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CELEBRATING 24 YEARS OF PUBLISHING POSITIVE COMMUNITY NEWS

COMMUNITY BRINGS 48TH ANNUAL RUSKIN VETERANS DAY PARADE BACK

By Marie Gilmore

After initially facing the possibility of cancellation, the Ruskin Veterans Day Parade will return to U.S. 41 this fall, thanks to generous community support.

The 48th annual Ruskin Veterans Day Parade is scheduled for Saturday, November 7, with the parade stepping off at 11 a.m. along the northbound lanes of U.S. 41 in Ruskin. The route will run from Fifth Avenue Southeast to 11th Avenue Northeast, the same route used last year.

The Greater SouthShore Chamber of Commerce recently announced that the longtime community tradition would move forward following a generous donation made on behalf of local veterans.

The announcement came after the chamber shared concerns about the rising costs associated with safely and successfully hosting the parade. Community members responded with financial support and encouragement, ultimately providing the funding needed to move forward.

Christopher Ligori & Associates, Military Family Support and Ruskin Memorial VFW Post 6287 are among the main sponsors supporting the 2026 parade. Hillsborough County Representative Michael Owen also played an integral role in helping organizers secure the remaining funds needed to provide a safe and fun community celebration.

"We are incredibly grateful to everyone who stepped forward with financial support, encouragement and a willingness to help," the chamber said.

For 48 years, the parade has brought together veterans, military organizations, businesses, schools, civic groups, marching bands and families to honor those who have served the nation.



Organizers emphasized that the event is a community effort relying on volunteers, sponsors, businesses and organizations to keep the tradition going. The parade gives residents an opportunity to line U.S. 41, wave flags and show their appreciation for veterans from the SouthShore community and beyond.

Following the parade, an awards ceremony will be held at Ruskin Memorial VFW Post 6287, located at 5120 N. U.S. 41 in Apollo Beach.

Businesses, schools, civic groups, organizations and other community members interested in participating are encouraged to register with the chamber. Military and veteran organizations are not required to pay a participation fee.

The current registration deadline is Sunday, October 4, although organizers expect that deadline to be extended.

The parade committee is also continuing to accept donations to help cover remaining expenses.

"Together, we will give our veterans the celebration they so richly deserve," said Bonnie Peacock, executive director of the Greater SouthShore Chamber of Commerce.

For registration, donations or additional information, visit the chamber website at www.southshorechamberofcommerce.org or call the chamber at 813-645-1366.

BUDDY BREW COFFEE OPENS INSIDE RIVERVIEW SPROUTS

By Brian Bokor



Buddy Brew Coffee opened inside the Riverview Sprouts Farmers Market on September 23, bringing its full cafe menu to 12960 S. U.S. 301.

The new location is the sixth of 10 Buddy Brew cafes planned inside Sprouts stores across the region. Buddy Brew President and co-founder Susan Ward said Sprouts approached the company and selected it as its coffee partner for Florida.

"We love them, they are great," Ward said.



Buddy Brew Coffee is owned by co-founders Dave and Susan Ward.

She pointed to Sprouts' culture, commitment to quality and hospitality as reasons the partnership works well for Buddy Brew.

Buddy Brew also helped shape the cafe's appearance.

"We partnered with them on the build-out. They were wonderful in allowing us to really have a big say in design so that it looks like a Buddy Brew," Ward said.

The cafe serves espresso drinks, brewed coffee, cold brews, matcha, smoothies, breakfast and lunch items, pastries and seasonal specialty drinks.

Sprouts store manager Matt Rainey said shoppers had been asking for another coffee option.

"I think it gives the people of Riverview a different option on local coffee, and it's going to bring more foot traffic to our location. Customers have been asking and asking, and they're super excited about it," Rainey said.

He said customers welcome an alternative to Dunkin' and Starbucks.

Ward praised the Riverview team and the friendly atmosphere it creates. She said Buddy Brew's "Brew good. Do good." culture means treating customers and team members with genuine care.

The company's Sprouts expansion continues beyond Riverview.

"Carrollwood's next, and then we have Palm Harbor, Trinity and Sarasota," Ward said.

For the opening, Buddy Brew offered gift bags containing merchandise, gift cards and other items to the first 25 guests in line. Guests also had a chance to win free coffee for a year.

The Riverview cafe is open daily from 7 a.m.-5 p.m. Susan and Dave Ward invite people who work nearby to stop in before work, during lunch or at the end of their shift to see what Buddy Brew has to offer.

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Adventure is reaching new heights at YMCA Camp Cristina in Riverview with a new 30-foot-high challenge course designed to bring climbing, teamwork, confidence-building and plenty of thrills to the community. See full story on Page 14.



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CHRISTIAN BROTHERS AUTOMOTIVE HOSTS FREE SERVICE DAY FOR LOCAL FAMILIES

By Marie Gilmore

Christian Brothers Automotive is inviting local families to take part in its annual National Day of Service on Saturday, October 10, when its Valrico, Riverview and Apollo Beach locations will come together to provide free automotive services and a day of support for families in need.

The event will run from 8 a.m.-2 p.m. at all three locations. Complimentary oil changes and automotive assistance will be available, along with car washes, giveaways and activities for children.

The event is designed with widows and single mothers in mind, providing families with an opportunity to have their vehicles cared for while enjoying a welcoming community event.

"We aim to make an even greater impact than in previous years," said Paul Clason, service manager at Christian Brothers Automotive in Riverview.

The three locations are working with local churches, vendors and nonprofit organizations to make the event possible. Community partners are helping provide automotive supplies, food, beverages, children's activities, giveaways and other resources.

Families attending can expect breakfast and lunch items, coffee and cold beverages, as well as activities for children, including games and other family-friendly entertainment.

The Christian Brothers Automotive teams are also seeking community partners willing to donate or sponsor items for the event. Requested contributions include food and beverages, automotive supplies, oil, filters, wiper blades and repair credits. Businesses and organizations can also contribute coloring books, arts and crafts supplies, games, small toys, gift cards, raffle items and other giveaways.

Bounce house or inflatable sponsorships and volunteers are also welcome.

"Every contribution helps us do a little more for a family in our community," the company said in its community partnership invitation. "Whether you help us service a vehicle, provide a meal or give a child something fun to do while their parent's vehicle is being cared for, you are helping us show our neighbors that their community cares."

The National Day of Service is part of Christian Brothers Automotive's broader commitment to serving the communities where its locations operate.

Families interested in participating can schedule their complimentary service through the individual location links:

Riverview: nsd.cbac.com/e/cjhn6gn3

Valrico: nsd.cbac.com/e/67wjn5ca

Apollo Beach: nsd.cbac.com/e/u4nxkk7d

For more information, contact Christian Brothers Automotive Riverview at 813-677-7007.

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.





SEA MONSTERS AND SECRET INK BRING ADVENTURES TO LIBRARIES

Staff Report

Join the Hillsborough County Public Library Cooperative for engaging, entertaining and informative free programs for the entire family in October. The events listed below are only a sampling of the many scheduled. Find more listings under the "Events & Classes" tab at https://hcplc.org/.

The views expressed in these programs are those of the presenters and do not necessarily reflect the official policies, positions or opinions of Hillsborough County, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Libraries or the Friends of the Library of Tampa-Hillsborough County Inc., which do not endorse the presenters. For more information about these and the many other programs at your library, call 813-273-3652 or visit https://hcplc.org/.

Be social! Like the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System on Facebook and follow @TampaHillsLib on Instagram, X and YouTube.

Stripped and Script: Loyalist Women Writers of the American Revolution

In this talk, Dr. Kacy Dowd Tillman offers a new perspective on patriotism and the American Revolution by examining the letters and journals of female loyalists. Recommended for adults. Registration recommended.

It'll be held on Thursday, October 8, 7-8 p.m., at Riverview Public Library, 9951 Balm Riverview Rd. in Riverview.

Hand-embroidered Greeting Cards: America's 250th Edition

Join in to learn about the history of greeting cards and make your own using beginner-friendly stitches to hand-embroider a patriotic-themed card for a friend or loved one. All supplies provided. Recommended for adults. Registration recommended.

It'll be held on Monday, October 12, 6-7 p.m., at Bloomingdale Regional Public Library, 1906 Bloomingdale Ave. in Valrico, as well as on Friday, October 16, 3:30-5 p.m., at Ruskin Branch Library, 26 Dickman Dr. SE in Ruskin.

Exploring the World of Flags: America's 250th Edition

Explore the world through flags. Flags are everywhere, sometimes in unexpected places. Learn about the variety of flags that surround us in everyday life and create a decorative door flag. Recommended for children. Registration recommended.

It'll be held on Tuesday, October 13, 3-4 p.m., at Bloomingdale Regional Public Library, 1906 Bloomingdale Ave. in Valrico.

Florida-Friendly Landscaping: Going Batty

Learn all about bats, including what species we have in Florida, what they eat, how they hunt and how they use ultrasonic systems to navigate. Recommended for adults. Registration recommended.

It'll be held on Saturday, October 17, 11 a.m.-12 Noon, at Bloomingdale Regional Public Library, 1906 Bloomingdale Ave. in Valrico.

Hillsborough County Fire Rescue Engine Visit

Join in for a fire engine visit. Observe the vehicle and its tools, gain insight into firefighting operations and witness firefighters in their bunker gear and air packs. Firefighters will cover topics such as home escape plans and their community assistance role. Recommended for children. Registration recommended.

It'll be held on Monday, October 19, 2-2:45 p.m., at Ruskin Branch Library, 26 Dickman Dr. SE in Ruskin.

MAKE-A-WISH SOUTH FLORIDA NAMES NEW CHAIR AND OFFICERS

Staff Report



The board of directors for Make-A-Wish Southern Florida, a nonprofit that grants life-changing wishes for critically ill children, has chosen Dennis Crowley as its chairman. He'll lead the group of business professionals and community volunteers that govern the organization during its next two fiscal years.

Crowley, who is also chairman of the board at Doctor's Choice Pharmacy, will be joined as an officer on the Make-A-Wish board by Ricky Patel (Akerman LLP), vice chair, and Karen Ford, treasurer. Diego Ojeda (Rilea Group) will join as a member.

"Some people want things to happen. Others pray that they happen," said Crowley, a Make-A-Wish board member since 2016. "But what I'm especially proud of is that this team works together to ensure things do happen that benefit kids and families."

The medically eligible children Make-A-Wish serves most often 'wish to be' (something), 'wish to meet' (someone), 'wish to go' (somewhere), 'wish to have' (something) or 'wish to give' (to a cause), and the organization makes this happen for each child and their entire family at no cost or obligation. In addition to helping determine the nonprofit's strategic direction, board members actively fundraise to make these dreams come true.

"Dennis has had a significant impact on our success during his many years on the board and, most recently, as vice chair," said Norman Wedderburn, president and CEO of Make-A-Wish Southern Florida. "He is a dynamic leader that believes in our mission to his very core, and we're fortunate he's committed his time and talent to our efforts."

Make-A-Wish Southern Florida (www.wish.org/sfla) has granted more than 15,000 life-changing wishes since 1983 for critically ill children. It aims to grant a wish for every medically eligible child in its territory and understands wishes aren't just nice — they're necessary for kids and families at some of the most difficult times in their lives.

The Southern Florida chapter's territory includes 22 counties/four regions: Southeast and Southwest Florida, the Suncoast and Tampa Bay. It also includes the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Follow and engage with Make-A-Wish Southern Florida on Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn and TikTok.

PRAYER TO THE BLESSED VIRGIN

(never known to fail)

O Most beautiful flowers of Mount Carmel, fruitful vine, splendor of Heaven, Blessed Mother of the Son of God, Immaculate Virgin, assist me in my necessity. O Star of the Sea, help me and show me here you are my mother. O Holy Mary Mother of God, Queen of Heaven and Earth, I humbly beseech you from the bottom of my heart, to succeed me in my necessity (make request). There are none that can withstand your power. O Mary conceived without sin pray for us who have recourse to thee (three times). Holy Mary I place this cause in your hands (three times).

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

T.O.C.M.B.



GUY HARVEY FOUNDATION HOSTS TEACHER TRAINING AT BUSCH GARDENS

By Kelly Wise Valdes



Lacie Conner (left) and Rebecca Cole.

The Guy Harvey Foundation (GHF), a not-for-profit dedicated to protecting marine life and introducing the next generation to the ocean through education and scientific research, recently hosted more than 130 elementary, middle and high school educators from throughout Florida for a professional development training session at Busch Gardens Tampa Bay. The two-day training session was made possible by the generous support from Coastal Conservation Association (CCA) Florida, which is part of the immersive, innovative and experiential Guy Harvey Conservation Education Program for educators that was launched in 2024.

During the training, led by experts from GHF and CCA, educators participated in unique hands-on activities and in-classroom science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics (STEAM) initiatives that they will take back to their classrooms to educate, inspire and excite their students.

"CCA Florida is proud to team up with the Guy Harvey Foundation and share our conservation work with educators throughout Florida," said CCA Florida Director of Habitat and Environmental Restoration Frank Gidus. "Our lessons highlighted the role clams, oysters, mangroves and marsh grasses play in Florida's coastal ecosystems and provided the teachers with the best tools and expert knowledge that will bring these lessons to life in their classrooms. By educating students about the importance of protecting and restoring Florida's marine habitat, we are helping inspire the next generation to become stewards of our coastal resources."

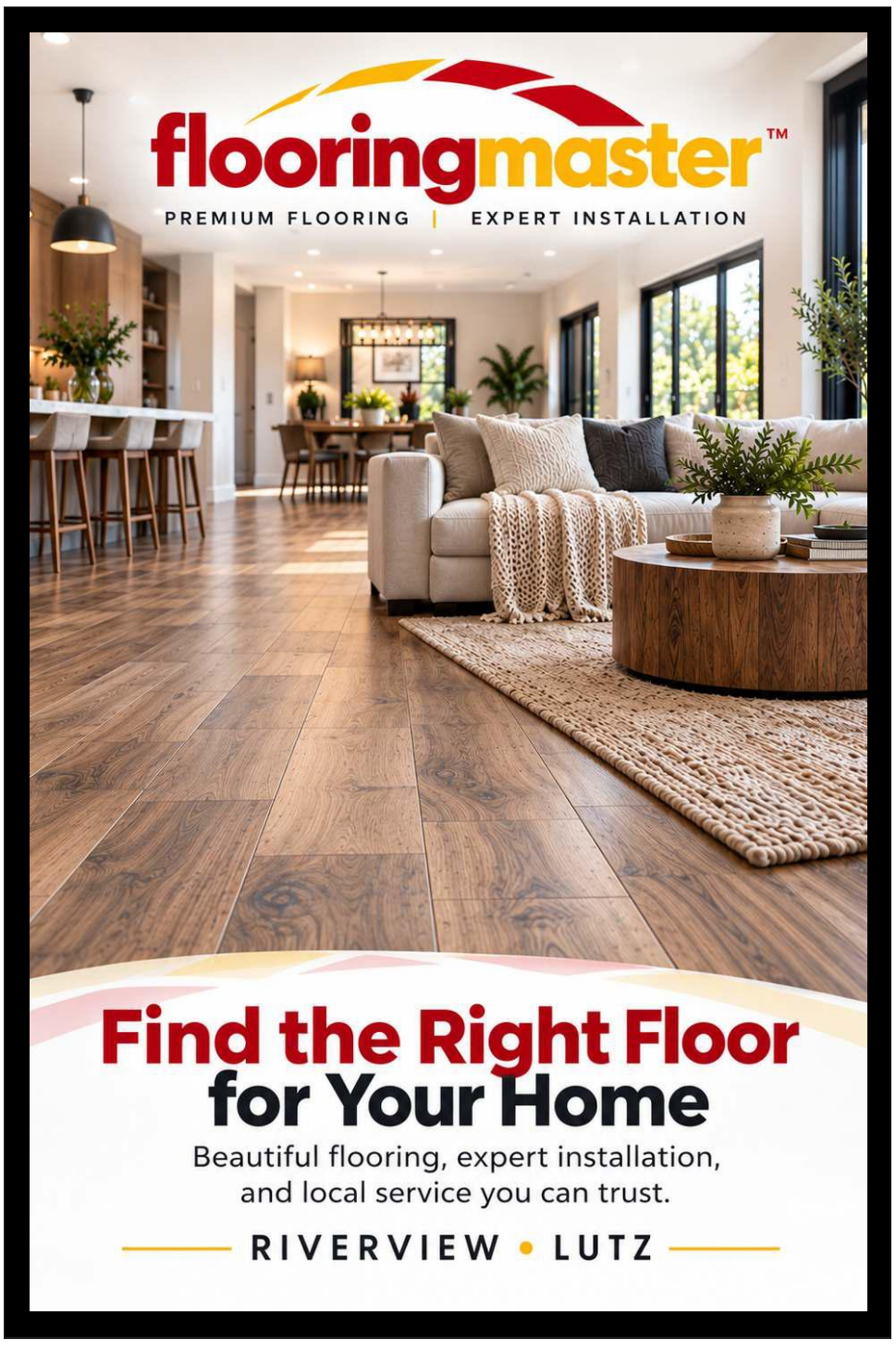
CCA's support of GHF's teacher training program further underscores the organization's commitment to conservation education and community engagement. GHF and CCA's partnership began in 2025, and since then GHF has developed new, co-branded educational content aligned with CCA's ecosystem restoration initiatives, spotlighting the critical role of oysters, clams, salt marshes and mangroves in protecting Florida's coastal waters. These lessons enhance GHF's existing conservation education programming while introducing educators and students to CCA's hands-on restoration efforts and community-driven stewardship.

"Our partnership with CCA has been instrumental to the Foundation's mission of expanding marine science education," said Guy Harvey Foundation CEO Jessica Harvey. "With CCA's support, our Conservation Education Training sessions have been incredibly popular with educators over the years. We are thankful to have CCA as a partner for this initiative and look forward to continuing this relationship for many years to come."

In support of CCA, the GHF has committed to funding a $25,000 Youth Scholarship for future CCA Florida STAR Youth Fishing Competitions.

Open to all K-12 educators, the Guy Harvey Conservation Education Program's training includes all the materials, classroom supplies and educational content that teachers require. Following completion, participants become Guy Harvey Conservation (GHC) Educators who are then empowered with recognition, knowledge and resources they can share with students to foster environmental awareness and contribute to a sustainable future. The program also offers grants for field trips and supplies enabling GHC Educators to enhance their teaching and instill conservation values in students. Educators may also receive Continuing Education Units in accordance with state and district policies.

For more, visit www.guyharveyfoundation.org. Follow the Foundation on Facebook and instagram @guyharveyocean. For more information on CCA Florida and its programs, visit www.ccaflorida.org.



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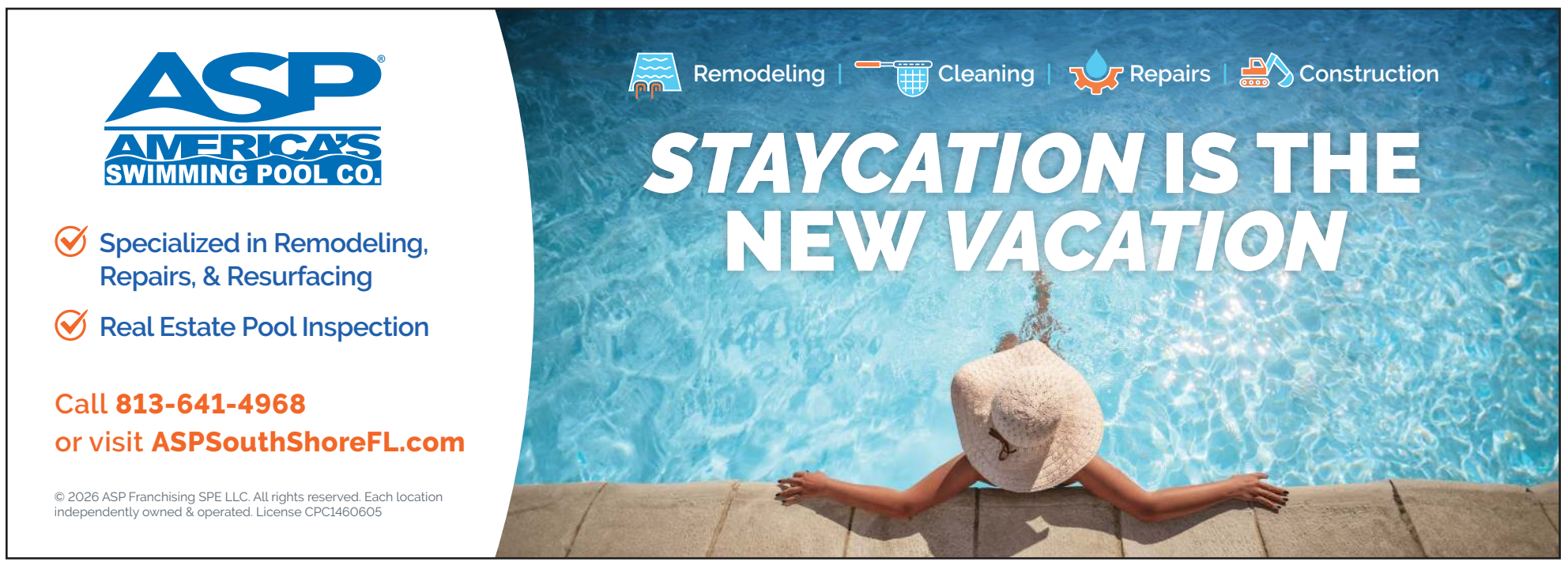


WATER RATE INCREASE SUPPORTS $2.44 BILLION IN COUNTY PROJECTS

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."

11TH ANNUAL WATERSET TURKEY TROT SUPPORTS FOUR LOCAL SCHOOLS

By Marie Gilmore



Join in for the 11th annual Turkey Trot at Waterset on Thanksgiving morning on Thursday, November 26, at 9 a.m. Proceeds of the Turkey Trot will benefit our local public schools: Doby Elementary, Eisenhower Middle School, East Bay High School and the Dorothy C. York Innovation Academy.



The race is chip-timed and a flat course. Want to participate virtually? No problem. Just sign up for the virtual 5K. However, virtual participant race packets are not guaranteed to arrive prior to Thanksgiving morning.

Registration is required. Register at https://runsignup.com/race/events/fl/apollobeach/turkeytrotatwaterset.

The 5K participants will each receive a race bib, race T-shirt and finisher's medal.

The Kids' Fun Run participants will each receive a race bib, race T-shirt and medal.

The 5K and Kids' Fun Run will start at approximately 8 a.m. and 9 a.m., respectively.

The 5K race route will be the same route as years past: north and south on Waterset Blvd. starting by The Lakeside, located at 7250 Parkshore Dr. in Apollo Beach.

The Kids' Fun Run routes will be the same as last year: 1-mile, half-mile and, for the little ones, a special mini route.

Strollers are welcome, but guests are asked to please go to the back of the starting line so the competitive participants can start first.

Pets are not allowed due to the growing size of the race. This new rule is simply to ensure the safety of all participants.

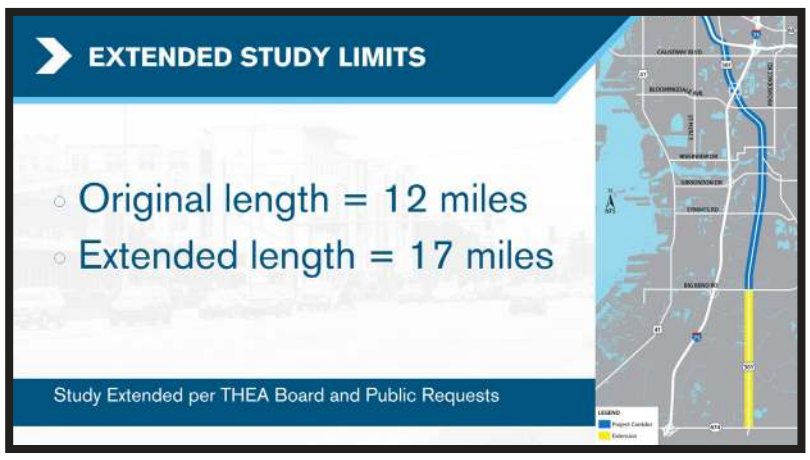
If you'd like to keep your distance when you walk/run, feel free to stay back and let participants start, and then you can start your race. Since it's chip-timed, your time won't start until you cross the starting line.

Online sign-up is available through November 26; however, shirts and specific sizes may not be available and are not guaranteed after Wednesday, November 4. The 5K Dri-FIT T-shirts are available in adult and youth sizes. The Kids' Fun Run T-shirts are also Dri-FIT this year, with youth sizes available.

For more information or to register for the event, visit https://runsignup.com/race/events/fl/apollobeach/turkeytrotatwaterset. The 5K registration prices will increase on Sunday, November 1, and then again on Monday, November 23. Kids' Fun Run registration will also increase on November 1.

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/.





WINN-DIXIE HELPS PROVIDE MORE THAN 1 MILLION MEALS

Staff Report



Winn-Dixie is helping put nutritious food on the tables of neighbors facing food insecurity through a Hunger Action Month initiative that will provide 1 million meals across Florida and southern Georgia.

The Winn-Dixie Company and its charitable arm, the Winn-Dixie Gives Foundation, donated $100,000 to Feeding America, with $10,000 designated for each of 10 partner food banks, including Feeding Tampa Bay.

In addition to the financial contribution, Winn-Dixie donated fresh produce and shelf-stable food through mobile food pantries operated in partnership with Feeding Tampa Bay and Feeding Northeast Florida. The mobile pantries bring food directly into local communities, helping provide immediate access to nutritious groceries for families and individuals in need.

"By providing nutritious food through mobile food pantries, Winn-Dixie is helping meet immediate needs and strengthen the communities we are proud to call home," said Raymond Rhee, president and CEO of The Winn-Dixie Company.

Feeding Tampa Bay is among the organizations benefiting from the $100,000 donation. Other recipients include All Faiths Food Bank, Feeding Northeast Florida, Feeding South Florida, Feeding the Gulf Coast, Harry Chapin Food Bank of Southwest Florida, Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida, Second Harvest of Coastal Georgia, Second Harvest of the Big Bend and Treasure Coast Food Bank.

Hunger Action Month, observed each September and led nationally by Feeding America, raises awareness about food insecurity and encourages communities to take action. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, nearly 48 million people in the United States experience hunger each year, including one in five children.

"Support from partners like The Winn-Dixie Company is critical in helping the Feeding America network deliver nutritious food to neighbors experiencing food insecurity," said Lisa Mann, chief development officer for Feeding America.

The Hunger Action Month effort builds on Winn-Dixie's year-round commitment to hunger relief. Earlier this year, the company donated $150,000 to the Florida State Alliance of YMCAs to help provide nutritious meals and snacks to children during the summer.

Customers can also support local hunger-relief organizations by purchasing $5, $10 or $15 prepackaged donation bags at participating Winn-Dixie stores. Since the program launched in November 2025, it has generated more than $900,000 in donated products for more than 100 organizations across Florida and southern Georgia.

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.

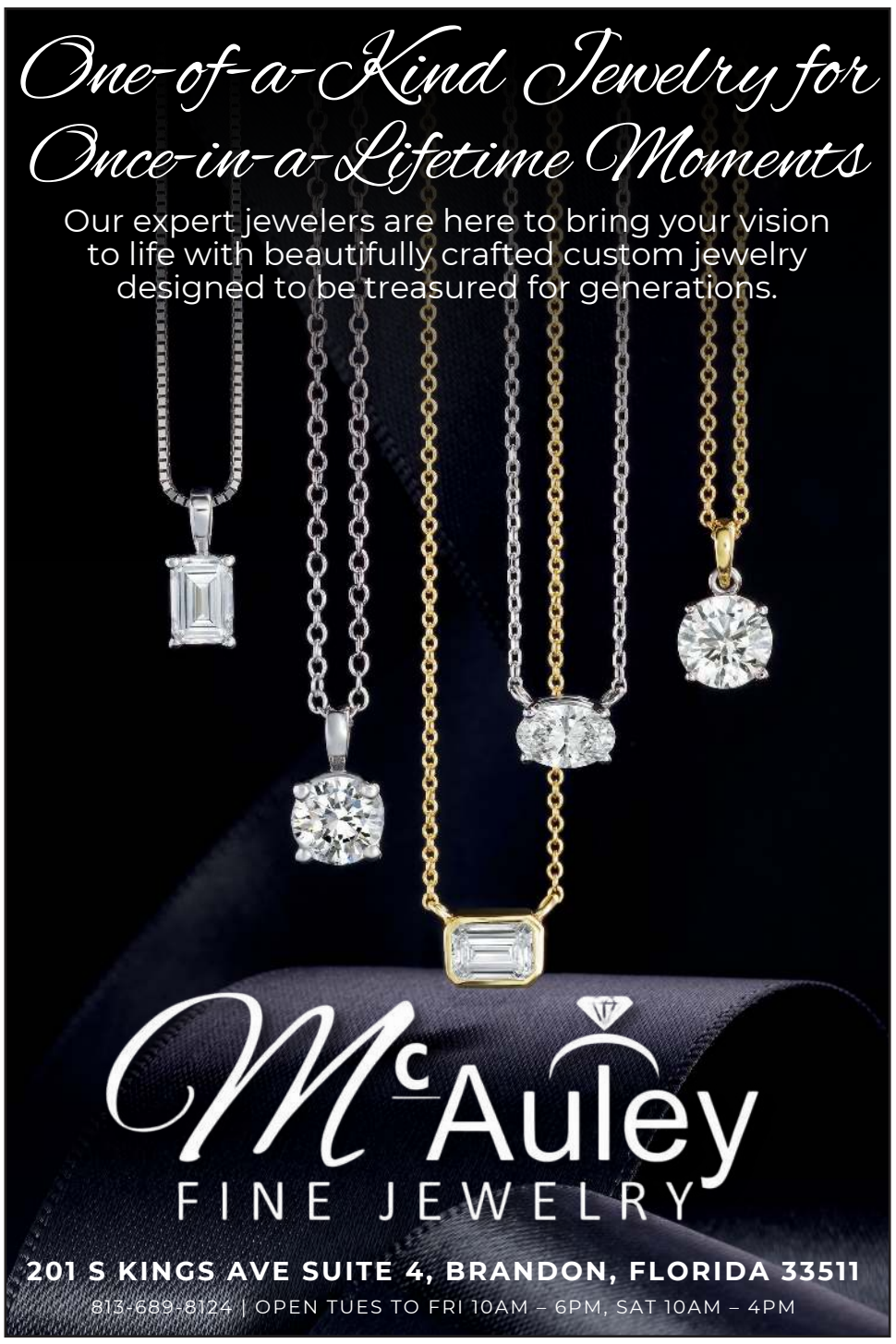
The mobile service is designed to continue that same personalized approach while eliminating the need for customers to transport their bicycles to a traditional shop.

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.







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.

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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/.



HALLOWEEN IS HIDING RIGHT IN PLANT CITY



DID YOU KNOW that one of the scariest Halloween experiences around is hiding right in Plant City?

Spooky season is officially here, and if you love Halloween, haunted houses, and that feeling of wondering whether you're brave enough to turn the next corner, there's a local attraction you need to know about.

Pemberton Haunted Acres
4802 W Knights Griffin Rd, Plant City, FL 33565

Pemberton Haunted Acres is a family-owned outdoor haunted attraction bringing a different kind of Halloween experience to the Plant City area.

At the center of the attraction is an approximately 5,000-square-foot haunted maze filled with handcrafted horror rooms, intense scare zones, immersive themed areas, and plenty of surprises waiting in the darkness.

And this isn't your typical walk-through Halloween display.

The experience is designed to put you right in the middle of the action. You'll make your way through dark passages, detailed horror scenes, themed rooms, and scare zones where you never quite know what—or who—is waiting around the next corner.

What makes Pemberton Haunted Acres even more interesting is that it's family-owned and locally created. A tremendous amount of work goes into building an attraction like this, from the sets and rooms to the characters, lighting, sound, and scares that bring everything to life.

So, if you're someone who counts down the days until October, watches scary movies all month, and believes Halloween should actually be SCARY, add this one to your spooky-season list.

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THISTLESCOTCH BRINGS THOUGHTFUL BODY CARE TO LIFE

By Marie Gilmore



For Jennifer Blair, ThistleScotch is more than a body care brand. It is a reflection of resilience, healing and the women whose experiences have shaped her life.

Blair came to skin care through loss and witness. After losing her mother to breast cancer, watching her son serve as a donor for a young woman battling leukemia, celebrating that woman's recovery and experiencing the challenges of pregnancy, Blair began to see skin care differently.

Her own journey through menopause, along with watching her identical twin navigate the same transition while living with an autoimmune disease, deepened that perspective.

Blair said she began to recognize the physical and emotional weight women carry and wanted to create products she could not find herself — products designed to meet women where they are.

"What I mindfully crafted were products from the stories I heard, the stories I lived, from my voice," Blair said.

That philosophy became the foundation for ThistleScotch, a growing collection of body care products designed to be simple, thoughtful and supportive of real skin.

The collection includes Body Brine, Nourishing Dry Body Oil; Phase to Infuse, Body Serum; Element 18, Eau de Parfum; and Southern Bits, Personal Moisturizer.

Blair focuses on straightforward formulas and ingredients selected with purpose. She said each product is evaluated for how it feels when applied, how it settles on the skin and how the skin feels hours later.

"If something did not feel right, it did not move forward," she said.

The brand's name also carries a personal history. The thistle honors Blair's Scottish heritage and represents a hardy plant that can thrive in difficult conditions.

"Resilient is the Thistle!" Blair said.

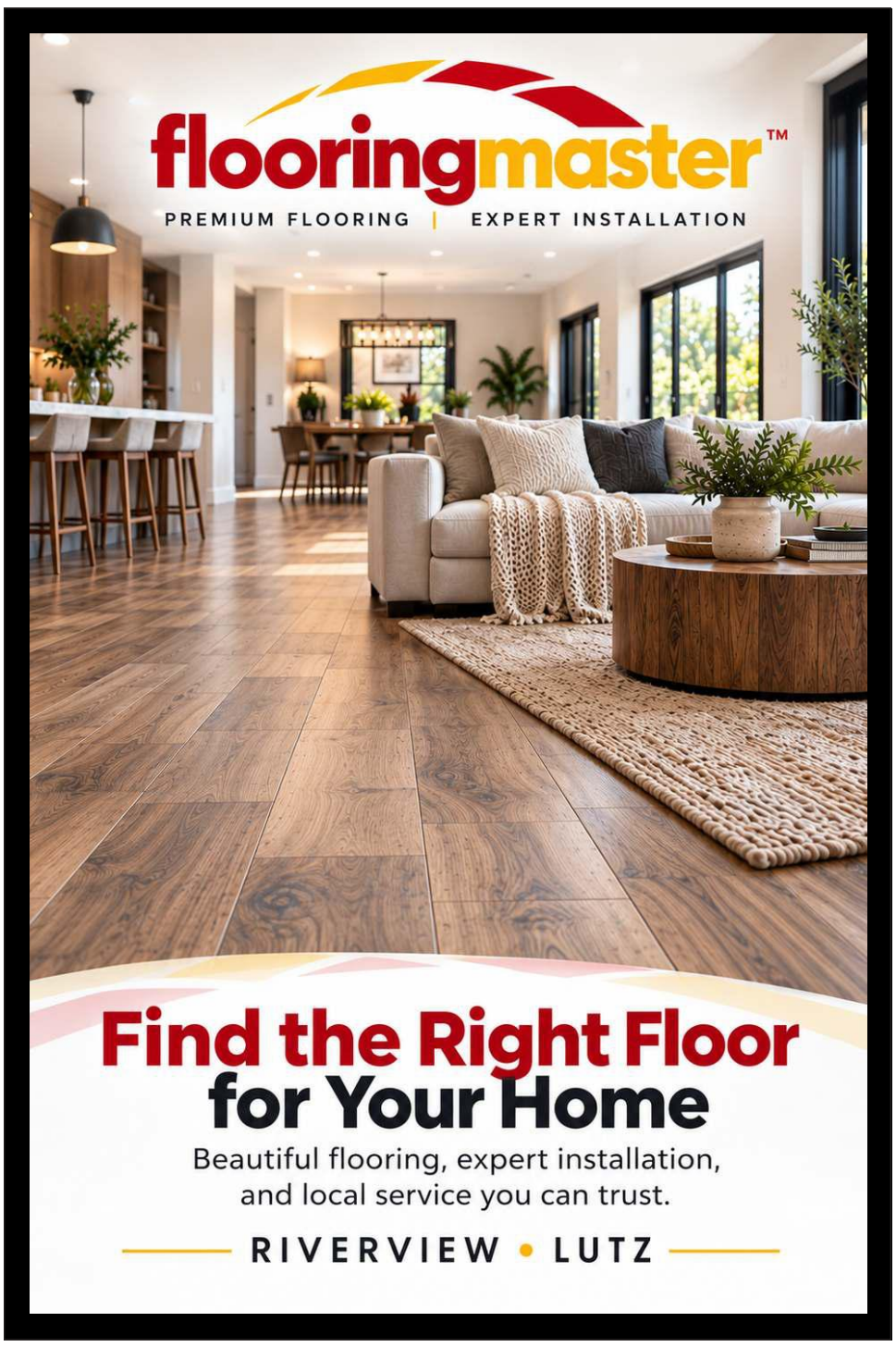
'Scotch' comes from a family story. When Blair's mother discovered she was unexpectedly expecting twins, she joked that she would name them Scotch and Brandy. Blair, the firstborn, became 'Scotch,' a nickname that did not last but became a cherished family memory.

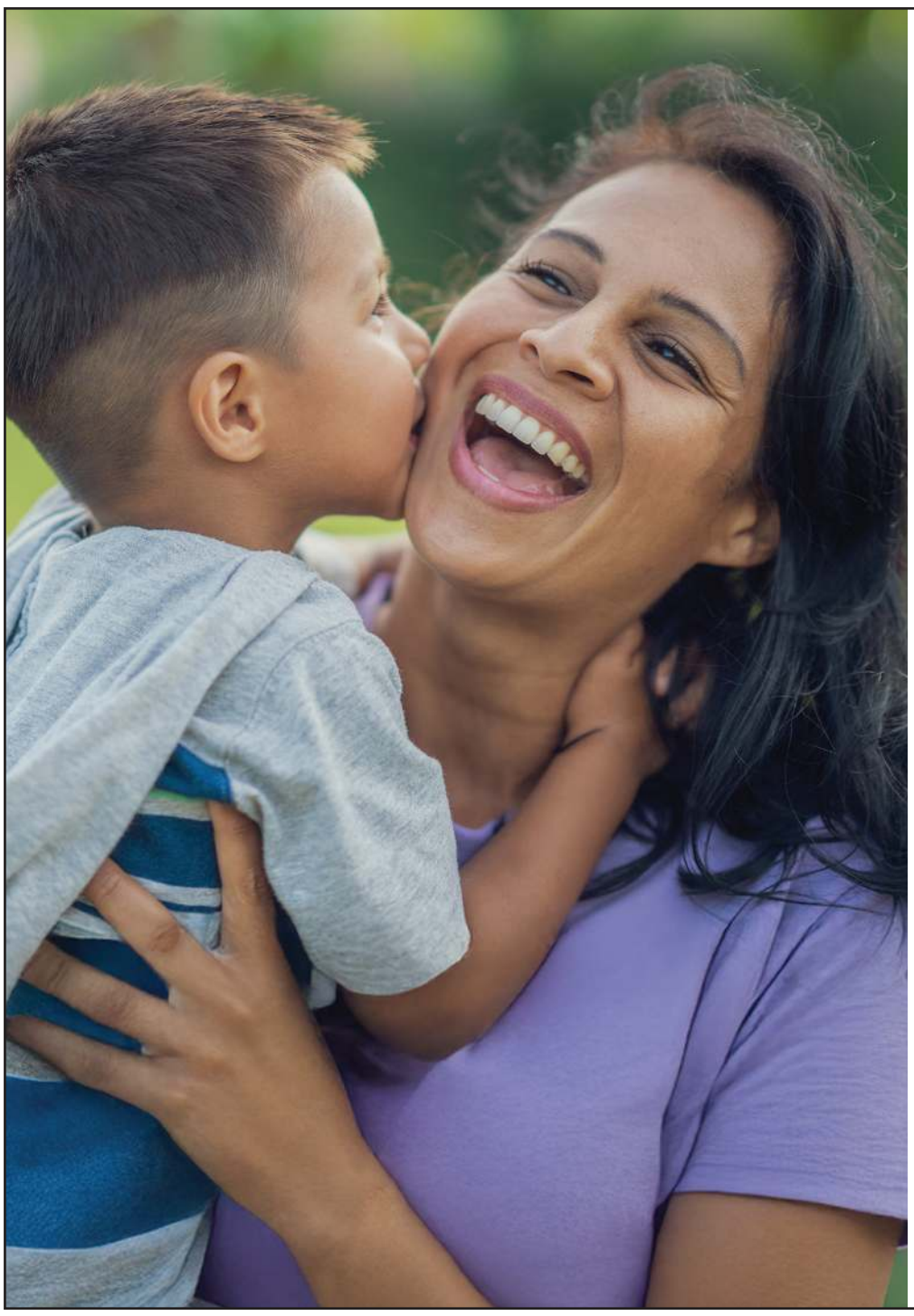
Today, that story lives on in ThistleScotch, connecting Blair's heritage, family and belief in women's resilience.

The brand's tagline, "A bit prickly. Thoughtfully created," reflects both the thistle and the honest spirit behind the products.

At its core, ThistleScotch encourages women to pause, reconnect with their bodies and remember that caring for themselves is not selfish — it is essential.

Learn more at thistlescotch.com.





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

Staff Report

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

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

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

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

Their hopes for this year's event are simple, to surpass their past achievements! Since the inception of this event which began in 2017, they have donated over $100,000 for research. Of course, like every year, Bernadette and O'Brien hope to bring awareness to this rare and orphan disease and remind everyone of the importance of an annual dilated eye exam.

Joining them will be the research doctors from the Moffitt Cancer Center speaking about ocular melanoma and current research that is happening because of events like their Your Next Step is the Cure 5K. Together, attendees run not just for miles but for hope, innovation and lifesaving progress. Join them as they continue to make strides toward awareness, research and a cure.

To follow posts and updates, please visit their Facebook page at www.facebook.com/yournextstepisthecure5k and their Instagram page @yournextstepisthecure.

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

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

CHIPOTLE OPENS RESTAURANT WITH DRIVE-THRU PICKUP LANE

By Marie Gilmore



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

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

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

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

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

All four restaurants are open daily from 10:45 a.m.-10 p.m.

Diners can also try two limited-time items. Pollo asado is grilled chicken seasoned with garlic, Mexican spices and cilantro, finished with citrus and lime. Chili lime chips are tortilla chips seasoned with lime and chili peppers.

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

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

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

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

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

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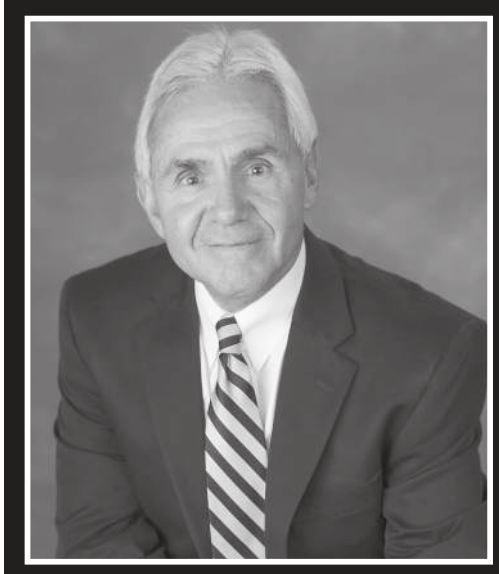

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YMCA CAMP CRISTINA UNVEILS NEW 30-FOOT CHALLENGE COURSE

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.

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

By Marie Gilmore

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



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

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

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

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

Several in-person meetings were held at schools across the district with one final virtual opportunity meeting remaining on Wednesday, October 14, from 6-7 p.m. on Microsoft Teams at https://rb.gy/0in6ib.

Members of the district's independent Citizen Oversight Committee will also participate in the meetings, sharing their perspective on accountability, transparency and how the Half-Penny Promise dollars have been monitored since the program began. The committee is made up of community leaders who review spending and ensure funds are spent as intended.

Since voters approved the Half-Penny Sales Tax in 2018, Hillsborough County Public Schools has invested more than $1.326 billion in school improvements, with more than $716 million awarded to local businesses. These investments have transformed learning environments across the district through critical upgrades such as air-conditioning replacements, roof renovations, enhanced safety and security measures and other essential infrastructure projects.

It appears on the ballot as Referendum 3: Continue the Half-Cent Sales Tax for Schools. This question asks whether to keep it for another 10 years, starting January 1, 2029. It is not a new tax. A YES vote continues the tax through 2038. A NO vote lets the tax end as scheduled.

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

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Edward Jones financial advisors use our 5-step process when working with clients to define and document specific, measurable financial goals based on what is most important to them. We can then identify solutions designed to help get them from where they are to where they want to be.

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2 Where would I like to be?
3 Can I get there?
4 How do I get there?
5 How can I stay on track?

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Edward Jones, its employees and its financial advisors cannot provide tax or legal advice. Individuals should consult their attorneys or qualified tax advisors for assistance with their tax and estate concerns.

Adam M benAbram
Financial Advisor
10312 W Bloomingdale Ave
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Riverview, FL 33578
813-626-3052

1 Where am I today?
Gather information: We begin by identifying and prioritizing the client's needs, establishing or updating their risk tolerance, and understanding the factors that impact his or her current financial picture — such as income, expenses and any savings, at both Edward Jones and other institutions.

2 Where would I like to be?
Establish and define goals: Understanding a client's vision for the future is critical. This is where we use our tools and resources to translate the client's vision into specific, measurable financial goals that will allow us to track their progress as we work together.

3 Can I get there?
Analyze information: In this step, we partner with you and any other members of your client's professional team to review the information we have collected and evaluate potential solutions and strategies.

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

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

www.edwardjones.com/adam-benabram

STOLBERG FOUNDATION HOSTS "A NIGHT TO BET ON HOPE"!

By Emma Snider



The Logan Michael Stolberg Foundation, also known as Logan's Heroes, is holding an exciting upcoming event: 'A Night to Bet on Hope.'

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

Currently, Logan's legacy is carried on by providing fun-filled duffle bags to pediatric cancer patients. Logan's heroes have grown to support six children's hospitals with no plans to stop expanding.

Randy and Jennifer stated, "For our family, every duffle bag is a way of carrying Logan's kindness forward and reminding another child and family that they are not alone."

Logan's Heroes' A Night to Bet on Hope is a casino night fundraiser that will be held on Friday, October 23, from 6-10 p.m. at The Regent, located at 6437 Watson Rd. in Riverview. This adults-only evening will be filled with food, music, casino-style entertainment, raffles, a silent auction and a fantastic opportunity for the community to come together to support children who are battling cancer. All proceeds from the event will go towards the creation of the duffle bags and Logan's Heroes' continuous efforts to aid and comfort children throughout their cancer treatment.

"Logan's Heroes is our way of making sure Logan's kindness continues to reach children he never had the chance to meet. If one of our duffle bags can give a child a smile, a little comfort or even a few minutes to simply feel like a kid instead of a cancer patient, then Logan's legacy is still doing exactly what he wanted it to do," said Jennifer.

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

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

For more details or to get involved, visit www.logansheroes.org.

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

By Marie Gilmore



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

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

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

Participants receive:

• Weekly Health eGuides delivered to your phone or email.

• Weekly educational sessions with UF Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) health educators.

• A virtual community to track your progress for accountability and support.

• Weekly physical activity challenges.

• A statewide tracking dashboard where participants can see progress.

• An official finisher medal and certificate of completion.

• Opportunities to win prizes.

Register to participate via Eventbrite at www.eventbrite.com/e/1999046640314.

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

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

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

About UF/IFAS

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

DAVE'S PUMPKIN PATCH CONTINUES 28 YEAR TRADITION IN BRANDON

By Dale Bliss



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

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

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

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

"My most favorable part of the operation is seeing how the little kids react to all the pumpkins and how they make them smile," Morrow said.

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

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

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

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

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

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







FITNESS FORGE CREATES A MORE PERSONAL TRAINING EXPERIENCE

By Makenzie Atkins Noel



Fitness Forge is a private personal training studio in Riverview designed around individualized training, measurable progress and one-on-one attention.

Fitness Forge is about more than simply getting through a workout. At the private personal training facility in Riverview, owners Brett Daven and Taylor Green are creating an environment where clients can feel supported, challenged and genuinely cared for as they work toward their goals.

Fitness Forge was founded by the two longtime friends, who share a passion for fitness and serving others. Daven began personal training in 2021 and quickly realized it was his calling, while Green brings more than 25 years of experience in the training industry. When the opportunity to open their own facility arose, the pair saw a chance to create the type of training experience they felt the local area needed.

"We wanted Fitness Forge to offer something that felt more personal, professional, and intentional than what people often experience at other training facilities," Daven said. "The goal was to create a place where clients receive individualized programming, genuine attention from their trainer and measurable progress — not just a standard workout."

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

Progress is tracked throughout the training process. Workouts, sets and weights are logged, while factors such as strength, endurance, mobility, body measurements and overall performance can be monitored. The facility also uses a Styku 3D body scanner to help clients visually track changes in body composition and physical measurements.

The owners also wanted the facility itself to reflect the same level of care as its training. Fitness Forge is designed to feel clean, welcoming and professional while maintaining the energy and community of a gym.

That sense of community was especially evident during the business' ribbon cutting, which Daven said showed the owners how big of a family they have built already.

Fitness Forge is continuing to build that community with its first Forge Games, a five-week challenge beginning in October. Clients will compete in weekly workouts, climb a leaderboard and compete for prizes during the final week.

For Daven and Green, the goal is to provide a personal training experience where every client receives the individualized attention and coaching needed to make meaningful progress.

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





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

Staff Report



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

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

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

"Opera houses and vaudeville theaters deserve primary credit for the spread of theatrical film presentations in Tampa and across the nation," said Dr. Charles McGraw Groh, museum director. "Short films took the place of individual songs or skits in variety shows at the turn of the century. It's not surprising, then, that filmmakers borrowed heavily from the best and worst traditions of vaudeville and minstrel shows, ranging from slapstick to blackface."

Soon, the Tampa Bay Hotel Casino introduced city residents to the first feature films, culminating in the sprawling epics of D.W. Griffith. Rare artifacts from the Museum of the Moving Image showcase the power of Griffith's film as propaganda.

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

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

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

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

USPS OPERATION SANTA PROGRAM IS NOW ACCEPTING LETTERS

Staff Report

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

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

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

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

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

Letter Adoption Registration to adopt letters starts on Monday, November 2, and people can register as individuals or groups. The letter adoption window opens on Monday, November 16, and registrants can adopt single or family letters to help brighten the holidays for those in need.

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

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

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

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





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SUNCOAST FOUNDATION INVESTS $327,000 IN HILLSBOROUGH EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

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

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

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

The work touched nearly every part of the food bank's operation, from the warehouse floor to the distribution line.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BROADWAY IN LAKELAND ANNOUNCES 2027 SEASON WITH THREE HIT SHOWS

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

The season opens with CLUE on January 31, 2027, at 7 p.m. Based on the popular 1985 movie and classic Hasbro board game, the production brings the familiar suspects and weapons to the stage for a comedic murder mystery. Six guests gather at Boddy Manor, where murder and blackmail lead to a night of twists, turns and unexpected revelations.

On March 2, 2027, at 7:30 p.m., HADESTOWN takes the stage. The Tony Award-winning musical, created by singer-songwriter Anaïs Mitchell and originally directed by Rachel Chavkin, weaves together the ancient stories of Orpheus and Eurydice and of Hades and Persephone. The production won eight Tony Awards in 2019, including Best Musical, as well as the 2020 Grammy Award for Best Musical Theater Album.

The season concludes on June 1, 2027, at 7 p.m. with The Who's TOMMY, a new production of the iconic rock opera created by The Who in 1969. Featuring songs including "Pinball Wizard," "I'm Free," "See Me, Feel Me" and "Sensation," the production follows Tommy Walker's extraordinary journey from troubled young man to pinball sensation.

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

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







LENNARD HIGH JROTC TRIO SAVE LIFE OF FELLOW STUDENT AFTER STABBING

Staff Report



State Rep. Danny Alvarez presents awards to three Lennard High School JROTC cadets, siblings Max and Tess Britton and Tyler Grooms (center), recognizing their courage and lifesaving actions after a fellow student was critically injured.

State Rep. Danny Alvarez, Michael Owen and Lennard High School JROTC leadership recognized three JROTC cadets for their extraordinary courage, quick thinking and lifesaving actions after encountering a fellow student critically injured near Lennard High School.

Three cadets, Tyler Grooms and siblings Max and Tess Britton, sprang into action in August after witnessing a fellow student in need of immediate medical assistance.

Max and Grooms quickly began providing first aid, using a belt as an improvised tourniquet to help control severe bleeding. Tess called 911 and ran to Lennard High School's administrative office to get additional help.

The cadets remained with the injured student until first responders arrived, working together and remaining composed under extraordinarily difficult circumstances.

"These three young leaders saw someone in desperate need of help, and they didn't hesitate. They acted," Alvarez said. "Max, Tess and Tyler showed courage, compassion and leadership well beyond their years. Their actions helped save a life, and they should make every parent, teacher and member of this community incredibly proud."

The cadets were recognized Thursday during a news conference in Lennard High School's JROTC classroom, where speakers highlighted the role JROTC instructors play in preparing students to lead, serve and respond when their communities need them.

Grooms said, "My scouts and JROTC first aid training came into action when we saw the bleeding."

"What happened that day demonstrates the tremendous character being developed in young people right here in our community," Owen said. "These cadets relied on one another, kept their composure and put someone else's well-being ahead of their own. That is service. That is leadership. And that is exactly why programs like JROTC and the instructors behind them are so valuable."

Lennard High School's JROTC program emphasizes leadership, teamwork, responsibility and service, preparing cadets to carry those principles beyond the classroom. The cadets' actions exemplify the Army values at the heart of JROTC, including duty, respect, selfless service, honor and personal courage.

"What these cadets did is a reminder that leadership isn't just about wearing a uniform or holding a title," Alvarez said. "Leadership is recognizing when someone needs you and having the courage to step forward. These three stepped forward, and a young man is alive today because people were willing to act."

The mother of the injured student sent a letter to Britton and Grooms thanking them for their life-saving actions. The student is home and recovering.

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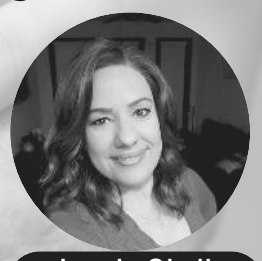

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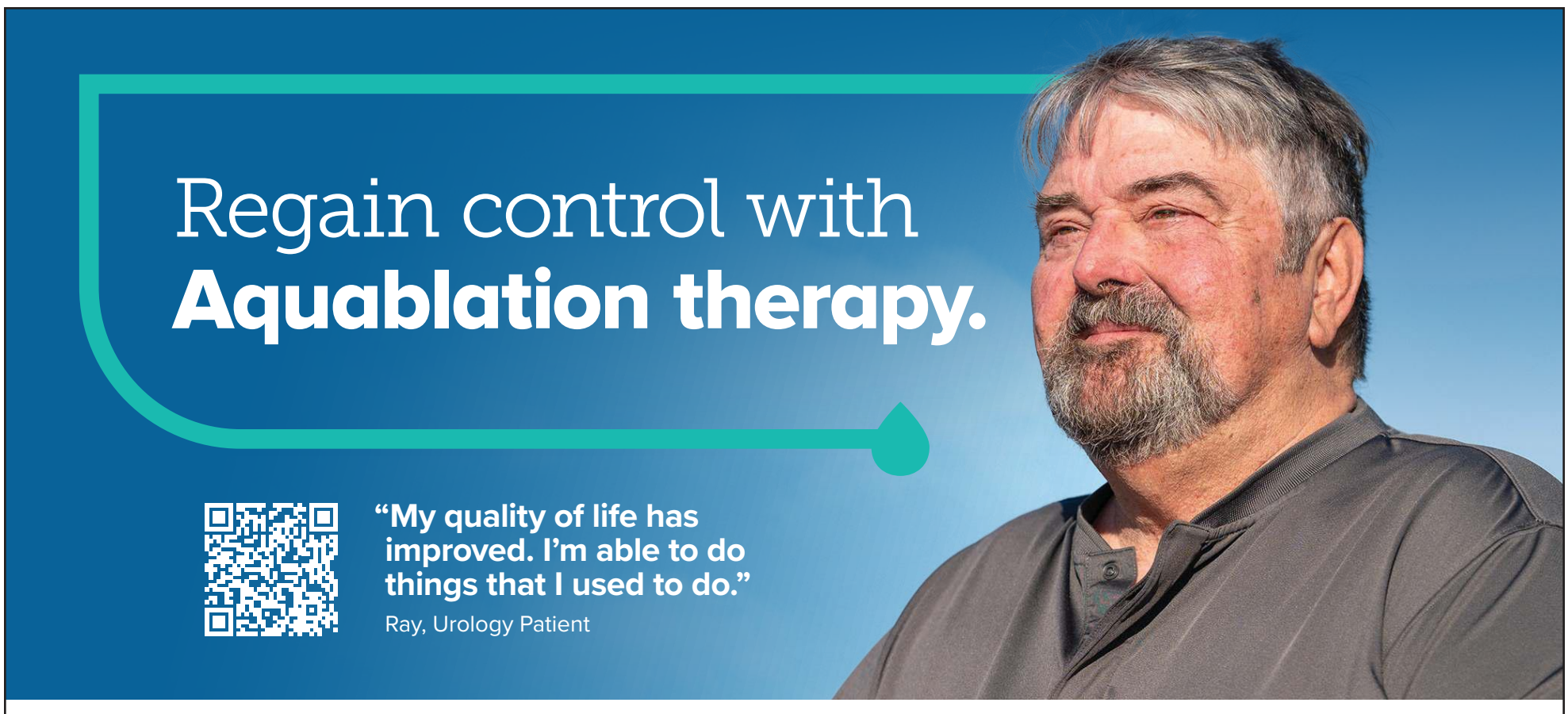

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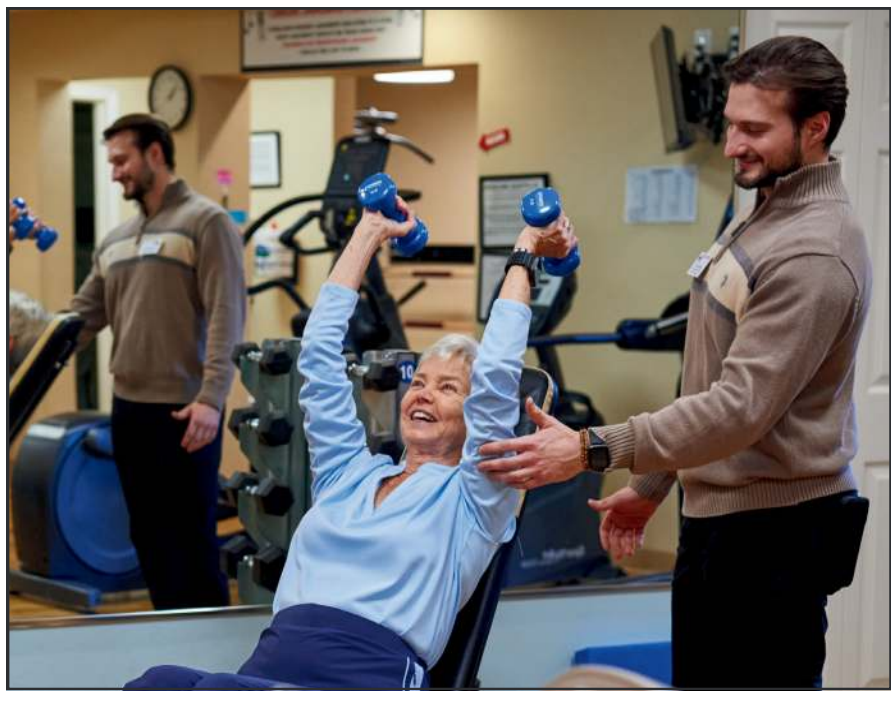


HALLOWEEN, FALL FESTS, BOO BASH AND ANNUAL BLACK CAT 5K

Staff Report

Boo Bash Trick-or-treat

Dillard's department store at Brandon Exchange is hosting Boo Bash, an indoor trick-or-treating event for families, on Saturday, October 24, from 12 Noon-2 p.m. Along with trick-or-treating, there will be games and music from a DJ. Dillard's is located at 303 Brandon Town Center Dr. in Brandon. Come out dressed in your favorite costume and enjoy the fun.



Grace At Lithia, Fall Festival

Grace at Lithia church is hosting a Fall Festival on Sunday, October 18 starting at Noon, in partnership with HCA Healthcare. It will have lots of family activities, including inflatables, games, food trucks, costumes, an ambulance for the kids to explore, and a really cute Teddy Bear Health Clinic where kids can take a teddy bear through a toy X-ray machine and receive a printout of the X-ray. Grace At Lithia is located at 5708 Lithia Pinecrest Rd., In Lithia.

Annual Black Cat 5K Fun Run Benefitting A Kitten Place

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

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

This year's event has an exciting new focus: fundraising through teams and individual participants. Organizers hope to expand the event's impact by encouraging supporters to create fundraising teams, invite friends and family to donate, and compete for fun prizes along the way. Registration is now open. For registration, fundraising information, sponsorship opportunities or more information about A Kitten Place, visit https://akittenplace.org/events/.

Haunted Woods Events At Hillsborough River State Park

Are you ready to face your worst nightmare? Haunted Woods at Hillsborough River State Park is where your nightmares become alive. As night falls, the woods come to life and turn into pure terror. Brave the Scare Trail — Beyond the Grave — where the undead are clocking in.

This is recommended for children over 12 years of age and will take place from 7-10 p.m. at Hillsborough River State Park, located at 15402 U.S. 301 in Thonotosassa, on Friday and Saturday, October 16-17. For a more family-friendly event, bring younger children to the Beyond the Grave Kids Trail event, which runs from 3-6 p.m. only. This is a cash-only event.

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.



6106 Delancey Station Street
Riverview, FL 33578

619 30th Street NE
Ruskin, FL 33570





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.'"

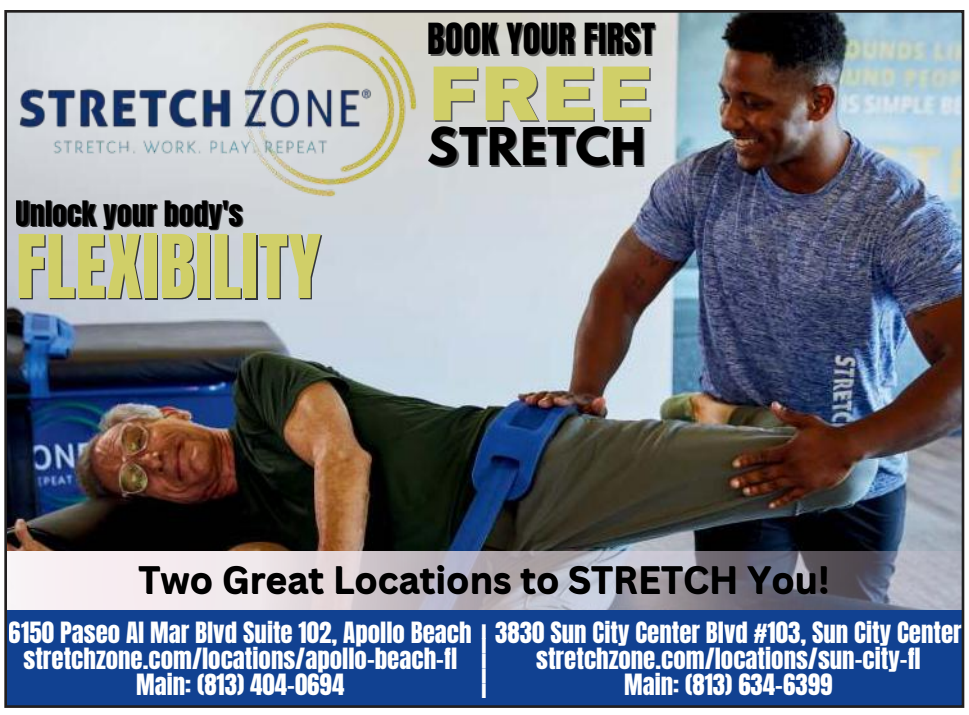
To help gifts go even further, the anonymous donor will match every donation toward the project dollar for dollar, doubling the community's impact while matching funds last. Similar projects are planned in cities across the country, including Chicago, Illinois; Cleveland, Ohio; Nashville, Tennessee;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







SHOP LOCAL: BUSINESSES STAY OPEN DURING PIPELINE CONSTRUCTION

By Maribel Medina



Tampa Bay Water continues to make significant progress on the construction of the new South Hillsborough Pipeline, and those efforts have been made easier by the cooperation of residents, business owners and drivers to make accommodations as they endure temporary inconveniences.

To help businesses continue to attract customers and help customers remember those businesses are still open and operating, we are unveiling a new Shop Local section on https://southhillsboroughpipeline.com. It makes it easier to discover businesses along and near the pipeline route whether grabbing lunch, meeting a friend for dinner, shopping for everyday essentials, going to a medical or dental appointment or scheduling a service.

You may find a longtime favorite or discover someplace new. Grab a coffee at Scooter's Coffee, enjoy a quick bite at Culver's, get back on track at Fitness Forge or stop by Danny's Deli for lunch. Take care of your health at Brandon Medical Center, find the perfect piece at Nova Furniture or treat your pet to a stay at Canine Cabana. These are just a few of the many businesses continuing to welcome customers throughout construction.

Every visit makes a difference. By continuing to shop, dine and patronize local businesses, you help ensure the unique places that make this community feel like home will make it through this construction period and be well-positioned to succeed after the pipeline is in place.

The website will also feature local deals, promotions and events, giving residents another reason to visit businesses throughout the corridor. Business owners can submit upcoming offers or events through the project website, https://southhillsboroughpipeline.com/shop-local/. There are also opportunities for businesses in need of support. If you are a business owner, Tampa Bay Water is here to help. Visit the new page to request additional promotion and support.

At the same time, visitors can use the website to review construction updates, closures and detours and sign up for email alerts.

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

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



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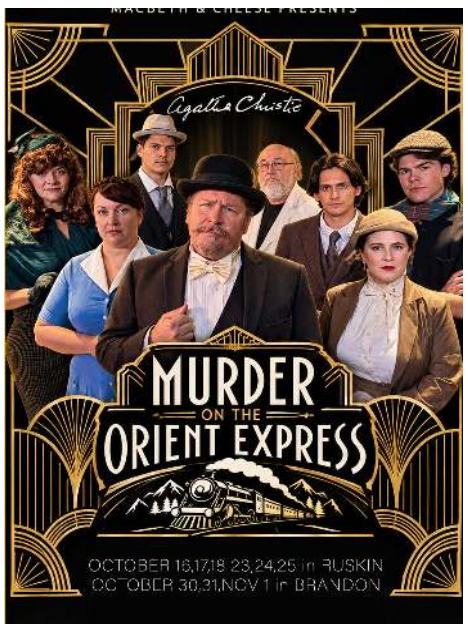
A LEGENDARY WHODUNIT COMES TO RUSKIN AND BRANDON

Staff Report



Following its last production, *Murder, Denied,* an original murder mystery that kept audiences guessing, MacBeth & Cheese is returning to the scene of the crime. But this time, it's trading an original mystery for a legendary one.

MacBeth & Cheese invites you to climb aboard the world's most famous train for Agatha Christie's classic mystery, *Murder on the Orient Express,* adapted for the stage by Ken Ludwig and directed by Amy Windle. The production promises the suspense, wit, memorable characters and twists of Christie's famous mystery.

"Bringing *Murder on the Orient Express* to the stage has been an absolute joy. It has everything you want in a great night of theater — a fantastic cast of characters, plenty of laughs, a little glamour and, of course, a murder to solve," said Amy Windle, director and co-founder of MacBeth & Cheese. "We've had so much fun creating this world, and I can't wait for our audiences to climb aboard and experience it with us."

A luxurious train.

A raging snowstorm.

A wealthy passenger found murdered in his compartment.

The train is stopped in its tracks — and a killer is trapped on board.

Now, legendary detective Hercule Poirot must unravel a web of secrets, lies and hidden motives. With a train full of suspects and nowhere to escape, the question is ... can YOU solve the murder before Poirot does?

Experience *Murder on the Orient Express* this October with MacBeth & Cheese, your local all-volunteer community theater.

Performances begin on Friday, October 16, at the Firehouse Cultural Center, located at 101 First Ave. NE in Ruskin, with additional performances at Brandon Performing Arts, located at located at 225 E. Brandon Blvd. in Brandon, beginning on Friday, October 30.

Mystery. Suspense. Humor. And an ending you won't want spoiled!

See the complete performance schedule at https://macbethandcheese.com/.

MacBeth & Cheese — live theater that pulls you in and doesn't let go.

MacBeth & Cheese, a community theater company, presents productions in partnership with the Firehouse Cultural Center in Ruskin.

For more information about MacBeth & Cheese, visit https://macbethandcheese.com/, call 813-485-4341 or email info@macbethandcheese.com.

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

NBS ESTHETICS HELPS CLIENTS FEEL CONFIDENT AT EVERY AGE

By Marie Gilmore



For Tina Delgado, skin care has always been about more than looking good. It is about feeling confident, caring for yourself and embracing every stage of life.

That philosophy is at the heart of New Beginnings Skincare LLC, doing business as NBS Esthetics, where Delgado combines professional skin care treatments with wellness education and practical guidance for healthy aging.

Based in Apollo Beach, Delgado specializes in maturing and sensitive skin and offers customized facials and treatments, including LED light therapy, dermaplaning, enzyme masks, microdermabrasion, peels, high-frequency and facial massage. She also offers back facials, aromatherapy and professional skin care products.

Her journey into the industry began in Orlando, where she represented Caribbean Sol Natural Sunscreen at luxury resorts and educated guests about mineral-based sun protection. After moving to Apollo Beach, she worked as an aesthetic technician with MediClinics Aesthetics in Tampa, gaining experience with advanced laser and skin-rejuvenation technologies.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Delgado continued her education at Chic Image Academy in Tampa, earning her Florida Facial Specialist license. She soon opened her own practice, bringing her experience and passion for natural approaches to skin care directly to clients.

Today, NBS Esthetics has expanded beyond traditional facials into a philosophy Delgado describes as "Healthy skin. Healthy living. Healthy aging." She encourages clients to consider the connection between professional skin care, daily habits, nutrition, movement, sun protection, self-care and overall wellness.

Delgado, who served in the Army Reserves, also serves as a referral resource for adults interested in learning more about physician-guided wellness options, including GLP-1 and peptide therapies. She emphasized that she is not a medical provider and does not diagnose, prescribe or oversee medical treatment. Those decisions are handled by licensed medical professionals through a telehealth partner.

For Delgado, education is an important part of the experience. Her goal is to help clients understand their options and develop realistic, consistent habits that support healthier-looking skin as they age.

Her advice is simple: Wear sunscreen, stay hydrated and take care of yourself from the inside out.

"I hope you feel seen, supported and empowered on your journey to healthy skin, healthy living and healthy aging," Delgado said.

NBS Esthetics is available by appointment inside Bay Area Salon, located 223 Flamingo Dr. in Apollo Beach. Call 813-922-9327 or book appointments online at www.nbsesthetics.com.





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EAST OF TAMPA HIGHLIGHTS COMMUNITY & BUSINESSES

By Marie Gilmore



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

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

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

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

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

His entrepreneurial philosophy is straightforward.

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

Through Bravo Company Digital, Plumstead helps businesses address both.

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

Plumstead also founded East of Tampa, a hyperlocal media company focused on eastern Hillsborough County. The platform has grown to more than 5,000 newsletter subscribers, 18,000 social media followers and more than 2 million monthly content views, while supporting local businesses through advertising.

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

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

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

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

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

SHADETREE OFFERS RESORT-STYLE RENTALS IN THE HEART OF RUSKIN

Staff Report



For residents looking for more than just a place to live, Shadetree Apartments in Ruskin offers a lifestyle centered around comfort, convenience and connection.

Located at 3511 Great Cypress Circle in the Cypress Village neighborhood, Shadetree features 260 apartment homes spread across 30 acres of lush landscaping, green space, ponds and walking paths. The community is designed to provide residents with resort-style amenities while keeping everyday conveniences close to home.

Recent community upgrades include brand-new grills, enhanced resort-style amenities and a robust calendar of resident events designed to encourage neighbors to connect and enjoy the community together.

At the heart of Shadetree is its 9,000-square-foot clubhouse, which provides spaces for both relaxation and productivity. Residents can work from the collaborative workspace, relax in the TV lounge, challenge friends to a game of pool or poker or gather around the wet bar. A book nook, a coffee bar and social areas offer additional places to unwind.

Outside, residents can enjoy a beach-style entry swimming pool with a fountain, private cabanas, a poolside pergola and a turf game lawn. New grilling options make it easy to host a barbecue or enjoy an evening outdoors. There are also two dog parks, expansive lawns and scenic walking paths for residents and their four-legged companions.

Wellness is another focus, with a fully equipped fitness center and therapeutic sauna available within the community.

Apartment homes feature open floor plans, 9 or 10-foot ceilings, expansive windows, quartz countertops, stainless steel appliances, full-size front-loading washers and dryers, luxury vinyl flooring and large walk-in closets. Select homes also offer private balconies or patios, garages, dens and views of ponds or green spaces.

Shadetree is also conveniently located near shopping, dining, outdoor recreation and Gulf Coast attractions that make Ruskin a popular place to call home.

For more information, visit www.shadetree.apartments and select "Schedule A Tour," or call 813-610-0079. Limited-time move-in specials may be available, including up to three months free for qualified applicants.



Holiday Sip & Shop, Craft Fair, & More

Compiled by Jenny Bennett
jbennett@ospreyobserver.com

Holiday Sip n Shop

Please join the Women of Grace for food, fellowship and fun at its Holiday Sip n Shop Tea at Grace at Lithia on Saturday, November 7, from 11 a.m.-2 p.m. In addition to tea and treats, there will be a carefully curated selection of local, woman-owned vendors present and multiple vacation getaways to bid on in the silent auction. You won't want to miss this exciting community event. Tickets are $30 and must be purchased in advance by Saturday, October 31. Proceeds will go to Grace at Lithia's community outreach missions. To register, please visit its website at https://mygraceumc.churchcenter.com/registrations/events/3851829.

Runway For A Reason

Women of Hope at New Hope Church will host Runway for a Reason, a fashion show and luncheon benefiting ECHO, on Saturday, October 10, at 11:30 a.m. The event will take place in the New Hope Church Social Hall, located at 121 N. Knights Ave. in Brandon. The afternoon will bring together fashion, fellowship and giving back while supporting ECHO's mission to provide emergency food, clothing and life-stabilizing resources to neighbors in need.

Guests will enjoy a luncheon and a fashion show featuring stylish looks from ECHO Thrift, showcasing clothing and accessories for all seasons. The event will also feature an ECHO Thrift Pop-Up Mini Store, giving guests an opportunity to shop while supporting ECHO.

Guests are asked to RSVP by Monday, October 5. Registration online at https://findnewhope.ccbchurch.com/goto/forms/704/responses/new.

Osprey Heights Craft Fair

Osprey Heights Gracious Retirement Living, located at 2808 Lithia Pinecrest Rd. in Valrico, will be hosting a craft fair at its facility's activity center on Saturday, October 17, from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Residents will be selling a wide variety of unique handmade items and crafts. Come and find that perfect, one-of-a-kind holiday or birthday gift for the people you care about.

Help Barrington Middle School Fill The Fence

Barrington Middle School PTSA is excited to kick off its 'Fill the Fence' fundraiser. It is asking families, friends and community members to help fill the school fence with support for the Barrington Bolts. Every contribution, big or small, makes a difference and helps support the students, teachers and school community. Email the PTSA at ptsd.barrington@gmail.comor call 813-657-7266 for additional information.

Tampa Bay Mission Of Hope Registration

Tampa Bay Mission of Hope will be accepting registrations for its Holiday of Hope Thanksgiving and Christmas food and toy assistance recipients. To register, please bring a photo ID, proof of income, children's birth certificates or Social Security cards.

Donations can be made at the Mission of Hope Thrift Store located at 212 S. St. Cloud Ave. in Valrico. Please visit the Tampa Bay Mission of Hope's website at www.tbmissionofhope.org for more information on the services it provides and ways that you can help.





ADVENTHEALTH, TAMPA YMCA PARTNER TO EXPAND CAMP CRISTINA RIDING ARENA

Staff Report



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



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

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

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

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

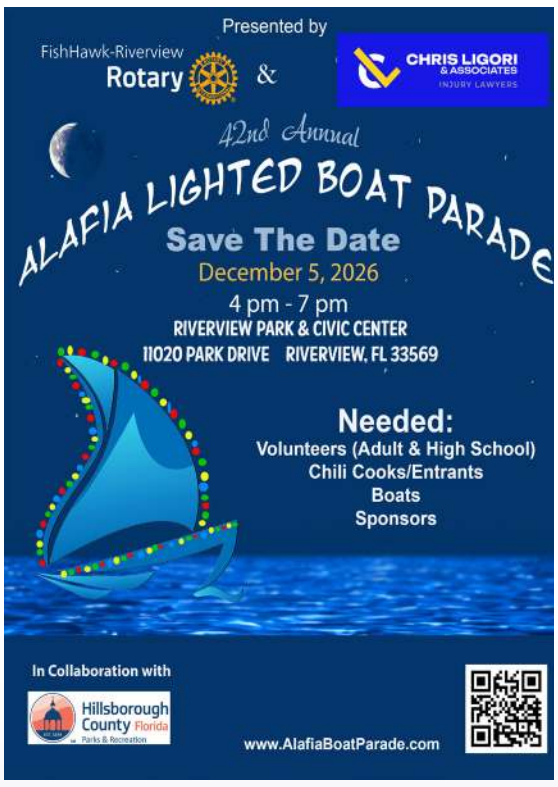
Located on a 65-acre campus at 9840 Balm Riverview Rd. in Riverview, YMCA Camp Cristina serves children, families and community groups through a wide range of programs, including youth sports, after-school care, camps, family activities and leadership development opportunities. The camp is designed to help young people explore new interests, build lasting friendships and develop a sense of belonging.

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

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

ANNUAL ALAFIA LIGHTED BOAT PARADE RETURNS DECEMBER 5

Staff Report



The FishHawk-Riverview Rotary Club, in collaboration with Hillsborough County Parks and Recreation and parade sponsor Chris Ligori Law & Associates, is proud to present the 42nd annual Alafia Lighted Boat Parade on Saturday, December 5. This treasured holiday tradition will bring families, friends and visitors together for an evening of festive activities, food, entertainment and a spectacular display of beautifully decorated boats illuminating the Alafia River.

Festivities begin at 4 p.m. at the Riverview Civic Center, where attendees can enjoy a visit with Santa, the annual chili cook-off, family-friendly activities, food, local nonprofits and live entertainment before gathering along the waterfront of the Riverview Civic Center at 5:45 pm for the highlight of the evening — the annual parade of creatively decorated and brilliantly illuminated boats.

Following the parade will be the announcement and awarding of prizes for the chili cook-off as well as an after party downriver at the River's Edge Bar & Grill, where boaters, sponsors, volunteers and community members can gather for the official announcement and awarding of cash prizes for the best decorated boats, recognizing participants for their creativity, holiday spirit and outstanding decorations.

"For 42 years, the Alafia Lighted Boat Parade has brought our community together to celebrate the holiday season along the Alafia River," said Christine Ans, event chair. "From the festivities and lighted boat parade at the Riverview Civic Center to the post-parade celebration at River's Edge Bar & Grill, it's a truly beautiful, magical evening for all ages."

In addition to a holiday celebration, the event helps support the FishHawk-Riverview Rotary Club's commitment to service. Proceeds benefit local service projects, scholarships and community initiatives that support children, families and organizations locally and abroad.

The Riverview Civic Center is located at 11020 Park Dr. in Riverview. River's Edge Bar & Grill is located 6226 Ohio Ave. in Gibsonton. For information about attending, sponsorships, boat or chili cook-off registration or volunteering, visit www.alafiaboatparade.com.

BROADWAY IN LAKELAND
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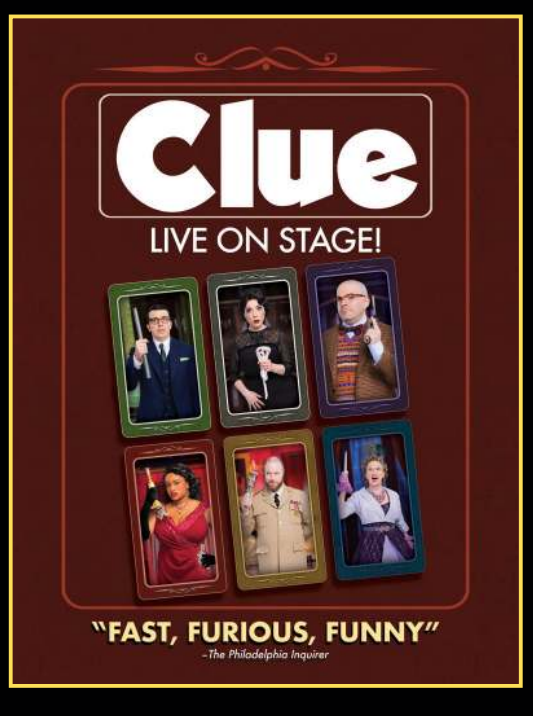

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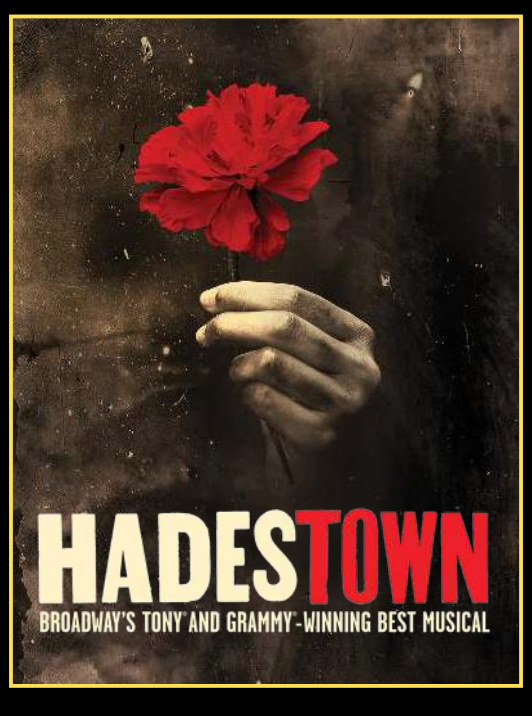

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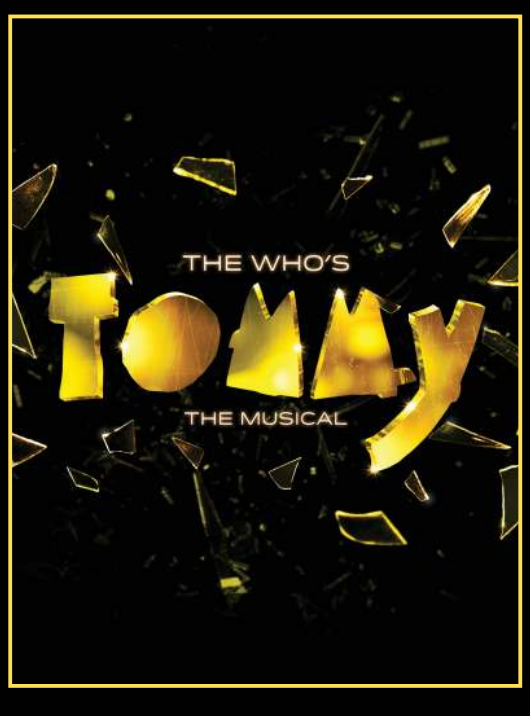

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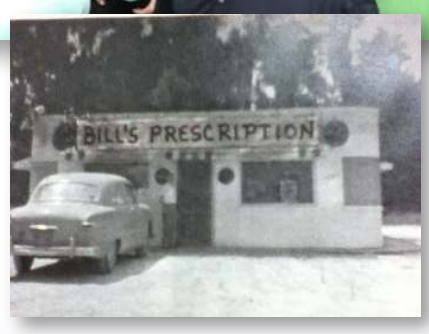
BILL'S PRESCRIPTION MARKS 70 YEARS WITH COMMUNITY CELEBRATION

By Marie Gilmore





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

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

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

Chelsea Noriega West, the founder's granddaughter and the daughter of the pharmacy's current owner, said her grandfather's philosophy of treating every patient like family remains at the heart of the business.

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

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

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

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

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

LOCAL DRUMMER FOLLOWS PASSION TO SEAWORLD STAGE

By Libby Hopkins



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Hoening is extremely happy that he followed his heart and kept on drumming, even when the path was uncertain. He said every rehearsal, audition and performance has helped remind him why he fell in love with percussion in the first place.

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

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

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

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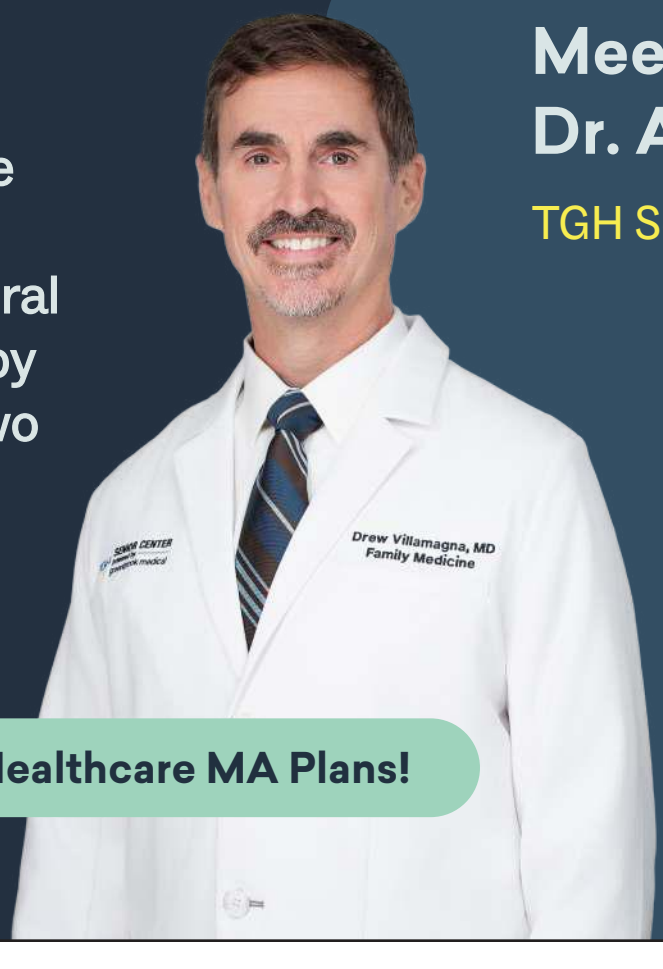

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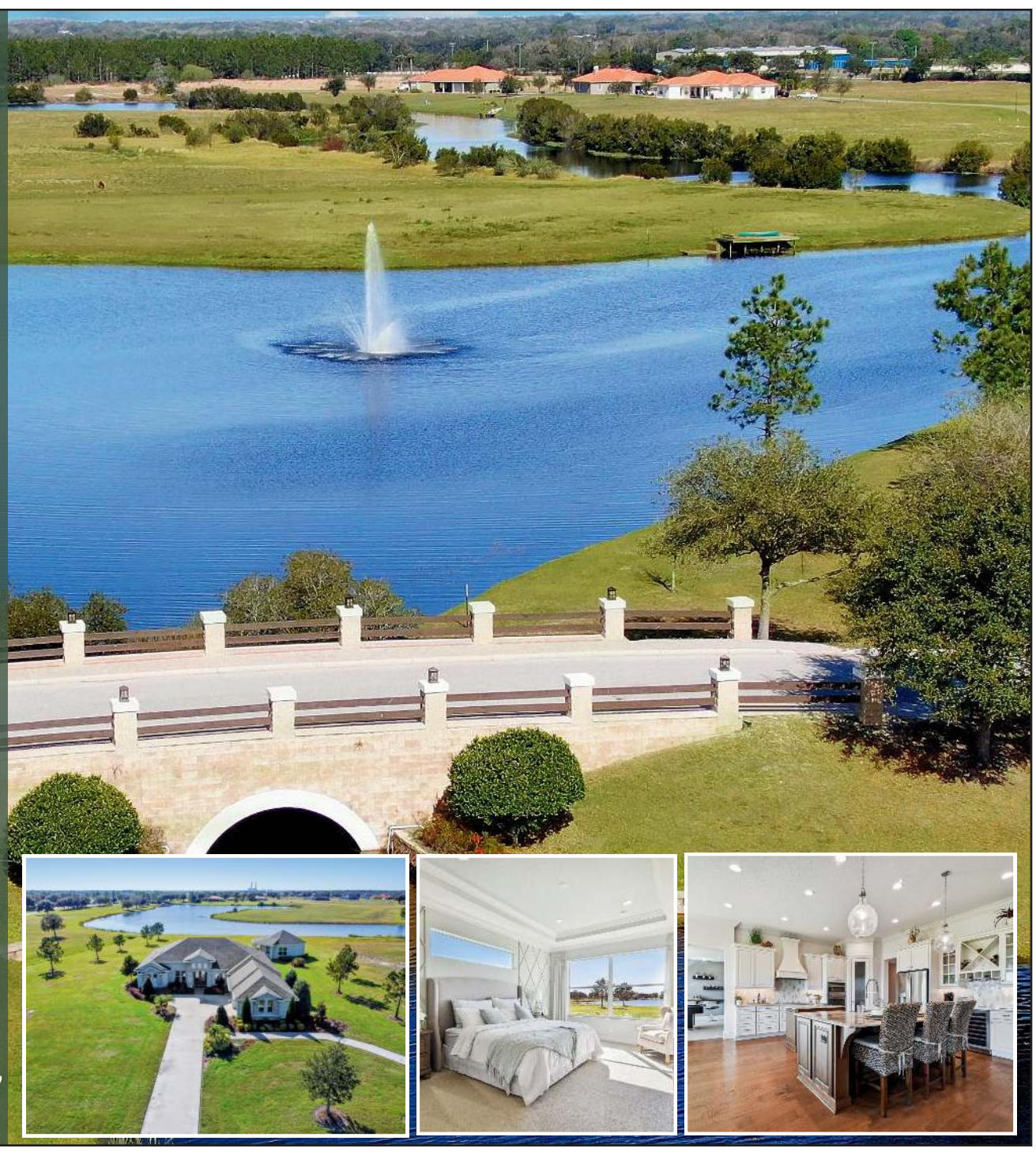

WHO'S GOT YOUR VOTE?

BALLOT EXPLAINED: THREE AMENDMENTS AND THREE REFERENDUMS

By Marie Gilmore

Voters will decide three statewide constitutional amendments and three Hillsborough County questions in the November 3 General Election. Statewide amendments require at least 60 percent approval. County referendums require a simple majority.

Statewide Amendments

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

Florida maintains a Budget Stabilization Fund to cover emergencies and budget shortfalls. The amendment would increase the amount that can be retained from 10 percent to 25 percent of the state's general revenue collections.

It would also require the Legislature to transfer the lesser of $750 million or the amount needed to reach 25 percent each year, unless specified conditions allow the transfer to be suspended. Lawmakers could continue withdrawing money for critical state needs.

A YES vote supports increasing the fund's maximum balance and requiring annual transfers.

A NO vote opposes the proposed changes.

Amendment 2: Property Tax Exemption for Certain Agricultural Equipment

This amendment would exempt certain tangible personal property from property taxes when located on agricultural land and used to produce agricultural products or for agritourism activities.

The property must be owned by the landowner or leaseholder. Examples include qualifying farm equipment, tools and machinery.

If approved, the exemption would apply beginning January 1, 2027.

A YES vote supports exempting qualifying agricultural and agritourism-related property from taxes.

A NO vote opposes the proposed exemption.



Amendment 3: Larger Homestead Exemption and Changes to Property Assessments

This amendment would make several changes to Florida's property tax system.

Larger homestead exemption: The exemption for non-school taxes would increase to $150,000 in 2027 and $250,000 in 2028, with adjustments for inflation beginning in 2029. It would not apply to school district taxes.

Local option: Counties and municipalities could increase the homestead exemption for their respective taxes up to the property's full assessed value. Special districts could do the same with voter approval.

New Florida residents: People who are not Florida residents as of December 31, 2026, would initially receive the existing homestead exemption when they qualify.

Lower assessment cap: The annual cap on increases in assessed value for non-homestead property would decrease from 10 percent to 5 percent. This does not apply to school district taxes.

Property tax spending: Counties and municipalities would be required to use property tax revenues for public safety, education, infrastructure, natural resources, bond debt service, employee retirement benefits, and government operations.

The amendment would take effect January 1, 2027.

A YES vote supports the proposed changes.

A NO vote opposes those changes.



Hillsborough County Referendums

Referendum 1: Should Voters Elect the School Superintendent?

Currently, the Hillsborough County School Board appoints the superintendent of Hillsborough County Public Schools. This referendum asks whether the superintendent should instead be elected by voters in a partisan election.

If approved, the change would take effect with the 2028 general election, with the superintendent serving a four-year term.

A YES vote supports electing the superintendent.

A NO vote keeps the superintendent appointed by the School Board.

Referendum 2: More County Commissioners, All Elected by District

Hillsborough County currently has seven county commissioners. This referendum would increase the number to nine and eventually to 11 when the county reaches a population of 2.5 million.

It also would require every commissioner to be elected from a single-member district, meaning only district voters would elect that commissioner.

A YES vote supports expanding the commission and making all seats district-based.

A NO vote leaves the current seven-member structure in place.

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

Hillsborough County voters approved a half-cent school capital outlay sales surtax in 2018. The tax is scheduled to expire in 2028.

This referendum asks whether to continue the half-cent sales tax for another 10 years beginning January 1, 2029. Revenue would fund air conditioning replacement and repairs, school construction and improvements, security enhancements and other maintenance needs.

A YES vote supports continuing the tax through 2038.

A NO vote allows the tax to expire as scheduled.



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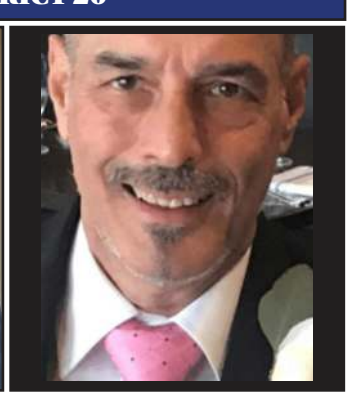

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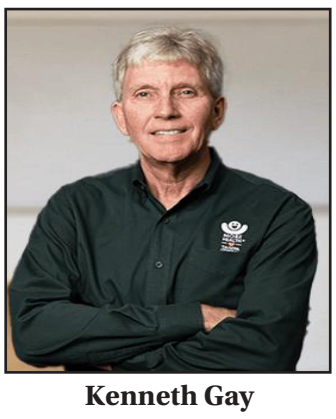

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Karen Perez
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YOUR VOTE COUNTS

WHO'S GOT YOUR VOTE?

BRITTANY LYSSY
SCHOOL BOARD, DISTRICT 2

Staff Report



Brittany Lyssy is a mom raising her children in Hillsborough County who says she often thinks about the questions facing local schools: Are children learning what they need to succeed? Are classrooms safe? Are teachers being supported? And are taxpayer dollars being used responsibly?

Those questions, she says, are why she is running for Hillsborough County School Board, District 2.

Lyssy has a background in education policy and law and has worked with school boards nationally on ethics, governance and policy. She also brings the perspective of a parent and says she understands what families expect when they send their children to school. In her view, strong schools begin with strong academics, supported teachers, safe classrooms and parent partnerships.

Lyssy says she respects educators and the work they do every day. She believes teachers should have the support and resources needed to help students learn, grow and succeed. She also believes School Board members have a responsibility to ask questions, examine how taxpayer dollars are spent, measure whether policies are producing results, and make sure parents have a meaningful voice in decisions affecting their children.

Her priorities include strengthening core academics, particularly reading and math; identifying struggling students early; supporting and retaining great teachers; maintaining safe and orderly classrooms; and directing resources toward students and classrooms.

Lyssy supports school choice and says parents should have the freedom to choose the educational setting that best meets their child's needs. She believes strong public schools and educational choice can coexist and that families deserve options.

Fiscal responsibility is another priority. Lyssy supports transparency and accountability, including a line-by-line review of spending and a budget that keeps classrooms at the forefront.

She also believes schools should prepare students for a variety of paths after graduation, including college, career and technical education, apprenticeships, military service or the workforce.

Brittany Lyssy is running for Hillsborough County School Board, District 2. Learn more at VoteBrittanyLyssy.com.

MICHAEL OWEN
FLORIDA HOUSE, DISTRICT 70

Staff Report



Serving House District 70 is personal for State Representative Michael Owen because this is home. The district includes portions of Hillsborough and Manatee counties, including Apollo Beach, Ruskin, Sun City Center, Riverview, Wimauma and Balm. These communities are home to families, businesses and residents who expect state government to stay focused on issues that affect everyday life.

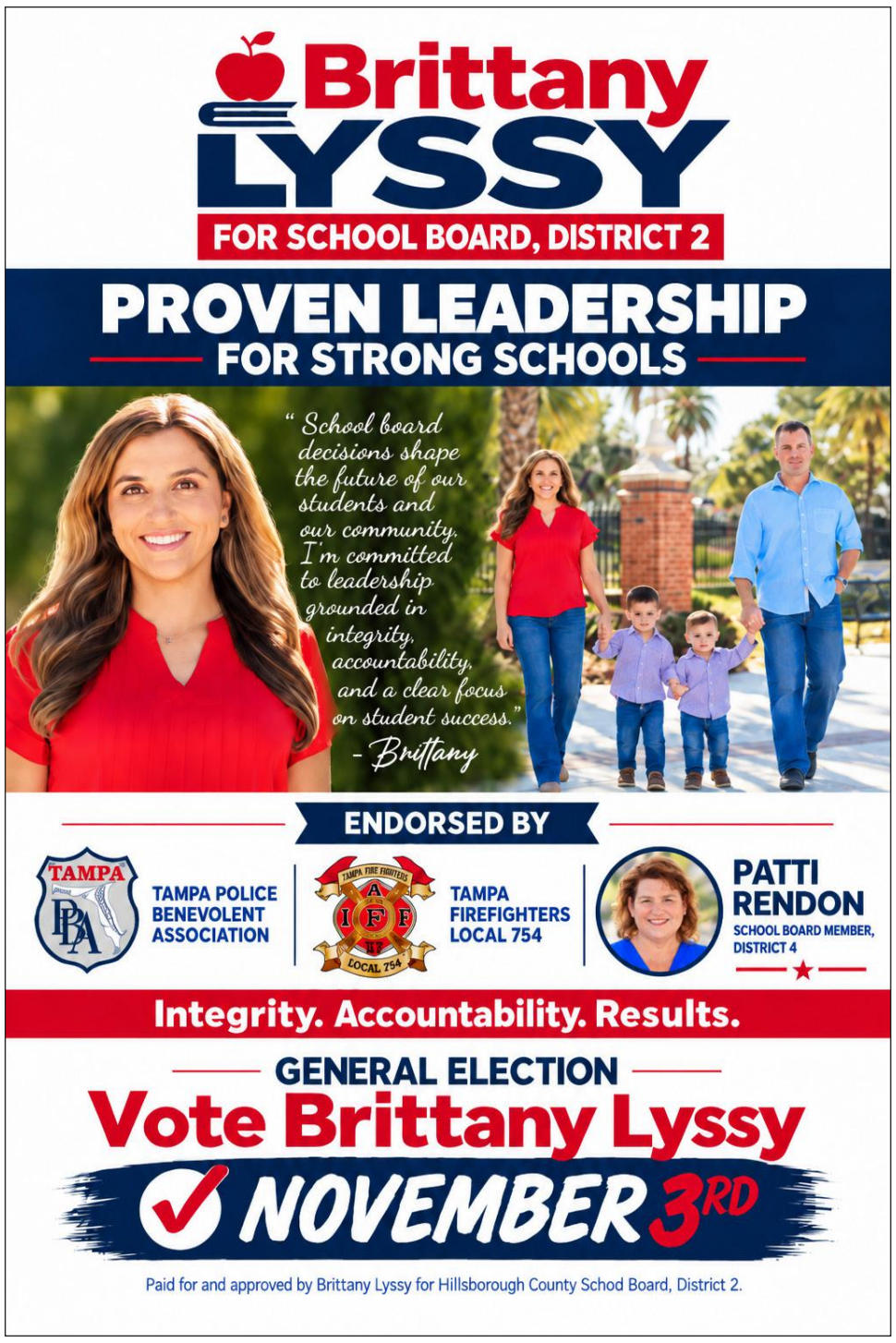
Owen has called Hillsborough County home for almost all of his life. He was raised in Brandon, built his career here and has spent more than 20 years as a small business owner. Before being elected to the Florida House in 2024, he served on the Hillsborough County Commission. His experience in local government gave him perspective as state government tackles issues such as affordability, transportation and infrastructure, property insurance, public safety, protection of natural resources and the responsible use of taxpayer dollars.

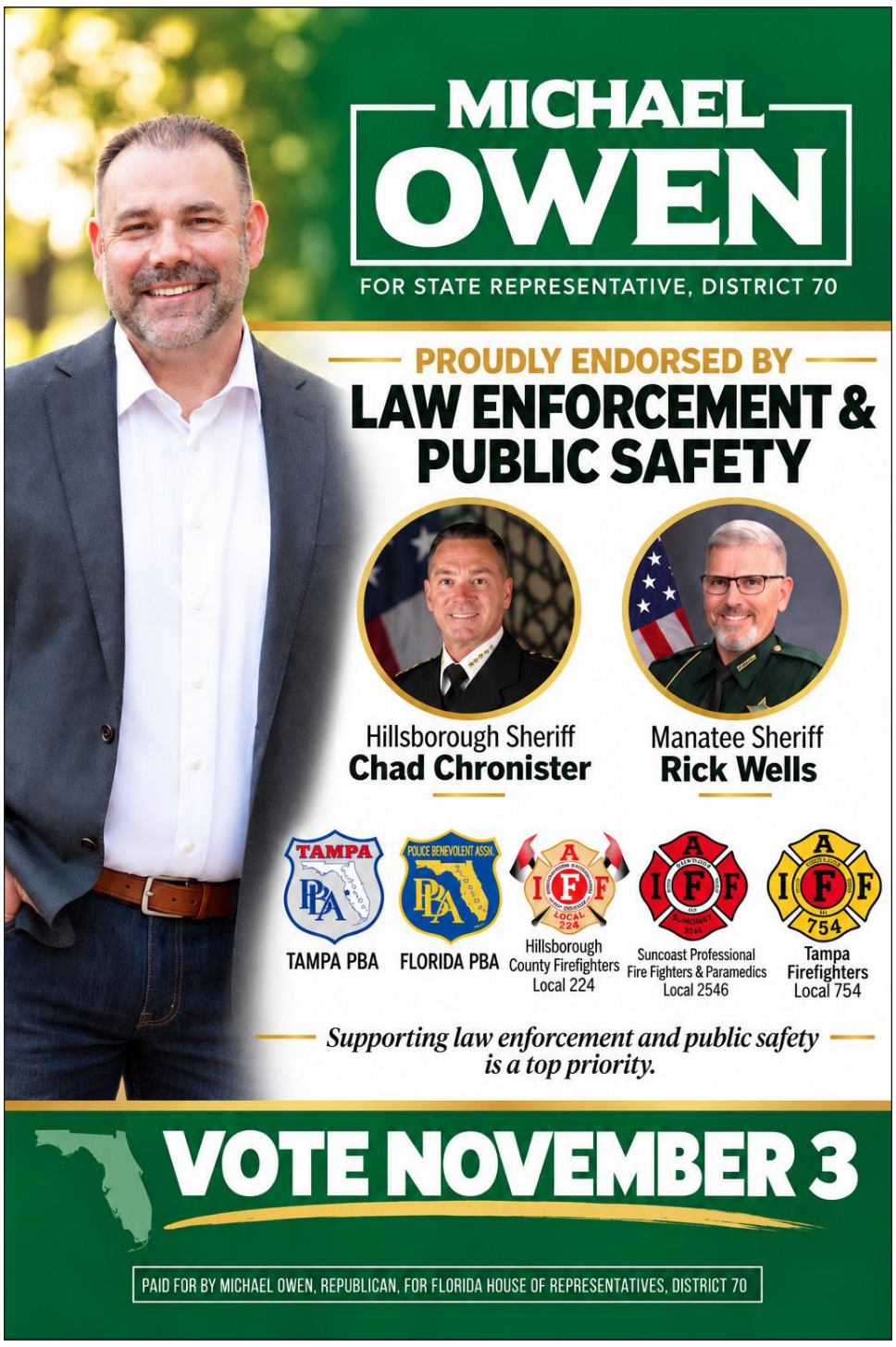
He has carried that local perspective with him to Tallahassee. His committee assignments have included State Affairs, Insurance and Banking, Natural Resources and Disasters, Student Academic Success, Transportation and Economic Development Budget, and the Select Committee on Property Taxes. Each of these areas touches issues that affect the people he represents.

During his time in the House, Owen has worked on legislation addressing consumer protections, regional planning and economic development, health care and local issues affecting Hillsborough County. He has also focused on transportation, property taxes, insurance, education, public safety and protecting Florida's natural resources.

Owen says his background in local government has reinforced the importance of making sure decisions in Tallahassee reflect how policies will affect communities at home. Whether the issue is roads and infrastructure, cost pressures facing families, support for law enforcement or responsible use of taxpayer dollars, he believes state leaders should understand the impact of the decisions they make.

For Owen, public service is about listening to the people he represents and carrying their concerns into the decisions made in Tallahassee. He is grateful for the opportunity to serve District 70 and, if elected, says he will continue working on the issues that matter to the families, businesses and communities that make the area home.





POLITICALLY SPEAKING

KAREN PEREZ
SCHOOL BOARD, DISTRICT 6

By Amanda Castillo



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

STACY HAHN
COUNTY COMMISSIONER, DIST. 5

By Libby Hopkins



Stacy Hahn has called Hillsborough County home for 25 years.

"My husband, Jeff, and I raised our three sons here because we believe in this community and the opportunities it offers families," Hahn said. "For the past eight years, I've had the privilege of serving on the Hillsborough County School Board, overseeing one of the nation's largest school districts, managing a multibillion-dollar budget and working to protect taxpayer dollars while improving outcomes for students."

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

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

Hahn earned a reputation for fiscal responsibility, transparency and delivering high-quality outcomes for students. She is now running for County Commission, District 5, to bring the same disciplined, results-driven leadership to the community.

"I'm running for county commission to bring that same leadership, accountability and problem-solving approach to the decisions that will shape our community's future," Hahn said. "My priorities are straightforward: protect taxpayers, improve infrastructure, support law enforcement and first responders and ensure growth is planned responsibly so our quality of life is protected."

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

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

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



WHO'S GOT YOUR VOTE?

DANIELA SIMIC
SCHOOL BOARD, DISTRICT 2

By Libby Hopkins



When Daniela Simic moved to Tampa in 2003, she knew education would be her life's work.

With a master's degree in Educational Policy and Leadership from the University of

Pennsylvania, she began her Hillsborough County career in the classroom.

Over the next two decades, Simic worked at nearly every level of public education, from teaching and supporting struggling schools to serving at the Florida Department of Education and ultimately becoming Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction for Hillsborough County Public Schools.

"I've seen our schools from many different perspectives," Simic said. "But the question has always been the same. Are we giving every child the best possible chance to succeed?"

Today, Simic sees the school system as the parent of a fifth grader in Hillsborough County Public Schools. She has spent years involved in PTA, serving as president of her son's school PTA and now as Vice President of Advocacy for the Hillsborough County Council PTA.

Her path to motherhood also shaped her perspective. Simic lost her husband while pregnant

and has raised her son as a single mother, strengthening her belief in strong schools and

communities.

Simic believes the district must be accountable for student outcomes and taxpayer dollars, directing resources toward classrooms and programs that demonstrate results. She also wants to retain great teachers and staff, keep schools safe and expand career and technical opportunities.

"Not every child will take the same path after graduation," Simic said. "Our responsibility is to make sure every path can lead somewhere meaningful."

She believes parents deserve a meaningful voice and decisions affecting families should be communicated clearly and transparently.

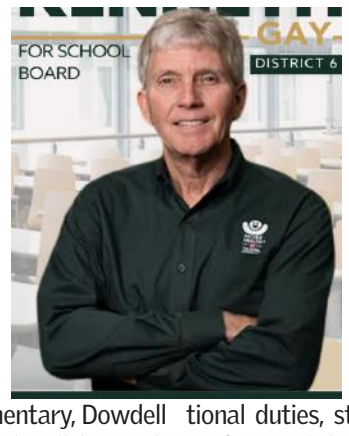
"School Board is a nonpartisan job," Simic said. "We may not agree on everything, but we can agree that our children deserve safe schools, great teachers, strong academics and adults who will put them first."

For Simic, it comes back to the belief that has guided her career: Every child deserves every chance to succeed.

Daniela Simic will be on the November 3 ballot for Hillsborough County School Board, District 2.

KENNETH GAY
SCHOOL BOARD, DISTRICT 6

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

Gay identifies student achievement as a central priority, emphasizing the importance of identifying learning gaps early, strengthening instruction and expanding opportunities that prepare students for college, military service, careers and life.

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

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

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

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

Endorsed by La Gaceta

Experience That Matters.

A Commitment to Our Schools.

Finished #1 in the Primary



ELECT EXPERIENCE
DANIELA SIMIC
for SCHOOL BOARD DISTRICT 2

DanielaForSchools.com

Paid political advertisement paid for and approved by Daniela Simic, non-partisan, for Hillsborough County Schools, District 2.

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EXPERIENCE. LEADERSHIP. RESULTS.

A BETTER FUTURE FOR HILLSBOROUGH SCHOOLS.

SUPPORT EDUCATORS
- Retain experienced teachers
- Create pathways for new teacher recruitment
- Tackle classroom behavioral challenges

STRONG STUDENT OUTCOMES
- Improve reading and math proficiency
- Increase graduation and workforce readiness
- Create safe classroom learning environments

RESPONSIBLE BUDGETING
- Transparent use of taxpayer dollars
- Prioritize funding for student learning
- Implement best practices for resource usage

39 YEARS SERVING HILLSBOROUGH STUDENTS
- Doctorate in Child & Youth Studies
- HCPS Mentor for Alternative Certification Teachers
- Proud Parent of Two HCPS Graduates
- Lifelong Hillsborough County Resident
- Health & Safety Educator with MORE HEALTH (Tampa General Hospital Nonprofit)
- Cracker Country Historical Docent & Florida State Fair Volunteer

WHY I'M RUNNING

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

VOTE November 3

LEARN MORE

VoteKennethGay.com

EARLY VOTING 10/19 - 11/1

Political advertisement paid for and approved by Kenneth "Ken" Gay for Hillsborough County School Board District 6.

POLITICALLY SPEAKING

NEIL MANIMALA COUNTY COMMISSIONER, DIST. 5

By Amanda Castillo



For Neil Manimala, Hillsborough County has been the backdrop to nearly every chapter of his life, from growing up in Valrico as the son of two healthcare workers, to building a career as a physician serving the local medical community and now raising a family of his own. Manimala's parents, both immigrants, worked in opposite hospitals while raising their family. His mother was a nurse and his father a respiratory therapist, an upbringing that cultivated his understanding of hard work, family, and service. Looking back on their journey, he sees it as a reflection of what they were able to build, "There is something to be said about the American dream."

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

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

His background in medicine and community shaped Manimala's decision to pursue public service as he campaigns for Hillsborough County Commission, District 5. His campaign has outlined priorities including health care access, public safety and economic opportunity.

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

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

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

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE OFFERS FOUR WEEKLY NETWORKING GROUPS

Staff Report



The Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce (BRCC) offers four weekly networking opportunities designed to help local professionals build relationships, exchange ideas and become more connected to the business community.

The chamber encourages members to view networking as an ongoing investment rather than a one-time interaction. Regular participation helps members build familiarity and trust that can lead to referrals, collaborations and new business opportunities.

"Showing up consistently gives members the opportunity to move beyond simply knowing someone's name or business," said Amber Aaron, president of the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce. "Our networking groups create an environment where members can build relationships, learn how they can support one another and become a trusted resource within our business community."

INSPIRE Networking Group meets Mondays at 3 p.m. at First Citizens Bank, 10670 Palm River Rd., Tampa, next to Topgolf. The faith-based group is led by Dave Lechuga of Florida Executive Realty and Mikey Blewett of Generations Church and incorporates faith, encouragement and relationship building.

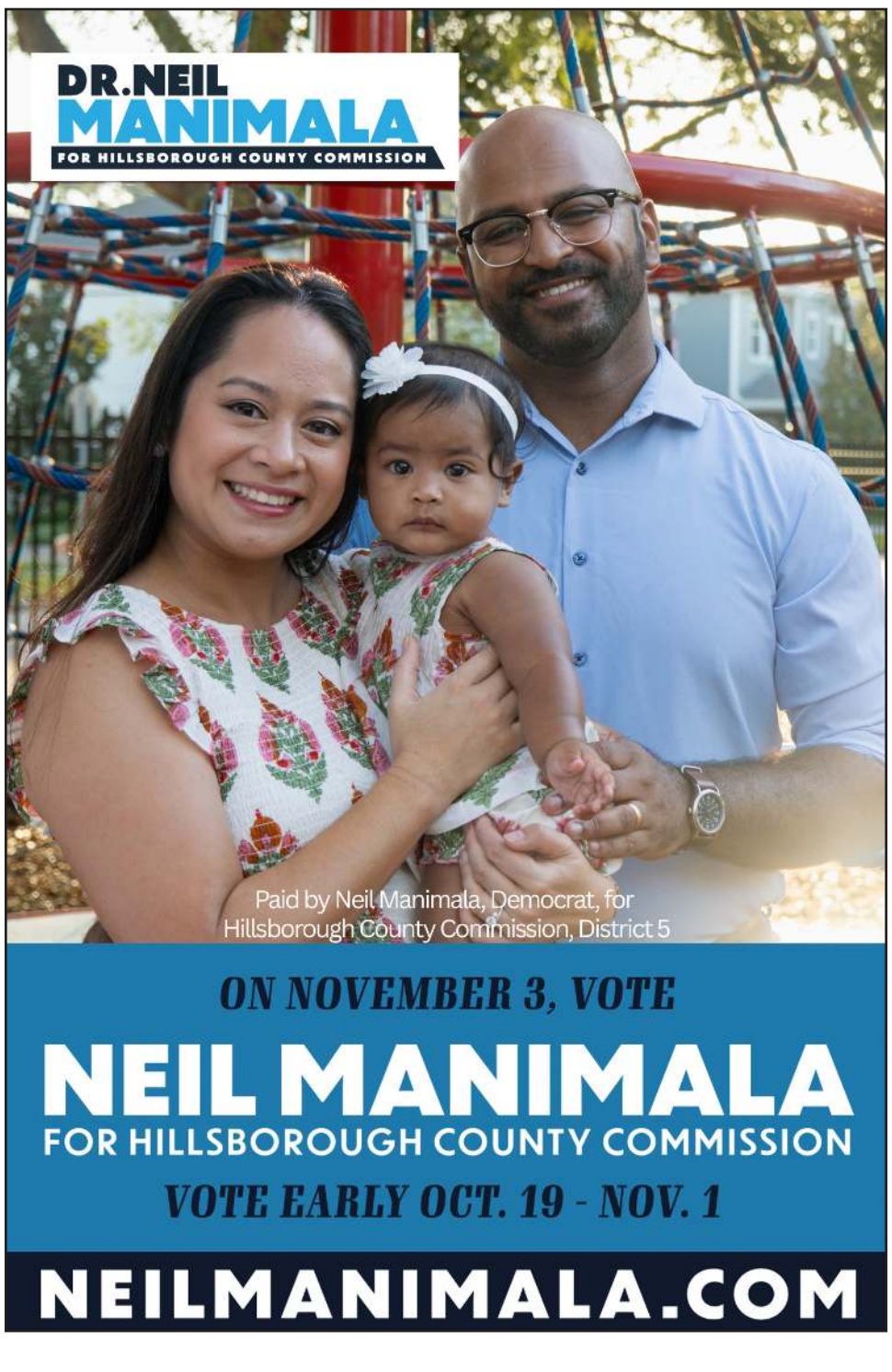
RISE Networking Group meets Thursdays at 8 a.m. at the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce office, 6437 Watson Rd., Lower Level, Riverview. Attendees should enter from the back of the building. The group is led by Me'Lanie' Munusami of G-FORCE Parking Lot Striping of Tampa and John Plumstead of East of Tampa.

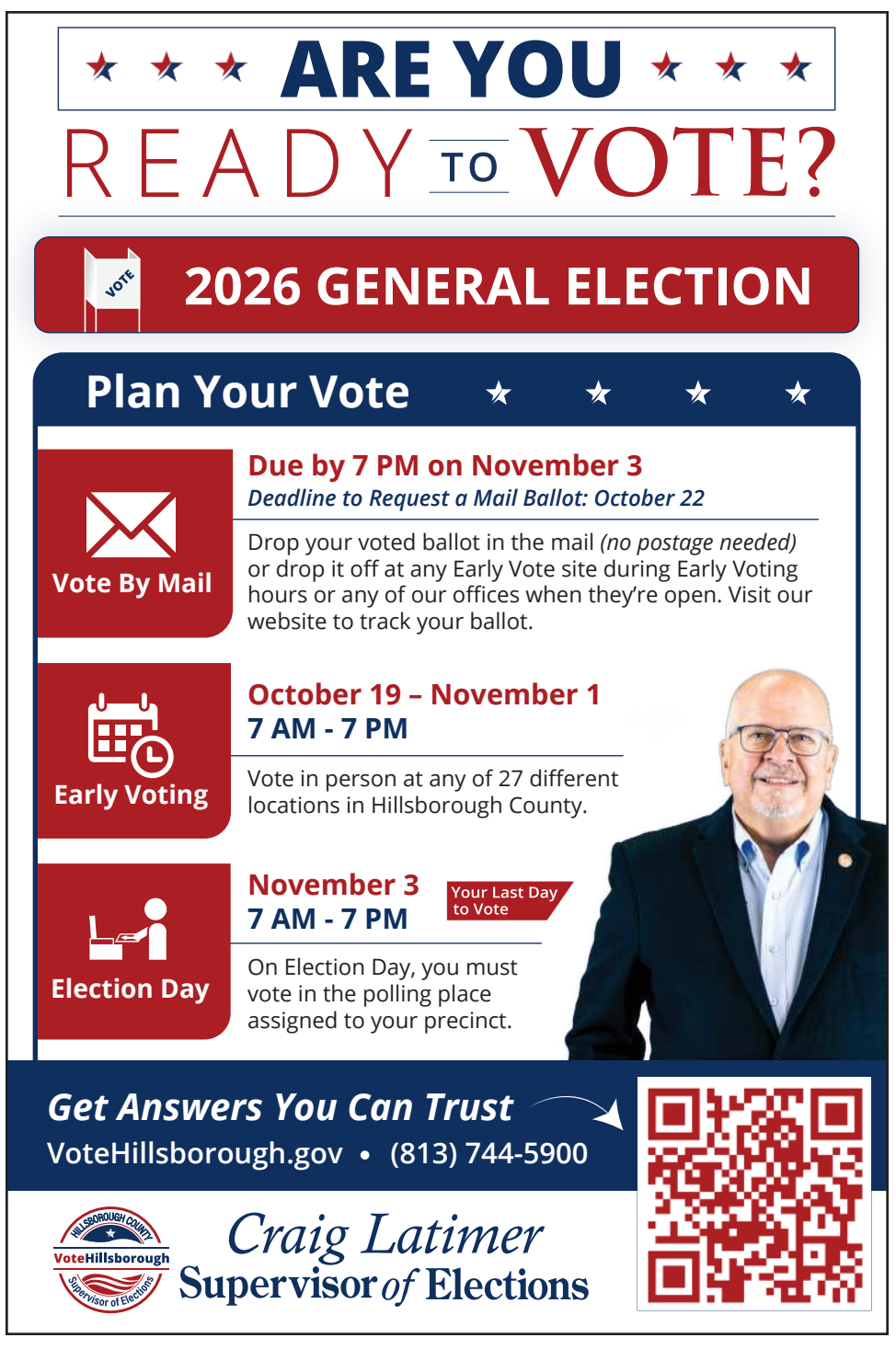
Networking@Noon EAST meets Fridays at noon at JF Kicks Restaurant and Patio Bar, 3345 Lithia Pinecrest Rd., Valrico. It is led by Michael May of All American Title and Troops in Contact and Yolonda Young of WeWed.

Networking@Noon WEST meets Fridays at noon at Brandon Crossroads Bowl, 609 Crater Lane, Tampa. The group is led by Barb Smith Gray of Flutterby Media and Joseph Brace of Primerica Financial Services.

All four groups are free and open to BRCC members. Visitors interested in experiencing the chamber's networking community may attend each group up to two times.

For more information, visit the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce or call 813-689-1221.





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Riverview

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EYE ON BUSINESS



Edited by:
Jenny Bennett

To Submit Business News & Press Releases Mail Attn: Business Editor, 2109 Lithia Pinecrest Rd., Valrico, FL 33596
Fax 657-4469 | Email: jbennett@ospreyobserver.com
Deadline: 15th of each month.

The Local Brew Company Celebrates One-year Anniversary



Cheers erupted as the Greater SouthShore Chamber of Commerce joined neighbors for a lively ribbon-cutting celebrating The Local Brew Company's successful one-year anniversary at 1050 Cypress Village Blvd. in Ruskin. Founded by Aaron and Joelle Schmalzle, this vibrant nano brewery serves small-batch craft beer, robotic espresso and house wines. The chamber congratulates the team on an outstanding first year of quality and community spirit.

"What an incredible milestone!" said Bonnie Peacock of the Greater SouthShore Chamber of Commerce. "They've truly brought people together — we can't wait to toast many more!"

Come raise a glass at www.localbrewcompany.com.

Blissologie Donates 3D Tattoos

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

Throughout October, Blissologie will be accepting applications from local breast cancer survivors who have undergone breast reconstruction and are interested in receiving this service. Those interested in applying or learning more can contact it privately at blissologie.info@gmail.com.

Dementia And Alzheimer's Support Groups For Caregivers

Ambiance at Brandon understands the journey of caregiving for a loved one with memory loss and the importance of having support along the way. It offers dementia and Alzheimer's support groups for care partners and families in the community, providing connection, encouragement, education and understanding in a compassionate environment, focused on creating the best day possible. Meetings are held every third Tuesday at 6:30 p.m. and every fourth Wednesday at 2 p.m. Meetings are available in person and virtually. For additional information, call Jill at 813-607-6880. Ambiance at Brandon is located at 1320 Oakfield Dr. in Brandon.

Nova Furniture Opens

Nova Furniture is celebrating the grand opening of its new Brandon showroom with a three-day grand opening weekend celebration from Friday through Sunday, October 2-4, at 225 W. Brandon Blvd. in Brandon. Nova Furniture offers living room, bedroom and dining room furniture, mattresses, home accents and more, with a focus on quality furniture at affordable prices and an exceptional shopping experience.

The celebration officially begins Friday morning with the opening address and ribbon cutting at 9:30 a.m., followed by doors opening at 10 a.m. Throughout the weekend, guests can enjoy entertainment, family fun, food, face painting, giveaways and special in-store activities.

Preservation 1st Financial Group, LLC Has New Location

Preservation 1st Financial Group LLC, which offers financial planning and insurance services, has moved to its new location at 3433 Lithia Pinecrest Rd., #357, in Valrico. Let it take the burden of retirement and estate planning off your mind. Call 813-627-0872 for your free consultation, and visit its website at www.preservation1st.com.

Gentle Touch Estate Sales

Gentle Touch Estate Sales has upcoming sales on Friday and Saturday, October 16-17 and 23-24. Visit its website at www.gentletouchestatesales.com for locations.

Dillard's Fashion Show

Dillard's department store is hosting a fashion show on Sunday, October 11, at its Brandon Exchange location. The show will feature two iconic brands, Tommy Bahama and Nic+Zoe, both featuring relaxed luxury and effortless style with beautiful modern details. The show will also be accompanied by a book signing by Dr. Pamela Duggan, a 37-year Army veteran and cancer survivor. Her book, The Invisible Hand, is a powerful journey of faith, resilience and triumph. Please call 813-653-4436 to reserve your place.



FOR 50 YEARS, VOLUNTEERS HAVE SERVED UP MEALS AND KINDNESS

By Dale Bliss

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

More information is available at www.brandonmealsonwheels.com.



GET THE DIRT:

BETTE S. WALKER DISCOVERY GARDEN

BY LYNN BARBER, URBAN HORTICULTURE AGENT



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

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

The garden rooms are named Florida-Friendly, Asian Influence, Wildlife Habitat, Backyard BBQ, Sensory and Water Features. Each garden has its own landscape theme and function. For example, one of the water gardens simulates a natural lake or pond and is in the process of being aqua-scaped with several Florida native plants. Recycled products, various types of pervious surfaces, mulches, plant materials and microirrigation are showcased. Both Florida native and non-native adaptive plants are included. Plant materials have changed over the years.

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

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

Contact Lynn Barber at labarber@ufl.edu.







STREETCAR LIVE MUSIC RETURNS ON SELECT FRIDAY NIGHTS

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

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

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

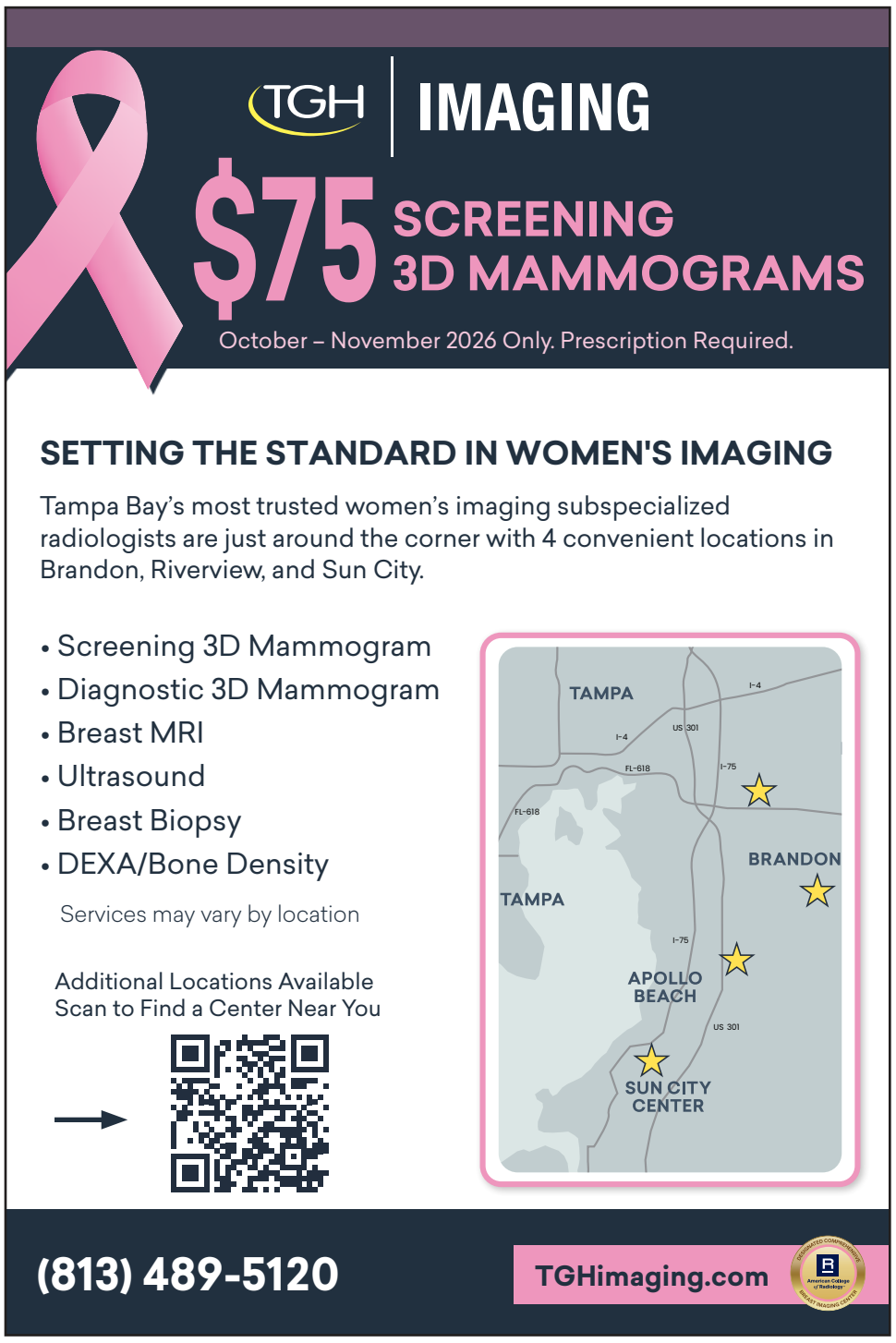
Concertgoers can share photos and videos from the shows on Facebook, X and Instagram using #StreetcarLive.

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

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

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

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



PREHURRICANE INSPECTION IS A SMART MOVE FOR HOMEOWNERS

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

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

Know What Needs Your Attention

An inspection can help identify visible concerns involving areas such as: roof coverings, flashing and exposed sealants, soffits, fascia, siding and exterior trim, windows, exterior doors and garage doors, gutters, downspouts and drainage conditions, exterior penetrations and openings, loose or deteriorated exterior components and trees or vegetation that may threaten the structure.

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

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

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

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

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

Call 813-860-8374 or visit www.apexsightsolutions.com.

RESIDENTS URGED TO FIGHT MOSQUITO BREEDING AS DENGUE CASES RISE

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For water that cannot easily be eliminated, residents can consider Bti mosquito larvicides, such as Mosquito Dunks or Mosquito Bits. Bti targets mosquito larvae before they become adult mosquitoes. Products should always be used according to the label.

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

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

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

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

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

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









1890: BRANDON GOT ITS FIRST POST OFFICE



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

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

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

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

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

Brandon received its first United States Post Office.

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

Imagine what that little post office must have meant.

A letter from a loved one could carry news from miles away. A newspaper could bring word of a changing world. Neighbors could gather, exchange stories and perhaps linger for a moment before returning to their farms and families.

The railroad had begun connecting this young community with the outside world, and the area around what is now Victoria Street and Moon Avenue was becoming the heart of Brandon. Nearby were the railroad depot, Galvin's General Store and a citrus packing house.

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

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

But they were laying the foundation for all of it.

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

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

That is the history worth preserving! If you would like to get involved.





Habitat for Humanity® | Veterans Build

Volunteers are welcome now for the annual Veterans Build by Habitat of Tampa Bay Hillsborough County!

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

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

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



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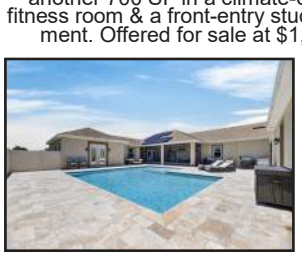
Let's Build Your Future In One Of These Homes!

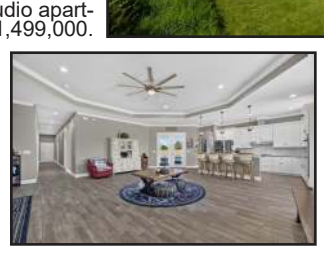
FIND YOUR FLORIDA TREASURE in the Lost River Preserve! This uniquely designed, thoughtfully constructed estate delivers advanced amenities inside & out on 2.6 acres of natural, waterside privacy still convenient to the highlights of life around Tampa Bay. Custom-built 6 years ago, it's packed with extras 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 exten-sions 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

















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. $469,900



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



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

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. $318,000



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

