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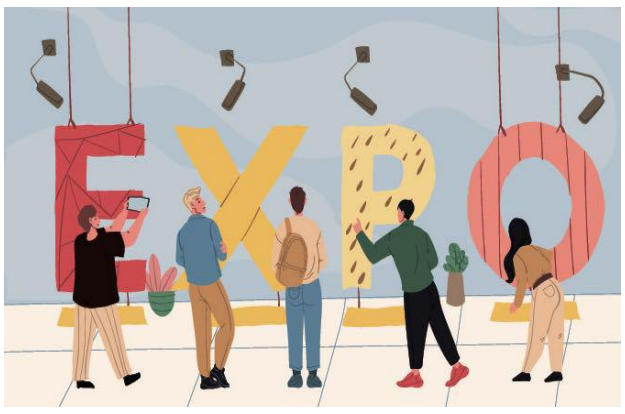
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CELEBRATING 24 YEARS OF PUBLISHING POSITIVE COMMUNITY NEWS

CHAMBER UNVEILS NEW BUSINESS EXPO TO BOOST LOCAL CONNECTIONS

Staff Report



The Greater SouthShore Chamber of Commerce is inviting businesses, nonprofits and residents to take part in a new kind of business expo designed to be more interactive, more engaging and more valuable for everyone involved. The inaugural Spring Business Expo will be held on Friday, February 27, from 9 a.m.-12 Noon at United Methodist Church at Sun City Center, located at 1971 Haverford Ave. in Sun City Center, and is free and open to the public.

Unlike traditional expos where vendors wait for foot traffic, this event has been intentionally designed to spark conversations and build meaningful connections. The timing is ideal, organizers said, as Sun City Center's full-time residents and seasonal 'snowbirds' are all in town, creating a strong audience for participating businesses.

One of the key features is a vendor promotion partnership, which encourages exhibitors to help spread the word. Vendors who promote the expo through social media, their place of business or community, church or neighborhood groups will receive a $25 discount on booth fees. In addition, the chamber will advertise across its social media platforms and in local newspapers to maximize exposure.

To further drive booth engagement, the expo will feature Attendee Bingo. Guests will receive bingo cards directing them to vendor booths to collect clues, encouraging face-to-face interaction. Completed cards will be entered into prize drawings featuring items and offers redeemable throughout the community — a win for attendees and vendors alike through increased traffic and conversation.

Vendors will also benefit from a vendor-to-vendor networking incentive, encouraging early setup and intentional networking with at least 10 new businesses during the expo. Organizers said this element adds value beyond customer leads, strengthening relationships within the local business community.

Booth options range from a $1,000 presenting title sponsor booth with premium placement and prominent logo exposure to premium entrance show booths at $300, standard booths at $125, and nonprofit booths at $75. Vendor space is available to chamber members only, and space is limited.

Chamber leaders believe the Spring Business Expo has the potential to become one of their most well-attended events yet. Businesses interested in participating are encouraged to register early at www.southshorechamberofcommerce.org or contact the chamber at 813-645-1366 or sherell@southshorechamberofcommerce.org for more information.

A LIFETIME OF SERVICE CONTINUES FOR NEWLY ELECTED PRESIDENT OF VETERANS COUNCIL OF HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY

By Denise Sansosti

Retired U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Joseph Muhlberger has been elected president of the Veterans Council of Hillsborough County (VCHC), an organization dedicated to uniting local veteran groups to better serve the county's veteran community.



Retired U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Joseph Muhlberger.

The mission of VCHC is to bring together Hillsborough County veteran organizations to plan, promote and conduct patriotic programs, events and activities for the community. The council also maintains a close relationship with county officials on veteran and military-related issues.

"If there is something we can present to the county commissioners," Muhlberger said, "it becomes a win for the largest community of veterans in the state of Florida."

VCHC meetings are held on the last Monday of each month at 6 p.m. at Tampa Veterans Memorial Park, located at 3602 U.S. Highway 301 N. in Tampa. More information is available at https://veteranscouncilhc.org/.

Muhlberger is serving a two-year term and is focused on strategic planning and communication.

"I am excited to fine-tune and implement a 24-month schedule," he said, "so veteran organizations within VCHC can anticipate what's coming and determine how best to participate and support one another."

After a distinguished 36-year career in the U.S. Air Force, Muhlberger retired to Florida in 2020.

"My wife and son ganged up on me and said, 'You have to get out and do something,'" he recalled. "I did what my uncles and grandparents did. I joined my local VFW."

Today, Muhlberger is active in numerous veteran organizations, including the American Legion, AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, Bob's Vets, MOWW, the Air & Space Forces Association, the Silver Osprey Squadron, MOAA and the Logistics Officers Association.

He also represents the Library of Congress Veterans History Project, helping preserve firsthand accounts from veterans of World War I through present-day conflicts. For the past year, he has also hosted Veterans Corner Radio (https://veteranscornerradio.com/), a weekly podcast reaching all 50 states and 47 countries, with more than 2 million listeners worldwide.

"We want to hear from our veterans or from nationwide organizations that support veterans," he said.

"If you're a military person, get involved," Muhlberger said. "My uncles and grandfathers served for their generation, I served for mine and now I'm giving back in a manner fitting of what I can contribute."

For more on VCHC or to schedule an interview for Veterans Corner Radio or the Veterans History Project, Muhlberger can be reached at joseph.muhlberger@gmail.com.



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In January, Spectrum technicians and supervisors gave Riverview High School students an inside look at a day in the life of a field service technician, showcasing Spectrum vehicles, demonstrating cable connections, explaining coax and fiber technology, and discussing safety protocols while sharing career insights and answering student questions.



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AFTER 24 YEARS, OSPREY OBSERVER LAUNCHES NEW SOUTHSHORE EDITION

By Marie Gilmore



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

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

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

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

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

Staff Report



Photo By Hillsborough Schools

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

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

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

"We truly believe in Junior Achievement's mission and the power of experiential learning to change lives," said Pam Muma. "After so many years, we've seen firsthand how BizTown, along with their other impactful education programs, sparks confidence and possibility. We look forward to what's ahead for students."

Strengthening Local Relevance and Community Ties

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

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

20th Anniversary Celebration

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





HONOR FLIGHT MISSION 11 OPENS REGISTRATION FOR MAY 2026 VETERAN JOURNEY

Staff Report



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

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

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

Veterans selected for Mission 11 will fly free of charge, thanks to community donations and volunteer support. Each veteran is paired with a trained guardian, who provides physical assistance and ensures a safe and memorable experience throughout the day, from airport travel to visits at the memorials.

Guardians wishing to accompany a veteran are also invited to apply. Guardians must be between 18-70 years of age and may not be a spouse or significant other of the veteran. Those selected are asked to make a $500 donation to help offset the cost of airfare and related expenses. Guardians play a vital role in the success of each mission, assisting veterans during travel and throughout the day in Washington.

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

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

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

NEW TACO DIRTY SERVES FRESH, CUSTOMIZABLE FLAVOR

By Olivia Clark



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



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

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

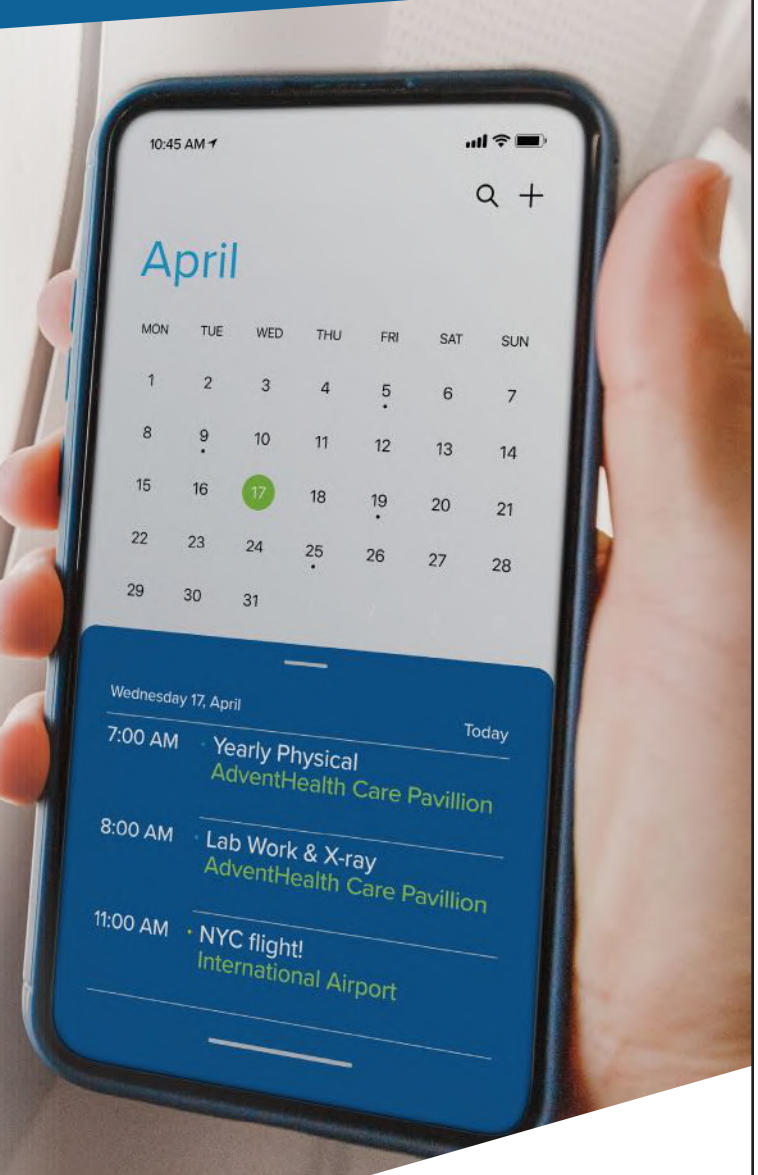
Popular menu items include signature bowls, such as the pineapple chicken, featuring brown rice, black beans, grilled ancho chicken, pineapple salsa and guac sauce, and the Ybor bowl, made with avocado citrus rice, black beans, lime and sour orange chicken, lime-jalapeño corn salad and buffalo avocado sauce. Taco Dirty also offers desserts, including its well-known chocolate chip churro cookies, which are vegan and gluten-free.

Taco Dirty is owned by Tampa-based Ciccio Restaurant Group, a hospitality company known for developing neighborhood-focused restaurants. The group's philosophy emphasizes partnership, team collaboration and community connection, allowing each restaurant to maintain its own identity while delivering consistent quality. That approach is reflected at Taco Dirty, where attention to fresh ingredients, efficient service and a welcoming atmosphere remains a priority.

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

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

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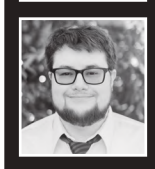
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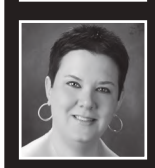
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2026 HYUNDAI PALISADE IS ROOMIER AND TRENDIER

By Nitish Rele



Bigger, cooler and, yes, better than its predecessor, the second-generation Hyundai Palisade has been completely overhauled for 2026. The midsize SUV grows in nearly every direction — length increases by 2.5 inches, wheelbase by 2.7, height by 0.6 and width by 0.2 — translating into improved leg, head and shoulder room for second- and third-row passengers.

PALISADE (CALLIGRAPHY, HTRAC AWD)
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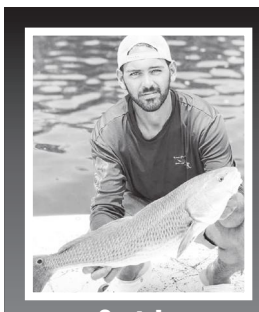
Under the hood, the previous 3.8-liter engine is replaced by a 3.3-liter V6 producing 287 horsepower and 260 pound-feet of torque. The smooth eight-speed automatic transmission with paddle shifters returns, paired with normal, sport and smart drive modes, plus new terrain settings for mud, sand and snow. Towing capacity remains 5,000 pounds. A retuned suspension featuring a MacPherson strut front and multilink rear, along with motor-driven rack-and-pinion steering, delivers confident handling. Added sound-damping materials reduce road and wind noise.

The Palisade's bold exterior features vertical LED headlights and daytime running lights framing a horizontal light bar, set against an oversized black grille with silver accents. The upright lighting theme continues at the rear, reinforcing the vehicle's boxy yet upscale look.

Inside, the spacious cabin offers 161.9 cubic feet of room and dual 12.3-inch displays integrated into a curved screen. New features include a front and rear dash camera and a UV sterilization tray for phones or keys. A 14-speaker Bose sound system replaces the previous Harmon Kardon setup, while a conveniently placed wireless charger improves usability.

The Calligraphy trim stands out with Nappa leather seating, heated and cooled power front seats, a suede headliner, three-zone climate control, a dual-pane sunroof, a digital rearview mirror and a head-up display. Wireless Android Auto and Apple CarPlay are standard for 2026.

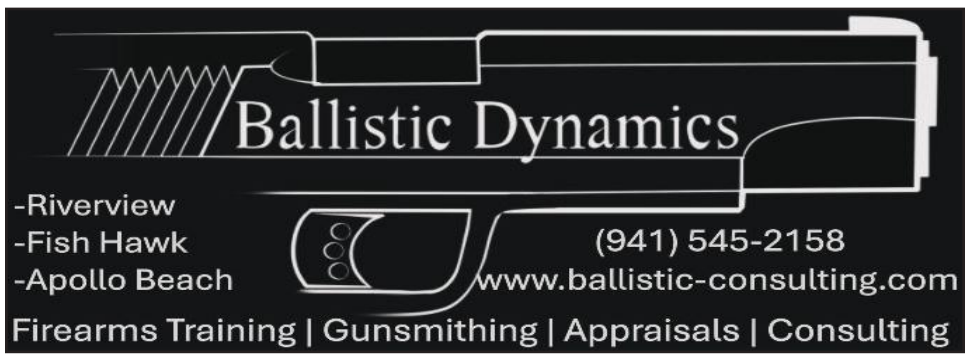
Hyundai SmartSense safety technology comes standard. With new hybrid and XRT PRO trims, the redesigned Palisade continues to raise the bar for family-friendly SUVs.



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DAVE'S HOT CHICKEN OPENS NEW LOCATION WITH RIBBON CUTTING

By Logan Walz



Photos by Amber Aaron, BRCC President



The Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce proudly hosted a Ribbon Cutting Ceremony on Thursday, January 29, to celebrate the grand opening of Dave's Hot Chicken's new Riverview location, marking an exciting addition to the local business community. The event took place at 11:00 a.m. at 10787 Big Bend Road, welcoming Chamber members, community leaders, and residents to officially welcome the popular restaurant to Riverview.

Founded in Los Angeles, Dave's Hot Chicken has rapidly grown into a fan favorite, celebrated for its crave-worthy Nashville-style hot chicken, bold flavors, and customizable heat levels ranging from "No Spice" to the legendary "Reaper." With its fun, high-energy atmosphere and menu featuring tenders, sliders, sides, and shakes, Dave's Hot Chicken brings a fresh and fiery dining experience to the Riverview area.

The ceremony began with remarks from Chamber President Amber Aaron, who welcomed attendees and spoke to the importance of supporting new businesses in the community. The event continued with the ceremonial ribbon cutting, officially marking Dave's Hot Chicken's opening. A special highlight followed as Chamber Ambassador Allie Savvides read a Proclamation declaring January 29 as "Dave's Hot Chicken Day," recognizing the restaurant's arrival and impact on the local dining scene.

Ian Lieberman, Co-Owner of Dave's Hot Chicken, addressed the crowd and expressed gratitude for the warm welcome and strong community support shown during the celebration.

The Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce is excited to welcome Dave's Hot Chicken to its growing business family and encourages the community to visit the new location and support this dynamic new member.

About the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce

The Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce is dedicated to promoting business growth, community engagement, and economic development throughout the Brandon and Riverview areas by connecting businesses, leaders, and residents.

For more information about the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce, visit www.brandonchamber.com

AMERICA'S SWIMMING POOL ELEVATES POOL CARE STANDARDS

By Kelly Wise Valdes



America's Swimming Pool Company hires trained and professional pool technicians to support its customers across SouthShore and South Tampa.

When Travis Larson launched America's Swimming Pool Company (ASP) South Shore in October 2023, he set out to raise the standards of an industry he believed had grown too comfortable with mediocrity. Two years later, the business expanded with the opening of ASP of South Tampa in August 2025, allowing the company to serve a wider portion of the Tampa Bay region while maintaining the same structured, professional approach that has defined its growth.

"I started this company because the pool industry has too many fractured solutions, which forces homeowners to accept far too much 'good enough,'" said Larson, owner of ASP South Shore and ASP South Tampa.

He said his goal from the beginning was to create a service homeowners could trust at the same level as other licensed trades.

"They should have one trusted partner who can handle weekly maintenance, licensed repairs and renovations, and be the first call when it's time to build a new pool," he said.

Larson said accountability is at the heart of his business philosophy.

"At the core, I believe pool ownership should be worry-free, transparent and done right — even when no one is watching," he said. That belief, he added, drives everything from technician training to water chemistry logs, service photos and proper permitting.

When asked what sets ASP apart, Larson pointed to the team.

"What truly sets us apart is our people and the experience we deliver to our customers," he said. "Our technicians know exactly what 'right' looks like, how to document their work and how to communicate clearly and professionally with customers."

As customer trust grew, so did demand for more services.

"We now install traditional gunite pools, fiberglass pools, and modern precast plunge pools," Larson said.

The company also handles renovations and full backyard transformations.

Larson said his favorite part of the job is simple: "My favorite part is solving problems and seeing the relief when a homeowner realizes they're in good hands."

ASP is currently offering the first month of weekly pool maintenance free for customers who mention the Osprey Observer, along with $200 off a new pool heater installation.

Larson said he is proud to be both locally owned and veteran-owned.

"We're not just maintaining pools — we're helping homeowners fall back in love with their backyards," he said.

More information is available at www.aspsouthshorefl.com or by calling 813-322-5270.

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SPOTO IS HOSTING THE NAVY JUNIOR ROTC STATE CHAMPIONSHIP FIELD MEET

By Emily Harper



Photos By Paul Lewis

Spoto ROTC practicing for their upcoming meet.



Spoto High School is hosting the annual Navy Junior ROTC State Championship Field Meet, on Saturday March 7th. The school will be welcoming the top 20 ROTC programs with approximately 800 cadets in total from all across the state of Florida, to compete. Spoto has hosted this event twice in the past, in which they have set the standard for their abilities.

In organizing this event, Spoto will utilize five of their school amenities. This includes, the football field for drills, the cafeteria for push-ups and sit-ups, the auditorium for academic testing, the gym for uniform/personnel inspection, and the culinary classroom will be used to feed the volunteer judges and staff.

The championship is an all day event spanning from 7 A.M. to approximately 7 P.M. During these hours, there are 10 separate ROTC focused competitions, some including basic drills, exhibition drills, and 100 yard shuttle run.

At the end of the competition, there will be a formal awards ceremony. Here, the top five programs will be recognized by being awarded trophies and the top two schools will get to proceed to Nationals, competing later in the school year.

Spoto has a highly competitive JROTC program. They have worked hard throughout the year to qualify for States. They have also been recognized the past two years with the title, "Distinguished Unit with Honors."

The Spoto program is sending 40 cadets to compete at this year's States. The cadets have been working diligently after school everyday to prepare for their events.

When asking the Senior Naval Science Instructor of Spoto High School, Paul Lewis, how he is preparing his cadets for the meet he said, "By emphasizing the importance of discipline, teamwork, and excellence!"

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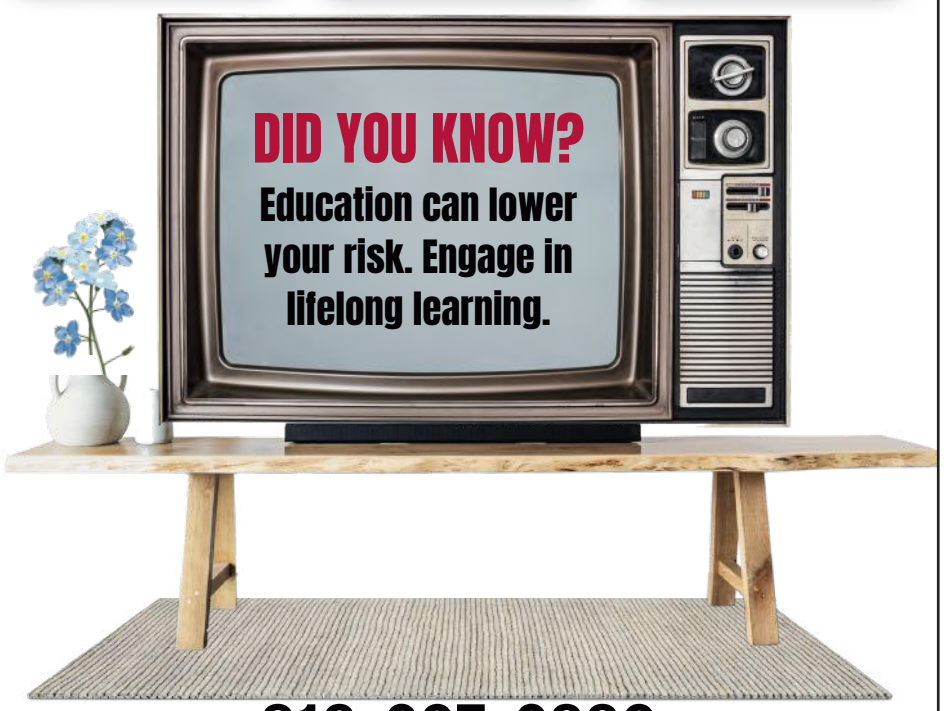
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HEROES PARADISE, BRANDON'S FAMILY-OWNED ENTERTAINMENT CENTER, ADDS FIRST U.S. EPICSURF DEEP-WATER STANDING WAVE

By Brian Bokor

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

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

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

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

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

"This is what's known as a deep-water standing wave," said Julie Kline, director of sales and marketing at ADG. "Unlike sheet-flow wave systems typically used for boogie boarding, EpicSurf generates a true surfable wave with real water depth, creating a more authentic experience for surfers."



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



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

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

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

The system is designed to accommodate a wide range of users, including children, seniors, adaptive athletes, and individuals with disabilities. EpicSurf is currently the only surf wave certified as an Autism Resource by the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Key features and activities include:

Laser Tag & Archery: Tactical, outdoor laser tag and competitive archery tag.

RC Raceway: Two tracks, including an off-road track and a tri-dirt oval.

Amenities include a clubhouse with 360° views, a cafe, and a covered observation deck.

Heroes Paradise was founded by Tim and Julie Pennenga in 2020, transforming the former Hidden Palms Tennis Club into a premier recreation spot. For more information, visit www.heroesparadise.com.







PIRATES INVADE RIVERVIEW CHICK-FIL-A JUST IN TIME FOR THE GASPARILLA CHILDREN'S PARADE

By Libby Hopkins



January is pirate season in Tampa Bay, and with that brings two Gasparilla parades. The Gasparilla Children's Parade took place on January 24, with the main Gasparilla Parade on January 31.

To kick off the parade season, the Riverview Chick-fil-A hosted its own pirate invasion for local families ahead of the Gasparilla Children's Parade.

"Chick-fil-A has been a sponsor of the Gasparilla Children's parade for years," said Toni Miller, restaurant marketing director of Chick-fil-A Riverview. "Our operator, Gabe, says that it's one of his favorite events and loves to participate year after year."

The Riverview Chick-fil-A was approached by the local pirate krewe, the Krewe of the South Shore Marauders, to host a fundraiser for its scholarship fund at the restaurant.

"We saw this as a great opportunity to bring a smile to the faces of our guests and combined forces to make it a whole experience by turning it into an event and bringing a taste of Gasparilla to Riverview," Miller said. "Their krewe dressed up in their pirate gear and passed out beads and balloon swords to our guests both inside the restaurant and in our drive-through. Our restaurant was decked out in pirate flags and maps, we had a DJ playing music outside and, of course, we were visited by the cow."

"We loved hosting the event and supporting their fundraiser and hope to grow it to be even bigger next year," Miller said. "Riverview is such a unique and special place to live.."

Chick-fil-A Riverview is owned and operated by Gabriel Porrata. It opened in October 2020 as the first Chick-fil-A in Riverview and was immediately very popular within the community. Chick-fil-A founder S. Truett Cathy believed "a great company is a caring company," and Porrata strives to bring that energy to his store in Riverview.

"No matter the title or job description, our reason for coming to work is to generously share our time, talents and resources," Miller said. "Everyone's job at Chick-fil-A is to care for and serve others. Chick-fil-A Riverview aims to be the most caring company in our community by serving great food that people can feel good about and strengthening our community."

The Riverview location hosts a breakfast bingo twice a month where guests can compete to win prizes while they enjoy their food. The next breakfast bingos will be held on Thursday, February 5, and Thursday, February 19. The Riverview Chick-fil-A is located at 12810 Summerfield Crossing Blvd.

SPURLINO FAMILY YMCA BUILDS IMPACT THROUGH PEOPLE AND PROGRAMMING

By Olivia Clark



Members participate in a Les Mills group exercise launch at the Spurlino Family YMCA, featuring new choreography and music led by certified instructors.

The Spurlino Family YMCA at Big Bend Road continues to serve as a hub for health, connection and community engagement in South Hillsborough County, offering programs that reflect both the needs and the voices of the families it serves.

Since opening in January 2019, the YMCA has expanded its reach alongside the growing Riverview and Gibsonton communities. Designed as a LEED Gold-certified facility, the campus features indoor and outdoor swimming pools, group exercise studios, walking trails, shaded picnic areas and an outdoor Airnasium. In January 2025, the YMCA added an 18,345-square-foot indoor gymnasium, increasing capacity for youth sports, fitness classes and community events.

Matt Grenagle, director of operations for the Spurlino Family YMCA, has been with the organization locally for two years and has spent 26 summers with the YMCA overall, beginning when he was 15 years old.

"My role focuses on anything that impacts our members and how we connect with the community," Grenagle said. "I started as a programmer, and over time it made more and more sense to focus on creating impact on a larger scale."

Recent months at the Spurlino Family YMCA have included Les Mills group exercise launches, BodyPump Heavy demonstrations, youth sports meet-and-greet events and program showcases. The YMCA also hosts mission markets, fitness expos and social events, such as Active Older Adult Bingo, creating opportunities for engagement beyond traditional workouts.

Youth sports remain a cornerstone, with basketball, soccer and flag football leagues offered for children ages 3-17, along with volleyball programs for ages 7-17. Swim lessons, camps, childcare and fitness programs serve individuals from infancy through older adulthood.

"Hearing the stories of how lives are being changed is the most rewarding part of this work," Grenagle said. "When you hear about a child passing their first swim test or a parent watching their child gain confidence in the water, those moments really matter."

Grenagle said one of his biggest realizations has been the YMCA's ability to adapt.

"Our biggest strength is our ability to pivot to what the community needs us to do," he said.

For Grenagle, the mission remains personal. "For me, it has always been about the people," he said. "The people who work here and the people we serve truly care about one another." For classes, times & more, visit www.tampaymca.org.



FORGOTTEN ANGELS: 2025 YEAR IN REVIEW AND 2026 EVENT SCHEDULE

By Brian Bokor



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

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

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

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

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

"We need the community's support because we get called daily for youth who need our help," said Tilley. "We are housing them, feeding them and teaching them how to become independent. All the fundraising and donations are helping us save lives."

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

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

The next major event is the Spring Motorcycle Campout and Rally, scheduled for Thursday through Sunday, March 12-15. The campout will open with a bike night kickoff on March 12 beginning at 6 p.m., hosted at Voodoo Brewing Co., located at 3432 SR 60 in Valrico. The kickoff event will feature live music by Adam Karch.

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

Also continuing into 2026 is a 'Trip of a Lifetime' raffle supported by food influencer Joel Hansen.

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

Beginning in April, Forgotten Angels will participate in weekly Tuesday bike nights and bingo nights hosted at Voodoo Brewing Co. Valrico, which has named Forgotten Angels as its official 2026 charity partner.

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

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

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

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




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

By Superintendent Van Ayres



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

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

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

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

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

Help them handle big feelings. New places come with new emotions. Talk through what school might look like and give them a plan, such as, "If you miss home, tell your teacher," or "If you need help, raise your hand." Kids do better when they know what to do.

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

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

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

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

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

NEWSOME, ARMWOOD AND SOUTH COUNTY CAREER CENTER LEAD GRADUATION GAINS

Staff Report



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

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

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

Significant improvement was also seen at South County Career Center, which recorded a 17.4 percentage-point increase in its graduation rate — one of the largest gains in the district. Officials said the increase highlights the impact of career-focused education combined with targeted academic support, helping students stay engaged while preparing for the workforce or postsecondary training.

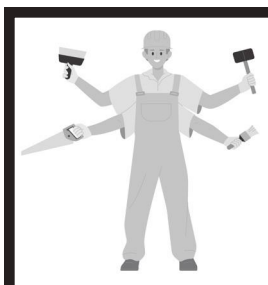
Armwood High School was another bright spot, achieving a 7.6 percent increase in its graduation rate over the previous year. District leaders praised the school's staff for identifying students in need of additional support and connecting them with resources such as credit recovery, tutoring and graduation planning.

Superintendent Van Ayres said the success at these schools illustrates the district's broader strategy of meeting students where they are.

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

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

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



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COMMEMORATION OF JULIA MOSELEY HONORING LIMONA CEMETERY'S 150TH ANNIVERSARY

By Lori Collins, Ph.D.



Members of The Timberly Trust gather at Limona Cemetery to honor 150 years of community history and legacy.

As Limona Cemetery marks its 150th anniversary, the community is pausing to reflect on the people who shaped the area long before modern development transformed eastern Hillsborough County. Surrounded in the late 19th century by citrus groves, clear lakes and longleaf pine forests, Limona emerged as a small but enduring winter colony rooted in land, family and heritage.

One of the strongest symbols of that legacy is Limona Cemetery, among the oldest formal burial grounds in the region. Beneath its pines rest generations of farmers, educators, craftsmen and pioneers whose lives trace the transition of Florida's frontier into a settled community. Their stories are inseparable from the history of both Limona and Brandon.

Central to that history is the Moseley family. Julia Daniels Moseley (1849–1917) and her husband, Charles Scott Moseley (1828–1918), settled near Ten Mile Lake in 1882. After their first log home was lost to fire, they built the Moseley Homestead in 1886, later known as "The Nest." Located on a wooded property called Timberly, the homestead became a center of art, music, literature and intellectual life. Letters and journals written there remain among the most valuable firsthand accounts of pioneer life in Florida.

This anniversary year also honors the legacy of their granddaughter, Julia Winifred Moseley (1919–2020), whose granite memorial stone is dedicated at the cemetery. Born and raised at Timberly, she spent more than a century safeguarding her family's history and the natural environment surrounding it. A historian, archivist and preservationist, she devoted her life to protecting the Moseley Homestead, now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, while preserving thousands of documents, photographs, artworks and journals.

Her most enduring contribution may be Come to My Sunland, a published collection of her grandmother's frontier letters that ensured Julia Daniels Moseley's voice would not be lost to time. Through her advocacy for land and water stewardship, Julia Winifred Moseley also bore witness to — and often spoke out against — the rapid loss of Florida's natural landscapes.

Although her ashes remain at Timberly, her memorial at Limona Cemetery fulfills her wish to be honored alongside her ancestors. There, her stone stands as a bridge between Florida's pioneer past and its future.

The Timberly Trust continues to share the history of The Nest, its people and its relationship to the environment. For more information, visit moseleyhomestead.com.

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.

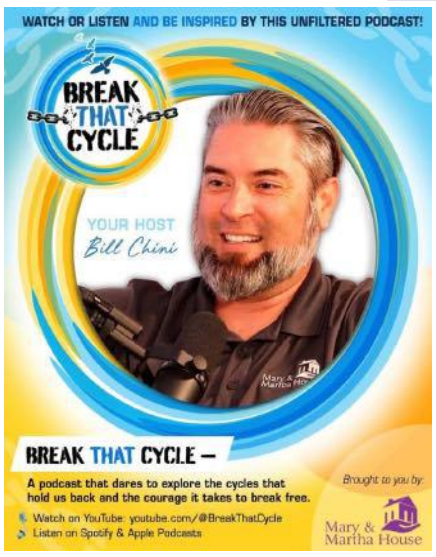






MARY & MARTHA HOUSE LEADER HOSTS PODCAST TO HELP PEOPLE BREAK CYCLES

By Kelly Wise Valdes



A local podcast aimed at confronting the issues people are often told to avoid discussing is gaining momentum as it enters its second year. Break That Cycle, sponsored by Mary & Martha House, debuted in May 2025 and releases new episodes monthly, said Executive Director Bill Chini. The podcast features guest speakers whose expertise aligns with the topic.

"Every episode has a new guest, depending on the subject. I find either experts, or those with lived experience, for each topic," Chini said. "For example, our second episode is about sexual assault, so the guest was someone who endured that pain but turned it into purpose and started her own nonprofit."

Episode nine focuses on human trafficking and features advocate Dotti Groover-Skipper, who has made it her life mission to help victims and stop human trafficking.

The podcast tackles a wide range of difficult subjects, including suicide prevention, sexual assault, narcissism, healthy relationships, youth violence, reintegration after incarceration and breaking the cycle of hunger. An upcoming episode, "Empowerment After Tragedy," highlights a mother who turned the loss of her son into purpose.

While Chini doesn't choose favorites, the mission is clear.

"I don't really have a favorite subject to cover, but I will say I enjoy having conversations that people are afraid to talk about," said Chini. "Every story matters."

Feedback is beginning to surface as the podcast builds its foundation.

"People have told me that the podcast either opened up their eyes to something or that it prompted them to tell their story," Chini said. "That's important because that's when the healing can begin."

The show's title reflects its purpose.

"Patterns are a beast. That's what we are trying to stop, at least the bad ones," Chini said. "Some people don't even know they are repeating bad cycles, and I hope these episodes open their eyes and give them the power to break them."

Though sponsored by Mary & Martha House, the podcast extends far beyond domestic violence.

"We are trying to tackle all the cycles," Chini said. "This was good information that should be spread around to the world, not just the ladies we serve."

"Break That Cycle was created because too many people are navigating trauma, fear and major life decisions without ever being taught the tools to survive them," Chini said. "If one episode helps someone recognize a red flag, ask for help or see themselves differently, then it's doing exactly what it's supposed to do."

Break That Cycle is available on all the major podcast platforms, including YouTube, at youtube.com/@breakthatcycle, Spotify and Apple Podcasts.

GIVE YOUR BUSINESS A BOOST WITH WE GOT THIS BOOKKEEPING

By Mylena C. Ferman

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

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



Grace Givens, owner of We Got This Bookkeeping.

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

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

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

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

"I want to remain the only bookkeeper because I want to be the one hands-on doing work," she said.

Basic monthly services, ideal for businesses in their first two years with only one employee, start at $350. This package includes account setup, monthly financial reports, unlimited email support and more. As a business grows, its needs will change. Givens says most of her clients pay around the $800-$1,200 a month.

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

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

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

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



BRIDGEWATER LANDING OPENS LEASING FOR NEWEST 55-PLUS APARTMENT HOMES

By Marie Gilmore



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leasing offices are open Monday-Friday from 10 a.m.-5 p.m. and Saturday from 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Email leasing@bridgewaterlandings.com or calling 813-934-2204.



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New Year's Financial Resolutions: Making Them Stick

As the calendar flips to a new year, millions of Americans pledge to improve their financial lives. But without a concrete plan, those well-intentioned resolutions often fade quickly.

Financial goals consistently top the list of New Year's resolutions. A 2025 CFP Board study shows that financial resolutions are prominent, with saving more money (45%) and reducing debt (32%) ranking among the top three goals. Unfortunately, most resolutions don't last. A 2023 Forbes Health poll found that over half of people give up on resolutions by the four-month mark and only 1% make it the full year.

The challenge isn't a lack of desire for change. People may set the same resolution year after year, revealing a disconnect between intentions and action. Or it may be that they try to tackle too many goals at once, or aim higher than is realistic, setting themselves up for disappointment.

Set smart financial goals. Before crafting your action plan, consider which financial priorities matter most to you. If you need ideas, here are some areas where you may want focus in 2026:

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

Be specific. Vague resolutions like "save more money" rarely succeed. Instead, it can help to make goals specific and measurable. For example, rather than making a resolution to "start an emergency fund," commit to a specific goal, such as, "I will put $100 a month into an emergency fund."

This shift from general to specific transforms wishful thinking into actionable steps. When goals are attainable, it's easier to track progress and stay motivated.

Find an accountability partner. Don't go it alone. Having someone to check in with can help you stay on track. This could be a spouse, friend or family member who shares similar goals.

Consider working with a financial advisor who can help you create a realistic plan, monitor your progress and adjust strategies as needed. A professional can provide expertise and accountability, making it easier to stay on track throughout the year.

Start small and build momentum. Rather than overhauling your entire financial life all at once, focus on one or two priority areas. Identify where the largest gap exists between your current situation and where you want to be, then concentrate your energy there.

Breaking larger goals into smaller, manageable actions makes them less overwhelming and more achievable. Each small win builds confidence and momentum for tackling the next challenge.

The new year offers a fresh start and renewed motivation to improve your financial health. With specific goals, a solid action plan and the right support system, this could be the year your financial resolutions finally stick.

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



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826 OAK PARK PL


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911 KIRKCALDY WAY


916 EAGLE LN


1210 HARBOUR BLUE ST


1318 RIVERFIELD CT


1425 SHELL FLOWER DR


1461 HARBOUR WALK RD


1521 BRILLIANT CUT WAY


1603 SCOTCH PINE DR


1806 DERBYWOOD DR


1807 PARKWOOD DR


2015 BRANCH TREE LN


2245 EAGLE BLUFF DR


2308 S CAROLINA AVE


2406 NATURES CT


2409 BUCKHORN RUN DR


2440 E DEL WEBB BLVD

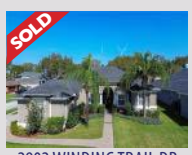

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2848 MOSSY TIMBER TRL


2902 WINDING TRAIL DR


2924 VALENCIA RIDGE ST

2934 WILDERNESS BLVD E

3004 W MASON ST #B

3012 COLONIAL RIDGE DR

3012 MAGNOLIA MEADOWS DR

3033 WISTER CIR

3041 COLONIAL RIDGE DR

3301 STONEBRIDGE TRL

3506 PINE KNOT DR

3511 CAPITAL RESERVE DR

3601 SAVANNAH LAKE PL

3610 SAVANNAH LAKE PL

3712 EAGLEWOOD ST

3717 QUAIL NESTING PL

3765 MAXWELL PARK DR

3798 PLAINVIEW DR

4524 SPRING RD

4531 RIVER OVERLOOK DR

4614 RIVER CLOSE BLVD

4643 JOHN MOORE RD

4720 POND RIDGE DR

4950 BAYSHORE BLVD #1

5070 SAN MARTINO DR

5112 TWIN CREEKS DR

5157 BLACK BIRCH TRL

5704 TPC BLVD

5728 WATERCOLOR DR

5732 STOCKPORT ST

5745 SKYTOP DR

5803 TANAGERSIDE RD

5823 AUDUBON MANOR BLVD

5903 CHERT HILL LN

5909 SANDHILL RIDGE DR

6003 TEALSIDE CT

6727 SIMMONS LOOP

7136 COLONY POINTE DR

7628 INTREPID RD

7885 BRISTOL PARK DR

8337 LAGERFELD DR

8417 MOULTON DR

8611 PARKWAY CIR

9511 LAUREL LEDGE DR

9827 SORBONNE LOOP

10333 SUMMER AZURE DR

10414 WICKER PARK PL

10425 HALLMARK BLVD

10577 CALLUNA DR

10813 DIXON DR

10929 BROOKSNEST CT

10943 VERAWOOD DR

11025 WINTER CREST DR

11110 SWANSEA ST

11512 RAULERSON RD

11521 LAKE LUCAYA DR

11524 RIVER COUNTRY DR

11531 CAMBIUM CROWN DR

11567 WESTON COURSE LOOP

11813 MILE MARSH DR

11882 FROST ASTER DR

11931 SAND MYRTLE RD

12004 CINNAMON FERN DR

13903 NATURES RESERVE DR

14015 KINGFISHER GLEN DR

14153 HOLINESS CHURCH RD

14208 CREEK RUN DR

14834 PADDOCK POND AVE

15063 RIDER PASS DR

15305 FISHHAWK PRESERVE DR

15422 STARLING CROSSING DR

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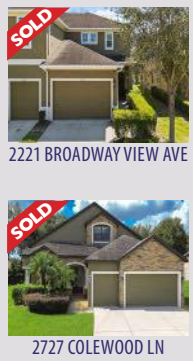

2114 GOLF MANOR BLVD


2117 LAINDALE PL


2117 VALTERRA VISTA WAY


2120 GOLF MANOR BLVD


2131 GOLDEN OAK LN


2221 BROADWAY VIEW AVE


2226 N CREEK CT


2234 LENNOX DALE LN

2542 CLARESIDE DR

2601 BROOKVILLE DR

2609 W CLEVELAND ST #B

2626 BERRYFIELD PL

2677 NORTHWOOD PARK ST

2707 N WOODROW AVE #2

2727 COLEWOOD LN

2821 HOLLY BLUFF CT

2829 52ND AVE S


3107 RED LION DR


3115 BENT CREEK DR


3125 S MILLER RD


3146 BEAVER POND TRL

3203 BEAVER POND TRL

3212 JOHN MOORE RD

3218 STONEBRIDGE TRL

3280 MANGROVE POINT DR

3301 RIVER WOODS DR

3809 BARBARA LEE CV

3817 COLD CREEK DR

3914 TURKEY OAK DR

3934 CEDAR CAY CIR

4002 W BAY TO BAY BLVD

4008 GREENMARK LN

4114 W INMAN AVE

4424 TEVALO DR

4439 DEVINSHIRE FIELDS LOOP

5208 CANDLER VIEW DR

5249 MOON SHELL DR

5309 ALAFIA FALLS DR

5314 ALAFIA FALLS DR

5318 CANDLER VIEW DR

5342 98TH AVE E

5407 TWIN CREEKS DR

5411 STARLING RIDGE DR

5608 FREESTONE CIR

6007 BURROWING OWL PL

6011 HAMMOCK HILL AVE

6021 FLATWOODS MANOR CIR

6030 SANDHILL RIDGE DR

6112 IBISPARK DR

6115 SHADOWLAKE DR

6120 WATERCOLOR DR

6359 JOURNEY WAY

6644 PAR CT

9931 BAY DR

10015 REMINGTON DR

10108 GOLDEN WONDER LN

10130 PADDOCK OAKS DR

10208 POPS CT

10212 HOLLAND RD

10222 EVENING TRAIL DR

10262 KEY DEER WAY

10282 KEY DEER WAY

11139 WINTHROP LAKE DR

11143 WINTHROP LAKE DR

11162 SPRING POINT CIR

11205 LARK LANDING CT

11229 HAWKS FERN DR

11308 GREAT NECK RD

11309 GRAND PARK AVE

11350 HAWKS FERN DR

11457 CAMBRAY CREEK LOOP

12102 HAZEN AVE

12402 CREEK EDGE DR

12846 TALLOWOOD DR

12902 BROOKSIDE MOSS DR

13111 BAHIA GRASS LN

13121 EARLY RUN LN

13146 HOMESTEAD LN

13163 PASTURE VIEW LOOP

13621 CIRCA CROSSING DR

15625 HAWKS CREST LOOP

15740 STARLING WATER DR

15810 STARLING WATER DR

15817 SORAWATER DR

16421 66TH LN E

17112 FALCONRIDGE RD

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17721 BRIGHT WHEAT DR

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ARABIC FILM FESTIVAL MAKES INAUGURAL DEBUT IN TAMPA BAY

By Libby Hopkins



The Florida Arab Film Festival launched its inaugural edition this past January, marking the first event of its kind in the state.

The Florida Arab Film Festival launched its inaugural edition this past January, marking the first event of its kind in the state. Presented by Movie Buffs Productions, Tampa Bay Film Circle and NCG Cinemas, the festival took place in Tampa Bay, celebrating the richness and diversity of Arab storytelling.

Dedicated to showcasing contemporary and independent Arabic films, the festival aimed to introduce Florida audiences to bold new voices, compelling narratives and vibrant cinematic perspectives from across the Arab world.

"The Florida Arab Film Festival was created to celebrate Arab cinema and give a platform to Arab filmmakers whose stories are often underrepresented or misunderstood in mainstream media," said Shady Makary, festival founder and director. "Arab cinema has a rich history spanning decades, but many filmmakers still struggle with access, protection, funding and international distribution, especially in the United States."

Hosting the festival in Tampa was a very intentional choice by Makary and his team.

"Tampa Bay is home to a growing and diverse Arab community, yet it has never had a dedicated Arab film festival," Makary said. "We wanted to bring these stories to a new audience, create cultural dialogue and make history by launching the first Arab film festival in Florida and the region. Tampa felt like the right city to start something meaningful, inclusive and long-lasting."

The films selected for the edition highlighted powerful Arab voices from across the region and the diaspora.

"Many of the stories are based on true events, humanitarian issues, faith-based themes and personal struggles that reflect the real experiences of Arab communities," Makary said. "These films go beyond stereotypes and headlines. They focused on identity, resilience, family, displacement, love and survival and told through authentic storytelling and strong cinematic vision. The festival will feature a mix of feature films, shorts and independent productions, giving space to both established and emerging filmmakers."

Makary and his team hosted the Tampa is a Golden Globes nominee and is shortlisted for the Academy Awards, as well as Palestine 36 Florida premiere, which is also shortlisted for the Academy Awards.

"Our guests got more than just film screenings," Makary said. "The festival was designed to be a cultural experience. Audiences enjoyed red-carpet moments, filmmaker and actor appearances, live Q&A sessions, panel discussions and opportunities to engage directly with the artists behind the films."

"Our hope is for the Florida Arab Film Festival to become a lasting cultural platform that supports Arab filmmakers and connects their stories to wider audiences," Makary said. For more information about the Florida Arab Film Festival, visit its website at https://floridaarabfilmfestival.com.

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

By Libby Hopkins



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

This past January, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Tampa Bay (BBBS) partnered with the Tampa Bay Lightning and Benchmark International for a dynamic National Mentoring Month campaign designed to spotlight the power of mentorship and respond to an urgent community need: more than 1,000 children across Greater Tampa Bay are currently waiting for a mentor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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COMMUNITY BREAKS GROUND ON ADAPTED HOME FOR ARMY VETERAN

By Brian Bokor

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MILKSHAKE FACTORY BRINGS FLAVOR AND BIGGER SMILES TO CUSTOMERS

By Kelly Wise Valdes

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



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

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

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

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

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

The menu features year-round favorites along with rotating seasonal creations. "We always have a limited-time-only shake," said Panepinto. "Our next one up will be the strawberry matcha milkshake. We also have chocolate-dipped strawberries, perfect for Valentine's Day, made daily in our store. Or you can get our signature, homemade bark in milk or white chocolate hearts for the holiday. We are very excited for our carrot cake milkshake, coming soon."

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

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

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

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

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

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ANNUAL BILL CAREY SPORTING CLAY TOURNAMENT RETURNS ON MARCH 28

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

Registration for the tournament officially opened in January. Participants can register teams, purchase raffle tickets and explore sponsorship opportunities online at www.bgctampa.org/billcarey-clayshoot.

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

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

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

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

UP BEFORE DAWN: ZORAN PAVIC KEEPS THE REGENT RUNNING

By Kelly Wise Valdes



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

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

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

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

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

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

His days start early — often before dawn.

"We are busy and have a lot of people at events. I get here at 5:30 a.m. and get rooms ready for the events of that day, sometimes do minor maintenance and check to make sure things are working and ready for event," said Pavic. "I sometimes go home and come back for the events at night. I take care of the needs of the event and clean up, then come back the next day to do it again."

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

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

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

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

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





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

By Brian Bokor

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

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

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

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

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

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



One of the founding families of Riverview, Wanda Ruth (Simmons) Westrook, 95, passed in November.

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

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

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

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



Photo Courtesy of Simmons Family
Graduating Class1948 Wimauma High School.

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

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

Earlier family reunions were held on the Simmons ranch and along Bullfrog Creek, drawing hundreds of relatives. Over time, changes in water flow, particularly following the construction of Interstate 75, altered the creek's condition. When the ranch was no longer available, reunions continued at the church. In later years, those gatherings became harder to maintain due to age and illness, quietly marking the close of another chapter in the family's long presence along Simmons Loop.

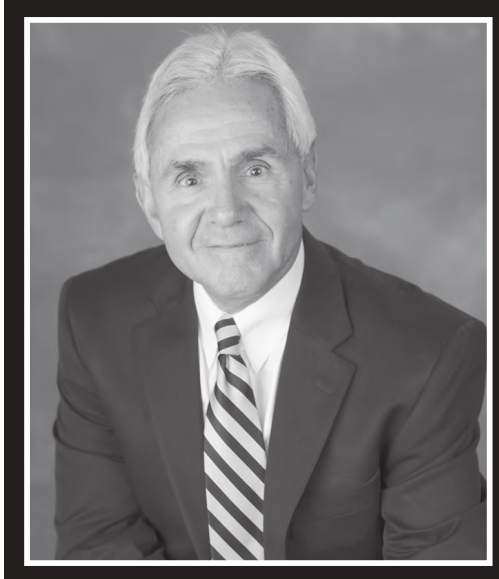
For more than four decades, Wanda Westbrook also worked as an Avon representative, becoming a familiar and trusted presence in Riverview neighborhoods. She was remembered for her kindness, steadiness and generosity toward those she encountered.

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

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

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

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Don't Worry...Be Healthy

Whether you're 32 or 82, one thing is universal: if you end up in the hospital, the last thing you want to worry about when you get home is unexpected medical bills. Recovery should be about healing, rest, and getting back to life, not about repayment and financial stress.

So let's have a quick "back of the envelope" conversation. Most health plans, whether employer coverage, Medicare, or something else, include out-of-pocket expenses. First, there's the deductible, the amount you must pay before insurance really starts paying. Then there's "shared cost," which may be a flat dollar copay or a percentage, known as coinsurance, where you pay part and the insurance company pays part. These shared costs usually have a cap called a maximum out-of-pocket, often referred to as MOOP.

I say "usually" because here's something that surprises many people. Original Medicare, without a supplement, has an 80/20 cost share with no cap at all. Yes, really. That means there is technically no limit to what you could owe.

Now picture this. You have insurance, but you're still exposed to very real costs. In fact, many people intentionally take on higher deductibles or greater cost sharing in exchange for lower monthly premiums. That strategy can make sense, but the exposure is still there, and it can quickly add up to thousands of dollars if something serious happens.

What if, for a relatively small monthly cost, often around $25 to $50, you could receive fixed cash benefits? Cash for ambulance rides. Cash for each day you're in the hospital. Even cash for things insurance doesn't consider, like boarding your pets while you're away. These are actual dollars paid directly to you to help cover deductibles, shared costs, and non-covered expenses.

This solution exists. It's called an indemnity plan. Because the benefits are fixed, the risk to the insurance company is limited, which keeps costs low. It also doesn't pay agents very well, which explains why no one is blowing up your phone to tell you about it. Just being honest.

You should run the math for your own situation, but savings of several thousand dollars a year are very realistic. Put away your checkbook and have a conversation with an RN who understands healthcare is about caring for your health and protecting your wealth. Let's talk.



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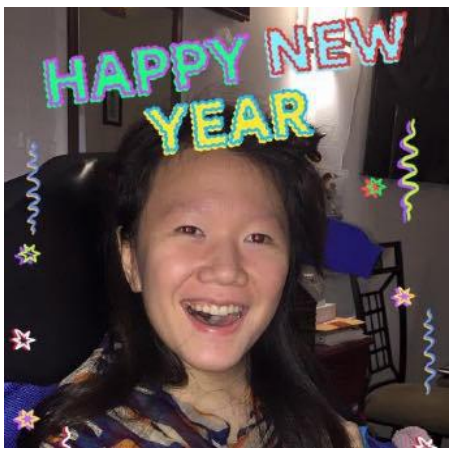


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QUEENA INSPIRES WHILE FACING HER JOURNEY OF HEALING

By Libby Hopkins



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

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

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

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

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

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

"Over the past year, Queena's overall health has remained stable, and we're grateful for that consistency," Nguyen said. "She does occasionally experience a brief mini seizure in the mornings, but otherwise her medical team feels she's doing well."

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

"She shows increased awareness, often smiling in response to voices, and appears more relaxed during movement exercises," Nguyen said. "Although she still requires full assistance for cycling and walking-based activities, the comfort and responsiveness she shows during sessions are encouraging steps forward."

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

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

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

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

By Makenzie Atkins Noel



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

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

Operating for more than 40 years as a family-run business, Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control was founded with a straightforward philosophy: do the job the right way, or don't do it at all. That commitment to quality remains at the core of everything the company does today.

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

Experience-driven care is a defining part of Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control's process. With more than four decades of industry knowledge behind the business, the company relies on customized fertilizer blends developed through firsthand experience. These blends are based on an understanding of what works, allowing Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control to avoid generic, one-size-fits-all treatments. The result is a more customized approach focused on producing noticeable and sustainable results for each customer.

"I started this company because I saw too many jobs being done halfway," said Mike Compton, owner of Forever Green Lawn and Pest Control. "We do it the right way or we don't do it at all, which is why I've spent 45 years perfecting our fertilizer blends based on what actually works for each customer."

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

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

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







COMMUNITY SHOOTERS AIM TO MAKE DIFFERENCE AT ANGEL FOUNDATION SPORTING CLAYS CLASSIC

Staff Report

The Angel Foundation FL is proud to host its fourth annual Sporting Clays Classic on Saturday, February 21, at FishHawk Sporting Clays.

This exciting event brings together supporters with the foundation's welcome breakfast, catered by Fresh Original Foods/Chick-N-Bones, and its awards luncheon, catered by Glory Days Grill. Shooters will enjoy a great morning on the course along with course contests, gun raffles, 50/50 raffle and raffles for exciting prices. Each shooter will also receive our special 'Player's Package' which also includes eye and ear protection and ammo for the tournament.



Representatives from Reed & Reed and Roof X join fellow sponsors in supporting the Angel Foundation FL's fourth annual Sporting Clays at FishHawk Sporting Clays.



CEO Liz Brewer shared, "We are thankful for our Eagle Eye Sponsors, Chadwell Supply, Reed & Reed and Roof X. Also, our High Master Sponsor, Rivard Buick GMC; Sharpshooter Sponsor, PCL Construction; and Brandon Legal Group. It is because of their financial support we are able to host first-class events for our community and raise funds to serve our families in the year ahead to keep them on the road to self-sufficiency when experiencing a life-threatening illness or catastrophic event."

This year, the Angel Foundation FL celebrates 20 years of serving families in our community who are in crisis by matching them with businesses to meet their practical needs as well as providing financial support. The foundation does not give them a 'hand out' but rather holds their hands through their darkest hours, giving them help and hope when they need it the most. For more information or to request assistance, visit https://angelfoundationfl.com/.

You can still register to participate in this event as a sponsor, a foursome or an individual player at the website www.angelfoundationfl.com/. The deadline is Friday, February 13.

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 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.



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

"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 everyone 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 community 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."



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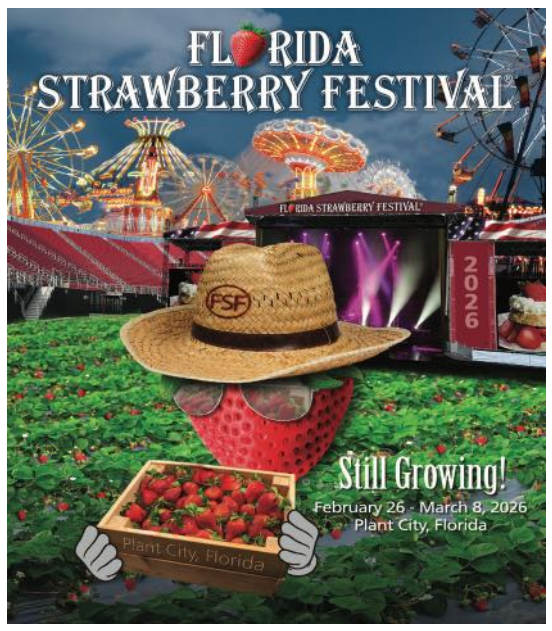
QUEEN AND COURT SELECTED FOR 91ST FLORIDA STRAWBERRY FESTIVAL

Staff Report





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



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

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

"Words cannot describe how incredibly blessed I am to have this opportunity to serve a community that has been nothing but gracious to me my entire life," said Layla Rothman. "I have dreamed of being able to represent the Florida Strawberry Festival and make every single person who walks into those festival gates feel seen and cared for. God has been with me throughout this entire journey, and I pray He will continue to shine through me. Thank you so much, everyone, for the unwavering support — I couldn't be more excited for BerryFest26!"

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

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

"The Queen's Pageant remains one of the most meaningful traditions of the Florida Strawberry Festival, and this year's contestants set a remarkable standard," said Florida Strawberry Festival President Kyle Robinson. "Each young lady displayed impressive talent, confidence and poise, making the selection process especially difficult. We are honored to welcome our new queen and court and are confident these five young ladies will represent the festival with pride and professionalism throughout their year of service."

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

The 91st annual Florida Strawberry Festival will take place from Thursday, February 26, through Sunday, March 8, in Plant City. Festival hours are 10 a.m.-11 p.m. daily and will feature a wide variety of entertainment, exhibits, food, livestock shows, rides, games and competitions. Headline entertainment on the Wish Farms Soundstage includes Alabama, Jo Dee Messina, Jamey Johnson, Lonestar, Ty Myers, Riley Green featuring Hannah McFarland, The Oak Ridge Boys, Legends of Love, Sandi Patty, Lauren Daigle, Forrest Frank, The Offspring, Joan Jett & The Blackhearts and more.

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

About the Florida Strawberry Festival

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

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

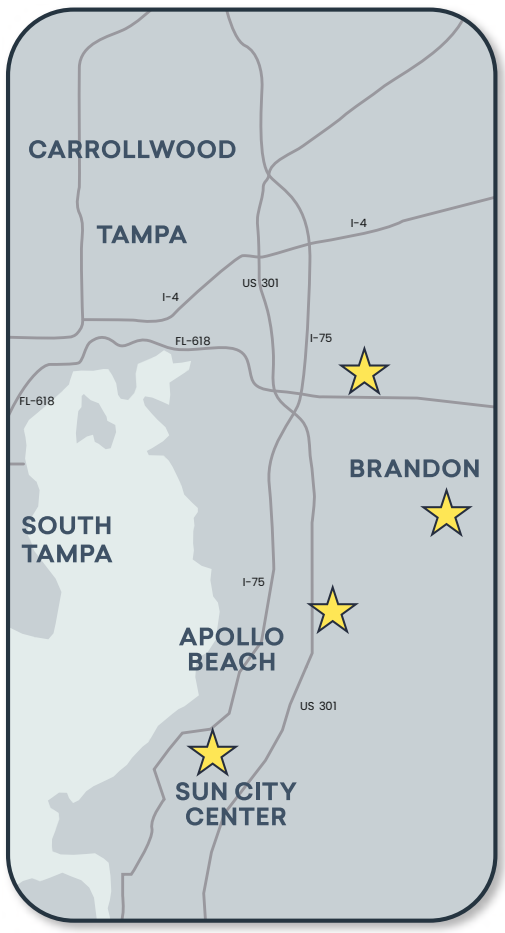
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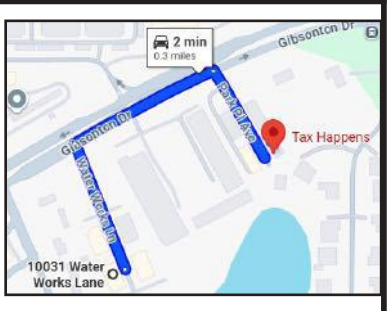
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THREE LOCAL EDUCATORS HONORED AT 2026 EDUCATION AWARDS

Staff Report



Adrian Sarmiento
Morgan High



Jennifer Giannone
Newsome High



Che Counce
Symmes Elementary

Hillsborough County educators were honored on a recent Thursday night as part of the 2026 Excellence in Education Awards, a signature celebration recognizing the individuals who represent the very best of public education across the district.

Presented by Hillsborough Education Foundation (HEF) in partnership with Hillsborough County Public Schools, the annual awards ceremony took place on January 22 at Morsani Hall at the Straz Center for the Performing Arts. This year's theme, 'Hillsborough's Treasures,' highlighted educators and support staff whose dedication, leadership and commitment continue to shape student success.

Among the honorees were three local finalists for the Ida S. Baker Diversity Educator of the Year Award: Che Counce, an Access Points teacher at Symmes Elementary School; Adrian Sarmiento, workforce program advisor at Morgan High School; and Jennifer Giannone, an AVID academic teacher at Newsome High School. Each was recognized onstage for outstanding efforts to foster inclusion, equity and opportunity for students across Hillsborough County.

The three educators were selected from a highly competitive pool of 690 nominations submitted by students, families, colleagues and community members. In total, 13 finalists were honored during the evening across three categories: Instructional Support Employee of the Year, Ida S. Baker Diversity Educator of the Year and Teacher of the Year.

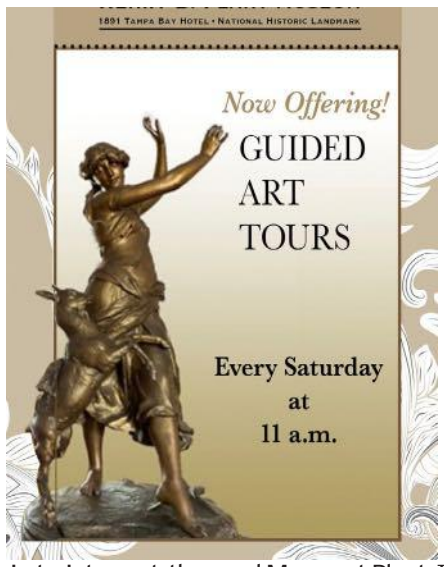
"This year's finalists represent the true treasures of Hillsborough County's public schools," said Anna Corman, president and CEO of Hillsborough Education Foundation. "Their commitment to students, colleagues and families creates a lasting impact well beyond the classroom, and we are proud to recognize the difference they make every day."

The Excellence in Education Awards serve as one of the district's most visible celebrations of public education, shining a spotlight on the educators and staff members whose work helps students thrive academically, socially and emotionally.

For more information about Hillsborough Education Foundation and its programs, visit the website directly at https://educationfoundation.com/.

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

By Libby Hopkins



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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







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

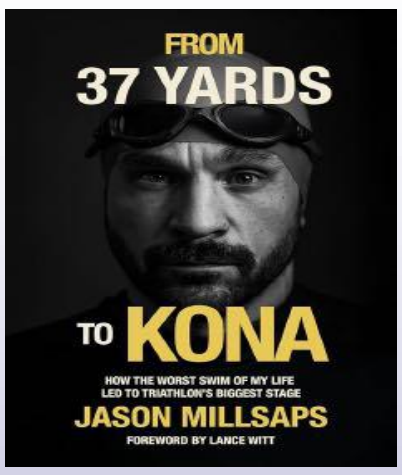
By Olivia Clark

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



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

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



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

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

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

Pastor Millsaps said the process was built on consistent effort and showing up even on difficult days. After more than a year of training, he completed his first full-distance IRONMAN at IRONMAN Arizona in November 2013. Since then, he has finished 16 full-distance IRONMAN races.

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

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

UNDERDOGS EMERGE AS MONSTER JAM SEASON HEATS UP FOR TAMPA FINALS

Staff Report

Familiar stars are once again pacing the field on the road to Monster Jam World Finals XXV. Drivers like Ryan Anderson, Camden Murphy and Jon Zimmer Jr. sit comfortably atop the early leaderboards, but as engines roar and points tighten, a new wave of challengers is quickly proving they belong in the championship conversation.



Among the most impressive risers is Tim Hall Jr., driver of Jurassic Attack. Known as 'The Cadillac Kid,' Hall Jr. is only in his second full season, yet he's already turning heads. Last weekend in Tacoma, Washington, he captured two overall event championships, pushing himself into third place in the Arena Championship Series West standings. Team Throttle Monster appears to have found a fierce competitor with staying power.

In the Stadium Championship Series East, Chris Koehler and Mayhem delivered consistent excellence. The second-generation driver earned a freestyle win in his first career start in St. Louis and currently sits third in points. After claiming Rookie of the Year honors, Koehler is building momentum that could propel him back to the main field at World Finals.

Another fan favorite on the rise is M.J. Solorio behind the wheel of El Toro Loco. Solorio's breakout moment came last year in Salt Lake City, where he went from alternate to podium finisher in the Two-wheel Skills Challenge. Now in his third season, he's second in Arena Championship Series East points and is fresh off a freestyle win and overall event championship in Baltimore.

Dalton Widner is also making noise in 2026 with a new look. Piloting Shell Shock'ed in Stadium Championship Series West, Widner has carried over the speed and consistency that made 2025 a banner year. Currently fourth in the standings, the Tennessee native continues to climb.

Rounding out the list is veteran Tony Ochs in JCB DIGatron. While no stranger to success, Ochs has stormed the Freestyle Mania Championship Series alongside teammate T.J. Tiffany, putting Team JCB in the top spot. An event win in Nashville shows Ochs hasn't missed a beat in his new ride.

As anticipation builds for the 2026 Monster Jam season, all eyes will soon turn to Tampa Bay. Monster Jam World Finals XXV roar into Raymond James Stadium on Saturday and Sunday, February 28 and March 1, bringing racing, freestyle, skills challenges and fan-favorite trucks, like Grave Digger and El Toro Loco. With rising stars and seasoned champions converging, the path to Monster Jam glory is shaping up to be one of the most exciting yet.

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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://stjosephssouthheart.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.

COLLEGE BOARD APPROVES MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING WITH TAMPA BAY RAYS

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

By State Attorney Suzy Lopez



State Attorney Suzy Lopez.

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

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

That is why I am proud to share some important news for our East Hillsborough community. The state attorney's office is expanding our Victim Assistance program to the Plant City Courthouse effective immediately. Beginning now, a trained victim advocate will be on-site every Friday from 8 a.m.-4 p.m. to help victims and their families navigate the court process and access the support they need.



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

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

Our victim advocates are some of the most dedicated and compassionate people on our team. They remind victims that they are not alone in this process. We couldn't do our work as prosecutors without them.

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



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Gala, Women's Club Fundraiser, Genealogical Society & More...

Compiled by Jenny Bennett
jbennett@ospreyobserver.com

Support 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.

Apollo Beach Woman's Club Fundraiser and Scholarship Application

Save the Date! The next big Apollo Beach Woman's Club event, Music of the Motown Era, will groove into Southshore Falls Clubhouse on March 28, from 4:00 to 7:00 pm. Proceeds will once again benefit scholarships.

Scholarship Applications for 2026 are now open. Visit https://www.apollobeachwomansclub.com for details. Applicants must meet ABWC criteria, attend East Bay or Lennard High School, be accepted at a Florida college or university, and demonstrate financial need. To find out more about the Apollo Beach Woman's Club, visit its website at http://www.apollobeachwomansclub.com/index.html.



Genealogical Society Meeting

The South Bay Genealogical Society meeting will be on February 17 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 roundtable 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.

Art Expo To Raise Funds For Scholarships

The Women's Democratic Club is holding an Art Expo Fundraiser on February 22, at Painter's Union Hall located at 8840 US 301, in Riverview, in honor of a past member, Sandra Morehouse an artist herself. It invites you to attend this event, the money raised will support the club's scholarship fund. This one day event will showcase the talent of several artists in our community. There will be light appetizers, drinks and raffles. Cost is $20.00 at the event or go to the website https://sehillsboroughdwc.org For more information email sedwcinfo@gmail.com or call (813)967-1457.

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 Building, 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 kathjosmith@gmail.com.

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

Lions Club Music Bingo Fundraiser

Join the Fishhawk Lions Club for a fun and exciting evening of music bingo at Bullfrog Creek Brewing Co. on Thursday, February 26, at 7 p.m. One hundred percent of the proceeds go to supporting the Fishhawk Lions Club's community service projects. Since 2020, the Fishhawk Lions Club has assisted local schools, churches, food banks, shelters and nursing homes by providing vision screening, charity work and aid. Bullfrog Creek Brewing Co. is located at 3632 Lithia Pinecrest Rd. in Valrico. Visit www.fishhawklionsclub.com for more details.

Homeschool Day At Cracker Country

What do commercial fishing, tourism, cattle ranching and citrus farming have in common? They are all pioneering Florida industries that were shaped by the natural resources of the Sunshine State. The homeschool day at Cracker Country on Wednesday, March 18, from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. will allow students to take part in activities like sorting oranges, packing for a cattle drive, casting a fishnet and more that highlight some of the earliest economic drivers in the developing state of Florida. Educators in historic dress will welcome guests to the 1894 Smith House, Okahumpka Railroad Depot, Terry General Store, school house and other structures authentic to Florida around the turn of the 20th century.

Advanced ticket purchase is required; visit www.crackercountry.org.

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Edited by: Jenny Bennett

EYE ON BUSINESS

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



Nothing Bundt Cakes Celebrates With BOGO Give Away

Nothing Bundt Cakes® has been named America's No. 1 Favorite Food Brand for the second year in a row, according to Technomic and Nation's Restaurant News — a back-to-back honor driven entirely by consumer feedback and praise. To celebrate and thank fans nationwide, the brand is rolling out a VIP sweepstakes and a limited-time Buy One Bundtlet, Get One FREE offer. The three sweepstakes winners will receive a trip to Dallas in 2026 for a behind-the-scenes visit to Nothing Bundt Cakes' headquarters and Bundt Lab, where they'll spend time with the brand's bakers and leadership. In addition, guests can enjoy a BOGO Bundtlet promotion from Feb. 16–22 at participating bakeries. Apply at nothingbundtcakes.com/americas-favorite-food-brand-sweepstakes/.

Hope And Harvest Continues To Expand Charcuterie Events

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

Cultivated Home Design Uses Holistic Approach To Transforming Homes

Cyndi Myers, owner of Cultivated Home Designs and a new FishHawk resident, is an interior designer and energy healer who brings the two modalities together to help people harness the energy of their home and its surrounding environment to improve their overall well-being.



A lifelong aficionado of interior design, Myers discovered during her two-and-a-half-year journey with leukemia the magic of energy healing and how the combination of the two altered her mindset and ultimately led to her remission from the disease. Contact Myers to begin your life-changing journey to boost your mind, body and spirit. You can reach her at 518-275-8536 or by email at cmyers768@gmail.com.



Cyndi Myers, owner of Cultivated Home Designs, uses a holistic approach to transforming homes.

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Feb. 26 - Mar. 8, 2026
Plant City, FL

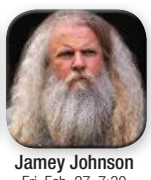



Jimmy Sturr & His Orchestra
Thu. Feb. 26, 10:30
FREE


The Oak Ridge Boys
Thu. Feb. 26, 3:30
$40-$45


Alabama
Thu. Feb. 26, 7:30
$65-$70-$85


Jo Dee Messina
Fri. Feb. 27, 3:30
$40-$50


Jamey Johnson
Fri. Feb. 27, 7:30
$45-$55-$75


Lonestar
Sat. Feb. 28, 3:30
$35-$45


Ty Myers
Sat. Feb. 28, 7:30
$50-$60-$75


Riley Green featuring Hannah McFarland
Sun. Mar. 1, 6:30 $110-$120-$135




Gene Watson
Mon. Mar. 2, 3:30
$30


Legends Of Love
Brian McKnight, Ginuwine, Ruben Studdard
Mon. Mar. 2, 7:30 $40-$45-$80


Sandi Patty
Tue. Mar. 3, 3:30
$30


Lauren Daigle
Tue. Mar. 3, 7:30
$70-$75-$85


John Foster
Wed. Mar. 4, 3:30
$25-$35


Brantley Gilbert
Wed. Mar. 4, 7:30
$50-$85


Bill Haley Jr. & The Comets
Thu. Mar. 5, 10:30
FREE


The Bellamy Brothers
Thu. Mar. 5, 3:30
$30


Dierks Bentley
Thu. Mar. 5, 7:30
$70-$80-$90


The Marshall Tucker Band
Fri. Mar. 6, 3:30
$35-$40



Forrest Frank
Fri. Mar. 6, 7:30
$70-$80-$90



Pitbull Toddler
Sat. Mar. 7, 3:30
FREE


The Offspring
Sat. Mar. 7, 7:30
$70-$80-$90


Joan Jett & The Blackhearts
Sun. Mar. 8, 7:30
$45-$55-$75

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SUN 'n FUN • General RV Center • Spectrum • Blackshades Sunglasses & Eyewear • Lazydays RV (powered by Campers Inn RV)

HUMAN TRAFFICKING AWARENESS TRAINING EMPHASIZES PREVENTION AND VIGILANCE

By Olivia Clark

Hillsborough County Florida Health Care Services

HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY COMMISSION ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

KAPPA DELTA PHI WELCOMES NEW VALRICO CHAPTER, KAPPA UPSILON

Staff Report



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

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

The chartering and installation of officers for Kappa Upsilon took place on January 10, 2026, at the home of Lily Barney, PNP. The celebration continued with a dinner social hosted at the home of Terry Montefusco, marking the beginning of the chapter's presence in the area.

The installation ceremony was conducted by Cindy Broeker, PNP, of the Counseling Chapter Gamma Alpha Nu in Huntingburg, Indiana. Nancy Wimble, Gulf Coast Regional Director, served as Mistress of Ceremonies for the event.

The newly installed officers of Kappa Upsilon include:

Amy Carey Lee, Chairman of the Board
Geraldine Clark, President
Katie Lambert, Vice President
Terry Montefusco, Treasurer
Nancy Kelley, Secretary
Claudia Yake, Guard
Colleen Barney, Monitor

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

Kappa Upsilon has already begun making an impact in the community. The chapter kicked off the year by donating more than 26 bags and numerous garment boxes to AMVETS, supporting local veterans in need.

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

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

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

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



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

By Olivia Clark

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



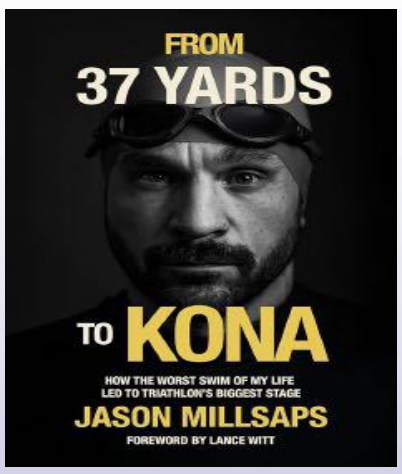
Pastor Jason Millsaps, worship pastor at Bell Shoals Church, recently released his debut memoir, From 37 Yards to Kona.

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

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

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

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



Pastor Millsaps said the process was built on consistent effort and showing up even on difficult days. After more than a year of training, he completed his first full-distance IRONMAN at IRONMAN Arizona in November 2013. Since then, he has finished 16 full-distance IRONMAN races.

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

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

KREWE OF CHARLOTTE DE BERRY TEES UP 7TH ANNUAL GOLF TOURNAMENT

Staff Report

The Ye Royal Krewe of Charlotte de Berry will host its 7th Annual Scholarship Golf Tournament on Saturday, Feb. 28,, at Cypress Creek Golf Club in Ruskin, continuing a long-standing tradition of supporting local female students pursuing higher education.



2025 scholarship winners with proceeds from last year's golf tournament.

The all-female South Shore–based Krewe has been part of the Gasparilla community for 25 years. Through its annual golf tournament, the organization has raised more than $72,000 and awarded 29 scholarships to outstanding female high school graduates entering college or technical programs.

This year's tournament will follow a four-person scramble format with a shotgun start at 8 a.m. Check-in begins at 6:30 a.m., with lunch and awards to follow play. Organizers hope to sell out the course with 120 golfers and surpass previous fundraising totals.

The event will include contests such as closest to the pin, longest drive, a putting challenge and a par-three challenge, along with raffle baskets, a silent auction and a 50/50 drawing. Registration includes green fees, cart, range balls, lunch and participation in tournament activities.

Golfers may register individually for $165 or as a foursome for $575.

Community members and businesses are also encouraged to support the tournament through sponsorships and donations. Sponsorship opportunities include hole sponsorships, a bar cart sponsor, premium sponsor packages and support of the tournament's meet-and-greet breakfast. Raffle baskets and silent auction items are also being accepted.

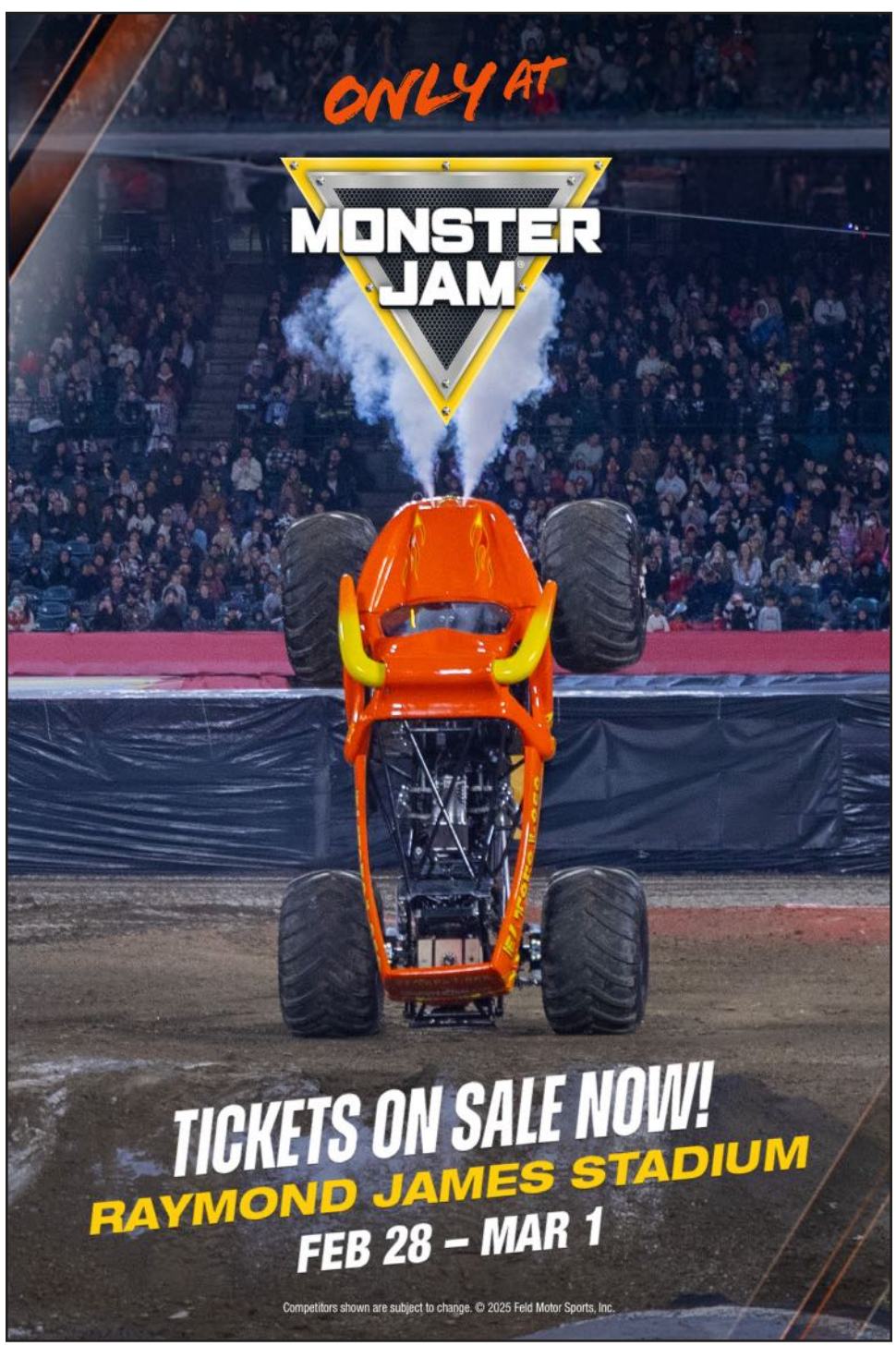
Sponsorship levels range from $125 for returning sponsors to $300 for premium sponsors, which includes two course signs and a table spot for added visibility.

Proceeds from the tournament directly benefit local female students from the South Shore area as they pursue college degrees or technical certifications.

In addition to its fundraising efforts, Ye Royal Krewe of Charlotte de Berry welcomes new members annually. The Krewe year runs from Sept. 1 through Aug. 31, with meetings held on the second Thursday of each month at the Egypt Shriners Event Facility in Tampa.

The tournament will be held at Cypress Creek Golf Club, located at 1011 Cypress Village Blvd. in Ruskin. To register, visit www.kreweofcharlottedeberry.com





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

By Brian Bokor

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



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

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

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

This year's expanded venue allowed for a broader range of attractions and experiences. Guests lined up throughout the day for autocross thrill rides, where professional drivers delivered high-speed precision laps in performance vehicles. The Enclave Race Lab Challenge, a racing simulator competition, drew enthusiastic participation as attendees competed for the fastest lap. Professional-driven, off-road thrill rides also gave visitors a chance to experience dirt, rocks and steep terrain on The Motor Enclave's exclusive off-road course.

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

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

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

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

COUNTY OPENS APPLICATIONS FOR ACTION BOARD SCHOLARSHIPS WITH UP TO $5,000 FOR ELIGIBLE STUDENTS

Staff Report

Hillsborough County is now accepting applications for its Community Action Board (CAB) Scholarship, a need-based program designed to help local students continue their education beyond high school.



The application window opened on January 12 and will close on Friday, March 20, or when capacity is reached, whichever comes first.

Achieving a higher education is an important life choice for young people and their families. The Hillsborough County Social Services department, in partnership with the Hillsborough County Community Action Board, is committed to helping eligible students reach this milestone by offering scholarships of up to $5,000 funded through the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) program.

The number of scholarships and the amount awarded depend on available grant funding. Scholarships are awarded on a first-come, first-served basis to eligible applicants who submit complete applications with all required documentation.

CAB Scholarship funds may be used at trade schools, community colleges or four-year universities to help offset tuition and related educational expenses, allowing students to focus on their academic goals rather than financial barriers.

As part of the application process, students are required to describe their academic status using the following prompts:

High school/GED applications: Explain why they should be selected for the scholarship by discussing academic strengths and areas for growth, career goals and any personal or financial circumstances that may affect their ability to pursue higher education.

Currently enrolled college students: Describe their most meaningful achievements since entering college and how the achievements relate to their field of study and future career goals. Explain how this scholarship will support both financial and nonfinancial needs while pursuing postsecondary education.

Students should review https://form.jotform.com/252883805886171 and Federal Poverty Guidelines (https://hcfl.gov/residents/human-services/financial-assistance/determine-eligibility) before applying. Call 813-272-5220 or email for info to socialservicescsbg@hcfl.gov for any questions.

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MIC DROP TAMPA BUILDS CONFIDENCE, COMMUNITY FOR WOMEN IN BRANDON

Staff Report



Tampa's Mic Drop Club will host its next speaker session on Tuesday, February 17, 2026, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Bin & Board in Brandon.

A growing women-led speaker series is bringing confidence, connection and powerful storytelling to Brandon this February as Mic Drop Tampa hosts its next community event.

Mic Drop Club Tampa will hold a speaker session on Tuesday, February 17, from 11 a.m.-1 p.m. at bin + board, located at 807 W. Bloomingdale Ave. in Brandon. The event is open to women interested in public speaking, leadership development and personal growth, with RSVP required.

Mic Drop is part of a national organization that creates supportive spaces for women to practice public speaking, share ideas and amplify their voices. With the launch of its Tampa Bay chapter at the end of 2025, the organization has quickly gained momentum locally, attracting professionals, creatives and community leaders from across the region.

The Tampa chapter is hosted by Caitlin Gardner, a Brandon-area entrepreneur, professional speaker and owner of Blooming Communications. Gardner brings more than two decades of corporate experience to the role and said the mission of Mic Drop resonates deeply with women in Tampa Bay.

"After two decades in corporate America, I've seen firsthand how many women have incredible stories and expertise but hesitate to claim the mic," Gardner said. "The Mic Drop Club gives us a place to practice, connect and grow the confidence to share those stories boldly. Tampa is filled with powerhouse women who deserve to be heard — and this community is where that courage begins."

Mic Drop Club Tampa is part of Mic Drop Workshop, a global organization founded to help women become thought leaders through public speaking. With chapters in cities around the world, Mic Drop Club is redefining who is seen and heard on stages, in boardrooms and in leadership roles.

Each Mic Drop Tampa session is designed to be interactive and supportive. Attendees participate in speaking prompts, receive structured feedback and engage in personal growth exercises that build confidence both professionally and personally. The events foster a welcoming environment where women can practice speaking skills without judgment and build meaningful connections.

For women seeking confidence, community and a place to use their voice boldly, Mic Drop Tampa offers an opportunity to step into the spotlight.

For more information, contact Gardner and visit www.bloomingcomm.com

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 understanding 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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LICENSED ACUPUNCTURE PHYSICIAN OFFERS NATURAL RELIEF BEYOND PAIN

By Denise Sansosti

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



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

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

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

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

While pain relief is the most common reason patients seek acupuncture, Dr. Carlson emphasizes that its benefits extend far beyond that.

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

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

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

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

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

TROOP 610'S MULCH SALE RETURNS, HELPING SCOUTS EARN WAY TO CAMP

Staff Report



Scouts BSA Troop 610 members load and deliver mulch as part of their annual fundraiser, helping earn funds for summer camp and troop activities.

Mulch season has officially arrived, and Scouts BSA Troop 610 is once again rolling up its sleeves to support its annual mulch fundraiser — an effort that helps fund summer camp, purchase equipment and support year-round Scouting activities.



The popular fundraiser, now live, has become a cornerstone for the Lithia-based troop, allowing Scouts to earn their way to camp while providing a convenient service for local residents. Each year, community members can order mulch and have it delivered directly to their homes, saving time, gas and heavy lifting.

Scout mom Caitlin Nguyen, who has been part of Troop 610 for seven years, said the fundraiser plays a major role in making Scouting opportunities accessible for families.

"The troop usually profits around $15,000 to $20,000 from this fundraiser," Nguyen said. "Last year, it paid about 80 percent of the cost for our troop to go to summer camp way up in North Carolina."

Mulch deliveries are scheduled for Saturday, March 7, to Apollo Beach, Brandon, Riverview and Valrico. Deliveries to Lithia (ZIP code: 33547) will take place on Saturday, March 14, weather permitting.

Orders must be received by Friday, February 20.

Residents can place orders online using a credit card by visiting https://tinyurl.com/troop610mulch.

Those ordering by mail should include their name, address, phone number, email address and gate code, if applicable.

Troop leaders said the fundraiser not only supports Scouting adventures like summer camp but also teaches Scouts responsibility, teamwork and the value of hard work.

For questions or additional information, contact Mike Nguyen by calling or texting 850-867-6032 or email troop610mulch@gmail.com.

Community support helps ensure Troop 610 continues providing meaningful outdoor and leadership experiences for local youth — one bag of mulch at a time.





WEST FLORIDA FLAMES BRANDON SENDS SIX TEAMS TO NATIONALS THIS SUMMER

By Emily Harper



An overview shot of the West Florida Flames' training complex.

The 2010 DPL Girls had a great showing at the 2025 nationals held in Minnesota. They finished the event with a record of two wins, one loss and one tie.

The 2012, 2010 and 2009 GA teams impressed at the national playoffs with their quality of play and represented the club with distinction; the 2010 team advanced to the final eight, highlighting a strong overall performance across all age groups.

The 2008 and 2009 NAL Boys teams competed at the NAL National Championships at Tuckahoe Turf Farms in New Jersey. They faced strong competition and performed well throughout the event; the 2009 team won two games, lost one and finished second in their group.

Original Story Printed In July 2025.

Six teams from the West Florida Flames have qualified for their division's Nationals, and they are preparing to represent the club on the national stage against other highly competitive programs.

These teams have put in countless hours and immense effort throughout the season to qualify, finishing at the top of their leagues and earning the right to compete at Nationals.

"I think it shows the strength and depth we have in the club in regard to the quality of players, the quality of coaches, and everyone being on the same page about what we want to achieve, with the main focus being the development of both girls and boys," said Associate Girls Academy Director Jamie McGunness.

The six teams representing West Florida Flames at Nationals are the 2008 National Academy League (NAL) Boys, 2009 NAL Boys, 2009 Girls Academy (GA), 2010 Girls Development Player League (DPL), 2010 GA, and 2012 GA. The teams will travel to either New Jersey, California, or Minnesota in June to compete.

The 2008 NAL Boys team, led by Head Coach Eric Sims, ended their regular season with a record of 9-2-3. The 2009 NAL Boys team, led by Head Coach John van der Luit, wrapped up their season with a 15-4-3 record.

Head Coach Jamie McGunness led the 2009 GA team to a historic, undefeated regular season, finishing 14-0-3.

The 2010 DPL Girls team, led by Head Coach Dani Dayan, is heading to Nationals for the second year in a row, finishing their season at 11-3-2. "Getting the experience of going to Nationals again, bonding with my team even more, and just having fun overall," are her goals, said team member Mia O'Conner Grana.

Head Coach Ashani Fairclough and his 2010 GA team had an incredible season, achieving a top-ten national ranking in the GA standings for the second year in a row. The team finished 14-3-1 in regular season play.

The 2012 GA team made history by becoming the first U13 GA team from West Florida Flames to qualify for Nationals. Led by Head Coach Brenda Van Stralen, the team finished their season with a record of 14-2-2.

Founded in 1975, the West Florida Flames soccer club includes players and coaches from across the Tampa Bay area. According to the club's website, its mission is to "promote the sport of soccer in the Greater Tampa Bay community with an emphasis on youth development, while providing each player positive opportunities and experiences to play soccer in a supportive and rewarding environment."

The teams will continue preparing in the coming weeks as Nationals approach.

WATERSET FLAG FOOTBALL TEAM WILL PLAY IN THIS SUMMER'S JUNIOR OLYMPICS

By Lily Belcher



The Waterset 49ers team of first and second graders will attend the Junior Olympics this summer in Houston, Texas.

Jeremy King of Waterset Flag Football (WFF) said, "Unfortunately the JR Olympics trip didn't go well for our group."

However, as of December 28, 2025, its local kids and league participants took home four national championships at the 2025 Under the Lights National Tournament powered by Under Armour. Those winning teams are the 3rd/4th Grade Boys Buccaneers, the 3rd-5th Grade Girls Ravens, the 6th-8th Grade Canes and the 7th/8th Grade Boys Army.

King stated that Waterset Flag Football's next season is slated to begin on Friday, January 23, and will be its largest season to date.

Original Story Printed In March 2025.

Blaise Williamson, the Waterset 49ers quarterback, will lead his team to the inaugural flag football Junior Olympics game in Texas.

He is a second grader and an athlete with the Under the Lights Flag Football League in Apollo Beach.

His mom, Marya Williamson, said her son has thrived in the league and the team has gotten progressively better.

"Nobody anticipated them winning, and they just kept winning every single game," she said.

They qualified for the Junior Olympics in December 2024, placing second in the first through second grader age group.

Williamson's husband, Jason, coaches the team. She said he helped lead the team through his coaching strategies and compassion.

"He just loves coaching," Marya said. "He loves being a positive influence in the kids."

The Junior Olympics will be hosted in July. Marya said it's all the 11 young athletes talk about.

"They're super excited," she said.

She said that during the season, the team would lose and become the underdogs going into the tournament.

"It's not mean, but they'll say, 'We're going to get our revenge today,'" Marya said. "They just have that grit about them, and they don't like to lose."

She said being the underdog fueled them to win.

Under the Lights Flag Football is a national youth league for flag football players in prekindergarten through eighth grade.

The Waterset 49ers include both rookies and more seasoned players, like Blaise, who started playing flag football at the Riverview YMCA in VPK.

Being part of the team allowed Marya's son and other young athletes to make close friendships through their shared love of the sport.

"It's really cool to see the bonds that they've developed overtime and that's what is pretty remarkable about them," Williamson said.

She said, since joining the team, the kids have grown a lot and learned skills they've even brought into the other sports they play.

In preparation for the Junior Olympics trip to Texas in July, the team has started a GoFundMe, to help raise money for the trip. The team is hoping to raise $29,000.

You can follow the team on Instagram @49ers_flagfootball.

Notice Under Fictitious Name Law Pursuant to Section 865.09, Florida Statutes

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that the undersigned, desiring to engage in business under the fictitious name of **Riverview Community Health Center** located at **10334 White Viburnum Way,** in **Hillsborough County,** in the city of **Riverview, FL 33578** intends to register said name with the Division of Corporations of the Florida Department of State, Tallahassee, Florida

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





TAMPA BAY PARTNERSHIP RELEASES FIRST TRI-COUNTY 'HOUSING REPORT TO ADDRESS AFFORDABILITY CRISIS

Staff Report



Recently, the Tampa Bay Partnership released 'The Housing Equation' report, the region's first comprehensive analysis of housing supply, demand and affordability across Hillsborough, Pinellas and Pasco counties.

Made possible with support from JPMorganChase and backed by independent research, this report delivers data-driven, actionable insights that empower investors, businesses, policymakers, developers, nonprofits and the public to better understand the tri-county housing gap, enabling them to shape meaningful solutions.

Tampa Bay is projected to add 564,000 residents and 211,000 households by 2035, a surge that will reshape housing needs. Yet, recent production hasn't kept pace. The research shows that between 2018-23, the region added nearly 100,000 households but built only 82,000 units, fueling rising costs and widening affordability gaps.

"Housing affordability affects every resident and employer in our region, making it one of the most urgent challenges we face together," said Bemetra Simmons, president and CEO of the Tampa Bay Partnership.

Key findings from The Housing Equation include: • Existing gap: The region does not have enough homes priced affordably for households earning 80 percent of the area median income (about $69,500 for a family of four) with an estimated shortage of 80,650 units.

• Future demand: By 2035, the region needs to add approximately 254,700 new housing units, an average of 21,225 units per year, to keep pace with projected growth. That includes 10,685 single-family units and 10,540 multifamily units annually.

• Cost burden: A third of all households — over 408,000 families — spend more than 30 percent of income on housing; 52 percent of renters are cost-burdened, and 24 percent of homeowners.

• Rising rents: Median rent surged 48 percent in five years, while wages rose only 29 percent.

• Funding leverage: If addressed, $273M in gap funding can unlock $663M in additional funding and create $1B in economic impact for Tampa Bay.

"The Housing Equation breaks down what's needed by county, income level and housing type, then points to proven strategies like zoning updates, creative financing and advocacy that can drive long-term economic growth," Simmons added. "Now that we have a clear understanding of how many units we need, we can create a comprehensive Regional Action Plan to meet that goal."

Read the full report at www.tampabay.org/housingequation/.

For more information, please contact: Jessica Vega-Eugene JessicaV@ConsultVistra.com, 813.263.0792







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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.



PattiCakes owner Patti Burnett.



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 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 her at address www.facebook.com/patticakescustomcake/, call 352-942-3455 or email directly 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.







CARDINAL ROOFING ANNOUNCES 12TH ANNUAL CHARITY CLAY SHOOT IN LITHIA

By Olivia Clark



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

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 fundraising 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).

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.

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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Se habla español

The patient and any other person responsible for payment has a right to refuse to pay, cancel payment or be reimbursed for payment for any other service, examination or treatment which is performed as a result within 72 hours of responding to the ad for the free, discounted fee, or reduced fee, exam or treatment.

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

By Brian Bokor

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

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

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

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

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

"This is what's known as a deep-water standing wave," said Julie Kline, director of sales and marketing at ADG. "Unlike sheet-flow wave systems typically used for boogie boarding, EpicSurf generates a true surfable wave with real water depth, creating a more authentic experience for surfers."



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



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

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

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

The system is designed to accommodate a wide range of users, including children, seniors, adaptive athletes, and individuals with disabilities. EpicSurf is currently the only surf wave certified as an Autism Resource by the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Key features and activities include:

Laser Tag & Archery: Tactical, outdoor laser tag and competitive archery tag.

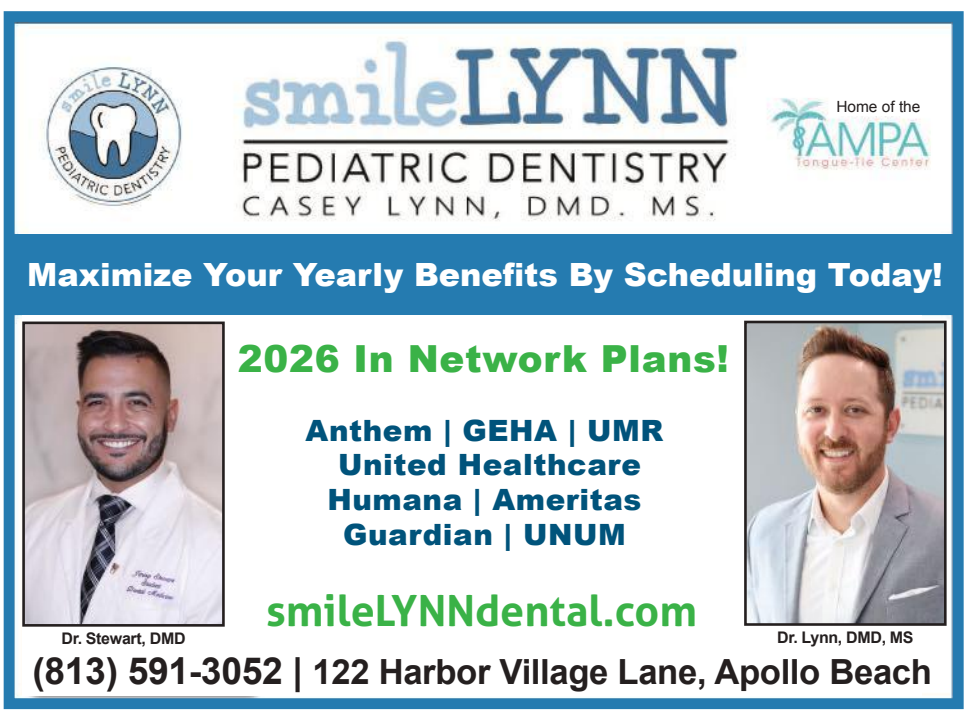
RC Raceway: Two tracks, including an off-road track and a tri-dirt oval.

Amenities include a clubhouse with 360° views, a cafe, and a covered observation deck.

Heroes Paradise was founded by Tim and Julie Pennenga in 2020, transforming the former Hidden Palms Tennis Club into a premier recreation spot. For more information, visit www.heroesparadise.com.







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/.

CAMPO YMCA OFFERS SWIMMING, CAMPS, SPORTS AND AMENITIES

By Olivia Clark



The Campo Family YMCA, located at 3414 Culbreath Rd. in Valrico, has served as a gathering place for families in Valrico, Bloomingdale and surrounding communities for more than two decades. Established to meet the area's growing need for youth development and family wellness programs, the nonprofit facility continues to evolve alongside the community it serves

Named in honor of the Campo family, longtime supporters of the Tampa Metropolitan Area YMCA, the Campo Family YMCA reflects a commitment to strengthening families through accessible programs and inclusive spaces.

"Campo Family YMCA just celebrated more than twenty years in the greater Valrico community," said Robyn Ostrem, executive director, Campo Family YMCA. "Campo Family YMCA has become stronger because of our community."

The YMCA offers a wide range of amenities, including a fitness center, gymnasium, weight room, group exercise studios and multipurpose spaces. Aquatics programming remains a major focus, with two swimming pools, a splash pad and water slides that are especially popular during warmer months. Swim lessons are available for all ages, beginning at six months through adulthood, and the pools are used throughout the day for lap swim, open swim and instruction.

"The Florida summer is hot," said Mario Gallegos, executive director, Campo Family YMCA. "In the summer, our aquatic center gets heavy use because of the heat. It is a great place to hang out with the family, hang out with friends and cool off while enjoying the Florida sunshine."

Youth and family programming continues to be a cornerstone of the Campo Family YMCA. Summer camps, Kids' Day Out programs and youth sports such as basketball, soccer and volleyball provide opportunities for children to stay active while building confidence and social skills.

"More than four thousand five hundred kids participated in experiences that cultivated values, skills and relationships that led to positive behaviors, better health and educational achievement," Ostrem said.

Childcare options, including the Youth Zone and Stay and Play, allow parents to participate in fitness activities while children enjoy supervised programs. Adult members also benefit from group exercise classes and sports leagues such as basketball and volleyball that promote connection and healthy competition.

As part of the Tampa Metropolitan Area YMCA network, the Campo Family YMCA provides access to association-wide programs and services. Financial assistance and scholarships ensure that individuals and families can participate regardless of income.







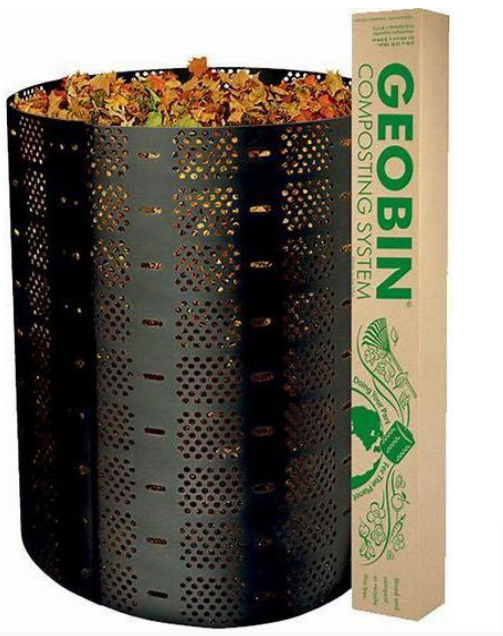




GET THE DIRT:

2026 TRIPLE WORKSHOPS: COMPOST, MICROIRRIGATION AND RAINWATER HARVESTING

BY LYNN BARBER, URBAN HORTICULTURE AGENT



If you have not previously attended these workshops at the Hillsborough County Extension Service, we hope you will. Make plans to register and spend the first Saturday morning, February through November, by attending our composting, microirrigation and rainwater harvesting workshops at our office in Seffner. Hillsborough County residents can attend one time only and receive one set of items per household. Preregistration is required.

Compost Happens: Learn how to turn trash into treasure. This workshop teaches attendees to recycle kitchen and yard waste while creating a rich soil amendment. Compost adds nutrients to the soil and retains moisture in the root zone, where it can be used by plants. Instead of hauling your yard waste to the curb, compost it on-site. By attending, you will receive a compost bin, bucket and thermometer.

Microirrigation: This teaches you how to have a healthy and attractive landscape while conserving water. Tips on installing and using microirrigation are presented. By attending, you will receive a microirrigation kit. Check our website for two other micro workshops: patio and vegetable.

Rainwater Harvesting: Receive a drilled and spigoted 50 to 55-gallon plastic, food-grade barrel. We will teach you how and where to install your barrel. Collecting rainwater for ornamental plant irrigation reduces erosion and stormwater runoff. Barrels are stored outside, so you may want to bring a blanket to put under the barrel.

By attending one, two or all three workshops, you will expand your environmental conservation education and have fun while learning something new. The cost to attend is $10 per household, per workshop. For additional information and to register, go to the Hillsborough County Extension Calendar of Events at https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/events/?location=hillsborough. Some rules apply, and they are listed on our website.

For more gardening information, please contact our office at 813-744-5519 or visit us at 5339 County Rd. 579 in Seffner, where you can walk through the Bette S. Walker Discovery Garden and see Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ in action. Hope to see you soon.

Contact at Lynn Barber, extension agent, at labarber@ufl.edu.

SOUTHSHORE DEFINED: COMMUNITY, GROWTH AND A NEW FLORIDA LIFESTYLE

By Marie Gilmore

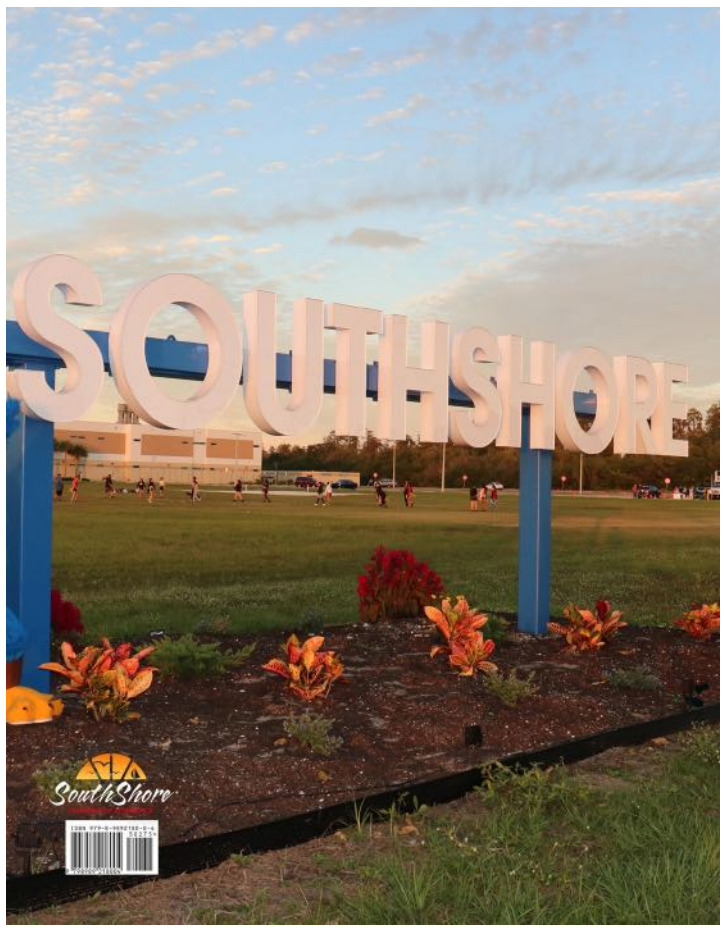


Photo Courtesy of the SouthShore Chamber

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.

Stretching across Southern Hillsborough County, SouthShore encompasses communities such as South Riverview, Gibsonton, Apollo Beach, Ruskin, Wimauma, Balm and Sun City Center, reaching south to the Manatee County line. Once largely rural and waterfront-focused, the area has evolved into a thriving destination for families, retirees and businesses seeking space, opportunity and quality of life.

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 industrial, 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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Christian Voice



Grace Notes

Mercy Me

By Debora Coty

My rescue pooch, Laz, taught me a spiritual lesson one evening.

It started as basic hunger. Laz watched me scarf down some succulent beef stir fry for dinner. I slipped a piece of beef under the table. He was happily surprised. And very thankful.

Little Laz jumped up on my leg, begging shamelessly for another bite. Again, I yielded, because I love him and enjoy giving him good things. He leapt toward the sliver of meat like a lion attacking an antelope on the Serengeti plain.

Suddenly, greed overtook the 8-pound terrier, and he became a 50-pound terror, clawing his way up my leg, lunging for my plate. Because of my previous kindness, he thought he deserved whatever I had. He was entitled to it. My stir fry now belonged to him.

As I shoved the wiggling mass of rapacity outside so we could peacefully finish dinner, I realized Laz was demonstrating the three levels of how we receive God's mercy.

Level 1: Gratitude. We're humbled, delighted and thankful for the Lord's unexpected mercy in the form of that unmerited blessing we received. Lamentations 3:22-23 (NLT) plays out: "The unfailing love of the LORD never ends ... Great is his faithfulness, his mercies begin afresh each day."

Level 2: Greed. The pleasure of the blessing suddenly morphs into the overwhelming desire for more. We don't just want more, we need more. We simply can't live without more. What we've been given just isn't enough. So, we claw, connive and attempt to convince the source of our blessing that we deserve more. If He won't give it willingly, we'll try to take it.

Level 3: Entitlement. We'll whine, wheedle, even snatch more of that blessing out of His hand. After all, we deserve it. Because of our elevated station as a child of God (even though we didn't work to attain it), we perceive that whatever is His also belongs to us.

We totally forget the generous promise of Lamentations 3: His mercy, His grace, His blessings are new every morning. We don't have to stockpile them. Or clutch them to our chests and hoard them in a selfish frenzy. Or consume them quickly so no one can take them away.

Our faithful Father is gracious enough to offer us new mercies over and over again. Every single morning!

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.

SNOW STORM OR SNOW JOB?

Save me, Lord,
from lying lips
and from deceitful
tongues. Psalm 120:2



To all those who are shocked about the coming winter storm, please note that it is in fact winter. I only point this out in response to the worst-case scenario headlines and "Snowmageddon" references competing for "look at me" readership.

We seem to be so desperate for attention, to acquire clicks and likes and hits and shares, we exhaust all possible five-alarm alerts long before anything actually happens. We so badly want to be noticed that we resort to anything to get people to look our way. When they do we have little of substance to say.

What baffles me about all the hyperbole and bluster and flat-out lying is that the truth is usually more interesting. If only we take the trouble to find it.

I visited a movie set and it looked like the main street of a town. Signs and window displays invited us into shops, a hotel, a bar, even a church. Yet if you walk to the end and look around there is nothing there. It's all facade with no depth or substance or content.

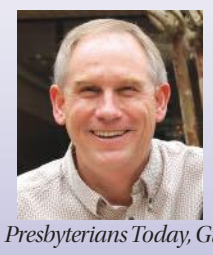
I am concerned that we our lives looking at the signs and the windows and the ads but we fail to take the trouble to read for content, or look on the inside. We are in a "pay no attention to the man behind the curtain" moment in the world right now.

We have to become more interested in truth. We have to look beyond the cardboard cutouts and the hype and the strobe lights and the smoke on the stage.

We were issued with some pretty good brains when we were born, most of us have gone to school, and basic research is not that hard of a task if we are motivated.

So what's stopping us? Aren't we tired of the hype, the politics, the deception, the misinformation, the headlines that lead nowhere and the facades in front of empty spaces?

Snow storm or snow job – we really need to be more discerning consumers of information – DEREK



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





It's American Heart Month! Did your New Year's resolutions include action against the nation's top cause of death? Learn more at heart.org!

American Heart Association | American Stroke Association

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

New Year, New You ... New Home?

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. New to market this month at $1,485,000.



WHEN YOU KNOW, YOU KNOW! If you want & recognize quality upgrades beyond most in an upscale neighborhood, here is the home for you within wonderful Waterset! Inside & outside this Sandpiper by West Bay, you'll find improvements from a 400-SF screened lanai to $65,000 in casement hurricane-impact windows. Tile & LVP floors, decorator fans & fixtures, seamless gutters, salt-free water softener, 8-foot doors including full-glass French doors to the office & a frosted-glass entry with sidelight, security system with cameras front & back, even an electric vehicle charger in the garage await you. It's a 2,100-SF 3/2/2 with a customized office that can be a 4th bedroom. $519,000

















Better than when it was built! From new tile, LVP & epoxy floors to updated fans, fixtures, & other finishes, this thoroughly renovated townhome towers 4 stories above the Apollo Beach waterfront in the upscale boating colony of Sunset Bay. Get nearly 3,100 SF plus a tandem garage over 700 SF. $499,900



In Boyette Park, a tree-shaded, step-down park as part of your own fenced back yard gives this 2,180-SF 3/2/3 something extra! With a woodsy conservation view instead of a rear neighbor, this special spot is now a young family's playground but offers many creative possibilities. $475,000



A 3-year-new roof & debt-free solar panels for home & pool are the crowning values at this 1,834-SF 3/2/2 overlooking conservation land in Boyette Springs! You'll truly appreciate the low electric power bills, also helped by efficiencies of its 3-ton AC/heat pump & water heater both new in 2023. $450,000

Watch sunsets over a tree-lined pond from the screened, stone-pavered lanai behind this surprisingly large home in gated Magnolia Park! 3,600 SF total includes the 340-SF lanai, a 2-car garage 20% bigger than usual, downstairs living/dining/kitchen/office, upstairs family room, plus 3 beds & 2.5 baths. $439,900



A super-sized lanai under a cathedral ceiling makes the private pond view beyond this fenced back yard something special! Enjoy coming home to an 1,800-SF 4/3/2 far from the crowd with no rear neighbor & no through traffic in Riverview's Covewood community. Recent roof & LVP floors. $375,000



Experience Encore, FishHawk's 55+ haven with resort-style amenities, from the added advantage of a minimal-maintenance villa! From roof & yard to exclusive club & community events, your comfort is covered in this well-appointed 2/2/2 with an extra room that makes the most of 1,600 SF. $350,000





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