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DESTIN *Life*

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Thanks to Dog-Harmony, More Tails Are Wagging



BY CHRISTIE SOLOMON

Where the therapy dogs' wagging tails go, area students are learning empathy toward animals and each other, and patients are healing faster

with smiles. Dog-Harmony, a 501(c)(3) affiliate of Intermountain Therapy Animals (ITA), evaluates and manages therapy dog teams in Bay, Walton, and Okaloosa coun-

ties in Northwest Florida.

For example, Dog-Harmony currently coordinates 12 volunteer therapy dog teams that serve public and nonprofit organizations such

as Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center and HCA Florida Twin Cities Hospi-

DOG HARMONY

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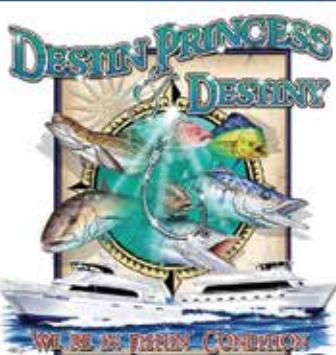
Closing the Digital Divide, Building Futures

Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast Impact Area Youth

BY LORI LEATH SMITH

For families in our Destin and surrounding area, opportunity increasingly hinges on access — to technology, to mentorship and to safe, supportive spaces where young

BOYS & GIRLS CLUB

continued on page 22

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DOG HARMONY

continued from page 1

tal in the nearby Niceville area through animal-assisted interactions, including the R.E.A.D.ing Paws program. Dog-Harmony is dedicated to reducing the shelter dog population through ongoing, community-focused, humane education and therapy dog programs that enrich the human-animal bond.

What is Humane Education?

“Humane education [is] designed to cultivate compassion for humans, animals, and/or the environment.” The Animal Legal Defense Fund states that the field “exists to foster creative and critical thinking skills within people, which enable them to make benevolent choices and enhance respect for the natural world and its inhabitants.” Access to humane education programming for children is critical as they begin developing empathy skills and humane attitudes.

The Role of Therapy Dogs in Humane Education

Therapy dog teams, consisting of an evaluated therapy dog

and handler, support Dog-Harmony’s humane education and responsible dog care programs for children and families, helping them practice what they learn. At the end of November, 4,250 children in Okaloosa and Walton counties had attended Dog-Harmony’s humane education programs in 2025.

Studies have shown that humane education programs improve children’s empathy toward animals and, in turn, each other.

A study of 257 students, aged 10 to 17, who participated in The Marine Humane Society’s after-school humane education programs between the Fall of 2014 and the Spring of 2018, revealed that the students’ evaluation scores improved for both treatment of animals and empathy (attitudes towards other people) after completing the eight-week program.

A 2021 study of 110 third-grade students in Hong Kong found that class-based, animal-assisted humane education increased cognitive competence and empathy and reduced hyperactivity among participants. The researchers also identified three central qualitative themes

from the study: “enhancement of self-control, promotion of humane attitude, and improvement of reading skills.”

Published in 2023, the results of an academic-year-long study of 605 first-grade students in six schools across four cities in eastern China revealed that the animal and nature content of the country’s humane education program, “Caring for Life,” increased the students’ affective and cognitive empathy scores. Affective empathy, associated with altruistic and prosocial behaviors in children, is the ability to share others’ emotions, whereas cognitive empathy is the ability to understand them.

R.E.A.D.ing Paws Program

In addition to empathy, therapy dogs can also encourage a love of reading. Dog-Harmony is an affiliate of ITA’s R.E.A.D.ing Paws (Reading Education Assistance Dogs) program, an initiative designed to help children build confidence and improve their literacy skills with the help of trained therapy dogs and their handlers. Evaluated therapy dog teams interested in participating in this program are required to take

the R.E.A.D.ing Paws workshop and undergo (human) background checks before being put into service.

The Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI) states, “Children have reported liking the animal and enjoying reading to them, increasing their motivation to read... Pets are not judgmental, they do not laugh [or] criticize, and allow children to read at their own pace. Dogs can reduce the stress reactions of children performing a stressful task.”

Therapy Dogs in Health Settings

In addition to social and emotional learning and literacy benefits for children in schools, interactions with therapy dogs can actively reduce stress and anxiety in medical and at-risk youth advocacy settings. Therapy dogs can improve human mental and physiological health through acceptance, physical comfort, mental stimulation, socialization, and entertainment through animal-assisted interactions.

According to HABRI, animal-assisted interactions have been shown to positively “in-

fluence levels of blood pressure, heart rate, [and] hormones correlated with well-being, including cortisol, oxytocin, β -endorphin, prolactin, phenylacetic acid and dopamine.”

Ways to Get Involved

Dog-Harmony founder, Nancy Brown, a Certified Professional Dog Trainer-Knowledge Assessed (CPDT-KA), knows that the continued growth of the organization’s therapy dog program relies on volunteers and the generosity of corporate sponsors and individual donors. Compassionate support volunteers help coordinate therapy dog visits in hospitals and support Dog-Harmony teams in the community. This support volunteer role provides an opportunity to shadow current therapy dog teams and offers insights into a potential future team role paired with an evaluated therapy dog.

To learn more, request a therapy dog visit, or become a volunteer, visit www.dog-harmony.org.



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Training for the Long Run: A Smarter Way to Think About Your Health

BY DR. KAREN DEVORE,
TORTOISE CLINIC

If you've ever laced up your shoes for a long walk, a run, or even just committed to showing up for yourself day after day, you already understand something

fundamental about health: real progress takes time.

In my work, I see it constantly—people who are frustrated, exhausted, and overwhelmed because they've tried everything. The detox teas. The extreme



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cleanses. The 30-day challenges promising a brand-new body and life by next month. And when those promises inevitably fall short, they blame themselves.

Here's the truth I want you to hear clearly: your body is not the problem. The problem is the belief that wellness should be fast, dramatic, and immediate.

Health doesn't work that way. It never has.

The Myth of the Quick Fix

We live in a culture that celebrates instant results. Faster internet. Overnight shipping. Before-and-after photos that suggest transformation can, and should, happen in weeks. It's no wonder people feel discouraged when their own bodies don't keep up with those expectations.

But your body is not a machine you can reboot. It is a living, adaptive system shaped by years of stress, habits, hormones, sleep patterns, relationships, injuries, and emotions. Expecting it to "snap back" after a few weeks of effort is not just unrealistic, it's unfair.

Fads and trends often work briefly because they shock the system. They rely on restrictions, extremes, or novelty. And while they may produce short-term changes, they rarely create lasting health. Once the trend ends, as it always does, the symptoms return, sometimes louder than before.

Why Slow and Steady Actually Works

When I say wellness is a mar-

athon, I don't mean it has to be miserable or exhausting. Quite the opposite. Sustainable health is built through consistent, manageable choices that your body can integrate over time.

Think about how trust is built in a relationship. It's not created by grand gestures alone. It's built through reliability. Showing up. Listening. Responding with care. Your body works the same way.

When you nourish yourself regularly, move in ways that feel supportive, address stress gently, and prioritize sleep, your nervous system begins to relax. Hormones rebalance. Digestion improves. Pain softens. Energy returns, not all at once, but gradually, reliably.

This is not flashy progress. It's quiet. And it's powerful.

Real Life Doesn't Happen in Perfect Conditions

One of the biggest reasons people abandon their wellness efforts is because they believe they've "fallen off the wagon." Life happens—a busy week, a sick child, a stressful deadline, a holiday meal—and suddenly it feels like everything is ruined.

But a marathon isn't lost because you slow down for water. Or because you stumble. Or because one mile feels harder than the last. You keep going.

Health is not about perfection. It's about resilience and return—coming back to yourself again and again without punishment or shame.

Continued on page 9

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Listed by Val Waters Auclair 850.855.6205



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 Community

Events Around Town

Camellia Festival at Eden Gardens State Park Feb. 7

Choctawhatchee Audubon will host educational stations during the annual Camellia Festival on Saturday, Feb. 7, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Eden Gardens State Park in Santa Rosa Beach. Festivalgoers can explore the historic gardens while learning about native birds, habitats and conservation efforts. For more information about Choctawhatchee Audubon programs and events, visit choctawhatchee-audubon.org.

Palate & Palette Feb. 7

Shelter House will host its 10th annual Palate & Palette fundraising event on Saturday, Feb. 7, bringing together art, cuisine and community in support of survivors of domestic violence. The evening features wine, tapas, live painting and silent and live auctions, with keynote speakers Nicole Schmidt and Tara Petito of the Gabby Petito Foundation. Festivities begin with a cocktail hour at 6 p.m., followed by a five-course seated

tapas tasting at 7 p.m., prepared by local chefs and paired with fine wines. The event takes place at Drive The Coast. Tickets and event details are available at shelterhousewfl.org.

DCWAF Annual Galentine's Fundraiser Feb. 7

DCWAF's Galentine's Day Fundraiser is turning five, and they're going all out to honor the queens in our community that come together to give back! Hosted in Destin at the home of Candis Wilson, Galentine's brings influential women in the community together to support one another while raising money for programs designed to empower young girls through DCWAF's 16 partner children's charities and beyond. All individuals and businesses affiliated with the production of this event are female owned and operated. The cards have been dealt, and every Queen deserves her moment during this fun day of giving. More info/tickets: [https://www.dcwaf.org/events/5th-an-nu](http://www.dcwaf.org/events/5th-an-nu)

al-galentines-day-fundraiser.

Hard Hats & High Heels Feb. 13



Habitat Walton County invites you to join the annual Hard Hats & High Heels, a women's empowerment luncheon bringing together a cross-section of the Emerald Coast's professional, social and philanthropic leaders. This year's keynote speaker, Lisa Gunderson, rallies groups and individuals to make life and leadership changes that truly make a difference.

Taking place at The Hilton

Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa from 11 a.m.-1 p.m., tickets are available for purchase online for \$75 at: <https://www.giveffect.com/campaigns/33480-7th-annual-hard-hats-high-heels>.

Complimentary Tropical Re-Union Wedding Vow Renewals Feb. 14 | 1-3 p.m.



Celebrate Valentine's Day with a romantic vow renewal at LuLu's Destin during its annual Tropical Re-Union Wedding Vow Renewal. The complimentary ceremony, officiated by a wedding professional, begins at 2 p.m. on LuLu's sandy beach overlooking Choctawhatchee Bay.

Couples will enjoy champagne toasts, wedding cake, flowers for the "brides," reunion certificates, and prize awards for the longest- and shortest-married couples and most festive attire. Pre-registration is encouraged

online through Feb. 9, with day-of registration available beginning at 11 a.m.

Info & pre-register: lulusfunfoodmusic.com

Location: Destin, at the foot of the Mid-Bay Bridge, next to Legendary Marina

Phone: (850) 710-5858

IDIDAHIKE 2026 Feb. 14



Spend Valentine's Day outdoors during IDIDAHIKE, hosted by the Choctawhatchee Chapter of the Florida Trail Association. The annual event features guided hikes of varying lengths through the scenic Nokuse Land Conservancy, part of the Florida Wildlife Corridor and home to sections of the Florida National Scenic Trail.

Designed for families, casual walkers and experienced hikers alike, IDIDAHIKE combines outdoor adventure, conservation education and community connection in one of Northwest

Continued on page 9

For the Love of Songwriting

February 13 & 14

Scan for Info & tickets



HITS TO MENTION

"Lover, Lover" Jerrod Niemann • "I Don't Dance" Lee Brice • "Livin' Our Love Song" Jason Michael Carroll • "Hard to Love" Lee Brice • "Suds In a Bucket" Sara Evans • "Goodnight Kiss" Randy Houser • "7 minutes in Heaven" Reba • "Like My Whiskey ft. Gretchen Wilson" Jessie G • "Damn Addiction" Justin Holmes & MANY MORE!

Jessie G Matt Wynn Justin Holmes Ava Connell



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For the Love of Songwriting

Feb. 13-14 | The Alice in Destin

This Valentine's weekend, fall in love with the songs behind the hits.

For the Love of Songwriting returns to The Alice in Destin for an intimate, two-night musical experience celebrating the art, heart and storytelling behind today's biggest country songs. Set beneath elegant clear tents with heaters for comfort, the event creates a cozy, romantic atmosphere where music lovers can connect deeply with the stories that shaped the soundtrack of their lives.

Enjoy live performances and behind-the-scenes stories from acclaimed hitmakers including Jerrod Niemann, Jason Michael Carroll, Rob

Hatch, Billy Montana and more — alongside rising songwriters you'll be proud to say you discovered first. Each evening offers a rare glimpse into the creative process, revealing the inspiration, emotion and moments that turned simple melodies into unforgettable hits.

Limited tickets are available for this exclusive Valentine's weekend experience. A portion of the proceeds benefits Angel Force Protection, supporting safety with purpose in our community.

Love songs. Real stories. One unforgettable weekend.

Tickets available at DestinSongwriterFestival.com



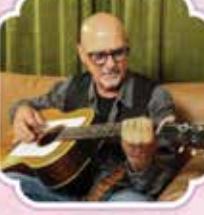
Jerrod Niemann



Jason Michael Carroll



Rob Hatch



Billy Montana



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Intimate Celebration Packages at The Alice – Just in Time for Valentine's Day!

A refined wedding experience at sunrise or sunset in Destin



By KRISTIN SULLIVAN,
GENERAL MANAGER

For couples seeking a personal and meaningful celebration, The Alice in Destin now offers a thoughtfully curated Intimate Celebration Package designed for unforgettable moments for simply two. Perfectly suited for weddings, vow renewals, or proposals, this experience is created for couples who want elegance, privacy, and simplicity, set against the natural beauty of Destin's waterfront.

Offered Sunday through Wednesday at Sunrise or Sunset, this all-inclusive package is available for \$5,000 and takes place on The Alice Sunset Dock, an iconic setting known for its romantic atmosphere and golden hour views.

Created for two, designed to be unforgettable!

This intimate package is created for two, making it ideal for elopements or deeply personal celebrations with a minimal guest presence. Every detail is intentionally included, allowing couples to relax and fully enjoy the experience without the stress of coordinating loads of logistics.

Intimate Celebration Package Inclusions:

- Professional Wedding Officiant
- Bridal bouquet and boutonnière
- Wedding cake
- Champagne for celebrating

- On-site coordinator
- Professional photographer
- Romantic dinner for two
- Two-night onsite stay at The Alice Guest Cottages

Each element is curated to create a seamless, elevated celebration that feels both luxurious and effortless.

Sunrise or sunset on The Alice Sunset Dock

Couples may choose between a tranquil sunrise ceremony, offering peaceful light and quiet intimacy, or a glowing sunset celebration, where warm hues and waterfront views create a naturally romantic backdrop. The Alice Sunset Dock provides a private, picturesque setting that enhances the experience without distraction.

Weekday celebrations with intention

Available Sunday through



Wednesday, these intimate celebrations offer a slower, more intentional alternative to traditional weekend weddings. Weekday availability allows for a relaxed timeline, increased privacy, and an experience that feels personal rather than production-driven, perfect for destination couples or those seeking a refined, unrushed celebration.

Weddings, vow renewals, and proposals

This package is ideal not only for weddings, but also for vow renewals and proposals, offering couples a meaningful way to celebrate love at any stage. Whether you are beginning your marriage or reaffirming it, The Alice provides a setting that honors the moment with grace and beauty.

Location & reservations

The Alice – A Gathering Place, 109 Calhoun Avenue, Destin, Florida

To reserve your Intimate Celebration Package, couples may call 850-460-4625.





THE ALICE

A GATHERING PLACE

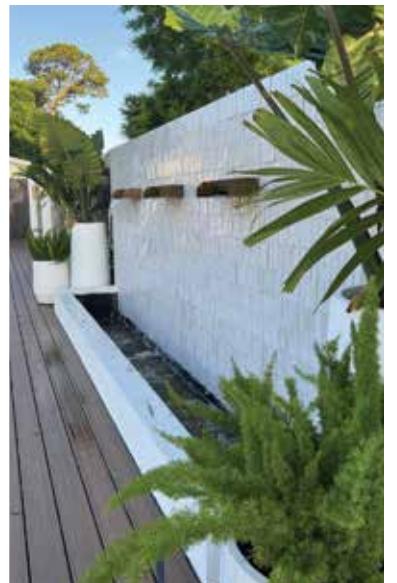
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Cali's To Do In Destin! FEBRUARY 2026

***** 6 *****

Friday Martini Lunch | 11am-4pm | Skybar Destin
Fire Pit Friday | 4pm | 30A Distilling Co

Free Beach Bonfire | 5pm | Royal Palm Grille
Karaoke | 7pm | Island Wing Company

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

Latin Night | 8pm-2am | Bosforo | Miramar Beach

Karaoke | 8pm | 5 o'Clock Somewhere | Baytowne Wharf

***** 6-8 *****

Yakov Smirnoff-Film/TV Star & Comedy Legend | 4pm & 7pm | The Palms Resort | Destin

***** 7 *****

Farmers Market | 9am-1pm | Grand Boulevard

Farmers Market | 9am | Seaside, FL

Farmers Market | 9am | Niceville

Camellia Festival | 10am-2pm | Eden Gardens State Park | SRB

Discover Science Saturday | 10am | Emerald Coast Science Museum

Chili Cookoff Benefit | 10am | De'France Indoor Flea Market

Free Women's Self Defense Seminar | 10:30am | Emerald Coast Martial Arts (726 Beal)

Brunch Fest | 12pm | Harborwalk Village

2026 Super Butt Rub – Destin Rotary Fundraiser | 1pm | Dave Morrow Insurance

DCWAF Galentine's Fundraiser | 2-5pm | Home of Candis Wilson | Destin

Destin Commons Market | 2pm | Destin Commons

A Midsummer Night's Dream: Charity Soiree | 4:30pm | 17 Industrial St NW | FWB

Nick's Seafood Annual Bonfire | 5pm | Nick's Seafood

Palate & Palette | 5:45pm | 342 South Co Hwy 393 | SRB

Karaoke | 6pm | Fatboys Destin

Classical Connections ft. Ying Li, Pianist | 7:30pm | Destin High School

Karaoke | 8pm | 5 o'Clock Somewhere | Baytowne Wharf

Karaoke | 9pm | Fubar

***** 8 *****

DJ Brunch | 10am | Azul @ Harborwalk

Melodies & Mimosas | 2pm | Harborwalk Village

Sound Bath Sundays | 6pm | Hotel Effie Sandestin

Karaoke | 9pm | Fubar

Karaoke | 9pm | Outcast Bar & Grill

***** 9 *****

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

Bingo Night | 6pm | American Legion Destin, 311 Main Street

***** 10 *****

YP of Destin Sunset Social | 5pm | Marina Cafe

Mug Club & Bingo | 6pm | Destin Brewery

Karaoke | 6pm | AJ's on the Bayou



Karaoke | 6pm | Hooters Destin

Karaoke | 6pm-9pm | Fatboys Destin

Trivia Night | 6pm | Ricks Crab Trap FWB

***** 11 *****

Bonfire on the Beach | 5pm | The Bay

Trivia Night | 5pm | Down Island

Run Club | 5:30pm | Destin Brewery

Trivia Night | 6pm | Destin Brewery

Trivia Night | 6pm | Craft Bar @ The Harbor

Karaoke | 7pm | Kenny D's

Karaoke | 7pm | AJ's Oyster Shanty

***** 12-15 *****

Valentine's Dinner for Two | 5-7:30pm

| Gulfarium | FWB

***** 12 *****

Valentine Pasta Making Class | 5:30pm | Elite Cabinet Design

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

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

Karaoke Night | 9pm | Harry Ts Lighthouse

Ladies Night | 10pm | McGuire's Destin

***** 13 *****

Destin Chamber Business Before Hours | 7:30am | Resorts of Pelican Beach

City of Destin Spring Craft Show | 10am-4pm | Destin Community Center

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

Hard Hats & High Heels Luncheon | 11am | Hilton Sandestin

For The Love of Songwriting – Songwriter Festival | 12pm-10pm | The Alice

Fire Pit Friday | 4pm | 30A Distilling Co

Free Beach Bonfire | 5pm | Royal Palm Grille

Mardi Gras on the Harbor | 5pm | Harborwalk Village

Valentine's Day Murder Mystery Dinner & Show | 6:30pm | AJ's on the Bayou

Karaoke | 7pm | Island Wing Company

Galentine's Party | 7pm | Soundside FWB

Valentine's Eve Bash: Stupid Cupid | 8pm | Ara Rooftop at Hotel Effie

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

Latin Night | 8pm-2am | Bosforo | Miramar Beach

Karaoke | 8pm | 5 o'Clock Somewhere | Baytowne Wharf

***** 16 *****

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

Bingo Night | 6pm | American Legion Destin, 311 Main Street

***** 17 *****

Bunco Ladies Night | 5:30pm | 311 Main Street

Beads & Bingo Bash | 6-8 pm | Baytowne Wharf | Miramar Beach

Mug Club & Bingo | 6pm | Destin Brewery

Karaoke | 6pm | AJ's on the Bayou

Karaoke | 6pm | Hooters Destin

Karaoke | 6pm-9pm | Fatboys Destin

Trivia Night | 6pm | Ricks Crab Trap FWB

***** 18 *****

Girlfriends in Business Coffee Meetup & Walk | 9am | Sandos Beachside

Ladies Who Lunch Powerhouse Women Series | 11:30am | Destin Chamber

Bonfire on the Beach | 5pm | The Bay

Trivia Night | 5pm | Down Island

Run Club | 5:30pm | Destin Brewery

Trivia Night | 6pm | Destin Brewery

| Gulfarium | FWB

***** 19 *****

Choctawhatchee Chap. FL Trail Assoc's IDIDAHIKE | Nokus Land Conservancy | Walton Co. near Freeport

Farmers Market | 9am-1pm | Grand Boulevard

Farmers Market | 9am | Seaside, FL

Farmers Market | 9am | Niceville

Farmers Market | 10am | Harborwalk Village

Trivia Night | 6pm | Craft Bar @ The Harbor

Karaoke | 7pm | Kenny D's

Karaoke | 7pm | AJ's Oyster Shanty

***** 20 *****

Bubbly Baytowne | 5pm | Baytowne Wharf

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

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

Planetarium Nights (Double Feature) | 6pm | Emerald Coast Science Center

Planetarium Nights (Double Feature) | 7pm | Emerald Coast Science Center

Karaoke Night | 9pm | Harry Ts Lighthouse

Ladies Night | 10pm | McGuire's Destin

***** 21 *****

Destin Forward Pins & Pancakes | 8am | Hurricane Lanes

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

NextGen United Adult Field Day | 12:15pm | 3rd Planet Brewing

Fire Pit Friday | 4pm | 30A Distilling Co

Free Beach Bonfire | 5pm | Royal Palm Grille

Sandestin Gumbo Festival Kick Off Party | 5pm | 5 O'Clock Somewhere Baytowne FWB

All Sports Association Awards Banquet | 6:30pm | Destin FWB Convention Center

Karaoke | 7pm | Island Wing Company

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

Latin Night | 8pm-2am | Bosforo | Miramar Beach

Karaoke | 8pm | 5 o'Clock Somewhere | Baytowne Wharf

***** 22 *****

DJ Brunch | 10am | Azul @ Harborwalk

Melodies & Mimosas | 2pm | Harborwalk Village

Karaoke | 9pm | Fubar

Karaoke | 9pm | Outcast Bar & Grill

***** 23 *****

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

Bingo Night | 6pm | American Legion Destin, 311 Main Street

***** 24 *****

Mug Club & Bingo | 6pm | Destin Brewery

Karaoke | 6pm | AJ's on the Bayou

Karaoke | 6pm | Hooters Destin

Karaoke | 6pm-9pm | Fatboys Destin

Trivia Night | 6pm | Ricks Crab Trap FWB

***** 25 *****

Bonfire on the Beach | 5pm | The Bay

Trivia Night | 5pm | Down Island

Run Club | 5:30pm | Destin Brewery

Prose & Pours Book Club | 6pm | 30A Distilling Co

Trivia Night | 6pm | Destin Brewery

Trivia Night | 6pm | Craft Bar @ The Harbor

Karaoke | 7pm | Kenny D's

Karaoke | 7pm | AJ's Oyster Shanty

***** 26 *****

FWB Chamber Business After Hours | 5:30pm | The Venue at Beach Weekend

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

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

Karaoke Night | 9pm | Harry Ts Lighthouse

***** 27 *****

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

Fire Pit Friday | 4pm | 30A Distilling Co

Free Beach Bonfire | 5pm | Royal Palm Grille

Sandestin Gumbo Festival Kick Off Party | 5pm | 5 O'Clock Somewhere Baytowne FWB

Ladies Night | 10pm | McGuire's Destin

EVENTS

continued from page 6

Florida's most treasured natural settings.

Info & registration: ididahike.org

Toast 'n Jam: Sincerely, Sondheim Feb. 15, 10:30 a.m. | Hotel Effie, Miramar Beach

Sinfonia Gulf Coast welcomes back Broadway favorite Nicholas Rodriguez for a special Valentine's weekend brunch concert celebrating the life and legacy of legendary composer Stephen Sondheim. *Toast 'n Jam: Sincerely, Sondheim* blends live music, storytelling and excerpts from Sondheim's handwritten letters for an intimate, heartfelt experience.

A beloved Sinfonia audience favorite, Rodriguez is joined on piano by Grammy- and Emmy Award-winning music director John McDaniel. Together, they bring to life selections from *Company*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Into the Woods* and other Sondheim classics, while sharing stories of the composer's friendships with icons such as Oscar Hammerstein II, Jonathan Larson and Lin-Manuel Miranda.

Tickets are \$125 per person and include brunch, performance and gratuities; limited front-row seating is available for \$195. Proceeds benefit Sinfonia Gulf Coast and its music education and com-

munity programs. Seating is limited. Tickets and information are available at SinfoniaGulfCoast.org or by calling (850) 460-8800.

Decade of Difference at CALM March 5

Join Crisis Aid for Littles and Moms (CALM) as the nonprofit celebrates 10 years of serving local littles and moms through vital community support programs. The special evening recognizes a decade of impact while raising funds to continue CALM's mission of meeting families in crisis with compassion and care.

Guests are invited to attend or sponsor the event, with all proceeds directly benefiting CALM's ongoing outreach and services.

Info & registration: crisisaidforlittlesandmoms.org

ECCAC Gala & Golf Weekend March 7-8

The Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center will host its 28th annual signature Gala & Golf Weekend on March 7-8, bringing the community together to support children in need. The Gala takes place Saturday, March 7, at 5:30 p.m. at the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa and includes dinner, music, a wine pull and live auction led by DawnMarie Kotsonis, "The Gavel Girl," with former ECCAC client Isabella Rose as the featured speaker. The weekend continues Sunday, March 8, with a noon shotgun-start Golf

TRAINING

continued from page 4

The Body Responds to Patience

I've watched patients experience profound change not because they did more, but because they did less—less forcing, less self-criticism, less urgency. They learned to listen instead of override. To adjust instead of quit. To trust that small improvements compound over time.

And they do.

A little better sleep leads to better energy. Better energy leads to gentler movement. Gentler movement supports hormone balance. Hormone balance improves mood and focus. Suddenly, the person who felt stuck begins to feel capable again.

That's how marathons are

won. Not by sprinting at the start, but by pacing wisely.

Redefining Success

What if success wasn't measured by how fast you change, but by how well you sustain? What if progress meant fewer crashes, quicker recovery, and a deeper sense of connection to your body?

Wellness is not a finish line you cross. It's a relationship you build.

So, if you're feeling discouraged, tired of trends, or tempted by the next "miracle" solution, pause. Take a breath. Ask yourself not what will fix you fastest, but what will support you longest.

Your body is in this for the long haul. And when you meet it with patience, consistency, and care, it will carry you farther than any shortcut ever could.



Tournament at Kelly Plantation Golf Club. Proceeds benefit ECCAC's mission to provide free services to child victims of abuse. Gala and golf reservations are available at ecccac.org. For details, contact Kate McDougall at 530-341-0802 or kate@ecccac.org.



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Gumbo Fest Meets Mardi Gras Magic at Baytowne!

Baytowne Wharf transforms into a hub of flavor and festivity as the 37th Annual Sandestin Gumbo Festival returns with gumbo, Mardi Gras spirit and nonstop fun. Recognized as one of the Emerald Coast's largest winter food festivals, this beloved event continues to draw crowds hungry for both tradition and taste.

Kick-Off Party at 5'OClock Somewhere

Friday, February 20th | 5-8 p.m.

Kick off your tasting days, Friday, Feb. 20, with a traditional Shrimp Boil Kick-Off Party at 5'OClock Somewhere from 5-8 p.m. PLUS—enjoy live music & stop by the Tito's, our Best Bloody Mary at The Beach Vodka Sponsor table!

Sandestin Gumbo Festival

Saturday, February 21st | 12-4 p.m.

On Saturday, Feb. 21, Gulf Coast restaurants will feature their top-secret gumbo recipes and compete for your vote at the Sandestin Gumbo Festival. Dark or light roux? Chicken, sausage or seafood? Sample the variety of gumbos and vote for your favorite as the "People's Choice" winner. Celebrity judges will name the "Area's Best." Serving up fun for everyone, listen to live music

from Dikki Du and the Zydeco Krewe and enjoy free kid's activities while you taste varieties of gumbo from restaurants in 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 judge those, too. Vote for your favorite and help contestants win the title of "Best Bloody Mary at The Beach."

Visit SandestinGumboFestival.com for details, including a daily schedule of events and entertainment. General admission tickets are \$45 before Feb. 21 and allow tastings of all gumbo and Bloody Marys. Tickets are on sale now at gumbo.bigtickets.com/gumbo26 This event sells out every year, so don't wait.

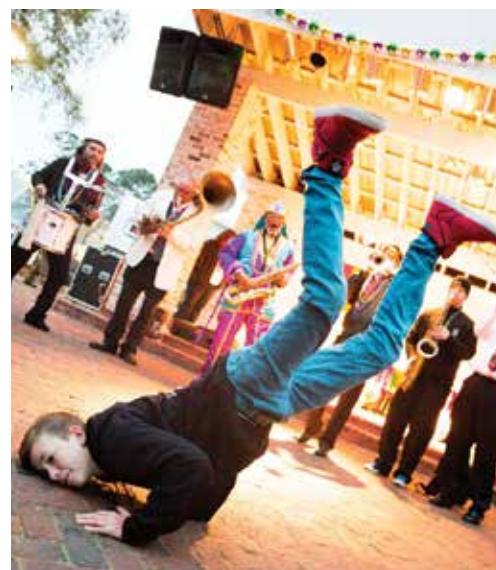
If you're interested in entering the event, visit baytownewharf.com. The event will happen rain or shine.

SandestinGumboFestival.com

It's Almost time for the Annual Mardi Gras Parade!

Sunday, February 15 | 2 p.m. | FREE

Join the Village of Baytowne Wharf as the Village streets are filled with costumed dogs and



their humans, along with unique and colorful floats, golf carts, vehicles, pick-up trucks and Mardi Gras cheer for the Baytowne Mardi Gras parade. Let the good times roll with dressed-up march-

ers 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, email baytowne@raebird-events.com.

Baytowne Beads & Bingo Bash

Tuesday, February 17 | 5-8 p.m. | FREE

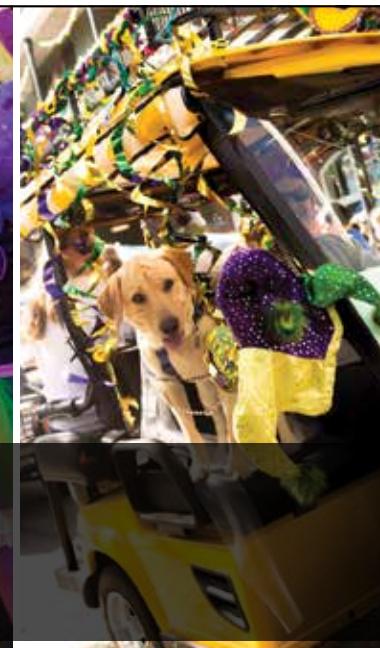
Let the good times roll at Baytowne's Mardi Gras Merchant Bingo Crawl! Grab a Bingo Card by the stage and stroll through the Village to discover bead-worthy merchant specials! Check off the square, complete bingo and turn it in for a festive prize. The fun doesn't stop there—enjoy live music on the main stage from Boukou Groove.

Join in for an evening full of beads, bargains and beats! Costumes and Mardi Gras spirit encouraged!

Bubbly Baytowne

Thursday, February 19 | 5 p.m. | FREE

Join us for an evening full of FREE champagne, sparkling wine and shopping during Bubbly Baytowne. Sip and shop throughout The Village of Baytowne Wharf! Stop in various retail stores as you enjoy a selection of premium bubbly! This event is free and for 21 & up only. The Village will be open to the public during this event.



The Village of Baytowne Wharf presents

Mardi Gras Parade

Sunday, February 15
Time: 2 pm | No Cost to Attend

Baytowne Beads & Bingo Bash

Tuesday, February 17
Time: 5-8 pm | No Cost to Attend

FOR MORE INFO VISIT: WWW.BAYTOWNEWHARF.COM

News Around Town

Destin Charity Wine Auction Is Turning 21 – and Going Wild for Kids April 24–25, 2026



The Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation (DCWAF), one of the nation's premier philanthropic wine events, is celebrating a milestone year as it marks its 21st annual Destin Charity Wine Auction, presented by the Jumonville Family, April 24–25, 2026. Proceeds from the weekend benefit children in need across Northwest Florida through DCWAF's 16 partner children's charities. In 2025 alone, the foundation donated \$3.1 million following one of its most successful auctions to date.

A limited number of patron packages are on sale now at dcwaf.org/tickets. Sponsorship opportunities are also available by contacting DCWAF at info@dcwaf.org.

This year's celebration promises an exceptional lineup of world-class vintners and celebrity chefs, hosted by philanthropic couples throughout the local community. The 2026 vintner roster includes owners and wine-makers from Marallisa Allegri Group, Cardinale and Lokoya, Domaine de la Clos Chapelle, Doubleback, Forman, Jarvis Estate, Phifer Pavitt, Pott Estate Wines, Revana Wine Portfolio, Roy Estate, Thompson 31Fifty, VGS Chateau Potelle and more, with additional participants to be announced.

The weekend begins Friday, April 24, with the highly anticipated Patron Dinner Experience. Each year, these intimate dinners are hosted in some of the Emerald Coast's most exqui-

site homes and restaurants, offering guests the rare opportunity to enjoy innovative cuisine paired with extraordinary wines while connecting with fellow wine enthusiasts. Each patron dinner directly benefits one of DCWAF's partner children's charities.

The main event takes place at 1 p.m. Saturday, April 25, with the Reserve Tasting and Live Auction held under an air-conditioned tent at Grand Boulevard Sandestin Town Center. Guests will enjoy distinctive wines from internationally acclaimed vintners paired with cuisine curated by top local restaurants, culminating in a high-energy live auction featuring rare wines, unforgettable travel experiences and one-of-a-kind offerings.

The Destin Charity Wine Auction is held in conjunction with the South Walton Beaches Wine and Food Festival, also taking place at Grand Boulevard Sandestin Town Center that weekend. The festival showcases hundreds of premium wines, spirits and culinary creations, with proceeds benefiting the Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation.

For tickets, full event details and updated lists of participating chefs and vintners, visit dcwaf.org/auction.

Destin Student Earns People's Choice Honor at National Art Museum



Eleanor Backes, a third-grade student at Destin Elementary School, was selected from hundreds of youth submissions to have her artwork showcased at the Walter Anderson Museum of Art in Ocean Springs, Mississippi—and came home with top honors.

The exhibition, held in December, featured student works

inspired by renowned watercolor artist Walter Anderson. During the showcase, museum visitors were invited to vote on their favorite pieces, and Eleanor's artwork was awarded the People's Choice Award.

Her winning piece is a silk

screen print with acrylic, reflecting both creativity and technical skill well beyond her years. Eleanor has been studying art for the past two years with Destin local artist Mrs. Rita Gwen, originally from Mississippi, whose guidance has helped nurture Elea-

nor's growing passion for art.

A proud moment for Eleanor, her family and the Destin community, the recognition highlights the talent being cultivated in local classrooms—and proves

Continued on page 42



 Community

Know Your Neighbor: **Zoran Subotich**

The Person Behind the Music, the Moments, and the Magic

BY LORI SMITH

I'll admit it — when I first sat down to write this, I smiled. Once upon a time, before publishing deadlines and page counts, I was a DJ myself. I know the rush of reading a room, the quiet pressure of timing it just right, the invisible responsibility of holding a moment in your hands and not dropping it.

So, when I say that Zoran Subotich gets it, I mean that in the deepest, most professional, been-there way.

For more than 30 years, Zoran has been the steady heartbeat behind thousands of celebrations across the Emerald Coast — from barefoot beach weddings on 30A and Destin to elegant military galas, mitzvahs, milestone birthdays and reunions that people still talk about a decade later. Four counties. Thousands of events. And somehow — no missed cues, no awkward silences, no stressed brides.

That doesn't happen by accident.



Zoran doesn't just plan parties.

He engineers memories.

Through his company, Celebrations By The Sea, Zoran offers a truly full-service approach — the kind that allows couples and families to relax and stay present in the moment while he quietly handles the flow behind the scenes. His services include:

- DJ and professional emcee services

- Full event planning and coordination
- Licensed wedding and event officiating
- Ceremony and reception direction
- Lighting and atmosphere design
- Timeline creation and flow management
- Multilingual hosting and announcements

All of it is tailored. All of it intentional. And all of it delivered with a calm confidence that makes even the most complex events feel effortless.

Why Locals Love Him

Ask around Destin, Fort Walton Beach, Miramar Beach or along 30A, and you'll hear the same things again and again.

Zoran shows up early. He stays calm under pressure. He listens — really listens.

Locals trust him because he doesn't force a formula. He reads



the room, adapts in real time, and keeps the focus where it belongs — on the people, not the production. Brides feel at ease. Families relax. Guests stay engaged. The event flows naturally, without feeling overproduced or rushed.

Another reason locals love Zoran? Range.

His background spans far beyond weddings and private events. Zoran is a former radio professional, trained actor, multilingual host, crisis intervention specialist, and even a black belt — a combination that gives him rare command, empathy and intuition. His résumé includes television credits on MTV's Road Rules and Prison Break, experiences that sharpened his ability to perform under pressure and connect with audiences of every kind.

That versatility allows him to move seamlessly from a beach-front ceremony at sunrise to a formal military banquet or multigenerational family celebration — always reading the energy of the room before the first guest even arrives.

And perhaps most important-

ly, he treats every event — big or small — like it matters. Because to the people there, it does.

That mindset has earned Zoran decades of loyalty, word-of-mouth referrals and, most recently, recognition as "Best of Business Rate 2025" for Wedding Services in Fort Walton Beach, an award based on verified reviews and consistent excellence.

This year, that heart for meaningful moments took on even deeper purpose.

Zoran and Celebrations By The Sea partnered with Wish Upon a Wedding, a nonprofit that grants weddings to couples facing terminal illness. On August 18, 2025, Zoran helped make Taylor and Ivan's wedding wish a reality — proof that for him, making moments matter isn't just business. It's deeply personal.

Based in Fort Walton Beach, Zoran serves the full Gulf Coast with a hands-on, full-service approach that has made Celebrations By The Sea a trusted name for locals, military families and destination couples alike.

"Excellence is our standard, but joy is our mission," Zoran says — and honestly, that says it all.

Not everyone knows how to make a moment matter.

Zoran does — every single time.

For more information, visit celebrationsbythesea.com, call (850) 217-5710, or follow @celebrationsbythesea and @wish-uponawedding.

- Coordinator
- Photographer
- Music
- Flowers

850.217.5710

CelebrationsbytheSea.com

Zoran Entertainment
ADJPro
Celebrations by The Sea

CELEBRATIONS BY THE SEA
DJ Zoran, Event Coordinator
DJ / Emcee
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Empowering Students. Enriching Community. Elevating Futures.

Open enrollment for Destin High School (DHS) is happening now – and this is your opportunity to join a high-performing, student-centered, tuition-free, public charter school where academics, opportunity, and community come together.

At DHS, we don't just prepare students for graduation – we prepare them for life. We deliver academic excellence while building creativity, leadership, and real-world readiness through meaningful experiences inside and outside the classroom – tuition-free and with no zoning restrictions.

Why Choose Destin High School?

Education should be engaging, personalized, and inspiring. DHS gives students the support, relationships, and opportunities to build a path that fits their goals – college, career, service, entrepreneurship, or all of the above.

✓ Academic Excellence

DHS offers AP, dual enrollment, honors, and standard courses, with multiple pathways



to challenge and support every student. Whether your plan is college or a specialized career track, DHS provides the foundation to excel.

✓ Award-Winning Performing and Visual Arts

Students shine on the stage and in the studio through:

Theatre (award-winning productions and competitions)

Marching & Concert Band (award-winning performances and competition opportunities)

Dance (competitive and performance-based programs)

Choir (skill-building and prestigious performances)

Visual Arts (multiple mediums and creative pathways)

✓ Athletic Excellence

With 20+ varsity sports, DHS athletes compete with pride and perform at a high level.

Varsity Football: Led by Coach E.G. Green (FSU Hall of Famer and former NFL player), DHS football is building something special - rooted in teamwork, discipline, kindness, and respect.

✓ One-of-a-Kind Saltwater Fishing Program

DHS offers a truly unique opportunity: students can pursue a pathway connected to saltwater fishing, charter and commercial operations, and real-world coastal industry skills - an experience that connects directly to our community and region.

✓ Cybersecurity & AI

Students explore modern, future-ready skills in cybersecurity and artificial intelligence – building foundations that align with high-demand career fields.

✓ Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA)

DHS students don't just learn

DHS Isn't Just a School - It's a Family

Anchored in excellence, DHS is a place where students grow academically, socially, and are personally known by name – whether they are scholars, ath-

letes, artists, leaders, or future entrepreneurs.

Act Now—Open Enrollment Is Open

Destin High School
4325 Commons Dr. W, Destin, FL 32541

(850) 204-4044

destinhighschool.org

Apply Online: destinhighschool.org/admissions-apply

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1st Application Period is Open Until February 13th, for School Year 2026-27

SEATS ARE LIMITED!

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- COLLEGE & CAREER READINESS
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 **Community**

Trends & Treasures!



Big Hair, Bold Lips, Serious Chemistry Pure & Couture

At Pure & Couture, February is all about turning up the attraction. This Valentine's season, skip the predictable gifts and give something unforgettable: confidence, transformation and a little wow factor. From hand-tied hair extensions and custom color to styling, makeup, spray tanning and facials, Pure & Couture specializes in looks that feel fresh, modern and completely you. And when Mardi Gras season calls for bold glam and celebration-ready confidence, this is the place to prep for parties, parades and nights out. Add therapeutic and medical massage, kinesiology and wellness-focused services, and suddenly self-care becomes the ultimate love language. The Pure & Couture team works with men, women and couples of all ages — helping everyone look and feel their best long after Valentine's Day.

Second location: Pure Collective Salon, 600 Grand Blvd., Suite 102.

(850) 424-3935 | [facebook.com/PureandCouture](https://www.facebook.com/PureandCouture)
pureandcouture.com

Monogrammed, Madly in Love Frill Seekers Gifts and Personalized Fabulous Finds

February is the month for thoughtful gestures — the kind that feel personal, intentional and timeless. Enter the monogram—a Southern staple that never goes out of style. From Valentine's surprises and newlywed keepsakes to baby gifts,

new homes and beach-house traditions, personalized pieces remain love letters you can keep. Monograms have made statements for centuries, from ancient rulers and Renaissance artists to Victorian society and modern Southern living. Today, they beautifully celebrate love stories and family legacies — and even shine during Mardi Gras season for hosts who enjoy adding personal flair to party notes and hostess gifts. Gold leaf-trimmed deluxe notepads featuring a classic Kensington monogram or gold, wearable cuffs make meaningful Valentine's gifts that keep the romance flowing all year long. When it comes to meaningful details that never go out of style, Frill Seekers delivers personalization with heart.

Shop online at FrillSeekersGifts.com or stop by the motherland of all things monogrammed.

Open Monday–Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

(850) 460-2700 | [Facebook.com/FrillSeekersGifts](https://www.facebook.com/FrillSeekersGifts)
frillseekersgifts.com

Diamonds Are Forever — Especially in February Beyond Measure Fine Jewelry

February is full of moments worth savoring — and maybe even popping the question. At Beyond Measure Fine Jewelry, romance takes center stage with breathtaking pieces designed to celebrate love stories big and small.

Located in City Market, the showroom features exquisite di-

amond, gemstone and precious metal jewelry — from statement rings and delicate necklaces to bracelets and earrings that sparkle with meaning. Each piece is thoughtfully selected or custom-designed to reflect the moments that matter most.

Owner Ashleigh Woolly is known for her passion for custom designs, especially engagement rings and wedding bands. "It is truly special to help people celebrate one of the biggest moments of their lives," Woolly said. Whether you're planning a proposal, marking an anniversary or simply saying "I love you," Beyond Measure offers a one-on-one jewelry experience that feels as special as the moment itself.

(850) 424-7011 | [Facebook.com/beyondmeasurejewelers](https://www.facebook.com/beyondmeasurejewelers)
beyondmeasurejewelry.com

Love at First Bite — All Month Long Smallcakes Destin

This February, celebrate love in every delicious form at Smallcakes of Destin. From chocolate-covered strawberries to custom cupcakes and cakes with edible logos and images, every treat is designed to feel personal, playful and unforgettable. And because February doesn't stop at Valentine's Day, the celebration continues with Mardi Gras King Cakes — baked fresh in traditional styles or filled with favorites like cream cheese, Bavarian cream, pecan praline, strawberry and apple. Smallcakes specializes in custom cakes, gourmet and holiday cupcakes, wedding and birthday cakes, housemade ice cream and even "pup cakes"

for four-legged Valentines. Daily offerings include 13 signature cupcake flavors, four specialty flavors, 12 ice cream flavors, plus jumbo cookies, brownies, cupcakes-in-a-jar and more. Not sure where to start? A 12-pack of assorted mini cupcakes is the perfect way to sample the love all month long.

Call ahead for pre-orders, DoorDash or curbside pickup.

Hours: Monday–Saturday, 11 a.m.–7 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m.–4 p.m.

(850) 842-9002 | SmallcakesDestin.com | Follow [@SmallCakesofDestin](https://www.instagram.com/SmallCakesofDestin)

Freeze the Moment — Feel the Benefits Together CRYO850 Performance and Recovery Center

This Valentine's season, skip the ordinary date night and try something cooler. CRYO850 Performance and Recovery Center is offering couples a limited-time 2-for-1 cryotherapy special, now through Valentine's Day. More couples are discovering that wellness is the ultimate love language. In just two to three minutes, cryotherapy helps reduce inflammation, ease joint and muscle pain, boost energy, improve sleep and enhance mental clarity — benefits that feel even better when shared. New to cryotherapy? Owner Amy Milligan personally guides each session, making the experience comfortable, safe and surprisingly fun. From athletes and busy professionals to parents and weekend warriors, cryotherapy offers powerful, drug-free benefits for both body and mind.

Ready to fall in love with your selling results?

Email Brian@BeOnTheCoast.com or call (850) 739-3800 | [Facebook.com/BeontheCoast](https://www.facebook.com/BeontheCoast)
BeOnTheCoast.com

This February, turn self-care into couple care and experience the advantages of the Igloo — together.

(850) 279-4145 | cryo850.com

Love Where You Live — and Profit from It Brian LoCicero, REALTOR®

February often sparks fresh starts — and for many homeowners, that means thinking seriously about selling. If love is in the air, let it extend to your bottom line. Luxury REALTOR® Brian K. LoCicero is sharing insider strategies designed to help sellers get top dollar in any market.

Brian's popular book reveals proven tactics used by the most successful home sellers — strategies that shorten time on market while maximizing value. These are the same methods Brian has used to help sell thousands of homes across Northwest Florida.

"In this book, I've provided an effective guide for you to have the most successful real estate transaction possible," Brian said. "We hired Brian to help us navigate 30A's tough real estate market," said client A. Albright. "Because of his efforts and strategies that he details in his book, we quickly sold our Destin home and bought a 30A beachfront home, below asking price."

Ready to fall in love with your selling results?

Email Brian@BeOnTheCoast.com or call (850) 739-3800 | [Facebook.com/BeontheCoast](https://www.facebook.com/BeontheCoast)
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Parkway • Destin, FL





Surtax is a Win for Okaloosa County

BY CAROLYN NEWCOMER
KETCHEL

The voter approved infrastructure surtax has been a hugely successful program that has allowed us to make significant infrastructure investments in Okaloosa County that will improve the daily lives of our residents for decades to come. Approved by citizens in 2016, it has raised more than \$136 million. These funds have been used to acquire matching grants for a total of \$279 million. Wait! There is more good news. Approximately 56% of the surtax is paid by tourists!

This 1/2 cent surtax has paid for over 300 projects ranging from roads to stormwater to public safety and sidewalks. We are particularly proud of the Southwest Crestview Bypass, that will soon be unveiled, the dirt road stabilization project in the north end, and installation of 12 communication towers throughout the county. These towers will allow public safety and law enforcement officials to communicate on one system in the event of a county-wide emergency. Some of our other completed projects are listed below:

- **A \$44,965 Sheriff Office project to replace and upgrade the vehicle fleet**, including safety vehicles such as evidence vans, water search

vessels, patrol and dive vessels, surveillance and prisoner transport vehicles.

- **A \$185,724 sidewalk project to close gaps in developer installed sidewalks linking Indian Bayou Trail and Matthew Blvd.** in Destin. The project was completed under budget and \$189,276 in unused funding was returned to the Surtax reserves.

- **A \$200,000 project to address persistent flooding in Bluewater Bay.** The county was awarded a hazard mitigation grant, comprising study/design and construction phases, along with requiring a 25% local match. This match included 18% from the Bluewater Bay Municipal Services Benefit Unit (MSBU) and 7% from the county.

- **A \$214,500 project to enhance all seven beach accessways on Okaloosa Island** with newly designed crosswalks including installation of signs and flashers. These new crosswalks provide safe pedestrian access from the north side of Santa Rosa Boulevard to the beach access parks on the south side.

- **A \$287,850 project to address frequent stormwater flooding along Meigs Drive** in Shalimar. The completed project included installation of shoreline rip rap and sod replacement.



tion of shoreline rip rap and sod replacement.

- **A \$431,618 project to improve the intersection of Lewis Turner Boulevard and Hospital Drive** near the newly improved Liza Jackson School in Fort Walton Beach. The project included storm water detention facilities, intersection upgrades and a new turn lane making the intersection safer for vehicles and pedestrians. Moreover, the project was completed under budget and the remaining allocation of \$68,382 was returned to the Surtax reserves to be utilized for additional future projects.

- **A \$682,901 project to address stormwater runoff and flooding of roadways in and around Standish Court and Lafitte Crescent** in Fort Walton Beach. The investment of \$682,901 in allocated Surtax funding, coupled with \$420,432 of RESTORE grant funding

allowed the County to replace the deteriorating pipe system with a modern, smooth-lined high-density polyethylene pipe network. Originally \$800,000 was allocated from Surtax Reserves and \$117,099 has been returned to the Surtax Reserves, reflecting our steadfast commitment to fiscal responsibility by leveraging strategic grant opportunities.

- **An \$857,029 project to improve Commons Drive in Destin.** The intersection of Commons Drive and Henderson Beach Drive was selected as a surtax project for the installation of a traffic signal to enhance safety and improve traffic flow. The project included turn lane enhancements, intersection upgrades, and improved pedestrian facilities. \$100,000 of the signalization funding was contributed by the City of Destin through developer funds.

- **A \$1,350,000 project to improve pedestrian traffic around Redwood Avenue and Plew Elementary School** in Niceville. The intersection of Redwood and Plew Elementary School was selected as a surtax project for the installation of a traffic signal to enhance safety and improve traffic flow. The project included turn lane enhancements, intersection upgrades, and improved pedestrian facilities. \$100,000 of the signalization funding was contributed by the City of Destin through developer funds.

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Training Center which offers several benefits including improved joint response and capabilities to active assailants, expanded and improved training capabilities to greater quantities of 1st responders (Police, Fire, EMS), and allowing for indoor scenario-based training capabilities.

- **A \$3,127,171 project to improve the aging stormwater infrastructure along 9th Ave.** and 6th Street in Port Dixie (Shalimar).

In addition, there are upcoming projects funded by surtax:

Lewis Turner & Poquito Rd traffic signal (north Fort Walton Beach).

In 2026, FDOT will design the project and will likely draft an agreement for the County to pay for half of the construction cost with Surtax.

Lloyd Street Drainage (central Fort Walton Beach)

This project includes stormwater modeling, pipe inspection, design and construction of stormwater infrastructure in the drainage basin that includes Lloyd Street and Mayflower Avenue and outfalls to Cinco Bayou.

Beachview Drive Drainage (eastern Fort Walton Beach)

This project will alleviate the flooding that occurs on Beachview Drive at the intersection with Eglin Parkway near the Eglin Federal Credit Union. The project is being done in coordination with FDOT because Eglin Parkway also floods at this location.

John King Road Widening (south Crestview)

Construction will occur in 2026. This project will provide dual left turns onto, and off of John King Road at SR 85.

Santa Rosa Boulevard Improvements (Okaloosa Island)

Construction is scheduled for 2026 to improve Santa Rosa Boulevard between US 98 and the 1st Beach Park.

College Blvd Multi-use Path (north Niceville)

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Continued on page 19

A New Way to Live in Retirement

Before the first streaks of sunrise settle over Inlet Beach, one member is already at the gym — stretching, lifting, moving with a quiet determination. “I wake up at 4:30,” he says with a shrug, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. “I work out, head back for breakfast, and then I decide: golf simulator... or swimming?”

He smiles. “I feel better than I have in years.”

Across the community, the day opens at its own gentle tempo. A woman clips a leash on her dog and walks toward one of the community’s dog-friendly outdoor areas, grateful for the easy routine they’ve settled into. Not long ago, she was living with her daughter in Alys Beach, watching Watersound Fountains being built across the highway. She never imagined it would one day be home.

“I thought, Those places aren’t for me,” she admits.

But when her daughter insisted she come take a look, everything shifted — the bright, thoughtfully designed apartments, the welcoming outdoor



spaces for her dog, the light, the openness, the surprising sense of possibility.

“After the first week,” she says, “there was no going back.”

The beauty of a morning here is that everyone’s version looks a little different. Some head to the balance studio for physical therapy. Others meet friends on the walking trails that curl through Watersound and 30A. Some hop on a bike. Some linger over coffee. Each person finds their own pace.

By mid-morning, the community hums with activity. One member laughs as she lists her schedule: “Today I had, back-to-back: physical therapy, a fitness class, book club, then happy hour.” She shakes her head, still amused. “It’s just kind of nonstop here.”

And yet, it’s never rushed. Life simply unfolds — with options around every corner.

For many, the choice to move to Watersound Fountains was about proximity. After years in



Georgia, far from children and grandchildren, one couple realized they wanted the holidays, the milestones, and the simple weekends back. Now their son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter live minutes away. “We do more now,” they say. “Especially with family so close.”

Afternoons often stretch into easy hours. Neighbors meet in the W Lounge. Others gather around the open hearth pizza oven, where flatbreads are rolled out right in front of them. On Fridays, The Mark dining room becomes the community’s favorite tradition — a dressed-up, reservations-only dinner with filet, snapper, grouper, and the kind of conversations people look forward to all week.

There’s always movement, always laughter, always someone waving from a walkway or

calling out a hello — the kind of natural, everyday community that makes a place feel alive.

What surprises many is not how much there is to do, but how effortless daily life feels here. The physical therapist is downstairs. The gym is steps away. The trails are safe and beautifully maintained. The beaches and local favorites are just a short drive. Every day can unfold at its own pace.

“You can do as much or as little as you want,” a member says as she waves to a neighbor. “It’s like living in a resort — but it feels like home.”

And maybe that’s the truest throughline here.

Occasionally, one member’s daughter will call and say, “Come home — come stay some.” And she’ll laugh and reply, “But I am home. This is my home.”

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



BY GREG DURETTE, YOUR FLORIDA HEALTH CONNECTOR

As many times as I've used the term "age-in" when discussing Medicare, it never fails to spark a visceral reaction — usually something like, "What do you mean by 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 4/30/2026!), we are now in the

middle of the Open Enrollment Period which runs from January 1 – March 31 of every year 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 2026 will typically cost \$202.90 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 long lasting, sometimes 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 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 based in Niceville providing Medicare insurance throughout the state. 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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Mayor Bobby Wagner and
PIO Tamara Young, PhD

By TAMARA L. YOUNG, PID FOR
THE WORLD'S LUCKIEST FISHING
VILLAGE

Each year during the legislative session, city leaders from across Florida travel to Tallahassee to meet with lawmakers and advocate for strong local decision making.

This year's Florida League of Cities Legislative Action Days were held January 26 to 28, 2026. The event brings municipal officials together at the Capitol during session, helping cities present a unified message on the issues that most affect communities back home.

Founded in 1922, the Florida League of Cities (originally known as the Florida League of Municipalities) was created to champion local decision making and protect the ability of each city to address its own needs. That principle was strengthened in 1968 when Florida adopted home rule powers, allowing local governments to pass ordinances unless the state has specifically preempted the issue. In practice, it means cities can take care of everyday priorities, from traffic safety improvements to storm water projects, as long as local laws do not conflict with state or federal law.

SURTAX

continued from page 16

the west side of Forest from College Blvd to Rocky Bayou.

Traffic Management Center

Will attach to the Emergency Operations Center in Niceville and provide real-time monitoring and adjustment capabilities for traffic signals and arterials in Okaloosa County.

Surtax has been a win for our community. Please visit our website at <https://myokaloosa.com/bcc/infrastructureprojects> to learn more about how we have assisted in improving military readiness, addressed seven environmental and flood reduction projects, and helped save lives by providing additional law enforcement, safety signage and equipment. A citizen oversight committee, appointed by county commissioners, monitors the

"Reel Talk" from the City of Destin

Legislative Action at the Local Level

In recent decades, however, city leaders have seen an increase in one size fits all legislation, often backed by special interests, that can limit local authority. These bills sometimes



Pictured here, Destin Councilwoman Teresa Hebert visits with Representative Shane Abbott of the Florida House

treat vastly different communities as if they face the same challenges and operate under the same conditions, restrictions, or protections. The State of Florida is about 500 miles long and 160 miles wide with diversity in multiple ways, and Destin's needs are often distinctly its own. This is why protecting local decision making remains a key priority.

funds and makes recommendations of projects. Without surtax revenue, completion of these projects would have required an increase of 19% of property tax.

In 2026, the citizens will once again have an opportunity to vote for extending this 1/2 cent surtax to assist the county in building and improving roads and bridges, funding essential law enforcement and public safety facilities, and addressing flood control and water quality improvements for another 10 years to 2038. Please consider the good work that has been accomplished when you go to the polls to vote.

It is an honor to serve as your Commissioner.

Carolyn Ketchel is Okaloosa County Commissioner, District 2. She can be reached at CKetchel@myokaloosa.com or 850-651-7105.

Fast facts regarding the adoption of Home Rule in Florida include:

- 1968 Constitution: Replaced a system where local governments only had powers explicitly granted by the state.
- 1973 Act: The Municipal Home Rules Power Act (codified in Ch. 166 of the Florida Statutes) ended challenges to city/county powers.
- Earlier Exceptions: A 1956 amendment to the 1885 Con-

stitution allowed Miami-Dade County to adopt a home rule charter, marking an earlier, localized move toward this authority.

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 Community

Expanding Opportunity: EMIF Awards Scholarships to Nine Students with Community Support

BY LORI SMITH

Local organization Ellison McCraney Ingram Foundation (EMIF) continues to grow its impact across Northwest Florida, awarding scholarships this year to nine students pursuing higher education and skilled-trade pathways — a reflection of both increasing demand and strong, sustained community support.

Founded in memory of Ellison McCraney Ingram, age 9, who passed away Oct. 19, 2021, from a bleeding brain tumor, the Destin-based nonprofit was created to ensure his life continues to make a difference through education and opportunity.

In the months following his passing, friends rallied around Ellison's family to transform heartbreak into hope by launching the foundation in his name. Anchored by the enduring compassion and commitment of Ellison's parents to children and families in Destin, the foundation has steadily grown — from three scholarships in its first year, to five annually — and now supports 13 students as they pursue their educational goals.

That growth has been made possible through long-standing relationships with the Destin Charity Wine Auction Foun-



PHOTO COURTESY EMIF

dation (DCWAF), local organizations, and donors who have continued to invest in the foundation's mission year after year.

EMIF's scholarships are intentionally comprehensive, helping remove the financial barriers that often stand in the way of long-term success.

Each recipient is eligible to receive up to \$40,000, distribut-

ed as \$10,000 per academic year for up to four years. Scholarships may be used at accredited four-year colleges and universities, trade schools and technical programs, covering tuition, books, fees, and room and board. To remain eligible, students must maintain a minimum 3.0 GPA and complete at least 12 semester hours per year.

This year's scholarship recipients include five students supported through EMIF's ongoing

partnership with the DCWAF:

- Ava Bowers, through Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center
- Uriel Sanchez, pursuing a trade-school path at Point Washington Medical Center
- Liliana Quinlan, through Boys & Girls Clubs
- Armin Jusis, through Ascension Sacred Heart

- Maima Hampton, through Youth Village

Thanks to overwhelming support, EMIF also expanded its reach this year by awarding four at-large scholarships to William Justiss, Brock Dugan, Isabella Riggs and Karissa Grant.

A significant factor in that expansion was DCWAF's continued investment, which includes an initial \$140,000 contribution followed by \$200,000 annually for the past three years — totaling more than \$700,000 in support and allowing the foundation to increase the number of students served. In addition, Affordable Home Insurance stepped forward to fund one of the scholarships after its board reached out directly, expressing a desire to support the foundation's mission.

"Each year, we continue to see more and more support for Ellison and his foundation," said Paul Barcus, EMIF executive board director, noting the collective generosity that makes the

program possible.

Scholarship recipients will be formally recognized during a private awards dinner Feb. 12 at Marina Cafe in Destin. The event is once again being generously hosted by Danny and Karen Bilger, owners of Marina Cafe, who are donating both the venue and the meal. Their ongoing support allows EMIF to direct more resources directly toward scholarships rather than event costs. The dinner has already sold out, with 130 attendees expected.

Through strategic partnerships, dedicated donors, and an expanding network of supporters, the Ellison McCraney Ingram Foundation continues to honor its namesake by investing in education — not just as an achievement, but as a lasting legacy.

For more information about the Ellison McCraney Ingram Foundation, visit emif.org.

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Don't Believe the Hype: Separating Real Estate Facts from Headlines, Hearsay and Habit



FROM YOUR FAVORITE
HOMEBOY, ITSPAULY.COM

Every market cycle brings its share of confident statements. Agents celebrate, "Home under contract in less than a week." Sellers say, "My neighbor's house is listed for \$XXX,XXX and mine has better upgrades." Buyers declare, "We want to offer \$10,000 less than list." All of these comments sound reasonable on the surface, but every one of them deserves scrutiny. Real estate decisions made on headlines, hearsay, or habit often miss the bigger picture.

At its core, a home's value

is simple: It is what a buyer is willing to pay and a seller is willing to accept at the same moment in time. Nothing more. Nothing less. When a home goes under contract quickly, it's usually because it was priced appropriately for its condition and the current buyer pool. That speed is not a reflection of market health, social media reach, flashy videos, or even an agent's network. It's about alignment. Condition meets price, price meets timing, and buyers respond.

Let's be honest about marketing for a moment. Most real estate videos are designed to promote the agent, not the property. That doesn't make them useless, but it does make them misunderstood. What actually moves a home is how well it's positioned from day one. That's where experience matters. Sellers should be asking how many homes an agent has successfully closed recently, not whether they're a friend of a



friend or quick to comment online. According to the National Association of Realtors, nearly 40 percent of licensed agents exited the business by 2026, not because they lacked licenses, but because they lacked experience, mentorship, or commitment. Getting a home under contract is easy. Closing it well, with strong terms and a great experience, is where real value shows up.

Sellers often fall into another common trap: comparing their home to active listings. Platforms like Zillow, Realtor.com, and Homes.com highlight what's for sale—not what has sold. If you're watching active listings, focus less on list price

and more on days on market, buyer engagement and saves. Long days on market signal resistance. Lots of "likes" suggest interest without action. Saves are the real indicator, when a buyer's eye and wallet are nearly aligned. That's where smart pricing wins. One ill-timed price adjustment by a neighbor can shift the tide for everyone. You don't want to outrun the slowest house, you want to be in the race buyers are actually running.

Buyers aren't immune to hype either. Offering less simply because it feels strategic can cost you the home you actually want. I regularly see buyers acknowledge that a home is a strong value, then attempt to negotiate anyway, only to lose the deal and admit afterward they would have paid full price. Momentum matters. Some sellers price intentionally to generate competition, reduce carrying costs, and drive stronger terms. Tripping over dollars to save pennies is rarely a winning strategy, espe-

cially when the home fits both your budget and your lifestyle.

As for video and social media, their real role is engagement. Your home is the commercial; the agent's content is the show people choose to watch. If no one is watching, no one is seeing your home. Repetitive, uninspired marketing doesn't create value, it just creates noise. Attention must be earned before it can drive results.

The market itself is neither good nor bad. It simply is. Understanding it, and working with someone who can create clarity at every price point, is what makes the difference. An experienced guide who navigates both calm and changing tides can help buyers and sellers make confident decisions, regardless of conditions.

Like and Follow me on IG @pauldomenech to be *infotained* and message me if you find value in my articles or would like me to share a point of view on a particular topic.

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 Community

BOYS & GIRLS CLUB

continued from page 1

people can learn and grow. Recently, the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast made a significant stride in strengthening that access for local youth across Okaloosa County.

The organization recently distributed 250 refurbished laptops to club kids and their families throughout Okaloosa, Walton and Escambia counties, directly benefiting students from Destin and surrounding communities. The two-day initiative was made possible through a partnership with Derrick Brooks Charities, AT&T and Compudopt, with laptops awarded to families based on demonstrated need.

In today's world, education, communication and opportunity increasingly depend on technology. These devices help level the playing field for students in Destin and beyond. "Tonight,



you could see what opportunity looks like on a child's face. For many of our club kids, this is the first laptop that's truly theirs — not one borrowed from a school, library or relative," said Shervin Rassa, CEO of Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast. "From the earliest grades through high school, a device at home is now essential to keep up with assignments, connect safely and explore what's possible."

In addition to the laptops, eligible families may qualify for

up to one year of free AT&T Fiber internet service through Compudopt, ensuring students can fully utilize their devices for online learning, homework and skill-building at home.

A Regional Impact with a Fort Walton Beach Hub

While the laptop distribution addresses immediate academic needs, it represents just one part of the Clubs' broader mission — much of which is anchored in Fort Walton Beach, where



programs serving youth from across the area are based.

That mission was recently highlighted during the grand reopening of the Jacobe Turner Teen Center in Fort Walton Beach, a central resource for teens from Destin, Fort Walton Beach and surrounding communities. The newly renovated center honors Jacobe Turner, a former club member and 2019 Youth of the Year whose legacy continues to inspire young people throughout the region.

Inside the center, teens participate in leadership development, academic support and enrichment programs including Passport to Manhood, Smart Girls, robotics and career-readiness initiatives — gaining practical life skills alongside confidence and connection.

"Our clubs provide more than after-school care," Rassa said. "They provide consistency, mentorship and a place where kids know they matter. That's especially important for families balancing work, school and rising costs of living in our area."

The renovation was supported by Florida Power & Light and the All Sports Association, Inc., helping expand services for teens across Okaloosa County.

Destin Event, Countywide Impact

Supporting these programs requires strong community involvement, and one of the most anticipated fundraisers of the year — hosted in Destin — directly benefits youth throughout the region.

The 7th Annual Shrimp & Grits Festival, benefiting the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast, will take place Saturday, Feb. 28, 2026, at the Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Village in Destin. The event draws supporters from Destin, Fort Walton Beach and beyond for an evening of food, music and purpose.

Guests will enjoy unlimited

shrimp and grits tastings as area chefs compete for Best Shrimp & Grits on the Emerald Coast, along with craft beverages and live entertainment. This year's festival will feature a performance by rising country artist Erin Kinsey.

"Every year, the Shrimp & Grits Festival grows in impact, bringing our community together over great food, great music and an even greater mission," said Rassa. "This year's move to the Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Village in Destin and the addition of Erin Kinsey mark an exciting new chapter. Every ticket purchased directly supports the futures of the thousands of Club kids we serve across the region. It's a fun night with a meaningful impact."

Proceeds from the festival support Boys & Girls Club programs serving Destin, Fort Walton Beach, Crestview, Pensacola, South Walton and DeFuniak Springs, ensuring local youth have access to academic support, leadership opportunities and positive role models during critical after-school hours.

**If You Go:
7th Annual Shrimp & Grits Festival**

Benefiting Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast

Saturday, Feb. 28, 2026 | 4-7:30 p.m.

Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Village, 4323 Commons Drive W, Destin

Tickets:

General Admission: \$100 (unlimited tastings and drink tickets)

VIP: \$175 (early entry 3-4 p.m., VIP lounge, exclusive culinary experiences and premium concert seating)

Tickets & Information: zeffy.com/en-US/ticketing/7th-annual-shrimp-and-grits-festival

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Education News

Okaloosa County School District Graduation Rate Climbs to 91 Percent

The Okaloosa County School District is celebrating a significant rise in its graduation rate for the 2024–2025 school year, reaching 91 percent, up from 87.7 percent the previous year. The increase reflects both statewide gains and the district's continued focus on helping students stay on track toward earning a high school diploma.

District leaders credit the improvement to strengthened student support systems, expanded academic pathways, and engagement strategies designed to meet students where they are.

"We are incredibly proud of our students and educators for this significant growth in Okaloosa County's graduation rate," Superintendent Marcus Chambers said. "Increasing from 87.7 percent to 91 percent in just one year reflects the hard work, perseverance, and commitment of our students, the dedication of our teachers and staff, and the strong partnerships we share with families and our commu-

nity. While we celebrate this progress, we remain focused on ensuring every student graduates prepared for success beyond high school."

The district plans to continue building on this momentum by expanding opportunities that support academic achievement, career readiness, and postsecondary success.

Okaloosa Schools Earn National AP Honor Roll Recognition

The Okaloosa County School District announced that Choctawhatchee High School, Fort Walton Beach High School and Niceville High School have been named to the 2025 College Board AP School Honor Roll, a national distinction recognizing schools that expand access to Advanced Placement coursework while supporting strong student outcomes.

- Choctawhatchee High School earned Gold recognition.
- Fort Walton Beach High School earned Silver recognition.
- Niceville High School

earned Silver recognition.

The AP School Honor Roll recognizes high schools that meet rigorous benchmarks in college readiness and student achievement, based on data from their most recent graduating class. Schools are evaluated on broad access to AP coursework, student success on AP exams, and sustained participation in advanced academics.

"Recognition on the AP School Honor Roll is a testament to the dedication of our students, teachers, and school leaders," said Superintendent Marcus Chambers. "Choctawhatchee High School's Gold distinction and the Silver recognition earned by Fort Walton Beach and Niceville High Schools reflect our district's continued commitment to academic excellence and preparing students for future success."

OCSD Names 2027 Teacher of the Year

The Okaloosa County School District has named Kimberly Day-Scanlon, a 4th- and 5th-grade ESE CBA teacher at Kenwood Elementary School, as its



2027 Teacher of the Year.

Day-Scanlon holds a bachelor's degree in special education from the College of Saint Rose and a master's degree in inclusive education/special education from Nazareth College. Known for her dedication to students with unique learning needs, she was selected for her compassion, skill, and impact in the classroom.

"Ms. Day-Scanlon exemplifies the heart of teaching in Okaloosa County," said Superintendent Marcus Chambers. "Her

dedication to students, particularly those with unique learning needs, reflects the very best of our profession. She represents the compassion, skill, and excellence we see every day in classrooms across our district, and we are incredibly proud to honor her as our Teacher of the Year."

Also recognized as Teacher of the Year runners-up were:

- Kimberly Moran, art teacher, Fort Walton Beach High School
- Sarah Therese, music teacher, Florosa Elementary School

This year's program included 38 nominees, one from each OCSD school. As the district honoree, Day-Scanlon will represent Okaloosa County in the statewide Teacher of the Year program and participate in Florida Department of Education recognition events.

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Why Red? It's a Love Story.



BY DANICA LAFIRE,
FISH WINDOW CLEANING

How a favorite color, a family-first decision, and a belief in opportunity built Fish Window Cleaning.

If you've lived here long enough, you've probably seen it.

A red bucket on the sidewalk.

A red truck parked just off the curb.

A team quietly at work, making something clearer.

What you may not have wondered is why red.

At Fish Window Cleaning, the color isn't a marketing decision or a branding exercise. It's something far simpler — and far more meaningful.

Red is Linda's favorite color — Linda Merrick, Mike's wife and partner in the earliest days of the business.

In 1978, after being unexpectedly laid off from his job in banking, Mike Merrick found

himself at a crossroads familiar to many families: start over, or stand still. With a future suddenly uncertain, Mike chose to buy a small window-cleaning route from a local cleaner — about 100 accounts, no fanfare, and no guarantees.

What he did have was work ethic, faith, and the quiet confidence of someone who believed he could build something better.

Linda believed it too.

She has spoken openly about knowing Mike was a hard worker — someone with initiative, discipline, and the willingness to grow a business through effort and persistence. That shared belief became the foundation on which Fish was built.

When it came time to name the business and decide how it would show up in the world, Mike and Linda made that decision together. They chose the name Fish Window Cleaning, believing the opportunity before them was guided by something larger than themselves. And the color red — Linda's favorite — became the symbol of the business. Not flashy. Not loud. Just visible. Dependable. Hard to miss.

In the early days, Mike did the work himself. He carried the buckets. Cleaned the glass. Built trust account by account. What began as a way to provide and

persevere gradually grew into something larger — a realization that this kind of business could create opportunity for others too.

Behind the scenes, Linda's attention to detail and systematic thinking helped transform a hands-on service business into something that could be taught, shared, and eventually franchised. Over time, processes moved from being stored in Mike's head to becoming repeatable systems — developed through trial, error, and a commitment to doing things the right way.

As Fish grew, so did the vision behind it.

Mike and Linda recognized something important about blue-collar work and small business ownership: many capable, hardworking people never see a clear path to leadership or ownership. Fish became their way of changing that — by turning a simple, honest service into a scalable system where everyday people could build something of their own, not by cutting corners, but by showing up consistently and following a proven process.

That belief is what ultimately drew me to invest in Fish Window Cleaning.

At first, it was the simplicity and focus of the service. At its



core, this business is about helping others look great. But what truly stopped me in my tracks was a message I saw on the wall:

Give a man a fish, feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime.

That philosophy has guided my life and leadership for a long time. I knew Fish would help me live out my purpose of helping other business owners, while empowering those who never thought they could level up their lives through leadership or gain more control over their earnings. All of which is woven into our company mission.

Interestingly, red was never a color I was naturally drawn to — except for my heels and my lipstick. In a previous chapter of my life, when I wore those, it meant I meant business. It meant what I was about to do had purpose and would make a difference. It meant I was a force. Red was my color of confidence.

That feeling hasn't changed.

Today, I'm proud to wear red almost daily. The confidence is

still there, but the mission has grown. My focus is helping others shine — through developing our team, serving our community, and fostering connections that help people grow. Fish is one of the ways I get to do that.

And yes, we also make windows shine — because first impressions matter. Whether it's a commercial storefront, a home being listed for sale, or a place where a family lives and gathers, clean windows quietly tell a story. They say someone cared enough to pay attention to the details.

For me, Fish is about opportunity — created through care, belief, and a genuine love for helping others grow.

When you see a red bucket outside a business or home, you're not just seeing a brand. You're seeing a story that began with a favorite color, an unexpected turning point, and two people who believed in each other — and continues every time someone is given the chance to grow, to lead, and to build something meaningful.

Sometimes, the clearest things tell the truest stories.

At Fish, we believe clear windows tell a story of care. If you are ready to brighten your home or business, contact us for a free estimate at 850.842.2162 or FishWindowCleaning.Com/3249. Or, if you're looking for an opportunity to grow within a team that values leadership and ownership, we'd love to hear from you. Let's shine together.

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From Rental to Residence: Full-Home Painting Projects That Add Value



BY KYLE SPARKS,
OVATION PAINTING

Across the Emerald Coast, many properties serve multiple purposes. Some are investment rentals, some are second homes,



and others eventually become primary residences. No matter how a property is used today, one thing is certain: a full-home painting project adds both beauty and value.

For families moving into a former rental, fresh paint is often the first step in making a house feel like home. Rentals are typically painted in basic, neutral shades to appeal to a wide variety of guests. A whole-home refresh brings consistency, warmth, and personality, transforming "a place to stay" into "a place to live."

But even for owners not making that move yet, painting is a smart investment. Updated interiors brighten rooms for visiting guests, improve rental appeal, and protect surfaces from years of wear and tear. A well-maintained property also increases resale value — something every owner or investor can appreciate.

This is especially true for property management companies and rental agencies. With dozens or even hundreds of homes under

your care, keeping them updated isn't just about aesthetics; it's about protecting the asset. Guests notice when a property feels fresh and clean, and owners notice when you help preserve their investment. A proactive painting schedule can set your agency apart, ensuring properties are market-ready and reducing the headaches of deferred maintenance.

Large-scale painting projects are about more than color. They extend the life of walls and trim, seal out moisture, and set a higher standard for both residents and guests. February is an ideal month to plan these projects, before spring break and peak season bring fuller calendars and heavier use.

Are you ready to give your home the protection it deserves? Reach out to Ovation Painting and let's plan your refresh today. Call or text us at (850) 830-9668 to get started. And as a thank you to those who serve, we proudly offer a military and first responder discount by mentioning this article!

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Destin Dining, Entertainment, Specials

AJ's Seafood & Oyster Bar

SUPER BOWL PARTY AT AJ'S DESTIN, Sunday, February 8!

Join AJ's Destin for the biggest game of the year! Come early to snag the best seats, because no matter what team you're cheering for, you won't want to miss the action on the largest TV in town! With TVs at the upstairs bar and downstairs, plus surround sound, you'll feel like you're right in the game! Enjoy Specialty Burgers and Drink Specials all night long! Register for Super Bowl Giveaways every quarter! Plus, enter to win a flat screen TV to be given away in the 4th quarter.

"Let the Good Times Roll" at AJ's on the Destin Harbor Saturday, February 14. The Mardi Gras Celebration starts at 1 p.m. with a flavorful Crawfish Boil and live music from Dikki Du and The Zydeco Krewe playing on the outdoor Jumbotron stage.

Since 1984, AJ's Seafood and Oyster Bar has been serving cold Gulf Coast oysters and cool libations. From its humble beginning shucking oysters off the deck behind a small trailer on 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. AJ's serves up delicious daily specials, mouth-watering drinks plus entertaining live mu-



sic all month.

(850) 837-1913
116 Harbor Blvd.
ajsdestin.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 daily from 3-6 p.m., \$2 off all bar drinks. Bucket Specials all day every day. Monday-Friday from 3 p.m. - 5 p.m. \$3 off a dozen raw oysters. 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 austonso98.com.

(850) 842-3200
125 Poinciana Blvd.,
Miramar Beach
Austonso98.com

Boathouse Oyster Bar

Oysters, live music and a lo-



cal 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 entertain-

ment 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

Café Destin

Looking for dining the entire family can enjoy? Looking for a place to work with free WiFi while enjoying your cup of coffee? For breakfast and lunch, Café Destin offers an expanded menu serving breakfast staples such as pancakes, waffles with Nutella, omelets, eggs benedict, biscuits and gravy and more. 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 lattés. 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.

(850) 424-6777
985 US-98 E, Destin
cafedestin.com

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Fridays:	4pm: Hunter Dawson
Saturdays:	8pm: Boathomies
Sundays:	4pm: Flash Flood
	8pm: Austin Jennings
	4pm: Jason Findley
	8pm: Airavata
	12pm: Joey Collins
	4pm: Flash Flood
	8pm: Gunner
	12pm: Brendon Preece
	4pm: Shane Curle
	8pm: Shane Curle Trip

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Slacker Sunday Oyster Brunch 11 am*

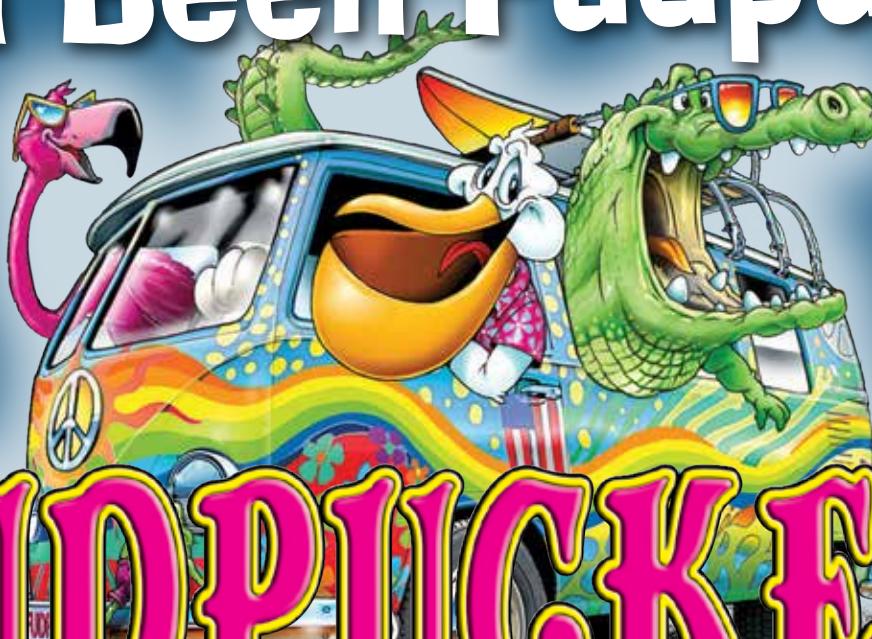
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Facebook: www.facebook.com/BoathouseOysterBar
www.boathouseoysterbardestin.com

Continued on page 28

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Destin Dining, Entertainment, Specials

DESTIN DINING

continued from page 26

Coastal Protein & Energy

Fuel your day the healthy way at Coastal Protein & Energy, Destin's cutest spot for clean caffeine and protein-packed treats. Sip on energizing loaded teas, protein coffee and shakes, or dig into protein waffles, smoothie bowls and even guilt-friendly protein donuts – all crafted to keep you going strong. Tucked along Harbor Boulevard in Norred Plaza across from Boshamps, this bright, beachy hangout has quickly become a favorite for locals looking for fast, feel-good fuel between school runs, gym sessions and days on the water. Special holiday flavors are available for a limited time and December specials include Gift Cards, wellness shots and koozies for gift-giving. Swing by for your morning energy, mid-day pick-me-up or post-workout refuel and see why everyone's talking about Coastal Protein & Energy.

(850) 904-9738

501 Harbor Blvd., Ste. F, Destin
Facebook.com/coastalprotein/ |
coastal-protein-co.square.site

Fudpucker's Beachside Bar & Grill

"Ya Ain't Been Pucked Til Ya Been Fudpucked!" Fudpucker's



Beachside Bar & Grill in Destin has been locally owned and operated since its inception in 1982. Fudpucker's restaurant stands out by being dedicated to its owners' three favorite "F" words: Food, Fun and Family. Fudpucker's is not just a restaurant, it's not just a bar, it's a one-of-a-kind entertainment experience, and one that can be enjoyed by locals, kids and families of all ages and all occasions with plenty of fun included! Bring your family and come for the food! Come for the fun! Get your gift shopping done with a Fudpucker's gift card or shop

the Fudpucker's gift shop for unique gifts and merchandise!

(850) 654-4200

20001 Emerald Coast Pkwy.

Destin

fudpucker.com

Tailfins Waterfront Grill

Hey football fans, Tailfins Waterfront Grill is calling YOU to watch the Super Bowl! With TV's all around, it's a local favorite for ALL sports watching fans!

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en 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. 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 college and pro games with Sunday Ticket.

(850) 842-3333

On the Harbor in Destin

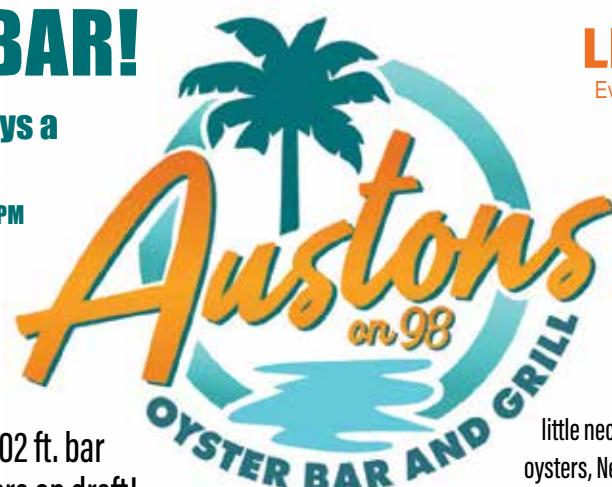
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tailfinsdestin.com

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Comedy Legend Yakov Smirnoff Brings Heart, Humor and Hope to Town

TV and film star and comedy legend Yakov Smirnoff is coming to town to perform his most up-close and personal shows ever. From his first appearance on The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson to his most recent return with Jimmy Fallon, Yakov's career has truly stood the test of time.

A beloved regular on the hit TV comedy *Night Court*, Smirnoff has also appeared in films alongside Tom Hanks, Meryl Streep, Robin Williams, Jack Nicholson and Richard Pryor. He is set to join Mark Wahlberg in a brand-new feature film scheduled for worldwide release in late 2026.

Yakov's incredible journey began in 1977 when he left his homeland in the former Soviet Union to pursue the American dream. His charming, insightful perspective as a newcomer to America quickly resonated with audiences, propelling him to the top of the comedy world and leading to

success on both the big screen and television. His PBS television special *Happily Ever After* was named "Best Special" in both 2016 and 2017, and he has had the rare honor of performing for four U.S. presidents.

More than just jokes, Yakov Smirnoff's comedy is a journey



of heart, humor and hope. His storytelling blends innocence with wisdom, absurdity with insight, and laughter with humanity, appealing to families, cou-

ples and anyone seeking clean, timeless comedy with genuine meaning.

Yakov will perform on Feb. 6, 7 and 8, with 4 and 7 p.m. showtimes at The Palms of Destin Resort. The venue features an intimate showroom with excellent table seating, alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages, and plentiful free parking. The

Palms is also home to a year-round house show produced by Hollywood-based entertainment producer Bart Rockett, featuring never-before-seen magic, illusions and hilarious comedy ventriloquism. While written for adults, the show is family-friendly and regularly enjoyed by children as well.

Tickets for Yakov Smirnoff's performances, as well as other shows at The Palms, are available at MagicDestin.com. Scroll down on the home page to find Yakov's link or explore additional performances. Reservations may also be made by emailing the box office at MagicTicketAgent@gmail.com.

TV/Film Star & Comedy Legend Yakov Smirnoff is coming to Destin to perform his most up-close & personal shows ever!



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FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 20TH, 2026

Golf Series: Our "Blue Bayou" at Bluewater Bay Golf Course



BY BARBARA PALMGREN

Linda Ronstadt once echoed these lines in her signature hit, "Blue Bayou."

*I'm going back someday
Come what may to Blue Bayou
Where the folks are fun
And the world is mine on Blue Bayou
Where those fishing boats with their
sails afloat
If I could only see
That familiar sunrise through sleepy
eyes
How happy I'd be.*

Only a few shrimp boats now

are seen on Choctawhatchee Bay as the sun rises to greet those fortunate enough to live in this paradise. That familiar sunrise? It's still very much alive — its colors often best appreciated from the Marsh course on hole No. 4 or the Bay course on hole No. 6, especially by those early-morning golfers lucky enough to be there.

But sleepy eyes? Not if you want to be sure the ball sails straight down the fairway — or if you need clear vision to determine the correct putting angle and speed so that little white ball drops into the hole.

Where the folks are fun? Yes. Like the swallows that return to Capistrano, the snowbirds are back, golf clubs in hand and dreams of low scores dancing in their heads, along with a bit of braggin' among friends about eagles, birdies and pars.

Nestled among homes in the Bluewater Bay community, golfers enjoy a course layout that is challenging, yet fair. Tee times



can be booked through GolfNow or by calling the pro shop. With scenic views that often distract in the best possible way, the course can now be enjoyed by golfers of all skill levels. With overseeded greens and tee boxes and reasonable fees, the beautiful course is ready for winter play — an accomplishment made possible by the dedication of Golf Course Superintendent Alfredo Francisco and his staff.

General Manager Stephan Kleemeyer has worked tirelessly over the past year to ensure growth and continued success for the club. Adding to that suc-

cess is the bonus of a full-service restaurant, the Blue Tee, where golfers and residents alike can enjoy breakfast, lunch or dinner from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. It may be chilly in February, but a warm lunch and accompanying beverage make for the perfect setting to share stories of that approach shot to the green that resulted in a birdie on the hole.

Membership remains the heart and soul of any golf course, and new member rates encourage golfers to join. Golf carts are included in the rate. While public play is important, membership provides the con-

tinued revenue needed to support and sustain the club.

So, yes, the world is ours — and being happy? The only time you can't play golf is when heavy rains, or perish the thought, snow soak or cover the fairways and greens.

Yes, our Blue Bayou warmly welcomes snowbirds and golfers alike to this hidden jewel of the Panhandle that is Bluewater Bay Golf Course.

To book or for more information, call (850) 897-3241, email golf@preservebwb.com or visit bwbresort.com.



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Coastal Dune Lakes at State Parks

BY HELEN PETRE

Our special part of the panhandle is famous for beaches, 30A, and dune lakes. While tourism makes up most of our economy, we benefit from state forests and parks which preserve our special environments. Part of that is our coastal dune lakes, all of which are threatened by coastal development and all that comes with it. Yet, some lakes are preserved by our land use choices.

Coastal dune lakes are permanent lakes that form inland of dunes. There are hundreds of dune lakes all over the world. Walton County has 19, or maybe 15, based on different classifications.

Walton County's dune lakes are tannin-stained, which makes the water look brown due to organic matter in the lake. It does not negatively affect the water quality. Tannin means "crushed oak bark." The tannin in the lakes is from the surrounding oak trees. Tannin is used for tanning animal skins.

Dune lakes are shallow (between 0.9 and 2.4 meters), and irregularly shaped. Most of our dune lakes have an intermittent connection with saltwater, or an outflow, which allows for water exchange, and results in an estuarine environment with

a mixture of salt and fresh water, or brackish water. Some of our lakes have outflows that flow into other lakes, or storm water drainage ditches, or the outfalls do not exist because of alterations for development. Many of our lakes have outflows that flow through constructed tunnels under 30A. The lakes in our state parks retain their natural outflows. Each lake is different, and all are treasures to preserve.

All of our lakes are fed by groundwater. Characteristics of lakes vary based on the size and shape of their basins, outflow channels, and the surrounding land use, but the water in the lakes always resembles ground water, because water tends to flow out of the lakes more than into them from the Gulf.

Groundwater levels are close to the ground surface, even during dry seasons. The sand and gravel aquifer brings ground water from high points in Alabama to our coast, so water tends to flow, only a few feet below the surface, from north to south, and empty into the Gulf, or close to it, in springs or dune lakes. The groundwater flow is unconfined and recharged from rainwater as well as river water from the north. Since ground water flows south, the lakes drain freshwater into the Gulf.



PHOTO COURTESY FLORIDA STATE PARKS
Grayton Beach State Park

Waves and tides, and especially storm events, can move saltwater into the lakes, but the water in the lakes still remains more characteristically fresh than salt.

Dune Lakes From East To West

Lake Powell is the largest and farthest east of our dune lakes. The outflow is in Bay County, while the lake is in both Walton and Bay Counties, at Camp Helen State Park. The outfall is open often, and it is amazing. Lake Powell is about a half a mile walk from the Camp Helen parking lot, either on a beach trail or through the woods.

Camp Creek Lake is surrounded by dense residential development and a golf course. The lake flows under 30A to connect to the Gulf. Access is limited except by walking along the beach or living in a community with access.

Deer Lake is part of Deer Lake State Park. A culvert passes under 30A connecting it to the Gulf.

Tresca Lake is the smallest dune lake. The outflow is permanently closed due to residential development, however, water overflows into Deer Lake.

Eastern Lake is on both sides of 30A and surrounded by residential and commercial development.

Western Northeast, Western, and Grayton Lakes are connected bodies of water. They have one outflow at Grayton Lake, which tends to open with high rainfall events. Western Lake is in Grayton Beach State Park.

Alligator Lake is on both sides of 30A, with a culvert connecting the two sides.

Little Redfish Lake and Big Redfish Lake are surrounded by dense residential development and are on both sides of 30A. Both have no public access other than walking along a beach.

Draper Lake is an elongated lake surrounded by dense residential development. There is no public access other than walking from a beach access.

Oyster Lake is surrounded by residential development. There is no public access. The outflow is under 30A.

Allen Lake overflows through a storm water ditch to Oyster Lake. Allen Lake is north

of 30A. There is no public access.

Stallworth Lake is surrounded by residential development. There is no public access except to walk along the beach from Topsail.

Topsail Hill Preserve State Park

No Name Lake, Campbell Lake, and Morris Lake and are within Topsail Hill Preserve State Park, with its pine forests and freshwater wetlands. Lakes within Topsail Hill Preserve State Park are accessible only by foot, or tram within the park.

These three lakes are least impacted by development because they are in the park and require effort to reach.

Fuller Lake is on the western edge of Topsail Hill Preserve State Park and overflows into Morris Lake. Fuller Lake is inside the Coffen Nature Preserve. The only access is through the nature preserve.

Preserving our Lakes

Most of our dune lakes are within residential communities. The people that live there surely want to keep the lakes pristine and natural, but it is difficult to develop land around water resources without altering them. Since the lakes naturally overflow into the Gulf, houses built around them must be built so they are not impacted by the outflow. People living in the communities must be conscious of the effects of fertilizer, pesticides and land use.

The lakes that are accessible to the public and are within our state parks are preserved and semi wild. Although many people walk to the outflows, especially at Camp Helen, they are often in awe, and unaware of what they are seeing. It is an ecosystem specially preserved for all of us, but a bit of a secret for those who know what it is. I am grateful that we have preserved these dune lakes, and not altered them, within our parks. When you visit the parks and see the outflows, remember what you are experiencing is something you most likely will not see anywhere else, and it is only due to the decisions we make about our land use and development that future generations can experience this.

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ACSM Trends That'll Give You Kicks in 2026



BY LISA LEATH TURPIN,
WELLNESS COACH

As a personal trainer here on the Emerald Coast, I'm always keeping an eye on where the industry is headed so I can keep my clients ahead of the curve. The ACSM 2026 Fitness Trends report has dropped, and it's clear that this year is all about "working smarter, not just harder." This list is exciting for someone like me that has been in the game a long time. It confirms and vindicates what I have believed and learned for decades and applies to my efforts to help others.

If you're planning your 2026 fitness goals, here are the three big shifts I'm seeing:

1. Fitness for Longevity

The biggest takeaway this year is the massive rise in Programs for Older Adults. It's no longer just about looking good in a swimsuit; it's about "active aging." My clients are asking for workouts that help them stay mobile, prevent falls, and keep up with their grandkids. We're moving away from high-impact "ego lifting" toward functional strength and balance. Functional exercises help by training in movements that mimic daily activities, keeping our bodies strong and ready. Walking: It's import-

ant to build up your endurance for walking. Seems simple, but that's what training is about—doing something regularly and consistently enough to progress (strength/endurance). If we are strong conditioned walkers, we can take those trips, endure parking a mile away from a sporting event, or just enjoy together time walking the beach with a loved one. Same with anything we want to get better at such as balance. Exercises that keep your ankles fluid, nimble and STRONG will massively help your feet to be prepared for that uneven surface, roots or obstacles and help you gracefully avoid falls. Try using "balance trainers" such as a BOSU or balance disc for a variety of movements.

2. The Data Revolution

Wearable Tech is still holding the #1 spot, but it's getting way more personal. It's not just about hitting 10,000 steps anymore. In 2026, we're using data to track recovery, sleep, and even how our bodies react to stress. If you aren't using a tracker yet, now is the time to start—it's like having a secondary coach on your wrist.

3. Social Fitness is Back

One of my favorite newcomers to the Top 10 list is Adult Recreation and Sport Clubs. People are tired of solo workout sessions. Whether it's pickleball, local run clubs, or group strength classes, there is a huge craving for community. Many people never lost this desire, but the pandemic forced isolation. Now, everyone is realizing the loneliness problems and the lack of motivation when you rely only on yourself. Group training is energizing and fulfilling; definitely a way to also boost



your mental health. A major shift toward "peer performance" means training where motivation comes from the group. Formats like indoor cycling, boot camps, and functional circuit training are treated as social events with high-fives and team-oriented goals. Also, look for community-led

projects, aka: "Active Socializing," that are increasingly tied to purposeful movement, such as community garden projects, park clean-ups, and charity "fun runs" or walk-a-thons. Fitness in 2026 is a team sport!

Whether you're looking to lose weight or just want to feel better mentally, the 2026 trends show that there is no "one size fits all" approach. If you're ready to get started, you can find a certified pro to help build a plan that actually sticks. Let's make 2026 your strongest year yet! For more information,

visit the American College of Sports Medicine at ACSM.ORG

2026 Top Ten (out of 20) ACSM Fitness Trends:

1. Wearable Technology
2. Fitness Programs for Older Adults (Active Aging)
3. Exercise for Weight Management
4. Mobile Exercise Apps
5. Balance, Flow, and Core Strength
6. Exercise for Mental Health
7. Traditional Strength Training
8. Data Driven Technology
9. Adult Recreation and Sport Clubs
10. Functional Fitness Training



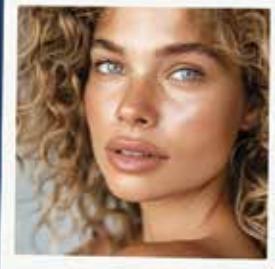
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 Wellness


BY STEPHENIE CRAIG

Do you ever look back at the way you used to be with judgement? Maybe you are embarrassed about the way you used to look or act in childhood. Perhaps you shame yourself for previous relationships. Maybe you feel

An Inner Voice Makeover

angry at yourself about how you handled your work life. Perhaps you are hard on yourself for past mistakes.

It's easy to be unkind and judgmental toward yourself from your present place of knowledge and understanding. However, what would it be like to consider what those earlier versions of yourself knew when they were making decisions? What did your 8-year-old self know when you were deciding how to manage growing up in your family of origin? What did your 15-year-old self know when you chose who to date? What did your 20-year-old version of yourself know when you were choosing a career? In most cases, these earlier versions of yourself were making decisions that made sense at the time with the current developmental information and understanding.

Rather than being unkind to yourself, consider that every version of you that came before the current version was an important part of your journey to the present. Each of these parts of yourself made decisions and have been working hard for years trying to protect you and to get you to today. While the life strategies of these parts of you may not have always panned out pos-



itively, they were trying to help you to cope and to survive. What might it look and feel like to shift from being mean to yourself to talking to yourself like someone you love deeply like a child or a dear friend? How would your words and approach be different?

Your words and tone create cycles with lasting impact. Often, the negative voice in your head originated from a critical parent or other authority figure who did not know how to be kind to themselves. When you learn to honor and speak kindly to yourself, it creates a natural result of you speaking kindly to others. Similarly, when you are critical and shaming of yourself, you are more likely in times of stress and hurt to speak unkindly to others resulting in you becoming the unkind voice in someone else's head. And beyond human relationship, the unkind voice in your head often unhelpfully gets attributed to God, creating an

impatient and angry idea about how God sees you when in reality, you are deeply loved and valued.

So, how do you shift your inner voice from judgement to kindness?

7 Ways to Talk to Yourself with Kindness

Notice when you are being harsh with yourself. "I'm not being very kind to myself in this moment."

Seek the source of the voice. "Where is this judgement coming from? Am I talking to myself the way someone talked to me when I was younger? When do I first remember talking to myself in this way?"

Acknowledge earlier parts of self. "I see you, 8-year-old me. What can you show me about your concerns and your strategies for getting my needs met?"

Validate earlier versions of yourself with grace. "I can see that you started trying to be perfect at a young age in order to get approval and I can understand why you needed to do that at the time. I can also see why you sometimes still want to do that now."

Show appreciation to earlier versions of self. "I really appreciate that you have been trying to help me along in life by trying to be perfect."

Talk to earlier versions of self like you would talk to someone you love. "I understand that you started trying to be perfect as a way to survive. I am here now and I see you and I care for you and I will help you figure out some different ways to feel okay."

Develop an ongoing friendship with earlier versions of self. "I am here and will be here for you every day to talk you through the hard moments."

While this approach may seem a bit unusual, incorporating loving, kindness into your inner voice creates a positive impact on how you feel about yourself, how you treat others, and how you understand your spiritual life. You love others better when you know how loved and valued you are. Connect with us along your journey for counseling and coaching support at Journeybravely.com.

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Living with a Neurodegenerative Diagnosis: Understanding the Impact — and the Hope



BY MELANIE YOST,
BE WELL SOLUTIONS

A neurodegenerative diagnosis changes far more than memory, movement or speech. It changes how a person sees themselves, how they connect with others and how they picture their future. Conditions such as Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, Lewy body dementia, frontotemporal dementia, ALS and vascular dementia are progressive, meaning symptoms tend to worsen over time. Even so, many people are surprised to learn that there is still room for hope and a better quality of life.

These conditions affect how the brain works. Thinking clouds, memory fades and words become harder to find. Many people struggle with confusion, focus or decision-making, and emotional changes. Depression, anxiety, irritability, loss of motivation or noticeable personality shifts can appear—sometimes even before physical symptoms.

The physical changes that often occur include: tremors, weakness, balance issues, slower movement and ongoing fatigue. Tasks that once felt simple—driving, cooking, managing money or personal care - can gradually become more challenging. This loss of independence can be one of the hardest parts of the diagnosis.

Adding to the stress of the symptoms is the emotional weight of the journey. Many individuals grieve who they used to be. Their confidence can fade and roles within their family change. A quiet fear about the future often lingers. Caregivers and loved ones carry their own

heavy load as they take on more caregiving duties while watching their loved one change into a different person. For many families, the experience feels lonely and overwhelming.

Traditional medical care plays an important role. Doctors help diagnose the condition, monitor progression, manage symptoms and plan for safety. Medications and therapies can slow certain changes and ease discomfort. Still, much of conventional care focuses on managing decline rather than supporting and building on what the brain can still do.

It is now understood that neurodegeneration is rarely caused by a single issue. Inflammation, reduced oxygen use, low energy production in brain cells, disrupted brain communication and metabolic stress often occur together. Because the challenges are layered, meaningful support must be layered as well.

A combined, non-invasive



approach can help support brain health from multiple directions at once. Therapies that improve oxygen delivery, support cellular energy, calm inflammation, strengthen brain pathways through use and training, and

help the brain regulate itself can work together in powerful ways.

These approaches do not claim to cure neurodegenerative disease. What they can offer, however, is deeply meaningful: improved clarity, steadier mood, better sleep, increased energy, improved balance and stronger emotional regulation for many individuals. Even small improvements can restore confidence, preserve dignity and make daily life feel more manageable for the person and their loved ones.

Just as important, this kind of care can restore a sense of control. Instead of simply waiting for what comes next, individuals and families can take an active

role in supporting brain health and overall well-being.

A neurodegenerative diagnosis is life-changing and often frightening. But, it does not mean the brain is without hope. With compassionate, supportive and evidenced based care, the brain can continue to adapt and function better than once believed possible.

And in that space, many people discover something invaluable—not just more time, but better quality of living within the time they have.

If you or a loved one are struggling with brain fog, memory changes, emotional instability or signs of cognitive decline, please reach out. There is hope. Your brain can heal and evidence-based therapies can help you reclaim clarity, resilience, and quality of life.

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 Wellness


BY DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

Sitting on opposite ends of the couch wondering if they were still in love. Same house, same couch, same bed, same routine, but where is the love, the fun, the passion? It seems like years since they've been intimate.

She doesn't seem interested anymore. He's tried so many times he just doesn't ask anymore. She always seems angry

about this or that. Complaining about things that shouldn't even matter; but, apparently they matter a lot. Complaining about not sleeping or waking up all night and always being tired. Is she just tired of him? It's like there's no way to make her happy anymore.

He doesn't seem interested anymore. When was the last time he came on to me? I can't even remember the last date we went on. We never spend time together. He's always asleep on the couch and we never talk anymore. If I still love him, why don't I have any desire? I thought marriage was supposed to get easier.

Does this sound familiar? It should. It's the story we hear from patients all the time. No libido, never feeling rested, just surviving each day so you can get home and crash, the weight



gain, the irritability. And why is everyone getting so annoying?

It's amazing what hormones are responsible for. Everyone seems to think testosterone = mean and muscles and estrogen = emotional overload. That's so far from the truth. It's hard to describe, but I might say, testosterone = fearless desire to engage in life, and estrogen = the emotional awareness to enjoy every moment.

Forget the health benefits of hormones today, and there are tons. Let's talk about how it changes your life.

would do, because it seems like you will never get there anyway.

Imagine your spouse approaching you with that look in his eye and you smile, because you've been waiting for him all day.

That's just a taste of what hormones do. I used to feel like you. I got treated 12 years ago. It changed my life. I felt alive. I slept. I was happy. I wasn't afraid of life. So, I quit my job and left over 20 years of traditional medicine. Why? So, I could help you feel better, too.

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Is Cholesterol Our Friend?



BY KAY LEAMAN, HEALTH ARCHITECT, HEALTHYDAY HEALTHYLIFE

I love learning new things and passing them on to all of you. When it comes to our health, knowledge empowers us to navigate our health journey. We've heard for a long time that high cholesterol is bad. My cardiologist wanted to put me on a statin even though my cholesterol was in a normal range; I declined.

So, let's take a look at what cholesterol does.

Cholesterol is a fat related compound found in all body tissues and in animal products. It is made within the body, primarily by the liver. Some is also produced by the intestinal wall. The body uses cholesterol to make hormones and vitamin D when we are exposed to the sun. The brain is our most cholesterol rich organ and is important in brain health. It is also our body's repair substance, creating scar tissue and patching damaged arteries. It, along with saturated fats, in the cell membranes gives our cells stability.

Cholesterol is also a primary component of the myelin that surrounds each nerve cell and acts a protective sheath giving insulation and allowing more efficient nerve impulse conduction.

Note: Many times, when our cholesterol is high, it's because the body needs it to perform its functions.

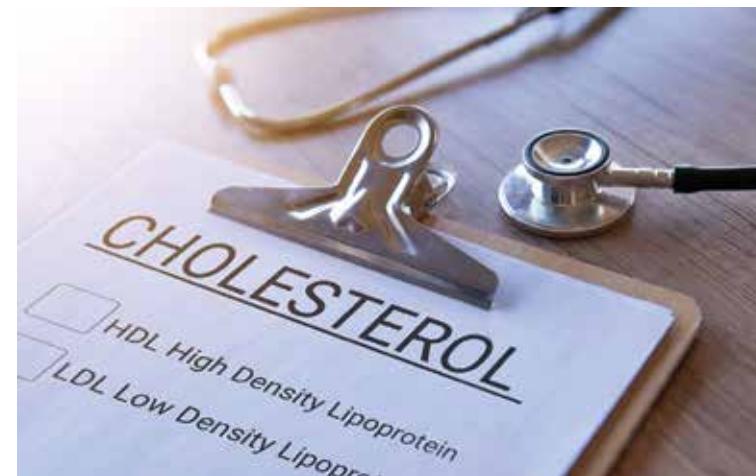
News Flash: Our LDL cholesterol is not the real problem.

It's the oxidized LDL combined with arterial inflammation that can lead to arterial calcification (plaque formation) and hardening of the arteries.

If the percent of LDL cholesterol molecules that are oxidized is low (less than 10% of total LDL) and arterial inflammation is kept at a minimum we won't need to worry about the levels. What is needed to keep these in check is anti-oxidants (nutrients, not medication).

A little science:

Homocysteine along with free radicals oxidizes the arterial lining along with the LDL and triglycerides which leads to the inflammation. This in turn releases the C-Reactive protein (produced by the liver) which is a known marker of arterial inflammation (5-7). Homocysteine causes nicks or cracks in the en-



dothelium (where inflammation takes place) and the oxidized LDL sticks to these nicks. LDL cholesterol that is not oxidized does not stick to these nicks, no matter how much there is.

This is good news because our cells need it to function and without it we would die. Lastly, many health problems can arise if our

levels are too low.

There are certain labs that can test and inform you where you actually stand. One doctor recommended lab is Life Extension. The tests to request:

- Oxidized LDL Cholesterol

- HDL Cholesterol, High sensitivity CRP
- Homocysteine (You can request this test with your normal blood work.)

The Big Take Away: If your oxidized LDL is low, and you boost your HDL and keep your homocysteine levels low, you won't be at an increased risk for heart attacks or death.

Our bodies are complex and so many of the functions are interwoven and dependent on each other. Every step we take in our journey makes a difference.

Have a fabulous Valentine's Day (A day to love others and yourself!) and a healthy 2026.

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 Wellness


By KRISY ANDERSON, OWNER,
BEVERLY HILLS DAY SPA

Valentine's Day may get the spotlight, but the season of love is really about something deeper — connection, self-care and taking time to slow down. This February, Beverly Hills Day Spa invites you to celebrate love in all its forms, whether that means nurturing yourself, sharing a mo-

ment with someone special, or simply pressing pause on a busy routine.

More couples and individuals are embracing intentional wellness dates — experiences that replace crowded dinners with meaningful moments of relaxation and renewal. A spa day has become the new go-to for couples seeking quality time, and for individuals choosing to prioritize rest, balance and self-love.

Throughout the month, Beverly Hills Day Spa is offering ro-

mantic and restorative packages designed to help you unwind, reconnect and feel your best.

February Featured Packages

Hug Me Package: Escape into pure relaxation with a rejuvenating 75-minute massage, paired with an express facial and makeup touch-up. February special: \$197.50.

Kiss Me Package: Set the mood with a romantic couples' massage designed for two. Enjoy

a 60-minute massage experience complete with champagne and chocolates — a perfect way to relax and reconnect together. February special: \$190.

Additional Spa Favorites

60-Minute Swedish Massage with Custom Facial — \$170

60-Minute Custom Rose Facial with Hand, Arm, Neck and Shoulder Massage — \$125

90-Minute Massage with Full-Body Red Light or Infrared Therapy — \$125

While flowers and chocolates may fade, the gift of relaxation lasts far longer. Treat yourself, your Valentine, or both of you together to an experience that restores the body, refreshes the mind and leaves you glowing.

Appointments are limited. To reserve your Valentine's spa experience, contact Krisy at Beverly Hills Day Spa at (850) 654-8544 or visit beverlyhillsdayspa.com.

This February, feel relaxed, refreshed — and feel like a star!

Book Review: Good Morning, Monster: A Psychotherapist's Delight in Raw Recovery Stories

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL McMANUS, MSW, LCSW

As a licensed therapist with over four decades in psychotherapy, Catherine Gildiner's "Good Morning, Monster" feels like a professional homecoming. This collection of five extended case studies—framed as "heroic stories of emotional recovery"—captures the gritty beauty of long-term therapy in ways few books do. Gildiner, a seasoned clinician herself, turns clinical

encounters into compelling narratives that resonate deeply with therapists craving transparent, relational accounts.

Each chapter traces a client's multi-year arc, from devastating intake to transformative follow-up.

- One grapples with a tyrannical mother's verbal venom ("Good morning, monster!"), internalized as self-loathing.

- Another navigates cult deprogramming after decades of

indoctrination.

- Stories span physical paralysis from psychosomatic roots, Munchausen-by-proxy survival, and more.

These aren't tidy vignettes; they're messy, real journeys mirroring the nonlinear paths we see daily.

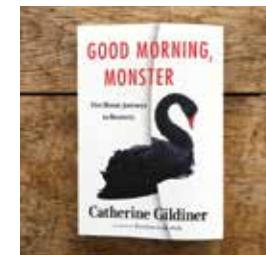
Themes That Hit Home

Gildiner spotlights core psychotherapy truths:

- Attachment wounds: Childhood neglect and abuse echo in adult bodies and bonds.

- Intergenerational cycles: Trauma's ripple effects demand generational reckoning.

- Therapist humanity: She owns countertransference stum-



bles and strategic pivots, demystifying our role.

For me, this validates the slow repetition of relational repair—rewiring neural pathways through lived safety.

What elevates this for fellow clinicians is Gildiner's candor on process. She dissects intake decisions, technique shifts (from psychodynamic probing to somatic attunement), and ethical an-

nymization. No jargon barriers obscure the work; instead, scenes reveal how theory lives in the room. Her admission of blind spots—moments when her own filters clouded empathy—spurs reflection on our use-of-self. It's a masterclass in endurance: therapy as marathon, not sprint, yielding hope amid entrenched pain.

Gildiner's prose sings—cinematic dialogue, wry humor amid horror, literary flair without artifice. Harrowing details (a client's ritualistic self-harm; another's hallucinatory gurus) balance with triumphs, like reclaimed autonomy. At 350 pages, it's brisk yet profound, accessible for trainees or veterans.

Extreme cases dominate, potentially sidelining "everyday" therapy's quiet wins. Subtle Canadian context adds flavor but limits universal transfer. Still, strengths overwhelm: ethical storytelling empowers clients' legacies without exploitation.

If you've ever ached for realistic portrayals of depth work—beyond pop-psych soundbites—this delivers.

Michael McManus LCSW is a psychotherapist in private practice in Santa Rosa Beach, Florida. Michael and his wife Angela, who is also a therapist, have raised four children. They enjoy exploring, cooking, reading, yoga, hiking, biking trying out the restaurants around town and traveling to visit their kids scattered around the country. Michael can be reached by phone or text at (850) 837-0123 or website: psychotherapy30A.com

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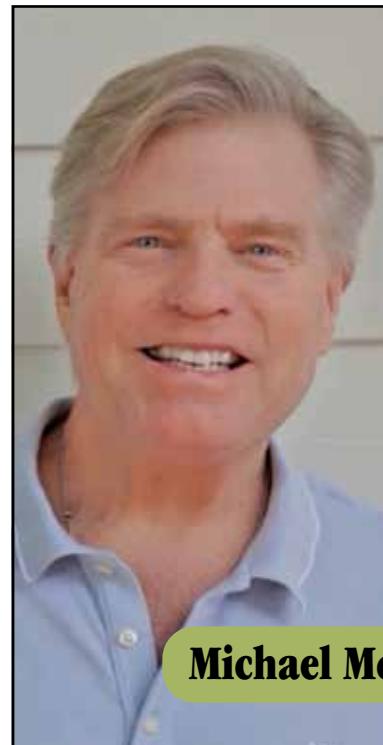
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Michael McManus LCSW

Unlocking Hidden Strengths at Work: Helping Deliberative and Developer Superpowers Thrive



BY BILL MASON, ROCKET FUEL COACH

Every team benefits from people who think carefully and those who help others grow. But under pressure, even our strongest traits can slip into “basement” behaviors. Recognizing what’s happening beneath the surface helps us support co-workers in returning to their “balcony,” where their natural strengths shine.

Unlocking Your Co-worker's Deliberative Superpower

Do you have a co-worker who's usually great at carefully weighing options and making thoughtful decisions, but every so often, they seem stuck in a loop of overthinking? I've got one on my team who typically shines by thinking things through, ensuring that every move is well-considered. But recently, during a project meeting, they became paralyzed by the need to analyze every possible risk and outcome. It was like watching a master of deliberation stuck in the basement of indecision!

This is a classic case of “basement” behaviors for someone with the Deliberative strength. When they feel overwhelmed by options or pressure, they can get bogged down in analysis, which

delays progress. But at their core, they have an amazing ability to make well-informed, thoughtful decisions that minimize risk and lead to success.

How can we help them get back to their “balcony” and thrive? Here are 3 ideas:

- Provide Clear Priorities – Help them focus on the most important decisions first. Having a clear framework can reduce the overwhelm and enable quicker action.
- Encourage Small Wins – Give them opportunities to make decisions on smaller, lower-risk items to build their confidence and momentum.
- Celebrate Their Thoughtfulness – Acknowledge their careful approach and how it brings clarity and stability to the team. Positive reinforcement can help them feel empowered to trust their judgment.

Let's help them tap into their deliberative strength and keep making thoughtful, confident decisions!

Unlocking Your Co-worker's Developer Superpower

Do you have a co-worker who's usually amazing at spotting potential and helping others grow, but every so often, they seem to get discouraged when progress feels slow? I've got one on my team who's typically great at nurturing talent and developing skills in others. But recently, when things didn't seem to be improving fast enough, they became frustrated and started focusing on what wasn't working. It was like watching a coach stuck in the basement of impatience!

This is a classic case of “basement” behaviors for someone

with the Developer strength. When they don't see immediate progress or growth, they can become disheartened and lose sight of their incredible ability to cultivate potential. But at their core, they have an amazing knack for seeing the best in others and helping people develop into their best selves.

How can we help them get back to their “balcony” and thrive? Here are 3 ideas:

- Celebrate Small Wins – Encourage them to acknowledge even small progress. Recognizing these achievements can help

them stay motivated and focused on the positive growth.

• Provide Encouraging Feedback – Remind them of how much impact they've had on others' development. Positive reinforcement can reignite their confidence in their role as a mentor.

• Foster Patience – Help them see the long-term potential in the people they're developing. Remind them that growth takes time and their efforts are creating lasting change.

Let's help them tap into their Developer strength and keep growing amazing talent!

When we understand how strengths behave under stress, we can lead with empathy and intention. Supporting thoughtful decision-makers and patient people-developers helps teams grow stronger, healthier and more effective.

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The Christian Capitalist:

Lori Joyner and Harvest House—Caring for Neighbors in Need

BY RICH SANDERS

Lori Joyner fills her days managing hundreds of pounds of groceries, groups of volunteers and dozens of people in need. As Executive Director of the Harvest House in Destin, she is responsible for caring for the poor and needy in Okaloosa County and helping them survive and thrive.

Lori and her family moved to Destin over twenty years ago as a result of divine intervention. "Throughout my walk in life, I surrendered my life to the Lord Jesus and said, 'Lord, whatever you want me to do, I will do for you. And I didn't take that lightly.'" After Lori thought about the move for three consecutive days and "just surrendered everything," and moved to Destin!

After meeting the founder of Harvest House, Jerry Ogle, she fell in love with it and became the Executive Director—three days later! As small business owners, Lori and her husband are great examples of Christian Capital-

ists, as that business helps her work so diligently on behalf of the poor and needy in our community.

Harvest House has been operating for over forty years, making it one of the oldest Christian non-profit charities on the Emerald Coast. Serving over four hundred families a month today, things keep getting busier. During the government shutdown in the Fall of 2025, demand for assistance spiked, in particular for food after funding for food stamps stalled. Lori and her group of volunteers took it in stride and continued to meet the needs of the people of Okaloosa County.

Harvest House provides all manner of support to those in need, including financial assistance with utilities. While many of the families regularly visit them, Lori also notes that the group of people seeking assistance continues to change and fluctuate with economic conditions... and with the seasons.



Lori Joyner at Harvest House

winter months, this is the time of year when Harvest House really leans on the community for support.

This is a particularly challenging time for Harvest House, since it was recently forced to change locations and lost its thrift store, therefore its income, in the process. Lori welcomes any current canned goods, unopened packaged food or toiletry items, and Harvest House is open every

weekday for pickup or delivery. Locals get it: grits are one of the most popular items that people request at the Harvest House!

Lori recently appeared on the Christian Capitalist podcast, and you can listen to the entire episode on SOWAL Life's website. We are excited to share inspirational stories of hard work and generous giving to the poor and needy in the name of Jesus Christ, like Lori Joyner!

Rich Sanders is a pastor, small business owner, retired healthcare attorney and adjunct professor at Emory University, and former intelligence officer in the U.S. Navy. He and his wife, Rebekah, met at church in 1996, have been blessed with three children (James, William and Caroline) and live in Destin with their large golden retriever, Cowboy.



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 **Musing**


BY SEAN DIETRICH

It was a Wednesday. I know this because on Wednesdays the Baptist church had family suppers.

And although I wasn't exactly a faithful Sunday churchgoer, I was a devout mid-week supper-eater.

That night, I stood in line behind a girl, holding my plate. She was funny. She had so much personality she hummed like a neon light.

Later, I sat beside her during service. That week, there was an out-of-town preacher. The kind with big hair, sweat rags, and

nice shoes. He invited people to walk the aisle to get born again.

My pal, Craig—who lost his religion every football season—recommitted for his thirtieth time. He said he felt something in the air that night.

I did too.

When service let out, the girl wasn't ready to go home. Neither was I. So, I suggested we drive. She liked the idea—though I'll never know why.

I pointed my vehicle east, we headed for nowhere, traveling as slow as my engine would run. The miles of pines made her more chatty. She propped her feet on my dashboard and let the words roll.

She talked about things. About how she saw the world, about her favorite kind of mustard, about religion, and the proper way to eat fried chicken.

I gave one-syllable responses because I didn't want to interrupt. She had a voice that

sounded like Escambia County in June.

By the time we landed in Port Saint Joe, her one-sided conversation had faded to a stop. I looked at her. She was sleeping.

So, I pulled into a gas station and got lukewarm coffee.

On the ride back, I thought long and hard. Not just about the sleeping girl, but about how I'd gotten a late start in life. And about how my childhood was a pitiful one.

So pathetic, in fact, it embarrassed me to talk about—kind

standards, and fostering peace and goodwill both locally and globally. Through annual fundraisers—including the popular Cajun Crawfish Bash—the club raises funds to reinvest directly into programs and initiatives that align with its priority areas and community needs. "This grant opportunity is about more than funding," the Rotary Club of Destin President Bekah Wagner said. "It's an opportunity to partner with organizations doing meaningful work and to expand our collective impact by working together to address critical issues in our community."

Grant applications will be reviewed based on criteria established by the Rotary Club of Destin Board of Directors. Eligible organizations are encouraged to apply and share how their programs support and strengthen the local community.

The application deadline is Feb. 13, 2026.

For eligibility requirements and to apply, visit: <https://forms.gle/NDyc7DCeMy4jkmjR7>

Washington's Birthday Weekend & America 250 Florida

As Florida gears up for America's 250th anniversary this year, Governor Ron DeSantis has announced a slate of statewide events, exhibits and public initiatives under America 250 Florida, the state's official observance of



without even trying. And even if I never saw her again, I was grateful for her.

When I arrived at her house, it was three in the morning. I walked her to the door. I hugged her and whispered, "Maybe I'll see you again, sometime."

She said, "What'n the hell's maybe? 'Course we'll see each other, dummy."

Every good thing in my life can be traced back to that night—the evening I became who I am. With her I have everything. Without her I'm a blind man.

That was the Wednesday I got born again.

the nation's semiquicentennial.

As part of the celebration, Washington's Birthday has been designated a Florida state holiday, with state offices closed on Monday, Feb. 16. Festivities will take place throughout Washington's Birthday Weekend, Feb. 12–16, honoring the leadership and legacy of General George Washington.

One highlight for locals and visitors alike: Florida State Parks will offer free day-use admission statewide from Friday, Feb. 13, through Monday, Feb. 16. In Destin, that means a perfect opportunity to enjoy one of Destin's crown jewels—Henderson Beach State Park—whether that means a peaceful beach walk,

picnic among the dunes, or soaking in one of our most beloved coastal views. Nearby Northwest Florida favorites are also included, inviting residents and visitors alike to explore the natural landscapes that shaped Florida long before statehood.

Good to know: Free admission applies to day use only and excludes Skyway Fishing Pier State Park and Olustee Battlefield Historic State Park. Overnight stays, special events and rentals are not included.

Plan your visit at FloridaStateParks.org and learn more about Florida's America 250 observance at America250FL.com.

NEWS

continued from page 11

that even young artists can make a big impression.

Rotary Club of Destin Announces Grant Funding Opportunity for Local Nonprofits

The Rotary Club of Destin invites local nonprofit organizations to apply for grant funding as part of its ongoing mission to create positive change and strengthen the local community.

As a service organization made up of professional men and women, the Rotary Club of Destin is committed to humanitarian service, high ethical

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ECTC Presents "Everlasting Love"

A Valentine's Day Musical Revue Fundraiser

Love takes center stage this Valentine's season as Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC) presents Everlasting Love, a special Valentine's Day musical revue fundraiser celebrating romance, connection, and timeless love songs on February 14th at 7 P.M. This intimate evening of music and storytelling will feature beloved performers Teresa Lombardi, Taylor Walker, Skylar Smith, and Jackie Rose.

Everlasting Love invites audiences to experience an unforgettable night filled with iconic love songs from stage and screen that span generations. Designed as both a celebration of love and a fundraiser supporting ECTC's mission, the revue offers a perfect Valentine's date night with a meaningful cause at its heart.

"Everlasting Love celebrates shared dreams and the meaningful relationships that grow when people come together," said Nathanael Fisher, Producing Artistic Director of Emerald Coast Theatre Company. "This evening is about connection, possibility, and supporting the future of theatre here on our Emerald Coast."

Everlasting Love will be held at Emerald Coast Theatre Company, located at 560 Grand Boulevard, Suite 200, Miramar Beach, FL. Tickets are \$150 each and are sold in pairs. Each pair of tickets includes a bottle of wine along with a sweet or savory charcuterie. Proceeds from the event directly support ECTC's youth educational programming and community outreach initiatives.

To make a tax-deductible donation, become a VIP or sponsor, or learn more, call (850) 684-0323 or visit emeraldcoasttheatre.org.



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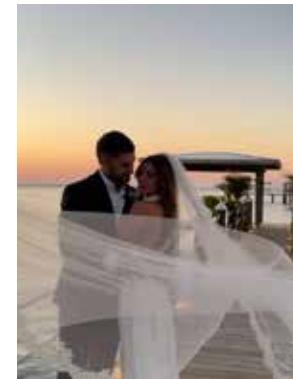
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 Arts & Music

MKAF 30th Anniversary of Concerts in the Village

Celebrate three decades of music under the stars as the Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation (MKAF) marks the 30th anniversary of its beloved Concerts in the Village series. The area's first live outdoor concert series returns Thursday evenings from April 9 through June 11, 2026, at the MKAF Dugas Pavilion in Destin.

This 10-concert, family-friendly series features premier regional and national artists and top tribute bands performing everything from classic rock, rhythm and blues, and disco to yacht rock and modern pop favorites.

The season opens April 9 with Smash Mouth, followed by Black Jacket Symphony recreating Van Halen's 1984. Other highlights include Yacht Rock Schooner, Rumours ATL (Fleetwood Mac tribute), Brass Transit: The Music of Chicago, The Turnstiles: A Tribute to Billy Joel, Boogie Wonder Band, The Molly Ringwalds, The Return: A Beatles Tribute performing Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, and a season finale

with A1A: The Official Jimmy Buffett Tribute Band.

"We are thrilled to celebrate 30 years of Concerts in the Village with one of our most dynamic and diverse lineups yet," said MKAF CEO Demetrios Fuller. "When you purchase a concert ticket, you are supporting our mission to bring arts education and engagement programs to thousands across Northwest Florida. We invite everyone to join us this season for unforgettable nights of music and community."

Gates open at 6 p.m., with concerts beginning at 7 p.m. Attendees are encouraged to bring lawn chairs and picnics, or enjoy food and beverages available for purchase from featured restaurants and food trucks.

General admission is \$40 per adult (including processing fees), with discounts available for active-duty military with ID.

Children 12 and under are free. Tickets are available at MKAF.org/events.

A limited number of VIP tables, seating eight guests for the entire season, are available. For availability or sponsorship information, call (850) 650-2226 or email info@mkaf.org.

MKAF members receive early entry, free admission to every concert, and discounts to other MKAF events. Learn more at MKAF.org.

Concert lineup is subject to change. All sales are final. Pets, drones, and tables larger than two feet are not permitted. Children 17 and under must be accompanied by a parent or guardian.



Thursday, May 7 | Brass Transit: The Musical Legacy of Chicago

Thursday, May 14 | Turnstile: The Music of Billy Joel

Thursday, May 21 | Boogie Wonder Band

Thursday, May 28 | The Molly Ringwalds

Thursday, June 4 | The Return: A Beatles Tribute

Thursday, June 11 | A1A: The Official Jimmy Buffett Tribute Band



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Top 10 Valentine's Day Songs

Valentine's Day is a celebration of love in all its forms: romantic, passionate, tender, and timeless. Few things capture those emotions quite like music. Over the years, certain songs have become synonymous with Valentine's Day because of their heartfelt lyrics, unforgettable melodies, and emotional depth. Here are the top 10 Valentine's Day songs and what makes each one truly special.

1. "All of Me" – John Legend

This modern classic is a raw and honest declaration of unconditional love. With simple piano accompaniment and deeply personal lyrics, "All of Me" resonates because it embraces imperfections and vulnerability, making it a favorite for weddings and Valentine's playlists alike.

2. "At Last" – Etta James

Few songs capture the feeling of love finally fulfilled like "At



Last." Etta James's powerful, soulful vocals paired with lush orchestration make this song a timeless anthem for enduring romance.

3. "Can't Help Falling in Love" – Elvis Presley

This gentle ballad remains one of the most iconic love songs ever written. Its simple message—that love is inevitable combined with Elvis's warm delivery gives it an innocence that continues to charm listeners across generations.

4. "Thinking Out Loud" – Ed Sheeran

Ed Sheeran's promise of lifelong devotion has made this song a modern Valentine's staple. Its lyrics imagine love that grows stronger with time, which resonates deeply with couples dreaming of a shared future.

5. "My Heart Will Go On" – Celine Dion

Forever linked to the film *Titanic*, this song is about love that transcends time and loss. Celine Dion's soaring vocals convey deep emotion, making it a powerful reminder that true love never fades.

6. "I Will Always Love You" – Whitney Houston

This song is often associated with heartbreak, but at its core, it is a profound expression of selfless love. Whitney Houston's unmatched vocal performance elevates the song into an emotional masterpiece that still moves listeners decades later.

7. "Let's Stay Together" – Al Green

Smooth, soulful, and optimistic, this song celebrates commitment and sticking together through life's ups and downs. Al Green's warm vocals and groovy rhythm make it a perfect Valentine's Day choice for couples who value lasting love.

8. "Something" – The Beatles

Written by George Harrison, "Something" stands out for its sincerity and understated beauty. Frank Sinatra once called it one of the greatest love songs ever written, and its gentle melody continues to prove why.

9. "Endless Love" – Diana Ross & Lionel Richie

A duet that defines romance, "Endless Love" captures the magic of two voices blending into one emotional message. Its lyrics express devotion, unity, and a love without limits which are perfect themes for Valentine's Day.

10. "Make You Feel My Love" – Adele

Adele's soulful interpretation

of this song adds depth and vulnerability to its lyrics. It's about unwavering support and standing by someone no matter what, making it a powerful expression of true, enduring love.

Why These Songs Endure

What makes these Valentine's Day songs special is their

ability to express universal emotions. They speak of devotion, longing, commitment, and hope feelings that never go out of style. Whether classic or contemporary, each song offers a soundtrack for love, making Valentine's Day a little more meaningful through music.

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This year's special guest is internationally renowned and iconic big band **Pink Martini**, the "little orchestra" that's wowed audiences around the globe with a dazzling blend of jazz, classical, and old-school pop sung in more than 25 languages. Founded by pianist Thomas Lauderdale, Pink Martini is known for its playful, cosmopolitan style and vibrant, genre-bending performances. As part of Sinfonia's 20th anniversary celebration, Pink Martini will be accompanied by the full **Sinfonia Gulf Coast orchestra**. This marks the first time the orchestra has performed at Crescendo!

Guests will enjoy reserved table seating, hors d'oeuvres, an elegant, seated late lunch, and an all-inclusive afternoon of music, wine, food, and fabulous fun — all in support of Sinfonia Gulf Coast's music education and community engagement initiatives throughout Northwest Florida.

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Ask Destinates: E-Bikes and Growing Concerns



BY PATRICIA LEE, OWNER,
www.DESTINATES.COM

This past month in our Facebook group for locals (www.facebook.com/groups/Destinates)

book.com/groups/Destinates), there was continued growing concern about safety for E-Bike riders. However, the situation has now progressed to concern about citizens in cars retaliating against E-Bikers. Below is a story one of our Destinates members posted in the group.

Member post:

Look, I get it. A lot of people have experienced the teens on their E-Bikes acting like fools. I've seen it. It's disappointing. I've seen grown adults do it, too.

Today, we were behind two



is all in the name of safety and trying to keep everyone alive.

If you are a Destin resident or in the surrounding area, I invite you to join our private, targeted group for locals and property owners at [Facebook.com/groups/Destinates](https://www.facebook.com/groups/Destinates). We now have 12,400+ members (est. Oct. 2018). Check out our local business directory at Destinates.com, where more than 500 local businesses are listed and enjoy advertising, in our targeted community group.

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teen boys on E-Bikes from Destin Community Center all the way to Wine World—the entire stretch of Commons Drive. I was so proud that these boys were following every single traffic law, staying in the lane, stopping at the stop signs, all the things. Then they ended up behind a driver who didn't like the fact that they were on E-Bikes, I guess. This girl, from Morgan Sports Center all the way to Wine world, was slamming on her brakes trying to get them to hit her and/or run them off the road. She was driving 12-18 mph the whole stretch, holding up traffic. I am flabbergasted. (No, these are not my kids.). Y'all be safe. These are our children for gracious sake.

Group member responses:

1. I saw that when they went by Maas Coffee. That front car (I couldn't see who was driving) was definitely trying to harm those boys.

2. What I think is just incredible is that these parents who are buying E-Bikes for their 10-14 y/o more than likely never let them ride regular bikes around Destin. After my son who was an avid bike rider from the Destin bridge to Morgan's burning

100's of miles in his five years of riding...I NEVER see regular bikes. So, how can you rationalize allowing E-Bikes when you never allowed a regular bike. Not to mention they are never wearing helmets.

3. While I agree that woman shouldn't have been brake checking most of these bikes have unlicensed drivers, no insurance and no registration while driving in the road. That is a major problem.

4. Yesterday, I witnessed an adult get hit. He was totally at fault. He was heading north in the south bound side of the sidewalk. He did not yield or stop at his "red hand" signal when the cars had a green light. Luckily, he didn't get hurt too bad when he ignored his red and proceeded through the intersection where the cars had a green. Something has to be done, because most of these riders automatically think they have the right of way or they just don't care and assume these vehicles can stop on a dime. This subject comes up from time to time, in our group. The E-Bikers need to be aware that people are starting to video them when they appear to not be following the laws. They are turning over those videos to the authorities. It

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