storage shed presented several challenges. Disorganization made it difficult to access materials, unstable shelves created safety concerns and rain entering through a side opening threatened equipment and supplies. Snively developed a plan to address each issue while managing the responsibilities required for an Eagle Scout project.



"This project was a great opportunity to improve my leadership because I had to plan everything by myself," said Snively. "I had to give a budget, buy supplies and tools and lead a group of volunteers to complete the project. It was a new, challenging experience that allowed me to put my leadership to the test."

Florida weather nearly delayed the effort. Heavy rain moved into the area during the project, creating uncertainty for volunteers and organizers.

"The biggest challenge I faced was the weather during the project," said Snively. "We almost had to pack up and come back another day due to heavy rain, but it eventually passed over, and we were able to work again."

Now completed, the renovated shed provides a more organized and dependable space for the marching band community Snively values.

For younger Scouts pursuing the same goal, Snively offers practical advice.

"Do not feel overwhelmed by the amount of work you have to do," said Snively. "Try your best to balance Boy Scouts with school and other activities and do the work one step at a time."

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PARTNERSHIP PUTS STUDENTS ON RIGHT PATH WITH 60 NEW BIKES

Staff Report



For many students in Hillsborough County, transportation is one of the biggest barriers standing between them and opportunity. Getting to school, work, training programs or internships can become a daily challenge when reliable transportation is out of reach.

To help address that challenge, Workforce Development Partners (WDP), onbikes, Hillsborough County Public Schools and generous anonymous donors partnered together to provide 60 bicycles to students across the county, with additional bikes expected in the future.

For educators and workforce professionals who work alongside these students every day, transportation challenges are an ongoing reality. Limited public transit, long distances and inconsistent transportation often force students to miss school, arrive late to work or pass on valuable opportunities altogether.

"We ask our students to show up, be on time and pursue opportunity, and most of them want exactly that. Wanting it and being able to do it are two different things when you are miles away from work or school without reliable transportation," said Ansberto Vallejo, supervisor of career, technical and adult education at Hillsborough County Public Schools. "A bike does not solve everything, but it solves something real, and that matters."

The initiative focuses on supporting students who have demonstrated a commitment to using bikes to access education, employment and workforce development opportunities. Through a nomination and application process coordinated with educators, students shared the transportation barriers they face and how access to a bicycle could impact their future. The first applicant was a young woman who needed a bike to get to school each day; her application reflected a willingness to take responsibility and put in the effort to make it happen. That spirit set the tone for the program.

"You do not fully appreciate how strong, resilient and determined these students are until you see what they can do with just a little support behind them," said Jillian Antonio, a former staff member at Freedom High School and the director of Workforce Development Partners District.

"These students are not asking for a free ride; they are asking for a way to get there," said Marissa Schwartz, CEO of onbikes. "Reliable transportation can change the trajectory of a young person's education, employment opportunities, confidence and independence."

When transportation kept surfacing as a barrier, Workforce Development Partners wanted to help find a solution.

Funding for the bicycles was made possible through WDP's outreach to community supporters and anonymous donors.

Workforce Development Partners is a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening the workforce pipeline in the Tampa Bay region in partnership with Hillsborough County Public Schools, visit www.workforcedevelopmentpartners.com.

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."

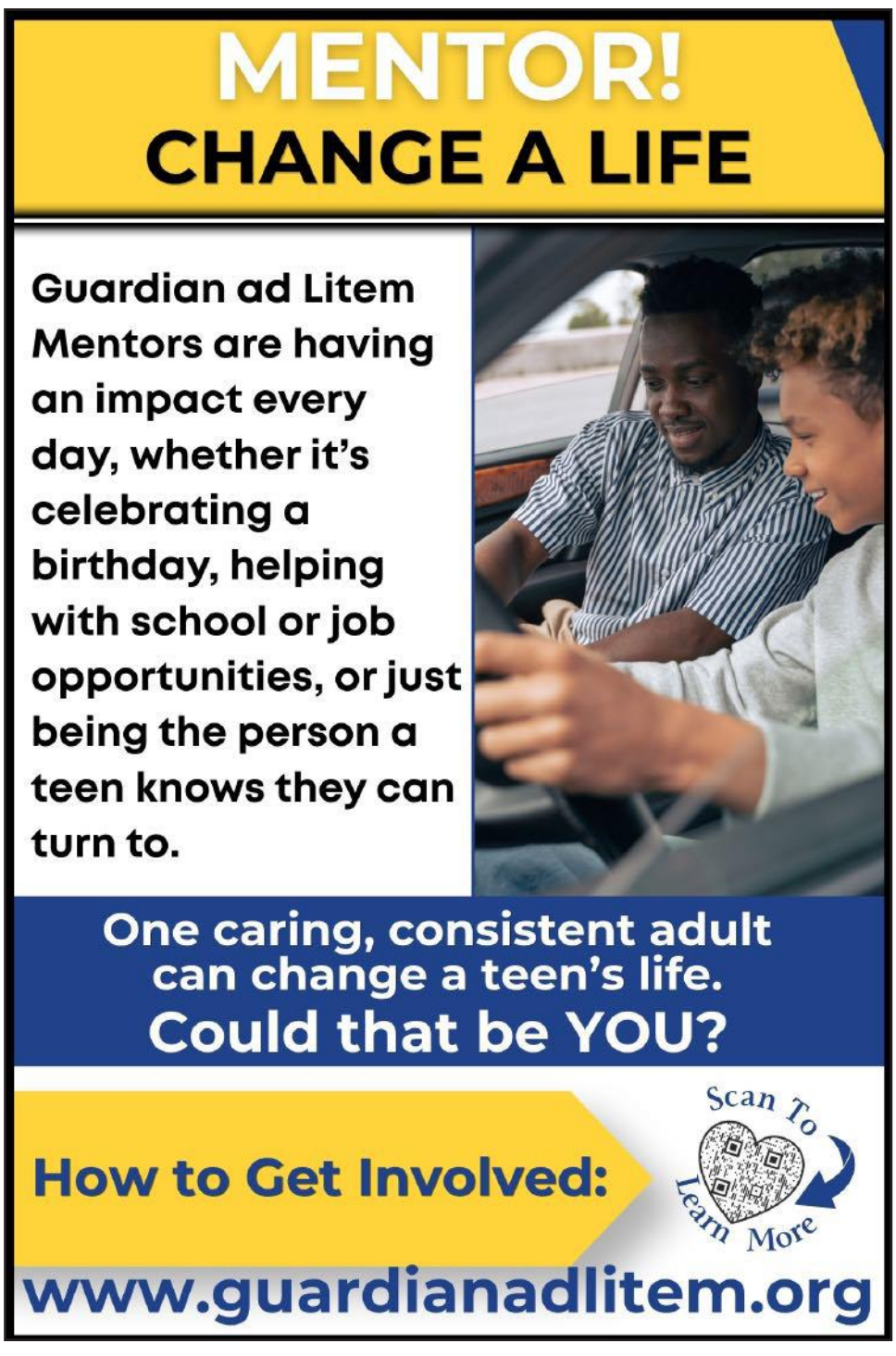
Visitors of Seminole Heights can admire the low-pitched roofs and wide front porches of the neighborhood's colorful bungalows, best suited for Tampa's subtropical climate. Some of these buildings are part of the United States National Register and the local Tampa Historic District, meaning they will 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/.

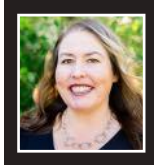




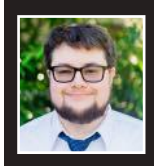


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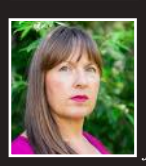

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FLORIDA POLY NAMES COACHES FOR MEN'S SOCCER AND BASEBALL

Staff Report


Florida Poly Men's Soccer coach Clay Roberts.


Florida Poly Baseball coach T.J. Marik.

As Florida Polytechnic University prepares to launch its new athletics program this fall, the university has selected experienced leaders to build two of its cornerstone teams from the ground up.

Florida Poly recently announced the hiring of Clay Roberts as the inaugural head coach of men's soccer and T.J. Marik as the first head coach of the university's baseball program, marking major milestones in the development of Florida Poly Athletics.

Roberts brings more than 20 years of experience as a collegiate and professional coach, player and administrator. Most recently, he served as head men's soccer coach at Southeastern University, where he became the program's all-time winningest coach. During his tenure, Southeastern captured three Sun Conference tournament championships and advanced to four NAIA national tournaments.

Roberts said the opportunity to build a program from its beginning was a major factor in his decision to join Florida Poly.

"There's something special starting to happen and grow here," Roberts said. "It was a great opportunity to build out a program."

Florida Poly Athletic Director Derek Lower said Roberts' success extends beyond wins and losses. "Clay's resume is indisputable," Lower said. "What stands out to me is his professionalism, ability to build relationships with his recruits and his willingness to lend a hand for the betterment of the entire athletics program."

Recruiting efforts are already underway as the team prepares for its first season this August.

Meanwhile, Marik takes the reins of the university's new baseball program after successful head coaching stints at Siena Heights University and Missouri Valley College. His teams earned all-conference honors, Gold Glove recognition and set several program records.

Marik said he is focused on finding student-athletes who fit Florida Poly's unique academic environment.

"I'm looking for three aspects in the players I recruit," Marik said. "I want to make sure they're prepared academically, have the athletic talent and are of strong character."

The baseball program has already secured commitments from 14 players and is working toward a roster of 25 to 30 student-athletes for its inaugural season.

Both coaches emphasized the importance of culture and relationships as they build their programs. Roberts has set his sights on competing for conference championships, while Marik hopes to develop one of the nation's premier collegiate baseball programs.

Florida Poly Athletics will debut this fall with eight sports, including baseball, softball, men's and women's soccer, basketball, and cross-country, as it seeks membership in the NAIA and Sun Conference.

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HC Registration, Hotel California Tribute at RP Funding & More...

Compiled by Jenny Bennett
jbennett@ospreyobserver.com

Hotel California Comes To RP Funding Center

Do you love classic rock? Hotel California, A Salute To The Eagles is coming to the R P Funding Center on July 18, starting at 8p.m. Hotel California "A Salute to the Eagles", is the ONLY show to have ever received "Official Authorization" to perform the Eagles catalog of music. It will be one night of endless classics and timeless memories, so join us on a trip down a dark desert highway... Feel the cool wind in your hair and check into the Hotel California.

Visit www.rpfundingcenter.com for information and to purchase tickets. The RP Funding Center is located at 701 W. Lime St. in Lakeland.

Store Owner Makes Donation To School

Shearon Bailey, owner of Teachers' Helper, donated the storefront apple from Teacher's Helper to Wilson Elementary School in Plant City. Teachers' Helper opened in Brandon in 1984 and Shearon owned the store from 2005 until its close in May of 2017. Shearon is a member of St Andrew's United Methodist Church and many church members volunteer at Wilson Elementary each week. The apple was placed in the media center.



From left to right: Ginny Henry, volunteer coordinator of St. Andrew's United Methodist Church; Shearon Bailey, owner of Teachers' Helper; and Kayla Forcucci, principal of Wilson Elementary School.

Strawberry Crest Student Wins Award For Her '250 Years In 250 Words' Essay



To commemorate the 250th birthday of the United States, members of the Annie Etheridge Detached Tent #14, Daughters of Union Veterans of the Civil War, donated $400 to award a JROTC cadet at Strawberry Crest High School for an essay. The designated topic was '250 Years in 250 Words.' Congratulations to Jordan Taylor Smith, the winner.

A brief excerpt from her winning essay follows: "At 250 years old, America remains unfinished. Its greatest strength is not age or power, but its capacity for self-correction. The American story is not one of constant triumph, but of continual becoming—a nation defined by its willingness to confront its failures and strive, again and again, toward a more just future."

Tent President Cherie Travis-Houghtaling presented the award along with a certificate at the annual JROTC awards ceremony on May 6.

Registration Open for Fall 2026 Semester At Hillsborough College

Fall 2026 registration is open for all new and returning students at Hillsborough College (HC). Registration is available at www.hcfl.edu/registernow for existing students. Registration and application information for new students can be found at www.hcfl.edu/admissions. HC offers flexible class schedules and course delivery options, allowing students to study at their own pace without compromising their work or family obligations.

Hillsborough College serves more than 46,000 students annually at its five campuses located throughout Tampa Bay. For more information, visit www.hcfl.edu.

TAMPA BAY RODEO THUNDERS INTO COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS

Staff Report



Florida sunshine meets cowboy grit at the Tampa Bay Rodeo & Family Festival, presented by Bartow Ford, Friday and Saturday, July 17-18 at the Hillsborough County Fairgrounds. Tampa Bay's hottest summer tradition delivers two high-energy nights of FULL RODEO action, featuring bull riding, bronco busting, barrel racing, calf roping and more. Tampa Bay Rodeo's viral sensation "Cowboy Sway" returns for the bronco busting competition after his heart-stopping crash in April.

A giant American Flag soaring 150 feet above the Family Festival helps kick off a celebration of America's 250th birthday. The rodeo competition opens with the National Anthem and a salute to the brave men and women in the military, law enforcement, fire and rescue who serve and protect our communities.

Guests can arrive early for the Family Festival packed with food, thrills and interactive fun for all ages. Festival favorites include BBQ, corn dogs, Cuban sandwiches, refreshing beverages and ice-cold beer. Fans can ride the mechanical bull, test their aim at axe throwing, soar on the bungee trampoline and tackle giant games and slides. Families can climb aboard a monster truck for an unforgettable ride and meet friendly goats and camels at the animal experience. Cowboy Sway will also meet fans during the Family Festival.

Back by popular demand, superfans can upgrade their experience with tickets to the VIP Rodeo Section featuring premium reserved bleacher seating near the bucking chutes, access to a private bar and lounge area, complimentary snacks and exclusive giveaways. Gates open at 5:00 p.m., and the rodeo action begins at 7:30 p.m.

The Tampa Bay Rodeo & Family Festival, presented by Bartow Ford, is a community event featuring local vendors and area sponsors, including; Bartow Ford, 97.5 WPCV, 99.5 QYK, Acme Barricades, Beef O'Brady's, Bleacher Rentals, Boot Barn, BOS Sewers Portables, BubbaQue's, Busch Light Rodeo, Duke's Brewhouse, FL Grit, G FIVE Feed & Outdoor, Hungry Howie's, John Deere Everglades, Keel & Curley Winery at Keel Farms, Luxe Flush, Origins Ranch, Polar, Professional Guardian of the Highways, RDK Truck Sales, Ring Power CAT, Russell's Work & Western Wear, Tampa Bay Times, US 103.5 and Wade's Tree Service.

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(never known to fail)

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Say this prayer for three consecutive days and then you must publish and it will be granted to you.

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Staff Report



In celebration of America's 250th birthday, ZooTampa at Lowry Park is offering complimentary admission this summer to Hillsborough County government employees, City of Tampa team members, Hillsborough County School teachers, and active-duty military personnel. The initiative aims to recognize and thank these individuals for their dedicated service to our community and the nation with a chance to explore the zoo for a day and create unforgettable connections with wildlife!

From now through September 7, eligible county and city employees, as well as teachers, can enjoy free admission to the zoo by presenting a valid employee ID at the ticket window. Additionally, they receive a 25% discount on general admission tickets for up to four guests, providing an opportunity for families and friends to experience the zoo's diverse wildlife together.

Our country's active-duty military members are also being honored this summer. They, along with up to three dependents, can receive complimentary admission during the same period by presenting a valid military identification.

"ZooTampa is proud to pay tribute to our community heroes who work diligently to make our county and city such a wonderful place to live and work," stated the zoo's CEO Joe Couceiro. "We also want to show our appreciation to our country's heroes, who often sacrifice family time to protect our freedom."

During their visit, guests are encouraged to explore the new Florida Waters area, which offers an immersive journey into Florida's vibrant aquatic wildlife, including manatees, otters, and stingrays.

ZooTampa at Lowry Park is operated by the Lowry Park Zoological Society, an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to excellence in conservation, education, and research. The zoo, an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) for over 30 years, is recognized as Florida's most attended zoological cultural attraction. ZooTampa and the David A. Straz, Jr. Manatee Critical Care Center, were voted among the "Best Zoos" and "Best Zoo Exhibits" in USA TODAY 10Best Readers' Choice Travel Awards.

ZooTampa is a nationally recognized leader in the rehabilitation and care of Florida species. The zoo is located at 1101 W. Sligh Avenue in Tampa and is open seven days a week (except Thanksgiving and Christmas) from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., with extended hours for select events. For more information, visit www.zootampa.org or follow us on Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok and YouTube.

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TOUR OFFERS FIRST LOOK AT GALLERY'S RESORT-STYLE SENIOR COMMUNITY

By Brian Bokor







Executive Director Launa Moore takes a hardhat tour of The Gallery Tampa with Osprey Observer Managing Editor Marie Gilmore.





The Gallery Tampa - 5049 Bell Shoals Rd Valrico



Construction crews were still actively working throughout the property during a recent hard-hat tour of The Gallery Tampa, an arts-inspired senior living community under construction at 5049 Bell Shoals Rd. in Valrico. The community is expected to welcome its first residents later this year.

During the behind-the-scenes walk-through, Executive Director Launa Moore provided an early look at a community designed to offer independent living, assisted living and memory care on a single campus.

"This will be dreamy when we're done," Moore said as she guided visitors through the construction site.

Operated by Experience Senior Living, The Gallery will feature 115 independent living residences, assisted living and memory care services, along with amenities designed to support active and engaged lifestyles.

Independent living residences are geared toward active seniors seeking a maintenance-free lifestyle. Assisted living will provide personalized support with daily activities, while memory care will serve residents living with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia in a secure, supportive environment. The model allows residents to transition between levels of care without leaving the community they already call home.

As the tour moved through the campus, Moore highlighted one of the property's most unique features.

"It's going to feel like we've always been here because we've left all these trees," she said.

Behind the community sits a four-acre nature preserve. "We were allowed to put a raised walking path back there for our residents to enjoy," Moore explained.

The hard-hat tour also showcased the Golden Marlin Bar, Little Marlin Restaurant, Gulfstream Restaurant, a zero-entry pool, pickleball courts, dog park, outdoor grilling areas, fitness center, club activities room and media room/theater.

The community's independent living residences will include first- and second-floor layouts, with elevators centrally located in each residential building. Select corner residences will offer up to 1,600 square feet of living space.

"The overwhelming theme here has been, 'I want to choose for myself. I do not want someone else to choose for me,'" Moore said.

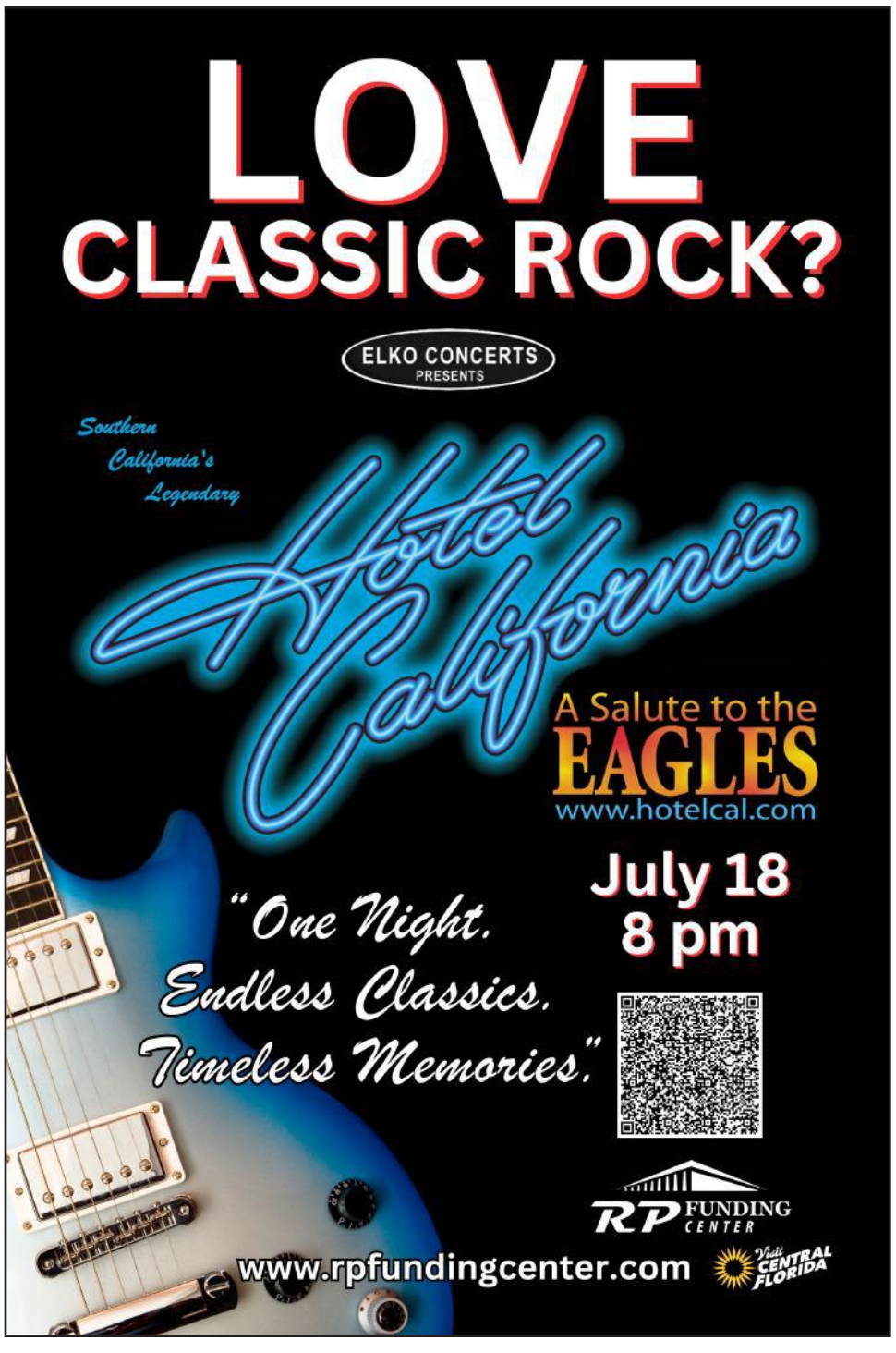
That philosophy extends throughout the campus, where residents can choose how involved they want to be in activities, wellness programs and social events. One example is the planned Rock Steady Boxing program for individuals living with Parkinson's disease.

"I think it is the camaraderie, having other people on that same journey that we can empathize with," Moore said.

The community will also offer transportation services seven days a week within a 10-mile radius for medical appointments, shopping and local outings. Unlike many age-restricted communities, The Gallery plans to welcome visiting grandchildren and pets, reinforcing its focus on family connections and quality of life.

For more information about The Gallery Tampa, contact Moore at 813-601-2916 or email lmoore@eslliving.com.







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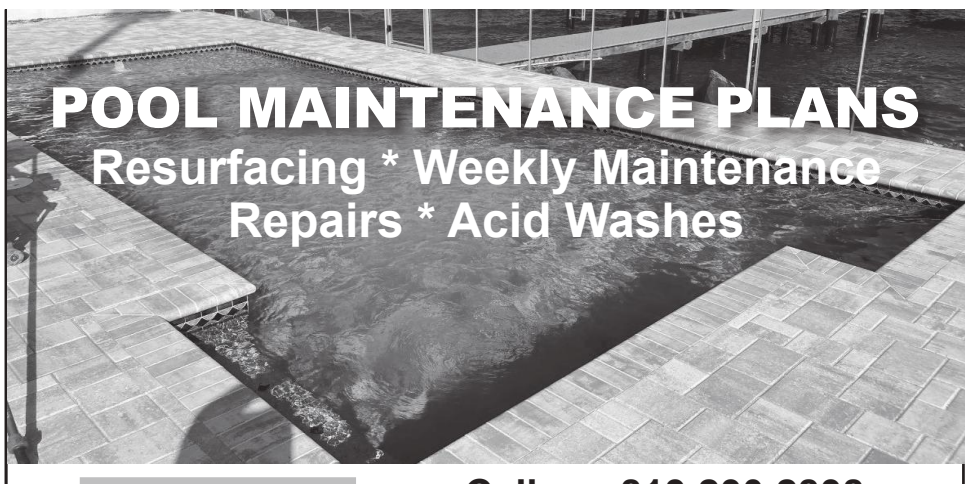
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SUMMER FEEDING PROGRAM PROVIDES FREE MEALS AT 150 SITES ACROSS COUNTY

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.

FANS INVITED TO 'CHECK INTO' HOTEL CALIFORNIA AT RP FUNDING CONCERT

By Nick Nahas



Fans of the Eagles will have an opportunity to relive some of the most beloved songs in classic rock history when Hotel California: A Salute to the Eagles performs at the RP Funding Center's YouKey Theatre in Lakeland on Saturday, July 18, at 8 p.m.

Widely regarded as one of the premier Eagles tribute acts in the country, Hotel California has built a reputation for faithfully recreating the music and harmonies that made the Eagles one of America's most successful bands. The group has earned a level of recognition typically associated with Gold and Platinum recording artists, becoming one of the longest-running and most successful tribute shows of its kind.

The performance promises an evening filled with the Eagles' greatest hits, transporting audiences back to the soundtrack of the 1970s and beyond. Known for its attention to detail, Hotel California strives to reproduce the Grammy Award-winning sound of the Eagles with remarkable accuracy while bringing its own energy and stage presence to each show.

Organizers describe the band's catalog as part of "our generation's Greatest American Songbook," featuring timeless favorites that continue to resonate with audiences decades after their original release. Concert-goers can expect to hear many of the songs that helped define an era of Southern California rock and made the Eagles one of the best-selling bands in music history.

The band's name comes from the Eagles' iconic hit "Hotel California," and promotional materials for the event invite fans to "join us on a dark desert highway" and "feel the cool wind in your hair" before checking into the musical experience that has captivated audiences across North America.

The concert will take place in the YouKey Theatre at the RP Funding Center, located at 701 W. Lime St. in Lakeland.. Conveniently situated between Tampa and Orlando along the Interstate 4 corridor, the venue attracts visitors from throughout Central Florida for a variety of entertainment events, concerts and performances throughout the year.

Tickets and additional event information are available through the RP Funding Center Box Office. Regular box office hours are Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Patrons can call 863-834-8111 for ticket information or visit the RP Funding Center website for details.

Hotel California: A Salute to the Eagles will take the stage on July 18 at 8 p.m., offering fans a chance to experience the music, harmonies and spirit of one of rock music's most enduring bands.

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FROM VALRICO TO WASHINGTON: BLOOMINGDALE STUDENT'S ART HEADED TO U.S. CAPITOL

By Marie Gilmore

Student artists from Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) earned top recognition in the 2026 Congressional Art Competition, a district-wide showcase announced by Congressman Vern Buchanan celebrating the creativity of high school students across Florida's 16th Congressional District.



Ireland Cates and Madelyn Bowers.

This year, 31 student artworks were submitted for consideration. HCPS students claimed first, second and third-place honors, underscoring the strength of the district's visual arts programs.



The first-place winner was Ireland Cates, a sophomore at Bloomingdale High School in Valrico. Her piece, "The Capitol," will be displayed for one year in Washington, D.C., in the corridor connecting the U.S. Capitol and the Cannon House Office Building.



Second place was awarded to Olivia Fields of Riverview High School in Riverview for "Production, Consumerism, Stars, and Stripes." Third place honors went to Madelyn Bowers of Bloomingdale High School for her artwork, "Repetition."

HCPS students also received recognition in the competition's Facebook Fan Favorite Awards, which honor student works selected by the public and displayed in the congressman's offices in Washington, D.C.; Bradenton; and Brandon. Fan Favorite Award winners include Malik Dante Walker of Sumner High School in Riverview for "Jammin' Under the Sun" and Adam Nuykin of Sumner High School for "Make a Splash."

"I'm incredibly impressed by the talent and creativity showcased by the students who participated in this year's Congressional Art Competition," Buchanan said. "Each submission reflected remarkable skill, originality and hard work."

The judging panel included representatives from State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota, including faculty and administrative leaders in art, academic affairs and public engagement.

The Congressional Art Competition is held annually to recognize and encourage artistic talent among high school students across participating congressional districts.

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.

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Why fund an IRA early?

Because time can make a big difference.

If you wait until the tax deadline to fund your IRA each year, you miss out on 15 months of potential tax-deferred growth on your contribution. For example, many people wait until April 15, 2026, to contribute to their IRAs for 2025, when they could have funded them as early as Jan. 1, 2025.

Although 15 months may not seem like a significant amount of time, it may considerably impact your retirement savings.

The following hypothetical example shows the difference between funding an IRA at the beginning of each year and at the tax deadline the following year.

IRAs: traditional, Roth and spousal	
Contribution limit	$7,500 for 2026
Catch-up contribution (at age 50+)	Ages 50 and older: $1,100 for 2026
Tax credits	Depending on income limits

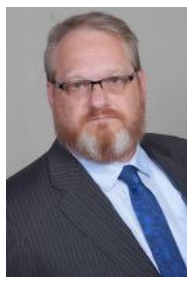
The difference 15 months can make*

IRA contributions begin at age	Total years investing	Money accumulated for retirement		The benefit of contributing early	
		Early contributions (Beginning of each year)	Late contributions (Tax deadline)	Individual	Both spouses
35	30	$787,623	$736,095	$51,527	$103,055
40	25	$537,147	$502,008	$35,138	$70,277
45	20	$358,563	$335,106	$23,247	$46,495
50	15	$231,237	$216,109	$15,127	$30,255
55	10	$127,138	$118,821	$8,317	$16,635
60	5	$52,918	$49,456	$3,461	$6,923

Source: Edward Jones calculations.

This projection assumes the individual contributes the maximum annual limit each year, including the full catch-up contribution starting in the year they turn 50 and continuing thereafter. For 2026, the standard contribution limit is $7,500, with an additional catch-up limit of $1,100. These limits may change over time due to cost-of-living adjustments or legislative updates.

The assumed annual rate of return is 7%, used solely for illustrative purposes and not indicative of any specific investment. Edward Jones does not provide tax or legal advice; you should consult a qualified tax or legal professional regarding your personal situation. Calculations assume reinvestment of all income and do not account for taxes, transaction costs, fees, or other charges, all of which would reduce actual results.



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LARGEST BANKSY ART COLLECTION COMES TO STRAZ THIS AUGUST

Staff Report



The Art of Banksy exhibit opens Saturday, August 1 through Sunday, August 30, featuring more than 160 original works, The Art of Banksy is the world's largest authenticated collection of privately-owned Banksy art worth $35 million. This globally acclaimed showcase features original and authenticated works associated with, arguably, the most intriguing and talked-about artist in modern history. On display are prints, canvases, screenprints, sculptures, unique works and limited-edition pieces.



The exhibit features iconic works such as "Girl and Balloon" and "Rude Copper" alongside some of Banksy's lesser-known masterpieces. Guests will experience a global exclusive – the original "Flower Thrower." This original piece was created in 1997 as a gift for Banksy's then girlfriend, Leonie Laws, whose exclusively-filmed testimonial will also be presented. Visitors in Tampa will also experience a signed, previously unseen work: Banksy's "Mona Lisa." Originally purchased directly from Banksy by actor Brad Pitt for his private collection, the artwork was returned to Banksy in 2022, who transformed it into a new piece, now on public display in the United States of America for the first time.

The Art of Banksy has welcomed more than one million visitors worldwide in Melbourne, Australia; Tel Aviv, Israel; Auckland, New Zealand; Toronto, Canada; Miami; Gothenburg, Sweden; Sydney, Australia; and ran two years in London, England. In 2010, Time magazine selected Banksy for its list of the worlds' 100 most influential people among the company of Barack Obama, Steve Jobs and Lady Gaga.

Regularly priced tickets for The Art of Banksy start at $29.99 and may be reserved online at www.strazcenter.org, in person at the Straz Center Ticket Sales Office or by calling 813-229-7827 or 800-955-1045 outside Tampa Bay. Special rates for students, seniors, military and children are available. Tickets are on sale now. For more information about Straz Center for the Performing Arts and its upcoming events, visit www.strazcenter.org.

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Sara Peacock has been practicing law for 15 years with experience in criminal defense, family law, civil litigation, and insurance litigation. She's tried 68 jury trials, including both criminal and civil cases.

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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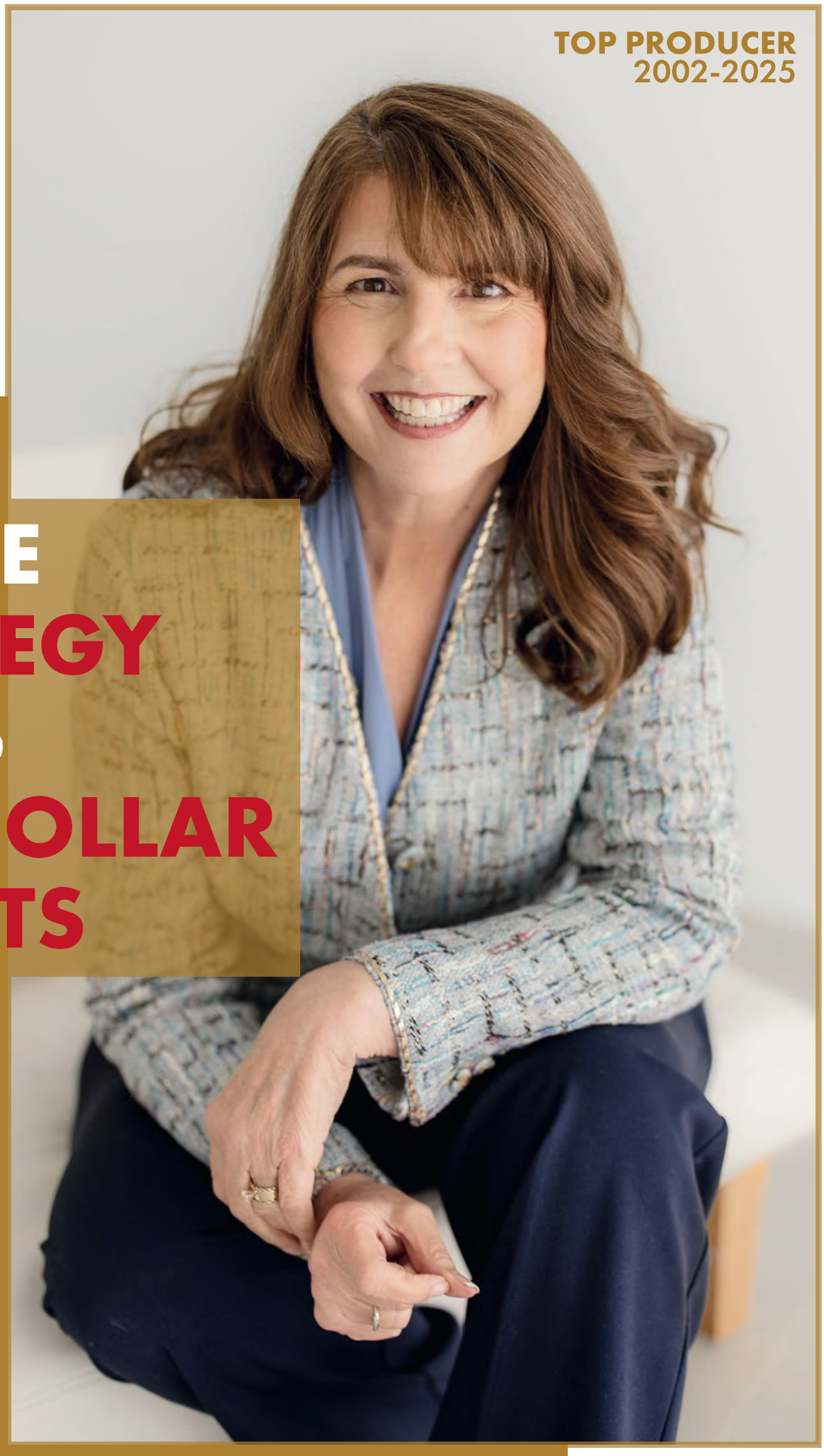
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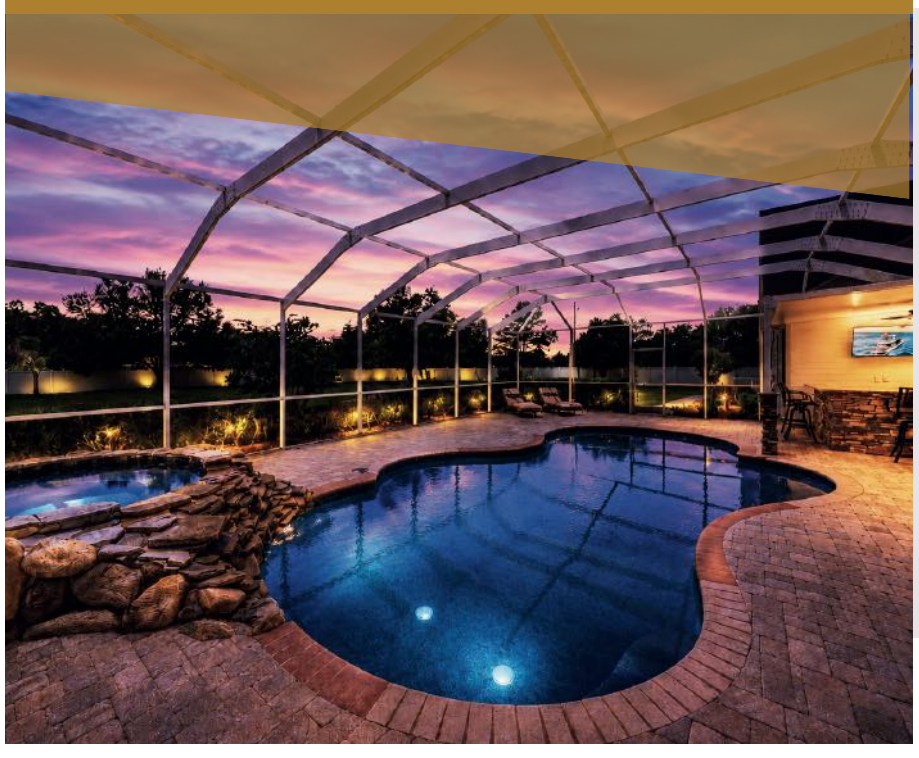
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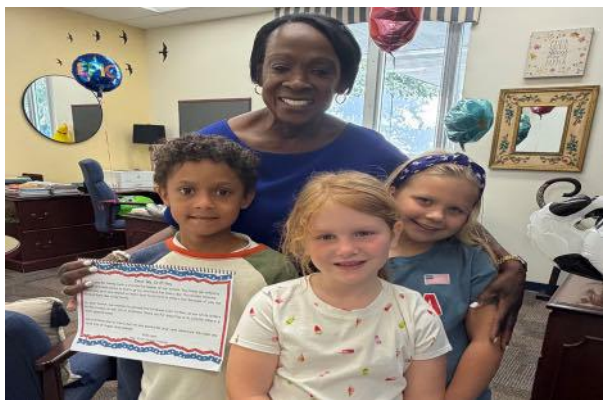
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CIMINO ELEMENTARY HONORS RETIRING PRINCIPAL JOANNE GRIFFITHS

By Jane Owen







First grade students Emilee Raschke, Leroy Robinson and Charlie Kundinger with Joanne Griffiths after presenting their service project of Letters to the Troops.





Retiring Cimino Principal Joanne Griffiths had a bucket-list dream of playing with the Bloomingdale High School drumline.



After close to 35 years as an educator, Cimino Elementary Principal Joanne Griffiths retired at the end of the 2026 school year. In a true testament of love and gratitude, students and staff at the school celebrated her daily the last week of school with surprises that included everything from a school-wide flash mob to community service projects in her honor.

Griffiths began her career in 1985 in New York midway through the school year, taking over third grade for a teacher on leave. She taught at three schools in New York and then moved to Florida and began teaching in Hillsborough County in 1991 at Tampa Palms Elementary. Griffiths held the role of principal at two schools: Cahoon Elementary and Cimino Elementary.

One of Griffiths' first goals as Cimino principal was to enrich the sense of community within the school by building on the concept of professional learning communities and to continue to be a significant part of the growing local community.

"When I came here, my goal was to take the good that I saw, all of the things that were the norms of Cimino and the community and enrich it," Griffiths said.

Griffiths' advice for new teachers is to find their purpose, find good people who have purpose and integrity to connect with and be a community with. For all teachers and administrators, she believes is important to be reflective and continually evaluate ways to improve.

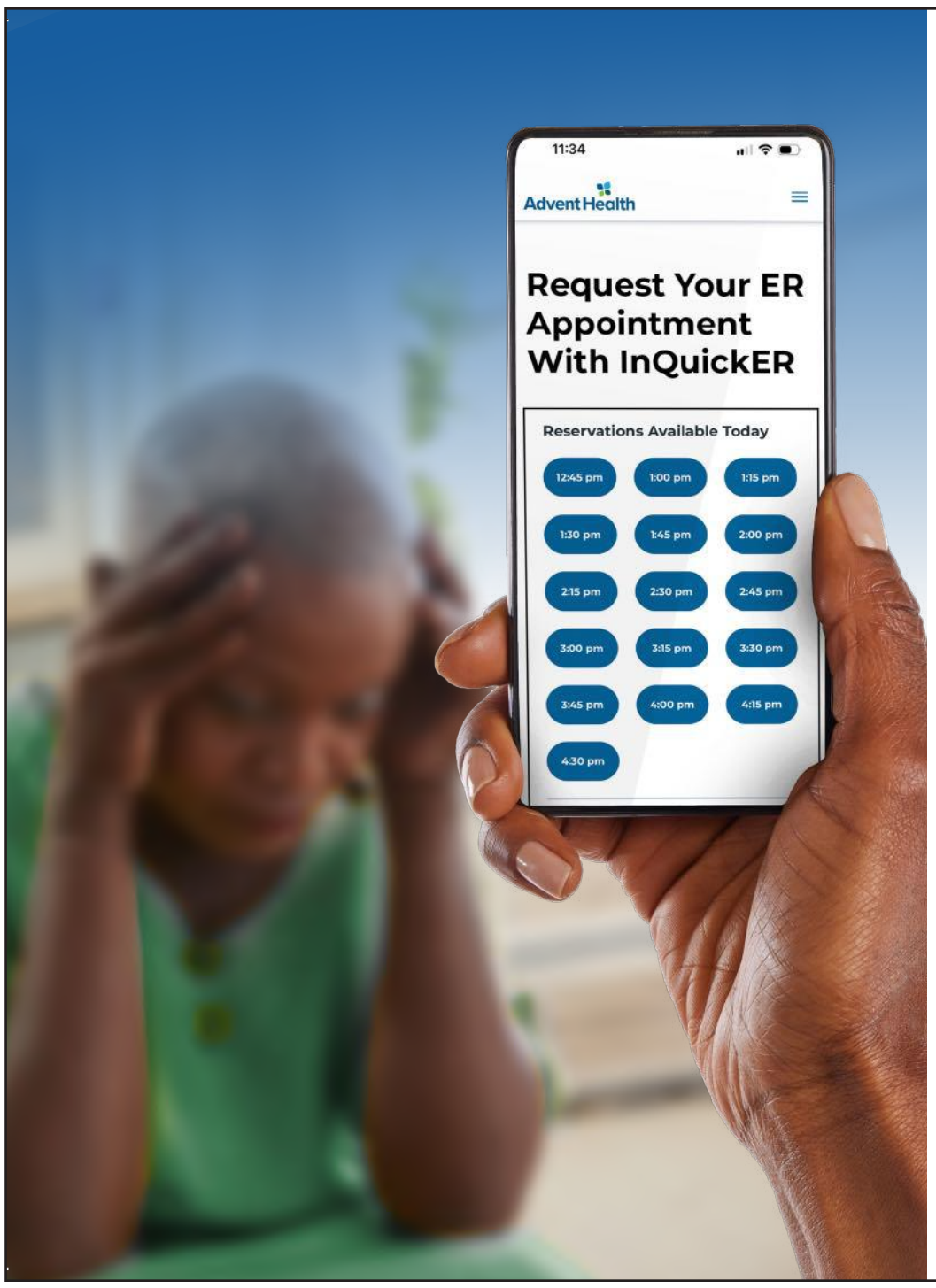
Anne Fiorita served as assistant principal with Griffiths and is the new Cimino principal. Fiorita said that the school wanted to honor Griffiths with events and actions that filled her heart and soul.

"Joanne understood the importance Cimino plays in the community and worked to preserve that. She helped plan the 20th year celebration to honor the legacy of Cimino while bringing her own legacy of the importance of good character and acts of kindness that will last into the next 20 years," Fiorta said.

Except for a retirement party with staff, all the celebrations for Griffiths in the last week of school were a surprise. There was a school-wideg flash mob, surprise balloons throughout a day as part of Up, Up and Away Day, and Bloomingdale High School's drumline played and had her as a guest drummer. Each grade surprised her by revealing that they had done a community service project in her honor. The community service projects included the ECHO Food Drive (kindergarten), Letters to the Troops (first grade), Thank You Book for Cimino's 'reading' dog (second), Educators That Made a Difference (third), Pet Resource Drive (fourth) and A Kid's Place Collection (fifth).

Griffiths said it was overwhelming and beautiful.

"Most people don't get the opportunity to be shown such kindness. It just filled my heart. And so that was the gift. The real gift was giving me a moment to pause and take in the honor of serving the community and how the community felt about that," said Griffiths.



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AdventHealth Riverview

TENNIS PLAYER SIGNS WITH CONVERSE UNIVERSITY ON SIGNING DAY

By Nick Nahas



Photo courtesy of Hillsborough County Public Schools

Bloomingdale High School senior tennis player Laila Clark signed with Converse University in Spartanburg, South Carolina, on Spring National Signing Day.

Bloomingdale High School senior tennis player Laila Clark signed with Converse University in Spartanburg, South Carolina, on Spring National Signing Day, April 15.

"When I signed my letter of intent, the biggest thing going through my mind was gratitude," said Clark. "I was thinking about my parents and everything they've sacrificed to give me this opportunity, and my coaches who have pushed me to become a better player and person. It was a really special moment because it wasn't just about me, it was about everyone who helped me get there. I felt proud, thankful and excited for what's ahead."

According to Clark's head coach, Anthony Fiorita, she is the first player ever from Bloomingdale High School to sign a letter of intent and play college tennis.

"I was so proud of her," said Fiorita. "This college signing was something that she didn't even consider a few months ago. She honestly wasn't sure that she was ready to make that jump to college. Anyone who sits and watches her play knows that there is no question. Converse University just signed a diamond in the rough, and with more polishing she will shine on the college level."

Clark was also recently recognized by Hillsborough County Public Schools with the Andres Garcia Memorial Award for Most Outstanding Female Tennis Player in Hillsborough County for 2026.

"I was honestly surprised and extremely honored," said Clark. "Knowing what the award represents makes it even more meaningful. It's not just about performance but also character and dedication, so it really meant a lot to be recognized in that way. I'm very grateful and motivated to keep representing those values moving forward."

Clark finished second in districts this season. She has lettered on the varsity tennis team since her freshman year and was the team captain this year. She also has well over a 4.0 GPA. She plans on majoring in mathematics or engineering.

"My ultimate goal is to compete at the highest level I can and continue improving every day," said Clark. "In college, I want to make an impact on my team, help us win and keep developing my game. Beyond that, I'd love to see how far tennis can take me. Whether that's playing professionally or staying involved in the sport in some way long-term."

TONY BARONI AWARDED REALTOR OF YEAR BY TAMPA BAY TOP PRODUCERS

By Libby Hopkins



Local Valrico realtor Tony Baroni of Keller Williams recently won Male Realtor of the Year – Agent's Choice through Tampa Bay Top Producers

The Tony Baroni Team at Keller Williams Realty in Valrico was built on relationships, referrals and creating exceptional client experiences. Tony Baroni entered into the real estate world in 2005 after previously working as a logistics consultant in the automotive industry, where he focused heavily on strategy, saving clients' money, negotiation and efficiency systems. Over time, the business naturally grew through referrals from happy clients across North America and trusted relationships throughout the logistics community.

"The team has now helped thousands of families buy and sell homes and has earned more than 2,800 five-star reviews online," Baroni said. "Our focus is getting listings sold, helping relocations move here from out of state and helping clients buy and sell in the same market and closing on the same day."

Baroni was incredibly honored to recently be nominated and to win Male Realtor of the Year – Agent's Choice through Tampa Bay Real Producers.

"What made the recognition especially meaningful was that it came from peers within the real estate community," Baroni said. "In the last five years, our team has won Male Realtor of the Year three times, the Ultimate Leadership award twice and Team of the Year once through Tampa Bay Real Producers, which is the top 500 agents in Tampa Bay within three counties. For the entire team, it felt less like an individual accomplishment and more like recognition of the culture, hard work and client experience that the whole organization strives to create every day. Everyone on the team contributes to that success."

If you ask Baroni what makes his realty business different from other ones in the community, he will tell you it's his team's reputation and service.

"One of the biggest differences is that our business was truly built on reputation, yet we are technology enhanced," Baroni said. "We focus heavily on relationships and long-term connections, rather than simply transactions. We want clients to feel supported not just during the buying or selling process but long after closing as well. Our old-school philosophy of answering our phones, getting back to people quickly and making the process as smooth as possible is what we focus on as a team."

The team also places a huge emphasis on systems, communication and culture internally so that clients consistently receive a high level of service no matter who they work with on the team.

"We genuinely believe that creating an outstanding experience is what earns repeat business and referrals for life," Baroni said. "So, training is a huge part of what we do on an ongoing basis."

You can visit its website at www.tonybaroni.com or call 813-425-1400. Its office is located at 2350 E. SR 60, Ste. 207, in Valrico.

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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 one of its locations, visit https://tampa.escapegameover.us/en.

BUSCH GARDENS TAMPA BAY UNVEILS ACTION-PACKED SUMMER

Staff Report



Summer is coming in hot at Busch Gardens Tampa Bay. The park today unveiled its can't-miss summer lineup, including Summer Nights, offering extended hours from now through Sunday, August 9, with an all-new drone show, themed dance parties, returning fan-favorite entertainment and seasonal food and beverage offerings. Plus, the all-new Lion and Hyena Ridge opens soon. The best part: Access to all events and attractions is included with park admission.

Summer Nights, Bigger and Better

From now through August 9, guests can experience the park after dark nightly with Summer Nights, offering extended park hours, electrifying entertainment and nighttime thrills, including:

• The all-new Wild Skies Drone Show & Fireworks Spectacular with two shows. On select nights, visitors can enjoy a nighttime spectacular featuring 400 drones and fireworks, during two all-new shows: a patriotic-themed show for America's 250th birthday and a drone show, starting Friday, July 10, showcasing designs unique to Busch Gardens.

• The all-new Beach Bash show, which is filled with retro, high-energy fun the whole family will love and takes place in Gwazi Plaza, and the Boom Box Dance Party returns with energetic vibes in Stanleyville.

• Nighttime rides, which offer a whole new experience, enjoying Busch Gardens' nine world-class roller coasters after dark.

Back by popular demand, these fan-favorite shows are held indoors when guests want to beat the heat:

• Cirque Electric — This acrobatic show features new thrilling, world-class, cirque-style performers to the Stanleyville Theater beginning Thursday, June 11. Guests can witness their extraordinary talent alongside an electric ensemble of dancers.

• Animal Tales — During this educational presentation, guests learn more about the park's diverse collection of more than 200 animal species and meet some of the animal ambassadors in person.

• Icons — This fan-favorite live performance features hits inspired by musical legends.

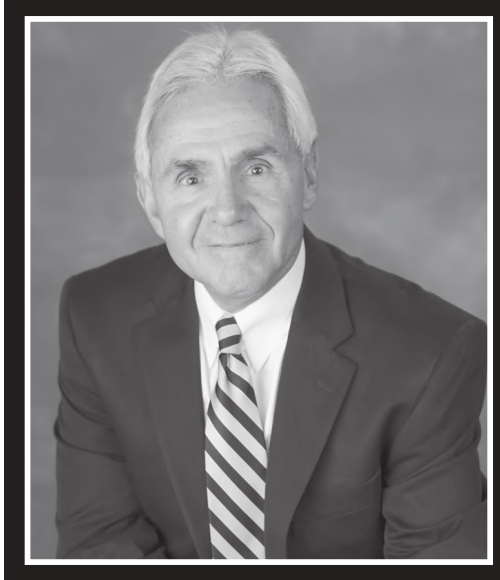
• Rhythm of Nature — Audiences embark on a spellbinding ice adventure following the journey of a brave young hero into a magical dream realm to uncover the wonders of the animal kingdom and embrace their destiny. This ice spectacle dazzles guests with the beauty, danger and wisdom of nature.

America's 250th Celebration at Busch Gardens

This patriotic summer event is packed with all-American excitement throughout the park. From now through Sunday, July 5, guests can experience special military appreciation offerings, shop patriotic merchandise and indulge in festive summer treats. To cap it off, a dazzling patriotic-themed drone show will captivate audiences.

For more information, visit https://buschgardens.com/tampa/. Follow Busch Gardens Tampa Bay on Facebook and Instagram for the latest summer details and information.

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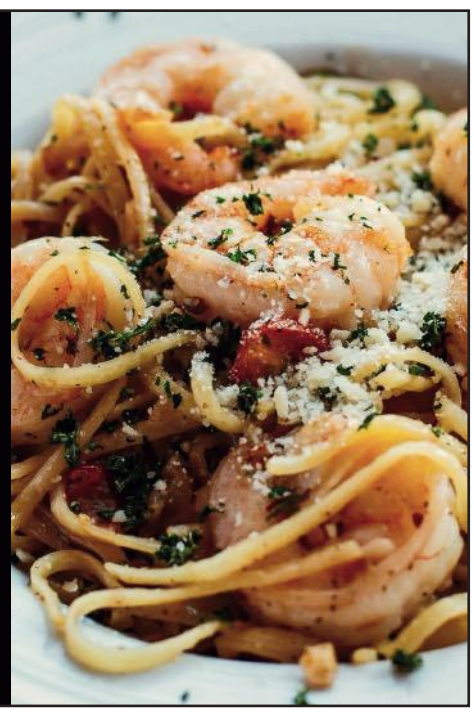
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Compiled by Taylor Wells



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Plans to Attend
Florida State University
Honors Program



Valedictorian
Andrew O'Toole
Durant High School
GPA 7.88
Plans to Attend
University of Florida



Salutatorian
Joshua Jones
Durant High School
GPA 7.50
Plans to Attend
University of Florida



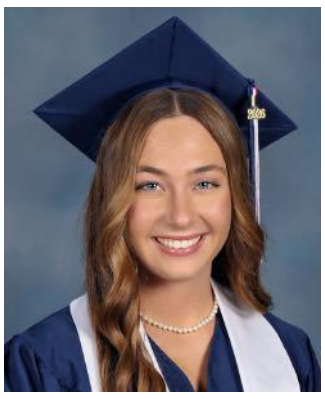
Valedictorian
William Skiver
Foundation Christian
Academy
GPA 7.31
Plans to Attend
Harding University



Second Highest GPA
Raymond Preston
Adams V
Foundation Christian
GPA 7.11
Plans to Attend
University of Miami



Valedictorian
Ethan Heruska
Grace Christian School
GPA 4.26
Plans to Attend
University of
South Florida.



Salutatorian
Elizabeth Spillane
Grace Christian School
GPA 4.25
Plans to Attend
University of
South Florida.



Valedictorian
Brayan Perez-Granados
Strawberry Crest
High School
GPA 7.92
Plans to Attend
University of Florida



Salutatorian
Sadie Gibson
Strawberry Crest
High School
GPA 7.42
Plans to Attend
University of
South Florida



Valedictorian
Ashank Saravanan
Strawberry Crest High
School (IB Program)
GPA 10.09
Plans to Attend
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Salutatorian
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College Selection
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$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.

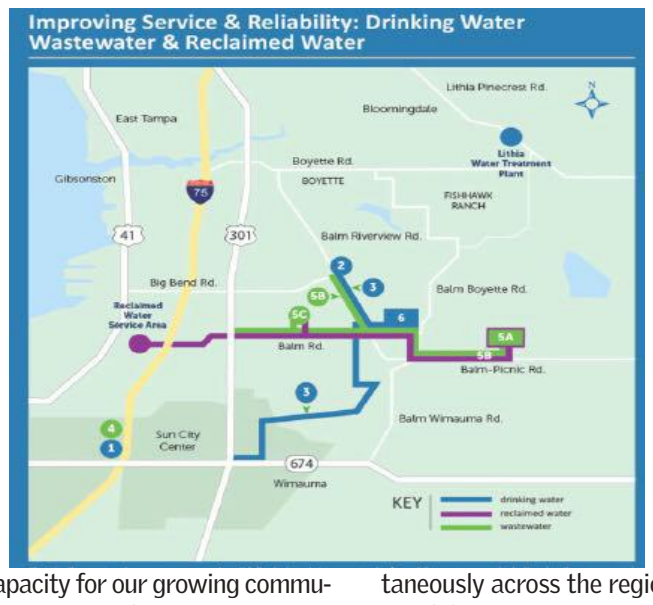
The One Water Program serves the county's rapidly growing south-central service area, including Apollo Beach, Brandon, Gibsonton, Riverview, Ruskin, Sun City Center, Valrico and Wimauma.

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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NEW HORIZONS GROUP HOMES PROVIDES SPECIAL EVENTS, ACTIVITIES & MORE

By Brad Stager

Ensuring the well-being of those who are at risk of marginalization or exploitation because of a disability is a principle wholeheartedly embraced by New Horizons Group Homes in its mission to provide safe, sustaining shelter for adults with special needs.

The genesis of New Horizons was in 1992, as a community of people concerned about a lack of resources for residents dealing with ability challenges came together in a partnership with the special needs ministry of First Baptist Church of Brandon. Its mission from the outset has been to support the notion that independence, dignity and respect are essential to a fully lived life, and that a home is an important part of making this possible for those whose disability makes daily living difficult.

From that beginning in 1992 grew a village, starting with the Mary Lou Creamer home, which opened in 1999 on the property located at 109 E. Clay Ave. in Brandon. That first structure was home for six women residents and was followed in 2002 with the opening of the Alice Storms home, which housed six men. A grant from Hillsborough County allowed for construction of the Peter and Brenda Watkins home, which opened to six men in 2017. Creamer, Storms and Watkins are among the names of New Horizons' founders.

The homes are operated as assisted living facilities licensed by the Florida Agency for Health Care Administration, with much of the funding derived from residents' Social Security benefits as well as through special events, like barbecues and luncheons, and developing supportive relationships with businesses and individuals in the community who wish to help.

As a partner with First Baptist Church's special needs ministry, New Horizons emphasizes Christian values in creating the homes' environments. Residents are encouraged to develop their full potential as human beings, and New Horizons draws upon community connections and resources to provide them. Many residents hold jobs and all are expected to do chores to keep the homes operating smoothly. Outings to local events and attractions also keep residents busy.

"It's a Christian, family-centered home to be all that they can be," said Brenda Watkins.

To learn more, including how to take a tour for interested families, visit www.newhorizonshomes.org or call 813-571-2690.

GRAZE CRAZE ELEVATES CHARCUTERIE WITH ARTFUL BOARDS & WORKSHOPS

By Makenzie Atkins Noel





Graze Craze Charcuterie Boards & Boxes, located in Brandon, specializes in handcrafted grazing boards, boxes, and catering spreads made with fresh, visually stunning ingredients.

Its offerings include individual Char-Cutie-Cups and Grab & Graze meals perfect for personal snacking or lunches, as well as larger picnic boxes, themed boards, and catering trays designed for everything from intimate gatherings to corporate events and celebrations.

Customers can choose from a variety of curated styles, including the meat-and-cheese-forward 'Gone Grazey,' the vegetarian-focused 'Vegegrazian,' the sweet-inspired 'Sweet & Grazey,' keto-friendly options, brunch boards and seasonal specialty selections. They can also upgrade their experience with new offerings, like the Premium Meat & Cheese Board, featuring elevated selections of meats and cheeses paired with a cracker box for a more indulgent spread. Each order is built with a thoughtful mix of artisan cheeses, fresh fruits and vegetables, breads, dips, jams and sweet treats, all arranged in an artful presentation.

Proudly veteran owned and family operated, Graze Craze Brandon is owned by Air Force veterans Jack and Tara White, who have brought the same precision and care from military service into their new venture. In just six months, the family has built the business around a mission of creating memorable experiences through food for the Brandon, Riverview, and greater Hillsborough County community. Their son, a Newsome High School junior, also helps contribute to the artistic grazing displays that have become part of the brand's identity.

"Graze Craze is more than just a business, it's a family passion," said White. "We're proud to serve our community with fresh, artfully arranged charcuterie boards made with love while helping create memorable experiences for our customers."

Every board is assembled fresh by trained "Grazologists," who focus on balance, color, and presentation so each spread feels like edible art rather than traditional catering. Customers can order online for pickup or delivery, making gourmet charcuterie an easy, stress-free option for both everyday meals and event planning.

Graze Craze also offers in-store Build-a-Board Workshops that turn charcuterie into an interactive experience. Groups are invited to join a fun session where they can sample a beautifully curated charcuterie board before creating their own masterpiece to take home. The workshops are a popular option for girls' nights, birthdays, team outings, or simply a fun get-together with friends.

With every board, workshop, and event, Graze Craze continues to build connections across the community through food that is meant to be shared.

To learn more and schedule a private Build-a-Board Workshop, please visit https://www.grazecraze.com/locations/brandon-fl or call 813-692-9230.

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SOUL CIRCUS COWBOYS COME HOME TO BRANDON FOR CHARITY FESTIVAL

By Brian Bokor





Inside Morrisound Recording Studio: Frank J. Myers, Rick Morgan, Billy McKnight, and Jim Morris during a recent recording session in Tampa. (right)

Before the Billboard-charting albums, national tours and collaborations with Grammy-winning songwriters and platinum-record producers, Billy McKnight was playing quarterback and middle linebacker for the Brandon Broncos while attending Nativity Catholic School in East Hillsborough County.

Years later, the Soul Circus Cowboys frontman became a familiar face at Nativity Novemberfest, where the band regularly drew large hometown crowds and helped create what McKnight once described as a "complete Brandon reunion."

Now, McKnight is bringing that same spirit to the upcoming Chris Rocks the Vote Music Festival benefiting Forgotten Angels and ECHO.

The festival is scheduled for Saturday, June 27, at the Forgotten Angels ranch, located at 3604 Little Stearns Rd. in Valrico, as part of Chris Ciulla's honorary mayor campaign supporting the two nonprofits. The honorary mayor race is a community fundraising competition where donations and ticket purchases count as votes supporting local charities.

Forgotten Angels supports young adults aging out of foster care, while ECHO assists local families and individuals facing financial hardship throughout the Brandon area.

"We couldn't be more grateful for having the Soul Circus Cowboys supporting Forgotten Angels and the kids we work with," said Cindy Tilley, founder of Forgotten Angels. "The funds they are helping us raise will help save the lives of youth in our community."

Forgotten Angels and ECHO work closely together to support local individuals and families facing difficult situations throughout the community.

The event will feature live music, food trucks and family activities, including performances by Wade Williams, Sidney O'Sullivan, Clay Bo, Sons of the South and Soul Circus Cowboys.

Despite years of touring and recording, McKnight said his connection to Brandon and Valrico has remained constant throughout his career, especially his longtime relationship with Raccoons Bar & Grill, where he performed even before moving to Nashville, Tennessee, in the 1990s.

"Three times a year, I always go back to where I came from," McKnight said. "I play there Thanksgiving Eve, once in the spring and again near the end of the year."

McKnight said football was originally his main focus growing up in Brandon before eventually turning his attention toward music after his athletic plans changed.

Soon afterward, he auditioned for a friend's band.

"His band wound up going with me and we got on Star Search," McKnight said.

That early exposure helped lead McKnight to Nashville in 1994, where he spent nearly a decade learning the music business.

"Nashville was like a college to me," McKnight said.

After returning home to Florida, McKnight formed Soul Circus Cowboys in 2009.

The band has since become one of the region's most recognizable country rock acts, sharing stages with nationally known artists, including Big & Rich.

Their 2016 album, Tailgate Country, reached No. 25 on Billboard's Top Country Albums chart.

Soul Circus Cowboys also gained regional attention during the Tampa Bay Buccaneers' 2020-21 Super Bowl season after releasing the fight song "We're Going to Buc You Up."

Along the way, McKnight built relationships with respected music industry veterans, including Grammy-winning songwriter Frank J. Myers, who won the 1995 Grammy Award for Best Country Song for co-writing the hit "I Swear."

McKnight said Myers first took interest in him after hearing him perform the song "High and Low."

"He heard me sing 'High and Low' and said, 'We want to meet him,'" McKnight recalled. "Then we met, and he said, 'OK, we're going to develop you.'"

"If you want to be the best, you've got to work with the best," McKnight said.

That philosophy eventually led to collaborations with additional respected music industry names, including Jim Morris of Morrisound Recording, the internationally recognized Tampa recording studio associated with multiple platinum-certified records.

The band recently released its newest single, "Something Stronger," and did a May 18 music video premiere on the American Country Network (ACN).

Despite the success, McKnight said giving back locally still comes first.

"Let's make this a Brandon reunion," McKnight said. "Come out and do some good for our neighborhood like we always do. When a Brandonite goes down, or one of our bikers goes down, we get together and put things like this event together to help out.

"Quote me — it's something I've said for years: Come on out and let's help other people out. This is more than just a concert for us."

Tickets for the June 27 festival are scheduled to go on sale on Monday, May 25, with general admission tickets priced at $25 and VIP tickets available for $50.

For event details, follow the Chris for Mayor 2026 Facebook page www.facebook.com/chrisformayor2026. Visit https://linktr.ee/chrisformayor to find ticket information and purchase.

Questions can also be directed to Forgotten Angels at ctilley@forgottenangelsflorida.org or by calling 813-812-0120.

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RESCUE PETS ISSUES URGENT PLEA FOR FOSTERS AS SHELTERS REACH CAPACITY

Staff Report

Rescue Pets of Florida, a volunteer-driven nonprofit that recently celebrated over 25,000 adoptions in its first 10 years, is issuing an urgent plea for foster homes as shelters and rescues across the Tampa Bay area reach dangerous overcrowding levels during kitten season.

The rescue currently has zero available foster homes for incoming kittens, while county shelters and rescue partners throughout the region continue to operate at or beyond capacity. According to the organization, local shelters have already begun euthanizing animals for space.

"We are at a critical point," said Jeanine Cohen, director and cat division lead for Rescue Pets of Florida. "Every single foster home directly translates into lives saved. Right now, we are being forced to make heartbreaking decisions simply because we do not have enough homes available to safely place more animals."

Founded in 2015, Rescue Pets of Florida began as a small cat rescue originally known as Rescue Cats of Florida. Over the past decade, the organization has grown into one of the region's largest volunteer-based rescues, operating five adoption centers throughout Tampa Bay and expanding its mission to save cats, dogs, neonatal kittens and farm animals in need.

The rescue relies entirely on volunteers and foster families rather than a traditional shelter facility. Foster homes provide temporary care for animals until they are medically cleared and adopted into permanent homes.

"We provide everything," said Tara Pisano, director and dog division lead for Rescue Pets of Florida. "Food, medical care, supplies, support — we just need people willing to open their homes temporarily. Even fostering for a few weeks can literally save lives."

In addition to rescue and adoption efforts, Rescue Pets of Florida has become known for its regional impact through spay/neuter initiatives and shelter partnerships. The organization also sponsors rescue and partner-rescue spay/neuter clinics aimed at reducing overpopulation before animals enter shelters. Since 2023, Rescue Pets of Florida and its rescue partners have completed thousands of sterilization surgeries, helping reduce intake pressure across multiple counties.

Rescue Pets of Florida is currently seeking foster homes throughout St. Petersburg, Valrico, Wesley Chapel, Spring Hill, Plant City and surrounding Tampa Bay areas. Community members interested in fostering can apply at www.rescuepetsofflorida.org/volunteer.

Donations to support medical care, food, and emergency rescue efforts can be made at www.rescuepetsofflorida.org/donate.

About Rescue Pets of Florida

Founded in 2015, Rescue Pets of Florida is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to rescuing, rehabilitating and rehoming homeless animals throughout the Tampa Bay area.





RUTLEDGES' PINCH A PENNY NOW OFFERS NEW POOL CONSTRUCTION

By Emily Harper



The Rutledge family, who has proudly served the community for 18 years.

Pinch A Penny Pool Patio & Spa, located in FishHawk, has been serving the community since 2008. Through the years, the Rutledge family, who owns and operates the business, has been dedicated and committed to their clients' needs.

Recently, the business has expanded its services, now offering new pool construction. This includes design, material selection, installation and 30 days of after-service support to ensure the pool is functioning properly and as intended.

Jim Rutledge sets his business apart from other pool building companies as a company already rooted and invested in the community. In this expansion, Pinch A Penny is still a small, intimate pool company focused on its clients' unique preferences. He explained that it expanded its client services to create a small, custom boutique-style pool building business focused on its customers.

Unlike other companies, once construction is complete, the company provides its clients with ongoing services, such as chemical testing, repairs and warranty work.

Jim Rutledge stated, "We are not going anywhere. When there is an issue, we are going to be there to support you."

Since offering new pool construction, the Rutledges' business has provided services to clients in both Hillsborough and Manatee counties. Throughout each specific building process, it has maintained its commitment to personalized service, quality workmanship and customer satisfaction.

Customers appreciate working directly with a local, family-owned business that takes the time to understand their vision and transform outdoor spaces into beautiful backyard retreats. Whether clients are looking for a custom-designed pool, a complete outdoor living area or enhancements to an existing space, the team works closely with them from concept to completion.

Known as a great community partner, the Rutledge family has long supported Newsome High School's Marching Band in addition to numerous community organizations.

In addition to pool construction, the business also specializes in outdoor kitchen design and fire pits, artificial turf and landscaping, along with patio lighting.

The Rutledges' Pinch A Penny Pool Patio & Spa store is located at 16715 FishHawk Blvd. in Lithia, in the shopping center across from Newsome High School. To learn more about its services and set up an appointment for new pool construction, contact 813-655-3700 or email the stoe at store191@pinchapenny.com.

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ASSET LOCATION: THE OVERLOOKED LEVER IN TAX-EFFICIENT INVESTING

Staff Report



The team at Payant Wealth Management in Sun City Center encourages clients to align investment and tax strategies for long-term financial success.

When it comes to building long-term wealth, most investors focus on what they own—stocks, bonds, funds, and alternatives. But an equally important question is where those assets are held. This concept, known as asset location, can have a meaningful impact on after-tax returns, yet it's often overlooked in portfolio construction.

Asset location refers to strategically placing investments across different account types—taxable accounts, tax-deferred accounts (like traditional IRAs or 401(k)s), and tax-free accounts (such as Roth IRAs). Each type carries its own tax treatment, and aligning investments accordingly can help reduce unnecessary tax drag.

For example, income-generating assets like bonds or high-turnover funds may be better suited for tax-deferred accounts, where interest and short-term gains are sheltered from annual taxation. Meanwhile, growth-oriented investments—such as equities with potential for long-term appreciation—can be ideal for taxable or Roth accounts, where capital gains benefits or tax-free growth may be realized.

The difference may seem incremental year to year, but over time, tax efficiency can significantly improve overall portfolio performance. In fact, minimizing taxes is one of the few "controllable" factors investors have, alongside costs and discipline.

Yet many investors unknowingly hold tax-inefficient assets in the wrong accounts, creating avoidable tax liabilities. This is where comprehensive planning—and ongoing coordination between investment strategy and tax considerations—becomes essential.

Ask yourself: Does your advisor talk to you about asset location?

Are your investments positioned with taxes in mind, or simply allocated based on risk alone?

How tax-efficient is your plan?

True financial planning goes beyond selecting investments—it involves integrating tax strategy, retirement goals, and portfolio design into one cohesive approach. Reviewing asset location regularly, especially as tax laws or personal circumstances change, can help ensure your portfolio is working as efficiently as possible.

In today's environment, where every basis point counts, thoughtful asset location isn't just a technical detail—it's a strategic advantage.

Payant Wealth Management is located att 1653 Sun City Center Plaza, Sun City. Visit www.payantwealthmanagementgroup.com or call (813) 633-7333.

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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.

"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.



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

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 classes 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.



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.

For more information, please call 813-633-8923 or visit the website at https://callcroftons.com/.

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Sponsored by: Osprey Observer — Your Community Newspaper



Edited by:
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EYE ON BUSINESS

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

Lake Michigan Credit Union Announces Community Open House

Lake Michigan Credit Union (LMCU) will celebrate the grand opening of its newest branch in Valrico, with a family-friendly open house and ribbon-cutting ceremony on Tuesday, June 23, from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. at 3467 Lithia Pinecrest Rd. Guests can enjoy light refreshments, games, and activities while learning about LMCU's full range of financial services, including checking accounts, credit cards, mortgages, home equity loans, commercial lending, and treasury management.

To support the local community, LMCU will donate $10 to the Impact Program for every new membership account opened at the Valrico branch through Friday, June 26. The Impact Program is a nonprofit organization serving Hillsborough and Polk counties through programs that promote healthy living and relationships for teens, parents, educators and youth leaders.

Fast-casual Italian Restaurant Opens In Riverview

Mister Pasta's Build-Your-Own Pasta Bar is a fast-casual Italian experience where you're in control. Start by choosing your favorite fresh-made pasta, pick from its house-made sauces, load up on unlimited fresh vegetables, add your choice of proteins like grilled chicken, meatballs, steak, shrimp or lobster and then watch as your custom creation is cooked to perfection right in front of you. Fresh, fast and made just the way you like it. It also does catering for weddings, parties, office or corporate events. Mister Pasta is located at 11681 Boyette Rd. in Riverview. Visit its website at https://misterpasta.com/ for additional information.



Center For Prestige Skin Innovations

The Center for Prestige Skin Innovations, located at 915 S. Parsons Ave., Ste. B, in Brandon, recently celebrated joining the Brandon and Riverview Chamber of Commerce with a ribbon cutting. The Center for Prestige Skin Innovations provides a soothing escape from the stresses of daily life that'll leave you feeling recharged and refreshed. From the moment you walk through the doors, you'll be embraced by a calm, peaceful atmosphere that allows you to unwind, recharge and be refreshed. It offers a wide array of luxurious treatments to renew your body and spirit, including facials, massages, permanent makeup and others. Visit https://prestigeskininnovations.com/ or call 813-543-6636 for additional information and to make an appointment.



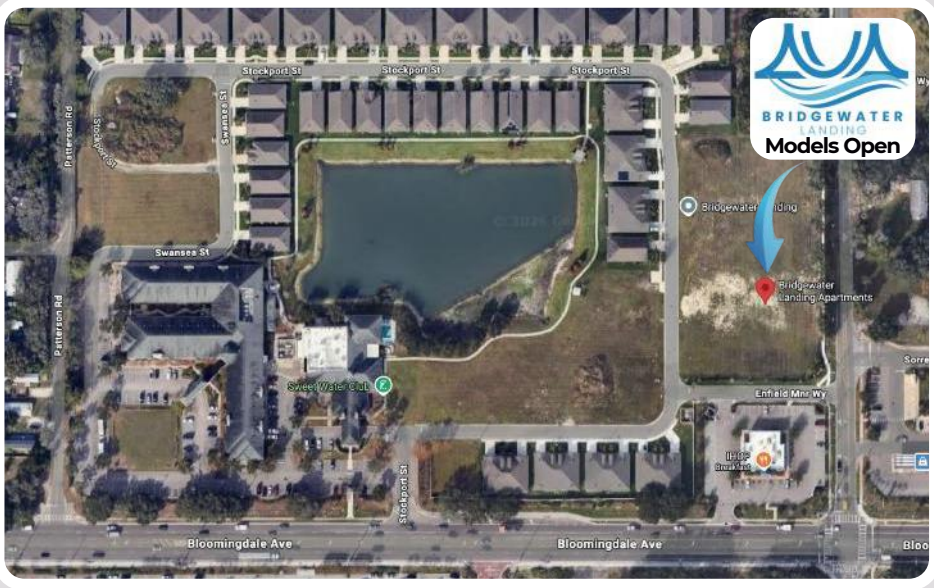


Steller Notary Services Celebrates Two-year Anniversary With A Ribbon Cutting

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.







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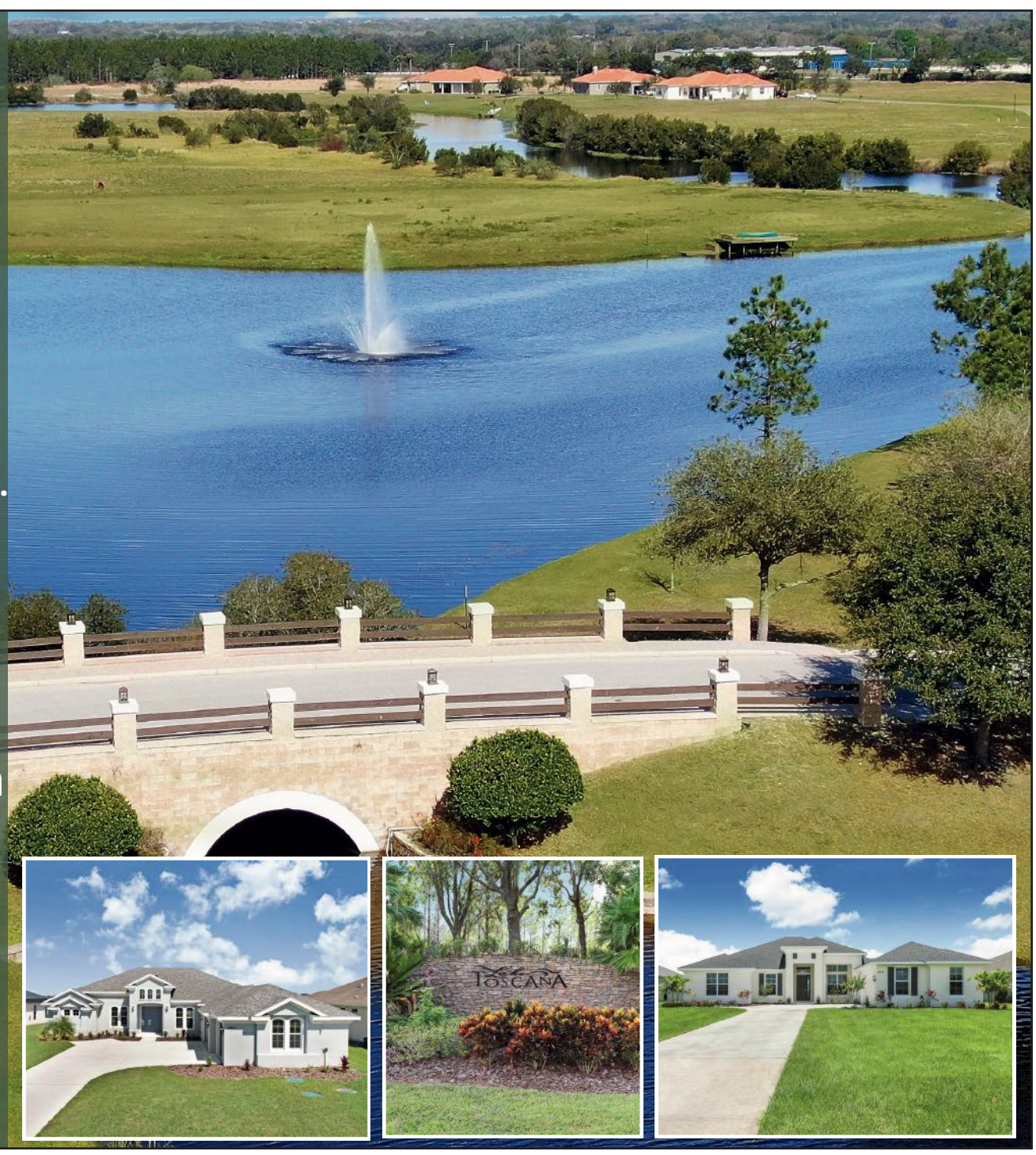
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$409,000



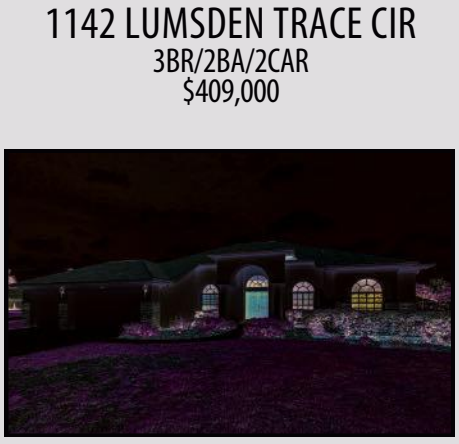
1216 BRANDON LAKES AVE
3BR/2BA/2CAR + LAKEFRONT + DOCK
$525,000



609 TROPICAL BREEZE WAY
2BR/2BA/2CAR
$625,000



8813 S LAGOON ST
4BR/3.5BA + 2 LOFTS + CARPORT + SAUNA + HOT TUB + WATERFRONT + DOCK
$1,299,000



2833 MOSSY TIMBER TRL
4BR/3BA/3CAR + BONUS + OFFICE + POOL
$625,000



5201 LAUREL POINTE DR
5BR/3BA/3CAR + OFFICE + POOL/SPA
$775,000



4206 HELENE PL
3BR/2BA/2CAR + POOL + RV CARPORT
$550,000



19914 BLUFF OAK BLVD
5BR/3BA/3CAR + BONUS + POOL + WATER VIEW
$699,000



2109 LITHIA PINECREST RD
5 OFFICES/ 2 BATHS + PREMIUM ROAD FRONTAGE
$499,000



1009 W CORAL ST
2BR/1.5BA + .26 ACRE
$550,000



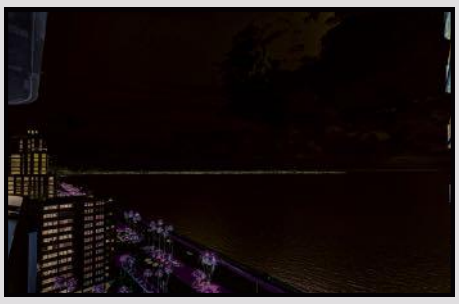
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