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YOUR COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER

February 2026

Volume 21, Issue 2



Ph: 813-657-2418

Still Growing!
February 26 - March 8, 2016
Plant City, Florida

FLORIDA STRAWBERRY FESTIVAL

SEE OUR AD ON PAGE 6

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BRANDON RIVERVIEW CHAMBER OF COMMERCE ANNOUNCES COMMUNITY HEALTH & WELLNESS FAIR

The Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce is proud to announce its Community Health & Wellness Fair, taking place Saturday, March 7, from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. at the Gardenville Park & Recreation Center, located at 6219 Symmes Rd. in Gibsonton.

This free, family-friendly event is designed to connect residents with valuable health, wellness and medical resources while creating a fun and engaging experience for all ages. The fair will feature local health and wellness businesses, medical providers and community organizations, along with interactive activities, on-site health screenings, food trucks, sports demonstrations and live entertainment.

"Our Community Health & Wellness Fair is all about bringing people together and empowering our community with access to resources that support healthier, happier lives," said the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce President Amber Aaron. "From preventative care and fitness to nutrition and mental wellness, this event offers something for everyone."

The fair also provides an excellent opportunity for health and wellness businesses to showcase their services directly to families, individuals and decision-makers

Staff Report

in the Brandon-River-view area. Participating businesses can build brand awareness, share expertise and form meaningful connections while supporting community well-being.

Businesses specializing in healthcare, fitness, nutrition, mental wellness, preventative care and holistic services are encouraged to par-

ticipate.

Community members are invited to attend at no cost, and businesses interested in showcasing their services can register online at <https://web.centralhillsboroughchamber.com/events/Community-Health-Wellness-Fair-63706/details>.

Join the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce for a high-energy, impactful event that educates, inspires and strengthens a healthier community.

About the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce

The Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce empowers businesses through opportunities for brand exposure, education and advocacy while fostering meaningful connections that strengthen our community and promote collaboration and growth.



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COOKIE SEASON BRINGS SWEET SUCCESS FORT AREA GIRL SCOUTS

By Kelly Wise Valdes

Troop 33521 of the Girl Scouts of West Central Florida is heading into cookie season with fresh inventory, ambitious goals and a deep sense of community purpose. The Cadette-level troop, part of the Fossil Valley Service Unit serving the Li FishHawk areas, is led by Melissa Sharma and supported by Jennifer Miller, with support from parent volunteer Jennifer Taylor.

The troop is selling cookies through a mix of traditional and digital methods.

"There are several ways to purchase cookies, and each girl chooses what works best for her schedule and goals," Sharma said.

Options include paper order forms, personalized Digital Cookie websites and in-person booths at local businesses. With preorders now closed, the troop is delivering early sales and preparing for booth season at locations including Publix, Outback, Walgreens, EggTown and Danny's Deli.

As the girls begin their busiest weeks, each Scout is working toward her own target. "Each girl sets her own personal goal," said Sharma. "As a troop, we are planning to average approximately 300 boxes per girl, combining personal and booth sales."

Her daughter, Olivia, has already sold 131 boxes online.

The girls involved with Troop 33521 are 13-14 years old and attend several middle schools, including Progress Village Middle Magnet School of the Arts, Randall, Barrington and Bell Creek Academy.

Girl Scout cookie season fuels more than treats.

"Our community support means everything to us — we truly could not reach our goals without it," Sharma said. "When you

purchase a box, the money stays right here in your neighborhood, supporting local girls and the organizations they serve."

This year, the Cadettes are pursuing two Silver Award projects focused on marine conservation:

Oyster Oasis and A Hermit Crab's Healthy Habitat. Sharma said cookie proceeds will help fund education and hands-on environmental work.

"Cookie sales have helped our girls earn their Bronze Award; travel to Savannah, the birthplace of Girl Scouts; and host multiple Me & My Guy (Daddy-Daughter) dances," Sharma said, noting that

their volunteer efforts span animal rescues, food drives, beach cleanups and support for children in need.

Sharma said watching the girls grow into confident leaders is the greatest reward.

"When we started, these girls were learning how to tie their shoes. Now they can market, manage inventory, handle money, troubleshoot booth locations, and confidently talk to customers."

Cookie flavors this year include Adventurefuls, Lemon-Ups, Trefoils, Do-si-dos, Samoas, Tagalongs, Thin Mints, Exploremores (new) and Toffee-tastic (gluten-free). Customers can find local booths at www.gswcf.org or order directly to buy your cookies at www.gswcf.org/en/cookies.html.



Girl Scouts from Troop 33521 greet customers with smiles and stacks of cookies as they kick off booth season in Lithia.



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Osprey Observer
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MARCH 6TH - MAY 10TH

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LOCALLY OWNED SOUTHERN CONSTRUCTION CELEBRATES A DECADE OF BUILDING TRUST

By Olivia Clark



One notable moment was Southern Construction's feature on HGTV's *100 Day Dream Home*, which showcased its craftsmanship to a national audience. The company also played a critical role in restoration efforts following Hurricanes Ian, Milton and Helene, expanding its emergency response capabilities to better serve both residential and commercial property owners.

Southern Construction reached a milestone in November 2025, marking 10 years in business and a decade of service within the construction and restoration industry. Since its founding in 2015, the company has grown into a trusted contractor serving residential and commercial clients throughout the region.

Over the past 10 years, Southern Construction has expanded its capabilities to include both general construction and comprehensive restoration services. Its work ranges from residential and commercial construction projects to emergency response following water, fire, mold and storm-related damage. The company maintains proper state licensing and industry certifications, allowing it to manage complex projects while meeting safety and quality standards.

"Reaching 10 years is a significant milestone — proof that our steady hard work has built a trusted, sustainable company," said Blair Johnson, president of Southern Construction. "It's a proud moment for our team and partners, showing we deliver consistently and that our relationships with clients and the community truly matter."

Several milestones over the decade helped shape the company's direction and growth.

SOUTHERN CONSTRUCTION

"Responding to Hurricanes Ian, Milton and Helene expanded our restoration capabilities so we could better serve residential and commercial clients when they needed us most," Johnson said.

As Southern Construction enters its second decade, the company is focused on strengthening its internal operations while preparing for future growth. Investments in workforce development and emergency planning remain key priorities.

"What excites us most about the future is developing our team at Southern Construction," Johnson said. "We are investing in workforce training to deliver higher-quality, more efficient projects. Expanding our emergency response plans deepens our partnerships with clients and the community, allowing us to take on bigger challenges and make a lasting regional impact."

With a decade of experience behind it, Southern Construction continues building on a foundation of reliability, adaptability and community-focused service.

For more information, visit the website at www.southernconstruction.net.

NORTH BRANDON YMCA EXPANDS PROGRAMS, RENOVATIONS FOR AREA FAMILIES

By Olivia Clark

The North Brandon Family YMCA, located at 3097 S. Kingsway Rd. in Seffner, has served as a gathering place for families in the North Brandon area for decades. Built in 1989, the facility offers programs and amenities designed to support wellness and connection for residents of all ages, from infants to active older adults.

A wide range of programs are available at the North Brandon location, including gymnastics, dance, youth sports, personal training and swim lessons. Formal swim instruction is offered for all ages, from 6 months through adulthood. The facility's pool is used throughout the day for lap swim, open swim, lessons and swim team activities. Members also have access to an indoor cycling studio, a wellness floor with cardio equipment, locker rooms, an outdoor conditioning area, a computer room and a reading center.

Youth and family programming remains a key focus. Stay & Play child care is available for children ages 6 weeks to 5 years, while the Youth Zone provides a dedicated space for ages 6-12. The basketball gym hosts open gym and pickup games, and pickleball is offered from Mon-Fri, 8 a.m.-12 Noon.

Over the years, the North Brandon Family YMCA has continued to invest in improve-



Swim and aqua fitness instructor Zitta leads a class at the North Brandon Family YMCA.



ments aimed at enhancing the member experience. Recent updates have included renovations to youth spaces, fitness areas and locker rooms, as well as expanded outdoor programming space.

"We truly do support the mind, body and spirit," said Jody Thorson, senior vice president of mission advancement.

Additional enhancements were completed last year when the YMCA's gymnasium underwent a renovation in February, supported by the Atlanta Tipoff Club and the Naismith Awards. The project included refinishing the gym floor, replacing backboards and wall pads and applying fresh paint.

"We're delighted to contribute to the Tampa community," said Eric Oberman, president of the Atlanta Tipoff Club.

"The North Brandon Family YMCA is a community hub," said Candace Culver, senior vice president of community partnerships for the Tampa Metropolitan Area YMCA.

The North Brandon Family YMCA is open from Monday to Thursday, 5 a.m.-9:30 p.m., on Friday, 5 a.m.-8:30 p.m.; on Saturday, 7 a.m.-6 p.m.; and on Sunday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Ccall 813-685-5402 or visit directly at www.tampaymca.org.



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FROM HCA NICU NURSE TO NEW MOM STORY SPANS TWO GENERATIONS

Staff Report

HCA Florida Brandon Hospital celebrates a powerful full-circle moment as one of its NICU nurses welcomed her own baby at the same hospital where she was born more than two decades ago.

Gabriella 'Gabby' Chandler was born at Brandon Hospital on May 29, 2000. Today, she serves as a nurse in the hospital's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, caring for premature and critically ill newborns and forming lifelong bonds with the families she serves.

Chandler's journey into nursing was inspired by her upbringing in a caregiving household and a desire to be present for patients and families during their most vulnerable moments. She discovered her passion for neonatal care after attending a job fair and accepting a position in the NICU, where she found her calling.

"We fall in love with the babies. We fall in love with the families," Chandler said. "That connection is what makes this work so meaningful."

One of those connections became especially significant when Chandler cared for a premature infant named Rhett Smith nearly three years ago. During his long NICU stay, she developed a close bond with Smith and his family that continued well beyond his discharge from the hospital. Two years later, Smith served as the ring bearer in Chandler's wedding, symbolizing the deep relationships formed through neonatal care.



The Chandler family welcomes Samuel Jr.

On January 21, Chandler and her husband welcomed their son, Samuel Jr., at Brandon Hospital. A photo taken in front of the hospital's Welcome Baby wall marks the moment with the same type of birth announcement display that once recorded Chandler's own arrival into the world.

Coworkers from across the hospital and families whose babies Chandler previously cared for followed her pregnancy journey and eagerly awaited the arrival of baby Samuel. His birth has become a shared celebration among staff and community members who have witnessed Chandler's story come full circle.

"Not everyone has the opportunity to care for babies in the same place where their own life began," Chandler said. "It is incredibly meaningful to return here as both a nurse and now a mother."

HCA Florida Brandon Hospital has served families in the Brandon community for nearly 50 years and continues to celebrate generations of care through its Women's Services and NICU programs.

This moment represents more than a personal milestone for one nurse. It reflects the enduring relationships formed within the hospital walls and the impact caregivers have on families long after they leave the NICU.

For more about HCA Florida Brandon Hospital's Women's Services and NICU, visit www.hcafloridabrandonhospital.com.

PLANT CITY CHORALE CONTINUES 2026 CONCERT SEASON WITH "JOURNEYS: PATHS WE WALK TOGETHER"

Staff Report

Plant City Community Chorale joyfully announces their 2026 Spring Concert:

"JOURNEYS: PATHS WE WALK TOGETHER"

This concert invites listeners on a deeply human journey of reflection, resilience, and hope, weaving together spirituals, folk traditions, and contemporary choral selections. Listeners will voyage from the serene, prayerful stillness of The Ground, to the uplifting, toe-tapping

beat of the 1970's pop hit Lean On Me, and into the love, comfort and timeless warmth of Wild Mountain Thyme among many other selections.

The Sunday, March 22 concert is sponsored by Grow Into You Foundation and Jonathan Pittman, Financial Advisor.



The concert begins at 5:00pm, and will be at St. Clement Catholic Church, 1104 N. Alexander Street in Plant City.

Tickets are \$25.00 online (debit & credit cards accepted) and are available at the Chorale website (www.pccchorale.org), [FB.com/plantcitycommunitychorale](https://www.facebook.com/plantcitycommunitychorale), or by texting 727-424-9661.

Tickets are also available at the door the night of the concert (cash, debit, & credit).

Children 12 and younger are free. Tickets may also be purchased in advance directly from your favorite Chorale member for \$20.00 (cash/check).



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Dated at Valrico, Florida this 22nd day of January 2026

GETTING YOUR CHILD READY FOR KINDERGARTEN (OR PRE-K)

By Superintendent Van Ayres

If you've got a little one heading into prekindergarten or kindergarten, you're probably feeling a mix of pride, excitement and maybe a little nervous. That's normal. Here's the truth: being 'ready' doesn't mean your child needs to be reading early or sitting still for long stretches. It means they're building the everyday skills that help them walk into school feeling confident and capable.

Here are a few practical ways to get started without turning your home into a classroom.

Focus on independence. Practice the basics: opening snack containers, washing hands, using the restroom, putting on a backpack and cleaning up after themselves. These small skills make a big difference in a busy classroom.

Lock in a routine. A steady bedtime and morning routine will set your child up for success and it will make your first week smoother, too. If your schedule has been flexible, start shifting to a school-night routine a couple of weeks early.

Help them handle big feelings. New places come with new emotions. Talk through what school might look like and give them a plan, such as, "If you



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

miss home, tell your teacher," or "If you need help, raise your hand." Kids do better when they know what to do.

Read every day and keep it simple. Even 10 minutes counts. Let your child choose books. Ask questions about the pictures. Talk about the story. Point out letters and words on signs and packages. You're building language and confidence, not giving a test.

Practice getting along with others. Taking turns, listening, sharing space and using respectful words matter just as much as counting and colors. Time at the park, story time at the library or playing with neighbors all help.

Keep your message positive. Kids pick up on our tone. If we talk about school as a safe place to learn, make friends and try new things, they'll walk in with more confidence.

One last thing: every child develops at their own pace. If your child feels supported, encouraged and excited to learn, you're on the right track. We're looking forward to welcoming your family and we'll be ready for them on day one.

To learn more about Hillsborough County Public Schools' early learning programs, visit <https://hcpsready.com/>.



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EAST HILLSBOROUGH HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS STEP INTO THE WORKING WORLD THROUGH INDUSTRY TOUR EXPERIENCE

By Brian Bokor



For the 450 East Hillsborough County high school seniors who chose to participate in the Future Career Academy (FCA) Business Tour field trips, the January 28 tour, one of eight immersive days throughout Hillsborough County, was not a break from class or a one-day field trip. It was a planned component of a yearlong program designed to prepare students for life after graduation.

Throughout this yearlong journey, students are also supported through a weekly workforce and professional development curriculum, along with additional experiences, all intentionally designed to prepare them for career pathways and connect them to employers, training partners and real-world opportunities.

As part of that program, participating seniors traveled on nine buses, and each rotated through three different workplace sectors across the region, gaining direct exposure to real-world settings that allowed them to compare career options side by side and begin making informed decisions about their future.

Throughout the day, students moved in groups from site to site, seeing what different lines of work look like day to day. Some stops placed them inside training classrooms and labs, while others brought them onto jobsites or into active facilities. The contrast

pushed students to think beyond job titles and consider work environments, training paths and long-term goals.

"I was expecting a bunch of learning opportunities," said Kayle Garris, a senior at Brandon High School. "I knew we were going to do business field trips and go to different areas to connect with different departments, like TECO. Today, we went to TECO and a nursing home, and we learned about all of that. I work at the Columbia Restaurant in Ybor City, and I've been looking at different options, including the Army and Hillsborough Community College. My plan is to go to HCC and then transfer to USF. I have a scholarship from USF — Richard Gonzmart from the Columbia gave me a Latino scholarship."

Like many students on the tour, Garris is balancing work, education, and long-term planning, using the day to explore multiple career options rather than committing to a single path.

It wasn't just the students who found value; local employers noted a level of engagement that shifted the day from a tour to a talent search.

From Blackrock Milling and Asphalt, recruiter Chris Hill said his first experience with FCA offered more than a chance to collect resumes.

"We at Blackrock are looking for more

than just a diploma or a degree; we are looking for employees that will make an immediate positive impact on our company," Hill said. "These young adults asked questions and were willing to learn about a trade they may have never thought about before. We look forward to interviewing and developing the next generation of leaders."

The mix of first-time recruiters and long-standing partners underscored the program's ability to serve both emerging workforce needs and established professional pipelines.

Returning partners, such as the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), focused on showing students how preparation connects directly to responsibility in the field.

During the event, FDOT representatives demonstrated a \$25,000 mobile excavation simulator used to train equipment operators before they ever step onto a job site. The simulator mirrors the controls found on heavy machinery — equipment that can start at \$150,000 and go far beyond that.

Ron Gibbons, an FDOT maintenance program manager, explained how the simulator builds muscle memory and confidence before trainees move into real equipment.

"Your hands feel the same thing, your feet feel the same thing as what you're experi-

encing here; ... it's muscle memory, ... do it while it's fresh," Gibbons said.

"We do this in the classroom, then take them right out into the field within two minutes; ... OK, get in this machine and show me the basics of what you just did. ... It builds confidence," he said.

Midway through the day, all students gathered at The Regent in Riverview for a working lunch presentation with recruiters and training organizations, creating a shared moment to reflect on what they had already seen and how it connected to broader professional trajectories.

Yvonne Fry, founder and CEO of both Future Career Academy and Workforce Development Partners, said the tours are designed to be the moment when preparation finally connects to purpose.

"This is the day the light bulb finally goes on," Fry said, explaining how the experience reshapes students' views of education.

Lynn Gray, a member of the Hillsborough County School Board, added, "The work that Workforce Development Partners does for our students is unmatched! This student-centered workforce development offers career opportunities from every trade in our Tampa Bay Region.

To learn more, visit the website at www.workforcedevelopmentpartners.com.

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BURN BOOT CAMP BRANDON CHOSEN FOR NATION-WIDE CAMP PROUD TOUR

By Jane Owen



Burn Boot Camp owners with co-founder Devan Kline. From left to right: Eric Hurley, Karissa Hurley, Kline, Katie Chalupsky and Dillon Chalupsky.

On January 20, Burn Boot Camp Brandon was stop No. 3 of a nationwide Burn Boot Camp tour. Burn Boot Camp's 'Proud Tour' celebrates the strength, stories, and the pride of Burn Boot Camp members. The tour includes 20 locations. There are 400 locations throughout the US.

What makes the Brandon stop even more significant is that Burn Boot Camp Brandon opened in September 2023. Owners Karissa Hurley, Eric Hurley, Katie Chalupsky and Dillon Chalupsky opened Burn Boot Camp Brandon with the desire to build strength for their members and with the community.

Devan Kline, Burn Boot Camp co-founder and visionary, was on-site for the Brandon Proud Tour stop. He led classes and spent time with members. He said Burn Boot Camp Brandon stood out as a stop on the tour because it represents why he created Burn Boot Camp with his wife, Morgan, in 2012.

"Burn Boot Camp Brandon stood out because it represents exactly why we built this brand — strong community, family-first leadership and life-changing results. This isn't just a high-performing gym. It's a system working the way it's supposed to — we always say you can join any gym, but you be-

long here," Kline said.

Since Burn Boot Camp Brandon opened, it has won awards, including being a Nutritional Award winner at the 2024 Burn Boot Camp annual summit and most recently the Valrico FishHawk Chamber 2025 Franchise Business of the Year award. Eric Hurley said they were

honored to be part of the Proud Tour and that the campaign shows that everyone has a story. A few of Brandon Burn Boot Camp's members' stories were highlighted on the Burn Boot Camp podcast.

"We have an amazing team. From the friendly welcome of the burn ambassador, care of the child watching staff and the one-on-one training from our trainers, we make sure everyone feels seen and challenged. But also, members find they build a community within the gym," Eric Hurley said.

The camp is a strong presence in our community, sponsoring events such as the FishHawk Turkey Trot, Brandon of Lights Parade and Bloomingdale High School's Running of the Bulls 5K.

To hear stories from Brandon's Burn Boot Camp members on the Burn Boot Camp podcast, visit season three, episode 44, @burnbootcampodcast, streaming on all platforms.

Burn Boot Camp Brandon is located at 107 W. Bloomingdale Ave. in Brandon. For more information, visit its website at <https://locations.burnbootcamp.com/locations/brandon-fl/> or call 813-601-8002.

MACDONALD TRAINING CENTER OPENS TO EXPAND SERVICES FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

By Olivia Clark



Karenne Levy, president and chief executive officer of MacDonald Training Center, cuts a ribbon with students.

MacDonald Training Center (MTC) marked a significant milestone on February 12 with a ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrating the opening of its new Tampa facility. Community leaders, staff members, board

members, families and program participants gathered to commemorate what leaders described as a three-year journey to expand services for individuals with disabilities.

Founded in 1953 by J. Clifford MacDonald and a group of parents, MTC was created at a time when options for individuals with disabilities were extremely limited. Today, it continues its mission to provide innovative educational, residential and employment services throughout the Tampa Bay area.

"We have been working to meet the needs of the community, and that is why we are here in this beautiful space today," said Karenne Levy, president and chief executive officer of MacDonald Training Center. "This is a day of love, perseverance and commitment. We will be able to provide bright, open spaces where learning is fun."

MTC serves individuals of all ages, from youth preparing for their first job to seniors seeking to age in place with dignity. Its programs include adult day training, employment services, community living support and career camps for youth ages 14-21 referred by Vocational Rehabilitation.

A key focus of the organization is employ-

ment. MTC has a decades-long history of placing individuals with disabilities into competitive employment, dating back to 1971. Its Innovation Vocational

Training and Internship program provides comprehensive support for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, collaborating with Tampa Bay employers to create job opportunities. MTC also partners with ZooTampa at Lowry Park through Project SEARCH, a nine-month immersive internship model that combines classroom instruction with hands-on workplace training.

During the ceremony, Andy Taylor of Tampa Electric, representing the Brandon River-view Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, formally recognized MTC's impact.

"MacDonald Training Center transforms the lives of people with all disabilities through innovative vocational training, employment services, residential support and life enrichment opportunities," said Taylor, who proclaimed February 12 as MacDonald Training Center Day.

The updated space reflects MTC's longstanding belief in real homes and real work environments, empowering individuals with disabilities to be productive, contributing and valued members of the community.

For more information, visit the website at <https://macdonaldcenter.org/>.



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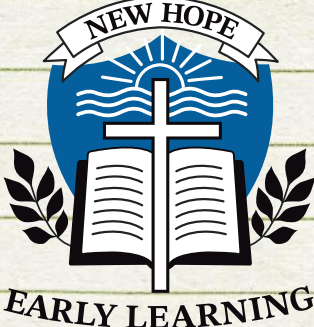
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NEW HOPE EARLY LEARNING CELEBRATES 60 YEARS OF SERVING THE COMMUNITY

By Emily Harper

New Hope Early Learning is celebrating its 60th anniversary of providing education in the Brandon area. In these 60 years, New Hope has been committed to serving families through Christ-centered education.

In celebration, the church has spent the last year refurbishing its buildings along with technology to improve their space. To showcase its updated facilities, the church is having a grand opening in early September.

New Hope Early Learning offers programs for children ages 6 months to preschool.

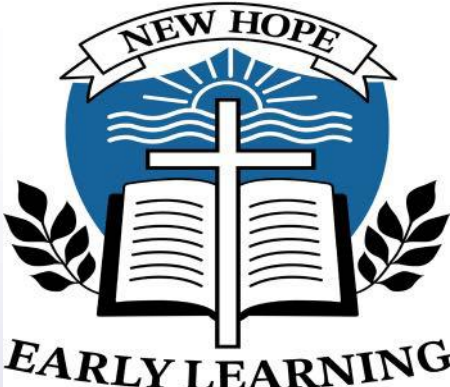
In these programs, parents can expect a close and intimate connection for both their child and themselves with the church. The church values creating deep connections with its families alongside being a support system.

"We know our families really well. We pride ourselves on not just knowing the child but knowing their expanded family and making those connections. I think that is one way that we are really different," said Julie Hamilton, New Hope discipleship pastor.

The church is offering what it calls 'Preschool Preview Days,' with one on Thursday, February 26, and another on Thursday,



New Hope Early Learning invites families to learn more about their programs.



April 16. At these events, families get to meet pastoral staff and educators, as well as tour the facilities as a whole. This way, families can experience the environment for themselves.

In day-to-day learning, the school functions like a traditional preschool program, allowing children to learn through hands-on activities for academic learning. In addition, the children have the opportunity to explore and discover the rich outdoor space since the school is housed on the spacious church campus.

There is also a weekly chapel, in which the parents are invited to join too, where the children are presented with a bible lesson along with worship music. Since the school is small, the parents are able to be a part of activities like this, creating a sense of connection between the families and the church.

The rolling registration process opened on February 2 and will remain open until the beginning of the school year or until classes fill up. If interested, more details about New Hope Early Learning's programs can be found on its website, www.newhopeearlylearning.com.

HONOR FLIGHT MISSION 11 OPENS REGISTRATION FOR MAY 2026 VETERAN JOURNEY

Staff Report

Planning is underway for Flight to Honor Polk Mission 11, and organizers are encouraging veterans and community members to apply now for the upcoming one-day trip to Washington, D.C., scheduled for Tuesday, May 5.

The Honor Flight-style mission will depart from and return to Lakeland Linder International Airport, offering participating veterans a meaningful opportunity to visit the national memorials built in recognition of their service. A mandatory orientation for selected participants will be held on Sunday, May 3.

Established in 2015, Flight to Honor Polk is based in Polk County but welcomes eligible veterans from any community to apply. All veterans who have not previously participated in an Honor Flight or Flight to Honor mission are eligible. Priority is given to veterans with severe medical conditions, followed by those who served during World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War, though veterans from all eras are encouraged to apply.

Veterans selected for Mission 11 will fly free of charge, thanks to community donations and volunteer support. Each veteran is paired with a trained guardian, who provides physical assistance and ensures



a safe and memorable experience throughout the day, from airport travel to visits at the memorials.

Guardians wishing to accompany a veteran are also invited to apply. Guardians must be between 18-70 years of age and may not be a spouse or significant other of the veteran. Those selected are asked to make a \$500 donation to help offset the cost of airfare and re-

lated expenses. Guardians play a vital role in the success of each mission, assisting veterans during travel and throughout the day in Washington.

Applications for both veterans and guardians are accepted on a rolling basis and can be downloaded at <https://polkvet-eranscouncil.com/>. Completed applications should be mailed to Flight to Honor, P.O. Box 3911, Lakeland, FL 33802.

Fundraising is currently underway to support Mission 11, and organizers stress that community involvement is essential. Tax-deductible contributions can be made through the GiveWell Community Foundation to support Flight to Honor Polk.

Flight to Honor Polk's mission is to promote national security and a strong national defense by honoring veterans, fostering community connections and building goodwill. Visit <https://polkvet-eranscouncil.com/> or email direct to flighttohonorpolk@gmail.com.



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NEWSOME, ARMWOOD AND SOUTH COUNTY CAREER CENTER LEAD GRADUATION GAINS

Staff Report

Hillsborough County Public Schools' (HCPS) record-setting graduation rate for the 2024-25 academic year was fueled by standout performances at campuses across the district, including exceptional results at Newsome High School, South County Career Center and Armwood High School.



crease in its graduation rate over the previous year. District leaders praised the school's staff for identifying students in need of additional support and connecting them with resources such as credit recovery, tutoring and graduation planning.

The district announced on Tuesday that its graduation rate climbed to 90.9 percent, the highest in HCPS history and a 2.9 percentage-point increase from the previous year. District leaders said the success reflects a focused effort to expand academic support, monitor student progress and ensure every senior has a clear pathway to a diploma.

Newsome High School once again ranked among the district's top-performing campuses, posting a 98.6 percent graduation rate. School leaders credited strong academic expectations, student engagement and family partnerships for helping nearly all seniors complete their high school journey on time.

Significant improvement was also seen at South County Career Center, which recorded a 174 percentage-point increase in its graduation rate — one of the largest gains in the district. Officials said the increase highlights the impact of career-focused education combined with targeted academic support, helping students stay engaged while preparing for the workforce or postsecondary training.

Armwood High School was another bright spot, achieving a 76 percent in-

crease in its graduation rate over the previous year. Superintendent Van Ayres said the success at these schools illustrates the district's broader strategy of meeting students where they are.

"Whether it's a high-performing traditional high school like Newsome, a career-focused campus like South County or a comprehensive high school like Armwood, the common thread is a commitment to student success," Ayres said. "These gains mean more students are crossing the stage and stepping into their futures."

Districtwide strategies contributing to the improved outcomes include free test preparation and testing opportunities, junior and senior academic checks, credit recovery programs, summer learning and the Graduation Advancement Program. The district's Graduation Task Force also continues to meet monthly to track individual student progress and address barriers such as attendance, housing instability and family communication.

Officials said the achievements at Newsome, South County Career Center and Armwood demonstrate how targeted support and dedicated educators can make a measurable difference in student outcomes.

THE SALTY SHAMROCK CELEBRATES ST. PATRICK'S DAY ALL MONTH LONG

By Olivia Clark

The Salty Shamrock Irish Pub is turning March into a monthlong celebration of Irish culture, music and community as it marks ten years in business. Located at 6186 U.S. Hwy. 41 N. in Apollo Beach, the neighborhood gathering place will host a series of themed events leading up to and including St. Patrick's Day.



The Salty Shamrock Irish Pub hosts monthlong St. Patrick's Day celebrations in Apollo Beach.



"Salty Shamrock is much more than an Irish pub — it is a true neighborhood gathering place where everyone feels welcome," said Terri Sherman, director of operations and creative services at Salty Shamrock. "For the past 10 years, we have focused on creating an environment where people come together not just for food and drinks, but for connection and community."

Festivities begin on Sunday, March 8, with the ninth annual Saint Puppies Day, a family-friendly event inviting guests to celebrate alongside their four-legged companions. The annual tradition supports local animals and sets a lighthearted tone for the St. Patrick's season.

The celebration continues from Friday through Tuesday, March 13-17, with the pub's Decade of Craic, a five-day festival honoring its 10-year milestone. What be-

gan years ago as a single-day celebration has steadily grown alongside the community.

"Expanding the celebration to five days represents a major milestone for both Salty Shamrock and the Apollo Beach community," Sherman said.

Throughout the five days, guests can expect live entertainment on the pub's outdoor stage, Irish food specials

and festive drink offerings. March 15 features the Not Quite Paddy's Party from 11 a.m.-9 p.m., designed for those unable to attend on St. Patrick's Day itself.

The celebration continues on March 16, with the Paddy's Eve Party from 5-10 p.m., leading into the main event on March 17 from 11 a.m.-11 p.m. St. Patrick's Day will include live music, outdoor tents, traditional fare and green beer as the community gathers for one of the area's largest Irish celebrations.

"This anniversary celebration is not just about marking a milestone but about honoring the people, families and friends who have supported Salty Shamrock since day one," Sherman said.

For more information, visit the website at www.saltyshamrock.net/ or call 813-938-5282.

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COMMUNITY BREAKS GROUND ON ADAPTED HOME FOR ARMY VETERAN

By Brian Bokor

Community members, veterans and local supporters gathered Jan. 10 at Newsome High School to celebrate the start of a new Homes For Our Troops (HFOT) build in Lithia. The ceremony marked the beginning of a custom home that will be donated to Army Sgt. 1st Class Aaron Cornelius, who was severely injured while serving in Iraq.

The home is being built through Homes For Our Troops, a national nonprofit that constructs and donates specially adapted, mortgage-free homes for severely injured post-9/11 veterans. Built by Elizabeth Evans Custom Homes, the project represents far more than shelter for Cornelius, who is blind.

"There's always a possibility of hurting yourself on something because it's not made for your disability," Cornelius said.

Cornelius enlisted in the U.S. Army at 19 to support his young family and continue a strong tradition of military service. He is the father of five daughters.

"My outstanding youngest one is here with me, still standing by me," he said. "She's actually my official caregiver as well, doing outstanding things for me."

During his third deployment to Iraq in 2008, Cornelius was serving as a platoon sergeant when an improvised explosive device detonated beneath him, leaving him blind. While still recovering at home, he suffered another devastating loss of his wife.



Community members, veterans and local supporters gather Jan. 10 at Newsome High School to celebrate the start of a Homes For Our Troops build in Lithia for Army Sgt. 1st Class Aaron Cornelius.

Despite these hardships, Cornelius refused to be defined by them. He discovered a passion for music and now works locally as a disc jockey. He also became a certified massage therapist, "because they said I probably couldn't do it — but I did it anyway," he said, and remains active with the Wounded Warrior Project.

HFOT homes exceed ADA standards and include more than 40 special adaptations designed to restore independence and reduce fall risk.

"Rails along the walls that help me guide myself around the home, so I'm not tripping and falling over things," Cornelius said.

Safety features extend to the kitchen, including an induction cooktop that automatically shuts off.

"It's not going to turn on unless I try to cook something, and when I take it off, it turns off," he said. "Cool safety features."

The home will also include voice-activated technology to improve nighttime security.

Cornelius chose to build in Lithia to remain close to family and fellow HFOT veteran Rusty Carter. Retired Army Brig. Gen. Tom Landwermeyer, HFOT president and CEO, said the organization's mission is restoring independence.

Construction will continue over the coming months, with volunteer opportunities available. More information is available at www.hfotusa.org.

MILKSHAKE FACTORY BRINGS FLAVOR AND BIGGER SMILES TO CUSTOMERS

By Kelly Wise Valdes

When Jodi Panepinto and Michael Longman opened the MilkShake Factory SouthShore location in April 2025, they brought a nationally recognized desert franchise and a century-old chocolate-making legacy to Hillsborough County.

"I wanted to bring a new concept to our area and get more involved in the community," said Panepinto.

The bright and upbeat shop serves

hand-spun milkshakes made with homemade ice cream alongside the brand's signature gourmet chocolates. MilkShake Factory traces its roots to a family of chocolatiers dating back to the early 1900s in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. That same family still operates stores in their hometown, and Panepinto said she is proud to share those recipes with local customers.

"A guest's experience is more than them just enjoying their milkshake or chocolate. We aim to provide exceptional customer service from start to finish," said Panepinto. "Going out for a milkshake should be a fun, easygoing experience regardless of what the rest of your day has been like. We hope Milkshake Factory brings smiles to all our guests."

Community involvement has quickly become part of the shop's identity.

"We love hosting school spirit nights," Panepinto said. "And we participated in the Ruskin Seafood Festival for the first time this year."

The menu features year-round favorites



along with rotating seasonal creations. "We always have a limited-time-only shake," said Panepinto. "Our next one up will be the strawberry matcha milkshake. We also have chocolate-dipped strawberries, perfect for Valentine's Day, made

daily in our store. Or you can get our signature, homemade bark in milk or white chocolate hearts for the holiday. We are very excited for our carrot cake milkshake, coming soon."

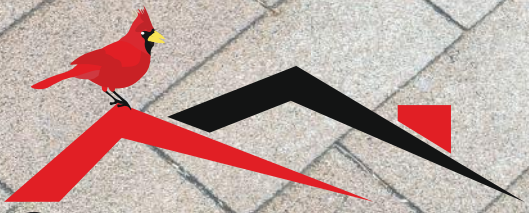
Panepinto said the team behind the counter is a major part of what makes the shop special.

"Our team members make this such a fun experience watching them go above and beyond for our guests. That's really made this endeavor so rewarding. And networking with other local small business, getting to know our regular customers," she said.

With a focus on quality, tradition and community, Panepinto said the shop offers something for everyone.

"A lot of thought goes into all of our flavors, both shakes and chocolates. There's a flavor for everyone," Panepinto said.

For more, visit www.milkshakefactory.com/locations/southshore or call 813-722-1878. The shop is located at 10446 Stelling Dr. in the Mission BBQ plaza.



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GIVE YOUR BUSINESS A BOOST WITH WE GOT THIS BOOKKEEPING

By Mylena C. Ferman

We Got This Bookkeeping (WGTB) offers small and medium-sized businesses affordable ways to manage their financial books.

Many businesses may start with a friend or family member keeping their books, but Grace Givens, owner of WGTB, suggests a bookkeeper is an investment a business should make sooner rather than later.

"It is easier to put your books together than it is to clean them up if you've been trying to do them yourself," she explains.

Virtual bookkeepers like Givens help businesses compile necessary paperwork, produce financial statements and analyze trends. This work ensures businesses make informed decisions about how they grow.

"They say that 50% of small businesses fail," Givens said, "A lot of that is because the businesses don't know how they're doing [financially]."

Givens began WGTB seven years ago while working as an accountant; she quickly learned that, despite her love for numbers, she preferred the bookkeeping side of business. Last year, she moved to work at WGTB full-time alongside her cat, Chief Cuteness Officer, Maggie. She has no plans to hire more bookkeepers, however.

"I want to remain the only bookkeeper because I want to be the one hands-on



Grace Givens, owner of We Got This Bookkeeping.



WE GOT THIS BOOKKEEPING

doing work," she said.

Basic monthly services, ideal for businesses in their first two years with only one employee, start at \$350. This package includes account setup, monthly financial reports, unlimited email support and more.

As a business grows, its needs will change. Givens says most of her clients pay around the \$800-\$1,200 a month.

"I like working with small businesses and helping them grow because it's the small businesses that make our economy great," Givens said.

As part of Givens' drive to help small businesses, WGTB offers businesses a free guide on its website titled "5 business expenses that could save you big money." The guide covers primary expenses that businesses may not realize they could write off.

"It really is small businesses that make communities feel like home and... grow. I want to be as supportive as I can with that," Givens said.

For more information about We Got This Bookkeeping, please visit its website <https://wegotthisbookkeeping.com/> or the We Got This Bookkeeping Facebook page.



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HEROES PARADISE, BRANDON'S FAMILY-OWNED ENTERTAINMENT CENTER, ADDS FIRST U.S. EPICSURF DEEP-WATER STANDING WAVE

By Brian Bokor

A new surf attraction under construction at Heroes Paradise in Brandon will introduce the first U.S. EpicSurf deep-water standing wave, bringing an inland surfing experience designed to replicate real ocean conditions.

The project is part of Heroes Paradise's long-term expansion plans, with ownership selecting EpicSurf as its technology partner and incorporating the attraction into the existing Brandon venue. The installation is being developed in partnership with Aquatic Development Group (ADG), a global aquatic design, construction and manufacturing firm specializing in wave-generation technology. ADG has completed more than 4,000 projects worldwide, including over 550 wave installations and more than 130 surf and board attractions.

"After years of research, discussions and design iterations, we chose EpicSurf as our technology partner," said Julie Pennenga, co-owner of Heroes Paradise.

Tim Pennenga, co-owner of Heroes Paradise and a veteran and former Hillsborough County sheriff's deputy, said much of the design process involved learning the technology as it came together.

Unlike shallow wave machines commonly found at resorts or on cruise ships, the EpicSurf system operates with 3-5 feet of water depth, allowing surfers to ride traditional surfboards with fins. The deeper water enables authentic techniques, such as carving, bottom turns and cutbacks, while also providing softer landings and a wider margin of safety.

"This is what's known as a deep-water standing wave," said Julie Kline, director of sales and marketing at ADG. "Unlike sheet-flow wave systems typically used for boogie boarding, EpicSurf generates a



Construction is underway on a new EpicSurf deep-water standing wave at Heroes Paradise in Brandon. The attraction will offer an inland surfing experience designed to replicate real ocean conditions, with adjustable wave heights for surfers of all skill levels and abilities.

true surfable wave with real water depth, creating a more authentic experience for surfers."

According to ADG, the wave is formed by using pumps to pull water from a below-deck tank and directing it down a ramp to create a true hydraulic jump, similar to naturally occurring river waves.

"Water is pulled up from the tank, flows down the ramp and creates a hydraulic jump, just like what you see in a river," Kline said. "A great example is the Eisbach in Germany, where surfers ride a standing river wave right in the middle of Munich."

Heroes Paradise will feature an ES46 EpicSurf model, offering 46 feet of surfable wave width within an overall footprint of approximately 66 by 90 feet.

The system is designed to accommodate



its ability to generate a consistent 3 to 5-foot deep-water wave that can be adjusted with the push of a button," said Bruce Quay, chief operating officer and partner at ADG. "Surfers can bring any surfboard they want, with any fin setup, in a consistent and safe environment."

Ethan Pennenga, a junior at Bloomington High School, described the origins of Heroes Paradise and the motivation behind its continued expansion.

"The dream started when my dad, a county patrol deputy, found this dilapidated, abandoned tennis court that was being used for criminal activity," Ethan Pennenga said. "He wanted to create a welcoming place where kids, parents and the community could safely interact with military members, first responders, and law enforcement heroes."

Dan Wagner with ARCO Murray, the project's design-build general contractor specializing in complex aquatic facilities, said the system's performance depends heavily on construction execution.

"The system is designed to deliver a consistent, controllable and repeatable surf surface, which places high demands on construction coordination and execution to ensure it performs the way it's intended once operational," Wagner said.

The EpicSurf attraction is scheduled to open by May. Heroes Paradise is a family-owned outdoor entertainment center offering the largest outdoor tactical laser tag in the Southeast, along with archery tag, rock climbing, and RC car tracks. Located at 733 Knowles Rd, it features a 32,000 sq ft arena (Hades) and an air-conditioned clubhouse.

Key features and activities include:

The EpicSurf attraction is scheduled to open by May. Heroes Paradise is a family-owned outdoor entertainment center offering the largest outdoor, tactical laser tag in the Southeast, along with archery tag, rock climbing and RC car tracks. Located at 733 Knowles Rd. in Brandon, it features a 32,000 sq. ft. arena (Hades) and an air-conditioned clubhouse.

Amenities include a clubhouse with 360-degree views, a cafe and a covered observation deck. For more information, visit www.heroesparadise.com.

Edward Jones

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New Year's Financial Resolutions: Making Them Stick

As the calendar flips to a new year, millions of Americans pledge to improve their financial lives. But without a concrete plan, those well-intentioned resolutions often fade quickly. Financial goals consistently top the list of New Year's resolutions. A 2025 CFP Board study shows that financial resolutions are prominent, with saving more money (45%) and reducing debt (32%) ranking among the top three goals. Unfortunately, most resolutions don't last. A 2023 Forbes Health poll found that over half of people give up on resolutions by the four-month mark and only 1% make it the full year. The challenge isn't a lack of desire for change. People may set the same resolution year after year, revealing a disconnect between intentions and action. Or it may be that they try to tackle too many goals at once, or aim higher than is realistic, setting themselves up for disappointment. Set smart financial goals. Before crafting your action plan, consider which financial priorities matter most to you. If you need ideas, here are some areas where you may want focus in 2026:

- Regularly review your financial goals and track progress toward meeting them
- Increase your 401(k) contributions or max out your IRA and/or HSA contributions
- Pay down debt strategically and negotiate lower interest payments
- Build an emergency savings fund of six to 12 months
- Save more consistently

Be specific. Vague resolutions like "save more money" rarely succeed. Instead, it can help to make goals specific and measurable. For example, rather than making a resolution to "start an emergency fund," commit to

a specific goal, such as, "I will put \$100 a month into an emergency fund." This shift from general to specific transforms wishful thinking into actionable steps. When goals are attainable, it's easier to track progress and stay motivated. Find an accountability partner. Don't go it alone. Having someone to check in with can help you stay on track. This could be a spouse, friend or family member who shares similar goals. Consider working with a financial advisor who can help you create a realistic plan, monitor your progress and adjust strategies as needed. A professional can provide expertise and accountability, making it easier to stay on track throughout the year. Start small and build momentum. Rather than overhauling your entire financial life all at once, focus on one or two priority areas. Identify where the largest gap exists between your current situation and where you want to be, then concentrate your energy there. Breaking larger goals into smaller, manageable actions makes them less overwhelming and more achievable. Each small win builds confidence and momentum for tackling the next challenge. The new year offers a fresh start and renewed motivation to improve your financial health. With specific goals, a solid action plan and the right support system, this could be the year your financial resolutions finally stick.

This article was written by Edward Jones for use by your local Edward Jones Financial Advisor.

Edward Jones, Member SIPC



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FORGOTTEN ANGELS: 2025 YEAR IN REVIEW AND 2026 EVENT SCHEDULE

By Brian Bokor

The Forgotten Angels Foundation, founded by Cindy Tilley and her husband, David Tyler, in Valrico, closed out 2025 with expanded outreach and fundraising efforts, concluding the year with a Christmas event focused on youth support while preparing for a full slate of community events in 2026.

The Christmas outreach event was held in December 2025 at the Forgotten Angels property, located at 3604 Little Stearns Rd. in Valrico, where the organization hosted more than 130 students from Simmons Career Center in Plant City. The event included lunch, gifts from Santa and activities designed to provide a safe and supportive holiday experience for students who often lack traditional family support.

Local businesses and community partners, including Chick-fil-A, Publix, Voodoo Brewing Co. and Marlin James, provided food and support. Organizers said the holiday event reflected the organization's family-style approach to serving youth aging out of the foster care system.

Organizers said Marlin James had also contributed air-conditioning units, facility repairs, food and financial support for multiple events throughout the year.

Forgotten Angels is a nonprofit organization that supports youth aging out of foster care, along with at-risk teens and young adults who often lack stable housing or family support. The organization provides a family-style living environment and focuses on life-skills training, such as financial literacy, employment readiness, education planning and independent living, to help participants transition successfully into adulthood.

"We need the community's support because we get called daily for youth who



need our help," said Tilley. "We are housing them, feeding them and teaching them how to become independent. All the fundraising and donations are helping us save lives."

Throughout 2025, the organization also hosted several fundraising events, including the Luke Holmberg Memorial Disc Golf Tournament on March 15, 2025, and the 10th anniversary Fall Campout from October 23-26, 2025, marking a decade of service.

That momentum carried into 2026, beginning with an EKKO RV gathering held in January at the Forgotten Angels property. The event was supported by La Mesa RV and featured Winnebago EKKO vehicles. Organizers said the gathering drew more than 70 EKKO RVs and included structured raffle fundraising ac-



tivities.

The next major event is the Spring Motorcycle Campout and Rally, scheduled for Thursday through Sunday, March

12-15. The campout will open with a bike night kickoff on March 12 beginning at 6 p.m., hosted at Voodoo Brewing Co., located at 3432 SR 60 in Valrico. The kickoff event will feature live music by Adam Karch.

Additional 2026 fundraising efforts include a Honda Goldwing motorcycle raffle, featuring a long-distance touring motorcycle that has traveled through more than 20 states. Raffle ticket proceeds support Forgotten Angels' programs, with tickets priced at \$25 for one, \$100 for five and \$200 for 25.

Also continuing into 2026 is a 'Trip of

a Lifetime' raffle supported by food influencer Joel Hansen.

The raffle offers one winner a VIP trip for two to destinations such as London, England; Las Vegas, Nevada; Orlando; a Mexican resort; a cruise package; a Texas barbecue tour; or Banff, Alberta. Organizers said the prize is valued at approximately \$12,500, with the drawing scheduled for March 13.

Beginning in April, Forgotten Angels will participate in weekly Tuesday bike nights and bingo nights hosted at Voodoo Brewing

Co. Valrico, which has named Forgotten Angels as its official 2026 charity partner.

Scheduled for Saturday, April 11 is the Forgotten Fur Babies pet adoption event, to be held at the Forgotten Angels property.

Later in the year, the organization will host its Fall Campout from Thursday through Sunday, October 22-25, along with an art auction fundraiser on October 22, involving events at Voodoo Brewing Co. Valrico.

Organizers said the combination of holiday outreach, recurring community partnerships and diversified fundraising events allows Forgotten Angels to sustain programs that provide housing, life-skills training, education planning and mentorship for young people transitioning toward independent, stable futures.

Contact Tilley at ctilley@forgottenangelsflorida.org or visit the organization's website directly at www.forgottenangelsflorida.org.

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Men of Valor, Tea With A Twist, A Night at the Theatre & More.....

Compiled by Jenny Bennett
jbennett@ospreyobserver.com

Men Of Valor Conference
New Hope Church is inviting churches and men from across the region to gather for the Men of Valor T3 Conference, a one-day men's event focused on spiritual growth, brotherhood and bold faith, on Saturday, March 7, from 8:30 a.m.-1:15 p.m. Check-in begins at 8 a.m.

The theme for 2026, T3 — 'Test. Transform. Triumph.' — draws from the powerful biblical significance of '40,' seasons throughout Scripture where God tests faith, brings transformation and prepares His people for victory. From Israel's time in the wilderness to Jesus' 40 days in the desert, these moments reveal how God shapes men for what comes next.

"This conference is about meeting men where they are and calling them forward — into deeper faith, stronger leadership and a life fully surrendered to Christ," organizers shared.

New Hope Church is located at 213 N. Knights Ave. in Brandon. For tickets and more information, visit <https://menofvalor2026.rsvpify.com/>.

03.07

40

T3

TEST
TRANSFORM
TRIUMPH

Family Promise Inaugural Fundraising Gala: Tea With A Twist
Family Promise of Hillsborough County invites the community to its inaugural fundraising gala, 'Tea With a Twist,' on Saturday, March 28, at New Hope Church. This unique afternoon tea will feature delicious refreshments, raffles, community connection and the event's signature surprise: a men's fashion show that promises fun, style and a fresh take on the traditional gala format.

As the organization's first official fundraising event, the gala is more than just a celebration; it's a call to action. All proceeds directly support Family Promise's mission to empower homeless and low-income families with children in Hillsborough County to achieve lasting independence. The event is open to the public. Individual tickets and sponsorship at www.family-promise-fl.org. New Hope Church is located at 213 N. Knights Ave. in Brandon.

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A Night At The Theatre
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pa Bay Heralds of Harmony and 2026 international champion Toast of Tampa Show Choir will perform 'A Night at the Theatre' on Sunday, March 8, starting at 4 p.m. The show will take place at the Temple Terrace United Methodist Church located at 5030 E Busch Blvd., in Temple Terrace. Visit <https://hohtot.eventbrite.com/> for tickets.

Women Of God Tampa Bay 5K Run To Benefit Local Charities
Women of God, a local non-profit women's ministry, is a community of Christ-centered women living out their faith through fellowship, action and a life rooted in Christ. It recognizes the growing mental health crises and is hosting the Stephanie & Iris Allen 5K Memorial Walk/Run to bring awareness, hope and healing to the community through faith. The event will take place at John Chesnut Sr. Park, located at 2200 E. Lake Rd. S. in Palm Harbor on Saturday, May 2. The benefiting charities include Women of God Tampa Bay, Hope for Her and One Another Counseling. To register for the event, visit <https://womenofgodtampabay.org/5k-memorial/>.



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AFTER 24 YEARS, OSPREY OBSERVER LAUNCHES NEW SOUTHSHORE EDITION

By Marie Gilmore



For 24 years, the Osprey Observer has shared the stories that matter most. Now, the team is proud to bring its trusted, hometown journalism to SouthShore.

For 24 years, the Osprey Observer has built its reputation on a simple but powerful mission: to tell the positive, hometown stories that matter most to local families, businesses and neighborhoods. Now, that mission is growing.

This month, the Osprey Observer announced its expansion into SouthShore with the launch of a brand-new local edition, bringing its community-focused journalism to one of the fastest-growing areas of the region. The new SouthShore edition will spotlight local schools, small businesses, nonprofits, civic leaders and everyday residents whose stories often go untold.

Founded in 2001, the Osprey Observer began as a small, community-centered publication dedicated to celebrating what makes local towns unique. Over more than two decades, it has grown steadily, earning the trust of readers by focusing on solutions, successes and the people working to make their communities better. While many news outlets have shifted toward national headlines and negative coverage, the Observer has remained committed to uplifting, hyper-local news.

"Communities deserve a newspaper that

reflects their heart," said the publication's leadership. "SouthShore is full of incredible stories, and we're excited to give them a platform."

The SouthShore edition will follow the same proven model that has sustained the Osprey Observer for nearly a quarter century: free distribution, locally written content and strong partnerships with area businesses and organizations. Readers can expect coverage of school achievements, youth sports, local events, new developments and profiles of residents making a difference.

Local leaders and business owners have welcomed the expansion, noting the importance of a trusted hometown paper as the area continues to grow. With new neighborhoods, schools and small businesses emerging across SouthShore, the need for a unifying community voice has never been greater.

The Osprey Observer's longevity in an ever-changing media landscape speaks to its relevance and reliability. For 24 years, it has been a staple on kitchen tables and in local shops, connecting neighbors through shared stories and common pride.

As the SouthShore edition launches, the Osprey Observer is not just expanding its footprint — it is reaffirming its commitment to positive, community-driven journalism. In a time when good news can be hard to find, the paper continues to prove that hometown stories still matter.

To submit a story idea for a future edition, email editor@ospreyobserver.com or visit www.ospreyobserver.com.

JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT OF TAMPA BAY TO RENAME JA BIZTOWN AS MUMA BIZTOWN

Staff Report

Junior Achievement of Tampa Bay (JA Tampa Bay) recently announced that JA BizTown in Tampa Bay and Polk County is now Muma BizTown, recognizing the long-standing and transformative support of Pam and Les Muma. The Mumas' multidecade involvement, including a \$5 million planned gift and \$2-3 million in operational support, has enriched the BizTown experience for 300,000-plus students across the region.

"This naming represents more than recognition — it reflects decades of shared commitment to education, opportunity and the future of our community," said Richard George, president of Junior Achievement of Tampa Bay. "The Mumas' support has helped ensure BizTown remains a place where students don't just learn about the world of work but experience it in meaningful, lasting ways."

In addition to honoring the Mumas' legacy, the renaming underscores JA Tampa Bay's broader growth strategy. The chapter is expanding to 28 3DE Schools and establishing new experiential learning centers across the region, prompting a modernization of brand architecture and donor recognition that reflects both JA's mission and today's philanthropic landscape.

"We truly believe in Junior Achievement's mission and the power of experiential learning to change lives," said Pam Muma. "After so many years, we've seen firsthand how BizTown, along with their other im-



Photo By Hillsborough Schools

pectful education programs, sparks confidence and possibility. We look forward to what's ahead for students."

Strengthening Local Relevance and Community Ties

Aligning the Muma name with BizTown strengthens local community relevance and links the program to institutions known for leadership in education and innovation, including the University of South Florida's Muma College of Business and Tampa General's Muma Children's Hospital.

From classrooms to boardrooms and from hospitals to innovation hubs, the Muma name has become synonymous with excellence and impact throughout the Tampa Bay region. By aligning BizTown with this legacy, Junior Achievement of Tampa Bay is elevating philanthropic visibility for a donor whose decades of support have directly contributed to the program's success. This renaming also reinforces the importance of long-term partnerships in advancing JA's mission.

20th Anniversary Celebration

The renaming coincides with BizTown's 20th anniversary. JA Tampa Bay will celebrate this milestone at its Spirit of Achievement event on Thursday, March 5, honoring outstanding partners, educators and volunteers who help make Muma BizTown a cornerstone of experiential learning for students throughout Tampa Bay and Polk County. For more information on the organization, visit www.jatampabay.org.



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LICENSED ACUPUNCTURE PHYSICIAN OFFERS NATURAL RELIEF BEYOND PAIN

By Denise Sansosti

After six years of practicing acupuncture in Sarasota, Dr. Ashley Carlson has expanded her practice with the opening of a new office in Brandon, bringing her work closer to home.

A licensed acupuncture physician and doctor of oriental medicine in the state of Florida, Dr. Carlson is also certified by the National Certification Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine. Her path to medicine began at the University of South Florida, where she earned a bachelor's degree in biomedical science. While originally planning a career in pharmacy, her own health challenges shifted her direction.

"I was getting five to 10 migraines a month," Dr. Carlson shared. "I tried pharmaceuticals and injections, but I experienced strange side effects, and nothing really worked."

Seeking a more natural approach, acupuncture relieved her migraines and gave her a new calling. Dr. Carlson attended East West College of Natural Medicine, earning a bachelor's degree in health science and a master's degree in oriental medicine. She is currently completing her doctoral program with a focus on reproductive health, orthopedics and cancer care.

While pain relief is the most common rea-



Dr. Ashley Carlson now offers private one-to-one treatment and consultations in her Brandon office.



son patients seek acupuncture, Dr. Carlson emphasizes that its benefits extend far beyond that.

"Most people don't think about acupuncture for chronic conditions like insomnia, anxiety or digestive issues," she explained. "Many people are in so much pain they can't sleep, or their minds just won't shut off. Acupuncture helps balance the system so the body can rest and reset."

Becoming licensed in Florida requires four board certifications and extensive training. "We have to complete Western medicine boards, and we also have the Chinese herbal board," Dr. Carlson noted. "We still go through all of the anatomy and physiology classes required in Western medicine, plus we study Western and Eastern nutrition."

What she values most is seeing real change in her patients.

"Helping people regain quality of life is the most rewarding part," she said. "Watching someone recover mobility after a stroke or improve their speech through acupuncture is incredible. This medicine is minimally invasive and has virtually no side effects."

If you have a fear of needles, she also provides other traditional Chinese medicines, such as acupressure, cupping, moxibustion, tui na and Chinese herbs. To schedule an appointment, visit <https://floatingspringsacu.com/> or call 813-535-0693.

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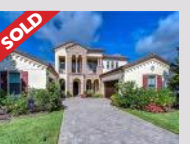
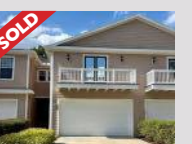
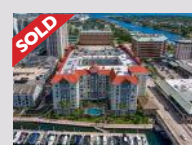
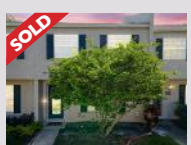
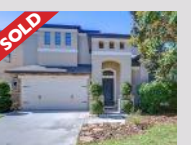
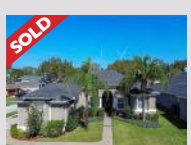
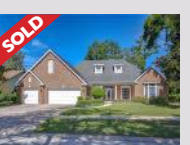
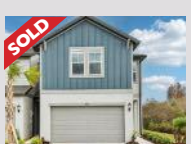
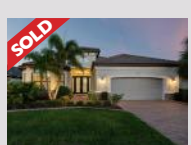
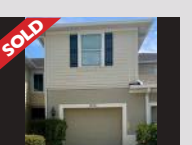
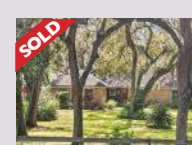
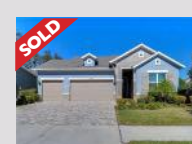
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GTE FINANCIAL'S FAMILY MOTOR FEST DRAWS 8,000 IN RECORD YEAR

GTE Financial's nationally recognized Family Motor Fest returned for its third and largest year yet, drawing an estimated 8,000 attendees and showcasing more than 2,500 vehicles at The Motor Enclave on November 22, 2025. The event marked the first time the popular festival was hosted at the motorsports destination and was free and open to the community.

Family Motor Fest has become one of GTE Financial's signature community events, combining a love of cars with a mission to support education. The festival serves as the credit union's largest annual fundraiser benefiting the GTE Scholarship Program, which has awarded more than \$1 million to local students over the past 12 years. The scholarship supports students who demonstrate academic achievement, leadership and a strong commitment to community involvement.

"Receiving the GTE Financial Scholarship changed everything for me," said Lleyton Dayes, a University of Florida student and scholarship recipient. "It helped relieve the financial stress of college and showed me that my community believes in my potential. Events like Family Motor Fest make those



The Motor Enclave Founder/CEO Brad Oleshansky (L) with Isaac Baker - Finishing Touch Auto Spa



opportunities possible for students like me."

This year's expanded venue allowed for a broader range of attractions and experiences. Guests lined up throughout the day for autocross thrill rides, where professional drivers delivered

high-speed precision laps in performance vehicles. The Enclave Race Lab Challenge, a racing simulator competition, drew enthusiastic participation as attendees competed for the fastest lap. Professional-driven, off-road thrill rides also gave visitors a chance to experience dirt, rocks and steep terrain on The Motor Enclave's exclusive off-road course.

"Family Motor Fest continues to be one of our most exciting traditions," said Brian Best, president and CEO of GTE Financial. "It's a celebration of cars, community and education."

Event organizers said the festival's continued growth reflects both community support and its expanding educational mission.

While the event was free to attend, the GTE Scholarship Program is sustained through the generous support of corporate sponsorships and private donations. Additional funding is generated through on-site vendor partnerships.

For more information, visit the website at, visit <https://themotorenclave.com/>.

WORSHIP PASTOR SWIMS FROM 37 YARDS TO AMAZON'S NO. 1 SPOT

By Olivia Clark

Pastor Jason Millsaps, worship pastor at Bell Shoals Church, is drawing attention beyond the altar this month after his debut memoir, *From 37 Yards to Kona*, climbed to No. 1 on Amazon in triathlon book categories.

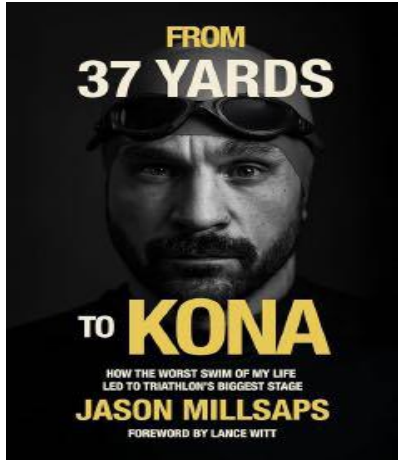
The book was released on January 6 and reached No. 1 in both triathlon books and Kindle triathlon. Pastor Millsaps said it also ranked among the top new releases in multiple sports training categories and has earned dozens of five-star reviews. The memoir includes endorsements from Mike Reilly, known as the 'Voice of IRONMAN'; James Lawrence, also known as the 'Iron Cowboy'; and professional triathlete Meredith Kessler.

A Valrico resident since 2014, Pastor Millsaps said the book follows his journey from 2012, when he could not swim more than 37 yards without stopping, to competing at the IRONMAN World Championships in Kona, Hawaii, in 2024 and Nice, France, in 2025. He pursued the goal while continuing his ministry work, supporting his family and recovering from two back surgeries.

Pastor Millsaps said the turning point came when he recognized how far his health had slipped and decided it was time to change.



Pastor Jason Millsaps, worship pastor at Bell Shoals Church, recently released his debut memoir, *From 37 Yards to Kona*.



"I feel like every one of us has our 37 yards in something, something that just seems impossible," Pastor Millsaps said. "In ministry and life, God doesn't always remove obstacles. He simply shows us what is possible when you refuse to quit."

Pastor Millsaps said the process was built on consistent effort and

showing up even on difficult days. After more than a year of training, he completed his first full-distance IRONMAN at IRONMAN Arizona in November 2013. Since then, he has finished 16 full-distance IRONMAN races.

Pastor Millsaps has also expanded into coaching. He is a certified USA Triathlon coach and launched 121 Tri Coaching, a name inspired by Hebrews 12:1 and its message to "run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

Readers can search for *From 37 Yards to Kona: How the Worst Swim of My Life Led to Triathlon's Biggest Stage* on Amazon.

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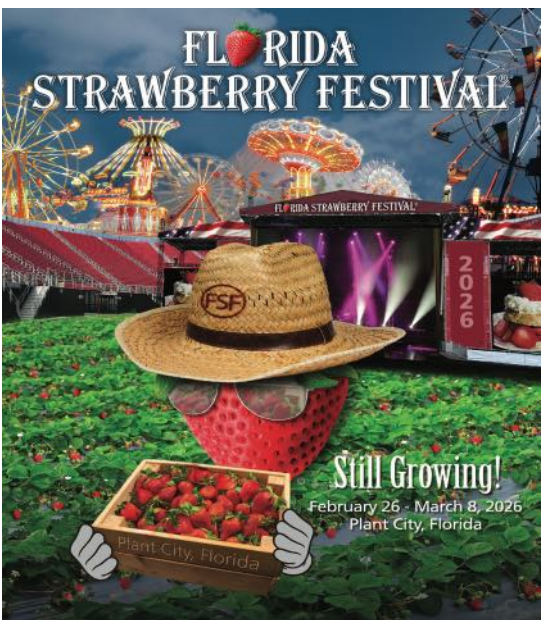
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QUEEN AND COURT SELECTED FOR 91ST FLORIDA STRAWBERRY FESTIVAL

Staff Report



Layla Rothman was crowned queen of the 91st Annual Florida Strawberry Festival Queen's Scholarship Pageant. She is joined by First Maid Marley Mueller and court members Cadence Cape, Addison Griffin, and Addison Pope.



Layla Rothman was crowned queen of the 91st annual Florida Strawberry Festival Queen's Scholarship Pageant, held on the evening of January 17 on the festival grounds. Layla Rothman was selected from a competitive field of 32 contestants. Marley Mueller was named first maid, with court members Cadence Cape, Addison Griffin, and Addison Pope rounding out the royal court.

Brooke Browning was named Miss Congeniality, an honor voted on by fellow contestants and awarded to the participant who best exemplifies kindness, sportsmanship and camaraderie throughout the competition. Browning is a junior at Strawberry Crest High School.

"Words cannot describe how incredibly blessed I am to have this opportunity to serve a community that has been nothing but gracious to me my entire life," said Layla Rothman. "I have dreamed of being able to represent the Florida Strawberry Festival and make every single person who walks into those festival gates feel seen and

cared for. God has been with me throughout this entire journey, and I pray He will continue to shine through me. Thank you so much, everyone, for the unwavering support — I couldn't be more excited for BerryFest26!"

Layla Rothman is the daughter of Mark and Rebecca Rothman and a senior at Plant City High School. Among her awards and accolades, she is dual enrolled at Hillsborough Community College, ranked in the top 7 percent of her class and is a member of the National Honor Society.

The Florida Strawberry Festival Queen's Scholarship Pageant is sponsored by the Plant City Lions Club. The competition includes five components: a personal interview, on-stage speaking, casual wear, evening wear and an impromptu question.

"The Queen's Pageant remains one of the most meaningful traditions of the Florida Strawberry Festival, and this year's contestants set a remarkable standard," said Florida Strawberry Festival President Kyle Robinson. "Each young lady displayed im-

pressive talent, confidence and poise, making the selection process especially difficult. We are honored to welcome our new queen and court and are confident these five young ladies will represent the festival with pride and professionalism throughout their year of service."

Throughout the year, the queen and her court will make more than 80 appearances, representing the Florida Strawberry Festival and the Plant City community at various local and regional events. The festival serves as their home base, where they will meet visitors and participate in a variety of activities during the 11-day celebration.

The 91st annual Florida Strawberry Festival will take place from Thursday, February 26, through Sunday, March 8, in Plant City. Festival hours are 10 a.m.-11 p.m. daily and will feature a wide variety of entertainment, exhibits, food, livestock shows, rides, games and competitions. Headline entertainment on the Wish Farms Soundstage includes Alabama, Jo Dee Messina, Jamey Johnson, Lonestar, Ty Myers, Riley

Green featuring Hannah McFarland, The Oak Ridge Boys, Legends of Love, Sandi Patty, Lauren Daigle, Forrest Frank, The Offspring, Joan Jett & The Blackhearts and more.

"We are also incredibly grateful to the Plant City Lions Club for their hard work and dedication," Robinson added. "Their organization plays a vital role in creating an event that is exceptional year after year, and their commitment to this tradition does not go unnoticed."

About the Florida Strawberry Festival
The Florida Strawberry Festival is a time-honored tradition in Eastern Hillsborough County celebrating the strawberry harvest with agricultural showcases, live entertainment, and community festivities. Each year, the festival attracts more than 650,000 visitors to Plant City for 11 days of fun, food and entertainment.

For more information, visit <https://fl-strawberryfestival.com/> and follow the Festival on Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok and YouTube (#BerryFest26).

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STRIKING GOLD: LEANNE’S COOKIE OWNER RECEIVES CUSTOM FLUTE

By Libby Hopkins



LeAnne Crabtree of Seffner poses with her solid gold flute from the Wm. S. Haynes Company, a lifelong dream that now plays a role in her motivational speaking as she continues to inspire the community.

LeAnne Crabtree of Seffner is an author, a motivational speaker and the owner of LeAnne’s Old Fashioned Cookie. Her cookies have been warming the hearts and igniting the taste buds of her customers for more than 36 years.

Crabtree is known for having a servant’s heart and giving back to her community whenever she gets the chance. Her two books, God Has a Sweet Tooth and The Encourager, have inspired many people in our community.

“I love being a part of this community and giving back to it when I can,” Crabtree said.

In addition to being a baker, entrepreneur, motivational speaker and author, Crabtree can now add ‘performer’ to her resume.

“Ever since I was little, I loved playing the flute,” Crabtree said. “I always wanted to have my own gold flute made by the Wm. S. Haynes Company. My father’s friend had one of their flutes, and he let me play it. It was an absolutely amazing experience that I have carried with me my entire life.”

The Wm. S. Haynes Company is one of the

oldest flute-making companies in the world. The company started in 1888 making wood flutes. By the 1920s, it started making silver flutes. In 1935, the Wm. S. Haynes Company made the first American platinum flute for the leading flutist of the time, Georges Barrère.

The Haynes Company has such a long and rich history that it is no wonder some of the most eminent flutists in the world are so attached to their Haynes instruments..

“The company makes a solid gold flute what I absolutely fell in love with when I saw it,” Crabtree said. “I knew owning a gold flute was something I would never have, or so I thought.”

One day, while her husband was at work, God spoke to him and told him his wife deserved to have her dream come true of owning the gold flute, Crabtree said.

“When he came home from work, he told me what God had told him and he said to me, ‘We are going to get you your gold flute,’ and I was in total shock,” Crabtree said. “It took a few months, but when it arrived, I was so thankful.”

Crabtree did a live unboxing of her flute on her Facebook page and even played it for her followers.

“I love how my flute has helped me to inspire so many people,” Crabtree said. “It’s truly a gift from God.”

For more, visit her website directly at www.leannecrabtree.com.

NEW TACO DIRTY SERVES FRESH, CUSTOMIZABLE FLAVOR

By Olivia Clark



The Taco Dirty Riverview location at 10460 Stelling Dr. offers fast-casual Mexican dining with a focus on quality and flavor.

Taco Dirty is bringing a fresh take on fast-casual Mexican dining to Riverview with a menu built around quality ingredients, bold flavors and complete customization. Located at 10460 Stelling Dr., the restaurant gives guests the freedom to create tacos, bowls, burritos and nachos tailored to their tastes.

The Taco Dirty concept focuses on fresh, thoughtfully sourced ingredients and a build-your-own format that appeals to a wide range of dietary preferences. Guests can choose from multiple bowl bases, add fresh vegetables, select from flavorful proteins and finish their meal with a variety of house-made sauces. The menu includes gluten-friendly, dairy-free, vegan and vegetarian options, while also offering antibiotic-free chicken and steak.

Popular menu items include signature bowls, such as the pineapple chicken, featuring brown rice, black beans, grilled ancho chicken, pineapple salsa and guac sauce, and the Ybor bowl, made with avocado citrus rice, black beans, lime and sour

orange chicken, lime-jalapeño corn salad and buffalo avocado sauce. Taco Dirty also offers desserts, including its well-known chocolate chip churro cookies, which are vegan and gluten-free.

Taco Dirty is owned by Tampa-based Ciccio Restaurant Group,

a hospitality company known for developing neighborhood-focused restaurants. The group’s philosophy emphasizes partnership, team collaboration and community connection, allowing each restaurant to maintain its own identity while delivering consistent quality. That approach is reflected

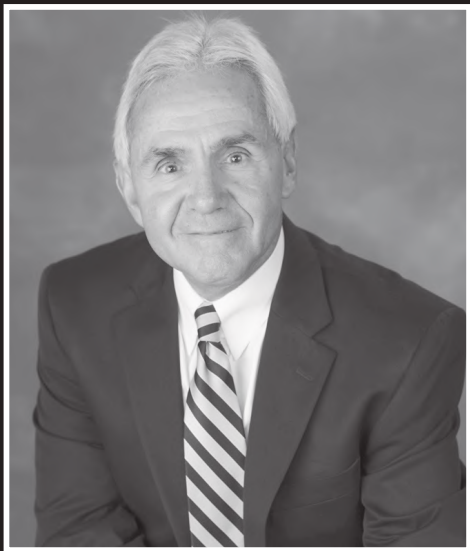
at Taco Dirty, where attention to fresh ingredients, efficient service and a welcoming atmosphere remains a priority.

In addition to its food offerings, Taco Dirty features happy hour daily from 2-6 p.m., making it a convenient option for both lunch and dinner. The Riverview restaurant represents an expansion of the Taco Dirty brand, which also operates a Tampa location at 2221 W. Platt St.

With its customizable menu, fresh ingredients and community-driven approach, Taco Dirty continues to establish itself as a go-to destination for fast-casual Mexican dining in the Tampa Bay area. More information is available at www.tacodirty.com.



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REMEMBERING WANDA WESTBROOK, LAST SURVIVING CHILD OF THE SIMMONS FAMILY THAT HELPED SHAPE RIVERVIEW

By Brian Bokor

Wanda Ruth Simmons Westbrook passed away the month before Christmas, at the age of 95. With her passing, Riverview lost one of its last living connections to the families who shaped the community long before paved roads, interstate highways and large-scale development.

Wanda Westbrook was the last surviving child of Herman G. Simmons and Mildred Long Simmons. She grew up in a Riverview of dirt roads, open land and working farms and lived to see it become the community it is today.

The Simmons family's roots in South Hillsborough County trace back to the 1800s. Descended from Marshall V. Simmons, the family first settled in Bloomingdale and Parrish before establishing permanent roots in Riverview. Over time, Simmons family land stretched along Big Bend Road west of U.S. 301 toward Bullfrog Creek.

Herman Simmons built a home along what became known as Simmons Loop Road, land that decades later would be redeveloped into the site of St. Joseph's Hospital South. During Wanda Westbrook's childhood, Big Bend Road was unpaved, homes were widely spaced, and life centered on farming, church, and family.

After Herman Simmons married Mildred Simmons, who moved to Florida from Tennessee, the couple operated a dairy farm on roughly 60 acres along Simmons Loop. Mildred Simmons later managed the dairy on her own while raising the children, overseeing the daily milking of about 65 cows.

Because of the dairy operation, the Simmons property received electricity earlier than much of South County, where widespread service did not arrive until the early 1930s. Milk was hauled in 10-gallon stainless steel containers to a Tampa dairy cooperative later absorbed by Sealtest. In



A member of one of the founding families of Riverview, Wanda Ruth Simmons Westbrook, 95, passed in November 2025.

later years, milk was also delivered directly to nearby homes.

Early Riverview life was simple and close-knit. Shopping was mostly local, with occasional trips into Tampa and Ybor City. Bullfrog Creek once ran clear and wide enough for swimming, easily accessible from Simmons family land. Wanda Westbrook also remembered severe storms, including a powerful hurricane in the mid-1930s that flooded the area and uprooted large oak trees.

By the time she reached adulthood, Riverview was already beginning its slow shift away from its agricultural roots.

Wanda Westbrook attended Wimauma High School, back then the only high school serving South Hillsborough County. After graduation, she worked at Margaret Ann's Grocery — later known as Quik Check and Winn-Dixie — where she met her future husband, Charles Westbrook.

Charles Westbrook served in the U.S.



Photo courtesy of Simmons family
The Wimauma High School graduating class of 1948.

Navy, and the couple spent nearly two decades stationed away from Florida, primarily along the East Coast. After his military service, they returned to Riverview, where Herman Simmons provided each of his children with a parcel of land along Simmons Loop.

Wanda and Charles Westbrook built their home on one of those parcels, land that today sits directly across from the hospital complex that now dominates the area. Married for 40 years, they raised four children together before Charles Westbrook passed away at age 62 from cancer.

Faith and family remained central throughout Wanda Westbrook's life. She was a longtime member of Simmons Loop Baptist Church, which served as a gathering place for generations of the Simmons family.

Earlier family reunions were held on the Simmons ranch and along Bullfrog Creek, drawing hundreds of relatives. Over time, changes in water flow, particularly following the construction of Interstate 75,

altered the creek's condition. When the ranch was no longer available, reunions continued at the church. In later years, those gatherings became harder to maintain due to age and illness, quietly marking the close of another chapter in the family's long presence along Simmons Loop.

For more than four decades, Wanda Westbrook also worked as an Avon representative, becoming a familiar and trusted presence in Riverview neighborhoods. She was remembered for her kindness, steadiness and generosity toward those she encountered.

Today, little physical evidence remains of the Simmons family dairy farm or the open land that once lined Simmons Loop Road. In its place stand hospitals, rehabilitation facilities and medical offices, symbols of Riverview's growth.

Yet the family's legacy endures in the geography itself. Simmons Loop Road is traveled daily by thousands who may never realize it bears the name of a real family whose land, labor and lives helped shape the community.

With the passing of Wanda Westbrook, Riverview lost more than a longtime resident. It lost a living bridge to its earliest days, a reminder that beneath today's development lies a history built by families whose stories still matter and deserve to be remembered.



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HUMAN TRAFFICKING AWARENESS TRAINING EMPHASIZES PREVENTION AND VIGILANCE



By Olivia Clark

Human trafficking often looks different than what is portrayed in movies or on social media, according to advocates from the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay, who recently led a community awareness training focused on prevention and education.

Stephanie Barona, human trafficking care coordinator at the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay, explained that trafficking involves one person exerting control over another through “force, fraud or coercion” for the purpose of exploitation. She emphasized that this control is not always obvious and can take many forms.

“Human trafficking is basically when one person exercises control over another person,” Barona said. “This person cannot simply walk away.”

Barona noted that trafficking can involve labor or sexual exploitation but stressed that community members do not need to be experts to help prevent it. Awareness of common warning signs is often the first step.

Shayla Gonzalez, sexual assault services and mental health ambassador at the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay, encouraged residents to rethink common assumptions about what trafficking looks like.

“There is no perfect picture of what this crime looks like,” Gonzalez said. “A lot of times we think of a white van scenario, but in actuality, this is something that is happening within our own city limits.”

According to Gonzalez and Barona, potential indicators may include individuals who appear fearful or unable to speak for themselves, lack access to personal identification, have limited control over money or transportation or are closely monitored by another person. While these signs do not always indicate trafficking, advocates said they are worth noting.

Gonzalez explained that traffickers often rely on manipulation rather than physical force.

“They are master manipulators,” she said, adding that traffickers may take advantage of trust, emotional connections or financial dependence to maintain control.

The training emphasized that community members should never attempt to intervene directly. Instead, attendees were encouraged to trust their instincts, document their concerns and report suspicious situations to the appropriate authorities.

“If you feel like something is going on, it’s better to report it,” Barona said. “It’s better to say something and it be nothing than to say nothing and it be something.”

Both speakers stressed that education plays a key role in prevention and that awareness should extend beyond Human Trafficking Awareness Month.

Residents seeking information, support or referrals can contact the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay’s 24-hour helpline by dialing 211.

KAPPA DELTA PHI WELCOMES NEW VALRICO CHAPTER, KAPPA UPSILON

Staff Report



Members of Kappa Delta Phi's newly chartered Kappa Upsilon chapter gathered during their installation ceremony held at the home of Lily Barney, PNP.

Kappa Delta Phi Sorority Inc. has officially welcomed a new chapter to the Valrico community with the chartering of Kappa Upsilon, a social and civic sisterhood dedicated to service, friendship and community involvement.

The chartering and installation of officers for Kappa Upsilon took place on January 10 at the home of Lily Barney, PNP. The celebration continued with a dinner social hosted at the home of Terry Montefusco, marking the beginning of the chapter’s presence in the area.

The installation ceremony was conducted by Cindy Broeker, PNP, of the counseling chapter Gamma Alpha Nu in Huntingburg, Indiana. Nancy Wimble, Gulf Coast regional director, served as mistress of ceremonies for the event.

The newly installed officers of Kappa Upsilon include:

- Amy Carey Lee, chairman of the board
- Geraldine Clark, president
- Katie Lambert, vice president
- Terry Montefusco, treasurer
- Nancy Kelley, secretary
- Claudia Yake, guard

• Colleen Barney, monitor

Additional charter members in attendance included Barney, Flora Temoin, Aurea Vasquez and Colleen Wimble.

Kappa Upsilon has already begun making an impact in the community. The chapter kicked off the year by donating more than 26 bags and

numerous garment boxes to AMVETS, supporting local veterans in need.

Looking ahead, the chapter has scheduled its first fundraising event to benefit the community. Music bingo will be held on Friday, March 6, at Bullfrog Creek Brewing Co., located at 3632 Lithia Pinecrest Rd. in Valrico. Community members are invited to attend and support the cause while enjoying an evening of music and fun.

Kappa Delta Phi currently has two chapters serving the local area — Kappa Upsilon and Kappa Kappa — providing opportunities for women interested in civic engagement, community service and forming lasting friendships.

Women interested in learning more about Kappa Delta Phi, Kappa Upsilon or membership opportunities may contact Lambert by email at katiw.lambert@hotmail.com.

Congratulations are extended to the members of Kappa Upsilon as they begin their journey of service and sisterhood in Valrico.



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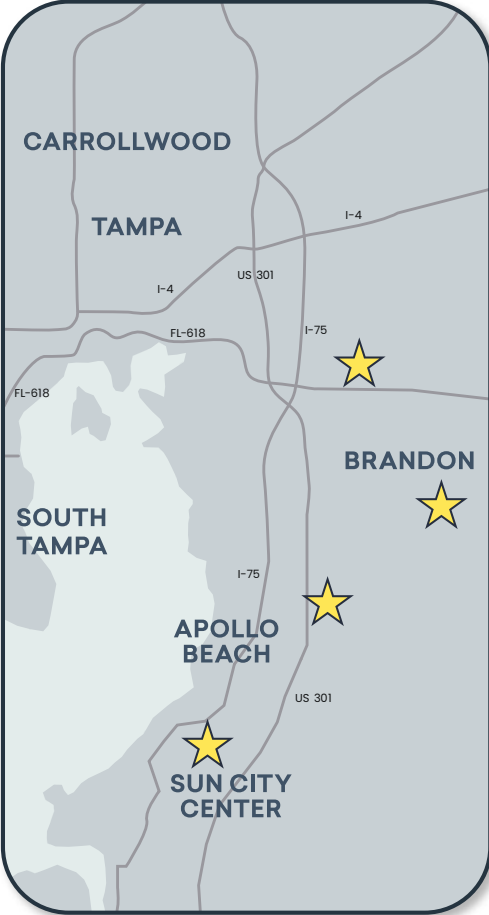
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QUEENA INSPIRES WHILE FACING HER JOURNEY OF HEALING

Queena Vuong has overcome many health obstacles since her attack at the Bloomingdale Regional Public Library more than 17 years ago. She's battled some tough obstacles. It hasn't been easy, but her fight goes on every day, as miracles continue to take place in her. Many have followed her story over the years and have come to know her as the 'Bloomingdale Library Survivor.'

"In moments of hardship, it can be difficult to recognize the strength still lives within us," said Queena's mother, Vanna Nguyen. "Yet, when we remain open to others, to love, and to possibility, we create space for healing and inspiration to grow."

After Queena's attack, it was the compassion and steadfast presence of those around her that carried her family forward. Over time, that support became a reminder that healing is not meant to be a solitary journey.

"It is something we walk through together," Nguyen said. "When we allow ourselves inspired, we find the courage to keep going, to recognize beauty even in uncertainty, and to reflect hope back into the world."

December 2025 marked 17th anniversary of Queena's discharge after seven months in the hospital and rehabilitation. Her journey continues to be one of perseverance, faith and quiet strength.

"Over the past year, Queena's overall health has remained stable, and we're grateful for that consistency," Nguyen said. "She does occasionally experience a brief mini



Queena Vuong is the survivor of an attack at the Bloomingdale Regional Public Library back in 2008.

By Libby Hopkins

seizure in the mornings, but otherwise her medical team feels she's doing well."

In her physical therapy at Stay In Step, Queena has seen meaningful signs of engagement.

"She shows increased awareness, often smiling in response to voices, and appears more relaxed during movement exercises," Nguyen said.

"Although she still requires full assistance for cycling and walking-based activities, the comfort and responsiveness she shows during sessions are encouraging steps forward."

"She is able to respond to yes/no and simple daily-living questions using gestures and vocalizations," Nguyen said.

Looking ahead, Queena would love to return to both water therapy and oxygen therapy. "These therapies have been beneficial for her in the past, but they are private-pay and extremely expensive," Nguyen said. "As a family, we're hoping to raise additional funds to help cover these costs so she can resume the treatments she enjoys and benefits from. One of Queena's biggest wishes is to visit Disney again. She hopes that an organization might be able to sponsor a future trip for her. Being able to experience Disney would bring her so much joy and would be a truly special moment for her and our family."

If you would like to learn more about Queena's journey or donate to her rehabilitation, you can visit her website at <https://joinqueena.com>.

FOREVER GREEN LAWN AND PEST CONTROL GROWS ON FOUR DECADES OF CUSTOMIZED, QUALITY CARE

By Makenzie Atkins Noel

Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control is a family-owned lawn care company built on experience, consistency, and a refusal to cut corners.

Operating for more than 40 years as a family-run business, Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control was founded with a straightforward philosophy: do the job the right way, or don't do it at all. That

commitment to quality remains at the core of everything the company does today.

Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control serves customers throughout Manatee, Pinellas, and Hillsborough counties, with offices located across the region to better support the communities it serves. The company offers comprehensive care, including lawn treatments, tree and shrub care and pest control.

Experience-driven care is a defining part of Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control's process. With more than four decades of industry knowledge behind the business, the company relies on customized fertilizer blends developed through firsthand experience. These blends are based on an understanding of what works, allowing



Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control combines decades of knowledge to provide a service that is focused on delivering reliable results customers can trust.

Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control to avoid generic, one-size-fits-all treatments. The result is a more customized approach focused on producing noticeable and sustainable results for each customer.

"I started this company because I saw too many jobs being done halfway," said Mike Compton, owner of Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control.

"We do it the right way or we don't do it at all, which is why I've spent 45 years perfecting our fertilizer blends based on what actually works for each customer."

Supporting that philosophy is a team of licensed and knowledgeable technicians who bring professionalism and consistency to every property they service. Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control places a strong emphasis on proper training, attention to detail and following established processes to ensure lawns, trees, and shrubs receive the care they need to thrive over time.

Founded on higher expectations and long-term results, Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control has grown steadily while remaining true to its family-owned roots.

For more information or to inquire about service, please visit www.fglawn.com.



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CHAMBER CELEBRATES BUSINESS STARS AT DINNER, AWARDS \$16,000 TO HOPE FOR HER AND ANNOUNCES 2026 CAUSES

Staff Report



Bikes For Christ was named Non-profit of the Year at the VFCC Annual Dinner.



Amani Med Spa received dual recognition as Small and Woman-owned Business of the Year.



Edge Pools was named winner of the Large Business of the Year at the VFCC Annual Dinner.



Tiffany Achille of Citizens Bank & Trust in Valrico was named Business Leader of the Year.

The Valrico FishHawk Chamber of Commerce (VFCC) rolled out the red carpet for its Annual Dinner and Business of the Year Awards, celebrating standout businesses, professionals and community leaders while reinforcing its mission of service through charitable giving.

Held on January 22 at The Regent, the chamber's signature event embraced the theme 'Hollywood Nights: Celebrating Our Chamber's Stars,' transforming the evening into a glamorous awards-style celebration. Chamber members, elected officials and community partners gathered for a night of recognition, networking and philanthropy, many arriving dressed in awards-night glam or as favorite movie characters.

Throughout the evening, the chamber honored excellence across a wide range of categories. Tiffany Achille of Citizens Bank & Trust in Valrico was named Business Leader of the Year, while 55 Rides earned Emerging Business of the Year. Other honorees included Burn Boot Camp as Franchise Business of the Year, Edge Pools as Large Business of the Year, iSmash as Me-

dium Business of the Year and Faith Based Fitness Bus as Minority-owned Business of the Year.

Amani Med Spa received dual recognition as both Small Business of the Year and Woman-owned Business of the Year, with Dr. Gina Brar recognized for her leadership. Additional awards went to Bikes For Christ as Non-profit of the Year; Katlyn Agosta of Papaya Primary Care as Solo Entrepreneur of the Year; Next Level Lending as Startup Business of the Year; Dream Vacations, owned by Jenifer Breau, as Veteran-owned Business of the Year; and Laurie Partanio of Professional Pets Florida as Young Professional of the Year.

Community service was also highlighted, with Angie Kagey of the Impact Program receiving the Community Impact of the Year award. Kevin Kemp of Kemp Designs earned the Member Spotlight Award, voted on by the chamber's executive board, while Rebecca Kerzan of Brandon Massage Oasis was named Ambassador of the Year.

In addition to celebrating business achievements, the chamber spotlighted

its charitable efforts. During the program, VFCC announced that its 2025 Charity of Choice, Hope for Her, received a \$16,000 donation raised throughout 2024. The funds will support women and children facing crisis situations in the local community.

Looking ahead, the chamber also announced its charities of choice for 2026. Seeds of Hope Inc. was selected for its mission of nourishing those in need through student-led initiatives, while We Are The Essentials was chosen for its work done by former law enforcement and military members who assist in locating missing persons.

Chamber leaders emphasized that the annual dinner is not only a celebration of success but also an opportunity to give back and strengthen the community. Citizens Bank & Trust served as the main event sponsor, helping make the evening possible.

With record attendance and strong community support, the Valrico FishHawk Chamber's annual dinner once again showcased the businesses and individuals who continue to make the region thrive — on

and off the red carpet.

The Valrico Fishhawk Chamber of Commerce supports local business owners and non-profit organizations through positive networking, business education, and community involvement.

Members are involved in building relationships and friendships that make a difference. Our Chamber has approximately 300 members representing businesses of all sizes. We focus on building a "know, like, and trust" approach so we're comfortable using and referring others to our fellow Chamber members.

The Valrico Fishhawk Chamber of Commerce (VFCC) works year-round to raise funds for a Charity of Choice (selected by the Board President), collect donations for its high school senior scholarship program for students entering a trade school, and give back to our schools with a great teacher luncheon and donated school supplies.

Visit a weekly or monthly networking meeting or event to grow business through the VFCC. Visit www.valricofishhawk.org.

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UP BEFORE DAWN: ZORAN PAVIC KEEPS THE REGENT RUNNING

By Kelly Wise Valdes

Long before the sun rises over The Regent event venue in Riverview, one staff member is already moving through the quiet halls, preparing the building for another full day of community events. For more than 15 years, facilities team member Zoran Pavic has been one of the venue's most dependable and recognizable faces — a steady presence whose work helps keep one of the region's busiest event centers running smoothly.

Pavic, originally from Bosnia and Herzegovina, came to the Tampa Bay area in 1998, bringing with him a background in plumbing and electrical work. That experience shaped the path that eventually led him to The Regent.

"He did plumbing and electrical in his home country and was able to find work doing those things here, which led him into facility maintenance working for Sodexo, who had the contract for HCC and the Regent when it was built," said Shannon Keil, president and CEO of The Regent.

Pavic officially joined The Regent's staff in 2009, and since then colleagues said his reliability and upbeat attitude have become part of the venue's identity.

"My boss, Shannon, is the best," said Pavic. "Communication is good, and together we fix things and make it work good for clients and the community."

His days start early — often before dawn. "We are busy and have a lot of people at events. I get here at 5:30 a.m. and get rooms



Zoran Pavic stands inside The Regent, where his behind-the-scenes work keeps the venue running seamlessly for weddings and galas.

ready for the events of that day, sometimes do minor maintenance and check to make sure things are working and ready for event," said Pavic. "I sometimes go home and come back for the events at night. I take care of the needs of the event and clean up, then come back the next day to do it again."

Over the years, Pavic has witnessed countless moments inside the venue's walls, from milestone celebrations to solemn ceremonies. One event stands out.

"We are part of special moments for families, students and members of the community," said Pavic. "One of my favorites is the Menton Dinner for Black Dagger Hunt Club, an organization for Gold Star families and wounded veterans. We hang a 40 ft. flag that was jumped from Normandy and have a 98-year-old Rosie the Riveter who comes every year. I like to listen to the speakers and see them recognize the soldiers who have been injured."

To those who work alongside him, Pavic's presence is more than operational support — it's a source of calm and consistency. Outside of work, Pavic keeps his priorities simple: spending time with his family, grandkids, wife and dogs.

"I really enjoy time with my family, and a really good bourbon!" he said.

The Regent is located at 6437 Watson Rd. in Riverview. For more information, visit www.experiencetherement.com or call 813-571-2494.

ANNUAL BILL CAREY SPORTING CLAY TOURNAMENT RETURNS ON MARCH 28

Staff Report



Shoot for a cause at the 14th annual Bill Carey Sporting Clay Tournament on Saturday, March 28, at FishHawk Sporting Clays in Lithia.

The 14th annual Bill Carey Sporting Clay Tournament will return to FishHawk Sporting Clays on Saturday, March 28, bringing together sportsmen, community leaders and supporters of local youth for a day of competition, camaraderie and cause-driven impact.

Benefiting the Carey Family Brandon Club, the annual event supports programs serving children and teens through the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Tampa Bay. The tournament runs from 8 a.m.-1 p.m. at FishHawk Sporting Clays, located at 13505 Hobson Simmons Rd. in Lithia.

Participants can expect an expanded clay shoot tournament on a larger course, followed by a barbecue lunch provided by BubbaQue's. The day will also feature raffle drawings with prizes including firearms, sporting goods, gift cards and more. Organizers say the event is designed to be both fun and meaningful, offering attendees the chance to enjoy a premier sporting experience while making a difference in the lives of local youth.

Registration for the tournament officially opened in January. Participants can register teams, purchase raffle tickets and explore sponsorship opportunities

online at www.bgcta.org/billcarey-clayshoot.

"Shooting events like this allow our community to come together in support of the kids we serve at the Carey Family Brandon Club," said Jamie McWade, director of events for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Tampa Bay. "It's an exciting day that directly impacts the programs and opportunities available to our club members."

The tournament schedule includes an 8 a.m. start time, with lunch served at 11:30 a.m. Sponsorship packages and raffle tickets will also be available for individuals and businesses looking to increase their support.

The event comes as the Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Tampa Bay celebrates 100 years of impact across the region. Since the Rotary Club of Tampa established the West Tampa Boys Club in 1926, the organization has expanded alongside the communities it serves, eventually merging with the former Boys & Girls Clubs of the Suncoast to better serve youth throughout Tampa Bay. Throughout a century of growth and change, the organization's mission has remained the same: ensuring every child has a place to belong and a path to a brighter future.

For more information about the tournament, sponsorship opportunities or registration, contact McWade at jmcwade@bgcta.org or by phone at 813-769-7528.



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BUSCH GARDENS TAMPA BAY ANNOUNCES 2026 CONCERT SERIES WITH A NEW AND EXPANDED LINEUP OF OVER 20 CHART-TOPPING ARTISTS

Staff Report



Top artists from the worlds of pop, rock, hip-hop, country and more will take the stage for full-length concerts this year at Busch Gardens Tampa Bay, the most in the park’s history; all concerts are included free of charge with all forms of admission

Busch Gardens Tampa Bay is turning up the volume with more live music than ever before. During the 2026 concert series, visitors can enjoy performances, including national headliners and nostalgic bands, taking place on select dates from now through Sunday, May 17. With concerts included with all forms of park admission, a Busch Gardens Annual Pass offers guests the most flexible way to access the full 2026 concert lineup all season long.

The electrifying performances span across three signature events, having begun with the Real Music Series, a mix of classic rock, soul and R&B, until February 20. The live music continues during the Food, Wine & Garden Festival, with chart-topping artists like Walker Hayes and Flo Rida performing full-length concerts. Finally, the series concludes with the return of Glory in the Gardens, featuring top Christian acts like Chris Tomlin.

Food, Wine & Garden Festival

The revamped Food, Wine & Garden festival pairs live entertainment with culinary creations. Country singer Walker Hayes kicks off

the festival on Saturday, March 7, with full-length concerts continuing every weekend of the event through Saturday, May 9. The lineup includes artists such as Flo Rida, Taking Back Sunday, Nick Carter, Bowling for Soup, Smash Mouth, Kansas, Dylan Scott, Bow Wow and the Pop 2000 Tour, featuring Chris Kirkpatrick of *NSYNC, O-Town, Ryan Cabrera and LFO.

Glory in the Gardens

Glory in the Gardens is a one weekend music event dedicated to Christian acts. On Saturday and Sunday, May 16-17, award-winning artists like Chris Tomlin, Brandon Heath and Danny Gokey will take the stage.

Concert Lineup & Artist Highlights

Food, Wine & Garden Festival:

- Saturday, March 7 | Walker Hayes
- Sunday, March 8 | Puddle of Mudd
- Saturday, March 14 | P.O.D.
- Sunday, March 15 | Grupo Mania
- Saturday, March 21 | Skillet
- Sunday, March 22 | Robin Thicke
- Friday, March 27 | Warren G
- Saturday, March 28 | Dylan Scott
- Sunday, March 29 | Kansas
- Saturday, April 4 | Nick Carter
- Friday, April 10 | The Band Perry
- Saturday, April 11 | El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico
- Sunday, April 12 | Smash Mouth

- Saturday, April 18 | Flo Rida
- Sunday, April 19 | Air Supply
- Friday, April 24 | Bowling For Soup
- Saturday, April 25 | Surprise Artist To Be Announced Soon
- Saturday, May. 2 | Bow Wow & Ying Yang Twins
- Sunday, May 3 | Taking Back Sunday
- Saturday, May 9 | Pop 2000 featuring Chris Kirkpatrick of *NSYNC, O-Town, Ryan Cabrera and LFO

Glory in the Gardens:

- Saturday, May 16 | Chris Tomlin + Brandon Heath
- Sunday, May 17 | Danny Gokey + Surprise Artist To Be Announced Soon

Visitors who want the best seats in the house can purchase VIP seating for each act. Additional information can be found at <https://buschgardens.com/tampa>.

Best Way to Experience Concerts at Busch Gardens Tampa Bay

The Busch Gardens Annual Pass program is designed to give guests flexibility with four tiers, each one allowing guests to choose the benefits that best fit their lifestyle. Annual passes start at \$14.50 per month, with no down payment and 0 percent APR.

From unlimited visits and seasonal event access to exclusive freebies and savings, pass members can expect:

- Free guest tickets to share the fun with friends and family.
- Free parking and discounts on food, beverage, and merchandise (select tiers).
- Free Busch Bucks to spend in park.
- Be among the first to experience the all-new Lion & Hyena Ridge when it opens in 2026.
- Discounts on one-of-a-kind animal encounters, VIP tours and youth summer camps.

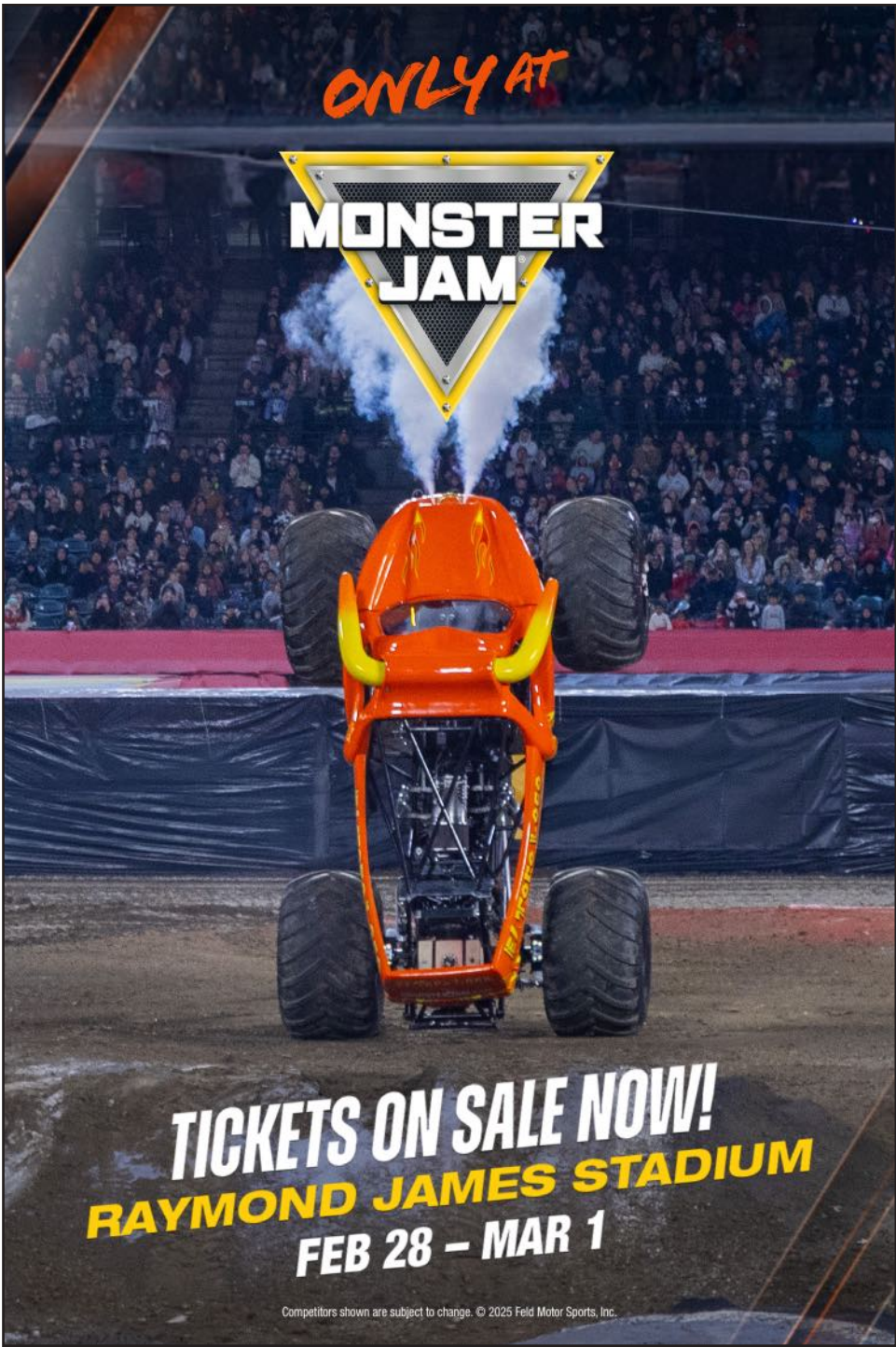
For more information on the concert series and annual pass, visit <https://buschgardens.com/tampa> and follow Busch Gardens on social media at @BuschGardens.

About Busch Gardens Tampa Bay

Busch Gardens Tampa Bay is the ultimate family adventure, offering 300 acres of fascinating attractions based on exotic explorations around the world. Busch Gardens is a unique blend of thrilling rides, an AZA-accredited zoo with over 16,000 animals representing more than 200 species and exciting seasonal events all year, providing unrivaled experiences for guests of every age. For more information, visit <https://buschgardentampa.com/>. Busch Gardens is owned by United Parks & Resorts Inc. (NYSE: PRKS), a leading theme park and entertainment company providing experiences that matter and inspiring guests to protect animals and the wild wonders of our world.

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CANDIDATES SOUGHT FOR HONORARY MAYOR'S RACE OF EAST HILLSBOROUGH

Staff Report



Last year's Honorary Mayor's Race participants Michael Brand of 55 Rides and Abi Merkle of AM Design & Services are pictured during the Chamber-supported event. The pair raised more than \$121,000 for local charities, with Brand earning the honorary mayor title after raising \$64,000.

The Valrico FishHawk Chamber of Commerce (VFCC) is excited to announce that applications will soon be accepted for the fourth annual Honorary Mayor's Race of East Hillsborough. From Monday, June 1, through Tuesday, June 30, selected community members will campaign to raise money for local charities. The person who raises the most money will earn the fun and meaningful title of Honorary Mayor of East Hillsborough for one year. East Hillsborough County does not have an elected mayor because it is an unincorporated area. This special race gives the community an 'honorary mayor' while also raising important funds for charities that help local families, schools and organizations. The Honorary Mayor's Race, supported by the Valrico FishHawk Chamber of Commerce, is nonpolitical and focused on giving back. Candidates raise mon-

ey for a charity or nonprofit they choose by hosting events, reaching out to neighbors and working together with the community. The goal is simple: have fun while helping others. Anyone with a heart for the community is encouraged to apply. Applications will be available starting on Sunday, March 1 and are due by Saturday, March 28. Charities can include school booster clubs, new nonprofits that need more attention or well-known local organizations. Both the candidate and the charity must live in, work in or support the East Hillsborough County area. Last year's race was a huge success. Participants Michael Brand of 55 Rides and Abi Merkle of AM Design & Services raised more than \$121,000 for local charities. Brand earned the honorary mayor title after raising \$64,000. Fundraisers included bingo nights, a clay shoot, bourbon tasting, concerts, sports events, auctions and even a second-chance prom. Merkle shared, "I'm so proud of what we were able to accomplish together as a community." To learn more or apply, visit the website at www.valricofishhawk.org.

FAMILY FUN GOES FULL THROTTLE AS MONSTER JAM® TAKES OVER TAMPA

Staff Report



Nothing compares to the one and only Monster Jam, roaring into Tampa for a week-end of adrenaline-charged excitement at Raymond James Stadium on February 28 and March 1, 2026. Featuring the Stadium Championship Series East, the event promises an unforgettable experience filled with massive trucks, gravity-defying stunts and world-class drivers competing at the highest level. Described as "unexpected, unscripted, and unforgettable," Monster Jam is far more than a motorsports event. Fans can expect 12,000-pound trucks launching into the air, balancing on two wheels and racing at full throttle in competitions of speed, skill and style. Racing, Skills and Freestyle events will determine the Event Champion, with fans helping to score drivers in real time. Tickets are on sale now through Ticketmaster, with Monster Jam Preferred Customers receiving early access to the best seats. Fans can still sign up for free to receive an exclusive presale code, while general public ticket sales begin Tuesday, September 16. Ticket prices vary, and additional venue or ticketing fees may apply. The fun begins even before the engines rev with the Monster Jam Pit Party®, held

both Saturday and Sunday prior to each event. Attendees can get up close to the trucks, meet drivers, collect autographs and learn how these powerful machines are built to withstand intense competition. Another fan favorite, Monster Jam Trackside, takes place about an hour before each event and features driver interviews, pit crew insights and giveaways. Twelve elite drivers will battle for the Stadium Championship Series East title and a coveted spot in the Monster Jam World Finals® in Salt Lake City, Utah. The lineup includes crowd favorites such as Grave Digger® driven by Adam Anderson, Sparkle Smash® driven by Jamie Sullivan, JCB DIGatron™ driven by Tristan England, Megalodon® driven by Kevin Crocker, El Toro Loco® driven by Joe Foley and more. Truck and driver lineups are subject to change. With heart-pounding action and family-friendly fun, Monster Jam continues to be one of the most anticipated live events of the year in Tampa. For tickets, pit passes and more information, visit www.monsterjam.com

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COLLEGE BOARD APPROVES MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING WITH TAMPA BAY RAYS

Staff Report

The Hillsborough College District Board of Trustees voted unanimously this week to approve a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Tampa Bay Rays, allowing the college to explore a potential partnership tied to the redevelopment of a new ballpark on a portion of its Dale Mabry campus.



Standing at the podium is Dr. Ken Atwater, college president. Behind him on the left is Greg Celestan, chairman of the Hillsborough College District Board of Trustees. On Atwater's right is Ken Babby, Tampa Bay Rays CEO.

Board Chairman Greg Celestan said the vote reflects a shared vision for long-term community impact that extends beyond professional sports.

"This is about so much more than a ballpark," Celestan said. "It's about economic development, opportunity for our students and creating something meaningful that benefits Tampa Bay for generations. Welcoming the Rays home to this site while creating a live, work, play and learn district is an extraordinary opportunity, and we're ready to help get this project in motion."

Under the agreement, Hillsborough College would continue operating on the Dale Mabry campus throughout any planning or construction phases. Instruction and student services would remain uninterrupted, with temporary on-campus facilities utilized as needed to ensure academic continuity. Long-term plans call for the development of new academic buildings and the reconfiguration of existing spaces to integrate into

a shared, mixed-use campus environment.

Hillsborough College President Dr. Ken Atwater described the proposal as a transformational opportunity centered on enhancing the student experience.

"A project of this scale and vision creates new pathways for learning, workforce development, internships and career-connected education," Atwater said. "By reimagining the Dale Mabry campus within a dynamic, mixed-use district, we are strengthening our role as an economic and civic anchor while expanding opportunity for our students, faculty and staff."

College officials emphasized that the MOU does not obligate Hillsborough College to move forward with the project. The agreement allows the institution to explore feasibility and collaboration while preserving the board's authority to terminate the MOU at any time.

Hillsborough College serves more than 46,000 students annually across five campuses throughout Tampa Bay, offering associate and baccalaureate degrees as well as certificates and diplomas at approved levels. The college is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC).

For more information about Hillsborough College, visit www.hcfl.edu.

STATE ATTORNEY'S OFFICE ADDS VICTIM ADVOCATE TO PLANT CITY COURTHOUSE

By State Attorney Suzy Lopez

For someone who has just been victimized, walking into a courthouse can feel intimidating and lonely. It doesn't have to. Justice works best when victims know they are supported every step of the way.

That is why I am proud to share some important news for our East Hillsborough community. The state attorney's office is expanding our Victim Assistance program to the Plant City Courthouse effectively immediately.

Beginning now, a trained victim advocate will be on-site every Friday from 8 a.m.-4 p.m. to help victims and their families navigate the court process and access the support they need.

This is more than a new office location. It is about meeting people where they are. By placing an advocate right inside the Plant City Courthouse, we are making sure help is closer and available when it is needed most.

The advocates serving Plant City are part



State Attorney Suzy Lopez.

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



as prosecutors without them.

If you or someone you know is a victim living in the east part of our county, you're invited to meet us at the Plant City courthouse. Call 813-574-6391 or visit <https://hillsboroughsao.gov> to learn more about the services our advocates provide.

of the same experienced team based in our downtown Tampa office. That means victims receive the same level of care and expertise no matter where their case is heard. These advocates do far more than explain court dates and paperwork. They help families understand what to expect and connect them with resources like counseling, shelters or clothing. Sometimes,

survivors are just looking for someone to listen.

Our victim advocates are some of the most dedicated and compassionate people on our team. They remind victims that they are not alone in this process. We couldn't do our work

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By Brian Bokor



L: Bob Delle Donne - Regional Sales, Launa Moore - Executive Director, Nick McLaughlin - Director of Sales. C: Executive Director Launa Moore and Director of Sales Nick McLaughlin (front row) with Guests

The leasing center is now open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m.-5 p.m., with weekend appointments available, as the community moves toward an opening in the final quarter of 2026. Additional information is available at 813-642-4430.



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HENRY B. PLANT MUSEUM OFFERS FREE GUIDED ART TOURS FOCUSING ON THE MUSEUM'S GILDED AGE ARTWORKS

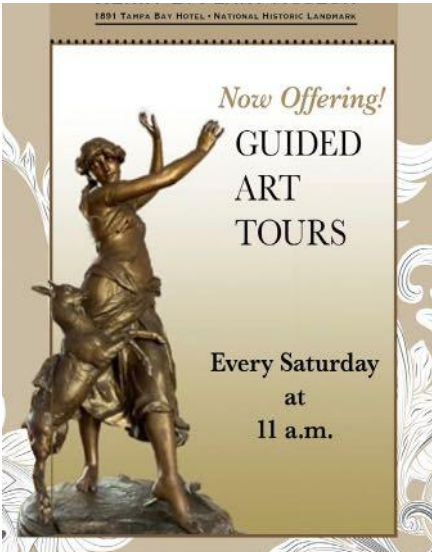
By Libby Hopkins

Since 1933, the Tampa Bay Hotel has been home to the Henry B. Plant Museum and The University of Tampa. The building, renamed Plant Hall, was declared a National Historic Landmark in recognition of its role as a military headquarters during the Spanish-American War. The Henry B. Plant Museum holds the distinction of accreditation by the American Alliance of Museums.

The museum's mission is to interpret the Tampa Bay Hotel and the experiences of the diverse individuals who contributed to its success. The museum awakens thought and transports visitors to another era through exhibits and innovative programs. Original furnishings and artifacts and a dynamic self-guided audio tour immerse visitors in the opulence of a Gilded Age seasonal resort hotel.

"There is a wide range of Gilded Age artworks on view, spanning paintings, sculpture and furniture," said the museum's membership and museum relations manager, Jill D'Anna. "Many of the works reflect the craftsmanship, materials and artistic trends of the period, offering visitors a glimpse into the art that defined the era."

Opened by railroad and shipping magnate Henry B. Plant, the Tampa Bay Hotel faced an uncertain future following his death in 1899. The City of Tampa purchased the property in 1905, and it continued to operate as a hotel until 1932.



The following year, the city established the Tampa Municipal Museum in the south wing of the first floor to preserve the legacy of the Tampa Bay Hotel. The remainder of the building, as well as the property, became home to The University of Tampa.

The museum houses original hotel furnishings and art objects from Europe and Asia collected by Henry and Margaret Plant. In 1974, the Tampa Municipal Museum became the Henry B. Plant Museum, commemorating Henry Plant's contribution to the development of the cigar city and the creation of Florida's tourist economy.

"The museum now offers guided art tours every Saturday at 11 a.m. and are completely free with paid museum admission," D'Anna said. "During the tour, guests can expect to see a diverse selection of works from our collection, including traditional paintings and sculpture, as well as furniture and decorative objects."

D'Anna hopes the tours help spread awareness about the importance of conservation and restoration while also showcasing the diversity of objects within the museum's collection.

For more about Henry B. Plant Museum, visit the website at www.plantmuseum.com or call 813-254-1891. The museum is located at 401 W. Kennedy Blvd. in downtown Tampa.

PARTNERSHIP SHINES SPOTLIGHT ON URGENT NEED FOR BIG BROTHERS AND BIG SISTERS

By Libby Hopkins

This past January, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Tampa Bay (BBBS) partnered with the Tampa Bay Lightning and Benchmark International for a dynamic National Mentoring Month campaign

designed to spotlight the power of mentorship and respond to an urgent community need: more than 1,000 children across Greater Tampa Bay are currently waiting for a mentor.

From January 5-20, the three organizations came together to raise awareness, celebrate existing mentors and recruited 50 new Big Brothers and Big Sisters who changed children's lives through consistency, connection and care.

The two-week partnership featured in-arena recognitions at Lightning games, a community ball hockey clinic for youth and storytelling moments throughout January, giving the public and media multiple opportunities to see mentorship in action.

"Mentorship is one of the most powerful tools we have to help young people feel supported, confident and hopeful about their future," said Robyn Ostrem, CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Tampa Bay. "With more than 1,000 children waiting for a mentor right now in Greater Tampa Bay, this partnership allowed us to meet the moment, celebrating our Bigs while inviting more people in our community to step forward and make a transformational



For National Mentoring Month, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Tampa Bay teamed up with the Tampa Bay Lightning and Benchmark International.

difference." Throughout the month, Bigs, Littles and supporters were recognized during Lightning games and special activations, amplifying the message that mentorship strengthens families, schools, and communities.

"We believe in using our platform to support causes that create real impact in our community," said Elizabeth Frazier, vice president of community hockey development and social impact for the Tampa Bay Lightning. "By partnering with Big Brothers Big Sisters during National Mentoring Month, we helped to shine a light on the importance of positive role models and creating memorable experiences that inspired kids, both on and off the ice."

Benchmark International's involvement reflected its commitment to investing in people and strengthening the communities where its employees live and work.

Becoming a Big Brother or Big Sister does not require special skills or a large time commitment.

It starts with a few hours a month and a willingness to build a relationship. With more than 1,000 children still waiting in Tampa Bay, the need for mentors continues well beyond National Mentoring Month. To learn more, visit the website at www.bbbstampa.org/be-a-big/.



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BRIDGEWATER LANDING OPENS LEASING FOR NEWEST 55-PLUS APARTMENT HOMES



Bridgewater Landing Apartments is now leasing in Riverview, welcoming residents to the area's newest 55-plus active adult apartment community thoughtfully designed for comfort, connection and carefree living.

Designed exclusively for independent adults 55 and better, Bridgewater Landing features one- and two-bedroom residences ranging from approximately 703 to 1,170 square feet. Rental rates currently begin at \$1,700 per month for one-bedroom, one-bath apartments and range up to \$2,435 per month for spacious two-bedroom, two-bath homes, depending on the floor-plan size and location within the building. Residents may choose from 10 unique floor plans to suit a variety of lifestyles and space needs.

Each apartment is designed with everyday ease and refined living in mind. Homes include private, modern kitchens with quartz countertops; high-end LG appliances; luxury vinyl flooring; soaring 9-foot, 6-inch ceilings; and full-size, in-unit washers and dryers. Many residences also feature private patios or balconies overlooking landscaped courtyards or a lake — a rare amenity in Riverview — allowing residents to enjoy Florida's sunshine and fresh air from the comfort of home. Water, Wi-Fi with 60 cable channels and in-unit laundry are included.

Bridgewater Landing offers a truly main-

By Marie Gilmore

tenance-free lifestyle, complemented by an array of amenities that encourage active, social living. Residents can enjoy access to the Sweet Water Club, an exclusive, on-property clubhouse offering wellness-focused fitness classes, creative experiences, social events and group outings. Additional amenities of the Sweet Water Club include a fitness center and resort-style pool.

The fully accessible buildings include elevator access and wheelchair-friendly apartments. Bridgewater Landing Apartments is also pet-friendly. A dedicated pet park is underway, providing space for residents and their four-legged companions to enjoy. The community also boasts a walking trail, outdoor gathering spaces, barbecue and on-site management and maintenance.

The property is located at 5790 Stockport St. in Riverview — on Bloomingdale Avenue, directly across from the Winthrop Town Centre.

Now open in its first building, Bridgewater Landing Apartments will ultimately include 168 units and complete the larger Bridgewater Landing active adult community of single-family homes and duplexes. The apartments are owned by Bridges Land and Development and were built by local homebuilder Sunrise Homes, which has been developing communities exclusively in Hillsborough County since 1983.

Leasing offices are open Mon-Fri from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. and Saturday from 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Call 813-934-2204. or email directly at leasing@bridgewaterlandings.com.



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HCA Florida Brandon Ranked Among America's 250 Best By Healthgrades

HCA Florida Brandon Hospital announced that it has been named one of America's 250 Best Hospitals by Healthgrades, the number one site Americans use when searching for a doctor or hospital. This achievement reflects Brandon Hospital's commitment to clinical excellence and top-tier patient care, placing the organization in the top 5 percent of U.S. hospitals for overall clinical performance.

In addition to this distinction for overall clinical care, Brandon Hospital has been recognized for its exceptional patient outcomes in key service areas, including orthopedic services, spine surgery, gastrointestinal services, gastrointestinal surgery and surgical care. For the third year in a row, Brandon Hospital has been named among America's 50 Best Hospitals for Surgical Care. These accolades further underscore Brandon Hospital's dedication to delivering the highest quality care to every patient, year after year.

HCA Florida Brandon Hospital is located at 119 Oakfield Dr. in Brandon. Visit its website at www.hcahealthcare.com.

Hope And Harvest Continues To Expand

Stefanie Emrith is a FishHawk local and the founder of Hope & Harvest, a charcuterie and

HCA Florida Brandon Hospital

experiential events business proudly serving FishHawk and the surrounding communities. Over the past year, Hope & Harvest has successfully served the community through workshops, private celebrations, corporate gatherings and community pop-ups. As a locally owned and community-rooted business, it is continuing to expand its offerings in 2026 through new partnerships, themed events and local venue collaborations. Visit its website at www.hopeandharvestevents.com to find out more.



DML Property Solutions Offers Residential And Commercial Lawn Care And Landscaping Services

DML Property Solutions offers residential and commercial lawn care and landscaping services, helping homeowners, business owners and HOAs keep their properties clean, beautiful and well maintained. Along with routine services, it offers additional services, including sod removal and installation, irrigation inspections and weed control mulching. Find out more at www.dmlproperty.com.

Say YES To You And Your Business Summit

The Say YES to You and Your Business Summit is a one-day immersive experience created for entrepreneurs and high-achieving professional women who are ready to



release burnout, reclaim clarity and create harmony between their ambition and their well-being. Founded by Say YES to Your Life Coach Pearl Chiarenza, the summit focuses on helping women bridge the gap between professional achievement and personal fulfillment through mindset coaching, mental fitness tools and real-life strategies they can apply immediately. The event will take place at The Regent, located at 6437 Watson Rd. in Riverview, on Thursday, May 14. For more information, tickets and to see available sponsorship opportunities, visit <https://sayyestoyousummit.com/>.

Professional Pets Florida

Professional Pets Florida, based in Valrico, is the premier provider of in-home pet-sitting and dog-walking care in the Hillsborough County area. Owned by Lauri Partanio, a former certified animal control officer and

veterinary technician, Professional Pets Florida is focused heavily on bringing veterinary medicine and animal welfare to pet sitting and dog walking locally. With the pet industry focusing heavily on 'healthspan' over just lifespan, owners of senior dogs and cats are recognizing that the high-stress environment of a kennel can be detrimental to an aging animal's immune system and cognitive health.

"The 2026 pet parent is more educated than ever. They don't just want a pet sitter; they want a professional that treats their pet like their own," Partanio said. Visit its website at <https://professionalpets.net/>.

Nothing Bundt Cakes Celebrates With BOGO Give Away

Nothing Bundt Cakes has been named America's No. 1 Favorite Food Brand for the second year in a row, according to Technomic and Nation's Restaurant News — a back-to-back honor driven entirely by consumer feedback and praise. To celebrate and thank fans



nationwide, the brand is rolling out a VIP sweepstakes and a limited-time buy-one-Bundtlet, get-one-free offer. The three sweepstakes winners will receive a trip to Dallas in 2026 for a behind-the-scenes visit to Nothing Bundt Cakes' headquarters and Bundt Lab, where they'll spend time with the brand's bakers and leadership. In addition, guests can enjoy a BOGO Bundtlet promotion from Monday through Sunday, February 16-22, at participating bakeries. Apply for the sweepstakes at www.nothingbundtcakes.com/americas-favorite-food-brand-sweepstakes/.

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