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YOUR COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER

JUNE 2026

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Wild Thrills, Cool Nights

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CELEBRATING 24 YEARS OF PUBLISHING POSITIVE COMMUNITY NEWS

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

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

Saunders is a Brandon resident, a Rotarian and the former Executive Director of E.C.H.O. of Brandon. She begins her new journey as the camp's director on July 13. "I was at E.C.H.O. for 11 years and I prayed very hard about taking the first step for the position at Rotary's Camp Florida," Saunders said. "The first step was submitting my resume and from that point it all seemed to fall into place."

The mission of Rotary's Camp Florida is to provide a safe, fun space to learn, grow, and play for groups whose members need supportive accommodations. "Rotary's Camp Florida is a 21-acre ADA-compliant campsite, and I can't wait to start pro-



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



By Libby Hopkins

moting the camp's mission to the community and beyond," Saunders said. "It is a place that has so much potential and I love helping local nonprofit organizations realign and grow."

Rotary's Camp Florida welcomes non-profit and for-profit organizations for celebrations, team building, planning meetings, corporate retreats, or workshops. Throughout the 21-acre campus, guests can enjoy peaceful seating areas, lakeside views, and outdoor spaces for teambuilding exercises and other activities. The camp's facilities can be rented for the day, the weekend or for

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

If you would like to learn more about Rotary's Camp Florida or if you are interested in renting the camp for an event. You can visit the camp's website at <https://rotaryscampflorida.org> or call 813-654-4042. The camp is located at 1915 Camp Florida Rd. in Brandon.

TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS PARTNER WITH HABITAT FOR HUMANITY

Staff Report

Thanks to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers' ongoing partnership with Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough, two local families received the keys to the very homes Buccaneers players helped build during the 2025 Holiday Home Build with the Bucs.

Habitat and the Bucs teamed up on June 12 to celebrate the home dedications for Ami Garcia and Raul Johnson. The event highlighted the completion of the affordable, storm-resilient homes in Habitat's Windhorst Commons community in Brandon, which was made possible through hands-on service from Bucs players, staff, community partners, Habitat volunteers and the future homeowners themselves.

Ami Garcia is a hardworking single mother of four daughters — Jadalyn (15), Janelidee (11), Nyree (10) and Angelisa (3) — who has overcome significant hardships while working to provide stability for her family. She currently lives in overcrowded and unsafe conditions in a deteriorating mobile home with mold, structural damage, unreliable electricity and air conditioning, and exposed wiring. Despite these challenges, Ami, a machine operator at B&M Precision, remained determined to provide a safe place where her daughters could grow and thrive.

Raul Johnson was inspired to apply for Habitat's affordable homeownership program after seeing its impact on his family. His niece has been a Habitat homeowner for seven years, and his daughter is currently in the program. He previously lost his job during the pandemic and was unemployed for nearly two years, creating significant financial hardship as rent and living costs continued to rise. He now



The Tampa Bay Bucs were on site in Brandon to help build homes for two local families.

works in food service at LCS Community and is focused on rebuilding stability.

Like all Habitat homeowners, both families partnered in the homebuilding process by completing sweat equity hours alongside volunteers and purchased their homes with affordable mortgages designed to fit their budgets.

The ceremony also recognized a Buccaneers player for his exceptional commitment to the project. Tight end Devin Culp will receive Habitat's Theology of the Hammer Award, which honors

volunteers who exemplify Habitat's mission through service. Culp made significant contributions during the Holiday Home Build, and he also serves on the Buccaneers Player Impact Board, which helps guide the team's community engagement efforts.

Windhorst Commons is a 23-home Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough neighborhood designed to address the growing need for affordable, disaster-resilient housing in Hillsborough County. The development reflects lessons learned from recent hurricanes and incorporates construction materials and practices to better protect families in future storms. The remaining homes in the community are all expected to be completed by early 2027.

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A background image of a law office interior. It features tall bookshelves filled with books, a desk with a computer monitor, and a leather office chair. The image is overlaid with a green diagonal design element.

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LOCAL FAMILY OPENS FIRST BETTER BLEND LOCATION IN FLORIDA

By Jane Owen

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

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

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

"We have custody of my sister. It's important to me to take good care of her. When I was looking for a job, Mike was



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

like, 'What can we do together that we will enjoy?' That's when we found Better Blend," Hillary said.

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

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

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

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



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

By Ella Baroni



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

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

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

A third-generation Floridian who grew up in Brandon, Cartmill has deep roots in the community she serves. Her dedication

to helping others and creating positive change inspires fellow members and encourages more women to become involved. Looking ahead, she hopes to expand the club's membership and continue strengthening its presence throughout the Brandon area.

The GFWC Brandon Junior Woman's Club provides women with opportunities to give back, develop leadership skills and build meaningful friendships while serving their community. The club meets on the first

Thursday of every month at 7 p.m. at the historic Brandon Woman's Club clubhouse, located at 129 N. Moon Ave. in Brandon. Members pay annual dues, and women interested in joining are encouraged to attend a meeting and learn more about the organization's mission and impact.

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

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SESCO CEMENT OPENS NEW IMPORT TERMINAL AT PORT TAMPA BAY



Photo Courtesy of SESCO Cement

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

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

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

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

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

"As a key partner in the region's construc-

By Brian Bokor

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE DRURY PLAZA HOTEL BRANDON IS FIRST IN THE TAMPA AND SEVENTH IN THE STATE OF FLORIDA

Staff Report

Drury Hotels, a leading service-oriented hospitality company with more than 150 hotels in 30 states, announces the opening of the first Drury Plaza Hotel in the Tampa Bay area. The Drury Plaza Hotel Tampa Brandon, the seventh Drury Hotel in Florida, features 210 guest rooms, flexible meeting space, on-site dining, Drury's award-winning customer service and best-in-class amenities.



The Drury Plaza Hotel Tampa Brandon is located off I-75 at 802 S. Falkenburg Rd. in Tampa, just east of downtown Tampa. The new hotel is a short drive to the Tampa Riverwalk, Busch Gardens, Raymond James Stadium and the Tampa Convention Center, and it is close to Tampa International Airport and Port Tampa Bay. Hotel guests enjoy free hot breakfast; Drury's signature 5:30 Kickback, featuring dinnertime snacks and drinks; and Wi-Fi throughout the hotel.

"We are excited to be a part of the Tampa Bay community and welcome guests to our newest Drury Plaza Hotel in Florida," said Chuck Drury, CEO of Drury Hotels. "The new hotel in Brandon makes it easy for travelers to enjoy all of the entertainment, dining, shopping, sports, and culture the Gulf Coast offers. Our team is eager to deliver the warm, award-winning hospitality our guests have come to expect when staying with Drury."

The new Drury Plaza Hotel fills a need for local small to mid-size meeting options with versatile event spaces and the value-driven

Meetings with More program. Tampa's business and group travelers will appreciate the hotel's top-rated amenities and more than 2,400 square feet of flexible meeting space — including two rooms that can accommodate up to 300 attendees.

The new Drury Plaza Hotel features 210 guest rooms, offering queen, king, and suite accommodations. The hotel's wide range of amenities includes 24-hour business and fitness centers, an outdoor pool and spa, and parking options for overnight guests. Guests can enjoy a variety of on-site dining options, including: Complimentary hot breakfast, evening popcorn and soda and dinnertime snacks and beverages at Drury's signature 5:30 Kickback. The Kitchen + Bar, a late-night dining option open late every night in the lobby. The guest market and 24-hour coffee service in the lobby.

The opening of the Drury Plaza Hotel Tampa Brandon comes amid the company's recent expansion in Florida, including the May 2026 opening of the Drury Inn & Suites Destin Miramar Beach and the recently opened Drury Plaza Hotel Tallahassee (2024) and Drury Plaza Hotel Orlando - Disney Springs Area (2022). The new hotel in Tampa will employ 65 full-time and part-time team members, with general manager Ian Gallaher leading the team.

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Dated at Valrico, Florida this 4th day of June 2026

PROGRAM CONNECTS STUDENTS TO HIGH-DEMAND CAREERS

By Zofia Osterman

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



Industries across the Tampa Bay region continue to seek skilled workers, particularly in health care, cybersecurity, welding and auto collision repair. Richard noted that demand for welders alone is ex-

pected to grow significantly over the next several years as experienced workers retire and regional growth fuels new construction and manufacturing projects.

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

Local employers are already seeing the benefits of the program.

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

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

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

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FIVE DECADES OF CARE: MARY GO ROUND HONORS 50-YEAR LEGACY

Staff Report



Families, former students, staff members and community supporters gather at Mary Go Round Child Care Center in Riverview to celebrate the center's 50th anniversary.

For half a century, Mary Go Round Child Care Center has been a place where local children have learned, played and grown while providing support and peace of mind to generations of families in the Riverview community.

The longtime child care center hosted its 50th anniversary in May with a free community barbecue at its original location, 10810 Hannaway Dr. in Riverview.

Founded in 1976, Mary Go Round has spent five decades serving families throughout Riverview and the surrounding area. What began as a local child care center has become a community institution, helping shape the lives of hundreds of children while building lasting relationships with families across multiple generations.

The anniversary celebration provided an opportunity for attendees to reconnect with former classmates, teachers and friends while reflecting on the center's history and impact. Organizers said the event will include food, refreshments and plenty of opportunities to share memories from the past 50 years.

For many families, Mary Go Round has been more than a child care provider. The center has offered a safe, nurturing and ed-

ucational environment where children could develop social skills, prepare for school and form friendships that often lasted beyond their preschool years.

Over the decades, former students have returned as parents, bringing their own children to the center and continuing a tradition that spans generations. Those enduring connections have helped make Mary Go Round a familiar and trusted part of the community.

The golden anniversary celebration was intended not only to honor the center's past but also to recognize the many families, educators and staff members who contributed to its success over the years. Organizers hope the event served as a reunion of sorts, bringing together people whose lives have been touched by the center since its founding.

Community members were invited to attend, whether they had a personal connection to Mary Go Round or simply wanted to help celebrate a local business that has served the area for 50 years.

As Mary Go Round marks this milestone anniversary, the center continues its mission of caring for children and supporting families, just as it has since opening its doors in 1976.

For more information about Mary Go Round Child Care Center, visit <https://marygoroundinc.com/>.

HILLSBOROUGH MOM AND CHILDREN CELEBRATE NEW HOME WITH HABITAT AND AJAX PAVING

Staff Report

There were smiles, happy tears, and plenty of excitement this morning as Paris Johnson and her two children, 6-year-old Galaxy and 15-year-old Deavi, celebrated the dedication of their new Habitat for Humanity home in Brandon.



Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough and home sponsor Ajax Paving joined volunteers, community leaders and supporters at Windhorst Commons to celebrate as the Johnson family officially received the keys to their forever home.

For Paris Johnson, a Tampa native and billing and funding specialist, the dedication marked the beginning of a more stable future for her children after years of rising rent costs and housing uncertainty. It also means having a permanent place where the family can continue their traditions and put down roots.

"We've always made every rental feel like home, whether that meant decorating with Star Wars themes, cooking together in the kitchen or turning the garage into a game room," said Paris Johnson. "But this is the first time we can truly settle in without worrying about having to leave. My kids finally have a home that belongs to them. Our happiness is through the roof."

Since 2019, Paris Johnson's rent had increased by more than \$600 per month, making it increasingly difficult to keep up with the rising cost of living. Through Hab-

itat's affordable homeowner-ship program, she completed financial education courses and hundreds of hours of sweat equity before purchasing the home with an affordable mortgage designed for long-term stability.

The dedication also showcased the continued growth of Windhorst Commons, Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough's 23-home affordable, disaster-resilient housing community in Brandon.

"Every Habitat home tells a different story, and today we celebrate a family that never gave up on the dream of homeownership," said Tina Forcier, Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough CEO.

As a company that has been paving roads and building infrastructure across Florida since 1981, Ajax Paving understands the impact a safe, stable home can have on a family and the community around them.

"At Ajax, we believe strong communities begin with strong foundations at home," said Scott Pittman, executive vice president from Ajax Paving. "Partnering with Habitat for Humanity gives us the opportunity to support families in a meaningful and lasting way, and we're honored to celebrate this milestone with Paris and her children."

The Johnson family's home is the third to be dedicated in Windhorst Commons, with the remaining homes all expected to be completed by early 2027.

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THRIFTY DEPOT IN BRANDON OFFERS QUALITY ITEMS AT RESALE PRICES

Bargain shoppers and anyone on a tight budget should check out Thrifty Depot in Brandon. Located near O'Brien's Irish Pub and Grill in the Oak Park Plaza on Lumsden Road, Thrifty Depot offers amazing deals on clothing, collectibles, housewares, toys, jewelry and more.

The inventory changes often and includes both gently used items from garage and estate sales and new items purchased from liquidation pallets from local stores.

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

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

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



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



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

"We like people. We love the people that come in. It's fun to see what items people buy, and sometimes the most unusual items go quick.

But we love getting to know people and the items they are looking for," Brenn said.

In addition to new items from liquidation sales, Thrifty Depot carries new jewelry, new military challenge coins and patches, new music equipment and 3D-printed art from a local artist. They

have a nice selection of CDs, DVDs and records as well.

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

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

By Jane Owen

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

By Libby Hopkins

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

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

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

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

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

"My time in Italy gave me the opportunity



to perform in one of the largest jazz festivals in the world, Umbria Jazz Festival," Cestero said. "Throughout this time of education and exploration I performed with professional jazz acts such as Michael Bublé, The Temptations and The Glenn Miller Orchestra. Additionally, I performed at the 2019 Women's World Cup in Le

Havre, France, as well as playing the 2025 Presidential Inauguration for the Veteran's Ball."

Teaching music is something Cestero is something he truly loves.

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

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

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

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



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SHERIFF RECEIVES 2026 ELLSWORTH G. SIMMONS GOOD GOV'T AWARD

Staff Report

The Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners presented the 2026 Ellsworth G. Simmons Good Government Award to Sheriff Chad Chronister in early May. The award's past winners include distinguished local leaders, such as Judge E.J. Salcines, former Gov. Bob Martinez, Lesley "Les" Miller, Jr., Dottie Berger MacKinnon, Dr. Earl J. Lennard, State Sen. Tom Lee, James L. Redman and last year's winner, Louis G. Betz Jr., who was awarded posthumously.

Chronister has served 34 years at the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office (HCSO). He has led the agency since 2017 and has won subsequent reelection three times. During his tenure, Hillsborough County has seen a sustained decline in crime, driven by his emphasis on proactive policing, intra-agency collaboration and data-driven enforcement strategies. Chronister has also led significant investments in advanced technology to improve deputy safety, public transparency and real-time crime analysis. He oversaw the development of a real-time crime center, an in-house firearms lab, a DNA lab and a digital forensics lab — each designed to streamline investigations, accelerate evidence processing and bring swift justice for victims. He currently serves as co-chairman of the Regional Domestic Security Task Force for Region IV Tampa Bay and is a council member of the Florida Attorney General's Statewide Council on Human Trafficking.



About the Ellsworth G. Simmons Good Government Award

In 1996, the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners established the Ellsworth G. Simmons Good Government Award, presented annually to an individual or group of individuals who played a significant role in improving government through leadership and vision.

The award was established in honor of Ellsworth G. Simmons, a respected government and civic leader who served 21 years on the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners. Through his leadership and guidance, new institutions and communities were created in Hillsborough County, including the University of South Florida and Sun City Center. He also helped spearhead the construction of Tampa International Airport, the founding of University Community Hospital and the expansion of the Florida Department of Health in Hillsborough County.

For more information, visit the Ellsworth G. Simmons Good Government Award webpage at <https://hcfi.gov/government/board-of-county-commissioners/coun-ty-awards/ellsworth-g-simmons-good-gov-ernment-award>.

FIRE RESCUE HOSTS GRADUATION & PINNING FOR NEW FIREFIGHTERS

Staff Report



A former chef, a teacher, a medical therapist and retired military personnel recently represented the new Hillsborough County Fire Rescue (HCFR) class as part of the Recruit Class 2026-01 Graduation and Pinning Ceremony at Riverhills Church of God, located at 6310 E. Sligh Ave. in Tampa. A total of 37 new firefighters with varying backgrounds joined the HCFR ranks at the May 14 ceremony.

The new firefighters got their station and shift assignments during the ceremony, putting them in firehouses throughout Hillsborough County. Each also received the HCFR shield for their helmet.

All graduates began their assignments in the following week, ready to fight fires, respond to emergency calls and assist residents every day.



All the new firefighters joining HCFR have graduated from the Fire Academy and are certified emergency medical technicians (EMTs). For the past five weeks, this recruiting class has been through a Hillsborough-specific orientation to get them ready for their first days on the job.

HCFR has nearly 1,300 firefighters at 47 fire stations serving 1.1 million residents and 909 square miles of unincorporated Hillsborough County. HCFR responds to nearly 140,000 emergency calls annually, making it one of the top-performing fire rescue agencies in the Southeastern United States.

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Why fund an IRA early?

Because time can make a big difference.

If you wait until the tax deadline to fund your IRA each year, you miss out on 15 months of potential tax-deferred growth on your contribution. For example, many people wait until April 15, 2026, to contribute to their IRAs for 2025, when they could have funded them as early as Jan. 1, 2025.

Although 15 months may not seem like a significant amount of time, it may considerably impact your retirement savings.

The following hypothetical example shows the difference between funding an IRA at the beginning of each year and at the tax deadline the following year.

IRAs: traditional, Roth and spousal			
Contribution limit	\$7,500 for 2026		
Catch-up contribution (at age 50+)	Ages 50 and older: \$1,100 for 2026		
Tax credits	Depending on income limits		

The difference 15 months can make*					
IRA contributions begin at age	Total years investing	Money accumulated for retirement		The benefit of contributing early	
		Early contributions (Beginning of each year)	Late contributions (Tax deadline)	Individual	Both spouses
35	30	\$787,623	\$736,095	\$51,527	\$103,055
40	25	\$537,147	\$502,008	\$35,138	\$70,277
45	20	\$358,563	\$335,106	\$23,247	\$46,495
50	15	\$231,237	\$216,109	\$15,127	\$30,255
55	10	\$127,138	\$118,821	\$8,317	\$16,635
60	5	\$52,918	\$49,456	\$3,461	\$6,923

Source: Edward Jones calculations.

This projection assumes the individual contributes the maximum annual limit each year, including the full catch-up contribution starting in the year they turn 50 and continuing thereafter. For 2026, the standard contribution limit is \$7,500, with an additional catch-up limit of \$1,100. These limits may change over time due to cost-of-living adjustments or legislative updates.

The assumed annual rate of return is 7%, used solely for illustrative purposes and not indicative of any specific investment. Edward Jones does not provide tax or legal advice; you should consult a qualified tax or legal professional regarding your personal situation. Calculations assume reinvestment of all income and do not account for taxes, transaction costs, fees, or other charges, all of which would reduce actual results.

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VINTAGE NIGHT RETURNS: EXCLUSIVE CURATED DROP AT ECHO THRIFT

Staff Report



ECHO Thrift invites the community to its upcoming First Fridays Vintage Drop, a quarterly curated shopping experience featuring rare, never-before-seen vintage items and one-of-a-kind finds.

This special event, to be held from 6:15-7:15 p.m. on Friday, August 7, will be hosted exclusively at the Bloomingdale location and is part of ECHO Thrift's ongoing effort to bring unique, community-centered shopping experiences to the Tampa Bay area.

The event offers guests early access to a thoughtfully curated selection of vintage fashion, retro decor, collectibles, classic games, vinyl records and seasonal treasures. Shoppers will be able to explore and purchase distinctive pieces before they are released to the general sales floor, making this a standout experience for vintage enthusiasts across the Tampa Bay region.



Admission is \$5 per person, with all proceeds directly supporting ECHO (Emergency Care Help Organization).

"Finding a truly curated vintage event in the Tampa Bay area where the proceeds go directly back into helping neighbors in need is very rare, which is why this event is so important to us and the community we serve," said ECHO marketing coordinator Kayla Vincent. "Every item purchased helps us continue meeting real needs right here at home. When shopping at ECHO Thrift, not only are you getting a great deal, you are also helping a neighbor in need."

Attendees will also receive early access to details about a special vintage sale that will be announced exclusively during the event, adding an extra layer of excitement for shoppers eager to discover rare and unique finds. ECHO Thrift Bloomingdale is located at 815 W. Bloomingdale Ave. in Brandon. More information is available at <https://echothrift.org/>.

BRICKTASTIC KICKOFF! LEGOLAND UNVEILS FIFA WORLD CUP THEMES

Staff Report

LEGOLAND Resorts recently revealed the FIFA World Cup 2026 Experience — an all-new, high-energy event, exclusively at LEGOLAND Resorts, transforming the resort into a celebration of soccer fandom and LEGO play.

Located in Winter Haven — within easy driving distance of Orlando and Tampa Bay — LEGOLAND Florida Resort invites visitors of all ages to celebrate matchday moments, spark creativity and share a piece of the action during their visit.

Designed to celebrate the fever pitch levels of excitement coming this soccer season, families can take on the challenge and score against a LEGO Minifigure, sharpen their technique in Spot Shot and Super Squad activities.

Guests can expect fan-favorite experiences including:

- Build. Dribble. Score! — A parkwide celebration of soccer fun brought to life with signature LEGO creativity.
- Score Against a LEGO Minifigure — Soccer skills are put to the test in a fast-paced challenge that turns every kick into a brick-built celebration.
- Spot Shot and Super Squad — Sharpen technique through playful, inclusive challenges designed for every age and skill level.
- Meet Soccer Legends in LEGO brick form — Get up close to LEGO brick versions of global icons, including LEGO FIFA Heroes Cristiano Ronaldo, Kylian Mbappé, Lionel Messi and Vini Jr., created exclusively for



around the world in a growing celebration of soccer-inspired creativity.

• Lift the LEGO FIFA World Cup Official Trophy — Celebrate the win with an iconic photo moment.

"Bringing the FIFA World Cup 2026 Experience area to LEGOLAND Florida Resort gives families the chance to be part of the tournament in true LEGO style — building, playing and celebrating the beautiful game together," said Brian Bacica, vice president of LEGOLAND Florida Resort. "This event captures the excitement of match day and turns it into hands-on fun for fans of all ages."

The event will also feature newly released LEGO Editions sets, including LEGO Soccer Ball Set 43019 and LEGO FIFA World Cup Official Trophy Set 43020, available at the LEGOLAND LEGO Shop, while supplies last.

FIFA World Cup 2026 Experience — exclusively at LEGOLAND Resorts — runs from now through Sunday, July 19, and is included with regular admission to LEGOLAND Florida Resort. Guests are encouraged to book early before the final whistle blows.

For more information on LEGO World Cup and to sign up to be the first to hear the buzz, visit www.legoland.com/fifaworldcup.

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BONNET SPRINGS PARK OFFERS ULTIMATE SCREEN-FREE ESCAPE

By Srishti Tripathi

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

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

That active energy keeps rolling all season long. Bonnet Springs Park keeps a steady stream of family-friendly events and community-driven activities planned



all the way through June and July. Families looking to cool off can head to the park's splash-ready waters for the "Summer at the Spring" interactive play mornings on Wednesday, June 24. Car enthusiasts can roll out to the monthly "Cars & Coffee" meetups outside the Florida Children's Museum on the second Saturday

of the month, while those looking for evening fun can catch the "Sunset Dance Series," featuring a live swing dancing night on Thursday, June 18 and salsa on Thursday, July 23.

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

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

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

By Brian Bokor



Treehouses were built and placed by volunteers at Mosaic.



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



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

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

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

Long before mining begins, companies must submit detailed reclamation plans showing regulators what the property will look like once mining is complete. According to Jackie Barron, Senior Manager of Stakeholder Relations &

Advocacy Communications for The Mosaic Company, restoration is built into the process from the beginning. "Before we ever touch or turn over a single piece of dirt, here's what it's going to look like when we're all said and done," Barron said. Since 1975, Florida law has required every acre of mined land to be reclaimed.

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

"For every wetland acre that is impacted for mining, you have to put back the same acres," Morris said. "We have to put back 10 percent more." Even areas that appear healthy and support wildlife may not satisfy every requirement established during the permitting process. At one point during the tour, Morris

pointed toward a thriving section of habitat and remarked, "That beautiful patch that you guys were taking pictures of ... that would not be releasable." According to Morris, reclamation is measured by environmental performance rather than appearance, requiring years of monitoring before land can be released from regulatory oversight.

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

Chuck Pons, Reclamation Compliance Specialist for The Mosaic Company, said the project includes approximately 4,000 acres of preservation, enhancement and reclamation areas. "When you put the preservation, enhancement and reclamation, it's around 4,000 acres," Pons said. The acreage includes wetlands, uplands, pine habitat and wildlife corridors that are already supporting native species and helping reconnect large

areas of conservation land throughout Southeastern Hillsborough County.

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

For Pons, seeing the finished product provides a unique sense of accomplishment. "My finished products, I'm a little more proud of than neighborhood, neighborhood, neighborhoods," he said. Many Hillsborough County residents already enjoy reclaimed phosphate lands without realizing it, including parks and conservation areas that were once active mining sites before undergoing similar restoration efforts.

"There are areas that you drive by all the time that you don't know that were mined and reclaimed," Morris said. That may ultimately be the goal of reclamation itself. When the work is successful, the mining disappears from view, leaving behind wetlands, forests, wildlife habitat and public lands that can serve future generations long after the phosphate has been removed.



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OH SO RUSTIC MARKET KICKS OFF VIBRANT SUMMER SEASON

By Srishti Tripathi

As the summer heat rolls into Florida, many local activities begin to wind down. But at La Viva Plaza, the community energy is just warming up. The Brandon Sunday Market is



mer can occasionally see a slight dip in sheer numbers, it opens the door for fresh faces. "Summer does seem to bring out some new and original vendors of all types," the organiz-

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

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

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

The market provides a crucial platform for small businesses. Vendor and food truck spots are intentionally kept accessible at just \$40, which helps keep the marketplace dynamic. While sum-

mer can occasionally see a slight dip in sheer numbers, it opens the door for fresh faces. "Summer does seem to bring out some new and original vendors of all types," the organiz-

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

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

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

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

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

TAKING EDUCATION NEXT LEVEL WITH STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS

By Jamie Lu

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

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

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

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

Studying abroad offers a wide range of



benefits, so it's important to choose the program that is the best fit for you.

When choosing the right study abroad program, it's important to consider several factors. These include what you

want to accomplish by studying abroad as well as your personal health and financial capabilities.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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HC Fall Registration Opens, Eagles At RP Funding & More.....

Compiled by Jenny Bennett
jbennett@ospreyobserver.com

Hotel California Comes To The RP Funding Center

Do you love classic rock? Hotel California, A Salute To The Eagles is coming to the RP Funding Center on Saturday, July 18, starting at 8 p.m. Hotel California "A Salute to the Eagles" is the only show to have ever received 'Official Authorization' to perform the Eagles catalog of music. It will be one night of endless classics and timeless memories, so join in on a trip down a dark desert highway, feel the cool wind in your hair and check into the Hotel California.

Visit www.rpfundingcenter.com for additional information and to purchase tickets. The RP Funding Center is located at 701 W. Lime St. in Lakeland.

Registration Open for Fall 2026 Semester At Hillsborough College

Fall 2026 registration is open for all new and returning students at Hillsborough College (HC). Registration is available at www.hcfl.edu/registernow for existing students. Registration and application information for

new students can be found at www.hcfl.edu/admissions. HC offers flexible class schedules and course delivery options, allowing students to study at their own pace without compromising their work or family obligations. Options include on campus, hybrid, simulcast, online with live class meetings, online without live class meetings and flexible start.

Hillsborough College serves more than 46,000 students annually at its five campuses located throughout Tampa Bay. For more information, visit www.hcfl.edu.

Community Service Award Presented To Gary Rideout

The Alafia River Chapter of the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution recently presented its Community Service Award to Gary Rideout in recognition of his leadership and service to Brandon-area families affected by Alzheimer's disease, dementia and related memory disorders.

Gary Rideout, retired co-pastor of St. Andrew's United Methodist Church, was honored for founding and developing the Vitality Respite Center, a volunteer-driven program based on the Respite for All (RFA) model.

The center's volunteers lead structured activities for memory-impaired individuals while also offering respite and support for caregivers. Since its founding, the program has continued to grow, earning recognition as the first RFA center in the area and be-



coming an important resource for local families navigating memory loss care.

D1 Training Opens In Brandon

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

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

D1 offers age-based training programs for youth athletes, adult fitness classes, personal training, speed and agility development, strength and conditioning, team training and seasonal camps.



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

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Located at 9708 Carr Rd. in Riverview, Canine Cabana offers day care, lodging, training, grooming and bathing services. Visit its website at <https://caninecabana.biz/> or call 813-672-9663 for additional information or to book service.



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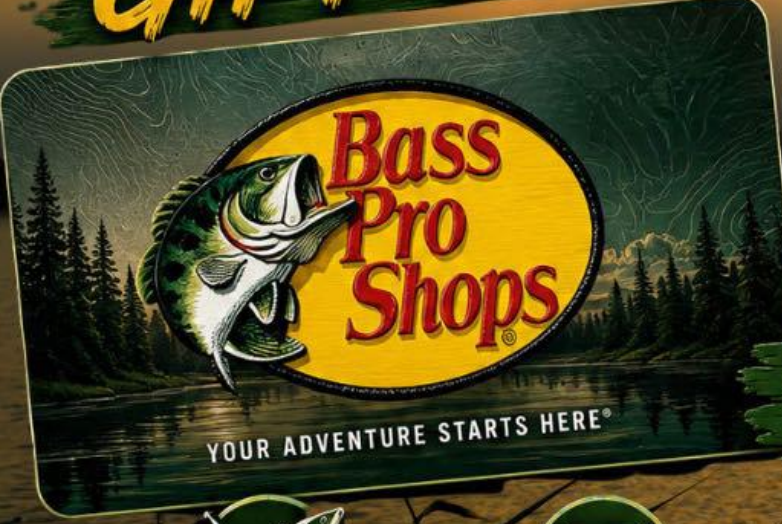
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WEST FLORIDA FOSTER CARE EXPANDS INTO FULL FAMILY SUPPORT AGENCY

By Kelly Wise Valdes

West Florida Foster Care Services (WFFCS) will re-launch as a full family support agency on Wednesday, July 1, expanding its reach across the Tampa Bay region and deepening services for foster, adoptive and reunifying families.

The organization has supported foster families in Hillsborough County for six years through its Family Advocacy Program. Executive Director Janet Rinaldi said the relaunch marks a major shift in how the agency can serve families.

"Relaunching as a full family support agency means that our reach can be extended and our service population can deepen throughout the Tampa Bay area," said Rinaldi. "We will now support licensed foster families, relative and nonrelative caregivers, bio families that are reunifying and families who have adopted through the foster care system."

The expanded services will include foster closets, a food pantry, safe community events and specialized training for caregivers.

The agency will celebrate the relaunch with a grand reopening event, Rev Up & Roll Out, on Saturday, June 27, from 11:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. at Tampa Community Church, located at 5101 N. Rome Ave. in Tampa. The free community event will feature face painting, food trucks, bounce houses, raffles and giveaways for children in foster care.

Rinaldi said she hopes the event highlights the importance of community involvement.

"Not everyone can take a child into their home, and not everyone should, but everyone can do something," she said. "I hope the



general public leaves this event having learned more about the foster care crisis in our community, with a committed desire to jump in and support in the way that works best for them."

Sponsorships play a critical role in sustaining the agency's programs, Rinaldi said, especially as foster families

struggle with limited support.

"Relational advocacy means we are meeting families and children where they are and supporting them in the ways that will mean the most to them in that moment," said Rinaldi.

The agency currently serves more than 650 families each month. Rinaldi said food insecurity, traumainformed training and support for reunifying families are among the most urgent needs.

Local foster mother Yvetta Lambert truly appreciates the assistance WFFCS provides.

"The support you provide is not only helpful but truly a necessity for families like ours who are committed to caring for children in need," said Lambert.

Rinaldi emphasized that community involvement remains essential to support foster families like Lambert's.

"What we're doing is important, and we cannot do it without our amazing and generous community," said Rinaldi.

For more information, visit www.wffcs.org or email fosterinfo@wffcs.org.

RUTLEDGES' PINCH A PENNY NOW OFFERS NEW POOL CONSTRUCTION

By Emily Harper



The Rutledge family, who has proudly served the community for 18 years.

Pinch A Penny Pool Patio & Spa, located in FishHawk, has been serving the community since 2008. Through the years, the Rutledge family, who owns and operates the business, has been dedicated and committed to their clients' needs.

Recently, the business has expanded its services, now offering new pool construction. This includes design, material selection, installation and 30 days of after-service support to ensure the pool is functioning properly and as intended.

Jim Rutledge sets his business apart from other pool building companies as a company already rooted and invested in the community. In this expansion, Pinch A Penny is still a small, intimate pool company focused on its clients' unique preferences. He explained that it expanded its client services to create a small, custom boutique-style pool building business focused on its customers.

Unlike other companies, once construction is complete, the company provides its clients with ongoing services, such as chemical testing, repairs and warranty work.

Jim Rutledge stated, "We are not going

anywhere. When there is an issue, we are going to be there to support you."

Since offering new pool construction, the Rutledges' business has provided services to clients in both Hillsborough and Manatee counties. Throughout each specific building process, it has maintained its com-

mitment to personalized service, quality workmanship and customer satisfaction.

Customers appreciate working directly with a local, family-owned business that takes the time to understand their vision and transform outdoor spaces into beautiful backyard retreats. Whether clients are looking for a custom-designed pool, a complete outdoor living area or enhancements to an existing space, the team works closely with them from concept to completion.

Known as a great community partner, the Rutledge family has long supported Newsome High School's Marching Band in addition to numerous community organizations.

In addition to pool construction, the business also specializes in outdoor kitchen design and fire pits, artificial turf and landscaping, along with patio lighting.

The Rutledges' Pinch A Penny Pool Patio & Spa store is located at 16715 FishHawk Blvd. in Lithia, in the shopping center across from Newsome High School. To learn more about its services and set up an appointment for new pool construction, contact 813-655-3700 or email the store at store191@pinchapenny.com.

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HIGH 5 INC. TEAM MEMBERS DRIVE THE ORGANIZATION'S FUTURE SUCCESS

By Emily Harper

High 5 Inc. recently promoted employees Amy Somers and Amanda Boody, recognizing their dedication to the company.

"Watching leaders within High 5 continue to grow alongside the organization is one of the most rewarding parts of what we do. Both of these individuals bring an incredible level of passion, experience and commitment to our mission, and their leadership will play an important role in shaping the future of High 5. We are extremely proud of all they have accomplished and excited to see how their continued growth will help us impact even more lives throughout our community," said Chuck Burgess, CEO.

Somers previously served as the chief operating officer, where she was in charge of daily operations. Now, Somers is the chief financial officer of High 5. In this role, she plans to strengthen the organization's financial processes, systems and infrastructure.

"I want to support all of our programming, our board and our senior leadership in bringing our strategic plan to life. At the same time, I'm committed to making sure we stay in full compliance and remain financially healthy so that the mission can continue to thrive for years to come," said Somers.

Somers is a University of Central Florida alumna with a degree in accounting. In



2009, she started Accounting by Moore, a firm dedicated to serving local nonprofits. High 5 became one of her earliest clients, and she worked closely with Burgess to grow the organization into what it is today. Somers, in 2016, transitioned into the full-time role of chief operating officer, from which she was recently promoted from.

Boody previously served as the senior biometric specialist for Check My Background. In this position, she was responsible for processing the on-boarding background checks of staff prior to employment with High 5. She was recently promoted to vice president of staff development.

"With this new role, my goal is to strengthen our team and organization by driving organizational growth, scaling professional development and leadership opportunities for our staff, and to foster a fun, inviting, high-performance culture," said Boody.

Boody started her career as a Registered Nurse, a profession she practiced for eight years. However, after moving to Florida, she decided to explore other opportunities, which led her to the High 5 organization.

For more information about High 5 Inc., visit <https://high5inc.org/>.

BUSCH GARDENS TAMPA BAY UNVEILS ACTION-PACKED SUMMER

Staff Report

Summer is coming in hot at Busch Gardens Tampa Bay. The park today unveiled its can't-miss summer lineup, including Summer Nights, offering extended hours from now through Sunday, August 9, with an all-new drone show, themed dance parties, returning fan-favorite entertainment and seasonal food and beverage offerings. Plus, the all-new Lion and Hyena Ridge opens soon. The best part: Access to all events and attractions is included with park admission.

Summer Nights, Bigger and Better

From now through August 9, guests can experience the park after dark nightly with Summer Nights, offering extended park hours, electrifying entertainment and nighttime thrills, including:

- The all-new Wild Skies Drone Show & Fireworks Spectacular with two shows. On select nights, visitors can enjoy a nighttime spectacular featuring 400 drones and fireworks, during two all-new shows: a patriotic-themed show for America's 250th birthday and a drone show, starting Friday, July 10, showcasing designs unique to Busch Gardens.

- The all-new Beach Bash show, which is filled with retro, high-energy fun the whole family will love and takes place in Gwazi Plaza, and the Boom Box Dance Party returns with energetic vibes in Stanleyville.

- Nighttime rides, which offer a whole new experience, enjoying Busch Gardens' nine world-class roller coasters after dark.

Back by popular demand, these fan-favorite shows are held indoors when guests want to beat the heat:



- **Cirque Electric** — This acrobatic show features new thrilling, world-class, cirque-style performers to the Stanleyville Theater beginning Thursday, June 11.

Guests can witness their extraordinary talent alongside an electric ensemble of dancers.

- **Animal Tales** — During this educational presentation, guests learn more about the park's diverse collection of more than 200 animal species and meet some of the animal ambassadors in person.

- **Icons** — This fan-favorite live performance features hits inspired by musical legends.

- **Rhythm of Nature** — Audiences embark on a spellbinding ice adventure following the journey of a brave young hero into a magical dream realm to uncover the wonders of the animal kingdom and embrace their destiny. This ice spectacle dazzles guests with the beauty, danger and wisdom of nature.

America's 250th Celebration at Busch Gardens

This patriotic summer event is packed with all-American excitement throughout the park. From now through Sunday, July 5, guests can experience special military appreciation offerings, shop patriotic merchandise and indulge in festive summer treats. To cap it off, a dazzling patriotic-themed drone show will captivate audiences.

For more information, visit <https://buschgardens.com/tampa/>. Follow Busch Gardens Tampa Bay on Facebook and Instagram for the latest summer details and information.



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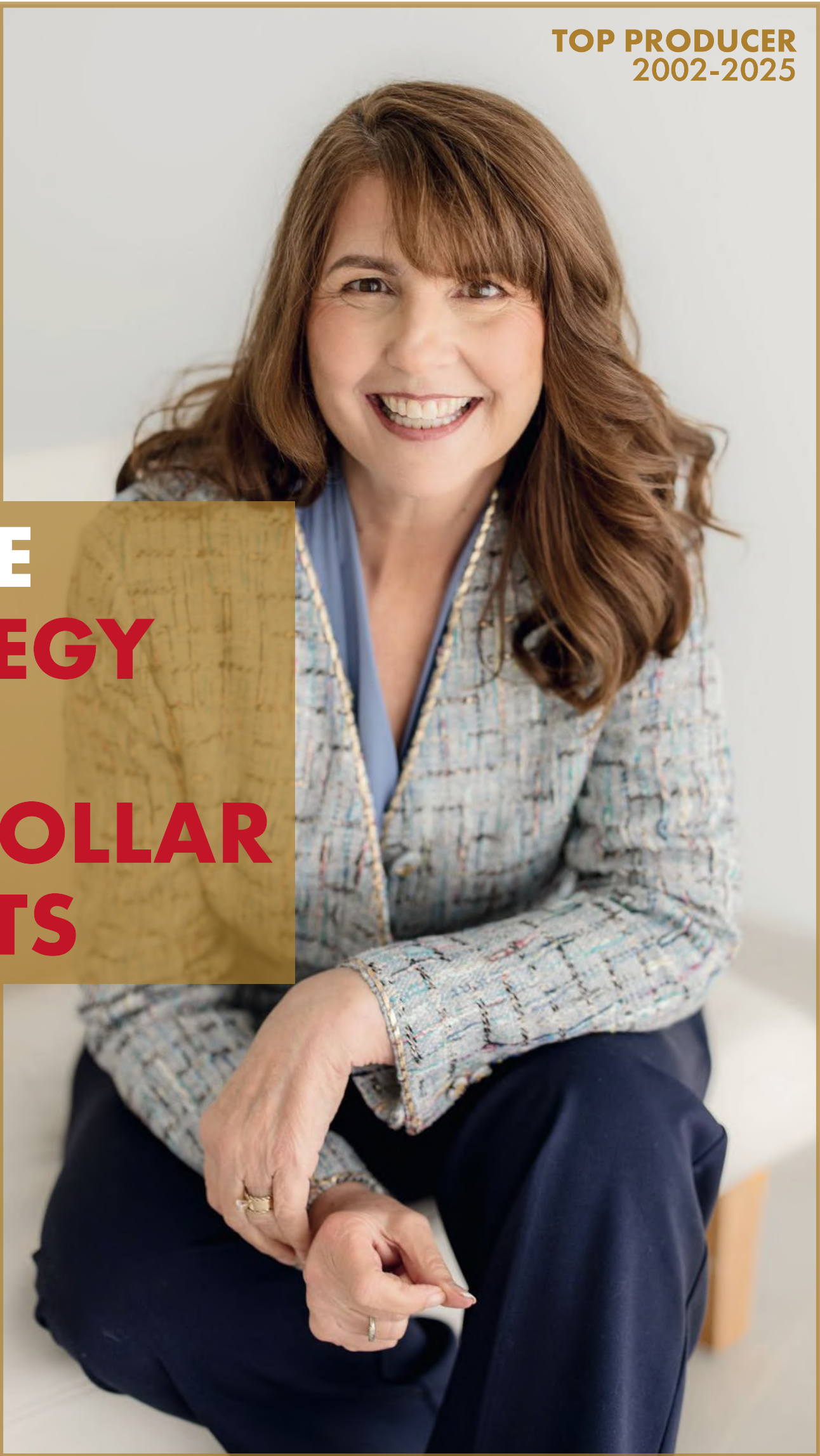
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THREE USF FACULTY TO BE INDUCTED INTO FL INVENTORS HALL OF FAME

Staff Report



The Florida Inventors Hall of Fame announced that three distinguished University of South Florida faculty innovators are among the 2026 class of inductees. Dr. Mark Frankle, Dr. Patrick Hwu and Donald Keck are receiving the prestigious honor for their groundbreaking research and contributions to science and society.

"The University of South Florida is proud to serve as the home of the Florida Inventors Hall of Fame," said USF President Moez Limayem. "The 2026 inductees represent the very best in Florida-connected innovation. Their achievements remind us that research, entrepreneurship and invention have the power to improve lives, strengthen industries and shape the future."

Dr. Frankle, the chief of shoulder and elbow surgery at the Florida Orthopaedic Institute and a clinical professor in the USF Health Morsani College of Medicine, is an internationally recognized orthopedic surgeon, inventor and medical device innovator.

"It is incredibly meaningful to see reverse shoulder arthroplasty recognized by the Florida Inventors Hall of Fame as an invention that has changed lives," Dr.

Dr. Hwu is the president and chief executive officer of Moffitt Cancer Center and a professor of oncologic sciences in the USF Health Morsani College of Medicine. He is an internationally recognized physician-scientist and pioneering innovator in cancer immunotherapy. Dr. Hwu is best known for foundational work in developing chimeric receptor genes that led to modern CART-cell therapies.

Dr. Hwu holds more than 10 U.S. patents, and he has authored more than 300 scientific publications.

Keck, a professor in USF's Institute for Advanced Discovery & Innovation, is a pioneering physicist whose work revolutionized global communications and laid the foundation for the modern internet. As a member of Corning's Optical Waveguide Project team, Keck co-invented low-loss optical fiber in 1970, transforming fiber optics from a scientific concept into a practical, scalable technology for long-distance communication.

The 2026 class of inventors will be formally inducted on Friday, November 6, at the annual Induction Ceremony and Fundraising Gala in Tampa.

FLORIDA POLY TIPS OFF WOMEN'S BASKETBALL WITH HEAD COACH

Staff Report

Florida Polytechnic University has named Nikki Jessee as the first head coach of its women's basketball program, adding another experienced leader as the University continues to build Florida Poly Athletics.

Jessee brings extensive experience in college basketball and a track record of building successful programs. The Lakeland native joined Florida Poly earlier this year as an academic success coach and said the opportunity to help launch women's basketball was one she had been eager for.



Nikki Jessee has been named the first head coach of Florida Polytechnic University's women's basketball program.

"I started here because I knew we were going to start athletics, so I was hoping that something would open up," Jessee said. "I've been in college athletics, specifically basketball, my whole life, and it was intriguing to start something literally from ground zero."

Before arriving at Florida Poly, Jessee led successful women's basketball programs at Warner and Saint Leo universities and helped turn around teams at Lynn University and Martin Methodist College.

Derek Lower, Florida Poly's athletic director, said Jessee is a strong fit in establishing the university's new program.

"Nikki is a phenomenal coach with a proven record of building up programs and creating championship-caliber teams," Lower said. "She has a strong focus on student success and building relationships with every member of her team."

Jessee said working on campus before stepping into the coaching role gave her a stronger understanding of what makes

Florida Poly unique and the kind of student athlete who will thrive at the university.

"I'm thankful because my time as a success coach helped me understand it is a different type of university," she said. "When we say high academics and STEM university, we really mean it."

That academic focus is already shaping her recruiting approach. Jessee said she looks first at whether prospective players are the right fit for Florida Poly's rigorous STEM environment, then at how they can contribute on the court.

"The first thing I ask when I get information on a player or I see someone with potential is what are they interested in studying," Jessee said. "We can't just take anybody; I want to make sure they can also make it academically."

Recruiting is already underway, and Jessee said she is encouraged by the early response. As the team forms, she will focus on establishing standards early and cultivating a culture of excellence and responsibility.

"If you're not good off the court, you're not going to be good on the court," she said. "How you do anything is how you do everything."

For the most recent university news, visit <https://floridapoly.edu/news/>.



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4TH PARADE RETURNS WITH NEW LOCATION AND EXPANDED FUNFEST

By Olivia Clark



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

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

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

"We moved our location this year due to all the watermain line construction and detours cutting through our Brandon roads in

order to get more water to South County," said Rodriguez.

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

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

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

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

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

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



FOURTH OF JULY: MORE THAN A PARADE

There is something about a Fourth of July morning in Brandon that feels familiar in a way that is hard to explain until you've lived it. Before the heat settles in and before the fireworks later that night, the town quietly transforms. Folding chairs begin appearing along the



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

sidewalks, children wave small flags too big for their hands, and neighbors who may not have seen each other in months greet one another like no time has passed at all.

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

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

Even when the parade was paused or reimagined in recent years, the community's response made something clear: This tradition matters. And when it returned in full,

so did the crowds, lining the streets with the same pride and excitement that generations before them once knew. What makes this parade so enduring is not only the floats, the marching bands or the candy tossed to waiting children. It is the continuity.

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

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

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

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

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FROM HOMETOWN PUZZLES TO GLOBAL ENTERTAINMENT EMPIRE

By Libby Hopkins

In 2017, father-and-son team Jeffrey and Blake Stone were proudly showing off their very first business venture in Brandon, a single escape room facility hand-built inside a converted law office. Today, the Stone family has transformed that local passion project into an international entertainment powerhouse, anchoring a massive global escape room franchise and introducing cutting-edge British virtual reality technology to the United States.

The Stone family is the owner of several GAME OVER Escape Rooms throughout Brandon and Tampa.

"Our family's rapid ascent showcases a masterclass in business scaling, shifting from localized, handcrafted experiences to high-tech, multinational partnerships," said Jeffery Stone. "When Legends Escape Rooms first opened its doors on Brandon Boulevard, it was a deeply personal affair. Our family spent six months meticulously building every puzzle by hand. Our initial rooms leaned heavily on family heritage and immersive storytelling."

That focus on premium quality paid off massively; their popular Dungeon VII room reached international critical acclaim when it received the Best Overall In-Person Escape Room of the Year award in 2021 from the industry site ESCAPETHEROOMERS.

To aggressively scale their business, the Stone family partnered with GAME OVER Escape Rooms, a global industry titan originally founded in Athens, Greece.

"Transitioning our operations to serve



The GAME OVER Escape Rooms brand has expanded to more than 34 countries worldwide.

as official flagship showrooms, we opened high-tech corporate locations across the area," Jeffery Stone said. "The upgrades brought premium electronic automation, movie-set-quality detailing and world-renowned room themes, like Lost City of Atlantis, Money Heist, Haunted Mansion, and Philosopher Stone."

The GAME OVER Escape Rooms brand has expanded to more than 34 countries worldwide. Because of their proven operational expertise, the Stone family now helps facilitate North American franchise opportunities for the GAME OVER corporation, guiding the next generation of entertainment entrepreneurs across the continent.

"In addition to conquering physical escape rooms, we have officially pivoted into the future of immersive tech," Jeffery Stone said. "Our family has partnered with VRXtra, a premier virtual reality gaming company from the United Kingdom that has taken the British entertainment sector by storm."

In a massive win for the local economy, the Stones have just launched the first-ever VRXtra location outside of the United Kingdom right here in the Tampa Bay area. Located at 317 N. Dale Mabry Highway in Tampa, the state-of-the-art facility sits in the booming Midtown district.

If you would like to learn more about GAME OVER Escape Rooms or visit one of its locations, visit <https://tampa.escapegameover.us/en>.

FIND FOOD, FUN AND CULTURE IN HISTORIC SEMINOLE HEIGHTS

By Jamie Lu

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

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

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

Visitors of Seminole Heights can admire the low-pitched roofs and wide front porches of the neighborhood's colorful bungalows, best suited for Tampa's subtropical climate. Some of these buildings are part of the United States National Register and the local Tampa Historic District, meaning they will be preserved for generations to come. Visitors can also stop by food spots



like Bo's Ice Cream, a locally-owned staple of the community since 1954, Front Porch Grille, a restaurant located in a 1898 Victorian house or The Rooster and the Till, a four-time Michelin Bib Gourmand Award recipient.

The Seminole Sunday Market, which takes place every second Sun-

day of the month, is one of the more popular events hosted by the district. Visitors can spend time listening to live music while perusing the stalls of over 70 local vendors of goods ranging from fresh produce to artisanal crafts.

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

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

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\$1.6 BILLION ONE WATER PROJECT MOVES FORWARD IN S. HILLSBOROUGH

By Brian Bokor

Hillsborough County officials officially broke ground on the One Water South Wastewater Conveyance and Treatment Project on April 24, marking a major milestone in the county's \$1.6 billion One Water infrastructure initiative.

The project centers on construction of a 200-acre Advanced Wastewater Treatment Plant near the Southeast County Landfill in Lithia. County officials said the facility is designed to support South Hillsborough's long-term wastewater and reclaimed water needs through at least 2050.

The One Water Program serves the county's rapidly growing south-central service area, including Apollo Beach, Brandon, Gibsonton, Riverview, Ruskin, Sun City Center, Valrico and Wimauma.

County leaders described the One Water Program as a long-range strategy focused on resiliency, sustainability and future growth. The 'One Water' concept treats drinking water, wastewater, reclaimed water and stormwater as one interconnected system designed to protect resources while supporting regional development.

The wastewater conveyance and treatment project itself is estimated at approximately \$1.2 billion. The project includes the advanced treatment facility, the Balm Road Super Pump Station and more than 20 miles of wastewater and reclaimed water pipelines. The broader \$1.6 billion capital program also includes additional long-term drinking water and reclaimed water improvements throughout South Hillsborough County.

By 2030, the Lithia facility is expected to process 24 million gallons of wastewater per day, with designs already in place to eventually expand capacity to 30 million gallons



of southeast plant operations at Garney. "At a time when growing communities are looking for more sustainable ways to plan ahead, Hillsborough County is setting a strong example through its long-term investment in infrastructure."

per day.

"What's going to be built is a 30 million gallon per day advanced wastewater treatment plant, some of the most advanced technology that's out there, for purposes of providing adequate treatment capacity for our growing community," said George Cassady, assistant county administrator for public utilities.

The project also includes the Balm Road Super Pump Station, which can move up to 56 million gallons of wastewater per day to the new facility. The station features a 5-million-gallon emergency storage tank designed to improve long-term system resiliency.

Pipeline construction is another major component of the project, including 10 miles of wastewater pipeline and 13 miles of reclaimed water pipeline ranging from 42-48 inches in diameter. Officials said reclaimed water infrastructure is critical because it reduces dependence on drinking water supplies while improving environmental sustain-



ability and future water reliability.

Much of the large-scale utility construction residents are currently seeing throughout South Hillsborough, including pipeline staging, trenching operations and roadway utility work, is tied to multiple major infrastructure projects happening simultaneously across the region.

While Tampa Bay Water's 26-mile South Hillsborough Pipeline project and Hillsborough County's One Water Wastewater Program are separate initiatives, the two projects are closely connected and designed to work together to support continued growth across Riverview, Brandon, Ruskin, Valrico and surrounding communities.

The project is being delivered through a progressive design-build partnership between Garney Construction and Hazen & Sawyer, along with partners Ardurra, Stantec and Wade Trim.

"What makes this project stand out is that it goes beyond simply adding treatment capacity," said Eric Wagner, director

County leaders said the investment is necessary as South Hillsborough continues experiencing rapid residential and commercial expansion.

"We are developing homes here, but we didn't have the infrastructure before," said Hillsborough County Commissioner Christine Miller. "And so, as the people continue to push outside of the city, we have to provide the resources for them."

While pipeline work began in fall 2025, the April 2026 groundbreaking launched vertical construction for the treatment facility and pump station. Phase one is expected to be completed in 2028, with full buildout anticipated by 2030.

Officials said existing customers should not notice interruptions to daily water or wastewater service during construction.

"The beauty of this program is that customers will not see a change in their service," Cassady said. "This will just provide additional resilient capacity for now and in the future."

Drivers may notice construction activity near County Road 672 and east of U.S. 301, though county officials said efforts are being made to minimize traffic disruptions during construction.

Once complete, the One Water Program is expected to become one of the most important infrastructure systems supporting long-term growth and resiliency throughout South Hillsborough County.



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RESCUE PETS ISSUES URGENT PLEA FOR FOSTERS AS SHELTERS REACH CAPACITY

Staff Report

Rescue Pets of Florida, a volunteer-driven nonprofit that recently celebrated over 25,000 adoptions in its first 10 years, is issuing an urgent plea for foster homes as shelters and rescues across the Tampa Bay area reach dangerous overcrowding levels during kitten season.

The rescue currently has zero available foster homes for incoming kittens, while county shelters and rescue partners throughout the region continue to operate at or beyond capacity. According to the organization, local shelters have already begun euthanizing animals for space.

"We are at a critical point," said Jeanine Cohen, director and cat division lead for Rescue Pets of Florida. "Every single foster home directly translates into lives saved. Right now, we are being forced to make heartbreaking decisions simply because we do not have enough homes available to safely place more animals."

Founded in 2015, Rescue Pets of Florida began as a small cat rescue originally known as Rescue Cats of Florida. Over the past decade, the organization has grown into one of the region's largest volunteer-based rescues, operating five adoption centers throughout Tampa Bay and expanding its mission to save cats, dogs, neonatal kittens and farm animals in need.

The rescue relies entirely on volunteers and foster families rather than a traditional shelter facility. Foster homes provide temporary care for animals until



they are medically cleared and adopted into permanent homes.

"We provide everything," said Tara Pisano, director and dog division lead for Rescue Pets of Florida. "Food, medical care, supplies, support —

we just need people willing to open their homes temporarily. Even fostering for a few weeks can literally save lives."

In addition to rescue and adoption efforts, Rescue Pets of Florida has become known for its regional impact through spay/neuter initiatives and shelter partnerships. The organization also sponsors rescue and partner-rescue spay/neuter clinics aimed at reducing overpopulation before animals enter shelters. Since 2023, Rescue Pets of Florida and its rescue partners have completed thousands of sterilization surgeries, helping reduce intake pressure across multiple counties.

Rescue Pets of Florida is currently seeking foster homes throughout St. Petersburg, Valrico, Wesley Chapel, Spring Hill, Plant City and surrounding Tampa Bay areas. Community members interested in fostering can apply at www.rescuepetsofflorida.org/volunteer.

Donations to support medical care, food, and emergency rescue efforts can be made at www.rescuepetsofflorida.org/donate.

About Rescue Pets of Florida
Founded in 2015, Rescue Pets of Florida is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to rescuing, rehabilitating and rehoming homeless animals throughout the Tampa Bay area.

USPS HONORS NATION'S 250TH WITH RALPH LAUREN STAMPS

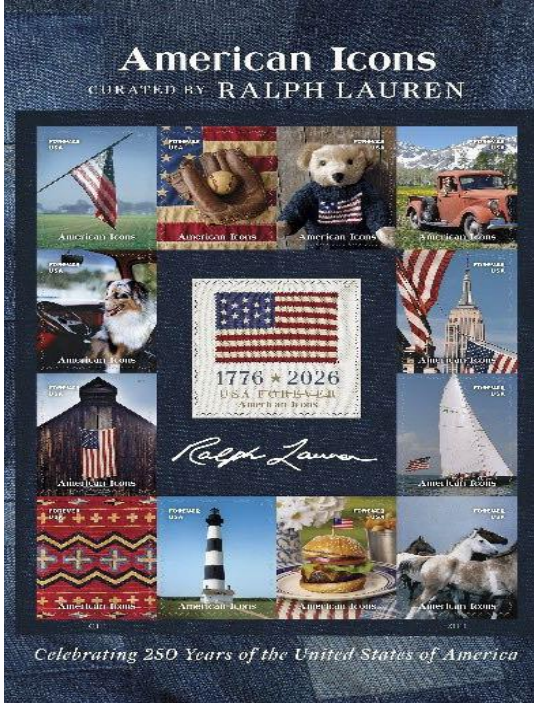
Staff Report

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

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

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

The American Icons collection includes photographs drawn from Lauren's personal archive and imagery that has inspired him throughout his career. Featured designs include the American flag, a baseball glove once used by Jackie Robinson, a weathered pickup truck, a faithful dog,



the Empire State Building, a traditional barn, a Diné (Navajo) blanket woven by artist Naomi Glasses, a teddy bear, a lighthouse, a hamburger, a racing sailboat and wild horses.

At the center of the pane is a 13th stamp featuring a knitted American flag design inspired by Lauren's iconic flag sweater and bearing the dates "1776 to 2026." The

pane's surrounding text celebrates 250 years of the United States and identifies the collection as curated by Ralph Lauren.

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

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

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

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NEW HORIZONS GROUP HOMES PROVIDES MORE THAN SHELTER

By Brad Stager



Ensuring the well-being of those who are at risk of marginalization or exploitation because of a disability is a principle wholeheartedly embraced by New Horizons Group Homes in its mission to provide safe, sustaining shelter for adults with special needs.

The genesis of New Horizons was in 1992, as a community of people concerned about a lack of resources for residents dealing with ability challenges came together in a partnership with the special needs ministry of First Baptist Church of Brandon. Its mission from the outset has been to support the notion that independence, dignity and respect are essential to a fully lived life, and that a home is an important part of making this possible for those whose disability makes daily living difficult.

From that beginning in 1992 grew a village, starting with the Mary Lou Creamer home, which opened in 1999 on the property located at 109 E. Clay Ave. in Brandon. That first structure was home for six women residents and was followed in 2002 with the opening of the Alice Storms home, which housed six men. A grant from Hillsborough County allowed for construction of the Peter and Brenda Watkins home, which opened to six men in 2017. Creamer, Storms and Watkins are among

the names of New Horizons' founders.

The homes are operated as assisted living facilities licensed by the Florida Agency for Health Care Administration, with much of

the funding derived from residents' Social Security benefits as well as through special events, like barbecues and luncheons, and developing supportive relationships with businesses and individuals in the community who wish to help.

As a partner with First Baptist Church's special needs ministry, New Horizons emphasizes Christian values in creating the homes' environments. Residents are encouraged to develop their full potential as human beings, and New Horizons draws upon community connections and resources to provide them. Many residents hold jobs and all are expected to do chores to keep the homes operating smoothly. Outings to local events and attractions also keep residents busy.

"It's a Christian, family-centered home to be all that they can be," said Brenda Watkins.

To learn more, including how to take a tour for interested families, visit www.newhorizonshomes.org or call 813-571-2690.

LIEUTENANT GOV. JAY COLLINS ANNOUNCES OPERATION F3

Staff Report

Recently, decorated Green Beret, Lieutenant Gov. and gubernatorial candidate Jay Collins announced 'Operation F3, Florida Families First: Education on Florida's Terms' in Tampa.

"Florida's families need a governor who truly understands the classrooms, the challenges and the dreams of Florida's children," said Jay Collins. "Florida doesn't need more Washington-style bureaucracy. We need bold, practical leadership rooted in our values, and that's exactly what I'll deliver as your next governor."

Jay Collins emphasized the importance of building an education system on Florida's terms, respecting parental rights and ensuring Florida's education is practical, not bureaucratic.

Operation Florida Families First has three main pillars: 1. Cybersecurity and Protecting Our Kids: We cannot put our children's education solely in the hands of artificial intelligence. There must be humans in the education and security loops. As governor, Jay Collins will direct immediate investments into cybersecurity, training and partnerships with Florida's world-class defense and technology sectors.

2. Rejecting One-size-fits-all Bureaucracy: Children must have the option to customize their education tailored to their career goals, whether they choose to go to college, learn a trade or join the military. Every child is unique and our education system should reflect that. However, giving each child an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is a bureaucratic nightmare. 3. Trade Opportunities and Agricultural Training: Florida is home



Lt. Gov. Jay Collins (Photo / X)

to many industries, including agriculture. Our education must prepare students for good-paying jobs and make all industries accessible to them.

Jay Collins was joined by Second Lady Layla Collins and Bernadette Pello, president and co-founder of Livingstone Academy, who shared their firsthand experience in education poli-

cy to support Jay Collins' approach. They emphasized the importance of integrating workforce education and ensuring each student has the ability to customize their education. See the biographies of the guest speakers below:

Layla Collins, Second Lady, State of Florida: Layla Collins has had a storied career in the United States Army which began in 1994 and spanned over two decades. Layla Collins served in multiple SOF units with a wide range of focus. Layla Collins was selected to be a core member of a Special Actions Team that evaluated security protocol at the highest levels of our government. She collaborated to develop curriculum and courses to train and educate other service members on sensitive skills and best practices. Working within the SOF community allowed

Layla Collins is the proud wife of Jay Collins, and mom of two precious boys, Gabe and Colt. Bernadette Pello, President and Co-founder, Livingstone Academy

Jay Collins is a 23-year veteran of the U.S. Army Special Forces, having served in combat around the world defending our nation. He currently serves as Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' lieutenant governor. For more information, visit www.jayforflorida.com.

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COUNTY SPRING ACADEMIC CHAMPS: COMPTON WINS 4A STATE TITLE

Hillsborough County recognized several individual athletes and teams for academic and athletic success during this past spring season.

Lennard High School won the girls flag football Class 4A State Championship, defeating Park Vista 12-6 to claim the school's first-ever state championship.

"It means everything to me to help bring the first state

championship to Lennard High School," said running back Willow Rager. "Being able to make history with this team is such a special feeling because we knew we were representing our school and community every time we stepped on the field. It's something we've worked toward all season, and I'm so proud of what we accomplished together."

The Newsome High School baseball team earned the FHSAA Class 7A Academic State Championship with a 3.59 cumulative team GPA. The FHSAA Academic Team Champion program recognizes teams with the highest cumulative grade point averages in each classification. To qualify, teams must achieve at least a 3.0 unweighted GPA.

Hayden Compton from Durant High School won the 4A Para-Athlete Division – 400 Meter Dash Wheelchair (1:12:15).

"I'm proud of the accomplishment, but I'm also focused on continuing to improve



Hayden Compton from Durant High won the 4A Para-Athlete Division – 400 Meter Dash (1:12:15).

By Nick Nahas

my times and compete at bigger meets," said Compton. "For me, it's proof that the hard work is paying off and that I'm continuing to improve as an athlete. I will remember how much I improved from last season to this season, including taking 21 seconds off my 800m time, and the hard work it

took to get there."

Luca Torres-Sigler of Spoto High School claimed the 3A Boys Tennis – Singles title.

"I felt a sense of accomplishment knowing that all of my hard work had finally paid off," said Torres-Sigler. "Winning this title makes me feel very proud of what I have accomplished. In addition, not too many fellow tennis players can say, 'I am a state singles champion.' That is very cool."

Torres-Sigler prepared for this tournament by training three times a week at the Eric Dobsha Tennis Academy with high-level juniors and collegiate-level athletes. He also played in several warm-up tournaments leading to the state finals.

"My goals for next season are to be competing at a level that high collegiate division schools take an interest in and hopefully get recruited to play in a Division I or Division II school," said Torres-Sigler. "Another goal of mine is to lead my team to the state championships next year."

BUCHANAN ANNOUNCES 2026 SERVICE ACADEMY APPOINTMENTS

Staff Report



Recently, Congressman Vern Buchanan announced that 16 of the students he nominated have received an appointment to a U.S. Service Academy.

"I would like to congratulate these exceptional young men and women on earning appointments to our nation's prestigious U.S. Service Academies," said Buchanan. "This achievement reflects their hard work, leadership, character and commitment to serving our country. It is a tremendous honor for these students, their families, their mentors and our entire community. I wish them continued success as they begin this important journey in service to our nation."

Each year, members of the U.S. House and Senate nominate high school seniors in their districts and states for admission to the U.S. Air Force, Merchant Marine, Military and Naval academies. Applicants who meet strict qualifications are interviewed and recommended by a nonpartisan Service Academy Board appointed by the congressman. The U.S. Coast Guard Academy does not require a nomination to be accepted.

The following students nominated by Bu-

chanan received an academy appointment for the fall:

Hillsborough County:

- Caine Cokkini-as, Newsome High School, appointed to the U.S. Military Academy.

- Reid Freda, Lakeland Christian High School, appointed to the U.S. Air Force Academy.

- Tyler Stargardt,

Newsome High School, appointed to the U.S. Air Force Academy.

- Hunter Wilk, Newsome High School, appointed to the U.S. Military Academy.

- Caitlin Nguyen, Riverview High School, appointed to the U.S. Merchant Marines Academy.

- Micah Pubillones, homeschooled, appointed to the U.S. Air Force Academy.

- John Wheaton, Newsome High School, appointed to the U.S. Merchant Marines Academy.

- Rory Jones, Newsome High School, appointed to the U.S. Naval Academy.

- Lazariyah Rashae Aranda, Naval Academy Prep School, appointed to the U.S. Naval Academy.

- Levi Ward, Georgia Military College, appointed to the U.S. Air Force Academy.

The U.S. Service Academies are four-year post-secondary institutions that combine educational excellence with military officer training. Students accepted to the academies receive a free four-year education in return for a commitment to serve five years in the active-duty military after graduation.

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TAX COLLECTOR INTEGRATES TOLL CLEARANCE INTO ONLINE REG. RENEWAL

The Hillsborough County Tax Collector's Office and Tampa Hillsborough Expressway Authority (THEA) recently announced a new partnership that allows customers to clear outstanding THEA tolls and renew their vehicle registrations in one seamless online transaction.

The integration, available through the Hillsborough County Tax Collector's website, eliminates the need for customers to contact multiple agencies or make repeat trips to complete their registration renewals.

Previously, customers with unpaid THEA tolls faced a multistep process. They had to contact THEA by phone or online, pay the outstanding balance, wait for the payment to process and then return to the tax collector's website or visit an office to complete their registration renewal. The process often resulted in delays, multiple attempts and additional office visits.

Now, customers can resolve outstanding tolls and renew their registrations immediately through a single online transaction.

"This partnership with THEA is a great example of how collaboration between agencies drives innovation in government service delivery," said Hillsborough County Tax Collector Nancy Millan. "By working together, we've eliminated unnecessary barriers and made it as easy as possible for customers to do business with us. No more phone calls, no more juggling multiple websites, no more driving to an office — just one seamless online transaction."

Millan noted that the tax collector's office



Staff Report

already offers a similar integration with Central Florida Expressway Authority (CFX), creating a comprehensive solution for customers who need to clear tolls from either agency.

Greg Slater, executive director and CEO of THEA, said many drivers are unaware they have unpaid toll balances until they attempt to renew their vehicle registrations.

"This innovative partnership with the Hillsborough tax collector streamlines the process so customers can quickly resolve unpaid tolls and complete their registration without delays," said Slater.

The integration was made possible through collaboration between the Hillsborough County Tax Collector's Office, THEA and technology partner GrantStreet Group. Once a toll payment is processed, registration renewal holds are automatically removed, allowing customers to complete the process without waiting.

Key benefits include immediate toll clearance and registration renewal, 24/7 online access, elimination of multiple websites and phone calls and fewer trips to tax collector offices.

The new service reflects the tax collector's continued focus on improving customer service through technology and partnerships. Customers can access both THEA and CFX toll clearance services while renewing vehicle registrations online at www.hillstaxfl.gov. For more information, visit the website or call 813-635-5200.

ASSET LOCATION: THE OVERLOOKED LEVER IN TAX-EFFICIENT INVESTING

Staff Report



The team at Payant Wealth Management in Sun City Center encourages clients to align investment and tax strategies for long-term financial success.

When it comes to building long-term wealth, most investors focus on what they own—stocks, bonds, funds, and alternatives. But an equally important question is where those assets are held. This concept, known as asset location, can have a meaningful impact on after-tax returns, yet it's often overlooked in portfolio construction.

Asset location refers to strategically placing investments across different account types—taxable accounts, tax-deferred accounts (like traditional IRAs or 401(k)s), and tax-free accounts (such as Roth IRAs). Each type carries its own tax treatment, and aligning investments accordingly can help reduce unnecessary tax drag.

For example, income-generating assets like bonds or high-turnover funds may be better suited for tax-deferred accounts, where interest and short-term gains are sheltered from annual taxation. Meanwhile, growth-oriented investments—such as equities with potential for long-term appreciation—can be ideal for taxable or Roth accounts, where capital gains benefits or tax-free growth may be realized.

The difference may seem incremental year

to year, but over time, tax efficiency can significantly improve overall portfolio performance. In fact, minimizing taxes is one of the few "controllable" factors investors have, alongside costs and discipline.

Yet many investors unknowingly hold tax-inefficient assets in the wrong accounts, creating avoidable tax liabilities.

This is where comprehensive planning—and ongoing coordination between investment strategy and tax considerations—becomes essential.

Ask yourself: Does your advisor talk to you about asset location?

Are your investments positioned with taxes in mind, or simply allocated based on risk alone?

How tax-efficient is your plan?

True financial planning goes beyond selecting investments—it involves integrating tax strategy, retirement goals, and portfolio design into one cohesive approach. Reviewing asset location regularly, especially as tax laws or personal circumstances change, can help ensure your portfolio is working as efficiently as possible.

In today's environment, where every basis point counts, thoughtful asset location isn't just a technical detail—it's a strategic advantage.

Payant Wealth Management is located at 1653 Sun City Center Plaza, Sun City. Visit www.payantwealthmanagementgroup.com or call (813) 633-7333.



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SUMMER FEEDING PROGRAM PROVIDES FREE MEALS AT 150 SITES ACROSS COUNTY

Hillsborough County Public Schools is once again helping ensure children have access to nutritious meals during the summer months through its annual Summer Feeding Program, which offers free breakfasts, lunches and snacks at more than 150 locations throughout the county.

The program started June 1 at HOST sites, with additional locations opening as summer programs get underway. Available to all children and teens ages 18 and younger, the meals are offered at no cost regardless of school enrollment status, and no registration is required.

District officials say the program is designed to bridge the gap for families who rely on school meals during the academic year. By providing convenient access to healthy food options throughout the summer, the district hopes to support student well-being while school is out of session.

At weekday on-site meal locations, children must be present to receive meals, and all food must be consumed on-site during designated serving times. Community members visiting school-based meal sites are asked to check in at the school's front office before proceeding to the cafeteria or designated serving area.

Families can find nearby meal locations and serving schedules by visiting the website at www.SummerBreakSpot.org and enter-

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ing their address. Many participating sites also offer activities, enrichment programs or recreational opportunities in addition to meals, depending on the location.

In addition to daily meal service, HCPS is offering a weekly seven-day meal box pickup option at the South County Career Center in Ruskin. The grab-and-go program runs through July 22 and is designed to provide greater flexibility for families who may not be able to visit meal sites each day.

Meal boxes can be picked up every Wednesday between 8 a.m. and 1 p.m. at the South County Career Center, located at 2810 John Sherman Way. Unlike on-site meal locations, children do not need to be present for pickup, and meals do not need to be consumed on-site.

Each meal box includes seven days' worth of breakfast and lunch meals, along with a gallon of milk, helping families keep children nourished throughout the week.

The Summer Feeding Program is part of Florida's Summer BreakSpot initiative, which provides free meals and snacks to children and teens across the state. District leaders encourage families to take advantage of the program to help ensure children remain healthy, active and ready to learn when school resumes in the fall.

SOUTH BAY ACADEMY ENROLLMENT OPENS FOR THE 2026-27 SCHOOL TERM

By Libby Hopkins

South Bay Academy is a Christ-centered pre-K through 12th grade private school in Riverview that strives to be Christ-centered in all aspects of the learning environment. It teaches and leads from a biblical worldview.



ing our students with a premier ESE department, specifically designed to support those with SLD and speech language impairments.

"At South Bay Academy, we believe every

"We offer a premier Christian Education to students, not just those who excel but those with unique abilities as well," said Sean Doherty, executive pastor of South Bay Church and treasurer of South Bay Academy. "Our mission is to cultivate a Christ-centered learning community where students are cared for with compassion, equipped with excellence, sent with purpose and connected deeply to the great commission."

South Bay Academy's journey is built on the faithful foundation of Livingstone Academy (Riverview campus), which served students on South Bay Church's campus from 2011 through 2025.

"Their years of dedication, particularly in providing personalized education and exceptional ESE services, helped shape the high standard of care we provide today," Doherty said. "We are proud to carry that legacy forward."

In 2023, South Bay Church cast a vision to establish a K-12 institution that would continue this history of excellence under a new banner. Following a successful transition year, South Bay Academy officially launched for the 2025–26 school year.

South Bay Academy specializes in serv-

student deserves an environment where they are truly known," Doherty said. "We combine rigorous Christian education with the specialized support necessary for every child to thrive."

South Bay Academy believes that excellence honors God and inspires people; so, it is a school with high academic standards. It prepares students to achieve their highest potential.

Enrollment is currently open for the 2026-27 school term.

"Parents of preschool through 11th grade students can inquire by visiting our website or calling us," Doherty said. "South Bay Academy is really about creating a family where students feel known and supported as they grow in their faith. The big hope is that by surrounding kids with mentors who truly care, they'll develop the confidence and character to go out and make a real difference in the lives of others."

If you would like to learn more about South Bay Academy or if you'd like to enroll your child at the school, you can visit its website at www.southbay.academy or call 813-399-3180. The school is located at 13498 U.S. 301 S. in Riverview.

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Where In The World

Melissa Hartmann took her Osprey Observer to the Hallgrímskirkja Church and Sun Voyager to see the Northern Lights.

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

By Makenzie Atkins Noel



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

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

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

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

finish."

The foundation of that reputation was laid in the 1980s, when founder Randy Crofton began learning the trade alongside his father. Over the course of more than 35 years, Randy Crofton developed a standard of craftsmanship rooted in honesty and dedication. His wife and business partner, Delight Crofton, has

played an integral role in the company's operations, billing and overall direction. Together, they built a business on a principle that has never wavered: Do the job right, treat people with respect and stand behind your work.

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

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

For more information, please call 813-633-8923 or visit the website at <https://callcroftons.com/>.

FLORIDA ORCHESTRA 2026-27 SEASON FEATURES BEETHOVEN, GERSHWIN & MORE

Staff Report

The Florida Orchestra has announced its 2026-27 season, a lineup that combines classical masterpieces, contemporary American composers and popular entertainment while expanding access to audiences throughout the Tampa Bay region.

The orchestra's 59th season, led by Music Director Michael Francis, will feature 14 Masterworks programs, a variety of Pops concerts and community performances designed to attract both longtime patrons and first-time concertgoers.

"This season is about new discovery and familiar connection," Francis said. "We're performing some of the most powerful works ever written while pairing them with music that feels fresh and unexpected."

Inspired in part by America's upcoming 250th anniversary, the season places a spotlight on American composers, including George Gershwin, Florence Price, Joan Tower, Michael Torke and Christopher Theofanidis. The orchestra will also revisit the work of Ludwig van Beethoven ahead of the 200th anniversary of the composer's death in 2027.

Among the highlights are three Beethoven works never before performed by The Florida Orchestra, including the complete incidental music to "Egmont," "Wellington's Victory" and the composer's only opera, "Fidelio." The orchestra's first-ever concert presentation of "Fidelio" is scheduled for March 2027 and will feature internationally acclaimed tenor Stuart Skelton alongside The Master Chorale of Tampa Bay.

The Masterworks series also includes audience favorites such as Rimsky-Korsakov's



"Scheherazade," Mahler's "Symphony No. 1," Rachmaninoff's "Symphony No. 2," Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" and Verdi's "Requiem."

The season will bring several notable guest artists to Tampa Bay stages. Rising British pianist Jeneba Kanneh-Mason will make her Florida Orchestra debut performing a concerto by Florence Price, while conductor Leonard Slatkin, violinists Tessa Lark and Charles Yang, and pianist Joyce Yang are among the featured performers.

The Raymond James Pops series will showcase large-scale productions, including "Revolution: The Music of The Beatles" and "Dreams of Bollywood." Other Pops offerings include tributes to film composer John Williams, soul music legends and the music of "The Wizard of Oz," "Wicked" and "The Wiz."

The orchestra also announced efforts to make performances more accessible. Season packages have been simplified, lower-priced seating options expanded and evening concert start times moved to 7:30 p.m. Season tickets start at \$22 for Morning Matinees and \$25 for Masterworks and Pops performances.

"Our goal is to create more pathways for people to experience live orchestral music," said President and CEO Ignacio Barrón Vela. Season ticket packages are on sale now, with individual tickets available beginning Aug. 11.

For tickets and information: <https://floridaorchestra.org/>. To donate now: <https://floridaorchestra.org/donate-now/>.



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FOUR FAMILIES MOVE IN AT HABITAT'S WINDHORST COMMONS

Staff Report



Megan Grufman celebrates with her children, David and Melanie.



Devan Mitchell and her son, Stephen, stand outside their new home in Windhorst Commons.



Natalie Sanchez and her daughter, Sariah, tour their new Habitat for Humanity home.

For four Hillsborough County families, the dream of homeownership has become a reality thanks to Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough and a network of community partners dedicated to addressing the region's affordable housing crisis.

During a series of home dedication ceremonies this spring, four mothers and their children received the keys to new homes in Windhorst Commons, Habitat's 23-home affordable housing community in Brandon. Each family arrived with a different story, but all shared a common challenge: rising housing costs that made stable homeownership seem increasingly out of reach.

For Megan Grufman, a single mother of two, the dedication marked the end of years spent living in overcrowded conditions with extended family. After rent prices made independent housing unaffordable, Grufman and her children moved in with her parents. Grufman shared a room with her 11-year-old son, David, while her 17-year-old daughter, Melanie, slept in a makeshift space in her grandmother's room.

Now, the family has a home of their own thanks to Habitat's 2025 Real Estate Build, sponsored by the Suncoast Tampa Association of REALTORS®.

"There were so many times I didn't know how we would ever get ahead or have a place of our own," Grufman said during her dedication ceremony.

Just days earlier, Devan Mitchell and her 15-year-old son, Stephen, celebrated a similar milestone. The billing specialist had spent years navigating rising rents and maintenance issues in rental housing while trying to provide stability for her family.

"This home means everything to us," Mitchell said. "It means stability, safety and hope for my son and me."

Mitchell's home was made possible through a partnership between Hillsborough County and Habitat for Humanity. The county invested \$1.4 million toward construction costs and materials for homes in Windhorst Commons, along with an additional \$600,000 for infrastructure improvements including roads, utilities and sewer lines.

The need for affordable housing has also affected families like Natalie Sanchez and her 6-year-old daughter, Sariah. As a remote retention specialist, Sanchez spent years balancing work and motherhood while



Paris Johnson celebrates with her children, Galaxy and Deavi, at their Habitat home in Brandon.

struggling with the financial pressures of escalating rental costs.

Through Habitat's affordable homeownership program and support from home sponsor Central Bank, Sanchez now has an affordable mortgage and a permanent place to raise her daughter.

The family's dedication ceremony marked one of the earliest milestones in the development of Windhorst Commons, which was specifically designed to provide affordable, disaster-resilient housing for working families and veterans.

For Paris Johnson and her children, Galaxy and Deavi, homeownership means something beyond financial stability — it means permanence.

Johnson, a billing and funding specialist, had watched her rent climb by more than \$600 per month since 2019. Despite the financial strain, she worked through Habitat's homeownership program, completing financial education classes and hundreds of hours of required sweat equity.

"We've always made every rental feel like

home," Johnson said. "But this is the first time we can truly settle in without worrying about having to leave."

Her home was sponsored by Ajax Paving, whose volunteers joined Habitat supporters in celebrating the family's achievement.

Habitat homeowners purchase their homes through affordable mortgages designed to fit family budgets. In exchange, participants complete financial education courses and contribute sweat equity hours, often helping build not only their own homes but those of future neighbors as well.

According to Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough CEO Tina Forcier, the impact of homeownership extends far beyond the walls of a house.

"A home changes everything for a family," Forcier said. "From a child's confidence in school to a parent's peace of mind, affordable homeownership creates opportunities that can last for generations."

Windhorst Commons is being developed as a hurricane-resilient neighborhood featuring homes equipped with storm shutters and built to withstand Florida's challenging weather conditions. The community will eventually include 23 homes.

As construction continues through early 2027, additional families will join the growing neighborhood, each bringing their own story of perseverance and determination. For more, visit HabitatHillsborough.org.

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Compiled by Taylor Wells



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Bloomington High School
GPA 8.44
Plans to Attend
University of Central Florida



Salutatorian
Connor Bledsoe
Bloomington High School
GPA 8.20
Plans to Attend
Florida State University
Honors Program



Valedictorian
Adam Biro
Brandon Academy
GPA 4.82
Plans to Attend
University of Florida



Salutatorian
Sabella Parwani
Brandon Academy
GPA 4.81
Plans to Attend
University of South Florida



Valedictorian
Aaliyah Robinson
Brandon High School
GPA 7.72
Plans to Attend
Dartmouth College



Salutatorian
Marielis Pena Suarez
Brandon High School
GPA 6.92
Plans to Attend
University of South Florida.



Valedictorian
Justin Lugo
Spoto High School
GPA 6.24
Plans to Attend
University of South Florida.



Salutatorian
Riley Demski
Spoto High School
GPA 6.22
Plans to Attend
University of South Florida.



Valedictorian
Madison Michnowicz
Spoto High School
Collegiate Academy
GPA 7.99
Plans to Attend
University of North Florida



Salutatorian
Laila Anello
Spoto High School
Collegiate Academy
GPA 7.93
Plans to Attend
Florida State University



Valedictorian
Brayan Perez-Granados
Strawberry Crest High School
GPA 7.92
Plans to Attend
University of Florida



Salutatorian
Sadie Gibson
Strawberry Crest High School
GPA 7.42
Plans to Attend
University of South Florida



Valedictorian
Ashank Saravanan
Strawberry Crest High School (IB Program)
GPA 10.09
Plans to Attend
University of Florida



Salutatorian
Varun Gajjar
Strawberry Crest High School (IB Program)
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College Selection
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Where In The World





Melissa Hartmann took her Osprey Observer to the Hallgrímskirkja Church and Sun Voyager to see the Northern Lights.

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KEEP TAMPA BAY GROWS GREENER FUTURE WITH VOLUNTEERS & TREES

By Ella Baroni

For more than three decades, Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful has demonstrated that meaningful environmental change begins at the



local level, empowering residents to improve their communities through volunteerism, education and hands-on conservation projects.

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

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

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

"Projects like this are about investing in our communities and creating spaces where people can thrive," said Kristina Moreta,

executive director of Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful. "With help from United Airlines and the Arbor Day Foundation, we are able to bring more shade, beauty and environmental benefits to neighborhoods that need it most."

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

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

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

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

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

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

By Abigail Dumas

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

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

The Tampa Theatre has historically offered diverse programming and celebrated queer art, being the annual host of the Tampa International Gay and Lesbian



Film Festival since 1990. Additionally, the venue often shows films directed by or starring LGBTQ+ individuals. *Hokus Pokus Live!* is one of the most high-profile drag shows ever hosted by the theater with it being a highly anticipated event by many.

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

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

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HCA HONORS FIRE RESCUE CREW FOR LIFESAVING CARE OF CADDIE SCHELLE

By Marie Gilmore



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

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

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

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

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

ing her to Brandon Hospital.

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

Doctors later discovered that Caddie had suffered a ruptured arteriovenous malformation, or AVM, resulting in a massive brain bleed.

After being stabilized at Brandon Hospital, she was airlifted to receive emergency pediatric surgery.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

80 CLUBS AND COUNTING: FLVS CONNECTS ONLINE LEARNERS

By Srishti Tripathi



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

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

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

The Club Awards afternoon didn't disappoint. The room was alive with energy as students put on dance routines, cheerleading performances and theater scenes. The energy shifted when American Sign Language students took the stage to interpret songs live, a moment that clearly stuck with

everyone in the audience. It wasn't just about the arts, either. The FLVS Future Farmers of America (FFA) chapter kicked off the event, and the senior class of 2026 officers delivered an original skit that captured the ups and downs of their virtual high school journey. If you wandered around, you could catch a mock debate, browse a photography showcase and check out projects from the Science

National Honor Society.

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

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

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

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Fast-casual Italian Bistro Opens In Riverview

Mister Pasta's Build-Your-Own Pasta Bar is a fast-casual Italian experience where you're in control. Start by choosing your favorite fresh-made pasta, pick from its house-made sauces, load up on unlimited fresh vegetables, add your choice of proteins like grilled chicken, meatballs, steak, shrimp or lobster and then watch as your custom creation is cooked to perfection right in front of you. Fresh, fast and made just the way you like it. It also does catering for weddings, parties, office or corporate events. Mister Pasta is located at 11681 Boyette Rd. in Riverview. Visit its website at <https://misterpasta.com/> for additional information.



cial, massages, permanent makeup and others. Visit <https://prestigeskininnovations.com/> or call 813-543-6636 for additional information and to make an appointment.

Center For Prestige Skin Innovations

The Center for Prestige Skin Innovations, located at 915 S. Parsons Ave., Ste. B, in Brandon, recently celebrated joining the Brandon and Riverview Chamber of Commerce with a ribbon cutting. The Center for Prestige Skin Innovations provides a soothing escape from the stresses of daily life that'll leave you feeling recharged and refreshed. From the moment you walk through the doors, you'll be embraced by a calm, peaceful atmosphere that allows you to unwind, recharge and be refreshed. It offers a wide array of luxurious treatments to renew your body and spirit, including fa-



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

Stellar Notary Services is a nationwide mobile and online notary company deeply rooted in service to the community. It works with clients across multiple industries including legal, real estate, construction and business services, helping people navigate important documents and major life moments with professionalism, care and reliability. It is especially passionate about remote online notarization (RON) because it allows fast, efficient and reliable notary services to people anywhere in the world. This year, Stellar Notary Services is proudly celebrating its



two-year anniversary with a ribbon-cutting ceremony from the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce. Stellar Notary Services is located at 11232 Boyette Rd., Ste. 1144, in Riverview. For additional information about the services it performs, visit its website at <https://stellarnotaryservices.net> or call 833-403-5601.

Smylie Legacy Law Celebrates Move With Ribbon Cutting

On May 21, Smylie Legacy Law celebrated its move with a ribbon cutting with the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce. Previously located in downtown Tampa, Smylie Legacy Law moved to Ware Boulevard, close to Adamo Drive. Owner Scott Smylie lives in Valrico and is passionate about giving families the gift of order and peace instead of chaos when a



loved one passes away. Smylie Legacy Law is an estate planning and elder law boutique firm that focuses on helping clients create and understand their estate plans. Smylie Legacy Law is located at 410 Ware Blvd., Ste. 818, in Tampa. To learn more, visit <https://smylielegacylaw.com/> or call 813-667-6808.

Lake Michigan Credit Union Announces Community Open House June 23

Lake Michigan Credit Union (LMCU) will celebrate the grand opening of its newest branch in Valrico, with a family-friendly open house and ribbon-cutting ceremony on Tuesday, June 23, from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. at 3467 Lithia Pinecrest Rd. Guests can enjoy light refreshments, games, and activities while learning about LMCU's full range of financial services, including checking accounts, credit cards, mortgages, home equity loans, commercial lending, and treasury management.

To support the local community, LMCU will donate \$10 to Impact Program for every new membership account opened at the Valrico branch through June 26. Impact Program is a nonprofit organization serving Hillsborough and Polk counties through programs that promote healthy living and relationships for teens, parents, educators, and youth leaders.

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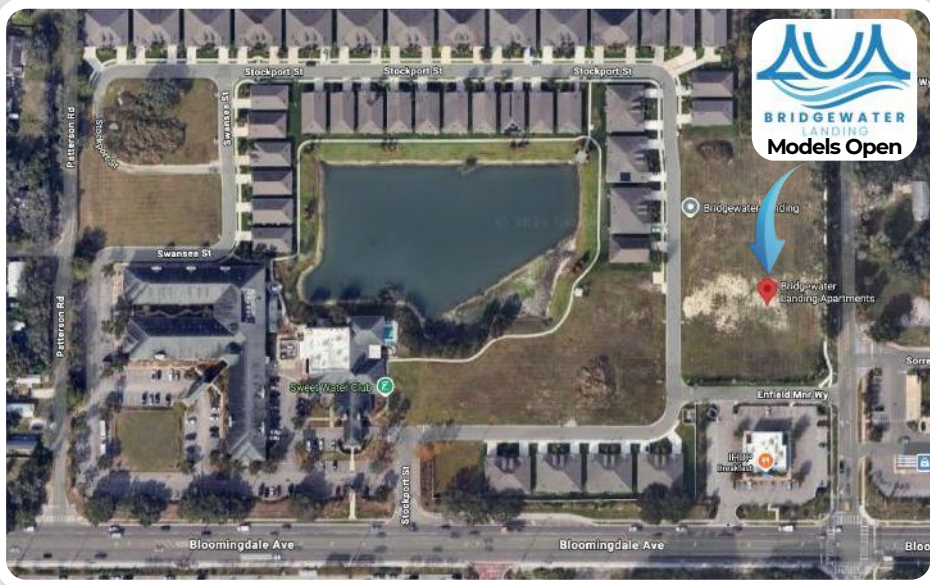


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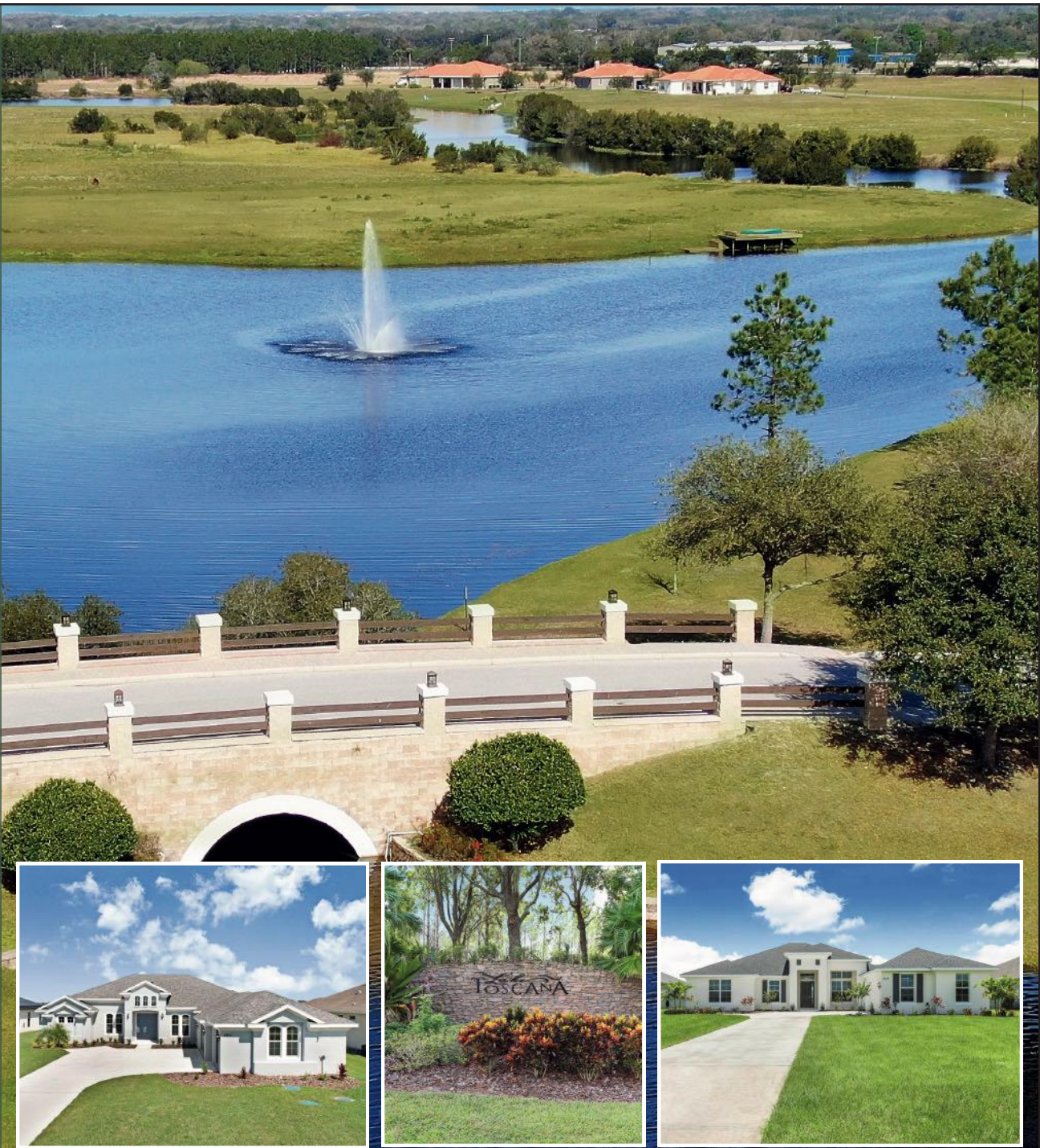
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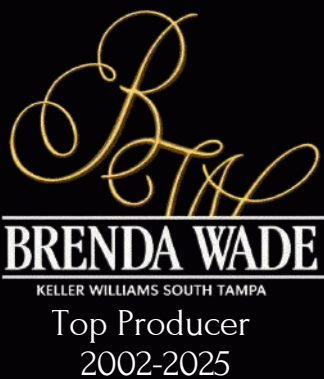


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