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MOM TURNS TRAGEDY INTO HOPE WITH NEW OVERDOSE SUPPORT GROUP

By Libby Hopkins



Showneen Hall of Riverview lost her son, Walter Shumaker, on October 22, 2023, at just 27 years old. He died from a fentanyl overdose.

Showneen Hall of Riverview got a call on October 22, 2023, that no parent ever wants to get. The call she got was to let her know that her son, Walter Shumaker, had died of an overdose. To make matters worse, because Walter had been incarcerated a few times in his life, she did not receive support from her community in her time of need.

"After losing my son to fentanyl addiction, my family and I were met with judgment and stigma by the very community that should have embraced us," Hall said. "The stress and harm caused by that treatment deeply affected my health and contributed to my suffering a heart attack."

Hall's son was just 27 years old at the time of his death.

Hall looked for support to help with her grief and found Tonya Aber of Ohio's Facebook post about an organization she started for families who were grieving the loss of loved ones who passed from drug overdoses.

"Tonya told me about her losing her daughter, Jessie, who also died from a fentanyl overdose," Hall said. "She also told me about the nonprofit she started to help families in the same situation as mine."

Aber's nonprofit is called 4 Them We Fight, and its mission is to love, support, advocate and educate veterans, addicts, those in recovery, those with mental illness and anybody else who may need a voice.

"We want to bring the veteran's story of their heroism to the public, show those lost in addiction through those in recovery that hope is possible and bring strength and love to those who just feel beaten down," Hall said. "This is why I started a Tampa chapter of 4 Them We Fight."

Hall started the Tampa chapter of 4 Then We Fight to offer support.

"We are here to remind parents, especially mothers of addicted angels, that it is OK to not be OK," Hall said. "There is no shame in loving a child who battled addiction, regardless of their past or their record."

Through 4 Them We Fight, Hall has become a certified NARCAN provider and is currently looking for local businesses that would allow her to put free NARCAN boxes at their locations to help raise awareness about fentanyl overdose.

"NARCAN nasal spray competes with opioids to bind with the same receptors in the brain, reversing the effects of an opioid overdose in two to three minutes," Hall said. "This can save lives."

Hall is also hosting her first support group meeting on Saturday, July 11, at 9 a.m. at Concierge Healthcare Training Services & Consultants, located at 504 S. Kings Ave. in Brandon.

"I will be hosting the meetings once a month, and they are free to attend," Hall said. "We are also looking for toiletry items to be donated so we can give out toiletry bags to the homeless in our area."

To learn more, visit its website at https://4themwefight.org/ or contact Hall at 813-270-6896.

TWO WOUNDED ARMY VETERANS TO RECEIVE MORTGAGE-FREE HOMES IN RIVERVIEW

By Brian Bokor



Two wounded U.S. Army veterans are preparing to begin a new chapter after being selected to receive mortgage-free homes in Riverview through PulteGroup's Built to Honor program in partnership with Building Homes for Heroes.

Army Spc. Ryan Heard and Army Sgt. Carson Shaw were honored during a groundbreaking ceremony on June 24 for their future homes at Spencer Glen, where both houses are expected to be completed by November. The project marks the first time PulteGroup's West Florida Division has awarded two Built to Honor homes at the same time.

According to PulteGroup, company leaders chose to honor both veterans after hearing their stories of military service and sacrifice.

Heard enlisted in the Army in 2007 and served two tours in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. In 2013, he suffered a traumatic brain injury when an improvised explosive device detonated during a counter-IED mission in Afghanistan's Logar province. He was later awarded the Purple Heart.

Ryan and his partner, Danielle, are currently living with family as they search for a permanent home where they can raise their children.

"The fact that we're going to go from a single bedroom to our own home means so much to me," Heard told Spectrum News.

Shaw joined the Army in 2019 and achieved his longtime goal of becoming an Army ranger. During six years with the 1st Ranger Battalion, he deployed to Iraq, Syria and Africa before a line-of-duty vehicle accident in October 2024 left him paralyzed from the waist down.

His new home will be specially designed to meet his accessibility needs while allowing him and his partner, Annalisa, to begin the next chapter of their lives together. Shaw is also studying finance and economics and plans to establish a nonprofit organization that provides water-based recreational opportunities for people with disabilities.

When Shaw learned he had been selected, he expressed his gratitude, saying, "Thank you so much. 'Thank you' does not even begin to cover what this means to me and my family."

Built to Honor was launched in 2013 to provide mortgage-free homes to injured veterans and their families. PulteGroup has donated more than 100 homes nationwide, with the Riverview project representing the West Florida Division's seventh and eighth Built to Honor homes.

IN THIS ISSUE:

HILLS COLLEGE DONATION.....PG 3
SHOLARSHIP AWARDS.....PG 6
YOUTH GRIEF SUPPORT.....PG 14
JOHN WESLEY MUSICIAN.....PG 23
POLITICAL GUIDE.....PGS 33-38

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A rendering of the new 'Middle School V V' planned for Wimauma shows the future campus, which is scheduled to open in August 2027 and will serve up to 1,600 students. As construction moves forward, the community is invited to submit name suggestions for the $72 million school by Friday, July 31, at www.surveymonkey.com/r/8fpxcm7. See the story on Page 9.



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PARKS & RECREATION FINALIST FOR BEST PARKS PROGRAM IN COUNTRY

Staff Report



For the fourth time in five years, Hillsborough County has been honored as having one of the top parks and recreation programs in the country.

Hillsborough County Parks & Recreation is one of four national finalists in the Class 1 category for the 2026 National Gold Medal Award for Excellence in Park and Recreation Management, the American Academy for Park and Recreation Administration announced. Class 1 includes the nation's largest parks and recreation departments, serving populations of more than 400,000.

Only one department will receive the highest award, the Grand Plaque, in October. Each finalist sends the judges a short video highlighting their department.

Achievements and highlights from Hillsborough County Parks & Recreation include:

• Effectively managing 180 parks, 223 sports fields, 118 playgrounds, 54 recreation centers, 47 athletic complexes, 11 dog parks, nine splash pads and four cultural/performing arts centers, spanning over 3,500 acres.

• Adding 40 new pickleball courts and six new splash pads and fitness zones in underserved communities.

• The Adaptive Sports program, which has grown by more than 200 percent since 2021, expanding from 26 programs serving 300 athletes to 68 programs reaching 955 athletes. The latest innovation is a dedicated Buddy Baseball field serving athletes ages 8-22.

• Collaborating with the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office to revitalize seven recreation centers through a $4.5 million investment.

• Launching the Swim Safe Initiative for children enrolled in Hillsborough County's Head Start program. In partnership with the City of Temple Terrace, the Tampa YMCA, the City of Tampa and High 5 Inc., children ages 3-5 are taken to nearby pools to receive free swim lessons.

• Hosting 336 performances last year at the New Tampa Performing Arts Center (NTPAC), ranging from The Florida Orchestra to fully staged musical theater, ballet, modern dance, stand-up comedy and jazz.

• Partnering with the American Heart Association to expand emergency preparedness across the park system, securing $125,000 to purchase nearly 100 automated external defibrillators (AEDs). These devices were strategically placed with youth sports partners, high-use parks and rural locations.

Founded in 1965, the Gold Medal Awards program honors park and recreation agencies in the United States and military installations worldwide that demonstrate excellence in parks and recreation through long-range planning, resource management, volunteerism, environmental stewardship, program development and more.

COLLEGE RECEIVES $120,000 STUDENT TRAINING GIFT FROM ADVANCE AUTO PARTS FOUNDATION

Staff Report



The Hillsborough College (HC) Foundation has received a $120,000 donation from the Advance Auto Parts Foundation to support students in the college's workforce programs, including the Automotive Service Technology and Diesel Systems Technician programs. The gift includes funding for industry-recognized certifications, specialty tools and instructional resources designed to help students build successful careers in the automotive repair and maintenance industry.

"We are proud to partner with and help support the automotive technology program at Hillsborough College and its students, as there's a growing demand for skilled automotive technicians," said Todd Davenport, president of the Advance Auto Parts Foundation and senior vice president, real estate and development at Advance Auto Parts. "Through this partnership, students will have expanded access to industry-recognized certifications, professional-grade tools and hands-on training that allows them to grow into skilled technicians dedicated to getting vehicles back on the road safely."

The gift includes $40,000 to help students earn additional Automotive Service Excellence (ASE) certifications — a key credential for advancing toward master technician status. The Advance Auto Parts Foundation will also provide three top-performing students with professional-grade tool sets containing about 800 tools, valued at approximately $15,000.

In addition, a $60,000 specialty tool fund will provide approximately 80 students with advanced tools commonly used in today's automotive and diesel repair facilities, and $5,000 in Advance Auto Parts gift cards will support the purchase of training materials and equipment.

"This generous investment from the Advance Auto Parts Foundation will have a lasting impact on our students and the communities they will serve," said Garrett Weddle, executive director of the Hillsborough College Foundation. "By helping students earn industry certifications and access the tools they need to succeed, this partnership removes barriers to opportunity while strengthening the pipeline of skilled technicians for Tampa Bay's workforce."

Students, faculty and representatives from the Advance Auto Parts Foundation celebrated the partnership during a gift presentation event on June 25 at the HC Ybor City Campus Training Center, located at 5610 E. Columbus Dr. in Tampa.

About Hillsborough College

Hillsborough College is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) to award associate and baccalaureate degrees. Hillsborough College also may offer credentials such as certificates and diplomas at approved degree levels. Visit www.hcfl.edu/accreditation for more information.

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TWO TEACHERS NAMED FINALISTS FOR GRAMMY MUSIC EDUCATOR AWARD

Staff Report



Francisco Quixtan.

Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) is proud to announce that two of its educators have been named quarterfinalists for the 2027 Grammy Music Educator Award, presented by the Recording Academy and Grammy Museum. Ernesta Chicklowski of Roosevelt Elementary School in Tampa and Francisco Quixtan of Jule F. Sumner High School in Riverview are among just 202 educators selected nationwide from more than 2,100 nominations submitted across all 50 states.

The Grammy Music Educator Award recognizes current educators — kindergarten through college, in both public and private schools — who have made a significant and lasting contribution to the field of music education and demonstrate a commitment to the broader cause of maintaining music education in schools.

"Having two of our educators recognized at this level is a tremendous honor and a testament to the extraordinary talent and dedication within our district," said Superintendent Van Ayres. "Ernesta and Francisco exemplify what it means to inspire the next generation through music, and we are proud to have them representing Hillsborough County Public Schools on a national stage."

HCPS serves more than 218,000 students across more than 233 schools, making it one of the largest school districts in the nation. The district has long been committed to providing robust fine arts programming as part of a well-rounded education. Recently, the district was honored with the Best Communities for Music Education by the National Merchants (NAMM) Foundation.

Semifinalists for the 2027 Grammy Music Educator Award will be announced in September, with 10 finalists to be named later this fall. The ultimate recipient will be recognized during Grammy Week 2027 in Los Angeles, California, ahead of the 69th annual Grammy Awards on February 7, 2027. The winner receives a $10,000 honorarium and a matching grant for their school program.

About the Educators

Chicklowski — beloved by her students and known to them as 'Mrs. Chick' — has been Roosevelt Elementary School's music teacher for 23 years, building one of the most celebrated elementary music programs in Florida. In 2023-24, she was recognized as the Florida Elementary Music Educator of the Year. This marks her fifth Grammy Music Educator Award nomination .

Quixtan is a distinguished music educator and conductor at Sumner High School. A passionate musician and mentor, Quixtan has built Sumner High School's orchestra into a program that includes a beginning orchestra, a chamber ensemble and a full symphony orchestra. Quixtan's selection as a Grammy Music Educator Award quarterfinalist reflects his dedication to building a thriving music program at a school still in its early years — a remarkable achievement that speaks to his talent, commitment and the culture of excellence he has cultivated among Sumner's community.

To learn more about the music and fine arts programs at HCPS, visit www.hillsboroughschools.org/o/hcps/page/music.

LORENZO IS NEW ST. JOSEPH'S SOUTH PATIENT SERVICE DIRECTOR

Staff Report



Hector Lorenzo.

Riverview's Hector Lorenzo is the new St. Joseph's Hospital-South patient services director. As patient services director, Lorenzo is part of the Riverview hospital's leadership team involved with planning, organization, policy development and priority-setting. He'll oversee nursing personnel and lead and evaluate the nursing team and set objectives and long-term goals. He'll also work closely with clinical and medical teams in monitoring and evaluating patient care and services.

Lorenzo succeeds Rita Smith, newly appointed vice president and chief nursing officer at St. Joseph's Hospital-South, Plant City's South Florida Baptist Hospital and BayCare Hospital Manatee, scheduled to open in 2028 in Palmetto.

Lorenzo has been a registered nurse both in Puerto Rico and locally since 2007. He's been at St. Joseph's Hospital-South since 2014, where he's held supervisory and management positions since then, including charge nurse, administrator on duty and assistant nurse manager. Since 2020, Lorenzo has been nurse manager on St. Joseph's Hospital-South's cardiac medical unit. He was also project manager for the BayCare Virtual Hospital, housed at St. Joseph's Hospital-South.

In announcing Lorenzo's appointment, Smith noted Lorenzo's key strengths, which include patient experience, quality outcomes, operations, leadership development and hospital and system initiatives.

"Throughout his career at St. Joseph's Hospital-South, Hector has demonstrated a consistent commitment to high-quality, patient-centered care, staff engagement and operational excellence," Smith wrote in the announcement. "He is well respected by his peers, his team and leadership at St. Joseph's Hospital-South and BayCare. I am confident that his leadership will be a valuable addition to the St. Joseph's Hospital-South leadership team as we continue to advance nursing practice, deliver exceptional care to our patients and community and support our departments in achieving top-decile performance."

"As I step into this new role as director of patient services, I hope to foster a collaborative approach across all disciplines, recognizing that our success depends on working together and sharing a common vision and goals," Lorenzo said. "As a leader, I am committed to building on the strong culture we have developed over the years and continuing to support our team in delivering high-quality care in a safe environment. I also look forward to focusing on opportunities to enhance the overall patient experience and improve clinical outcomes."

Lorenzo holds a master's degree in health care administration and bachelor's in nursing.



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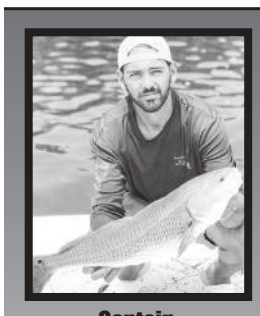
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'26 GMC Sierra Denali Ult Is A Utilitarian Workhorse!

By Nitish Rele



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

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City/hwy./comb.: 15/19/16 mpg
Base price: $84,400
Price as tested: $88,290
Website: www.gmc.com

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

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

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

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

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

Indeed, the Sierra boasts an outstanding performance, plentiful tow capacity and a gigantic classic but high-tech cabin.

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RIVERVIEW WOMAN'S CLUB AND FOUNDATION AWARDS SCHOLARSHIPS

Staff Report



Left to right: Nile Osawe, Ann Pham, Naylani Smith, Catherine Howard, Edsel Baker III, Riley Connely and Riley Dempsi. (Photo credit: Korina Aldridge, Studio Solest Family Portrait Co.)

At an awards luncheon on June 10, the Riverview Woman's Club and Foundation awarded scholarships to seven deserving area residents. Students were introduced to the membership, enjoyed a luncheon and were given a bubbles send-off for their success in their higher-education journey.

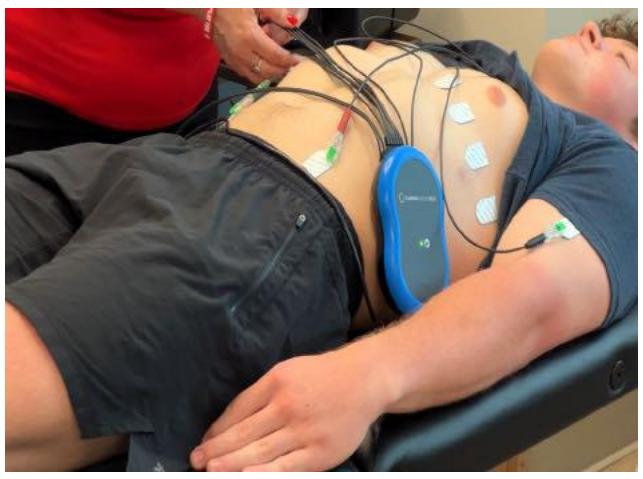
The winners, all graduates, were Nile Osawe of East Bay High School, who received a Heather Schlagheck Scholarship, funded by club member and past president Heather Schlagheck; Naylani Smith of East Bay High School, who received a Larry Brooks Scholarship, funded by member Larry Brooks; Ann Pham of Jule F. Sumner High School, who received a Jill Jofko Memorial Scholarship, named in honor of by late member and past president Jill Jofko; Catherine Howard of Riverview High School; Edsel Baker III of Tampa Preparatory School; Riley Connely of Riverview High School; and Riley Dempsi of Richard C. Spoto High School. The latter five winners' scholarships were funded through the Riverview Woman's Club's fundraising efforts.

Since its start in 2012, the Riverview Woman's Club and Foundation has awarded 72 scholarships. Individual members have also been responsible for awarding an additional 19 scholarships. The Riverview Woman's Club is a community organization dedicated to empowering women, supporting local causes and providing scholarships for students in the Riverview area.

If you wish to get acquainted with the club, attend any of its events which will resume in September, including a coffee on Tuesday, September 1; a luncheon on Wednesday, September 9; and a music bingo fundraiser on Tuesday, September 29. Until then, you can read about the club on the website at www.riverviewwomansclub.org or on Facebook at www.facebook/riverviewwomansclub.

NEW LAW REQUIRES ECG HEART SCREENINGS FOR STUDENT ATHLETES

Staff Report



July 1 marks a major milestone in protecting Florida's young athletes, as the Second Chance Act officially took effect statewide.

Now, new student athletes participating in Florida high school sports must complete an electrocardiogram (ECG or EKG) heart screening before their first tryout, practice or conditioning session helping identify potentially life-threatening heart conditions before tragedy strikes.

The law was created to help prevent sudden cardiac arrest (SCA), the number one cause of death on school campuses and the leading cause of death for student athletes. Each year, SCA claims the lives of approximately 23,000 young people nationwide, while an estimated one in 300 youth unknowingly lives with a potentially dangerous heart condition.

"This is a historic day for Florida families," said Evan Ernst, executive director of Who We Play For. "The Second Chance Act will save lives. Every parent deserves the peace of mind that comes from knowing their child has been screened before stepping onto the field, court or track. We encourage families not to wait until the last minute to schedule their child's ECG."

The law applies to students who are entering ninth grade and participating in school athletics for the first time, new to a Florida high school athletic program or participating in a high school sport for the first time.

Who We Play For, a Florida nonprofit founded by parents and physicians following the loss of young athletes to sudden cardiac arrest, has spent months preparing for the law's implementation through its statewide Cardiac Countdown campaign. The organization has partnered with hospitals, physicians, schools and community organizations to host heart screening events across Florida. At each event, medical professionals conduct noninvasive screenings, which involve placing small stickers on a person's chest. Boys and girls are screened separately. ECG results are securely sent to cardiologists for review, and parents typically receive results within 10 business days.

Screenings are performed using Cardiac Insight's Cardea 20/20 ECG system, the same technology used by major professional sports leagues. The system applies international criteria when age-appropriate to help deliver highly accurate results with a low false-positive rate of approximately 2 percent, reducing unnecessary follow-ups and anxiety for families.

Parents and guardians are encouraged to schedule an ECG screening as soon as possible to ensure students meet the new requirement before the upcoming school sports season.

To find an upcoming community heart screening or learn more about Florida's Second Chance Act, visit www.whoweplayfor.org/heart-screening-registration.

FOUNDATION AWARDS CAREERSOURCE $50,000 TO SUPPORT YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

Staff Report

CareerSource Tampa Bay (CSTB) has been awarded a $50,000 grant from Community Foundation Tampa Bay to support Summer P.A.Y.S. (Preparing Area Youth for Success), a youth employment program serving more than 650 young people ages 15-24 this summer.

CareerSource Tampa Bay was selected as one of 88 local nonprofit organizations to receive funding through Community Foundation Tampa Bay's annual Competitive Grants program. Through its most recent grant cycle, Community Foundation Tampa Bay distributed a record-breaking $2,520,473 in competitive grants amid the largest applicant pool in the program's history, supporting initiatives that address economic opportunity, environmental sustainability, mental and physical health and education.

The funding will help support the continued impact of Summer P.A.Y.S., which has served more than 4,000 low-income and underserved youth since its launch in 2019. Through Summer P.A.Y.S., participants gain paid work experience, career exploration opportunities, workplace-readiness training, mentorship, leadership development, entrepreneurial resources and financial literacy education.

"This funding creates opportunities that extend far beyond a summer job," said Leondra Foster, director of youth programs at CareerSource Tampa Bay. "The skills, experience and confidence youth gain through this program can influence their educational and career success for years to come."

Community Foundation Tampa Bay connects philanthropy with community needs, working alongside donors and nonprofit partners to build a stronger, more vibrant region.

To learn more about this year's grant awards, visit Community Foundation Tampa Bay's website at www.cftampabay.org.

About CareerSource Tampa Bay

Effective July 1, 2024, CareerSource Tampa Bay is the designated local workforce development board serving Hillsborough and Pinellas counties. CareerSource Tampa Bay is governed by a board of directors whose members are appointed by a consortium of chief local elected officials (CLEOs) from each county commission.

CareerSource Tampa Bay is an equal opportunity employer/program. Auxiliary aids and services are available upon request to individuals with disabilities. All voice telephone numbers listed may be reached by persons using TTY/TDD equipment via the Florida Relay Service at 711.

CareerSource Tampa Bay is the direct service provider for various workforce programs which are supported by the U.S. Department of Labor, Health and Human Services, Agriculture and other agencies as part of awards totaling $38,665,000, with 93 percent federally funded (updated annually, as of September 2025).

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USF RECEIVES $1.5 MILLION GIFT FROM RELIAQUEST TO ADVANCE AI EDUCATION

By Kim Vreeland



The University of South Florida announced a $1.5 million investment from ReliaQuest that will benefit students in the Bellini College of Artificial Intelligence, Cybersecurity and Computing. The gift expands AI cybersecurity programming, establishes the new college's first-ever endowed professorship and creates a study track within the ReliaQuest Labs program focused on AI-supported software engineering.

Made through the USF Foundation, the gift will establish the ReliaQuest AI and Cybersecurity Professorship and expand the ReliaQuest Labs experiential learning program, strengthening the college's ability to attract top talent and prepare workforce-ready graduates.

"This transformative gift enhances USF's hands-on learning opportunities for students while supporting USF's efforts to attract and retain world-class faculty in critical and rapidly evolving fields," President Moez Limayem said.

The ReliaQuest Labs program was established in 2018 to provide students with hands-on experience that complements the in-class curriculum. More than 300 USF students have graduated from the Labs program since its inception, with the vast majority accepting jobs at ReliaQuest or other leading cybersecurity employers.

"Cybersecurity is the greatest technical challenge of our generation, and with AI reshaping the threat landscape, it's only getting more complex. That just creates even more opportunity for talented individuals to enter this industry," said ReliaQuest founder and CEO Brian Murphy.

Of the total, $1 million will endow the named professorship, enabling the college to attract and retain world-class faculty who will continue to elevate teaching, advance research and drive the future of artificial intelligence and cybersecurity education.

The remaining $500,000 will support the continuation of the already successful ReliaQuest Labs program and enhance hands-on learning opportunities for students. It will also add a second track in software engineering to the existing cybersecurity operations focus.

"ReliaQuest's support enables USF to expand cutting-edge research and education in artificial intelligence and cybersecurity by attracting exceptional faculty members," said Sudeep Sarkar, launch dean and professor in the college.

"We are deeply grateful for Brian Murphy and ReliaQuest's continued investment in USF and our students," said Jay Stroman, USF Foundation CEO. "Partnerships like this expand opportunity. They empower our faculty and students and advance innovation and workforce development in areas that are critical to our future."

For more, visit www.usf.edu.

STUDENTS EARN TOP HONORS AT 2026 FLORIDA FFA STATE CONVENTION

Staff Report



Newsome High School FFA took home several awards from the FFA State Convention including Florida's Finest chapter award.

Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) students brought home an impressive collection of state championships, top five finishes and chapter recognitions from the 2026 Florida FFA State Convention, showcasing the district's strength in agricultural education, leadership development, and career readiness.

The annual convention, held from June 15-19 in Orlando, brings together nearly 6,000 FFA members, advisors, alumni and industry leaders from across Florida to compete, develop leadership skills and celebrate excellence in agricultural education. The event features career development events (CDEs), leadership workshops, award ceremonies and recognition of the state's top FFA chapters and student organizations.

Students from HCPS middle and high schools earned state recognition across a wide range of competitive events, from floriculture and forestry to agricultural communications, environmental science and agricultural technology.

"These outstanding achievements reflect the dedication of our students, teachers and advisors, as well as the strength of our agricultural education programs," said Superintendent Van Ayres.

Several HCPS teams captured first-place state titles, including:

Middle School State Champion:

Randall Middle School —First Place, Nursery & Landscape.

High School State Champions:

Durant High School — First place, Citrus, Environmental & Natural Resources. Floriculture, Vegetable Evaluation, Ornamental Horticulture Demonstration and Landscaping (Ashlyn Demanovich and Jackson Sturgis).

HCPS students earned numerous additional top five finishes.

Middle School Awards: Mulrennan Middle School —Fifth place, Livestock Evaluation, Second place-Meats Evaluation.

Randall Middle School — Fourth place, Meats Evaluation.

High School Awards:

Durant High School — Third place, Agricultural Technology & Mechanical Systems, Fifth place, Dairy Cattle Evaluation & Management, Third place, Food Science & Technology, Second place, Forestry, Fifth place, Livestock Evaluation, Fourth place, Meats Evaluation, Second place, Nursery & Landscape.

Florida's Finest — Durant High School, Mulrennan Middle School, Newsome High School, Plant City High School, Randall Middle School, Turkey Creek Middle School.

Chapter SAE Awards — Durant High School.

Premier Chapter Awards: Brandon High School, Durant High School, Durant Junior Chapter – J.F. St. Martin, Newsome High School, Randall Middle School, Tomlin Middle School.

FFA is the nation's premier organization for students interested in agriculture, food systems, environmental science, agribusiness and natural resources. To learn more about HCPS's FFA programs, visit the website at www.hillsboroughschools.org.





VETERANS GATHERED IN TAMPA FOR NATIONAL GOLDEN AGE GAMES

By Zofia Osterman



More than 1,400 veterans from across the country recently traveled to the Tampa Bay area as the National Veterans Golden Age Games made their Tampa debut.

Hosted by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the 41st annual National Veterans Golden Age Games took place from June 27 through July 2, featuring five days of athletic competition, wellness activities and opportunities for veterans ages 55 and older to stay active while connecting with fellow service members.

The games are the VA's premier adaptive sports competition for older veterans and are built around the theme of "fitness for life," encouraging participants to maintain healthy, active lifestyles through sports and recreation. Since the program began in 1985, it has helped thousands of veterans improve their physical and mental well-being while demonstrating that healthy aging is possible at every stage of life.

More than 1,400 athletes competed in 21 events across ambulatory, wheelchair and vision-impaired divisions. Competitors are grouped into five-year age categories beginning at age 55, allowing veterans of similar ages and abilities to compete while showcasing the inclusive nature of the games.

Athletes participated in a wide variety of sports, including basketball, cycling, archery, powerlifting, swimming, golf, pickleball, boccia, volleyball and track and field. Competitions were held at venues throughout Hillsborough County, including the Tampa Convention Center, the University of South Florida, Bay Pines VA Medical Center and additional locations in the Tampa Bay area.

Among those competing was Connie White, a retired member of the Women's Army Corps who served from 1967-87. White competed in the ambulatory division in the 75-79 age group, and she is proud to have participated in an event that honors veterans while encouraging lifelong health and fitness.

Beyond competition, the Golden Age Games highlight the important role physical activity plays in improving overall health, rehabilitation and quality of life. The VA incorporates recreation therapy and sports medicine into the event, giving participants the opportunity to build strength, confidence and lasting friendships while celebrating their service to the nation.

Participation is open to veterans age 55 and older who receive care through a VA medical facility.

For more information about the National Veterans Golden Age Games, visit the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' National Veterans Golden Age Games website at https://department.va.gov/veteran-sports/national-veterans-golden-age-games/ or follow @Sports4Vets on Facebook, Instagram and X.

COMMUNITY INVITED TO HELP NAME NEW WIMAUMA MIDDLE SCHOOL

Staff Report

Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) is seeking community input to help name the district's new middle school in the rapidly growing Wimauma community.



The approximately $72 million project will accommodate up to 1,600 students and is scheduled to open in August 2027. The school will offer dynamic academic and enrichment opportunities designed to complement the academic excellence at nearby Aquilla J. Morgan High School.

Programs will include rigorous and accelerated coursework, opportunities to earn high school credit, career and technical education, industry certifications and extracurricular activities such as clubs and sports based on student interest.

The project reflects the district's ongoing investment in modern, future-ready educational facilities to support Hillsborough County's continued population growth. Located on an 87-acre site at 1712 W. Lake Dr. in Wimauma, the new middle school will be situated near Aquilla J. Morgan High School, which opened in August 2025, as well as a future elementary school.

"Middle School VV represents our continued commitment to providing students with access to innovative learning environments in communities experiencing rapid growth," said Superintendent Van Ayres. "This new school will expand opportunities for students and support the educational needs of families in Wimauma and the surrounding area."

All proposed names must follow School Board Policy 7250. The naming and renaming of all school sites and facilities must respect all races, cultures and ethnic values. The school board also prohibits any name that violates School Board Policy 2260 – Nondiscrimination and Access to Equal Educational Opportunity.

School sites and facilities may be named for individuals who have rendered outstanding public service to public education, geographical locations or groups and clubs, as outlined in board policy. Elementary, middle and secondary schools may be named for U.S. presidents, school board members, educators, outstanding citizens or geographic locations. An elected official must have been out of public office for at least five years before being considered, and no current candidate for public office may be considered.

Name recommendations for the new middle school in the heart of the Wimauma community can be submitted at www.surveymonkey.com/r/8fpxcm7.

Submissions will be accepted from now through 5 p.m. on Friday, July 31. All names will be presented to the Hillsborough County School Board for consideration. The board is scheduled to vote on a name at its Tuesday, September 1, meeting.

To stay up to date on the school's progress, visit www.hillsboroughschools.org/page/middle-vv.



EASTERSEALS HOSTS INCLUSIVE SUMMER CAMP FOR YOUNG LEARNERS

By Chloe Wagner



The Easterseals School for Limitless Learning is hosting their summer program designed for young neurodiverse learners and those with other disabilities in kindergarten through second grade.

The hands-on experience provides interactive STEAM-related activities (science, technology, engineering, arts, mathematics) for children to learn and grow in an inclusive, supportive environment.

Easterseals Florida has served individuals from all walks of life with all kinds of disabilities across Florida since 1948. This includes services such as workforce development, early intervention, autism services, mental health services and recreation and camps. The school, located in the Bloomingdale area, was founded in 2024.

Easterseals School for Limitless Learning's School Administrator, Dr. Janine Stewart, heads both the school and the summer camp programs.

"The summer program was created in response to the need for meaningful, structured activities during the summer for special needs children," Stewart said.

According to Stewart, Hillsborough county faces a growing need for specialized education services, with 35,000 students, or 15% of the county population, needing Individualized Education Programs.

"We believe every child deserves meaningful access to STEAM experiences, and we provide the individualized supports to help each camper succeed," Stewart said.

The program currently has 22 campers, but Stewart and the school have plans to expand the summer program to hopefully accommodate more students in the future.

Activities for the camp are thoughtfully planned out with the support for each child's various needs. It is designed to foster an environment in which the children feel safe, understood and successful. Some activities at the camp include sensory activities, themed crafts, STEM exploration, music and movement, story time, outdoor play, gross motor activities, and imaginative play.

The most beloved tradition at camp are the Friday Water Days, where campers end their week with water-related festivities such as sensory friendly water play, sprinklers, splash activities, and outdoor fun.

"Because our campers are neurodiverse, every child has different interests and sensory preferences. Some love messy sensory play, while others enjoy movement activities, music, building, or hands-on exploration," Stewart said. "We intentionally offer a variety of sensory rich experiences, so every camper has opportunities to engage in activities they enjoy."

Easterseals School for Limitless Learning is currently enrolling for their Early Learning and Lower Elementary programs.

To learn more or to schedule a tour, visit florida.easterseals.com or contact Dr. Janine Stewart at jstewart@esfl.org or at her number, 813-236-5589. Easterseals School for Limitless Learning is located in Valrico at 2460 Bloomingdale Ave, Suite 170.

HCA FLORIDA BRANDON HOSPITAL HOSTS OFFICE RIBBON CUTTING AND TOURS

Staff Report



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

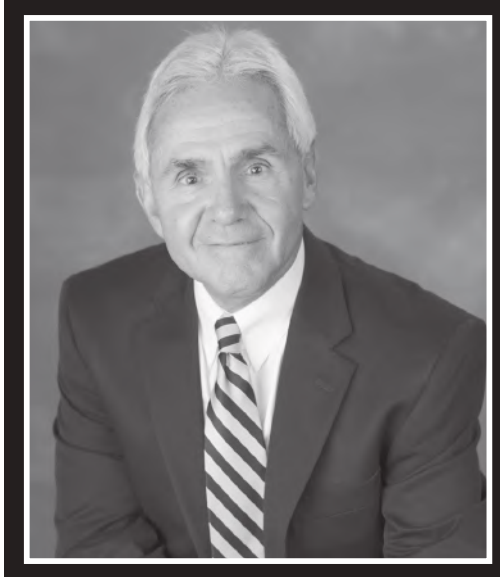
"With the opening of this new medical office building, HCA Florida vascular specialists and HCA Florida cardiac surgical specialists will begin seeing patients in a convenient location near HCA Florida Brandon Hospital," said Laura Ehlen, vice president of operations at HCA Florida Brandon Hospital.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

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

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

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

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BRANDON WOMAN RECEIVES FIRST TYPE 1 DIABETES SERVICE DOG

By Chloe Wagner



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

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

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

"I was considered a 'brittle diabetic' because my blood sugar levels were constantly fluctuating based on my emotions, stress, excitement and daily activities," Sullivan said. "I was very blessed to have a wonderful family that always made life as normal as possible."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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











LOCAL YMCAS PREPARE FOR THE ANNUAL LIFEGUARD GAMES

By Abigail Dumas



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

By Emily Harper



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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INVESTING IN YOUNG MEN, STRENGTHENING OUR COMMUNITY

By State Attorney Suzy Lopez



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

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

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

His story is a powerful reminder of why mentorship matters.

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

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

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

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

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

CHANGING NARRATIVE: INSIDE BRANDON'S YOUTH GRIEF SUPPORT PROGRAM

By Srishti Tripathi



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

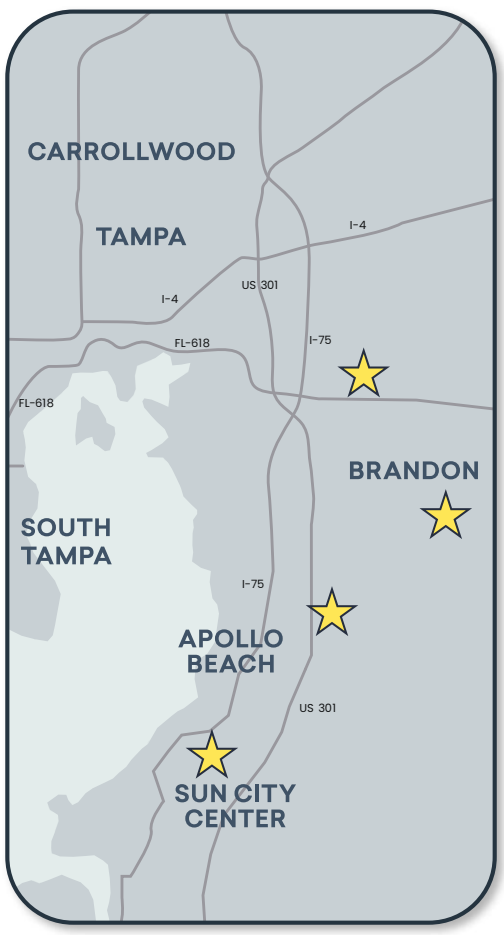
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COOL OFF WITH METROLAGOONS' SPECIAL DEALS AND SPLASH PASSES

By Abigail Dumas



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

EXPERTS BREAK DOWN THE MYTH OF MOSQUITO-REPELLING PLANTS

By Lourdes Mederos, rodriguezl@ufl.edu



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

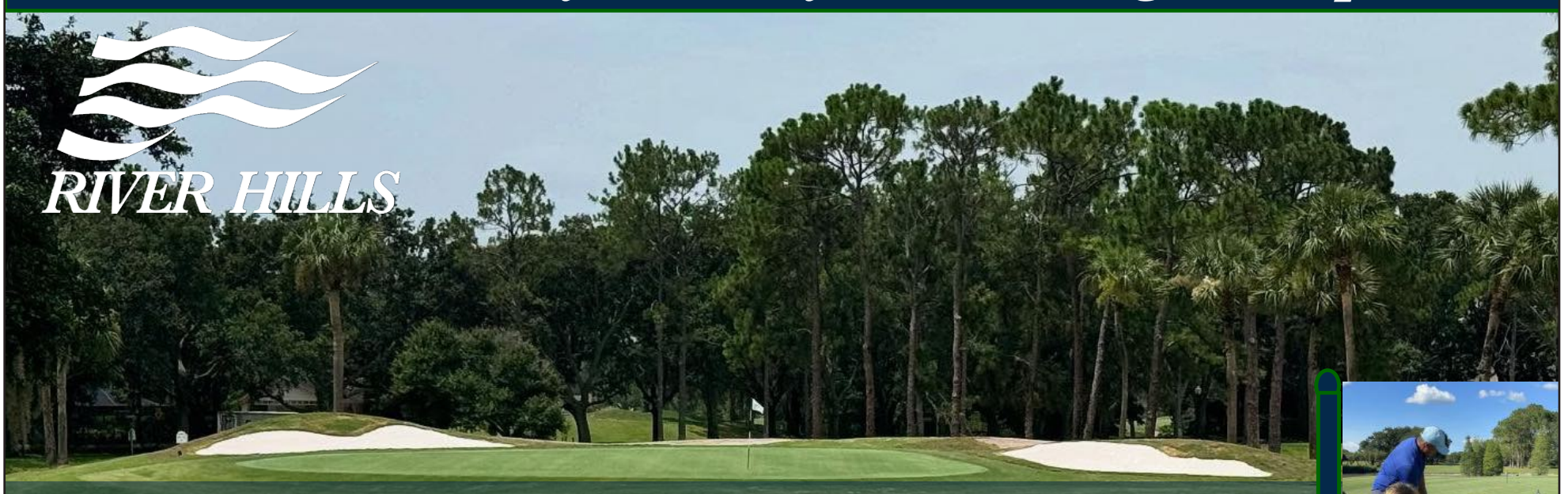
"Even the smallest amount of water — such as what collects in a bottle cap — can become a breeding ground," Pelham said.

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

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

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

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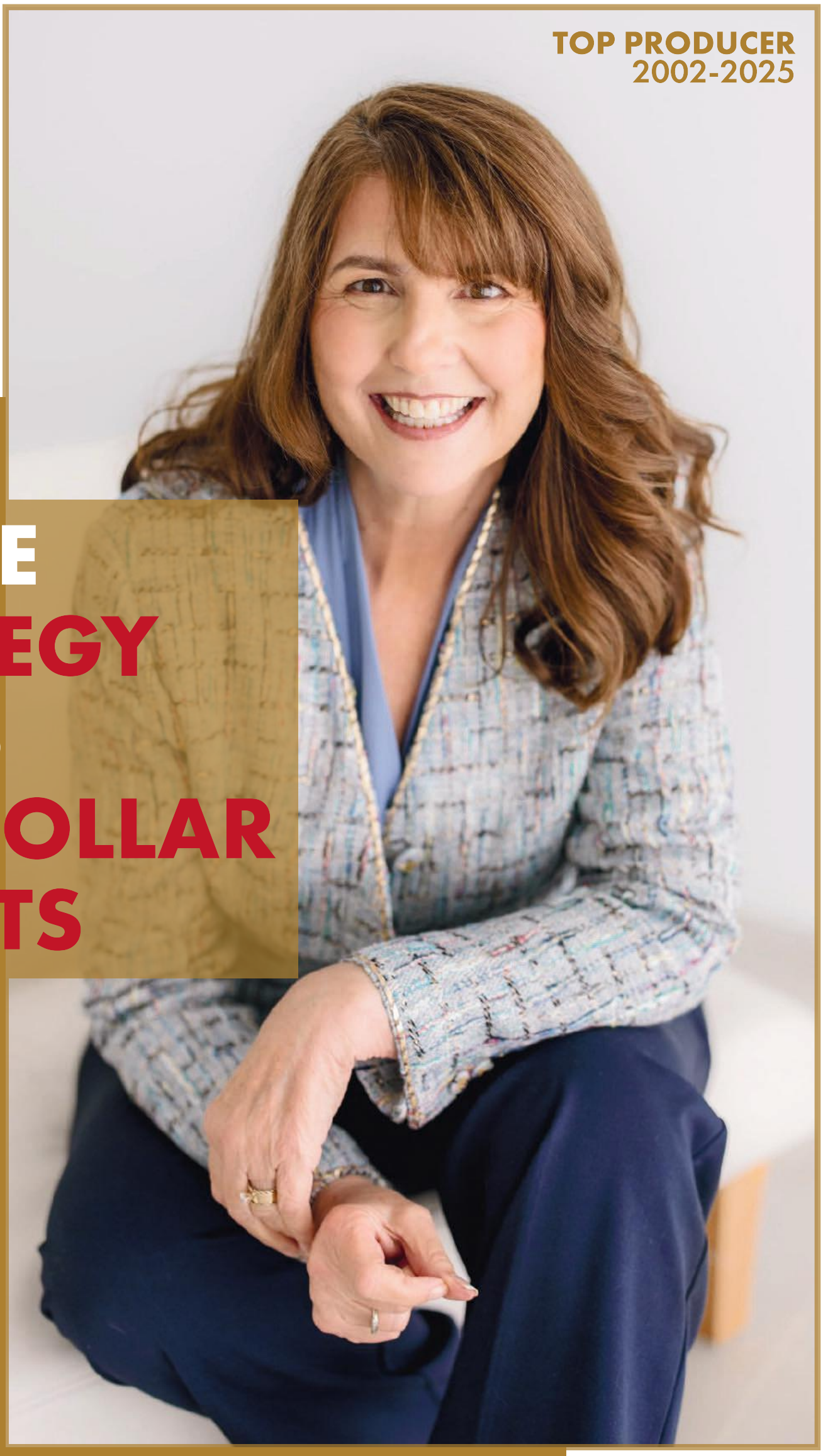
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TEENS TO LEARN 'MILLIONAIRE MINDSET' AT LOCAL SCORE SEMINAR

By Srishti Tripathi



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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IN AN EMERGENCY, CLOSE CARE MATTERS

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Staff Report



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

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

Montalva's winnings include a $15,000 grand prize and the title of Steak Master Series Champion. He bested six other finalists in the championship round held during a one-day grill-off in Orlando to become the ninth-ever winner of the competition.

A team member at the LongHorn Steakhouse in Riverview, Montalva has worked for the company for 25 years.

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

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

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

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

HGTV'S HOMETOWN DREAM TEAM CELEBRATES SIXTH SEASON SUCCESS

By Libby Hopkins



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

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



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

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

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

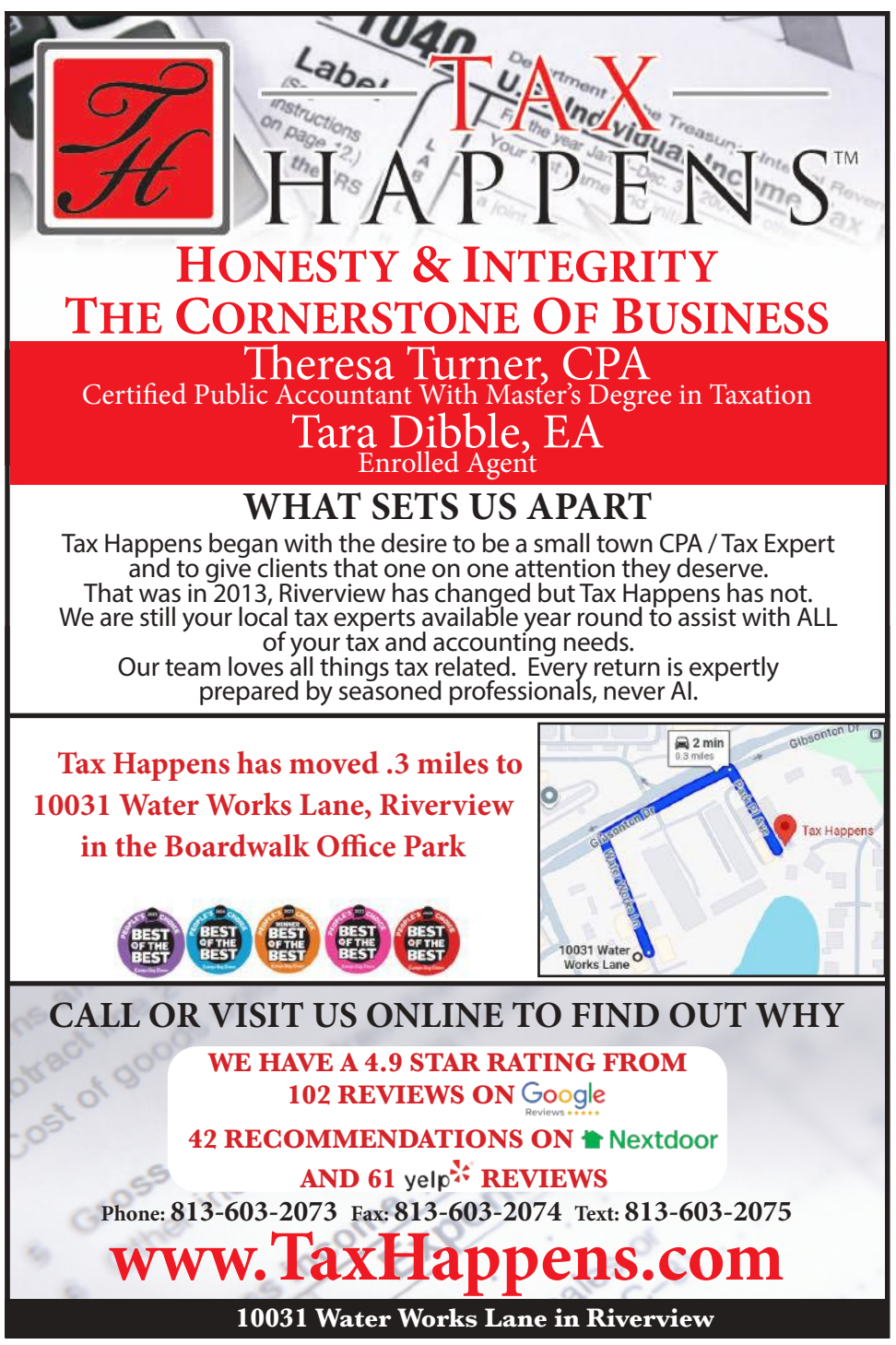
"We built this together from the ground up," Mika said. "We are local realtors in the area, and we do a ton of projects with our local community. Most of the things we do are not on TV."

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

"With a personalized approach, strong local connections and a commitment to exceptional service, we make it easy to turn your ideas into reality and confidently take the next step," Brian said.

For more information, visit the website at https://dirt2design.com/ or call 813-400-3910.





BLOOMINGDALE TEEN HELPS UKRAINIAN YOUTH LEARN ENGLISH ONLINE

By Abigail Dumas



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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









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TAMPA BAY RODEO THUNDERS INTO COUNTY FAIRGROUNDS

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

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

For more information and tickets, please visit our website.

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

By Kelly Wise Valdes



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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JOHN WESLEY COMES HOME TO PERFORM WITH BAND VERTICAL HORIZON

By Brian Bokor

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

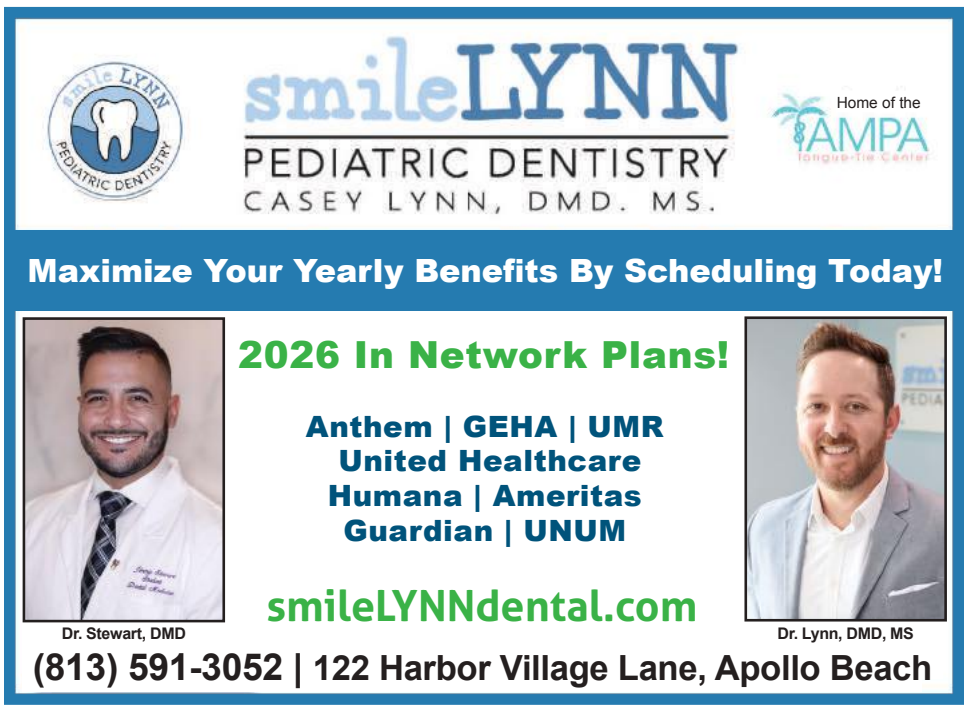
Along the way, Wesley developed friendships with many of rock's most respected artists, including legendary Rush drummer Neil Peart. Vertical Horizon founder Matt Scannell also worked with Peart, collaborating with him on the band's 2009 album, *Burning the Days*.

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

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

For Brandon, it's a chance to applaud one of its own. Want to learn more? Fans can follow John Wesley on his YouTube channel, John Wesley – The Journeyman Guitarist, where he shares music, behind-the-scenes stories from his career, guitar lessons and insights, and links to his official social media and Patreon.







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

By Brian Bokor





Reps from Homes For Our Troops and Lithia neighbors gathered to welcome Army Sgt. 1st Class Aaron Cornelius and daughter Gabby to their new home.

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

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

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

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

Features include a home automation package with voice-activated controls, smart locks, security cameras, smart blinds and voice communication systems.

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

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

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

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

"I know he was a little nervous, but I think he's super excited," she said.

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

Founded in 2004, Homes For Our Troops builds specially adapted custom homes to help injured post-9/11 veterans rebuild their lives.

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

By Libby Hopkins



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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





BONNET SPRINGS PARK OFFERS ULTIMATE SCREEN-FREE ESCAPE

By Srishti Tripathi



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

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

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

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

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





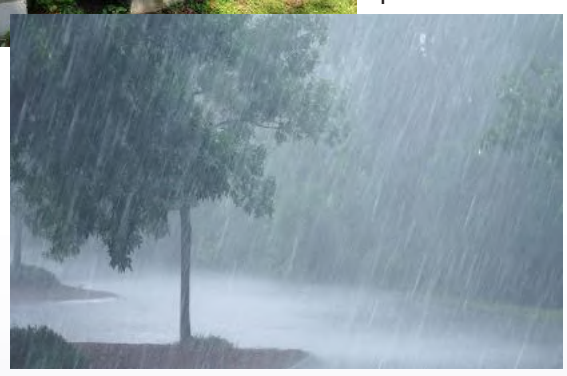




GET THE DIRT: RAIN HAS ARRIVED!

BY LYNN BARBER, URBAN HORTICULTURE AGENT





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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

By Ella Baroni



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



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

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

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

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

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

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EVERY MONTH AT 6:30 PM

FOURTH WEDNESDAY OF
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alzheimer's association

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SESCO CEMENT OPENS NEW IMPORT TERMINAL AT PORT TAMPA BAY

By Brian Bokor



Photo Courtesy of SESCO Cement

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MAJOR SCHOOL SUMMER UPGRADES UNDERWAY ACROSS COUNTY

By Superintendent Van Ayres



A Letter From The SUPERINTENDENT of Hillsborough County Public Schools

Van Ayres

While students and families enjoy a well-earned summer break, Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) is hard at work transforming campuses across the district. Funded through the voter-approved half-penny sales tax and state capital dollars, dozens of projects are underway to ensure students return to safe, modern and engaging learning environments this fall.

Summer improvements include air conditioning upgrades, drainage repairs and refreshed media centers. Below are some of the schools receiving air conditioning repairs or replacements:

- Alafia Elementary School – $7.1 million, air conditioning repair/replacement
- Apollo Beach K-8 School – $3.6 million, air conditioning repair/replacement
- Armwood High School – $11.5 million, air conditioning repair/replacement
- Stowers Elementary School – $4.3 million, air conditioning repair/replacement
- Turkey Creek Middle School – $8.9 million, air conditioning repair/replacement

Construction is also progressing on major long-term projects across the district. Most recently, HCPS celebrated a topping-off ceremony for the new middle school in the Wimauma area, marking a significant milestone. The school, scheduled to open in August 2027, will help accommodate continued growth in southern Hillsborough County and provide students with a state-of-the-art learning environment.

These improvements go beyond bricks and mortar. Updated, well-maintained schools foster student engagement, support academic success and build pride among students, staff and families. Creating safe, comfortable and inspiring spaces remains a top priority as the district prepares for the upcoming school year.

These investments are made possible through the continued support of Hillsborough County voters and taxpayers. As of May 31, 2026, the half-penny sales tax has generated more than $1.33 billion, with more than $1.29 billion already invested in school improvement projects. Notably, more than $704 million has been awarded to local businesses, ensuring these dollars also strengthen the local economy.

To learn more about current projects and how the half-penny sales tax continues to support school improvements, visit https://www.hillsboroughschools.org/page/half-penny-sales-tax-referendum.



HIGH 5 MAIN CAMPUS | 7AM - 6PM

405 Beverly Blvd, Brandon, FL, 33511

- 1-TIME REGISTRATION FEE - **$40**
- **$175/WEEK** | MONDAY - FRIDAY

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OFF-SITE CAMPUS | 7AM - 6PM

Bevis Elementary School - 5720 Osprey Ridge Dr, Lithia, FL 33547

- 1-TIME REGISTRATION FEE - **$30**
- **$90/WEEK** | MONDAY - THURSDAY

**Pools and field trips NOT included at the offsite location*

SUMMER FUN INCLUDES:

- POOLS/DIVING BOARDS (MAIN CAMPUS)
- ON-SITE FIELD TRIPS (MAIN CAMPUS)
- GAMERS GROTTO
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www.high5inc.org/camp

Sun City Legion Post, Music Bingo, Trivia Night & More...

Compiled by Jenny Bennett
jbennett@ospreyobserver.com

Trivia Night Benefitting Seeds Of Hope

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

Sun City Center American Legion Post 246 Meeting

The next meeting of the Sun City Center American Legion Post 246 will be held on Friday, July 17, at 9:30 a.m. in Room 3 of the Sun City Center Community Hall, located at 1910 S. Pebble Beach Blvd. in Sun City Center.

Installation of Post 246 leadership will be conducted by the American Legion 15th District commander. Also, interviewers representing the Veterans History Project will be available for personal interviews. This is a great opportunity for any veteran to have their story recorded for review by future generations.

Following the meeting, Mission BBQ will host a barbecue in the pavilion at the horseshoe courts located directly behind the community hall.

As usual, coffee and donuts will be available at 9 a.m. (social time). All veterans, spouses and veterans' caregivers are welcome. For more information, call Paul Wheat at 813-391-7309 or email pawheatjr@aol.com.

Music Bingo Fundraiser

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

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

The Gathering 2026

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

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

- Local: advancing workforce development, youth empowerment and community stability in the Tampa Bay region.
- National: strengthening church collaboration and cross-sector partnerships.
- Global: expanding a unified movement built on five pillars of focus.

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

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

Celebrate America's Birthday At The Council Growers Garden Center

The Council Growers Garden Center, located at 3226 24th St. SE in Ruskin, is helping you to celebrate America's 250th birthday by giving you 'council cash.' For every $76 you spend between Wednesday, July 1, and Saturday, July 11, it will give you a $17 voucher to use at a future date. The voucher is good for a wide variety of items, including green goods, hardscape items and pottery.

DUCKS UNLIMITED HONORS MOSAIC WITH THE CONSERVATION AWARD

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Learn more at www.ducks.org.





MIRACLE BABY INSPIRES WHILE ON HIS PEDIATRIC AIRWAY JOURNEY

By Libby Hopkins



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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







OH SO RUSTIC MARKET KICKS OFF VIBRANT SUMMER SEASON

By Srishti Tripathi



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TAKING EDUCATION NEXT LEVEL WITH STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS

By Jamie Lu



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

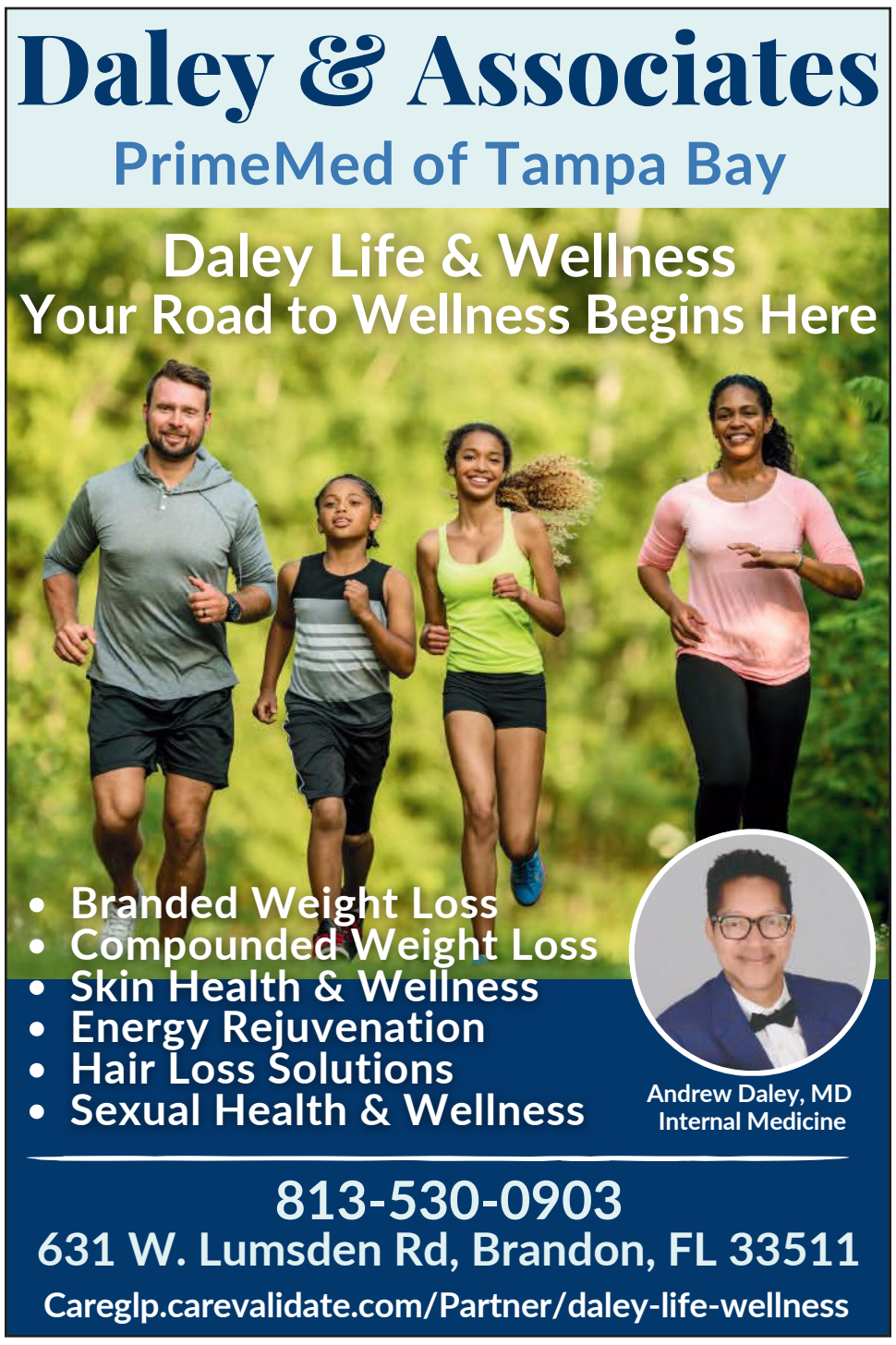
Furthermore, some schools and third-party organizations offer study abroad programs for visiting students, so your options aren't limited to the school that you attend.

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

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

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

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







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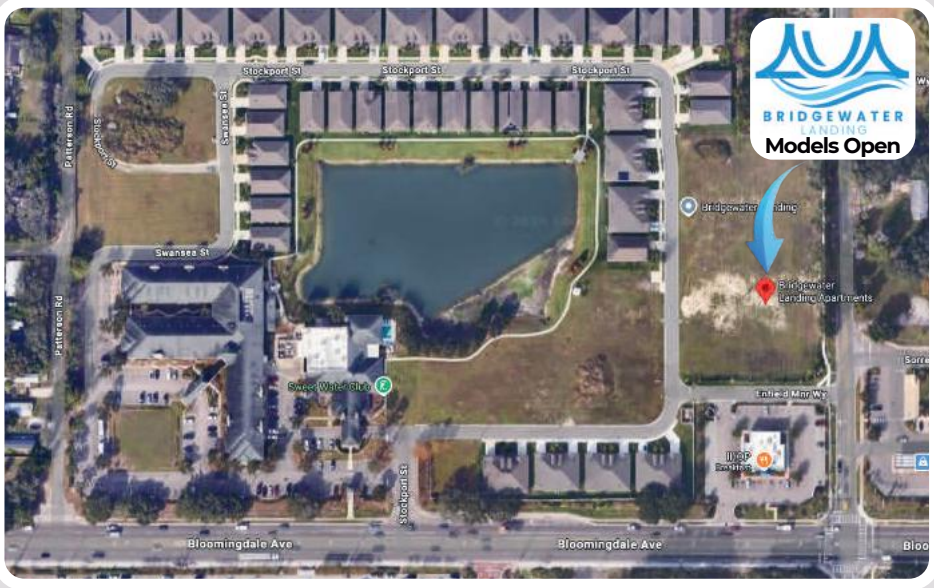
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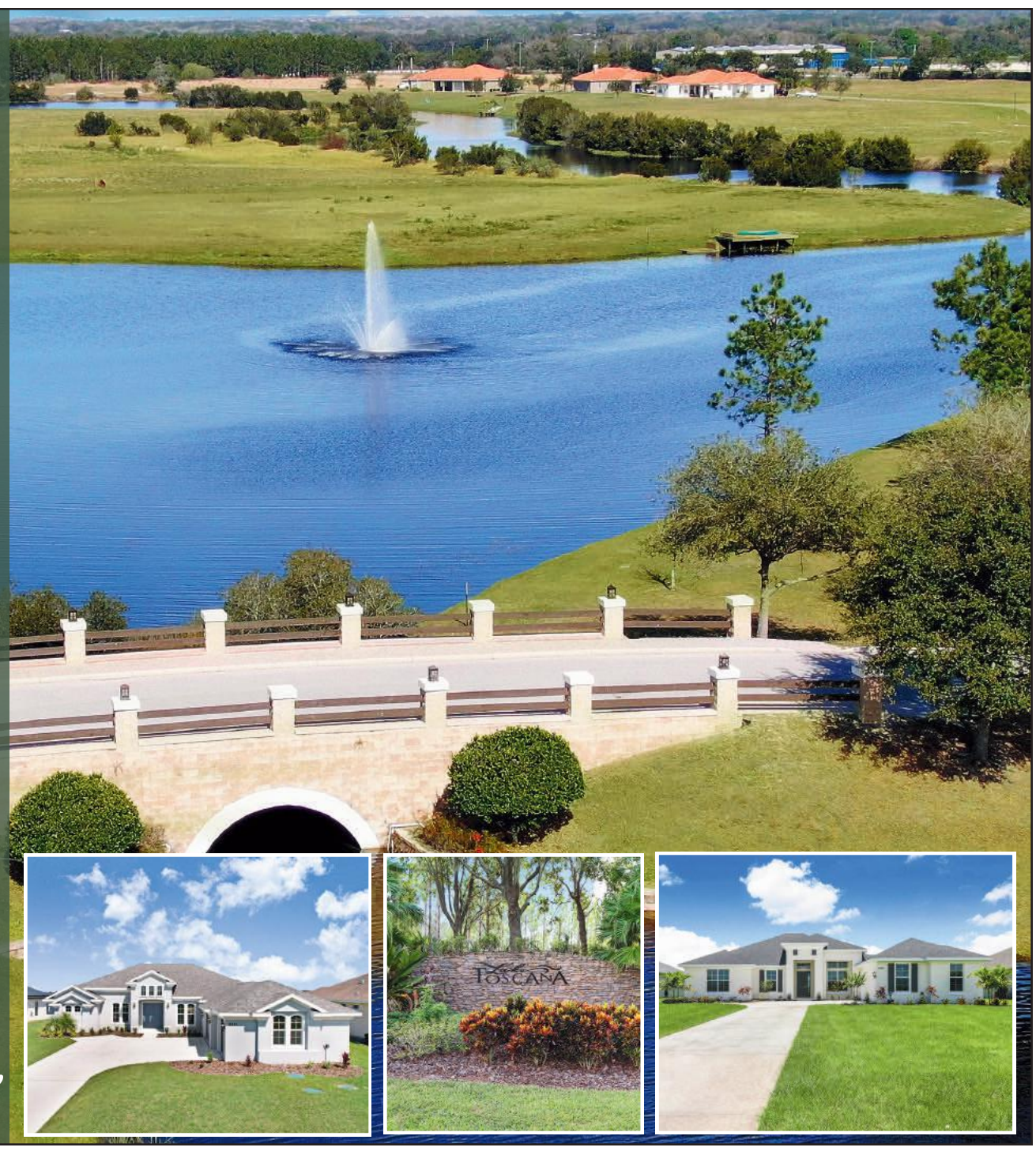
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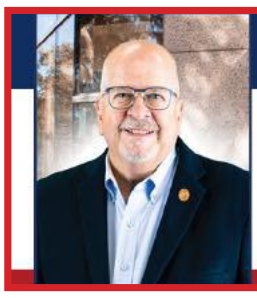


MEET YOUR CANDIDATES

SPECIAL SECTION INSIDE

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

Staff Report



FROM THE DESK OF...

Craig Latimer
Supervisor of Elections

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

Are You Ready To Vote?

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

Primary Election Dates & Deadlines

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

YOUR VOTE COUNTS

REQUESTING A VOTE BY MAIL BALLOT IS EASY:

1. Online: Vote By Mail Ballot Request
2. By Phone: (813) 744-5900
3. By Fax: (813) 744-5843
4. In Person: at any of our Supervisor of Elections

REQUESTING VOTE BY MAIL FOR YOURSELF, YOU MUST OFFICES

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



Understanding Primaries

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

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

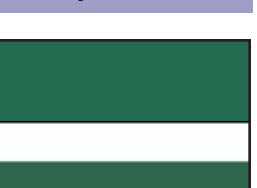
There will be three different ballots: a Republican ballot, a Democratic ballot and a nonpartisan ballot. Nonpartisan judicial and school board races will be on everyone's ballot, and voters in State Senate District 16, State House District 62 and State House District 63 will have a Universal Primary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

VOTE EARLY

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

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

Legislative Updates For 2026 — What's Changed?



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

What Hasn't Changed?

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

The Last Word

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

POLITICALLY SPEAKING

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER DISTRICT 2



Brittany Lyssy
www.votebrittanylyssy.com



Daniela Simic
www.danielaforschools.com



Chris Taylor
www.electchristaylor.com

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER DISTRICT 6



Kenneth Gay
www.votekennethgay.com



Sally Harris Williamson
www.sallyharris.org



Karen Perez
www.keepkarenperez.com



COUNTY COMMISSIONER DISTRICT 3



Twanda E. Bradley
www.votetwandabradley district3.com



Gwen Myers
www.votegwenmyers.com

COUNTY COMMISSIONER DISTRICT 5



Donna Cameron Cepeda
https://donnacameroncepeda.com



Stacy Hahn
www.votestacyhahn.com

COUNTY COMMISSIONER DISTRICT 7



Aileen Rodriguez
www.voteaileen2026.com



Cindy Stuart
www.facebook.com/VoteCindyStuart

13TH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT GROUP 7



Luis Aguila
www.louieforjudge.com



Sara Peacock
www.sarapeacockforjudge.com



13TH JUDICIAL COURT GROUP 13



Nina McGucken Alvarez
www.electnina.com



Jim Wimsatt
www.jimforjudge.com



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WHO'S GOT YOUR VOTE?

SARA PEACOCK
13TH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT, GROUP 7

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BRITTANY LYSSY
SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER, DIST. 2

Staff Report



Every parent wants to know their child is receiving the best education possible. For Brittany Lyssy, that belief is more than a campaign slogan—it's personal. As she and her husband raise their three young sons in Hillsborough County, Lyssy is committed to helping every student have the opportunity to learn, grow, and succeed.

A lifelong Floridian, Lyssy believes the decisions made today will shape the classrooms, opportunities and future of our students. Her husband, a former firefighter who now serves as a physician, shares her lifelong commitment to serving others and strengthening our community.

Running for public office for the first time, Lyssy brings a fresh perspective shaped by her experiences as a mother, community volunteer and professional. She believes the best outcomes happen when families, teachers, principals and school staff work together as partners to help every child succeed. She supports high-quality educational options so parents can choose the learning environment that best meets their child's individual needs. Lyssy also believes schools should prepare students for success after graduation — whether that means college, skilled trades, military service or entering the workforce. Preparing students for success strengthens families and community.

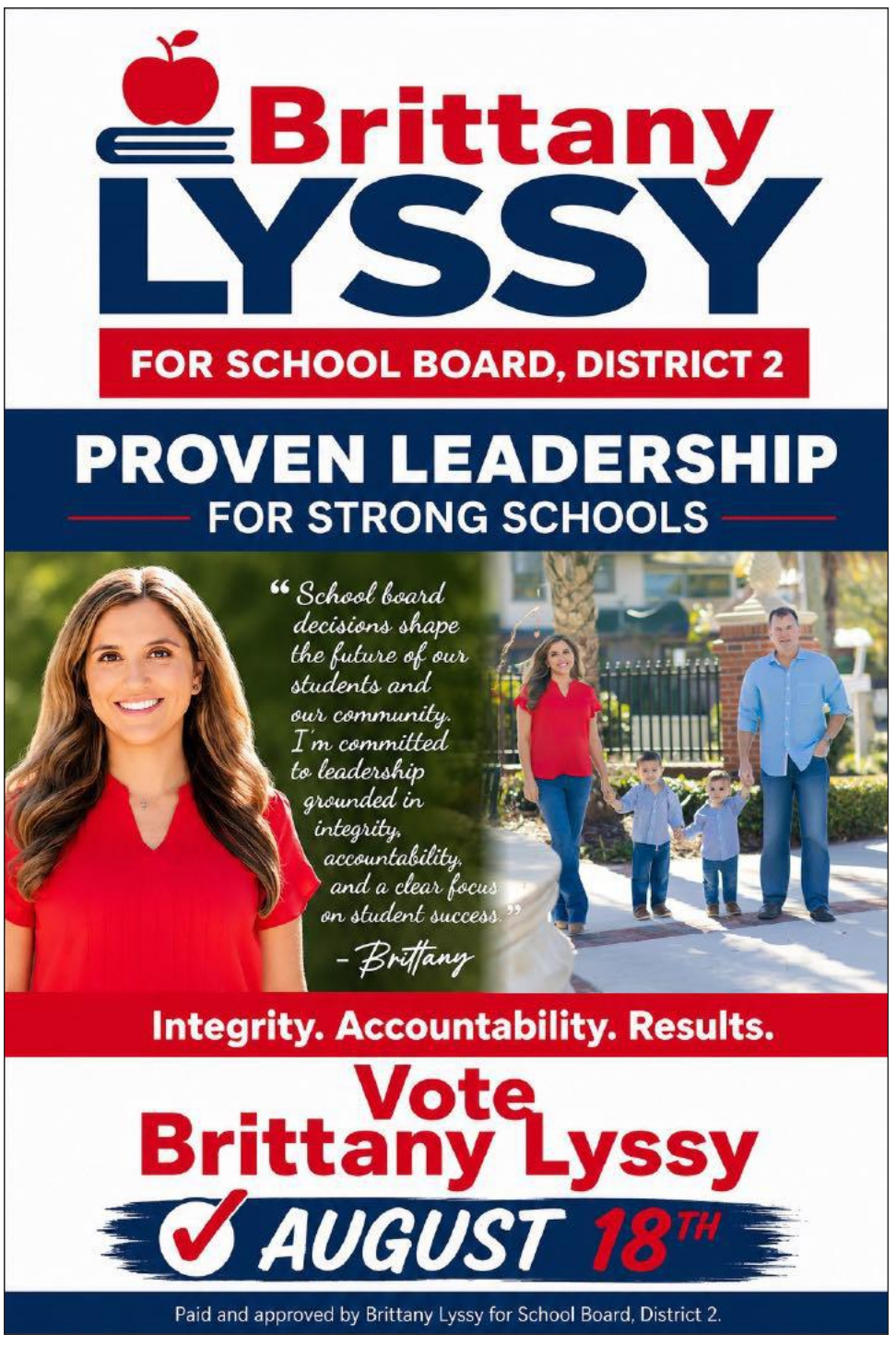
Lyssy earned degrees from the University of Florida and Stetson University College of Law and is pursuing a Ph.D. in public policy at Liberty University. Her professional experience in law and public policy has provided her firsthand experience with analyzing complex issues, understanding budgets and governance and working with school board leaders on ethics, transparency and effective decision-making. She understands that every school board decision directly impacts students, teachers, families and taxpayers.

Her community involvement includes the Junior League of Tampa, the American Cancer Society and service on the City of Tampa Citizens Advisory Budget and Finance Committee.

Lyssy's priorities include strengthening literacy, providing responsible fiscal oversight, increasing transparency and encouraging meaningful parental involvement. She believes the school board should conduct its business with integrity, transparency and accountability because families, educators and taxpayers deserve leadership they can trust.

Vote Brittany Lyssy for Hillsborough County School Board on Tuesday, August 18.





POLITICALLY SPEAKING

NINA ALVAREZ
13TH JUDICIAL COURT, GROUP 13

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

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

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

SALLY HARRIS
SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER, DIST. 6

By McKenzie Brown



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

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

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

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

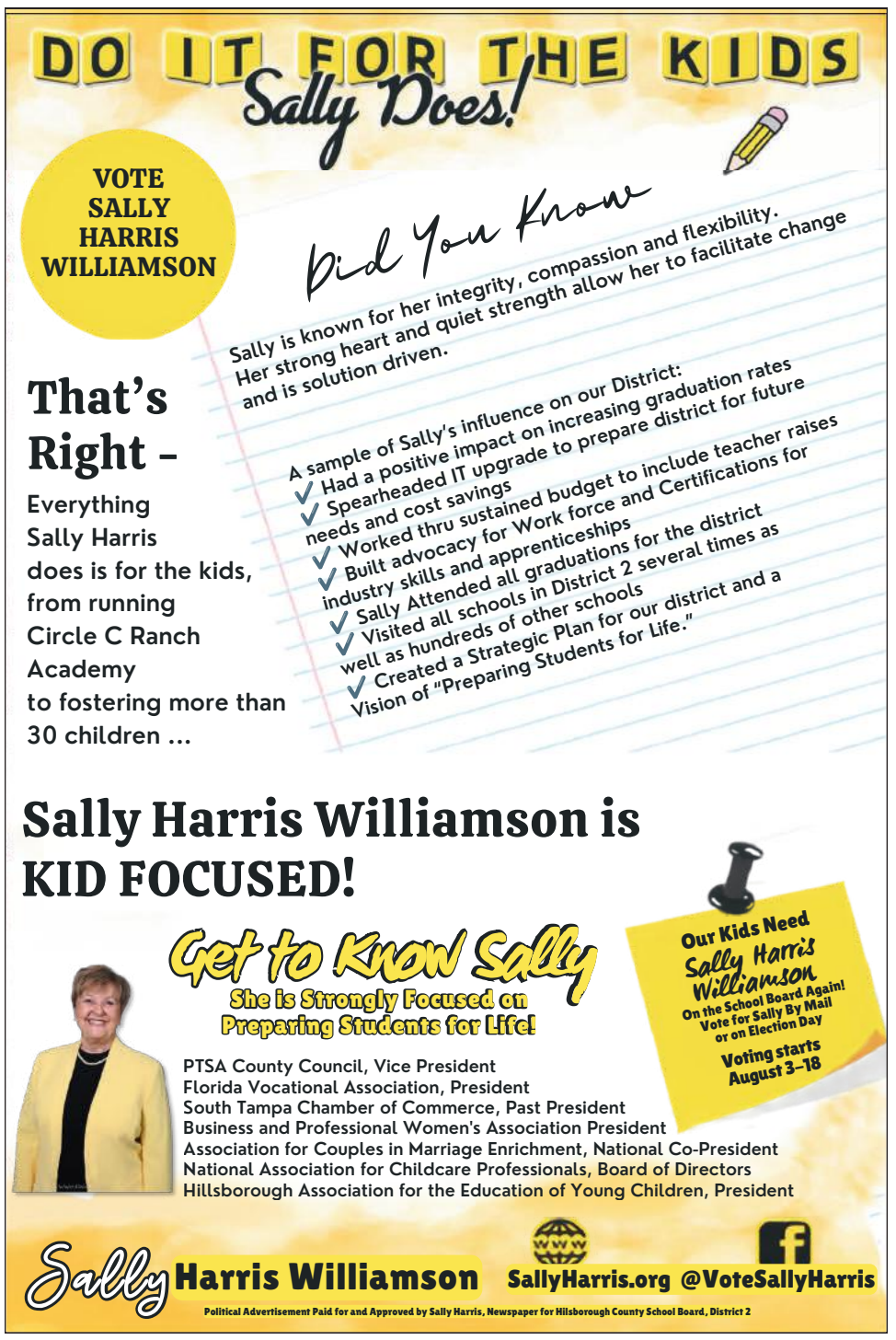
Harris said she decided to run because she believes she can still make a meaningful difference in the lives of students and educators. "I felt like I still had some great ideas and work that could make a difference."

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

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

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





WHO'S GOT YOUR VOTE?

JIM WIMSATT
13TH JUDICIAL COURT, GROUP 13

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

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

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

Please vote Jim Wimsatt for circuit judge.

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

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

Staff Report



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Families Matter to Jim Wimsatt

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

Attorney for 22 years

Super Lawyers: 2024 and 2025

Best Lawyers in America: 2023, 2024, 2025, 2026

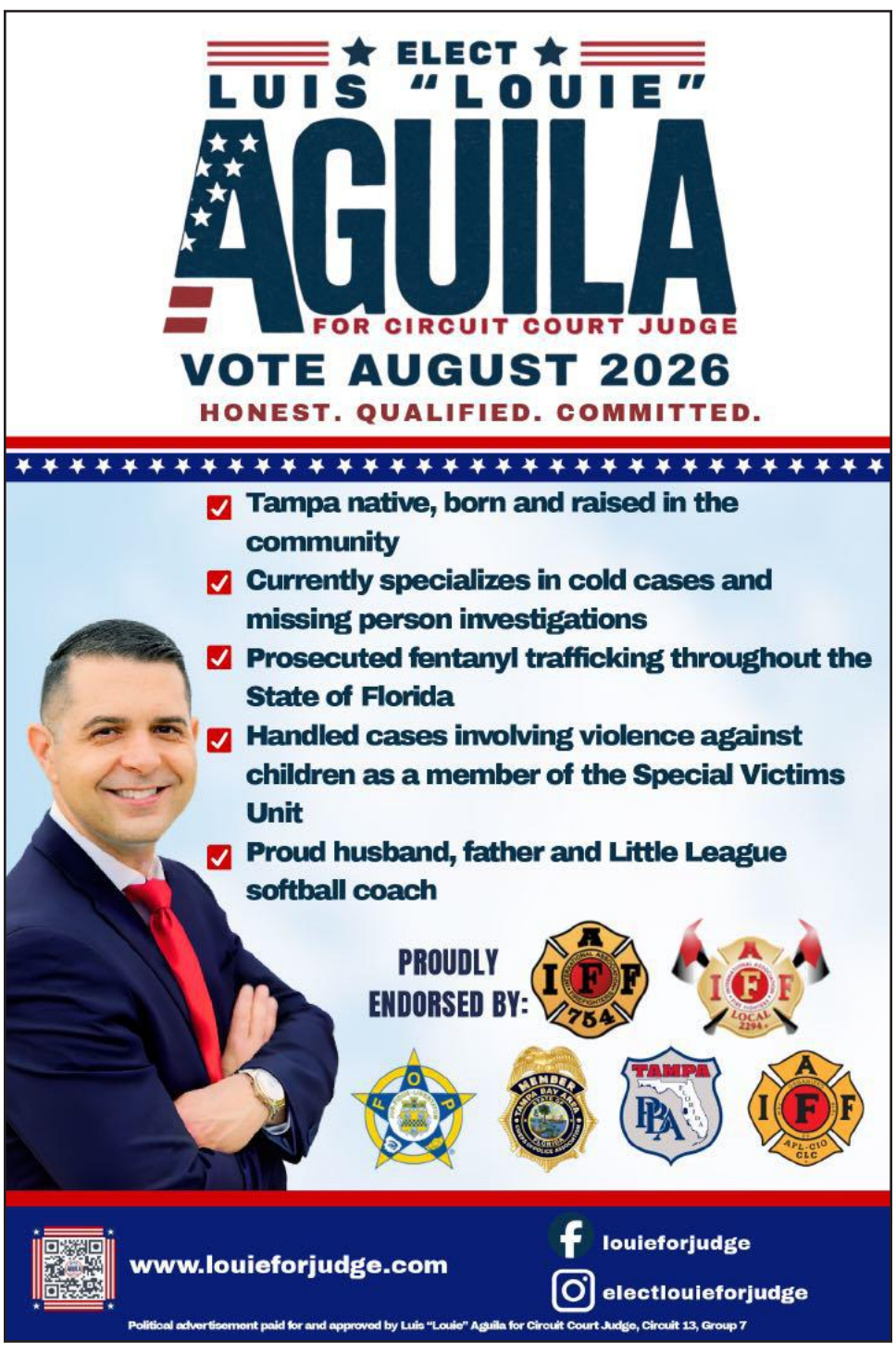
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POLITICALLY SPEAKING

STACY HAHN
COUNTY COMMISSIONER, DIST. 5

By Libby Hopkins



Stacy Hahn has called Hillsborough County home for 25 years.

"My husband, Jeff, and I raised our three sons here because we believe in this community and the opportunities it offers families," Hahn said. "For the past eight years, I've had the privilege of serving on the Hillsborough County School Board, overseeing one of the nation's largest school districts, managing a multibillion-dollar budget and working to protect taxpayer dollars while improving outcomes for students."

Throughout her service, she has listened, turned conversations into action and built partnerships that solve complex challenges. Before serving in elected office, she was professor at the University of South Florida.

"Public service has always been about giving back to the community that has given so much to my family, and I'm committed to continuing that service by helping Hillsborough County remain a place where families and businesses can thrive," Hahn said.

Hahn earned a reputation for fiscal responsibility, transparency and delivering high-quality outcomes for students. She is now running for County Commission, District 5, to bring the same disciplined, results-driven leadership to the community.

"I'm running for county commission to bring that same leadership, accountability and problem-solving approach to the decisions that will shape our community's future," Hahn said. "My priorities are straightforward: protect taxpayers, improve infrastructure, support law enforcement and first responders and ensure growth is planned responsibly so our quality of life is protected."

"Through initiatives like the Early Childhood Literacy Fair, Storytime Online, the Early Childhood Literacy Bus and community book distributions, we've helped thousands of children develop a love of reading before they enter the classroom," Hahn said.

"If elected, I want people to know they have a commissioner who is accessible, prepared, fiscally responsible and committed to making thoughtful decisions that strengthen our community for generations to come," she said. "When we work together, we create deeper, more lasting impacts."

To learn more about Hahn or become involved in her campaign, you can visit her website at www.votestacyhahn.com.



ARE YOU READY TO VOTE?

2026 PRIMARY ELECTION
Deadline to Register or Change Parties: July 20

Three Ways To Vote

Vote By Mail

Due by 7 PM on August 18

Mark your ballot at home, then mail it back or drop it off at any Early Voting site or any of our offices when they are open.

Request your ballot online or by giving our office a call.

Early Voting

August 3 – August 16
10 AM - 6 PM

Vote in person at any of 27 different locations in Hillsborough County.

Election Day

August 18
7 AM - 7 PM
Your Last Day to Vote

On Election Day, you must vote in the polling place assigned to your precinct.



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Craig Latimer
Supervisor *of* Elections

Edward Jones
> edwardjones.com | Member SIPC

How we work together:
Helping you reach your financial goals

My team and I will take the time to truly get to know you, since how we turn your vision into a reality is very unique to you. I'll work with you to create a personalized financial strategy that includes advice, tools and resources to help you achieve your financial goals.

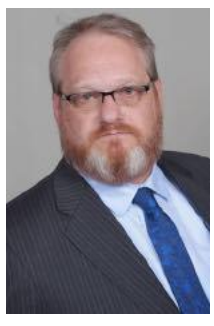
I'll do this in three important steps:

1. **Understanding what's important to you**
   Your strategy should be personalized. So, before I make a recommendation, we'll work closely together to understand what is most important to you, including your goals, comfort with risk and how you'd prefer to work together.
2. **Using an established process to build your personalized financial strategies**
   I use an established 5-step Process, incorporating what's important to you, to develop a personalized strategy using our advice, guidance and advanced tools. Our 5-step Process helps me fully understand what is most important to you and then create a personalized and actionable financial strategy.
3. **Partnering together over time to help keep you on track**
   Markets, interest rates and life's priorities may change, but our relationship and my commitment to helping you achieve your goals won't. I'll make sure I'm with you every step of the way by:
   - Providing regular reviews and updates
   - Identifying timely risks and opportunities
   - Helping you keep your emotions in check during market volatility
   - Helping you prepare for the unexpected

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Edited by: Jenny Bennett

EYE ON BUSINESS

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

D1 Training Opens In Brandon

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

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

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



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

AdventHealth Welcomes New Generation Of Physicians In White Coat Ceremony

AdventHealth's West Florida Division officially welcomed its newest class of resident physicians during its annual White Coat Ceremony The ceremony marked an important milestone as dozens of physicians-in-training from AdventHealth Tampa, AdventHealth Wesley Chapel and AdventHealth Sebring received their first white coats, symbolizing their transition into the next phase of medical training and their commitment to compassionate patient care.

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

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

Rosemary Real Estate Team At Flip Side Realty By Design

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



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

Dancing For Joy Now Providing After School Care

Dancing For Joy, located at 11691 Boyette Rd. in Riverview, is now offering after-school care. Students will be collected from local schools, and care will be provided until 6 p.m. The weekly rate of $180 also includes dance classes, homework assistance, creative playtime, educational videos and snacks, all in a safe and happy environment. Register now via its website at www.dancingforjoy1.com or call 813-610-0801.

Smylie Legacy Law Celebrates Move With Ribbon Cutting

On May 21, Smylie Legacy Law celebrated its move with a ribbon cutting with the Brandon Riverview Chamber of Commerce. Previously located in downtown Tampa, Smylie Legacy Law moved to Ware Boulevard, close to Adamo Drive.

Owner Scott Smylie lives in Valrico and is passionate about giving families the gift of order and peace instead of chaos when a loved one passes away. Smylie Legacy Law is an estate planning and elder law boutique firm that focuses on helping clients create and understand their estate plans. Smylie Legacy Law is located at 410 Ware Blvd., Ste. 818, in Tampa. Visit https://smylielegacylaw.com/ or call 813-667-6808.

Explore By Del Webb North River Ranch

PulteGroup officially celebrated the grand opening of Explore by Del Webb North River Ranch, the first Explore by Del Webb community in Florida and only the third Explore community nationwide. The grand opening celebration for the 413-acre, 901-homesite community took place on May 30 at the community's location, 11435 Emberstone Circle in Parrish. Located within the award-winning North River Ranch master planned community,



Christian Voice



Grace Notes

Valleys

By Debora Coty

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHAT'S IN A NAME?



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

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

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

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

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

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

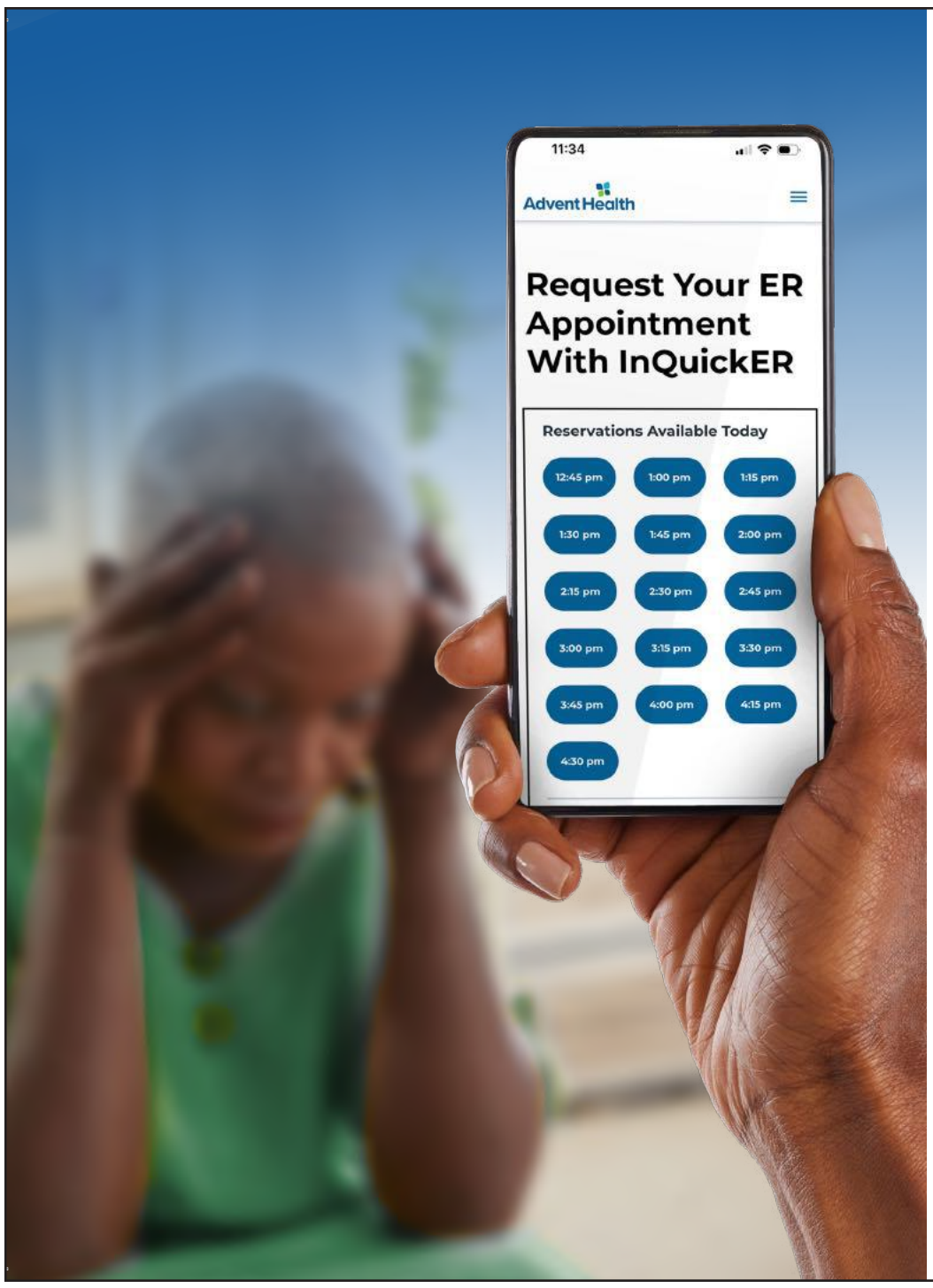
Maul is a wonderful name mostly because my father, David, and my grandfather, FW, lived with such deep integrity and depth of character and unrelenting witness to the grace and the goodness of God.

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

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



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



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AdventHealth Riverview

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

By Libby Hopkins



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



TRIPLE CREEK RADIO CONTROL AIRCRAFT CLUB



Photo by Phillip Brown Jr.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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FIND FOOD, FUN AND CULTURE IN HISTORIC SEMINOLE HEIGHTS

By Jamie Lu



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

By Libby Hopkins



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

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

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

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

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

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

Teaching music is something Cestero is something he truly loves.

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

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

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

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



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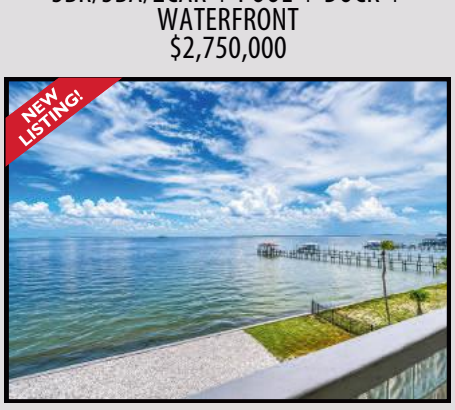
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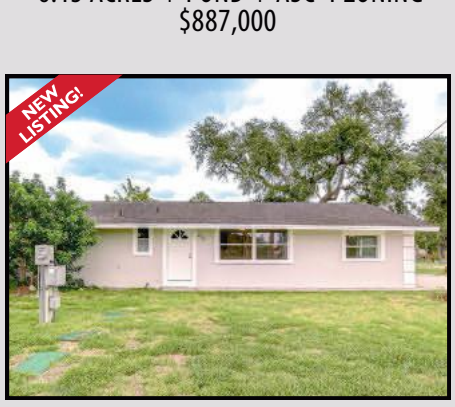
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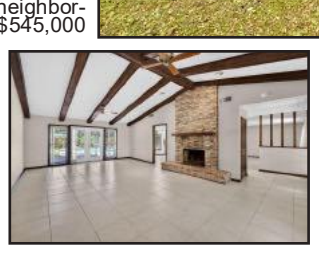


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