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October 2026

Volume 25, Issue 10

24 YEARS

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SCHOOL DISTRICT ASKS FOR SUPPORT AHEAD OF HALF-PENNY TAX VOTE

By Marie Gilmore

Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) is hosting in person and virtual meetings about the Half-Penny Promise referendum that will appear on the November ballot.

The town halls are part of the district's commitment to providing voters with information about the Half-Penny Promise, including projects completed through the current program, ongoing investments in school facilities, and what reauthorization would mean for students and schools in the future.

"The Half-Penny Promise has supported major improvements in our schools, and these town halls will give residents a chance to learn more about the program, hear from district leaders, and understand how funds have been invested over time," said Superintendent Van Ayres.

Since its approval in 2018, more than \$1.5 billion has been invested in schools, 1,000 projects have been completed and the average cost to Hillsborough County households is \$8 per month. An additional 25 percent of the fund is paid by tourists. Groceries and prescriptions are exempt, as are anything above the first \$5,000 of a purchase.

Several in-person meetings were held at schools across the district with one final virtual opportunity meeting remaining on Wednesday, October 14, from 6-7 p.m. on Microsoft Teams at <https://rb.gy/Oin6ib>.

Members of the district's independent Citizen Oversight Committee will also participate in the meetings, sharing their perspective on accountability, transparency and how the Half-Penny Promise dollars have



Chris Farkas, the district's Deputy Superintendent of Operations, School Board Member Patti Rendon and Citizen Oversight Committee member Ed Narain, MBA, JD.

been monitored since the program began. The committee is made up of community leaders who review spending and ensure funds are spent as intended.

Since voters approved the Half-Penny Sales Tax in 2018, Hillsborough County Public Schools

has invested more than \$1.326 billion in school improvements, with more than \$716 million awarded to local businesses. These investments have transformed learning environments across the district through critical upgrades such as air-conditioning replacements, roof renovations, enhanced safety and security measures and other essential infrastructure projects. Dedicated exclusively to capital improvements, the program operates with full transparency through independent oversight and regular public reporting, ensuring taxpayer dollars are invested responsibly and effectively in our schools.

It appears on the ballot as Referendum 3: Continue the Half-Cent Sales Tax for Schools. This question asks whether to keep it for another 10 years, starting January 1, 2029. It is not a new tax.

A YES vote continues the tax through 2038. A NO vote lets the tax end as scheduled.

To learn more about the Half Penny Promise, visit www.hillsboroughschools.org/half-penny-sales-tax-referendum.

FISHHAWK TURKEY TROT RETURNS THANKSGIVING MORNING FOR 18TH ANNUAL RUN

By Marie Gilmore

Thanksgiving morning in FishHawk will once again begin with running shoes, community spirit and a little friendly competition when the 18th annual FishHawk Turkey Trot takes place on Thursday, November 26.

The annual family-friendly event will begin at 5668 FishHawk Crossing Blvd. in Lithia and welcomes runners and walkers of all ages and abilities. Participants can choose from timed 5K and 10K races, an untimed 5K, a Fun Run and a Mini-Run.

More than a race, the FishHawk Turkey Trot supports Seeds of Hope, a local non-profit dedicated to helping provide food to individuals and families experiencing food insecurity. Proceeds from the event help fund Seeds of Hope's food distribution programs and provide groceries to local families throughout the year.

The tradition began in 2009 when Leda Eaton and her teenage children, Wesley and Allie, wanted to create a local Thanksgiving race that would give students an opportunity to earn volunteer hours while giving back to their community.

"There wasn't a local turkey trot, and I thought it'd be nice for families to have one close to FishHawk," Eaton said.

The event has grown significantly since then. Last year, more than 3,000 participants took part, while hundreds of volunteers help each year with registration, water stations, staging and other race-day activities.

Eaton said the event also helped open her eyes to the issue of food insecurity in the community and ultimately inspired the creation of Seeds of Hope.

The 2026 event will offer shirts while supplies last, with medals limited to the first 3,500 participants. Early packet pick-

Seeds of Hope's 18th Annual

2026

FISHHAWK

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WILL TROT FOR FOOD

Families and runners of all ages are expected to gather Thanksgiving morning for the 18th annual FishHawk Turkey Trot on November 26. The annual event benefits Seeds of Hope and its programs supporting local families experiencing food insecurity.



up will be available on Wednesday, November 25, from 12 Noon-7 p.m. at the Palmetto Club, located at 17004 Dorman Rd. in Lithia. Race-day packet pickup begins at

6:30 a.m., with the timed 5K and 10K starting at 8 a.m. The untimed 5K begins at 8:15 a.m., followed by the Fun Run and Mini-Run at 9:15 a.m.

Race-day registration will also open at 6:30 a.m. in the FishHawk Publix parking lot. Organizers encourage participants to arrive about an hour before their scheduled race due to parking and event traffic.

Registration is available online through RunSignUp. Sponsorship opportunities are available by contacting sponsor@sohopefl.org. Questions about the event can be directed to admin@sohopefl.org. For more information, visit <https://runsignup.com/race/donate/fl/lithia/fishhawkturkeytrot>.

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Chipotle Mexican Grill celebrated the grand opening of its newest FishHawk Ranch location at 16509 Fishhawk Blvd. The restaurant features a Chipotle drive-thru for convenient pickup, along with Chipotle's burritos, bowls, tacos and limited-time menu items. See full story on Page 3.

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CHIPOTLE OPENS RESTAURANT WITH DRIVE-THRU PICKUP LANE

By Marie Gilmore



Lakewood Ranch area. All four restaurants are open daily from 10:45 a.m.-10 p.m. Diners can also try two limited-time items. Pollo asado is grilled chicken seasoned with garlic, Mexican spices and cilantro, finished with citrus and lime. Chili lime chips are tortilla chips seasoned with lime and chili peppers.

The restaurants also serve Chipotle's high protein menu, with items ranging from 15-81 grams of protein, including the Double High Protein Bowl, the High Protein-High Fiber Bowl and a High Protein Cup snack. A single chicken taco starts at \$3.50. Family meals are available for groups eating at home.

Fishhawk Ranch residents have a new spot for burritos and bowls. Chipotle Mexican Grill opened its newest restaurant on September 22 at 16509 Fishhawk Blvd. in Lithia, one of four locations the chain is opening across the Tampa Bay area this month.

Ramon Gomez, CTM of the FishHawk Ranch restaurant, came to the new store from Chipotle's Gibsonton location. He said the first days have been busy.

"The grand opening is going very well, and we are being welcomed by the community. We have had a great response and a very busy opening," Gomez said.

Like the other three new restaurants, the FishHawk location features a Chipotle lane, a drive-through lane where customers can pick up orders placed through the Chipotle app or website without leaving their cars.

The chain opened a restaurant at 1185 S. Broad St. in Brooksville on September 16. Two more opened on September 29, one at 22820 State Rd. 54 in Lutz, near Land O' Lakes, and one at 16680 E. State Rd. 64 in Bradenton, in the northeast

New members of the Chipotle Rewards program, which offers monthly free food drops and birthday rewards, receive free chips and guacamole with a purchase. Customers can enroll at <https://chipotle.com/rewards>.

The company is hiring about 30 employees at each of the four new restaurants. Benefits include a crew bonus that can equal an extra month's pay each year, a debt-free college degree program, English as a second language classes and access to mental health care for employees and their families.

Applications are available at <https://chipotle.com/careers>.

Local groups and organizations can also set up fundraisers through Chipotle to benefit community causes.

TROOP 665 SCOUTS COMPLETE A YEAR OF HIGH ADVENTURE

Staff Report



Scouts from Troop 665 spent the past year reaching new heights, exploring history beneath the sea and enduring extreme cold through three of Scouting America's premier high-adventure programs. Boy Scout Troop 665 truly lived up to their motto, "On the edge of adventure." Whether climbing a mountain, operating as a sailing crew or relying on one another in the winter wilderness, the Scouts developed resilience, confidence, leadership and self-reliance. Troop 665 thanks their adult leaders, parents, volunteers and community supporters whose training, planning and encouragement made these memorable adventures possible.

The troop's first winter adventure took them to Northern Tier near Ely, Minnesota, where they learned cold-weather survival skills and slept in a snow shelter the scouts built, during subzero temperatures. The Scouts learned valuable skills and experienced life in snow and cold weather conditions.

At Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico, the Scouts completed a demanding back-

country trek, covering more than 59 miles, and climbed Mount Baldy, rising more than 12,000 feet above sea level. Carrying their own equipment, preparing meals, navigating mountain trails and encouraging one another through the effects of distance and altitude tested their endurance, preparation and teamwork.

At Florida Sea Base in Islamorada, the Scouts exchanged mountain trails for open water as they learned sailing, navigation, fishing, snorkeling and the responsibilities of living aboard a 40-foot sailboat. A highlight of the adventure was snorkeling over the wreck of the San Pedro, a Spanish galleon that sank in 1733 in the Florida Keys. The experience allowed the Scouts to explore maritime history while observing the coral, fish and other marine life that now inhabit the wreck site.

Boy Scout Troop 665 meets on Tuesdays at 7-8:30 p.m., at Grace Community Methodist Church, located at 5708 Lithia Pinecrest Rd. in Lithia. If you are interested in learning outdoor skills and leadership, come and visit a troop meeting.

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TAMPA BAY WATER TO TEST EMERGENCY SIRENS AT RESERVOIR ON OCTOBER 7



Photo Courtesy of Tampa Bay Water
The 15.5-billion gallon C.W. Bill Young Regional Reservoir makes the region's water supply more drought resistant, reliable and flexible.

Tampa Bay Water is conducting a test of its emergency siren system at the C.W. Bill Young Regional Reservoir on Wednesday, October 7, at 9 a.m. To ensure the sirens are effective in the unlikely event of an emergency, the sirens will sound at 9 a.m. and will include three to five short blasts lasting 10-20 seconds each. This is only a test. Tampa Bay Water has notified Hillsborough County Emergency Management, the sheriff's office, fire rescue staff and residents surrounding the reservoir.

If residents have any questions or concerns about the sirens or the regularly scheduled testing, they may call our dedicated hotline at 1-866-INFO-H2O (1-866-463-6420) or email reservoir@tampabaywater.org. Residents may also sign up for email reminders of when the sirens will be tested at www.tampabaywater.org/sirentest.

Should the reservoir siren system sound for an actual emergency, the sirens will sound in a continuous blast. Hillsborough County Emergency Man-



agement will immediately contact residents using text messages, emails and telephone calls. Emergency responders will be dispatched to direct residents to safe evacuation routes.

To receive emergency notifications, residents should sign up and register their contact information by visiting <https://hcfl.gov/hcflalert>.

Following the October 7 reservoir siren test, there are two more tests scheduled for 2026:

- Wednesday, November 4, at 9 a.m.
 - Wednesday, December 2, at 9 a.m.
- The sirens were installed in 2004 during the construction of the C.W. Bill Young Regional Reservoir. The purpose of the sirens is to notify those closest to the facility of an emergency situation that requires immediate evacuation.

The reservoir is located in Southern Hillsborough County at 17611 Boyette Rd. in Lithia.

About Tampa Bay Water

Tampa Bay Water provides wholesale water to the public utility systems of Hillsborough, Pasco and Pinellas counties, as well as the cities of New Port Richey, St. Petersburg and Tampa. To learn more about Tampa Bay Water, please visit www.tampabaywater.org.

Staff Report

STOLBERG FOUNDATION HOSTS "A NIGHT TO BET ON HOPE"

By Emma Snider

Logan Heroes was founded by Randy and Jennifer Stolberg after they lost their son Logan who was diagnosed with leukemia at age 14 and underwent treatment for 22 months before passing away at age 16. During Logan's treatment, he received tons of support and kindness, and he wanted to find a way to spread that support to other children going through cancer treatment. Because of Logan's desire to give back, Logan's Heroes mission is to help children going through cancer treatment have experiences that allow them to simply feel like kids again.

Currently, Logan's legacy is carried on by providing fun filled duffle bags to pediatric cancer patients. Logan's heroes have grown to support six children's hospitals with no plans to stop expanding. Randy and Jennifer Stolberg state "For our family, every duffle bag is a way of carrying Logan's kindness forward and reminding another child and family that they are not alone".

Logan's Heroes "A Night to Bet on Hope" is a Casino Night fundraiser held on Friday, October 23 6-10 p.m. at The Regent, 6437 Watson Rd, Riverview. This adults-only evening will be filled with food, music, casino-style entertainment, raffles, a silent auction, and a fantastic opportunity for the community to come together to support children who are battling cancer. All proceeds from the event will go towards the



creation of the duffle bags and Logan's Heroes' continuous efforts to aid and comfort children throughout their cancer treatment. This fun filled event has the meaningful purpose of continuing the mission Logan's life inspired.

"Logan's Heroes is our way of making sure Logan's kindness continues to reach children he never had the chance to meet. If

one of our duffle bags can give a child a smile, a little comfort, or even a few minutes to simply feel like a kid instead of a cancer patient, then Logan's legacy is still doing exactly what he wanted it to do." says Jennifer Stolberg.

Logan's Heroes would like to highlight that Logan was so much more than his cancer diagnosis. Logan's sense of humor, caring heart, love for gaming, dedication to Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, and dreams to become a pediatric oncologist to help other children battling cancer is what he is remembered for.

"That is an important part of Logan's Heroes. We want people to remember that behind every diagnosis is a child with a personality, interests, dreams and a family who loves them. Our mission is to bring joy and hope into some of their hardest days while continuing the legacy of a remarkable 16-year-old who wanted to give back" said Randy and Jennifer Stolberg.

For more details or to get involved, visit <https://www.logansheroes.org/>

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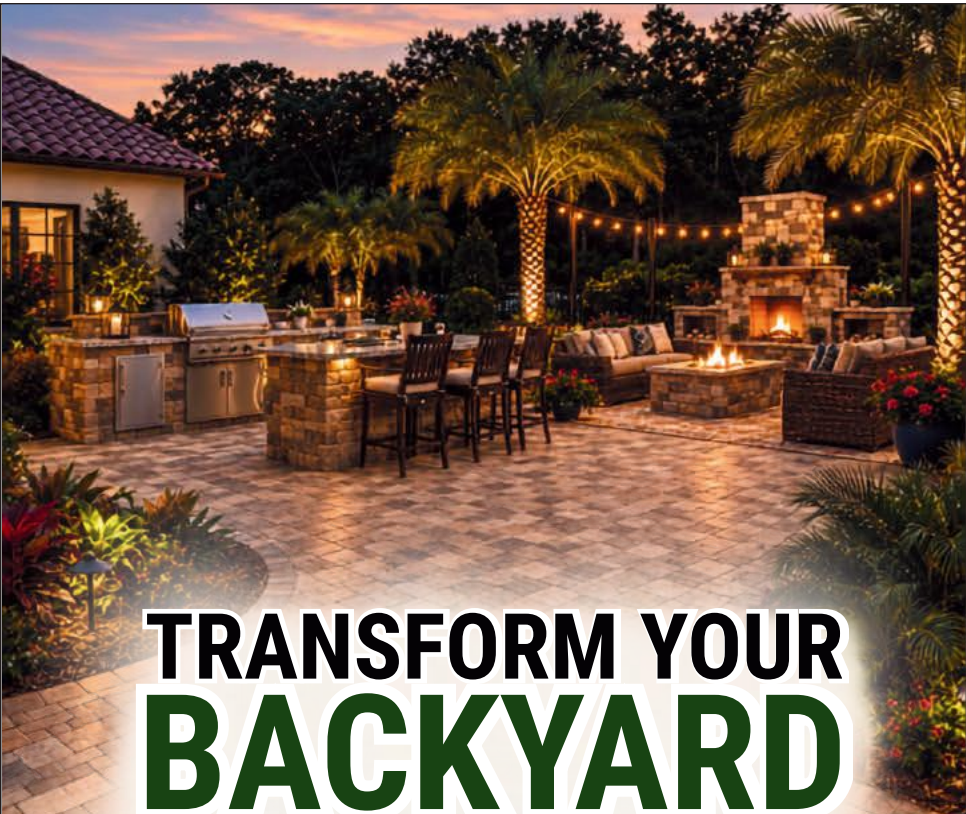
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Economical Subaru WRX Base Model Returns

By Nitish Rele

After a 2025 hiatus, the WRX base trim is back in the fold for the year. Base-priced at just \$32,495, the high-performance sports sedan comes with a standard six-speed manual gearbox and, of course, Subaru's renowned all-wheel-drive system offered on all its vehicles. The WRX is one of just a handful of stick-shift sedans still available on the market; so purists, here's a chance to buy this affordable ride!

Under the hood resides a 2.4-liter horizontally opposed four-cylinder turbocharged/intercooled engine cranking out a substantial 271 horsepower at 5,600 rpm and 258 pounds-feet of torque at 5,200 rpm. Whether navigating peak-hour traffic or merging into a tight spot, the manual transmission is absolutely flawless and a blast to shift. A MacPherson strut front and double wishbone rear suspension soak bumps and potholes with sure-footedness and self-assurance. The electric power rack-and-pinion steering returns a weighted, direct response to the driver's input. The WRX remains stable under heavy braking thanks to forceful 12.4-inch ventilated front and 11.4-inch solid rear discs.

Up front, the signature hexagonal mesh grille with a centered Subaru star cluster emblem is surrounded by C-shaped LED headlights to result in a handsome appearance. Atop the aluminum hood sits a protruding but noticeable, practical scoop. Also distinct is WRX red badging on the grille and rear trunk lid. This being a bare-bones model, the well-laid-out cabin is adorned in black cloth upholstery with



WRX
Tires: 245/40R18
Wheelbase: 105.2 inches
Length: 183.8 inches
Height: 57.8 inches
Width: 71.9 inches
Weight: 3,351 pounds
Fuel capacity: 16.6 gallons
City/hwy./comb.: 19/26/22 mpg
Website: www.subaru.com

eye-catching red stitches. Forget power front seats, but the twin cockpit is endowed with crystal-clear electroluminescent gauge displays for speedometer, tachometer, fuel and coolant temperature. New for 2026 is a standard push-button start. An 11.6-inch tablet-style vertical display serves as your infotainment reading matched by physical buttons for audio volume, tune and temp control. The 12.5-cubic-foot trunk capacity affords space for couple suitcases and carry-ons to haul on a weekend trip. Basic conveniences include the dual auto AC, 60/40-fold rear seat, flat-bottomed leather steering column, wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto, keyless entry, six-speaker sound system, dual USB ports and aluminum alloy pedals.

Dual front and side airbags, side curtain airbags, driver knee airbag, four-wheel antilock brakes with electronic brake distribution and brake assist, vehicle dynamic control, active front seat head restraints, active torque vectoring, EyeSight (adaptive cruise control, pre-collision and front cross-traffic brakes, lane-sway/center/departure warning), blind-spot detection, rear cross-traffic alert, rearview camera, remote keyless entry, tire pressure monitoring system and daytime running lights are standard.

A compelling engine, airy cabin, easier-on-the-wallet price tag and, best of all, all-wheel drive makes the WRX a wise pick for a potential sport sedan buyer. It is just perfect for the everyday chore.



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MOMBIES BRING "THRILLER" BACK TO PARK SQUARE ON OCT. 25

By Marie Gilmore

The MOMbies of FishHawk are returning to Park Square for another evening of family-friendly Halloween fun, community spirit and support for breast cancer research. This year, the group of dancing moms hopes to put on its biggest show yet.

The festivities begin at 4 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 25, at Park Square Plaza, 16132 Churchview Dr., in Lithia. Before the main event, families can enjoy raffles and prizes, face painting, a kids' costume contest, photo booth pictures and other Halloween activities.

At 6:30 p.m., the MOMbies take the stage for their highly anticipated annual performance, a flash-mob-style routine set to Michael Jackson's 1982 hit "Thriller."

Whether they have seen the MOMbies before or are catching the show for the first time, attendees are encouraged to come dressed for the occasion and bring family, friends and neighbors.

The group was founded by FishHawk resident Andrea Young after she saw a viral video of the original MOMbies, a movement that began in Fairfield, Connecticut, in 2016. Inspired to bring the tradition to Florida, she launched the FishHawk chapter, which gave its first performance in 2023. The group has returned to Park Square every October since, turning the routine into a neighborhood Halloween tra-



dition. Young said 31 MOMbies are already training for this year's show. "The performance is open to the public and we would love the community to come out and support this event and this important cause," she said.

Behind the costumes and choreography is a serious purpose. Their performances double as community fundraisers, with all proceeds donated to The Cancer Couch Foundation, which funds metastatic breast cancer research at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York. This year, every donation will be matched, doubling its impact.

In 2023, its first year, the group raised more than \$7,000 for the cause. Residents who want to support the cause before the big night have two more chances. The MOMbies will host music bingo at 6 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 15, at JF Kicks. They will also have a tent at FishHawk's fall festival on Saturday, Oct. 24, where visitors can stop by to meet the group.

To learn more about the group's mission and upcoming events, follow FishHawk MOMbies on Facebook and @fishhawk_mombies on Instagram.

MOVE YOUR WAY, EARN A MEDAL: UF/IFAS VIRTUAL CHALLENGE

By Marie Gilmore



As the weather cools, it's the perfect time to join an easy, supportive way to become more active. Let's Walk Florida!, hosted by University of Florida (UF) Extension, is a statewide virtual educational program designed to help Floridians achieve and maintain health through physical activity. Let's Walk Florida! meets you where you are — both in terms of physical location and your current fitness level.

The statewide physical activity challenge runs from Monday, October 5, through Monday, November 23.

This program is designed for all fitness levels, and despite the name, you do not have to walk to participate. Any intentional physical activity counts, including swimming, biking, dancing, walking. Participants will be counting minutes of intentional physical activity, not steps.

- Participants receive:
- Weekly Health eGuides delivered to your phone or email.
 - Weekly educational sessions with UF Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) health educators.
 - A virtual community to track your progress for accountability and support.
 - Weekly physical activity challenges.
 - A statewide tracking dashboard

where participants can see progress.

- An official finisher medal and certificate of completion.
- Opportunities to win prizes.

Register to participate via [Eventbrite at www.eventbrite.com/e/1999046640314](https://www.eventbrite.com/e/1999046640314).

There is a nominal fee of \$15 to participate, and scholarships are available if needed.

For questions about the program, please contact Andrea Nikolai, UF/IFAS Extension Polk County Family and Consumer Sciences agent, at andrea-nikolai@ufl.edu or 863-519-1072.

UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) is the home of UF/IFAS Extension Family and Consumer Sciences, providing research-based education in nutrition and wellness, food safety, personal finance and more to improve Floridians' quality of life. With Let's Walk Florida!, the goal is simple: move more, wherever you are, and be part of a community of Floridians working toward better health together.

About UF/IFAS
The mission of the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) is to develop knowledge relevant to agricultural, human and natural resources and to make that knowledge available to sustain and enhance the quality of human life. With more than a dozen research facilities, 67 county Extension offices and award-winning students and faculty in the UF College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, UF/IFAS brings science-based solutions to the state's agricultural and natural resources industries, and all Florida residents.



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DAVE'S PUMPKIN PATCH CONTINUES 28 YEAR TRADITION IN BRANDON

By Dale Bliss



There is something about the arrival of fall that brings a little extra excitement to the air. Cooler mornings, changing colors and the return of pumpkins, hay bales and fall decorations all signal that the season has arrived.

For families in Brandon, Valrico and FishHawk, one of those familiar signs of fall has been Dave's Pumpkin Patch, a local tradition that has been welcoming families for more than 25 years.

Located at 106 E. Lumsden Avenue at the northeast corner of Lumsden Road and Parsons Avenue in Brandon, Dave's Pumpkin Patch returns each October with pumpkins in a variety of shapes, sizes and colors. The family-owned business has supported local Brandon, Valrico and FishHawk PTAs since 1998.

Owner Dave Morrow got his start in the pumpkin business in 1996 when he helped his son sell pumpkins through school. Two years later, he opened his own pumpkin operation, creating a seasonal tradition that continues today.

"My most favorable part of the oper-

ation is seeing how the little kids react to all the pumpkins and how they make them smile," Morrow said.

The pumpkin selection includes pie pumpkins, mini pumpkins, jack-o'-lantern pumpkins, white pumpkins, blue pumpkins and gourds. Families can also find corn stalks, hay and straw bales to add a little fall flair at home.

And for families looking to capture the season, the pumpkin lot offers plenty of opportunities for photos. Visitors are encouraged to bring their cameras and take pictures among the pumpkins and fall displays.

Every once in a while, Morrow also brings in some especially large pumpkins, including "Big Mac" pumpkins that can weigh 70 to 80 pounds.

Dave's Pumpkin Patch is scheduled to operate October 1-31, 2026. Hours are Monday through Friday from 1-8 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday from 9 a.m.-8 p.m. Pumpkins are listed as starting at \$4.

Whether searching for the perfect pumpkin to carve, decorating the front porch or simply taking a family photo to mark the season, Dave's Pumpkin Patch continues to offer a familiar reminder that fall has arrived in Brandon.

For more information, visit daveschristmastreelot.com or call 813-843-8182.

VETERANS ART CENTER TO HOST 'RHYTHMS, RESILIENCE AND LAUGHTER' CONCERT

By Brian Bokor



As the Veterans Art Center Tampa Bay (VACTB) celebrates its 13th anniversary, the organization is taking its mission from the art gallery to the main stage.

On Sunday, November 15, from 1:30-5:15 p.m., VACTB invites the community to The Dallas Bull for a powerful concert event dedicated to expanding mental health programs for military personnel, veterans, first responders, and their families.

For over a decade, VACTB has served as a beacon of hope, utilizing alternative art therapies to foster mental health and facilitate healing. With a mission deeply rooted in suicide prevention, the organization has achieved significant milestones:

- Providing art therapy to over 3,025 individuals. Each of these individuals has embarked on a unique journey of self-discovery and healing through the therapeutic power of art.
- Preventing seven veteran suicides. This profound impact speaks directly to the critical need for our services and the tangible difference we are making in saving lives.
- Supporting over 29,005 children. By extending its reach to the families of its heroes, VACTB is nurturing resilience and providing crucial support to the next generation.

Over 350 testimonials confirm its program's profound impact. Participants report a 90 percent reduction in suicidal ideation and a 75 percent increase in emotional well-being, from crisis to a place of lasting hope and resilience.

A "To Those Served" Memorial Dedication at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg campus.

Providing six major contracted exhibits. These exhibitions have served as powerful platforms to share the stories and artistic expressions of those VACTB serves with a wider audience, fostering understanding and connection.

"For our veterans, art isn't just a hobby; it's a lifeline," said Mack Macksam, founder and CEO of VACTB. "Partnering

with the Soul Circus Cowboys at this legendary venue allows us to celebrate their incredible resilience. When 'I Stand' fills the room, it stands as an anthem for every hero we serve."

Event Highlights

The afternoon will feature a high-energy lineup designed to inspire and entertain, headlined by Bill-

board-charting Southern rock sensation Randy McNeeley and the Soul Circus Cowboys, alongside the comedic talents of Ginger Kelly. The event will be emceed by veteran radio personality and comedian Pat Largo. Activities include live music, comedy, a veteran art showcase and high-end silent auctions.

Supporting The Mission
VACTB aims secure over 300 RSVPs and raise \$20,000 to bolster its 2027 programming.

Supporters are encouraged to purchase tickets or explore various sponsorship tiers — ranging from silver to presenting levels — which offer unique recognition opportunities and exclusive event experiences.

"We are a community built on real stories," added Macksam. "We stand behind those who have given so much for this country, and we invite the Tampa Bay community to join us in proving that art and connection are the ultimate tools for healing."

The Dallas Bull is located at 3322 U.S. 301 N. in Tampa. For tickets, sponsorship information, and additional details, visit <https://vactb.org/events-for-veterans-and-supporters>.

About Veterans Art Center Tampa Bay (VACTB)

VACTB is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to providing alternative art therapies to military members, veterans, first responders and their families. Through creative intervention, VACTB facilitates mental wellness, builds community and works tirelessly toward suicide prevention.



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STAYCATION IS THE NEW VACATION



Staff Report

Because Tucker cannot see, Rescue Pets of Florida is raising money to build him a secure enclosure where he can move around safely, rest, graze and learn his surroundings. Donations will help pay for fencing and gates, ground preparation, a sheltered resting area, feeding areas designed for his needs, safety improvements and ongoing maintenance.



For more information about Tucker, adopting Oakley or other ways to help, visit rescuepetsofflorida.org.

By Makenzie Atkins Noel

In order to help clients find a personalized routine that works for them, Fitness Forge focuses exclusively on personal training. Each client begins by discussing their goals, fitness history, limitations, lifestyle and what they hope to accomplish. Trainers then use that information to create an individualized



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Fitness Forge is located at 13456 Boyette Rd. in Riverview. For more information on joining Fitness Forge, please visit www.fitnessforge2025.com or call 813-654-1313.



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PAWS WITH PURPOSE BRINGS FREE DOG TRAINING TO MILITARY

Staff Report

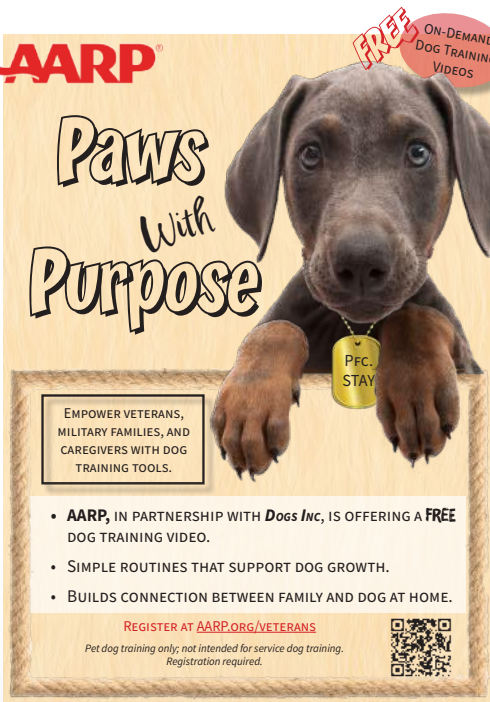
For many military households, the family dog is part of the team. Now veterans, military families and caregivers who want a better-behaved family dog can get help for free, from the comfort of home.

AARP has partnered with Dogs Inc. to launch Paws with Purpose, an on-demand video series that teaches families how to train the dogs they already have. The lessons are online, cost nothing and can be watched whenever it fits a family's schedule.

The series focuses on positive training techniques, walking owners through how to build healthy routines, encourage good behavior and strengthen the bond between dogs and the people who love them. The approach relies on rewarding good behavior rather than punishment.

According to AARP, the program is designed to help pet owners set up simple, effective training routines and to encourage meaningful time together between families and their dogs. Because the lessons are available on demand, families can use them whenever they have a few free minutes rather than working around a class schedule.

The library will also keep growing. Any-



one who registers gets access to the videos already released, plus each new installment as it comes out, so there is no wrong time to start.

AARP is careful to point out that Paws with Purpose is for pet dogs only. It is not a service dog training program, and it does not certify or place service animals. Families seeking a service dog would need to look elsewhere.

Dogs Inc., is a Palmetto-based nonprofit known for breeding and training guide and service dogs, including dogs for veterans. That makes the partnership a natural fit for a program aimed at military families.

AARP Government Affairs has been sharing the program with congressional offices, encouraging them to pass information along to veterans, military families and caregivers through newsletters, resource guides and constituent services. April Canter Bohrer, AARP's federal strategy director, described it as a resource that can make a difference at home for those who have served and their families.

The program is also open to caregivers, making it an option for households where a family member helps care for a veteran or loved one.

Registration is required and takes about a minute at AARP.org/veterans.

SCOUT LEADER WILL RUN HALF MARATHON AS A PARKINSON'S CHAMPION

Staff Report

For Fossil Valley Girl Scout troop leader and avid runner Sarah Miller, the 2027 Disney Princess Half Marathon is about much more than crossing a finish line.

She's running for her Grandpa Ralph.

Miller will participate in the 2027 Disney Princess Half Marathon as a Parkinson's Champion, raising funds and awareness for the Parkinson's Foundation. Her fundraising goal is \$1,750.

The cause is deeply personal.

"My Grandpa Ralph was an amazing man, but watching him battle Parkinson's disease changed my life and shaped so many of my memories of him," Miller said. "I'm running a half marathon and raising funds to help put an end to this disease so other families won't have to go through the same journey."

Miller is asking friends, families, fellow Girl Scouts, local businesses and community members to join her in honoring her grandfather's memory by supporting her fundraising campaign.

Running is something Miller genuinely loves, and running at Disney holds a special place in her heart. The opportunity to combine her passion for running with a cause that has personally affected her family made becoming a Parkinson's Champion an especially meaningful challenge.

As a Parkinson's Champion, Miller will raise funds for the Parkinson's Foundation, which works to improve care for people living with Parkinson's disease while advancing research toward better treatments and a cure.

Her goal is to raise \$1,750 before the race,



which will be held from February 25 through March 1, 2027.

"I know \$1,750 can sound like a big number," Miller said. "But I'm hoping to reach it one step at a time, with the help of our community."

Local businesses

and community members who would like to help Miller reach her goal can make a donation or share her fundraising campaign with others.

Miller is a local Girl Scout troop leader in the Fossil Valley community and an avid runner. She enjoys helping Girl Scouts learn, grow and serve their community, and she has a particular love for running at Disney. She's also an active sports mom; you'll see her on the sidelines cheering on one of her kids, whether it be flag football, soccer or her daughter's favorite, lax games and tournaments.

In 2027, she will combine that passion for running with a deeply personal mission: honoring the memory of her grandfather, Ralph, while raising funds and awareness for Parkinson's disease.

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CIGAR CITY CINEMA BRINGS TAMPA'S GOLDEN AGE OF MOVIES TO LIFE

Staff Report



Long before streaming services and multiplexes, opera houses and movie palaces thrilled audiences with a revolutionary new form of entertainment: moving pictures.

Opening on Saturday, October 3, at the Henry B. Plant Museum, located at 401 W. Kennedy Blvd. in Tampa, Cigar City Cinema: Tampa Goes to the Movies, 1897-1936 explores the evolution of the city's movie-going experience from the first short film exhibitions at the Tampa Bay Hotel Casino to the innovations in sound, camera techniques and social commentary that defined the inaugural decade of film screenings at Tampa Theatre.

The dawn of movie magic began in December 1897 when 2,000 people packed the opera house of the Tampa Bay Hotel Casino to see Biograph Company short films that appeared so lifelike audience members gasped. Cigar City Cinema gives modern audiences the opportunity to share this experience by viewing some of these early films.

"Opera houses and vaudeville theaters deserve primary credit for the spread of theatrical film presentations in Tampa and across the nation," said Dr. Charles Mc-

Graw Groh, museum director. "Short films took the place of individual songs or skits in variety shows at the turn of the century. It's not surprising, then, that filmmakers borrowed heavily from the best and worst traditions of vaudeville and minstrel shows, ranging from slapstick to blackface."

Soon, the Tampa Bay Hotel Casino introduced city residents to the first feature films, culminating in the sprawling epics of

D.W. Griffith. Rare artifacts from the Museum of the Moving Image showcase the power of Griffith's film as propaganda.

The opening of Tampa Theatre in 1926 ushered in the golden age of Hollywood. The magnificent Wurlitzer organ and a full orchestra thrilled audiences in the final years of the silent film era. Cigar City Cinema guides visitors through the sound revolution and the reactions of local audiences.

Tampa Theatre will present a series of films that are featured in the exhibit. The series kicks off with a matinee screening of Dracula on Sunday, October 25. Future showings include Oscar-winning films Sunrise and Grand Hotel. The exhibit features a rotating film presentation, opening with King Kong.

The Cigar City Cinema exhibition is included with museum admission. For hours and visitor information, visit www.plant-museum.com.

Cigar City Cinema is graciously underwritten by The Bank of Tampa, the Betsy and Steve Chambers Family Foundation, Cogent Bank, the Henry B. Plant Museum Society and Raymond James.

USPS OPERATION SANTA PROGRAM IS NOW ACCEPTING LETTERS

Staff Report



September 15 marked the start of the 114th year of USPS Operation Santa, and the U.S. Postal Service is now accepting holiday letters from children and families throughout the continental U.S., Hawaii and Puerto Rico.

Every year, thousands of families send letters to Santa at the North Pole. The beloved postal service program makes it possible for people to adopt and respond to these letters, fulfilling the holiday wishes of children and families across the country.

"The holidays are a time to celebrate the joy of the season. But for some, the simple act of exchanging even small gifts is out of reach," said Sheila Holman, vice president of marketing for the U.S. Postal Service. "For more than 100 years, USPS Operation Santa has given kindhearted people the opportunity to make dreams come true for thousands of children and their families through simple acts of kindness."

Submitted letters must follow the program guidelines found on www.uspsoperationsanta.com and be postmarked by Saturday, December 5, to be eligible for potential adoption and fulfillment — there is no guarantee that letters submitted to the program will be adopted.

Letters should be sent to Santa's official workshop address: Santa Claus 123 Elf Rd., North Pole, 88888.

Letter Adoption

Registration to adopt letters starts on Monday, November 2, and people can register as individuals or groups. The letter adoption

window opens on Monday, November 16, and registrants can adopt single or family letters to help brighten the holidays for those in need.

For more information on the program, history, important dates and how to participate as either a letter writer or adopter, visit www.uspsoperationsanta.com.

Please Note: The United States Postal Service is an independent federal establishment, mandated to be self-financing and to serve every American community through the affordable, reliable and secure delivery of mail and packages to more than 170 million addresses six and often seven days a week. Overseen by a bipartisan board of governors, the postal service is currently pursuing a transformation plan aimed at restoring long-term financial sustainability, improving service and maintaining the organization as one of America's most valued and trusted brands.

The postal service generally receives no tax dollars for operating expenses and relies on the sale of postage, products and services to fund its operations.

For more information about the Postal Service, visit usps.com and facts.usps.com.

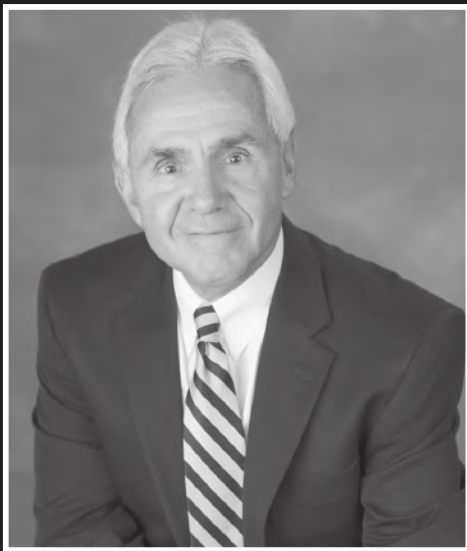
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SUNCOAST FOUNDATION INVESTS \$327,000 IN HILLSBOROUGH EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Staff Report



Hillsborough Education Foundation (HEF) is proud to announce a charitable gift of \$327,000 from the Suncoast Credit Union Foundation. The funds will support several of HEF's key programs, ensuring that students, teachers and schools throughout Hillsborough County receive the resources they need to thrive.

Through the Teaching Tools Resource Center, teachers can access essential classroom supplies at no cost, while the Transforming Early Literacy Initiative provides job-embedded coaching for early educators at 31 high-needs schools, helping young learners build strong foundations for future success. Suncoast Credit Union Foundation's support also helps fund School and Classroom Enrichment Grants that bring innovative learning opportunities to students, mentoring programs that provide students with guidance and encouragement and the CEOs in Schools initiative, which connects business leaders with public schools to deepen understanding and strengthen community partnerships.

"Suncoast Credit Union Foundation is a valued partner in expanding opportu-



nities for students and educators across Hillsborough County," said Anna Corman, president and CEO of Hillsborough Education Foundation. "Their generous investment helps put essential resources in the hands of teachers, build strong foundations for our youngest learners and prepare students for success beyond high school. We are grateful for their continued commitment to public education and for investing alongside us in the success of our students, teachers and schools."

Suncoast Credit Union, Florida's largest credit union, founded the Suncoast Credit Union Foundation to promote the education, health and emotional well-being of children in the community. Each time a Suncoast member uses their debit or credit card, the credit union donates four cents to the foundation to fund local initiatives. Since its inception in 1990, the foundation has raised and donated more than \$68 million.

"Founded by educators in 1934, Suncoast Credit Union has spent more than 90 years investing in teachers, students and schools," said Kevin Johnson, president and CEO of Suncoast Credit Union. "We're especially proud to help students across Hillsborough County thrive and reach their full potential."

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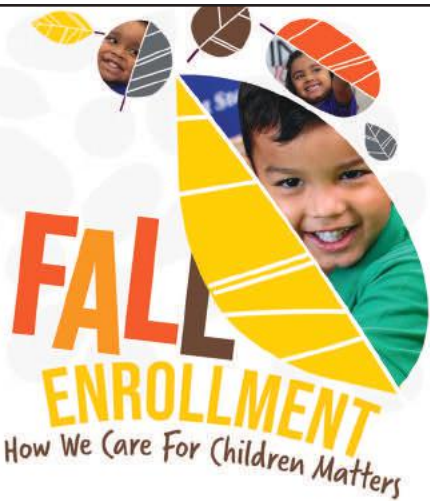
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PUBLIX SERVES BRINGS 40 VOLUNTEERS AND A \$60,000 GIFT TO LOCAL FOOD BANK

Staff Report



More than 40 Publix associates and store managers from 12 area stores spent Sept. 22 volunteering at United Food Bank and Services in Plant City as part of the company's Publix Serves initiative.

The visit also came with a major boost for the food bank. Publix Super Markets Charities presented the organization with a \$60,000 contribution to strengthen hunger-relief efforts across eastern Hillsborough County.

John Doran, executive director of Publix Super Markets Charities, joined associates and local store leaders for the presentation. Publix Super Markets Charities, the grocery chain's charitable foundation, supports organizations focused on hunger relief, education and other community needs.

Throughout the day, volunteers worked on a range of projects that keep the food bank running. They assembled Kids Week-end Bags for students at 26 local schools, sorted fresh produce and shelf-stable food, prepared beverage bags and handed out meal boxes to families. Others pitched in on behind-the-scenes tasks that help the organization carry out its mission.

The work touched nearly every part of

the food bank's operation, from the warehouse floor to the distribution line.

The Kids Week-end Bags are designed to help students who may not have enough to eat at home when school meals are not available, such as over the weekend.

The impact reaches well beyond a single day. United Food Bank and Services serves about 15,000 people each month, and the Publix donation will help provide food and other essential resources to local children, families, seniors and veterans.

Since 1991, the nonprofit has served as a lifeline for individuals and families facing hunger and hardship. Its mission is to help people move from "a state of hunger" to self-sufficiency, empowerment and self-reliance.

Through its Feeding Our Community program, the food bank offers daily on-site food distribution along with targeted outreach in underserved neighborhoods.

Publix Serves is the company's volunteer program, which encourages associates to give back in the communities where they live and work.

The food bank relies on donations and volunteers to keep up with demand. Contributions, according to the organization, help do more than fill empty plates; they help create lasting change.

For more information or to donate, visit ufbpc.org or follow @UnitedFoodBank-AndServices on social media.

BROADWAY IN LAKELAND ANNOUNCES 2027 SEASON WITH THREE HIT SHOWS

Staff Report

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Broadway fans can look forward to a new season of theater at the RP Funding Center in Lakeland, with three acclaimed productions scheduled for 2027.

The inaugural Broadway in Lakeland season will feature CLUE, HADESTOWN and The Who's TOMMY, offering audiences a mix of comedy, mythology and rock music.

Season subscriptions are now available, with packages starting at \$145 for all three shows. Series price levels are \$280 for Level One, \$220 for Level Two and \$145 for Level Three.

Subscribers receive guaranteed seats for each performance, access to the best available seats at subscription pricing, first options to upgrade seats and special ticket offers. Subscribers also have the opportunity to purchase tickets to select add-on performances before they go on sale to the general public.

The season opens with CLUE on Sunday, January 31 at 7 p.m. Based on the popular 1985 movie and classic Hasbro board game, the production brings the familiar suspects and weapons to the stage for a comedic murder mystery. Six guests gather at Boddy Manor, where murder and blackmail lead to a night of twists, turns and unexpected revelations.

On Tuesday, March 2 at 7:30 p.m., HADESTOWN takes the stage. The Tony Award-winning musical, created by singer-songwriter Anaïs Mitchell and originally directed by Rachel Chavkin, weaves together the ancient stories of Orpheus and Eurydice and Hades and Persephone. The production won eight Tony Awards in 2019, including Best Musical, as well as the 2020 Grammy Award for Best Musical Theater Album.

The season concludes Tuesday, June 1 at 7 p.m. with The Who's TOMMY, a new production of the iconic rock opera created by The Who in 1969. Featuring songs including "Pinball Wizard," "I'm Free," "See Me, Feel Me" and "Sensation," the production follows Tommy Walker's extraordinary journey from troubled young man to pinball sensation.

Subscriptions can be purchased online at www.rpfundingcenter.com/broadway, by calling the RP Funding Center Box Office at 863-834-8111 or in person at 701 W. Lime St. The box office is open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Mondays and Thursdays.

For ticket and ADA seating information, call 863-834-8100. Service fees may apply.



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RACE DIRECTORS TAKE ON OCULAR MELANOMA AT ALDERMAN'S FORD 5K

Staff Report

Who is ready to run for a cause? Join Bernadette Boyle and Linda O'Brien, the race directors for the ninth annual Your Next Step is the Cure 5K event on Saturday, December 5, at Alderman's Ford Conservation Park, located at 100 Alderman Ford Park Dr. in Plant City.

What began as a passion nine years ago to

raise awareness has now expanded even further with the establishment of their official 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, strengthening their commitment to this mission for years to come. Proceeds from this year's event will benefit the uveal melanoma research at Moffitt Cancer Center and the laboratories of Dr. Keiran Smalley, Dr. Florian Karreth and Dr. Alex Jaeger, where groundbreaking discoveries are being made to better this disease and develop new treatment strategies.

The race supports awareness and research for ocular melanoma, a rare and aggressive cancer that affects just six out of every 1 million people each year. Though rare, its impact on patients and families is profound — and urgently in need of continued research and breakthroughs.

Their 'why': Bernadette and O'Brien have a vested interest in this disease. Bernadette lost her husband, Joe Boyle, to this dreaded cancer in January 2016, and O'Brien is still fighting with yearly scans and eye exams; O'Brien remains NED — no evidence of dis-



ease. Their hopes for this year's event are simple, to surpass their past achievements! Since the inception of this event which began in 2017, they have donated over \$100,000 for research. Of course, like every year, Bernadette

and O'Brien hope to bring awareness to this rare and orphan disease and remind everyone of the importance of an annual dilated eye exam. Joining them will be the research doctors from the Moffitt Cancer Center speaking about ocular melanoma and current research that is happening because of events like their Your Next Step is the Cure 5K. Together, attendees run not just for miles but for hope, innovation and lifesaving progress. Join them as they continue to make strides toward awareness, research and a cure.

To follow posts and updates, please visit their Facebook page at www.facebook.com/yournextstepisthecure5k and their Instagram page [@yournextstepisthecure](https://www.instagram.com/yournextstepisthecure).

If you are interested in learning more about their event and/or sponsoring, you can email Bernadette and O'Brien at yournextstepisthecure@aol.com.

For registration for the race/walk and to donate, please visit <https://runsignup.com/race/fl/plantcity/yournextstepisthecure>.

STREETCAR LIVE MUSIC RETURNS ON SELECT FRIDAY NIGHTS

Staff Report

Live music is back on the rails in Tampa. Streetcar Live, a monthly concert series aboard the free TECO Line Streetcar, is returning for a new season, giving riders a soundtrack as they roll through Ybor City, the Channel District, Water Street and downtown Tampa.

Performances take place on the fourth Friday of each month from September through May, and the series is produced in partnership with the Gasparilla Music Festival. The season runs for nine months, bringing a new performer aboard each month.

The season opened on September 25 with hip-hop artists J.IN.X and Frxxmxn. The performers boarded the 6 p.m. trip departing Centennial Park Station No. 1 and performed for riders along the route.

Next up, DJ Mr. Marley will bring a mix of funk, disco, reggae and hip-hop to the streetcar on Friday, October 23.

The concerts offer a different way to experience the city, pairing live performances with a ride through some of Tampa's liveliest neighborhoods aboard the historic streetcar. Like the streetcar itself, the shows are free. Riders can make the concert part of a night out in Ybor City, a stroll along Water Street or dinner in the Channel District.



Seating is limited and available on a first-come, first-served basis, so riders are encouraged to arrive early. With shows continuing through May, riders will have plenty of chances to catch a performance.

Concertgoers can share photos and videos from the shows on Facebook, X and Instagram using #StreetcarLive.

The TECO Line Streetcar System is managed by the Hillsborough Area Regional Transit Authority (HART), the regional mobility provider for Hillsborough County. Created on October 3, 1979, HART serves more than 1.4 million residents in Tampa, Temple Terrace and parts of unincorporated Hillsborough County, the fourth-most populous county in Florida.

Its service area covers 1,000 square miles. In addition to the streetcar, HART operates local and express bus routes, door-to-door paratransit service and flex-route service.

The agency's mission is to take people to places that enhance their lives, and Streetcar Live adds a little music to the trip.

For more information about Streetcar Live and upcoming performers, visit <https://tecolinestreetcar.org/>. Information about the Gasparilla Music Festival is available at <https://gasparillamusic.com/>.

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LAKE TOSCANA ENTERS FINAL CHAPTER AS SUNRISE HOMES OPENS REMAINING LOTS

By Kelly Wise Valdes

Sunrise Homes is nearing the end of its long-running buildout in Lake Toscana, a community in Wimauma known for expansive homesites and quiet, natural scenery. With only a few lots remaining, company representatives said this final stretch marks a unique opportunity



Sunrise Homes is also offering buyers a sizable incentive that Hall described as especially valuable for those wanting to personalize their new build.

for buyers seeking privacy and space in one of South Hillsborough's most distinctive neighborhoods.

Dr. Ali Hasbini, CEO of Sunrise Homes, said the community's scale and natural features have set it apart.

"Lake Toscana is truly a one-of-a-kind community. With 512 acres and only 127 homesites, homeowners have a level of space and privacy that is becoming increasingly difficult to find," said Dr. Hasbini. "The half-acre to 1-acre homesites, combined with the natural beauty of the community, have made Lake Toscana a very special place to build a home. With only four homesites remaining, we're proud to see the vision for this community come to life and excited to welcome its final homeowners."

"Each of the remaining homesites offers a unique, private view. All without backyard neighbors," said Rob Hall, a sales associated with Sunrise Homes in Lake Toscana.

The community, developed in phases over several years, has drawn buyers looking for oversized lots and access to preserved landscapes. Hall said these last sites continue that theme, providing wide-ranging views and a sense of seclusion that were established in earlier phases.

"This incentive may apply to any upgrades at our design center," he said, referring to a \$50,000 credit often used toward flooring, cabinetry, countertops, fixtures and other high-end finishes.

Hall said the environmental setting plays a key role in how Sunrise Homes approaches its layouts.

"We build open, spacious designs featuring large windows that capture natural light and offer views of the peaceful surroundings," he said.

For buyers looking to build from the ground up, Sunrise Homes provides a hands-on design experience.

"Sunrise Homes offers the experience of customizing your design features independently (not 'packages' like other builders)," said Hall. "We allow some structural changes such as larger garages, wall extensions and door/window openings, depending on the buyer's needs."

He added that the overall timeline is straightforward.

"The process takes approximately 11 months from the purchase agreement to move-in," said Hall.

For more information, visit www.sunrisehomescorp.com. You can visit the model home at 5333 Lake Venice Dr. in Wimauma or call 813-934-2206.

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3 Can I get there?

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4 How do I get there?

Identify tailored solutions: Once we understand each client's complete financial picture, we can identify a customized combination of investments, protection and services designed specifically to support their financial goals.

5 How can I stay on track?

Review progress: Regular communication with a client allows us to provide ongoing guidance and adapt strategies as time passes and needs change. We meet with clients regularly to evaluate any life changes that might impact their goals, as well as market changes that may influence the strategies we've put in place.

www.edwardjones.com/adam-benabram

YBOR CITY GHOST WALK BRINGS TAMPA'S SPOOKY PAST TO LIFE

By Libby Hopkins

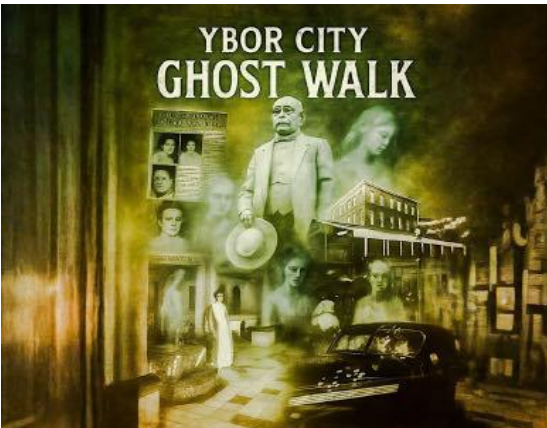
The Tampabay Community Design Center (TCDC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to celebrating the rich design and architectural heritage of the Tampa Bay region while fostering a forward-thinking approach to design. It champions historic preservation, sustainability and promote innovative design solutions for the future.

TCDC also loves Tampa's haunted history, along with its haunted historic buildings. The organization will be hosting a Ybor City Ghost Walk on Tuesday, October 20, from 5:30-7 p.m.

"Ybor City Ghost Walk will be offered to 25 brave souls, leaving from the Centro Espanol steps at 1526 Seventh Ave.," said Linda Saul-Sena of TCDC. "We hope guests will join this actor-led tour as you get off the beaten path and deep into the soul of Ybor City. Eleven ghosts tell their stories and reveal their secrets."

A true 'melting pot' of immigration, what began as an area populated largely by alligators and snakes grew to become home to tens of thousands of people within the span of just 40 years. Along with the cigar workers who came from Cuba and Europe to make a new life in the New World, 'Cigar City' hosted more than its share of villains, conspirators, buccaneers, bandits and gangsters.

They arrived from all over the globe, and some have never left, despite slipping the bounds of their worldly forms. Tampa's famous 'Latin District' has no lack of strange and creepy happenings. It is home to some



of the most haunted buildings in America.

"Our Ghost Walk will entertain you with stories of the characters and legends that make Ybor City such a fascinating place to explore," Saul-Sena said. "Eventbrite tickets are \$25, which allow you to embark on a spicy journey for all your senses. Smell the aromas of the cigars and taste the coffee, especially the cafe con leche. Be touched by our ghosts and travel with them to a different time, when Tampa was the cigar capital of the world."

The team at TCDC hopes the community will come out to explore darkened side streets and hear chilling but true tales of long-dead citizens, now ghosts who hang in the shadows here ... all the time.

"From Charlie Wall to Paulina Pederosa, you'll never hear these names again without a shudder," Saul-Sena said. "Meet us at 1526 Seventh Ave. at 5:15 on Tuesday, October 20, if you dare. We'll slip into the darkened alleys (huddled together) promptly at 5:30 p.m. Julia Gorzka Freeman and I will be your guides on this actor-guided tour. The cost is \$25, with a limit of 25 guests."

If you would like to be one of the 25 guests to take the Ghost Walk with TCDC, you can purchase your ticket at www.eventbrite.com/e/2002296646169. Due to true stories of murder and mayhem, this tour is not recommended for children or the faint at heart.

YOUNG LITHIA AUTHOR SHOWS THE POWER OF IMAGINATION

By Libby Hopkins

At an age when most children are just beginning to develop their writing skills, 5-year-old Nila Praveen of Lithia is a published author. Her story is more than publishing a book —

she is a curious, creative child who loves learning and storytelling, and her journey raises a compelling question: "What could children accomplish if we stopped underestimating them?"

Nila possesses a profound love for the arts and creative expression.

"She enjoys creating art, singing, dancing and engaging in imaginative play," said her mother, Shanthy Bala. "An avid reader and budding pianist, Nila is also dedicated to her training in the classical Indian dance tradition of Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music and has performed before live audiences domestically and internationally nearly a dozen times. Her curiosity, creativity and enthusiasm for learning shine through in everything she does."

At just 4 years old, Nila, under her pen name, N.P. Boomi, wrote the heartfelt children's book *Meme, My Friend*, inspired by a deeply personal experience: the discovery and nurturing of her first pet, a dragonfly she lovingly named 'Meme.'

"Their brief but meaningful friendship



left a lasting impression on Nila, teaching her about the enduring values of friendship, compassion and family," Bala said. "To preserve the memory of her tiny companion and the lessons she had learned, Nila transformed her experience into a story, immortalizing Meme through her own words."

Through her book, Nila hopes to inspire other children to discover the joy of reading and the power of their own voices through writing.

"Nila started reading and writing when she was 3 years old," Bala said. "She hopes to encourage young readers and aspiring writers to embrace their creativity and recognize that meaningful ideas and accomplishments are

not limited by age."

Nila dedicated her book to Britto, her late grandfather's beloved dog, who was a cherished companion not only to her grandfather but to her entire family. Her deep affection for animals inspired her to bring animal characters to life through her storytelling.

Britto passed away just days after *Meme, My Friend* was published.

Nila has already written her next children's book and is currently in the process of editing. She hopes to have it published in time for this year's Christmas season.

If you would like to get a copy of Nila's book, *Meme, My Friend*, it is available for purchase on Amazon.

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FLIGHT TO HONOR MISSION 12 ACCEPTING GUARDIAN APPLICATIONS

By Brad Stager



They're gearing up for Flight to Honor Polk Mission 12 to fly local military veterans to Washington, D.C. where they will spend a day visiting monuments and shrines dedicated to the historical sacrifices of their youth.



erans during the honor mission. The guardians' purpose is to assist veterans with the travel and memorial sightseeing activities. If a guardian applicant is chosen to participate, a \$500 donation to defray the cost of the mission will be requested. Guardians

The airborne missions began in 2015 and give veterans a chance to visit the places where the nation honors those who have served in the armed forces and shaped its history as called upon to do so in times of war and peace.

The process of accepting applications from veterans who fly free of charge and guardians who accompany them on the daylong roundtrip journey that begins the morning of Tuesday, April 27, 2027 has begun. The flights take off from Lakeland Linder International Airport for the approximately two-hour journey early in the day and return that night. An orientation for participants is scheduled for Sunday, April 25, 2027.

Priority for the flights is given to those dealing with severe medical conditions first, followed by veterans who served in World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

Designated guardians who volunteer to serve on the missions accompany the vet-

are assigned to a veteran in the order that applications are received.

The Flight to Honor missions are one way the Polk County Veterans Council fulfills its mission to support veterans and the military community.

"The Polk County Veterans Council is committed to recognizing and supporting Military Veterans," Gary Clark, chairman of the Polk County Veterans Council and a retired Air Force colonel wrote in an email.

"Flight to Honor #12 veteran participants will be largely Vietnam War and Vietnam Era Veterans. Our goal is to show these veterans that their service was appreciated. The support we receive from the community attests to this goal not just in the Welcome Home celebration but also in the monetary donations received to fund the mission."

You can get the latest details about Flight to Honor Polk including an application and information about donating to support Mission 12 at polkveteranscouncil.com.



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A LEGENDARY *WHODUNIT* COMES TO RUSKIN AND BRANDON

Staff Report

A head-and-shoulders portrait of Dr. Jennifer L. Cook, a woman with long dark hair, smiling at the camera. She is wearing a dark top with a light-colored collar. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**TAMPA
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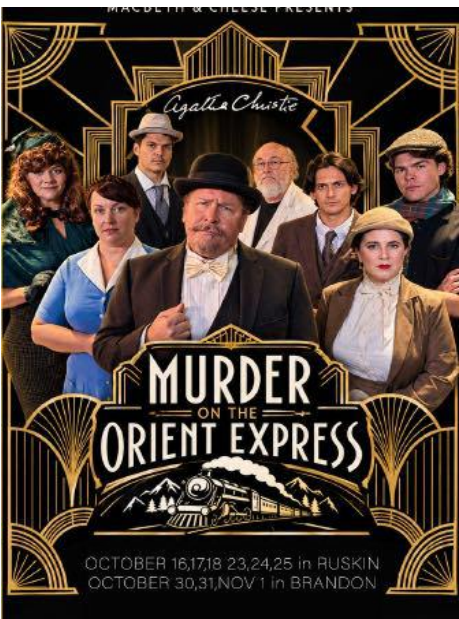
We are all in this together — Tampa Bay Water, Hillsborough County, local businesses, residents and the entire South Hillsborough County community. Embrace the Shop Local campaign and check out the new business directory on the website. A construction detour may add a few minutes to your trip, but your continued support of local businesses along the pipeline route will help them cope now and flourish later.

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

The website will also feature local deals, promotions and events, giving residents another reason to visit businesses throughout the corridor. Business owners can submit upcoming offers or events through the project website, <https://southhillsboroughpipeline.com/shop-local/>. There are also opportunities for businesses in need of support. If you

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Performances begin on Friday, October 16, at the Firehouse Cultural Center, located at n Ruskin, with additional at Brandon Performance located at 225 E. Brandon, beginning on

For tickets, upcoming performances and arts programming at the Firehouse Cultural Center, visit <https://firehouseculturalcenter.org/> or call 813-645-7651.

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DEMENTIA AND THE HOLIDAYS, COMPASSIONATE CONVERSATIONS

Staff Report

On Wednesday, November 4, Sandy's Daughter Dementia Education will be presenting a workshop, Dementia and the Holidays, Compassionate Conversations, at UF/IFAS Extension Hillsborough County, located at 5339 County Rd. 579 in Seffner.

Many families come together over the holiday season to celebrate. Many families also need to have conversations about the future of the finances, legal needs, care needs and living situations of their older family members. Sandy's Daughter founder CherylAnn Haley is bringing together three local professionals to share key points to cover.

Haley will share Positive Approach to Care skills to make these conversations productive and compassionate as families create a plan to move forward. Jonathan Pittmann from Edward Jones understands the importance of family

relationships and wealth management. He will present strategies to preserve both. State laws vary, and it is important for families to understand and update plans specific to Florida. Tina Spinks of Florida Elder Law & Legacy Planning will break down the legal needs in Florida. For some families, a change in living arrangements may become necessary. Mary Curtis Pizzano of Assisted Living Locators will explain the distinct types of options available for those looking for independent or assisted living or memory care communities. Whether a person chooses to age in place or relocate closer to family, Pizzano can help families navigate the changes. While hosted by Sandy's Daughter Dementia Education, this workshop is open to anyone who may need to navigate these changes in upcoming years. Please RSVP to 941-626-7447 or sandysdaughter@outlook.com.



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EAST OF TAMPA HIGHLIGHTS COMMUNITY & BUSINESSES

By Marie Gilmore

After 13 years as an Army officer, John Plumstead made a decision that would take him from leading soldiers to leading businesses.

Plumstead served from Second Lieutenant to Major, taught at West Point and led soldiers in combat before taking off his uniform in 2022.

"I never went and got a job. Not one day of it," Plumstead said.

Instead, he continued building on a path he had already started while serving. Plumstead had been investing in real estate on active duty and, by the time he separated from the Army, was raising outside capital for self-storage investments.

Today, he has built a seven-figure business, closed more than \$20 million in real estate deals and completed more than 100 residential flips.

His entrepreneurial philosophy is straightforward.

"Every business I own has the same two problems. It needs people, and it needs customers," he said. "I solved both for myself before I ever sold either one to anyone else."

Through Bravo Company Digital, Plumstead helps businesses address both.

The company provides full-time, college-educated professionals for roles ranging from sales development and bookkeeping to customer service, permitting, operations and executive assistance. It also provides lead-generation services through Meta ad-



vertising, outbound marketing and fractional CMO services.

Plumstead also founded East of Tampa, a hyper-local media company focused on eastern Hill-

sborough County. The platform has grown to more than 5,000 newsletter subscribers, 18,000 social media followers and more than 2 million monthly content views, while supporting local businesses through advertising.

His other ventures include Gray Line Investments, a veteran-owned real estate company focused on self-storage and industrial properties, and Team Plumstead, the residential real estate team he operates with his wife, Danielle.

Outside of business, Plumstead remains focused on community and family. He coaches Pop Warner football and serves as Athletic Director for the FishHawk Spartans, where his wife also serves as league manager.

The Plumsteads are raising four sons in FishHawk after their children spent their early years living in 10 states over 10 years.

For Plumstead, the common thread connecting military service, entrepreneurship, coaching and fatherhood is intensity.

"Football. Building businesses. Competing. Anything that rewards intensity," he said. "I'm a high achiever, I tend to go all in, and I like that about myself."

TAMPA BEER BURROS BRING BIG SMILES TO SPECIAL EVENTS

By Libby Hopkins



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

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

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

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

"She was so animated and seemed to love mini donkeys as much as I do, and I can't

say no to someone who needs donkeys in their special moment in time. I told her I would figure it out and make that happen for her," Karnowski said.

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

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

Karnowski herself, of course, has a deep love for her mini donkeys.

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

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

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

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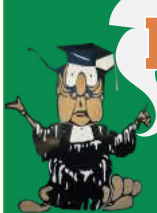
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A YEAR OF IMPACT, ACHIEVEMENT AND MOMENTUM

By Superintendent Van Ayres

This month, we released the latest Hillsborough County Public Schools Impact Report that highlights the academic achievements from the last school year.

The results are worth celebrating. Our students and educators delivered extraordinary results that reflect the strength of our schools and communities.

The district earned its first A grade in a decade, achieved a 92.8 percent graduation rate at our traditional high schools and reached a 71 percent college and career readiness rate, demonstrating meaningful progress in preparing students for success beyond graduation. For the first time in district history, every school in our Transformation Network earned an A, B or C grade, a powerful testament to the impact of sustained support, strategic investment and the dedication of our educators and staff.

Students achieved a 71 percent Advanced Placement exam pass rate and continued to excel in rigorous academic programs, with hundreds earning International Baccalaureate and Cambridge AICE diplomas.

Across grades three through eight, students made continued gains in both reading and mathematics proficiency, reflecting the effectiveness of focused academic supports and high-quality instruction. This momentum is evident across the district, with more than 120 HCPS schools recognized among



the nation's best, underscoring a culture of excellence that is creating greater opportunities and brighter futures for students in every community we serve.

These achievements represent far more than numbers on a page. Behind every milestone is a teacher who stayed after the bell, a school leader who refused to lower expectations, a family that remained engaged in their child's success and a student who rose to meet the challenge. They are the result of a community that believes in public education and the transformative opportunities it creates. The latest Impact Report tells that story in full, highlighting the progress we have made together and the momentum we are building for the future.

Progress isn't a finish line; it's a foundation. In the year ahead, we will keep investing in early literacy, expanding pathways to college and career and strengthening the culture of support that helps each child reach their full potential. We will celebrate what's working and continually look for opportunities to grow and improve.

I invite every member of our community to read the complete Impact Report at www.hillsboroughschools.org/impact and join us as we build on this momentum for every student, in every school, in every corner of Hillsborough County.

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ADVENTHEALTH, TAMPA YMCA PARTNER TO EXPAND CAMP CRISTINA RIDING ARENA

Staff Report

More children in the Riverview area will be able to enjoy horseback riding lessons in a safer and more comfortable environment thanks to a new horse corral at YMCA Camp Cristina.



Brothers Darius Hufford, 9, and Cyrus Hufford, 11, of Riverview are glad to have the new arena open for their lessons.

AdventHealth partnered with the Tampa Metropolitan Area YMCA to fund the project, which provides much-needed shade and shelter for young riders while enhancing a program that serves families from across the community.

AdventHealth and the Tampa Metropolitan Area YMCA celebrated the completion of the new 50 by 120 ft. corral on September 14 during a community gathering at YMCA Camp Cristina.

The new structure supports the camp's equestrian program, where children of all experience levels can learn to ride, build confidence and develop new skills. By providing protection from Florida's heat and weather, especially during the hot and humid summer months, the corral creates a more comfortable environment for riders, horses and instructors throughout the year.

Located on a 65-acre campus at 9840 Balm Riverview Rd. in Riverview, YMCA Camp Cristina serves children, families and



community groups through a wide range of programs, including youth sports, after-school care, camps, family activities and leadership development opportunities. The camp is designed to help young people explore new interests, build lasting friendships and develop a sense of belonging.

"We're excited to create even more opportunities for young people to learn, grow and challenge themselves in an encouraging, engaging environment," Matt Lewis, vice president of membership and programs at the Tampa Y, said. "This new shaded riding arena does just that, reinforcing our commitment to youth development at YMCA Camp Cristina for years to come."

"Every child deserves the opportunity to learn, explore and build confidence in a safe and supportive environment," Jason Newmyer, president and CEO of AdventHealth Riverview, said. "We're excited to partner with the YMCA to help create a space where children can experience the joy of horseback riding while gaining skills and confidence that will stay with them long after the lesson ends."

BONNET SPRINGS ANNOUNCES FALL AND HOLIDAY EVENT LINEUP

Staff Report

Bonnet Springs Park (BSP), located at 400 Bonnet Springs Blvd. in Lakeland, invites locals and visitors to celebrate the season with three signature events featuring live entertainment, cultural experiences, regional cuisine and holiday traditions.

Beginning with the vibrant Hispanic Heritage celebration Bienvenido a BSP; continuing with the park's premier culinary event, Central Florida Food Fest; and concluding with more than two weeks of holiday festivities during Light Up BSP, the park's fall and holiday lineup offers unforgettable ways for the community to gather, connect and celebrate.

"We are finishing the year strong with an incredible lineup of seasonal experiences," said Kirsten Hein, vice president of engagement. "Whether we are honoring Hispanic Heritage Month, uplifting our culinary scene at the Central Florida Food Fest or taking in the magic of Light Up BSP, these annual events have become cherished traditions for families across our region. We are thrilled to continue bringing our community together in thoughtful, intentional ways, surrounded by the natural beauty of the park."

Bienvenido a BSP
Saturday, October 10 | 3-9 p.m., Allen & Company Family Lawn
The season begins with Bienvenido a BSP,



Bonnet Springs Park's free Hispanic Heritage celebration honoring the vibrant flavors, colors, rhythms and traditions of Hispanic and Latino cultures.

Headlining the evening will be Los Potritos, featuring renowned percussionist and tripanero creator Daniel Díaz and percussionist and vocalist Jafet Murguía. Díaz has collaborated with artists including Residente, Ricky Martin and Bad Bunny, while Murguía is known for his longstanding musical partnership with Díaz and his work within the Puerto Rican music scene. Also taking the stage will be PJ

Kids, a Latin children's music family band formed by the Latin Grammy-nominated duo Periko & Jessi León alongside their 5-year-old drummer son, Milo.

The entertainment lineup also includes Son Curramba, Izis La Enfermera, Capullitos de Alelí, Mariachi Las Aztecas and DJ Lanz & Dimelotony.

Guests can explore an artisan market featuring local makers and small businesses, enjoy authentic cuisine from a diverse collection of food vendors and participate in hands-on cultural activities, including sugar skull mask-making presented by Latinas Profesionales in Action and hojalata tin art.

Admission is free, and the event is open to all ages. Details on this and all park events are available at the website at www.bonnetspringspark.com.

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VILLAGE PLAYERS BRINGS ADDAMS FAMILY TO THE STAGE

Staff Report

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

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

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

The Village Players production is directed by Lois Green and more information, please visit the Village Players' website.



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



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

ams, Chelsea Scourtes as Morticia Addams, Gabriella Reece as Wednesday Addams, Abby Mann as Alice Beineke, along with a large cast of familiar Village Players performers and newcomers.

Performances will be held at the historic James McCabe Theater, located at 506 5th St. in Valrico.

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

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

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

Tickets are \$23 for adults and \$20 for seniors and students and are available now at <https://thevillageplayersvalrico.com/>. For more information, please visit the Village Players' website.

PREVENTING DRUG ABUSE, PROTECTING OUR COMMUNITY

By State Attorney Suzy Lopez

"Two of the men I depended on the most are gone," Lisa Jo Burke said after losing both her son Brandon, and her husband, John, to fentanyl overdoses less than a year apart.

Her words capture the devastation substance abuse can leave behind. Addiction doesn't only affect the person using drugs. It can tear families apart.

October is National Substance Abuse Prevention Month, and tragedies like this are a reminder that prevention requires more than one approach. As prosecutors, our job is to hold people accountable when they break the law. But there is an important distinction between someone struggling with substance use disorder and someone who profits from selling dangerous drugs in our community.

Sometimes, the person standing in a courtroom is there because addiction has taken over their life. In those cases, jail alone may never solve the problem. For certain nonviolent offenders, drug treatment court gives them a chance to get help while still being held accountable.

It's not the easy way out. Participants are closely supervised and expected to prove that they are serious about changing their lives. When treatment works, communities become safer and fewer people reoffend.

That is very different from someone who profits by selling dangerous drugs.



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

When a dealer puts fentanyl or other deadly substances into our community, the consequences can be devastating and irreversible. Florida law allows prosecutors to pursue first-degree murder charges when the drugs they sell cause someone's death. When a family loses a loved one that way, we will use every tool the law gives us to hold the responsible party accountable.

The best outcome is always to prevent the loss in the first place. That starts at home. Talk to your children about the dangers of drugs. If someone you love is struggling, don't wait for an arrest or an overdose to take it seriously.

National Substance Abuse Prevention Month is a reminder that we all have a role. In our office, that means helping people break free from addiction and holding drug dealers accountable for preying on vulnerable people in our community.

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

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BILL'S PRESCRIPTION MARKS 70 YEARS WITH COMMUNITY CELEBRATION

By Marie Gilmore

When a local pharmacist Justo 'Bill' Noriega, opened a small drugstore on Brandon Boulevard in 1956, he could not have known it would one day care for four generations of the same families. Seventy years later, Bill's Prescription Center is still doing just that, and the family-owned pharmacy is inviting the community to celebrate.

The pharmacy will host a Community Wellness Celebration from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, November 7, at its location at 202 E. Brandon Blvd. in Brandon. The free event will bring together local health care providers, wellness businesses, longtime customers and neighbors for a day focused on health, education and connection.

Visitors can receive free health screenings, including blood pressure and glucose checks, as well as flu shots. Local health and wellness vendors will be on hand, along with giveaways, raffle prizes and family-friendly activities. The day will also include a special tribute to the pharmacy's founder and to the patients, employees, health care professionals and community members who have been part of its history.

Chelsea Noriega West, the founder's granddaughter and the daughter of the pharmacy's current owner, said her grandfather's philosophy of treating every patient



like family remains at the heart of the business.

"My grandfather could never have imagined in 1956 that the small pharmacy he opened would become part of the lives of so many Brandon families," she said. "We have cared for grandparents, parents, children and now grandchildren of many of the same families who first walked through our doors decades ago."

Now a three-generation family business, Bill's Prescription Center has remained independent through seven decades of change in the health care industry. Noriega West said the anniversary is about more than the passage of time.

"It is a celebration of the people who have trusted us with their care, the dedicated staff members who have served generations of families and a community that has supported a local independent pharmacy," she said.

As health care continues to evolve, she added, the family hopes its story highlights the lasting value of accessible, personal, community-based care and the vital role local providers continue to play in the lives of Brandon residents.

For more information about the celebration, call Bill's Prescription Center at 813-277-8242.

ALL ABOARD: NORTH POLE EXPRESS BRINGS HOLIDAY MAGIC TO PARRISH

Staff Report



kits will be available for purchase at the North Pole.

Families can choose from several classes of service. Coach Class offers an economical, open-air railroad experience, while Excursion Class provides assigned seating and additional comfort. First Class features fully enclosed, climate-controlled

passenger cars and includes complimentary snacks and beverages during the ride to the North Pole.

Groups and extended families can also reserve a private historic caboose for up to 16 guests. Each caboose includes tables, flexible seating, a restroom and space for personal belongings, with a museum host accompanying the group.

Regardless of the class selected, every ticket includes the complete North Pole experience, including round-trip train transportation, a Santa visit, a child's gift, cookies, hot chocolate and holiday activities.

Guests are encouraged to arrive 45-60 minutes before departure to allow time for parking, ticket pickup and boarding. Boarding generally begins approximately 20-30 minutes before departure, and the train must leave on schedule.

Tickets are now on sale, and popular departures are expected to sell out quickly. Prices vary according to the event date, departure time and class of service selected.

The North Pole Express operates November 27-29 and December 2-6, 9-13 and 16-22.

The Florida Railroad Museum is located at 12210 83rd St. E. in Parrish. For tickets and additional information, visit its website at www.frrm.org.

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THE REHAB CENTER JUST SAID, "MEDICARE IS CUTTING OFF" WHAT'S NEXT?

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

The call usually comes on a weekday afternoon. Mom broke her hip, the hospital sent her to rehab, and Medicare has been paying for everything--Medicare coverage is ending, and if Mom stays, the bill is yours. The family's first reaction is almost always the same. Wait. Medicare paid for the rehab. Mom clearly still needs care. Why won't it pay for the nursing home?

Medicare Buys Recovery. It Does Not Buy Care.

Here is the distinction the entire system turns on. Medicare is health insurance. It pays for skilled care, meaning treatment that requires nurses or therapists working to address a medical condition, like physical therapy after that hip surgery.

What Medicare does not pay for is custodial care, which is help with the tasks of daily living: bathing, dressing, eating, using the bathroom, supervision for dementia. That is precisely the care most nursing home residents need, month after month, and it is precisely the care Medicare excludes no matter how medically fragile your mother is.

So Medicare covered rehab because Mom was receiving skilled therapy. Once her care becomes primarily custodial, Medicare's role ends. The care did not stop being necessary. It stopped being the kind of care Medicare covers.

The "100 Days" Everyone Mentions and Almost Nobody Gets

You may have heard that Medicare covers 100 days in a skilled nursing facility. Treat that number as a ceiling, not a promise. Coverage generally requires a qualifying inpatient hospital stay first, and here is a trap worth knowing: Time spent in the hospital under observation status may not count, even if Mom slept there for three nights. After the first 20 covered days, a substantial daily copayment kicks in. And coverage continues only as long as skilled care is actually needed, which is why so many families see it end well before day 100.

One more myth worth correcting, because I hear it constantly: families are often told coverage must end because Mom has "plateaued" or is "no longer improving." Improvement is not actually the legal standard. Skilled care to maintain her condition or slow decline can still qualify, and families have the right to appeal a cutoff they believe is premature. Facilities do not always volunteer that.

So Who Does Pay for the Nursing Home?

For long-term custodial care in a nursing home, there are essentially three payers: your own savings, long-term care insurance if it was purchased years earlier, and Medicaid.

Medicaid is the program families con-

fuse with Medicare, and the one-letter difference costs people dearly. Medicaid is needs-based. It pays for exactly the custodial nursing home care Medicare refuses to cover, but only for people who qualify financially under strict income and asset rules. And Florida's Medicaid program reviews financial transfers made during the look-back period, so decisions made years earlier, including well-meaning gifts to children and grandchildren, can affect eligibility at the worst possible moment.

This is where planning matters. As a Florida Board Certified Elder Law attorney, I can tell you that the gap between "Medicare is cutting off" and "Medicaid is approved" is where families lose homes and savings they could have protected.

What to Do If You Just Got the Cutoff Notice

Do not panic, and do not assume the facility's word is final. Ask whether the decision can be appealed, and note the deadlines, which are short. Ask exactly what care Mom needs going forward and what it will cost privately.

At the Law Offices of Laurie E. Ohall, we help Fishhawk area families bridge the gap between Medicare's limits and Medicaid's rules, protecting what can be protected while making sure a loved one gets the care they need. Call us at (813) 438-8503 to schedule a consultation, ideally before the care meeting, but we can help even if the notice is already in your hand.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the difference between Medicare and Medicaid for nursing home care?

Medicare is health insurance that covers short-term skilled care, such as rehab after a hospital stay, and it does not cover long-term custodial care. Medicaid is a needs-based program that does pay for long-term nursing home care, but only for those who meet strict financial eligibility rules.

Does Medicare ever pay for any nursing home stay?

Yes, but only in limited circumstances: generally after a qualifying inpatient hospital stay, only while skilled nursing or therapy is needed, and only up to 100 days per benefit period, with a significant daily copayment after day 20. It is short-term recovery coverage, not long-term care coverage.

Is it too late to protect assets if my parent is already in a nursing home?

Often, no. While the best results come from planning years ahead of a care crisis, Florida law still permits certain planning strategies even after a nursing home admission. Speak with an elder law attorney before spending down assets, because options may exist that families rarely find on their own.



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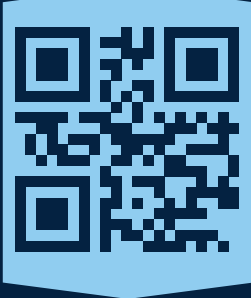
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LOCAL DRUMMER FOLLOWS PASSION TO SEAWORLD STAGE

By Libby Hopkins

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

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

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

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

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



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



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

"For this show, I'll actually be drumming on a coffin with knives," Hoening said. "The show is running through October 31, and it's really interesting, and I can't wait to get out on stage and perform."

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

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

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

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

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



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UNDERSTAND, ACCEPT, LOVE.

INCLUSION STARTS WITH OPPORTUNITY

One of the things I love most about our SouthShore community is the diversity of the families who call it home. Among our neighbors are many children and adults with autism and other disabilities who want the same thing we all do, the opportunity to belong, participate and experience life alongside their peers.

For families like mine, inclusion means more than simply being invited. It means our loved ones are given a real opportunity to participate, learn, grow and be seen for what they can do.

My 21-year-old son, Avery, has had opportunities to play sports just like his older brothers. Not because everything came easily for him but because inclusive programs were available, and we took a chance and signed him up.

Sometimes, as parents, taking that chance can be scary. We wonder: Will they understand my child? Will he be accepted? Will she be able to participate? What if it doesn't go perfectly?

But what if it does?

Every opportunity to participate can become an opportunity to build confidence, create friendships, discover a new interest or simply experience something every person deserves to experience.



And inclusion doesn't only impact the individual or their family. It impacts the volunteers, coaches, businesses and community members who participate alongside them. These experiences help people move beyond simply being 'aware' of disabilities. They create understanding, acceptance and connection.

They allow others to see the abilities and potential in individuals who may not always be given the opportunity to show them.

That is how we build a truly inclusive community, not by expecting everyone to be the same but by making room for our differences.

To families of children, teens and adults with disabilities, I encourage you to take the chance. Sign them up. Try the sport. Attend the community event. Join the social group. Give them the opportunity to experience something new.

They may surprise you.

And to our SouthShore community, keep creating those opportunities. You may never fully realize just how much they mean to families like mine.

Inclusion starts when someone is given a chance.





HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY
SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Deputy Jeff Merry

CREDIT CARD FRAUD: TECHNOLOGY KEEPS CHANGING

Credit card fraud is nothing new — but the technology scammers use to commit it is constantly evolving. Criminals are becoming more sophisticated, using technology to make their scams look legitimate and to turn stolen credit card information into quick profits.

A recent example involved Florida Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (FLHSMV) scam texts and toll-payment scams. Millions upon millions of fraudulent text messages were sent claiming that the recipient's driver's license would be suspended or that they owed money for an unpaid toll or traffic violation. The message included a link directing the victim to a convincing payment page.

After entering their credit card information, the victim might receive a legitimate text from their financial institution containing a six-digit authentication code. At the same time, the scammer would send another message claiming that the code was needed to 'verify' or complete the payment. In reality, the victim was unknowingly providing the scammer with the final piece of information needed to compromise the card.

Criminals have also found ways to use stolen card information with Apple Wallet or Google Wallet. This does not mean Apple Pay or Google Pay has been



compromised. These digital payment systems use strong security features, including tokenization, to protect your actual card number. Instead, criminals are abusing the wallet technology after obtaining stolen card information and authentication credentials. They can make fraudulent transactions appear more like legitimate digital-wallet purchases, making the technology another tool in their fraud scheme.

The best defense is vigilance. Monitor your credit card and bank statements regularly. If you see a transaction you do not recognize, contact your financial institution immediately using the phone number on the back of your card or through its official app or website.

Set up text or email alerts for purchases and other account activity so you know when transactions occur.

Most importantly, use two-factor authentication whenever it is available — but never give an authentication code to someone who contacts you. That six-digit code is designed to protect you. Giving it to a scammer can give them the final authorization they need.

The technology may change, but the safest rule remains the same: Protect your information, verify before you act and never share your authentication code.



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This nonprofit organization works with our community in the week leading to Veterans Day, Nov. 11, to build a new home for a local veteran and preserve the homes of other veterans in need.

Fundraising continues meanwhile for the organization’s Veterans Initiative program that assists others all year.

For more information, go online to www.habitathillsborough.org or call 813-239-2242.



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IT'S A 3-CAR GARAGE despite a 2-car appearance! It's tandem style, & you'll find it on a long list of advantages at this 3-bed, 2-bath, 2,040-SF pool home in Riverglen: 3-year-new solar panels fully paid off, a 900-watt home generator, 50-amp EV charger, new water heater, new pool heater & pump, etc. \$459,900



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A BACKYARD BONUS you'll love: an extended, screened, roof-covered lanai & attached patio overlooking a tree-lined pond with lighted fountain! It's the all-day-or-night, all-weather highlight of this 2,200-SF gem in The Reserve at Pradera. Also, 2 suites among the 4 total beds & 3 full baths! \$415,000



BLOOMINGDALE RIDGE is where you'll find this woody pond view with no back neighbor from a screened, roof-covered lanai! On a cul-de-sac street, an open "great room" design stretches all the way back to the lanai, which adds 330 SF to help the 3-bed, 2-bath home live larger than 1,335 SF. \$329,900



NEARLY EVERYTHING is new & improved at this maintenance-free villa with a backyard pond in Rivercrest! AC & water heater, LVP & tile floors, LED lights & ceiling fans, garage door opener & epoxy floor, hurricane shutters & more. It's a 3/2/2 with a screened lanai overlooking that pond. \$279,900





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Blissologie Donates 3D Tattoos

In honor of Breast Cancer Awareness Month, Blissologie Beauty, located at 101 Flamingo Dr. in Apollo Beach, is launching a special community initiative to provide two breast cancer survivors with complimentary 3D areola tattoo restoration services. 3D areola tattooing is a specialized paramedical tattoo technique that recreates the natural appearance of the areola and nipple following breast surgery and reconstruction. For many breast cancer survivors, this can be a meaningful final step in their reconstruction journey and help restore a sense of confidence and wholeness. Those interested in applying or learning more can contact it privately at blissologie.info@gmail.com.



along the way. Registration is now open. For registration, fundraising information, sponsorship opportunities or more information about A Kitten Place, visit <https://akittenplace.org/events/>.

Annual Black Cat 5K Fun Run Benefitting A Kitten Place

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

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

This year's event has an exciting new focus: fundraising through teams and individual participants. Organizers hope to expand the event's impact by encouraging supporters to create fundraising teams, invite friends and family to donate, and compete for fun prizes

Sidekicks Family Martial Arts Makes Donation To A Kid's Place Of Tampa Bay

Sidekicks Family Martial Arts is proud to announce that its students and families have collected 1,103 pairs of socks to benefit A Kid's Place of Tampa Bay, providing a practical and meaningful donation to support children in foster care throughout the Tampa Bay community. The sock drive is part of Sidekicks Family Martial Arts' ongoing commitment to developing students who understand that excellence extends far beyond their performance in martial arts.

At Sidekicks, students are encouraged to embrace the idea that a black belt mentality isn't simply about learning how to kick and punch well. It is about becoming the kind of person who looks beyond themselves, recognizes



Sidekicks Family Martial Arts recently donated 1,103 pairs of socks to A Kid's Place of Tampa Bay. opportunities to help others and uses their strengths to make a positive impact in their community.

Sidekicks Family Martial Arts is located at 16132 Churchview Dr., Ste. 210., in Lithia. Call 813-308-0306 or visit its website at www.ilovesidekicks.com for more information.

Nova Furniture Opens

Nova Furniture is celebrating the grand opening of its new Brandon showroom with a three-day grand



opening weekend celebration from Friday through Sunday, October 2-4, at 225 W. Brandon Blvd. in Brandon. Nova Furniture offers living room, bedroom and dining room furniture, mattresses, home accents and more, with a focus on quality furniture at affordable prices

and an exceptional shopping experience.

The celebration officially begins Friday morning with the opening address and ribbon cutting at 9:30 a.m., followed by doors opening at 10 a.m.

Veteran's Day Appreciation Event

RAZZLEDAZZLE Barbershop is teaming up with VetAble Technologies, a service-disabled veteran-owned small business focused on serving the federal government with technology solutions, to honor all who served. As a small token of gratitude, they are offering free professional haircuts to all U.S. veterans on Veterans Day — Wednesday, November 11. A complementary men's haircut has a \$35

value. If the shop reaches capacity, veterans who visit in person

on November 11 will receive a free haircut gift card to redeem later. Food and refreshments will be sponsored by Gasparilla Pizzeria. Call 813-820-3757. RAZZLEDAZZLE Barbershop is located at 11296 Sullivan St. in Riverview and open from 10 a.m.-7 p.m.

Dillard's Fashion Show

Dillard's department store is hosting a fashion show on Sunday, October 11, at its Brandon Exchange location. The show will feature two iconic brands, Tommy Bahama and Nic+Zoe. The show will also be accompanied by a book signing by Dr. Pamela Duggan, a 37-year Army veteran and cancer survivor. Please call 813-653-4436 to reserve your place.



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WHO'S GOT YOUR VOTE?

BALLOT EXPLAINED: THREE AMENDMENTS AND THREE REFERENDUMS

By Marie Gilmore

Voters will decide three statewide constitutional amendments and three Hillsborough County referendum questions this fall. Statewide amendments need at least 60% "yes" votes to pass. Referendum questions need a simple majority.

Statewide Amendments

Amendment 1: A Bigger "Rainy Day Fund" for the State

Florida keeps a savings account, called the Budget Stabilization Fund, to cover emergencies and budget shortfalls. Right now, it can hold up to 10% of the state's general tax collections. This amendment would raise that limit to 25%.

It would also require lawmakers to set aside money each year, either \$750 million or whatever amount is needed to reach the 25% limit, whichever is smaller, unless certain conditions apply. Lawmakers could still take money out for critical state needs.

A YES vote means the state would be required to save more money each year, with a higher cap on its reserves.

A NO vote keeps the current 10% limit and no required yearly deposit.

Amendment 2: No Property Tax on Farm Equipment

This amendment would stop counties from charging property tax on equipment and other personal property kept on farmland, such as tractors, tools and machinery. To qualify, the property must be used to produce farm products or for agritourism (farm tours, u-pick operations and similar activities), and must be owned by the person who owns or leases the land.

If approved, it would begin with the 2027 tax year.

A YES vote exempts qualifying farm equipment from property taxes.

A NO vote keeps taxing it as it is today.

Amendment 3: Bigger Homestead Exemption and Changes to Local Property Taxes

This is the most far-reaching measure on the ballot. It does several things:

Bigger break for homeowners. People who live in their own homes would get a much larger homestead exemption, the portion of a home's value that can't be taxed. It would rise to \$150,000 in 2027 and \$250,000 in 2028, then grow with inflation. The larger exemption applies to city, county and other local taxes, but not to school taxes.

Local option to go further. Counties and cities could choose to raise the exemption even higher, up to a home's full value. Special taxing districts could do the same if their voters approve.

Newcomers wait. People who aren't Florida residents by Dec. 31, 2026, would get the current, smaller exemption when they buy a home here. The bigger exemption would start in their fifth year.

Smaller increases for other properties. Right now, yearly increases in the taxable value of rental homes, second homes and

business property are capped at 10%. This would lower that cap to 5%.

Limits on how property tax money is spent. Counties and cities would have to spend property tax dollars on public safety, schools and education, infrastructure, natural resources, debt payments, employee retirement, and government operations. Local officials could approve other spending unless state law forbids it.

The changes would take effect Jan. 1, 2027.

A YES vote means lower property taxes for many homeowners and property owners, with less revenue for local governments and new rules on how it's spent.

A NO vote keeps the current exemption, cap and spending rules.

Hillsborough County Questions Referendum 1: Should Voters Elect the School Superintendent?

Today, the Hillsborough County School Board hires the superintendent who runs the school district. This question asks whether that job should instead be filled by voters in a partisan election, with candidates running as Republicans, Democrats or other parties. The first election would be in November 2028, for a four-year term.

A YES vote makes the superintendent an elected official.

A NO vote keeps the School Board in charge of hiring.

Referendum 2: More County Commissioners, All Elected by District

The County Commission now has seven members: four elected by voters in their own districts and three elected countywide. This change would expand the board to nine members, and later to 11 once the county's population reaches 2.5 million. Every commissioner would be elected only by voters living in his or her district, ending countywide seats.

A YES vote enlarges the commission and makes all seats district-based.

A NO vote keeps the current seven-member board.

Referendum 3: Continue the Half-Cent Sales Tax for Schools

Hillsborough voters approved a half-cent school sales tax in 2018, and it is set to expire in 2028. This question asks whether to keep it for another 10 years, starting Jan. 1, 2029. It is not a new tax.

The money would pay for replacing and repairing school air conditioning, building and upgrading schools, adding security improvements and other maintenance.

A YES vote continues the tax through 2038.

A NO vote lets the tax end as scheduled.



STACY HAHN

FOR COUNTY COMMISSION, DISTRICT 5

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POLITICALLY SPEAKING

KENNETH GAY

SCHOOL BOARD, DISTRICT 6

Staff Report

Kenneth 'Ken' Gay is seeking a seat on the Hillsborough County School Board, District 6, drawing on nearly four decades of experience in public education and a lifelong connection to the community he hopes to serve.

A fifth-generation Floridian, Gay was born and raised in Tampa Bay and is a graduate of Palm River Elementary, Dowdell Middle Magnet School and Hillsborough High School. He continued his education at Hillsborough College, the University of South Florida and Nova Southeastern University, earning two master's degrees and a doctorate in child and youth studies.

Gay devoted 39 years to Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) as an educator and administrator before retiring in 2022. He continues working with students through MORE HEALTH and mentors teachers entering the profession through alternative certification.

His decision to run, he said, is rooted in a desire to keep students at the center of school district decisions while supporting educators, strengthening family partnerships and ensuring taxpayer resources are used effectively.

Gay identifies student achievement as a central priority, emphasizing the importance of identifying learning gaps early,



strengthening instruction and expanding opportunities that prepare students for college, military service, careers and life.

He also points to teacher recruitment and retention as essential to student success. His priorities include competitive compensation, reducing unnecessary paperwork and noninstructional duties, strengthening mentoring and professional development and giving educators meaningful input before decisions affect classrooms.

School safety and discipline are another focus. Drawing on his experience as an assistant principal, Gay supports clear behavior expectations, consistent enforcement of discipline policies, family involvement and partnerships with school resource officers.

Beyond education, Gay serves as clerk of session at First Presbyterian Church of Brandon and has volunteered with Tampa Bay Watch, helping restore marine habitat.

After a lifetime in Hillsborough County, Gay said he is seeking the District 6 seat to continue serving students, educators and families through experienced leadership, fiscal responsibility and a focus on stronger student outcomes. District 6 is a countywide seat, meaning all Hillsborough County voters can participate in the election. For more information, visit www.votekennethgay.com.

NEIL MANIMALA

COUNTY COMMISSIONER, DIST. 5

By Amanda Castillo

For Neil Manimala, Hillsborough County has been the backdrop to nearly every chapter of his life, from growing up in Valrico as the son of two healthcare workers, to building a career as a physician serving the local medical community and now raising a family of his own. Manimala's parents, both immigrants,

worked in opposite hospitals while raising their family. His mother was a nurse and his father a respiratory therapist, an upbringing that cultivated his understanding of hard work, family, and service. Looking back on their journey, he sees it as a reflection of what they were able to build, "There is something to be said about the American dream."

That example eventually led Manimala into health care. After graduating from Hillsborough County public schools, he earned his Medical degree from the University of South Florida. Today, he's a board certified urologist caring for patients throughout Brandon, Riverview, Plant City and Sun City Center, and serves as the president of the Hillsborough County Medical Association.

His connection to the community ex-



tends beyond his medical practice. Manimala has served on the county's Health Care Advisory Board and the Health Council of West Central Florida, experiences that have kept him connected to issues affecting Hillsborough County.

His background in medicine and community shaped Manimala's decision to pursue public service as he campaigns for Hillsborough County

Commission, District 5. His campaign has outlined priorities including health care access, public safety and economic opportunity.

Since welcoming his daughter, Manimala's connection to Hillsborough County has taken on a new meaning. Becoming a father has sharpened his focus on the county's future and the community where his daughter will grow up. "I couldn't sit on the sidelines," he says, "I couldn't let my daughter be my age 36 years from now looking back at this generation and saying we didn't do enough."

His campaign is rooted not only in the place he has called home for his whole life, but also in his determination to help build a healthier, more equitable Hillsborough County for the next generation.

For more information about Manimala and his campaign, visit NeilManimala.com

ELECTION DAY
November 3

District 6 is a countywide seat.
All Hillsborough County voters can vote in this race.

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KENNETH
FOR SCHOOL BOARD

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DISTRICT 6
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Doctorate in Child & Youth Studies

HCPS Mentor for Alternative Certification Teachers

Proud Parent of Two HCPS Graduates

Lifelong Hillsborough County Resident

Health & Safety Educator with MORE HEALTH (Tampa General Hospital Nonprofit)

Cracker Country Historical Docent & Florida State Fair Volunteer

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Create safe classroom learning environments

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Transparent use of taxpayer dollars

Prioritize funding for student learning

Implement best practices for resource usage

WHY I'M RUNNING

After 39 years serving Hillsborough students, I've seen what works. Our schools need experienced leadership focused on students, supporting teachers, and being responsible stewards of taxpayer dollars.

Kenneth Gay

VOTE
November 3

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WHO'S GOT YOUR VOTE?

KAREN PEREZ SCHOOL BOARD, DISTRICT 6

By Amanda Castillo

Karen Perez's connection to Tampa began when she was 15 years old. In 1979, her mother moved her to Tampa to continue her education. What began as a move would eventually become the foundation for a life spent helping others find their own opportunities.

For Perez, education has never been just about a diploma. It is something she carries with her and believes needs to be shared with others.

"Education does not make us superior to others but helps us level the playing field," she said.

Today, Perez serves as chair of the Hillsborough County School Board and is running for reelection to the District 6 at-large seat. She was first elected to the school board in 2018 and reelected in 2022.

Prior to entering public service, Perez spent years working in social work and mental health. She earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees in social work from the University of South Florida and became a licensed clinical social worker. Throughout her career, Perez has worked closely with children, families and veterans, focusing on mental health and the challenges that shape people's lives.

That experience continues to shape the



way Perez approaches her work on the school board. Her years in social work taught her to look beyond what is visible and to understand that there is often more to a person's circumstances than what others see.

"Every person has a story," Perez said, a perspective she has carried into her work with students, families and the

community.

As she addresses challenges facing Hillsborough County Public Schools, Perez emphasizes the importance of understanding the people behind the issues, not just the issues themselves.

Perez is running for another term because she believes "there is still work to be done." For her, that work begins with listening to the people behind the issues and making sure their experiences are heard.

Now, Perez hopes that the work she leaves behind will continue after her time in public service ends. She wants students and families to know that their stories matter, their voices deserve to be heard and someone will advocate for them. The opportunity her mother once fought to give her became a lifelong commitment to opening doors for others.

STACY HAHN COUNTY COMMISSIONER, DIST. 5

By Libby Hopkins

Stacy Hahn has called Hillsborough County home for 25 years.

"My husband, Jeff, and I raised our three sons here because we believe in this community and the opportunities it offers families," Hahn said. "For

the past eight years, I've had the privilege of serving on the Hillsborough County School Board, overseeing one of the nation's largest school districts, managing a multibillion-dollar budget and working to protect taxpayer dollars while improving outcomes for students."

Throughout her service, she has listened, turned conversations into action and built partnerships that solve complex challenges. Before serving in elected office, she was professor at the University of South Florida.

"Public service has always been about giving back to the community that has given so much to my family, and I'm committed to continuing that service by helping Hillsborough County remain a place where families and businesses can thrive," Hahn said.

Hahn earned a reputation for fiscal responsibility, transparency and delivering high-quality outcomes for students. She is now running for County Commission, Dis-



trict 5, to bring the same disciplined, results-driven leadership to the community.

"I'm running for county commission to bring that same leadership, accountability and problem-solving approach to the decisions that will

shape our community's future," Hahn said. "My priorities are straightforward: protect taxpayers, improve infrastructure, support law enforcement and first responders and ensure growth is planned responsibly so our quality of life is protected."

"Through initiatives like the Early Childhood Literacy Fair, Storytime Online, the Early Childhood Literacy Bus and community book distributions, we've helped thousands of children develop a love of reading before they enter the classroom," Hahn said.

"If elected, I want people to know they have a commissioner who is accessible, prepared, fiscally responsible and committed to making thoughtful decisions that strengthen our community for generations to come," she said. "When we work together, we create deeper, more lasting impacts."

To learn more about Hahn or become involved in her campaign, you can visit her website at www.votestacyhahn.com.



Karen Perez
for school board district 6

A PLAN TO MEET TODAY'S CHALLENGES

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- ✓ INVEST IN SCHOOL SAFETY
- ✓ RETAIN QUALITY TEACHERS
- ✓ FOCUS OUR LIMITED RESOURCES ON THE CLASSROOM

Karen's experience as Chair of the School Board, mother, business owner and mental health specialist, makes her uniquely prepared to face today's challenges.

- + Elected to Hillsborough County School Board in 2018 and serves as Chair
- + Owns a small business that works with children, families, and veterans on mental health issues
- + Mother of three adult children, eight grandchildren and lives in New Tampa with Riley and Baxter, certified Therapy Dogs for comforting her clients
- + Florida School Board Assoc. Member
- + Serves on Value Adjustment Board
- + Safe and Sound Leadership Council
- + National Assoc. Social Workers Member
- + Trilingual - English, Spanish and American Sign Language



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Political advertisement paid for and approved by Karen Perez, non-partisan, for Hillsborough County School Board District 6.

LAUREL WILT IS HERE — WHAT EVERY HOMEOWNER NEEDS TO KNOW

By Tony Padgett, ISA Certified Arborist, Panorama Tree Care

If you have a redbay, avocado, camphor or sassafras tree on your property, walk out and look at it this week. Laurel wilt disease has been confirmed in Hillsborough County, and I am seeing it move fast along the preserve edges in Brandon and FishHawk.

The first sign is a single branch that suddenly wilts and turns reddish brown while the leaves stay attached. Healthy trees do not drop leaves that way. Within a few weeks, the wilt spreads through the whole crown. If you peel back a small piece of bark on an affected limb, you will see dark streaks running through the sapwood. That streaking is the fungus, and there is no cure once it reaches the trunk.

The disease is spread by a beetle the size of a sesame seed called the redbay ambrosia beetle. It bores into the wood, carries the fungus with it, and the tree dies from the inside. One infected redbay along a preserve line can seed a whole neighborhood because the beetles fly and the wood gets moved.

The single most important thing a homeowner can do is stop moving firewood. If a laurel-family tree comes down on your lot, do not haul it to a friend's fire pit and do



not stack it by the fence for next winter. The beetles keep living in cut wood for months. Chip it on-site to pieces smaller than 1 inch, or bag and dispose of it with regular yard waste so the county handles it. Burning it where it fell is fine. Burning it 3 miles away is how the disease jumps a neighborhood.

For avocado trees, which many FishHawk families planted for the fruit, a preventive trunk injection of propiconazole gives about a year of protection and is worth considering if your tree is

still healthy. It does nothing once symptoms appear.

If you see wilting redbays along the trails behind Brandon or near the FishHawk preserves, report it to the Florida Forest Service. Early reports slow the spread.

Source: www.panoramatreeservice.com/laurel-wilt-tampa-hillsborough-county-trees/.

Tony Padgett is an ISA Certified Arborist and owner of Panorama Tree Care, his certifications and field expertise set the tone for a team dedicated to professionalism, ongoing training, and genuine customer care. Padgett's active ISA Certified Arborist credentials (FL-9569A, ANAB-accredited under ISO/IEC 17024) and the ISA Tree Risk Assessment Qualification (TRAQ).

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FOR 50 YEARS, VOLUNTEERS HAVE SERVED UP MEALS AND KINDNESS

By Dale Bliss

Greater Brandon



For some home-bound residents in Brandon, a knock on the door and a friendly greeting can mean just as much as the hot meal waiting on the other side.

For nearly 50 years, volunteers at St. Andrew's United Methodist Church have been helping provide both through Greater Brandon Meals on Wheels. Since 1976, the church has participated in the communitywide effort to provide nutritious, home-delivered meals to people who are unable to prepare meals for themselves.

Greater Brandon Meals on Wheels operates Monday through Friday, with participating local churches taking responsibility for individual days. Tuesday is St. Andrew's United Methodist Church's day, and volunteers have continued the tradition for five decades.

At St. Andrew's, Phala Pesano and Tim Bridge co-chair the ministry. Each Tuesday, volunteers arrive early to plan, shop for and prepare meals from scratch. The typical meal includes a protein, vegetable, starch, salad and dinner roll, along with dessert.

"On a typical Tuesday, the team cooks for 77 to 78 seniors," Pesano said.

A backup team arrives around 10:30 a.m. to help prepare and package the meals before delivery volunteers head out on their routes. Meals are delivered between 11 a.m.-1 p.m., with volunteers making sure each recipient receives more

than just a nutritious meal.

"The best part of being a volunteer is knowing we are helping people who really need help," Pesano said.

For many home-bound neighbors, a Meals on Wheels volunteer may be the only person they see or speak with during the day. A typical delivery route takes about an hour, but that brief visit can provide important social connection and a reminder that the community cares.

Recipients can be referred by family members, friends, churches, physicians and other organizations. Anyone who is homebound and unable to prepare a home-cooked meal may qualify, whether the need is temporary or permanent. Clients are screened in their homes to verify their need, and a suggested donation helps offset the cost of meals.

The ministry also adds a little extra cheer during the holidays by preparing goodie bags filled with items such as granola bars and individual applesauce cups.

Those interested in volunteering or supporting the ministry can contact St. Andrew's United Methodist Church at 813-689-6849. Meals on Wheels volunteers meet Tuesdays at 9:30 a.m. in the Family Life Center kitchen at St. Andrew's United Methodist Church, located at 3315 S. Bryan Rd. in Brandon.

More information is available at www.brandonmealsonwheels.com.

GET THE DIRT: BETTE S. WALKER DISCOVERY GARDEN

BY LYNN BARBER, URBAN HORTICULTURE AGENT



Features. Each garden has its own landscape theme and function. For example, one of the water gardens simulates a natural lake or pond and is in the process of being aqua-scaped with several Florida native plants. Recycled products, various types of pervious surfaces, mulches, plant materials and microirrigation are showcased. Both Florida native and non-native adaptive plants are included.

Interested in innovative ideas for your landscape? Need a mini getaway? Now is a great time to visit the Bette S. Walker Discovery Garden, located in the courtyard of the University of Florida/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Hillsborough County office in Seffner, near the I-4/I-75 interchange.

Although small in scale, the Bette S. Walker Discovery Garden features a collection of six themed gardens which convey landscape design and maintenance ideas based entirely on the nine principles of the Florida-Friendly Landscaping program. These principles include right plant/right place, water efficiently, mulch, recycle yard waste, fertilize appropriately, control yard pests responsibly, reduce stormwater runoff, attract wildlife and protect the waterfront.

The garden rooms are named Florida-Friendly, Asian Influence, Wildlife Habitat, Backyard BBQ, Sensory and Water

ed. Plant materials have changed over the years.

There are several other reasons to stop by our office. We have a gorgeous perennial garden and a pollinator garden created by Girl Scouts. There is a Master Gardener volunteer on duty who can answer your questions, and you can submit a soil sample for testing at a nominal cost. Please view our events for upcoming programs in your browser at <https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/events/?location=hillsborough>.

Discovery Garden group tours can be scheduled by calling Michael at 813-744-5519, ext. 54146. Individual garden strolls need not be scheduled. The garden is open from 8:15 a.m.-4:45 p.m., Monday through Friday. The Extension office is located at 5339 County Rd. 579 in Seffner. Hope to see you strolling here soon!

Contact Lynn Barber at labarber@ufl.edu.



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PREHURRICANE INSPECTION IS A SMART MOVE FOR HOMEOWNERS

Staff Report



Living in Hillsborough County means hurricane preparation is simply part of owning a home. While stocking supplies, reviewing evacuation plans and bringing outdoor furniture inside are important, preparing the home itself should also be part of the plan.

A prehurricane inspection can help identify conditions around your property that may become bigger problems when high winds and heavy rain arrive.

Small defects can be easy to overlook during normal weather. Loose roof materials, deteriorated sealant, damaged soffits or fascia, clogged gutters, deteriorated exterior components or problems around windows and doors may not seem urgent on a sunny Florida afternoon.

During a tropical storm or hurricane, however, those same conditions can provide opportunities for wind or water to cause additional damage.

A prehurricane inspection gives homeowners an opportunity to address concerns while contractors and materials are still available instead of trying to make repairs while a storm is approaching.

Know What Needs Your Attention

An inspection can help identify visible concerns involving areas such as: roof coverings, flashing and exposed sealants, soffits, fascia, siding and exterior trim, windows, exterior doors and garage doors, gutters,

downspouts and drainage conditions, exterior penetrations and openings, loose or deteriorated exterior components and trees or vegetation that may threaten the structure.

The goal is not to predict what a hurricane will do or guarantee that a home will avoid damage. It is to identify observable conditions that may deserve attention before the property is exposed to severe weather.

Another benefit is documentation. Photographs taken during an inspection can provide a record of the property's visible condition before a storm occurs. If damage is discovered afterward, having prestorm documentation may help establish what was present beforehand and what appears to have changed.

Florida's Atlantic hurricane season runs from June through November. Waiting until a storm is approaching Tampa Bay can mean competing for contractors, supplies and limited time.

A prehurricane inspection allows you to prepare on your schedule instead of the storm's.

Veteran-owned Apex Sight Solutions provides prehurricane property inspections throughout Hillsborough County and surrounding communities to help property owners identify concerns before severe weather arrives.

Call 813-860-8374 or visit www.apex-sightsolutions.com.



RESIDENTS URGED TO FIGHT MOSQUITO BREEDING AS DENGUE CASES RISE

Staff Report

Hillsborough County residents are being encouraged to take simple steps around their homes to reduce mosquito breeding as locally acquired dengue infections continue to be reported in the Tampa Bay area.



to larvicides, such as Mosquito Dunks or Mosquito Bits. Bti targets mosquito larvae before they become adult mosquitoes. Products should al-

ways be used according to the label.

Residents should also look beyond the obvious. Potential breeding sites can include children's outdoor toys, self-watering planters, rain barrels, unused pools, tree holes, ditches and decorative water features.

Removing standing water should always be the first step. Larvicides are intended for water that cannot reasonably be removed, not as a replacement for eliminating breeding sites.

Mosquitoes may also breed in drainage areas or other locations outside an individual yard. Residents who see persistent standing water in a public area should report it to the appropriate local authority or mosquito-control agency.

Mosquito prevention works best as a community effort. A few minutes spent checking a yard can help reduce mosquito populations and the risk of mosquito-borne disease.

Dump it. Drain it. Cover it. And where appropriate, dunk it.

For more information, visit the Florida Department of Health's Fight the Bite resources at www.floridahealth.gov/mosquito or Hillsborough County's Mosquito Control webpage at <https://hcfl.gov/residents/property-owners-and-renters/mosquito-control>.

According to the Florida Department of Health, Hillsborough County has reported 59 locally acquired dengue infections, making it the center of an unusual increase in locally transmitted dengue cases in Florida. Health officials are urging residents to protect themselves from mosquito bites and eliminate standing water where mosquitoes can breed.

Dengue is spread by the bite of an infected Aedes mosquito. These mosquitoes can breed in surprisingly small amounts of water, including water found in plant saucers, toys, buckets, clogged gutters and other containers around homes.

One simple way to remember mosquito prevention is the three D's: dump, drain and cover.

Dump: Empty standing water from plant saucers, toys, buckets, pet dishes, birdbaths and other containers. Check yards regularly, especially after rainfall.

Drain: Clear clogged gutters and downspouts and address areas where water routinely collects. Check decorative fountains, drainage areas and low spots around the property.

Cover: Keep containers that hold water covered and make sure doors and windows have intact screens.

For water that cannot easily be eliminated, residents can consider Bti mosqui-



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TADA DANCERS LEARN FROM 'HAMILTON' TOURING PERFORMER

By Libby Hopkins

Theatre Arts and Dance Alliance (TADA) believes in promoting positive self-esteem while instilling love and appreciation for dance and movement. Its expectation is for each dancer to reach their potential and to receive individual and personal attention, no matter the level.

"Our vision is to create a world where everyone can access the magic of dance, theater and music," said Mistie Kraack, founder and artistic director of TADA. "We have witnessed firsthand how the arts can build character, confidence and friendships. These beautiful, enriching forms of art are an incredible tool to teach body awareness, self-discipline and teamwork. Through our service of teaching dance and theater, we strive to provide exceptional instruction and leadership to our students."

Recently, TADA connected with Stage Door Access, an organization that arranges master classes with professional performers touring the area. Through it, Kraack arranged for Terrance Martin, who is currently performing as a dance captain/swing on the Philip Tour of Hamilton: An American Musical, to visit TADA and work with its students.

"We're thrilled to bring his experi-



ence into our studio," Kraack said. "Terrance will teach two musical theater dance master classes on Saturday, October 31. The first class will be from 9 a.m.-10:30 a.m., and it will be beginner/intermediate students, ages 9-13, grades four to seven. The second class will be from 10:30 a.m.-Noon, and it will be for intermediate/advanced students, ages 13-18, grades eight to 12."

Students will learn directly from a professional performer in a session geared toward their age and experience. They'll have an opportunity to explore musical theater dance, experience a guest artist's teaching approach, and challenge

themselves creatively.

"I hope our students leave inspired, more confident and excited to keep learning," Kraack said. "Meeting and working with someone currently touring in a major production can make a professional performing career feel more tangible. I want our students to see the connection between what they practice each week and the opportunities those skills can create. Most of all, I hope they enjoy the experience and leave proud of themselves for trying something new."

To learn more about TADA, you can visit its website at www.tadance.com or call 813-571-0901.



1890: BRANDON GOT ITS FIRST POST OFFICE

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine Brandon on September 15, 1890.

There is no Brandon Boulevard. No traffic. No shopping centers. No rows of houses stretching for miles.

Instead, there are pine trees swaying in the Florida breeze, dirt roads winding through the countryside, citrus groves beginning to flourish and the sounds of wagons, farm animals and the occasional train breaking the quiet.

Brandon was a much different place then, a small community of roughly 450 people, many of whom were farmers and pioneers building lives from the land.

And on this particular September day, something happened that may have seemed small at the time but was actually a significant moment in the story of our community.

Brandon received its first United States Post Office.

It was located in the home of Victoria Brandon, widow of pioneer John Brandon, whose name would ultimately become synonymous with the community we know today. Victoria served as the first postmaster.

Imagine what that little post office must have meant.

A letter from a loved one could carry news from miles away. A newspaper



could bring word of a changing world. Neighbors could gather, exchange stories and perhaps linger for a moment before returning to their farms and families.

The railroad had begun connecting this young community with the outside world, and the area around what is now Victoria

Street and Moon Avenue was becoming the heart of Brandon. Nearby were the railroad depot, Galvin's General Store and a citrus packing house.

There was no way those early residents could have known what Brandon would become.

They could not have imagined six-lane roads, towering buildings, shopping centers or hundreds of thousands of neighbors.

But they were laying the foundation for all of it.

So each September 15, perhaps we should pause and remember that Brandon's story didn't begin with the bustling community we see today.

It began quietly, with pioneers, dirt roads, citrus trees, a railroad, a determined woman named Victoria Brandon and a small post office that connected a young community to the world.

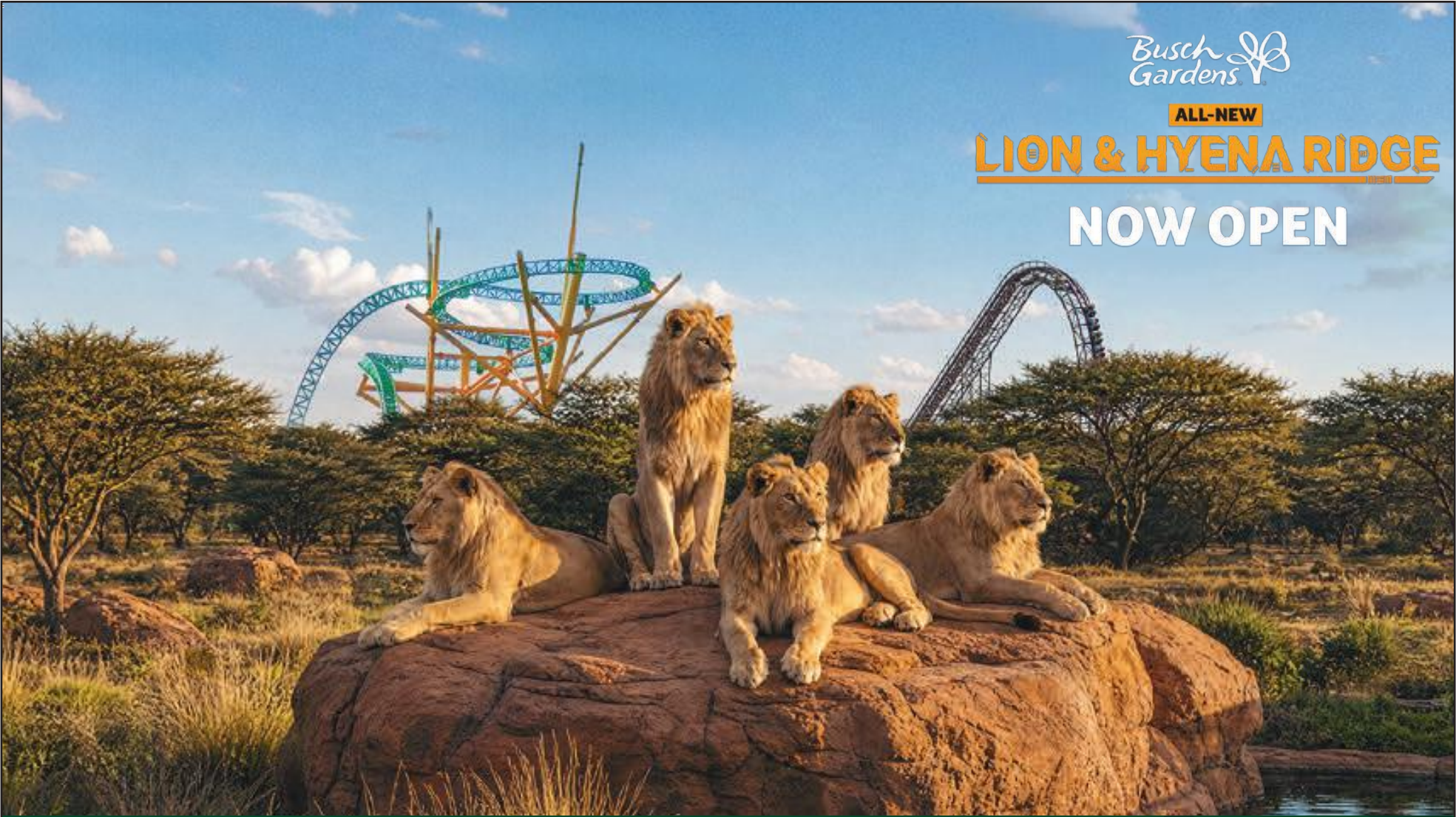
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Christian Voice



Grace Notes

Love Me Some Perks

By Debora Coty

I recently heard an interview with a famous Hollywood actress who smugly recited the “mah-va-lous perks” she enjoys because of her massive film success. Here are some of the celebrity benefits she touted:

1. No waiting to be seated at restaurants.
2. Bigger everything.
3. No heart palpitations, muss or fuss when bills come in.
4. If you’re undecided between the ruby necklace and designer gown, just buy both. And add another closet.
5. No matter where you go, everybody knows your name.
6. Keeping up your image is tough, but you can hire somebody to do that for you.

Now contrast her list with the benefits of being a Christian that I found in Psalm 103 (grab your Bible and see how many perks you can add to the list):

1. Pardon
2. Healing
3. Redemption
4. Kindness
5. Compassion
6. Satisfaction
7. Energy renewal

Now go back and read that list once again, slowly and with consideration of what each of these incredible perks from your heavenly Father means to you personally.

Do you truly appreciate these perks of your faith? Do you use them? Spend a few minutes thinking about:

1. What you need to be pardoned from.
2. Which wounds deep inside you need healing.
3. How His love redeems the messes you’ve made.
4. Which perspectives have changed in you because of the kindness and compassion offered to you by your unconditionally loving Father.
5. Who is the only one who can satisfy your years with His good things.
6. What changes in you when your sagging energy has been renewed by His supernatural power.

Hey, who doesn’t love a great perk, right? Now that’s a benefits package that can’t be beat!

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits,” (Psalm 103:1-2).

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

COMMUNITY MATTERS IF WE WANT TO SEE HEALING

“Let us consider each other carefully for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds. Don’t stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other.” — Hebrews 10:24-25.

One of my favorite things to do is to sit down with a friend over a cup of coffee, or lunch, or at the brewery, and just chat. It is more than just enjoyable; I believe it is spiritual food. We were created for community. It’s a fact supported by research in anthropology and in psychology and even in biology.

I read an article recently that discussed the cost to our culture when church is no longer the epicenter of life and identity. What has been lost is a kind of fabric that knits us together. Leaving does not reproduce it in some other context — it is simply gone. Community is life.

This is at the heart of my love for men’s ministry. Men are generally not so well equipped as women when it comes to the whole relationship dynamic. Sharing, asking for support, conversational intimacy, vulnerability and praying together can be a bit of a stretch — whereas women tend to be more relationally intuitive.

Some of this came up in conversation with my friend at the Coffee House. We



agree that “being an encourager” is one of the best things men can do for one another. And we can’t encourage if we don’t know, and we won’t know if we are afraid to be vulnerable, and we

will never be vulnerable unless we are confident enough to be honest, and confidence depends on mutual trust, and how can we trust each other outside of love?

And how can we love or be loved if we keep so much of ourselves under wraps? This is the cost of losing fellowship; so, we must come back together and with the commitment to build one another up, the willingness to know and to be known.

This quality of community is one of the most important things we can do if we want to see healing. Healing in ourselves, healing in community and healing in this nation.

— Derek



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

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NOTICE OF FINAL AGENCY ACTION BY THE SOUTHWEST FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

Notice is given that the District's Final Agency Action is approval of the application for an Environmental Resource Permit to serve Permit Modification activities on 7.96 acres known as Berry Bay Commercial. The project is located in Hillsborough County, Section(s) 19, Township 32 South, Range 20 East. The permit applicant is CC Saffold Farms LLC, whose address is 111 South Armenia Avenue, Tampa, FL 33609. The Permit No. is 1000618 / 0044708.010. The file(s) pertaining to the project referred to above is available for inspection Monday through Friday except for legal holidays, 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., at the Southwest Florida Water Management District, 7601 U.S. Highway 301 North, Tampa, Florida 33637. Any person whose substantial interests are affected by the District's action regarding this matter may request an administrative hearing in accordance with Sections 120.569 and 120.57, Florida Statutes (F.S.), and Chapter 28-106, Florida Administrative Code (F.A.C.), of the Uniform Rules of Procedure. A request for hearing must (1) explain how the substantial interests of each person requesting the hearing will be affected by the District's action, or proposed action; (2) state all material facts disputed by each person requesting the hearing or state that there are no disputed facts; and (3) otherwise comply with Chapter 28-106, F.A.C. A request for hearing must be filed with and received by the Agency Clerk of the District at the District's Tampa address, 7601 US Hwy. 301, Tampa, FL 33637-6759 within 21 days of publication of this notice (or within 14 days for an Environmental Resource Permit with Proprietary Authorization for the use of Sovereign Submerged Lands). Failure to file a request for hearing within this time period shall constitute a waiver of any right such person may have to request a hearing under Sections 120.569 and 120.57, F.S. Because the administrative hearing process is designed to formulate final agency action, the filing of a petition means that the District's final action may be different from the position taken by it in this notice of agency action. Persons whose substantial interests will be affected by any such final decision of the District in this matter have the right to petition to become a party to the proceeding, in accordance with the requirements set forth above. Mediation pursuant to Section 120.573, F.S., to settle an administrative dispute regarding the District's action in this matter is not available prior to the filing of a request for hearing.

NEW HORIZONS PREPARES FOR ANNUAL BBQ AND SILENT AUCTION

Staff Report

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

CIRQUE DREAMS HOLIDAZE RETURNS TO RP FUNDING FOR ONE NIGHT

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

Cirque Dreams Holidaze will perform one show at

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

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

About Cirque Dreams

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

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