

AFTER 24 YEARS, OSPREY OBSERVER LAUNCHES NEW SOUTHSORE EDITION

By Marie Gilmore



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SOUTHSORE DEFINED: COMMUNITY, GROWTH AND A NEW FLORIDA LIFESTYLE

By Marie Gilmore

SouthShore is no longer just a collection of small towns south of Tampa Bay — it is one of the region's fastest-growing and most dynamic areas, defined by thoughtful development, strong community connections and a lifestyle that blends modern convenience with Florida's natural beauty.



Photo Courtesy of the SouthShore Chamber

Stretching across Southern Hillsborough County, South-Shore encompasses communities such as South Riverview, Gibsonton, Apollo Beach, Balm and Sun City Center to the Manatee County rural and waterfront areas evolved into a thriving families, retirees and business opportunity and quality

What draws people to SouthShore is its balance. Residents enjoy suburban, laid-back living while remaining within easy reach of Tampa's major employment centers, entertainment and cultural attractions. Parks, trails, community centers and waterfront access are woven throughout the region, offering opportunities for boating, fishing, kayaking, paddleboarding and outdoor recreation year-round.

Master-planned communities have become a defining feature of the SouthShore landscape. Developments like Southshore Bay in Wimauma showcase resort-style living with innovative amenities, including the well-known crystal lagoon — a massive, man-made waterfront complete with sandy beaches, water sports and a swim-up bar. Nearby, active adult communities such as Medley at Southshore Bay and Southshore Falls in Apollo Beach cater to retirees seeking an active, social lifestyle with trails, fitness facilities and organized activities.

Families are also a driving force behind SouthShore's growth, attracted by newer neighborhoods, expanding school options and the sense of community found in youth

sports leagues, local events and neighborhood gatherings. Golf carts are a common sight in some "What makes SouthShore special is the pride people feel in belonging here. Our six communities may each have their own identity, but together they form a unified region that blends rural beauty, waterfront living and unforgettable sunsets with strong indus-

trial, educational, medical and recreational opportunities. It's that balance — between growth and tradition, progress and nature — that continues to draw people to SouthShore," said Melanie Davis, Executive Director of the Greater SouthShore Chamber of Commerce.

That future is being shaped in part by the Greater SouthShore Chamber of Commerce, which represents a unified voice for the region's businesses and communities. Formed in November 2023 through the merger of the historic SouthShore Chamber and the South Hillsborough Chamber, the organization now serves a broad and diverse area, strengthening collaboration from South Riverview through Wimauma and beyond.

In essence, SouthShore is defined by connection: connection to nature, to neighbors and to opportunity. With its mix of relaxation, recreation and progress, the region is writing a new chapter in Florida living — one that continues to attract those looking not just for a place to live but also a place to belong.

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THE DRAGON IS CALLING; LOCAL TEAM IS LOOKING FOR INTERESTED PADDLERS

By Denise Sansosti



The Leviathans, a local dragon boat team, has been in Apollo Beach since 2012.

The new year brings goal-setting and, for many people, goal-breaking. National Quitters Day falls on the second Friday of January and is the unofficial day when many abandon their New Year's resolutions. Research shows people are more likely to stick with a team sport than an individual one. Team sports foster camaraderie, confidence and teamwork while also reducing stress and promoting a sense of community.

Although its history dates back more than 2,000 years, many people have never seen a dragon boat. The sport involves 10-20 paddlers using single-bladed paddles while a steersperson guides the boat. Often referred to as the ultimate team sport, dragon boating requires every paddler to work in complete unison. Participants paddle while seated, making it a full-body workout with excellent cardiovascular benefits.

Most people have no prior experience before stepping into the boat. Laura White, a newer teammate of the Leviathans in Apollo Beach, shared, "My favorite thing about dragon boating is being on the water with a friendly and encouraging group of people. Being connected to the other

paddlers and the water is both meditative and rewarding."

The Leviathans are coached by H. Banks Edwards, who has been with the team since 2012. He has also competed at the national and world championship levels with other teams.

"When I started, I didn't know anything about the sport," Edwards said. "I stuck with it for fitness and positive group dynamics."

He added, "What I enjoy most about coaching is teaching the fundamentals of dragon boat paddling and then working with paddlers as they grow into stronger, more confident athletes."

All are welcome to join a practice to discover a new form of exercise on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 6-7 p.m. and Saturdays from 8:30-10 a.m. No equipment or experience is required. Interested participants are asked to email ahead of time to reserve a seat and receive additional details at leviathansdbinfo@gmail.com.

Member Abbey Boyle joined the Leviathans because "it looked interesting, I needed exercise and I enjoy being outside on the water. Races are so much fun. Teams are supportive of one another while still being competitive. I love being part of a team."

To learn more or watch videos, follow the team on social media at www.facebook.com/groups/mbdbc.

BETH ISRAEL CONGREGATION MARKS 50 YEARS OF SERVICE

By Brad Stager

As the new year begins, Beth Israel Jewish Congregation of Sun City Center acknowledges and celebrates the significance of its hard work and achievements in reaching its 50-year milestone and anniversary.

This enduring vessel of faith has been anchored to the Hillsborough County South-Shore community for half a century and it marks the event with a gathering at Kings Point Veterans Theater on January 31, for a celebration of the cumulative work the congregation has performed thus far.

Ricki Bauman is the president of Beth Israel Sun City Center, and she said that working to benefit others is a core principle of the group and largely defines its purpose.

"We are very active in what we call social action," she said.

Beth Israel's social action efforts include things like sustaining a meal delivery program for local senior citizens and collecting school supplies not just for young scholars learning their lessons but for their teachers as well.

Today's thriving congregation dates back to 1975 and is the legacy of a cohort, small in number but possessed of that hard-



Rabbi Adolf Feinberg, Ph.D., is regarded as the founder of Beth Israel Jewish Congregation of Sun City Center.



BETH ISRAEL
THE JEWISH CONGREGATION OF
SUN CITY CENTER

won faith common to those who seek meaningful answers to life's questions. Its leader, Rabbi Adolf Feinberg, Ph.D., was a retired Army chaplain who combined spiritual clarity and administrative prowess to establish Beth Israel's foundations.

As the group of devotees gathered and grew over the years, a series of leaders provided intermittent spiritual guidance to them until they received Rabbi Car-

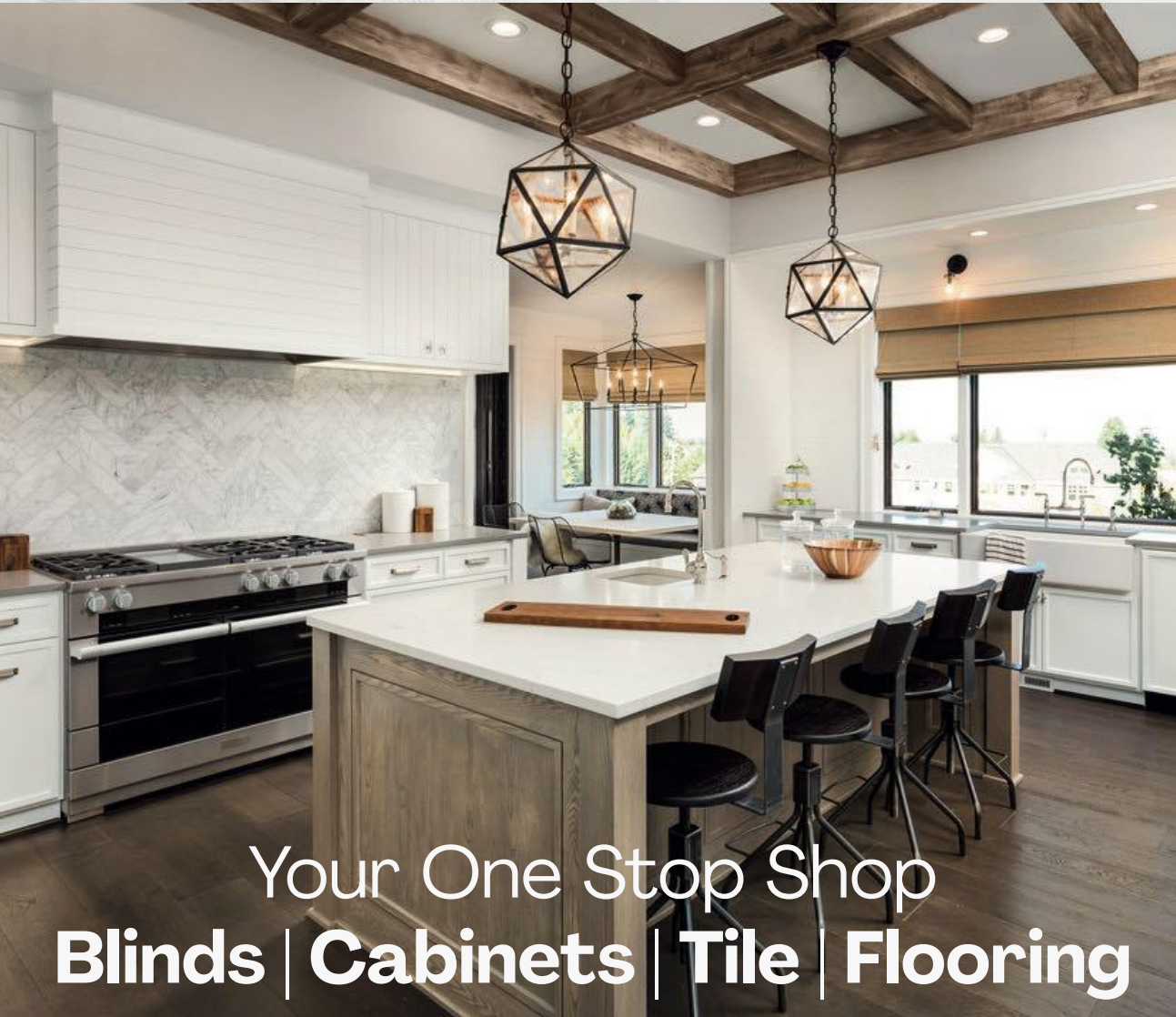
la Freedman in July of 2013. This brought about more formal instruction in the Jewish faith and greater access to pastoral services as she excelled in creating a congregation defined by compassion. Her passing in 2024 presents a great initial challenge for the next 50 years as the congregation seeks to maintain its religious, education and social development in selecting its next spiritual leader.

"We want to expand on all those aspects of growth in the next 50 years," said Bauman, who added that all are welcome to learn about the congregation and its programs.

Beth Israel is currently led by Rabbi Philip Cohen, PhD as interim rabbi.

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VALENCIA NEIGHBORS GO ABOVE AND BEYOND TO SUPPORT PANTRY

Staff Report

"Since 1999, Our Lady's Pantry has been putting food on the tables of thousands of men, women and children here in Southern Hillsborough County," said director Tom Bullaro. "This has only been possible thanks to the generosity of



Valencia Lakes residents deliver food donations to Our Lady's Pantry, continuing years of generous community support.

neighbors near and far. In fact, neighborhoods throughout Sun City Center and surrounding towns, and as far away as Lithia and Parrish, bring us food from time to time.

"One neighborhood, however, stands apart from the others in their dedication to our pantry," said Bullaro. "That would be Valencia Lakes.

"When Anita and I first moved from Pennsylvania to Florida in 2004, Southern Hillsborough County, especially along U.S. 301, was mostly countryside. But that changed quickly. And among the new homes going up everywhere, Valencia Lakes, just a couple of miles north of Our Lady's Pantry, in Wimauma, seems to have adopted us into their care."

Word of Mouth

Marge Burk from Valencia Lakes, who has worked at Our Lady's Pantry with her husband, Dave, for six years already, said the pantry has always had lots of volunteers from Valencia Lakes.

"I think what happened is that as some of us find the pantry, and we tell our friends," said Burk. "So then, they come and work too. It's kind of word of mouth more than anything. Obviously, not every-

one is free to work, but they can all bring food. And so, they do."

According to Burk, the Valencia Lakes Women's Club, which started in 2016, has long had a box in the commu-

nity center where residents just drop in food, knowing that somebody else is going to pick it up and bring it to the pantry.

"So yeah, it's a community thing, but independent people do their own thing too," said Burk. "Gail Greenburg, for example, who is not part of the women's club, puts out the call for donations through the Nextdoor app."

Kim Kordalski, co-director of Our Lady's Pantry, can't thank Greenberg and the Burks enough.

"Gail works on-site every Friday and asks me, 'What do you need?' She then puts a list on the Nextdoor app. Gail and the Burks bring in the food every time they come," said Kordalski.

"Just this week, Linda Benson, from the Women's Club of Valencia Lakes, brought us a check for \$2,000, along with 500 pounds of food from the club's most recent food drive. Last year, we received an amazing donation of \$8,700 from One Hundred Who Care Valencia Lakes.

"Whether donating food, time or treasure, it's like Valencia Lakes has us under their wing," said Bullaro. "We thank them for their extraordinary care over many years now."

CUSTOMIZED, FULL-SERVICE SOLUTIONS AT ONLINE PRINT SMART

By McKenzie Brown

Online Print Smart is a full-service print consulting company dedicated to helping businesses use print effectively to support growth and brand visibility. Rather than operating as a traditional copy shop or order-taking service, its team focuses on understanding each client's objectives and developing customized print solutions that align with those goals.

The company's services are built around four core pillars: print, signage, promotional products and graphic design. Online Print Smart produces a plethora of materials, including business cards, brochures, flyers, postcards, booklets, catalogs, banners, signage, packaging, labels, promotional items and more. In addition, it designs and manages Every Door Direct Mail (EDDM) programs, allowing businesses to reach targeted neighborhoods with professionally printed mail pieces.

As a print broker, Online Print Smart partners with a nationwide network of vetted trade printers. This model enables them to provide competitive pricing while maintaining consistent quality across different projects. Its team also offers consultation and education for DIY clients, carefully reviewing all supplied artwork to ensure it is fully print-ready prior to production. For clients who require creative support, professional design services are available.

Founded by Jack Parry, Online Print Smart is backed by more than 38 years of print in-



Jack Perry, founder of Online Print Smart.



dustry experience. Jack established the company with the goal of guiding small and mid-sized businesses through the complexities of print, delivering reliable results, cost-effective solutions and exceptional service. His commitment to client success has resulted in a strong base of long-term, returning customers. Jack's slogan, "If you're not happy with your current printer, then you don't know Jack," proves itself true time and

time again.

The leadership team has recently expanded with the addition of David Parry, Jack's son and Online Print Smart's operations officer. David brings a background in U.S. Army operations and construction management, contributing strong organizational and planning skills that ensure projects are produced accurately and delivered on schedule.

From concept through delivery, Online Print Smart prioritizes accuracy, accountability and service. If challenges arise, it takes responsibility and resolves them promptly. Its focus is not on one-time print jobs but on building lasting partnerships and serving as a trusted print resource well into the future. You can contact Jack at print@onlineprintsmart.com, find out more at <https://onlineprintsmart.com/> or contact Jack at 813-681-4543.

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CONNECTING COMMUNITIES: 2026 NEIGHBORHOODS EXPO BRINGS COUNTY SERVICES TO RESIDENTS

Staff Report

Hillsborough County's neighborhoods are as diverse as the nearly 1.5 million people who call them home, stretching across 1,266 square miles from the rocky shores of Old Tampa Bay to the coastal prairie

of the county's southern edge. On Saturday, February 28, residents from every corner of the county are invited to come together to celebrate that diversity at the 2026 annual Neighborhoods Expo.

Hosted by Hillsborough County Neighborhood Relations, the free event will take place from 9 a.m.-12 Noon at Feeding Tampa Bay's new facility, located at 3624 Causeway Blvd. in Tampa. Doors open at 9 a.m., with a welcome from the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners scheduled for 9:30 a.m.

Now in its 21st year, the Neighborhoods Expo has become a beloved civic tradition, offering residents a unique opportunity to connect directly with the county departments and agencies that help their communities thrive. This year's theme, 'Love Our Neighborhoods,' reflects a renewed focus on building strong relationships between residents and local government.

"This event is really about connection," said Stephanie Agliano, who directs the county's engagement efforts with residents. "We want people to feel comfortable asking questions, learning what resources are available, and under-



standing how county services support safe, healthy and engaged neighborhoods."

Throughout the morning, attendees can meet face-to-face with representatives

from county departments ranging from public safety and code enforcement to permitting and neighborhood services. While the expo is not intended for conducting official business, staff will be on hand to provide guidance, answer questions and point residents in the right direction for follow-up assistance.

The event is designed for longtime neighborhood leaders and first-time attendees alike. Participants can expect informative conversations, hands-on learning and a welcoming atmosphere — along with a few giveaways to take home.

Registration is recommended to help organizers better understand the interests of attendees, but walk-ins are welcome. County officials encourage residents to spread the word and bring neighbors along.

For Hillsborough County, the Neighborhoods Expo is more than an event — it's a reminder that strong neighborhoods are built through shared knowledge, open communication and community pride. Residents interested in attending can register online and learn more at <https://hcfl.gov/>.

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A SHOW-STOPPING SURPRISE: HILLSBOROUGH TEACHERS GET ACCESS TO NCL COSTUME CLOSET

By Kelly Wise Valdes

Hillsborough County theater and dance teachers received an unexpected surprise when Norwegian Cruise Line opened its Riverview costume warehouse, offering educators the chance to select from thousands of professional garments and accessories.

Rachel Anderson, costume production coordinator at Norwegian Cruise Line, said the idea grew from a desire to support young performers. Anderson said she wants students to love dance and drama and hopes these costumes will help inspire students to continue with theater. For years, the company has donated retired costumes only to employees, but then Anderson had the idea to open it up to theater programs across Hillsborough County, where Norwegian's warehouse is located.

This year, teachers arriving at the warehouse found an expansive selection with more than 30 racks filled with costumes, including leather jackets, sequins, feathers, fur, dancewear and tap shoes.

Educators wasted no time selecting pieces for upcoming productions.

"Strawberry Crest High School's theater department, preparing for an upcoming



A Hillsborough County theater teacher looks through racks of donated costumes at Norwegian Cruise Line's Riverview warehouse.



performance of Aladdin, stocked up on shimmering pieces, while York PreK-8, launching its theater program, gathered a wide variety of essentials," said Debra Bellanti, director of public relations at Hillsborough County Public Schools. "She was very excited to be able to get some basics that she could use year-round, and they are also planning a production of Beauty and the Beast, so she grabbed a lot of costumes she thinks will work for that."

The process for teachers is straightforward. Laura Hobby, the K-12 art and theater supervisor, has formed a relationship with Norwegian, so it will contact her when it has costumes it wants to donate, and Hobby will notify all the Hillsborough County theater and dance departments of the time and date. This is expected to take place annually.

Organizers called the donation transformative for Hillsborough County schools' theater and arts departments. With more than tens of thousands of dollars in costumes and shoes generously donated to Hillsborough schools, the impact is enormous.

The warehouse is located at 6423 S. Falkenburg Rd. in Riverview. Anderson can be reached at raanderson@ncl.com or 645-240-5078.

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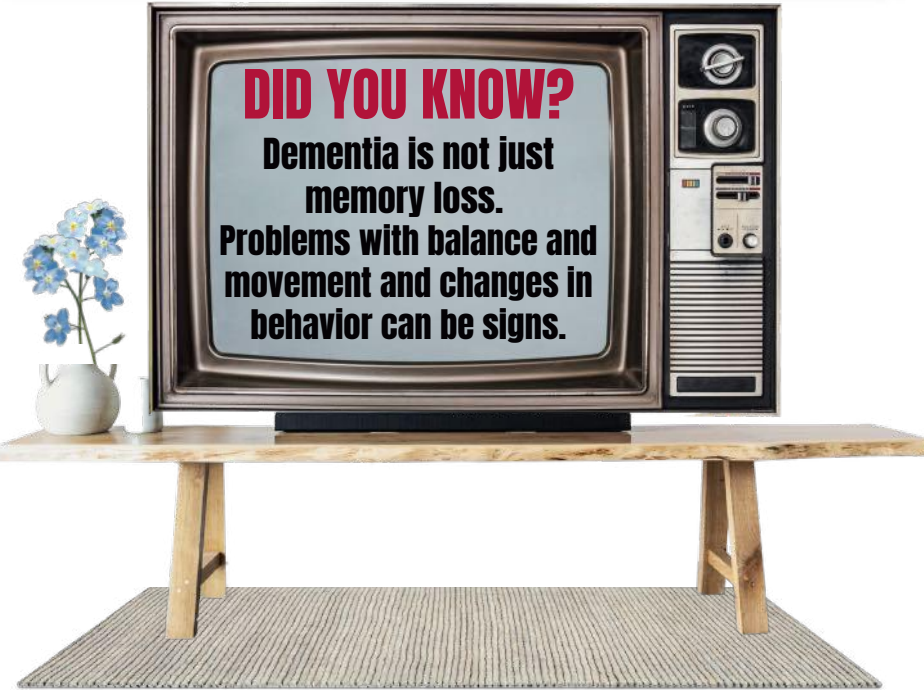


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FLORIDA STATE FAIR TO MARK AMERICA'S 250TH ANNIVERSARY WITH PATRIOTIC 2026 THEME

The Florida State Fair is preparing to shine brighter than ever in 2026 as it celebrates America's 250th birthday with a patriotic theme, festive entertainment and a limited-time advance ticket deal.

Fair officials announced this week that the 2026 Florida State Fair will be themed "America's Sunniest Celebration," a tribute to 250 years of American history infused with Florida flair. The annual 12-day event will take place Feb. 5-16, 2026, at the Florida State Fairgrounds in Tampa, running through Presidents Day.

Billed as part of the nationwide America250 celebration, the 2026 fair is being promoted as a milestone event filled with classic fair traditions, deep-fried favorites, dazzling fireworks, live entertainment and agricultural showcases, alongside special nods to the nation's past.

"Celebrating 250 years of America is something truly special, and we're excited to mark the occasion with a fair that honors both our nation's history and Florida's unique roots," said Cheryl Flood, chief executive officer of the Florida State Fair. "'America's Sunniest Celebration' is more than just a theme, it's a chance to bring people together, shine a light on our state's rich



Crowds enjoy the sights and attractions at the Florida State Fairgrounds in Tampa. The 2026 Florida State Fair will run Feb. 5-16 and feature the patriotic theme "America's Sunniest Celebration" in honor of the nation's 250th birthday.

Staff Report

agricultural traditions and create new memories with family and friends. We can't wait to welcome everyone back to the fairgrounds for a celebration that's as bright as Florida itself."

In addition to unveiling the theme, fair officials announced a one-day-only

advance ticket flash sale scheduled for Oct. 1. During the sale,

admission tickets will be available for \$5 from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., or while supplies last, with no additional fees. Officials say the discounted tickets represent the lowest admission price available for the 2026 fair and offer savings of up to \$11 compared to gate prices.

Parking will also be offered at a flash sale price of \$5, limited to one per transaction.

Looking ahead, officials said the 2026 fair will feature agricultural events and exhibits, a journey through time at the fair's living history museum, and a mix of classic and new fan-favorite foods.

Tickets can only be purchased online through the Florida State Fair website www.floridastatefair.com.

ARTIST BRINGS CANVASES TO LIFE THROUGH LIVE PAINTING EVENTS

By Olivia Clark

Riverview-based artist Alexis King has built a name for herself by turning blank canvases into works of art in real time. Specializing in realism, King is known for live painting at charity events and community fundraisers, where her finished pieces are often auctioned to benefit nonprofit organizations. She also offers live painting services for weddings, creating commissioned keepsakes for couples and clients.

King describes herself as an artist drawn to people and animals, using realism and detail to tell a story through her work.

"I enjoy capturing the essence of a subject," said King, owner of Alexis King Artworks. "My work is very detailed. My work is as color-accurate as possible."

King did not grow up believing art was a natural talent she possessed. Her journey began in 2014 while homeschooling her children.

"My kids and I got into this mindset that 'I can teach myself anything,'" King said. "My kids asked me to search drawing tutorials, and something just clicked. Once someone explains it in a way you can understand, your brain connects the dots."

Primarily self-taught, King learned through online portrait classes and YouTube tutorials, practicing consistently while raising her children. She credits the



Riverview artist Alexis King holds an owl painting, showcasing her realism style and attention to fine detail.

experience with shaping her career and showing her children the value of pursuing passions.

"I think it was great for my kids to see that you can pick up something new," King said. "If they see that Mommy can do it, they can do whatever they put their mind to."

King's interest in live painting grew as audiences responded to watching her

creative process on social media. She later began offering live painting services for weddings and charity events, combining her love of art with community involvement.

"To see something I created bring joy to people and then be auctioned to support a cause is such an honor," King said. "It's a very humbling experience."

Her work has been featured on HGTV and at red-carpet fundraising events, including the Lions Eye Institute annual gala. She is expanding into large-scale murals across Tampa and St. Petersburg, while four of her original paintings were recently selected for display in Hudson's Furniture locations.

Visit <https://alexiskingartworks.pro/> or follow Alexis King Artworks on Facebook and Instagram.



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ROTARY SPOTLIGHT: ACTIVITIES, MEETINGS & MORE

Staff Report

34th Annual Bill Harper Classic Golf Tournament

The Rotary Club of Brandon is kicking off 2026 with two major fundraising events aimed at supporting local charities and providing scholarships for college-bound students.

The first event, the 34th annual Bill Harper Classic Golf Tournament, is scheduled for Thursday, January 15, at Buckhorn Springs Golf and Country Club. Those interested in participating or learning more can contact Brett Briggs at 813-240-5380.

2026 Wild Game Dinner

Next on the calendar is the 2026 Wild Game Dinner, set for Friday, February 27, at the Hillsborough County Fairgrounds. Attendees will enjoy an all-you-can-eat wild game feast, an open bar, a wall-of-guns raffle, a corn-hole tournament and a 50/50 drawing.

Tickets, sponsorship details and additional information are available at <https://brandonwildgame.com/>, or by reaching out to any Rotary Club of Brandon member.

If you are interested in finding out more about Rotary or how to join this



amazing club, text Debbie Meegan at 813-601-2315 or join the club for lunch on Tuesdays at 12 Noon at the Rivard Simmons Rotary Event Center, located at 3007 S. Kings Ave. in Brandon.

Brandon January Speakers For FishHawk/Riverview Rotary Club

The FishHawk/Riverview Rotary Club continues its

community programming with several meetings and events planned through December and January. January programs include Liz Anderson, director of development for the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay, on Monday, January 5; Hillsborough County Chief Deputy Joe Mauier on Monday, January 12; and a Honduras Trip recap highlighting recent international service work on Monday, January 26.

You can also join the club on Mondays from 12 Noon-1 p.m. at Gasparilla Pizzeria & Growlers, located at 1028 E. Bloomingdale Ave. in Valrico, or on Thursdays from 5-6:30 p.m. at the Shrimp Boat, located at 1020 Bloomingdale Ave. in Valrico. For more information, contact Betty Huth at betty@hbphoto.com.

FEBRUARY IS HEART MONTH, BLOOD PRESSURE MONITORING IS IMPORTANT

Staff Report



Vriscilla Alexander, of St. Joseph's Hospital-South's facilities team, checks her blood pressure in the wellness station in the hospital's main lobby. The wellness station there is used by visitors, hospital team members and medical staff and others for free, quick health self-checks, including blood pressure. Wellness stations like this one are also located in Publix Super Markets.

February is Heart Month, raising awareness about cardiovascular disease prevention. Heart disease can take on many forms and often has subtle symptoms, including chest pressure or discomfort, sluggishness, lightheadedness, sudden dizziness and fatigue.

It's important not to ignore these subtle signs and symptoms. If you are experiencing pressure, heaviness or pain in the chest, the arm, below the breastbone or in combination with sweating, nausea, extreme shortness of breath or irregular heartbeats, you may be having a heart attack. Call 911 immediately.

St. Joseph's Hospital-South in Riverview recommends that you regularly monitor your blood pressure. With support from your health care team, you can lower your risk for heart disease and stroke. You can check your blood pressure at the doctor's office, other medical

locations, at home with a blood pressure monitoring device or for free at one of the wellness stations located in local Publix Super Markets.

The wellness stations conveniently provide you with free, interactive screenings giving you personal health stats of blood pressure, body weight and body mass index.

Learn more about St. Joseph's Hospital-South's heart and vascular services at <https://stjosephssouth-heart.org>.

St. Joseph's Hospital-South, part of the

BayCare Health System, opened in February 2015 to bring high-quality health care services to Southern Hillsborough County and Northern Manatee County in an environment designed to help patients heal. St. Joseph's Hospital-South features all-private suites and offers emergency care, an ICU, surgical services, imaging, oncology, cardiac catheterization, heart and vascular services, orthopedics, obstetrics, a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), pediatrics and more in a peaceful, relaxing and family-centered environment. The all-digital, state-of-the-art facility is specially designed to make visitors as comfortable as possible during their hospital experience. The 223-bed hospital is located south of Tampa at 6901 Simmons Loop in Riverview. For more information, visit <https://baycare.org/sjhs>.

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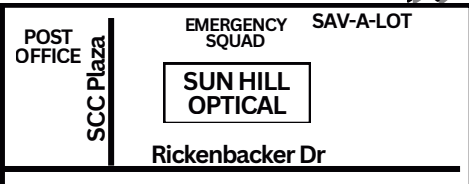
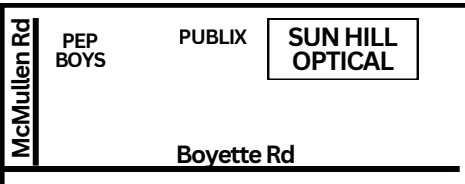
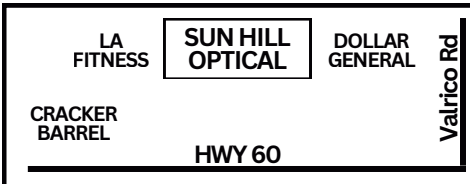
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FLORIDA CLARIFIES LICENSE PLATE FRAME LAW AFTER CONFUSION

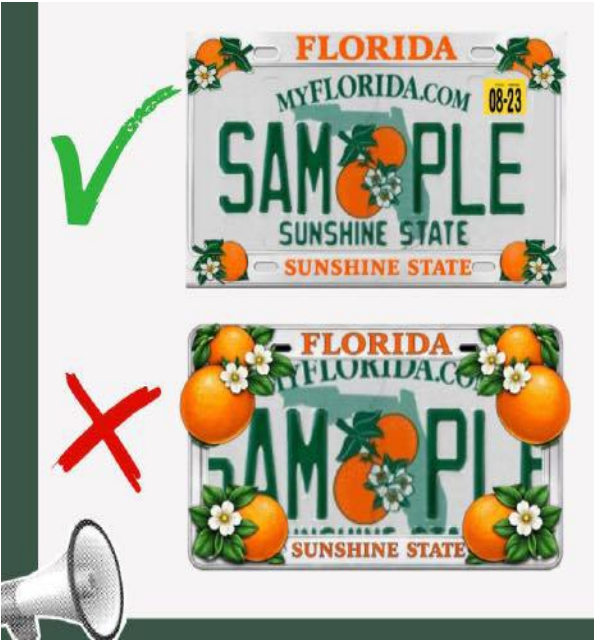
By Brad Stager

Recent updates to Florida's motor vehicle laws have caused confusion among drivers and even some law enforcement agencies, particularly concerning the legality of license plate frames, those few inches of cheap plastic or metal that advertise car dealerships or promote personal messages and surround a vehicle's metal registration tag. State and local officials have intervened to provide necessary clarification.

The changes became effective October 1, 2025, with the intention of combatting toll road scofflaws who try to avoid paying a required fare and to be able to better identify motorists who crash and flee.

Law enforcement agencies throughout the state administered warnings at first, but when a South Florida man faced serious consequences after he was arrested by Davie Police because the first 'S' in 'Sunshine State' on the tag was covered by the frame, an official clarification was issued.

The arrest was ruled invalid after the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (FLHSMV) issued a memo to all law enforcement agencies to clarify matters. The key points are that frames are okay to use as long as they do not obscure the alphanumeric plate identifier (the license plate numbers and letters) or the decal located in



The Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office posted examples of proper and improper framing of a vehicle's registration tag.

the top right-hand corner (the registration sticker) which indicates all taxes and fees on the vehicle have been collected.

The FLHSMV explicitly noted that it does "not consider the information on the bottom to be a primary feature."

Furthermore, a frame that "impinges on the information at the top of the plate is permissible, as long as law enforcement is able to identify the state that issued the license plate."

For local drivers, Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) announced its position on the agency's Facebook page: "License plate frames are okay as long as they don't block the plate number or decal. Covers, tinted shields, sprays or anything that makes a plate harder to read could lead to enforcement action. Before you drive, take a quick look at your tag and make sure it's clear," reads the December 30, 2025, post.

For those who fall outside of the guidelines, penalties for the second-degree misdemeanor can be severe, including fines up to \$500 and/or 60 days in jail. To completely avoid potential issues, many drivers are choosing to remove their license plate frames.

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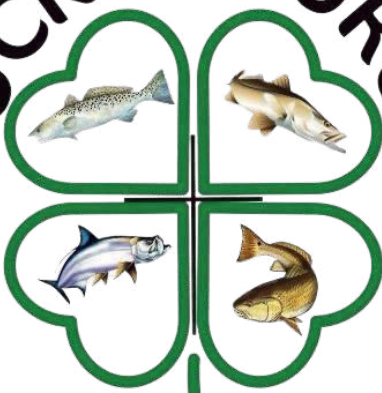


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BOB'S VETS GROWS INTO FLORIDA'S LARGEST VETERAN GATHERING

Staff Report

"Scaling restoration is essential to keeping pace with the challenges facing Florida's reefs," said Martha Campbell, operations manager at Reef Renewal USA. "FCR3 funding allows us to bridge the gap between coral spawning and reef restoration by growing corals to a size where they are more likely to survive and contribute to reef recovery. This partnership helps turn science into measurable, real-world impact."

Above all, Bob's Vets is a place where friendships deepen, challenges are shared and no veteran feels alone. To attend, speak or support, reach out to host Steve Browning at 314 853-3932 or browning99@hotmail.com. All veterans are welcome on Thursday mornings from 7-8:30 a.m. at the Bob Evans located at 102 Commercial Center Dr. in Ruskin.

(813) 591-3052 | 122 Harbor Village Lane, Apollo Beach

LOCAL CENTENARIAN SHARES WISDOM, TRAVEL STORIES AND GRATITUDE FOR LIFE

By Olivia Clark

Arlene Strehlau recently celebrated a milestone that still catches her off guard: her 100th birthday. Strehlau said the reality of reaching triple digits feels both "strange" and "fantastic," not because she feels older but because the years seemed to arrive faster than she ever expected.

"It was more so a feeling you never thought you'd get to, or it seems so far away," said Strehlau. "I just don't think about being old. That's the strange thing about it."

Her December 2025 birthday celebration stood out not for the number itself, but for the people who helped mark the occasion. Strehlau said she was surprised with thoughtful gifts, including new walking shoes and a new name badge, and she was especially touched by how many people gathered to celebrate with cake.

"The amount of people that came in for the cake, I don't know how many it was, but it was quite a few," said Strehlau. "Oh boy. That was something that surprised me."

When reflecting on her life, Strehlau said she is most proud of her long working career, lasting friendships and her creative talents. She worked until age 67 and continues to value her artistic ability,



Arlene Strehlau celebrated her 100th birthday on December 28, 2025.

particularly watercolor painting.

Travel has also played a major role in her life. Strehlau said she has visited 49 states and traveled internationally to countries such as Norway, China and Germany. Norway remains her favorite destination, including a memorable trip she took at age 94.

"We sat around a fire, and we had elk skins on our feet," said Strehlau. "I would take photos on my travels and then come home and paint them."

Strehlau credited staying active as one of the keys to a long life. Walking remains part of her daily routine, and she said she recently logged 5,100 steps in a single morning.

Her advice for younger generations is straightforward.

"Walking. Being active," said Strehlau. "Everybody should be traveling while they can."

Today, Strehlau said she finds comfort in routine and simple pleasures, from enjoying meals to getting dressed for the day. Church is another source of peace.

"I'm happy for the rest of that day," said Strehlau.

Looking back on a century of life, Strehlau described her journey with gratitude.

"I feel like I have been on the train of life," said Strehlau. "It has been a good train ride."

MAGIC COMES TO THE FARM: WIZARDFEST SET FOR LIMITED RUN AT RAPRAGER FARMS

Staff Report

A new immersive festival celebrating magic, fantasy and family fun is coming to Raprager Farms this winter with the debut of its first-ever WizardFest.

The limited-time event begins on Friday, February 20, and will run on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays only, transforming the farm into a world of magic and mystery inspired by legendary wizards such as Gandalf, Harry and Merlin. Tickets for WizardFest are on sale now.

WizardFest is designed to appeal to both fantasy fans and visitors who simply want to enjoy a unique seasonal attraction. Guests who purchase Wizard tickets will be able to take part in themed wizard classes, including Defense Against the Dark Arts, Monsters Class, Herbology, Potions, Broom Flying, Magic Class, Magical Crafting and Divination. An interactive Escape from Dark Wizards experience will challenge participants to work together to solve magical puzzles.

Nonmagic guests, known as 'wuggles,' are also welcome and will have access to all farm activities, which will be specially themed for the festival.

In addition to the magical programming, the event features more than two acres of attractions, including a 300-animal petting zoo and farm animal experience. Visitors can explore a 17,000-square-foot maze; slide



Children can enjoy hands-on attractions at WizardFest, including Fort Merlin and farm animal experiences.

down a 40-foot, second-story hay chute; jump into a corn pit; or play inside Fort Merlin, a 2,000-square-foot kids fort.

Additional attractions include a bounce pillow with tormentors, battle-axe throwing, a mechanical bull and a variety of games such as cornhole, Connect 4 and field chess. Entertainment and photo opportunities are located throughout the property, including a chance to take pictures with a full-sized dragon.

WizardFest will also debut all-new menus and specialty offerings. The SweetShop will feature gourmet fudge, coffee and cider donuts, while other food stands will offer ice cream, kettle corn and additional treats. The Lemonade Stand will serve fresh-squeezed lemonade, cinnamon roasted nuts and sno cones. Adult guests can visit The Packing House Bar, which will offer beer, wine and batch cocktails, including special wizard-themed drinks.

Optional add-on activities include face painting, unicorn rides and gem mining, available for an additional fee.

Raprager Family Farms is located at 16907 Boy Scout Road in Odessa. Call (813) 922-2799 or visit <https://rapragerfamilyfarms.com/for details>.

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KNIGHTS, ARTISANS AND MERRIMENT AWAIT AT 2026 BAY AREA REN FEST

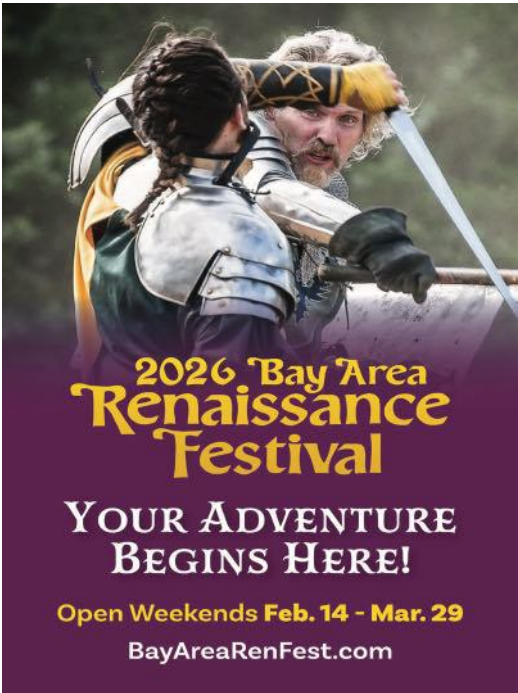
Staff Report

The clang of swords, the cheers of the crowd and the music of wandering minstrels will once again fill the air as the Bay Area Renaissance Festival returns for its 48th season in 2026. One of Florida's longest-running and most beloved cultural traditions, the festival invites guests to step back into a lively, 16th-century European village, brought to life on the scenic festival grounds in Dade City.

Running weekends from Saturday, February 14, through Sunday, March 29, the Bay Area Renaissance Festival will be open Saturdays and Sundays from 10 a.m.-6 p.m., rain or shine. Families, history enthusiasts and adventure seekers alike can expect a full day of immersive entertainment, food and interactive experiences that transport visitors to another era.

Since its debut decades ago in Largo, the festival has grown into a sprawling celebration featuring 15 stages of entertainment and an expanded roster of performers. Throughout the day, guests can enjoy live music, comedy, theatrical acts and daring feats of skill. A highlight for many is the action-packed jousting tournament, where armored knights clash in thrilling competitions before roaring crowds.

Beyond the entertainment, the festival



is known for its impressive artisan marketplace, featuring more than 100 unique craftspeople. Shoppers can browse handcrafted jewelry, pottery, leather goods, costumes, woodwork, metal art, glass and other one-of-a-kind treasures. Each booth offers handmade wares, making the marketplace a destination for those seeking distinctive gifts

and keepsakes.

The 2026 season also offers a variety of specialty experiences designed to deepen the immersion. Guests can participate in mead tastings, pub and cocktail crawls, themed teas, romance packages with front-row joust seating, brunch at the joust and even large-scale marriage and vow renewal ceremonies. Costumed characters roam the grounds, interacting with visitors and adding to the atmosphere of a bustling Renaissance village.

Located at 12838 Auton Rd. in Dade City, the festival grounds offer free parking and easy access for visitors from across the Tampa Bay area. With over 60,000 annual attendees, the Bay Area Renaissance Festival continues to be a vibrant celebration of history, creativity and community. Tickets and additional information are available at <https://bayarearenfest.com/>.

COUNTY'S CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT GRANT PROGRAM OPENS FOR LOCAL NONPROFITS

By Libby Hopkins

The Hillsborough County Art Council's Cultural Development Grant Program is accepting applications for the 2027 fiscal year. Applications will remain open until Friday, January 30, at 5 p.m., and the grant offers \$25,000 maximum.

"This program offers general support to local cultural organizations that have as their primary mission the delivery of cultural programs serving a specific cultural discipline," said Kathy Collins of the Hillsborough County Art Council.

The Cultural Development Grant Program provides general program support to local cultural organizations with programming that not only serves diverse audiences but also reaches geographically diverse communities. It is the intent of the program to encourage the development of both cultural and administrative operations of these organizations.

"Funds provided through this grant program are also intended to enhance the organization's ability to attract new audiences and increase funding from other sources," Collins said.

An organization applying for a grant must have as its primary mission the delivery of cultural programs. Cultural disciplines encompass, but are not limited to, architecture, crafts, creative writing, dance, history, literature, media arts, music, photography, theater, traditional arts and visual arts, as well as the execution, exhibition or presen-



The Hillsborough County Arts Council's Cultural Development Grant Program is accepting applications for the 2027 fiscal year.

ing requests from cultural organizations with programming that not only serves diverse audiences but also reaches geographically diverse communities.

Cultural Development Grants are awarded on a competitive basis to nonprofit and tax-exempt, 501(c)(3) Florida corporations that meet the eligibility requirements and provide cultural programming in Hillsborough County. Funding is awarded for general program support based on overall quality of three categories: Access & Community Engagement, Artistic & Cultural Vitality and Organizational Capacity. The council anticipates total grant requests will exceed funds available; consequently, requests are generally not fully funded.

"All applications must be submitted in the online grant system by the January due date," Collins said. "Deadlines will not be extended, and partial or incomplete applications will be deemed ineligible. Board review and scoring of applications takes place on Tuesday, March 10, 2026, at 11 a.m."

For more, please visit the Hillsborough County Art Council's website at www.hillsborougharts.org/organizational-grants.



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CHAD’S PROMISE KEEPS VETERANS AND THEIR DOGS TOGETHER

Chad Landrey of Plant City served as a combat military police soldier in the Army National Guard from 2001-08. He was sent to Afghanistan in 2004 and stationed at Bagram Air Force Base. After he returned to the U.S., he worked as a police officer in Sebring, Lake Wales and Lakeland.

Landrey started his nonprofit, Chad’s Promise in 2023 when he and his wife, Tracy, were getting calls from some of his veteran friends who had to go for inpatient treatment for mental/medical issues.

“They had no place else to take their dogs except the humane society,” said Carol Tracey of Chad’s Promise. “The Humane Society only keeps the dogs for about a week, then the dogs are adopted out or euthanized. Veterans weren’t going for the help they needed for fear of losing their dog, oftentimes their best and only friend. Many have no family members to care for their pet while they are getting well.”

Chad’s Promise was born out of a deep-seated desire to make a difference in the lives of veterans and their furry companions. Chad’s Promise is a free boarding facility for veterans’ dogs while they receive medical or mental health treatment.

“The service is free for 30 days and includes food, veterinary care, grooming, daily exercise and the outdoor kennels that are sterilized two times a day,” Tracey said. “The



Chad’s Promise in Plant City is a local nonprofit organization that offers free boarding for veterans’ dogs while they receive medical or mental health treatment.

indoor kennels are in a temperature-controlled environment and are also cleaned daily.”

Tracey became involved with Chad’s Promise through Patriot Canine Services, which is the business the Landreys also operate at their facility.

“I had my dog Todd trained there because he was an unruly puppy and too strong for me to handle,” Tracey said. “I also had my dog Lucy trained there to be a therapy dog so I can take her to the hospital to visit the veterans whose dogs we have. Lucy is finishing up her final training. She is a 15-month-old standard poodle.”

Being involved with Chad’s Promise is a very heartfelt experience for everyone at the organization.

“When we pick up a veteran’s dog, it is very emotional for the veteran because they are going to be separated from their dog,” Tracey said. “When the veteran is finished with their treatment, the reunions are the best! It is our goal to reunite them with their pet. Occasionally, the veteran is unable to care for their dog after treatment, so we find the dog a forever home.”

If you’d like to learn more about Chad’s Promise or donate to the organization, you can visit their website at <https://chadspromise.com/> or call 813-296-4906. Chad’s Promise is located at 7314 W. Knights Griffin Rd. in Plant City.

BUSCH GARDENS TURNS BACK THE CLOCK WITH RETURN OF REAL MUSIC CONCERT SERIES

Staff Report

Busch Gardens Tampa Bay is turning up the volume once again with the return of its longest-running concert tradition, the Real Music Series. Now through Friday, February 20, the park will host a lineup of celebrated performers delivering timeless hits from the 1970s, ’80s and ’90s, offering guests a chance to relive the soundtrack of their lives six days a week.

Held Monday through Friday with select Saturday performances, the Real Music Series features live concerts included with park admission. Guests can enjoy performances spanning classic rock, soul, pop, jazz and R&B, all presented by artists known for capturing the sound and spirit of legendary music icons. Shows take place at the Stanleyville Theater, making it easy for visitors to build live entertainment into their day at the park.

New this year, select Saturdays add extra excitement with special performances by iconic acts. Village People brought their high-energy hits to the stage on January 17, following a January 10 appearance by Blue Öyster Cult. These special concerts add a weekend highlight to the weekday-focused series.

JAN 5 - FEB 20 At Stanleyville Theater		
Martha Reeves and The Vandellas JAN 5-9	Blue Öyster Cult JAN 10	Blood, Sweat & Tears JAN 12-16
Village People JAN 17	Pablo Cruise and Their Hit Songs JAN 19-23	The Artimus Pyle Band Honoring Ronnie Van Zant's Lynyrd Skynyrd JAN 26-30
The Tommy Dorsey Orchestra FEB 2-6	Revisiting Creedence FEB 9-13	Magic Moments Performing the songs of The Temptations, The Four Tops, The Platters and The Drifters FEB 16-20

The 2026 weekday lineup (all Monday through Friday) began in the week of January 5-9 with Martha Reeves and The Vandellas, followed by Blood, Sweat & Tears from January 12-16. Fans can catch Pablo Cruise and Their Hit Songs from January 19-23, and the Artimus Pyle Band honoring Ronnie Van Zant’s Lynyrd Skynyrd from January 26-30. February opens with The Tommy Dorsey Orchestra from February 2-6, Revisiting Creedence from February 9-13 and concludes from February 16-20 with Magic Moments, featuring original singers Theo Peoples, Joe Coleman and Jerome Jackson performing classics from The Temptations, The Four Tops, The Platters and The Drifters.

Park officials said the Real Music Series is designed for guests of all ages, whether they are rediscovering favorite songs or hearing classic hits for the first time. With concerts included in admission, the series offers a value-added experience for families, couples and music lovers alike.

For showtimes and additional details, visit www.buschgardenstampa.com.



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CARDINAL ROOFING ANNOUNCES 12TH ANNUAL CHARITY CLAY SHOOT IN LITHIA

By Olivia Clark

Cardinal Roofing will host its 12th annual Cardinal Roofing Charity Clay Shoot on Friday, February 13, at FishHawk Sporting Clays, located at 13505 Hobson Simmons Rd. in Lithia. Sign-in begins at 11:30 a.m. for a day of sporting clays, food and fundraising in support of charitable causes tied to veterans and missing persons.

The annual sporting clays event has been a signature fundraiser for Cardinal Roofing for more than a decade. For many years, proceeds from the event supported Honor Flights, reflecting the company's long-standing commitment to honoring veterans. In recent years, the focus has shifted to benefit 'We Are The Essentials For The Missing.'

We Are The Essentials For The Missing is a nonprofit organization made up of former law enforcement officers and military service members who conduct search and recovery investigations for missing persons. The organization recently became an official 501(c)(3) nonprofit, allowing donations and rewards for solved cases to help offset the costs associated with investigations and specialized equipment. The group's mission is to provide answers and closure to families searching for missing loved ones.

This year's charity clay shoot has a fund-



Shooters participate in a previous Cardinal Roofing Charity Clay Shoot at FishHawk Sporting Clays in Lithia.

raising goal of \$20,000. Participants may register as individual shooters for \$250 or as a four-person team for \$800. Sponsorship opportunities are also available, including an Essential

Sponsor level for \$2,000, station sponsorships for \$100 and vendor-only or add-on options for \$225.

Cardinal Roofing is a third-generation, family-owned roofing contractor that has served the community for decades. Founded in 1995, the locally owned company remains actively involved in the areas where its owners and employees live and work, supporting a variety of charitable initiatives throughout the year.

Bridget Jenkins Wilson, president of Cardinal Roofing, plays a leading role in the company's philanthropic efforts. Wilson chairs and organizes the annual charity clay shoot and works alongside co-owners Roger Jenkins and Chad Curchin to continue the family-owned business and its commitment to community involvement.

To register or learn more about the event, visit www.girlroofer.com. Additional information about Cardinal Roofing is available at www.cardinalroofingfl.com or by calling 813-689-7663 (ROOF).



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LOCAL RAPTOR CENTER IS BRINGING THEIR PUPPET SHOW TO PRINT

By Denise Sansosti

The Raptor Center of Tampa Bay (RCTB) has been based in the Brandon area since 2018. From bald eagles to skunks, social media followers can catch a glimpse of the steady stream of animals coming in and out of the facility. When Florida native Nancy Murrah, president and founder, is asked what her favorite animal is, she always replies, "Whichever one is in front of me."



A bald eagle currently in care at Raptor Center of Tampa Bay.

The work never takes a day off, and neither does Murrah. As a federally and state permitted wildlife rehabilitator, she is licensed to care for all Florida wildlife. RCTB rescues, raises, rehabilitates and releases hundreds of native birds of prey and other wild animals each year throughout Hillsborough, Hard-ee, Highlands, Pasco and Polk counties. Murrah cannot carry out the mission alone. RCTB's success is made possible through the support of dedicated volunteers, a committed board of directors, community outreach and generous donations. In 2024, the center took in 600 animals; by 2025, that number had risen to 945. Rehabilitation costs alone average between \$1,000-\$1,700 per week, and when all operational expenses are included, total annual costs exceed \$100,000. In addition to rehabilitation, RCTB is

deeply committed to education and environmental awareness. Its Magical Bird Bus offers hands-on learning experiences, while an engaging puppet show teaches children about wildlife and conservation in a fun, memorable way. The performance brings more than a dozen animals to life through the I Can Save the Planet puppet show. The production is moving from puppets to print with an upcoming children's book of the same name.

"I try to inspire the next generation about the planet and conservation," said Murrah. "When we started writing the book,

it was important to talk not only about what people can do to help animals but also the role each animal plays on the planet."

The book is scheduled for release this spring and is beautifully illustrated by local artist Samantha Dormio, owner of Wild Planet Creations.

"We met at an event, and once we saw her eye-catching paintings, we knew we wanted to partner with her to make the book appealing to kids of all ages," said Murrah.

For information on donating, volunteering or upcoming events to meet winged ambassadors, visit www.raptorcenteroftampabay.org or follow RCTB at www.facebook.com/raptorcenteroftampabay. To report a sick or injured animal, please call the hotline at 813-205-1851.

TAMPA BAY FERRY MOVES CLOSER TO RELAUNCH WITH NEW VESSEL

By Brian Bokor

Plans to restore passenger ferry service across Tampa Bay advanced in early December 2025 when the Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority (PSTA) unanimously approved key elements of a restructured, long-term program linking downtown Tampa and downtown St. Petersburg.

The service, temporarily branded the Tampa Bay Ferry, is intended to replace the former Cross Bay Ferry, which ceased operations in April 2025 following contractual disputes with its previous operator. Officials said the new model is designed to address the financial and operational challenges that hampered the pilot service.

Under the newly approved plan, PSTA will oversee ferry operations and has selected Hubbard's Marina to operate the service through its subsidiary, Tampa Bay Sea Taxi Inc. The agreement establishes a five-year operating contract with an optional five-year extension, allowing for up to a decade of continuous service if performance benchmarks are met.

Unlike the prior arrangement, which relied on an out-of-state operator and leased vessels, the new model emphasizes local operators and publicly owned assets, an approach officials said will reduce costs and improve reliability.

PSTA has approved the purchase of a high-speed ferry currently operating in the San Francisco area for \$1.5 million using federal grant funds. With transportation, refurbishment and upgrades, total investment is expected to reach approximately \$2.5 million.

Built in 1994, the vessel will undergo



major improvements before entering service, including installation of a refurbished engine scheduled for January, interior renovations, repainting, inspections and sea trials. Once delivered to Tampa Bay via the Panama Canal, the ferry will provide

seating for up to 250 passengers, up from the previous service's 149-passenger capacity.

PSTA officials are also continuing to search for a second vessel to further increase capacity and reduce wait times during peak travel periods.

The relaunch is supported by a combination of federal funding and local government contributions. Tampa and St. Petersburg have each approved interlocal agreements committing up to \$350,000 annually toward the service.

In addition, the U.S. Department of Transportation approved the transfer of nearly \$5 million in federal grant funding from the Hillsborough Area Regional Transit Authority to PSTA to support vessel acquisition and startup costs.

Initial service is expected to operate from temporary docking facilities in both cities, with Tampa's dock remaining at the Tampa Convention Center. St. Petersburg plans to establish a temporary dock near the Vinoy Basin while pursuing a permanent facility near the Museum of History.

If final approvals from the Federal Transit Administration are secured and refurbishment proceeds as planned, officials expect the Tampa Bay Ferry to begin operations this spring or summer, with the potential for year-round service.

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PATTICAKES FEATURED AT GOVERNOR'S LUNCHEON

By Logan Walz

PattiCakes Custom Cakes LLC has been selected to provide desserts for this year's Governor's Luncheon, held on opening day at the Florida State Fairgrounds. The opportunity marks a significant milestone for the locally owned business, which has grown steadily through word of mouth and custom orders over the past several years.

Owner Patti Burnett said being chosen for the event was both exciting and meaningful.

"I was so honored to be asked," Burnett said. "I think it's a huge opportunity, and the visibility of having my brand featured for these honored guests will be priceless for the future growth of my business."

The opportunity came after an event coordinator with the Florida State Fair noticed one of Burnett's previous dessert table displays. After seeing her work, the coordinator reached out to ask if Burnett could create something similar on a much larger scale.

"There was a dessert table display that I had done for another client, which the event coordinator for the Florida State Fair happened to see," Burnett said. "She asked me if I could accomplish something like that on a much larger scale. I was shocked and honored by the request, but I know I can rise to



PattiCakes owner Patti Burnett.



the occasion."

To prepare for the high-profile luncheon, Burnett said she has been carefully planning and organizing to ensure everything runs smoothly.

"I have extra hands on deck, and I'm doing lots of strategic preparation and organizing to make sure everything is fresh and ready to go," she said.

Guests at the Governor's Luncheon can expect a large-scale dessert display featuring a variety of PattiCakes' specialty items.

"I will be doing a large-scale variety dessert table featuring an assortment of my specialty desserts," Burnett said.

PattiCakes Custom Cakes began as a small operation while Burnett stayed home with her children after leaving her teaching career. Over time, the business grew organically through consistent quality and customer satisfaction.

"When I left teaching to stay home with my children, my business began as me simply baking for friends and family," Burnett said. "PattiCakes has grown organically over the last seven to eight years through word of mouth, one satisfied customer at a time."

"I hope this accomplishment encourages readers to keep me in mind for their own events, no matter how big or small," she said.

For more information, visit www.facebook.com/patticakescustomcake/, call 352-942-3455 or email patticakescustomcakes@gmail.com.

PITCH GROUP MARKS MILESTONE, REAL ESTATE PROS INVITED

By Olivia Clark



Real estate professionals gather at Three Bulls Tavern & Brewery on Bell Shoals Road for weekly Brandon/Valrico Real Estate Pitch Group meetings.

The Brandon/Valrico Real Estate Pitch Group, a free weekly meetup for real estate professionals, is marking a milestone year with record attendance and a renewed push to grow participation in the new year.

The group meets every Wednesday from 9:30-10:30 a.m. at Three Bulls Tavern & Brewery on Bell Shoals Road and is open to anyone involved in the home-selling industry, including realtors, brokers, builders, roofers, insurance professionals, title companies and other real-estate-related businesses. The meetings are designed to encourage collaboration, networking and the exchange of timely market information.

The group recently logged its largest turnout to date with 54 attendees. Participants representing a wide range of brokerages and service providers attend to pitch current listings, discuss price changes, promote open houses, share buyer wants and needs and highlight recent success stories.

"It's one of the reasons we're here. Sixteen years we're doing this now. I think

we have the most successful pitch group anywhere," said Tim Ryan, an employee of Fidelity National Financial and founder of the Brandon/Valrico group.

Along with listings and buyer needs, professionals use the meetings to

share real-world market experiences. One Realtor described a property that "went on the market before the hurricanes last year and it took 15 months to sell," eventually closing on December 29, 2024.

Guest speakers also provide practical guidance on marketing, pricing and client relationships. "Be out amongst the people, that's what is going to help you do great in this business," said Steve Moran, who spoke at the most recent networking event.

Ryan said the group meets every Wednesday for the next 48 weeks and is structured to ensure attendees leave with useful information.

"We want everyone to come here and pitch their listings, learn something and get a piece of information," he said.

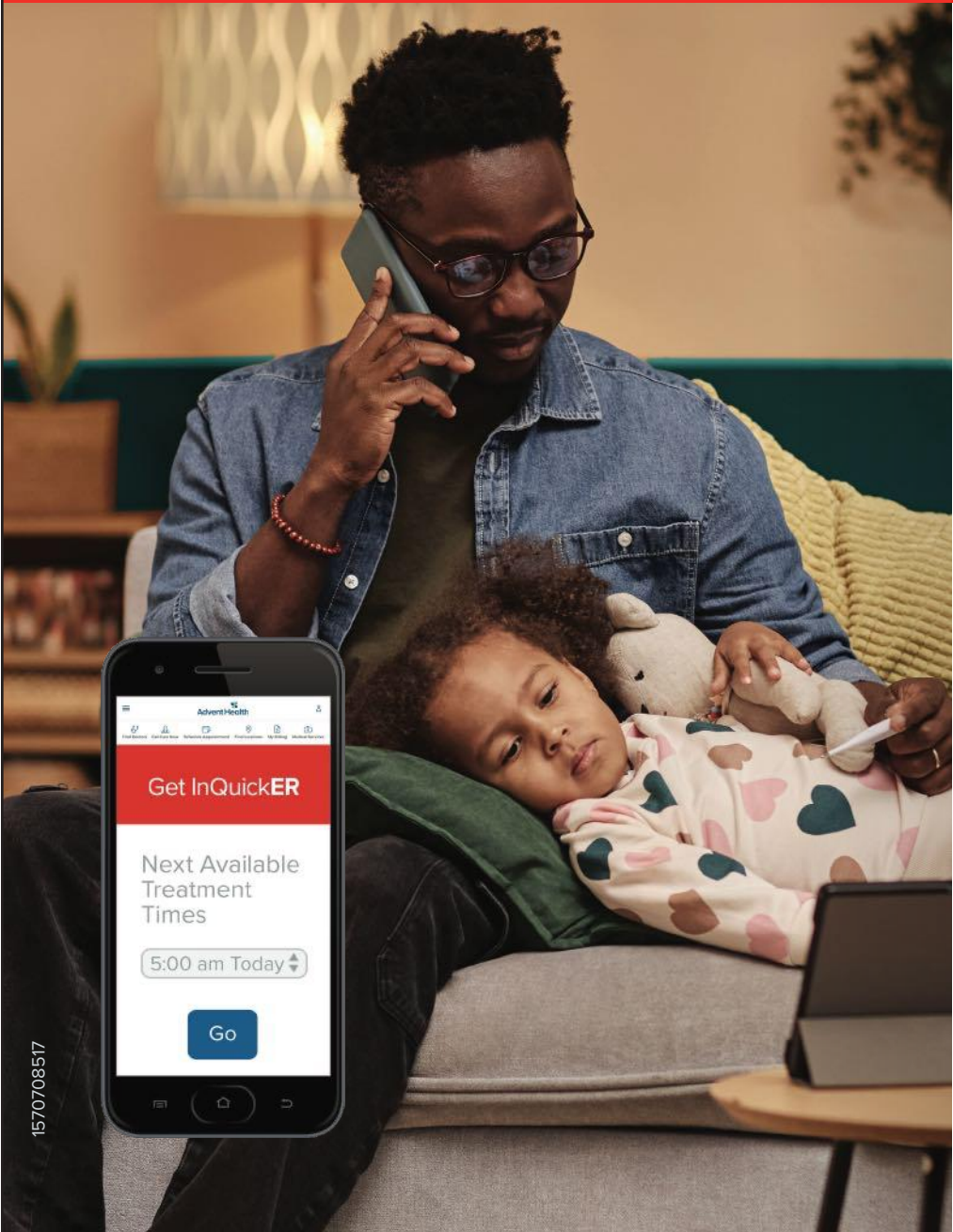
Jim Gaffney and Mike Holmes assist with coordinating the meetings.

A state-of-the-industry address focused on the current market is planned for Wednesday, January 21. For more information, contact Ryan at tryan@fnf.com or 813-928-2862.

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Compiled by Jenny Bennett
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South Bay Genealogical Society Meeting

The South Bay Genealogical Society meeting will be at the South Hillsborough Elks Lodge No. 2672, located at 1630 S. U.S. 41 in Ruskin. Beginning at 10:30 a.m., there is an optional round-table discussion, followed by a sit-down luncheon at 12 Noon. Following the luncheon at 1 p.m., the guest speaker will be Lori Coffey. Coffey's presentation is 'Three Fer!' Coffey will present three 20-minute programs: Ancestry Fixes, Revolution in the South and Tech Tips for Genealogy. The cost is \$18 per person for the luncheon and presentation. For reservations and meal choices, call Vicki at 360-608-1647.

Bank OZK Makes Donation To Enterprising Latinas

Bank OZK is proud to announce a \$5,000 donation was made to Enterprising Latinas, a nonprofit organization serving women entrepreneurs in Wimauma and surrounding communities. The contribution supports Enterprising Latinas' mission to create pathways of opportunity for Latinas in Tampa Bay.

"Small businesses are the backbone of our local economy, and organizations like Enterprising Latinas play a vital role in helping entrepreneurs turn ideas into thriving enterprises," said Michele Maynard, Bank OZK vice president and business development officer. "We are honored to support their work and the positive impact they make in the community."

Bank OZK is one of the top-performing financial institutions in the country, and this donation reflects the bank's ongoing commitment to community investment and economic development in the markets it serves. By partnering with local organizations, Bank OZK continues to support financial empowerment and opportunities for individuals and businesses throughout the region.



Learn To Play Bridge

The Duplicate Bridge Association of Sun City Center is proud to announce that Kathy Smith, a Life Master bridge player and an American Contract Bridge League (ACBL) game director, is offering a series of classes of duplicate bridge for beginners, dubbed Easybridge. Classes are scheduled for Thursday, January 29, from 1-4 p.m. for 15 consecutive weeks in the Horizon Room in the Atrium Build-



ing, located at 947 N. Course Lane in Sun City Center. The first four weeks are complementary. The remaining classes are \$4 for Sun City Center residents and \$5 for non-SCC applicants. The classes are structured for a supportive and friendly environment. Sample dealer hands will be available to apply lessons learned.

Registration is taken at kathjoseph@gmail.com.

Second Chance Sale At Redeemer Lutheran Church

Redeemer Lutheran Church, located at 701 Valley Forge Blvd. in Sun City Center, will hold its annual rummage sale on Friday, February 6, from 8 a.m.-2 p.m. and on Saturday, February 7, from 8 a.m.-1 p.m. This is a large indoor sale packed with donated treasures.

It is your opportunity to find great bargains. There will also be a bake sale and food sale. Outdoors you will find Sam's Honeybees honey. Kids are invited to try on a beekeeper jacket/veil for pictures or find the queen bee for a sticker.

Center 4Life Learning Opportunity

Join the Center 4Life Learning for an engaging session with Tom Barrett, a retired high-altitude reconnaissance pilot renowned for flying some of the U.S. Air Force's most clandestine photographic missions. Come and listen to Barrett's captivating accounts on Wednesday, February 25, from 1-2:30 p.m. Prepare to be transported back to a pivotal era in history as Barrett shares stories of ad-



venture and intrigue from the skies. This is a unique opportunity to gain insights from someone who experienced these events firsthand. Visit www.lovethelight.org/4lifelearning

for more information or to register online. The Center 4Life Learning office is located on the campus of the United Methodist Church of Sun City Center at 1971 Haverford Ave. in Sun City Center.

Experienced Autism Alliance Is Collecting Teddy Bears

Experienced Autism Alliance is collecting new teddy bears for its upcoming teddy bear clinic, a hands-on event designed to help children with autism feel more comfortable and confident during medical visits.

Its goal is to collect 50-100 new teddy bears by Friday, January 30. Drop off at the Greater SouthShore Chamber of Commerce office (located at 226 W. College Ave. in Ruskin), bring to a chamber event or schedule pickup with Tanya. Your support will make a meaningful difference in helping reduce fear and build confidence for the families it serves. For more information, contact Tanya at tanya@autismalliancefl.org or call 813-324-5352.



Mega Sale At St. John Divine Church

St. John the Divine Episcopal Church is emptying its storage pods and taking over the large parish event hall. You will find never-before-seen inventory, including clothing, jewelry, shoes, purses, tabletop home decor, small furniture, lamps and more. The event will take place on the church's campus, located at 1015 E. Del Webb Blvd. in Sun City Center, on Friday and Saturday, February 6-7, from 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Cash or checks only.

Life Story Writing Returns To Bloomingdale Regional Public Library

Some of us want to leave a legacy for the next generation or just seek clarity in our own lives. Maybe you are interested in publishing your own books, but it never seems to get started. Whatever your reason, come join in for a free 10-week life story writing course beginning Friday, January 30, from 10:30 a.m.-2 p.m. at Bloomingdale Regional Public Library, located at 1906 Bloomingdale Ave. in Valrico.

Space is limited, so registration is required. Contact Val Perry at vperry650@msn.com for more information or to register.

A Kid's Place's Fostering Hope Gala

This Valentine's Day, skip the ordinary and be part of something truly special by supporting the children of A Kid's Place. The Vinoy Resort & Golf Club in St. Petersburg will

provide an elegant backdrop where guests can look forward to an inspiring evening program featuring speakers with heartwarming stories, those whose lives have been touched by A Kid's Place. There will be live and silent auctions, delicious food and cocktails as well as dancing and other activities to enjoy. Your presence helps ensure that every child at A Kid's Place receives the love, care and stability that they deserve. Celebrate love in action and reserve your seats today at <https://bit.ly/AKP2026Gala>.

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ALABAMA, JOAN JETT & MORE HEADLINE 2026 FLORIDA STRAWBERRY FESTIVAL

Staff Report



The Florida Strawberry Festival® is turning up the volume for its 91st year, unveiling a star-studded entertainment lineup that reflects the event's 2026 theme, "Still Growing." From country legends and rock icons to chart-topping Christian artists and R&B superstars, BerryFest26 promises one of the most dynamic musical offerings in Festival history.

Headlining the Wish Farms Soundstage are major crowd favorites including Alabama, Dierks Bentley, Brantley Gilbert, Riley Green, The Offspring, Joan Jett & The Blackhearts, and the powerhouse R&B collaboration Legends of Love featuring Brian McKnight, Ginuwine and Ruben Studdard. These popular acts highlight how the Festival continues to grow in scale, reach and entertainment appeal while staying rooted in its deep agricultural and community traditions.

The theme "Still Growing" reflects the Festival's ongoing evolution — from record-setting attendance and expanding attractions to continued celebration of Plant City's iconic strawberry industry. That growth is evident in both the diversity and caliber of this year's performers, offering something for every generation of Festival-goers.

"As we unveil our headline entertainment for BerryFest26, I am beyond excited to say this year's theme perfectly captures the energy and anticipation surrounding our in-

credible lineup," said Florida Strawberry Festival® President Kyle Robinson.

Among the most anticipated performances is Joan Jett & The Blackhearts, who will deliver the Festival's closing-night concert on March 8, 2026. Known for timeless hits including "I Love Rock 'n' Roll," "Bad Reputation," and "Crimson and Clover,"

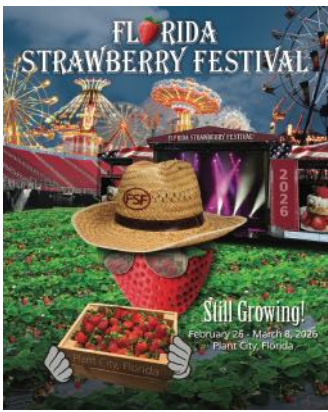
Jett will cap off BerryFest26 with a high-energy finale.

Another standout is Legends of Love, bringing together the smooth vocals and chart-topping careers of Brian McKnight, Ginuwine and Ruben Studdard for a soulful R&B showcase that adds fresh range and star power to the lineup.

"Announcing both Legends of Love and Joan Jett is truly special for us," said Florida Strawberry Festival President Kyle Robinson. We're thrilled to welcome them both to BerryFest26."

Advance tickets for gate admission and headline entertainment are available online, through the Festival's mobile app, by phone at 813-754-1996, or in person at the Amscot Main Ticket Office located at 2209 W. Oak Avenue in Plant City. Tickets can also be purchased at www.flstrawberryfestival.com

The 2026 Florida Strawberry Festival will take place February 26 through March 8 in Plant City.



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EYE ON BUSINESS

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

Local Assistant Helps Seniors Stay Independent

Kathy Bass, owner of Helping Hands Assistant LLC, is a personal assistant dedicated to helping individuals and businesses stay organized, efficient and stress-free. With years of experience in supporting private clients and companies of all sizes, she has built a reputation as the 'go-to gal' for making life run a little smoother.

Her specialty is supporting seniors, providing the extra set of hands they need to maintain independence and peace of mind. Whether it's accompanying clients to appointments, running errands, organizing their homes or assisting with day-to-day tasks that have become challenging, she offers dependable, personalized help with a warm, patient approach.

For more information or to schedule assistance, please contact Bass at 863-409-9890 or kathy75cole05@verizon.net.

David Weekley Opens New Model Home In Coastera Community

David Weekley Homes, one of the largest privately held national home builders, has opened a new model home, The Gilbert, in the Palmetto community of Coastera. The 1-story model home showcases 3,031 square feet with four bedrooms, three full baths, a three-car garage, a study, a TV room and a super shower in the owner's retreat bath. Located at 7747 Ocean Spray Trail, the model home is open daily for tours.

Homeowners in Coastera can enjoy access



to an amenity center bordering the 60-acre lake, a resort-style pool, a cabana and splash pad, a fitness deck, a jogging trail, pickleball courts, nature trails, a lake with a dock and canoe launch, a lakeside pavilion and bar, a social lounge, a fire pit, a lake house, sports fields, a playground and a dog park. The community is also convenient to downtown Tampa, Sarasota and St. Petersburg. Students attend School District of Manatee County schools.

For more information about David Weekley Homes in Coastera, contact 941-306-4384 or visit the company's website at www.davidweekleyhomes.com.

David Weekley Homes

The National Notary Coalition Launches Nationwide Organization

The National Notary Coalition (NNC) has officially launched as a nationwide organization dedicated to strengthening, unifying and advocating for independent notaries across

the United States. Founded by Tye Brown, founder and CEO, the coalition aims to elevate professional standards, promote ethical practices and provide a unified voice for notaries in an evolving regulatory environment. The NNC's launch is supported by a strategic partnership with Keeler Notary & Fingerprinting, a veteran-owned small business based in Valrico, illustrating how local leadership can drive national impact within the notary profession.

"The notary profession is essential to public trust and fraud prevention, yet independent notaries have lacked cohesive representation," Brown said. "The National Notary Coalition was created to address that gap and support notaries nationwide."

More information on Keeler Notary & Fingerprinting can be found on its website at www.tampabaysigning.com or by calling 816-372-5220.

Freedom Plaza's Management Company Stays As J.D. Power's Most Awarded Senior Living Provider

J.D. Power announced the results of its 2025 U.S. Senior Living Satisfaction Study, and Freedom Plaza's management company, LCS, has been recognized for the seventh consecutive year as No. 1 in resident satisfaction among independent

senior living communities. The J.D. Power 2025 U.S. Senior Living Satisfaction Study recognized LCS for excellence in independent living, which also included achieving

No. 1 in all six factors of resident satisfaction: dining, community building/grounds, resident apartment/living unit, price paid for services received, community staff, and resident activities. The consecutive awards make LCS the most awarded independent senior living company in the history of the J.D. Power U.S. Senior Living Satisfaction Study.



Freedom Plaza



Stretch Zone Apollo Beach Celebrates Wellness

Stretch Zone Apollo Beach, located at 6150 Paseo Al Mar Blvd. in Apollo Beach, is celebrating Wellness Wednesday on January 28 from 5-7 p.m. Stop in to visit with local vendors as well as enjoy raffles, snacks and drinks. Free mini stretches will also be available. Please RSVP your spot by emailing the studio director at szstudiodirector@gmail.com. This is a fun event, and everyone is welcome to attend.

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