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YOUR COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER

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Volume 23, Issue 1

23 YEARS Osprey Observer Your Community Newspaper POSITIVE NEWS

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See Our Ad On Page 4

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ALABAMA, JOAN JETT & MORE HEADLINE 2026 FLORIDA STRAWBERRY FESTIVAL

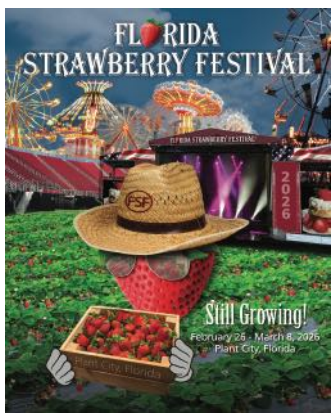
Staff Report







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



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

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

"As we unveil our headline entertainment for BerryFest26, I am beyond excited to say this year's theme perfectly captures the energy and anticipation surrounding our incredible lineup," said Florida Strawberry Festival® President Kyle Robinson.

"We've worked hard to create an event that celebrates not just our community's love for strawberries, but also our shared passion for music, fun, and tradition. Get ready- 'The Stage Is Set!,' and we can't wait to see you there!"

Among the most anticipated performances is Joan Jett & The Blackhearts, who will deliver the Festival's closing-night concert on March 8, 2026. Known for timeless hits including "I Love Rock 'n' Roll," "Bad Reputation," and "Crimson and Clover," Jett will cap off BerryFest26 with a high-energy finale.

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

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

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

The 2026 Florida Strawberry Festival will take place February 26 through March 8 in Plant City. The 11-day community celebration draws more than 600,000 visitors annually, featuring headline entertainment, youth livestock shows, commercial exhibits and its famous strawberry shortcake — a tradition more than nine decades strong.

CARDINAL ROOFING ANNOUNCES 12TH ANNUAL CHARITY CLAY SHOOT IN LITHIA

By Olivia Clark



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

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

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



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

This year's charity clay shoot has a fundraising goal of $20,000. Participants may register as individual shooters for $250 or as a four-person team for $800. Sponsorship opportunities are also available, including an Essential Sponsor level for $2,000, station sponsorships for $100 and vendor-only or add-on options for $225.

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

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

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

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For residents, Holland's message is simple: Do not place lithium batteries in the garbage or recycling bin. Hillsborough County has also warned that lithium-ion batteries can cause fires in garbage trucks and at waste facilities and directs residents to disposal guidance through its Fire Prevention & Battery Recovery resource page at https://hcfl.gov/. *See Full Story Page 3.*

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TAMPA BAY FERRY MOVES CLOSER TO RELAUNCH WITH NEW VESSEL

By Brian Bokor

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

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

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

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

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

Built in 1994, the vessel will undergo major improvements before entering service, including installation of a refurbished engine scheduled for January, interior renovations, repainting, inspections and sea trials. Once delivered to Tampa Bay via the Panama Canal, the ferry will provide seating for up to 250 passengers, up from the previous service's 149-passenger capacity.

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

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

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

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

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

STEVE HOLLAND, BRANDON AUTO OWNER, URGES SAFE LITHIUM BATTERY DISPOSAL AS FIRE RISKS GROW

By Olivia Clark

As lithium-ion batteries power more everyday devices, from e-bikes and power tools to electric vehicles, local industry leaders said safe disposal has not kept up with demand. The result is a growing public safety concern, especially when damaged batteries are stored or tossed into household trash.



Steven Holland, owner of Brandon Auto Services, and longtime business partner Ken Anderson have operated the family-owned business in Valrico for more than five decades.



Steve Holland, owner of Brandon Auto Services, said the salvage industry is facing a major gap in Florida: There is currently no reliable destination for damaged lithium batteries removed from wrecked electric vehicles. Holland serves as legislative chairman and past president of the Florida Auto Dismantlers & Recyclers Association, also known as FADRA, and works with the national Automotive Recyclers Association on policy issues affecting recyclers.

"Our salvage industry has no source to send damaged lithium batteries to at this time," said Holland. "The few salvage yards that are processing EV vehicles are storing these batteries in metal containers away from buildings and areas that can flood."

Holland said lithium batteries can ignite without warning, which makes transport difficult. Many hauling companies will not accept them due to fire risk. He added that undamaged batteries may be reused for other projects, including off-grid power systems, but recycling options can be limited and expensive.

At the state level, Holland said a bill addressing the management and storage of lithium batteries was introduced during the 2025 Florida legislative session but did not advance. He said discussions have continued around storage requirements for damaged electric vehicles, including proposed legislation related to towing and storage fees.

For residents, Holland's message is simple: Do not place lithium batteries in the garbage or recycling bin. Hillsborough County has also warned that lithium-ion batteries can cause fires in garbage trucks and at waste facilities and directs residents to disposal guidance through its Fire Prevention & Battery Recovery resource page at https://hcfl.gov/.





MAJOR MILESTONE REACHED AS 9,000 CORAL BABIES ARE TRANSFERRED TO RESTORATION PARTNERS

Staff Report



Florida's investment in coral reef restoration reached a major milestone as The Florida Aquarium successfully transferred 9,000 juvenile corals to restoration partners Reef Renewal USA and The Reef Institute. This marks one of the largest statewide deployments of land-grown coral babies under the Florida's Coral Reef Restoration and Recovery (FCR3) Initiative.

The corals — born and raised at The Florida Aquarium's Coral Conservation and Research Center — are part of the state's FCR3 Initiative, led by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. The effort marks a critical step toward large-scale reef recovery and the long-term goal of restoring at least 25 percent of Florida's coral reef by 2050. The initial phase of the initiative focused on increasing infrastructure for coral breeding and raising coral offspring on land in addition to training a workforce to scale coral production for reef restoration.

"This moment shows what's possible when long-term state investment, science and collaboration come together," said Keri O'Neil, Coral Conservation Program director at The Florida Aquarium. "Coral reefs are vital to Florida's economy, tourism and marine life. These corals began as microscopic larvae here in Apollo Beach. Now, they're on their way to our partners for further growth on land and, ultimately, Florida's reefs — where they'll help replenish coral populations that were heavily impacted by stony coral tissue loss disease. Thanks to the FCR3 Initiative, we now have a functional pipeline to scale coral breeding efforts and get these corals back to the reef."

During the transfer, biologists carefully packed and transported corals from the 2024 and 2025 spawning seasons, including great star corals, boulder brain corals, symmetrical brain corals and grooved brain corals.

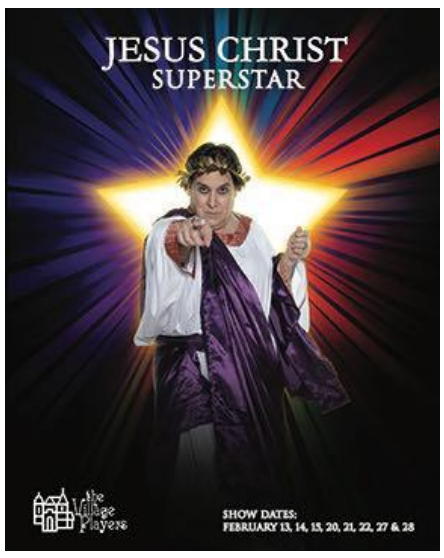
The Reef Institute received approximately 4,500 coral babies, which will continue growing at its new 23,000-square-foot, land-based facility in West Palm Beach before being outplanted onto reefs in Palm Beach and Martin counties.

Reef Renewal USA received its first group of corals in December 2025 and just received an additional 4,000 7-month-old grooved brain corals produced during the 2025 spawning season. These corals will continue growing at the organization's land-based coral production nursery in Ruskin before being outplanted onto reefs throughout the Florida Keys over the next year.

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

THE VILLAGE PLAYERS COMMUNITY THEATRE PRESENTS *JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR*

Staff Report



The Village Players is bringing one of the most powerful and enduring rock operas of all time to the stage with Jesus Christ Superstar, opening this February with a limited run at the historic James McCabe Theater in Valrico.

With music by Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyrics by Tim Rice, Jesus Christ Superstar tells the story of the final days of Jesus Christ through a modern, human lens, focusing on the personal struggles, doubts and conflicts of the people closest to Him. Featuring an iconic rock score and emotionally charged performances, the show explores faith, loyalty, ambition and betrayal in a way that remains strikingly relevant.

This production is directed by Domin Pazo, artistic director of The Village Players, who brings more than four decades of theatrical experience to the stage. Pazo has been with The Village Players for 39 years and has been working in theater for 45 years, with credits spanning television, radio, film and more than 200 stage productions. In addition to his work in community theater, he works for Disney during the day.

"This show asks big questions and doesn't offer easy answers," said Pazo. "It's intense, emotional and deeply human. I'm incredibly grateful to this cast and crew for their endless hard work, dedication and trust in telling this story."

Jesus Christ Superstar features a dynamic cast, powerful vocals and choreography that drives the story with urgency and emotional weight. This production continues The Village Players' tradition of presenting ambitious, high-quality musical theater while spotlighting local talent.

Performance dates:

• Evening performances, 8 p.m.: Friday and Saturday, February 13-14, 20-21 and 27-28.

• Matinees, 3 p.m.: Thursday, February 15 and 22.

Doors open at least 30 minutes before curtain time.

General admission tickets cost $23, and tickets for seniors, students and military cost $20. Tickets are available now at https://thevillageplayersvalrico.com/. Advance purchase is recommended, as performances are expected to sell out.

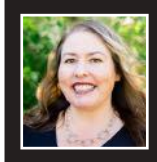
About The Village Players

The Village Players is a nonprofit, all-volunteer teaching theater performing at the James McCabe Theater, located at 506 N. 5th St. in Valrico. Dedicated to making theater accessible and affordable, The Village Players focuses on developing local talent of all ages while fostering a welcoming, creative community.

Bold, emotional and unforgettable, Jesus Christ Superstar is a theatrical experience that stays with you long after the final note. This is a production you won't want to miss.



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HILLSBOROUGH CO. SCHOOLS:
STAYING FOCUSED ON STUDENT SUCCESS

By Superintendent Van Ayres



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

As we begin a new semester and a new year, I'm reminded of what makes Hillsborough County Public Schools strong: the determination of our students, the unwavering dedication of our employees and a community that believes every child deserves an exceptional education.

Across the nation, public education is transforming to open doors to new opportunities for today's students and tomorrow's leaders. Here in Hillsborough County, we see this moment as a chance to innovate, grow and strengthen what we do best, empowering every student to succeed. Through every change, one thing remains unwavering: our commitment to keeping students at the center of all we do.

When I visit campuses, I see so much to be excited about. Classrooms buzzing with creativity. Labs full of handson learning. Career training spaces where students are gaining realworld skills and earning industry credentials. Everywhere I go, students are pushing themselves, lifting one another up and discovering talents they didn't even know they had. And behind them are the incredible teachers, principals and staff who encourage, inspire and support them every single day.

In this school district, we stay grounded in what matters: great instruction, welcoming schools and the supports students need to thrive. We're committed to high expectations and to creating pathways that prepare students for bright futures — whether that's college, a career or military service.

And we're not alone in doing this work. Families, volunteers, mentors, business partners and neighbors across Hillsborough County are stepping up to help students succeed. Their energy and generosity make our schools stronger, and we're grateful for every bit of support they give.

As we look ahead to the new year, I want to thank every student, family and employee for the hard work and heart you have brought to this school year. Together, we will continue moving forward — focused, determined and united around what matters most: student success.

On behalf of Hillsborough County Public Schools, I wish you a happy, healthy and successful new year.

To learn more about the programs, resources and pathways we offer all students, visit www.hillsboroughschools.org.

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LOCAL CENTENARIAN SHARES WISDOM, TRAVEL STORIES AND GRATITUDE FOR LIFE

By Olivia Clark

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her advice for younger generations is straightforward.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Staff Report

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



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

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

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

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

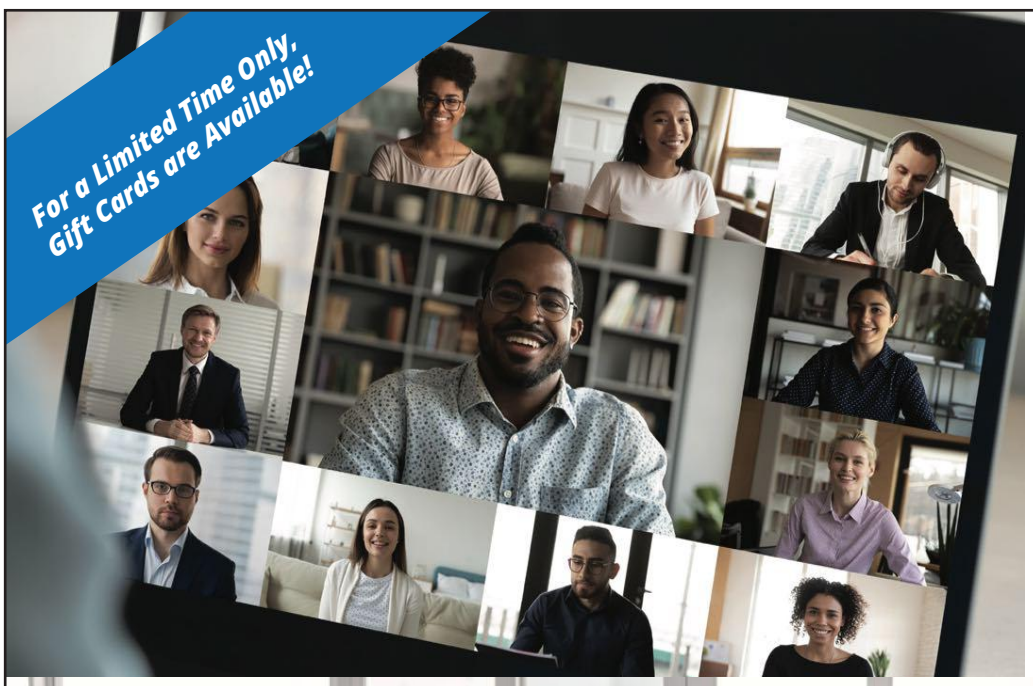
In addition to the magical programming, the event features more than two acres of attractions, including a 300-animal petting zoo and farm animal experience. Visitors can explore a 17,000-square-foot maze; slide down a 40-foot, second-story hay chute; jump into a corn pit; or play inside Fort Merlin, a 2,000-square-foot kids fort.

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

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

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

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





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EARLY EXPLORERS PRESCHOOL ENTERS NEW CHAPTER UNDER NEW OWNERSHIP IN VALRICO

By Logan Walz



Early Explorers Preschool in Valrico is entering a new phase of growth and enhancement under its new ownership. The school is focused on strengthening its classroom quality and creating an improved educational experience for both students and families.

Early Explorers offers full-time care and early learning programs for children ages 6 weeks through 5 years, including infants, toddlers, preschool and VPK. The preschool provides free VPK and accepts School Readiness, expanding access for local families. In addition to early childhood programs, the school offers before and after-school care, as well as break camps for school-age children. Its before and after-school program currently serves Valrico, Buckhorn and Brooker elementary schools.

Located in a quiet and safe residential neighborhood at 1520 Brentwood Hills Blvd. in Valrico, Early Explorers provides a comfortable and welcoming setting for young learners. The preschool's staff is composed of experienced teachers and caregivers who have spent many years supporting early childhood development. Early Explorers is also enrolled in the Child Care Food Program and the Hillsborough Infant & Toddler Initiative, reflecting its commitment to high-quality nutrition and developmental support.

Under its new ownership, the school's primary goal is to elevate its quality across every area of operation. This includes enhanced classroom environments, strengthened instructional practices and an increased focus on family engagement and student success. The preschool aims to continue building a positive and consistent learning atmosphere where children can grow academically, socially and emotionally.

Early Explorers is currently accepting new students. Families are welcome to schedule a tour to learn more about the programs, meet the staff and see the classrooms firsthand.

For more information or to set up an appointment, call 813-684-1622.

CUSTOMIZED, FULL-SERVICE SOLUTIONS AT ONLINE PRINT SMART

By McKenzie Brown



Jack Perry, founder of Online Print Smart.

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

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

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

Founded by Jack Parry, Online Print Smart is backed by more than 38 years of print industry experience. Jack established the company with the goal of guiding small and mid-sized businesses through the complexities of print, delivering reliable results, cost-effective solutions and exceptional service. His commitment to client success has resulted in a strong base of long-term, returning customers. Jack's slogan, "If you're not happy with your current printer, then you don't know Jack," proves itself true time and time again.

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

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

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FROM VALRICO ROOTS TO TRUSTED POOL CARE: SWEERS POOL SERVICE DELIVERS QUALITY & DEPENDABILITY

By McKenzie Brown

Sweers Pool Service is a locally owned business dedicated to keeping pools safe, clean, and enjoyable for families throughout Hillsborough County. Founded by Valrico native Alan Sweers, the company is built on the belief that every pool is different—and deserves individualized care based on its specific needs.



Sweers Pool Service owner Alan Sweers

Serving communities including Lithia, Valrico, Brandon, Riverview, Bloomingdale, and FishHawk, Sweers Pool Service offers reliable weekday service with a strong focus on water safety, consistency, and customer education. Sweers and his team work closely with pool owners to help them understand proper pool care, ensuring long-term health of both the pool and the people who use it.

Sweers Pool Service provides a full range of professional maintenance services, including comprehensive water testing to balance pH, chlorine, and alkalinity levels. Regular skimming and vacuuming remove surface debris and clean the pool floor, while brushing walls and steps helps prevent algae buildup and keeps pools looking their best. The team also cleans and inspects filters to maintain optimal circulation, along with routine equipment inspections of pumps and heaters to ensure everything runs efficiently.

Sweers' passion for pool care started early. He began cleaning pools in his early 20s, working in the industry for five years. Pool service was his first job, and it laid the foundation for a strong work ethic and hands-on expertise. After later working as a bartender and server, Alan found himself at a crossroads during the 2020 shutdowns. Looking for a new direction, he returned to what he knew best—pool service—with a renewed purpose.

Determined to serve his community, Sweers attended "pool school," earned his certification as a Certified Pool Operator, and officially launched Sweers Pool Service in 2021. Today, his business continues to grow, driven by experience, integrity, and a genuine commitment to quality service. Sweers likes to go by the slogan, "I'm not the cheapest, I'm not the most expensive, but I am the best."

For dependable, knowledgeable pool care, Sweers Pool Service stands by its promise to deliver the best—every pool, every visit. They serve Hillsborough County, Florida with weekday service available. To schedule an appointment, call 813-293-6236 or email them at sweerspoolservice@gmail.com.

LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL: MARDI GRAS 2026 SET FOR BUSCH GARDENS TAMPA BAY

Staff Report

Busch Gardens Tampa Bay will once again transform into a slice of New Orleans as its popular Mardi Gras celebration returns in 2026, running on select dates from January 24 through March 1.



Included with regular park admission, the seasonal event invites guests to let the good times roll with Cajun-inspired cuisine, festive parades, live music and family-friendly entertainment woven throughout the park. The celebration is part of Busch Gardens' broader 2026 lineup of special events, offering visitors another reason to plan a winter or early spring visit.

Food takes center stage during Mardi Gras, with themed culinary offerings inspired by the flavors of the French Quarter. Guests can enjoy classic favorites such as Po' Boys, Étouffée and King Cake Beignets, along with specialty cocktails crafted exclusively for the event. Food and beverage sampler lanyards are typically available for purchase, allowing visitors to sample multiple dishes and drinks throughout the day.

Entertainment adds to the festive atmosphere, featuring Mardi Gras-style parades with colorful floats, lively characters and strings of beads tossed to cheering crowds. Live bands and musicians perform throughout the event dates, bringing authentic sounds that capture the spirit of the celebration.

Families visiting during the early weeks of the festival can also take advantage of Kids' Weekends, scheduled from January 24 through February 8. These weekends include additional family-focused activities and appearances by popular Sesame Street characters, making the event accessible and engaging for guests of all ages.

Busch Gardens encourages visitors to check the park's official website as the event approaches to confirm specific dates, hours and entertainment schedules, as offerings may vary by day.

Beyond Mardi Gras, Busch Gardens Tampa Bay continues to stand out as one of Florida's premier theme parks, combining world-class thrill rides, award-winning roller coasters and one of North America's largest zoos, home to more than 200 animal species. From adrenaline-pumping attractions like Iron Gwazi and Cheetah Hunt® to immersive animal encounters and seasonal favorites such as Howl-O-Scream® and Christmas Town™, the park offers something new with every visit.

With food, music and celebration included with admission, Mardi Gras 2026 promises to be a highlight of the season at Busch Gardens Tampa Bay.

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BUCHANAN HONORS 19 VETERANS WITH CONGRESSIONAL COMMENDATION

Staff Report



In December, Congressman Vern Buchanan announced the honorees of the 3rd Annual Congressional Veteran Commendation ceremony. Buchanan established the awards to honor the wartime sacrifices and peacetime community involvement of veterans residing in Florida's 16th Congressional District which is home to more than 64,000 Veterans.

"I established these awards to recognize our local heroes who have valiantly served both our country in uniform and our community," said Buchanan. "While we will never be able to fully repay the honorees for their selfless sacrifices, I hope the Congressional Veteran Commendation helps express how grateful our community truly is for their service."

Buchanan has a strong record of fighting for veterans and military families. In December 2021, a Buchanan measure to reduce military training accidents following the death of Bradenton soldier Nicolas Panipinto was enacted into law. In February 2025, Buchanan introduced the Veterans Mental Health Crisis Referral Enhancement Act (H.R. 1290), which directs the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a three-year pilot program to refer veterans experiencing mental health crises to approved non-Veterans Affairs mental health care providers, ensuring timely access to competent care. Buchanan also reintroduced the Veterans Overmedication and Suicide Prevention Act (H.R. 136) this Congress, which requires the VA to study the link between addictive opioids and the alarmingly high rate of suicides among veterans.

An independent panel chose the following 19 veterans for their service:

Nelson Betancourt U.S. Army.
Benny Blackshire U.S. Army-Vietnam
Jeffery Camp U.S. Army & Army National Guard Iraq and Afghanistan Wars
Jack Carter U.S. Marine Corps Vietnam and Gulf Wars
Charles Conover Jr. U.S. Army
Ronald Cousineau U.S. Air Force
Emily Farkas U.S. Air Force Iraq and Afghanistan Wars
Ferris Garrett Jr. U.S. Air Force Vietnam.
William Greer U.S. Air Force
Brian Hammer U.S. Army Iraq and Afghanistan Wars
Nathaniel Hawthorne U.S. Navy Iraq
Roberta Jordan U.S. Army
Robert Lucas II U.S. Army
Danny Melton U.S. Marine Corps
MaryAnn Rowe Michigan Army National Guard Iraq
Richard Steinestel U.S. Navy Vietnam
Roland Tiso Jr. U.S. Army Iraq and Afghanistan Wars
Paul Wheat Jr. U.S. Army Vietnam
Edward Wudarsky Jr. U.S. Army Vietnam

HARTMANN CELEBRATES 60TH WITH FIVE GENERATIONS OF WOMEN AND A LEGACY OF GIVING

By Jane Owen

Osprey Observer advertising representative Melissa Hartmann, who has been part of the Osprey family for nine years, celebrated a milestone this October — her 60th birthday. Clients, friends and loved ones honored her for her dedication, kindness and steadfast friendship.



Five generations: Alice Katherine, 6 months with mother Gabrielle, grandmother Whitney, great-grandmother Melissa and great-great-grandmother Barbara.

One moment stood out above all others: a special breakfast shared by Hartmann, her mom, daughter, granddaughter and great-granddaughter. Few families are blessed with five living generations, and even fewer can gather together at one table. For Hartmann, sitting side by side with five decades of women in her family was a reminder of the strength and continuity that have carried them through so many changes over the years.

The tradition began several years ago when Hartmann's daughter, Whitney Laurion, organized their first multigenerational birthday breakfast. This year held extra meaning — it was baby Alice Katherine's first time joining the circle of women who came before her.

"I always love breakfast with our family, but this one was super special with Alice there," Hartmann said. "She was the perfect angel and was happily passed around to each of us to get some love."

Although life keeps each branch of the family busy — living in different towns, juggling work and responsibilities — they remain devoted to showing up for one another.

"Family is very important to me," Hartmann said. "My family is the kind that is always there for you — whether it's a soccer game or you're in the hospital, we will always show up."

The roots of this closeness run deep. Five-generation photos began in 1985 when Hartmann's grandmother, Barbara Repko, was still living, and the tradition has endured through decades of change, celebrations and challenges. What has never changed is their shared belief that family comes first.

Just as meaningful is the family's shared spirit of giving. Hartmann's mom is a devoted supporter of veterans and shops all year long so children in need can receive Christmas gifts. Hartmann is a board member at Mary & Martha House. Whitney shops for teens at A Kid's Place at Christmas.. And Gabrielle, before welcoming Alice, spent her free time singing for seniors rather than hanging out with friends.

These acts of service reflect a defining thread woven through all five generations — each one carries a giving heart.

The commitment extends to the men in the family as well, including Hartmann's son, Mark, and to every way Hartmann continues to support and uplift the local community.

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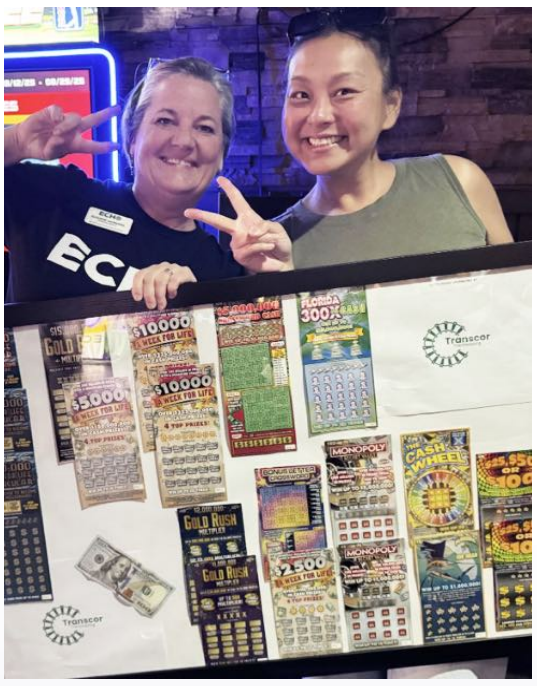
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MUSIC BINGO FUNDRAISER WILL SUPPORT EMERGENCY SUPPORT PROGRAMS THROUGH ECHO

By Lily Belcher



Voodoo Brewing Co. is hosting a music bingo night fundraiser for a good cause: to help ECHO support the community.

On February 10, the Valrico brewery will open its doors to customers, bingo fans and generous community members to help drum up support for the Emergency Care Help Organization, or ECHO.

ECHO, which was founded in 1987, helps neighbors going through food insecurity or those who need clothing or are looking for a new job. The organization is planning to open its third resource center in Thonotosassa at the end of 2026 or early 2027.

Kayla Vincent is the marketing coordinator with ECHO. She said the goal is to raise as much money as possible and get support from the community for the non profit's programs.

"[The money raised] will be distributed between our food, clothing and job coaches for our back to work program," Vincent said. "So it'll get distributed a little bit everywhere."

ECHO's food pantry and clothing rooms service the Brandon and Riverview areas. People who are in a crisis situation can get temporary help from the locations. The one-on-one job coaching is another opportunity for the community to access local resources, including assessing skills, resume help and learning interview skills.

All of ECHO's services are offered to members of the community who are in need for free and the group aims to reach people across Eastern Hillsborough County.

This is the organization's second time hosting a music bingo fundraiser at Voodoo Brewing Co. They had their first music bingo event in November 2025 and hope to host the fundraiser twice a year.

"We have a lot of need in our community and we need to rile the troops and help our neighbors in this time of need," Vincent said.

Music bingo will span across genres and decades and include some live tunes.

Tickets can be bought in advance.

The doors will open at 6 pm for music bingo and the first game will start at 7 pm.

Voodoo Brewing Co. is located off Highway 60 in Valrico. For more information about ECHO or its music bingo fundraiser, call 813-856-7232.

NINETEEN-YEAR-OLD ANDREA ROMINE BEGINS REAL ESTATE CAREER AT KELLER WILLIAMS VALRICO

Staff Report



Andrea Romine, a 19-year-old real estate professional with Keller Williams, is proud to announce the launch of her real estate career in the local market after relocating from Ohio to Florida. New to the area but driven by ambition and a strong support system, Romine is building her business around two core missions: serving as a trusted Ohio-to-Florida relocation connector and inspiring young people to start their real estate careers early — without the need for a traditional four-year degree.

A Dedicated Ohio-to-Florida Relocation Connector

Having personally made the move from Ohio to Florida, Romine understands the emotions, logistics and timing that come with relocating. She is positioning herself as a go-to Ohio-to-Florida moving agent, helping clients seamlessly sell their homes in Ohio and purchase their next home in Florida — or make the move in reverse.

Romine has built strong relationships with a network of trusted referral associates throughout Ohio, allowing her clients to feel confident in knowing their transaction is handled by experienced professionals on both ends. By acting as the central point of contact, she simplifies the process, reduces stress and ensures continuity from start to finish.

"Relocating doesn't have to feel overwhelming," said Romine. "My goal is to be the connector — someone who understands both markets and can guide clients through every step, whether they're heading to Florida or moving back home to Ohio."

Starting Early: A Message to Future Real Estate Professionals

Romine's second focus is encouraging high school students and young adults who are interested in real estate to start now. She is passionate about showing that a successful career in real estate does not require a college or trade school degree — only discipline, strong work ethic and clear goals.

"Real estate is one of the few careers where you can get licensed right after high school and immediately start building your future," Romine said. "If you have big goals later in life, you might as well start now."

Through Keller Williams, Romine has access to industry-leading training, coaching and mentorship, including classroom-style learning and team-based support. She credits Keller Williams for providing the education and guidance that allows new agents — especially young professionals — to grow with confidence and professionalism.

Romaine is with The Ans Group- Keller Williams Suburban Tampa located at 2350 E. SR 60 in Valrico. Visit theansgroup.kw.com or call (740) 974-8837.



RELAY FOR LIFE RETURNS WITH OVERNIGHT TRIBUTE ON MARCH 7

Staff Report



The American Cancer Society (ACS) has announced that the 2026 Relay For Life of Greater Tampa Bay will return to Raymond James Stadium on Saturday, March 7, from 4 p.m. to 5 a.m., continuing one of the region's most meaningful annual traditions. Ultimate Medical Academy (UMA) has been named the presenting sponsor for the overnight event, which brings together survivors, caregivers, families, schools and businesses in the fight against cancer.

Relay For Life is known as a family-centered, community-driven experience that celebrates cancer survivors, honors caregivers, remembers loved ones and rallies the community to fight back against every cancer. Tampa Bay has emerged as a national leader in the movement, finishing third in the nation last year and earning recognition as the 2025 ACS Southeast Region's Relay For Life Event of the Year for its community impact, volunteer engagement and fundraising success.

The 2025 event demonstrated the strength of local support, with 206 teams, 3,265 participants and more than 100 Tampa Bay-area schools taking part. Together, they raised $632,040 to support survivors, families and lifesaving cancer research. Organizers are now building on that momentum for 2026, with 121 teams already registered, more than 1,000 participants committed and more than $150,000 raised toward a $650,000 goal.

"Relay For Life is where Tampa Bay comes together for hope," said Shelly Hollingsworth, Relay For Life of Greater Tampa Bay Executive Ambassador Chair. "It's not just an event - it's families camping out overnight, students showing up in huge numbers, survivors taking a victory lap, caregivers receiving the recognition they deserve, and an entire community lighting the stadium with luminarias for love and remembrance. We're grateful to Ultimate Medical Academy for stepping forward to help elevate this lifesaving movement across Tampa Bay."

The overnight event will once again feature Relay For Life's four signature elements: a Survivor Celebration, Caregiver Celebration, Luminaria Ceremony and the Fight Back Together call to action.

Ultimate Medical Academy, an accredited nonprofit educational institution focused on training healthcare professionals, said its sponsorship reflects a shared commitment to compassion and service. "We are honored to serve as the Presenting Sponsor for the 2026 Relay For Life of Greater Tampa Bay," said April Neumann, EVP of Workforce Transformation at UMA. "Our learners enter the healthcare field to make a difference in people's lives, and Relay represents that same spirit of compassion and service. We're proud to stand with the American Cancer Society and with every family touched by cancer."

Community members are encouraged to participate by forming teams or registering at relayforlife.org/tampabayfl.

KTTB INVITES RESIDENTS TO PROTECT PARKS, ROADS AND WATERWAYS

By Olivia Clark



Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful offers opportunities such as Adopt-A-Road, hosted clean-ups and educational outreach to support local environmental stewardship.

Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful is a Tampa-based nonprofit that has worked since 1989 to reduce litter, improve public spaces and inspire environmental stewardship across Hillsborough County. Founded by community members concerned about pollution and neighborhood cleanliness, the organization promotes a culture of environmental protection through volunteer service and education, offering residents opportunities to make a direct and lasting impact.

Throughout the year, Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful organizes community cleanups and beautification projects across beaches, parks, roadways and waterways. Signature events include the After Gasparilla Cleanup, Great Port Cleanup, Hillsborough River Coastal Cleanup and World Oceans Day activities. In addition to large-scale events, individuals, families and small groups can plan self-led cleanups. Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful assists by coordinating locations, providing free cleanup supplies and managing trash disposal so volunteers can focus on service.

For those interested in a long-term commitment, Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful administers the Adopt-A-Road Program for Hillsborough County and the City of Tampa. The program allows individuals, businesses and community organizations to adopt roadways, parks, beaches or shorelines and maintain them through regular cleanups. Tree and bench dedication options are also available to honor loved ones while contributing to public spaces.

The organization supports greener neighborhoods through tree planting and landscaping initiatives that encourage sustainability and environmental awareness. Its education program offers free presentations and an age-appropriate curriculum for schools, community groups and businesses, covering topics such as litter prevention, conservation and responsible environmental practices. Students can earn service hours by volunteering and may qualify for leadership opportunities, internships and scholarships offered through the organization.

Keep Tampa Bay Beautiful is funded through community support, including individual donations, event sponsorships, partnerships and fundraising efforts. These resources allow the nonprofit to keep programs accessible while ensuring that support remains local and focused on Tampa Bay communities.

Residents interested in volunteering, sponsoring a cleanup or learning more about available programs can visit www.keeptampabaybeautiful.org.

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Systematic investing does not guarantee a profit or protect against loss. Such a strategy involves continual investment in securities regardless of fluctuating price levels of such securities. The investor should consider the financial ability to continue the purchases through periods of low price levels.

HAPPY NEW YEAR



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Music Series At Busch Gardens, Bridge League & More...

Compiled by Jenny Bennett
jbennett@ospreyobserver.com

Real Music Series Returns To Busch Gardens

Get ready to rock through the decades with music's fan-favorite hits! Now through Friday, February 20, Busch Gardens Tampa Bay brings back its longest-running concert series — Real Music — packed with all-new music performances and unforgettable sounds six days a week, Monday through Saturday. Guests can experience an electrifying lineup of acclaimed performers delivering timeless hits from the '70s, '80s and '90s. Best of all, every show is included with park admission, making it the perfect opportunity to sing along, dance in your seat and create lasting memories with family and friends.

This year's Real Music Series features a The 2026 all-new lineup (all Monday tFor more information, park hours and to view showtimes, guests can visit www.buschgardenstampa.com.

Big Trucks. Big Smiles. Big Fun! Touch-A-Truck Is Rolling In!

Join in for Touch-A-Truck on Saturday, January 24, from 1-4 p.m. at St. Andrew's United Methodist Church, located at 3315 S. Bryan Rd. in Brandon. Kids can explore trucks, meet community servicemen and women, play transportation-themed games, create crafts, enjoy hot chocolate, and earn prizes. The event will be fun for the whole family — friends and community welcome.

St. Andrew's is grateful for its community partners for the Touch-A-Truck event: HCA Florida Healthcare, the Hillsborough County Fire Department, Hillsborough County Waste Reduction and Recycling, Coast Guard Auxiliary Unit, Adcock Cranes, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Department and The Green Table on Tour food truck. For more, visit its website at www.saumc.net.

Learn To Play Bridge

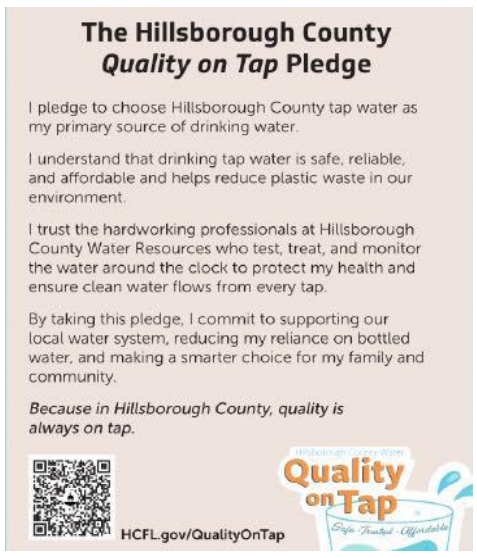
The Duplicate Bridge Association of Sun City Center is proud to announce that Kathy Smith, a Life Master bridge player and an American Contract Bridge League (ACBL) game director, is offering a series of classes of duplicate bridge for beginners, dubbed Easybridge. Classes are scheduled for Thursday, January 29, from 1-4 p.m. for 15 consecutive weeks in the Horizon Room in the Atrium Building, located at 947 N. Course Lane in Sun City Center. The first four weeks are complementary. The remaining classes are $4 for Sun City Center residents and $5 for non-SCC applicants. The classes are structured for a supportive and friendly environment. Sample dealer hands will be available to apply lessons learned.

Registration is taken at kathjosmith@gmail.com.

COUNTY CAMPAIGN HIGHLIGHTS SAFETY OF COUNTY DRINKING WATER

By Brian Bokor

Hillsborough County Water Resources is encouraging residents to learn more about their local drinking water through its ongoing 'Quality on Tap' public awareness effort, which spotlights the science and infrastructure behind every gallon delivered to homes across the county.



Each day, the department provides more than 73 million gallons of drinking water to over 725,000 residents in unincorporated Hillsborough County. All water is treated and monitored to meet or exceed state and federal standards, with extensive year-round testing to ensure safety and reliability.

In 2024, county staff collected more than 7,600 water samples and conducted over 33,500 laboratory tests, with thousands more performed by the county's certified environmental laboratory as part of ongoing quality control. According to the department, tap water remains one of the most affordable options for residents at approximately $4.10 per 1,000 gallons, a fraction of the cost of bottled water and a more environmentally responsible choice.

Hillsborough County Water Resources operates four water treatment plants, five wastewater treatment plants, a bio-solids facility and multiple field support locations. Trained water professionals oversee the system 24 hours a day, maintaining infrastructure, protecting public health and supporting long-term water reliability for a fast-growing region.

While Tampa Bay Water serves as the regional wholesale supplier for Hillsborough, Pinellas, and Pasco counties, Hillsborough County Water Resources is responsible for treating, testing and delivering drinking water directly to residents. Tampa Bay Water is also advancing a major Southern Hillsborough County pipeline expansion that will move up to 65 million gallons of drinking water per day to support projected population growth. Construction activity related to this regional project is already creating local traffic impacts and is expected to continue through its anticipated completion in 2028.

Most *Osprey Observer* readers are served by the county's south-central community public water system, which covers large portions of Central and Southeastern unincorporated Hillsborough County, including Brandon, Riverview, Apollo Beach and surrounding communities.

The county operates 11 community public water systems, each with its own annual water quality report. The 2024 reports, published in 2025, are the most current and include testing results and information required by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which mandates monitoring for more than 80 regulated contaminants. Residents can identify their specific water system using the lookup tool on the county's website. Printed reports may be requested by calling 813-246-3146.

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BUCHANAN ANNOUNCES 2025 FIRE AND RESCUE/EMS AWARD WINNERS

Staff Report





Sun City Center Emergency Squad received the Dedication and Professionalism Award

Congressman Vern Buchanan announced the recipients of the 16th Congressional District Fire and Rescue and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Awards. Buchanan established the awards to give special recognition to fire and rescue and EMS personnel who have provided distinguished service to his constituents in 2025.

"As first responders, fire departments and EMS teams are summoned on short notice to serve their communities," said Buchanan.

"Oftentimes, they arrive at scenes of great adversity and trauma, to which they reliably bring strength and composure. I believe these awards are a fitting tribute to our first responders and a reminder of the important role they play in our communities."

This year's award recipients were selected by an independent committee comprised of a cross section of current and retired fire and rescue personnel living in the district.

Buchanan presented awards to the following Hillsborough County fire and rescue and EMS personnel:

Dedication and Professionalism Award: Hillsborough County Fire Rescue: Company Fire Captain Ralph Mascaro Sun City Center Emergency Squad

Preservation of Life Award: Hillsborough County Fire Rescue: Firefighter/Paramedic Jacob Campbell, Fire Captain Clifford Davis, Firefighter/Paramedic Anna Inman, and Firefighter Maurice Swan

Unit Citation: Tampa General Hospital Aeromed: Pilot Stu O'Shannon, Flight Nurse Alisha Burnett, Flight Paramedic Chuck Nelson, Flight Paramedic Orientee Luis Vazquez, Pilot Mark Boudreau, Flight Nurse Rob Freas, and Flight Paramedic Kelly Curren

Career Service Award: Hillsborough County Fire Rescue: Battalion Chief Jeff Martin

In total, 125 Area First Responders and 4 Civilians Recognized for Distinguished Service. Visit https://buchanan.house.gov/.

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ATX AUCTIONS TAMPA BRINGS BRAND-NAME BARGAINS TO LOCAL DISCOUNT SHOPPERS

By Olivia Clark

What started as a creative way to furnish an apartment on a tight budget has grown into a local business helping Tampa Bay residents score brand-name merchandise at a fraction of the price.



Hannah Berry is a co-owner of ATX Auctions Tampa, which opened in January 2023.

ATX Auctions Tampa, located at 5401 E. Henry Ave., Unit B, in Tampa, offers weekly online auctions featuring box-damaged merchandise from major retailers, such as Amazon and Costco. Each auction begins at $5 and runs entirely online, with items available for local pickup only.

"We were customers ourselves before becoming owners," said Hannah Berry, co-owner of ATX Auctions Tampa. "We furnished our apartment on a low budget, and it was a fun way to shop."

The Tampa location opened in January 2023 after Berry and co-owner Justys Keckler decided to relocate from Utah and open a business of their own. With no prior ties to the area, they moved to Tampa to launch the operation.

"ATX Corporate told us we could pick a spot, and they would put us there," Berry said. "We sold everything, made the three day trip and lived in the warehouse for the first couple of months while we got things going."

Keckler's brothers are also involved in running the Tampa operation, helping manage day-to-day responsibilities as the business continues to grow.

ATX Auctions Tampa features a rotating inventory of household goods, furniture, bedding and home decor. Many items are brand-new, with the only issue being damaged packaging.

"The only thing wrong with most items is the condition of the box," Berry said. "It may have been dinged by a forklift, or the packaging isn't pretty anymore, so customers won't pay full price. That's where we come in."

Each item is inspected before being listed online, with condition details clearly shown in listing photos. Berry said transparency and customer trust are central to the business model.

"If something isn't listed correctly and we made a mistake, we will make it right," Berry said.

ATX Auctions Tampa does not offer shipping, a choice Berry said helps the business maintain its local focus.

"We wanted to give back to the community that has given us this business," Berry said. "The face-to-face interactions remind us what's important."

For more information, visit www.atx-auctionstampa.com or follow ATX Auctions Tampa on Facebook.

MEDED SENIOR SOLUTIONS HELPS PEOPLE GET THE BEST COVERAGE PLAN FOR THEM

By Lily Belcher

Understanding Medicare can be difficult for seniors, especially when they have expectations for what will or won't be covered.

Elaine Johnson is helping people figure out how to get the most out of their Medicare coverage through MedEd Senior Solutions.

"We help seniors navigate through the trenches of Medicare and select the best plan that will work for them," Elaine said.



Elaine and J Johnson are helping seniors understand their options for Medicare through MedEd Senior Solutions.

Elaine worked as a registered nurse and is now focusing on advocating for seniors after working with a major insurance company for years. Her husband, J. Johnson, is a certified financial planner and has had several clients asking for help with this. And from them, MedEd Senior Solutions was born.

Elaine is helping clients on the front end pick out the right plan for them and find health care that isn't going to break the bank.

Education is at the heart of helping seniors figure out what plan meets both their medical needs and their budget constraints, protecting their health and their wealth.

"It was just hearing what the frustrations were with so many people," Elaine said. "People are coming into Medicare thinking, 'I paid in and there's no other costs here.' And we're totally disillusioned that we have to pay for this and I have a copay for this."

MedEd Senior Solutions takes the confusion out of using Medicare before and during its coverage, especially with specific health care needs that seniors face.

"I can see, as being a very seasoned nurse, ways that I could direct them into a plan that could address these chronic health care needs," she said.

While there is a lot to navigate, MedEd Senior Solutions brings extensive experience in navigating and breaking down the maze of Medicare.

Before talking with MedEd Senior Solutions, Elaine said all clients need to be prepared to do is have an honest conversation about their needs.

MedEd Senior Solutions is an organization within Johnson Brothers & Kurios Inc., which is owned by J.

For more information on MedEd Senior Solutions and how it can help you, visit www.mededseniorsolutions.com or call 813-450-6473.

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2025 Year In Review



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#1

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9,880+ Sky Miles

Four national training trips this year — because growth never stops.
Pictured with author Phil M. Jones

1,000s of Candy

Trunk or Treat event! We loved celebrating with our community and hope you'll join us again next year for all the fun.



1 RED DAY

Every year in May, our team steps away from real estate and steps into service. This year's RED Day brought us to Feeding Tampa Bay—a mission especially meaningful to our team.



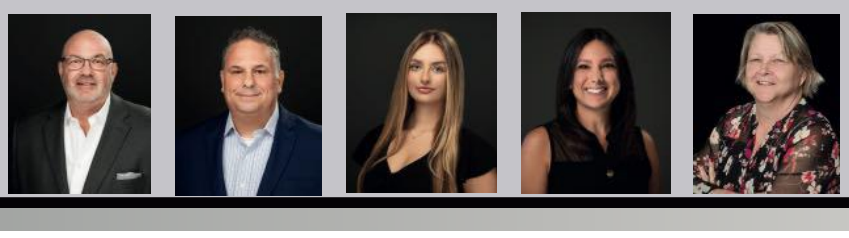
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Year In Review – Updates On Our Top Stories From 2025

TAMPA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT BREAKS GROUND ON AIRSIDE D

Staff Report



Photos courtesy of Tampa International Airport.



"The design of Airside D is currently being finalized and is soon expected to go to the Hillsborough County Aviation Authority Board of Directors for approval," stated Josh Gillin, C.M., senior manager of communications at Tampa International Airport. "Site preparation is ongoing, with drainage systems and foundation work being done now. Further enabling work like a contractor complex, secure fencing and access road construction has been completed or is near completion. Structural steel is scheduled to start to go vertical this summer."

Original Story Printed In January 2025.

Tampa International Airport (TPA) officials joined business and community leaders on December 18, 2024, to officially break ground on Airside D, the first new Airside terminal at TPA in nearly 20 years.

With flags marking the enormous space the future terminal will fill on TPA's airfield, guests at the momentous event were able to envision Airside D, which will accommodate the region's rapid growth and anticipated increase in passengers and flights.

"This state-of-the-art Airside will help us continue our tradition of staying ahead of trends by adding 16 gates for both domestic and international flights at TPA," Tampa International Airport CEO Joe Lopano said. "It will also feature the latest technology for our passengers when it opens in 2028. We're going to do it the Tampa way."

Lopano was joined by several key officials involved with the project, including Florida Department of Transportation Secretary Jared Perdue; Tampa Mayor and Hillsborough County Aviation Authority (HCAA) board member Jane Castor; TPA Executive Vice President of Planning & Development and Maintenance Smitha Radhakrishnan; and Hensel Phelps Regional Vice President for the Southeast Justin Starnes.

The new Airside D will feature two levels plus a mezzanine for two airline lounges, a bright and spacious international passenger arrival processing area on the first floor, glass boarding bridges to allow views of the airfield for travelers and new shopping and dining locations.

The facility is a centerpiece project of phase three of TPA's master plan, a blueprint for how the airport will deal with projected traveler growth. The Airside will help TPA, which currently serves an estimated 25 million passengers annually, serve up to 35 million annual passengers by 2037.

For more information, visit www.tampaairport.com/business/airside-d.

COUNTY-SUPPORTED PROJECT BUILDS HOMES WITH 3D PRINTING

By Brad Stager



This empty stretch of land in the East Lake-Orient Park community will have 18 affordable homes built on it, with four of them using 3D-printing methods.

Achieving the goal of providing more affordable housing options to Hillsborough County residents got a boost in October 2025 when representatives from the county, construction industry and the Corporation to Develop Communities of Tampa Inc. (CDC of Tampa) broke ground on a new 18-home community that will include four that feature 3D printing construction methods.

"We will start the printing in a couple of weeks on the first home at 4426 Lurline Cir.," said Will Crawford, CDC's acquisitions and special projects manager, in an early January email.

Original Story Printed In October 2025.

The dream of homeownership met the concrete reality of technological progress at a groundbreaking ceremony for the construction of a neighborhood of 18 affordable homes, with four of them being built with the help of a cutting-edge 3D printer.

The groundwork for the construction was laid by the Corporation to Develop Communities of Tampa (CDC of Tampa's), a local nonprofit promoting affordable housing, among other initiatives. The CDC used a $500,000 grant from Hillsborough County to purchase a 3D printer that can construct walls of a house, followed by a $2.4 million grant from the county for construction of the neighborhood's homes, located just north of Sligh Avenue in the East Lake-Orient Park community.

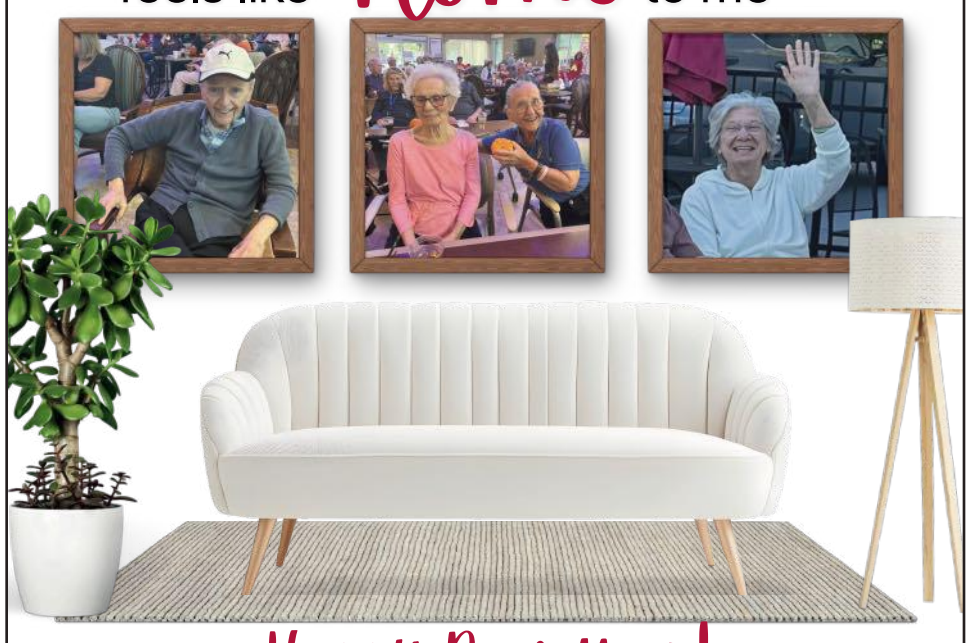
Replacing the sounds of hammer-on-nail banging with the soft hum and hiss of mechanical machinery and using a digital blueprint, a large, robotic 3D printer precisely extrudes a concrete mixture layer by layer. This automated process forms a house's walls, with the printer's computer-controlled movements ensuring the material is deposited according to the architectural design. According to proponents, this method significantly accelerates construction compared to traditional techniques, resulting in savings that can benefit homebuyers. Building with 3D-printing technology is also touted as more storm-resistant and energy-efficient.

The homes CDC of Tampa is building are 1,200-square-foot houses that will feature three bedrooms and two bathrooms and offer a genuine opportunity for families earning 80 percent or less of the area's median income who yearn for a roof of their own over their heads. According to U.S. Federal Reserve data, the median income for Hillsborough County is pegged at $76,528 in the latest estimate, released last year.

Besides the CDC project, a commercial builder, Click Print Home 3D Home Printing Company (CPH3D), is also using 3D technology to build homes in the Tampa Bay area.



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Year In Review – Updates On Our Top Stories From 2025

IMPORTANT PUBLIC MEETINGS COMING FOR SOUTH COUNTY PIPELINE PROJECT

By Brian Bokor





According to Brandon Moore, APR, public communications manager at Tampa Bay Water:

Construction for the South Hillsborough Pipeline started at FishHawk Creek and at the intersection of Kings and Bloomingdale avenues.

Construction will ramp up in 2026 and occur simultaneously in multiple locations over the next three years for the pipeline in service by 2028.

Seventeen tunneling locations will minimize traffic impacts, reduce utility conflicts and reduce environmental impacts.

Residents can receive project updates, by signing up for the email list at https://southhillsboroughpipeline.com/.

Original Story Printed In February 2025.

To meet long-term water needs, Tampa Bay Water is building a new South Hillsborough Pipeline that will deliver up to 65 million gallons per day of additional drinking water to the rapidly growing southern Hillsborough County service area.

The 26-mile pipeline will include pipes up to 60 inches in diameter and carries a total project cost of $505.7 million, with up to $84 million funded by Hillsborough County. Construction is expected to begin as early as fall 2025, with completion anticipated in spring 2029. The pipeline is expected to be placed into service by late 2028.

The pipeline will begin at Tampa Bay Water's Tampa Bay Regional Surface Water Treatment Plant in Brandon, connect to Hillsborough County's Lithia Water Treatment Plant, and end at the county's new connection point at Balm Riverview and Balm roads. Once completed, it will provide system redundancy between the Brandon and Lithia water treatment plants.

Tampa Bay Water is hosting several community meetings along the pipeline route to share information and answer questions. Residents are encouraged to review the project map and attend the meeting closest to their home or business. Those living along the route will receive invitation postcards indicating which meeting to attend.

Each meeting will begin at 6:30 p.m. with an open house featuring maps and informational displays, followed by a formal presentation at 7 p.m. and a question-and-answer session.

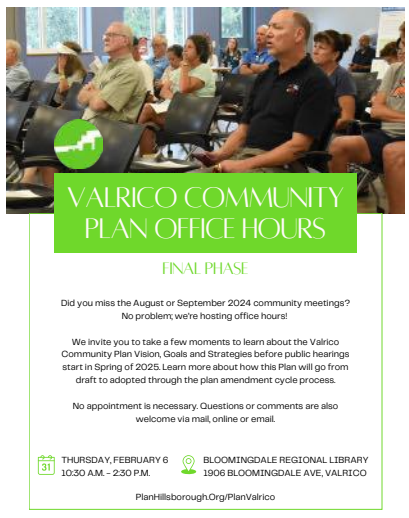
Engineering consultants evaluated 10 possible routes using 13 selection criteria, including public inconvenience, safety, environmental impacts, permitting and cost, narrowing the options to three preferred routes.

Sam Flowers, construction manager of Garney Construction, said, "To expedite the project, crews are working Monday through Saturday, 7 a.m.-5 p.m.

Some night work is planned to reduce impacts on local businesses, with rolling three-block street closures used during construction.

VALRICO COMMUNITY PLAN READY TO PRESENT

By Marie Gilmore



In 2025, the Valrico Community Plan went before the Planning Commission on April 14 and the board of county commissioners on August 14 and then November 13, on which the plan was adopted by the board. The effective date of the language is January 1, 2026, and will be posted on the Plan Hillsborough website shortly following.

The project website (https://planhillsborough.org/planvalrico/) has highlighted the draft community plan, nonadopted background report and concept map documents. The "plan amendment" button will take you to a folder with all the information for the Valrico plan amendment. Public hearing videos are at the bottom of the webpage.

The project page will be updated with the final documents following the effective date of the community plan. Please check back early January for updated information.

Original Story Printed In February 2025.

County planners have been working with community members, advocates and homeowners association boards to create the Valrico Community Plan. In March 2023, the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners requested staff initiate the process to develop the plan.

A community plan is an extension and refinement of the county's comprehensive plan. While the comprehensive plan provides broad, countywide guidance, a community plan is more detailed and focuses on specific issues raised by local stakeholders. The Valrico Community Plan is being developed through a process that involves the community at each phase and highlights the area's special and unique characteristics.

The scope of the study includes creating a community-wide vision, establishing community goals, developing strategies to achieve those goals and producing a community concept map.

Valrico by the numbers shows the importance of the effort. In 2022, Valrico was home to approximately 50,000 residents, 18,000 residences and 2,000 jobs. Thirty-one percent of the population is between the ages of 45 and 64.

The study will result in the Valrico Community Plan, which will be presented to the Board of County Commissioners for consideration. Adoption of the plan could lead to amendments to the Hillsborough County Comprehensive Plan and/or the Land Development Code, though any final policy changes remain at the discretion of the board.

Plan manager Jay Collins added, "The Valrico Community Plan will only be part of the Unincorporated Hillsborough County Comprehensive Plan. The Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) did not direct staff to work on the Land Development Code. If adopted by the BOCC, the Valrico Community Plan will be the 23rd adopted Community Plan in Unincorporated Hillsborough County.

VFor maps and information, visit https://planhillsborough.org/planvalrico/



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HABITAT BRING AFFORDABLES, HURRICANE-HARDENED HOMES TO BRANDON IN 2026

Staff Report

Original Story Published August 2025



In Hillsborough County's eastern suburbs, a new 23-home community called Windhorst Commons is quickly rising to serve families struggling to find safe, affordable housing.

Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough is on target to complete the new neighborhood of hurricane-strengthened homes — concrete block construction with storm-resistant shutters and roofs — by the end of 2026. All 11 homes currently in phase one are expected to be finished by June.

In December 2025, Florida Lt. Gov. Jay Collins toured the subdivision at 205 W. Windhorst Rd. in Brandon and visited the future home of U.S. Army veteran Brian Nakamura to highlight the urgent need for affordable and resilient housing across the state for working families and veterans.

"As a veteran, I understand how critical stable housing is to a family's success," said Collins. "Communities like Windhorst Commons show what's possible when we invest in resilient construction and partners like Habitat for Humanity who honor service members and help families stay safe, housed and prepared for the future."

Windhorst Commons will also include homes for eight families in the planned Pope Leo Village, a new multicity initiative sponsored and inspired by an anonymous donor committed to Pope Leo's vision and commitment to serve others. The goal is to inspire and activate young people and people of any faith to volunteer and financially support the work of Habitat for Humanity.

"Building high-quality, affordable housing provides an exciting opportunity for us all, with a special appeal to young adults, to put Faith into Action with the Pope Leo Village initiative," said the anonymous donor. "As Pope Leo has said, 'In that service to others we may find that coming together in friendship, building up community, we, too, can find true meaning in our lives.'"

To make gifts go even further, the anonymous donor will match all donations up to $100,000 toward building the Pope Leo Village.

Also, as its class project this year, Leadership Tampa will help design and build the Windhorst Commons Park, a neighborhood green space that will serve as a community gathering area.

"We want this neighborhood to address issues that so many working families struggle with — housing that's affordable and also disaster resilient," said Habitat for Humanity of Tampa Bay Hillsborough CEO Tina Forcier.

TEE UP FOR A CAUSE: JOIN THE KITTEN CLASSIC GOLF TOURNAMENT TO SUPPORT LOCAL ANIMAL RESCUE

Staff Report



The Kitten Classic Golf Tournament held last year raised a little over $17,000, with 18 teams of four players participating, stated A Kitten Place. To date, A Kitten Place has now helped save almost 2,800 cats and kittens so far, up nearly 300 since May 2025.

Original Story Printed In April 2025.

Looking for a way to enjoy a day on the green and make a difference in your community? The inaugural Kitten Classic Golf Tournament on Friday, May 23, at Bloomingdale Golfers Club is the perfect opportunity. Not only will you enjoy a fun-filled day of golf, but you'll also be supporting A Kitten Place, a local animal rescue organization dedicated to saving homeless cats and kittens in need.

Location: Bloomingdale Golfers Club at 4113 Great Golfers Place in Valrico.

Whether you're a seasoned golfer or a weekend enthusiast, this event is the perfect way to enjoy a round of golf while giving back. Gather your friends and family, form a team and get ready to support a great cause.

A Kitten Place is a completely volunteer-based organization dedicated to rescuing orphaned kittens and homeless cats from our local communities. Co-founded by Michelle Bass and Alicia Pollock, the nonprofit provides essential care for vulnerable kittens, offering food, shelter and veterinary treatment until they're ready to be adopted into loving homes.

"We take the kittens into our homes, provide veterinary care and oftentimes critical care, food, shelter and socialization until the kittens reach an adoptable age," described Bass. "Once the kittens are vetted and sterilized, we find suitable homes for them either through social media postings or through in-person adoption events."

To date, the organization has rescued more than 2,500 cats and kittens, thanks to the efforts of its passionate volunteers. Your participation in the Kitten Classic will directly help fund its ongoing rescue work.

For more details or to register, please visit https://akittenplace.org/ or contact akpgolf@gmail.com.

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Year In Review – Updates On Our Top Stories From 2025

NEW HOPE CHURCH PARTNERS WITH SLEEP IN HEAVENLY PEACE FOR BED BUILD

By Libby Hopkins



New Hope Church of Brandon has partnered with the nonprofit Sleep in Heavenly Peace to help build t20-25 bunk beds for Bunks Across America.

New Hope Church had enough lumber to build the parts for 46 beds for Bunks Across America, with over 100 volunteers helping out.

"We are so grateful to the area Sleep in Heavenly Peace coordinators, Amanda and Max Glynn, as well as their seasoned volunteers who kept us organized and safe," said Alan Howe, missions director at New Hope. "Those beds were given out over the next couple of months in several bed delivery days. All glory goes to God. We plan on having another Bed Build later in 2026. The need for beds continues and we challenge other churches, organizations and businesses to sponsor throughout the year."

Original Story Printed In September 2025.

At New Hope Church of Brandon, they believe that God has called them to share the life-transforming love and truth of Jesus through word and deed with those across the street and around the globe. This is fundamental to who they are as a church.

"About three years ago, New Hope had a Mission site in Dover," said New Hope's missions director, Alan Howe. "They did a bed build there and it was a great experience before my time. I was told about a veteran Sleep in Heavenly Peace (SHP) bed builder in the church this past spring. I gave him a call and had a conversation. I was hooked, went on a build with my wife, then later a delivery. It's so much fun, meaningful and a tangible way to help kids and families. I proposed a build to our leaders, contacted the Tampa SHP chapter and we chose the date of September 13, which is Bunks Across America Build Day as well."

SHP is a nonprofit organization that provides twin beds to kids ages 3-17 who need them. To apply, you must live near one of its active chapters, have a suitable living environment and fill out its online form.

Bunks Across America is SHP's flagship annual initiative, which brings together communities nationwide for the largest coordinated bed-building event of its kind. This powerful week of service unites local chapters, volunteers and sponsors in our shared mission to ensure no kid sleeps on the floor in our town.

During Bunks Across America 2024, SHP witnessed the incredible power of community in action. One hundred and seventy-four SHP chapters joined forces with more 12,100 volunteers to build 7,629 beds in a single day, making a tangible difference in the lives of thousands of children across North America.

"We will be building the parts for 20-25 beds," Howe said. "If we get extra sponsorship and donations, we may be able to build more." To get involved, visit https://shpbeds.org/chapter/fl-tampa-bay. The church is located at 213 N. Knights Ave. in Brandon.

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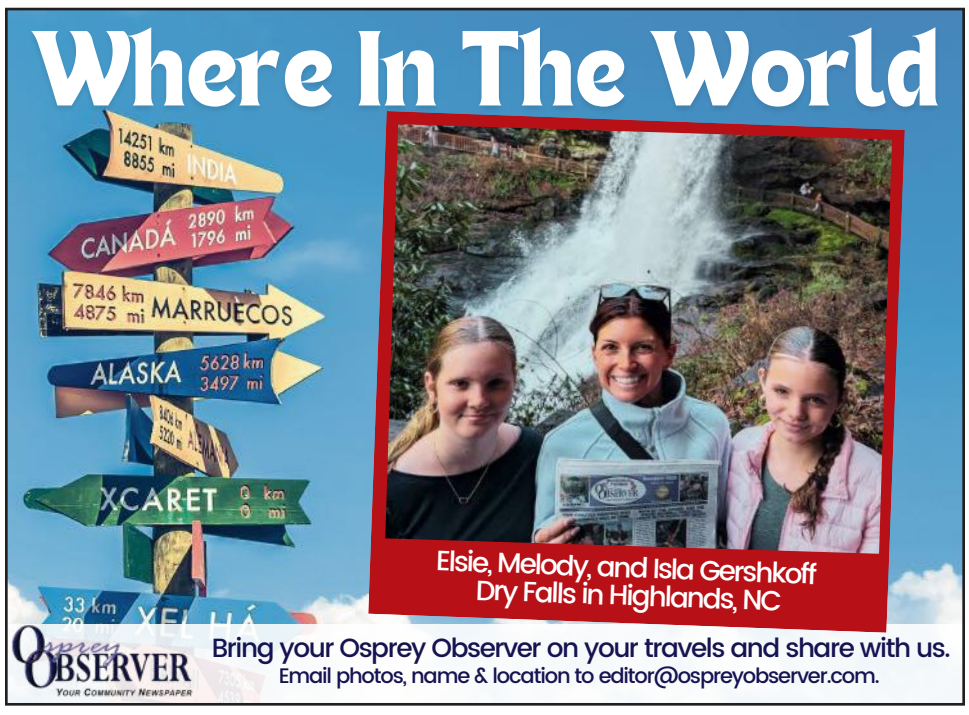
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Where In The World



Elsie, Melody, and Isla Gershkoff
Dry Falls in Highlands, NC

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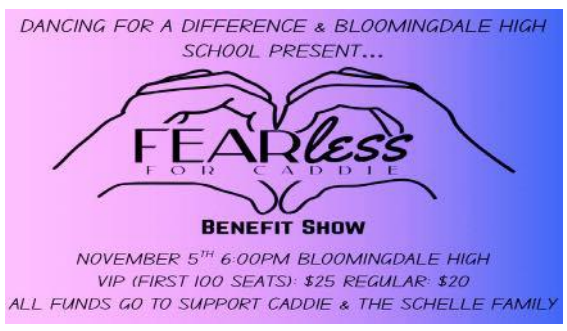
STAND FEARLESS FOR CADDIE!

BLOOMINGDALE AND DANCING FOR A DIFFERENCE HOST BENEFIT SHOW NOV. 5

By Jane Owen



The Fearless for Caddie Benefit Show will be held in the auditorium at Bloomingdale High School, located at 1700 E Bloomingdale Ave. in Valrico, at 6 p.m. For tickets, visit https://dancestudio-pro.com/tickets/d4d or email office@dancing4adifference.com.



Caddie Schelle has been doing great and making amazing progress in her healing, said a coordinator from Fearless for Caddie.

The benefit show raised over $4,000. While a drop in the bucket for the medical bills the Schelle family is facing, it was a huge success.

"It was truly moving. The amount of work Sara effortlessly put into organizing this event was inspiring," said the coordinator.

The family is still in need of much support. Some upcoming events to help include:

Thursday, February 5 — JF Kicks will host Dueling Pianos by That Piano Entertainment.

Thursday, March 26 — Voodoo Brewing will host a benefit concert by Sidney O'Sullivan.

Sunday, April 26 — iSmash will host a private party benefit.

Original Story Printed In October 2025.

On August 12, Bloomingdale High School sophomore Caddie Schelle collapsed at school golf practice. Everyone thought it was likely summer dehydration. She was taken to HCA Florida Brandon Hospital, where it was determined Caddie had suffered a ruptured arteriovenous malformation (AVM), causing a massive brain bleed. She was airlifted to Tampa General Hospital and underwent emergency surgery to remove part of her skull to let her brain expand. The prognosis was not good. In a matter of 24 hours, a strong high school athlete was fighting for her life.

In the days and weeks that followed, Caddie underwent more surgeries. Through it all, her body did more than expected, and the Schelle family was embraced by community support.

Caddie is expected to come home from the hospital on Wednesday, October 15. It is nothing short of a miracle. The road to recovery is not over, however; follow-up physical therapy and hospital visits will be a regular part of the Schelle family routine.

Rob and Kilene Schelle, Caddie's parents, said their family has been blown away by the love they have received from the community.

"It's sounds cliché, but they say that it 'takes a village.' People say that all the time, but you don't really realize the village you've got until something like this happens and it goes into action. We are blessed to be part of this community," Rob said.

On Wednesday, November 5, Dancing for a Difference dance studio and Bloomingdale High School are hosting a benefit to assist the Schelle family with the cost of medical bills. Caddie is a 'Swiftie,' aka a dedicated fan of Taylor Swift. The Fearless for Caddie Benefit Show is a nod to Taylor Swift's Fearless album and Caddie's resilience. Caddie will be there.

Dancing for a Difference Director Sara Battaglia set up the event and is grateful to be able to support Caddie through her studio. The show includes performances from Dancing for a Difference and Bloomingdale Fine Arts students.

The Fearless for Caddie Benefit Show will be held in the auditorium at Bloomingdale High School, located at 1700 E Bloomingdale Ave. in Valrico, at 6 p.m. For tickets, visit https://dancestudio-pro.com/tickets/d4d or email office@dancing4adifference.com.

To follow Caddie's recovery, join the 'Fearless for Caddie: Updates & Support' group on Facebook. To donate to her recovery, visit www.gofundme.com/f/support-caddies-fight-for-recovery.

PARA-ATHLETE HAYDEN COMPTON

WINS 4A STATE CHAMPIONSHIP IN 800M RACE

By Nick Nahas



Hayden Compton hopes to set more personal records, eventually become a Paralympian and earn a college scholarship to play the sport.



Durant High School athlete Hayden Compton won the 4A state championship in the 800m and took second place in the 100m, 200m and 400m.

Hayden Compton competed in the Hartford Nationals from July 12-14, 2025.

"I did very well at nationals and set personal records in three events: the 100, 200 and 400," said Compton. "It was a great experience to meet and compete against adaptive athletes from all over the United States and face strong competition. I plan to continue competing at the high school and national level, then compete in college and ultimately work toward competing in the Paralympics."

Original Story Printed In August 2025.

Durant High School (DHS) athlete Hayden Compton won the 4A state championship in the 800m and took second place in the 100m, 200m and 400m.

"I'm very proud of my performance. I worked all season to earn a personal record, and I went all season without a PR, and I finally did it at states," said Compton.

"Hayden has exemplified what it means to be a champion," said Head Coach Frank Lane. "In only his first year at DHS, he has helped create a culture of hard work, dedication and pride. He has a huge following within our school and even amongst the rival schools. They always cheer and accommodate him during the meets. He has been a huge advocate for wheelchair athletes and promoting the para division in track and field. He's an awesome kid that makes it all worth it."

The sophomore, who also competes in the summer with the Hillsborough County Adaptive Sports program under the Hillsborough County Parks & Recreation Department, has been a big advocate for adaptive sports. He also plays adaptive basketball with the program.

"I really wish more kids had the chance to get involved in adaptive sports in Hillsborough County," said Compton. "There are so many opportunities out there, but most families don't know they exist. I think it would make a big difference if schools helped connect their adaptive athletes to programs in the community."

He is a great student as well with a 4.0 GPA and is a part of student government and sophomore council at Durant.

Compton hopes to set more personal records, eventually become a Paralympian and earn a college scholarship to play the sport. He will compete at nationals in July in Grand Rapids, Michigan. A lot of preparation goes into being ready to compete in a race. Compton trains five days a week, doing weightlifting and endurance training.

"Hayden's work ethic is unlike any other athlete I have seen," said Lane. "He is always the first to practice and focused on his work. He challenges himself with very tough timing on his races. I am very proud of Hayden and extremely excited for his future."







GET THE DIRT:
SPICE UP YOUR HOLIDAYS

BY LYNN BARBER, URBAN HORTICULTURE AGENT







More holidays are upon us. Some favorite spices include rosemary, sage and marjoram.

Rosemary is a fragrant herb that is easy to grow and works well in your landscape and kitchen. It can be used fresh or dried in recipes containing meats, breads and vegetables. Rosemary adds great flavor to a skewer for the barbecue. It's attractive in the landscape and is drought-tolerant, thriving on well-drained soil and at least six hours of sun. Don't water too often — less is better than more.

Sage thrives in full sun and well-drained soil. It is drought-tolerant once established but can't tolerate wet or poorly drained soils, which may lead to root rot. This perennial herb is a low-maintenance plant that can be pruned to maintain shape and encourage bushier growth. Salvia officinalis, or common sage, is used to flavor meats (pork, poultry), stuffings for turkey, sauces and soups. It can be fried until crispy or infused into butter for pasta, potatoes and squash.

Marjoram has a delicate, sweet and slightly piney flavor. Most people use it to enhance poultry, pork, fish and delicate vegetables, like green beans, carrots and squash. This spice compliments tomato sauces, soups and salads. Many people add fresh marjoram at the end of cooking to preserve the subtle flavor.

Contact Lynn Barber at labarber@ufl.edu.

ROTARY SPOTLIGHT:
ACTIVITIES, MEETINGS & MORE

Staff Report

Rotary Club of Brandon

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

The first event, the 34th annual Bill Harper Classic Golf Tournament, is scheduled for January 15, 2026, at Buckhorn Springs Golf and Country Club. Those interested in participating or learning more can contact Brett Briggs at 8132405380.

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

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

If you are interested in finding out more about Rotary or how to join this amazing club, text Debbie Meegan at 813-601-2315 or join the club for lunch on Tuesdays at 12 Noon at the Rivard Simmons Rotary Event Center, located at 3007 S. Kings Ave. in Brandon.

FishHawk/Riverview Rotary Club

The FishHawk/Riverview Rotary Club continues its community programming with several meetings and events planned through December and January. Its January programs include Liz Anderson, director of development for the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay, on January 5, 2026; Hillsborough County Chief Deputy Joe Mauier on January 12, 2026; and a Honduras Trip recap highlighting recent international service work on January 26, 2026.

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

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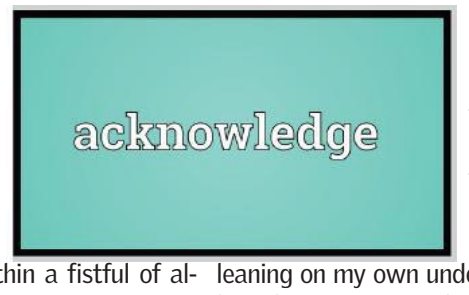
Christian Voice



Grace Notes

Word for the Year

By Debora Coty



Each January, many people choose a word for the upcoming year—a single word that symbolizes their New Year's quest. A focus. An aspiration. A goal. You might even say a resolution encased within a fistful of alphabet letters.

An easily post-able, portable, proverbial reminder of what we deem most important to personally achieve during the next 365 days.

I decided to choose a word this year too. So I asked Papa God for wisdom about my focal word. Several flitted through my mind, but none seemed quite right. Then I looked up. My eyes focused on the contrail of an airplane slashing the blue morning sky with a straight, white line disappearing into cloud cover, its final destination hidden from view.

Acknowledge, a still, small voice whispered to my heart. And a familiar Scripture flashed before my mind's eye: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways a c k n owl e d g e him, and he will make your paths straight," (Proverbs 3:5-6, NIV).

I could sure use a straight path. But in order to find one, the Word of God says I need to do three things: Trust in the Lord with all my heart. Stop leaning on my own understanding, which is based on my personal experiences and perceptions and colored by my pain.

Acknowledge Him in all my ways. Know God first (the root of 'knowledge'). Then take action based on that knowledge.

Action + knowledge = acknowledge. Of course. That's my word. And my quest for this year: To actively lean on His understanding, not mine, by delving deeper into His Word, which will allow me to discern His will; to base my actions on that knowledge and trust Him with my whole heart.

This will result in a straight path. Even though I can't see where the path ends, it's the trail I want to be on. Like that contrail. So how about you, my friend?

Are you up for the challenge of choosing your life focal word for the upcoming year? New year. New adventures. New blessings. After all, the sky's the limit!

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

HOLIDAY DECORATIONS: ORNAMENTAL OR SACRAMENTAL?

This column may be born on Christmas, but it works for the new year too. I will start with a quiz. Ready? Looking at this photograph, what is the most compelling decorative element?



The handmade quilt? Or the beautiful tree in the corner? Is it the collection of lace snowflakes? Maybe the poinsettias in the hearth?

They are all good answers, but the response I'm thinking of is our dog, Max! An artfully placed golden retriever enhances any holiday scene. Actually, he just plopped down after walking through. When I photographed our last house for sale, someone asked why I put Max in so many pictures. I didn't; he just shows up, and he's pretty stealth about it.

But, other than being decorative, Max is real — and I think that is the most compelling thing. Holiday decorations — other than the occasional 'live' tree — are only real to the extent the symbolism they carry points to truth rather than make-believe.

Symbolism is fine, but it only holds life if it is rooted in life. Absent spiritual truth and our connection to the heart of God, a manger scene and a heavenly host are about as real as the plastic Santa on the front lawn — maybe less so because at least Santa oils the wheels of commerce.

I believe that the emptiness that is so pervasive in our world is amplified to the extent that the manger scene, the baby Jesus, the lights on the house and the Christmas symbols we display have no meaningful connection to that Holy Night, the Living God, a personal Jesus and the very real introduction of hope and promise and redemption into this world.

Nostalgia alone does not cannot answer the deep yearning people have for a restored relationship with the Creator and for spiritual healing.

If the only holiday decoration that seems real to you is the golden retriever, then understand this: Because of Jesus — Wonderful Counselor, Beautiful Savior, Prince of Peace — the decorations are no longer merely ornamental, they will become sacramental.

May it be so. — DEREK



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

VALRICO / FISHHAWK CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

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The VFCC Annual Awards Dinner is a wonderful night of raffles, silent auctions, business awards, recognition, and an amazing dinner. Businesses can sponsor a table, donate raffle and silent auction items, and invite guests.

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ZOOTAMPA IS 'FUREVER' HOME FOR TWO RESCUED RED FOXES

Staff Report

ZooTampa at Lowry Park is a little fuzzier now as two rescued red foxes settle into their new forever home at the zoo.

The foxes, named Sadie and Seth, were among over 250 animals saved from deplorable conditions at the Grand River Fur Exchange in Ashtabula County, Ohio, earlier in 2025. The Humane Society of the United States led the rescue operation after the facility's owner passed away, leaving the animals in dire circumstances.



Sadie



Seth

Upon arrival in November, Sadie and Seth underwent comprehensive health evaluations and a quarantine period under the supervision of the zoo's Animal Health and Animal Care teams. The zoo's Florida team spent time daily with the duo, establishing a relationship with both. Seth, the male, exhibits a classic reddish coat, while Sadie, the female, has a pearl-colored coat, giving her a striking black appearance.

The playful pair have since been introduced to their new habitat in the Florida Wilds area of the zoo, adjacent to the Roaring Springs ride. They have been observed actively exploring their surroundings and engaging playfully with each other.

"Both Sadie and Seth are healthy and adjusting well to their new environment," said Chris Massaro, senior vice president and chief zoological officer at ZooTampa. "We are committed to providing a safe and enriching home for these animals, especially after the traumatic experiences they endured."

Red foxes are known for their acute hearing, capable of detecting high-frequency sounds even underground, which aids in hunting small prey, such as rabbits and rodents. They employ a hunting technique that involves crouching low to blend with their surroundings before leaping to capture their target.

BRANDON RIVERVIEW CHAMBER OF COMMERCE ANNOUNCES ANNUAL MEETING & INSTALLATION LUNCHEON

Staff Report

The Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce is pleased to announce its annual meeting, to be held on Tuesday, January 27, at 11:30 a.m. at The Regent, located at 6437 Watson Rd. in Riverview.

This signature luncheon brings together business leaders, community partners and chamber members to celebrate the successes of the past year, recognize outstanding contributions and share the vision for the year ahead.

During the event, attendees will enjoy an afternoon of connection and celebration, including:

- Reflections and highlights of 2025.
- Recognition of members and community partners.
- Installation of the 2026 chair and board of directors.
- An overview of the chamber's strategic priorities for 2026.



The Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce is pleased to announce its annual meeting, to be held on Tuesday, January 27, at 11:30 a.m. at The Regent, located at 6437 Watson Rd. in Riverview.

The annual meeting serves as both a celebration and a launchpad — honoring the achievements that strengthened the Brandon and Riverview business community in 2025 while outlining the initiatives that will drive growth, advocacy and collaboration in 2026.

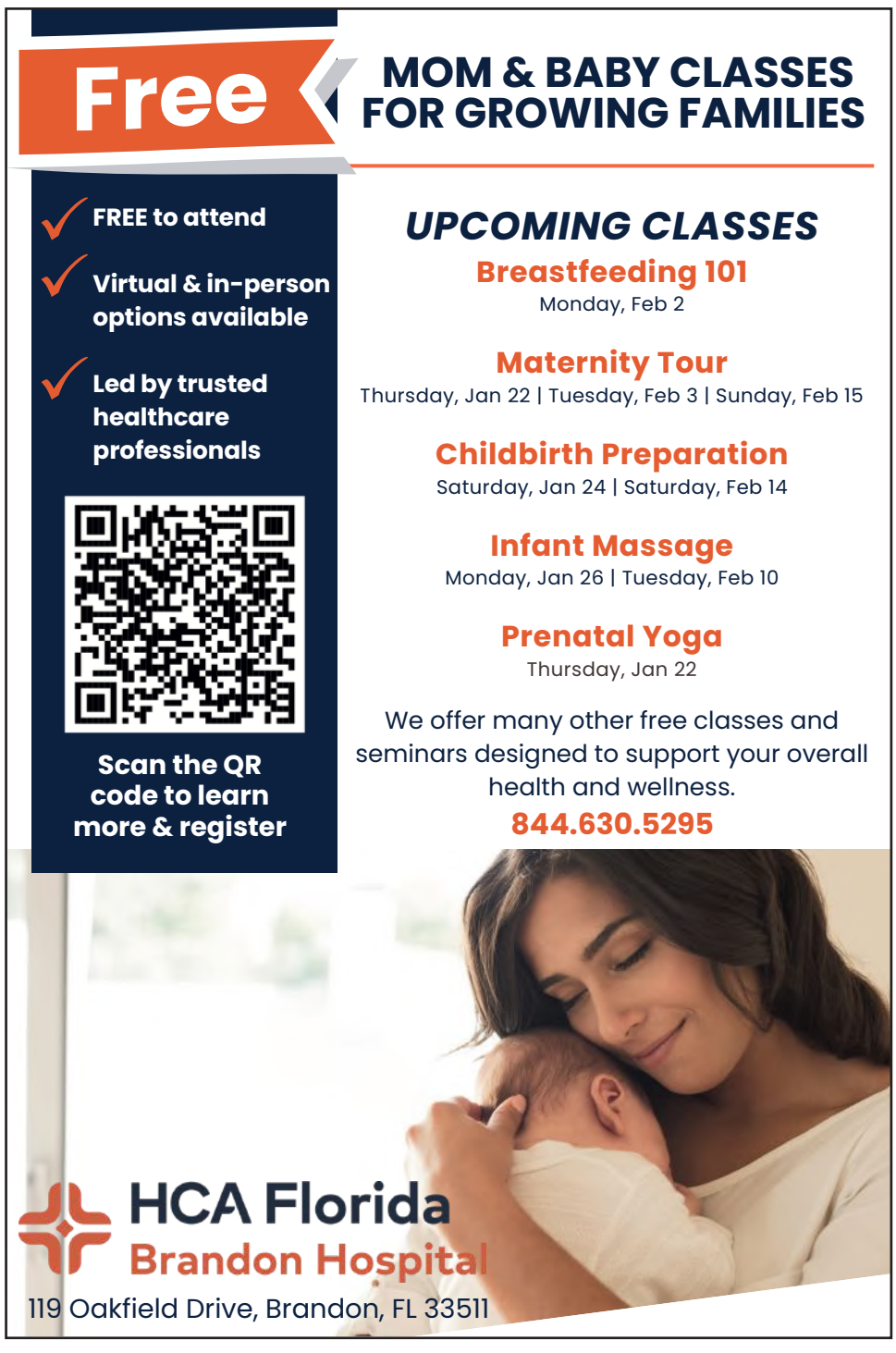
Members, guests and community leaders are invited to join this important gathering as the chamber steps confidently into a new year of progress and partnership.

For more information or to register, please contact the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce at info@brandonriverviewchamber.net or 813-234-5944.

About the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce

The Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce is dedicated to strengthening the regional economy, supporting local businesses and fostering a thriving community through leadership, advocacy and collaboration.

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







BRANDON PARADE OF LIGHTS CAPS SECOND YEAR WITH AWARDS, COMMUNITY GIVING AND 10,000 SPECTATORS

By Brian Bokor









The Brandon Parade of Lights wrapped up its second year with a celebration and awards ceremony at The Regent.

The Brandon Parade of Lights wrapped up its second year with a celebration and awards ceremony held on December 18 at The Regent in Riverview, recognizing parade participants, volunteers and community partners following another successful holiday event.

The annual parade drew an estimated 10,000 spectators along its route and featured 2,861 participants representing 115 floats, underscoring the rapid growth of the event in just its second year.

Melissa Canfield, parade chairperson, used the ceremony to put those numbers into perspective.

"2,861. What is that? That is the amount of participants that we had this year in the parade," Canfield said. "What does that consist of? 115 floats."

"Those entries included the parade's grand marshal, 10 Tampa Bay News anchor Caitlin Lockerbie, along with five local high school marching bands, five local Gasparilla krewes, 38 local businesses and 24 local nonprofit organizations. Participation also extended to the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, Hillsborough County Fire Department, county commissioners, school board members — including the superintendent — as well as local officials, beauty queens, dance studios and youth teams. The parade also featured holiday favorites, including, of course, Santa and Mrs. Claus," she said.

Reflecting on the scope of the event, Canfield added, "It's absolutely amazing how many people were involved in this."

Led by grand marshal Lockerbie, the parade traveled from South Lakewood Drive along Oakfield Drive, crossing Kings Avenue and ending at Vonderburg Drive. High school marching bands from Armwood, Bloomingdale, Brandon, Newsome and Riverview helped set the tone, while thousands of spectators lined the route to watch floats from businesses, nonprofits, performance groups and community organizations.

Awards were a major focus of the evening, recognizing creativity and community spirit among parade participants.

"So, the first category we will present is the most festive floats," said award presenter Dawn Myers. "We considered how unique of a theme this group had, and how wonderfully and beautifully lighting their float was."

Amani Med Spa received the Most Festive award.

The Most Original award was presented to Krewe of Girls and Pearls. In presenting the honor, Myers praised the group's creativity and execution.

"We felt like we had never really even thought about this theme being a Christmas parade, or a Parade of Lights parade. The outfits that their people wore were on point and on theme. And they had almost what looked like a live volcano on their float. So, the most original goes to the Krewe of the Girls 'n Pearls," Myers said.

The Crowd Choice award was presented to the Krewe of the Rising Phoenix.

In announcing the winner, Myers said, "The judges were all very, very impressed with not only the costumes but also the music."

Dance Quest earned the Judges' Choice award.

"This group had a fantastic float. It was beautifully decorated. They had amazing costumes. And they had a fantastic performance," Myers said. "Because they checked all the boxes, we had to give this to the Judges' Choice for Dance Quest."

Additional award winners included DeSoto Masonic Lodge for Most Community Spirit, Newsome High School for Best Band and TC Drums for Best Performance.

Charitable giving was also a central focus of the evening. Organizers presented $5,000 checks to Hope for Her and PCAT (Parents and Children Advancing Together Literacy Ministries), recognizing both organizations as beneficiaries of this year's parade proceeds.

The charities were selected in partnership with the Valrico FishHawk Chamber of Commerce and the newly merged Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce, continuing the Brandon Parade of Lights' commitment to supporting local nonprofits alongside celebrating the holiday season.

Canfield thanked the many volunteers, sponsors and participants who made both the event and its charitable impact possible. She noted that an estimated 50 volunteers helped support parade operations, adding, "Thank you for allowing me to be a small part of this parade."

The celebration also marked a transition in leadership, as Canfield formally passed the Brandon Parade of Lights chairperson duties to Erica Jourdain of Flower Me Tampa, who was announced as the 2026 parade chairperson. Organizers thanked Canfield for her leadership during the parade's second year and welcomed Jourdain as planning begins for the next chapter of the event. Organizers confirmed that the next Brandon Parade of Lights will be held on December 12, 2026.

Now entering its third year, the Brandon Parade of Lights continues to establish itself as a signature holiday tradition — celebrating creativity, community spirit and meaningful local impact while bringing families, businesses and neighbors together during the holiday season.



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

By Denise Sansosti



Bob's Vets is a group that meets at Bob Evans restaurant in Sun City Center Florida every Thursday morning throughout the year. All veterans and those who support veterans are welcome to attend. No membership is required and no dues are charged for the meeting.

Every Thursday morning in Sun City Center, Bob Evans opens its doors early to nearly 100 veterans, spouses and friends. Known as Bob's Vets, the group welcomes every branch of the military for one simple purpose: breakfast and camaraderie.

The tradition began in 2008 when Vietnam fighter pilot Sam Martin walked into a Bob Evans in St. Petersburg and spotted three men wearing veteran hats. A casual breakfast turned into a weekly ritual. Martin brought the idea to Sun City Center in 2012, and the group quickly grew. Today, more than 400 veterans are on the roster, making it the largest Bob's Vets in the state. Florida is home to the nation's second-largest veteran population, with Hillsborough County leading the state in the number of veterans who live here.

Bob's Vets is not an official nonprofit, and there are no dues or membership requirements. Instead, the group runs on community spirit. A monthly email keeps everyone informed about VA updates, birthdays and upcoming events. Guest speakers often attend, including representatives from the VA, Social Security, law enforcement, county offices and even local elected officials. Their goal is simple: help veterans access benefits, stay informed and feel supported.

The group occasionally takes collections to assist members with medical needs or to support special situations, such as raising funds to send a disabled female veteran to a Paralympic table tennis competition. Local business or national donations are always welcome. Last year, the Gary Sinise Foundation's 'Soaring Valor' program flew four WWII members to New Orleans for a multiday experience at The National WWII Museum.

As the group continues to grow, Host Steve Browning said, "Unfortunately, we are getting too big for our restaurant, so that is the main problem we're facing. We are trying to get more recognition for our veterans through the media and guest speakers who come and show their sincere support or thanks."

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

FREEDOM TO WALK HOSTS A MUSIC BINGO TO RAISE FUNDS FOR THOSE WHO SUFFER WITH FOOT DROP

By Libby Hopkins



The Freedom to Walk Foundation will be hosting its Love Music Bingo event in February.

The Freedom to Walk Foundation is a local nonprofit organization dedicated to assisting patients and their families by providing financial assistance for the purchase of WalkAide or Bioness devices for children and adults experiencing foot drop. Its goal is to help individuals regain their independence and mobility by providing them with the necessary technology to walk again. It believes that every individual should have the freedom to walk and live their life to the fullest.

Daisy Vega founded the Freedom to Walk Foundation in January of 2013. For the past 45 years, she has been experiencing multiple sclerosis. Additionally, she experienced foot drop in 2012. After two and a half years of wearing the electrical stimulation device, she walked out of her device and no longer needed it to walk. "Foot drop is a weakness or paralysis of the muscles involved in lifting the front part of the foot necessary to walk," Vega said. "It causes a person to drag the foot and toes or engage in a high-stepping walk called steppage gait. The Bioness L300 Go device, when worn on the calf, sends electric impulses to the affected foot, causing the foot and leg to lift and follow through with a natural, unimpaired gait."

The Freedom to Walk Foundation will be hosting its Love Music Bingo event on Saturday, February 7, from 2-5 p.m. at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, at 1239 W. Del Webb Blvd. in Sun City Center. Tickets are $20 per person.

"Guests can bring their own beverages and snacks," Vega said. "No musical expertise is required, just a love for music, fun and a giving heart."

Guests will enjoy a high-energy fundraising event bringing people together through music and fun. "There will be raffle prizes and giveaways throughout the event," Vega said. "Guests will also experience community connection with supporters, businesses and local partners."

Over the last year, the Freedom to Walk Foundation has helped 11 individuals take steps toward independence by obtaining their Bioness L300 Go devices.

"With an out-of-pocket cost of $5,800, the device is prohibitive for many who see it as an invaluable opportunity to improve their quality of life," Vega said. "Freedom to Walk Foundation welcomes support from individuals and businesses who want to make an impact through sponsorship, raffle items, gift cards, merchandise or services."

Every ticket purchased, raffle item donated and sponsorship helps move the Freedom to Walk Foundation closer to its goal of restoring independence, dignity and hope for those who need it most. For tickets, sponsorships, or more information, contact Vega at daisy.vega@freedomtowalkfoundation.org, call 813-546-2329 or visit thewebsite at www.freedomtowalkfoundation.org.

PRAYER TO THE BLESSED VIRGIN

(never known to fail)

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

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

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January, Vol. 23, Iss. 1



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Fax 657-4469 | Email: jbennett@ospreyobserver.com
Deadline: 15th of each month.

Local Assistant Helps Seniors Stay Independent

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

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

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



Bass is an assistant dedicated to helping individuals and businesses stay organized.

David Weekley Opens New Model Home In Coasterra Community

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

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

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



National Notary Coalition Launches Nationwide Organization

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

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

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

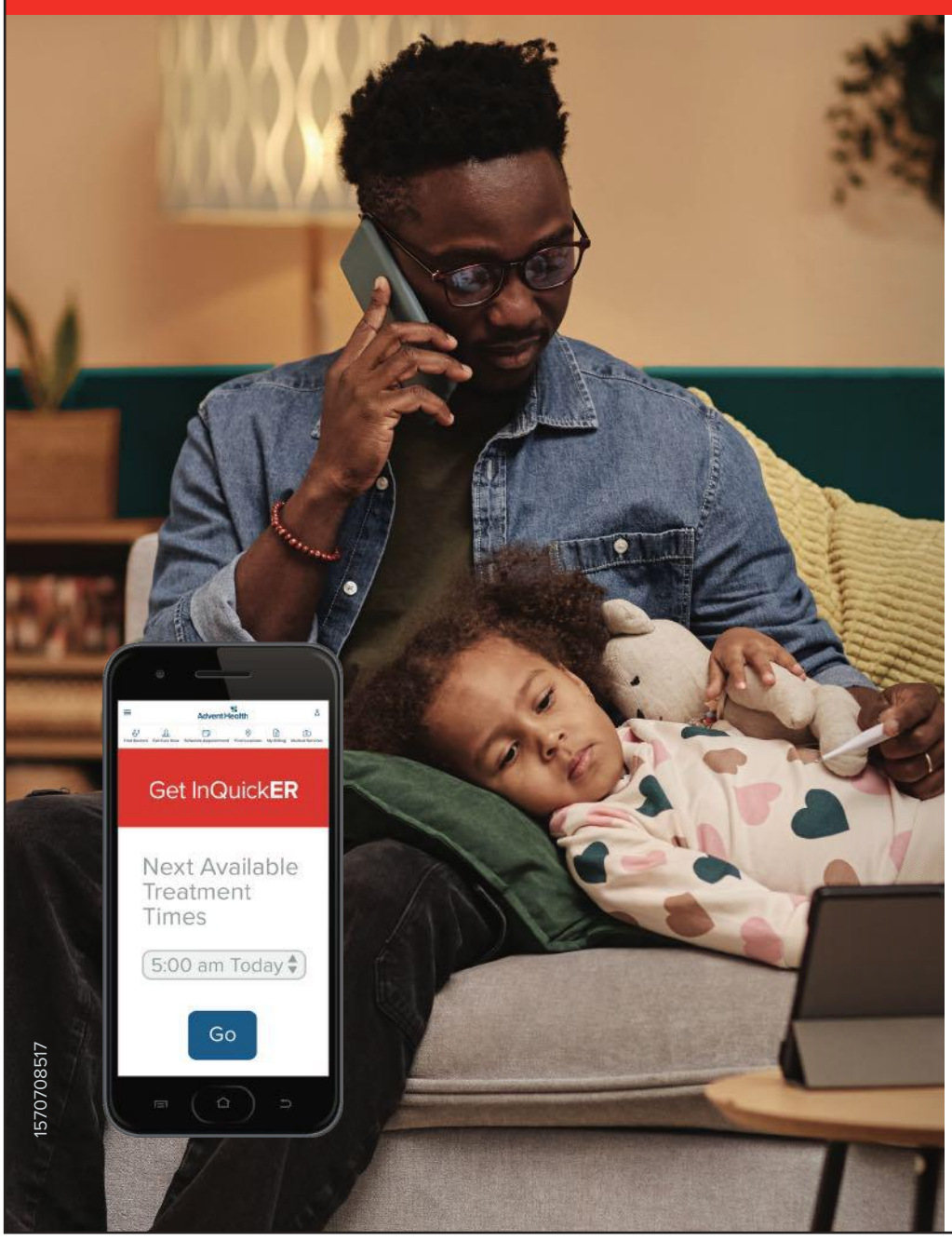
Chen's Duck & Dumplings Collabs With Hong BBQ & Hot Pot

Chen's Duck & Dumplings is excited to announce the launch of its concept at Hong BBQ & Hot Pot, located at 804 Providence Rd. in Brandon, bringing authentic Beijing-style Peking duck, handmade soup dumplings and many other traditional Chinese dishes to the community.



Known for its traditional roasting techniques and fresh, handcrafted dishes, Chen's Duck & Dumplings offers signature Peking duck carved at its bar, delicate soup dumplings, noodles and family-style favorites. The brand's goal is simple: to share the true flavors of Beijing in a warm and welcoming space. Make your reservation for an unforgettable Peking Duck experience today by calling 813-315-8617.

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ARTIST BRINGS CANVASES TO LIFE THROUGH LIVE PAINTING EVENTS

By Olivia Clark

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



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

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

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

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

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

Primarily self-taught, King learned through online portrait classes and YouTube tutorials, practicing consistently while raising her children. She credits the experience with shaping her career and showing her children the value of pursuing passions.

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

King's interest in live painting grew as audiences responded to watching her creative process on social media. She later began offering live painting services for weddings and charity events, combining her love of art with community involvement.

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

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

King will also be live painting at a charity event benefiting families experiencing trauma on January 3, 2026, at 7 p.m. at the New Tampa Performing Arts Center, located at 8550 Hunters Village Rd. in Tampa.

For more information, visit https://alexiskingartworks.pro/ or follow Alexis King Artworks on Facebook and Instagram.

EAGLE AUDUBON SOCIETY IS NOT JUST FOR THE BIRDS

By Denise Sansosti

The National Audubon Society (NAS) has a long history of helping Florida wildlife. By 1900, more than 5 million birds were being killed every year, including 95 percent of Florida's shorebirds, primarily for women's decorative hats. Some birds, such as the snowy egret, were nearing extinction. In 1905, the NAS was formed to protect birds and their habitat. It has become one of the oldest and most influential environmental organizations in the Americas.



Eagle Audubon January 1 State Park Hike at Little Manatee River State Park.

Since 1984, the Eagle Audubon Society chapter has been serving South Hillsborough County. Its mission is to foster interest and involvement in the local environment, wildlife and conservation issues. The Eagle Audubon Society holds monthly meetings featuring guest speakers on topics such as bird identification, avian evolution and environmental issues. These meetings are open to everyone, including nonmembers.

Past President Dr. Julie Stocksdale, who has been a member for 10 years, said, "I learn something from every speaker and strongly support what the NAS does. The mission is conservation. Some focus on birds, but it's not exclusive."

She proudly shared that the chapter has earned an Outstanding Conservation Project award for its stormwater pond native plant installation.

There are frequent field trips to nearby birding hotspots and natural areas, such as Celery Fields and Little Manatee River State Park. Florida is one of the premier states for birding due to its diverse wetlands, prairies, woodlands, coasts and scrublands. Each unique habitat has its own species of local and migratory birds.

The Eagle Audubon Society undertakes several hands-on community projects, including maintenance of the Window in the Woods bird sanctuary in Sun City Center and the delightful butterfly habitat at the Ruskin Camp Bayou Nature Preserve. Both are open to the public.

Dr. Stocksdale wants the community to know "all are welcome to participate in any capacity. You do not have to be a member." Monthly speakers and nature walks offer the perfect learning experiences for everyone, from homeschooled children to retirees.

Meetings are held from October through April on the third Monday of each month from 1-3 p.m. at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, located at 1239 W. Del Webb Blvd. in Sun City Center. For more information, visit https://eagleaudubonflorida.org/.



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PET RESOURCE FOUNDATION SEEKS HOMES FOR OVERCROWDED SHELTER PETS

By Logan Walz

The Hillsborough County Pet Resources Foundation, an open-admission shelter, continues its mission to care for animals in need through adoption services, volunteer programs and community support initiatives. Board secretary Chelsea Waldeck, CVA, explained, "As an open-admission shelter, we take in every animal that needs help, no matter the breed, age or condition. Our goal is always to give each pet the best chance at a safe and healthy life."



Max became one of the shelter's most memorable success stories after months of care and support from staff and volunteers.

The foundation requires adopters to be at least 18 years old and present identification. Upon entering the shelter, visitors speak with customer service staff before touring the kennels. Those interested in a specific dog or cat bring the animal's kennel card to staff, who then provide information and arrange a meet and greet. Animals already spayed or neutered, vaccinated and microchipped are considered ready to go and may be adopted the same day. Pets still awaiting procedures may be preadopted and picked up once their medical care is complete. Stray animals have a required hold period that varies based on whether they arrived with identification.

The Hillsborough Pet Resources Foundation offers a wide range of volunteer opportunities for individuals 16 years or older. Volunteers assist with dog and cat care, customer service, laundry, dishes and the veterinary services department. The shelter's foster program provides additional support options, including daytime outings, weekend sleepovers and longer-term fostering for pets experiencing kennel stress or medical issues. Applications and training are available online.

During the holiday season, donations of blankets help keep animals warm during colder nights, while soft treats, catnip, harnesses, leashes and toys are always useful. Food donations support the shelter's pet food pantry, which assists owners experiencing financial hardship and helps keep pets in their homes. In preparation for kitten season, the shelter collects kitten formula, warming discs, playpens and mother and kitten food.

As an open-admission shelter, the Hillsborough Pet Resources Foundation faces ongoing challenges related to space and capacity. Despite this, it maintains a 94 percent live outcome rate and does not euthanize for space. The shelter's veterinary team provides on-site care, and rescue partners assist with cases needing specialized support. Enrichment programs, playgroups and individualized care plans help animals experiencing stress or behavioral concerns.

One memorable adoption involved Max, a dogo Argentino who struggled medically and behaviorally but ultimately found a successful placement after months of care. Stories like Max's reflect the foundation's dedication to every animal in need.

For more information, visit https://hcprfoundation.org/ or call 813-586-1988.

HOW HUSTLE HARD RUNNING CO HELPS ATHLETES THRIVE

By McKenzie Brown

Hustle Hard Running Co was created based on a simple belief: When athletes are coached the right way, they are capable of doing more than they could ever imagine. For Sarah Sexton, founder and head coach, she believes, "Coaching is what God called me to do. I love helping athletes realize they're capable of more than they think, especially through running, which has a way of building confidence quickly when it's taught well."



The Hustle Hard Running Co athletes are showing us what they are made of, day in and day out.

Running plays a central role in that mission. When taught accurately, it builds confidence quickly, offering athletes clear proof of growth through strength, speed and consistency. Hustle Hard Running Co was designed to meet athletes exactly where they are, whether they're brand-new to running or ready to compete. The goal has always been to create a youth-centered environment with multiple entry points: beginner run clubs, competitive track teams, small-group speed training and individualized coaching.

With 19 years of experience in coaching youth and high school athletes, Sexton brings a broad background in track and field, cross country, multisport speed development and youth soccer. Her coaching philosophy is grounded in long-term athlete development, healthy movement patterns and age-appropriate training that prioritizes both performance and well-being. Supported by certifications through USATF, RRCA, NFHS, CPR/AED and yoga, her approach blends science, experience and care. She loves what she does and does it with passion.

Sexton said, "I started Hustle Hard Running Co to create a youth-centered running environment where athletes could find the right entry point for them, whether that's a beginner run club, a competitive track team, small-group speed training or individualized coaching. Our track program begins in January, and watching athletes discover their strengths, commit to the process and grow into confident runners and competitors is what makes me stay."

What sets Hustle Hard Running Co apart is its commitment to proven systems. Training is intentional and purposeful, focused on helping athletes become stronger, faster and more confident — without shortcuts, gimmicks or unnecessary hype. Every program emphasizes sound mechanics, smart progression and consistency over time.

Athletes train through three core formats. Private one-on-one coaching offers fully customized sessions for targeted development. Small-group speed and agility training combines individualized feedback with a motivating, competitive atmosphere. The track and field program, which begins each January, provides both competitive and beginner pathways, allowing athletes to grow into confident runners and teammates at their own pace.

Contact the Sexton at 744-571-0093 or email hustlehardrunningco@gmail.com.

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

Staff Report

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

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



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

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

"Celebrating 250 years of America is something truly special, and we're excited to mark the occasion with a fair that honors both our nation's history and Florida's unique roots," said Cheryl Flood, chief executive officer of the Florida State Fair. "'America's Sunniest Celebration' is more than just a theme, it's a chance to bring people together, shine a light on our state's rich agricultural traditions and create new memories with family and friends. We can't wait to welcome everyone back to the fairgrounds for a celebration that's as bright as Florida itself."

In addition to unveiling the theme, fair officials announced a one-day-only advance ticket flash sale scheduled for Oct. 1. During the sale, admission tickets will be available for $5 from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., or while supplies last, with no additional fees. Officials say the discounted tickets represent the lowest admission price available for the 2026 fair and offer savings of up to $11 compared to gate prices.

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

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

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

HIGH 5 HOLIDAY TALENT SHOW CELEBRATES CREATIVITY AND INCLUSION

By Logan Walz





The High 5 Holiday Talent Show took place this December, offering an evening focused on creativity, confidence, and community. The event provided members in the TRIDENT special needs program and clients from Livingstone Academies Transition Program the opportunity to showcase their talents in a supportive and inclusive setting.

This year marked the first time the talent show was held offsite at The Regent. Hosting the event at a public venue allowed for a larger audience and a stage setting for participants to perform in front of family, friends, and community members.

"This was the first year for the High 5 Holiday Talent Show, and it was also our first time hosting it offsite," Patrick Skidmore says.

The event was not structured as a competition, and no official winners were named. Instead, the focus remained on participation and celebration, emphasizing the talents and individuality of each performer.

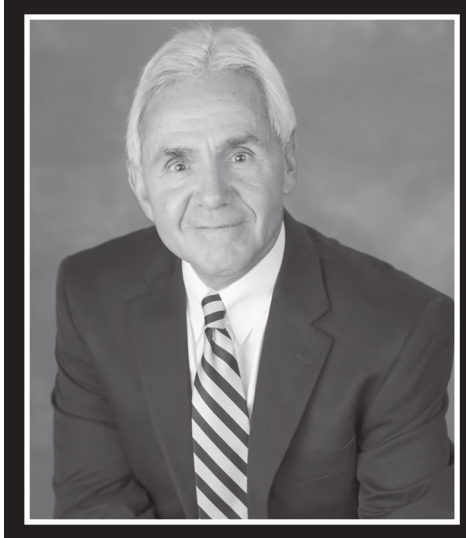
Participants dressed in outfits inspired by various decades, adding a creative element to the evening. Performances included singing and stage acts that highlighted personal expression and confidence.

Guests also had the opportunity to browse crafts and handmade items created by program participants. Although the event was not intended as a fundraiser, a few hundred dollars were raised through craft sales and donations. The proceeds will help support future activities and programming.

Organizers said the success of the inaugural event has set the foundation for future talent shows. The High 5 Holiday Talent Show is planned to take place annually each December, and the åtails regarding next year's event.

T.R.I.D.E.N.T.-Training and Recreation for the Intellectually Disabled Enhancing their Natural Talents focuses on three main areas: active recreation, proper socialization / interpersonal skills, and independent life skills. We aim to provide an enriching environment where our members can continue to learn and perfect their interpersonal and life skills, create bonding social relationships with their peers and benefit from organized activities, games and sports to lead a more active lifestyle. The program is located at 405 Beverly Blvd. Brandon. Call (813) 689-0908 or visit https://high5inc.org/trident-2/.

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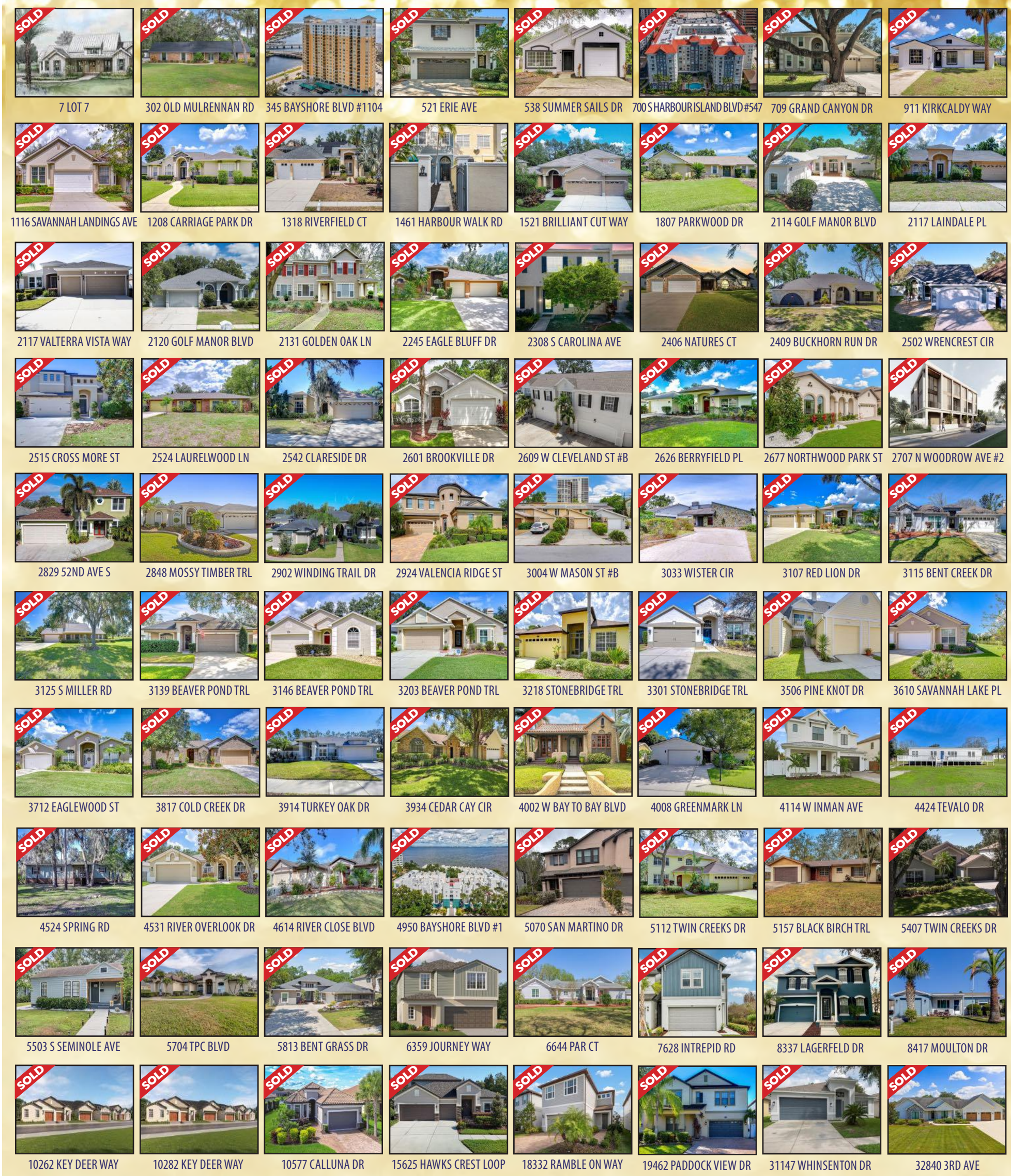
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7 LOT 7 | 302 OLD MULRENNAN RD | 345 BAYSHORE BLVD #1104 | 521 ERIE AVE | 538 SUMMER SAILS DR | 700 S HARBOUR ISLAND BLVD #547 | 709 GRAND CANYON DR | 911 KIRKCALDY WAY

1116 SAVANNAH LANDINGS AVE | 1208 CARRIAGE PARK DR | 1318 RIVERFIELD CT | 1461 HARBOUR WALK RD | 1521 BRILLIANT CUT WAY | 1807 PARKWOOD DR | 2114 GOLF MANOR BLVD | 2117 LAINDALE PL

2117 VALTERRA VISTA WAY | 2120 GOLF MANOR BLVD | 2131 GOLDEN OAK LN | 2245 EAGLE BLUFF DR | 2308 S CAROLINA AVE | 2406 NATURES CT | 2409 BUCKHORN RUN DR | 2502 WRENCREST CIR

2515 CROSS MORE ST | 2524 LAURELWOOD LN | 2542 CLARESIDE DR | 2601 BROOKVILLE DR | 2609 W CLEVELAND ST #B | 2626 BERRYFIELD PL | 2677 NORTHWOOD PARK ST | 2707 N WOODROW AVE #2

2829 52ND AVE S | 2848 MOSSY TIMBER TRL | 2902 WINDING TRAIL DR | 2924 VALENCIA RIDGE ST | 3004 W MASON ST #B | 3033 WISTER CIR | 3107 RED LION DR | 3115 BENT CREEK DR

3125 S MILLER RD | 3139 BEAVER POND TRL | 3146 BEAVER POND TRL | 3203 BEAVER POND TRL | 3218 STONEBRIDGE TRL | 3301 STONEBRIDGE TRL | 3506 PINE KNOT DR | 3610 SAVANNAH LAKE PL

3712 EAGLEWOOD ST | 3817 COLD CREEK DR | 3914 TURKEY OAK DR | 3934 CEDAR CAY CIR | 4002 W BAY TO BAY BLVD | 4008 GREENMARK LN | 4114 W INMAN AVE | 4424 TEVALO DR

4524 SPRING RD | 4531 RIVER OVERLOOK DR | 4614 RIVER CLOSE BLVD | 4950 BAYSHORE BLVD #1 | 5070 SAN MARTINO DR | 5112 TWIN CREEKS DR | 5157 BLACK BIRCH TRL | 5407 TWIN CREEKS DR

5503 S SEMINOLE AVE | 5704 TPC BLVD | 5813 BENT GRASS DR | 6359 JOURNEY WAY | 6644 PAR CT | 7628 INTREPID RD | 8337 LAGERFELD DR | 8417 MOULTON DR

10262 KEY DEER WAY | 10282 KEY DEER WAY | 10577 CALLUNA DR | 15625 HAWKS CREST LOOP | 18332 RAMBLE ON WAY | 19462 PADDOCK VIEW DR | 31147 WHINSENTON DR | 32840 3RD AVE

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