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BLOOMINGDALE TEEN HELPS UKRAINIAN YOUTH LEARN ENGLISH ONLINE

By Abigail Dumas



Mariana Caraballo preps for a call with her students, previewing her presentation on Kupala Night.

It is commonplace for high school students to participate in some form of volunteering or community service. Whether it's walking dogs at a local shelter or delivering food to those in need, many teens do their best to try and make a difference in the world. But for one local student, giving back looks a little different.

Mariana Caraballo, a rising senior at Bloomingdale High School, spends her time working to improve the lives of Ukrainian children through virtual connection. Caraballo does this through ENGin, a global nonprofit organization dedicated to helping Ukrainians learn English, exchange cultural knowledge and make friends from around the world.

ENGin works to connect Ukrainians with English-speaking volunteers in weekly one-hour meetings. Caraballo first discovered ENGin on a website for online volunteering opportunities in February 2025. Since that time, Caraballo and her two students, who are currently living in Ukraine, have participated in over 35 hours of video chatting. The meetings are one-on-one with a focus on language learning. Caraballo uses several different strategies and tools to help her students become more fluent in English, and her hard work is paying off.

"I've seen improvement in their overall performance, whether it be through grammar or even incorporating new words into our conversations," said Caraballo.

Even though her students are more than 5,400 miles away, Caraballo has become close with them and values them as good friends. Especially her 14-year-old student, Anna, who Caraballo has formed a tight bond with.

"There are times where we will argue about pineapple being on pizza or play Dress to Impress on Roblox together," said Caraballo.

Caraballo even recalled a funny time when Anna asked her the meaning of 'six seven' in the middle of a lesson. Caraballo cited it as an example of how globally connected she is with her students, regardless of the distance between them.

The weekly calls are beneficial not only for the students but also for Caraballo herself. The young volunteer has stated how grateful she is to be able to learn about Ukraine's culture, especially with all that the country has been through in recent times.

Ukraine has been amid a full-scale war since February of 2022. The citizens of this country have seen unspeakable tragedy and suffered much loss. Although such a large international conflict may seem beyond help, ordinary people can pitch in and make a difference where it counts. With the help of organizations like ENGin, and people like Mariana Caraballo, the Ukrainian people have received some of the aid and support they require to get through such a hard time.

For any readers interested in becoming one of ENGin's 32,000 volunteers, visit www.enginprogram.org. All ages and backgrounds are eligible to become volunteers and will be trained after registration.

HOMES FOR OUR TROOPS WELCOMES BLINDED ARMY VETERAN TO HIS NEW ADAPTED LITHIA HOME

By Brian Bokor


Representatives from Homes For Our Troops, the community and neighbors gathered to welcome Army Sgt. 1st Class Aaron Cornelius and his daughter Gabby to their new home in Lithia.

Army Sgt. 1st Class Aaron Cornelius received the keys to a mortgage-free, specially adapted custom home in Lithia on June 13, becoming the recipient of Homes For Our Troops' (HFOT) 50th home built and donated in Florida.

Cornelius was blinded in an IED blast during his third combat deployment in Iraq in 2008. The custom-built home is designed to provide the safety, accessibility and technology needed to help him navigate the next chapter of his life with greater independence.

The milestone home reflects the mission of Homes For Our Troops, a nonprofit organization that builds specially adapted homes for severely injured post-9/11 veterans.

Built by Elizabeth Evans Custom Homes, the residence was tailored specifically to Cornelius' needs and incorporates a variety of features that make everyday tasks safer and more accessible.

Features include a home automation package with voice-activated controls, smart locks, security cameras, smart blinds and voice communication systems. The home also includes driveway delineators, tactile paving near the street, a chair rail system, larger cabinet hardware, magnetic door stops throughout, smart appliances and an induction cooktop equipped with built-in safety features.

For Cornelius, the day marked the culmination of nearly three years of planning and anticipation.

"It was kind of a lot of anxiety at first, uncertainty," Cornelius said. "But as things got closer and closer, and coming into the home and learning about everything that's here and that's going to help me, it settled everything and made me more comfortable."

"I think this is just going to be a blessing moving forward," he added. "I can be at peace and help others in my life. I'm just so excited about this place. It's incredible."

One of the reasons Cornelius chose Florida was to be closer to his daughter, Gabby.

When asked what it means to have family nearby as he enters this new chapter, Cornelius said, "It gives me more self-confidence and comfort to move forward."

He added, "A big portion of her is the reason why I changed my life and refocused myself."

Gabby said watching her father receive the home after years of waiting was a special moment.

"I know he was a little nervous, but I

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Shepherd St. Hilaire of Valrico is just a little over a year old, but he is a true inspiration to his family and community. Shepard was born without a trachea (tracheal agenesis), a rare congenital anomaly that's been documented less than 200 times since 1900. See full story on Page 8.



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BRANDON WOMAN RECEIVES FIRST TYPE 1 DIABETES SERVICE DOG

By Chloe Wagner



Tampa-based nonprofit Dogs Inc. has gifted a Brandon resident with the organization's first Type 1 diabetes service dog, kickstarting the organization's new Type 1 program.

Dogs Inc., created in 1982, has a variety of nationwide programs for service dogs, including guide dogs, service dogs for veterans suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder, Gold Star family dogs and more. The Type 1 service dog program is brand-new, with Latha Dawn Sullivan being the first recipient.

Sullivan was diagnosed with Type 1 when she was 3 years old. Growing up, Sullivan struggled with diabetes "ruling her life," as well as her siblings and parents' lives, she said.

"I was considered a 'brittle diabetic' because my blood sugar levels were constantly fluctuating based on my emotions, stress, excitement and daily activities," Sullivan said. "I was very

blessed to have a wonderful family that always made life as normal as possible."

She began her Type 1 service dog research in 2022, quickly hitting financial and locational roadblocks. The only program that met her standards was Dogs Inc., which had not advertised a Type 1 service program.

Sullivan reached out to the nonprofit and was informed that it had recently launched a program for Type 1 diabetics and jumped on the opportunity to be added to its waitlist at the end of 2025. While wait times for service dogs vary, Sullivan's service dog, a black labrador lovingly named Rita, was placed within her care at the beginning of 2026.

Dogs Inc. was able to provide Sullivan with Rita free of cost, as all of its programs come at no cost to the service dog recipient. Dogs Inc. is fully funded off donations and is operated by volunteers.

Alysia Santos is the scent detection program manager for the Type 1 program at Dogs Inc., overseeing the entire process of training and homing of the dogs.

The total training period for the dogs lasts around two years. Volunteer puppy raisers provide the puppies with foundational training till they are about 16-18 months.

Type 1 trainers will teach the dogs to put their paws on them and eventually pair that cue with the scent of low blood sugar, which is followed by more advanced, nuanced tasks. The smells are obtained by volunteers with Type 1 who donate scent samples, such as perspiration or saliva.

Rita has greatly impacted Sullivan and the management of her Type 1 diabetes. She was constantly on alert with her diabetes before receiving Rita, carrying an emergency bag full of medications, snacks and juices everywhere she went. She has been able to live her life with less stress with Rita, as she is trained to detect blood sugar level changes and notifies Sullivan 10-20 minutes before her electronic medical devices can.

For more information and to get involved, visit https://dogsinc.org/.

DANCING FOR A DIFFERENCE MARKS 10TH ANNIVERSARY WITH OPEN HOUSE

By Olivia Clark

Dancing for a Difference (D4D), a local nonprofit dance studio based in Brandon, has spent the past 10 years making dance and music accessible to people of all ages and abilities throughout the Tampa Bay area while giving back to the community.



Dancers perform during a recital.

To celebrate its 10th season, the studio will host an Open house and ribbon-cutting celebration on Saturday, August 15, from 9 a.m.-1 p.m. The event will feature vendors, face painting, character appearances, snow cones, a book sale, balloon animals and more.

The studio began as a small dance class with a mission to serve the community. In her first class, founder Sara Battaglia accepted canned goods as payment. Since then, the program has grown into a nonprofit organization that offers free programs for children with disabilities and children in foster care, as well as reduced-cost programs for families in need.

Battaglia serves as the studio's director and teacher, bringing years of experience as a dancer, performer and educator. Trained at renowned institutions, including the Sarasota Ballet and the School of Russian Ballet, she has performed professionally and taught throughout Florida. With certifications in dance education, youth protection, yoga and acro training, Battaglia is dedicated to creating a safe and inclusive environment where dancers can grow with confidence, acceptance and joy.

Student Jenna Clark shared her appreciation for the studio, saying, "I love how D4D brings so many different people together into one community where we are all thought of and appreciated."

Dancing for a Difference offers classes in a variety of dance styles, including ballet, tap, jazz, acro, hip-hop, pom jazz, lyrical, pointe and pre-pointe. The studio also offers additional movement and performance programs, such as Obstacle Ninja Course, Dance Team and Voice Team.

The studio has earned praise from parents and families for its welcoming atmosphere and commitment to inclusion.

Valerie, whose daughter, Victoria, attends the studio, said, "I love D4D because it is so much more than a dance studio. It's truly a village. The dancers receive excellent training, work hard, compete and celebrate many accomplishments, but what makes D4D special goes far beyond trophies and titles.

"D4D focuses on inclusion, integration and creating meaningful experiences for every child. The dancers build genuine friendships and learn the value of teamwork, encouragement and supporting one another both on and off the stage. The studio creates a family atmosphere where every child feels seen, valued and part of something bigger than themselves.

Dancing for a Difference is located at 1076 E. Brandon Blvd., Ste. 109, in Brandon. For more information, call 813-601-3009 or email office@dancing4adifference.com.

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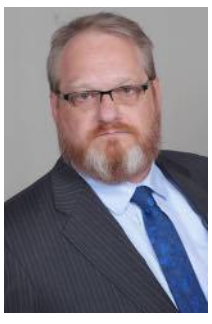
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TWO LOCAL GIRL SCOUTS AWARDED FOSSIL VALLEY SCHOLARSHIPS

Staff Report



Recipients of the 2026 Fossil Valley Girl Scouts Service Unit Scholarship Peyton Stamps (left) and Ashlyn Grisham (right).

The Fossil Valley Girl Scouts Service Unit has named Ashlyn Grisham and Peyton Stamps as recipients of its 2026 Fossil Valley Scholarship, recognizing their years of leadership, volunteer service and dedication to the values of Girl Scouting.

The annual scholarship honors graduating Girl Scouts who have demonstrated exceptional commitment to service, mentorship and leadership while making a lasting impact on their community.

Grisham has been a Girl Scout for 10 years and has become a familiar volunteer at nearly every Fossil Valley event. From encampments and World Thinking Day celebrations to Juliette Gordon Low birthday events, she has consistently devoted her time to mentoring younger Girl Scouts and helping create meaningful experiences for others.

She has earned both her Bronze and Silver Awards and served as a counselor-in-training and intern during summer camps, building leadership, teamwork and project management skills. In her scholarship essay, Grisham described Girl Scouts as a journey that taught her resilience, service and the importance of lifting others up.

This fall, she will attend Florida Gulf Coast University to study marine science with plans to pursue a career in ocean conservation and environmental stewardship.

Stamps has been a Girl Scout for 13 years and joined the Fossil Valley Service Unit in 2019. As the daughter of a military family, she credits Girl Scouts with providing lifelong friendships and a sense of belonging through multiple moves across the country.

Her Silver Award project, "The Stuffy Project," collected more than 200 stuffed animals for children entering protective care through the Hillsborough County Child Protective Investigation Division, providing comfort to children during difficult times while strengthening her leadership and organizational skills.

Stamps has also mentored younger Girl Scouts, including serving as a group leader for the Cadette AMAZE Journey in a Day program, where she helped middle school girls develop healthy friendships, confidence and leadership skills.

She will attend Florida State University this fall, majoring in writing, editing and media, beginning her college career with a semester abroad in London, England.

Fossil Valley volunteers praised both recipients for their compassion, leadership and willingness to serve others.

"Both Ashlyn and Peyton exemplify what it means to be a Girl Scout," volunteers said. "Their dedication to mentoring younger girls and strengthening our community has left a lasting legacy. We congratulate them on this well-deserved honor and look forward to the positive impact they will continue to make in the years ahead."

LOCAL YMCAS PREPARE FOR THE ANNUAL LIFEGUARD GAMES

By Abigail Dumas



The Campo Lifeguard Team competed in the Lifeguard Games against other Tampa Association YMCAs — and brought home 1st Place Overall in 2025!

This summer, YMCAs from across the Tampa area will gather on Sunday, July 19, to host the 2026 annual Lifeguard Games. Lifeguards from all 16 locations will represent their YMCA locations and compete in a series of fast-paced challenges testing their rescue skills, endurance and teamwork. Throughout the events, teams work to rack up the most points and be crowned the winner, earning an engraved trophy and, of course, bragging rights.

There are four events in which staff members compete: passive victim rescue, brick tow relay, infant CPR relay and buoy relay.

The passive victim rescue event is a simulated rescue simulation in which a team of lifeguards are tasked with successfully extracting a mannequin, or 'passive victim,' from the water using a backboard and performing proper rescue techniques, all while trying to achieve the fastest time possible. The event is designed to test a guard's quick thinking and lifesaving abilities.

The brick tow relay is a timed, multiswimmer version of the brick test lifeguards are administered during training. Participants must swim 25 meters across a pool and then dive down and retrieve a 10-pound brick, which they must return 25 meters back to the side of the pool they started on while kicking on their back and holding the brick over their chest. Once one swimmer finishes, the next jumps in and does the same. The relay is a four-person event, and the team with the fastest time earns points.

In the infant CPR relay event, guards test their CPR skills by performing chest compressions on a Red Cross CPR dummy. Competitors are evaluated on their technique and team efficiency to determine their scores.

The buoy relay is a swim-based event in which contestants must swim 25 meters by either freestyle or breaststroke while keeping a lifeguard buoy under their chest. The team with the fastest time earns the points, although there is a five-second penalty if a swimmer loses their buoy.

The games are held every year at the end of July and have become highly anticipated by YMCA employees across the Bay area. At last year's games, the local Campo Family YMCA took home first place, scoring the highest in the competitive events and team spirit categories. The Campo guards are hoping to have a repeat victory this year and keep possession of the coveted trophy.

Lifeguarding is a very serious job and responsibility, and the Lifeguard Games are a fun way to bond with colleagues while refreshing on important lifesaving skills. A large majority of lifeguards are high school and college-aged young adults. Lifeguarding can provide work experience, life skills, and safety/first aid knowledge.

For those interested in becoming certified as a lifeguard, check the https://tampaymca.org/, which has information on upcoming certification courses or junior lifeguard classes.



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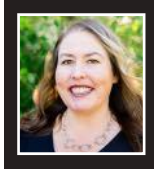
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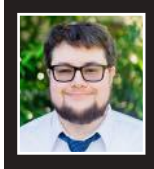
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'26 GMC Sierra Denali Ult Is A Utilitarian Workhorse!

By Nitish Rele



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Basically, it is a souped-up version of the twin from the other stable, Chevy Silverado. And just like its sibling, the GMC Sierra Denali 1500 4WD Crew Cab Ultimate truck is equipped with a 6.2-liter engine. This ensures that the solidly built full-size pickup delivers quick acceleration from any speed, ample passing ability and accurate handling/balance. The four-wheel-drive system can be driven in auto, 2WD, 4Hi or 4Lo mode, depending on road/weather conditions.

The V8 engine, mated to a 10-speed auto transmission, cranks out 420 horsepower at 5,600 rpm and 460 pounds-feet of torque at 4,100 rpm. Handling the suspension is an independent coil-over shock front and a solid axle rear. The power rack-and-pinion electric power steering has a solid and communicative feel, making the truck easy to place at sharp curves. GM's Dynamic Fuel Management system deactivates up to four of the eight cylinders for fuel savings. The tow capacity is an amazing 9,200 pounds. And yes, you can turn on the hands-free driver assistance Super Cruise while trailering too on select highways. The six-position MultiPro tailgate comes handy as a table, an extension or a step to load items onto the lightweight carbon-fiber bed. And 12 fixed tie-downs each have a capacity to withstand 500 pounds of weight.

The robust Sierra boasts a mammoth bright and multi-dimensional grille with eye-catching Vader chrome accents, surrounded by LED headlights with C-shaped elements. The rear also shows off C-formed LED features within the tail lamps and integrated dual exhaust tips. Our 5-foot, 8-inch box offers 63 cubic feet for stowage. Step into the airy interior and the driver will face a large 12.3-inch diagonal digital cluster. The infotainment touch screen is a sweeping horizontal, 13.4-inch instrument panel.

It includes built-in Google Assistant, maps, etc., if you are a fan, along with wireless Android Auto and Apple CarPlay. A 15-inch head-up display ensures that the driver's eyes are fixed on the road with info directly in the line of sight to keep distractions to minimum.

The Alpine Umber interior implies you get full-grain leather appointments for the seats, instrument panel and center console and, lest we forget, a microsuede headliner. And absolutely stunning, open-pore paldao wood on doors and center console. Other notable features include the dual auto AC, 16-way power massage front seats, two glove boxes, 12-speaker Bose stereo, 60/40 rear-fold seat, power side steps/sunroof, etc.

The dual front and side airbags; side curtain airbags for second row; stability/traction and trailer sway control with hill start assist; lane-change, blind-zone, forward-collision and rear-cross traffic alerts; two-speed transfer case; front/rear park assist; adaptive cruise control; four-wheel antilock brakes; rearview camera; tire pressure monitoring system; and daytime running lights are standard.

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INVESTING IN YOUNG MEN, STRENGTHENING OUR COMMUNITY

By State Attorney Suzy Lopez



One of the most important ways we can strengthen our community is by investing in our young people, especially young men who need positive role models and opportunities to succeed.

I was recently honored to speak at the Gentlemen's Quest Awards Gala. 'GQ' is a Hillsborough County mentoring organization that helps young men develop leadership skills, build confidence, and prepare for their future. During the event, I met an impressive young man named Don'Trevius Gadson.

At just 6 years old, Gadson watched his father being taken to jail. Experiences like that can leave lasting scars, but they do not have to define a child's future. Through the support of his mother, mentors and programs like Gentlemen's Quest, Gadson found direction and purpose. This spring, he graduated from Spoto High School. This fall, he will attend Florida A&M University with plans to become a criminal defense attorney.

His story is a powerful reminder of why mentorship matters.

The good news is there are many opportunities in Hillsborough County for young men to find that guidance. I was the keynote speaker at the Scouting America luncheon in Plant City last month, where we discussed the importance of positive adult influences in the lives of young people. The room was filled with leaders who understand that strengthening our community starts with investing in our next generation. Whether it is Scouting America, Gentlemen's Quest, youth sports or a program at church, mentorship comes in many forms. And we can all play our part.

As state attorney, I often see the consequences when young people make poor decisions. What the public doesn't always see are the success stories that happen because a coach, mentor or teacher took time to help a student realize his potential. Those stories may not make headlines, but they are helping build a safer and stronger community every day.

That is why I offered internships and job interviews to students at the Gentlemen's Quest Gala. We want these young men to see themselves in the courtroom one day as an attorney, a bailiff or a judge. Because sometimes the difference between success and failure is not talent or intelligence. It's whether someone is given a chance.

One day, I believe Gadson will walk into a courtroom as an attorney. Not only because he is smart and ambitious, but also because he has people in his corner who have helped him get there. That combination is powerful, and it is exactly why mentorship matters.

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

CHANGING NARRATIVE: INSIDE BRANDON'S YOUTH GRIEF SUPPORT PROGRAM

By Srishti Tripathi



When Keisha Wheeler's husband passed away, she was suddenly a widowed mother of seven navigating a world of profound loss. She quickly realized that grief ignores age, watching her 1 and 3-year-old children deeply feel their father's absence. When the local grief support group that helped her family heal ceased operations, Wheeler knew she had to act. Driven by faith, community and necessity, she founded Hand in Hand, a grassroots nonprofit dedicated to supporting grieving children and caregivers.

Every Tuesday evening, Hand in Hand transforms a local space into a comforting haven. The night begins with a shared light meal, followed by age-appropriate activities like art, storytelling and peer discussions. Simultaneously, a caregiver group provides adults with tools to support their children while navigating their own sorrow. Wheeler intentionally cultivates an environment where joy and grief coexist freely, ensuring no emotion is hidden.

"At Hand in Hand, there is no pressure to share before you're ready," Wheeler noted. "We simply offer a safe place to be with people who understand."

The organization's profound impact has expanded far beyond Florida. Thanks to University of South Florida (USF) interns, Hand in Hand now reaches families in states such as Texas, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Georgia through virtual support groups and personalized touches like handwritten cards. Wheeler views her own children as 'grief ambassadors' who help lead this mission, embodying the spirit of service they practiced alongside their late father.

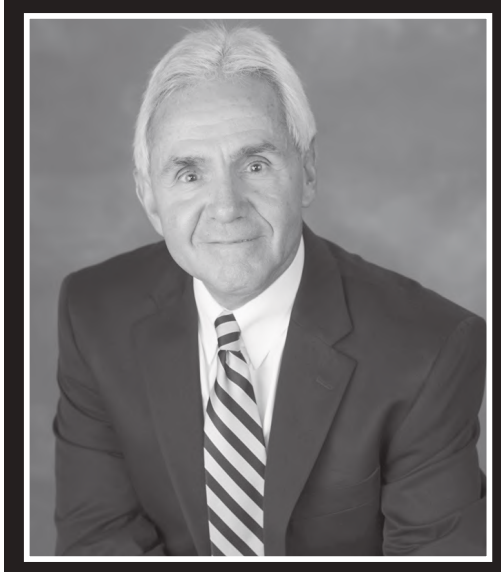
"Serving others has become part of their healing," Wheeler shared. "It reminds them that even in the midst of loss, there is still purpose."

Operating entirely on donations and volunteers, Hand in Hand aims to welcome 25 additional families in Brandon through the generosity of St. Andrew's United Methodist Church. To secure sustainable funding, the organization is looking forward to its annual October fundraising gala, Art Heals the Heart, hosted by The Regent, which showcases artwork from local artists and participants.

Looking ahead, Wheeler envisions 'The Oasis of Hope,' a 3 to 5-acre healing farm in Hillsborough County where families can find quiet retreat. Ultimately, her mission is to completely reshape how society views loss.

"I always tell the children, 'Your grief is welcome here,'" Wheeler said. "My hope is that one day they won't need a special place to hear those word, that every grieving child will grow up in a community that understands grief."

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MOSAIC AND COUNTY WORK TO RECLAIM 4,300 ACRES AT FOUR CORNERS PHOSPHATE MINE SITE FOR FUTURE RECREATION USE

By Brian Bokor



Treehouses were built and placed by volunteers at Mosaic.



Laura Morris, Mosaic Company, gives a tour of Four Corners.



Four Corners offers 4,300 acres of lowland and wetland.

When most people visit places like Alafia River State Park or Edward Medard Conservation Park, they likely don't realize they are standing on land that was once mined for phosphate. Across Southeastern Hillsborough County, a similar transformation is underway as The Mosaic Company works to restore thousands of acres of former mining property into wetlands, wildlife habitat and conservation land.

During a recent media tour of the Four Corners/Lonesome Project, Mosaic representatives provided an inside look at the lengthy process required to reclaim land after mining operations end. The restoration effort encompasses approximately 4,000 acres of preservation, enhancement and reclamation areas near County Road 39 and State Road 674, east of Wimauma and south of Lithia. While mining itself may last only a portion of a property's history, reclamation can continue for decades as restored lands are monitored and evaluated against regulatory performance standards.

Long before mining begins, companies must submit detailed reclamation plans showing regulators what the property will look like once mining is complete. According to Jackie Barron, Senior Manager of Stakeholder Relations & Advocacy Communications for The Mosaic Company, restoration is built into the process from the beginning. "Before we ever touch or turn over a single piece of dirt, here's what it's going to look like when we're all said and done," Barron said. Since 1975, Florida law has required every acre of mined land to be reclaimed.

Modern reclamation standards require far more than simply planting vegetation after mining concludes. Laura Morris, Superintendent of Reclamation Compliance for The Mosaic Company, explained that today's requirements stem from regulations designed to ensure mined lands are restored rather than abandoned. "The rule came in 1975 and said, okay, you can't just mine it and leave it open cut," Morris said. Today, reclamation projects must meet strict standards involving wetlands, native vegetation, wildlife habitat and long-term ecological performance.

"For every wetland acre that is impacted for mining, you have to put back the same acres," Morris said. "We have to put back 10 percent more." Even areas that appear healthy and support wildlife may not satisfy every requirement established during the permitting process. At one point during the tour, Morris pointed toward a thriving section of habitat and remarked, "That beautiful patch that you guys were taking pictures of ... that would not be releasable." According to Morris, reclamation is measured by environmental performance rather than appearance, requiring years of monitoring before land can be released from regulatory oversight.

The timeline itself is one of the most surprising aspects of the project. According to Mosaic officials, portions of the current land donation effort are still being completed nearly three decades after the original agreement was reached. "So we're 30 years in ... 30 years. That's a long time," Morris said. The long-term nature of the project reflects the time required to establish functioning wetlands, mature forests and sustainable wildlife habitat.

Chuck Pons, Reclamation Compliance Specialist for The Mosaic Company, said the project includes approximately 4,000 acres of preservation, enhancement and reclamation areas.

"When you put the preservation, enhancement and reclamation, it's around 4,000 acres," Pons said. The acreage includes wetlands, uplands, pine habitat and wildlife corridors that are already supporting native species and helping reconnect large areas of conservation land throughout Southeastern Hillsborough County.

Even after vegetation becomes established, the work continues. "Then you have to maintain basically every year," Morris said. And perhaps the simplest explanation for why reclamation takes so long came while discussing forest recovery: "Trees don't grow overnight," Morris said.

For Pons, seeing the finished product provides a unique sense of accomplishment. "My finished products, I'm a little more proud of than neighborhood, neighborhood, neighborhoods," he said.

Many Hillsborough County residents already enjoy reclaimed phosphate lands without realizing it, including parks and conservation areas that were once active mining sites before undergoing similar restoration efforts.

"There are areas that you drive by all the time that you don't know that were mined and reclaimed," Morris said.

That may ultimately be the goal of reclamation itself. When the work is successful, the mining disappears from view, leaving behind wetlands, forests, wildlife habitat and public lands that can serve future generations long after the phosphate has been removed.

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HCA FLORIDA BRANDON HOSPITAL HOSTS OFFICE RIBBON CUTTING AND TOURS

Staff Report



HCA Florida Brandon Hospital recently celebrated the opening of the new HCA Florida Brandon Medical Offices with a ribbon cutting and tours of the 70,000-square-foot medical office building. The building is located at the corner of Moon Avenue and Oakfield Drive, across the street from HCA Florida Brandon Hospital, located at 119 Oakfield Dr. in Brandon.

"With the opening of this new medical office building, HCA Florida vascular specialists and HCA Florida cardiac surgical specialists will begin seeing patients in a convenient location near HCA Florida Brandon Hospital," said Laura Ehlen, vice president of operations at HCA Florida Brandon Hospital. "The building will continue to expand access to outpatient care and provide dedicated space for our growing graduate medical education program."

The new medical office building reflects Brandon Hospital's focus on helping patients access connected care close to home, from hospital-based services to outpatient follow-up and specialty care. Brandon Hospital also has plans to construct a pedestrian bridge spanning Oakfield Drive that will connect the new medical office building to the hospital's main campus. The bridge will provide a safer and more convenient route for patients, physicians and hospital staff traveling between the two facilities, further enhancing connectivity across the hospital's expanding campus.

The office building also serves as the home of HCA Florida Brandon Hospital's Graduate Medical Education (GME) program, providing state-of-the-art technology and dedicated learning environments designed to support the next generation of physicians. Brandon Hospital offers Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME)-accredited training programs in internal medicine, emergency medicine, obstetrics and gynecology, pathology, transitional year, surgery, addiction medicine, interventional cardiology and cardiovascular disease. The hospital's GME program currently includes nearly 200 residents and fellows.

The new GME space was thoughtfully designed to enhance both education and well-being, featuring advanced simulation laboratories where residents and fellows can practice and refine clinical skills in a realistic environment. Additional amenities include modern classrooms, collaborative office space, on-site sleeping quarters, a fitness area and dedicated spaces for relaxation and wellness, creating a comprehensive learning environment that supports academic excellence and physician development.

MIRACLE BABY INSPIRES WHILE ON HIS PEDIATRIC AIRWAY JOURNEY

By Libby Hopkins



Shepherd St. Hilaire of Valrico is just a little over a year old and a true inspiration to the community.

Shepherd St. Hilaire of Valrico is just a little more than a year old, but he has endured more than most adults. Shepard was born without a trachea (tracheal agenesis), a rare congenital anomaly that's been documented less than 200 times since 1900. His esophagus and trachea never separated during fetal development, so he was born with one common channel from which his lungs are attached.

Anything from his stomach can enter his lungs, and breathing can force air into his stomach.

"Over the course of 359 days, Shep had dozens of staged surgeries, with the longest being nearly 18 hours," said his mother, Tara. "His team turned his common channel (technically esophagus) into a trachea but combined his own rib cartilage with titanium splints (the first ever) to keep his airway patent. They then needed to build him an esophagus since they had just used his common channel for an airway. For this they did a Roux-en-Y jejunostomy. This is a piece of his intestine that's pulled up and connected to the cricoid completely bypassing his stomach. He's fed via G-tube into his stomach, but anything by mouth bypasses the stomach and drains right into the intestines. After months of smaller surgeries, procedures and recovery, we finally got to go home after almost one year."

After being home from the hospital for only one week, Shepherd ended up getting pneumonia which sent him back to the hospital for another month.

"We then were home for about a month before having to call 911 for respiratory distress," Tara said. "He was rushed to Brandon Hospital and then medevaced him to Johns Hopkins, where they found that one of his titanium splints had eroded a hole into his esophagus. They removed a portion of the upper ring, which ultimately caused his airway to collapse enough to the point that he needed a tracheostomy. We spent another two months in the PICU before finally getting discharged."

This journey has not only been tough for Shepherd but also for his family.

"We both work full-time jobs and are raising our other son, who is 5 years old," Tara said. "We'd work all day and one of us would go and spend the night at the hospital with Shepherd while the other stayed back with our oldest son. This routine was every day, Monday-Friday, with all of us going to visit on the weekends. Trying to juggle work, parenting and splitting time between hospital and home for that extended period of time is completely exhausting."

The family is currently looking for qualified RNs with trach and vent experience for home nursing.

"Our hope for Shepherd is that he can stay out of the hospital and live a somewhat normal life," Tara said. "He is generally the happiest baby and has a smile that will melt your heart."

Visit Instagram at www.instagram.com/sheps_world25/. Donations toward his care can also be made through his GoFundMe page at https://gofund.me/763b70bd3.





A LOOK INTO HIGH 5 INC.'S ADULT DAY TRAINING (ADT) PROGRAM

By Emily Harper



High 5 Inc.'s Adult Day Training (ADT) Program is centered around adults with disabilities. The main focus of this program is to promote independence and self-reliance in everyday life.

When the program began in 2025, the organization wanted to provide a program with a safe and caring environment for individuals in the community who are sometimes overlooked and treated differently by others.

Currently, this program has more than 60 adults enrolled learning life skills to improve their everyday experiences and encouraging others to join.

"As the director, my goal is to work with as many adults with disabilities as possible within the community and to have as much impact daily in each of their lives while assisting them to reach as many of their goals as possible. At High 5, we would like to see every person with the desire and corresponding abilities to go out and live life to the fullest extent and ultimately to provide this program and services to as many people as possible," said Joe Somers, director of ADT.

The ADT Program is generally focused on individuals ages 22 and older, as that is the age that the Agency for Persons with Disabilities services normally begin at. To help bridge the gap between high school and adulthood for young adults ages 18-22, High 5 partnered with Livingstone Academy's Transition Program. Through this partnership, Livingstone Academy prepares them for adult-style programs, before High 5's program.

Every experience is tailored to each specific individual's needs. The High 5 team is dedicated to understanding each participant and making accommodations to encourage growth, independence and connectioån.

"For me personally, being able to see what this program does for so many people and their families on a daily basis and what it means for not only their futures but those individuals we have not even had the opportunity to meet, teach and care about. None of this would even be possible without the amazing staff and instructors who work tirelessly every day to provide the best experience possible while they themselves are still growing and learning to be amazing and thought-provoking leaders within the community," said Somers.

To learn more information about this program, visit its website at https://high5inc.org/adt/.

DUCKS UNLIMITED HONORS MOSAIC WITH THE CONSERVATION AWARD

Staff Report



Left to right: Bob Spoerl, chairman of the Ducks Unlimited Board of Directors; Bruce Bodine, president and CEO of The Mosaic Company; Dr. Rex Schulz, president of Ducks Unlimited; and Adam Putnam, CEO of Ducks Unlimited.

Ducks Unlimited (DU) is proud to announce The Mosaic Company (Mosaic) and The Mosaic Company Foundation for Sustainable Food Systems (The Mosaic Company Foundation) as the 2025 joint recipients of the DU Corporate Conservation Achievement Award, honoring their exceptional commitment to conservation in North America. The award was presented during the 89th Ducks Unlimited National Convention, held in Tampa. The DU Corporate Conservation Achievement Award honors companies in the United States, Canada and Mexico that demonstrate exceptional commitment to conserving wetlands, working lands and wildlife habitat.

Headquartered in Tampa, Mosaic has been a long-standing Ducks Unlimited partner, supporting conservation outcomes that benefit farmers, wildlife and communities. Mosaic is the world's leading integrated producer of concentrated phosphate and potash — two of the three most important nutrients in agriculture.

"Mosaic is honored to be recognized by Ducks Unlimited for conservation leadership," said Bruce Bodine, president and CEO of Mosaic. "Our long-standing partnership reflects a shared commitment to science-based conservation that benefits wetlands and wildlife and helps protect natural resources for the future."

The Mosaic Company Foundation's relationship with Ducks Unlimited began more than 20 years ago through local engagement in Florida and has since evolved into one of DU's strongest foundation partnerships.

Early projects highlighted Mosaic land reclamation efforts and demonstrated how responsibly managed working lands can support wildlife. A significant milestone in the partnership came through the company's support of wetland conservation initiatives, including funding that helped complete the Sherburne Wildlife Management Area project near Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

In 2013, The Mosaic Company Foundation became a major sponsor of Ducks Unlimited Canada's Winter Wheat Program, providing $1 million in funds to advance conservation-minded agricultural practices that benefit waterfowl, soil health and working farmland across the Canadian Prairies.

"Together, The Mosaic Company and The Mosaic Company Foundation have demonstrated what long-term corporate conservation leadership looks like," said Adam Putnam, chief executive officer of Ducks Unlimited.

Ducks Unlimited congratulates Mosaic and The Mosaic Company Foundation on this recognition and thanks its leadership, employees and partners for their continued commitment to conservation.

Learn more at www.ducks.org.

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STAYCATION IS THE NEW VACATION

COOL OFF WITH METROLAGOONS' SPECIAL DEALS AND SPLASH PASSES

By Abigail Dumas



It's finally summer. Schools out, vacations are planned and the Florida weather just won't quit. For fun lovers of all ages who are looking to beat the heat, you're in luck. MetroLagoons is offering a special, which includes weekdays: a Two Guest Beach Lounger Bundle for $42.50 per guest, including admissions, Splash Passes and two reserved loungers with an umbrella on the beach. This is the perfect spot to enjoy your day in paradise!

Splash Passes include access to each of the following: an water obstacle course (30 mins.), a kid-friendly obstacle course, bumper boats, a kayak (30 mins.) and a stand-up paddle board (30 mins.).

Age and height requirements apply. For the water obstacle course, you must be 48" tall. For kayaks and stand-up paddle boards, you must be 42" tall to ride solo. For the kids water obstacle course, the minimum is 39" tall and the maximum is 64" tall. For bumper boats, you must be 40" tall to ride with adults and 44" to ride solo.

Tickets can be purchased at www.metrolagoons.com or in person at each location's respective ticket gate.

MetroLagoons has four locations, with the Epperson and Southshore Bay facilities being the closest to the FishHawk and Riverview areas. Epperson Lagoon is located at 31885 Overpass Rd. in Wesley Chapel and Southshore Bay can be found at 16881 Lagoon Shore Blvd. in Wimauma. Both locations serve as community pools for the Metro Development Group neighborhoods that surround them.

These resort-style lagoons offer unforgettable experiences for the whole family, having both adult and kid-centered attractions. The famous crystal-clear lagoons are filled with things to do, including kayaking, obstacle courses, swimming areas, bumper boats, water slides, paddleboarding and swim-up bars. Sandy beaches surround the water and offer even more to do with relaxation areas, live events, volleyball and restaurants.

To gain access to all activities listed, a day ticket must be purchased with a Splash Pass.

Additionally, guests have the option to rent a private cabana with seating and shade, perfect for large groups, parties and families.

Throughout the summer, all MetroLagoons locations will be hosting a variety of events, such as karaoke, bingo and more. Notably, Epperson Lagoon will host a family fun nights and Southshore Bay will put on events, concerts and more.

EXPERTS BREAK DOWN THE MYTH OF MOSQUITO-REPELLING PLANTS

By Lourdes Mederos, rodriguezl@ufl.edu



As Florida enters the heart of summer, it also reaches the peak of rainy season and mosquito season, with frequent downpours creating ideal breeding conditions for mosquitoes statewide.

If you've wondered whether planting citronella, lavender or other fragrant plants around your patio will keep mosquitoes away, University of Florida experts say the answer is largely no.

"Certain plants do contain mosquito-repelling compounds," said Liah Continentino, environmental horticulture agent with UF/IFAS Extension Monroe County. "But unless you're extracting their oils and applying them like a spray, they're not doing much just sitting in your garden."

In other words, mosquito-repelling plants are more myth than magic when it comes to passive protection.

"Plants like eucalyptus, citronella, mint, basil, lavender and marigolds have oils that can deter mosquitoes. But the key word is 'oils.' These compounds need to be extracted and used in concentrated forms — like sprays — to be truly effective," she said. "Citronella candles? There's anecdotal information, but science hasn't confirmed their bite-fighting power."

Instead of relying on a single solution, UF/IFAS scientists recommend combining several mosquito-control strategies, including personal protection, eliminating breeding sites and encouraging natural predators.

"I wear repellent daily and focus on attracting wildlife," Continentino added. "My yard has flowering plants and shrubs that support birds and beneficial insects. It's not about eliminating mosquitoes entirely — it's about creating a healthy, balanced ecosystem that keeps populations in check."

Jennifer Pelham, director of UF/IFAS Extension Martin County, said removing standing water remains one of the most effective ways to reduce mosquito populations because mosquitoes lay their eggs in stagnant water.

"Even the smallest amount of water — such as what collects in a bottle cap — can become a breeding ground," Pelham said.

She recommends regularly emptying plant saucers, bird baths, pet water bowls, bromeliads and other water-holding containers. Refreshing bird baths and pet bowls several times a week and flushing bromeliad cups with a hose can prevent mosquito larvae from developing.

"Creating a layered landscape with native trees, shrubs and groundcovers not only enhances your yard's beauty but also builds habitat for insect-eating animals," said Lorna Bravo, urban horticulture agent with UF/IFAS Extension Broward County. "For dragonflies, which are highly effective mosquito hunters, they are drawn to native aquatic plants. For birds, include shrubs and trees that supply food, shelter and nesting areas."

For permanent water features, UF/IFAS recommends mosquito-eating fish such as Gambusia to control larvae naturally. Native plants also support birds, dragonflies, bats and other mosquito-eating wildlife while requiring less maintenance in Florida landscapes.



NBA CHAMPION TO LEAD FLORIDA POLY MEN'S BASKETBALL

Staff Report

Few coaches can match a resume that includes winning an NBA championship alongside Michael Jordan and leading a college program to sustained success on the national stage. Dennis Hopson has done both.

Now, Florida Polytechnic University has named the NBA champion and longtime coach as the inaugural head coach of its men's basketball program, adding a leader whose career spans the highest levels of the sport as the university continues building Florida Poly Athletics.



Florida Poly's first-ever men's basketball coach Dennis Hopson.

Hopson brings decades of experience as both a player and a coach, highlighted by an NBA championship with the iconic 1991 Chicago Bulls team. A former first-round NBA Draft pick, Hopson also played with the New Jersey Nets, the Sacramento Kings and professional teams overseas before transitioning into an accomplished coaching career.

Before joining Florida Poly, Hopson coached multiple teams, including most recently at Lourdes University, where the Gray Wolves won nearly 100 games in five seasons, made three straight national tournament appearances and achieved a 99 percent student athlete graduation rate.

"I think my background means a whole lot to this process and I will use it to get players to come here," he said. "I used to be them, and I know the importance of going to a school that's in a great situation with a great location and sound academics that also has a strong basketball program."

Hopson said he wants Florida Poly Basketball to reflect six core values: family, integrity, balance, respect, attitude and leadership. And he wants his players to learn that basketball is about much more than competition.

"School work and other things can be stressful, so we want to make this to where it's not about the sport; it's about what the sport can do for you," Hopson said. "They're going to have a lot of fun and we're going to learn a lot of life lessons through the game of basketball because you're going to live a lot longer than you play the game."

Derek Lower, Florida Poly's athletic director, said Hopson is a perfect fit for the university.

"Coach Hopson is the best person to lead us in our inaugural basketball season," Lower said. "Dennis knows how to build winning programs that last, and his professionalism, leadership and experience make his role as a coach and mentor to student athletes invaluable."

For Hopson, success starts with finding the right players and making sure they can excel on campus before setting foot on the court.

"We want high-character people," he said. "We want to make sure we get people who we don't have to worry about at night; people who can get it done in the classroom."

Recruiting is already underway, and Hopson said Florida Poly's first-ever men's basketball team is close to filling its 14-member roster. Visit https://floridapoly.edu/news/.

IN AN EMERGENCY, CLOSE CARE MATTERS

Staff Report



AdventHealth Riverview EMT Jared provides compassionate emergency care to patients when every second counts. His professionalism and reassuring presence reflect the hospital's commitment to delivering fast, high-quality care close to home for those facing urgent medical needs.

Emergency care and timely treatment matter when you have an illness or injury that needs immediate medical attention.

For three years, Kayla McDonald had episodes where her heart rate spiked to roughly 200 beats per minute. But every time she went to the emergency room, physicians said her heart wasn't the problem.

"The first time it happened in Panama City, they said I was too young for a heart condition. Without doing an EKG or anything, they just told me I was having a panic attack," said the 25-year-old. "The second time, they didn't take me seriously either. And after that, I felt bad even calling 911 or calling to ask for help."

That changed once McDonald moved to the Tampa Bay area. During another event in November 2025, emergency room physicians diagnosed her with supraventricular tachycardia (SVT), a common condition that causes fast, irregular heartbeats; chest pain; and lightheadedness.

The next time McDonald's SVT hit, she went to the emergency room at nearby AdventHealth Riverview and knew immediately that she'd found a health care home.

And that's where she went three times a week until she had a cardiac ablation to cure her SVT in May.

"They did everything they could for me very quickly and went the extra mile to fix my heart rhythm. They did their best to get me in and out immediately," she said. "It meant so much that they knew me. I got anxious with every episode, but they were very calming and caring. They never made me feel bad about coming in for help."

With AdventHealth, there are three ways to find complete care when you have a non-life-threatening illness or injury that still needs care fast. You can schedule a treatment time in the emergency room through InQuickER, request a virtual care visit with a physician or nurse practitioner or visit one of the AdventHealth Primary Care+ clinics located throughout the Tampa Bay area.

When you have an urgent illness or injury, AdventHealth Riverview, located at 9330 U.S. 301 in Riverview, is nearby with convenient emergency care. Find out more about its advanced emergency services at the website located at www.adventhealthriverview.com.

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TEENS TO LEARN 'MILLIONAIRE MINDSET' AT LOCAL SCORE SEMINAR

By Srishti Tripathi



With economic landscapes shifting rapidly, learning how to build wealth early is more critical than ever for the next generation. To give local youth a head start, SCORE Tampa is hosting a specialized financial seminar titled 'How To Become a Millionaire' on Thursday, July 16, at 12 Noon at the Entrepreneur Collaborative Center in Tampa. The event, which charges a $5 fee to cover costs, is designed specifically to equip teenagers with the tools needed for long-term financial freedom.

The seminar arrives during a historic surge in entrepreneurial interest. According to Kevin Dorsey, a Certified Mentor with SCORE Tampa, local demand for business guidance is skyrocketing.

"The Hillsborough County Entrepreneur Collaborative Center had the largest number of seminar attendees, people seeking help to start businesses, etc. in May than in the entire history of the center," Dorsey noted.

Driven by technological shifts like artificial intelligence, which are expected to reshape traditional career paths, SCORE is focused on preparing youth for a self-reliant future. The seminar will tackle essential financial literacy topics, including understanding compound interest, analyzing the true cost of buying a car and mapping out high-growth careers through 2030. Additionally, it will address how to overcome personal obstacles, such as learning disabilities and economic hardships, when building a business.

For Dorsey, the motivation behind the seminar is deeply personal.

"The real answer is that I wish I would have known this information when I was a teenager or young adult," Dorsey said. "I wanted to try and reach out to help teens so they can be better prepared to be successful adults."

A major focus of the presentation will be the psychological and practical shift from consumer to investor. Dorsey emphasized that the event will teach youth "how their spending versus saving early in life will yield a more secure life now, and a much more comfortable future down the road."

Beyond teaching the mechanics of compound interest, Dorsey highlighted that young entrepreneurs require a strong support system, noting that "startup money is key," but emotional backing is just as vital.

"Starting and running a business can be very stressful, as well as fun," Dorsey said. "Everyone needs a hug and encouragement."

The Entrepreneur Collaborative Center is located at 2101 E. Palm Ave. in Tampa. For more information about SCORE Tampa, visit www.score.org/fl/tampa/.

SHARKCON 12 BRINGS SHARKS, SCIENCE AND HOLLYWOOD TO TAMPA THIS JULY

Staff Report



SharkCon 12 is set to make a splash at the Florida State Fairgrounds Expo Hall on Saturday and Sunday, July 18-19, bringing together shark experts, conservationists, celebrities and ocean enthusiasts for a weekend packed with education, entertainment and family fun.

Now in its 12th year, SharkCon has become one of the nation's premier shark and ocean-themed conventions, offering something for everyone — from curious families and beach lovers to marine science enthusiasts and dedicated shark fans.

One of this year's highlights is the premiere of Water Park Shark, the latest film from Anthony C. Ferrante, director of the wildly popular Sharknado franchise. Ferrante, along with the film's cast, will attend a special screening followed by a question-and-answer session with fans.

Visitors will also have the opportunity to meet and hear from scientists, conservationists and television personalities featured on Discovery Channel's Shark Week and National Geographic's SharkFest. These experts will share stories from the field, discuss shark research and offer behind-the-scenes insights into filming some of television's most popular shark programs.

Celebrity guest Mario Van Peebles, known for his acting and directing career and his role in Jaws: The Revenge, is also scheduled to appear.

Beyond the celebrity lineup, SharkCon offers dozens of interactive exhibits and activities. Clearwater Marine Aquarium, Mote Marine Laboratory & Aquarium, Gatorland and numerous conservation organizations will be onsite with educational displays, touch tanks and hands-on experiences designed to inspire the next generation of ocean advocates.

Families can enjoy a 45-foot inflatable megalodon, a 27-foot shark slide, shark tooth sand digs, paddleboard and kayak clinics, marine rescue demonstrations and a free treasure map hunt with prizes for children. Guests can even try scuba diving in a safe, controlled environment through the Off the Wall Adventures and Outfitters Scuba Pool.

"SharkCon is more than just a great time," organizers said. "It is an event dedicated to raising awareness about shark and ocean conservation, as well as sustainability. We want to ensure the health of the oceans for generations to come."

SharkCon 12 will take place from 9 a.m.-5 p.m. on both July 18 and July 19 at the Florida State Fairgrounds Expo Hall, located at 4800 U.S. 301 N. in Tampa.

Advance tickets are available online, with adult admission priced at $24.95 and children's admission at $9.95. Tickets will also be available at the door.

For more information, tickets or volunteer opportunities, visit https://sharkcon.com/ or call 941-539-0833.





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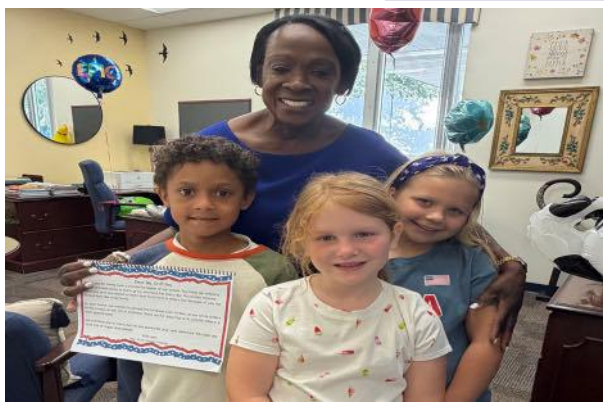


CIMINO ELEMENTARY HONORS RETIRING PRINCIPAL JOANNE GRIFFITHS

By Jane Owen







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





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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Griffiths said it was overwhelming and beautiful.

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



UNITED FOOD BANK EXPANDS HUNGER RELIEF WITH NEW TRUCK, FORKLIFT

By Libby Hopkins



United Food Bank & Services (UFB) is expanding its ability to fight hunger in Eastern Hillsborough County with the addition of a new refrigerated box truck and forklift, thanks to the support of community partners and local government.

The nonprofit celebrated the new equipment during a ribbon-cutting and reveal ceremony held on June 23 at its Plant City headquarters. Community leaders, funding partners and supporters gathered to mark the milestone, which officials say will strengthen UFB's ability to rescue, transport, store and distribute fresh food to families in need.

The new refrigerated truck was made possible through funding from Publix Super Markets Charities and The Mosaic Company, while Hillsborough County provided funding for the organization's new forklift.

District 4 Hillsborough County Commissioner Christine Miller joined representatives from the sponsoring organizations and United Food Bank & Services leadership for the ceremony, highlighting the importance of partnerships in addressing food insecurity across the region.

According to UFB, the refrigerated truck will significantly increase the organization's capacity to safely transport perishable food items, including fresh produce, dairy products and other refrigerated goods. The addition will allow the food bank to rescue more food that might otherwise go to waste while ensuring it reaches local families safely.

The new forklift will improve warehouse efficiency by making it easier to move, organize and distribute large quantities of food. Together, the two pieces of equipment are expected to increase the organization's overall distribution capacity and help meet the growing demand for food assistance throughout Eastern Hillsborough County.

The investment comes as United Food Bank & Services continues to serve a growing number of residents facing food insecurity. During the 2024-2025 fiscal year, the nonprofit distributed the equivalent of 3,534,951 meals to children, families, seniors and individuals across the community.

Organization leaders said the additional equipment will help expand that impact for years to come by increasing operational efficiency and allowing staff and volunteers to reach more neighbors with fresh, nutritious food.

United Food Bank & Services, located at 702 E. Alsobrook St. in Plant City, provides hunger relief, nutrition education and community support programs throughout Eastern Hillsborough County. Its mission is to provide dignified access to food and essential resources for those in need while helping families build healthier, more secure futures.

United Food Bank & Services is a nonprofit organization serving Eastern Hillsborough County through hunger relief, nutrition education, and community support programs. For more, visit www.UFBPC.org

ORCHESTRA RECEIVES GRANT FOR DETENTION CENTER STRINGS PROGRAM

Staff Report

The Florida Orchestra (TFO) has been awarded a $10,000 grant from the Mockingbird Foundation to expand its Detention Center Strings program, an innovative partnership that engages vulnerable youth with classical music.



Bethany Thompson, TFO's senior string specialist.

The grant will help The Florida Orchestra grow violin and cello instruction sessions from 14 weeks to 16 weeks at Department of Juvenile Justice facilities in Hillsborough County. Participants receive hands-on music education, culminating in performances inside the detention centers, at retirement communities and as part of the orchestra's Lobby Performance program at major performing arts halls throughout Tampa Bay.

"We are grateful to the Mockingbird Foundation for investing in the power of music when these young people need it most," said Ignacio Barrón Viela, president and CEO of The Florida Orchestra. "This support helps us bring meaningful musical experiences to vulnerable young people at a pivotal time in their lives. Through music, we can foster confidence, connection and hope while helping students develop skills that can positively shape their futures."

Detention Center Strings is part of the orchestra's Strings Project, an ongoing commitment to education, wellness and community partnership throughout Tampa Bay. The program uses music as a tool for personal growth, self-expression and connection, helping students develop discipline, teamwork and creative confidence.

"A Detention Center Strings student once told me, 'Learning the violin proves that I can make people proud and do good things in life,'" said Bethany Thompson, TFO's senior string specialist, who specializes in prison and juvenile justice music education. "We are deeply grateful for this grant, which will enable more incarcerated youth to experience that same moment of possibility."

The grant was awarded as part of the Mockingbird Foundation's latest round of music education funding. Founded and operated entirely by volunteer fans of the band Phish, the Mockingbird Foundation has awarded 793 grants totaling more than $3 million to music education programs across all 50 states since 1996.

The Florida Orchestra was one of 12 organizations nationwide selected in the foundation's 31st round of competitive grants, which drew 939 initial inquiries requesting more than $6 million in funding. Due to such high demand, Mockingbird's two-tiered online application process remains one of the most competitive in the nation.

As The Florida Orchestra wraps up its 58th season, this investment comes at a time of significant growth for the orchestra's music education programs. In the 2025-26 season, the programs increased their reach in Hillsborough and Pinellas counties and continued collaborations with the Boys & Girls Club.

For tickets and information, visit https://floridaorchestra.org/.

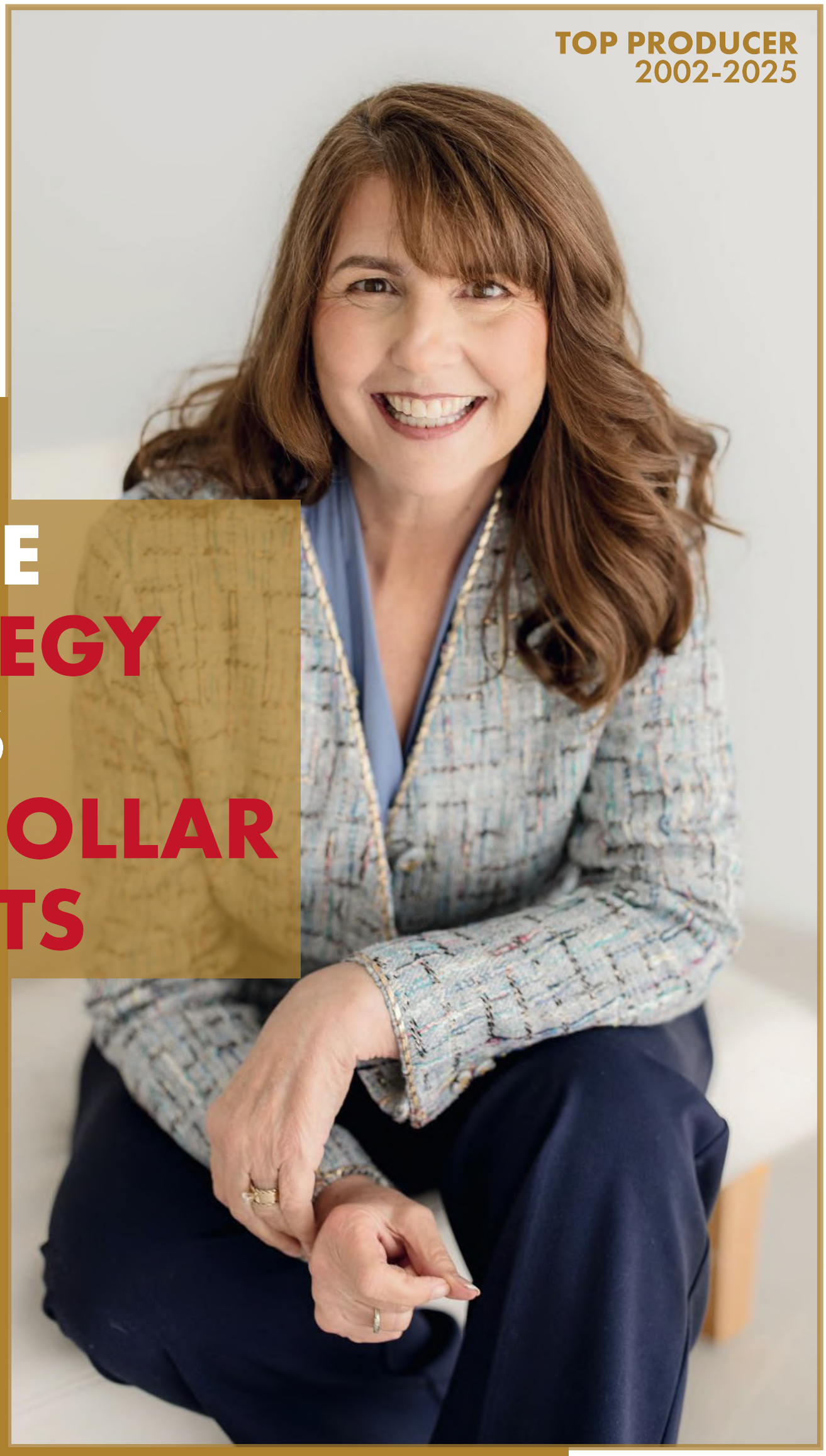








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HOMESCHOOL ATHLETICS LAUNCHES ACADEMY, EXPANDS YOUTH PROGRAMS

Staff Report



Fishhawk Homeschool Athletics (FHA) operates under Strong Futures Project Inc., a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and approved Step Up for Students direct-pay provider. It was created to provide local homeschool families with accessible athletic, mentorship and enrichment opportunities within the Lithia community.

In just a few short months, what began as a simple idea has quickly grown into a thriving community of families participating in weekly athletic sessions, social meetups and mentorship-driven experiences designed to help students stay active, build friendships, develop confidence and learn from strong mentors.

FHA' current homeschool programs include speed and agility, baseball, softball, flag football, basketball, soccer, cheer, tumbling, tennis, pickleball, athlete development, family meetups and teen social events.

What makes FHA unique is our flexible, à la carte model, which allows families to participate without membership fees, contracts or long-term commitments. Our athletes have access to high-quality coaching from experienced mentors, including former professional athletes, Division I-level coaches, world championship-level performance coaches and accomplished leaders in athletics and military service, all at a fraction of what similar private training would typically cost. By offering affordable small-group sessions across multiple sports, we're creating opportunities for homeschool families to explore, develop and grow without the financial and scheduling barriers often found in traditional youth sports.

In addition to athletics, we are also actively building Fishhawk Homeschool Academy, an extension of our nonprofit focused on practical educational opportunities, such as career exploration, leadership development, life skills, emergency preparedness and real-world learning experiences for homeschool students.

As our community continues to grow, we are actively seeking local sponsors and community partners to help support the next phase of expansion and increase access to these opportunities for more families. Sponsorship support helps fund: liability insurance and safety coverage, athlete shirts, website development, additional field and indoor facility space, community events and meetups and future educational and enrichment programming.

We're especially excited to be launching our first athlete shirt order, which will feature our founding sponsors and community partners.

At its core, our mission has always been about more than sports. It's about building community, creating opportunities and helping young people grow in confidence, resilience and character through meaningful experiences.

For more, call 203-448-8927 or email fishhawkhomeschoolathletics@gmail.com

LOCAL WINS $15,000 GRAND PRIZE IN LONGHORN'S STEAK MASTER SERIES

Staff Report



After months of intense competition, Wimauma resident Jesse Montalva from the Riverview LongHorn Steakhouse has reached elite grilling status, taking first place in LongHorn Steakhouse's Steak Master Series — a national competition that lets grill masters from across the country put their skills to the test. This was his second time competing as a finalist, having achieved fourth place in his first appearance in the first-ever Steak Master Series competition in 2016. Among the 3,000 competitors who participated in the rigorous series, Montalva came back to win it all.

"The competition was more intense than it was in 2016, with more participants and a greater focus on steak execution. The questions were tougher as well," said Montalva. "My manager pushed me to keep going, and I trained harder, so I'm happy I made it."

Montalva's winnings include a $15,000 grand prize and the title of Steak Master Series Champion. He bested six other finalists in the championship round held during a one-day grill-off in Orlando to become the ninth-ever winner of the competition. A team member at the LongHorn Steakhouse in Riverview, Montalva has worked for the company for 25 years.

"It feels incredible to be the 2026 Steak Master Series Champion," said Montalva about winning the competition. "I wanted this so badly, so to bring the trophy home to Riverview and put my name out there is an amazing feeling. I still can't believe I won."

The six remaining finalists were also honored for their grilling prowess: Second place: Aidyn LoVetro from Wilmington, North Carolina. Third place: Carlos Henning from Nashville, Tennessee. Fourth-place tie: Chuck Harrel from Rocky River, Ohio; Trenton Carver from Columbia, South Carolina; Diego Uribi from Phoenix, Arizona; and Shaka Craigwell from Mays Landing, New Jersey.

This marks the ninth year of LongHorn Steakhouse's Steak Master Series, which recognizes LongHorn's commitment to food quality while also celebrating the skill and expertise of grill cooks, or 'Grill Masters,' across the brand's 615 restaurants nationwide.

For more or to see the award-winning chef in action, visit the Riverview Longhorn at 12974 South U.S. Hwy 301 or visit the website at www.longhornsteakhouse.com.



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JOHN WESLEY COMES HOME TO PERFORM WITH BAND VERTICAL HORIZON

By Brian Bokor

There couldn't have been more than a dozen people gathered on the patio at The Talking Pint in Riverview that evening. No stage lights. No backstage security. No road crew. Just a man with a guitar, an amplifier, a couple of speakers and a handful of people enjoying an intimate acoustic performance.



Brandon native John Wesley Dearth III (far left) and Vertical Horizon perform at Jannus Live in St. Petersburg on Friday, July 24"

As a longtime Porcupine Tree fan, I knew exactly who I was watching. Looking around, I couldn't help but wonder if anyone else did.

For more than three decades, Brandon native John Wesley Dearth III, better known simply as Wes to friends and family, has built a career taking him around the world, performing alongside internationally respected musicians on stages across North America, Europe and Asia.

What stayed with me wasn't just the music. It was the man behind it. Between songs, Wesley thanked people for coming, talked with anyone who wanted to say hello and carried himself with the humility of someone playing his first local show.

It reminded me that many people in Brandon and the surrounding communities have no idea that one of rock's most respected touring guitarists quietly calls Tampa Bay home.

That story comes full circle on Friday, July 24, when Wesley returns to the Tampa Bay area with Vertical Horizon for a concert at Jannus Live, located at 200 First Ave. N., Ste. 206, in downtown St. Petersburg. Fans can expect to hear Vertical Horizon favorites, including "Everything You Want," "You're a God" and "Best I Ever Had (Grey Sky Morning)," along with Tonic's signature hit, "If You Could Only See."

A 1980 graduate of Brandon High School and former student at Nativity Catholic School, Wesley built his career one opportunity at a time. He released several critically acclaimed solo albums and spent years touring internationally with Porcupine Tree, logging more than 450 performances before joining Vertical Horizon.

Along the way, Wesley developed friendships with many of rock's most respected artists, including legendary Rush drummer Neil Peart. Vertical Horizon founder Matt Scannell also worked with Peart, collaborating with him on the band's 2009 album, Burning the Days.

Today, Wesley tours with Vertical Horizon, the multiplatinum band whose music helped define late-'90s rock. More than 25 years after the release of *Everything You Want,* the band continues to perform throughout the United States and internationally. He and his wife, Becka, a Ruskin native, chose to make the area their home rather than relocate to one of the music industry's traditional hubs.

"I'm thrilled to be doing a hometown gig and excited to see a ton of friends and family," Wesley said.

For Brandon, it's a chance to applaud one of its own.

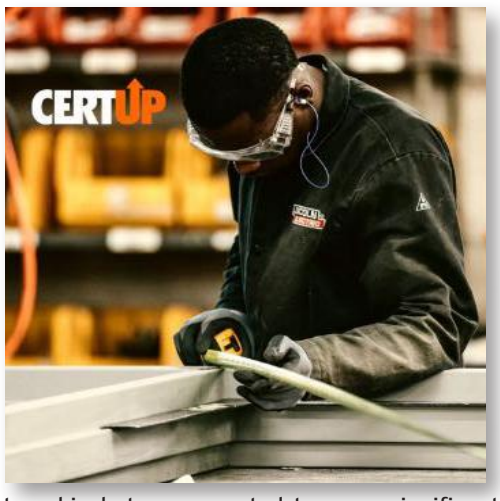






PROGRAM CONNECTS STUDENTS TO HIGH-DEMAND CAREERS

By Zofia Osterman



As graduation season arrives, many students are exploring alternatives to traditional four-year college degrees. A workforce development initiative called CertUp is helping Hillsborough County residents prepare for high-demand careers through accelerated training programs that lead directly to employment opportunities.

Created through a partnership between Hillsborough College, the Tampa Bay Economic Development Council and local employers, CertUp promotes career focused programs in fields such as welding, auto collision technology, emergency medical services and electrical linework. Program leaders report a 100 percent job placement rate and an average starting salary of approximately $62,000 for graduates.

According to recent surveys, 63 percent of Americans believe a college degree is not worth the cost, leading more students to consider alternative pathways into the workforce.

Craig Richard, CEO and president of the Tampa Bay Economic Development Council, said the program helps connect residents with careers that offer strong earning potential without requiring a bachelor's degree.

"CertUp helps address workforce shortages by highlighting high-demand career opportunities that don't require a four-year degree," said Richard. "These jobs often offer great benefits, good job security and opportunities for advancement and greater earnings."

Industries across the Tampa Bay region continue to seek skilled workers, particularly in health care, cybersecurity, welding and auto collision repair. Richard noted that demand for welders alone is expected to grow significantly over the next several years as experienced workers retire and regional growth fuels new construction and manufacturing projects.

The hands-on training provided through Hillsborough College prepares students to enter the workforce quickly. Students in the Auto Collision Technology Technician program work on real vehicles while learning industry-standard repair and painting techniques.

Local employers are already seeing the benefits of the program.

"We've had a relationship with Hillsborough College for years and have hired many graduates from this program," said Joe Schlueter, vice president of fixed operations for Morgan Auto Group. "These graduates come to us ready to build upon those skills and quickly integrate into our organization."

Schlueter added that career advancement opportunities are substantial within the industry, with experienced technicians earning well into six figures and demand for qualified workers staying strong nationwide. For more information about CertUp and Hillsborough College workforce programs, visit https://certuptampa.com/.

HGTV'S HOMETOWN DREAM TEAM CELEBRATES SIXTH SEASON SUCCESS

By Libby Hopkins



Brian and Mika Kleinschmidt are HGTV reality TV stars and local real estate business owners.

Brian and Mika Kleinschmidt of Riverview met in high school chorus class, but they didn't become a couple until years later after high school. Mika spent a decade working in the fitness industry helping clients achieve their personal goals, while Brian went to attend the University of Central Florida, where he spent his spring breaks and weekends volunteering for Habitat for Humanity. He fell in love with building homes as he gained lots of hands-on experience as well. After graduation he started flipping homes on his own.



The 2008 housing crash made a way for Brian and Mika's paths to cross. Since the housing crash left Brian unable to flip homes, he started opening a chain of fitness clubs. This led to him connecting Mika and them becoming a couple, and a romance and business were born. While Mika was becoming one of the top realtors in the area, Brian had the itch to get his hands dirty again with construction.

"Life has been amazing and we have done so much since we were in the fitness industry," Brian said.

The couple just wrapped up season six of their HGTV show, *100 Day Dream Home*. Mika is also a mentor on the HGTV show *Battle on the Beach*, which premiered in June. Additionally, the couple has a local realty company, Dirt 2 Design.

"We built this together from the ground up," Mika said. "We are local realtors in the area, and we do a ton of projects with our local community. Most of the things we do are not on TV."

At Dirt 2 Design, their 'Dream–Design–Build–Start' approach brings their clients' entire real estate journey together in one seamless experience. Whether it's helping them buy or sell in the Tampa Bay area, designing spaces that reflect their vision or building custom homes with trusted local partners, the Kleinschmidts are with their clients every step of the way.

"With a personalized approach, strong local connections and a commitment to exceptional service, we make it easy to turn your ideas into reality and confidently take the next step," Brian said. "We have a team of us servicing the Tampa Bay area. We love what we do locally for our clients."

If you would like to learn more about Dirt 2 Design, you can visit the website at https://dirt2design.com/ or call 813-400-3910. Stay tuned for more exciting things from this powerhouse couple.



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PLUMBING YOU CAN COUNT ON, FROM A FAMILY YOU CAN TRUST, CROFTON'S

By Makenzie Atkins Noel



Randy and Delight Crofton built the business on trust and craftsmanship — now their children April and Jon are carrying on that legacy.

Finding a plumber is easy. Finding one you can actually trust with your home, your time and your money is a different story. With more than 35 years of experience, Crofton's Plumbing & Drain Solutions has spent decades earning that trust one job at a time.

As a full-service residential and commercial plumbing company serving Sun City Center, Riverview, Wimauma and the surrounding communities, Crofton's offers a comprehensive range of solutions. Services include repiping, water heater installation and repair, kitchen and bathroom remodels, sewer line repairs and 24/7 emergency services. Every job is backed by a one-year parts and labor guarantee and approached with the same commitment to fast response times, transparency and a client-first standard.

"We treat our customers the way we would want our own family treated: with respect, transparency, and urgency," said Randy Crofton, owner of Crofton's Plumbing & Drain Solutions. "Our goal isn't just to fix the issue. It's to create a positive experience from start to finish."

The foundation of that reputation was laid in the 1980s, when founder Randy Crofton began learning the trade alongside his father. Over the course of more than 35 years, Randy Crofton developed a standard of craftsmanship rooted in honesty and dedication. His wife and business partner, Delight Crofton, has played an integral role in the company's operations, billing and overall direction. Together, they built a business on a principle that has never wavered: Do the job right, treat people with respect and stand behind your work.

That legacy is now carried forward by the next generation. Their daughter, April, serves as chief administrative officer, overseeing the business operations that keep the company running efficiently, while their son, Jon, leads the technical side as director of field operations. Their combined leadership ensures the values Randy and Delight Crofton established remain at the center of every service call.

Crofton's Plumbing & Drain Solutions is not just a company built on experience. It is a company built on relationships, and for homeowners and businesses across Riverview, Sun City Center, Wimauma, and beyond, that commitment is what sets it apart.

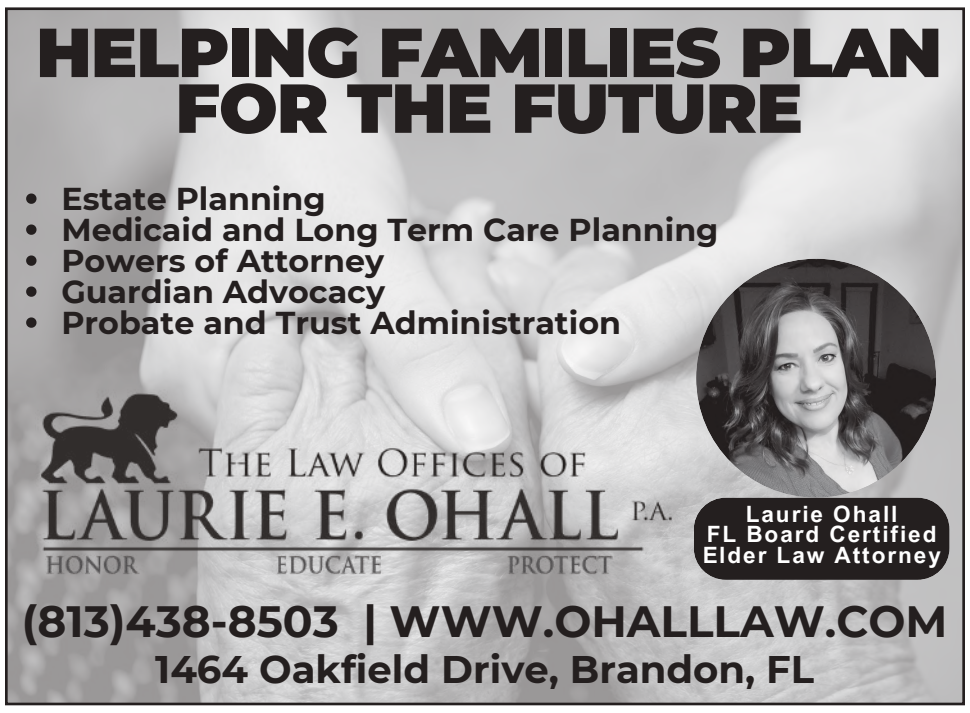
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TAMPA BAY RODEO THUNDERS INTO COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

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

For more information and tickets, please visit our website.

27NORTH REALTY BUILDS ITS BRAND ON CONFIDENCE, CLARITY AND CARE

By Kelly Wise Valdes



27 North Realty's Shawna and broker/owner Gregg Calvert.

In a fast-moving Tampa Bay real estate market, 27North Realty has carved out a reputation built on something simple but increasingly rare: putting people before transactions.

"We believe people are looking for something different than they were even a few years ago," said broker/owner Gregg Calvert. "They want honest advice, local expertise and someone who will tell them the truth, even when it's not the easiest conversation."

Calvert said that philosophy is the foundation of 27North Realty, where agents are encouraged to prioritize relationships over commissions.

"Clients continue to choose us because they know we genuinely care about the outcome, not just the sale," said Calvert.

That approach is reflected in the company's guiding phrase, 'navigate home,' which Calvert described as a commitment to clarity and care throughout the buying or selling process.

"Buying or selling a home can feel overwhelming," he said. "'Navigate home' means helping people understand their options so they can make confident decisions."

Guidance often includes educating clients on flood zones, insurance costs, waterfront considerations, builder contracts, HOA rules and longterm financial implications.

"We want our clients to feel informed, prepared and supported every step of the way," Calvert said.

As Tampa Bay continues to grow, Calvert said buyers are becoming more intentional.

"The days of making rushed decisions are largely behind us," he said.

Buyers are weighing value, insurance costs and lifestyle more carefully. Waterfront sellers, meanwhile, are focusing on presentation and pricing as competition increases.

"SouthShore attracts families who want more space, newer homes and a strong sense of connection," he said.

Calvert's promise to "outwork, out-prepare and out-care" shows up in ways that rarely appear on a closing statement.

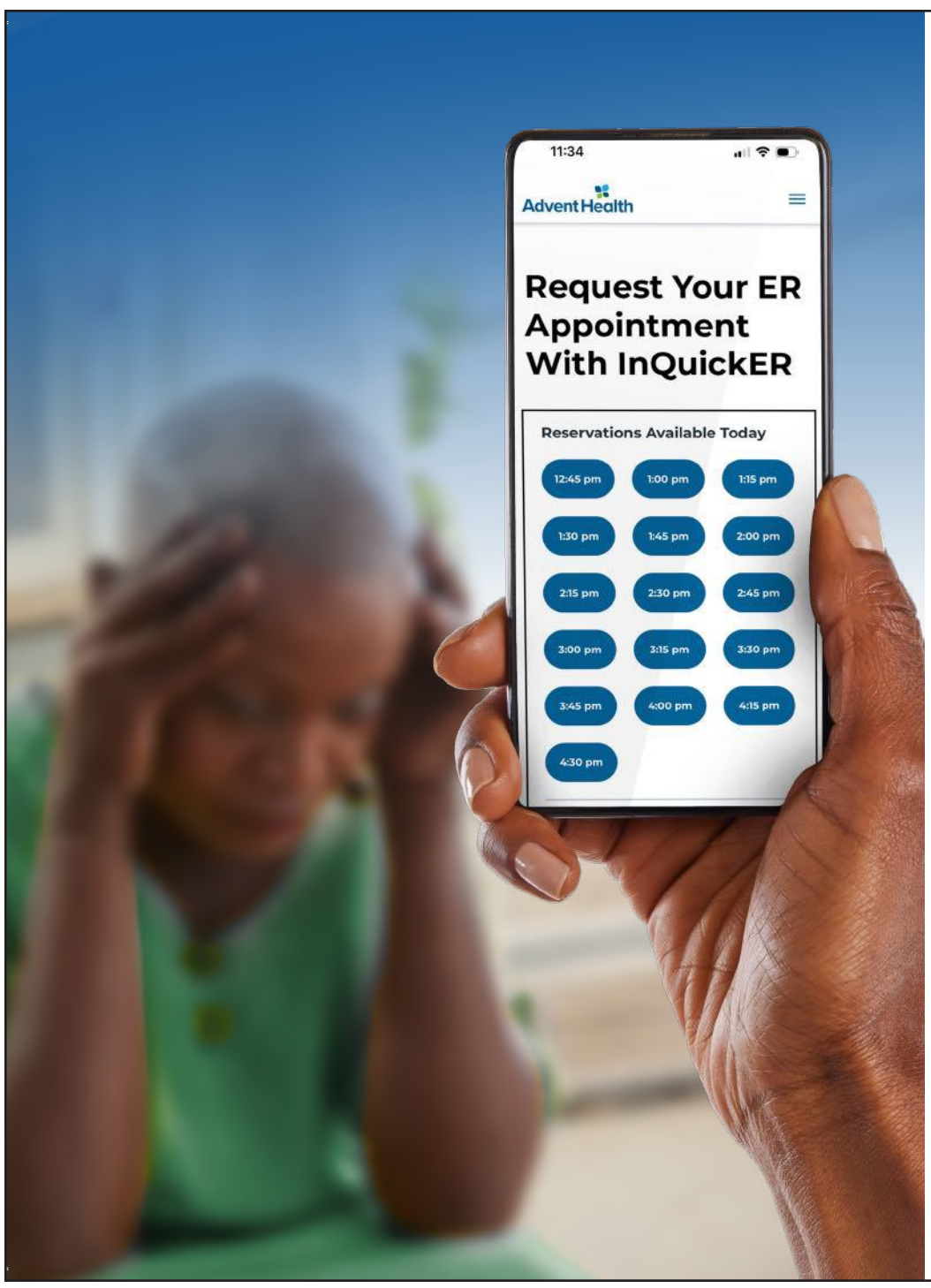
"We've coordinated contractors, inspections, estate sales, moving companies, attorneys, title issues and repairs long before a home ever reaches the market," he said.

For newcomers to Florida, the team spends time explaining communities, schools, flood zones and lifestyle differences.

"We want them to choose the right community, not just the right house," he said.

"Real estate is ultimately about people," he said. "Homes matter because of the lives that happen inside them. Our goal is to help people navigate those moments with confidence, clarity and care."

For more information visit www.27northrealty.com or call 813-645-4663. 27North Realty's office is located at 6138 N. U.S. 41 in Apollo Beach.



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AdventHealth Riverview

BONNET SPRINGS PARK OFFERS ULTIMATE SCREEN-FREE ESCAPE

By Srishti Tripathi



Summer in Central Florida isn't just about avoiding the heat; lately, it's become a full-on showdown with screen time. Kids are glued to devices in states of perpetual scrolling, while parents search for ways to pull them back into the real world. Honestly, it's tough. Devices are always around, and let's face it, sometimes they're easier than suggesting another backyard adventure. Still, plenty of families want something different. That's where Bonnet Springs Park jumps in, giving folks a genuine chance to get outside and remember what summer is supposed to feel like.

The park was designed with curiosity in mind, creating a kind of old-school playground with a modern twist. Every path, every shady boardwalk, and every interactive exhibit in the nature center feels like an open invitation to explore. The playground sprawls across the grounds, and it's not your standard swings-and-slide setup; it's a place that inspires kids, and, honestly, adults too, to run, climb, and imagine new worlds.

That active energy keeps rolling all season long. Bonnet Springs Park keeps a steady stream of family-friendly events and community-driven activities planned all the way through June and July. Families looking to cool off can head to the park's splash-ready waters for the "Summer at the Spring" interactive play mornings on Wednesday, June 24. Car enthusiasts can roll out to the monthly "Cars & Coffee" meet-ups outside the Florida Children's Museum on the second Saturday of the month, while those looking for evening fun can catch the "Sunset Dance Series," featuring a live swing dancing night on Thursday, June 18 and salsa on Thursday, July 23.

Best of all, most of these programs cost absolutely nothing. The park wants everyone to feel welcome, so local families can build golden summer memories without worrying about ticket prices.

If you're tired of negotiating device time or need that push to reclaim a classic, hands-on summer, it is time to pack up the car. Located just outside of downtown Lakeland at 400 Bonnet Springs Blvd, Bonnet Springs Park is the ultimate place to plot your next outdoor adventure. To check park hours, view a full calendar of June and July events, or plan your perfect screen-free weekend, visit their official website at www.bonnetspringspark.com.

ROTARY'S CAMP FLORIDA NAMES ELEANOR SAUNDERS AS NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

By Libby Hopkins



Eleanor Saunders will become the new Director of Rotary's Camp Florida on July 13 of this year. Saunders is a Brandon resident, a Rotarian and the former Executive Director of E.C.H.O. of Brandon.



Rotary's Camp Florida has been a part of the Brandon community since the 1950s. It was originally a camp used by the United Methodist Church, but in 1991, Rotary's Camp Florida was incorporated to acquire, operate and maintain a year-round camp facility for children with special medical needs. The property on which Rotary's Camp Florida sits was purchased on December 26, 1991, and extensively remodeled. As the church camp was built in the 1950s, it was not designed for special-needs children.

"It a local hidden gem, and I don't want it to be hidden anymore," said Rotary's Camp Florida's new director, Eleanor Saunders.

Saunders is a Brandon resident, a Rotarian and the former executive director of ECHO of Brandon. She begins her new journey as the camp's director on Monday, July 13.

"I was at ECHO for 11 years and I prayed very hard about taking the first step for the position at Rotary's Camp Florida," Saunders said. "The first step was submitting my resume, and from that point it all seemed to fall into place."

The mission of Rotary's Camp Florida is to provide a safe, fun space to learn, grow and play for groups whose members need supportive accommodations.

"Rotary's Camp Florida is a 21-acre, ADA-compliant campsite, and I can't wait to start promoting the camp's mission to the community and beyond," Saunders said. "It is a place that has so much potential, and I love helping local nonprofit organizations realign and grow."

"I love that the camp has something for everyone," Saunders said. "My hope for the camp is that it will become very well known in the local market as an option for retreats and events, and that earned revenue will fully support our campers, so kids with special needs can come to camp without money being a concern. They can just come to camp and be a kid."

For more, visit the camp's website at https://rotaryscampflorida.org/ or call 813-654-4042. The camp is located at 1915 Camp Florida Rd. in Brandon.

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KEEP TAMPA BAY GROWS GREENER FUTURE WITH VOLUNTEERS & TREES

By Ella Baroni



For more than three decades, Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful has demonstrated that meaningful environmental change begins at the local level, empowering residents to improve their communities through volunteerism, education and hands-on conservation projects.

Founded in 1989, the nonprofit organization has become a leading force for environmental stewardship throughout Hillsborough County, engaging thousands of volunteers each year in community cleanups, tree plantings, sustainability initiatives and educational programs. Its mission is simple: inspire individuals to take an active role in creating a cleaner, greener and more resilient Tampa Bay.

One of the organization's latest efforts took place in May when Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful partnered with United Airlines and the Arbor Day Foundation to plant 15 trees at Skyway Park in Tampa. The project was designed to address several environmental challenges facing urban areas, including poor air quality, extreme heat, limited shade and a lack of green space.

The newly planted trees will provide long-term benefits to the community, helping reduce temperatures, improve air quality, manage stormwater runoff and enhance habitat for local wildlife. The initiative also supports efforts to rebuild tree canopy lost to storms, development and other environmental stressors.

"Projects like this are about investing in our communities and creating spaces where people can thrive," said Kristina Moreta, executive director of Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful. "With help from United Airlines and the Arbor Day Foundation, we are able to bring more shade, beauty and environmental benefits to neighborhoods that need it most."

The tree-planting project is part of a broader collaboration between Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful, the Arbor Day Foundation and corporate partners committed to strengthening urban forests and increasing climate resilience across the region.

The Arbor Day Foundation, a global nonprofit organization that has helped plant more than 500 million trees in communities and forests around the world, worked alongside local volunteers to make the Skyway Park project possible.

The recent effort is just one example of Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful's ongoing work. The organization also manages community cleanup events, Adopt-A-Road programs, hurricane preparedness and recovery initiatives, shoreline restoration projects and environmental education opportunities. Earlier this month, the nonprofit launched another major initiative to plant 100 trees at MacDill 48 Park.

As Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful continues expanding its reach, the message remains clear: when community members come together, even small actions can grow into a movement that benefits Tampa Bay for generations to come.

To get involved and learn more about opportunities, visit the website at www.keeptampabaybeautiful.org.

ALL ABOARD FOR SUMMER FUN AT THE FLORIDA RAILROAD MUSEUM

By Ella Baroni



Looking for a unique summer adventure close to home? The Florida Railroad Museum in Parrish offers visitors the opportunity to experience Florida's rich railroad heritage through historic train excursions, exhibits and special events.

Known as the museum "where you ride the exhibits," the Florida Railroad Museum allows guests to board vintage railcars and travel through the scenic countryside of rural Manatee County while learning about the important role railroads played in shaping Florida's history.

Founded with the mission of preserving the state's railroad heritage, the nonprofit museum operates on a six-mile stretch of track between Parrish and Willow. The rail line, originally built by the Seaboard Air Line Railroad in the early 1900s, was the first railroad route through Manatee County.

Each weekend, visitors can enjoy diesel-powered excursions aboard a variety of open-air, open-window and air-conditioned railcars. The trains are operated entirely by museum volunteers who contribute thousands of hours annually to maintain and preserve the collection.

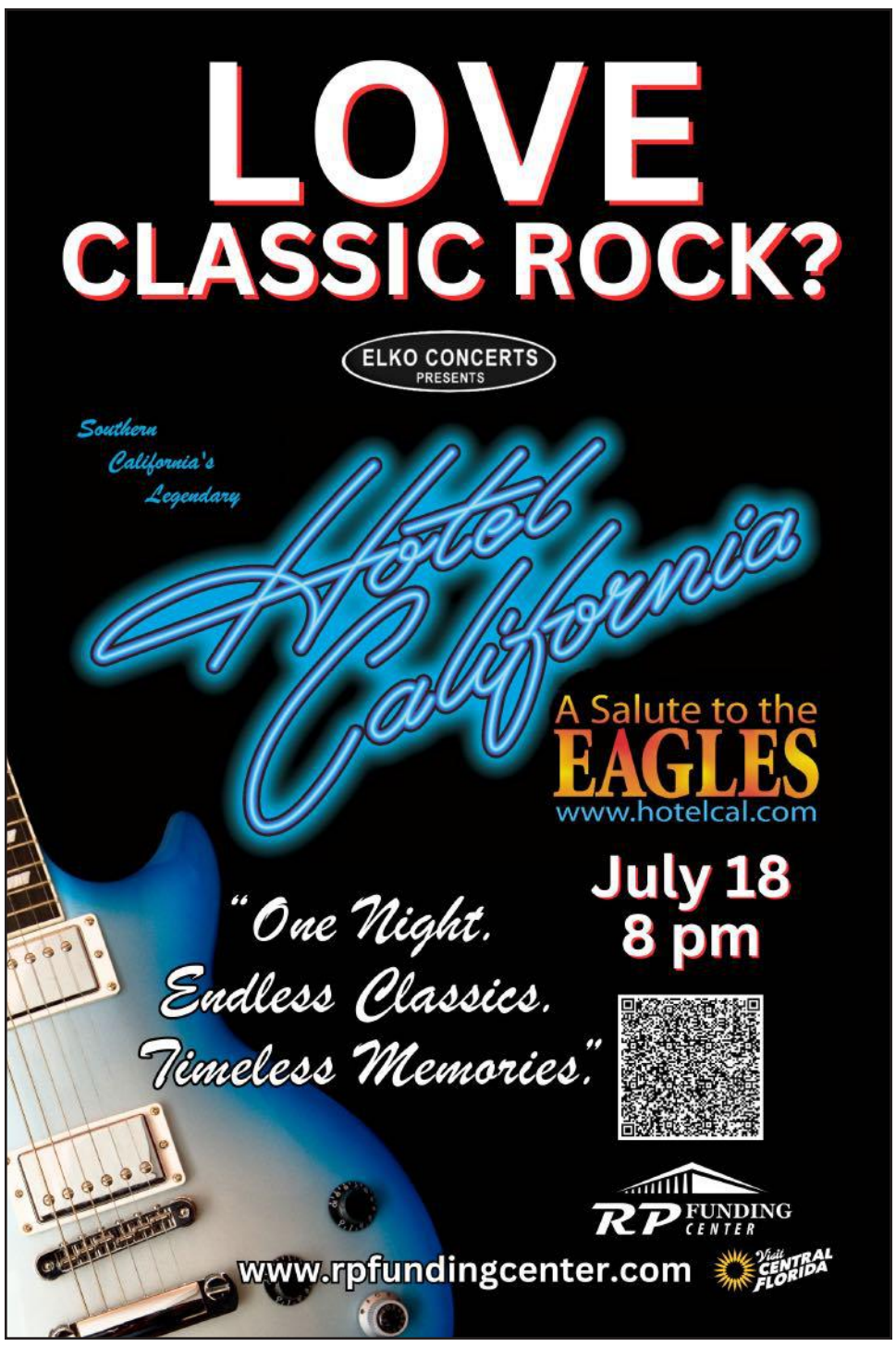
In addition to regular excursions, the museum hosts a variety of special events throughout the year. Summer offerings include themed train rides and the popular Murder Mystery Dinner Train, which combines dining with interactive entertainment. Seasonal favorites return later in the year, including the Pumpkin Patch Express in the fall and the highly anticipated North Pole Express during the holiday season. The Christmas-themed attraction has become a cherished tradition for many local families.

Visitors can also explore the museum's gift shop, model railroad display and exhibits showcasing railroad artifacts.

In Willow, a replica Seaboard Air Line station provides passengers with an opportunity to step off the train and experience a piece of Florida railroad history firsthand.

Named Tripadvisor's top attraction in Parrish, the museum also offers annual memberships starting at $45 and welcomes volunteers interested in helping preserve railroad history. Opportunities range from serving as a car host to assisting with train operations and restoration projects.

The Florida Railroad Museum is located at 12210 83rd St. E. in Parrish. The ticket office, gift shop and model railroad are open Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., while train excursions operate on weekends. For schedules, ticket information and upcoming events, visit www.frrm.org or call 941-776-0906.





4TH PARADE RETURNS WITH NEW LOCATION AND EXPANDED FUNFEST

By Olivia Clark



A community tradition is returning this year as the Greater Brandon July 4th Parade celebrates its 69th year with a new location and a lineup of activities designed for families. Hosted by the Greater Brandon Action Network (GBAN), the parade will take place on Saturday, July 4, at the Hillsborough County Fairgrounds, located at 215 Sydney Washer Rd. in Dover. Following the parade, guests can enjoy a community Funfest featuring free admission, free parking and activities for all ages.

This year's event holds special significance, as the nation is celebrating the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Organizers are encouraging residents from Brandon and surrounding communities to gather and commemorate the milestone while continuing a local tradition that has brought families together for generations.

According to Lisa Rodriguez, GBAN president and parade chair, the event was moved from its traditional Brandon route due to extensive Tampa Bay Water construction projects impacting major roadways throughout the area.

"We moved our location this year due to all the watermain line construction and detours cutting through our Brandon roads in order to get more water to South County," said Rodriguez.

After exploring multiple options, organizers found a new home at the Hillsborough County Fairgrounds, where the additional space created an opportunity to expand the celebration beyond the parade itself.

"After meeting with the fairgrounds staff and seeing all the space available to us, we decided to add the Funfest to follow the parade," said Rodriguez.

Attendees can look forward to a variety of attractions throughout the day, including children's activities, food trucks, vendors, a live band, a DJ, a dunk tank and community contests. Guests will also have the opportunity to participate in watermelon and cherry pie eating contests as well as a chili cook-off, with prizes awarded throughout the event.

GBAN, a nonprofit organization, was established to ensure the continuation of Brandon's annual Independence Day parade tradition after leadership transitioned from The Community Roundtable Board of Trustees. Since then, the organization has remained committed to creating a family-friendly event that celebrates both community pride and patriotism.

"This year marks a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to celebrate America's 250th birthday," said Rodriguez. "Put on your red, white and blue and join us for a festive day."

The Greater Brandon July 4th Parade and Funfest will conclude at 6 p.m. For more information, visit www.greaterbrandonactionnetwork.com or email july4thparade@greaterbrandonactionnetwork.com.



FOURTH OF JULY: MORE THAN A PARADE

There is something about a Fourth of July morning in Brandon that feels familiar in a way that is hard to explain until you've lived it. Before the heat settles in and before the fireworks later that night, the town quietly transforms. Folding chairs begin appearing along the sidewalks, children wave small flags too big for their hands, and neighbors who may not have seen each other in months greet one another like no time has passed at all.



A 1980s Fourth of July parade on the corner of Moon Avenue and Brandon Boulevard.

The Brandon Fourth of July Parade has been part of this community for more than 60 years, with some accounts placing its origins back to the late 1950s. What began as a small hometown celebration, created by local volunteers who simply wanted to bring people together, has grown into one of the most cherished Independence Day traditions in Hillsborough County.

Over the decades, the parade has evolved. Routes have shifted, organizations have changed and leadership has passed from one group of community volunteers to another. Yet through all of it, the spirit has remained the same. This is not just an event; it is a reflection of Brandon itself.

Even when the parade was paused or reimagined in recent years, the community's response made something clear: This tradition matters. And when it returned in full, so did the crowds, lining the streets with the same pride and excitement that generations before them once knew.

What makes this parade so enduring is not only the floats, the marching bands or the candy tossed to waiting children. It is the continuity.

In a world that changes quickly, Brandon's Fourth of July parade remains one of those rare traditions that holds steady. It reminds us that history is not only something we study; it is something we live, together, year after year, right here at home.

As we look ahead to America's 250th anniversary, this small-town parade feels even more meaningful.

It is a reminder that the story of this country is not only written in grand places but also in communities like ours, where tradition is carried forward not because it has to be but because we choose to keep showing up.

This year's parade, set to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, will take place at a new location at the Hillsborough County Fairgrounds in Dover at 215 Sydney Washer Rd., beginning at 10 a.m.



HOMES FOR OUR TROOPS ARMY SGT. 1ST CLASS AARON CORNELIUS CON'T FROM PAGE 1...

By Brian Bokor



Army Sgt. 1st Class Aaron Cornelius celebrates with family, friends, volunteers and supporters during a welcome home ceremony on June 13 in Lithia after receiving the keys to his mortgage-free, specially adapted custom home from Homes For Our Troops.

think he's super excited," she said.

Asked which features she was most excited about, Gabby pointed to the home's safety and accessibility features.

"I think, for one, the security," she said. "And for two, the cooking features. He's able to make more things for himself."

Despite losing his sight, Cornelius has continued to pursue an active lifestyle and challenge himself in new ways.

"Since we spoke, I actually went to Montana and skied down Big Sky Mountain," he said.

He is already preparing for his next challenge. "I'm getting ready to go up to Boston and run a 5K," Cornelius said.

The ceremony also featured a special presentation of Ray-Ban Meta smart glasses, which are now being made available to eligible legally blind veterans through a newly announced partnership between Meta and the Blinded Veterans Association. The AI-powered glasses can assist users by reading text, recognizing colors and helping with everyday tasks through voice commands.

Cornelius said he expects the technology to make a significant difference in his daily life.

"I think it's going to be a wonderful addition," he said. "I can read things myself. I can see what color things are. I can read money. It just opens up a big door for me to do many things I used to do."

Founded in 2004, Homes For Our Troops builds specially adapted custom homes to help injured post-9/11 veterans rebuild their lives. The organization currently has 70 active projects nationwide, including six in Florida, and recently dedicated its 441st home in El Paso, Texas.

As he prepares to settle into his new home, Cornelius remains focused on the future.

"I'm excited to move forward now with this new chapter," he said. "I'm just so excited and blessed to have these tools with me."

Learn more about SFC Cornelius: https://www.hfotusa.org/cornelius/

SNIVELY JR. HONORS MARCHING BAND WITH EAGLE SCOUT SERVICE PROJECT

By Zofia Osterman



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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Music Bingo, Yard Guards on Doody, Trivia Night & More...

Compiled by Jenny Bennett
jbennett@ospreyobserver.com

Music Bingo Fundraiser

Community for Women of St. Stephen Catholic Church is sponsoring music bingo at Bullfrog Creek Brewing Co., located at 3632 Lithia Pinecrest Rd. in Valrico on Tuesday, July 21. Please come and support its mission of giving to St. Vincent de Paul food bank, Home Makers of Hope, feeding the homeless and community nursing.

Along with a fun night of bingo, there will also be a 50/50 drawing, raffle prizes and silent auction baskets to bid on. Bingo starts at 7 p.m., so arrive early to save your seat.

Trivia Night Benefiting Seeds Of Hope

Join the Bloomingdale Neighborhood Association on Sunday, July 20, at 7 p.m. at JF Kicks, located at 3345 Lithia Pinecrest Rd. in Valrico, for a fun-filled Community Trivia Night benefiting Seeds of Hope. Enjoy trivia, raffle baskets, a 50/50 raffle, prizes for the top teams and help support local families through donations of food and school supplies for the Seeds of Hope Backpack Drive. Come early for dinner, bring your friends and help make a difference in our community.

The Gathering 2026

The Gathering 2026 is set to bring together leaders from across the globe for a transformational three-day movement focused on strengthening communities, empowering youth and advancing collaborative solutions across sectors.

This year's Gathering is designed to create impact on three levels:

• Local: advancing workforce development, youth empowerment and community stability in the Tampa Bay region.

• National: strengthening church collaboration and cross-sector partnerships.

• Global: expanding a unified movement built on five pillars of focus.

This initiative is more than a conference — it is a call to action for leaders, organizations and partners who share a heart for building the future. Through the visionary leadership of Bishop MB Jefferson, Dr. Brenda Jefferson and Bishop-Designate Calvin Jefferson, The Gathering 2026 is uniting voices, resources and strategies for a greater purpose.

Together, these leaders are mobilizing a movement that equips communities, strengthens families and creates pathways of opportunity for generations to come.

Yard Guards On Doody Celebrates 23 Years

Yard Guards On Doody LLC is proud to announce the celebration of its 23rd anniversary this June, marking over two decades of dedicated service to residential and commercial customers throughout the community.

Founded in 2003, Yard Guards On Doody has built a reputation for reliability, professionalism and exceptional customer care in the pet waste removal industry. What began as a simple idea has grown into a trusted local business committed to helping pet owners maintain cleaner, healthier and more enjoyable outdoor spaces. For more information about Yard Guards On Doody and its services, please visit www.yardguardsondoody.com.

SEVEN SENIORS EARN SCHOLARSHIPS FOR K-12 PERFECT ATTENDANCE

Staff Report



Seven Hillsborough County Public Schools seniors were recognized at the June 2 School Board meeting for achieving perfect attendance from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Seven Hillsborough County Public Schools seniors were recently recognized for an extraordinary accomplishment that few students achieve: maintaining perfect attendance from kindergarten through 12th grade.

The students were honored during the Hillsborough County School Board meeting on June 2, where district leaders celebrated their dedication, perseverance and commitment to education over the course of 13 consecutive school years.

To further recognize the achievement, Suncoast Credit Union presented each student with a $500 scholarship.

The students earning the distinction of perfect attendance throughout their entire K-12 educational journey are Julius Montalvo of Gaither High School; Nathan Jorden and Noah Jorden of Lennard High School; Amanda Harris of Newsome High School; Darius Donaldson-Dunphy of Plant City High School; and Matthew Mason and Sadie Jones of Sickles High School.

Perfect attendance requires students to be present every school day for more than a decade, despite illnesses, family obligations, transportation challenges and other circumstances that can interrupt school attendance. District officials noted that the achievement reflects not only the students' commitment but also the support of parents and guardians who prioritized education and helped ensure their children were in class each day.

"I am incredibly proud of these students and commend the consistency and commitment they have shown throughout their education," said Superintendent Van Ayres. "Their dedication speaks volumes about their character and will serve them well in the future. I also want to congratulate their families for providing the support that helped them succeed and thank Suncoast Credit Union for recognizing these students in such a meaningful way."

School leaders said regular attendance is one of the strongest indicators of academic success, helping students stay engaged in learning, build relationships with teachers and peers, and develop habits that prepare them for college, careers and life beyond graduation.

As these seven students prepare to begin the next chapter of their lives, they leave behind a remarkable record of reliability and determination that sets them apart among their graduating classmates. Their achievement serves as an example of the value of consistency, responsibility and commitment to personal goals.







GET THE DIRT: RAIN HAS ARRIVED!

BY LYNN BARBER, URBAN HORTICULTURE AGENT





Rainfall can easily be captured in a rain barrel, a device used to collect rainwater mainly for landscape irrigation.

One workshop attendee said, "I like using natural resources that are free and beneficial to the environment. Capturing rainwater prevents stormwater runoff which displaced the soil, mulch and plants under my roofline."

Benefits: Reduce potable (drinking) water used for landscape irrigation; decrease erosion, stormwater runoff and water source pollution.

Facts: One inch of rain from a 1,000-square-foot roof yields 625 gallons. Considering our 50-53 inches of rainfall annually, we could capture 31,000-plus gallons of rainwater.

Location: Locate the barrel near a downspout. If you do not have downspouts/gutters, place the barrel under the area where the roof forms a V.

Materials: Food-grade container/drum, drill, 15/16-inch drill bit, brass boiler drain, PVC cement and concrete blocks.

Platform stability: Two or four concrete blocks placed horizontally under a barrel work well. Do not stand the blocks vertically. For more than one layer of blocks, stack in a crisscross pattern. Make sure the ground under the blocks is level and packed down. This takes more time than any of the other steps. One gallon of water weighs 8.3 pounds, so a full 55-gallon rain barrel weighs 456.5 pounds.

Installation: To transition from the gutter/downspout to the rain barrel opening, use a cross piece of downspout material or a flexible downspout extender.

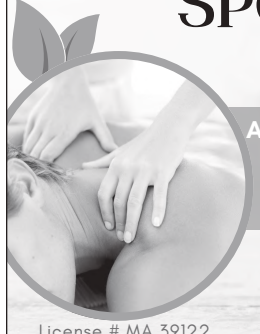
Clean barrel prior to installation: Use a green cleaning solution or one-eighth cup of bleach and 5 gallons of water.

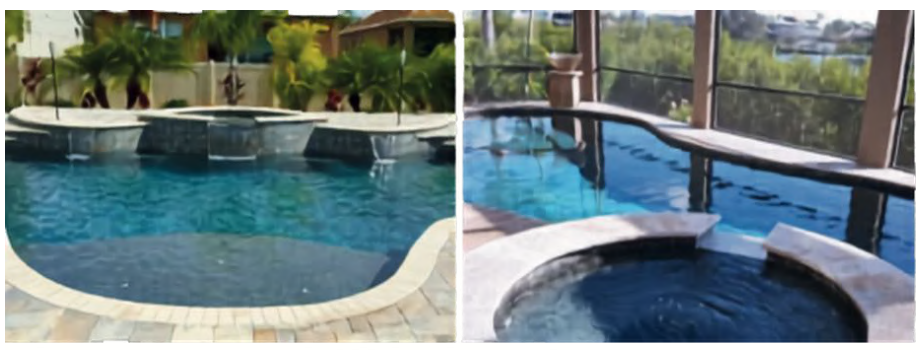
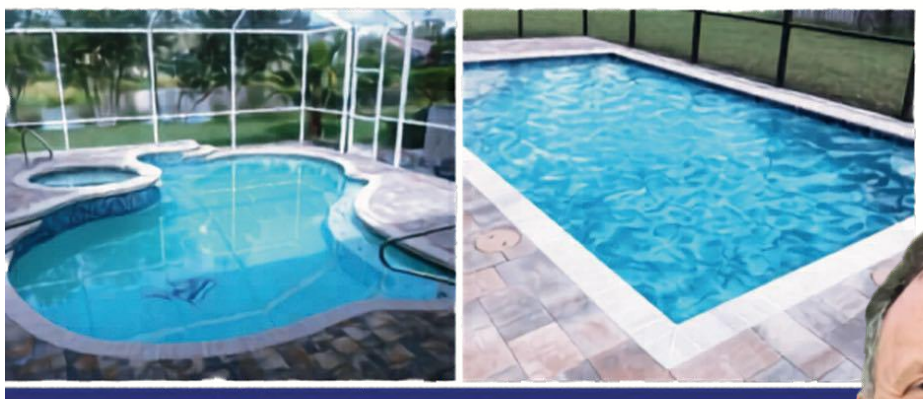
Painting: Before installation, prime the barrel, then use outdoor acrylic paint. If you don't prime the barrel before painting, use paint specifically for plastic. After painting, let it dry according to the directions; then put one to two coats of polyurethane over the paint for protection.

We offer rainwater harvesting workshops on the first Saturday of the month from February through November. Check our website at https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/hillsborough/ for dates/times.

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HOKUS POKUS LIVE! AT TAMPA THEATRE, PREPARE TO BE SPELLBOUND

By Abigail Dumas



This fall, get ready for a night of wickedly good fun as the beloved Sanderson Sisters take the stage like you've never seen them before. On Tuesday, November 3, at 8 p.m., the historic Tampa Theatre will host *Hokus Pokus Live!,* a theatrical parody of everyone's favorite Halloween classic.

This 18-plus camp retelling will be performed by a star-studded cast of drag royalty, including Jujubee, Sapphira Cristal and Ginger Minj of *RuPaul's Drag Race* as the three witches and Landon Cider of *Dragula* as Billy the zombie. The show follows the iconic three witches as they are resurrected for a night of chaos and comedy. In true Sanderson Sister fashion, the witches are ready to hex, enchant and attack unsuspecting victims in their quest for beauty and immortality. The production includes original songs and glamorous costumes, while serving tribute to the original 1993 movie.

The Tampa Theatre has historically offered diverse programming and celebrated queer art, being the annual host of the Tampa International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival since 1990. Additionally, the venue often shows films directed by or starring LGBTQ+ individuals. *Hokus Pokus Live!* is one of the most high-profile drag shows ever hosted by the theater with it being a highly anticipated event by many.

The Tampa Theatre previously hosted the 2025 production of *Hokus Pokus Live!* last October during its first tour, and tickets sold out completely. The show was well received by theatergoers in both America and Canada, prompting the cast to tour again. Excitingly, the final performance of this year's tour will be here in Tampa as the cast and crew wrap up their second season on the road.

Tickets are on sale now and can be purchased at the Tampa Theatre's physical box office, located at 711 N. Franklin St., in Tampa, or online at https://tampatheatre.org/. Standard tickets range from $23.50-$73, while VIP Meet and Greet packages start at $69 and go up to $99 plus fees and taxes. For those who love anything fun, campy and a little spooky, *Hokus Pokus Live!* is the perfect pick. Grab your broomsticks, gather your coven and prepare for a bewitching night at the Tampa Theatre.

80 CLUBS AND COUNTING: FLVS CONNECTS ONLINE LEARNERS

By Srishti Tripathi



Florida Virtual School students, families, and club sponsors gather face-to-face at the Hilton Orlando on May 14 to showcase academic, performance, and leadership milestones during the annual FLVS Club Awards event. (Photo courtesy of Florida Virtual School.)

Most people probably imagine online learning as a lonely experience, just a student and a computer, far from everyone else. But Florida Virtual School (FLVS) keeps proving that idea wrong. FLVS has created an online environment that feels very much like a real, thriving community. You can really see this in action every year at the FLVS Club Awards. Last month, students from all over Florida, including the Southeast Hillsborough County area, came together in Orlando for the big event.

On May 14, the Hilton Orlando buzzed with excitement as more than 150 students (from kindergarten all the way through 12th grade), along with their families and club sponsors, gathered for the celebration. This was one of those rare chances for students who usually connect online to finally shake hands, exchange stories and show off all the projects and skills they've poured their hearts into during the school year.

The Club Awards afternoon didn't disappoint. The room was alive with energy as students put on dance routines, cheerleading performances and theater scenes. The energy shifted when American Sign Language students took the stage to interpret songs live, a moment that clearly stuck with everyone in the audience. It wasn't just about the arts, either. The FLVS Future Farmers of America (FFA) chapter kicked off the event, and the senior class of 2026 officers delivered an original skit that captured the ups and downs of their virtual high school journey. If you wandered around, you could catch a mock debate, browse a photography showcase and check out projects from the Science National Honor Society.

If you're a family in Riverview or Hillsborough County and you want your child to have these kinds of experiences, there's plenty to choose from. FLVS currently runs more than 80 clubs and activities, such as the Spanish Honor Society and groups focused on robotics, creative writing and specific interests that appeal to all kinds of students. The FLVS Foundation supports these clubs, and although most meetings happen online, the school organizes in-person events throughout the year, so students have a chance to turn virtual friendships into real ones.

Summer is around the corner, and for a lot of local families, the Club Awards are a reminder that education doesn't have to mean being stuck inside a traditional classroom. FLVS keeps blending the flexibility of digital learning with those classic, unforgettable moments you'd expect from any school experience. If you want to find out more or check out the clubs for yourself, head over to www.flvs.net. There's a whole new community waiting for you.

Visit its website or call 800-374-1430. For student activities and extracurricular information, visit www.flvs.net/clubs.



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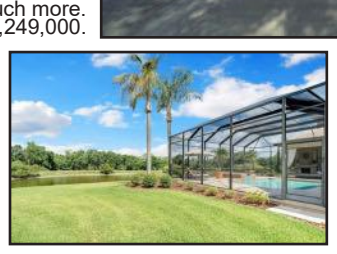
EXCELLENCE & ELEGANCE surround you at this magnificent, custom-built, 5,000-SF home in FishHawk's Kestrel Ridge! On a cul-de-sac half-acre in the security-gated enclave, the property features an impressive pool & spa lanai with a panoramic view of conservation woods & water. An outdoor kitchen & gas fireplace flank the heated pool on a travertine-tiled deck; triple pocket sliders open it all for great entertaining. Details are just as dazzling inside, of course: coffered ceilings, crown molding, columns & arches, gorgeous granite, diagonal-tile floors & backsplashes, decorative listello, raised-panel wood cabinets, walk-in wine closet & so much more. Offered at $1,249,000.



A SOLAR-HEATED POOL in a freshly resurfaced & screened lanai, along a cul-de-sac with a wooded backdrop instead of another neighbor, gets your attention first at this home in FishHawk's Shearwater enclave! But don't overlook all the other attractive qualities here – including brand-new luxury vinyl plank & carpet alongside tile floors, a dimensional-shingle roof installed with the solar panels just 6 years ago, as well as customizations from a stone fireplace to cabinet / shelf buildouts in 2 rooms to a French-door den or office in front. This 2,350-SF Cardel Sandhill design also has been modified to open the 4th bedroom into a play space in the back corner between secondary beds & bath. $525,000















HERE'S A 3-CAR GARAGE despite its 2-car appearance because it's a tandem style at this well-maintained pool home in Riverview's Riverglen neighborhood! Also not immediately seen are 3-year-new rooftop solar panels fully paid off & a mechanized shade on the screened & roof-covered pool lanai for maximized outdoor enjoyment. You get front living & dining rooms, a kitchen with dining space too, a back family room, 3 bedrooms & 2 baths in more than 2,000 SF. Riverglen has no CDD, & an HOA fee of only $400 a year, yet the community provides its own parks & recreation facilities along with proximity to good schools, shops, services, restaurants, other entertainment & more. $489,900



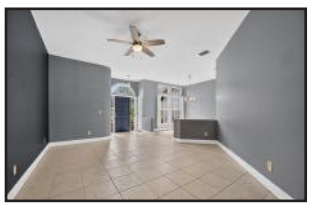
A DOZEN NOTABLE IMPROVEMENTS during the last 3 years make for 1 of this year's best summer sales opportunities in no-fee Boyette Springs! From the 2023 AC & dimensional-shingle roof with solar panels to the newer hot tub, pool pump, appliances & stone counters, this freshly painted home is ready for you now. In 2,200 SF you'll find front living & dining rooms, a kitchen with dining space also, a back family room, 4 bedrooms & 2 baths. The key feature of the Centex Waldorf design, though, is a 500-SF, Florida-style space that throws the home open to a screened & roof-covered pool lanai through 4 sets of sliders from living room, family room, kitchen & owner's suite. $489,900







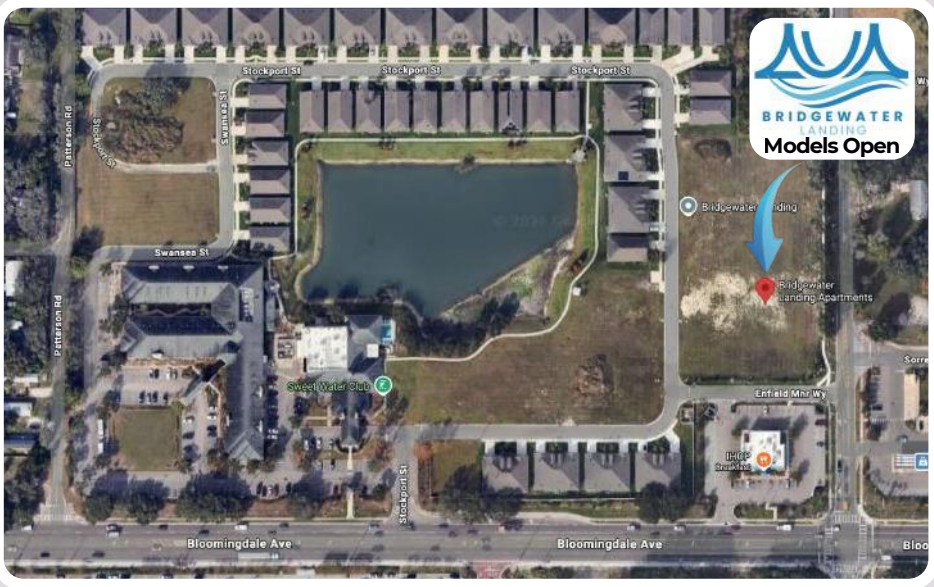












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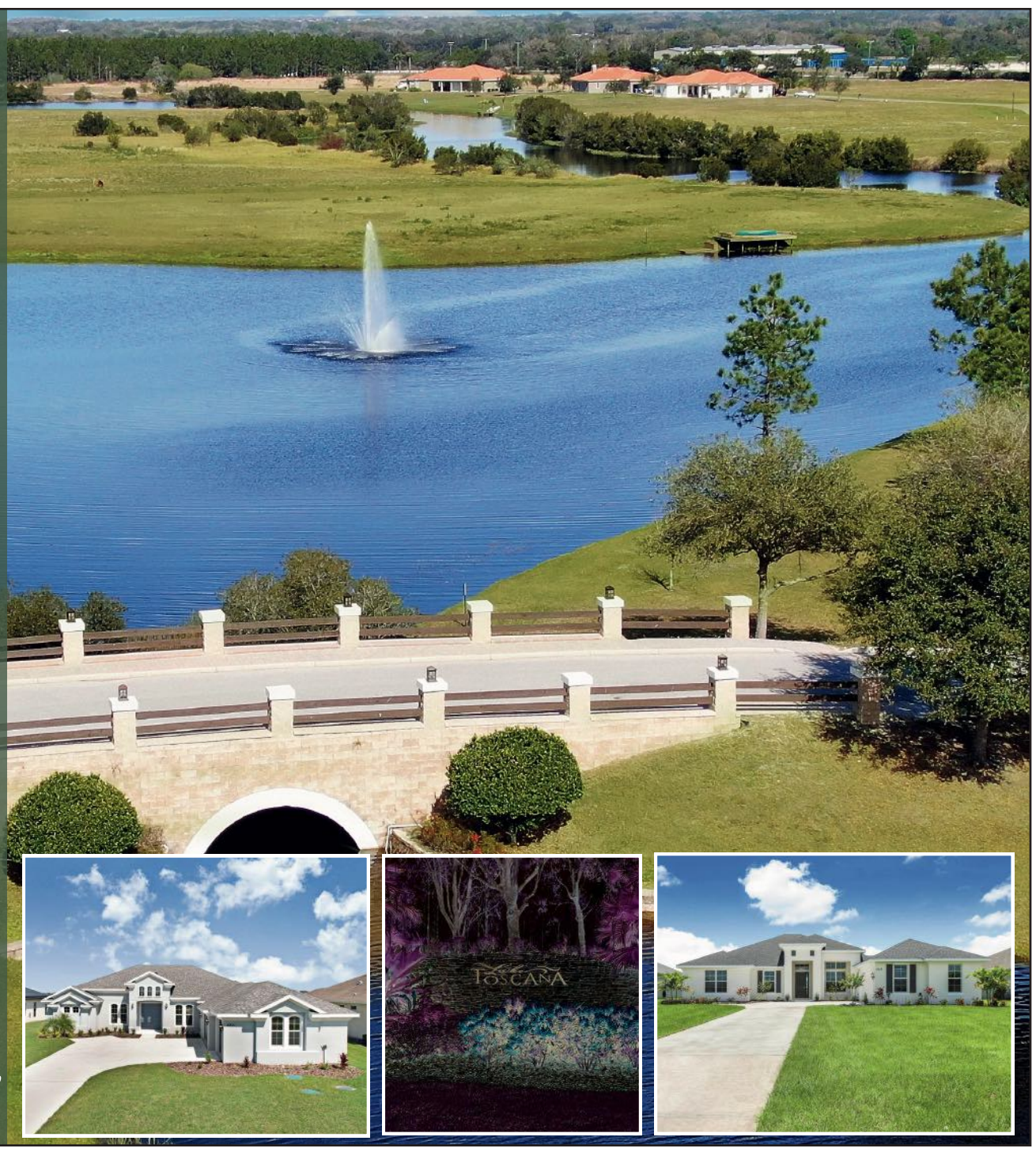
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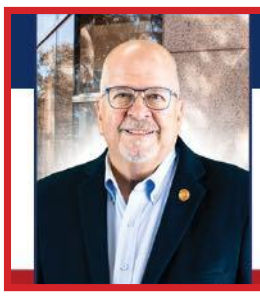


MEET YOUR CANDIDATES

SPECIAL SECTION INSIDE

Know The Key Dates And The Three Ways To Vote Ahead Of Florida's Primary Election

Staff Report



FROM THE DESK OF...

Craig Latimer
Supervisor of Elections

In order to be an effective voter, you must be an informed voter. You need to know the key dates, know the three methods of voting available to every voter in Hillsborough County and wear your "I Voted Sticker" proudly.

Are You Ready To Vote?

The 2026 primary election is right around the corner, so I want to know — are you ready to vote? You still have time to register to vote, request a vote-by-mail ballot and make changes to your voter information.

Primary Election Dates & Deadlines

Deadline to register/change party: Monday, July 20.

Deadline to request a vote-by-mail ballot: Thursday, August 6, 5 p.m.

Votes by mail: Due to our office no later than 7 p.m. on Tuesday, August 18.

Early voting: Monday, August 3, through Sunday, August 16, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.

Election day: Tuesday, August 18, 7 a.m.-7 p.m.

Call our office at 813-744-5900 or visit our website and use the Voter Information Lookup tool at www.votehillsborough.gov to check your status and make any updates.

The deadline for candidates to qualify for the ballot was June 12. Visit the Local Candidates & Committees page of our website to see local candidates who qualified with our office, and the Candidates and Races database on the Division of Elections website at https://dos.elections.myflorida.com/candidates/ to see who qualified with them. Sample ballots showing the races that will be on your primary election ballot will be available on our website next month.

YOUR VOTE COUNTS

REQUESTING A VOTE BY MAIL BALLOT IS EASY:

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3. By Fax: (813) 744-5843
4. In Person: at any of our Supervisor of Elections

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1. Your name and home address
2. Your date of birth
3. Your mailing address, if different from home address (Ballots cannot be forwarded. Be sure to provide your current mailing address.)
4. Your signature (for written requests)



Understanding Primaries

During the primary, political parties nominate state and local candidates to move on to the general election. The races that appear on your ballot depend on where you live and what party you belong to.

Florida has closed primaries, which means that you must be registered with a political party to vote in that party's primary races. However, the primary election will also include nonpartisan contests that everybody votes on, whether affiliated with a party or not.

There will be three different ballots: a Republican ballot, a Democratic ballot and a nonpartisan ballot. Nonpartisan judicial and school board races will be on everyone's ballot, and voters in State Senate District 16, State House District 62 and State House District 63 will have a Universal Primary Contest on their ballot. Universal Primary Contests occur when all candidates for a seat have the same party affiliation and the winner would be unopposed in the general election.

VOTE EARLY

Voters living in Temple Terrace and some special taxing districts will also have a referendum on the ballot.

Take a look at this quick video that explains Florida's closed primaries: https://vimeo.com/676448886.

Legislative Updates For 2026 — What's Changed?



You may live in a different congressional district because the legislature changed the district boundaries this year. Those changes affect which candidates will be on your ballot. We're sending new voter information cards to all voters so you can see all of your voting districts at a glance.

What Hasn't Changed?

Florida's voter registration and voting ID requirements haven't changed for the 2026 election. If you plan to vote in person, go to www.votehillsborough.gov and search "What to Bring" to find the list of acceptable ID.

The Last Word

Your signature can change over time — and the signature on file is used to verify your identity on vote-by-mail ballots, provisional ballots and petitions. Call us at 813-744-5900, go to www.votehillsborough.gov or visit any of our offices or public libraries to get a voter registration application (https://registertovoteflorida.gov/home) and update your signature so that you are #ElectionReady for 2026.

POLITICALLY SPEAKING

YOUR VOTE COUNTS

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER DISTRICT 2



Brittany Lyssy
www.votebrittanylyssy.com

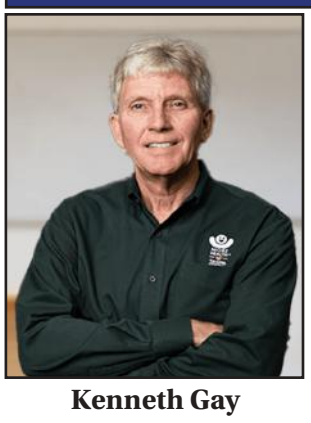


Daniela Simic
www.danielaforschools.com



Chris Taylor
www.electchristaylor.com

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER DISTRICT 6



Kenneth Gay
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Ms. Sally Harris Williamson
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13TH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT GROUP 7



Luis Aguila
www.louieforjudge.com



Sara Peacock
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13TH JUDICIAL COURT GROUP 13



Nina McGucken Alvarez
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Jim Wimsatt
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WHO'S GOT YOUR VOTE?

SARA PEACOCK
13TH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT, GROUP 7

Staff Report



Few judicial candidates bring the combination of experience, community involvement and professional respect that Sara Peacock offers. A Tampa native, Peacock has spent her life in the community she now seeks to serve as a circuit judge.

Inspired by her parents, who are both attorneys, for the past 15 years Peacock has built a legal career that has prepared her for the responsibilities of the bench. Her experience includes family law, criminal defense and civil litigation, giving her a broad understanding of the issues that come before the circuit court. She has handled matters affecting individuals and families, earning a reputation for fairness, professionalism and sound judgment.

The respect Peacock has earned throughout her career is reflected in the broad support she has received from the legal community. Her endorsements include a retired chief justice of the Florida Supreme Court, numerous retired appellate and circuit court judges, the retired Hillsborough County public defender and more than 30 former presidents of local and statewide bar associations. Those who have worked with Peacock and observed her career firsthand recognize in her the qualities of an outstanding judge.

Away from the courtroom, Peacock is deeply involved in her community. She is married to Jason Bartos, and they have two children. She volunteers at her children's school, serves as 'Cookie Mom' for her daughter's Girl Scout troop, sings with the Tampa Oratorio Singers, volunteers with efforts to help children facing food insecurity and serves as an elder at Palma Ceia Presbyterian Church, where she has been a lifelong member. Her commitment to service reflects the same values of responsibility and leadership that have guided her legal career.

Peacock understands that judges make decisions that affect real people and real families. She believes every person deserves to be treated with fairness, dignity and respect, and that every case deserves careful preparation and thoughtful consideration.

Those qualities have defined Peacock's career and make her the right choice for circuit judge.

For more about Peacock, visit her website at www.sarapeacockforjudge.com.

SALLY HARRIS
SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER, DIST. 6

By McKenzie Brown



Longtime educator, business owner and community leader Sally Harris has dedicated her life to improving educational opportunities for children and families throughout Hillsborough County. Now, she hopes to continue that work by bringing her experience and ideas back to public service.

Harris founded Circle C Ranch Academy in Tampa in 1985, launching what would become one of the area's most respected early childhood education programs. For nearly four decades, the academy has earned local, regional and national recognition for excellence, receiving repeated national accreditations and maintaining the Florida Department of Children & Families Gold Seal of Excellence since 1999.

Beyond her work in education, Harris has been actively involved in the community. She has been a member of the South Tampa Chamber of Commerce since 1984 and served as its president from 1988-89. She has also held leadership positions with several professional and civic organizations, including the Florida Vocational Association, the Business and Professional Women's Association and the Hillsborough Association for Child Care Professionals.

Harris previously served on the Hillsborough County School Board from 2014-18 and later served as board chair. During her tenure, district graduation rates increased by 15 percent, reaching 83 percent in 2018. She also championed teacher pay raises, supported workforce development and apprenticeship programs.

Harris said she decided to run because she believes she can still make a meaningful difference in the lives of students and educators. "I felt like I still had some great ideas and work that could make a difference."

Among her priorities is improving kindergarten readiness. Harris noted that only about 50 percent of children enter kindergarten fully prepared and believes expanding access to the county's free Voluntary Prekindergarten program could help address the issue.

A mother of five, foster parent to more than 30 children and grandmother of nine, Harris has built a career centered on service, leadership and a commitment to helping children succeed.

Contact Sally Harris at 813-766- 8429 or visit her online at www.sallyharris.org.



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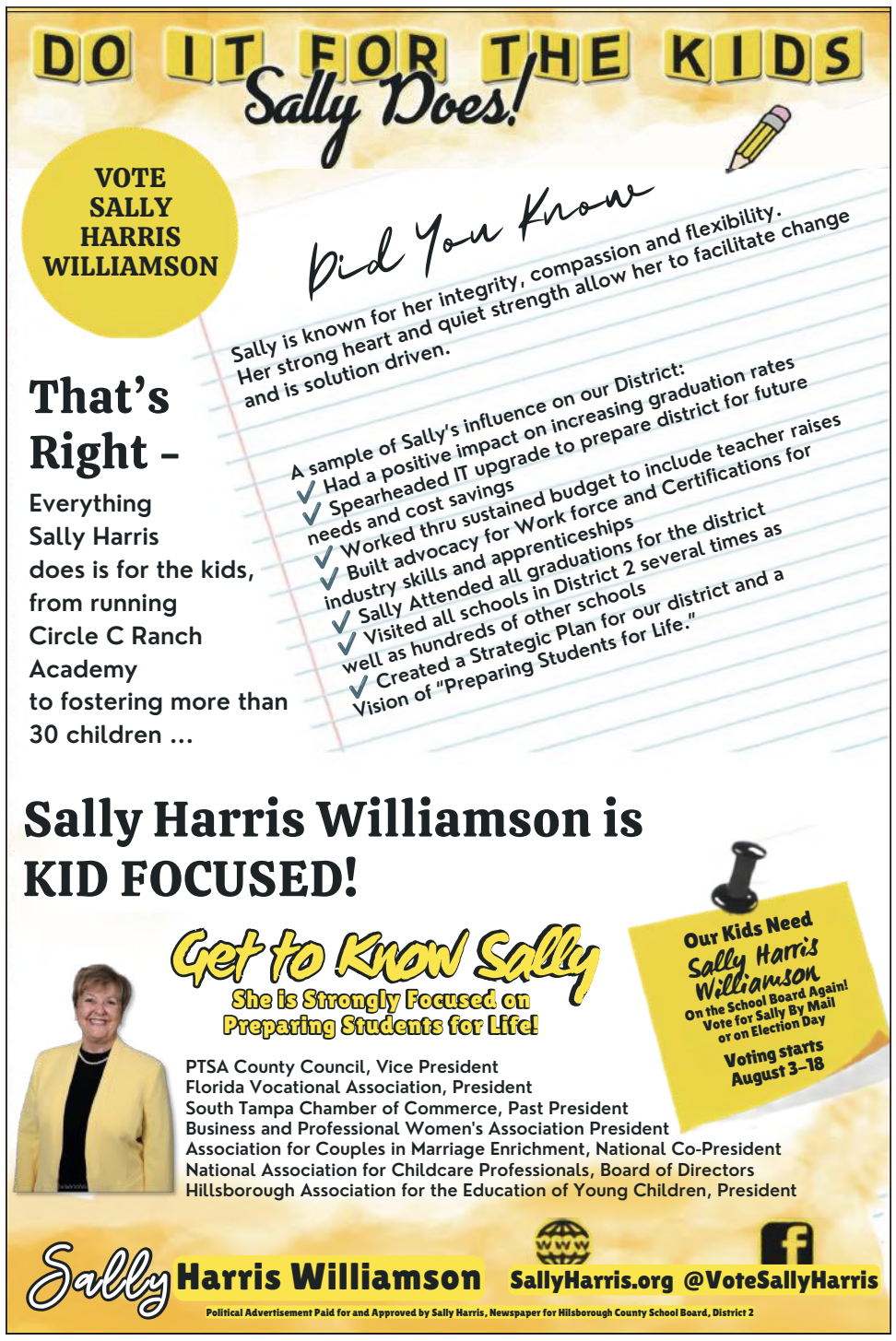
Sara Peacock has been practicing law for 15 years with experience in criminal defense, family law, civil litigation, and insurance litigation. She's tried 68 jury trials, including both criminal and civil cases.

She is involved in our community and volunteers for deserving causes. A Hillsborough County native, Sara is married with two children and is an elder at her church.

ELECT SARA PEACOCK FOR CIRCUIT JUDGE

SaraPeacockforJudge.com

Political advertisement paid for and approved by Sara Peacock for Circuit Court Judge, Circuit 13



POLITICALLY SPEAKING

NINA ALVAREZ
13TH JUDICIAL COURT, GROUP 13

Staff Report



For Nina McGucken Alvarez, serving the people of Hillsborough County is both a professional calling and a personal mission. As a third-generation Tampanian and lifelong resident of Hillsborough County, Alvarez has spent her life building strong connections within the community she proudly calls home. Her commitment to fairness, justice and public service has guided a legal career spanning more than 17 years and has earned her a reputation as a compassionate advocate and skilled attorney.

Alvarez brings a diverse range of legal experience to her work. For the past decade, she has been the owner of McGucken Alvarez, P.A., a law firm concentrating in family law, probate and guardianship matters. Through her private practice, she has helped families navigate some of life's most challenging circumstances with compassion, professionalism and a steadfast commitment to protecting their rights.

In addition to her private practice, Alvarez serves as assistant regional counsel with the Office of Criminal Conflict and Civil Regional Counsel in Tampa. She is privileged to serve as the only attorney in Hillsborough County appointed to represent indigent clients with developmental disabilities. This unique role reflects both her specialized legal knowledge and her passion for advocating for vulnerable members of the community. Her work in public service has provided her with extensive courtroom experience and reinforced her belief that every individual deserves equal access to justice, regardless of their circumstances.

She has also served for 15 years on the Hillsborough County court-appointed registry for incapacity, guardianship and guardian advocacy matters, gaining valuable insight into the legal and personal challenges faced by families and individuals requiring court protection.

Beyond her professional achievements, Alvarez is deeply rooted in family values. She has been married for 19 years and is the proud mother of two daughters. Her career and family have shaped her understanding of the issues that matter most to local families and strengthened her commitment to ensuring every person has a voice and a fair chance at justice.

With experience, integrity and a lifelong dedication to Hillsborough County, Nina McGucken Alvarez remains focused on our community with fairness, impartiality and respect for the rule of law.

LUIS 'LOUIE' AGUILA
13TH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT, GROUP 7

Staff Report



Luis 'Louie' Aguila is a lifelong Tampanian, dedicated public servant, and experienced prosecutor committed to protecting the community he proudly calls home.

Born and raised in Tampa, Aguila attended St. Lawrence Catholic School, graduated from Tampa Catholic High School and earned degrees from Florida College, the University of South Florida and Barry University School of Law.

Aguila's story reflects the American Dream. His father, grandparents and uncle immigrated from Cuba in the early 1960s seeking opportunity and a better future. Through hard work, sacrifice and determination, Aguila's grandfather built a successful family business that became a Tampa tradition. La Ideal and Aguila Sandwich Shop were more than local restaurants — they represented the values of faith, family, perseverance and service that continue to guide Aguila today.

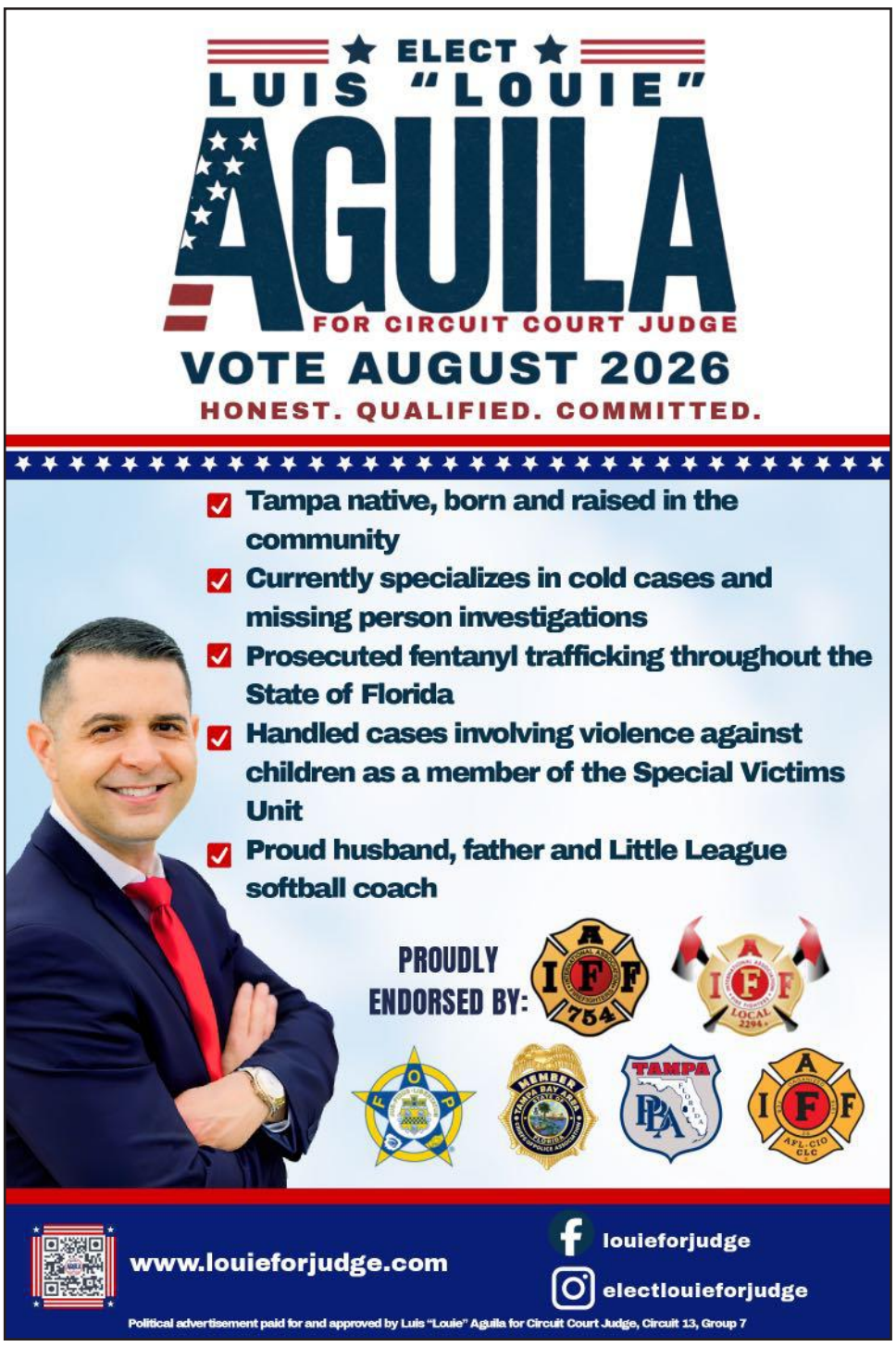
From a young age, Aguila learned that success is earned through hard work and integrity. Those values inspired him to pursue a career in public service.

Since becoming an attorney in 2014, Aguila has devoted his career to seeking justice and protecting families. During eight years with the Hillsborough County State Attorney's Office, he prosecuted serious crimes, including homicide, domestic violence, child abuse, sexual assault and drug trafficking. Today, he serves in the Florida Attorney General's Office as a member of the Cold Case Unit, working to solve unsolved homicides and bringing answers to families who have waited years for justice.

Beyond the courtroom, Aguila is a devoted husband and proud father of two daughters. He is a parishioner of St. Timothy Catholic Church and remains deeply involved in his community. Aguila coaches his daughters' Little League softball team, helping teach the next generation the values of teamwork, discipline and respect.

Luis 'Louie' Aguila is a qualified attorney, proven leader, devoted family man and proud son and grandson of Cuban immigrants. He has spent his career serving the people of Hillsborough County with honor and integrity. Now, he is ready to continue that service as your next circuit court judge.





WHO'S GOT YOUR VOTE?

JIM WIMSATT
13TH JUDICIAL COURT, GROUP 13

Staff Report



Jim Wimsatt understands that when people walk into a courtroom, they are often facing some of the most important moments of their lives. Decisions about children, families, homes, finances and futures can have lasting consequences. Those decisions deserve a circuit judge with experience, judgment, compassion and integrity.

Wimsatt has spent the last 22 years building a legal career that reflects those values. A graduate of Georgetown University Law Center, he has earned a reputation as a thoughtful attorney, a respected advocate and a dedicated member of the legal community.

For the past decade, Wimsatt has concentrated on family law, handling cases that affect the future of children, loved ones, homes, jobs and income. That experience is especially important because family law cases account for roughly 40 percent of all circuit court cases in Florida. He understands that behind every case file is a family seeking fairness, stability and justice.

His peers have recognized both his legal ability and his character. Wimsatt has been named to Best Lawyers in America for four consecutive years and Super Lawyers for two consecutive years. He also holds the prestigious AV Preeminent rating from Martindale-Hubbell, an honor awarded to less than 5 percent of attorneys who demonstrate the highest levels of professional excellence, ethics and legal skill.

Outside the courtroom, Wimsatt believes in serving the community he hopes to serve on the bench. He volunteers with organizations that help families in need, serves in community leadership roles and gives his time to mentoring young people through Scouting. He and his wife, Lauren, have been married for 15 years and are raising their two children, Lucy and Beck, in Hillsborough County.

Voters deserve judges who will approach every case with fairness, preparation and respect for the people whose lives are affected by their decisions. Wimsatt has spent his career earning that trust. He has the experience, temperament and integrity to serve the people of Hillsborough County with distinction.

Please vote Jim Wimsatt for circuit judge.

For more information about Wimsatt and his campaign for circuit judge, visit https://jimforjudge.com/.

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.



Families Matter to Jim Wimsatt

Jim Wimsatt is a highly skilled family law attorney. That's important when Family Law Cases make up roughly 40% of all circuit court cases in Florida. Citizens deserve a judge who is knowledgeable, prepared, compassionate and fair when they go to court and the future of the children, loved ones, house, job and income is on the line. ***Jim Wimsatt is the judge you want when you go to court.***

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JimforJudge.com

Paid by Jim Wimsatt for Circuit Judge, Circuit 13

VETERAN LAUNCHES CHOO-CHOO LEARNERS, A NEW EARLY LEARNING PROGRAM

By Libby Hopkins



Tampa Bay veteran and entrepreneur Rosa E. Rivera is launching Choo-Choo Learners, a new early learning program designed to help children ages 3-6 build confidence, creativity, literacy, communication skills and kindergarten readiness through storytelling, music, movement and hands-on learning.

Developed by Rivera's woman-owned company, Choo-Choo Animation Studio in Gibsonton, Choo-Choo Learners is a curriculum-based educational system built around the philosophy: "Print. Press play. Learn."

The program was created to provide families and educators with a complete learning solution in one place. Each package includes educational videos, printable materials, storybooks, original music, worksheets, crafts, hands-on activities and guided lesson plans, eliminating the need to search for resources from multiple sources.

"As a mom, creator and educator, I know how hard it can be to find quality learning resources without spending hours planning and piecing everything together," Rivera said. "Our goal is simple: 'Print. Press play. Learn.' We want families and educators to have everything they need in one place so they can spend less time preparing and more time learning together."

The curriculum is based on research-backed early childhood learning principles and supports multiple learning styles through repetition, visual storytelling, music, movement and interactive play. Lessons are designed to strengthen literacy, early math skills, communication, fine motor development, creativity, problem-solving and social-emotional growth.

A unique feature of Choo-Choo Learners is that all content was created in-house by Choo-Choo Animation Studio. Every animated character, song, book, worksheet and activity is original intellectual property developed specifically for early childhood education.

At the center of the program are Monkey & Banana, characters first introduced through the studio's Learning with Monkey & Banana educational series. The series has reached viewers in more than 32 countries and helped build the studio's growing library of educational content. The characters now serve as the stars of the new Jungle School with Monkey & Banana series, which forms the foundation of many Choo-Choo Learners lessons and activities.

"Children learn best when they feel emotionally connected to what they're learning," Rivera said. "We wanted to create something joyful, supportive and meaningful during some of their most important developmental years."

In addition to paid curriculum packages, Choo-Choo Learners offers free educational resources and printable materials for teachers, homeschool families and community organizations. For more information, visit www.choochooanimationstudio.com.

HCA HONORS FIRE RESCUE CREW FOR LIFESAVING CARE OF CADDIE SCHELLE

By Marie Gilmore



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Calling a stroke alert for a child is extremely uncommon, but this crew trusted their instincts and acted quickly," said Nealy Kinnison, vice president of emergency services at Brandon Hospital.

"Their rapid assessment and communication helped mobilize lifesaving stroke care before Caddie even arrived at the hospital."

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

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

Despite undergoing multiple surgeries in the weeks that followed, Caddie has defied expectations.

Today, she continues therapy and follow-up care while inspiring family, friends and the community with her resilience.

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

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TRIPLE CREEK RADIO CONTROL AIRCRAFT CLUB

Hey Riverview, did you know there's a hidden gem where pilots take to the skies without ever leaving the ground?

Tucked away off Balm Boyette Road is the Triple Creek Radio Control Aircraft Club (Triple Creek RC Field), one of the coolest places in our community that many people drive right past without ever realizing it's there!



Photo by Phillip Brown Jr.

This incredible flying field is home to hobbyists who fly everything from realistic warbirds and aerobatic stunt planes to giant-scale aircraft and helicopters. Watching these talented pilots is like seeing a real airshow on a smaller scale — and the precision and skill involved is truly impressive.

Whether you've been flying RC aircraft for years or you're simply curious about the hobby, the club welcomes visitors who want to stop by and watch the action. It's a great family outing, and kids especially love seeing these amazing model airplanes perform loops, rolls, and incredible aerial maneuvers.

Thinking about getting into the hobby? Club members are known for being friendly, knowledgeable, and always happy to talk about their aircraft and answer questions from newcomers.

The Triple Creek RC Field is located at 12705 Balm Boyette Rd. in Riverview.

When can you visit? The field is generally active throughout the week, but weekend mornings — especially Saturdays and Sundays — are usually the busiest times, making them the perfect opportunity to see dozens of aircraft in the air and meet local pilots.

So, next time you're looking for something unique to do around Riverview, grab the family and check out one of our area's best-kept secrets. You might just discover your next favorite hobby!

Have you ever visited the Triple Creek RC Field? Let me know — I always love discovering the hidden gems that make our community so special! Have a hidden gem you'd like to see featured? Email me at thekeringroup@gmail.com.

For more on Triple Creek Radio Club visit www.triplecreekrc.com.







FIND FOOD, FUN AND CULTURE IN HISTORIC SEMINOLE HEIGHTS

By Jamie Lu



Seminole Heights is a historic district in central Tampa characterized by its 20th century bungalow homes. Full of cafes, restaurants and eclectic shops, Seminole Heights ranks among America's best places to spend a slow Sunday, according to online www.Calgary.com.

The neighborhood was established in the 1910s through the work of pioneer real estate developer T. Roy Young. Over time, the area grew in popularity and size, with the Sulphur Springs Traction Line connecting the suburbs to downtown Tampa.

Today, Seminole Heights is bounded on the west by Florida Avenue, on the north by Hanna Avenue, on the east by Interstate 275 and on the south by Osborne Avenue. It is separated into three neighborhoods: Old Seminole Heights, South Seminole Heights and Southeast Seminole Heights. The district is flourishing with places to dine and shop while still maintaining its old-timey charm. The streets are paved with brick and lined by palm and shady oak trees. Calgary.com says "daily life there feels easier, slower, and more connected."

Visitors of Seminole Heights can admire the low-pitched roofs and wide front porches of the neighborhood's colorful bungalows, best suited for Tampa's subtropical climate. Some of these buildings are part of the United States National Register and the local Tampa Historic District, meaning they will be preserved for generations to come. Visitors can also stop by food spots like Bo's Ice Cream, a locally-owned staple of the community since 1954, Front Porch Grille, a restaurant located in a 1898 Victorian house or The Rooster and the Till, a four-time Michelin Bib Gourmand Award recipient.

The Seminole Sunday Market, which takes place every second Sunday of the month, is one of the more popular events hosted by the district. Visitors can spend time listening to live music while perusing the stalls of over 70 local vendors of goods ranging from fresh produce to artisanal crafts.

And as the afternoon fades away, the vibrant nightlife of the neighborhood comes alive. Those interested in the Heights' diverse brewery and distillery scene can visit 82ºW Distilling — the first craft distillery built in Tampa's city limits — or Angry Chair Brewing, popular for its unique atmosphere and creative stouts.

The Southeast Seminole Heights Civic Association, the South Seminole Heights Civic Association and the Old Seminole Heights Neighborhood Association work to keep the community of Seminole Heights active, informed and close-knit. This sense of solidarity is what helped Seminole Heights preserve its historic beauty against the encroachment of highway infrastructure in the 1960s and the 1980s.

Visit https://seseminoleheights.com/, https://www.sshca.org/, or https://www.oldseminoleheights.org/.

LOCAL MUSIC TEACHER SHARE HIS PASSION FOR LEARNING TO PLAY INSTRUMENTS WITH HIS STUDENTS

By Libby Hopkins



Jonathan Cestero is a local music teacher who loves to continue learning right along with his students. Each school semester, he picks a new instrument to learn how to play while his students are learning to play it as well.

"I believe it is important to always keep growing," Cestero said. "As a musician, I enjoy the challenge of learning a new instrument and also showing my students the time and dedication required to play it. Together, we experience the highs and lows of music. This year, I chose the trombone."

Cestero is the director of bands at Manatee School for the Arts but lives in the Brandon area. He began playing music professionally at 18 after high school.

"My first band was with friends, and we were called The Super Villains," Cestero said. "We later developed into a full-time traveling gig that continued for 13 years. Afterwards, I attended the University of South Florida, where I earned my bachelor's degree, majoring in jazz performance. I continued my education by obtaining a master's degree in jazz performance, also from USF."

During his education, Cestero was able to study and perform in multiple countries such as Germany, England, Scotland, Colombia and Italy.

"My time in Italy gave me the opportunity to perform in one of the largest jazz festivals in the world, Umbria Jazz Festival," Cestero said. "Throughout this time of education and exploration I performed with professional jazz acts such as Michael Bublé, The Temptations and The Glenn Miller Orchestra. Additionally, I performed at the 2019 Women's World Cup in Le Havre, France, as well as playing the 2025 Presidential Inauguration for the Veteran's Ball."

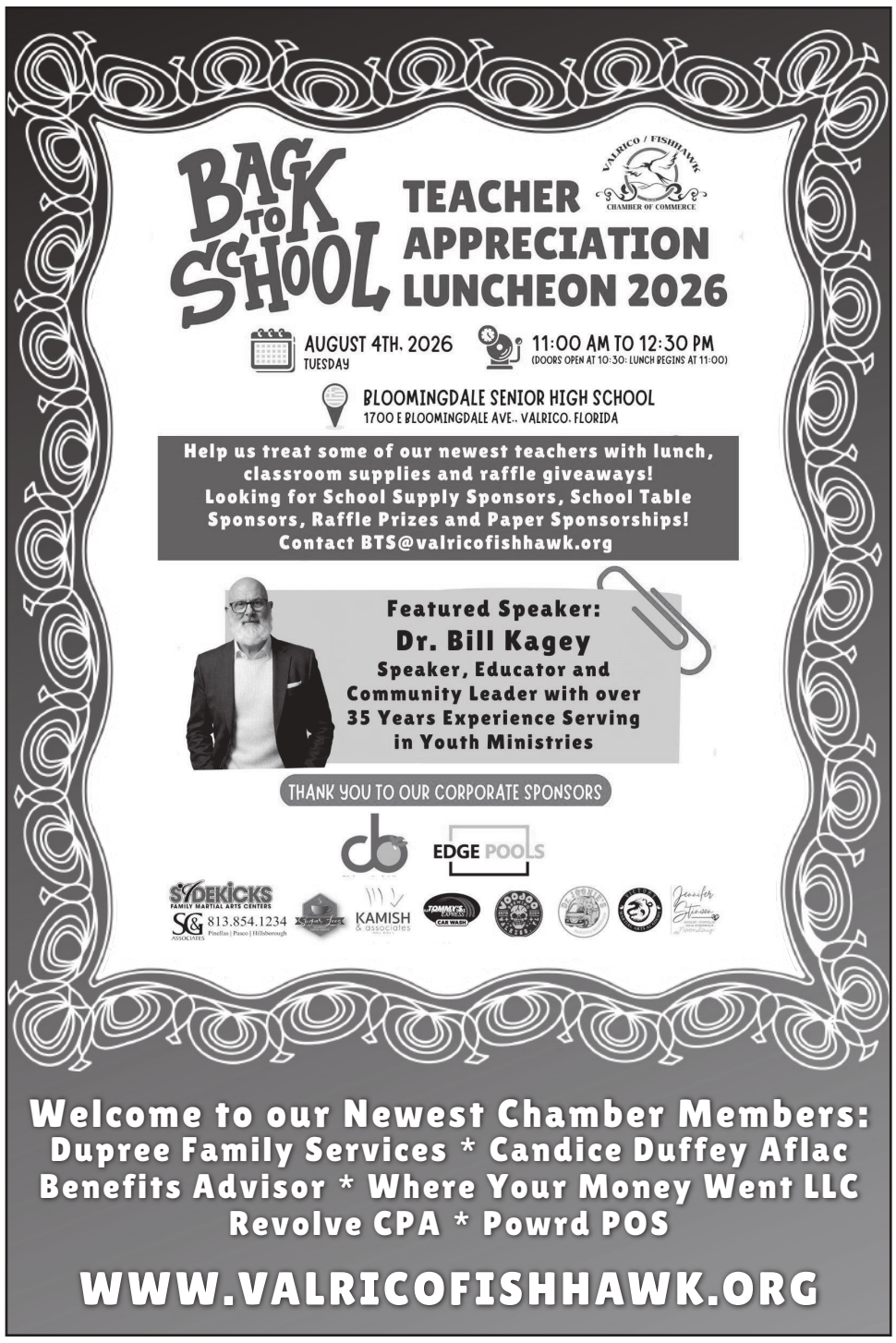
Teaching music is something Cestero is something he truly loves.

"Now, I apply my trade to students ages 11-18 as the director of bands for Manatee School for the Arts," Cestero said. "In this position, I am able to teach different levels of concert band material, percussion ensembles and a jazz band."

So, which instrument will Cestero pick for himself and his students to learn when school goes back in session for the fall?

"This upcoming year, I will attempt to learn the oboe," Cestero said. "It is an essential instrument for a woodwind performer like me. I'm also always on the lookout for donated instruments because so many children need them."

If you have any instruments you would like to donate to Cestero, you can email him at jcestero@msa.raeschools.org.





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AdventHealth Welcomes New Generation Of Physicians In White Coat Ceremony

AdventHealth's West Florida Division officially welcomed its newest class of resident physicians during its annual White Coat Ceremony held at the JW Marriott Tampa Water Street.

The ceremony marked an important milestone as dozens of physicians-in-training from AdventHealth Tampa, AdventHealth Wesley Chapel and AdventHealth Sebring received their first white coats, symbolizing their transition into the next phase of medical training and their commitment to compassionate patient care.



Dr. Joseph Pepe, a physician leader at AdventHealth Tampa, presents a new resident doctor with his white coat. (Photo courtesy of AdventHealth.)

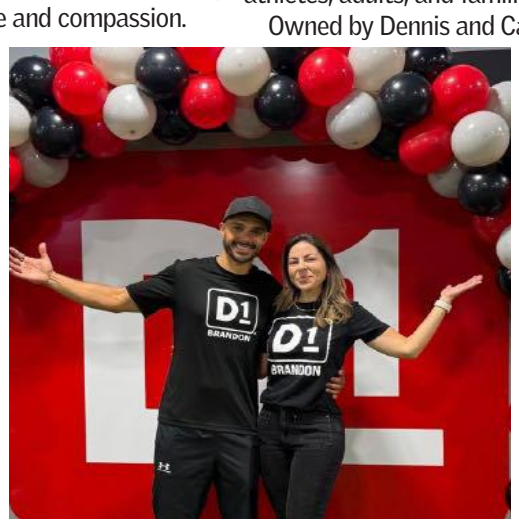
A White Coat Ceremony is a long-standing tradition in medical education that celebrates the beginning of a physician's clinical journey. The white coat represents professionalism, responsibility and a commitment to serving patients with excellence and compassion.

These new resident physicians will live, learn and serve throughout communities across West Florida as they begin caring for patients under the guidance of experienced physician mentors. These residents represent the future of health care and will help address the growing need for physicians throughout the region.

D1 Training Opens In Brandon

D1 Training is excited to bring a new approach to fitness and athletic development to the Brandon community. D1 combines the energy and coaching of Division I-style training with a welcoming environment for youth athletes, adults, and families.

Owned by Dennis and Camilla Santa Paula, D1 Training Brandon was created with a simple vision: to provide local families access to the same level of coaching, structure and performance training typically available only to elite athletes. As parents themselves, they saw firsthand the need for a place where children can build confidence, discipline and healthy habits while adults pursue their own fitness goals.



D1 Training Brandon is located at 1915 W. Lumsden Rd. in Brandon. For more information, visit D1 Training Brandon, go to its website at https://d1training.com/facility/brandon or follow @d1trainingbrandon.



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

Stellar Notary Services is a nationwide mobile and online notary company deeply rooted in service to the community. It works with clients across multiple industries including legal, real estate, construction and business services, helping people navigate important documents and major life moments with professionalism, care and reliability. It is especially passionate about remote online notarization (RON) because it allows fast, efficient and reliable notary services to people anywhere in the world. This year, Stellar Notary Services is proudly celebrating its two-year anniversary with a ribbon-cutting ceremony from the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce. Steller Notary Services is located at 11232 Boyette Rd., Ste. 1144, in Riverview. For additional information about the services it performs, visit its website at https://stellarnotaryservices.net or call 833-403-5601.

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Rosemary Leist specializes in 55-plus residential home sales and lives locally in Sun City Center. She has an extensive professional background in the legal/regulatory arena which has led to valuable skills in the art of negotiation. Having practiced real estate in Florida, Tennessee and Washington, D.C., she has acquired a unique balance of southern charm and northeastern tenacity. As an ordained minister, her core beliefs provide a solid foundation of integrity and trust. She looks forward to earning your business.

To contact Leist, call 301-399-4332. For more information, visit https://rosemary-realestateteam.com/.

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OH SO RUSTIC MARKET KICKS OFF VIBRANT SUMMER SEASON

By Srishti Tripathi



As the summer heat rolls into Florida, many local activities begin to wind down. But at La Viva Plaza, the community energy is just warming up. The Brandon Sunday Market is officially launching its highly anticipated summer season, offering residents a vibrant, local escape every second Sunday of each month from 10 a.m.-2 p.m.

Organized entirely by Oh So Rustic, a beloved brick-and-mortar home decor store located right on the market site at 788 W. Lumsden Rd. in Brandon, the event has become a staple for local shopping. While some might question launching a market series in the middle of a brutal Sunshine State summer, the organizers view it as business as usual.

"During our almost 10 years of existence, we have always operated in the summer," the organizers shared. "We have many full-time vendors; it's also a good time for relatively new vendors to gain some experience, and frankly the weather is not much different in July than it is in September. It's Florida, baby!"

The market provides a crucial platform for small businesses. Vendor and food truck spots are intentionally kept accessible at just $40, which helps keep the marketplace dynamic. While summer can occasionally see a slight dip in sheer numbers, it opens the door for fresh faces.

"Summer does seem to bring out some new and original vendors of all types," the organizers noted, ensuring that attendees will always find something unique.

Beyond the unique artisan crafts and delicious food truck eats, what truly sets this event apart is its deep, grassroots connection to the neighborhood. In a landscape often dominated by third-party event coordinators, this market is proudly homegrown.

"We are not one of the many out-of-area 'vendor management companies,'" the owners emphasized.

Instead, they described the gathering as "a market by the people for the people" wholly focused on fostering a genuine local connection.

For those planning to attend the upcoming dates on July 12 and August 9, the atmosphere promises to be incredibly lively. The market features free admission, pet-friendly walking paths, interactive booths and live entertainment courtesy of Music By Robbie.

"Our vendors are dancing in the aisles when they're not selling merch," the owners added. "It is Brandon's market and we are honored to be a part of it."

TAKING EDUCATION NEXT LEVEL WITH STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS

By Jamie Lu



Studying abroad — that is, pursuing educational opportunities in a foreign country — can be a valuable and exciting experience for college students of all fields and interests. Here are some reasons why studying abroad can be useful, as well as strategies on how to make your study abroad trip more affordable and specific to your goals.

While studying abroad, students tend to live with or among locals and other travelers of many unique backgrounds. They are exposed to new foods, transportation systems, cultures, customs and ways of living. Therefore, studying abroad can expand a student's knowledge about the world while also developing their ability to connect with diverse groups of people.

Living far away from home also helps students become more independent by teaching them to problem-solve and manage their own well-being while being far away from home. While the transition can seem challenging or intimidating, stepping out of one's comfort zone in early adulthood is necessary for gaining life experience and developing discipline and strength of character.

Studying abroad comes with professional advantages as well. Some students study abroad to earn course credit towards their degree. Others study abroad to explore personal interests, learn a new language or become familiar with different education systems. Making connections with professionals abroad can also expand a student's future career or graduate school prospects.

Studying abroad offers a wide range of benefits, so it's important to choose the program that is the best fit for you.

When choosing the right study abroad program, it's important to consider several factors. These include what you want to accomplish by studying abroad as well as your personal health and financial capabilities.

There are many different types of programs offered by higher education institutions, including exchange programs, internship programs and faculty-led programs. Some are centralized at an educational institution, while others may require travel around one or more countries.

Furthermore, some schools and third-party organizations offer study abroad programs for visiting students, so your options aren't limited to the school that you attend.

The time at which a program takes place is also important, especially cost-wise. Programs that take place during the fall and spring semesters tend to be more expensive because they are several months long.

Students should also consult their college advisors to determine what course credits their chosen study abroad program will offer and whether those credits count toward any degree requirements.

Finally, students should also keep in mind the area they will be staying in. Consider whether you prefer somewhere busier, like the city, or somewhere more remote.

Ultimately, the best way to make studying abroad more affordable is by choosing the right program. To learn more about studying abroad, visit www.isepstudyabroad.org.

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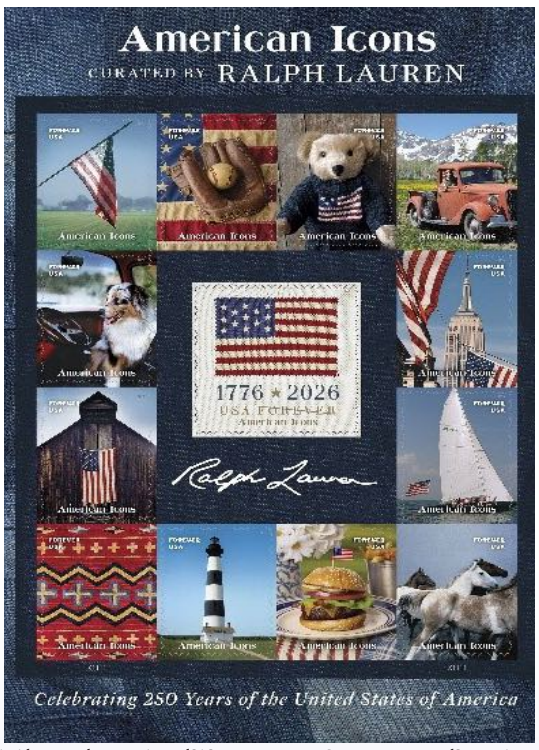
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USPS HONORS NATION'S 250TH WITH RALPH LAUREN STAMPS

Staff Report



The U.S. Postal Service has announced a special commemorative stamp collection to celebrate the nation's 250th anniversary in 2026, marking the first time an individual has been invited to curate an entire official USPS stamp issuance.

Titled American Icons, the collection features 13 Forever stamps selected by legendary fashion designer Ralph Lauren. The stamps highlight images that reflect the values, traditions and symbols that have shaped the United States over the past two and a half centuries.

Lauren, who received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2025, is known worldwide for creating a brand rooted in American heritage and culture. Born in the Bronx in 1939, he built his business from humble beginnings, selling neckties from a single drawer in New York City's Empire State Building before developing one of the world's most recognizable lifestyle brands.

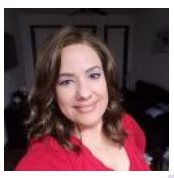
The American Icons collection includes photographs drawn from Lauren's personal archive and imagery that has inspired him throughout his career. Featured designs include the American flag, a baseball glove once used by Jackie Robinson, a weathered pickup truck, a faithful dog, the Empire State Building, a traditional barn, a Diné (Navajo) blanket woven by artist Naiomi Glasses, a teddy bear, a lighthouse, a hamburger, a racing sailboat and wild horses.

At the center of the pane is a 13th stamp featuring a knitted American flag design inspired by Lauren's iconic flag sweater and bearing the dates "1776 to 2026." The pane's surrounding text celebrates 250 years of the United States and identifies the collection as curated by Ralph Lauren.

In addition to the commemorative set, USPS will release a 2026 U.S. Flag Mail Use Stamp featuring a detailed photograph of Lauren's knitted flag design. The definitive stamp will be available in panes, booklets and coils for everyday mail use.

The stamps will be formally dedicated during a ceremony on June 9 at New York City's historic James A. Farley Post Office Building. USPS officials say the collection honors the shared values and enduring spirit that have united Americans since the nation's founding.

The American Icons stamps will be sold in panes of 13 and, as Forever stamps, will always be valid for the current First-Class Mail 1-ounce rate.



WHY DO I NEED ESTATE PLANNING?

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



Estate planning is often misunderstood as something only wealthy families need, but it is about far more than distributing assets. Think of it as a roadmap that protects your wishes and provides security for your loved ones during your lifetime and after your passing.

A complete estate plan typically includes several important documents. A will outlines basic instructions for distributing assets but does not avoid probate. A revocable living trust allows assets to pass privately and helps avoid probate. A power of attorney appoints someone to manage financial matters if you become unable to do so. Advance directives communicate health care wishes when you cannot speak for yourself, and final disposition instructions explain your preferences for burial or cremation. Together, these documents create a framework that evolves with your life and protects your intentions.

Many people wonder why they still need a will if they already have a trust. The answer is simple: a 'pour-over will' acts as a safety net. If any assets were not transferred into the trust during your lifetime, the will directs them there after death. Ideally, it is never needed, but it provides important protection for overlooked assets.

The most important document in an estate plan depends on the situation. During incapacity, the trust and power of attorney become essential. After death, a will becomes critical for assets outside the trust. For many families, the revocable living trust serves as the cornerstone because it helps create smooth transitions in both situations.

Your estate includes everything you own — your home, vehicles, bank accounts, retirement funds, personal belongings and even sentimental family items. Many people underestimate the value and complexity of what they own.

While do-it-yourself estate planning may appear inexpensive, mistakes and omissions can create significant legal and financial problems later. Families often spend far more fixing avoidable errors than they would have spent creating a proper plan with professional guidance.

Every family's estate planning puzzle is unique. The right plan depends on your assets, family dynamics and personal wishes for the future.

Laurie Ohall is a Florida board-certified elder law attorney practicing in Brandon, Florida. She has been practicing law for 30 years and her practice is focused on estate planning, elder law planning and probate. Ohall is licensed to practice law in Florida and Ohio.



Christian Voice



Grace Notes

Valleys

By Debora Coty

Having just returned from the lovely Smokies, I miss hiking the elevated mountain trails. But I've found there's a better place to spend time than the mountaintop ... the Valley of Blessing.

Yep, it's a real place. A valley that restores hope. A safe place. A springboard for heartfelt gratitude. A haven of rest. Of healing and regrouping, physically, metaphorically and spiritually.

Described in 2 Chronicles 20:26, the Valley of Blessing was so named because Jehovah miraculously rescued His people (Judah) from their enemies there. The Hebrews, having been assured that "the battle is not yours but God's" (2 Chron. 20:15), loudly sang praise songs to God as they clumsily marched toward the enemy's camp. Jehovah caused the enemy army to become disoriented, turn on their fellow soldiers and destroy themselves.

The Hebrews were so overcome with joy that after they spent three days sorting out all the plunder-blessings abandoned by the fleeing army, they held a massive praise fest in the valley, profusely thanked God for orchestrating their enemy's shocking self-destruction and for restoring "peace on all sides" (2 Chron. 20:20).

They called this spontaneous worship place the "Valley of Blessing."

Many of us are more familiar with a different valley, the "Valley of the Shadow of Death" (Psalm 23). I recently found a Christmas newsletter I'd written in 2005 expressing my thankfulness for a reprieve outside that oppressive Shadow of Death. After years of heartbreak from six miscarriages, I was grateful for a period of restoration and regeneration.

I entered the Valley of Blessing. And it was truly a blessed relief.

I've since relished my sweet reposes in the Valley of Blessing, even if brief. I hope you do too, my friend. For it's in this holy valley that we may cherish "peace on all sides." When we recognize and appreciate that our Valley of Blessing is from Jehovah, we can apply to ourselves the Holy Spirit's admonition:

"You need not fight in this battle; station yourselves, stand and see the salvation of the LORD on your behalf. ... Do not fear or be dismayed; ... go out to face them, [your enemies], for the LORD is with you," (2 Chron. 20:17 NASB).

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

WHAT'S IN A NAME?



In the future, foreigners who do not belong to your people Israel will hear of you. They will come from distant lands because of your name, for they will hear of your great name and your strong hand and your powerful arm." — 1 Kings 8:41-42.

I have to lead with a shoutout to Maul's Bike Shop in Halifax, Massachusetts. We have exchanged several emails, and the proprietor kindly sent me a Maul's Bike Shop T-shirt.

It turns out there is a serious worldwide shortage of Mauls, so it is gratifying to run into one willing to communicate. The fact that I am beginning to explore the world of biking makes the timing a serendipity.

Family names are interesting. It may not be something we can choose — which can leave you feeling helpless, but it is absolutely something we can help to define — which in turn is empowering.

My mother never liked the name. She was vocal about this, and it hurt my dad's feelings. My brother, Geoff, was two years ahead at school, so teachers would greet me with "Not another Maul!"

Then, I discovered an interesting family scandal which helped by adding some notoriety. Apparently, my great-great-grandfather's mother, Eliza, was in between a series of husbands at the time he was born (circa 1840). And so, Eliza gave him her maiden name, Maul.

Maul is a wonderful name mostly because my father, David, and my grandfather, FW, lived with such deep integrity and depth of character and unrelenting witness to the grace and the goodness of God.

So, my opportunity has been to build on such a positive heritage, and I pray that the name — my name — carries an association with grace, peace, light, love, mercy, justice, healing, encouragement, promise, hope and possibility. Not just because people have read my books and articles but also because they know me and experience the truth and the power of the good news.

The legacy associated with any name is the cumulative witness that our life bears to the story we live. The name 'Derek Maul' is my part in — my contribution to — The Greatest Story Ever Told.



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



LOCAL FAMILY OPENS FIRST BETTER BLEND LOCATION IN FLORIDA

By Jane Owen



Owners of the new Better Blend in Brandon, The Faustini family (Mike, Hillary, Skyleigh and Brody) on June 6, opening day.

The grand opening of Florida's first Better Blend location, Better Blend Brandon, was celebrated with fanfare on June 6. The celebration included free smoothie bowls for a year for the first 25 customers, half off smoothie bowls for the next 75 customers, free samples, a raffle for a food truck event, and a grand prize raffle with a total value of over $1,000.

Owners Mike and Hillary Faustini are long-time residents of Riverview. Hillary was born and raised in Brandon. Their reasons for bringing Better Blend to Florida are two-fold. Mike was searching for healthy low sugar, high protein food options as he was improving his health. Hillary was looking for a meaningful job that she could do while raising her kids, Skyleigh and Brody, and caring for her sister Hope who has Down Syndrome and is non-verbal autistic.

"I was looking for a healthier lifestyle and Hillary was looking for a job. We found Better Blend and we saw that it is a family run business, as well. That really resonated with us. We tried their products and we fell in love with them," Mike said.

"We have custody of my sister. It's important to me to take good care of her. When I was looking for a job, Mike was like, 'What can we do together that we will enjoy?' That's when we found Better Blend," Hillary said.

Better Blend smoothies are made with high-quality protein, organic stevia, zero added sugar, and 13 essential vitamins and minerals. The menu also includes acai bowls, protein bowls and snacks. Mike's current favorite menu item is the Acai Power Bowl. Hillary's is the Orange Creamsicle Blend.

Better Blend was founded by Issac Hamlin in 2018. A college rugby athlete, Hamlin was inspired to find a better way to fuel his game. He was in Brandon for opening weekend.

"Opening our first Florida location in Brandon is incredibly special for us, and it makes it even more meaningful to do it alongside the family. They genuinely care about their community and share our belief that small, everyday choices can make a big difference in people's lives," Hamlin said.

Better Blend Brandon offers catering, has a food truck for events, and is located at 955 E Brandon Blvd, Brandon, FL 33511. For more information and to see their menu, visit www.betterblend-smoothies-bowls.com.

GFWC BR. JUNIOR WOMAN'S CLUB CONTINUES 70-YEAR LEGACY OF COMMUNITY SERVICE & IMPACT

By Ella Baroni



The GFWC Brandon Junior Woman's Club welcomes new members. Visit the website at www.gfwcbrandonjuniors.org.



For more than seven decades, the GFWC Brandon Junior Woman's Club has been making a lasting difference in the Brandon community through volunteer service, fundraising efforts and outreach programs. Founded in 1955, the organization is part of the General Federation of Women's Clubs and is dedicated to improving the lives of others through hands-on service and community support.

Leading the club is second-year President Mylisa Cartmill, whose passion for helping others reflects the organization's mission. Cartmill proudly embraces the club's motto: "We don't sit, we don't stand, we SERVE." Whether she is organizing community projects or rescuing French bulldogs in need of loving homes, she is committed to making a positive impact.

A third-generation Floridian who grew up in Brandon, Cartmill has deep roots in the community she serves. Her dedication to helping others and creating positive change inspires fellow members and encourages more women to become involved. Looking ahead, she hopes to expand the club's membership and continue strengthening its presence throughout the Brandon area.

The GFWC Brandon Junior Woman's Club provides women with opportunities to give back, develop leadership skills and build meaningful friendships while serving their community. The club meets on the first Thursday of every month at 7 p.m. at the historic Brandon Woman's Club clubhouse, located at 129 N. Moon Ave. in Brandon. Members pay annual dues, and women interested in joining are encouraged to attend a meeting and learn more about the organization's mission and impact.

For women looking to make a difference, the Brandon Junior Woman's Club offers an opportunity to turn compassion into action. As Cartmill and her fellow members continue their work, they prove that when women come together with a shared purpose, they have the power to create meaningful change in their community. For more, visit www.gfwcbrandonjuniors.org.

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SESCO CEMENT OPENS NEW IMPORT TERMINAL AT PORT TAMPA BAY

By Brian Bokor



Photo Courtesy of SESCO Cement

SESCO Cement officially opened its new cement import terminal at Port Redwing in Gibsonton, marking a major investment in Tampa Bay's construction supply chain and regional infrastructure network.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony was held June 9, at 6035 Diana Toledo Almeida Road and included SESCO Cement leadership, Port Tampa Bay officials, State Representative Michael Owen, and representatives from the construction and maritime industries.

The 14-acre facility includes nearly 100,000 tons of storage capacity and is expected to become the largest cement terminal in Florida upon full build-out, creating a major new gateway for construction materials serving one of the nation's fastest-growing states.

The terminal features what the company describes as the largest wheel-mounted cement ship unloader currently in operation, along with an advanced mobile conveyor system designed to efficiently move materials from ships to storage and distribution networks.

SESCO Cement CEO Rick Van Eyk said the project represents years of investment, engineering, and collaboration.

"As a key partner in the region's construction and infrastructure supply chain, SESCO Cement plays an important role in supporting continued growth across West Central Florida and reinforcing Tampa's increasing importance as a gateway for global construction materials," Van Eyk said.

The terminal is strategically positioned to serve Florida's major construction markets through maritime shipping lanes, interstate highways, and rail networks. SESCO expects to move significant volumes of cement, supplementary cementitious materials, and aggregates through the facility.

A custom-designed ship unloader arrived in Tampa earlier this year following a 25-day voyage and was assembled locally after nearly two years of engineering and design work.

"Port Tampa Bay is proud to welcome SESCO Cement as an operating partner," said Raul Alfonso, executive vice president and chief commercial officer for Port Tampa Bay. "This terminal strengthens our position as a key hub for construction materials and underscores the vital role Port Tampa Bay plays in supporting infrastructure needs for Florida's more than 23 million residents."

SESCO Cement, established in 2014, operates a network of cement terminals serving construction, manufacturing, and distribution customers across the United States.

Port Tampa Bay is Florida's largest seaport by tonnage and land area and serves as a critical gateway for construction materials, energy products, and international trade.

THRIFTY DEPOT IN BRANDON OFFERS QUALITY ITEMS AT RESALE PRICES

By Jane Owen

Bargain shoppers and anyone on a tight budget should check out Thrifty Depot in Brandon. Located near O'Brien's Irish Pub and Grill in the Oak Park Plaza on Lumsden Road, Thrifty Depot offer amazing deals on clothing, collectibles, housewares, toys, jewelry and more. The inventory changes often and includes both gently used items from garage and estate sales and new items purchased from liquidation pallets from local stores.



Thrifty Depot is located at 723 W. Lumsden Rd. It is open Monday through Friday, 4:30-8:30 p.m., and on Saturday, 10 a.m.-8:30 p.m.



The owners, Gil Brenn and Doris Maggiore, are a son-and-mom team who live in Brandon and Valrico, respectively. They previously had a store in Tampa but decided to move their shop closer to home.

"Choosing this location was because it is close to home in our community," Brenn said.

Brenn and Maggiore love the hunt of finding good items. On early Saturday mornings, they go together to garage sales and estate sales in the area. They also regularly pick up pallets of liquidation items from stores like Target.

When asked what they love most about having a thrift store, the answer came quickly.

"We like people. We love the people that come in. It's fun to see what items people buy, and sometimes the most unusual items go quick. But we love getting to know people and the items they are looking for," Brenn said.

In addition to new items from liquidation sales, Thrifty Depot carries new jewelry, new military challenge coins and patches, new music equipment and 3D-printed art from a local artist. They have a nice selection of CDs, DVDs and records as well.

Veterans receive a 15 percent discount, and seniors receive a 10 percent discount.

Thrifty Depot is located at 723 W. Lumsden Rd. It is open Monday through Friday, 4:30-8:30 p.m., and on Saturday, 10 a.m.-8:30 p.m. For more information, visit https://thriftydepot.com/ or call 813-315-8210.

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SUMMER: A GREAT TIME TO DREAM BIGGER



Summertime often brings a change of pace for families affected by autism. School routines pause, calendars may become a little less hectic and many parents begin looking for ways to keep their children engaged, learning and growing.

As parents, we are constantly surrounded by advice. Friends, family members, professionals, social media and even strangers often have opinions about what we should be doing. While advice can be helpful, it's important to remember that nobody knows your child, and your family, better than you do.

You are the expert on your child.

This summer, instead of focusing on what your child 'should' be doing, consider what you would like to empower them to accomplish next. What strengths can you build on? What interests bring them joy? What goals are meaningful for your family?

Maybe your child has a talent that deserves more attention. Perhaps they love music, art, technology, animals, swimming, cooking or building things. Maybe they have a hobby that lights them up and gives them confidence. Summer can be the perfect opportunity to explore those interests and help them grow.

For some families, growth may look different. For example, my personal focus for my 21-year-old son this summer is on life skills, communication, social opportunities and creating more opportunities for independence. And sometimes, what a child needs most is rest. After a long school year filled with demands and expectations, summer can be a chance to recharge and reset.

The goal isn't perfection. The goal is to make progress.

Small steps often lead to big accomplishments over time. Celebrate the victories, no matter how small they may seem. A new skill, a new friendship, trying a new activity and gaining confidence in something they once found difficult are all wins worth celebrating.

At Experienced Autism Alliance, we encourage families to focus on possibilities rather than limitations. Every child has unique strengths, gifts and potential waiting to be discovered.

This summer, dream a little bigger, follow your child's lead and remember that growth looks different for everyone. The journey is not about comparing your child to others; it's about helping them become the best version of themselves.



THE GOLD BAR SCAM: STEALING FROM SENIORS



A growing fraud trend across Florida is costing seniors their life savings. Recent cases locally highlight a sophisticated scam in which criminals convince victims to liquidate their assets, purchase gold bars and hand them over to couriers posing as government agents.

One of the most notable cases involved an 80-year-old Bradenton veteran who lost his entire $1.4 million life savings. Detectives later connected the scheme to a nationwide fraud operation that stole more than $6 million from victims across the country.

The scam typically begins with a phone call, email, text message or computer pop-up warning that the victim's identity has been compromised. The caller often claims to be from a federal agency such as U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the U.S. Marshals Service, the FBI or another government entity.

The criminal then creates a crisis. The victim is told that their Social Security number has been linked to criminal activity, their bank accounts are under attack or that an arrest warrant has been issued in their name. To make the story believable, the scammer may provide a fake badge number, a case number, official-looking documents and even transfer calls between multiple 'agents.'

Once fear and trust have been established, the victim is instructed to withdraw money from retirement accounts, savings accounts or investment funds and convert those funds into physical gold bars. The scammers claim the gold is needed to protect the victim's assets or assist with a confidential government investigation.

The final step is the courier. A person arrives at the victim's home or a designated location to collect the gold. By the time the victim realizes the truth, the gold is gone and nearly impossible to recover.

Remember:

• No legitimate government agency, law enforcement organization or financial institution will ever instruct you to purchase gold, withdraw cash or surrender valuables as part of an investigation.

• If you receive such a request, stop communication immediately and contact local law enforcement or a trusted family member before taking any action.

If you have any other questions or concerns, please contact me, Master Deputy Jeff Merry, Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, at 813-242-5515.





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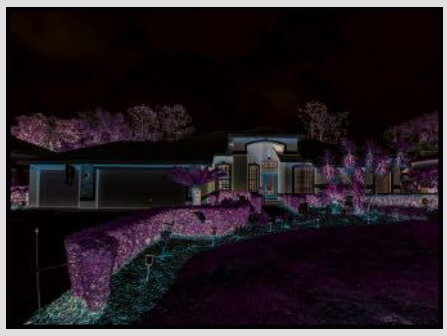
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