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# DESTIN Life

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## The 16th Annual 30A Songwriters Festival Hits the Area as the Number One Songwriters Festival in the Country

By WILL ESTELL

If you consider yourself a fan of great music and the talented songwriters who make the songs you love possible, you will definitely want to make plans to attend the 16th Annual 30A Songwriters Festival—especially since it is now considered the top-rated songwriters' festival in America—happening along our beautiful beach communities of South Walton and the white sands of Northwest Florida's Gulf Coast.

The renowned festival is celebrating its 16th year of Hooks, Lines and Singers January 16 - 20, 2025, with performances on presenting sponsor Grand Boulevard's main stage in beautiful Miramar Beach, as well as more than 30 other popular venues dotting the map of World Famous 30A.

This year's rendition of the popular festival includes headline performances by



Grammy award winning rocker Melissa Etheridge; the acoustic Americana sound of Amos Lee; the masterful harmonies and arrangements of The Jayhawks; the blues in-



fused Southern rock of The Devon Allman Project, and the multi-genre sound of Maggie Rose and Secret Sisters.

The long winter weekend

of music and fun has now become the most celebrated

**SONGWRITERS**  
*continued on page 2*



Welcome to the Club!

## The Destin Snowbirds Are Back

By CHRISTOPHER MANSON

*Coming together is a beginning.  
Staying together is progress.  
Working together is success.  
~ The Destin Snowbirds Club Motto*

Once again, the city of Destin welcomes winter guests and residents for a season of camaraderie, charitable efforts, and goodwill within the community. New connections are fostered, and old friends from all over reunite for social activities.

**DESTIN SNOWBIRDS**  
*continued on page 8*



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 Community

## SONGWRITERS

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songwriters' festival in the entire country and is revered by artists and music lovers around the globe. With more than 175 artists, encompassing over 225 performances at 30 plus venues, the 16th annual 30A Songwriters Festival most definitely has something for everyone. Whether you're a fan of folk music, rock, soul, country or anything in between, this festival covers it all and does so with some of the best writers and performers to ever grace the stages of these South Walton coastal venues.

The 2025 lineup is chock-full of phenomenal artists like Holly Williams, Charlie Mars, Shawn Mullins, Mary Gauthier, Jeffrey Steele, Hayes Carll, Lilly Hiatt, Tommy Prine, Grayson Capps, Chuck Cannon, Jeff Black, Randall Bramblett, Kelly Willis, Bob Schneider, Steve Politz, Adam Hood, John Driskell-Hopkins, Dan Bern, Will Kimbrough, Lilly Winwood, Ellis Paul, Darrel Scott, Livingston Taylor, Griffin House, David Ryan Harris, Emerson Hart, Certainly So, Abe Partridge, Chris Stills, Will Hoge, Chastity Brown, Vicki Peterson, Jennifer Lynn Simpson, Sara Hells, Jack Barksdale, Cat Ridgeway, Caitlin Cannon, Bradley Cole Smith, Nelson Nolan, Mike Whitty with The Sand Ole Opry, Cousin Curtis, Ryan Hood, John Cowsill, John Paul White, Ruthie Foster, Black Opry Revue, John Fullbright and numerous others.

Additionally, some top-notch writers and performers making

their first trip to our beautiful beaches to perform include: Charlie Starr and Benji Shanks of Blackberry Smoke, country sensation Brandy Clark, Chuck Prophet, Josh Joplin Group, Willi Carlisle, Bee Taylor Band, Langhorne Slim, Josh Rouse, Chris Knight, Jontavious Willis, as well as Josh Rouse, Paul McDonald, Jill Sobule, Kyle Davis, Tyler Ramsey, David Borne', Andrea Von Kampen, Beth Bombara, Anna Grace, Mallory Johnson, and one of my personal favorite new country artists, Jada Cato.

The popular festival takes place at venues spread across a span of slightly over 30 miles of South Walton beach communities, including the large outdoor main stage facility at Grand Boulevard in Miramar Beach. These live music hotspots include well-known restaurants, entertainment venues, hotel lobbies and cafés dotting the two-lane Scenic Hwy. 30A. And one thing is for sure, if you're hanging in places like these, near beaches like these, listening to artists like this festival brings, you are most definitely sure to have a fabulous time, that will undoubtedly find you hitting spot after spot for more music and fun.

I asked multi-hit Nashville songwriter Jeffrey Steele what keeps him coming back year-after-year: He simply lamented, "I always look forward to 30A Songwriters Festival, not only as another opportunity to do what I love, singing and entertaining, but also seeing the fans, my writer friends I don't see often, and



catching up and hangin' at the beach."

From the main stage at Grand Boulevard, featuring Saturday and Sunday's headliners to popular spots like AJ's Grayton Beach, Bud & Ally's, Water Color's Fish Out of Water, Boat House and Lake House to 30A Café to Rosemary Beach Town Hall, and Old Florida Fish House there is certainly no shortage of venues hosting great songwriters and musicians for this event. Since its inception in 2010, 30A Songwriters Festival has grown year after year, and is one of many endeavors made possible by Walton County Cultural Arts Alliance (CAA), a remarkable organization that adds so much to our coastal community through its artistic and philanthropic endeavors.

The festival is co-produced by Russell Carter Artist Management, which has been the driving force behind the talent booking since the festival began in 2010. Additionally, 100% of 30A Songwriters Festival's net profits benefit CAA's mission to advance the arts in Walton County through education, leadership, advocacy and the funding of special arts related programs within the community.

Festival Co-Producer, Russell Carter, President of Russell Carter Artist Management, has good reason to be immensely proud of the festival he helped to create.

"This festival began as a small event and grew quickly into a premier one-of-a-kind musical showcase for world-class songwriters. Our goal is to curate a festival that presents the absolute best in touring songwriters and performers. We want our audiences to experience musicians representing

diverse genres of music – jazz, blues, country, folk, Americana, and rock, with just two stipulations – they have to write their own music and they have to be really great at it!" said Carter.

### Grab Your Festival Tickets Today!

Full weekend passes start at only \$445, and premium seating VIP passes at just \$1,225. per person, and Premiere VIP passes, with special front row seating at the Grand Boulevard Headliners Stage for only \$1,600 pp. All of these ticket packages come in at quite the bargain considering you have the ability to see and hear so many remarkable songwriters and artists across your four days along the idyllic beach communities of South Walton. In addition to the weekend packages, concert goers can also purchase a limited number of daily headliners, one day and one night, and VIP transportation offerings. In other words, there are a lot of ways to put this year's 30A Songwriters Festival passes on your short list by visiting their site at [30ASongwritersFestival.com](http://30ASongwritersFestival.com). I hope to see you there. I'll be the guy in the ball cap and vest with a beer in his hand, his dancing wife by his side and music in his heart!

### Writer Bio:

*Will Estell is a writer, editor, and Northwest Florida media guru with over 700 published magazine features in an array of genres, including tourism, music, real estate, and automobile editorials. Will has penned one-on-one cover interview features with such well-known artists as Kenny Chesney, Jimmy Buffett, Alan Jackson, Darius Rucker, Styx, Amy Grant, Sara Evans and numerous others. He is the chief creative officer of Estell Hussey Media, LLC, and over the*

*past 26 years has been instrumental in co-founding twelve new magazine titles from concept to fruition – both for other publishers and himself – as well as serving as editor in chief for numerous others nationally. Originally from the backwoods of rural Mississippi, Will Estell is a father of three who splits his time between Destin and Navarre Beach, along with his wife, ABC 3 Florida news anchor, Laura Hussey-Estell. Will is a regular contributor to Life Media's family of publications.*



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# The Housing Revolution Starts Now Meet Visionary Bekah Manley

BY CHRISTOPHER MANSON

Bekah Manley is a holistic realtor, meaning that she looks well beyond the structure of a house. “I take the physical, spiritual and emotional into consideration,” she explains. “I go a little deeper than most realtors when it comes to finding an environment in which a person will best thrive. To me, a house is more than a structure. It’s a sanctuary for your soul.”

Bekah has called the Emerald Coast her home since 2017. After graduating from Auburn University (Manley majored in psychology, which she says she uses every day in her work), she visited her mother who had recently moved to the area. “And me being a broke, confused college student, it was either go back to my hometown or go to the beach,” she says. “I decided to go to the beach.”



The Northwest Alabama native has been engaged to Destin Mayor Bobby Wagner for more than a year now, and I jokingly ask if she has any influence over the city government. “No,” she laughs. “But we have been able to use both our jobs to create a positive impact on the community.”

Bekah and Mayor Wagner worked together shooting videos in Gulf County after Hurricane Michael, letting the rest of the world know that the area was rebuilding. She obtained her real estate license in 2021, and one of the first things Bekah did was ask her brokers:

“Why do we keep building the same thing over and over again and expecting different results?”

Bekah sought out contractors and architects with a passion for revolutionizing the building environment “from the ground up” as well as utilizing political connections to “challenge and change the building standards for the state of Florida.”

For the past three years, Bekah and business partner Joseph Beeman have been building THEIA Development to create sustainable, resilient

and affordable houses using advanced technology like 3D printing. “Due to recent hurricanes, people’s eyes have been opened” to new things, she says. “You don’t have to be an expert to know if something isn’t working. I believe we can change the standards. The ‘Oh, we’ve always done it this way’ isn’t working anymore.”

Bekah says traditional building methods are outdated. “Insurance rates are not going to budge until we have better products for them to cover.”

She is also working to connect with industry people interested in green initiatives. “I know they exist,” says Bekah. “I’m just trying to bring different experts – appraisers, lenders, builders, engineers – out of the woodwork who care about sustainable futuristic building practices.”

Bekah and her team are looking to launch the new housing initiatives here in the Panhandle, with a focus on areas affected by hurricanes. And then, spreading throughout the state and beyond.

“The next step for me is to build a physical product for people to touch and feel,” she says, “so they can see the whole process and open their minds about how to build in the future.”

“It’s not that scary. The big obstacle is that a lot of people fear change and things they don’t understand. Sometimes people tend to be a little closed-minded when it comes to (housing).” Bekah is working to create a dialogue and educate the community.

“It should be clear, in light of recent events, why I’m looking to change things. And have been.”



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Community



# Seeking Justice

## Destin True Crime Club

Murder is an unnatural act that fascinates many of us. Not that we want to commit it; but, we wonder about those who do. The rise in popularity of true crime books and streaming shows proves the unexplained fascination with murder – as long as we view it at a distance from the safety and comfort of home.

However, a few select people go further and seek out online forums and special interest groups that discuss specific murders.

The Destin True Crime Club is a dedicated group of people who get together to discuss murders. Members review various cold case murders and select one with the goal of solving the murder through extensive research, interviews (when possible) and public records. The information is then presented to the proper investigative agency, in the hope that they can move the case toward a solution.

In this journey, club members learn the principles of solid

homicide investigations. Local resident, Mike Yoder, who leads the group, is a retired FBI Supervisory Special Agent with 20+ years working on violent crimes, with eight years of that career as a Criminal Profiler where he worked on both single and serial murder cases, violent child crimes, kidnappings and FBI Top Ten Most Wanted cases. Mike taught at the University of West Florida as an Adjunct Instructor in the Criminal Justice program, and as founder, mentor and advisor to the Destin True Crime Club, he shares his vast knowledge of crime, interviewing, and investigation so that civilian members unfamiliar with criminal investigations are effective and well trained.

“Each case starts with researching who the victim is because we want to learn how a victim becomes a victim (**Victimology**),” says Mike. “We look for reasons that the murder occurred (**Motive**). We research how the crime happened, the circumstances of how the murder took place, when it occurred, and any forensic information we can find to form a theory on a possible offender (**Crime Scene Analysis**).”

He continues, “We look at the details of the murder, because each has its own characteristic (**Typology**). In many cases, we learn enough to understand the type of offender (**Offender Profiling**). We incorporate police techniques such as statement analysis and behavioral analysis to help us understand



the nature of the crime,” Mike says.

The Destin True Crime Club members learn to become true crime sleuths by digging deep into the research and learning how the information fits into the narrative of who committed the murder and why they committed it. “Our shared goal with the police is to seek justice for a victim that can no longer speak for themselves by holding someone responsible for their deadly acts,” says Mike. “We hope our efforts bring closure to the families and friends of victims as they mourn the loss of their loved one.”

“Human behavior is varied and complex, but most behavior fits into common themes.

It is about knowing the various themes and applying the correct one to the specific crime,” says Mike.

If you have an interest in true crime and want to know how to become a sleuth, please check out the FaceBook page at Destin True Crime Club. The group meets once a month to discuss its ongoing research of the case at hand and brainstorm ways to continue its research. “This is a serious, but fun, group of people who have the passion to solve cases,” Mike says.

Email Mike at [myoder0361@gmail.com](mailto:myoder0361@gmail.com) for questions about the club. Mike is also available to speak to groups on a variety of violent crime issues.



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Community



Mayor Bobby Wagner and PIO Tamara Young, PhD

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# "Reel Talk" from the City of Destin

## The Master of all Plans

This time, Mayor Wagner and I sat down and talked about the city's Master Plan. Merrill Romanik and Gianno Feoli from SRS presented updated plans at the last Council meeting.

**TY:** So far with the Town

Center Master Plan, we've had community meetings, a digital survey, meetings with the Chamber of Commerce and also the Publix Site Developer. Lots of talk, and we're ready for action.

**BW:** Action is the key to



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turning dreams into reality! The input we've gathered from the community and stakeholders has laid the groundwork for a plan that reflects Destin's unique charm and future aspirations. Now it's about bringing together key partners and pursuing grant opportunities to ensure this vision becomes a reality. Collaboration and smart funding will be the driving forces behind making the Town Center a vibrant and functional heart of our city.

**TY:** The idea of incorporating Destin's history is a critical piece to this and was seen in the Fishing Village concept. Among other clever incorporations, the latest renderings show a weigh-in picture spot, fish camp replica, bait and tackle gift shop, and an outdoor lawn and play area.

**BW:** Destin's identity is rooted in its fishing heritage, and these ideas honor that beautifully. These elements not only celebrate our story but also create inviting spaces for both locals and visitors to enjoy. I'm excited about continuing discussions on

how we can further weave our history into this plan, creating a meaningful and dynamic space that serves our current and future citizens. This is about more than design—it's about community and legacy.

**TY:** Another significant component was the recommendation of a 30,000 square foot City Hall and a 40,000 square foot Community Center, both near the roundabout. What's your thoughts about this piece of the plan?

**BW:** Placing City Hall and the Community Center at Morgan Sports Center is a chance to create something truly special. I see these spaces as more than just buildings—they're opportunities to bring our community together. Imagine partnerships with Destin High School or the Boys and Girls Club, creating hubs for education, recreation, and connection. My vision is a place that enriches lives and meets real needs, making Destin an even better place for our residents.



# Gumbo Anyone? Pursue the Roux at the 36th Annual Sandestin Gumbo Festival!

Friday, Feb. 21, 5 p.m. and Saturday, Feb. 22, 12-4 p.m.

## Kick-off the Party at Hammerhead's Bar & Grille

Friday, Feb. 21, 5-7 p.m.

Mark your calendar for the official kick-off of the Sandestin Gumbo Festival weekend with a low-country shrimp boil at Hammerhead's Bar & Grille and live music starting at 4 p.m. Tickets: \$35 meal only; \$50 with beer and wine.

Then tantalize your taste buds at the Sandestin Gumbo Festival celebrating 36 years as the Best Gumbo Cook-Off on the Emerald Coast! Yum! Yum! Known as one of the largest and most popular winter food events in our region, Gulf Coast restaurants will feature their top-secret gumbo recipes and compete for your vote. Sample the variety of gumbos and vote for your favorite as the "People's Choice" winner. Dark or light roux? Chicken, sausage or seafood? Celebrity judges will name the "Area's Best." This festival's atmosphere is filled with fun—live music while you taste, free kids' activities and restaurants from all over our area vying for your coveted vote.

And, the popular Bloody Mary competition is back again this year, featuring the best Bloody Marys at the beach! Taste some of the finest local bars' and restaurants' Bloody Marys and you get to judge those, too. Vote for your favorite and help contestants win the title of "Best Bloody Mary at The Beach."



Visit [www.SandestinGumboFestival.com](http://www.SandestinGumboFestival.com) for tickets and details, including a daily schedule of events and entertainment. General admission tickets are \$45 before Feb. 22 and allow tastings of all gumbo and Bloody Marys; \$55 day of. If you're interested in entering the event, visit [baytownewharf.com](http://baytownewharf.com). The event will happen rain or shine.

## Laissez Les Bon Temps Rouler!

### Save the Date for the Annual Mardi Gras Parade!

Sunday, March 2, 2 p.m. No Cost to Attend.

Mardi Gras is bigger and better than ever at The Village of Baytowne Wharf! Again, this year, the Fat Tuesday Baytowne Bash Parade and the Mardi Gras Dog Parade will join forces for one festive event. The Village streets will be filled

with costumed dogs and their humans along with unique and colorful floats, golf carts, vehicles, pick-up trucks and Mardi Gras cheer. Let the good times roll with dressed-up marchers in their Mardi Gras best and Mardi Gras music filling the air as four-pawed friends and parade participants shower parade-goers with a barrage of beads, moon pies and other trinkets.

Baytowne is looking for Krewes to join in the Mardi Gras festivities. To participate, register by Friday, Feb. 28, at 4 p.m. at [baytownewharf.com](http://baytownewharf.com). Participants who register by Feb. 7 will receive 5 points added to their score.

## There's still time to have your Winter Fun at Baytowne On Ice Now-Feb. 9

Lace up those skates and continue the magical winter spirit at The Village of Baytowne

Wharf's Baytowne on Ice. For locals and visitors who miss the cold and ice, Baytowne's seasonal ice rink is the perfect opportunity to share some of your favorite winter traditions. The ice rink is open through Sunday, Feb. 9. Hours vary daily. Check the schedule at [baytownewharf.com](http://baytownewharf.com). The cost is \$15 for 90-minute skate and \$3 skate rentals. Skaters must be at least age 3 and fit into appropriately sized skates. Children under age 6 must be accompanied by a parent or adult family member. Rent the rink for private parties and functions starting at \$300.

Call (850) 428-2736 or visit [baytownewharf.com](http://baytownewharf.com) for more information.

## Additional Fun Baytowne Wharf January events!

Let it Snow, Let it Snow, Let it Snow! at the **Winter Wonderland**, Saturday, Jan. 11, 9 a.m.-12 p.m. The Village of

Baytowne Wharf's Event Plaza is turning into a Winter Wonderland full of real snow! Bundle up and bring the whole family for a day of free, frosty fun!

On Thursday, Jan. 16, 5 p.m., join Baytowne Wharf for an evening full of free champagne and shopping during its **Bubbly Baytowne**. Sip and shop through the Village streets. Stop in various retail merchants as you enjoy a selection of premium champagnes. \* This event is free and for 21 and up only. The village will be open to the public during this event.

## Save the Date!

Walk or run with friends and family at the **Pink Walk & 5K Benefiting Fore Her** on Saturday, Feb. 8, at 8:30 a.m. Wear your pink and have fun while raising funds for breast cancer patients in financial need. Register at [www.foreher.org/pink-walk5k](http://www.foreher.org/pink-walk5k).





 Community

**DESTIN SNOWBIRDS**

*continued from page 1*

The Destin Snowbirds have events and meetings lined up for the next few months. The organization’s “big” registration event happened earlier this month at the Destin Community Center. Anyone that missed out can register online at [TheDestin-Snowbirds.com](http://TheDestin-Snowbirds.com). Registration is \$13 and can be paid via PayPal.

“This season promises to be an exciting one,” 2024-25 Destin Snowbirds President Jerry Reckman writes. Weekly meetings and “Thank Goodness It’s Friday” events feature live entertainment by returning favorites like Flash Flood. Additional activities include golf, bus trips, craft shows and a Valentine Dinner Dance.

Last month, the Destin Snowbirds participated in the city’s



Winter guests and residents are encouraged to join Fore Her for its 2025 Pink Run supporting Emerald Coast breast cancer patients Saturday, Feb. 8, at the Village of Baytowne Wharf at Sandestin.

Christmas Parade, sharing candy and spreading holiday joy. Before that, a ribbon cutting ceremony took place at the Destin Community Center, host to the group’s weekly gatherings.

The Destin Snowbirds are also looking for volunteers and a webmaster. Contact Dean Harper at 865-336-0421.

You can learn more by visiting [thedestinsnowbirds.com](http://thedestinsnowbirds.com),



The Destin Snowbirds 2024-2025 President Jerry Reckman

and their Facebook page, The Destin Snowbirds, where more than 8,000 members share photos, recommendations and upcoming events. Reckman calls it “a great source of information about the surrounding area.”

**Upcoming Events:**

**Jan. 14 Snowbird Meeting**

Destin Community Center, 101 Stahlman Avenue, Destin, 10 a.m.

Musician Rich McDuff, a favorite from his frequent appearances at the Destin and Pensacola locations of McGuire’s Irish Pub, provides the entertainment.

**Jan. 21 Snowbird Meeting**

Destin Community Center, 10 a.m.  
Todd Herendeen performs.

**Jan. 21 Thank Goodness It’s Tuesday**

LuLu’s, 4807 Legendary Marina Drive, Destin, 3-6 p.m.  
Admission is \$5 per person at the door. Dance to the music of

Todd Herendeen and enjoy special drink pricing.

**Jan. 27 Harbor Cruise**

Contact: Steve Ericson, 612-360-7584, [slericson@yahoo.com](mailto:slericson@yahoo.com)

**Jan. 28 Snowbird Meeting**

Destin Community Center, 10 a.m.

The 16-piece Hashtag Swing Band – a group that includes professional musicians, music educators and jazz lovers – plays favorites from the Big Band/Swing era.

**Jan. 30 Free Jazz Concert**

Fudpucker’s Beachside Bar & Grill, 20001 Emerald Coast Parkway, Destin, 7 p.m.

The Hashtag Swing Band wraps up a busy week. Doors open at 6 p.m., and cash bar, entrée, appetizer and dessert options will be available during the performance.

**Feb. 4 Snowbird Meeting**

Destin Community Center, 10 a.m.

Enjoy the soulful vocals of local favorite Michael Bethea.

**Feb. 4 Thank Goodness It’s Tuesday**

LuLu’s, 4807 Legendary Marina Drive, Destin, 3-6 p.m.

Admission is \$5 per person at the door. Enjoy the formidable vocal talents of Michael Bethea, dance the afternoon away, and enjoy special drink pricing.

*Continued on page 46*

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**PROCEEDS BENEFIT THE NORTHWEST FLORIDA SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA & YOUTH MUSICAL ENDEAVORS**

**100 COLLEGE BOULEVARD | NICEVILLE, FL 32578**

**A Taste of Mardi Gras: Food, Wine, Craft Beer and More!**

A Taste of Mardi Gras, this year’s Food and Wine Tasting Festival supporting the Northwest Florida Symphony Orchestra’s youth programs, will feature a jazz combo, tastes of 40 different wines, local craft beers and samples of cuisine from area restaurants, such as Aegean Greek Restaurant, Cafe Bienville, Magnolia Grill, Peppers Mexican Cantina, Papa’s Smokehouse, PB&J Bistro & Cafe and several others.

Scheduled for Sunday, Feb. 16, 2025, from 1-4 p.m. in the Raider Central of Northwest Florida State College in

Niceville, the event will also include a silent auction containing a variety of items such as gift cards, art, jewelry and gift baskets.

Sponsored by the Northwest Florida Symphony Guild, the event raises funds to support the Symphony’s youth programs, such as the Fifth-Grade concerts and the annual John Leatherwood Concerto Competition.

Tickets are \$65 and can be purchased by calling the Mattie Kelly box office at 850-729-6000 or online at [www.MattieKellyArtsCenter.org](http://www.MattieKellyArtsCenter.org).



# Cali's To Do In Destin! JANUARY 2025

**January Events Every Day:**  
**Baytowne on Ice** | Hours vary daily | Village of Baytowne Wharf

..... 6 .....

**Prop Builders Workshop** | 9am | Emerald Coast Science Center

**Free Beach Bonfire/SIN Night** | 5pm | Royal Palm Grille

**Trivia Night** | 6:30pm | Destin Brewery

**Trivia Night** | 7pm | Beachview Breakfast & Grill

**Singo Music Bingo** | 7pm | Sound-side FWB

..... 7 .....

**Singo Music Bingo** | 5pm | The Island Resort

**Karaoke** | 6pm | AJ's on the Bayou

**Trivia Night** | 6pm | Ricks Crab Trap FWB

**Karaoke** | 6pm-9pm | FatBoys Destin

**Bingo Trivia Mash Up** | 7pm | Wood Foot Beer

..... 8 .....

**Bonfire on the Beach** | 5pm | The Bay

Trivia Night | 5pm | Down Island

**Music Match Game Night** | 5pm | The Island Resort

**Run Club** | 5:30pm | Destin Brewery

**Rock n Roll Bingo** | 6pm | Fatboys Niceville

**Women in Business** | 6pm | Barnett Facial Plastic Surgery

**Music Bingo** | 6:30pm | Palm Folly

**Trivia Night** | 7pm | Boardroom Pub FWB

**Karaoke** | 7pm | AJ's Oyster Shanty

..... 9 .....

**Yoga Class** | 6pm | Destin Community Center

**Little Black Dress Night** | 6:30pm-9:30pm | Marina Café

**Fort Comedy Open Mic Standup** | 7pm | Downtown Music Hall

**Every Brilliant Thing Performance** | 7pm | Emerald Coast Theatre Co

**Ladies Night** | 10pm | McGuire's Destin

..... 10 .....

**Friday Martini Lunch** | 11am-4pm | Skybar Destin

**Fire Pit Friday** | 4pm | 30A Distilling Co

**Free Beach Bonfire** | 5pm | Royal Palm Grille

**Singo Music Bingo** | 5pm | The Island Resort

**Karaoke** | 7pm | American Legion

**Every Brilliant Thing Performance** | 7pm | Emerald Coast Theatre Co.

**Salsa & Bachata Dance Lessons** | 8pm | Bric a Brac

..... 11 .....

**Farmers Market** | 8am | Village of Baytowne Wharf

**Farmers Market** | 8am | The Landing FWB

**Farmers Market** | 9am-1pm | Grand Boulevard



**Farmers Market** | 9am | Niceville

**Goat Yoga** | 2pm | St Michael's Brewing Navarre

**Goat Yoga** | 6pm | Palm Folly

**Lil Jon & Yung Joc Pensacola Mardi Gras Mambo** | 6pm | Pensacola Bay Center

**Every Brilliant Thing Performance** | 7pm | Emerald Coast Theatre Co

..... 12 .....

**Beach Church Service** | 7:30am | Crab Trap Destin

**DJ Brunch** | 10am | Azul @ Harborwalk

**Melodies & Mimosas** | 2pm | Harborwalk Village

**Every Brilliant Thing Performance** | 2pm | Emerald Coast Theatre Co

**Sip & Paint** | 4pm | Palm Folly

**Trivia Night** | 6pm | The Wharf 850

..... 13 .....

**Trivia Night** | 4pm-7pm | Beachview Breakfast & Grill

**Free Beach Bonfire/SIN Night** | 5pm | Royal Palm Grille

**Paint & Pints** | 6pm | Props Brewery Hammock Bay

**Trivia Night** | 6:30pm | Destin Brewery

**Trivia Night** | 7pm | Soundside FWB

..... 14 .....

**YP Of Destin** | 7:30am | Causeway Coffee

**Singo Music Bingo** | 5pm | The Island Resort

**Pasta Making Class** | 5:30pm | Palm Folly

**Karaoke** | 6pm | AJ's on the Bayou

**Trivia Night** | 6pm | Ricks Crab Trap FWB

**Trivia Night** | 6pm | Beachcamp BrewPub

**Karaoke** | 6pm-9pm | FatBoys Destin

**Bingo Trivia Mash Up** | 7pm | Wood Foot Beer

..... 15 .....

**Destin Chamber's Tourism & Hospitality Luncheon** | 11:30am | Destin Chamber

**Every Brilliant Thing Performance** | 2pm | Emerald Coast Theatre Co

**Bonfire on the Beach** | 5pm | The Bay

**Trivia Night** | 5pm | Down Island

**Music Match Game Night** | 5pm | The Island Resort

**Run Club** | 5:30pm | Destin Brewery

**Rock n Roll Bingo** | 6pm | Fatboys Niceville

**Music Bingo** | 6:30pm | Palm Folly

**Trivia Night** | 7pm | Boardroom Pub FWB

**Karaoke** | 7pm | AJ's Oyster Shanty

**Harlem Globe Trotters** | 7pm | Pensacola Bay Center

..... 16 .....

**Business After Hours** | 5:30pm | Emerald Coast Science Center

**Yoga Class** | 6pm | Destin Community Center

**Little Black Dress Night** | 6:30pm-9:30pm | Marina Café

**Every Brilliant Thing Performance** | 7pm | Emerald Coast Theatre Co

**Karaoke** | 7pm-10pm | Soundside FWB

**Fort Comedy Open Mic Standup** | 7pm | Downtown Music Hall

**Ladies Night** | 10pm | McGuire's Destin

..... 17 .....

**30A Songwriters Festival Friday Martini Lunch** | 11am-4pm | Skybar Destin

**Fire Pit Friday** | 4pm | 30A Distilling Co

**Free Beach Bonfire** | 5pm | Royal Palm Grille

**Singo Music Bingo** | 5pm | The Island Resort

**Headphone Yoga** | 6pm | Palm Folly

**Every Brilliant Thing Performance** | 7pm | Emerald Coast Theatre Co

**Bette, Babs & Beyond** | 7:30pm | Destin FWB Convention Center

**Salsa & Bachata Dance Lessons** | 8pm | Bric a Brac

..... 18 .....

**30A Songwriters Festival Farmers Market** | 8am | Village of Baytowne Wharf

**Farmers Market** | 9am-1pm | Grand Boulevard

**Pet Adoption Event** | 10am | Pet Supermarket FWB

**The Science of Music** | 10am | Emerald Coast Science Center

**Karaoke** | 7pm | Palm Folly

..... 19 .....

**30A Songwriters Festival CARffine** | 7am | Maas Coffee Roasters Destin

**Destin Community Farmers Market** | 9am-1pm | Bealls Parking Lot, Destin

**Big Lebowski Themed Brunch** | 10am | Boathouse Oyster Bar

**DJ Brunch** | 10am | Azul @ Harborwalk

**Pints & Poses** | 12:30pm | Palm Folly

**Melodies & Mimosas** | 2pm | Harborwalk Village

**Trivia Night** | 6pm | The Wharf 850

**Karaoke** | 9pm | Outcast Bar & Grill

..... 20 .....

**Trivia Night** | 4pm-7pm | Beachview Breakfast & Grill

**Free Beach Bonfire/SIN Night** | 5pm | Royal Palm Grille

**Trivia Night** | 6:30pm | Destin Brewery

**Singo Music Bingo** | 7pm | Sound-side FWB

..... 21 .....

**Singo Music Bingo** | 5pm | The Island Resort

**Salt Strong Emerald Coast Chapter Meeting** | 5:30pm | Fudpucker's Destin

**Karaoke** | 6pm | AJ's on the Bayou

**Trivia Night** | 6pm | Ricks Crab Trap FWB

**Trivia Night** | 6pm | Beachcamp BrewPub

**Karaoke** | 6pm-9pm | FatBoys Destin

**Bingo Trivia Mash Up** | 7pm | Wood Foot Beer

..... 22 .....

**Bonfire on the Beach** | 5pm | The Bay

**Trivia Night** | 5pm | Down Island

**Pressed Flower Glass** | 5pm | Palm Folly

**Music Match Game Night** | 5pm | The Island Resort

**Run Club** | 5:30pm | Destin Brewery

**Rock n Roll Bingo** | 6pm | Fatboys Niceville

**Music Bingo** | 6:30pm | Palm Folly

**Trivia Night** | 7pm | Boardroom Pub FWB

**Karaoke** | 7pm | AJ's Oyster Shanty

..... 23 .....

**Little Black Dress Night** | 6:30pm-9:30pm | Marina Café

**Fort Comedy Open Mic Standup** | 7pm | Downtown Music Hall

**Karaoke with Mary-aoke** | 7pm | Soundside FWB

**Ladies Night** | 10pm | McGuire's Destin

..... 24 .....

**Friday Martini Lunch** | 11am-4pm | Skybar Destin

**Fire Pit Friday** | 4pm | 30A Distilling Co

**Free Beach Bonfire** | 5pm | Royal Palm Grille

**Singo Music Bingo** | 5pm | The Island Resort

**Salsa & Bachata Dance Lessons** | 8pm | Bric a Brac

..... 25 .....

**Farmers Market** | 8am | Village of Baytowne Wharf

**Farmers Market** | 8am | The Landing FWB

**Farmers Market** | 9am-1pm | Grand Boulevard

**Gumbo Competition** | 11am | Destin Community Center

**Grown Up Book Fair** | 11am | Odd Colony Brewing Co

**Mardi Gras Wine Tasting** | 5pm | Twisted Grape

**Trivia Night** | 6pm | The Wharf 850

..... 26 .....

**Destin Community Farmers Market** | 9am-1pm | Beall's Parking Lot, Destin

**DJ Brunch** | 10am | Azul @ Harborwalk

**Destin Commons Farmers Market** | 11am | Destin Commons

**Grown Up Book Fair** | 11am | Odd Colony Brewing Co

**Melodies & Mimosas** | 2pm | Harborwalk Village

**Paint Your Pet** | 4pm | Palm Folly

**Karaoke** | 9pm | Outcast Bar & Grill

..... 27 .....

**Trivia Night** | 4pm-7pm | Beachview Breakfast & Grill

**Free Beach Bonfire/SIN Night** | 5pm | Royal Palm Grille

**Trivia Night** | 6:30pm | Destin Brewery

**Trivia Night** | 7pm | Soundside FWB

..... 28 .....

**Karaoke** | 6pm | AJ's on the Bayou

**Trivia Night** | 6pm | Ricks Crab Trap FWB

**Trivia Night** | 6pm | Beachcamp BrewPub

**Karaoke** | 6pm-9pm | FatBoys Destin

**Bingo Trivia Mash Up** | 7pm | Wood Foot Beer

..... 29 .....

**Bonfire on the Beach** | 5pm | The Bay

**Music Match Game Night** | 5pm | The Island Resort

**Trivia Night** | 5pm | Down Island

**Run Club** | 5:30pm | Destin Brewery

**Rock n Roll Bingo** | 6pm | Fatboys Niceville

**Music Bingo** | 6:30pm | Palm Folly

**Trivia Night** | 7pm | Boardroom Pub FWB

**Karaoke** | 7pm | AJ's Oyster Shanty

..... 30 .....

**Crescedo! Kick Off Lunch** | 11am | Bijoux Destin

**Galaxy Gateway Ribbon Cutting** | 3:30pm | Emerald Coast Science Center

**Ribbon Cutting** | 4pm | 850Froyo & Kwench Juice Bar

**Little Black Dress Night** | 6:30pm-9:30pm | Marina Café

**Fort Comedy Open Mic Standup** | 7pm | Downtown Music Hall

**Karaoke with Mary-aoke** | 7pm | Soundside FWB

**Free Jazz Concert** | 7pm | Fudpucker's Destin

**Ladies Night** | 10pm | McGuire's Destin

..... 31 .....

**Friday Martini Lunch** | 11am-4pm | Skybar Destin

**Fire Pit Friday** | 4pm | 30A Distilling Co

**Free Beach Bonfire** | 5pm | Royal Palm Grille

**Singo Music Bingo** | 5pm | The Island Resort

**Salsa & Bachata Dance Lessons** | 8pm | Bric a Brac

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# From Hardship to Hope: A Story of Resilience and Renewal

By SHERRY JONES

Homelessness. It's a word we often hear, a situation we see, but one that too many of us avoid truly talking about. For some, it feels distant—an issue for “other people.” But what happens when homelessness isn't just a statistic, but a reality that hits someone you know, someone you love?

For me, it was personal.

I grew up in Fort Walton Beach, a place filled with fond memories and a deep sense of community. It's the same community where someone near and dear to my heart also grew up. He was someone who gave his life to caring for others—particularly his mother, whom he loved dearly and supported for as long as he could remember. But when she passed away, everything changed.

Grief is a difficult road to walk, and, for him, it brought more than just emotional strug-

gles. A tragedy occurred—a life-altering event that became the start of a downward spiral. When life hits you with an unexpected boulder, sometimes you don't see it coming. Sometimes, it rolls downhill, taking everything with it—mental and emotional well-being, finances, and stability. And despite his best efforts, he found himself in a place no one ever imagines: homeless.

I wish I could say this story is uncommon. But the truth is, it's not. For so many of us, there's someone—a family member, a friend, a neighbor—who has struggled with homelessness. It's not just a distant issue. It's real, it's painful, and it's closer than we like to admit.

Last year, during the holiday season, my loved one's story became a testament to the power of hope and perseverance. At his lowest point, he was referred to One Hopeful Place (OHP) by



a family member: me.

At OHP, he found more than just shelter. He found a team of compassionate, dedicated individuals who gave him the support he needed to start over.

Among them was Mike, whose kindness and encouragement made an immediate and lasting impact.

“I'll never forget the day I arrived at OHP,” he shared

with me. “It was cold and rainy, and Mike welcomed me with warmth and kindness. He talked with me about housing re-

*Continued on next page*

# 5

## Reasons to Choose Will Estell for Your Coastal Real Estate:

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**Only \$428,900!**





FROM HARDSHIP

continued from previous page

sources and what OHP could offer to help me rebuild my life. Over the next eight months, Mike continued to be a positive force—not just for me, but for so many others who entered OHP. That support meant everything.”

This guidance, combined with the extraordinary leadership of Donna and Liz—who many refer to as the “Mother Teresas” of OHP—gave him the foundation he needed to rebuild his life. He committed to saving money, accessing critical resources and working through the struggles he faced.

OHP, under the umbrella of Community Solutions of the Emerald Coast, helps par-

ticipants who are committed to changing their lives and becoming self-sufficient. With the help of grant money, OHP assists participants and veterans in obtaining permanent housing by covering deposits and providing essential items they need to rebuild their lives.

The holidays were a time of reflection and motivation for him. Surrounded by the generosity of the OHP community and their holiday efforts, he found a renewed sense of purpose. By the end of the year, his hard work paid off—he was approved for his own apartment, a place to finally call home.

Now, as the new year begins, his success story is a reminder of what’s possible when compassion meets action. Homelessness doesn’t discriminate. It can



happen to anyone—regardless of their background or circumstances. But with support, hope

and determination, a brighter future is always within reach.

To OHP, thank you for be-

ing the light in so many people’s darkest days. Your unwavering commitment to those in need continues to change lives every day.

To my loved one, I am so proud of your courage, your resilience and your determination to create a better future for yourself. Your story inspires us all to never give up, no matter how difficult the journey might seem.

As we move forward into this new year, let us carry the lessons of the holiday season with us. Compassion, kindness and belief in others have the power to change lives. Together, we can build a community that lifts each other up and provides the tools for success.

Hope changes lives. I know this firsthand.



Join us on Saturday February 1 from 1pm-3pm

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 Community

# Trends & Treasures!



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get your thank you notes for all the wonderful Christmas gifts! Always have some on-hand, too, for your birthday thank you's. Plan ahead and order a set of notecards, notepads, stationery or calling cards engraved with your name and monogram. A “save-the-date” card and a wedding invitation will be your guests' first impression of the special event. Baby gift thank you notes are a must after the shower or your precious baby is born. Frill Seekers Gifts will help you design and create special, beautiful stationery to match your style, look, feel and budget—an art in itself. Schedule a private appointment or stop by to review the incredible selection of 2024 custom, personalized stationery, thank you notes, invitations and more!

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## New Year! New YOU! Pure & Couture Salon

“It has been our pleasure to have had you all as our valued clients, friends and partners this past year,” says Adrienne Brackett, Pure & Couture owner. “We all at Pure & Couture hope that this brand, new year—2025—holds great success for your hair and skin.” Treat yourself to a colorful, trendy transformation and begin the year with “pure” confidence. Invest in good hair care products to change your hair game. Whether you're looking to grow it longer or have healthier hair, Pure & Couture has products to help such as the Renewal Remedies Treatment by Oribe. Pure and Couture's team of stylists and make-up artists listen to what YOU want your hair to look and feel like. They discuss YOUR preferences for makeup and personality and suggest options that

work with your skin tone, face shape, lifestyle and budget. With hand-tied hair extensions, color, styling, makeup, spray tans, a pampering facial or even a therapeutic massage or kinesiology, Pure and Couture wants a relationship with you! Offering curbside pick-ups and online ordering, too!

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## Meet the Top Realtor Brian Locicero, REALTOR®

Award-winning. Record-breaking. Knowledgeable. In fact, there are few people that know the Destin-30a-Seaside real estate market as well as REALTOR® Brian K. LoCicero. As a local, he has an exceptional perspective on the community and its development. Brian is a longtime resident and well-respected member of the community who will assure that all your real estate needs are met. He specializes in selling, listing and marketing unique properties, in addition to finding key locations for new or expanding businesses desiring to bring their brand to the Destin-30A area. Brian is known locally as the “go to” person to handle real estate transactions for individuals, businesses and lending institutions. He has his finger on the pulse of the market and can quickly analyze your needs to identify areas that best fit your lifestyle. As an elite Luxury real estate consultant with Keller Williams Luxury Division, Brian has continued raising the bar of excellence in the Destin-30A luxury home market. He has a well-established network to help connect buyers and sellers quickly and effectively.

Brian owes his remarkable success to his real estate acumen and detailed knowledge of the

Emerald Coast area markets; his aggressive advertising and marketing campaigns on behalf of his clients and the great team of professionals he has assembled to help clients through every step of their real estate transaction.

When you're ready to buy or sell property along Florida's Gulf Coast from Pensacola to Perdido Key, Navarre Beach to Destin, or Sandestin to Alys Beach, contact Brian at (850) 739-3800 or visit his website at [BeOnTheCoast.com](http://BeOnTheCoast.com).

## Welcome 2025 in Exquisite Style!

### Beyond Measure Fine Jewelry

Do you love diamonds? You have come to the right place! Specializing in the utmost quality diamond, gemstone and precious metal jewelry pieces, the Beyond Measure Jewelers' showroom is full of diamond and gemstone bracelets, rings, necklaces and earrings. Owner Ashleigh Woolly is passionate about exquisite and custom-designed jewelry. Celebrating all things jewelry, she especially is passionate about selling engagement rings, wedding bands and working with couples, because “it is truly special to help people celebrate one of the biggest moments of their lives! Beyond Measure had the honor of designing hundreds of custom projects this year! Congratulations to everyone who got engaged and married and thank you to everyone who trusted their custom projects to us,” said Ashleigh. “I am grateful beyond measure.” No matter what your taste, plan to be amazed. Stop by and dazzle your way into the new year. At Beyond Measure Fine Jewelry, a one-on-one exquisite jewelry experience is waiting. Booking your design consultations now where a one-on-one exquisite jewelry experience is waiting!

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## To Your Health! Thrive in 2025!

### CRYO850 Performance and Recovery Center

With this new year, it's time to put extra focus on your health... enter CRYO850! With a long list of science backed technologies for health, wellness and skin care for ages 8 to 80, CRYO850 helps you manage pain and inflammation, improve athletic performance, boost the immune system, increase metabolism, reinforce cognitive abilities, improve mood and sleep, detoxify and skin care. Try the Fire and Ice Experience for Cryo + Red Light (\$50), Chillax for Cryo + Compression (\$50), or combine all three for a Tri-fecta (\$75). Want more? Try the six-service Day Pass (\$99) or a Day Pass with a Friend (\$175). For muscle relief or weight loss, Chill & Sweat offers Cryo and the Cocoon Sauna Pod with full body relaxation. For respiratory health, Just Breathe offers Cryo and Dry Salt Therapy to clear the lungs and reduce infection and effects of COPD and long COVID. Fitness enthusiasts can Level Up with Cryo and the Cognitive Vision Training Board or try the Next Gen Fit Experience the try latest in wireless EMS training by Vision Body (\$50). More geared towards esthetics? A Cryo Express Facial builds collagen, smooths wrinkles and reduces teen acne.

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 Community


By JULIE A. MARTIN

When you live in a community governed by a Homeowners Association (HOA), you might feel like your options for homeowner's insurance are limited.

However, working with an independent insurance agent can help you find the right coverage that meets both your needs and the requirements of your HOA. For instance, some town-

homes are covered by a COA, Condo Association, and the Association assumes responsibility for the exterior walls and the roof of the buildings, so that the unit owners only require coverage for the inside of the dwellings, from the drywall in, as well as their personal property, liability, mold coverage, etc.

Homeowners Associations generally require their unit-owners to purchase insurance coverage that includes coverage for the exterior walls and the roof, in addition to coverage for liability and even flood insurance on that townhome.

An independent insurance agent is not tied to any specific insurance company. So, they can provide you with a range of options and help you choose the one that best suits your situation. They have the knowledge and experience to navigate the complex world of insurance policies and can help you understand the various types of coverage available. This is especially important when dealing with an HOA, which may have specific requirements for the insurance coverage you need.

An independent insurance agent can help you find the right policy that meets these requirements, while also ensuring that you have the appropriate level of coverage for your individual needs.

Furthermore, an independent insurance agent can help you identify potential gaps in your coverage that you may not have considered. For instance, if you have valuable jewelry or art, you may need additional coverage beyond the standard policy. An independent insurance agent can help you identify these gaps and recommend coverage options that meet your needs.

In the case of Jewelry or fine arts and other related types of valuable personal property, the property itself is more likely to be lost through theft or mysterious disappearance than any other type of peril. There are 12 categories of personal property that require appraisals for full coverage in the event of theft, breakage, or mysterious disappearance.

Carriers require a current



appraisal, usually within the last 36 months, along with a picture of the item or set, and a full description. Additionally, they may require the type of location of the item such as in your home or in a bank vault, and rate at least partially based on the location given.

Working with an independent insurance agent also provides the added benefit of having a personal relationship with your agent. You can build a relationship of trust and confidence with your agent, who can provide ongoing support and guidance throughout the life of your policy. They can help you navigate the claims process and make sure that you receive the coverage you need when you need it most.

Finally, working with an independent insurance agent can save you time and money. They can help you compare policies from different insurance companies and find the best coverage at the most competitive price. They can also help you identify discounts and other cost-saving opportunities that you may not be aware of.

In conclusion, when you live in an HOA-governed community, it is important to work with an independent insurance agent to find the right homeowner's insurance policy that meets both your needs and the requirements of your HOA.

An independent insurance agent can provide you with a range of options, help you identify potential gaps in your coverage, build a personal relationship with you, and save you time and money. Don't leave the protection of your home and personal belongings to chance — work with an independent insurance agent to ensure that you have the right coverage for your needs.

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# Doug Stauffer Elected as Chairman of Okaloosa County Republican Party

The Okaloosa County Republican Executive Committee (OCREC) has ushered in a new era of leadership by electing Doug Stauffer as its Chairman alongside a slate of other new officers. This marks a significant transition for the organization, with all four Executive Board positions replaced in the recent election.



Doug Stauffer, a pastor, author, Life Media writer and Niceville City Councilman, was overwhelmingly chosen to lead the party, garnering more than 75% of the vote. Stauffer made headlines early in 2024 when he won a Niceville City Council seat through a historic coin flip to break a tie vote. He has been a member of OCREC since 2019 and has served as Treasurer for the last two terms.

“I am deeply humbled and honored to be elected Chairman of the Republican Party of Okaloosa County,” stated Stauffer. “With President Trump’s election as our 47th President, the Panhandle counties must remain a bedrock of conservative values in Florida. As the world watches our nation over the next four years, we are poised to lead with strength, unity, and a commitment to our shared principles.”

Stauffer also addressed the role of faith in public service: “Christians have been told they should stay out of politics, but the opposite is true. While government needs to stay out of the church, Christians must greatly influence the government. The Founding Fathers designed our Republic to be guided by biblical principles, ensuring that faith and values form the bedrock of a just and moral society. Republicans must insist on ‘following the science’ rather than ideologies driven by agenda-based narratives that undermine truth, freedom and morality.”

Stauffer succeeds Sandra Atkinson, who dedicated over 12 years to the OCREC and served as Chair for the past four years, a period marked by significant challenges within the Okaloosa Republican Party. She withdrew her name from the ballot during the Republican primary in June. Her departure comes as the OCREC undergoes a transfor-

mative renewal, welcoming over 50 new members and embracing a fresh start.

OCREC members elected Chris McKay, the former Secretary, as Vice Chair and Diana Graham, who succeeded McKay as Secretary. Neither had a challenger and were elected by unanimous consent. Stauffer appointed Ed Gilbert as interim Treasurer until a formal election for that position is held on January 27, 2025.

Okaloosa County remains a Republican stronghold, with registered Republicans far outnumbering Democrats. President Trump, Senator Rick Scott, State Senator Don Gaetz, and State Representative Patt Maney secured over 70% of the county’s vote in the November general election. Representative Maney emphasized, “To maintain our momentum, we must boost turnout to counter heavily Democratic counties. With key races ahead, including Congressional and State House elections, robust education and get-out-the-vote efforts will be critical.”

The OCREC is a critical resource for Republican candidates, designed to provide support, training, and grassroots organization. “We are not campaign managers,” emphasized Stauffer. “Our role is to serve as a resource pool for Republican candidates at every level, from city and county positions to congressional and other national offices.” Voter turnout in Okaloosa County dropped by 2% from the 2020 presidential election.

Stauffer brings a wealth of experience to his role, balancing his duties as pastor of Faith Independent Baptist Church, Niceville City Councilman, and a commissioner for the Niceville CRA, the Okaloosa County Transit Cooperative, and the

Okaloosa County Library Governing Board.

Stauffer’s leadership seeks to rebrand the county Republican party as a unified, cohesive organization dedicated to consti-

tutional principles. Okaloosa County should serve as a model county for others to follow. Success will be measured not by maintaining the status quo, but by principled individuals achiev-

ing truly conservative outcomes that align with the founding of this great Republic. For more information or to get involved, please visit [www.OkaloosaGOP.com](http://www.OkaloosaGOP.com).



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Community

# What Does it Mean to "Age-In" to Medicare?



By GREG DURETTE, FLORIDA HEALTH CONNECTOR

As many times as I have said the term "age-in" to folks when discussing Medicare, it has never failed to elicit a visceral response like, "What do you mean with this age-in thing?!" or "I don't feel aged-in!"

The fact of the matter is, aging-in means you are turning 65 soon, and it is a good thing. There are many we all know that didn't make it to that milestone. Bravo for making it and

cheers for many more.

With Annual Enrollment Period now officially ended (even though there is a little known Special Enrollment Period for certain local counties which extends the period until 3/31/2025!), we are now in the middle of the Open Enrollment Period which runs from January 1 – March 31 of every year for pre-dominantly for Advantage Plan members (you can re-read my article from last month for more information about the ins

and outs of that). But, that does not change the fact many people have birthdays all year long and are actually aging-in during this time as well. Confusing but, it can be made sense of with a little guidance.

What generally happens is, folks get confused between what they see on TV with all the pitches about "time running out" and, what they can actually do during the aging-in period. So, let me attempt to de-mystify it a little bit here.

There is a period of time when a person ages-in and becomes eligible for Medicare. Typically, this period of time is three months before the month in which they turn 65 and three months after the month in which they turn 65. Do the math and you will see this is a seven-month period of time around your birthday. There are a few other exceptions to this eligibility period. But, those will have to be saved for another article or very long-winded phone call for the braver among us!

The first order of business is to obtain your Part A and B (if desired or needed) through Social Security. Without adding a litany of boring details as to qualifications for each, suffice it to say Part A is typically \$0 premium for most folks and Part B for 2024 will typically cost \$185.00 per month. The Part B premium is means tested and can get a little complicated (and expensive)—certainly more complicated than can be described in this article. Again,

suffice it to say, some could pay much more or much less, depending on your Modified Adjusted Gross Income from two years prior unless you apply for a break based on current income. There is a form for that.

If you wish to avoid LIFE-LONG penalties, you will have to have Part B and Part D (prescription coverage) in place at the time of first becoming eligible. As a reminder, eligibilities are one of those things unique to each person's circumstances so, it is important to know how these things apply to you.

If you choose to obtain a Supplement, commonly called a "Medi-Gap" policy, you will need to also obtain a separate Part D prescription plan as Supplement plans DO NOT INCLUDE such. If you choose to obtain an Advantage plan, the Part D prescription coverage is typically INCLUDED.

As you can see this can, and usually is, a very confusing time for most folks used to having traditional insurance for their whole lives. Suddenly, you are thrust into this new system when everybody and their cousin is calling and/or mailing you every single day with their "better option."

Your best option is the one that best suits you. Maybe it is a great price. Maybe it is a great network of providers. Maybe it is just the peace of mind in knowing you have someone you can rely upon for information when you need it.

If there is only one take away you can have from this article, it would be to work with someone that can help you navigate the local landscape and help you completely understand this otherwise very confusing time in life.

Happy New Year!

*Greg Durette is a qualified, licensed agent with Florida Health Connector providing Medicare insurance throughout the State and is based in Niceville. He has been in the insurance industry for nearly 42 years and can be reached at his office at 850-842-2400 or his mobile at 978-509-2941.*

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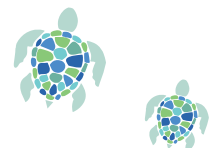
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# New Day, New Way: Real Estate on the Emerald Coast



BY PAUL DOMENECH

The real estate landscape is constantly evolving, and here on the Emerald Coast, we're seeing significant shifts. Rental properties, which once dominated the market, are staying vacant longer. This indicates rising consumer confidence in homeownership and is likely to trigger an increase in listings. Many out-of-town investors who purchased primary resi-

dential homes for investment purposes may now feel the pressure to sell. Even with low-interest mortgages, carrying costs for extended vacancies can lead to substantial losses.

### For Buyers: The Time to Prepare is Now

If you're a buyer, now is the time to get ready. In today's market, asking for closing costs is customary. Should interest rates decrease, buyers could benefit from a favorable rate and negotiate seller concessions to cover costs.

However, waiting for rates to drop comes with risks. Lower interest rates often bring more buyers into the market, increasing competition and driving up home prices. In such a scenario, sellers become less inclined to negotiate. Acting sooner rather than later can put you in the driver's seat to secure the home you want at a competitive price.

### For Sellers: Seize the Momentum

For sellers, momentum is building as renters transition to homeownership. While inventory levels are higher, this can be an advantage with the right strategy. Buyers in today's market are looking for move-in-ready properties, so positioning your home as turnkey can make all the difference.

The key lies in the strategy and branding. With the right approach, you can maximize your home's market value. This is where having a dedicated real estate team matters. A polished presentation and strategic marketing plan can set your property apart, ensuring it garners the best possible offer.

### The Domenech Effect

Navigating this dynamic market requires expertise, whether you're looking to buy or sell. That's where I come in. At The Domenech Group, we've developed a proven ap-



proach called the Domenech Effect. This strategy leverages data-driven strategies to help sellers achieve maximum value for their properties.

If you're ready to explore opportunities or need guidance in understanding the market, reach out to me directly, Paul Domenech at 850-543-1418. Let's sit down and chart a path

tailored to your goals. The proof is in the data—the Domenech Effect is working, and I'd be honored to share it with you.

Emerald Coast's real estate market with our team is thriving. And, whether you're buying or selling, there's no better time to act. Let's make your next move your best move!

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# ECSC's Diane Fraser: Discovering the Chemistry between Science and Community

By CAROLYN KETCHEL

Diane was born in Mobile, Ala., graduated from Niceville High School, earned her undergraduate degree from Huntington College, and her master's degree from University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB).

Armed with her chemistry and forensic science degrees, she moved to Salt Lake City. In her 20's she was looking forward to seeing something different and broadening her horizons. She enjoyed working in a forensic toxicology lab doing cutting edge research. Diane will tell you television shows about crime scene investigation are not true to life. The script will combine six jobs into one character. Diane met her husband in Salt Lake City.

Diane and her husband moved to Cincinnati after they were married, where she worked for five years as a research chemist at the Food and Drug Administration. The Forensic Chemistry Center par-

ticipated in a lot of criminal investigations. If someone had an adverse effect from some food or chemical, etc., her team would try to find out what was in there that made the person sick.

While in Cincinnati, her husband traveled a lot and was gone all week. They decided to move back to Fort Walton Beach in 1999. His family was there and her family was in Niceville. Diane quit work and became a full-time mom. She has taught as an adjunct professor at UWF since 2003 and joined the Emerald Coast Science Center (ECSC) board in the spring of 2014.

A couple of weeks into November, the ECSC director left to become a full-time teacher. The board asked Diane to be the interim director while they looked for a replacement. In 2015, Diane became the permanent director. It was a leap of faith. There was no money to invest in new exhibits and programs; there hadn't been invest-



ments in a while, and the science center didn't have the strongest reputation. It took a couple of years to change the perception. The experience of attending the science center needed to change between visits or why would anyone come back?

With no business experience, but plenty of ignorance and enthusiasm, Diane didn't know how scared she should be. She started writing grants and, with board guidance, began to

make friends in the community, improved the science center's reputation, obtained some investments, generated more revenue and began to build small successes.

The ECSC generates revenue by charging admission. The staff hosts field trips from Okaloosa County, Walton County and Alabama. The center also provides home school programs. Fundraising programs along with personal and corporate donations help the science center keep moving forward.

When asked to share the greatest lesson she's learned, Diane says it's collaboration with our communities. The first two years were focused on investing and income generation to become stable. Then Covid happened. There were big concerns.

The science center board met weekly and the community stepped up. Diane gets emotional when she talks about the community support. The

Fort Walton Chamber and Ted Corcoran were also there with support. Facebook generated donations of \$5, \$10 or \$100. The science center was reinvigorated. Many people helped.

To say thank you, the ECSC offered free passes to the United Way, foster programs, guardian ad litem programs and Big Brothers. Anyone with EDT or SNAP can show their card and four people get in for \$12. Normally the fee is \$12 per person. Diane says the science center is not serving the mission if a lot of the population don't have access. "Many families can't afford admission and still pay bills. One of these kids could be the scientist that solves the next big problem."

The ECSC houses 60 animals. There are birds, reptiles, tortoises, chinchillas, geckos, tarantulas, turtles, parrots, hedgehogs and hermit crabs to name a few. They name their animals

*Continued on page 24*



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As lottery applications for the 2025-2026 school year open, families throughout our area have an incredible opportunity to join a school that consistently raises the bar. If you've been searching for a place where your child can excel, grow and feel truly seen, here are the top five reasons why SEASIDE SCHOOL™ should be at the top of your list:

## 1. A Proven Track Record of Academic Excellence

SEASIDE SCHOOL™ isn't

just another charter school—it's a powerhouse of academic achievement. For more than 20 years, it has led the region in performance, ranking among the top 1% of Florida public schools in math and science and in the top 2% of all Florida Public Schools overall. The results speak for themselves. Each year, SEASIDE SCHOOL™ graduates earn thousands of college credits, securing millions in scholarships and saving families substantial tuition costs. In fact, 60% of recent graduates walked away with both a high school diploma and an Associate's degree—putting them two years ahead of their peers academically.

## 2. Personalized Academic and Career Support

Every student at SEASIDE SCHOOL™ is more than just a name on a roster. Our educators and administrators take the time to understand each student's unique learning style, strengths, and aspirations. From individualized career planning to college application workshops and scholarship coaching, we ensure

every student has the tools they need to thrive. At SEASIDE SCHOOL™, your child isn't just prepared for the next step—they're empowered to excel.

## 3. Real-World Experience and Leadership Opportunities

Education at SEASIDE SCHOOL™ extends far beyond textbooks. Whether through leadership initiatives, robust athletic programs, or arts and music opportunities, students are immersed in experiences that build character, resilience, and teamwork.

Programs like The Amazing Shake, mentorship, student government, and diverse extracurriculars equip students with the skills they need to thrive—not just in college, but in life. This focus on real-world preparation empowers SEASIDE SCHOOL™ graduates to stand out, lead with confidence, and tackle the future with unparalleled readiness.

## 4. Certifications, Biliteracy, and Durable Life Skills

We know the importance of equipping students with

tools for the future. SEASIDE SCHOOL™ offers pathways to industry certifications in fields like cybersecurity, entrepreneurship, and artificial intelligence, ensuring that students graduate with real-world skills that open doors to high-paying careers. Additionally, students can earn the Florida Seal of Biliteracy, recognizing proficiency in multiple languages—a highly valued asset in today's global economy.

Beyond technical skills, our curriculum emphasizes critical thinking, communication, and adaptability—essential traits for success in an ever-changing world. These “durable” life skills give our graduates an edge, no matter what path they choose to follow.

## 5. Dual Enrollment and Flexible Pathways

One of the most significant advantages at SEASIDE SCHOOL™ is our dual enrollment program in partnership with Northwest Florida State College. Students have the opportunity to take college courses while in high school, earning up

to 60 tuition-free credits. This allows them to explore subjects that interest them, lighten their future course load, and gain confidence in a college setting—all while still enjoying the high school experience.

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Perhaps the greatest reason families choose SEASIDE SCHOOL™ is the sense of belonging it fosters. In this tight-knit community, students are supported by peers, guided by caring educators, and encouraged to reach their highest potential. The blend of academic rigor and emotional support creates an environment where every child can flourish.

Lottery applications open January 8, 2025, and will close February 14, 2025. If you're ready to provide your child with an education that shapes not only their future but their character, visit [SeasideSchools.net](http://SeasideSchools.net) to apply. Spots are limited, but the impact SEASIDE SCHOOL™ leaves on its students is limitless.

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- 2. Personalized Academic + Career Support**  
Every student receives personalized support and guidance to unlock their full potential. From career planning to college prep, we empower each child to thrive and succeed beyond the classroom.
- 3. Real-World Experience + Leadership Opportunities**  
Education goes beyond textbooks—students grow through leadership, athletics, arts, and real-world experiences. Programs like The Amazing Shake and mentorship build confidence, resilience, and teamwork, preparing them to lead and thrive in life.
- 4. Certifications, Biliteracy, + Durable Life Skills**  
Students gain real-world skills and certifications in fields like cybersecurity and AI, along with the Florida Seal of Biliteracy, preparing them for high-paying careers. Our focus on critical thinking and adaptability ensures graduates are ready to excel in any path they choose.
- 5. Dual Enrollment + Flexible Pathways**  
We offer students the chance to earn up to 60 tuition-free college credits through dual enrollment at Northwest Florida State College, blending college-level learning with the full high school experience. This head start empowers students to explore their interests, reduce future tuition costs, and build confidence for life after graduation.







# Alaqua Animal Refuge Calls for Emergency Support

Alaqua Animal Refuge, a nationally recognized nonprofit organization dedicated to saving animals in need, stepped in recently to rescue 21 severely neglected horses in partnership with the Washington County Sheriff's Office and Washington County Animal Control. These horses, now safe at Alaqua's sanctuary, were victims of heartbreaking neglect and cruelty, leaving them frail and vulnerable.

The rescue operation took place amidst freezing temperatures, raising concerns about what might have happened if these horses had been left in the cold. Their emaciated bodies, weakened by starvation and mistreatment, would not have survived the harsh conditions.

"No animal should ever endure what these horses have been through," said Laurie Hood, Founder and CEO of Alaqua Animal Refuge. "Thanks to the swift action of law enforcement and animal control, they are now safe. However, their journey to recovery will be long and costly."

These horses require immediate and intensive medical care, specialized nutrition, and constant attention. Already operating at full capacity, Alaqua had to activate its emergency sheltering to accommodate them. The financial strain of their rescue and care is immense, and the organization is reaching out for public support.

Alaqua Animal Refuge, located on 100 donated acres in



Freeport, has become a beacon of hope for animals throughout the country, offering rehabilitation, refuge, and second chances.

The rescue of these horses underscores Alaqua's commitment to its mission, but also highlights the urgent need for community support during crises like this.

### How You Can Help:

Alaqua is calling on compassionate individuals to donate to the care of these horses. Contributions will fund critical needs such as medical treatments, specialized feed and the daily care required to give these animals a chance at recovery. Donations can be made online at: <https://secure.qgiv.com/for/wchorses>.

com/for/wchorses.

"Every dollar makes a difference," Hood said. "Together, we can show these horses the love and care they've never known and help them regain their strength."

All in all, thanks to supporters like you, in 2024 Alaqua accomplished so much:

- 1,726 rescued and 1,204 rehomed animals.
- Provided emergency shelter for animals displaced by Hurricane Milton.
- Helped prosecute abusers and gave dozens of neglected animals a new lease on life.

The need for Alaqua's work continues to grow, and your support is vital to helping them expand and improve. Visit [Alaqua.org](http://Alaqua.org) to learn more.

## Dog-Harmony Opens Registration for Fifth Annual "Hops for Hounds"

Dog-Harmony has opened registration for one of its signature events, the 5th Annual "Hops for Hounds" dog walk and after party, **February 23rd, 1-3 p.m. at Props Brewery in Hammock Bay, Freeport.** This tail-wagging event promises fur-raising fun for pups and their humans alike!

The day will start with a picturesque, short stroll followed by a lively after-party at Props Brewery, complete with craft beer (for thirsty humans 21 and older), live music, vendors, food trucks and more. Rescue Animal Photography will also be on hand to capture the magical moments.

Tickets are \$35 per entry (includes one human and one fur friend), an adult-sized t-shirt, and a digital photo of participants with their pets. Each human walker will also receive a complimentary craft beer from Props Brewery – Must be age 21 or over to partake.

To register, visit <https://dog-harmony.org/hops-for-hounds-2025/>.

(All dogs must be current on rabies vaccinations and at least six-months old. No prong, shock or choke collars will be permitted.)

"I am so grateful to Props Brewery, Hammock Bay for giving this amazing event a home," says Nancy Brown, Founder of Dog-Harmony. "Proceeds from this event are crucial to the continued success of our programs for local pups and their families."

Event sponsorships are also

available, offering businesses a unique opportunity to engage with a targeted audience, while supporting a worthy cause and enjoying a fun, memorable experience. For details on sponsorship levels and pricing, please contact [hello@dog-harmony.org](mailto:hello@dog-harmony.org).

All proceeds from Hops for Hounds sponsorships and ticket sales will benefit Dog-Harmony and its efforts to support the pups and programs in our communities.

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# Out With the Old, In with the New Design Trends of 2025



BY KIM SCHNEIDER,  
COASTAL DESIGN BY KIM

Happy New Year! Now that the hustle and bustle of the holidays are behind us and all the holiday décor is packed away, you're probably looking around your home and thinking it feels empty. If you're anything like me, this is when I want to do something new and different to start off the new year. As we are all aware, design trends come and go, and this year is no exception. Below are a few trends we will see everywhere and a few styles that are fading into the sunset.

**Color:** We've seen all the light colors that provide the open and airy vibe but the color shift to rich saturated hues are upon us. It's believed that the reason we're gravitating to these rich colors is because we grew up with them. There's a sense of nostalgia we feel when we walk into a room that is color drenched in bold colors like deep blues, greens and black. Jewel-toned purples and desert browns (think chocolate, caramel and coffee) are also highly favored this year. Bedrooms, Living Rooms Kitchens and Offices are all being transformed into cozy, opulent spaces.

Grey! Grey and the all-white color palettes that we've been seeing for far too long are finally considered outdated. Sage Greens are also taking a back seat on the color spectrum. Basically, we're waving good-bye to all the cool color palettes in 2025.

**Curtains:** From Café Curtains (yes, they're back, but not like your grandma's) to Layering, Ripple Fold Drapes and Sheers. Curtains bring an element of softness to any room and can also add texture, color and prints. Don't be surprised when you see a wall of windows that disappear with motor-

ized curtains hanging from the ceiling on an integrated track. Motorized shades mounted inside the window and Plantation Shutters are still in demand, especially in the panhandle.

Valances that are made in the same fabric as the drapes and Grommet curtains are no longer a favorite and will be considered dated by many. Vertical blinds are no longer sought after and are becoming increasingly harder to find replacement slats.

**Furniture:** This year we are finally getting back to comfort, timeless designs and craftsmanship. We're going to see more rounded conversational styled sofas, bubble shaped chairs and round tables being incorporated into spaces. Rich textured fabrics and mixing patterns like animal print and florals on furniture are taking over as well. Blending vintage appeal with modern functionality will help us create spaces with a warm and familiar feel. One-of-a-kind carved vintage pieces are being highly sought after. They bring a unique textured detail and top-quality craftsmanship to any space. Those scalloped details from the 50's are back! You'll see them on nightstands, headboards and even dining tables. Wingback chairs are popular again too! Go visit Grandma and maybe you can score a piece or two from her attic. It's a WIN-WIN!

Minimalistic furniture is a thing of the past due to the cold and stark feeling it created. The all-beige monochromatic furniture look is considered a thing of the past, because you had no depth-perception, and it lacked visual interest. The over-stuffed chunky furniture is out because it tends to over crowd the space and is awkward to sit on for many.

**Kids' Bedrooms:** Many times, we glaze over kids' rooms, because they're growing quickly. But, the reality is that they deserve a space they can relax in and be proud of. Fill their space with color, do something decorative on the ceiling, add built-ins with storage that they can grow with. Combine those built-ins with a desk to promote their artsy side, as well as do their homework. If their space



is small, consider a loft bed that can provide storage underneath and a place to play, study or read. The biggest part of this is allowing your child to be part of the decision making. Often, I hear, "But they want an orange room." Give them an orange wall or use orange pillows and artwork. There are many creative ways to give them the color they want, and you can close the door on the way out if it really bugs you. They're only young once and it goes by quickly.

Themed rooms are out of style. Too much of something is never a good idea. If your son loves trucks or your daughter loves ballerinas, that's great, but use it in small doses. Apply the orange wall theory from above and their room will be delightful.

**Kitchens:** Embracing color and wood tones in our kitchen is the hot ticket these days. Blues and Greens are big color choices

for cabinets, as well as medium to dark toned stained wood. Wood is a great way to add texture and warmth to the kitchen space. Dark wood cabinetry can be very inviting and create a sophisticated space when it's paired with the right flooring and countertops. Integrating your appliances behind cabinetry doors is increasing in popularity [again] and we'll start seeing a lot more unlacquered brass, polished nickel and soft bronze toned finishes as well.

Utilitarian kitchens are no longer being requested. All white kitchens and lighter wood cabinets are beginning to decline, along with matte black and bright gold finishes. Backsplashes with lots of grout lines are becoming dated as well.

**Lighting:** Prioritizing a layered lighting plan in your space is key. Using a mixture of overhead lighting, floor and table lamps and sconces help to create

a home that's both welcoming and functional. This year you can expect to see more lighting made from earthy materials like oak wood, rattan, and alabaster. Organic shapes, hand blown glass, artsy eye-catching designs and vintage lighting are all making a statement and add personality to any room.

Dome shaped lights, a.k.a. the boob light fixture, screams builder-grade and are reminiscent of Y2K. Over the top intricate chandeliers, exposed bulbs with clear glass shades and track lights are all worthy of a decorative change.

Design Trends come with a caveat—I always say, "Regardless of the trends, you should always do what YOU love." Coastal Design by Kim takes pride in listening to our clients and designing a space that brings your vision to reality. That's why our tag line is "Bringing Beautiful, Functional Designs to Life!" Contact us today to discuss your design dreams. (850) 904-6622 or visit our website at [www.coastaldesignbykim.com](http://www.coastaldesignbykim.com).

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Around Town

# Around Town

## 30A BBQ Fest Breaks Record for The Sonder Project!

The fifth edition of the 30A BBQ Festival, presented by 360 Blue, raised a record-breaking \$103,228 for The Sonder Project.

The sold-out, annual event in November at Grand Boulevard at Sandestin®, featured 14 regional and local restaurants and catering companies, each competing for the title of “Best BBQ” chosen by the 800 guests in attendance. Participants included 3 Sons BBQ, Back Beach Barbecue, Camp Creek Inn, Cinders and Salt, Dickey’s Barbecue Pit, Evie Mae’s Barbecue, Harry T’s, Local Smoke

at The Big Chill, Marrow Private Chefs, The Perfect Pig, Sons of Amvets Post 29, Swiftly Catered, Uncle KU’s BarbeKU, and Vin’tij Food and Wine.

**Winners:**

1st Place People’s Choice Award: Evie Mae’s Pit BBQ

2nd Place People’s Choice Award: Uncle KU’s BarbeKU

3rd Place People’s Choice Award: Vin’tij Food and Wine

Judge’s Choice Award: 3 Sons Bar-B-Q

“It was great to see the different styles and flair of each participant,” said Chad Zibelman, CEO of The Sonder Project. “We had everything from pulled pork and brisket, to smoked



s’mores and sliders. It was a melting pot of the best barbecue around and we’re so grateful to each of our vendors for donating their time and food to be a part of this year’s festival. They are all winners in our book!”

## Okaloosa County School Superintendent, Marcus Chambers, Makes Generous ECCAC Donation

Demonstrating his commitment to being a good steward for the community, Marcus Chambers, Okaloosa County School Superintendent, recently donated \$25,000 from his unused campaign funds to the Emerald Coast Children’s Advocacy Center (ECCAC). The donation will greatly benefit ECCAC’s vital programs, such as the Safety Matters prevention program which teaches children in local schools how to recognize and respond to unsafe situations.

Chambers shared with the ECCAC staff, “Investing in the ECCAC is an investment in our community’s future. Their transformative mission is to

heal and support traumatized children, restore lost innocence, and instill hope. Together, we can make a profound difference, ensuring every child feels seen, heard, and understood.”

## READING Paws Inspires Local Students



Through the READING Paws program, students at Destin Elementary as well as Wright, Kenwood and Bluewater Elementary schools and Lewis School are discovering the joy of reading in a supportive and comforting environment.

The READING Paws Program is part of the Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.®) initiative, which partners certified therapy dog teams with schools to boost literacy and confidence among young readers. Scout, a nationally certified R.E.A.D.® dog, visits our area schools to listen to

students as they read aloud, offering a fun and stress-free way to improve their reading skills.

Nancy Bown, founder of Dog-Harmony, emphasized the program’s broader mission: “The goal of READING Paws is to improve literacy skills in children through the assistance of nationally registered and qualified therapy animal-owner teams. Dog-Harmony has partnered with READING Paws and Intermountain Therapy Animals as an affiliate therapy organization that tests and places therapy dog teams. These teams demonstrate unwavering dedication and have profoundly impacted our community. One team recently reconnected with an Okaloosa student who helped overcome reading challenges years ago. Now 17, she credits her academic success to her experience with the READING Paws program.”

For more information about the program or to volunteer, please get in touch with [hello@dog-harmony.org](mailto:hello@dog-harmony.org).



Savvy Leigh

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# Welcome to the Winter Season

By LIESEL SCHMIDT

As we transition out of the holidays and into the new year, it's all about blending comfort and style—which means cute, but fantastically supportive loafers and closed-toe shoes (beauty isn't always pain, ladies), fabulous wide-leg trousers and jeans, and accessories that help finish it off and pull it all together into one amazing look. Because the temperatures might be cooling down, but you can still look hot.

## Step Into Style: Loafers, Wedges, and Heels (Oh My!)

Say hello to supportive, cute loafers from Aetrex for the winter. Whether you're headed to brunch or running errands, loafers are the MVP of the shoe world right now. Comfortable? Check. Stylish? Double check. They're perfect for pairing with pretty much everything, from skirts to jeans or trousers. These shoes say, "I'm here to slay" without making your feet scream for mercy before lunchtime.

For anyone craving a little extra height, closed-toe wedges and heels are here to save the

day, and Aetrex offers both with the added bonus of built-in arch support that keeps you comfy and ready to crush your look. Wedges are fun and easy, perfect for pairing with fall's signature wide-leg trousers and jeans; and closed-toe heels offer a polished, sophisticated option for those days when you want to be a little fancy.

## Wide-Leg Trousers and Jeans: The Pant of the Season

Winter 2025 is the season of the wide-leg. Whether you're slipping into wide-leg trousers or throwing on some high-waisted, wide-leg jeans, this silhouette is all about giving you that chic, elongated look. These pants are not only super flattering (they cinch in at the waist and flow out for a dramatic, elegant effect), but they also pair perfectly with all of those loafers and wedges you've just invested in. Liverpool trousers are ideal for the office, while their range of wide-leg jeans can take you from casual coffee dates to stylish weekend strolls.

## Layer Up: The Art of Layers

With temperatures dipping (and then swing up again), layering is your best friend. Light layers are the key to mastering that in-between season vibe without being too hot or too cool. Lightweight cardigans, puffer vests and cropped jackets are pieces that keep you warm without overheating and also add a level of sophistication to your look. Liverpool, Flag & Anthem and Rhythm offer great options for any wardrobe, with colors, textures and prints that elevate your outfit and keep you cozy. Don't be afraid to play with lengths—long cardigans over shorter tops, cropped jackets with flowy blouses. It's all about balance and creating visual interest.

## Leather Handbags: The Must-Have Accessory

No winter wardrobe is complete without a fabulous leather handbag. Whether you prefer a sleek crossbody, a structured tote, or a bold, colorful satchel, a quality leather bag is your go-to for adding that luxe touch to any outfit. Go for classic shades like



black or brown for everyday use, or choose rich hues such as burgundy, mustard or forest green to add a pop of seasonal color. A leather handbag isn't just an accessory—it's the finishing touch that ties your whole look together and makes you feel like the queen you are. Check out Hobo's line of leather goods and find your new favorite.

## Accessorize Like a Pro: Earrings, Necklaces and More

Winter is a fabulous time to experiment with bold, statement earrings and layered necklaces. You know how they say accessories make the outfit? They weren't kidding. Adding some chic earrings or a stack of del-

icate gold necklaces or beaded chains can transform your look in seconds.

This season, go for metallics, chunky jewelry or even playful, nature-inspired pieces like leaf-shaped earrings or gemstone necklaces. Don't be shy—it's the time to experiment, and accessories are the easiest way to do it.

If you're rocking a simple, monochrome look, a vibrant pair of earrings can instantly elevate it. It's all about balance and having fun with your style!

Add a pair (or ten) of earrings in fun shapes and patterns by Clay Creations from Ellesee; mixed metals and textures from Lizou's line of earrings, necklaces and bracelets; handmade pieces from Fran & Bel; pearly baubles from Studio G; or happy, whimsical little studs from Lilliput—you may even find some wickedly fun Halloween-inspired goodies to add a little spook to your spice.

Go on, girl—strut into fall with confidence and flair! Come into Blue Bay Lifestyle Co. to find all your essentials, because you're about to own this season.






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For a lighter take, it also has a variety of fancy toasts (avocado, salmon and more), along with pastries and muffins. For lunch, choose from a variety of burgers, sandwiches and salads. You will love the full-service coffee shop, offering everything from hot or iced fresh, local Amavida coffee to espresso and lattes. And there are diverse fresh fruit smoothies

and a variety of tantalizing teas. Check out the special kids menu, too. Indoor and outdoor seating on the large covered patio are both available. Book after-hours for private events or special occasions. Open for breakfast and lunch every day, 7 a.m.-2 p.m.

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985 US-98 E, Destin  
cafedestin.com



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**ECSC**

continued from page 18

after scientists. There are 14 employees including two animal care specialists who work 365 days a year, along with seven educators, three of whom work full-time and front desk personnel.

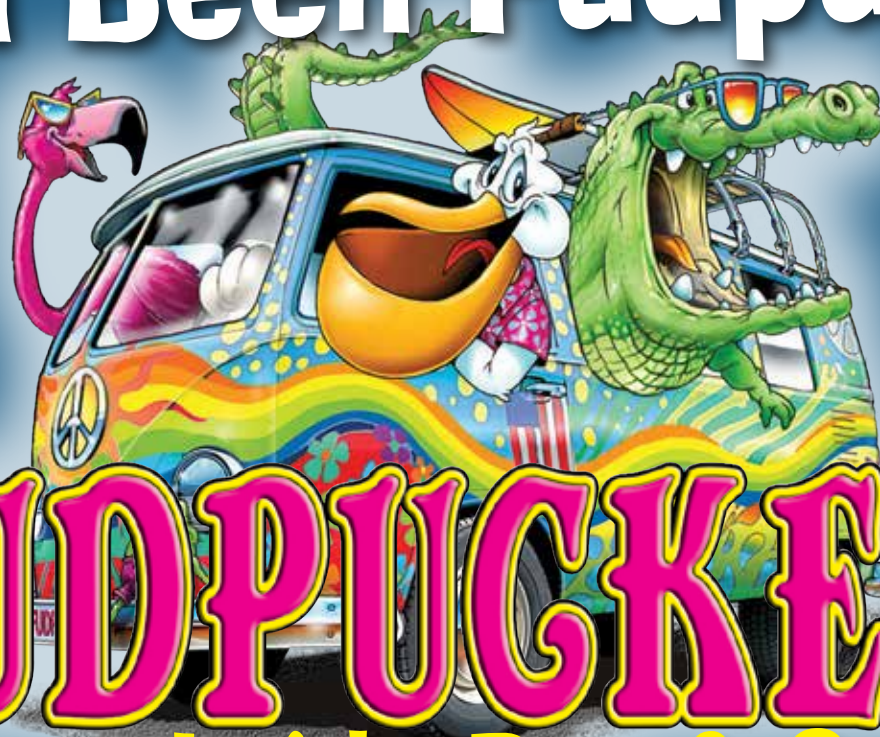
Among the many science center offerings, there are summer camps, a presence at festivals, libraries, day care centers, hosting birthday parties and even Girl Scout badge workshops.

Diane says no one can do this by themselves. Celebrating 10 years in the community, ECSC has exceeded its pre-pandemic numbers. But, there is still room to grow. As the only science museum in Okaloosa County, your gift helps close the STEAM education learning gap by providing successful, transformative educational opportunities for children. To support, visit <https://www.ecscience.org/support>. For more information, visit [www.ecscience.org](http://www.ecscience.org).



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# 2024 Football Guide

## Football. Food. Fun. Fans. Let the Games Begin...



## Best Places to Watch Your Favorite Teams



By SCOTT MILLER

I'll bet you never expected we would have a 12-team college football playoff taking place this year without the Crimson Tide involved. Sorry Alabama fans, I know y'all are still letting that sink in. But I'd be remiss not to talk about it. The Nick Saban led Alabama football team has had an unprecedented run this past decade or so—there is no denying that. But, we are walking through a whole new era in college football these days. So, I

guess it's really not a big surprise when you think about it.

Conferences are different now, college kids are getting paid now, this thing we call the transfer portal is really shaking things up now and on and on we go. It sure has made for an interesting season this year.

So, fans, get ready for the big finale. It's time for Bowl Games and Playoff Games all mixed up together and coming soon to a big screen TV near you.

Will Penn State have what it takes to beat an outstanding Notre Dame team to advance to the championship game? Does Texas have what it takes to handle the dominating Ohio State Buckeyes?

I can't wait to find out. And of course January means pro football playoffs are here. The Lions look unstoppable. The



Chiefs are, well the Chiefs are the Chiefs which means they are capable of running the table again this year. The Ravens and the Eagles are hard to count out. Sounds like a wild ride to the end. Where will you be watching? We're in for some super exciting football, college or pro. Find your favorite sports



bar, grab a seat and don't miss a minute of the action.

Here are some of my favorite places to go on game day. I hope to see you there, too!

### AJ's Seafood & Oyster Bar

For 40 years, AJ's Seafood and Oyster Bar has been serving cold Gulf Coast oysters and

cool libations. What began as a popular local hang out known for fresh oysters and cold beer has grown into one of the most iconic "hot spots" on the Destin Harbor. From its humble beginning shucking oysters off the deck behind a small trailer on

*Continued on next page*

**AJ's FOOTBALL IS BACK!**

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Logos: NFL SUNDAY TICKET, ESPN COLLEGE GAMEDAY, AJ's Seafood & Oyster Bar, AJ's On the Bayou, AJ's Oyster Shanty, AJ's Grayton Beach.



**BEST PLACES**

*continued from previous page*

the Destin Harbor, it has grown to four locations along our Emerald Coast, serving fresh seafood, live music and exciting water activities in the Destin area. Attention all die hard football fans, AJ's boasts the one and only Jumbotron on the Destin Harbor, where you can watch your favorite games on the BIG, BIG screen surrounded by the energy and beauty of the Destin Harbor. AJ's serves up delicious daily specials, mouth-watering drinks plus entertaining live music all month, too. Don't miss any of the action! Come on down to AJ's Seafood and Oyster Bar all season long.

(850)837-1913  
116 Harbor Blvd.  
ajstestin.com

**Austons on 98**

Offering an amazing raw oyster bar and the best happy hour in town, Austons is the place to be and home of the 102-foot bar, including 32 beers on draft! Some of the specialties include little neck clams, freshly shucked raw oysters, New England-style clam chowder and jumbo shrimp cocktail. With big screen TVs all around and football season upon us, there's no bad seat in the house. So, come by and watch the games all season long. Happy Hour Specials from Monday-Friday, 2-5 p.m., \$2 off all bar drinks and Monday-Friday from 3 p.m. - 5 p.m. \$3 off a dozen raw oysters. Bucket Specials all day every day. Auston's on 98 is open daily from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. and features its own "Real Deal Nashville Hot Sauce." View full menu at austonson98.com.

(850) 842-3200  
125 Poinciana Blvd.,  
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Austonson98.com

**Boathouse Oyster Bar**

Oysters, live music and a local vibe, the Boathouse is where the locals go with live music every night. Located in the heart of Destin on the Destin Harbor, the Boathouse specializes in making oysters a delicacy. Boathouse's gumbo recipe was written by Mama Gumbo herself. And, of course, the oysters are raw, steamed or baked, just the way you like 'em. The first Friday of each month, The Boathouse hosts locals on the Destin



Harbor from 5-7 p.m. Listen and move with live entertainment daily. See ad for bands and times. Music schedule subject to change. Follow on Facebook for updates. During or after the game, mosey on over to hang with the locals.

(850) 837-3645  
288-B Harbor Blvd., Destin  
Boathouseoysterbardestin.com

**Tailfins Waterfront Grill**

Hey football fans, Tailfins Waterfront Grill is calling YOU! That's right y'all, Destin's favorite season is here and there's not a better place in Destin to come and watch your team play.

Looking for a locals' favorite breakfast before the game? Start

your day off right with Tailfins breakfast from 8-11 a.m., seven days a week. Enjoy a classic breakfast with bacon and eggs, a seafood or Cajun omelet and even a kid's smiley pancake. Be sure to order up a round of mimosas and bloody marys. Watch Tailfins' sushi chef create right in front of your eyes. Enjoy some of your favorite food and drinks, scrumptious early bird dinner specials Monday to Friday, 4-6 p.m. Happy hour from 4-6 p.m. Monday through Friday, featuring \$24 domestic bottle buckets, \$7 house wines and well drinks and \$5 Long Island iced teas. Live music on the docks. Tailfins is a go-to destination for sports watching featuring more than

70 big screen TVs showing all college football games and Sunday Ticket.

(850) 650-1200  
On the Harbor in Destin,  
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tailfinsdestin.com

**Tequila's Sports Bar & Grill**

Did someone say Margaritas? Tequila's Mexican Restaurant is a local favorite, with world class, jumbo-sized margaritas, Mexican food favorites inspired by years of tradition and authentic spices such as the Tequila's Plate, chili con carne, The Three Amigos and the new Master Parrillada – a unique fusion of sports bar food and delightful Mexican dishes.

Football season is here, so don't miss a game all season long. Celebrate Taco Tuesdays with 2-for-1 margaritas. Lunch specials are offered Monday-Friday for \$8.99. "Our love lies in the food we make and the connections we create with our customers every day," says Oni, Tequila's owner. "Our goal is to have the widest selection of tequila brands in town. You're sure to find your favorites here." Open seven days a week for lunch and dinner or call ahead to place your take out and to-go orders.

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8pm: Austin Jennings
- Fridays:** 4pm: Jason Findley  
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# January 2025 Pro Football Schedule

The 2025 NFL Playoffs start with Wild card games on January 11, 12 and 13, then continue with the Divisional playoffs, Conference Championships and finish with the Super Bowl which will take place on Sunday February 9, 2025.

**NFL Playoffs 2025 Key Dates**

Wild-Card Rounds: Jan. 11-13, 2025  
 Divisional Playoffs: Jan. 18-19, 2025  
 Conference Championships: Jan. 26, 2025  
 Pro Bowl: February 4, 2025

Super Bowl LVIII: Feb. 9, 2025

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**AFC Conference:**  
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- Buffalo Bills (13-4) AFC East Winners
- Baltimore Ravens (12-5) AFC North Winners
- Houston Texans (10-7) AFC South Winners
- Los Angeles Chargers (11-5) Wild Card No. 1
- Pittsburg Steelers (10-7) Wild Card No. 2
- Denver Broncos (10-7) Wild Card No. 3

**NFC Conference:**

- Detroit Lions (15-2) NFC North Winners (First-Round Bye)
- Philadelphia Eagles (14-3) NFC East Winners
- Tampa Bay Buccaneers (10-7) NFC South Winners
- Los Angeles Rams (10-7) NFC West Winners
- Minnesota Vikings (14-3) Wild Card No. 1
- Washington Commanders (12-5) Wild Card No. 2
- Green Bay Packers (11-6) Wild Card No. 3

**Wild Card Round**

- Game 1: Saturday, Jan. 11, 2025 | 3:30 p.m. | Chargers vs. Texans
- Game 2: Saturday, Jan. 11, 2025 | 7:00 pm | Steelers vs. Ravens
- Game 3: Sunday Jan. 12, 2025 | Noon | Broncos vs. Bills

- Game 4: Sunday, Jan. 12, 2025 | 3:30 pm | Packers vs. Eagles
- Game 5: Sunday, Jan. 12, 2025 | 7:00 pm | Commanders vs. Buccaneers
- Game 6: Monday, Jan. 13, 2025 | 7:00 pm | Vikings vs. Rams

**Divisional Round**

- Game 1: Saturday, Jan. 18, 2025 | 3:30 pm, Channel TBA
- Game 2: Saturday, Jan. 18, 2025 | 7:15, Channel TBA
- Game 3: Sunday, Jan. 19, 2025 | 2:00 pm Channel TBA
- Game 4: Sunday, Jan. 19, 2025 | 5:30 pm Channel TBA

**Conference Title Games**

- AFC Championship Game: Sunday, Jan. 26, 2025 | 2 pm FOX
- NFC Championship Game: Sunday, Jan. 26, 2025 | 5:30 pm CBS

**Super Bowl 59 2025!**

Sunday, Feb. 9 | 5:30 pm FOX at Caesars Superdome, New Orleans, Louisiana

Note: All times are Central. All CBS games can be streamed on Paramount+. All NBC, Fox and ESPN games can be streamed on FuboTV.



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Off the Hook

# How the 2024 Hurricane Season Impacted Recreational Fishing in the Gulf

BY NOAA FISHERIES, SOUTH-EAST REGIONAL OFFICE

The 2024 Atlantic hurricane season, which officially ended on November 30, showcased above-average activity. It had a profound impact on recreational fishing in the Gulf of Mexico, causing recreational fishers to face challenges and interim closures. Hurricanes Beryl, He-

lene, and Milton caused devastating effects in many Gulf Coast fishing communities—many of which are still working to recover.

The aftermath of this hurricane season is still being felt by many key industries that contribute to the coastal economy—including the recreational fishing community. NOAA Fisheries’

Southeast Recreational Fishing Coordinator, Sean Meehan has spoken with key members in the industry to learn the full scale of this hurricane season’s impacts.

“Hurricanes can upset coastal marine ecosystems, but they also have the ability to negatively impact the economy in the Gulf,” Sean Meehan says, “Many business owners rely on tourism to keep their tackle shops and charter operations running smoothly. I’ve met with several members of the recreational fishing community here in Florida who have shared the challenges they’re facing in the wake of the 2024 Atlantic hurricane season. Rebuilding efforts are underway and it’s only up from here.”



On Oct. 8, 2024, at 6:30 p.m. EDT, NOAA’s GOES East satellite captured this imagery of Hurricane Milton approaching the Gulf Coast of Florida. At its most powerful, Milton’s maximum sustained winds reached 180 mph making the storm an extremely dangerous Category 5 hurricane.

is experienced in Atlantic hurricane seasons.

“This hurricane season has had a horrendous impact,” says Captain Dylan Hubbard, owner of Hubbard’s Marina, “But while we got knocked down, it’s all about how we get back up. We were back running strong just days after the storm but admit that we need help from our inland neighbors to come out and shop local, shop small to help our coastal communities and fishing communities to rebound more quickly.”

Hubbard’s is just one of many fishing businesses in the Southeast that were impacted by these storms. While others are on their way to recovery like Hubbard’s, many others are still struggling.

### Key Impacts on Recreational Fishing in the Gulf Safety Concerns and Storm Damage

Part of the widespread damage is moderate to severe damage to popular marinas, piers, and docks. Recreational fishermen use these to access waterways in the Gulf. Periods of intense weather also raise safety concerns with rough seas, heavy rainfall, and strong winds, making it dangerous for anglers and those with smaller vessels.

Shore-based anglers are finding that many key water access points have been damaged or temporarily closed. Many private recreational fishermen who

*Continued on next page*

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### How the Fishing Industry is Recovering

Hubbard’s Marina has been operating in the Tampa Bay area since 1928. They offer deep sea fishing trips, dolphin-watching excursions, sunset cruises, island visits, and private fishing charters to both visitors and locals alike. After four generations of family ownership and operations on the Gulf Coast, one could say the Hubbard family

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# Surf Brigade: Empowering Veterans Through Surf Therapy

BY KEVIN LALIBERTE, SURF BRIGADE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

In the heart of Santa Rosa Beach, a transformative initiative is making waves for military veterans. Surf Brigade, a non-profit organization founded by veterans for veterans, harnesses the healing powers of the ocean and the camaraderie of surfing to address the unique challenges faced by those who have served. With a dedicated 5-week evidence-based surf therapy program, Surf Brigade is helping veterans redefine their purpose, write their narratives, and build a supportive community along the stunning Emerald Coast.



**Finding Your Community:** Isolation is a common struggle for many veterans. Surf Brigade aims to cultivate a sense of belonging by connecting participants with others who understand their journey. This community aspect is crucial for ongoing support and camaraderie.

## The Program: More Than Just Surfing

Surf Brigade's program is not solely about riding the waves; it encompasses a holistic approach to mental health and well-being. Each week, veterans participate in group discussions facilitated by licensed professional counselors, focusing on three critical challenges:

**Defining Your Purpose:** Transitioning from military to civilian life can leave veterans feeling adrift. Through guided conversations, participants explore their passions and values, helping them reconnect with their sense of purpose.

**Writing Your Narrative:** Every veteran has a unique story, often filled with experiences that can be difficult to articulate. The program encourages veterans to share their journeys, fostering self-reflection and personal growth while reinforcing the importance of their experiences.

## Surf Therapy: A Unique Healing Approach

At the core of Surf Brigade's program is the weekly surf therapy session. Participants receive instruction from professional surf coaches on the picturesque beaches of the Gulf Coast. The act of surfing not only provides physical benefits but also offers a unique therapeutic experience. The ocean's rhythm and the exhilaration of riding waves help veterans release pent-up stress and anxiety.

Research supports the therapeutic benefits of surf therapy, linking it to improved mental health outcomes. The combination of physical activity, exposure to nature, and the thrill of learning a new skill contributes to a sense of accomplishment and boosts self-esteem. For many veterans, the ocean

becomes a place of healing and reflection, where they can leave behind the weight of their service.

## A Community Built on Shared Experiences

One of the most powerful aspects of Surf Brigade is its emphasis on building a community among participants. Graduating from the program means not only gaining a new sense of purpose and confidence but also forming lasting friendships with fellow veterans. Surfing together fosters a sense of belonging and shared experience, creating a network of support that extends beyond the program itself.

Surf Brigade is committed to making this life-changing experience accessible to all veterans. There is no cost to participate, and no prior surf experience is required. All necessary equipment is provided, ensuring that anyone can join in and benefit from the program.

## Join the Movement

Surf Brigade is more than just a surf therapy program; it's a lifeline for veterans seeking connection and purpose. By blending the therapeutic qual-

ities of surfing with meaningful dialogue, the organization empowers veterans to embrace their stories, redefine their paths, and foster a sense of community that lasts a lifetime.

For more information about Surf Brigade and how to get

involved, visit [surfbrigade.com](http://surfbrigade.com). Whether you're a veteran looking for support or someone wanting to contribute to this noble cause, Surf Brigade welcomes you to ride the wave of healing together.



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## HURRICANE SEASON

*continued from previous page*

don't have access to boats/vessels rely on these access points to fish. Hurricanes can destroy or damage shoreline structures, docks, and piers commonly used by this group of anglers.

### Environmental Damage

Hurricanes can disturb marine ecosystems and agitate longstanding habits held by certain fish populations and species. For example, increased sand, sediment, and nutrient runoff into the Gulf can impact

the health of crucial habitats for spawning and feeding fish.

In severe cases, entire waterways can become closed off, causing some species to temporarily move away from damaged areas. Often they return once waterways are able to stabilize again, but this has impacts on the frequency and amount of fish caught in certain areas.

### Economic Impacts

Some recreational fishing charter companies have had to suspend operations or temporarily close due to storm damage. Tackle shops, boat rental

companies, and bait suppliers can suffer financially due to a reduced amount of tourism to hurricane impacted areas. Many local economies in the Gulf rely on out-of-town visitors to stay open year-round.

Although the 2024 hurricane season has presented many challenges, there have also been notable moments where communities have united to support each other and assist in recovery efforts. The best way to help recovering businesses and communities is by continuing to fish.





# It's Almost Time for the 23rd Annual Seaside School™ Half Marathon + 5K!

Race registration presented by South Walton is now open for the SEASIDE SCHOOL™ Half Marathon + 5K Race Weekend held February 13-16, 2025 in beautiful Seaside, FL benefiting the Seaside School Foundation™

The Seaside School™ Half Marathon + 5K Race Weekend, presented by the Lauderdale Family of Frankie's Bike

Shop and hosted by Seaside®, is returning for its 23rd running from February 13-16, 2025, in Seaside! Registration, presented by South Walton, is still open, inviting runners from around the world to participate in this iconic event.

The race weekend is more than just a run; it's a celebration of community, excellence, and a commitment to education.

All proceeds directly benefit the Seaside School Foundation™, which supports the Seaside School™ – one of Florida's oldest and top-performing public charter schools. Since its inception, the race has become a paramount fundraiser for the Foundation, with 100% of proceeds going toward enriching the educational experiences of students at Seaside Neighbor-

hood School™ and Seacoast Collegiate High School.

“The Seaside School™ Half Marathon + 5K is a cornerstone of our fundraising efforts, and the support we receive from participants, sponsors and the community is invaluable,” said Teresa Horton, Executive Director of the Seaside School Foundation™. “This event not only raises crucial funds, but also brings together a diverse group of individuals who share a passion for education and community, making a lasting impact on the future of our students.”

“It's not just about the race itself—runners and their families fill Seaside's Central Square, enjoying our shops and restaurants throughout the entire weekend,” said Kevin Boyle, General Manager, Seaside Community Development Corporation. “What makes it even more special is that every race registration, ticket sold and silent auction item won raises funds for vital programs at the charter school, making a direct impact on the students' education. Personally, after nearly 16 years of being a part of this incredible weekend, it's inspiring to see how it continues to be a milestone event for our community.”

Race weekend kicks off on Friday, February 14th from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., with the highly anticipated Taste of the Race.

The excitement continues on Saturday, February 15th, with the Race Expo from 12-4 p.m. at Seaside Neighborhood School™, where runners can pick up their race packets and explore offerings from sponsors and vendors. Locals' Packet Pickup is Thursday, February 13th, from 3:30-7:30 p.m. at Seacoast Collegiate High School.

The main events take place on Sunday, February 16th, with the Half Marathon starting at 7 a.m. and the 5K at 7:30 a.m. along the iconic Scenic Highway 30A, offering breathtaking views of the Coastal Dune Lakes and picturesque communities. The race is US-ATF certified and serves as a qualifier for both the NYC and Chicago Marathons, making it a must-do for serious runners.



The weekend concludes with an after-race party featuring entertainment, local food and beverages, and an awards ceremony to celebrate the participants' achievements.

“The philanthropic funds raised from this event are instrumental in supporting our mission to foster the success of every student, both academically and personally,” said Dr. Tom Miller, Executive Director of the Seaside School™. “Through the dedication of our community and the impact of this race, we are able to provide our students with a personalized learning approach to prepare them for college and beyond.”

The Seaside School™ Half Marathon has earned numerous accolades, including being ranked the #4 Flattest Half Marathon in the U.S. by USA Today Sports and recognized as one of the Best Seaside Road Races in the U.S. by Outside-Online.com. As one of the largest events on 30A, the race draws over 12,000 attendees annually, making it a signature event in Northwest Florida.

The success of race weekend would not be possible without the dedication of over 500 volunteers, including students, teachers and parents from the Seaside School. “Their hard work and dedication make this event possible, and we are truly thankful for their commitment to our school and our mission,” said Kim Mixson, Principal of Seaside Neighborhood School™.

Registration for the Seaside School™ Half Marathon + 5K includes an exclusive gift from the Swag + Merch Sponsor, The Seaside Style™, a commemorative race medal and t-shirt with artwork from renowned local artist, Billie Gaffrey, and much more. Special discounts are available for military personnel, first responders and educators. [RunSeasideFL.com](http://RunSeasideFL.com).

## Taste of the Race

Get ready for an unforgettable evening the Seaside School™ kicks off its annual Half Marathon + 5K Race Weekend with one of 30A's most eagerly awaited events—Taste of the Race, presented by Publix and headlined by The Velcro Pygmies, the high-energy rock band known for bringing 80s hair band flair to fan favorites across rock, dance, and country genres!

Mark your calendar for Fri-

day, February 14, 2025, at the iconic SEASIDE® Lyceum. Experience the culinary talents of the Gulf Coast's top chefs and restaurants as they compete for prestigious awards like People's Choice, Judges' Choice, and Chef's Choice. Enjoy delicious tastings from over a dozen talented chefs, complemented by fine wines, craft cocktails, and local brews, all while soaking in the lively musical entertainment.

There will also be a special performance by the Seaside Neighborhood School™ Performance Band.

Proceeds from Taste of the Race support the Seaside School Foundation™, benefiting programs that enhance academic and extracurricular opportunities for students at Seaside Neighborhood School™ and Seacoast Collegiate High School.

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# New Year, New You: **A Sustainable Approach to Weight Loss**

BY DR. KAREN DEVORE

As the calendar turns and the holiday festivities wind down, many of us feel the pull to reset, refresh and refocus on our health. Detox and weight loss are two of the most common New Year's resolutions, sparking motivation to shed holiday indulgences and kickstart healthier habits. A quick Google search for "weight loss programs" yields an overwhelming number of results, from juice cleanses to fad diets promising dramatic results in just a few weeks.

But here's the truth—quick fixes often lead to quick rebounds. At the Tortoise Clinic, we see this pattern far too often. Our patients come to us frustrated by the rollercoaster of unsustainable programs that offer

little personalization and even less clarity on how to maintain long-term results. It's disheartening to watch weight that took months or years to accumulate return just as quickly after extreme dieting efforts.

## Slow and Steady Wins the Race

Just as it didn't take two weeks to gain the weight, it shouldn't take two weeks to lose it. True, lasting weight loss is a marathon, not a sprint. Sustainable health isn't about cutting corners or following one-size-fits-all plans—it's about creating a tailored, thoughtful approach to your body's unique needs.

We take a comprehensive, whole-body approach to weight management with our patients. This means digging deeper than calorie counting and cardio sessions. We look at the full picture—your diet, lifestyle, hormones, metabolic health, behavior patterns, cellular health, and relationship with food.

For some, a personalized

cleanse or detox may serve as a helpful reset, allowing the body to release toxins and reduce inflammation. For others, the path to sustainable weight loss requires a closer look at hormone levels, sleep patterns, nutrient deficiencies, and even genetic predispositions. Weight management is never linear, and the best results come from individualized strategies that consider both short-term goals and long-term health.

## The Building Blocks of Personalized Weight Loss

Weight loss is more than cutting carbs or ramping up workouts—it's about addressing the root causes from the inside out. Our approach begins with a comprehensive health review to analyze your health history, lab work, and metabolic markers, uncovering the reasons behind weight gain or plateaus.

In addition, we focus on balancing hormones that may be slowing your metabolism, while using herbs and nutrition to reg-

ulate blood sugar, stimulate ketogenesis, and restore essential nutrients for cellular health. Personalized dietary strategies are also implemented to help you develop sustainable habits with whole foods and proper macronutrient balance, while muscle mass preservation ensures you build or maintain strength as fat is lost.

For those needing additional support, we offer GLP-1 therapies, which help control appetite, improve blood sugar levels, and boost weight loss by enhancing metabolic function. By fine-tuning your metabolism and creating individualized plans, we guide you toward long-term, sustainable results that fit your lifestyle.

## Why Personalization Matters

I often remind patients that weight loss is not just about the number on the scale. It's about optimizing overall health—feeling energized, confident, and in balance. When you focus on

whole-body wellness, weight loss becomes a natural byproduct of a healthier lifestyle.

That's why working with a practitioner who understands the full spectrum of health is crucial. We draw on both Eastern and Western practices at the Tortoise Clinic to create personalized weight management programs. Whether we're using acupuncture to support digestion and hormone balance, or addressing metabolic health with herbs and nutritional support, our goal is to empower you with tools for lasting change.

If you're tired of the cycle of quick fixes and frustration, I invite you to consider a different approach. Let this year be the one where slow, steady, and sustainable wins the race, just like in the story of the tortoise and the hare.

Schedule your consultation today and take the first step toward the healthiest version of yourself at [TortoiseClinic.com](http://TortoiseClinic.com).



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# What Do You Want, Really?



BY STEPHENIE CRAIG,  
JOURNEY BRAVELY

You're back to a new year with resolutions to overhaul areas of life. Maybe you're back to the gym or back to morning practices or back to church, crossing your fingers you can keep it going longer than last year.

While the idea of positive life change is helpful, resolutions are often missing a key ingredient to make them truly life impacting. Why does the resolution matter? Why are you trying to change? Are you changing because someone judged you, you don't feel enough, you're jealous of someone else? Are you changing because you have something to prove, you want better photos to post, you're seeking approval? Judgement, shame, and approv-

al seeking will only drive change for short periods of time. If you want long-term life change, it's time to ask a different question.

What do you want, really?

When you get to the end of life and reflect back on how you lived, what you made important, how you invested your energy, what do you want to be true about the person you've been and the way you lived your life? What do you want, really?

## Eight Steps to Figure Out What You Want, Really

**Ask yourself what you want, really.** Brainstorm what you want. "I want to double my current income."

**Ask yourself, "What will that get you?"** What will doubling your income get you? It will give me more freedom for family vacations. What will more family vacations get you? More vacations will give me more time with my family. What will more time with your family get you? More time with family will help me know what's going on with my kids beyond grades and activities. And what will

knowing what's going on with your kids more get you? It will get me more authentic, connected relationship with them so they know I really want to know them.

**Follow the "What will that get you?"** question to the deeper desires and values. Name your desires and values. What I want really is to have authentic, connected relationship with my kids and for them to know I really want to know them.

**Clarify what you want, really.** So, it's not really that I want to double my income (while that would be nice), what I really want is deeper, more connected relationships in my family.

**Orient your priorities and choices toward what you really want.** Try using reminders in your phone and post it notes for several weeks to remember your value/desire. How am I scheduling my time this week to prioritize more meaningful connection with my family? How are we considering family connection when we sign up for family activities? How am



I putting boundaries around my phone time to prioritize family connection? How am I showing up in conversations with my family this week? What will I choose to say no to so I can say yes to what I really want?

**Determine how you will measure your progress at the end of 2025.** How will you know if you have engaged in more authentic, connected relationships with your kids and shown that you really want to know them? I will know based on how much they share about their lives outside of grades/sport. I will know based on average face to face time spent talking or having fun together each week. I will know based on how affectionate we are or how

much we laugh together.

## Celebrate progress or evaluate lack of progress.

If you made progress in living toward what you want, enjoy and continue to lean into change. If you don't see the progress you were hoping for, identify the one thing that prevented progress the most. Distraction with work on my phone during family time was the one thing that prevented progress the most.

## Determine the one thing you can commit to that will most likely move you toward what you really want.

I will create a phone/email boundary from 5-9 so I can be more present with family in the evenings.

Approaching personal growth from your deeper values drives long-term change much more effectively than trying to live up to an external standard. Remember that orienting your life habits to your values takes time and commitment and is very worth the work. Connect with us along your journey for counseling and coaching at [Journeybravely.com](http://Journeybravely.com).

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# Book Review: 365 Thank Yous by John Kralik



BY MICHAEL McMANUS LCSW  
 “365 Thank Yous” by John Kralik is a heartfelt and inspir-

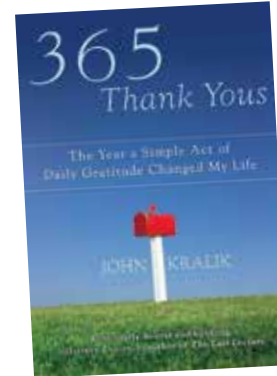
ing memoir that illustrates the transformative power of gratitude. In this uplifting book, Kralik recounts his personal journey during a particularly challenging time in his life, where he decides to write a thank-you note every day for an entire year.

When I am working with clients in therapy it can be very beneficial and uplifting when they identify aspects of their lives they can be grateful for. Kralik does this beautifully in the form of writing thank-you

notes and it has subtle and not-so-subtle transformative effects.

His writing is both engaging and relatable, drawing readers into his experiences as he navigates through his struggles. His decision to embrace gratitude becomes a lifeline, allowing him to shift his focus from despair to appreciation. Each chapter highlights a different note and the stories behind it, showcasing the diverse people and moments that inspire him.

The book emphasizes the profound impact that simple acts of gratitude can have on our lives and relationships. Kralik skillfully illustrates how acknowledging the kindness of others can strengthen connections, foster positivity, and ultimately lead to a more fulfilling life. His reflections serve as a gentle reminder that even in difficult times, there are always




Overall, “365 Thank You” is a delightful read that encourages readers to embrace gratitude as a way of life. Kralik’s journey is a testament to the idea that appreciation can lead to profound changes in mindset and emotional well-being. This book is a must-read for anyone seeking to cultivate a more positive outlook and deepen their relationships with others. It’s a beautiful reminder that gratitude, no matter how small, has the power to transform our lives for the better.

This book makes me ponder how life would be if we all wrote a few or a lot more thank-you notes!

*Michael McManus LCSW is a psychotherapist in private practice in Santa Rosa Beach Florida and can be reached by phone or text at (850) 837-0123 or [psychotherapy30A.com](http://psychotherapy30A.com).*

reasons to be thankful.

What makes “365 Thank Yous” particularly special is its universal appeal. Kralik’s experiences resonate with readers from all walks of life, encouraging them to reflect on their own lives and consider whom they might thank. The book inspires a sense of community and connection, making gratitude feel attainable and relevant.



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## Self-Care Corner: A New Year of Benefitting Your Body



BY KRISY ANDERSON, OWNER,  
 BEVERLY HILLS DAY SPA

Is your New Year’s resolution to exercise more for health reasons, alleviate pain, destress and relax? One of the most beneficial ways to do this is through massage—especially when increasing your work outs! And it’s not just for women; men, you deserve to feel good, too. A massage has incredible benefits for your physique and, for those who exercise, soothes your sore muscles even more than stretching after a workout.

**Pain Relief:** Next time you think about popping that pain pill, make an appointment for a massage instead. Soreness and stiffness result when over-worked muscles produce waste products like lactic acid, and massage can help by improv-

ing the circulation to muscles to flush these out. Tense muscles can also compress blood vessels and nerves, and massage leads to a gradual release that eases the pain. Just be sure to let your massage therapist know if your pain is caused by stress, injury or surgery.

**Improved lymph movement:** Lymph is the milky-white fluid that drains waste from the cells. The pumping effect of muscle contraction moves lymph through the body, and massage (as well as exercise) can facilitate the process. The pressure of massage also increases blood flow that can help reduce swelling after surgery.

**Increased circulation:** The manual pressure of massage increases blood flow to the treated areas. The increased blood flow brings more oxygen and nutrients to the muscles to help repair and revitalize the body.

**Better skin:** Massage helps the skin by stimulating the sebaceous and sweat glands. Increased blood flow also has a positive effect on the skin by supplying the cell with nutrients and oxygen. More blood at the skin’s surface also leads to a rosy,

healthy glow.

**Positive attitude:** Massage has been shown to increase the body’s protection of “feel-good” endorphins and the mood regulating hormone serotonin and decrease levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

**Balance the nervous system:** Stress revs up the nervous system, leading to restlessness, hyperactivity, anxiety, muscle tension, cardiovascular stress and even abdominal problems. Massage helps reduce stress and the body’s reaction to it, bringing your nervous system back into harmony.

**More perfect posture:** Muscles that are too tight or too slack can throw off your posture. To compensate, your body will utilize other muscles, which can eventually become accepted by your body and lead to permanent imbalance and chronic muscle pain. Massage can loosen those areas and help bring them back into balance.

Questions? I’m here to help with a customized massage tailored to your needs and would love to talk with you. Visit [beverlyhillsdayspa.com](http://beverlyhillsdayspa.com) or call me, Krisy, at (850) 654-8544.

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# Just Breathe



BY KAY LEAMAN, HEALTH ARCHITECT, HEALTHYDAY HEALTHYLIFE

Happy New Year. 2024 is over and I'm ready to take a few deep breaths...Looking ahead, I have renewed hope and new adventures awaiting me. This is the way I've chosen to walk in the weeks and months to come. Will you join me?

Breathing is life and our brain ensures we do it from birth to our last breath. The problem lies with how our breathing changes as we grow up. Symptoms of breathing incorrectly can be trouble catching one's breath, elevated heart rate, pain in the neck and shoulders, pain or weakness in the chest, labored breathing, involuntary breathing gasps, taking a sudden deep breath, overall weakness, dizziness and inability to speak.

We can also experience symptoms of obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) such as snoring, daytime sleepiness, waking up suddenly during the night, sometimes gasping or choking, dry mouth or sore throat, morning headache, difficulty concentrating during the day, mood changes, such as depression or irritability, high blood pressure and decreased libido.

There are 4 types of breathing patterns:

• **Eupnea:** This is our breathing pattern when we aren't thinking about it. It's also called quiet breathing.

• **Diaphragmatic breathing or deep breathing:** As



the diaphragm muscle contracts the breath passively leaves the lungs.

• **Costal breathing:** Shallow breathing uses the muscles between ribs (intercostal mus-

cles). As they relax the air leave the lungs. This can happen when stressed or unconsciously holding our breath.

• **Hyperpnea:** Forced breathing happens when both the inhalation and exhalation are active rather than passive due to muscle contractions.

Proper breathing and deep breathing activates the vagus nerve (The boss of the parasympathetic nervous system.) which oversees things like mood, digestion, heart rate, etc. It also sends more oxygen to your brain and organs. Some of the benefits include lowering anxiety and

*Continued on page 46*

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 Business

# Insights for Investors: Strategies to Consider for 2025



BY MAURICE STOUSE, FINANCIAL ADVISOR AND BRANCH MANAGER

Happy New Year to our readers! We hope that you can move closer to attaining your goals and realizing your dreams.

The new year brings resolutions, a new administration, a new congress and a lot of potential things that can impact investors in 2025. We thought it would be an innovative idea to get our readers thinking of some strategies that might help them become more tax efficient, work toward their objectives and help maximize the return on their savings and investments.

Let us start with tax advantaged type plans. First there is an IRA of course (it may or may not be tax deductible and it grows tax deferred). Next, do you have a workplace retire-

ment savings plan? If you do, are you maximizing the amount you can have deducted (thus reducing your taxable income) from your paycheck? There are so many updates and potential for investors that we cannot cover them all here. Check out the IRS.gov website and look at IRS notice 2024-80. In summary, contribution limits are higher and there is even a provision where those 60-63 years old can do an \$11,250 additional catch-up contribution vs. the \$7500 catchup available to those over 50. The IRS max is \$23,500 and if over age 50, it could be \$31,000 in total. If age 60-63, that could be \$34,750. That could lower taxes in the current year and help build your retirement. Add to that that employers can make contributions to your 401k as well and the grand total for your and your employer for 2025 has moved up to \$70,000.

Then there is the Roth IRA. To qualify single tax filers would need make less than \$146,000 and joint filers less than \$230,000. That is because the ability to put in \$7,000 to \$8,000 to a Roth starts phasing out at those levels. The most important thing about a Roth? It grows tax free. So, while you may not get a tax deduction for

the contribution think about never having to pay taxes on withdrawals. Retirement savers with Traditional IRAs from years ago are now taking distributions and of course those are taxable income. Note, they have an option to start converting a part of their traditional IRA to a Roth each year, pay the tax now and let it grow tax free. Unlike a traditional IRA there is no required minimum distribution when you reach that point for traditional IRAs. For these reasons and others, we believe Roth IRAs (and now Roth 401ks) have grown increasingly popular for those who can save and invest for their retirement. There are other things that investors should explore about Roths: The Kiddie Roth which allows the starting of this tax-free vehicle for those under age 18. We have learned that time in the market has meant more than timing the market and the longer the time money has to grow, the greater the potential. Lastly, for those that might have 529 funds remaining, some portion might be able to direct to a Roth.

Note that this information is for education and thought and cannot be a substitute for tax advice. Please utilize professionals on tax advice when wanting

to potentially act on any of this. Also, working in conjunction with a financial or tax advisor might help you decide if one of these would be beneficial for you to consider.

What about HSAs (health savings accounts)? Another vehicle to lower taxable income and have a benefit grow tax free (if used for medical expenses). First you need to be enrolled in a high deductible health insurance plan to qualify. If you do, individuals can contribute \$4,300 (add \$1,000 if over age 55) and a family can contribute \$8,550 (\$9,550 if over age 55). These contributions lower your taxable income as well. Many providers also offer investment options for your contributions giving those the opportunity for growth. In sum, HSAs offer tax deductible contributions, tax free growth and tax-free withdrawals for qualified medical expense. Any funds not used by age 65 can be withdrawn without penalty, but it does count as taxable income. You could also pay some Medicare premiums and Medicare advantage plans from the HSA.

There is much more for savers and investors to consider when it comes to investing and saving in a most tax efficient was

as possible. Once again, consult a tax advisor in collaboration with your financial advisor.

*Maurice Stouse is a Financial Advisor and the branch manager of The First Wealth Management/ Raymond James in the main office located at The First Bank, 2000 98 Palms Blvd., Destin, 850.654.8124. Raymond James advisors do not offer tax advice. Please see your tax professionals. Email: Maurice.stouse@raymondjames.com.*

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# Say Goodbye to Toxicity:

## Building Healthy Teams with Confidence - Part 3 of 6



BY BILL MASON,  
ROCKET FUEL COACH

**Backstory:**

In a buzzing marketing firm, Sarah and Mike, two team members, found themselves clashing over a big project. As deadlines loomed, Sarah grew frustrated with Mike's reluctance to share his ideas during meetings. She felt he was holding back valuable input and suspected betrayal. With a mix of confusion and annoyance, she confronted Mike one afternoon, accusing him of slacking. Mike, feeling cornered, fired back, insisting he was trying to contribute but felt Sarah often brushed off his ideas. Their exchange quickly turned into a heated argument, leaving both feeling unheard and unsupported, creating a tense team atmosphere.

The tension affected not just Sarah and Mike, but the entire team. Ideas were stifled, collaboration faded and the once-exciting project was on the brink of failure. Luckily, their manager noticed the growing rift and introduced the Clifton Strengths

Deep Dive Program, a.k.a. the Ignite Course, along with some team-building sessions. Through these, Sarah and Mike engaged in guided conversations and trust-building exercises, allowing them to express their feelings without fear of judgment. They realized that a lack of trust led them to misinterpret each other's actions. Rebuilding that trust not only improved their working relationship, but also reignited the team's collaborative spirit, proving that healthy conflict can lead to amazing



breakthroughs!

In this six-part series, we are talking about six ways to improve Building Healthy Teams with Confidence. The third way is: Dread of Meetings and Avoidance are further signs of mistrust. If meetings are feared and team interactions are avoided, it often means underlying conflicts and unresolved issues are present. The Ignite Course addresses these challenges by fostering a deeper understanding of each individual's strengths and how they align with the team's goals. This awareness helps reduce anxiety about meetings, as team members gain clarity on their roles and how they contribute to the overall success of the team.

To learn how the Ignite Course can transform your team, visit Rocket Fuel Coach. Let's create teams that foster trust, embrace constructive con-

flict and achieve remarkable success!

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Life is too short to waste on unnecessary conflict when it's avoidable. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, "Be the change that you wish to see in the world."

Stay tuned to learn other ways to improve Building Healthy Teams with Confidence.

Cheers,

*Bill Mason*

*Publisher's Note: To catch up on Parts 1 & 2 of Say Goodbye to Toxicity, visit MyDestinLife.com and view November and December 2024 issues.*

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 Musing



# A Pastor's Ponderings: What Makes You a Powerful Christian?

BY PASTOR DAVE HOLLAND

*"You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." Luke 24:48-49, NIV*

Our super-heroes want to be clothed with power. Superman and Batman have their capes. The Hulk has his muscles and Wonder woman has her uniform. We use these figures to fantasize that we have a super-power. It's fiction with no foundation in reality.

Jesus wants to clothe us in

real power, Spirit-power.

The disciples had witnessed Christ's life by living with him and working alongside him. Day and night for over three years they observed both his miracles and listened to his teachings. The Lord is now commissioning them to tell the world about what they have learned. But they lack something important—power.

The same Spirit that empowered Mary to conceive Baby Jesus is now promised to us by the Father. The Holy Spirit raised Jesus from the dead and now pledged to us. Jesus told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they received this promise.

They waited in prayer for 10 days for the Spirit to come during the Holiday of Pente-

cost. And the Spirit came with power.

The King James Bible translated Luke 24:49 with the phrase "endued with power." But the modern phrasing catches the meaning better, "to be clothed with power," literally to sink into God's garment of power. The Spirit of God is real.

Christ has a purpose and a mission for each of us. But, we cannot achieve that purpose without being clothed with power. Not a fantasy cape, but clothed with the Spirit of Christ and his power.

What would happen to our lives if we waited for the Spirit to come? What would happen to our churches if they waited on the Spirit instead of their agenda?

We do not have the power to change lives. The Holy Spirit has that power. As the Apostles went forth witnessing, the Holy Spirit persuaded and confirmed their witness, and people received salvation. It happens the same way today.

Many years ago, I was leading a summer youth camp in New Hampshire. As always, there were some troublesome young people among the bunch. Some teenagers had come from inner-city Boston, being sponsored by various business people in our church.

One of these rambunctious kids was brought to me for discipline. Though I was irritated by his constant disruptions, compassion overwhelmed me and I laid my hand on his shoulder, looked into his eyes, and said the words given to me. "Young man, you are better than this. I see you as leader who is destined to be a man of God." The Holy Spirit was speaking through me with grace and power I did not have. The Spirit was writing on his heart.

Fast forward roughly 25 years with my daughter Jessica, now a youth pastor in the Columbus, Ohio, area. She had taken a group of young people to a summer camp in the Midwest. There, a dynamic speaker ministered effectively to the teenagers present. The preacher was from the Boston area, and



he described how a camp director had once spoken into his life, leading him to a lifetime of ministry.

Yep, that troubled teen from the camp in New Hampshire was now the dynamic minister in Ohio. God is great.

We don't need a superman cape to be a powerful Christian. If we wait and ask to be clothed with the Spirit, the Lord can use us in wonderful ways. The Holy Spirit still moves with power, confirming Christ's saving power.


*Dave Holland pastored churches for 38 years before retiring in Destin. Learn more about him from his website, [DaveHolland.org](http://DaveHolland.org). Pastor Dave is available to preach and teach at churches and conferences. Contact him at [DavidHolland54@gmail.com](mailto:DavidHolland54@gmail.com).*



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# Sean of the South: **New Year**



BY SEAN DIETRICH

The misperception about New Year's is that it's supposed to be a happy occasion. Sort of like Christmas. Or a birthday party.

But it's not Christmas. New Year's represents the end of something. And goodbyes are not joyous.

New Year's is also a beginning. Beginnings are not entirely happy affairs, either. Beginnings are frightening. You have no idea what you're in for. Could be good. Could be bad.

This year your wife could win the lottery. And when you get home, she might scream, "We won the lottery, honey! Pack your bags!"

"What?" you might reply. "Should I pack for the beach or the mountains?"

"I don't care!" she might an-

swer. "Just pack your bags and get out of my house!"

Sometimes the worst news you can get is good news.

In many ways, last year was a rough one. Six of my close friends died. I was a pallbearer twice. That wasn't happy.

But last year was also a year I accumulated new friends.

It all started when I adopted a blind dog. Which I wrote about in this column. Which led to me getting invited to schools for the blind.

I spoke at the Helen Keller Art Show. There, I met Henrietta, who has blindness due to a mitochondrial disease. She has practically grown up in hospitals. One of the happiest people

I know. "I'm not fearless," Henrietta said. "I'm brave. There's a difference."

I learned how to use a white cane in the hallways of the Callahan School for the Deaf and Blind. Whereupon a little blind girl traced my face with her little hands and sang "You Are So Beautiful."

I visited Alabama Institute for the Blind and Deaf, where a little boy felt my face, and said, "Will you hug me so I know what you feel like?"

I met a cheerful 17-year-old girl named Morgan. We were at the Service Dogs Alabama training facility.

Morgan has paralysis on the left side of her body, frequent seizures, diabetes. She has low vision, and is blind in one eye. Today, she is a freshman at UAB. Totally independent, thanks to Clarabelle, the black Lab who has saved her life on more than one occasion.

I'll never forget when Morgan squeezed my hand and said, "You have a choice to be happy or sad. And each moment you must consciously make that choice."

I inherited a blind goddaughter named Becca.

I met a kid named Owen, who came to one of my shows.

He underwent brain surgery that separates the left from the right hemisphere. He hugged me and said, "You're shorter than I thought."

I met a young woman who is blind, who was a national Braille reading champion. She held my hands and in a happy voice, said, "You're officially one of us now."

In only one year, I was sort of welcomed into the Blind and Deaf community. I have no idea how this happened. Or why.

And I don't know what it means.

But I know one thing. And this one thing was told to me by a young man who could not see, hear, or speak. Our conversation was translated by a tactile sign language interpreter.

He said to me, "When I first went blind, I told my mom that this is not the end, Mom. This is just the beginning of an adventure."

And I can't think of better words to begin the new year.

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# An Interview with Lyle Lovett

BY WILL ESTELL

If you know much about music, then you likely know at least something about the talented Texan turned singer, songwriter, actor and producer, Lyle Lovett.

As if 14 albums, 25 singles to date, four Grammy Awards (including wins for Best Male Country Vocal Performance,

and Best Country Album) were not enough to prove his creative genius, Lovett has also managed to snag over 40 acting credits in film and television, in addition to more than 30 vocal and scoring credits.

In addition to all of his entertainment accolades, however, the multi-talented Lovett, who

celebrated his 67th birthday in November while performing at the recent Moon Crush Cowboy Moon event, can also add to that impressive resume: Dad to seven-year-old twins.

In advance of his Moon Crush performances, I sat down to talk with Lyle about everything from fatherhood, music,



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acting and his time playing along our beautiful beach communities:

**Man, You're quite the work horse. You're playing two of three nights at Moon Crush in Miramar Beach, and then you head out for a UK tour where you are literally playing five nights in a row, from Glasgow to Dublin to Belfast then two dates in London. That has to be incredibly exhausting to play so many days in a row. Most artists I talk with just don't do that—or can't. How do you handle that with such a small amount of vocal rest?**

You know, I don't really worry about doing shows multiple nights. My voice is not such an instrument that I have to take that kind of care of it. I mean, I sort of sound the way I sound no matter what [laughing].

**Have you always done numerous back-to-back dates like that, across most of your touring career?**

We have to, you know, just because of the size of our group. I mean, with the full band we had 32 people on the road this summer, so we really do have to work in five or six nights a week. And you know, I would rather be productive when I'm away from home than have a night off somewhere and do nothing. So that then when I am home, I get to really be home and spend time with my family.

**There are plenty of artists that don't choose to do it that way, but one thing that I've found over the**

**years, to quote one of my mom's training axioms, when she was a training specialist at Exxon, "There are many, many correct ways to do something." I'm guessing having twins in first grade also makes being home as often as possible very important, right?**

Absolutely it does. And I'm home far more than I'm gone. In fact, I've kind of kept track, and since they were born in 2017, I've only missed 12 days [at once] away from home, and that was just for logistical reasons. Many times, I even fly back home when I have one day off between shows. It's hard for me to go for more than a week without seeing them. So, most of the time, I'm able to get on an early flight out and be home even if it's just for the day, you know. But when I'm home, I'm really home and I get to take them to school in the morning.

**You've stayed close to your roots having grown up just outside of Houston, and still calling that general area home. What made you stay there?**

Yeah, I grew up in Klein [a rural Texas town near Houston]. My mom was a Klein and my great, great grandpa was the first Klein there. So, that's our place. We've got a real family connection to the area. And that's just one reason it's important to me. Ours is one of the last rural properties in the area and we're surrounded by subdivisions at this point.

In many ways that place has

*Continued on next page*



**LYLE LOVETT**

*continued from previous page*

been my life's work. To hang on to my grandpa's farm place, you know. Buying it back over the years after being sold out of the family back in the early 80's. And, you know, reassembling it.

**I think it's safe to say that your music is most typically associated with the country genre. But, the truth is, your compositions are really amalgamations of everything from blues and jazz to folk and gospel. What does Lyle Lovett consider his music to be, and where did that influence come from?**

I grew up in Houston, which was, as you know, one of the big media markets in the country. And I listened to pop music. I listened to country music. I listened to my parents' record collection, which had Glenn Miller records, Ray Price records, Ray Charles records and Nat King Cole records. So, to me, that was all just great music. My writing just reflects my taste, really.

**What about the gospel element to some of your songs. What brought that**

**into the writing room?**

I grew up in church, but I grew up in the Lutheran church. So, singing that kind of gospel music didn't really happen. But, I always liked that kind of gospel music. My dad was raised Baptist, and when we'd go visit his home church, I could hear the difference. They'd have a gospel quartet for music. I love church music and I've always been intrigued by different styles of music.

**I've asked artists from the late great Jimmy Buffett to Kenny Chesney to Darius Rucker. What the biggest changes have been over their musical career, that actually made a specific impact on how they do things. You've come up in some of that same time frame. What industry changes have impacted you the most?**

Well, the changes I've seen are more from just observing and listening, but I don't feel like they do impact me, as much as they have some. But, you know, there's certainly more pop influence in country than ever before. I mean, the style of country—what's considered

country—has changed dramatically even since the 80's when my first record came out.

I've kind of always been into doing my own thing. I started out playing solo, or with one other person, doing my own songs. I mean, I've always played singer songwriter rooms and folk clubs. So, my approach to performing has always been more from that point of view. I really never was thinking about how I can write a hit like one that's on the radio right now, or what sort of styles I need to write. I was able to make up songs that appeal to me for personal reasons, rather than, you know, sort of trying to guess what the market might want at any given time.

**What keeps you going? What is the driving force behind Lyle Lovett all these years later?**

I just love being able to do what I get to do. It was very important to my parents that I went to college and got a degree, so I did. My parents both worked really hard and made decisions based on what they had to do. And, by doing that, they were able to afford me the ability to instead do something I wanted to do. I never ever want

to take that for granted, and, I believe I owe it to them and me to be the best I can at this. No matter how long I do it.

**What would you be doing if you weren't writing and performing music or acting?**

I have no idea, Will. [laughing].

**Then I guess it's a damn good thing that you're so good at what you do. [both laughing]**

**I saw you perform at 30A Songwriter's Festival and you've mentioned to me that was your first time along our Northwest Florida beach communities. What do you think of our area? Have you been able to hit the beaches and spend any time out taking in scenery that has drawn so many of your fellow artists, and Texans, to spend their vacations along our shores?**

When I was there for the 30A Songwriter's Festival [2023], that was really the first time that I'd spent any time there, besides just driving through.

April, my wife, used to go to Destin every summer with her

parents and she's really fond of the area. I mean it's beautiful, as you know. I'm excited that we get to be there for a few days this weekend. I grew up going to Galveston and Surfside [Texas beaches] where the beaches are quite different. Where the sand is kind of brown. So, it's a whole different deal. And I know it is quite the destination for lots of folks.

**Any parting thoughts or perils of Texan wisdom you'd like to leave for our readers?**

Get out and see the shows! Our shows with The Large Band [the actual name of Lovett's full band] are just incredible. I absolutely love what the people in my band bring to my songs and how they make my songs better and more musical. You know, I get to play music with some of my heroes. Legends in the business. I mean, we have Russ Kunkel playing drums. Leland Skylar playing bass and Jim Cox playing piano. James Herr along with Jeff White on guitar. That's quite the lineup, right? You know, to step on stage with them when those guys are trying their best to help me, that's a great feeling.





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Arts & Music

# Goodbye 2024

BY ANNA FISHER, ASSOCIATE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, ECTC

I turned around and you were gone—I mean we were just getting to know each other! Wasn't it just yesterday we found out that Taylor Swift was dating a Super Bowl Champion

and Christopher Nolan had to endure "BarbieHeimer" on his way to the Oscars?

Here at Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC), we are still humming along to all of our favorite songs from the fall opening musical "Jersey Boys."

And it wasn't that long ago we had hundreds of children sing, dance and act their hearts out onstage in our multiple summer camps. A lot of those same children joined us again in "Shrek the Musical" this past fall. I knew you were coming to a close

when we opened our hearts for "All is Calm: The Christmas Truce of 1914." I felt you slipping away and I just wasn't ready to see you go. We've had some good times, 2024. I'll never forget how many people came together to support us this past year when the state cut our arts funding with no warning. Our belief in the miracle that "Anything Can Happen" was renewed when so many people in our community stepped forward and gave with open hearts and hands.

Throughout the year, we saw again and again the incredible growth that comes from word of mouth and the shared desire for human connection in real

time. Real stories performed by real actors onstage in a show that will never happen the same way twice. A unique, living, breathing experience that must be shared to even exist. You showed us once again that it is the people who are the heart of ECTC.

We have said our goodbyes with a bittersweet embrace, 2024. It was a beautiful year with so many miracles grand and small. And the greatest miracle of all is that we now have this gift of a New Year. A fresh start with so many possibilities, opportunities and dreams where "Anything Can Happen."

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**Little Shop of Horrors** follows meek plant store attendant Seymour, his co-worker crush Audrey, her sadistic dentist boyfriend and the man-eating plant that threatens them and the world as we know it.

Tickets or info, call 850.684.0323 or visit [EmeraldCoastTheatre.org](http://EmeraldCoastTheatre.org)  
560 Grand Boulevard, Suite 200 | Miramar Beach, FL 32550

## Local Author Bookshelf: Every Day Jesus by Dave Holland

Start your new year with a practice that will transform your life—reading the Gospel of Luke and experiencing the life of Christ daily. Read with a companion book as *Every Day Jesus* presents the real Jesus—who He is, what He does and what He teaches.

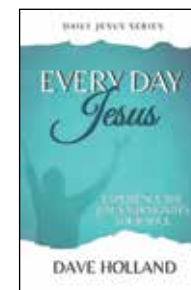
This 40-Day devotional/Bible study invites you to join Luke as he unveils the pathway to knowing the living Christ daily. Empty of theological and denominational dogma, the book simply shows how to follow Jesus.

Follow Luke around as he uncovers more of the life of Jesus each day. Walk with Jesus as your friend, not just a distant deity. The book ushers you into the Lord's inner circle of disciples.

Luke is the only Gentile author of a Bible book. We in the Western World are descendants of Greco-Roman culture. Luke wrote for us as he is from the same mindset. Luke is like us. It is the most culturally relevant gospel for us who live in the western world.

Luke speaks to the discipleship needs of believers by simply showing the life and lessons of Christ. The average reader can finish a daily devotion in less than fifteen minutes.

*Every Day Jesus* explains



Luke Chapters 1-5 paragraph by paragraph—experience by experience. The second book, *Extraordinary Jesus*, picks up the next phase of Christ's ministry in Luke 5b-9 and makes up book 2 in *The Daily Jesus Series*.

Absorb the scriptures daily, walk with Jesus through the stories and illustrations provided, and respond by praying according to that day's reading. You will experience Jesus by following Him on the roads of Palestine and responding to the events of His life. This practice is the essence of Christianity and the fuel that will cause you to burn with pure passion. Come walk with Jesus *Every Day* through the pages of *Every Day Jesus* by local author, Dave Holland.

Dave Holland pastored churches for 38 years before retiring in Destin. Get a copy of his book at [DaveHolland.org](http://DaveHolland.org) or at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com). Pastor Dave is available to preach and teach at churches and conferences. Contact him at [DavidvHolland54@gmail.com](mailto:DavidvHolland54@gmail.com).

### SEVEN GIFTS GOD GIVES US TO WELCOME THE KING

*Christmas Jesus*  
SEVEN GIFTS GOD GIVES US TO WELCOME THE KING  
DAVE HOLLAND

Christmas Jesus is a gleaming of devotions gathered from the Gospel of Luke—the gospel written for us in the Western World. Doctor Luke is the only Gentile to write books of the Bible and he conveys the life of Christ through his deep passion partnered with sound research. He gives us an intimate and accurate rendering of the birth of the Messiah.

This book will fill your heart with joy and trustworthy truth. God has seven gifts for you that will prepare you for the birth of His Son. Glow in spiritual glory this Christmas as Jesus is born anew in your heart. Let this be your Happy Birthday Jesus book!

Christmas Jesus has become a classic retelling of the splendid story of the birth of Christ—updated to bring fresh insights to this ancient story.

Adding five new parables in a fiction section makes this book more fun and gives fresh insight into the wonder of God the Father sending us Jesus.

Find the Book at [DaveHolland.org](http://DaveHolland.org)

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dave Holland loves Jesus and has dedicated his life to sharing God's love. While studying at Gordon-Conwell Seminary and pastoring churches for almost forty years, he discovered Jesus is so much more than school and church—Jesus is life. Genuine faith is not about organizations, denominations, or personalities, but it is about discovering the depths of God's love and grace. Dave and his wife Jonie live in Destin, Florida. Contact Dave on his website, [DaveHolland.Org](http://DaveHolland.Org).





# Writing Off into the Sunset: Destin Word Weavers Brings Authors Together

Everyone loves a story, especially a tale they can cry about, bleed with, or laugh at. Anyone who can tell such a story will have their face carved onto the mountain of immortality. Just ask Ernest Hemingway, William Shakespeare, or Theodor Seuss Geisel (author of the Dr. Seuss books). Do you dream of writing stories that will live in people's hearts?

Literature is human. Fiction or non-fiction, humor or tragedy, prose or poetry: we all want to communicate. Did you know there are local friends helping each other write well?

Groups of Christian writers work together on the craft of writing called "Word Weavers." One such group is here on the Emerald Coast. Meeting monthly in Niceville, the Destin Word Weavers meet to listen to one another's works and give

positive critiques and encouragement.

The members range from amateurs to published authors and publishers, all from various walks of life. The genres they represent include non-fiction, mystery, humor, memoir, devotional, biographical, fiction and poetry. With mutual respect and finely tuned skills, they edit, correct, and inspire one another.

Most of the members are Christians who attend various churches including Catholic, Protestant, Charismatic, and non-denominational.

Alice Murray currently leads the Destin Word Weavers Chapter. She is an author of an annotated Agatha Christie book and she's had several jokes published in Reader's Digest. Numerous magazines have published her articles. The group meets on the second Saturday morning of

each month at 9:30 a.m. in the Crosspoint Church, Bluewater Bay Campus, 214 Partin Drive S, Niceville, Florida, 32578. The next meeting is on December 14th.

All kinds of people participate in the Destin Word Weavers group. Freeport resident Paul Renfroe has written a theological series, while Dave Holland has published a series of devotionals based on the Gospel of Luke. Susan Neal writes books fostering good health and maturity while she also leads the Christian Indie Publishing Association (CIPA.Podia.com). Jud Stone, our chaplain, writes histories of great Christians who are little known.

You can join our hearty band of writers, poets, Bible commentators, and historians. Whether it's a legacy for your family or the next blockbuster,



Word Weavers members who recently received various writing awards at the Blue Lake Writers Conference.

you are welcome in the Destin Word Weavers! We convene the second Saturday morning of each month at 9:30 in the Crosspoint Church, Bluewater Bay Campus, 214 Partin Drive S, Niceville.

You can learn more about the Word Weavers at <https://word-weavers.com/>.

For more information, please call Dave Holland at 970-691-9017 or email at [davidvholland54@gmail.com](mailto:davidvholland54@gmail.com).

Word Weavers members who recently received various writing awards at the Blue Lake Writers Conference.

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# Ask Destinites: What Locals Want for Destin In 2025



BY PATRICIA LEE, OWNER  
DESTINITES.COM

During December, I asked our targeted locals Facebook group the following question:

What stores would you like to see come to Destin or what would you like to see implemented for the city in the coming 2025 year? I love asking this question at the beginning of each new year since some needs of the city can certainly change from year to year. As citizens, the

hope is that city/county council members, the mayor or some deep pocketed entrepreneur will see the suggestions and take action. Note: There was one store which was repeatedly mentioned to an overwhelming degree, and that was Trader Joe's! Members also expressed specific ideas that the city could implement.

### Member responses:

1. Trader Joe's is much cheaper than a lot of grocery stores. And they have a wonderful selection of cleaning products and personal care stuff. The meat and breads are a really good deal, along with their gluten-free and dairy-free options. I will drive to Tallahassee for a Trader Joe's shopping trip for a day, because the food prices and selections are that good.

2. I would still like to see walkovers built at various points up and down 98; especially at Harborwalk Village. It's getting

more and more crowded in season, thus becoming increasingly dangerous at the intersections.

3. I still desperately want a food truck area where multiple food trucks can park and there is some green space and picnic tables!

4. Make Taylor Clements Park on Calhoun Dr. dog friendly (on leash and pick up station).

5. Walkway from Calhoun under the bridge to Harbor Walk.

6. Dave and Busters for sure! Keeps tourists happy and locals!

7. I don't want to drive to Shalimar for dinner after working a 10-hour shift. Destin needs something for the folks that live here and work for all the tourists. We need something to help us for a change!

8. Bands on the beach! Affordable, better clothing stores. Not too cheap, but not a boutique. I'm really having a hard

time finding clothes.

9. A Planetarium

10. Fixing the playground at the Morgan Sports Complex. Coming up on 10 months that it's been mostly torn down and nothing has happened.

11. It would be awesome to see more locally owned restaurants. I, for one, would love a healthy food option restaurant and a really good place to get soup that wasn't 10 bucks.

12. A resident-only beach access! How is it that residents have to fight for beach access and parking against tourists every year when we pay taxes and live here? I still believe that a deal could be worked out between the city and the hotels for either a discount or deal for beach access for locals.

13. A park for autistic and disabled children.

14. We need entertainment inside. When it rains, people

don't know what to do. Wish malls were inside. PCB getting top golf, dinner on a boat show inside by Dolly, tootsies, etc. We need more to do inside. No more fast food, storage units, apartments or car washes.

The complete list of suggestions of which there were over 400, can be seen in our Destinites Facebook group at [www.Facebook.com/groups/Destinites](http://www.Facebook.com/groups/Destinites).

Happy New Year To All!

If you are a Destin resident or in the close surrounding area, I invite you to join our private targeted group for locals and property owners at [www.Facebook.com/groups/Destinites](http://www.Facebook.com/groups/Destinites) with 11,000+ members (Est. Oct. 2018). Check out our monthly newsletter and local business directory at [www.Destinites.com](http://www.Destinites.com). If your business is listed in our local directory, you may advertise in our Facebook group.

## JUST BREATHE

*continued from page 37*

depression, managing stress and improving focus. We can also experience better sleep, faster

recovery from exercise or exertion.

Our breathing begins to change around age 5 which is when we start sitting for longer periods of time. Injuries as

well as wearing waist bands, bra straps, compression garments and sucking in our gut also contributes to the change.

The role proper breathing has in our well-being includes regulating the nervous system and emotional well-being. It also enhances vitality by increasing the alpha and beta waves and boosts respiratory performance. Studies with athletes suggests that deep breathing following intense physical exercise can foster antioxidant response and protection from the effects of free radicals. This translates to improved levels of health and greater longevity. By the way, you don't have to be an athlete to experience these benefits.

Taking the time to learn how to breathe and practicing it daily can definitely offer health benefits. Proper breathing can aid in combating diseases such as cardiovascular by lowering blood pressure and heart rates, lowering stress (places the body back into the parasympathetic system), lessening anxiety and depression, aids the respiratory system with asthma and tuberculosis and people who want to quit smoking. It also improves the sympathetic response when combined with diabetic treatment. Lastly cancer patients can improve fatigue, sleep and anxiety caused by treatment.

Stand up and take a deep breath. If your neck and should-

ers moved, stop. Relax and take another deep breath relaxing your shoulders. Your breath should expand 360 degrees around your rib cage and back. You'll feel your ribs open as well as your back. Watch your pets breathe; nature is a great teacher.

Another great thing about breathing properly is that it can be done anywhere and at any time. So, no matter where you are, take a few minutes to just breathe.

*Here's to Health in 2025!  
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## DESTIN SNOWBIRDS

*continued from page 8*

### Feb. 8 2025 Pink Run Benefiting Fore Her

The Village of Baytowne Wharf, Miramar Beach, 8:30 a.m.

Snowbirds are encouraged to wear pink and join the community in a walk or run benefiting breast cancer patients in financial need. Enjoy a photo booth, prizes, food samples, and a DJ-fueled after party. Register

at [PinkRunBenefitingForeHer.itsyourrace.com](http://PinkRunBenefitingForeHer.itsyourrace.com).

Learn more about the 501(c)(3) organization hosting the big event at [foreher.org](http://foreher.org).

### Feb. 11 Snowbird Meeting

Destin Community Center, 10 a.m.

The Voices of Northwest Florida State College perform.

### Feb. 14 Valetine Dinner Dance

Austons on 98, Miramar

Beach, 5-9 p.m.

Cost is \$40 per ticket (\$40 plus \$2 processing fee online). 30 tickets available online (must have a badge #).

Purchase tickets online at [thedestinsnowbirds.com/valentine-dinner](http://thedestinsnowbirds.com/valentine-dinner).

### Feb. 24 Harbor Cruise

Contact: Steve Ericson, 612-360-7584, [slericson@yahoo.com](mailto:slericson@yahoo.com)



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