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November 2026
Volume 25, Issue 11

24 YEARS Osprey OBSERVER Your Community Newspaper POSITIVE NEWS

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WREATHS across AMERICA
SEE PAGE 3

CELEBRATING 24 YEARS OF PUBLISHING POSITIVE COMMUNITY NEWS

SIDNEY O'SULLIVAN GOES FROM BEVIS BRONCO TO TEACHER OF THE YEAR

By Libby Hopkins



Sidney O'Sullivan is a product of Hillsborough County Public Schools. She went to Bevis Elementary School as a student of Tricia Simonsen, who was her principal. She proceeded to Randall Middle School, Newsome High School and then earned her bachelor's in elementary education at the University of South Florida.

"I have been teaching for nine years, only ever working at Valrico Elementary School under the wonderful lead of Mrs. Simonsen," O'Sullivan said. "Besides being a teacher, I am mom to the best 5-year-old son, Connor, who also attends Valrico Elementary. I also sing live music on the weekends in our community at some local spots as well."

O'Sullivan loves working with her students and growing relationships with each child.

"Our classroom always feels like one big family full of love, acceptance and learning," she said. "It's inspiring to watch the 'magic' happen when these young minds grow. They teach me so much about resilience and how each and every one of them is capable of amazing things. It's a profession that certainly leaves your heart bursting."

O'Sullivan recently became Valrico Elementary's Teacher of the Year.

"I was in the middle of teaching a math lesson when administration, fellow colleagues and my entire family entered the room clapping and cheering with pompoms and music," she said. "My son presented me with a certificate for 'Teacher of the Year,' and that's when Mrs. Simonsen made the announcement to the class that I had been nominated. It was very special to have all of my people there."

Simonsen couldn't be prouder of her former student and employee.

"As a principal, moments like this are truly special," Simonsen said. "Years ago, I had the privilege of serving as Sidney's principal throughout her elementary years at Bevis Elementary. Today, I am honored to continue serving as her principal while she thrives as an outstanding educator. Watching her journey come full circle, from a Bevis Bronco student to a Valrico Hawk teacher, has been incredibly rewarding. Her recognition as Valrico Teacher of the Year is a well-deserved reflection of her passion for teaching, commitment to students and dedication to our school community. Ms. O'Sullivan exemplifies the very best of our profession, and I'm so proud to celebrate this remarkable achievement with her."

O'Sullivan's students were extremely proud of their teacher as well.

"They were so sweet," she said. "They shared some very kind words and showered me with hugs and congratulations. Valrico Elementary is truly a special place to be. I may be biased, but the faculty, staff and administration here are like no other. I love being a Valrico Hawk."

Valrico Elementary is located at 609 S. Miller Rd. in Valrico. For more information about the school, visit www.hillsboroughschools.org/o/valrico.

THREE INDUCTED INTO BLOOMINGDALE ATHLETICS HALL OF FAME '26 CLASS

By Nick Nahas



Photo credit Michael Nahas

Former Bloomingdale High School athletes and coach reunite: Bonnie Hess (center), who coached Bloomingdale volleyball from 1994-2008 and earned 440 career wins, stands with Ryan Nye (left), who wrestled for the Bulls from 2002-06, and Representative Michael Owen (right), who played varsity baseball for Bloomingdale in 1994 and 1995.

Two former student athletes and a former head coach were inducted into the Bloomingdale High School Athletics Hall of Fame Class of 2026 in front of a sold-out homecoming football game at Charlie Harris Stadium in Valrico.

Bonnie Hess was the head volleyball coach at Bloomingdale from 1994-2008. She won 75 percent of her games with 440 wins overall. In her time leading the program, her teams won five district titles, had seven regional appearances and had one final four appearance, finishing third in the state in 1994, her first season. Hess had 26 Bloomingdale players who went on to play in college. She was selected as Western Conference Coach of the Year in 2006. Hess also contributed to Bloomingdale High School by sponsoring the Fellowship of Christian Athletes club and had the biggest FCA program in the southeast United States for several years.

"It means a lot, it was totally unexpected," said Hess. "This was my life for 17 years or so. My son grew up in the gym because he was very young when I came here. This is like my old home, but I haven't been here in years, and what I'm seeing are students that I had that are now teaching here, so it means a lot; it's very moving."

Representative Michael Owen played varsity baseball for Bloomingdale as a catcher and first baseman in 1994 and 1995. During his time on the baseball team, the Bulls won back-to-back Saladino Tournaments and were district champions in 1994 and 1995. Owen went on to play college baseball for Hillsborough College and later Saint Leo University, where he graduated cum laude. After graduating, Owen attended Western Michigan Law School and later returned to Hillsborough County to practice law. Owen was elected to the Hillsborough County Commission in 2022, and in 2024 he was elected to the Florida House of Representatives. While in the state house, he has championed education through the Student Academic Success Subcommittee.

"It means a lot just because this is my hometown," said Owen. "Other than going to law school, I've always kind of hung around home. It's just an honor because this place meant a lot to me — it reminds me of the good old days when I drive by the school. It just means a lot to me to be here with other great people that have come before me."

Ryan Nye, also a graduate of Bloomingdale High School, wrestled for the Bulls for four years from 2002-06. During his four-year varsity career, he was a two-time team captain, two-time state finalist and 2006 state champion. After graduating, Nye went on the attend the United States Military Academy at West Point. He is currently serving the country as a major in the Army.

"It's remarkable; I haven't been back here in 20 years," said Nye. "I was genuinely surprised when I got the call. It's been such a trip down memory lane. I think about how high school sports got me into college, helped get me the career that I have today and how all these things that I did when I was 16, 17 really made the difference, and so it's nice to come back."

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Future Career Academy Business Panels brought local employers and community partners into Hillsborough County high schools, giving seniors the opportunity to learn about career paths, training programs and employment opportunities after graduation. See Full Story on Page 7.



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LOCAL CEMETERIES HONOR VETERANS WITH WREATHS ACROSS AMERICA

By Marie Gilmore



Local communities will come together on Saturday, December 19, for National Wreaths Across America Day, for which volunteers will gather at cemeteries across the country to remember and honor veterans by placing remembrance wreaths on their graves.

Two local locations participating in this year's program are Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell and Serenity Meadows Memorial Park, Funeral Home & Crematory in Riverview.

Wreaths Across America carries the year-round mission to "Remember, Honor and Teach," with volunteers coordinating wreath-laying ceremonies at thousands of locations across all 50 states, at sea and abroad. The national effort provides an opportunity for families, veterans' organizations, community groups and individuals to honor those who served.

At Florida National Cemetery, located at 6502 SW 102nd Ave., the National Wreaths Across America Day ceremony and wreath distribution will take place at 10 a.m. on December 19. The cemetery will also host a Friends & Family Day event on Saturday, December 12, giving community members an additional opportunity to learn more about the program and support the effort.

Community members can participate by sponsoring a wreath in honor of a veteran or volunteering during the wreath-laying event. Each sponsorship helps provide a wreath for a veteran's grave while supporting Wreaths Across America's mission of remembrance and education.

Serenity Meadows Memorial Park, Funeral Home & Crematory, located at 6919 Providence Rd., will also participate. The cemetery has 750 veteran graves and is working toward its goal of placing a wreath on every veteran's grave.

The ceremony at Serenity Meadows will begin at 10 a.m., with wreath placement immediately afterward. Volunteers will have the opportunity to participate in laying remembrance wreaths and saying the name of each veteran aloud, creating a personal tribute to those who served.

Serenity Meadows is accepting volunteers, and community members interested in participating can call 813-677-9494. Wreath sponsorships are $17.

National Wreaths Across America Day is more than a wreath-laying ceremony. It provides an opportunity for generations to come together, share stories of military service and ensure the sacrifices of veterans are remembered.

For more information about Wreaths Across America and opportunities to sponsor a wreath or volunteer, visit www.wreathsacrossamerica.org.

THE BLOOM EXCHANGE: COFFEE, FLOWERS AND PLANTS COME TOGETHER

By McKenzie Brown



The Bloom Exchange owners Kish and Shannon Patel offer a wide variety of houseplants, fresh flowers, plant care items and a small coffee bar.

For plant lovers and coffee enthusiasts, The Bloom Exchange in Riverview offers a place where two passions come together under one roof.

Located at 13438 Boyette Rd., The Bloom Exchange is a neighborhood plant shop, floral boutique and coffee bar owned by Shannon and Kish Patel. The welcoming space was created as a place where customers can shop for plants and flowers, enjoy a specialty coffee and take a moment to slow down and reconnect with nature.

The shop carries a wide selection of houseplants, ranging from beginner-friendly varieties to unique tropical plants sought after by experienced collectors. New selections arrive regularly, including monthly restocks, giving customers a reason to return and discover something different.

Customers can also find everything they need to care for their plants, including pots, planters, specialized soil, plant-care tools and other accessories.

Fresh flowers are another highlight at The Bloom Exchange. Fresh-cut flowers arrive each weekend, with grab-and-go bouquets and arrangements that change with the seasons. Customers can also build their own floral selections or choose from specialty Bloom Boxes, which pair coffee with a mini floral arrangement displayed in a glass vase.

At the coffee bar, visitors can enjoy hot or iced specialty drinks made with beans from local Banyan Coffee Co. The menu includes Americanos, cappuccinos, lattes and mochas, with options for syrups and alternative milks. A selection of TeBella teas is also available, including Florida Orange Blossom, Moroccan Mint, Pumpkin Chai, Masala Chai and Sweet Banana Crème.

The Bloom Exchange is also preparing to offer creative workshops designed to bring the community together. Upcoming classes will include floral arranging, terrarium building and other plant-inspired projects. The workshops will give participants an opportunity to learn something new while creating something they can take home.

"The Bloom Exchange was created to share our love for plants, flowers and creativity," Shannon said. "We wanted to build a warm, welcoming space where plant lovers can share plant tips, exchange knowledge and inspiration and celebrate the joy of greenery."

The shop is open Wednesday through Saturday from 9 a.m.-6 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m.-6 p.m. It is closed Monday and Tuesday. For more information, email fhbloomexchange@gmail.com.





LIBRARY CARD OPENS THE DOOR TO FREE FLORIDA ORCHESTRA TICKETS

By Kelly Wise Valdes



A Hillsborough County library card now offers free orchestra vouchers, along with other cultural freebies across Tampa Bay.

The Hillsborough County Public Library Cooperative is partnering with The Florida Orchestra to give residents a chance to enjoy live symphonic music free of charge during the orchestra's 2026-27 season.

The library announced that a limited number of free concert vouchers will be available on a firstcome, firstserved basis at local library branches beginning this month. Each person may receive up to two vouchers while supplies last.

The Florida Orchestra, founded in 1968, performs more than 100 concerts each year and serves as one of the region's major cultural institutions. Library officials expect interest in the vouchers to be high and encourage early pickup at any Hillsborough County Public Library Cooperative location.

Library officials said the partnership supports its mission to expand access to the arts and create new opportunities for cultural engagement. The Florida Orchestra's 2026-27 season includes a mix of traditional masterworks, contemporary pieces and special event concerts intended to appeal to both longtime patrons and new audiences.

Residents can claim vouchers by visiting any participating Hillsborough County Public Library Cooperative location. Library staff will distribute them until all are claimed, with no reservations or holds permitted.

In addition to the new orchestra vouchers, library cardholders can also take advantage of the county's popular Discovery Pass program, which provides free onetime admission to a variety of local museums and attractions. Participating venues include the Tampa Bay History Center, Glazer Children's Museum, Florida Museum of Photographic Arts, American Victory Ship & Museum, Florida Holocaust Museum, Imagine Museum of Contemporary Glass Art, Tampa Museum of Art, Henry B. Plant Museum and others. Reservations are digital, limited in number and typically valid for a seven-day checkout period.

Residents seeking more information about free cultural programs, museum access or voucher availability can visit their local library or check the library system's website at www.hcplc.org or call 813-273-3652. You can also contact the library via text messaging at 813-352-1603.

HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY HIKING SPREE RETURNS FOR 11TH YEAR

By Marie Gilmore



Hillsborough County residents are invited to lace up their hiking shoes and explore the area's parks, preserves and natural spaces during the 11th Annual Hillsborough County Hiking Spree, taking place from November 1 through March 31, 2027.

The annual program encourages residents of all ages and fitness levels to get outside, stay active and discover the natural beauty found throughout Hillsborough County. Participants can choose from a variety of trails and experiences, making the Hiking Spree accessible to both experienced hikers and those who are new to the trails.

The Hiking Spree officially kicks off on Saturday, November 7, from 9 a.m.-2 p.m. at Keystone Park and Recreation Center, located at 17928 Gunn Hwy. in Odessa. The free celebration will feature guided hikes, live presentations, interactive exhibitors, family-friendly activities and local food trucks.

No registration is required to attend the kickoff, providing an opportunity for returning hikers to reconnect with fellow trail enthusiasts while newcomers can learn more about the program and begin planning their Hiking Spree adventure.

To complete the Hiking Spree, participants must hike a minimum of eight designated trails, including at least one "choice" trail. Those who complete the requirements can earn rewards including an annual patch, a walking stick medallion or a bandana for their hiking companion.

The Hiking Spree offers trails ranging from easy, paved pathways to more strenuous routes through natural areas. Neighborhood park and recreation center trails are generally shorter and paved, with many offering water, restrooms and other amenities. These trails are also a good starting point for people who are new to hiking.

Conservation park trails provide a more immersive nature experience, with many featuring primitive paths through habitats such as upland pine flatwoods, wetlands and forests. Nature preserve trails take hikers even farther into natural areas, with unpaved paths, rougher terrain and fewer amenities.

Local hiking opportunities featured in past Hiking Sprees have included FishHawk Creek Nature Preserve, Alderman's Ford and Rhodine Scrub Nature Preserve, giving residents in the eastern portion of the county opportunities to participate close to home.

Hikers are encouraged to bring a trail map, compass or GPS, plenty of water, appropriate shoes, sun protection, snacks and bug spray. Trail conditions can vary, so participants should select routes that match their experience and fitness level.

For more information, including trail locations, maps and reward details, visit the website at https://hcfl.gov/.



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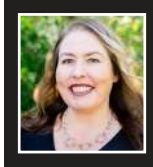

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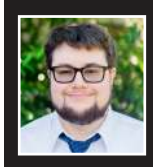

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By Nitish Rele



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Ever since it was launched in 2020, the Telluride SUV has received accolades from numerous automotive outlets. To keep the momentum going without resting on its laurels, Kia engineers have totally overhauled the hot seller for next year by skipping on the 2026 model. Wheelbase increases by 2.7 inches and length increases by 2.3 inches from its predecessor, opening up more leg and shoulder room for occupants. You now have a more rugged, bolder and boxier SUV than in the past, and the 2027 Telluride is already available at dealerships.

Out goes the previous 3.8-liter V6 engine to be replaced by a smaller but formidable 2.5-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine blasting off 274 horsepower (down 17) at 5,800 rpm and 262 pounds-feet of torque (up 49) at 4,000 rpm. Sure, the power is slightly less, but the 2027 Telluride moves quickly and gently down the road, with excellent ride and reasonable handling. Once again, the full-size AWD SUV is equipped with an eight-speed auto gear box that shifts quietly and smoothly. The suspension handled via an independent MacPherson strut front and multilink rear delivers a comfortable well-damped ride. The rack-mounted motor-drive power steering responds to the slightest movement, is perfectly weighted and provides excellent feedback. The driver has at their disposal several modes, such as eco, normal, sport and my mode, or, if venturing off-road, snow, mud and sand. Ground clearance for the X-Pro is 9.1 inches, 1.5 higher than the basic models.

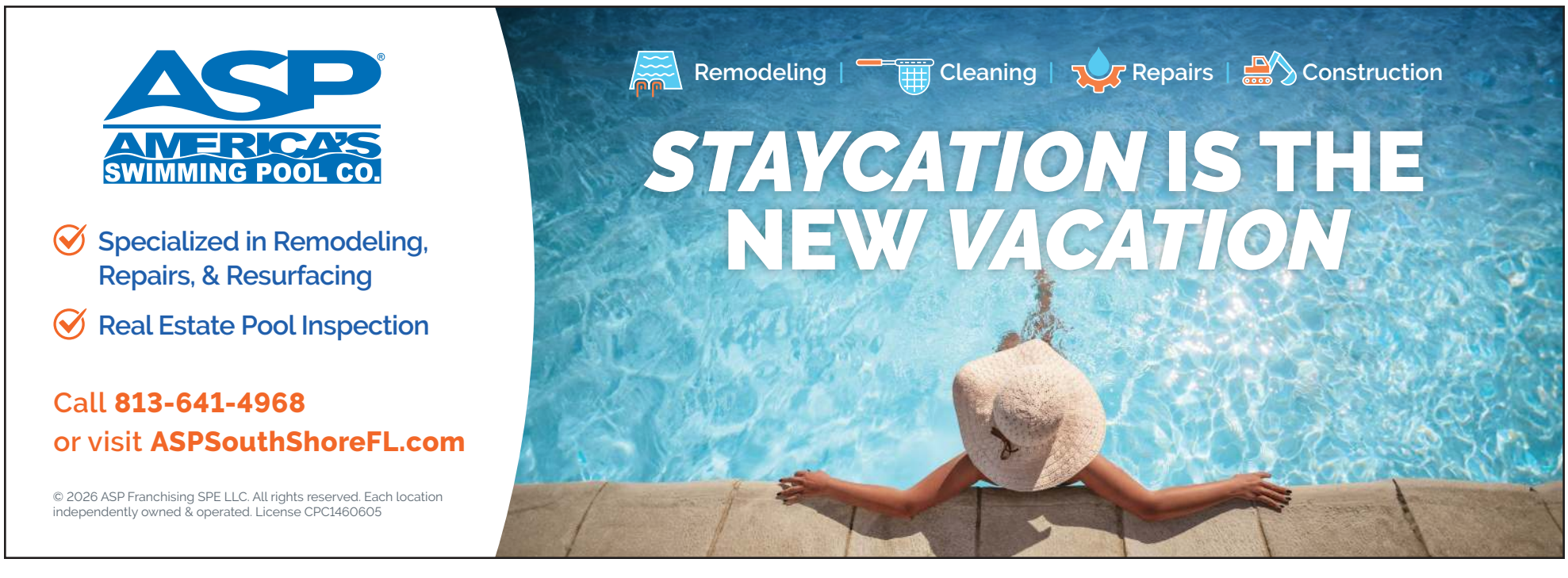
New vertical LED projector headlamps flank a high-gloss mesh grille with blacked-out wheel arches, squared-off lower black bumper and front/rear recovery hooks in case of our test X-Pro SX-Prestige. Step into the spacious cabin and you will notice that the dual 12.3-inch displays for digital cluster and infotainment have been replaced by a 30-inch curved screen with a 5-inch climate control display squeezed in between. Maximum cargo space is plentiful at 89.3 cubic feet. Hidden behind the power tilt/telescopic steering column is the start/stop button, which may take a little time to get used to, along with the obscured inside door handles. The two wireless phone charges under the dash are nifty. Other cool treats are the synthetic leather cooled/heated/massaging front seats, second-row heated/cooled captain's chairs, tri-zone auto AC, suede headliner, Meridian premium sound and stainless-steel pedals/scuff plates.

Ten airbags, a driver knee airbag, four-wheel antilock brakes with brake assist, vehicle stability/traction control, front/rear crumple zones, electronic limited-slip differential (automatically manages power delivery between wheels), blind-spot/rear cross-traffic/forward-collision avoidance, safe exit and lane-keep/follow assists, smart cruise control, daytime running lights and tire pressure monitoring system are standard.

Looking to buy a full-size SUV that you can on a whim take off the beaten path? Then the Telluride X-Pro with its off-road prowess makes perfect sense. This satisfying mix of people and cargo-hauling practicality is a pretty solid value for the money in our eyes.







TAMPA MUSEUM OF ART BRINGS THIRD GRADE LESSONS TO LIFE

By Marie Gilmore



Third grade students in Hillsborough County are getting a new opportunity to connect classroom lessons with art through an expanded educational field trip program at the Tampa Museum of Art.

The museum has developed new tours specifically around the third grade curriculum, giving students a hands-on way to explore topics they are learning in school. Developed in collaboration with local educators, the tours align with Florida academic standards and incorporate world cultures, elements of art and principles of design, storytelling and English/language arts vocabulary.

"Third grade is a pivotal year, when students begin connecting ideas across subjects and discovering how they see the world," said Tom Hochhausler, Penny and Jeff Vinik interim executive director of the Tampa Museum of Art. "By aligning our tours with what teachers are already teaching, we're making the museum a true extension of the classroom."

During each visit, students explore all of the museum's galleries and participate in critical-thinking conversations centered on four works of art from the museum's ancient, modern and contemporary collections. One conversation incorporates See/Think/Wonder, an artful thinking routine used in all Hillsborough County Public Schools elementary art classrooms.

Teachers also receive a lesson plan aligned with Florida State Standards for Visual Art and English Language Arts and can share specific learning objectives with museum educators.

We worked side by side with elementary art teachers and third-grade teachers to understand how to best engage with their students and what they are learning throughout the year," said Danette Albino, manager for K-12 Learning and Access at the Tampa Museum of Art. "Combining our experience with teacher expertise results in a seamless experience that ties each student's time at the museum directly to their work in the classroom."

The program is funded in part through the Hillsborough County school referendum approved by voters in November 2024. A portion of the funding supports educational field trips, helping students experience cultural and educational institutions throughout the community.

The museum expects approximately 11,000 students to participate during the 2026-27 school year, with capacity for up to 15,000.

"This is exactly what our community's investment in our students was intended to do," said Superintendent Van Ayres. "Through the millage, we are able to cover admission for students to visit cultural and educational institutions like the Tampa Museum of Art."

Located at 120 W. Gasparilla Plaza in downtown Tampa, the museum's Vinik Family Education Center provides more than 8,000 square feet for school tours, studio classes and educational programs.

For more information, visit TampaMuseum.org or call 813-274-8130.

$350,000 AWARD TO EXPAND CAREER SUPPORT FOR TAMPA BAY VETERANS

Staff Report



CareerSource Tampa Bay (CSTB) was awarded $350,000 in state appropriations funding for the Veterans Project for Job Recovery, sponsored by Florida Senator Nick DiCeglie and Representative Berny Jacques. The project will provide training, employment and supportive services to local veterans, transitioning service members and eligible spouses.

The project will prioritize veterans facing barriers to employment, including veterans experiencing homelessness, veterans with disabilities and women veterans. The goal is to help participants obtain or retain employment and pursue opportunities for career advancement and increased wages.

The investment will serve a significant veteran population in the Tampa Bay region. Nearly 175,000 veterans live in Hillsborough and Pinellas counties, representing approximately 12 percent of Florida's veteran population.

From July 1, 2025, through June 30, 2026, CSTB served 2,814 veterans across Hillsborough and Pinellas counties. Of those, 2,087 were veterans facing qualifying employment barriers, 666 were veterans with disabilities, 440 were women veteran and 258 were experiencing homelessness.

"Supporting those who have served our country is a vital part of our mission at CareerSource Tampa Bay," said Keidrian Kunkel, president and CEO of CareerSource Tampa Bay. "With such a significant veteran population in our region, this funding represents an important investment in veterans and their individual needs, while creating stronger pathways to translate their military skills and experience into meaningful, high-demand and high-wage careers."

About CareerSource Tampa Bay

Effective July 1, 2024, CareerSource Tampa Bay is the designated local workforce development board serving Hillsborough County and Pinellas County. CareerSource Tampa Bay is governed by a board of directors whose members are appointed by a consortium of chief local elected officials (CLEOs) from each county commission.

CareerSource Tampa Bay is an equal opportunity employer/program. Auxiliary aids and services are available upon request to individuals with disabilities. All voice telephone numbers listed may be reached by persons using TTY/TDD equipment via the Florida Relay Service at 711.

CareerSource Tampa Bay is the direct service provider for various workforce programs which are supported by the U.S. Department of Labor, Health and Human Services, Agriculture and other agencies as part of awards totaling $38,665,000 with 93 percent federally funded (updated annually, as of September 2025).

For more information about CareerSource Tampa Bay, please visit the website at www.careersourcetampabay.com.

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COUNTY FAIR CELEBRATES 25TH ANNUAL HARVEST AWARDS

Staff Report



The Greater Hillsborough County Fair Association celebrated a special milestone with the 25th Annual Hillsborough County Fair Harvest Awards on October 20 at the Hillsborough County Fair Exhibition Building, located at 215 Sydney Washer Rd. in Dover.

For 25 years, the Harvest Awards have recognized individuals, families, businesses and organizations whose dedication, leadership and service have strengthened agriculture and enriched the Hillsborough County community. The awards celebrate those who help preserve the county's agricultural heritage while supporting its continued growth for future generations.

The Harvest Awards reflect the fair's broader mission to provide events, experiences, entertainment and education for families and children of all ages, while responding to the agricultural history, growth and interests of the Hillsborough County community. The fair also strives to celebrate tradition, bring the community together, create lasting memories and support youth as the leaders of tomorrow.

The 2026 Harvest Award recipients were:

• Farm Family: Astin Farms.

• Lifetime Achievement: John Davidson.

• Woman in Agriculture: Hilda Castillo.

• Outstanding Public & Community Service: Plant City Commons Community Garden.

• Outstanding Agribusiness: Everglades Farm Equipment.

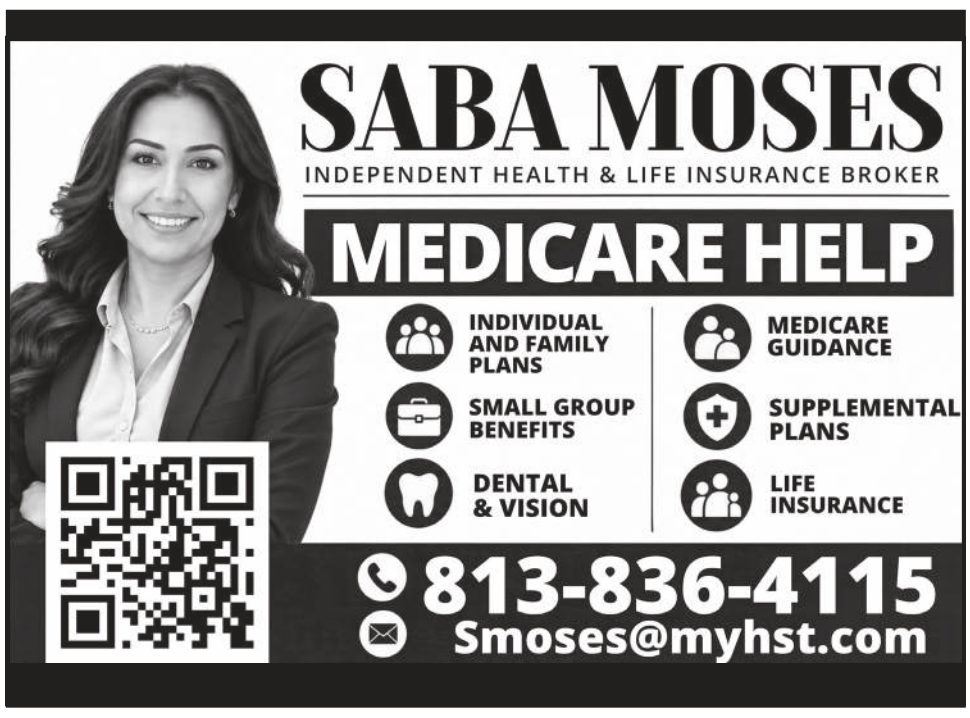
This year's 25th anniversary celebration was especially fitting, as the Hillsborough County Fair prepares for its 2026 theme, 'Celebrate America.' The theme provides an opportunity to celebrate the traditions, people and communities that make our country special — including the farmers, ranchers, agricultural businesses and families who have helped shape Hillsborough County.

The Harvest Awards bring together agricultural leaders, community partners, families and friends to recognize the people and organizations whose work helps ensure agriculture remains an important part of Hillsborough County's future.

Additional Harvest Awards details are available at www.hillsboroughcountyfair.com.

About the Hillsborough County Fair

The Greater Hillsborough County Fair serves the community through family-friendly events, education, entertainment and opportunities that showcase Hillsborough County youth and agriculture. The 2026 Hillsborough County Fair, themed 'Celebrate America,' will be held from Thursday, November 5, through Sunday, November 15, at the Hillsborough County Fairgrounds in Dover.



BUSINESS PANELS HELP STUDENTS EXPLORE CAREER PATHS

By Brian Bokor



High school seniors across East and South Hillsborough explored jobs and training options through Future Career Academy Business Panels held at their schools. The events brought local employers and community partners into schools to help students plan for life after graduation.

Workforce Development Partners organized the panels as the first major Future Career Academy experience of the 2026-27 school year. The program helps graduating seniors learn about jobs, training and career paths available within their communities.

For students still deciding what comes next, the panels offered a place to begin. They could hear from employers, ask questions and consider choices they might not have explored before. The focus was on helping seniors connect their plans with real opportunities.

East Hillsborough's schedule included Newsome, Bloomingdale and Spoto high schools on October 14. Brandon High School, Riverview High School and Pepin Academies' Riverview campus followed on October 15.

South Hillsborough's schedule included East Bay, Lennard and Morgan high schools on October 28. Sumner High School and South County Career Center followed on October 29.

At Riverview High School, the October 15 panel brought together people representing health care, construction, banking, utilities, retail, public safety and other career fields. Students also learned about apprenticeships, which combine paid work with training.

Health care and banking were represented by Julie Linde of BayCare and Kendra Dock of Regions Bank. Fred Lay of Construction Service Inc. and Will Fike of Mattamy Homes brought the construction industry's perspective.

Other panelists included Stephen Foster of TECO, Donnie Fesser of Publix and Billy Wilkerson of Hillsborough County Public Schools Apprenticeships. Deputy Cumba represented the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, while Wendy Foster represented MacDill Air Force Base.

The discussion covered questions many seniors face: What jobs can they get after high school? Will employers train them? How can a first job lead to a lasting career? Presentation prompts asked speakers to explain starting positions and ways employees could advance.

Students were also encouraged to consider how working while still in school could help them reach their goals. Other topics included further education and starting a business, giving students several ways to think about building their futures.

At Riverview High School, English teacher Christina Friend handed out 'Business Panel Bingo' worksheets. The activity asked students to identify industries, starting jobs and paths for career growth. They also looked for companies that offered training or hired workers with a high school diploma.

The worksheet gave students specific details to listen for throughout the discussion. They were asked to include company names in their answers, helping them connect each opportunity with an employer they could learn more about later.

The activity also encouraged students to consider more than pay when comparing jobs. It asked them to identify employers offering paid time off, retirement savings plans and help paying tuition. Slides covered health insurance, mentoring, apprenticeships and extra pay for bilingual skills.

Workplace expectations were another part of the exercise. Students considered the value of good attendance and a positive attitude, along with other traits employers seek. They also recorded advice about what seniors could do now to prepare for work.

Each student was asked to develop a question for a panelist and write down the response. Students were then asked to share the most important thing they learned and whether any company or career interested them.

After the panel, students had a chance to speak with the guests and ask more questions. These conversations gave them time to follow up on details that mattered to their own plans.

The panels began a three-part series of career experiences. Business tours were planned for January and February, allowing students to visit workplaces and meet employees. Future Fair Hiring Events were planned for April, when students could connect with employers and apply for jobs.

Community guests were also invited to lunches prepared by participating schools' culinary arts programs. The lunches provided another way to showcase student skills while connecting school leaders, panelists and community partners.

Learn more about Future Career Academy and ways to take part at https://workforcedevelopmentpartners.com/.



MRS. ROPER ROMP EVENT RETURNS TO SUPPORT FORGOTTEN ANGELS

By Marie Gilmore



Members of the GFWC Brandon Junior Woman's Club and Charity Chicks invite the community to dress in their best Mrs. Roper-inspired outfits for the second annual Mrs. Roper Romp on Saturday, November 14.

The GFWC Brandon Junior Woman's Club and Charity Chicks will bring colorful costumes, community spirit and a little Mrs. Roper flair to Valrico on Saturday, November 14, when they host the second annual Mrs. Roper Romp benefiting Forgotten Angels.

The themed community walk and charity event will take place from 9:30-11:30 a.m. at Valrico Park, located at 707 S. Miller Rd. in Valrico. Participants are encouraged to dress in colorful, Mrs. Roper-inspired outfits and take part in games, prizes, opportunity baskets, a 50/50 drawing, a best-costume contest and a scavenger hunt.

Following the morning activities at the park, participants will head to Voodoo Brewing Co., located at 3432 E. SR 60 in Valrico, from 11:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m. for lunch and more Mrs. Roper-themed fun.

Registration is $25 per person. Participants can register using the QR code on the event invitation or register and pay on-site at either the park or Voodoo Brewing Co.

Proceeds from the event will benefit Forgotten Angels and its efforts to address food insecurity and support young people who have aged out of foster care.

The event reflects the Brandon Junior Woman's Club's longstanding commitment to serving the community. The GFWC Brandon Junior Woman's Club was established in 1955 and has supported a wide range of local initiatives throughout its history, including the Brandon Civic Center, the School of Hope for Exceptional Children, preschool vision screenings, the Special Olympics, CPR equipmen and the Nettles Group Home.

The club also continues to care for its historic clubhouse, located at 129 N. Moon Ave. in Brandon. Originally built in 1928 by the Brandon Woman's Club, the building has served the community in numerous ways over the decades, including as a polling place, driver's licensing facility, World War II draft board, health clinic and library. The historic building is designated as a Hillsborough County landmark and was later deeded to the Brandon Junior Woman's Club.

Today, the organization continues its mission of improving the community through volunteer service and financial support. Its programs focus on areas including children, domestic and sexual violence awareness, arts and culture, civic engagement, education, environmental efforts, health and wellness and literacy.

Contact Kori Hamilton at 813-720-6101 or treasurerbjwc33509@gmail.com. Visit www.gfwcbrandonjuniors.org for additional information.

UNIQUE GIVING MACHINE OFFERS GIFTS FOR THOSE IN NEED

Staff Report



This holiday season, Tampa Bay residents are invited to share the joy of giving in a unique, hands-on way. Have you ever purchased warm meals, essential medical care, clothing for a child, or livestock for a family in need from a vending machine? From November 16 through December 7, visitors to Regency Square in Brandon can experience instant generosity through the Light the World Giving Machine.

Located in the central courtyard next to the AMC Theatre at Regency Square (2400–2478 West Brandon Blvd, Brandon, FL 33511), these vibrant red vending machines replace traditional snacks and sodas with tangible charitable items. Visitors use an interactive touchscreen to choose essential goods and services that benefit local nonprofit organizations and global humanitarian programs. An official launch event and ribbon-cutting ceremony will take place on Tuesday, November 17 at 11:00 a.m.

"We were very excited to be selected to participate in the Giving Machine. We were drawn to the concept because it offers our community a simple way to make a meaningful difference in a child's life. At Joshua House, children and teens who have experienced abuse, neglect, or abandonment need opportunities to feel safe, supported, and hopeful about their future. We're grateful to be part of this effort, and excited for the care and generosity it will bring to the foster children we serve," said DeDe Grundel, executive director, Friends of Joshua House Foundation.

Every item purchased at the Light the World Giving Machine at Regency Square directly benefits one of four participating Tampa Bay area charities and two global charities: •Joshua House
•Gulf Coast Jewish Family and Community Services
•kidsPACK
•Unicef (Global)
•Coptic Orthodox Charities
•CWS Global (Global)

Items in the machine will range from $10 to $100, making giving accessible for individuals and families of all ages. For those looking to maximize their community impact, the 777 Challenge allows donors to enter "777" on the Giving Machine touchscreen to purchase one of every available donation item for a total of $1,280, supporting every nonprofit represented in the machine.

100% of every donation made at the Giving Machine goes directly to the participating charities.The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints fully covers all operational and administrative costs as a gift to the community.

Since launching in 2017, the Light The World Giving Machine initiative has expanded to over 120 cities worldwide, raising more than $70 million in humanitarian aid and providing lifelines to hundreds of thousands of individuals worldwide.

To learn more about the Light The World Giving Machine and view event schedules, visit GivingMachine.org or follow @GivingMachineFlorida on Instagram and Facebook.

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MAKE-A-WISH HELPS VALRICO TEEN STEP INTO NFL BROADCASTING BOOTH

Staff Report



Valrico's Justin Pogorzala, 15, met his broadcasting hero, CBS Sports announcer Kevin Harlan, as part of a Make-A-Wish Southern Florida experience.

A Valrico teenager whose heart condition forced him to give up competitive sports recently found a new way to stay close to the games he loves when Make-A-Wish Southern Florida helped make his dream come true.

Justin Pogorzala, 15, requires an implantable cardiac defibrillator to protect against sudden cardiac arrest. Before his diagnosis changed his plans, Justin was a promising young athlete. He has since channeled his passion for sports into a new goal — becoming a play-by-play broadcaster.

His broadcasting hero is CBS Sports announcer Kevin Harlan, and Justin's wish was to meet Harlan and experience what it is like to work behind the scenes of an NFL broadcast.

That wish became a multi-day VIP experience in South Florida when the Kansas City Chiefs faced the Miami Dolphins at Hard Rock Stadium.

Justin not only met Harlan but spent time with the veteran broadcaster, learning about his career and getting an insider's perspective on how a professional NFL broadcast comes together.

The two quickly connected over their shared love of sports. Harlan offered Justin career advice and was impressed by the teenager's knowledge of the game and his voice, telling him he sees a promising future for him in broadcasting.

Justin also had the opportunity to wear a headset and sit in the broadcast booth during the game, giving him a first-hand look at the action from the perspective of the announcers.

The experience extended well beyond the broadcast booth. Justin met players on the field, watched as Kansas City quarterback Patrick Mahomes was interviewed and received team gear and memorabilia.

His family was also treated to a memorable experience, arriving at and leaving the stadium in a chauffeur-driven limousine.

The wish was made possible through a collaborative effort involving CBS, the NFL, the Kansas City Chiefs and the Miami Dolphins, all of which helped create a behind-the-scenes experience Justin and his family will remember.

For Justin, the opportunity provided more than a chance to meet a sports broadcasting idol. It offered encouragement and a glimpse into a possible future after his health challenges forced him to leave competitive athletics.

The experience demonstrated how a passion for sports can take on a new form and how a dream can provide direction during a difficult time.

Make-A-Wish Southern Florida provided photos and video from Justin's experience. Materials are credited to Make-A-Wish Southern Florida.

LIONS CLUB CONTINUES HOLIDAY TRADITION WITH LUMINARIA PROJECT

Staff Report



Brandon Lions Club members prepare for the annual Luminaria Project, a holiday tradition that began in 2002. The $9 kits include 15 bags, candles, cups and sand.

For more than two decades, the Brandon Lions Club has been helping local families brighten Christmas Eve while supporting charitable causes through its annual Luminaria Project. The tradition began in 2002 and continues this year with luminaria kits available throughout the Greater Brandon area.

Each year, residents, neighborhoods and community groups participate by lining walkways and driveways with glowing, white luminaria. Traditionally displayed on Christmas Eve, the simple lights create a warm and festive atmosphere while supporting the Brandon Lions Club's charitable work.

Each luminaria kit includes 15 white paper bags, 15 long-burning votive candles, 15 candle cups and a bag of sand to provide a stable base for each candle. The kits are available for $9 each.

Orders must be placed by Sunday, November 15. No payment is required when placing an order. All orders are cash on delivery and may be picked up or, for orders of 15 kits or more, delivered to participating neighborhoods.

Orders will be available for pickup or delivery on Saturday, December 19, at the Brandon Lions Club, located at 610 Limona Rd. in Brandon.

To order, contact Joe Kuebler at 813-263-2522 or email brandonlionsclub@gmail.com.

Proceeds from the Luminaria Project benefit Brandon Lions Charities, a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that supports eyesight and hearing programs at the state and national levels. Locally, the organization supports Dogs Inc., ECHO, Family Promise, the Brandon High School Don Bishop Track Meet, Selah Freedom Inc. and other community needs.

The Brandon Lions Club, chartered in 1954, is the area's oldest community service organization. While Lions Clubs are known for their commitment to sight conservation, prevention of blindness and assisting those experiencing vision loss, the Brandon club supports a variety of charitable and community programs.

The annual Luminaria Project reflects the club's long-standing commitment to combining community service with opportunities for residents to come together and celebrate the holiday season.

The Brandon Lions Club meets on the first and third Thursdays of each month at its clubhouse. Dinner begins at 6:15 p.m., followed by the meeting at 7 p.m.

For more information about the Luminaria Project, Brandon Lions Club activities or membership opportunities, contact the club or attend an upcoming meeting.



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NEWSOME TEACHER WINS $500 IN NATIONWIDE GIVEAWAY

Staff Report

A Newsome High School teacher will have an extra $500 to put toward classroom needs after being selected as one of 20 educators nationwide to receive a prize through Arch Painting's annual $10K Teacher Giveaway.

Riley Kay of Newsome High School in Lithia was randomly selected among teachers from across the country for the 2026 giveaway. Each of the 20 winning educators received $500 to use toward school supplies and other resources for their classrooms.

The annual program, sponsored by Arch Painting, a nationwide commercial painting contractor, is designed to help teachers offset some of the expenses they frequently cover out of their own pockets.

With educators often working with limited classroom budgets, the giveaway provides teachers with additional resources to purchase materials that can enhance their students' learning experiences.

"Our annual teacher giveaway strives to support teachers nationwide by defraying some of the out-of-pocket costs they face supplying their classroom each school year," said Richard Kilgannon, president and CEO of Arch Painting. "Teachers are the foundation to the communities we serve — helping to educate our future employees and customers. Supporting teachers has long been part of Arch Painting's mission."

Kay was among the 2026 recipients selected from entries submitted by educators throughout the United States.

The $500 award can be used for a variety of classroom needs, including instructional materials, school supplies, educational resources and other items that help teachers create an engaging learning environment.

Another 2026 winner, Assunta Spino of Parthum Elementary School in Lawrence, Massachusetts, described how she used her award to provide students with tools for self-regulation and concentration, as well as classroom supplies and academic resources.

Spino purchased Kickbands and Wibble Wobble chair feet, along with birthday prizes, colored pencils, dry erase markers and erasers, laminating sheets, fidget toys and math posters.

"I am so grateful to be chosen by Arch Painting for the Teacher Giveaway. This is a tremendous gift for our students," Spino said.

Arch Painting, founded in 1997, provides commercial painting services across the United States. The company says supporting the communities it serves is an important part of its mission, including recognizing the contributions of educators.

For Kay and the other 19 teachers selected nationwide, the giveaway provides an opportunity to bring additional resources into their classrooms as the 2026-27 school year continues.

For more information about Arch Painting and its community initiatives, visit Arch Painting.

TAMPA THEATRE CELEBRATES 100 YEARS OF MOVIE MAGIC

Staff Report



A Tampa landmark that has entertained generations of moviegoers celebrated a major milestone on October 15 when Tampa Theatre officially marked its 100th anniversary.

Located at 711 N. Franklin St. in downtown Tampa, the historic theater opened its doors on October 15, 1926 as a grand movie palace designed by renowned theater architect John Eberson. A century later, the theater remains a vibrant cultural destination for movies, concerts, comedy, special events and community programs.

Tampa Theatre was designed in an ornate atmospheric style intended to make guests feel as though they were sitting outdoors in a Mediterranean courtyard. Its elaborate architecture combines Baroque, Greek Revival and Italian Renaissance influences, while its signature ceiling recreates a nighttime sky complete with twinkling stars.

The building also made Tampa history as the city's first commercial building with air conditioning, a major attraction when it opened.

The theater celebrated its centennial with a 1920s-themed birthday celebration that recreated elements of its original opening night. Festivities included swing dancing, live jazz and red-carpet photos beneath the historic marquee.

Inside, the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra and Tampa Theatre's 1,400-pipe Mighty Wurlitzer Theatre Organ provided live music for a screening of Buster Keaton's silent comedy *Sherlock Jr.* The celebration concluded with Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, which was also part of the theater's original opening program, paired with modern special effects.

The anniversary comes following a $24.5 million restoration project designed to preserve the theater's historic character while preparing it for its second century.

The 1,238-seat Duncan Auditorium underwent extensive restoration, including repairs to its original plaster, cleaning of decorative elements and preservation of historic fixtures. The iconic starry ceiling was also refreshed.

The project also included improvements to backstage rigging, infrastructure and HVAC systems, along with construction of the new 3,000-square-foot Jackie Price Education Center for year-round educational programming and events.

Tampa Theatre's history includes a major preservation effort in the 1970s, when local citizens and city leaders worked to save the building from demolition. That community support helped transform the theater into the nonprofit cultural venue it remains today.

Now, 100 years after its opening, Tampa Theatre continues to serve as a gathering place for the community while preserving a unique piece of Tampa's history.

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FOOD BANK EXPANDS PROGRAMS TO HELP SENIORS AND STUDENTS FIGHT HUNGER

By Libby Hopkins



The mission of United Food Bank and Services in Plant City is to help those in need by moving them from a "state of hunger" and "impoverishment" to self-sufficiency, empowerment and self-reliance.

The organization is succeeding in this mission through two unique programs: Feeding Our Legacy, which helps local seniors, and Feeding Our Future, which helps local school and college students.

"Our Feeding Our Legacy program helps local seniors access food and essential household resources closer to home," said Mary Heysek, United Food Bank and Services' president and CEO. "We visit two off-site locations each month, one in Bealsville and the other at Plant City Towers in downtown Plant City, to serve seniors who may have difficulty traveling to our main facility or lack reliable transportation. We currently have 376 seniors registered and served through this program, and that number continues to grow. Our goal is to make nutritious food and essential supplies more accessible while helping seniors maintain their independence and quality of life."

Seniors are an increasingly vulnerable population, with older adults representing one of the fastest-growing segments of the homeless population. Too often, seniors must make difficult choices between purchasing nutritious food and paying for medications or other essential expenses.

"Through our Feeding Our Legacy program, we work to ease some of that burden, improve access to food and resources and help our seniors maintain their health, independence and dignity," Heysek said.

The organization's college hunger program, part of Feeding Our Future, partners with 26 local schools to provide 1,300 weekend food bags each week during the school year and 1,500 break bags each week during nonschool time.

"We also partner with two colleges to help address food insecurity among students at Hillsborough College by providing food assistance each week," Heysek said. "We currently serve approximately 35 students weekly. United Food Bank and Services stocks an on-site student food pantry at the University of Florida IFAS, extending our support to students beyond our immediate community."

United Food Bank and Services is looking to build partnerships in the Valrico, Brandon and Lithia areas to extend its reach and make food assistance more accessible to families and individuals who can't travel to its Plant City location.

"As our community continues to grow, it is important that we look at where additional support may be needed and how we can work with local organizations to reach people closer to where they live," Heysek said.

For more information, visit ufbpc.org or contact Heysek at 813-764-0265. The office is located at 702 E. Alsobrook St. in Plant City.







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NEW BRANDON FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER HONORS JUDGE KATHERINE ESSRIG

Staff Report



Families in Brandon have a new, expanded resource for support, parenting guidance and children's developmental services with the opening of the Katherine Essrig Children's Board Family Resource Center.

The Children's Board of Hillsborough County will officially dedicate the center on Monday, November 16, recognizing the longtime service and advocacy of the Honorable Judge Katherine G. Essrig. The new facility provides a welcoming place where families can connect with services and find support to help their children thrive.

Named in honor of Essrig, a Tampa native and longtime champion of children and families, the center recognizes her more than two decades of service on the Children's Board of Hillsborough County Board of Directors. Throughout her more than 30-year judicial career and community involvement, Essrig has advocated for stronger child welfare systems and improved outcomes for children and families throughout the county.

The expanded Brandon location builds on the Children's Board's commitment to helping families access resources within their own communities. The center is funded by the Children's Board of Hillsborough County and operated by Lutheran Services Florida.

Services include family support, developmental screenings, parenting assistance, community referrals and other designed to help children remain healthy and safe, stay on track developmentally and resources prepare for learning and success.

The center also provides opportunities for families to build connections and identify support systems that can make a difference as children grow. By bringing services together in a welcoming community setting, the resource center helps parents and caregivers find assistance and guidance when they need it.

The Children's Board of Hillsborough County invests in quality programs that support the success of children and families throughout the county. Its work focuses on ensuring children are healthy and safe, developmentally on track, supported by strong families and ready to learn.

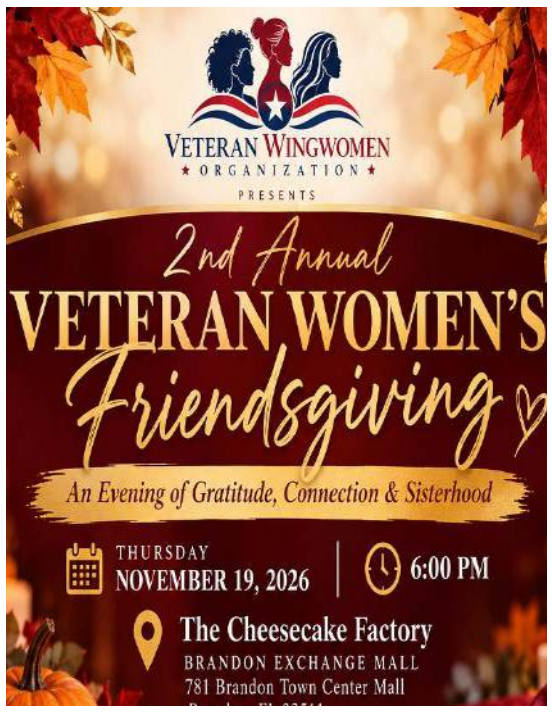
In 2025, the Children's Board invested $60 million in grants supporting more than 80 nonprofit organizations and 152 programs serving children and families.

The new Brandon center expands access to those efforts locally while honoring Essrig's lasting contributions to the community. Its dedication celebrates both the opening of a larger resource for area families and the legacy of a leader whose work has helped shape services and advocacy for children across Hillsborough County.

Families seeking support can visit the Katherine Essrig Children's Board Family Resource Center at 308 W. Robertson St. in Brandon.

VETERAN WOMEN INVITED TO SECOND ANNUAL FRIENDSGIVING IN BRANDON

Staff Report



Women veterans in Brandon and surrounding communities will have an opportunity to connect, share stories and celebrate the spirit of Thanksgiving during the second annual Veteran Women's Friendsgiving on Thursday, November 19.

Hosted by Veteran WingWomen Organization founder KeishaMarie Douglas, a retired U.S. Air Force veteran, the gathering will take place at 6 p.m. at The Cheesecake Factory at Brandon Exchange mall, located 781 Brandon Town Center Dr. in Brandon.

The event was created to provide women who have served in the military with a welcoming space to build friendships, strengthen connections and enjoy time with others who understand the unique experiences of military service.

For Douglas, the idea is rooted in a Thanksgiving memory from 2001, when she was deployed overseas with the Air Force. Although her military role was as a dental assistant, she was temporarily assigned to work in a dining facility during the holiday.

She remembers walking from table to table in a makeshift dining tent, talking with fellow service members and checking on how everyone was doing.

Twenty-five years later, that experience continues to influence her desire to bring people together and help others feel welcomed, valued and connected. That mission is especially meaningful during the holiday season, when some veterans may find themselves far from family or without a strong support network nearby.

Douglas hopes Friendsgiving will offer more than a shared meal. It is an opportunity for women veterans to spend time with others who understand military life, exchange experiences and develop relationships that can continue long after the gathering ends.

Through Veteran WingWomen Organization, Douglas works to create opportunities for women veterans to find community and support as they navigate life during and after military service.

The organization's Friendsgiving event reflects that mission by encouraging camaraderie and reminding participants that they do not have to navigate their experiences alone. Women veterans interested in attending the second annual gathering must register by Sunday, November 15. Space is limited, and advance registration is required.

To register, visit https://forms.gle/e6veQhLcLo2dw2GN7.

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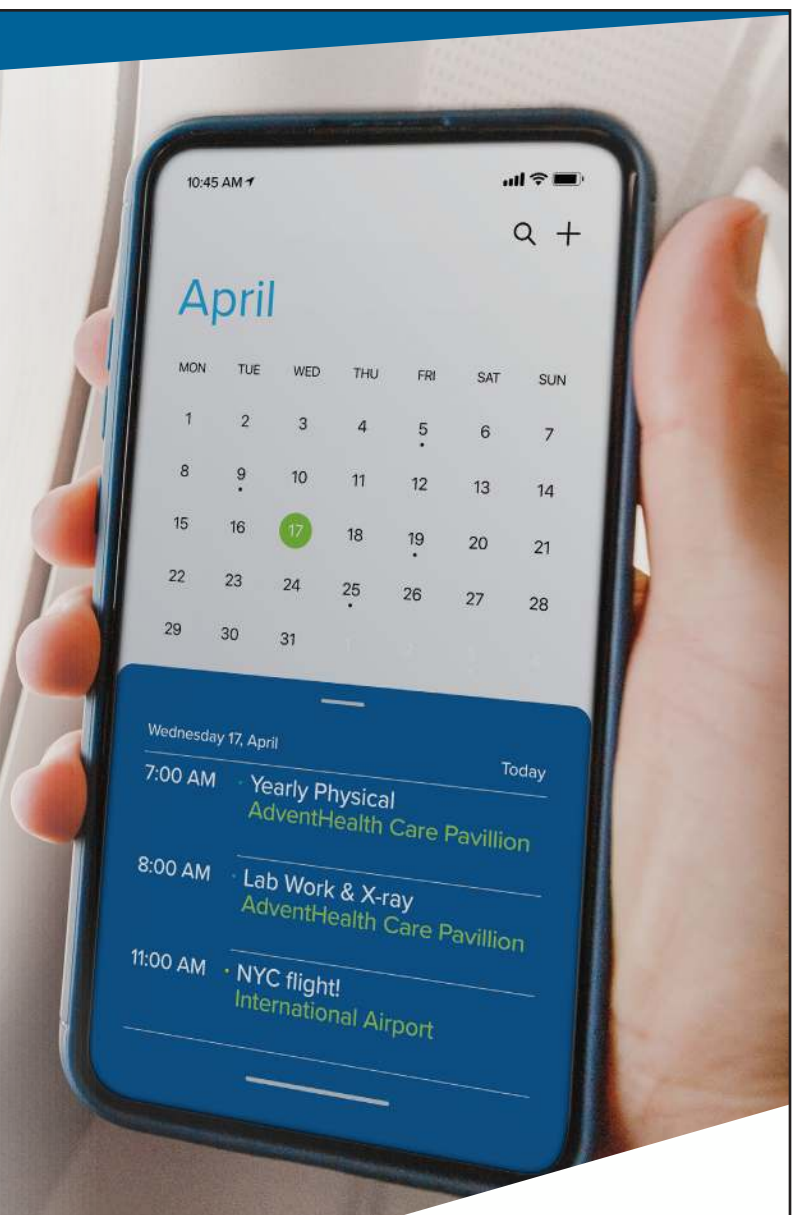

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INSPIRA SUPPORTS NEURODIVERGENT AND AT-RISK CHILDREN

By Libby Hopkins



At Inspira Tampa Bay, it embraces community development and a cultural humility approach that fosters inclusion for marginalized, vulnerable and historically underserved individuals.

At Inspira Tampa Bay, it embraces community development and a cultural humility approach that fosters inclusion for marginalized, vulnerable and historically underserved individuals.

Founded by speech language pathologists, occupational therapy practitioners and dedicated community volunteers, their organization exists because every child deserves access to resources, opportunities and a community that believes in their potential.

"Like the butterfly, every child develops at their own pace, and with the right support, every child can flourish," said Jennifer Torres, program director of Inspira Tampa Bay Inc. "We inspire families to strive for a better tomorrow by equipping neurodivergent and at-risk children throughout Southern Hillsborough County with high-quality programs, meaningful resources and inclusive opportunities while educating and empowering the community to create lasting change."

Recognizing the growing need for comprehensive support beyond traditional services, Inspira Tampa Bay Inc. was born from the compassionate vision and community commitment of Southshore Bilingual Therapy Inc. Established as a nonprofit organization, Inspira was created to expand access to meaningful resources, therapeutic support, education and opportunities for children and families throughout Southern Hillsborough County.

"The name 'Inspira,' derived from the Spanish word for inspire, reflects the heart of our organization: to inspire hope, encourage possibility and empower individuals and families to strive for a better tomorrow," Torres said. "We focus on expanding opportunities and improving outcomes for vulnerable and underserved populations, including at-risk and neurodivergent children, parents and caregivers, aspiring minority professionals and professionals who serve these communities."

Inspira partners with many local business and churches to host community events.

"Our current book drive is in collaboration with The United Methodist Church of Sun City Center to support our Sensory Santa event on December 12," Torres said. "This year will be our fifth annual Sensory Santa event for the community. The church is collecting books through a book drive both in person and online."

"Children can take their time exploring holiday activities, enjoying sensory-friendly play, creating crafts, participating in adapted games and meeting Santa in a way that feels comfortable for them." Torres said.

To learn more, visit its website directly at https://inspiratampabay.org or call 813-323-5783. They are located at 707 W. Lake Dr. in Wimauma.

CHAMBER CELEBRATES INSURED AMERICAN FAMILY'S 10 YEARS

Staff Report



The Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce (BRCC) recently celebrated Insured American Family with a special ribbon-cutting ceremony recognizing the veteran-owned, family-run insurance agency for more than 10 years in business.

Chamber members, community leaders, friends and supporters gathered to congratulate the Insured American Family team on this important business milestone. Guests enjoyed networking, a charcuterie spread, custom desserts, giveaways and the opportunity to learn more about the agency and the services it provides.

Insured American Family provides personalized insurance solutions for individuals, families and businesses, including health, Medicare, life, supplemental, dental, vision and small-business coverage. Licensed in 36 states, the agency works with major insurance carriers to compare available plans and help clients identify coverage options that fit their individual needs and budgets.

BRCC President Amber Aaron welcomed those in attendance and thanked the community for coming together to support a fellow chamber member. She then introduced Insured American Family owner Craig Gruenbaum, who shared more about the company, its history and its commitment to serving clients.

Following the official ribbon cutting, BRCC Ambassador Lawrence Barnes presented a special proclamation recognizing the occasion and declaring the day 'Insured American Family Day.'

The Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce congratulates Gruenbaum and the entire Insured American Family team on more than a decade in business and wishes them continued growth and success in the years ahead.





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HOPE SERVICES EXPANDS JOB AND LIFE SKILLS TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

By Libby Hopkins



Hope Services is a workforce development organization dedicated to helping individuals overcome barriers to employment and achieve sustainable careers.

Hope Services was founded in 2003 to help individuals with disabilities and other barriers to employment build brighter futures. Since then, it has grown to offer personalized employment services and a Life Skills and Vocational Training Center with programs in culinary arts, construction, retail and hospitality.

"Our goal is to help each person gain the skills, confidence and support needed to enjoy a meaningful career and greater independence," said Hope Services' Founder and CEO, Cindy Bray. "The greatest reward is seeing someone gain confidence, find a job and build independence."

Hope Services' mission is to provide personalized vocational services that enable its clients to realize their career potential.

"At our company, we know that disabilities do not undercut a person's value or potential, and we've found that these individuals carry with them unique giftedness that can enrich a company's culture," Bray said. "As the company has grown tremendously throughout West-Central Florida, our passion and core beliefs stay the same — we care, we help and we give hope."

Hope Services offers personalized job coaching, career guidance, job placement, on-the-job training and work-based learning experience to help individuals find and succeed in meaningful employment. Its Life Skills and Vocational Training Center provides hands-on training in culinary arts, construction, retail and hospitality.

"We help people build practical skills, confidence and independence, with support tailored to their individual goals," Bray said. "In 2025, we served 689 individuals and helped 423 people find jobs. Behind those numbers are lives changed, families strengthened and local employers connected with capable workers. To me, our greatest impact is giving people hope and a positive future."

Bray and her team are excited to expand into Hudson with a second Life Skills and Vocational Training Center.

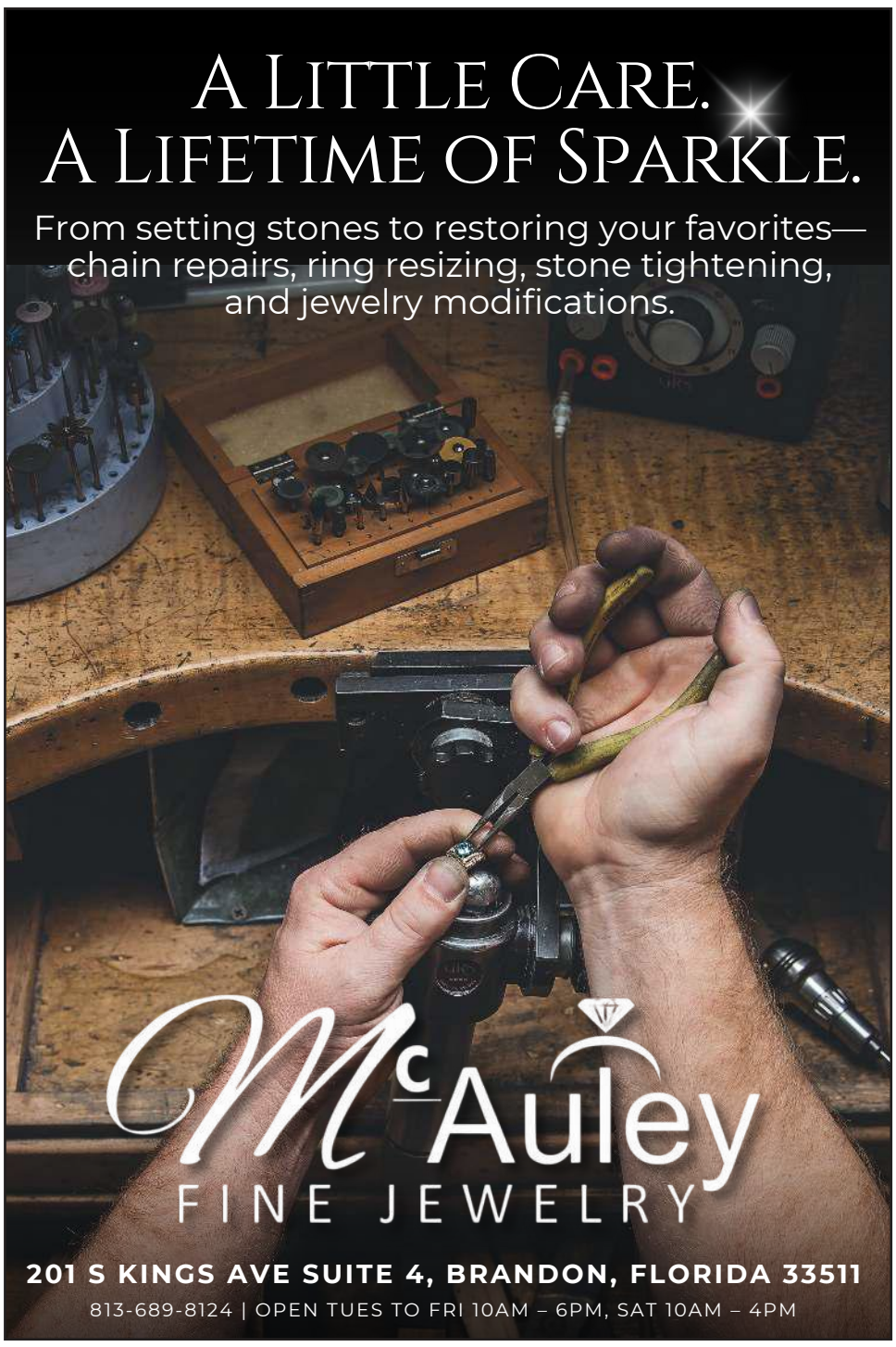
"We anticipate renovations beginning in January 2027, with a hopeful grand opening in spring," Bray said. "The center will offer training in culinary arts, construction, health care skills and retail. A future second phase may include a thrift store and coffee shop, creating additional opportunities for hands-on learning and meaningful employment."

Bray knows that community support makes Hope Services' work possible.

If you would like to learn more about Hope Services, you can visit its website at https://hopegetsjobs.org/ or call 813-907-3731. Its office is located at 5426 Land O' Lakes Blvd. in Land O' Lakes.







WINTER VILLAGE IS RETURNING TO CURTIS HIXON PARK

Staff Report

Real-ice skating, local shopping and festive entertainment highlight annual tradition

Tampa's Downtown waterfront will transform into a festive holiday destination when Winter Village, presented by the Tampa Bay Lightning, returns to Curtis Hixon Park from Friday, November 20, through Sunday, January 3, 2027.

The annual event will bring the community together for real-ice skating, holiday shopping, seasonal food and beverages, live entertainment and family-friendly activities along the Tampa Riverwalk.

"Winter Village is a celebration of what makes Tampa's Downtown special: our community, our local businesses and the public spaces that bring us together," said Kenyetta Hairston-Bridges, president and CEO of the Tampa Downtown Partnership. "Each year, Winter Village creates opportunities for residents and visitors to connect, support local businesses and make lasting holiday memories."

The real-ice skating rink will once again serve as the centerpiece of the event. Skating sessions last 75 minutes and include skate rental. Tickets cost $17 for skaters over age 12 and $15 for children under 12. College students with valid identification can receive $2 off skating rentals on Thursdays from 5-9 p.m.

Winter Village will feature weekly programming throughout the season, including silent discos, Saturday night entertainment from 7-8 p.m. and seasonal character visits on select Sundays from 1-4 p.m. Guests may encounter Frosty, Elsa, Olaf, the Grinch and the Gingerbread Man. Special ice-skating performances will also take place on select dates.

Visitors can explore The Shops of Winter Village, delivered by PODS, featuring eight full-season retailers, seven partial-season shops and 18 rotating vendors. Offerings will include handmade jewelry, apparel, home decor, candles, Tampa-themed gifts, baked goods and artwork.

Shop Small Weekend will take place Saturday and Sunday, November 28-29, from 1-4 p.m., highlighting young entrepreneurs. The first 100 shoppers at the Winter Village Shop will receive a free commemorative tote bag.

Food and beverage vendors, including Hot Dog Fever, Whatever Pops, Blind Tiger and Gourmet Crepes and Coffee, will offer everything from coffee and pastries to crepes, empanadas and frozen treats.

Visitors can reach the event through nearby scooter and bike rentals, DASH Tampa micro-transit service and the Pirate Water Taxi. The Winter Village Express will also return, offering a festive TECO Line Streetcar ride between Whiting Station and Ybor City for $10 per ticket. Advance reservations are required.

Skating reservations and Winter Village Express tickets are available online. For schedules, tickets and updates, visit wintervillagetampa.com.

BRANDON DENTAL CARE CELEBRATES 60 YEARS OF CARING FOR THE COMMUNITY

By Marie Gilmore



Since opening its doors in 1966, Brandon Dental Care has helped generations of local families maintain healthy smiles while building a legacy of community service that continues today.

The dental practice is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year, marking six decades of caring for patients throughout Brandon, Valrico, Riverview and surrounding communities.

The office originally opened on North Moon Street before moving to its longtime Brandon location at 413 W. Robertson St. In 1992, Dr. Rudy Liddell joined Dr. Dan Noland and Dr. Richard Reed, and the practice became known as Brandon Dental Care.

Over the years, the practice welcomed additional dentists, including Dr. Craig Oldham, Dr. Chris Waite, Dr. Stephen Zuknick and Dr. Dan Branca. A second location opened in Riverview in 2012, expanding access to care for area residents.

For Dr. Branca, joining the practice brought his dental journey full circle. He first became a patient of Dr. Liddell in 1997 as a child. After graduating from the University of Florida College of Dentistry in 2014, Dr. Branca returned to Brandon Dental Care in 2017, where he had the opportunity to work alongside the dentist who had cared for him growing up.

The practice's legacy also includes a long-standing commitment to helping those in need. In 2017, Dr. Branca established a dental clinic at Beth-El Farmworkers Ministry in Wimauma, where Dr. Oldham also volunteers.

Dr. Zuknick and Dr. Branca are leaders at the annual Florida Mission of Mercy event, where dentists from across the state donate free dental care to more than 1,500 patients. The event provides an estimated $1.9 million in dental services.

Brandon Dental Care's commitment to service extends to its employees and patients. Fourteen of its 30 employees have worked at the practice for more than 10 years, including eight who have been there for more than 20 years. Treatment coordinator Valerie Alex retired in 2023 after 47 years with the office, having previously served as a dental assistant for Dr. Reed.

Dr. Liddell, who retired in December 2022, was recognized as Florida Dentist of the Year in 2021 and received a lifetime achievement award in 2026. He also served as president of the West Coast District Dental Association and the Florida Dental Association.

Brandon Dental Care continues its mission of providing comprehensive dental services in a welcoming environment, with a focus on patient education, comfort and oral health.

For more information, visit the website at https://brandondentalcare.com/.







GREATEST GENERATION CONFERENCE TO BRING WWII HISTORY TO TAMPA

Staff Report



World War II history will come to life this December when the VBC Greatest Generation Live World War II Conference brings veterans, historians, authors and military enthusiasts together in Tampa from Wednesday through Sunday, December 2-6.

The four-day conference will explore some of the most significant campaigns and personalities of World War II while providing opportunities for attendees to hear directly from veterans and experts. December 6 is the departure day and will have no formal programming.

The conference opens on December 2 with registration and a welcome reception, followed by dinner and an opening program. The keynote address will be presented by Michael S. Bell, executive director of the Jenny Craig Institute for the Study of War and Democracy at The National WWII Museum. His presentation, 'The American Liberators: The U.S. Army and Germany's Concentration Camps,' will examine the role of American soldiers in the liberation of concentration camps.

Thursday's sessions will begin with 'Masters of the Air: The Bloody 100th and the Air War Over Europe,' featuring 100th Bomb Group historian Mike P. Faley, author Rebecca Crosby Hutchinson and Luftwaffe historian Colin Heaton, a consultant to the Apple TV+ series Masters of the Air.

The afternoon session, 'Turning the Tide: Guadalcanal and Buna, New Guinea,' will focus on the Pacific War and feature historians and authors Jeff Ballard, Dave Holland, James Campbell and Chris Kolakowski.

Friday will continue with 'Winning the War: America's High Command,' examining the leadership of figures including George Patton, Mark Clark and Dwight Eisenhower. Speakers will include Helen Patton, granddaughter of General George S. Patton, retired Lt. Col. Roger Cirillo and author Michel Paradis.

The afternoon session, 'Coming Home: The Hidden Legacies of World War II,' will explore the lasting effects of the war on veterans and their families. Authors David Nasaw, Carol Schultz Vento and Richard Sherman will participate.

Friday evening will feature a film tribute honoring attending World War II veterans, followed by a veterans dinner featuring conversations and interviews.

The conference will conclude on Saturday with an excursion to the Zephyrhills Museum of Military History for Pearl Harbor remembrance activities, guided tours and a closing luncheon. Transportation will be provided.

The conference offers attendees an opportunity to learn from those who have dedicated their lives to preserving the history and stories of the Greatest Generation. For more information, visit https://veteransbreakfastclub.org/wwii-tampa-2026/.





TWO BLOOMINGDALE SWIMMERS BREAK RECORDS AT COUNTY CHAMPIONSHIPS

By Nick Nahas



Zet and Torres have trained together since they were young. They continue to inspire, cheer and root for each other to this day.

Bloomingdale High School junior swimmers Sophia Torres and Matthew Zet made school history at the 2026 county championships on September 25.

Torres broke the girls 100-yard breaststroke record that had stood since 1996. Torres previously set two school records at Newsome High School during her freshman and sophomore years before transferring to Bloomingdale for her final two years of high school.

"I knew the record had stood since 1996, so I was really excited to have the opportunity to break a record that had lasted for so many years," said Torres. "My mom texted me right after the event because she was so excited, and when I saw her message, it was such a cool feeling. I now hold a record at both Newsome High School and Bloomingdale High School, which makes the accomplishment even more special. It's exciting to be part of both schools' swimming histories."

Zet also made history at the county championships, breaking the boys 100-yard breaststroke record that had stood since 2003.

"This record that I broke means a lot to me because it really shows that all of the work that I have put in over the years has finally paid off," said Zet. "This record is just the first of many to come."

Zet and Torres have trained together since they were young. They continue to inspire, cheer and root for each other to this day.

"Matthew and I have been friends and training together for many years, so it was really great to see us both succeed at the county championships," said Torres. "Being able to set records together, especially in the same events, made it even more meaningful. We both work extremely hard in training, so it's exciting to see that dedication pay off for both of us."



Bloomingdale High School junior swimmers Sophia Torres and Matthew Zet made school history at the 2026 county championships.

Bloomingdale boys Swim and Dive Head Coach Jason Fatjo has had a rewarding experience seeing these two swimmers blossom in such a short time.

"Sophia is a powerhouse swimmer who excels as a natural talent as well as on a technical level," said Fatjo. "While this is her first year with Bloomingdale, she has an indispensable camaraderie with her fellow Bulls that has been cultivated over years of team swimming."

"I could see Matthew's fist-pump reaction when he saw the time," said Fatjo. "He had entered the water with a goal, and the spirit of achievement was shared, not just with me, but with the team as a whole. The team captain was leading with his example."

"My goals for the rest of the season are to qualify for finals at the state championships and continue lowering my times in my main events that I swim," said Zet.

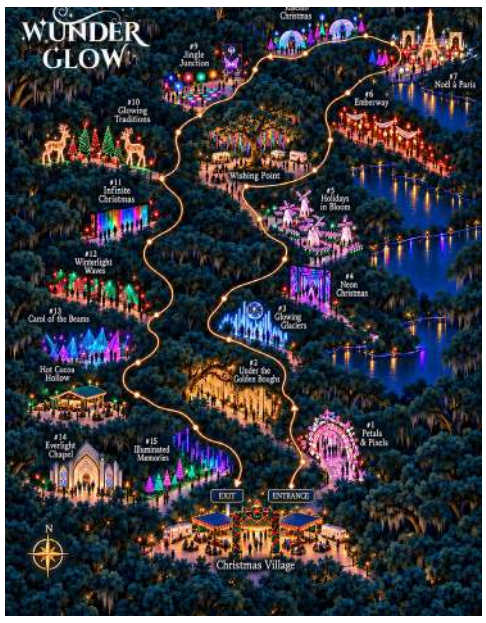
Torres continues her season, qualifying for both the Toyota U.S. Open Championships and the Speedo Winter Junior Championships, which will take place in December.

"This is the first time I've qualified for either meet," said Torres. "I knew Winter Juniors was a realistic goal I could work toward, but qualifying for the U.S. Open was something I honestly didn't expect yet."

WUNDER GLOW BRINGS A MILE OF HOLIDAY LIGHTS TO DADE CITY

Staff Report

Wunder Glow will open Saturday, November 21, bringing more than a mile of holiday music and light scenes to 50 acres of Florida's majestic oaks in Dade City. At a cost of over $10 million, the new holiday music and light show walk-through experience has been built by the same team behind Snowcat Ridge and TreeHoppers Aerial Adventure Park.



Tickets are on sale now at https://wunderglow.com/, with general admission tickets starting at $18.95. The team also unveiled the first artist's renderings, previewing the music and light scenes guests will discover along the path. Guests can play with fog-filled bubbles, ride a butterfly swing and step across glowing floor pads. At Wishing Point, they can tie a ribbon to the wishing tree. Hot Cocoa Hollow offers hot cocoa and a glowing dance floor beneath falling snow effects.

Dozens of artists, designers and craftspeople have helped bring Wunder Glow to life, including concept artists, scenic designers, skilled painters and lighting designers. Their work combines detailed scenery, synchronized lighting and holiday music to create magical scenes throughout Florida's oak forest.

"We wanted to create an amazing experience where families could spend an entire holiday evening together," said Benjamin Nagengast, CEO of Wunder Glow. "From exploring the lights beneath the oaks to sharing hot cocoa and visiting Santa, our goal is to give our guests a holiday tradition to return to year after year."

Symphonies of Light & Sound will feature illuminated scenes synchronized to holiday music, including the golden canopy of Under the Golden Boughs, Glowing Glaciers, Noël à Paris and the mirrored Infinite Christmas. Along the way, Wunder Spots will offer photo opportunities with a giant sleigh, sculpted wings and a glowing heart arch.

Christmas Village will feature four food trucks, a biergarten, s'mores fire pits and a gift shop. Families can visit Santa and enjoy story time with Mrs. Claus through Thursday, December 24. Santa visits are included in admission, with photo packages sold separately.

The season runs through January 9, 2027, with closures on Thanksgiving Day and from January 4-7, 2027. Christmas Village opens at 5:15 p.m. on operating nights, followed by the holiday light and music path at 5:30 p.m. Closing times vary by date. Guests should allow two to three hours for their visit.

Ticket prices vary by date and entry time, and tickets cost $6 more at the box office. Children under 2 are admitted for free. For a limited time, use code WUNDER10 at https://wunderglow.com/ to save 10 percent on all ticket types during the preseason sale.

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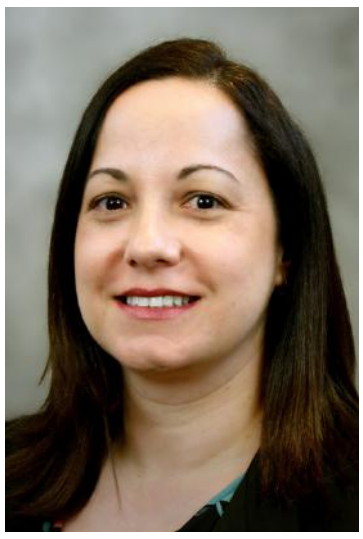
PIPELINE CONSTRUCTION FOCUSES ON SAFETY, COMMUNICATION AND TRAFFIC FLOW

By Maribel Medina



As Tampa Bay Water continues construction of the new South Hillsborough Pipeline, a choreographed sequence of preparation, installation, inspection and restoration helps keep traffic moving and residents, shoppers and drivers safe.

First, preparation work crews ready a specific area by locating utility lines in the pipeline's path, scraping asphalt from roads and removing landscaping. Dewatering systems are installed to ensure the ground is dry before excavation. Then, the installation crew installs the pipeline that can be up to 5 feet in diameter. After the pipe is welded together underground and every weld is inspected, a restoration crew follows behind to repave roads, install landscaping and make the work area as good as new.

To ensure the 26-mile pipeline is completed by the end of 2028, work simultaneously occurs at different locations along the route. At every stage, the overriding goal is to keep everyone informed and safe.

For example, there will be 17 tunnels under roads and bodies of water to keep traffic moving on major roads and to protect wildlife. One of those tunnels is under State Road 60 at West Robertson Street, where crews worked around the clock to install the pipe in a tunnel approximately 22 feet beneath the road as the traffic above continued to flow. Six tunnels along the route have been completed to date.

Communication and coordination are vital to keeping everyone safe and minimizing inconveniences. Two weeks before any digging, digital message boards alert drivers to upcoming changes in traffic patterns. Notifications are sent to nearby homes and businesses, which also can receive temporary signs reassuring customers they are still open.

Every step of the way, public safety officials, including fire and law enforcement, are kept informed so they know the quickest routes to provide help. So are local schools, school officials, hospitals and other medical providers. We are all working together to keep everyone safe as we work on this pipeline that will deliver drinking water vital to South Hillsborough's future.

Remember: Anyone can go to https://southhillsboroughpipeline.com/ to sign up for email alerts about pipeline construction or check upcoming construction dates, road closures and detours. Your safety is our top priority.

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

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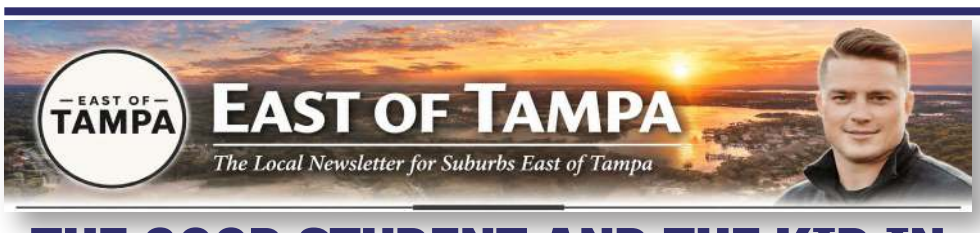

THE GOOD STUDENT AND THE KID IN THE BACK ROW

By John Plumstead, The East Of Tampa Guy



Every class had a kid who did the reading, turned it in on time and got it right. And every class had a kid in the back who skipped the essay and raised his hand to ask the teacher how she ended up teaching in the first place.

Marie Gilmore was the first kid. I was the second.

In January 2002, Marie hand-delivered 750 copies of a brand-new newspaper to homes in FishHawk Ranch. By the second month, neighborhood kids were delivering it. By the third, it went out by mail. Today the *Osprey Observer* reaches more than 70,000 homes every month, and it's paid for entirely by local businesses who believe in it.

She's done that for almost 25 years. Every month, every fact checked, always about the people, places and things that make this community great. That's the good student.

I never saw myself as a writer. Articles were for the smart kids. I was the guy who took pride in a good joke or a good presentation, and who always had a question that got the teacher off track. I still do. How'd you build this? Was it hard?

So, I'm starting a podcast.

On the East of Tampa Podcast, I sit down with the business owners, coaches and neighbors who built East Hillsborough and ask the questions I've always wanted to ask.

Marie writes it down. I'd rather talk. If you've ever sat next to me at a chamber breakfast, you know I might like the sound of my own voice a little too much.

So, when it came time to pick a first guest, the kid in the back row went straight to the front of the class.

Marie and I talk about how the *Observer* got started, what it takes to put out five editions and more than 200 pages every month and what she's seen change around here since that first stack of 750 papers.

You can listen to the East of Tampa Podcast wherever you get your podcasts. Follow us on social and subscribe to the newsletter at https://eastoftampa.com/.

And the next time the *Osprey Observer* shows up in your mailbox, think about how it got there.

How awesome are Marie Gilmore and the *Osprey Observer* team?

IMPACT DESIGNER PURSE BINGO COMBINES FUN WITH A MEANINGFUL CAUSE

Staff Report



Impact Program Inc. Executive Director Angie Kagey invites the community to its annual Designer Purse Bingo on Thursday, December 3 at The Regent in Riverview.

The Impact Program Inc. will host its annual Designer Purse Bingo event on Thursday, December 3, offering an evening of bingo, prizes, food and fellowship while raising funds to support local youth and families.

The event will take place from 6-9 p.m. at The Regent, located near Winthrop at 6437 Watson Rd. in Riverview. Doors open at 6 p.m., with bingo beginning promptly at 7 p.m.

Tickets are $55 per person and include food and beverages, as well as one set of 10 bingo games. The event is alcohol-free. Guests who want additional chances to win can purchase additional game packs, available in sets of three cards.

Participants will have the opportunity to win designer purses, including a Kate Spade purse, along with other prizes. The evening will also feature raffle opportunities and a silent auction, giving guests additional ways to participate while supporting Impact's programs.

"Impact has been serving the community for the past 23 years and is supported by businesses, individuals, civic and other organizations," said Angie Kagey, executive director of Impact. "The overwhelming support of the community allows our staff and volunteers to continue to make an 'Impact' in the lives of students and parents."

All proceeds from ticket sales, raffle purchases and silent auction items will benefit Impact Program, a nonprofit youth development organization focused on educating, equipping and empowering young people to make positive life choices and avoid high-risk behaviors.

For more than two decades, Impact has provided classroom education and presentations for teens, parents, teachers and other youth leaders. Its programs emphasize healthy lifestyles and relationships while providing young people with information and resources to make informed decisions.

Funds raised through Designer Purse Bingo will help support Impact's ongoing programs throughout Hillsborough County, including classroom education and presentations for parents and students.

Organizers encourage residents to gather their friends and enjoy a night out while supporting a local organization dedicated to strengthening youth and families.

Tickets and sponsorship opportunities are available at https://secure.fundeasy.com/ministrysync/event/?e=32995. For questions, contact Kagey at akagey@whatisimpact.com. More information about Impact and its programs is available at www.whatisimpact.com.

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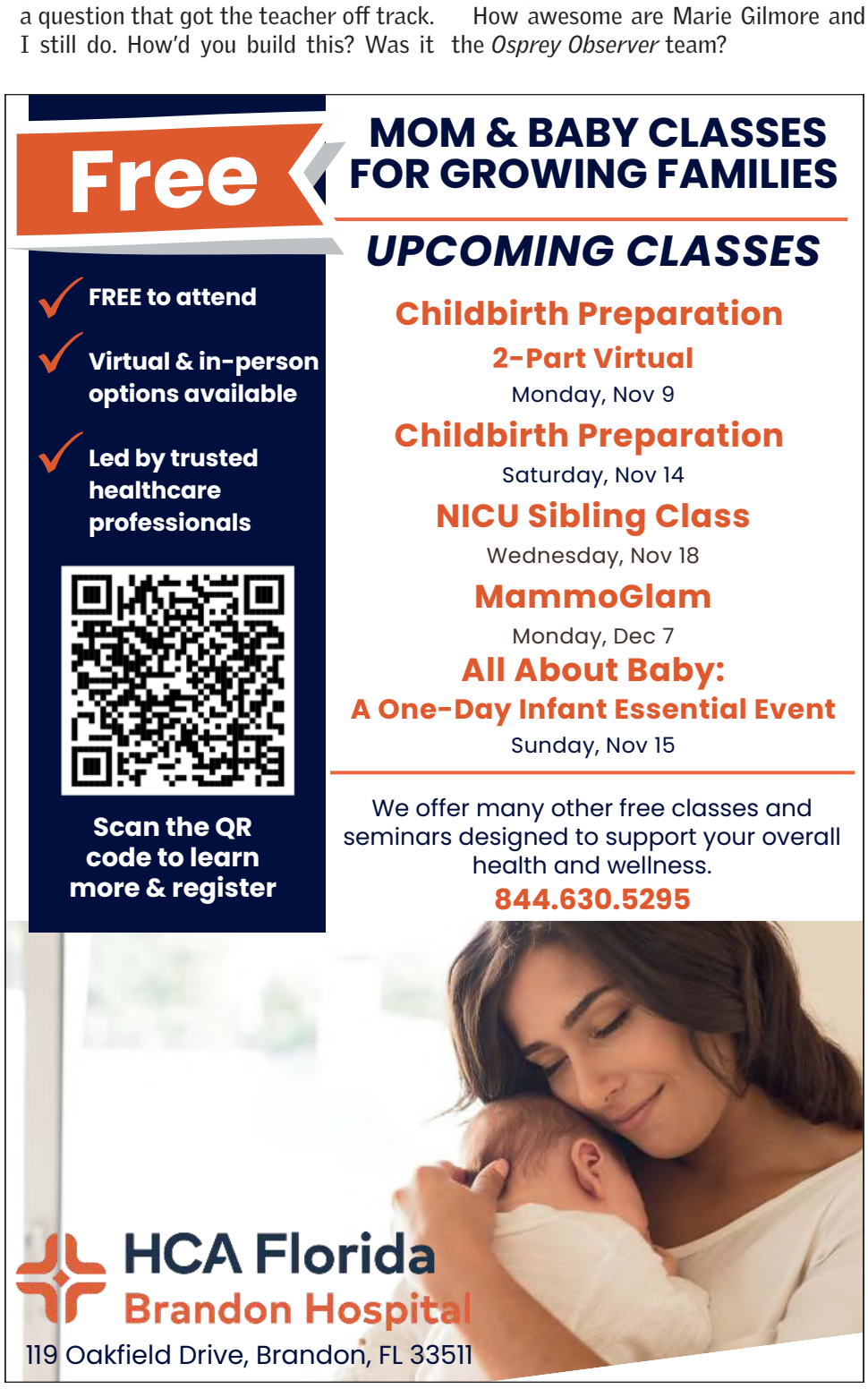

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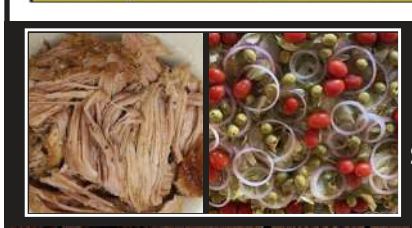



COUNTY FAIR INVITES STUDENTS TO FIRST HIGH SCHOOL MEDIA DAY

Staff Report



High school students interested in journalism, broadcasting, photography and digital media have the opportunity to experience the Hillsborough County Fair from a reporter's perspective during the inaugural High School Media Day on Thursday, November 5.

Hosted by the Greater Hillsborough County Fair Association, the new program takes place on opening day of the 2026 Hillsborough County Fair at the Hillsborough County Fairgrounds in Dover.

The free program provides students with hands-on experience covering a major community event while connecting them with the people and stories behind the Fair.

Students receive official media credentials and participate in an Opening Day press conference and question-and-answer session. They also have opportunities to interview Fair leaders and participants, take photographs, record video and gather B-roll throughout designated areas of the Fairgrounds.

The Fair Association encourages students to approach the event as working reporters by preparing questions, finding a story angle and developing their own coverage.

Students can explore potential stories involving agriculture and livestock, youth exhibitors, Fair food, entertainment, the midway and Fair operations, along with the 2026 "Celebrate America" theme.

Media Day is open to students involved in high school TV production and broadcasting, journalism and student newspapers, digital and multimedia programs, photography, yearbook staffs, communications programs and FFA communications or public relations teams.

Schools can participate in Media Day without entering the optional Student Media Challenge. Those choosing to compete submit one finished, student-produced feature highlighting their Fair experience.

The Media Day schedule begins with check-in at 11:30 a.m., followed by a welcome at noon and the press conference at 12:15 p.m. Student media access takes place from 12:45-3:30 p.m.

The inaugural program is designed to give students a meaningful educational experience while helping them build relationships with local media professionals and learn more about the people and activities that make the Hillsborough County Fair a community tradition.

The 2026 Hillsborough County Fair runs through November 15, giving students an opportunity to put their classroom skills into practice while telling stories about one of Hillsborough County's annual community events. For more, www.hillsboroughcountyfair.com.





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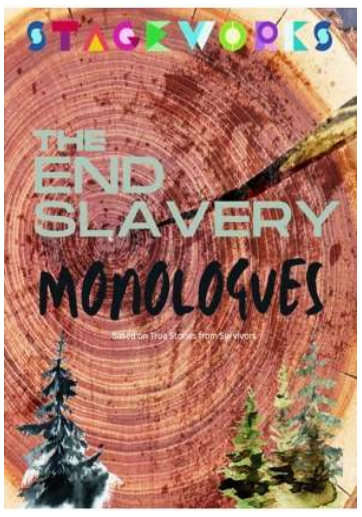
THE END SLAVERY MONOLOGUES MAKES FLORIDA PREMIERE AT STAGEWORKS

Staff Report



The End Slavery Monologues makes its Florida premiere at Stageworks Theatre in Tampa on Friday and Saturday, November 6-7. Directed by Janet Salem, the production is a theater documentary that brings eleven survivors' stories of human trafficking to the stage. Fifty percent of ticket proceeds will benefit Bridging Freedom, a Tampa Bay nonprofit working to end child sex trafficking.

The monologues are based on the stories of survivors who have been part of AnkoraTN's road to recovery. Each monologue is a single voice. All are drawn from the true stories of survivors and of those impacted by human trafficking. Most are survivors speaking for themselves, about what was done to them and the lives they are building now. Others belong to the people around them: a parent, a doctor, the people who saw and wondered if they should have done more.

"These stories are not about victims. They are about people who survived, and who are still here, telling us. Our job is to listen, and then to do something," said Salem.

The cast features Kayley Jewel, Alexandra Pugliese, Pax Matos, Faith Kopeky, Alex Martinez, Landon Green, Annalise Drab, Leyla-Jade Curbelo, Aaliyah St. Charles, Mariana Montoya and Jen Casler.

"Trafficking happens here, in our own communities, and it thrives on silence. This production breaks that silence. Every ticket sold helps us reach young people before traffickers do and walk with survivors as they heal. We are grateful to share this stage and this cause," said Laura Hamilton, CEO of Bridging Freedom.

Performances are at 3 p.m. at Stageworks Theatre, located at 1120 E. Kennedy Blvd., Ste. 151, in Tampa. Tickets are available for $30 at https://stageworkstheatre.org/, at the Stageworks box office or by calling 813-374-2416, ext. 1. The running time is about 75 minutes, performed without intermission.

Content advisory: e.g., contains mature themes, including descriptions of sexual violence and abuse.

About Bridging Freedom

Bridging Freedom is a 501(c)(3) licensed Safe Home for girls ages 10-17 who have survived child sex trafficking. In a safe, nurturing environment, each girl receives long-term care from an interdisciplinary team of professionals tailored to her individual needs. Its holistic program includes therapy and therapeutic activities, education, life-skills development, recreation, health care management and opportunities for personal growth. A dedicated team provides around-the-clock care, encouragement and stability. Each girl lives in a home where she has her own bedroom and bathroom.

About Stageworks Theatre

Stageworks Theatre is Tampa's longest-running professional theater company, onstage since 1983. Its mission is to ignite the human spirit, and its vision is to be the community catalyst eradicating intolerance through performing arts and education. Stageworks and its directors, playwrights, actors and designers have been recognized with numerous awards for producing plays that matter to the Tampa Bay area. Learn more at https://stageworkstheatre.org/.

FITNESS FORGE COLLECTS HOLIDAY DONATIONS FOR LOCAL SENIORS

Staff Report



Fitness Forge in Riverview is inviting the community to help make the holidays brighter for local seniors through a special Christmas donation drive benefiting residents of Twin Creeks senior living.

Beginning November 1, the gym will collect donations of thoughtful gifts and everyday items to create holiday gift bags for residents. The collection will continue through Wednesday, December 16, at 7 p.m., giving community members plenty of time to participate in the seasonal initiative.

Brett Daven, co-owner of Fitness Forge, and co-owner Taylor Green will organize the donations, assemble the gift bags and deliver them to Twin Creeks during a special Christmas celebration planned for Friday, December 18, after lunch.

Daven and Green also plan to invite Fitness Forge members who wish to participate to join them for an afternoon of visiting and mingling with residents. The gathering will offer an opportunity to share holiday cheer and make personal connections with seniors in the community.

The donation list includes practical comforts and fun activities designed to bring enjoyment throughout the holiday season. Requested items include soft lap blankets, nonslip socks, easy-grip water bottles or mugs, large-print puzzle books, playing cards, coloring books and colored pencils. Easy-to-read calendars, picture frames, small toiletry organizers and gentle, unscented personal care kits are also welcome.

Community members can contribute medium and large Christmas gift bags and tissue paper to help prepare the packages. Greeting cards featuring handwritten messages are another requested item, offering donors a simple way to share a personal note of encouragement and holiday wishes.

Individually wrapped treats are also welcome, including regular chocolate, soft cookies and a variety of sugar-free options such as chocolates, hard candies, chewy candies, caramels and mints.

The initiative gives residents, gym members and other community supporters an opportunity to help make the season more meaningful for seniors. By combining useful gifts with personal messages and an in-person visit, the Fitness Forge team hopes to deliver more than presents — it wants residents to feel remembered and appreciated during the holidays.

Donations can be dropped off at Fitness Forge, located at 13456 Boyette Road in Riverview, near the corner of Boyette Road and FishHawk Boulevard.

For more information about the holiday donation drive, contact Fitness Forge at 813-654-1313 or email admin@fitness-forge2025.com. Community members are encouraged to contribute and help spread a little extra holiday happiness to Twin Creeks residents.

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FROM SORTING TO SALE DAY, GENTLE TOUCH ESTATE SALES CAN HELP

Staff Report



If you have never been involved in an estate sale, you may wonder how the process works, what happens to household belongings and whether you should hire a professional estate sale company. An estate sale is an organized way to sell personal property when a family is downsizing, relocating, settling an estate or going through another major life transition.

What Happens During an Estate Sale?

The estate sale process typically begins with a consultation. The estate sale company evaluates the home, discusses the family's goals and explains its services and fees.

Before preparation begins, the family identifies items that should not be sold, including important documents, photographs, personal information, medications and sentimental belongings.

Next, the estate sale company sorts and organizes the household contents. Furniture, kitchenware, clothing, tools, collectibles, artwork, jewelry, electronics and other items are displayed so shoppers can easily browse.

Pricing and Research

Estate sale pricing is based on factors such as condition, brand, age, rarity, demand and current resale value. Professional estate sale companies may research unusual or collectible items to help establish appropriate prices.

Advertising and Sale Day

On sale day, shoppers browse the home and purchase items through a designated checkout area. Policies regarding payment methods, discounts, negotiations and furniture pickup vary by company.

Most estate sale merchandise is sold as-is, so buyers should carefully inspect items before purchasing.

What Happens To Unsold Items?

Not everything necessarily sells during an estate sale. Depending on the family's wishes and the company's agreement, remaining items may be donated, removed by the family or otherwise handled according to the agreed plan.

Why Hire an Estate Sale Company?

A professional estate sale company can manage much of the work, including sorting, pricing, staging, advertising, conducting the sale and coordinating postsale services.

For families dealing with an estate or preparing to downsize, professional assistance can make an overwhelming process more organized and manageable.

If you're considering an estate sale, contact Gentle Touch Estate Sales at 813-812-0780 or visit https://gentletouchestatesales.com/ to learn more about its estate sale services and how it can help you navigate the process from preparation through completion.

LOCAL SCHOOLS RECOGNIZED AS FLORIDA SCHOOLS OF EXCELLENCE

By Marie Gilmore



Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) is proud to announce that 38 schools have been designated as 2025-2026 Florida Schools of Excellence by the Florida State Board of Education on October 14. The designation recognizes schools whose sustained academic performance places them among the highest-performing schools in the state.

The Schools of Excellence designation is awarded by the Florida State Board of Education pursuant to Florida law and honors schools that demonstrate exceptional student achievement and academic outcomes.

"Being recognized as a Florida School of Excellence is a tremendous honor and a reflection of the hard work happening in classrooms across our district every day," said Superintendent Van Ayres. "This achievement belongs to our students, teachers, support staff, school leaders and families who work together to create outstanding learning environments for our students. We are incredibly proud of these schools and grateful for their commitment to excellence."

The recognition adds to a growing list of academic accomplishments across Hillsborough County Public Schools and highlights the district's continued focus on student achievement, high expectations and supporting each student's success.

The designation also celebrates the collaboration among educators, administrators, families and students that helps schools build strong academic foundations. From classroom instruction and individualized student support to family engagement and school leadership, these efforts contribute to an environment where students can reach their full potential.

For schools across Hillsborough County, the recognition serves as an opportunity to highlight successful practices and celebrate the dedication of the people who make a difference in students' lives each day. Teachers and staff play an important role in creating engaging learning experiences, encouraging students to set ambitious goals and helping them develop the skills needed for future success.

The 38 schools represent a significant achievement for the district and its school communities. Their designation reflects a commitment to maintaining high standards while continuing to provide students with opportunities to learn, grow and succeed.

HCPS continues to emphasize academic excellence throughout its schools, with a focus on ensuring students are prepared for the next steps in their education and beyond. The Florida Schools of Excellence recognition underscores the importance of continued teamwork and dedication in supporting positive educational outcomes across the district.







WALK THE WALK PET CARE CELEBRATES A DECADE OF CARING

By Amanda Castillo

When Samantha Evensen recognized a need for more reliable pet care in her community, she knew local pet owners needed someone they could count on. With encouragement from a friend, she started Walk the Walk Professional Pet Care 10 years ago as a one-person operation. Since then, she has grown it into a professional team that provides dependable pet care and peace of mind for owners throughout our community.



Walk the Walk Professional Pet Care owner Samantha Evensen celebrates 10 years of providing dependable, personalized pet care to local families.



The past decade has brought plenty of changes and challenges for Evensen, from working independently to building a team, but she remains proud that the business has stayed true to its original purpose. "We are really proud of what we have been able to accomplish the last 10 years, and essentially, as much as we've grown, the heart of the business really hasn't changed."

That commitment to dependable, personalized care remains central to Walk the Walk Professional Pet Care. The business offers dog walking, pet sitting and in-home pet care throughout the community, helping pet owners feel confident their animals are in good hands when life gets busy.

For Evensen, the job is about more than caring for animals. One of the most rewarding parts is getting to know the pets and their owners, turning everyday visits into lasting relationships within the close-knit community she serves.

That personal approach is reflected in the company's name. For Evensen, "Walk the Walk" means following through on the promise to provide dependable, quality care for every pet. "Our slogan is Walk the Walk. It's not just our name, it's how we do business. Walk the Walk is our promise to the community, because we are not just talking about giving quality service, we are truly living by that standard."

For Evensen, there is something special about knowing that every wagging tail and familiar face represents a relationship built on trust. Getting to know each pet and the people who love them has turned routine visits into lasting connections. It's those relationships that continue to shape Walk the Walk Professional Pet Care and make it more than just a service to the community.

To learn more about Walk the Walk Professional Pet Care, visit walkthewalkppc.com or call 813-465-3082.



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JUST RIDE BICYCLES BRINGS BIKE REPAIR SERVICE TO LOCAL RIDERS

By Sharon Still



Joe Kennedy has transitioned Just Ride Bicycles into a mobile repair service, offering reliable bicycle maintenance throughout the community.

After 15 years of serving local cyclists from a brick-and-mortar shop in the FishHawk and Riverview area, Just Ride Bicycles owner Joe Kennedy is taking his business on the road.

Kennedy recently closed his longtime storefront in River Springs Town Center on Boyette Road and transitioned Just Ride Bicycles into a mobile bicycle repair and service business. The move allows Kennedy to continue serving the customers who have supported the shop while offering a more convenient option for busy families and cyclists.

"As one chapter ends, ... another begins," Kennedy said.

For Kennedy, the transition is about meeting customers where they are.

He credits his wife, Tricia, with inspiring the move toward mobile service.

"Everyone is so busy, and if we can make life easier, then there is a value," Kennedy said.

The new mobile model currently offers bicycle pickup and drop-off service, with plans to expand to on-site repairs in the future. Kennedy eventually hopes to bring his tools directly to customers' homes, businesses or even cyclists who need assistance while out on the trail.

Services include flat repairs, tune-ups, adjustments and bicycle assembly for both traditional bicycles and e-bikes.

"It has been successful so far, as we are serving several repeat customers with whom we have built loyalty and trust," Kennedy said.

That loyalty has been built over 15 years of providing bicycle sales, repairs and personalized service to the local community. Just Ride Bicycles has served everyone from children and families to recreational riders and competitive cyclists, with customers often citing Kennedy's knowledgeable advice, fair pricing and timely service.

The mobile service is designed to continue that same personalized approach while eliminating the need for customers to transport their bicycles to a traditional shop.

Kennedy said the model can also help customers save both time and money.

"Everyone is looking to save time and money, and this type of concierge service is a way to offer that," he said.

Just Ride Bicycles serves customers throughout Brandon, Valrico, Lithia, Riverview, Sun City Center, FishHawk and surrounding communities.

Appointments can be scheduled online at www.justridebicycles.com or by calling 813-381-3907. Updates about mobile services are also available through Just Ride Bicycles on social media.

MATHNASIUM MARKS 13 YEARS OF MATH, MENTORSHIP AND COMMUNITY

By Libby Hopkins

This October marks 13 years since Becky McDaniels opened her first Mathnasium, and when she thinks about those years, she thinks about the people who have walked through her doors.



This October marks 13 years since Becky McDaniels opened her first Mathnasium in the Brandon Community.

"We've had the privilege of serving so many students and families, and we've also had some incredible people become part of our Mathnasium team along the way," McDaniels said. "Every student, family and team member has become part of our story, and they've certainly become part of mine.

"I've watched team members grow in confidence and leadership and go on to do amazing things, and through all of that, they've helped me grow too," she said. "I started Mathnasium because I wanted to make a difference for kids, but 13 years later, I can honestly say that they have made just as much of a difference in my life."

Today, McDaniels and her team are incredibly grateful to have two locations serving the community, Mathnasium of Brandon and Mathnasium of Riverview.

"We're looking forward to continuing that journey with Mathnasium of Parrish when God provides us with the right space," McDaniels said. "We're excited about what the future holds, but we're also incredibly thankful for where we are and for all of the families who have trusted us along the way. That's what makes this anniversary so special to me. Mathnasium has never just been a business. It's been 13 years of relationships, growth and getting to do work that I truly love.

Something McDaniels and her team are especially excited about right now is Mathnasium Plus.

"For years, we've helped students who need to catch up, but we've always worked with advanced students as well," she said. "Mathnasium Plus gives us an exciting additional way to serve students who are already performing well and are ready for more. Sometimes a child gets overlooked simply because they're getting A's. Everyone thinks, 'They're doing great. They don't need anything,' but an advanced student needs to be challenged too. We don't want a child who loves math to become bored with it. We want to feed that curiosity."

Mathnasium Plus is designed for students who are ready to go deeper, think differently, solve more challenging problems and stretch their mathematical thinking.

"It's not about piling on more worksheets or just racing ahead to the next grade level," McDaniels said "It's about giving strong math students the opportunity to explore, problem-solve and develop the kind of mathematical thinking that will continue to serve them as they move into more advanced coursework. We're really excited to bring that opportunity to our families."

Mathnasium of Brandon is located at 1048 E. Bloomingdale Ave. in Valrico, visit www.mathnasium.com/math-centers/brandon or call 813-655-6284.

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Simple budgeting tips that fit real life
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If you've just started managing your own finances, recommitted to doing it well or noticed your spending isn't making you as happy as you'd hoped, a budget might be exactly what you need. When you know where your money is going, you're likely to feel more in control and more confident your finances reflect what actually matters to you.

A simple budgeting framework to start: The 50/30/20 rule

One of the easiest ways to structure a budget is the 50/30/20 rule. The concept is refreshingly straightforward: Put 50% of your after-tax income toward necessities (housing, groceries, utilities, transportation), 30% toward wants (dining out, entertainment, streaming subscriptions) and 20% toward savings or paying down debt.

The 50/30/20 rule is a great foundation, but you may need to adjust it a little. If you live in a high-cost city, housing alone might require more than half your paycheck. Or you may have high income and can save more than 20%. Think of the 50/30/20 rule as a starting point you can adjust as your life evolves.

Not sure where your money goes?

That's completely normal. If you honestly don't know what you spend each month, try a low-pressure approach first. Spend a few months simply observing. Check your accounts without judgment, noting money coming in and going out. Think of it as a financial check-in rather than a report card. You can't change the past, but you can absolutely adjust for the future.

From there, small steps go a long way. Even spending 15 minutes a week on your budget can make the whole process feel far less daunting.

Make technology your easy button

Some budgeting apps do the routine work for you, syncing with your accounts and tracking spending automatically. Others are more hands-on, encouraging you to map out your spending plan in advance. There's likely one out there for every style of budgeting. The goal is to find a system you'll actually use and stick with.

When the numbers feel discouraging

Sometimes looking at spending brings up more stress than relief. If that happens, start by shifting your perspective. Focus on the expenses that brought you real value — a modest gift that meant the world to a friend or how your rent provides a comfortable, stable life. Then look for changes that align your spending with your values. Substituting expenses, reducing expenses or creating more income could all be used to help you keep your spending below your income.

Build a buffer

If you can, consider building a small buffer into your budget for unexpected expenses such as birthdays, minor repairs or spontaneous plans. Adding perhaps 3% of your income or a set dollar amount, like $200, helps keep those costs from throwing your whole plan off course.

The bottom line

With a few simple steps, budgeting becomes easier to stick with and more meaningful over time. At its core, it's a way to align your money with what matters while enjoying today and planning for tomorrow.



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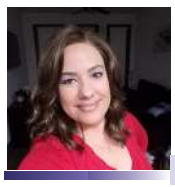

WHAT IS A LADY BIRD DEED?

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

Lately, I have had many a phone call from potential clients asking about a 'ladybird' deed or saying that they need one for their house. Although it is one of the simplest ways to keep a home out of probate and away from Medicaid estate recovery, it does come with some pitfalls.



As an elder law attorney, I reach for this tool often. Here is what it does, what it does not do and who it tends to help most.

The legal name is an 'enhanced life estate' deed. The deed allows you to keep a life estate for your house and names who receives the home when you pass. The word 'enhanced' is what makes it different from a traditional life estate. You keep the right to sell the home, mortgage it, rent it or even change your mind about who inherits it, without asking anyone's permission. The people you named have no ownership interest until the day you pass. When you pass away, the beneficiaries record a death certificate. No probate, no court, no waiting.

For long-term care Medicaid purposes, this is not considered a gift. If you gift assets to your children, there is, typically, a five-year lookback period and gifts incur a penalty. Since this is not a gift, that means no penalty period.

The ladybird deed does not affect your homestead exemption, and the Save Our Homes cap stays in place. Your creditor protection stays in place. When the home passes, your beneficiaries typically receive a stepped-up basis, which can save them meaningful capital gains tax if they later sell.

Although a ladybird deed is a powerful tool, it comes with some drawbacks. One of the drawbacks is that Florida's homestead rules limit how you can leave a home if you have a spouse (who is not on the deed) or minor child, and a deed that ignores those rules can be challenged. The deed also does not name backup beneficiaries well, so if a named child passes before you, the result may not be what you intended. And a deed handles one asset. It does not replace a will, a trust or your powers of attorney. It works best as one piece of a complete plan.

Used correctly, this small document can spare your family months of court involvement and protect the home you worked for from a state claim after you are gone.



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Compiled by Jenny Bennett
jbennett@ospreyobserver.com



Support Barrington PTSA At Dave's Christmas Tree Lot

The holiday season is right around the corner, make Dave's Christmas Tree Lot part of your holiday tradition while giving back to the school! From fall favorites to Christmas cheer, there's something for everyone! When you shop at Dave's Christmas Tree Lot, located at the corner of Parsons Avenue and Lumsden Road, you can help support Barrington Middle School PTSA! Just Purchase your Christmas tree, pumpkins, gourds, hay, mini pumpkins, corn stalks, and firewood at Dave's Christmas Tree Lot and mention Barrington Middle School at checkout.

Memory And More Health Awareness Event

The Vitality Respite Center of St. Andrew's UMC, located at 3315 S Bryan Rd., in Brandon, will recognize Alzheimer's Awareness Month this November by hosting Memory and More, a community event designed to provide practical information, helpful resources, and greater awareness of memory health. This free event will take place on Sat. Nov. 21st from 9 - 11am.

Attendees will hear from three expert speakers who will address topics related to Alzheimer's.

Free memory screenings will also be available from 10am - 2pm (must register at www.saumc.net, space is limited), giving community members an opportunity to take a proactive step in understanding their cognitive health or the health of loved ones.

The Democratic Woman's Club Of S.E. Hillsborough County Meeting

The Democratic Woman's Club of Southeast Hillsborough County will meet on Thursday, November 5, 6:30PM. This will be a zoom meeting only, no in person meeting for November. Please go to www.sehillsboroughdwc.org to get on call. The guest speakers are Pamela Castellana, expert on increasing political engagement and Erin Begley, Development Officer of the RCMA organization. For more information please email sedwcinfo@gmail.com or call (813)503-8639.

2026 Tampa Walk For Apraxia

The 2026 Tampa Walk for Apraxia event will be held on November 7th at Water Works Park to benefit children with apraxia of speech (CAS). The event begins at 10:00 am with a ceremony beginning at 11:15 am. Registration is FREE!

Childhood apraxia of speech is a rare motor speech disorder that makes it difficult for an individual to speak. Treatment includes intense speech therapy and sometimes other therapies to help an individual reach their highest communication ability, but there is no cure. Raising awareness is one of the most tangible ways that communities at large can help children with apraxia thrive. For more information on how you can join the Walk for Apraxia, please visit: https://act.apraxia-kids.org/walk-for-apraxia

ECHO Hosts Music Bingo

ECHO of Brandon will bring an evening of music, fun and community connection to Voodoo Brewing Co. on Tuesday, November 17, for a special music bingo fundraiser benefiting ECHO's mission to bridge the gap between crisis and stability for neighbors in need.

Doors will open at 6 p.m., with the music bingo game beginning at 7 p.m. at Voodoo Brewing Co., located at 3432 SR 60 in Valrico. Music bingo combines the excitement of traditional bingo with the fun of recognizing favorite songs and artists. Visit www.echofl.org/music-bingo to register. Seats are limited and expected to fill quickly. Guests are encouraged to reserve their spots in advance.

HCA Florida Special Photography Project

HCA Florida Brandon Hospital is inviting local high school student artists to submit their favorite digital images at 300dpi to kathleen.rogers2@hcahealthcare.com for this special photography project to provide featured art for the new emergency room serving FishHawk, Riverview and Bloomingdale, opening in 2027. Please include the photographer's name, high school and grade and title of the image with each submission. Images should capture the heart of our community from local landmarks in Riverview, FishHawk and surrounding communities to stunning landscapes. The deadline for submissions is December 4.

St. Stephen's Bingo Night

Come to bingo on Tuesday, November 17, in the St. Stephen Family Life Center, located at 10118 St. Stephen Circle in Riverview. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. Games start at 6:30 p.m.

Bingo is $20 per person. The Community For Women group will also be displaying and selling tickets for its Raffle Bonanza Baskets. The raffle will be drawn on Wednesday, November 18. Attendees must be 18 years of age or older to play bingo.

Foundation Christian Academy Harvest Festival

Join Foundation Christian Academy for its 8th Annual Harvest Festival on Saturday, November 7, 11 AM–3 PM. This fun filled event is located at 3955 Lithia Pinecrest Rd., in Valrico and open to the public. It will feature a wide variety of over 20 vendors, a chili cook-off, car show, silent auction, raffles, inflatable games, a mechanical bull, and fun for the little ones! Enjoy the new prize tent and lunch from Ronnie Ron's BBQ.

Visit https://www.foundationchristianacademy.org/.



COUNTY TO HONOR VETERANS WITH 62ND ANNUAL VETERANS DAY TRIBUTE

Staff Report



Hillsborough County will honor Veterans of all eras during its 62nd Annual Veterans Day Tribute on Wednesday, November 11 at Veterans Memorial Park & Rear Admiral LeRoy Collins, Jr. Veterans Museum in Tampa.

Hillsborough County will honor Veterans of all eras during its 62nd Annual Veterans Day Tribute on Wednesday, November 11 at Veterans Memorial Park & Rear Admiral LeRoy Collins, Jr. Veterans Museum, located at 3602 N. U.S. 301 in Tampa.

Hosted by Hillsborough County Veteran Community Services and the Veterans Council of Hillsborough County, the free event will begin at 10 a.m. and offer a patriotic, family-friendly celebration honoring those who have served in the nation's military.

The ceremony will include a JROTC color guard, Veterans Council awards and a sing-along salute recognizing each branch of the U.S. military. Special guests will include Retired U.S. Coast Guard Rear Adm. Steve Poulin and Retired U.S. Army Col. Roland Tiso.

The tribute will also include refreshments and an opportunity for Veterans, military families and community members to gather and fellowship following the ceremony. Representatives from James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital, the YMCA Military Program and Hillsborough County Veteran Community Services will be available to provide information and resources for Veterans and their families.

The celebration also recognizes America's upcoming 250th anniversary and the important role Veterans have played throughout the nation's history.

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Hillsborough County remains the most heavily populated county for Veterans in Florida. As of September 2026, the county was home to 94,334 Veterans, with the local Veteran community contributing an estimated $1.4 billion in economic impact.

For the 10th consecutive year, the national Veterans Day Committee of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has selected Veterans Memorial Park & Rear Admiral LeRoy Collins, Jr. Veterans Museum as an official Regional Veterans Day Site. The designation recognizes locations that demonstrate excellence in honoring the nation's military and promoting patriotism.

The park is free and open to the public daily from 7 a.m.-5 p.m. Visitors can explore its many monuments, including the new Buffalo Soldiers Memorial and Gold Star Family Memorial.

Admission and parking for the Veterans Day Tribute are free, and the community is encouraged to attend.

For more information about the 62nd Annual Veterans Day Tribute or Veterans Memorial Park, visit HCFL.gov/Veterans or call 813-635-8316.



RACE FOR EDUCATION MOVES TO USF FOR FIFTH ANNUAL RUN

By Jane Owen

The Race for Education benefiting Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) will take place on the campus of University of South Florida (USF) on Saturday, November 7.

The fifth annual event is a partnership between the Hillsborough Education Foundation (HEF), HCPS and USF and is being held at USF for the first time. The funds that are generated beyond the cost of the event will support HEF's school and classroom grants.

AnnMarie Courtney, the director of partnership engagement for HCPS, said the Race for Education provides a meaningful opportunity for students, families and staff to come together while promoting physical health, mental well-being and a strong sense of community.

"The Race for Education creates a culture of wellness by demonstrating that being active can be enjoyable and inclusive. Whether participants run, jog or walk, everyone can take part at their own pace. The shared experience promotes connection, school spirit and healthy choices that can extend well beyond race day," Courtney said.

HEF President and CEO Anna Corman said she is thankful for the way the race brings people together to celebrate public schools.

"Seeing so many people come out and participate is a powerful reminder of how much our community values its schools and the students and educators within them. We are very excited to bring this year's Race for Education to a new location at the University of South Florida, giving our community a new setting to come together and celebrate public education," Corman said.

In 2025, just over 1,200 community members participated in the event. Corman and Courtney are grateful for the participants, the business sponsors for the event and the new partnership with USF.

Genna Custard, a Florida Virtual School teacher and former HCPS educator, is a participant who runs the race every year.

"Year after year, I come back to the HEF run because I will use any opportunity to give back to teachers. I know teachers are the core and heart of our schools. They pour into our students every day. On a personal note, I enjoy seeing my fitness progress year after year. I do 99 percent of my runs solo and this is an opportunity to cheer on friends and colleagues and just have fun!" Custard said.

The Race for Education includes a 5K and 1-mile walk/run. There is on-course entertainment from HCPS student groups. The 5K is timed, and the top age-group 5K finishers will receive awards. Finishers of both the 5K and 1-mile walk/run will receive a race shirt and finisher's medal.

USF is located at 4202 E. Fowler Ave. in Tampa. To register for the race, visit https://runsignup.com/race/fl/tampa/hef5k.





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DENNIS RIESE BUILDS ONE-OF-A-KIND, CUSTOM ARCADE MACHINES

By Libby Hopkins



Dennis Riese, a resident of Valrico and the founder of Phantom Arcades, builds premium, fully custom arcades for homes, businesses and events. Built with high-end components, stunning artwork and thousands of games, each machine delivers an unforgettable experience.

Since 2015, Riese has built 51 custom cabinets for celebrity owners, including The Undertaker and Michelle McCool, Rhea Ripley and Buddy Matthews, AJ Styles, Lil Yachty, Nick Carter, Joey Fatone and JWoww. Every machine is hand-built locally and designed around its owner, and his build videos have more than 10 million views online.

"Phantom Arcades really started by accident," Riese said. "I built my first arcade as a hobby for myself. One day, I had some friends over, and one of them liked it so much that he asked if he could buy it from me. I sold it to him and figured I'd just build myself another one. A few weeks later, another friend saw the new arcade and wanted to buy that one. So, I sold it to him too and built another. That was when I started thinking that maybe I had something here."

By 2022, Phantom Arcades had grown to the point where Riese had a decision to make.

"I decided to take a chance on the business, leave New York City Transit after 14 years, sell our home on Long Island, and move my family to Florida," he said. "That was when I committed to Phantom Arcades full time. Looking back, it's pretty incredible to think that the entire business started because a friend came over to my house and wanted to buy something I had built as a hobby."

What Riese enjoys most about building arcades is that no two projects are exactly the same.

"I get to take a customer's ideas, whether it's their favorite games, sports teams, movies, music or something personal to them, and turn those ideas into an arcade that is completely unique to them," he said. "I also love what happens after the arcade leaves my shop. These machines become something families and friends gather around. Knowing that something I built can become part of the memories a family makes together is probably the most rewarding part of what I do."

Riese's biggest goal for Phantom Arcades is to continue growing the business to the point where he can start hiring employees and building a team around it.

"Right now, Phantom Arcades is essentially a one-person operation," he said. "I'm very proud of that, but I also know that if I want the company to continue growing, eventually I can't do everything myself. I'd love to reach the point where I can hire people, teach them how I build these machines and create jobs here in our local community."

Recently, Phantom Arcades was featured on The Price Is Right, where one of Riese's custom arcades was a prize on the show.

If you'd like to learn more about Phantom Arcades or have a custom machine made, you can visit Riese's website at https://phantomarcades.com/ or call 813-419-7979.

HIGH 5 INC.'S ANNUAL CASINO NIGHT IS AROUND THE CORNER

By Emily Harper





High 5 Inc. is hosting its annual Ice the Dice Casino Night fundraiser on Friday, November 20. This event is the nonprofit's largest fundraiser of the year and serves as a way to positively impact the community.

"Don't miss one of the most exciting nights of the year — come roll the dice and change lives," High 5 Inc. posted on social media.

High 5 Inc. serves over 25,000 individuals in the Brandon area. The organization is dedicated to making a positive impact through its five pillars in progress: learn to swim, special needs education, after-school care, sports and recreation and community partnerships.

"Every dollar raised helps open doors to lifesaving swim lessons, adaptive programs that foster independence for adults with special needs, supportive places for children to learn and grow in a safe after-school space and recreational opportunities that build confidence, friendships and lifelong skills," according to High 5 Inc.'s website.

The fundraiser will be held at The Regent, located at 6437 Watson Rd. in Riverview, from 7-11 p.m. The attire is 'We're Bringing Back the '80s,' encouraging participants to dress in their favorite 80s-inspired fashion.

Throughout the night, there will be a variety of casino games, a dance floor, a silent auction, open bar, unlimited food and other entertainment.

Tickets can be purchased on High 5 Inc.'s website for $75 per person. You must be 21 or older to attend, and tickets include an open bar, unlimited food and play money.

High 5 is offering sponsorship opportunities at different tier levels, which include event tickets, open bar, unlimited food, play money and marketing specials.

For additional information about Ice the Dice Casino Night tickets or sponsorships, visit High 5 Inc.'s website at https://high5inc.org/casino-night/.



Thanks!

Thanksgiving reminds us to be grateful for all we have -- and to help those less fortunate. Here are some worthy local organizations that welcome your donations!

Feeding Tampa Bay, serving needs countywide: 813-254-1190 or FeedingTampaBay.org

Seeds of Hope, featuring the Nov. 26 FishHawk Turkey Trot: SoHopeFL.org

ECHO (Emergency Care Help Organization): Brandon 813-685-0935, Riverview 813-540-9880

Meals on Wheels: MOWTampa.org, BrandonMealsOnWheels.com

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



Ann Marie Vaughan, Realtor

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Ready To Be Thankful For A New Home?

FIND YOUR FLORIDA TREASURE in the Lost River Preserve! This uniquely designed, thoughtfully constructed estate delivers advanced amenities inside & out on 2.6 acres of natural, waterside privacy still convenient to the highlights of life around Tampa Bay. Custom-built 6 years ago it's packed with extras such as rooftop solar, 20kWh home battery, tankless water heater, EV charger, RV parking pad with electric hookup, & a beautiful courtyard pool surrounded by a travertine deck. The main residence provides 3,170 SF of single-story living with 4 bedrooms & 3.5 baths, but there's another 700 SF in a climate-controlled fitness room & a front-entry studio apartment. Offered for sale at $1,499,000.



YOUR OWN 1/4 ACRE with pool, spa, patio, & fire pit privacy-fenced in back make this home worth discovering in the security-gated section of Riverglen! Spread out in 2,700 SF with the Windward Homes St. George design, which offers spacious formal & casual living & dining rooms flanked by 4 bedrooms & 3 baths, then adds bay-windowed extensions to both the owner suite & another bedroom. The big pool lanai, with screened & roof-sheltered portions for all-weather enjoyment, is accessible from the suite on one end, a back bathroom on the other, & through sliders from the central family room beside the kitchen. No carpet, only tile or wood & luxury vinyl plank floors. $525,000

















BRING YOUR BOAT or RV to a neighborhood that allows them & a big corner yard with double gate to handle them! In Boyette Springs, this 2,370-SF pool home offers a flexible design for 3 or 4 bedrooms & 2.5 or 3.5 baths. It has tile, wood, & brand-new luxury vinyl plank floors & much more. $489,900



GET 2,700 SF on a gated & fenced 1/4 acre with no rear neighbor or HOA fees! In Boyette Springs, this original-owner home is available for the first time in a generation, still overlooking county conservation land from a big,pavered patio. An upstairs bonus room adds to 4 beds, 3 baths & lots more. $450,000



A PRIVATE, WOODED pond instead of a back neighbor is just 1 highlight of this 2,000-SF 3/2/2 on nearly an acre in 0-fee Boyette Springs! Other advantages include a 50-year metal roof, storm-impact windows, tile or luxury vinyl plank floors with no carpet, & a screened back porch. $399,900

GET MORE from your Florida lakeside lifestyle with extra space, attractive advantages, & solar-powered savings all on a quiet cul-de-sac near the bustling heart of Sun City Center! This 3-bed, 2-bath home with recent updates & its own dock also provides a 525-SF screened lanai beyond its1,670 SF. $359,900



BLOOMINGDALE RIDGE is where you'll find this woodsy pond view with no back neighbor from a screened, roof-covered lanai! On a cul-de-sac street, an open "great room" design stretches all the way back to the lanai, which adds 330 SF to help the 3-bed, 2-bath home live larger than 1,335 SF. $305,000



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



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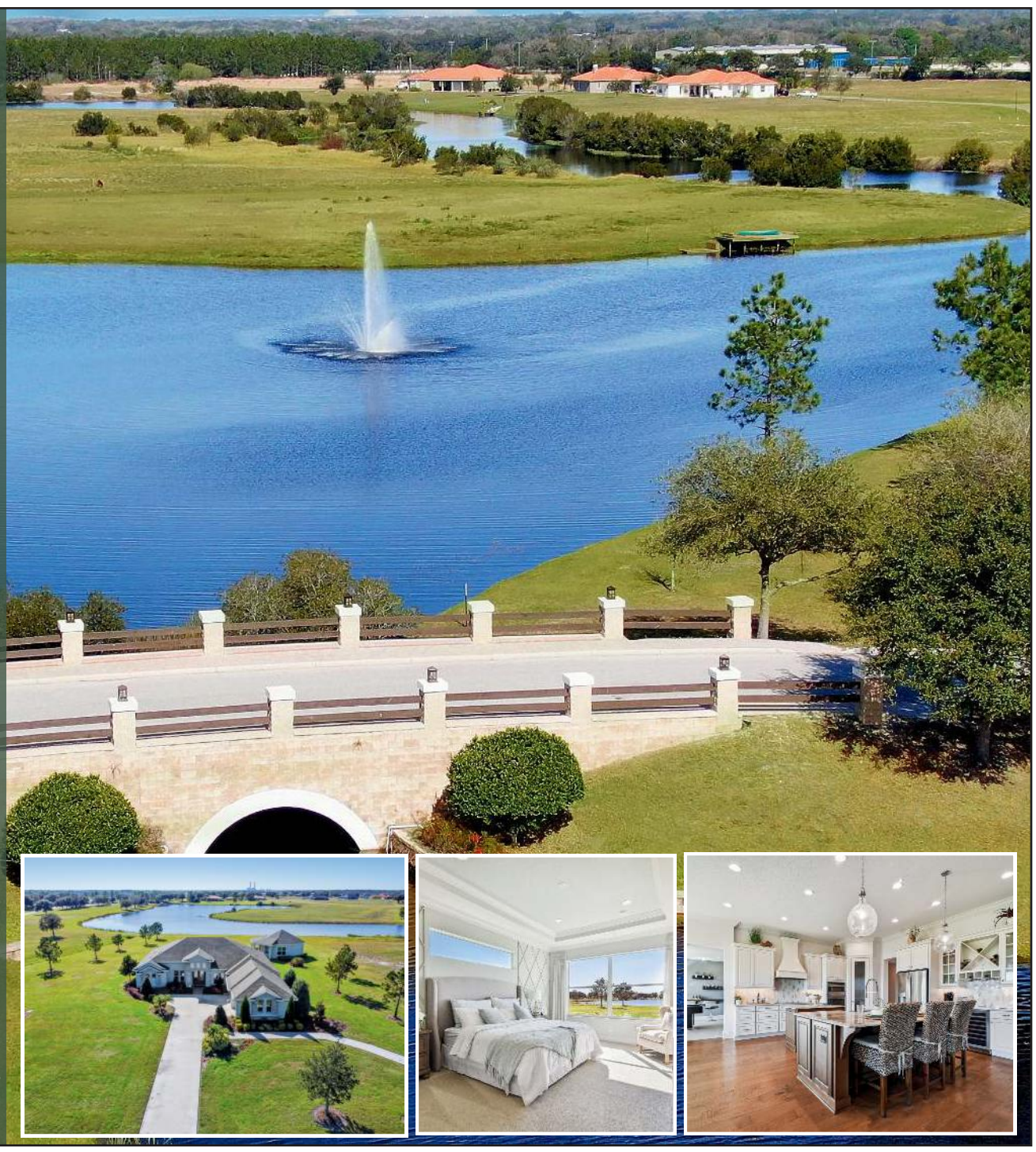




THE OSPREY OBSERVER **Bloomingdale/FishHawk Edition**

Eye *on* Business

EDITED BY **Jenny Bennett**

October 2026, Vol. 25, Iss. 11

SUBMIT BUSINESS NEWS & PRESS RELEASES

Send to **Business Editor**
116 E. Bloomingdale Ave., Brandon, FL 33511
or email **jbennett@ospreyobserver.com**
DEADLINE: 15TH OF EACH MONTH

Jeff's Bagel Run Now Open In Bloomingdale

Jeff's Bagel Run is a scratch bakery, specializing in New York-style bagels, with everything made in house. It has a wide variety of bagel flavors and cream cheeses, including seasonal favorites like pumpkin chocolate sprinkle bagels and pumpkin spice cream cheese. It celebrated its recent opening with a ribbon cutting from the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce. The store is located in Bloomingdale Square at 875 E. Bloomingdale Ave., Ste. 613, in Brandon and is open daily until 2 p.m. For more information, visit its website at www.jeffsbagelrun.com.

Human Equation Human Resources

Human EQ LLC, doing business as Human Equation, is a certified women and minority-owned small business and federal contractor providing comprehensive human resources, talent, leadership and organizational consulting solutions to public and private-sector organizations.

Founded by former global human resources and talent acquisition leaders from The Walt Disney Company, Human Equation combines Fortune 100 experience with an agile, highly customized approach to helping organizations solve complex people and business challenges. The firm's leaders bring experience supporting diverse business segments, corporate functions and global workforces, allowing Human Equation to deliver enterprise-level expertise with the responsiveness of a boutique advisory firm.

To learn more, visit its website at www.humaneq.co.

Floating Springs Celebrates One-year Anniversary

Floating Springs Acupuncture & Wellness is celebrating its one-year anniversary. It is a peaceful, welcoming space designed to help you slow down, reconnect with your body and support your overall well-being. If you've never experienced acupuncture or wellness care before, your first visit begins with a private consultation. It takes time to listen to your concerns, learn about your health history, lifestyle and wellness goals; and answer any questions you may have. This personalized conversation helps it understand your individual needs and develop an approach that is right for you.

Floating Springs Acupuncture & Wellness is located at 500 Vonderburg Dr. W., Ste. 214B, in Brandon. Call 813-535-0693 or visit at https://floatingspringsacu.com/.



Walk the Walk Professional Pet Care celebrated a ribbon cutting with the Valrico FishHawk Chamber of Commerce. Visit www.walkthewalkppc.com for information.

PipeFlow Solutions Provides Solutions With Minimal Disruption

PipeFlow Solutions, a Florida-based underground infrastructure and trenchless pipe rehabilitation company, is proud to provide residential and commercial customers throughout Florida with innovative solutions for repairing and restoring damaged piping systems.

With one of the company's co-founders based locally in the FishHawk community, PipeFlow Solutions has strong roots in the Tampa Bay area while proudly serving residential, commercial, multi-family and municipal customers throughout the State of Florida.

PipeFlow Solutions specializes in modern trenchless technologies that allow aging or damaged pipes to be rehabilitated with significantly less excavation, property damage and disruption than traditional pipe replacement methods. From a homeowner experiencing sewer line problems to complex commercial and municipal pipe rehabilitation projects, PipeFlow Solutions is proudly serving the State of Florida and helping customers extend the life of critical underground infrastructure.

For additional information visit its website at www.pipeflowsolutions.com or call 973 391 3841.

HomeWell Care Services Joins Chamber Of Commerce

The Greater SouthShore Chamber of Commerce recently held a Ribbon Cutting for one of its newest members, HomeWell Care Services, owned by Raphael and Ketchine Debrosse.

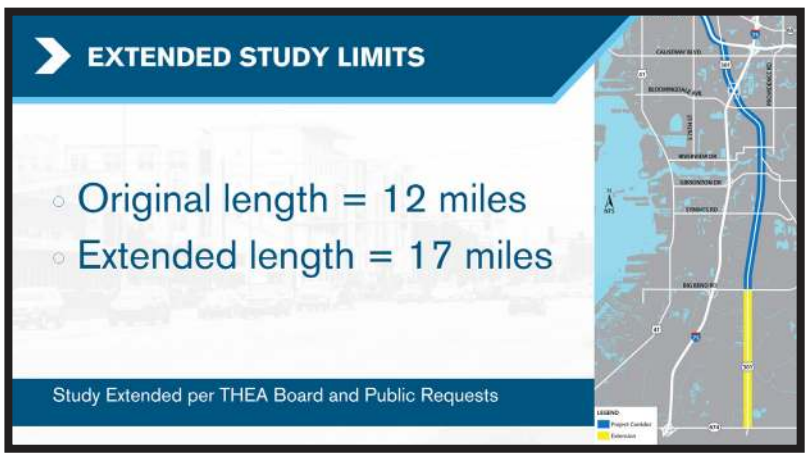
The Debrosses bring more than three decades of combined care experience. HomeWell provides in-home companion care, personal care, Alzheimer's and dementia care, respite care, veterans care, transportation, and post-hospital support. Care is available hourly, around the clock, or live-in, and serves surrounding communities including Apollo Beach, Gibsonton, Riverview, Ruskin, Sun City Center, Wimauma, and Lithia.

HomeWell Care Services is located at 400 Frandorson Circle, Suite 4218, Apollo Beach, FL 33572. For more information, call 813-738-4900 or visit homewellcares.com.

PROPOSED U.S. 301 EXPRESS LANES COULD CUT COMMUTE TIMES FOR SOUTH COUNTY DRIVERS

By Brian Bokor

For South County drivers caught in morning and evening traffic, a proposed express route could offer another way toward Tampa and more time back in their day.



The Tampa Hillsborough Expressway Authority, known as THEA, is studying express lanes along 17 miles of U.S. 301 between the Selmon Expressway and north of State Road 674, or Sun City Center Boulevard.

The lanes could give U.S. 301 and Interstate 75 drivers another route, easing pressure on both roads while leaving more room on U.S. 301 for local trips.

Greg Slater, THEA's executive director and CEO, updated the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners during its September 16 regular meeting, covering traffic, access points, public outreach and financing.

The original 12-mile study ended at Big Bend Road. Requests from residents and THEA's board helped extend it five miles south.

"The important thing to note on that southern section, which is that Big Bend to Sun City, that's an area that has the least amount of volume of traffic today but it's also the area that we're seeing with the highest amount of growth between now and 2050," Slater said.

Early analysis estimated potential peak-period travel-time savings of up to 81 percent. Projected northbound morning savings included 62 minutes from Big Bend Road to the Selmon, 36 minutes from Gibsonton and 12 minutes from Bloomingdale.

Those projections are preliminary. THEA is working with the county and Florida Department of Transportation to update its traffic model with recent development and growth.

Slater said congestion can make rush hour last longer.

"One of the things that we find with congestion in particular is there's a point where it doesn't get worse, it just gets longer, so your peak hour becomes two hours and starts to kind of linger into the rest of it, and that's what we're seeing down there," he said.

The U.S. 301 study area corridor has 35 signalized intersections and 40 median openings. Express lanes would let longer-distance drivers bypass traffic lights.

Slater said choosing where drivers enter and exit will be "some of the most critical decisions that we make."

Potential access areas include between Sun City Center Boulevard and Big Bend Road, between Big Bend Road and Symmes Road, just south and north of Gibsonton Drive and just south of Bloomingdale Avenue. The presentation also shows a possible connection between Bloomingdale and Interstate 75, plus connections near the Selmon north of Causeway Boulevard. Exact ramp locations remain under study.



THEA is examining four sections and could address northern bottlenecks before moving south. Much of the corridor has about 200 feet of public right-of-way, or land set aside for transportation.

"There's a tremendous amount of room along that corridor to provide a solution," Slater said.

Engineers must work around structures near Interstate 75 and narrower right-of-way near the Alafia River. Near the Coca-Cola property between Causeway Boulevard and the Selmon, the team is exploring elevated lanes along the side of U.S. 301 because median space is limited.

Residents have provided feedback through workshops, community events and homeowners association meetings. Materials are available in English and Spanish, and the project website offers updates.

Local business input will also be welcome. THEA's past efforts include Shop Gandy, which supported Gandy corridor businesses during the Selmon Extension project.

A survey found that 92 percent of respondents experienced heavy or very heavy congestion on U.S. 301. More than nine in 10 supported exploring solutions. Concerns included noise, appearance and nearby roads.

"So, we want to make sure that we really work with the community to understand exactly what those concerns are so that we can provide some relief but also provide it in the context of that community that we're serving down there," Slater said.

Financing will shape the schedule. THEA is studying toll rates similar to the existing Selmon and following a federal process that could provide lower-cost loans. Grants or a state partnership could advance the project sooner.

The Project Development and Environment study contract has been awarded. A preview of alternatives is expected in summer 2027, with a public hearing anticipated in summer 2029. No construction or opening date was announced.

"And so, I argue a little bit on that timeline, where sometimes it's about going slow so you can go faster on the implementation front," Slater said.

Residents can learn more and sign up for updates at https://selmonstudies.com/us-301-study/.



IMPORTANT 2026 PROPERTY TAX NOTICE

The 2026 Hillsborough County tax roll has been delivered to the Tax Collector by the Property Appraiser's office. The collection of the ad valorem taxes and non- ad valorem assessments will begin on **November 1, 2026**.

Nancy C. Millan, Tax Collector

To the Residents of Hillsborough County,

The 2026 property tax roll is now open, and tax bills will begin arriving in mailboxes and inboxes in early November.

Your property taxes do more than cover a bill. They fund the schools our children attend, the first responders who answer our calls, and the parks, roads, and services that make Hillsborough County home. Our job is to make paying them as simple as possible, so you can take care of it and get back to your life.

Whether you prefer to pay online, by mail, or in person, we've made it easy, and paying early means you save.

Have a question? Don't hesitate to reach out to our team. We are here to serve you, and we are grateful for the trust you place in us.

Sincerely,

Nancy C. Millan
Hillsborough County Tax Collector

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3% if paid by Dec. 31
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DROP BOX
Select offices have drop boxes available to the public. Visit **HillsTaxFL.gov** for locations. *Please do not deposit cash into drop boxes.*

IN PERSON
Visit **HillsTaxFL.gov** for a list of convenient locations.

NANCY C. MILLAN
HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY TAX COLLECTOR

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2026 PROPERTY TAX REFORM: KNOW THE FACTS

FIND THE RIGHT FIT: MAGNET & CHOICE APPLICATIONS NOW OPEN

By Superintendent Van Ayres



Every child has different interests, strengths and dreams for the future. Finding the right school experience can help turn those interests into opportunities.

At Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS), Magnet & Choice programs give families the opportunity to explore educational options designed to match how their child learns, what excites them and where they want to go next.

From elementary through high school, HCPS offers a wide variety of Magnet programs that allow students to dive deeper into areas they are passionate about. Students can explore everything from biomedical sciences and robotics to performing arts, environmental studies, culinary arts and more, all while building a strong academic foundation.

These specialized programs bring learning to life through hands-on experiences that encourage students to create, collaborate, solve problems and think critically. By connecting classroom learning with real-world experiences, students can discover new interests and begin building skills that will serve in college, careers, and beyond.

Families can also explore a range of Choice opportunities that provide different academic and career pathways. Students may pursue advanced programs, such as Cambridge AICE, International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP), or explore Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs that can lead to industry certifications and workforce-ready skills.

For families, school choice is about more than selecting a program. It is about finding an environment where a child can feel challenged, inspired and excited about learning. Whether a student already has a passion or is just beginning to discover one, HCPS offers opportunities to help them explore their potential and prepare for what comes next.

Magnet & Choice applications are now open, and the application window closes on Monday, December 7.

Families can learn more about available programs, the application process and important dates at https://hillsboroughschools.org/choice.

MACBETH & CHEESE PRESENTS: A ONE-DAY ACTING MASTERCLASS WITH KEN EULO

Staff Report



Ken Eulo, an accomplished actor, writer, director and teacher with more than 30 years of experience, will lead a one-day Acting Masterclass on Saturday, November 7.

Aspiring actors and performers will have an opportunity to learn from an entertainment industry veteran when MacBeth & Cheese, the performing arts program at Brandon Performing Arts, presents a one-day Acting Masterclass with Ken Eulo on Saturday, November 7.

The workshop will take place from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. at the Brandon Performing Arts Center, located at 225 E. Brandon Blvd. in Brandon.

Eulo brings more than three decades of experience in theater, film and television to the masterclass. His career has taken him from Broadway to Hollywood, where he has worked alongside notable performers including Robert De Niro, Al Pacino, Rip Torn, Geraldine Page, Betty Grable and Ray Milland.

An actor, writer, director and teacher, Eulo began teaching acting at the Courtyard Playhouse, one of New York's longest-running Off-Broadway theaters. His training has also included working with influential acting teachers and directors Robert Lewis, Lee Strasberg and Elia Kazan.

The hands-on masterclass is designed for performers at a variety of experience levels, whether they are new to acting, returning to the stage or looking to strengthen their existing skills.

Participants will explore acting techniques and scene study through practical exercises designed to encourage natural emotional responses. The workshop also will include theater games and improvisation focused on spontaneity, creativity, voice, energy and emotional expression.

Character development will be another key component, with participants learning how to approach roles and create believable characters for stage, film, television and digital media.

The day will also emphasize performance skills, confidence and authentic connection with fellow performers.

To provide a focused learning environment, participation is limited to 15 people. Tuition is $250 and includes the full day of instruction with Eulo. Directors who would like to observe the workshop without participating may attend free of charge.

Early registration is encouraged. For more information or to reserve a spot, visit macbethandcheese.com.

MacBeth & Cheese is part of Brandon Performing Arts and works to bring live performing arts opportunities and experiences to the local community.



HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY EXTENDS EMERGENCY OVER DENGUE CONCERNS

By Marie Gilmlore



Hillsborough County has extended its state of local emergency through October 29 and likely longer as mosquito control crews continue efforts to reduce the mosquito population responsible for spreading locally acquired dengue fever.

County Administrator Bonnie Wise signed an executive order extending the emergency under authority granted by the County's Emergency Management Ordinance and Chapter 252 of the Florida Statutes. The original emergency declaration was issued September 24 and has since been extended in seven-day increments, including extensions through October 8, October 15 and October 22.

A state of local emergency can remain in effect for seven days unless it is rescinded or extended. The declaration allows county officials and emergency managers to take certain actions more quickly to protect the health, safety and welfare of residents. It also provides a path for reimbursement of certain emergency-related expenses.

Hillsborough County has reported more than 200 locally acquired dengue cases during the outbreak, accounting for the vast majority of Florida's reported cases. Cases have been identified in nearly 60 ZIP codes across the county.

Dengue is primarily spread by infected Aedes mosquitoes. Symptoms can include sudden high fever, severe headache, pain behind the eyes, muscle, bone or joint pain, nausea, vomiting and a rash. Most people recover within two to seven days.

Residents should seek emergency medical care if warning signs of severe dengue develop. These can include severe abdominal pain, persistent vomiting, bleeding from the nose or gums, blood in vomit or stool, extreme fatigue or irritability, and difficulty breathing.

Mosquito Management crews are increasing treatments by both air and ground after mosquito surveillance identified dengue virus activity in mosquito populations in multiple neighborhoods. The county is coordinating with the Florida Department of Health in Hillsborough County on education and treatment efforts in impacted areas.

Residents throughout Hillsborough County are encouraged to help reduce mosquito breeding areas by eliminating standing water around their homes, particularly following recent heavy rains. Even small amounts of standing water in containers, plant saucers and other items can provide breeding areas for mosquitoes.

Residents can also sign up for notifications about localized aerial treatments in their neighborhoods and access information about current mosquito-control activities through Hillsborough County's online resources.

Mosquito control services are funded in part through Hillsborough County property tax dollars. For more information, contact Hillsborough County Mosquito Management Services at 813-635-5400.

WATER RATE INCREASE SUPPORTS $2.44 BILLION IN COUNTY PROJECTS

Staff Report



Hillsborough County recently embarked on one of the largest infrastructure projects in the county's history with the $1.2 billion One Water South Wastewater Conveyance and Treatment Project in Lithia.

Hillsborough County Water Resources customers are seeing new water and wastewater rates beginning October 1 following approval by the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners.

The updated rates are intended to help fund the ongoing operation, maintenance and improvement of the county's water and wastewater systems, which provide service to customers 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

For a residential customer using an average of 8,000 gallons of water per month, the estimated increase is approximately $9.31 per month. Actual bills will vary depending on factors including meter size, water consumption and wastewater service.

For fiscal year 2027, the Board approved a 5 percent rate increase, along with a 2.91 percent price index increase. The Tampa Bay Water passthrough charge also increased from $3.02 to $3.04 per 1,000 gallons.

According to Hillsborough County Water Resources, the rates help cover increasing operating costs, routine maintenance, system improvements, resiliency needs, regulatory requirements and investments in infrastructure needed to continue providing reliable service.

The additional revenue also supports a significant portfolio of capital improvement projects currently underway throughout the county.

The county's One Water Program includes 10 projects with a total investment of approximately $1.5 billion, making it the county's largest infrastructure project to date.

Other projects include 16 Master Program infrastructure projects totaling $573.09 million; nine Septic-to-Sewer projects totaling $157 million; and 13 Treatment Facility projects totaling $128 million.

The county is also investing $87 million in seven other projects and $47 million in three projects through the countywide Hillsborough Aquifer Recharge Program, known as CHARP.

Together, the Water Resources capital improvement program includes 58 projects representing approximately $2.44 billion in planned infrastructure investment.

The projects are designed to address both current and future needs as Hillsborough County continues to grow, while supporting the long-term reliability and resiliency of its water and wastewater systems.

Customers can view a detailed breakdown of current water and wastewater rates and fees online at hcfl.gov/water by selecting "Water Rates & Fees."



YMCA CAMP CRISTINA UNVEILS NEW 30-FOOT CHALLENGE COURSE

By Marie Gilmore



Adventure is reaching new heights at YMCA Camp Cristina in Riverview with plans for a new 30-foot-high challenge course designed to bring climbing, teamwork, confidence-building and plenty of thrills to the community.

The new course will offer children, families, school groups, businesses and community organizations an opportunity to get outdoors, challenge themselves and experience YMCA Camp Cristina in a new way.

The centerpiece will be a 30-foot adventure tower featuring a climbing wall and elevated platform. From there, participants will navigate a series of high elements suspended above the ground, including platforms, cables, bridges and other obstacles designed to test balance, communication, problem-solving and courage.

The experience is intended to be about more than adrenaline.

Participants will have opportunities to work together, encourage one another and discover what they can accomplish outside their comfort zones.

"The goal isn't simply to see who can climb the highest or move through the course the fastest," according to the YMCA. "It's about creating experiences where people discover confidence in themselves and learn to trust the people around them."

The challenge course will add another attraction to the 65-acre YMCA Camp Cristina and create opportunities beyond traditional summer camp programming.

The YMCA envisions the course being used by families and YMCA members, school groups, teens, corporate teams, community organizations, birthday celebrations, retreats and leadership-development programs.

For businesses, the course could provide an opportunity for employees to participate in team-building activities while encouraging communication and collaboration. For families and young people, it can provide a supportive environment to face challenges, build confidence and celebrate accomplishments.

The project also reflects the YMCA's broader goal of making YMCA Camp Cristina a year-round destination.

Located in the heart of South Hillsborough, YMCA Camp Cristina has long provided opportunities for children and families to connect with nature, develop new skills and build relationships. The new challenge course will expand those opportunities with an elevated adventure experience.

YMCA Camp Cristina is located at 9840 Balm Riverview Rd. in Riverview.

For more information about YMCA Camp Cristina, its programs and upcoming opportunities, visit www.tampaymca.org/locations/ymca-camp-cristina or call 813-677-8400.

COMMUNITY RALLIES AROUND TAMPA FIRE CAPTAIN BENNY

By Brian Bokor



Tampa Fire Rescue Captain Benjamin 'Benny' Bengter has spent 15 years answering calls for people who needed help. Now, as Benny continues a difficult recovery from a life-threatening medical emergency, firefighters and community members throughout Tampa Bay are answering the call for him.

First responders, their families, friends and residents packed Voodoo Brewing Co. in Valrico on September 13 for 'Beers for Benny,' a fundraiser organized to support Benny, his fiancée and their young daughter.

Voodoo Brewing Co. Valrico owner Chris Ciulla said two firefighters who work at the brewery approached him after telling him what had happened to Benny.

"I have two firefighters who work for us, and they told me about Benny and what happened to him," Ciulla said. "They asked if they could hold a fundraiser, and I said, 'Hey, you can have use of my place any night you need. We're going to raise as much money for the family as we can.'"

Ciulla's connection to the fire service made the decision especially personal.

"My dad is a retired fire chief in New York City, so anytime we can help a firefighter, it hits home for me," Ciulla said.

The gathering brought together members of Tampa Fire Rescue and Hillsborough County Fire Rescue, including Hillsborough County Fire Rescue Chief Jason Dougherty. Some knew Benny personally, while others came because a firefighter and his family needed their support.

Benny became critically ill while vacationing with his family in Hawaii. His mother, Irina Bengter, said an attack of pancreatitis progressed to shock, organ failure, abdominal compartment syndrome and sepsis. Doctors performed emergency surgery and spent weeks stabilizing him before he returned to Tampa.

Although Benny could not attend the fundraiser, his daughter and a friend sent him photographs and videos throughout the evening. Irina said he was excited by what he saw and deeply appreciative.

"Ben asked me to share his heartfelt gratitude and say thank you to everyone who has lifted him up in prayer, supported him financially, sent messages, made phone calls and shown their love and support in so many other ways," Irina said. "He is forever grateful to each and every one of you."

The event featured "Benny Strong" T-shirts, vendors, food and drink specials, raffles, a silent auction and a DJ. More than $20,000 worth of prizes were donated.

Tampa Fire Rescue Driver Engineer Benjamin Carlson, a longtime friend of Benny, helped organize the fundraiser with assistance from the Firemen's Benevolent Association of the City of Tampa. The two have known each other since paramedic school in 2011.

"Last night truly filled my heart," Carlson wrote. "It means the world to me and my family."

Benny followed his father and uncles into the fire service and has risen from driver engineer to captain at Tampa Fire Rescue Station 16.

The Firemen's Benevolent Association has established an online fundraiser to help with medical and recovery expenses.





BEYOND THE COURTROOM: OUR FIRST 'DAY OF SERVICE'

By State Attorney Suzy Lopez



When you work at the state attorney's office, serving the community is part of your job description. But most people associate that service with what happens inside a courtroom. Recently, our team had the opportunity to serve Hillsborough County in a different way.

We held our first-ever State Attorney's Office Day of Service, giving employees the chance to step away from their daily responsibilities and volunteer with organizations that help our neighbors through some of life's most difficult challenges.

Our team spent the day volunteering at Feeding Tampa Bay, Metropolitan Ministries and the Hillsborough County Pet Resource Center. While these organizations have different missions, they share a commitment to helping people facing difficult circumstances.

What made the day especially valuable wasn't just the opportunity to lend a hand. It was the chance to learn more about the challenges people in our community face and the resources available to help them.

For example, many people know the Pet Resource Center as the county animal shelter. But our volunteers learned that its work goes far beyond caring for homeless animals.

The center offers resources designed to keep pets with the families who love them. Through its community pet pantry, vaccination clinics and a special program for owners considering surrendering their pets, the center helps families find solutions during difficult times. We even got to help them prepare for their vaccination clinic, which was set to help hundreds of families over just one weekend. It's just one example of how much important work is happening in our community that many of us may never see.

As prosecutors, we encounter people from all walks of life, often during some of their most difficult moments. While our primary responsibility is to hold offenders accountable and protect public safety, understanding the challenges people face outside the courtroom makes us better at serving them. That's what I hoped our team would take away from this experience.

Our first Day of Service was about more than donating a few hours of our time. It was an opportunity to strengthen our connections with the community and remind ourselves why public service matters so much.

I'm proud of our team for embracing this opportunity, and I hope this becomes a tradition at our office for years to come. Because serving Hillsborough County doesn't begin or end at the courthouse doors.

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

MIDDLE SCHOOL NAMED IN HONOR OF EDUCATOR KENNETH R. OTERO

By Marie Gilmore



A new middle school under construction in Wimauma will bear the name of a longtime Hillsborough County Public Schools leader whose career spanned nearly four decades.

On September 1, the Hillsborough County School Board voted to name the new campus Kenneth R. Otero Middle School. Currently referred to as Middle School VV, the school's name was selected following a community naming process that generated more than 1,100 recommendations for consideration.

Located on West Lake Drive in Wimauma, on the same property as Aquilla J. Morgan High School, the approximately $72 million middle school is scheduled to open in August 2027. The school will serve students in grades six through eight, with capacity for up to 1,600 students.

The new campus will provide students with a variety of academic and enrichment opportunities designed to complement the educational offerings at nearby Aquilla J. Morgan High School, which opened in 2025.

Planned programs include rigorous and accelerated coursework, opportunities to earn high school credits, career and technical education, industry certifications and extracurricular activities. Students will also have opportunities to participate in clubs and sports based on student interest.

Kenneth R. Otero Middle School will honor an educator and administrator who dedicated 38 years to Hillsborough County Public Schools, serving from 1975 to 2013.

Otero began his career as a teacher at Plant High School in 1975 before becoming an assistant principal at the school. He later served as principal of Sligh Junior High School and Tampa Bay Technical High School.

In 1996, Otero transitioned into district leadership as general director. He subsequently served as assistant superintendent for administration and deputy superintendent.

Throughout his career, Otero helped support student success, strengthen school leadership and advance educational opportunities throughout the district.

"This new middle school represents our continued commitment to providing students with access to innovative learning environments in communities experiencing rapid growth," said Superintendent Van Ayres.

"We look forward to opening the Kenneth R. Otero Middle School in 2027, which will honor an exceptional former leader whose contributions helped shape the success of our district and the students we serve."

The school's opening will expand educational opportunities for families in the rapidly growing South Hillsborough County community.

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FEATURED SPEAKERS
DR. SUSAN STEEN
Principal Investigator of Clinical Trials Axiom Brain Health
Topic: Understanding Memory Loss and Cognitive Care
JILL ANDREW
Ambiance at Brandon Assisted Living and Memory Care
Topic: Communication Techniques with Your Loved One and Tips for Living
DEANN MARASCO
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SESCO WELCOMES FIRST BULK CEMENT SHIPS TO PORT TAMPA BAY TERMINAL

Staff Report



SESCO Cement welcomed the first two ships carrying bulk gray cement to its import terminal at Port Tampa Bay, bringing the facility's major assets online and marking the start of full commercial operations. The arrivals come just months after the company celebrated the terminal's opening with a ribbon cutting in June.

Each vessel is making a partial discharge at the Port Redwing terminal in Gibsonton before continuing across the gulf to SESCO's Houston, Texas, terminal to complete delivery. The two-port route links SESCO's Florida and Texas operations and gives the company added capacity and flexibility to meet current and future regional demand, building Port Tampa Bay into a key hub within SESCO's global network.

The deliveries were made possible by the terminal's custom-designed ship unloader and conveyor system, which moves bulk cement from the ship's hold directly into SESCO's storage silos. The unloader, the largest wheel-mounted cement ship unloader in operation, arrived in Tampa earlier this year after nearly two years of engineering and design.

Activating the silos also dramatically speeds distribution to customers across the region. The new automated silo system provides quick and efficient truck loading, significantly increasing throughput and allowing SESCO to move more cement to ready-mix producers and other customers each day.

"The arrival of our first bulk cement ships is the moment this terminal was built for," said Rick Van Eyk, CEO of SESCO Cement. "With our ship unloader, conveyor system and silos now running together, we are fully operational and able to get cement to our customers faster than ever. These operations add capacity and flexibility that support both current and future demand across the region, and they establish Port Tampa Bay as a key hub within our global network."

The Port Tampa Bay terminal is strategically positioned to serve Florida's major construction markets via maritime shipping lanes, interstate highways and rail networks. Upon full build-out, it will be the largest cement terminal in Florida.

About SESCO Cement

Established in 2014, SESCO Cement is a subsidiary of the SESCO Group, a vertically integrated manufacturing, shipping, and logistics company with a global presence. In the United States, SESCO Cement has a 22-acre facility in Houston that has a 240,000-ton storage capacity, and a new 14-acre terminal in Tampa with 100,000 tons of storage capacity. SESCO Cement's Houston facility is the largest cement terminal in the country.

For more information about SESCO Cement, visit https://sescocement.com/.



GET THE DIRT:

LET'S MAKE A LIST AND CHECK IT TWICE

BY LYNN BARBER, URBAN HORTICULTURE AGENT



Some people enjoy creating to-do lists to help them track successes and otherwise. Here's my list for fall:

• Conserve as much water as you can. Take a shower versus a bath. Decrease landscape irrigation frequency as needed. Consider turning off your irrigation controller and watering only when plants need water. Check out our Water-Wise Workshops for Hillsborough County residents, who can attend and receive three different types of microirrigation kits for attending workshops.

• Mulch retains soil moisture, regulates soil temperature, adds nutrients to the soil as it decomposes, suppresses weed growth, reduces stormwater runoff and erosion, provides increased area for root growth and protects plants from lawnmowers and weed eaters. Mulch should be 2-3 inches deep after it settles.

• Consult two great resources: the University of Florida (UF) Central Florida Gardening Calendar, which provides information about what to plant and other activities to accomplish each month of the year, and the UF Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide, which provides recommended varieties, days to harvest, spacing and seed depth.

• The most challenging aspect of controlling insects can be proper identification, which is critical to selecting the method of control. The methods include cultural, mechanical, biological and chemical. There are several environmentally safe pest solutions available.

• Divide and conquer your perennials: Divide clumping perennials and replant them throughout your landscape.

• If your houseplants were outside for the summer and early fall, consider bringing them inside before temperature dips below 55 degrees Fahrenheit.

Fall is an exciting time to manage what needs to be addressed in your landscape. The heat and humidity are in the process of moving on, which allows us to get outside and garden. We hope you will stop by to stroll through the Bette S. Walker Discovery Garden in our courtyard and our Master Gardener demonstration area behind our building. Hope to see you soon.

Contact: Lynn Barber - labarber@ufl.edu



NOMINATIONS OPEN FOR 2027 COUNTY WOMEN'S HALL OF FAME

Staff Report



Hillsborough County is inviting residents to nominate an exceptional woman who has made a significant positive impact on the community for induction into the Women's Hall of Fame.

The program, presented by the Hillsborough County Commission on the Status of Women (COSW), celebrates local women whose contributions have improved the lives of residents through areas including social services, education, philanthropy, the military and public service.

Up to three women are selected for the honor each year. Since the program was established in 2011, more than 40 Hillsborough County women have been recognized for their leadership, service and accomplishments.

The 2026 inductees included Liana Fernandez Fox, Ph.D., Susan Wagner Leisner, CFA, and Norma Camero Reno, three women whose careers and community service have created opportunities for others and strengthened the community.

A fourth-generation Tampa native, Fox has dedicated more than 50 years to expanding access to higher education and advancing women's leadership in Hillsborough County. Her career has included serving as a mathematics professor, academic leader and union president, as well as philanthropic and advocacy work supporting Latinx representation. Her accomplishments have earned her honors including Professor Emeritus at Hillsborough Community College, Woman of Distinction and Tampa Bay Lightning Hometown Hero.

Leisner is a nationally recognized finance expert and advocate for gender equality. She broke the corporate glass ceiling as the lead plaintiff in a landmark Title VII discrimination case and later became the second woman appointed to the Florida Public Service Commission. Through decades of leadership and philanthropy, she has continued working to expand opportunities for women in Hillsborough County and beyond.

Reno, a Venezuelan-born attorney, educator and human rights advocate, has devoted decades to empowering immigrant and Hispanic communities. She is a co-founder of Casa Venezuela Tampa Bay and has served in civic and advisory leadership roles while promoting cross-cultural understanding through her community service, legal scholarship and bilingual writing.

Residents are encouraged to nominate a woman who has served as a mentor, teacher, business leader, community advocate or volunteer and whose work has made a lasting difference.

Nomination forms are available at HCFL.gov/WHOF and will be accepted until 5 p.m. Thursday, November 12. For questions, contact Jaida Clark at 813-635-7403.

The COSW was created to study issues affecting women and make recommendations to the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners on topics including discrimination, employment, daycare, education and healthcare.

NOVEMBERFEST CELEBRATES 55 YEARS OF COMMUNITY TRADITION

By Marie Gilmore



For 55 years, Novemberfest has brought families, friends and neighbors together for a weekend of rides, food, entertainment and fellowship. This year, Nativity Catholic Church and School will celebrate the longtime Brandon tradition from Friday, November 20, through Sunday, November 22.

Held on the grounds of Nativity Catholic Church and School at 705 E. Brandon Blvd. in Brandon, Novemberfest is a family-friendly carnival featuring amusement rides, food, games and live entertainment. Admission and parking are free, with rides, food and other activities available for purchase throughout the weekend.

The 2026 celebration will open on November 20 at 4 p.m. and continue until 12 Midnight. Saturday's festivities will run from 11 a.m.-12 Midnight, followed by Sunday's schedule from 12 Noon-9 p.m. Entertainment will include Soul Circus Cowboys on Friday, adding live music to an evening filled with carnival attractions and activities.

For families planning to enjoy the rides, access is based on height rather than age. Ride tickets and wristbands can be purchased at kiosks or the Ride Kiosk Trailer located on the midway. Fairgoers can choose between a Ride Card, which can be loaded with the desired number of credits, or a $30 wristband.

Ride credits cost $1 each, and there is a one-time $2 activation fee when a Ride Card or wristband is first purchased.

Ride availability and height requirements vary, and families can check individual ride requirements before attending.

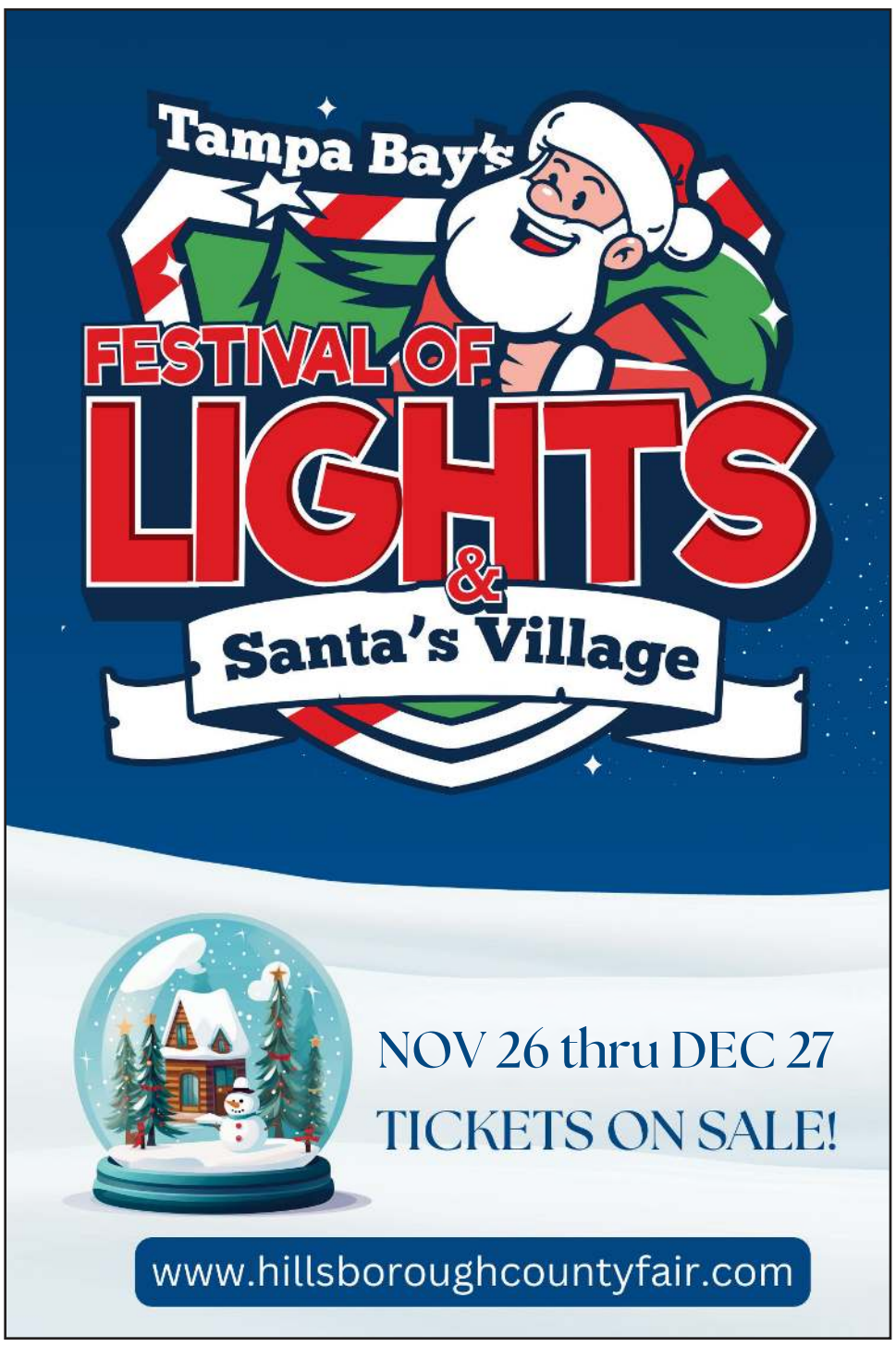
Food will also be a major part of the Novemberfest experience, with a variety of options available for purchase throughout the festival.

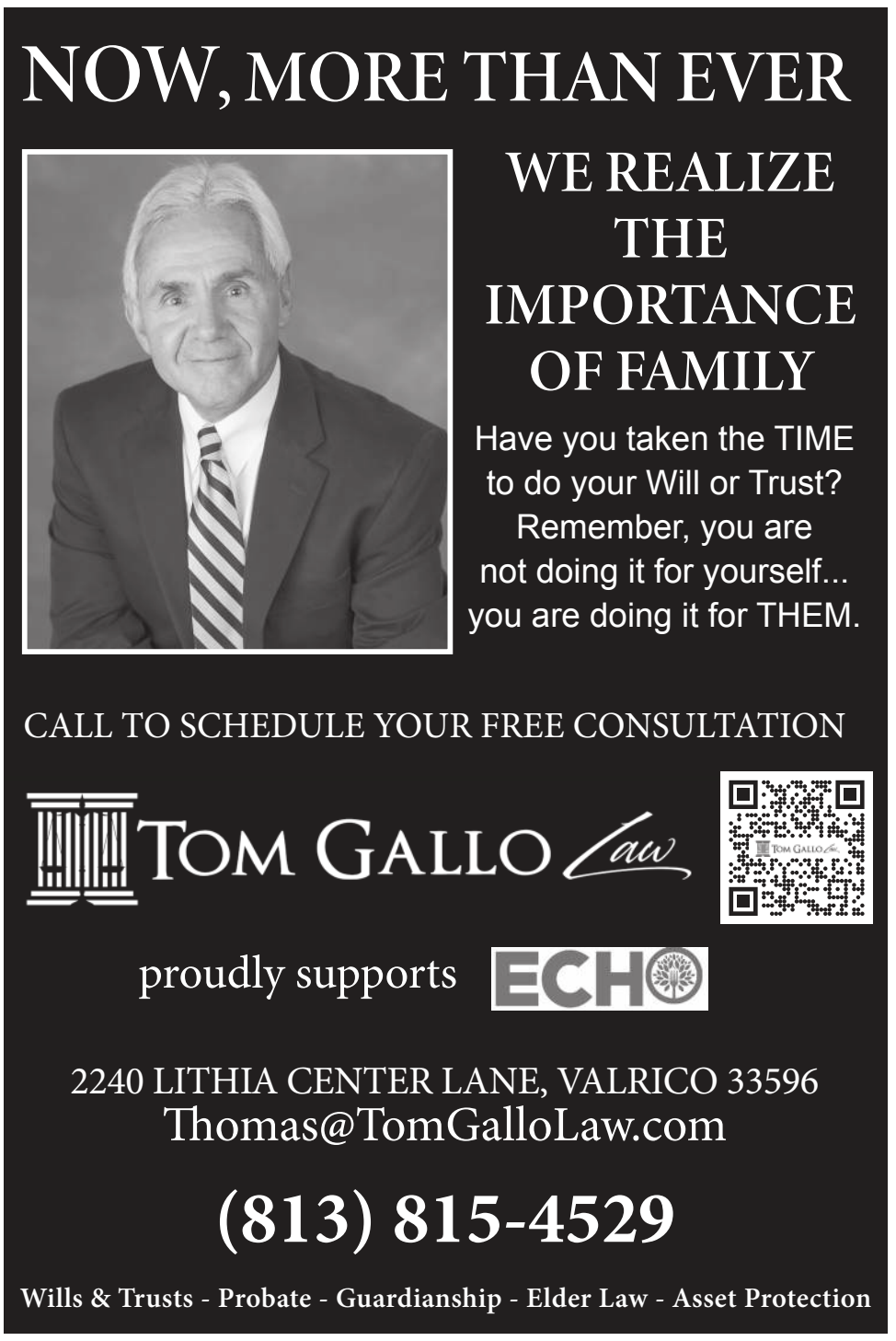
Organizers noted that all sales for ride vouchers, ride tickets, food vouchers, food tickets and games are final. There are no refunds or rain checks. Some rides may temporarily close because of inclement weather or lightning and will reopen when conditions are safe.

Florida Highway Patrol will be on-site throughout the event to help ensure the safety of guests.

The 55th anniversary also provides an opportunity for local businesses, organizations and families to support Novemberfest through sponsorships. Sponsorships help make the event possible while supporting students at Nativity Catholic School and youth ministry programs at Nativity Catholic Church.

For sponsorship information, contact Therese Alonso at talonso@nativitycatholicchurch.org or 813-681-4608, ext. 2237.





JEFF'S BAGEL RUN EXPANDS TO BLOOMINGDALE WITH LOCAL OWNERS

By Brian Bokor





For Rob Shuffield, opening Jeff's Bagel Run in Bloomingdale Square brings a longtime restaurant dream back to familiar ground. The 1990 Brandon High School graduate and his wife, Teresa, celebrated the shop's grand opening on October 2, bringing scratch-made bagels, spreads and coffee to a community they already serve through their Nothing Bundt Cakes bakeries in Winthrop and Brandon.

Located at 875 E. Bloomingdale Ave. in Brandon, between Bealls and EOS Fitness, the new shop puts the couple close to the families and schools that drew Rob to Bloomingdale Square.

"From the moment we started preparing to open in Brandon, the community has been incredibly welcoming," company founder Jeff Perera said.

Customers can watch staff mix and shape dough, then boil and bake bagels in small batches throughout the day. Fresh batches continue throughout the morning, with no toasters behind the counter.

"Fresh baked bagels don't need to be toasted," Perera said.

The menu includes spreads such as roasted jalapeño, chive and onion, cake batter and banana pudding, along with hot coffee, iced lattes, cold brew, teas and refreshers..

Perera's bagel-making journey began after he lost his job in 2019. His wife, Danielle, encouraged him to make the bagels they struggled to find near their Central Florida home. The home project eventually became Jeff's Bagel Run, with the first storefront opening in Ocoee in 2021.

The company has since grown to 41 shops.

"It's exciting to see how far the brand has come in a relatively short amount of time," Perera said.

For the Shuffields, restaurant ownership began long before Jeff's. Rob's interest started in high school.

"I wanted to own a Beef 'O' Brady's franchise since I was in 10th grade," Rob said. "We would go there after our tennis matches in high school."

After meeting Teresa at the University of Florida, the couple gained restaurant experience and eventually became CiCi's Pizza franchise owners. They later opened locations in Virginia before returning to Florida.

A fellow franchise owner introduced them to Nothing Bundt Cakes.

"Teresa and I signed up and opened our first location January 2016," Rob said.

They are now expanding their Jeff's Bagel Run presence, with locations in The Villages, Gainesville and Bloomingdale.

Jeff's Bagel Run is open daily from 6:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Visit www.jeffsbagelrun.com or call 656-272-5774 for information.

PRESERVING BRANDON FLORIDA

Get in touch at Preserving Brandon@gmail.com

SECOND CHANCE FOR THE GALVIN-CARL HOUSE



For more than a century, the Galvin-Carl House on Mulrennan Road in Valrico has quietly witnessed the transformation of Eastern Hillsborough County from a rural community into one of the region's fastest-growing areas.

Built in the late 19th century, with historical records generally dating the home to circa 1890, and some local documentation identifying 1893, the house was built for Daniel J. Galvin, an early Brandon businessman and civic leader. John McCormick was identified as the builder.

Galvin was a prominent figure during Brandon's early development. He operated a general store near the Brandon railroad depot on Moon Avenue and was involved in Hillsborough County government. His home stands as a tangible connection to the families and businesses that helped shape the community more than 130 years ago.

The property originally encompassed approximately 40 acres and included a citrus grove. Over the decades, the surrounding landscape changed, families came and went and the historic home eventually fell into significant disrepair.

With so few historic homes remaining in the Brandon and Valrico area, the future of the Galvin-Carl House became a matter of concern for local preservation advocates. At one point, demolition appeared to be its likely fate.

Then the story changed.

The current owner ultimately chose restoration over demolition, giving the historic property an opportunity to continue into another generation.

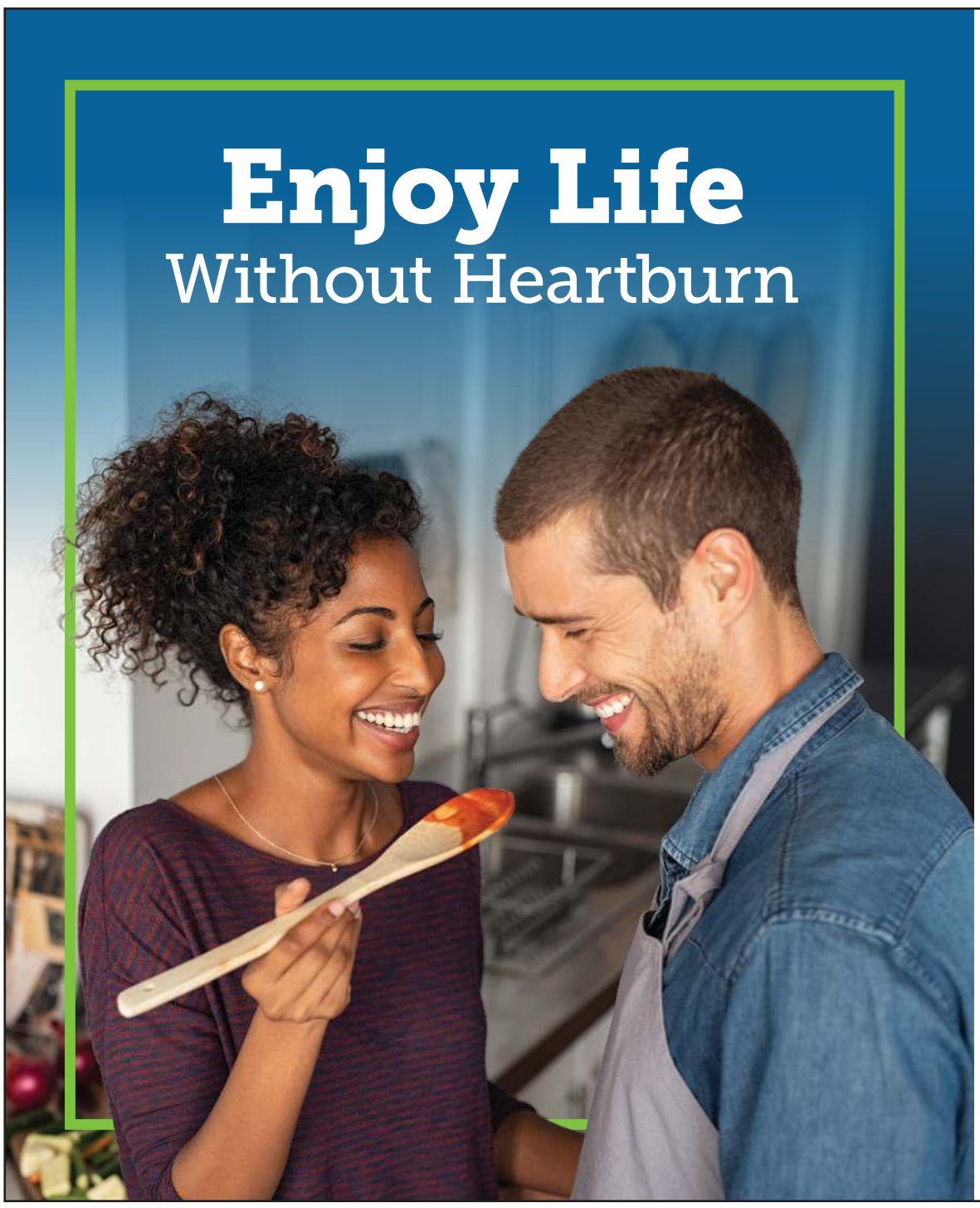
"Once completed, the Galvin-Carl House will pay homage to the original architecture, preserving the exterior details specific to the house when it was built in 1893," current owner said.

The plumbing, electrical and air-conditioning systems are being completely replaced, while much of the interior will be redesigned and key historic elements preserved.

"Every effort is being done to restore this historic resource while rebuilding it to last another 100 years," current owner said.

For a community rapidly losing many of its historic structures, the Galvin-Carl House represents more than an old building. It is a physical connection to the people, places and stories that came before us and a reminder that preservation sometimes begins with one important decision: to save it.

To learn more or get involved with Preserving Brandon, please contact us at preservingbrandon@gmail.com.



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Christian Voice



Grace Notes

When Your Sacrifice Crawls Off the Altar

By Debora Coty

Someone recently asked me, "Are altar sacrifices still expected of Christ-followers today?"

The answer is yes, but in a different form than biblical times: sacrificial giving.

A little digging revealed King David's insight while seeking a suitable place to build an altar to ask Jehovah's forgiveness via an animal sacrifice for a rotten sin David had committed (aren't we glad that because of Jesus' blood sacrifice on the cross we don't have to do that anymore?).

David inquired about a certain piece of real estate. The submissive owner offered the land to his king for FREE, and wood and oxen (to sacrifice) too.

King David wisely replied: "No, but I will surely buy it for the full price; for I will not take what is yours for the LORD or offer a sacrifice which costs me nothing," (1 Chronicles 21:24).

Note: If it costs you nothing, it isn't a real sacrifice. It's worthless. It means zilch.

I let those sobering thoughts percolate. Maybe my own sacrificial giving is too easy. Most of the things I do for the Lord cost me nothing. I do them because I like doing them. I turn down things that I don't like doing because they're too time-consuming, difficult or energy-draining.

They cost me too much.

Then a friend asked if I would spend the afternoon with her live-in 91-year-old mom while she worked. Now, this may not sound like a sacrifice to you, but because of my chronic nighttime insomnia and afternoon naps being necessary to keep (barely) functioning, it's a big deal to me. Skipping my nap would mean a blossoming migraine and terminal irritability.

Yikes. My sacrifice was trying to crawl off the altar. I felt the Holy Spirit's elbow jab: It's not a sacrifice if it costs you nothing, Deb.

So, I went granny-sitting. And the Almighty blessed my socks off with a wonderful afternoon of fellowship with the perkiest and godliest sweetly ripened gal ever.

I guess my sacrificial parameters aren't set in stone after all. And that's a good thing, because Papa God is pleased when we don't allow our living sacrifices to crawl off the altar.

"Do not neglect doing good and sharing; for with such sacrifices God is pleased," (Hebrews 13:16 NASB).

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

TEACHING: BOTH EXHILARATING AND FRIGHTENING!



"We are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago," (Ephesians 2:10).

Teaching is an interesting phenomenon. I really enjoyed it in the classroom when I was a young man, working with exceptional student education. Later, I taught adult ed. and led small groups in church. I also have fun speaking at retreats and workshops as a spin-off from the books I write.

But what's happening now with the community men's Bible study here in North Carolina is a serendipitous highlight in my life, something neither planned for nor expected, at the same time both exhilarating and a little bit frightening.

I always return home with a tight knot in my stomach because A) I care so deeply for these guys, B) I am conscious of how important this is and C) I second-guess nearly everything I do!

I believe that God is trusting me with something special, and I want to be as good as I can. And that means pointing people toward Jesus. Or, as John the Baptist put it, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

Currently, we're reading Ephesians, where Paul writes that we are all citizens together and covered by the same covenant promises. And along with our membership in God's household comes responsibility. Not rule-keeping obligations but the opportunity to join in with God's initiatives of mercy, grace, goodness, reconciliation, healing, justice and more.

Jesus is a catalyst who, in a sense, activates and releases the power and the purpose of our spiritual nature. We become, as Paul points out, "God's masterpiece, recreated in Jesus so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago."

Jesus accepted pretty much everyone without being judgy — but he also said, "By their fruits you shall know them." Jesus invites us to live our salvation out loud and to join in with God's good work.

Like all good lessons, this one ended too soon. But we will pick it up again next week ... and if I didn't completely blow it this time, I suspect that the guys will be back!

— Derek



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

FIRST POPE LEO VILLAGE HOMES DEDICATED IN WINDHORST COMMONS

Staff Report







Just hours after receiving the keys to their new homes, Sharvona Jordan and David Reece are beginning new chapters as the first homeowners in Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough's Pope Leo Village initiative.

For Jordan, a licensed insurance agent, the moment means leaving behind a home where she shares a bedroom with her 5-year-old daughter; water must be boiled before it can be used for cooking, bathing or cleaning; and the roof is not stable.

"Home means security to me," said Jordan. "It ensures my daughter has a safe environment where she can thrive and be the very best version of herself. Having a home makes me feel so accomplished, and I am so grateful for this opportunity."

For Reece, a flight attendant who had been sharing limited space in his sister's home, homeownership brings the independence and permanence he has wanted for a long time.

"Home is a place where you can relax, knowing that you belong right where you are," said Reece. "It's a firm foundation I have only dreamed of having until now. I love to travel for work, but I look forward to returning home to friends and family. To the donor and volunteers, you are difference-makers beyond belief."

The across-the-street homes in Windhorst Commons in Brandon are the first completed in the local eight-home Pope Leo Village project, a new multicity effort sponsored and inspired by an anonymous donor dedicated to Pope Leo's vision and commitment to serve others.

"Sharvona and David's stories are exactly why we're building Pope Leo Village, to create safe, affordable homes while giving more people the opportunity to serve their neighbors and help build a stronger future for families," said Tina Forcier, CEO of Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough. "We hope these homes inspire young people and people of all faiths to volunteer and financially support our work."

The donor wants the initiative to not only create housing but also reignite civic engagement and a shared sense of purpose, drawing inspiration from Pope Leo's emphasis on community service, especially among younger generations.

"Building high-quality, affordable housing provides an exciting opportunity for us all, with a special appeal to young adults, to put Faith into Action with the Pope Leo Village initiative," said the anonymous donor. "As Pope Leo has said, 'In that service to others we may find that coming together in friendship, building up community, we, too, can find true meaning in our lives.'"

To help gifts go even further, the anonymous donor will match every donation toward the project dollar for dollar, doubling the community's impact while matching funds last. Similar projects are planned in cities across the country, including Chicago, Illinois; Cleveland, Ohio; Nashville, Tennessee; and St. Louis, Missouri.

Habitat homeowners also contribute sweat equity, putting in hundreds of hours helping build their homes and making an investment in their future. The two homes are part of Windhorst Commons, Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough's 23-home neighborhood in Brandon, featuring hurricane-resilient construction. The remaining homes in the community are expected to be completed by early 2027.

About Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough

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

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