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DESTIN Life

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'Time Is': Destin Remembers Bruce Cheves

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

The boats returned to the docks at A.J.'s Seafood & Oyster Bar just as they had thousands of times before. Captains tied off lines. Friends gathered along the harbor. Members of Destin's fishing community exchanged hugs, stories, memories and some tried-n-true AJ's barbecue. But this time, something was missing.

For the first time in more than four decades, the familiar voice that had become synonymous with the Destin Fishing Rodeo was not there to greet them.

On May 30, family, friends, anglers and longtime Rodeo supporters gathered at A.J.'s to celebrate the life of Bruce Cheves, the beloved Destin Fishing Rodeo weighmaster who passed away April 30 following a battle with cancer. As the sun began to set over our Destin Harbor and boats set out, the community came together to honor a man whose voice, humor and larger-than-life personality helped define generations of fishing memories.



PHOTO KIRK AUSBURN

For many, Bruce wasn't simply the Rodeo's weighmaster. He was the Rodeo.

The evening served not only as a celebration of Bruce's life, but also as a reflection of the deep connections he built throughout the Destin community. Family members expressed gratitude to A.J.'s Seafood & Oyster Bar for its hospitality and support, to the crew of the American Spirit Party Boat for providing a meaningful burial at sea and to Father Mike Hesse for offering heartfelt prayers and words of comfort during the ceremony.

Throughout the evening, friends and family shared stories, laughter and memories that reflected the impact Bruce had on generations of captains, anglers and residents. The gathering drew a large crowd from across the Destin fishing community, a testament to how deeply Bruce was loved and respected.

For those who attended, the evening felt fitting for a man who spent much of his life bringing people together. In many ways, the celebration reflected the same sense of community that Bruce

helped create throughout his decades at the Destin Fishing Rodeo.

The Voice of the Destin Fishing Rodeo

Born Feb. 21, 1951, in Monterey, Ca., Bruce grew up surrounded by coastal waters and developed a lifelong love for fishing and the sea.

That passion eventually brought him to Northwest Florida in 1977. After arriving in Crestview, he found his way to Kelly Docks and immersed himself in the traditions and culture of Destin's fishing fleet.

Guided by local captains and inspired by the words of Capt. Bruce Marler — "If you pay attention, you will learn something every day." — Bruce devoted himself to learning every aspect of the sport, from weather patterns and moon phases to the instincts and knowledge passed down through generations of Gulf fishermen.

In 1984, Bruce began

BRUCE CHEVES

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1776 Meets 2026:

Okaloosa County Launches America 250 Celebration in Grand Style

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

As America approaches its 250th birthday, Okaloosa County is preparing to celebrate in a way that's both deeply patriotic and unmistakably local — with fireworks in the sky, colonial coats in the crowd and its continued, year-long effort designed to bring history to life for an entirely new generation.

And next up on that growing calendar of celebrations? A gala unlike anything our area has seen before.

On June 12, the Okaloosa Com-

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With no zoning restrictions and a boutique-school atmosphere, Destin High School combines the close-knit culture of a private school with the accessibility of public education. Every student is known by name, supported by caring educators and encouraged to discover their passions while preparing for college, careers and life beyond graduation.

Enrollment at DHS contin-

ues to soar, with more than 260 applications already accepted for the upcoming school year — a reflection of the school's growing reputation for academic excellence, student opportunity and strong community culture.

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portunities for students. For the 2026–2027 school year, DHS will offer 11 Advanced Placement (AP) courses along with dual enrollment, the ability for students to earn their Associates of Arts degree, as well as honors and standard academic pathways designed to meet students where they are while preparing them for future success.

New for next year, DHS will launch Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Biomedical Sciences courses, further strengthening the school's commitment to career-ready education and innovative learning opportunities.

“Our career and technical education programs are award winning,” said J.C. Hollis, CTW Lead and cybersecurity instructor at DHS. “The job market is continually shifting — in fact the majority of jobs in the next 5 to 10 years probably have not even been created yet. But that's what we are doing here at Destin with our entrepreneurship, cyber and marine technology programs — implementing opportunities for the jobs of the future.”

Students at DHS are not only succeeding academically — they are earning life-changing opportunities. Members of the 2026 graduating class earned hundreds of thousands of dollars in scholarships, including several full-ride scholarships, and will attend colleges and universities across the country, including Florida State University, the University of Florida, Auburn University, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Northwestern University, the University of Alabama, Mississippi State University, the University of Georgia and many more.

DHS also proudly celebrates two National Merit Scholarship Semifinalists this year: Charlie Frankfurt and Regan Reiker.

In academic competition, one DHS Academic Team student was selected to compete on the Okaloosa County Schools public school academic team, which went on to win a state championship.

“We are willing to embrace things that help our students move forward,” said Shannon Madison, science instructor at DHS. “Because of our size, the student experience is extremely well-blended with opportunities you would not have elsewhere. The teachers are excited to teach their students and our students are achieving at high levels, they are successful, and will be the next leaders in this community.”

Athletic Excellence Continues to Rise

Destin High School athletics continues to make history. This year, DHS celebrated its first-ever individual state champion as Elena Nava captured a Florida state championship in girls weightlifting. DHS also celebrated Regional Girls Wrestling Champion Veronica Madrid. In fact, several student-athletes advanced to district and regional competitions across multiple sports, building a reputation of excellence statewide of the DHS teams.

Other highlights from the year include:

- Girls Basketball District Champions
- Girls Flag Football advancing to the “Elite 8,” narrowly missing a Final Four appearance
- District Tennis Champions Charlie and Lucy Frankfurt

Boasting 22 athletic programs, the school's pursuit of

Continued on next page

DHS

continued from previous page

athletic excellence continues to expand. DHS student-athletes are proving they can compete with the best programs in Florida while building a culture centered on discipline, leadership and teamwork.

Award-Winning Programs Beyond the Classroom

Destin High School continues to offer one-of-a-kind experiences that students cannot find anywhere else. The school's nationally recognized Fishing Education Program is the only program of its kind in the state of Florida and one of only seven others in the country. Not only investing in the biggest industry in our community, but also giving back to the environment in which we live by adding 10 additional artificial reefs this year to the Destin High School Artificial Reef system, further expanding the nation's only high school-based artificial reef program. Students gain hands-on experience in marine conservation, environmental stewardship and coastal resource management while making a lasting



impact on the Gulf Coast community.

Next year, DHS Marine Science and Commercial Fishing students will continue partnering with the Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance while participating in the Million Oyster Project, giving students additional hands-on opportunities in marine habitat restoration, environmental science and coastal conservation efforts that directly impact local waterways and ecosystems.

"Our students have the opportunity to learn about the biggest industries in Destin—tourism and fishing," said Brandy Miles, Captain and fishing instructor

at DHS. "In fact, we are the only one in the state offering a commercial fishing program, where we teach our students the basics of the charter industry, commercial fishing industry, and the heritage of Destin."

The school's Broadcasting Club also experienced tremendous growth through its ongoing partnership with DestinFM. This year, students successfully launched the "SharkTalk" podcast, giving students real-world experience in broadcasting, journalism, interviewing, production and digital media communication.

These career-connected opportunities reflect DHS's com-



mitment to preparing students not just for graduation — but for meaningful futures.

A Different Kind of School Experience

One of the defining features of Destin High School is its innovative 4.5-day school week model. Students attend classes Monday through Thursday, while the additional half-day emphasis supports tutoring, academic enrichment, internships, service opportunities and individualized student support.

School leaders say the model creates stronger academic focus while also promoting student wellness, flexibility and deeper

engagement. Combined with small class sizes, personalized attention and strong relationships between students and staff, DHS offers a learning environment where students feel connected, supported and challenged to succeed.

"We're more than just a school — we're a family," said Dr. Willy Williams, executive director of DHS. "At Destin High School, every student matters, every student is known and every student has opportunities to succeed. Our school truly is growing our community's next leaders. We are building a legacy here and are excited at the growth of our school and how many families are wanting to become a part of what is happening at Destin High School."

Whether students are future scientists, athletes, artists, entrepreneurs, broadcasters or marine conservationists, Destin High School provides opportunities to grow, lead and thrive.

Open enrollment is currently underway.

For more information, visit destinhighschool.org, call 850-204-4044, or stop by the campus at 4325 Commons Drive West in Destin.

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 Community

The Modern Men's Health Conversation



By DR. KAREN DEVORE

June is Men's Health Month, and it's time to broaden the conversation around what men's health actually means.

For years, it was almost expected that men would only seek care when something became impossible to ignore such as when symptoms disrupted

daily life or concern from others became unavoidable. That mindset is starting to shift.

More men are thinking about longevity, prevention, recovery, and performance. They're paying attention to sleep, nutrition, strength, and how their bodies function before a crisis happens. And that shift matters.

Because many of the issues men experience daily are common, closely tied to overall health, and often more manageable when addressed early.

I hear consistent themes from men across all stages of life and from the people who care about them.

“Why don't I feel like myself anymore?”

This concern rarely comes out directly. More often, it shows up as fatigue, low motivation, irritability, poor recovery, or unexplained weight gain.

While aging plays a role, what I often see is the cumulative effect of chronic stress, poor sleep, under-recovery, inconsistent nutrition, declining muscle mass, and sedentary work.

Modern life doesn't support physiology well. Many men are overstimulated, under-recovered, and running at a high level while quietly depleted. Over time, that catches up but the body is often highly responsive with consistent support.

“Why am I gaining weight around my stomach even though I'm trying?”

Abdominal weight gain isn't just cosmetic; it's often a metabolic signal.

As muscle declines and stress stays elevated, the body becomes more efficient at storing fat, especially around the midsection. Blood sugar becomes less stable, energy drops, recovery worsens, and cravings increase.

Many men feel like they're trying, but habits are often more inconsistent than they realize such as skipping meals, under-eating protein, relying on convenience foods, eating late, or cycling between restriction and overeating.

What works better is returning to fundamentals including prioritizing protein, maintaining muscle, walking regularly, strength training, improving sleep, eating consistently, and supporting recovery.

The goal isn't perfection; it's consistency and long-term metabolic resilience.

“Why am I exhausted but still sleeping poorly?”

Sleep disruption has become so normalized that many underestimate its impact.

Sleep affects metabolism, re-



covery, mood, cognition, inflammation, and hormone regulation. Yet many men operate in a chronically sleep-deprived state relying on caffeine, late-night stimulation, alcohol, and inconsistent schedules while expecting optimal performance.

Sometimes the issue is sleep apnea. Sometimes it's chronic stress or years of running in “go mode” without real recovery. Improving sleep often changes far more than expected.

“Why do I feel more anxious, irritable, or mentally checked out?”

These symptoms are often rooted in physiology as much as psychology.

Brain fog, low motivation, irritability, and anxiety frequently reflect an overloaded system including poor sleep, unstable blood sugar, chronic stress, and inflammation layered onto demanding lives.

Many men are balancing work, family, and responsibility while running on empty. This is where preventive care matters, not because every symptom is serious, but because early understanding can prevent years of unnecessary struggle.

“Why is this starting to matter more now?”

At some point, often in the late 30s, 40s, or 50s, health stops feeling theoretical. Energy changes become more noticeable, recovery slows, and small shifts become harder to ignore.

At the same time, many begin noticing changes in others like aging parents, friends facing health issues, or loved ones dealing with diagnoses that once felt distant.

What was once abstract becomes personal. For many men, this isn't about fear. It's about staying capable, present, and

Continued on page 42

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Community

1776

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mission 250 will host its highly anticipated "250th Birthday of America Gala & Drone Show" at the Destin-Fort Walton Beach Rigdon Center, formerly known as the Northwest Florida Fairgrounds. The event will blend colonial-era pageantry with modern spectacle — creating what organizers hope will become one of the signature patriotic experiences of the year.

The evening, set for 6–10 p.m. with doors opening at 5:30 p.m., promises far more than a traditional dinner event. Guests can expect a colonial feast, live entertainment, 1776 reenactments, music, dancing and a patriotic drone show designed to illuminate the ideals of freedom, unity and resolve.

The invitation itself describes

the experience as "1776 Meets 2026," encouraging attendees to step into an evening "where the bold spirit of our nation's founders meets the brilliance of modern America." Guests are even encouraged to wear semi-formal or colonial attire — from tricorne hats and military uniforms to elegant gowns and bonnets — helping transform the event into a living celebration of America's founding era.

A Much Bigger Story Unfolding Across Okaloosa County

The America 250 movement marks the semiquincentennial — 250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. While national celebrations are taking place across the country, Okaloosa County leaders wanted to ensure the local community had a meaningful

role in commemorating the milestone.

That vision led the Okaloosa County Board of County Commissioners to establish the America 250 Commission earlier this year. Formed by county resolution on Jan. 20, 2026, the commission is tasked with organizing events throughout the year that honor America's founding principles while educating, engaging and inspiring local residents and visitors alike.

The commission officially held its first organizational meeting Feb. 5 in Shalimar, launching what has quickly become one of the area's most ambitious community-wide patriotic initiatives.

Leading the effort is Chairman Graham Fountain, president of the Sons of the American Revolution, alongside Vice Chairman Mitzi Henley of the Daughters of the American Rev-

olution's Choctawhatchee Bay Chapter. Together with 18 appointed commissioners and more than 50 volunteers, the group represents a wide cross-section of Okaloosa County leadership and civic life.

Participants include representatives from the Sons of the American Revolution, Daughters of the American Revolution (Choctawhatchee Bay Chapter), West Florida Daughters of the American Revolution, Tourist Development Department, Okaloosa County School District, Florida State Historical Commission, chambers of commerce, the Okaloosa League of Cities, local military installations, Scouting America, first responders, the Billy Bowlegs organization, NAACP leadership and county-appointed at-large members.

In many ways, the structure mirrors the spirit of the original colonies themselves — diverse groups coming together around a shared purpose. "We have a rich history that deserves to be recognized both nationally and in Okaloosa County," Fountain said during the commission's inaugural meeting. "We can all come together, pause and reflect on the contributions made by our patriot ancestors who fought and died to create our great republic."

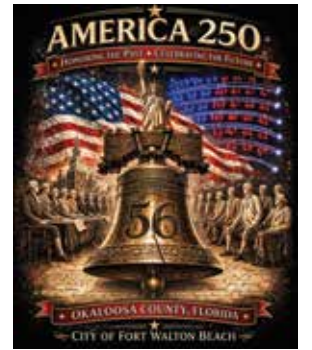
Together, they will honor our Founding Fathers and their enduring principles, recognize our patriotic ancestors, commemorate the Revolutionary War era, and promote education and community awareness across Okaloosa County.

And while history is certainly central to the effort, organizers say they also want these events to feel celebratory, interactive and fun.

Future America 250 events already in planning include expanded Fourth of July celebrations with local municipalities, a patriotic-focused "Remember 9/11" event organized by the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber this fall and a full Veterans Day lineup Nov. 11 featuring ceremonies and a parade across the county.

Organizers are also encouraging local businesses, nonprofits and civic groups to participate by hosting their own themed events and partnering with the commission through social media and community promotions.

To have an event added to the Life Media calendar, organizers may contact Cali Hlavac at To Do in Destin at cali.hla-



vac@gmail.com and Shantelle at shantelle@francesroy.com. Organizers can also visit getthecoast.com/America250 for submissions.

Organizations are also encouraged to add @OkaloosaCountyAmerica250 as a co-host on Facebook to help expand visibility and community engagement.

Businesses and event organizers interested in advertising America 250-related events may also contact Scott Miller at Scott@LifeMediaGrp.com for promotional opportunities through local media partnerships and community outreach campaigns.

One especially fascinating detail woven throughout the campaign is the commission's tribute to "The 56" — the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence. Organizers point out that these founders represented nearly every profession imaginable: merchants, ministers, farmers, musicians, physicians, military leaders, printers, lawyers and scientists. In other words, America's founding wasn't built by one type of person — but by ordinary citizens willing to step into extraordinary moments.

Perhaps that's part of what makes the America 250 celebration resonate so strongly here on the Emerald Coast.

In a community shaped by military service, patriotism, volunteerism and small-town pride, the celebration feels less like looking backward — and more like reconnecting with the ideals that still unite Americans today.

For questions, please email the Commission's Chairman, the Hon. Graham W. Fountain at america250@myokaloosa.com or call (850) 830-0002. Submit photos, flyers, logos and other assets for your event at https://bit.ly/Okaloosa250Assets For gala information, tickets and schedule of events, visit Get The Coast America 250 or on Facebook at @OkaloosaCountyAmerica250.

Rotary Club of Destin Expands Rescue Tube Project Across Okaloosa County

By LORI LEATH MILLER

The Rotary Club of Destin announced the expansion of its Public Rescue Tube (PRT) Project across additional Okaloosa County beaches following the program’s successful launch at Destin beach accesses in 2025.

The countywide expansion, completed in partnership with the Rotary Club of Fort Walton Beach, resulted in the installation of 17 new rescue tubes at public beach access points on Okaloosa Island.

Through partnerships with local businesses, each \$500 sponsorship covered the cost of the rescue tube, installation and five years of maintenance. Sponsors also received recognition on the rescue tube signage through the inclusion of their company name or logo. Because the effort became a joint project between the Destin and Fort Walton Beach Rotary clubs, a new sign logo incorporating both clubs was created for the expansion. “These rescue tubes have already proven to be a valuable safety resource at Destin beach accesses,” said Rotary project co-chair Dion Moniz. “We were proud to expand the program into more

areas of Okaloosa County and help make our beaches safer for both residents and visitors.”

The Rotary Club of Destin and the Rotary Club of Fort Walton Beach also plan to install the remaining nine rescue tubes at James Lee Park in mid-June, bringing the countywide total to 26 new public rescue tubes.

To read the facts behind rescue tubes, please see Destin Life, October 2025, here: <https://destin.lifemediagr.com/rotary-club-of-destin-expands-rescue-tube-project-across-okaloosa-county/>.

The Destin initiative is part of a larger regional effort led by Rotary Clubs and partners to protect swimmers across Northwest Florida. Rescue tubes have already been installed or approved in the following areas: Navarre, Perdido Key, Pensacola Beach, Panama City Beach, Bay County, Destin, Freeport, Eglin AFB and Walton County. With Okaloosa County’s 26 new installations, the Emerald Coast is quickly becoming one of the most rescue-ready beach regions in the country.

While each PRT station costs roughly \$245 to install (tube, signage, post, hardware), the



\$500 sponsorship fee ensures long-term sustainability. Rotary members and volunteers inspect the stations every 4–6 weeks, before peak tourist seasons and after major storms. Annual community “work parties” handle larger repairs, and signage includes a public phone number for reporting damage or missing equipment.

Sponsorships are still available for future expansion. “This is a hands-on way to save lives in our community,” Moniz said. “We encourage local businesses and individuals to join us in this important effort.” For more in-

formation or to sponsor a Rescue Tube, please contact Dion Moniz with the Rotary Club of Destin at dmoniz@handfirm.com or (850) 814-3598.

Publisher’s Note: Rescue tubes have become an increasingly important tool in beach safety efforts across North America. More than 700 Rescue Tube stations are now installed throughout the United States and Canada, and the devices have been credited with more than 400 documented rescues. According to program data, every known rescue involving a Rescue Tube has been successful, and notably, no rescuer has ever been injured while using one. Designed to provide flotation support in emergency situations, rescue tubes allow bystanders to assist swimmers in distress without placing themselves at the same level of risk as a direct water rescue. Their proven track record has made them a valuable addition to public beach safety programs and drowning prevention initiatives nationwide.



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television show, blends magic, comedy and ventriloquism into an interactive performance designed for all ages. Special guest appearances by Rockett's children, Kadan and Brooklyn, add to the family-friendly fun.

Guests can enjoy all-table seating with food and drinks delivered directly to their seats, plus dining options at the adjacent Blue Lagoon restaurant. Showtimes include 7 p.m. evening performances and select 4

p.m. Sunday matinees. Seating is limited and advance reservations are recommended. Free parking is available. Tickets & info: MagicDestin.com

Island Summer Concert Series Returns to Okaloosa Island

Wednesdays Through July 29 | 6:30–9:30 p.m. | The Island Resort at Fort Walton Beach

The Island Resort brings



back its popular Island Summer Concert Series with free beachfront live music every Wednesday evening through July 29. The family-friendly series features live bands, food trucks, cocktails and a fireworks finale over the Gulf.

This year's lineup includes Rockstar Fish on June 3, The Aces Band on June 10, Seven Ply on June 17, Boukou Groove on June 24, Shenanigans on July 1, Tribe Zion on July 8, Lex and the Luthors on July 15, Below Alabama on July 22 and Jones & Company on July 29. Enjoy food and drinks from The Frosty Palm, Sizzle & Smash and The Beach Bar while relaxing on the resort's beachside patio.

Concerts are FREE to attend, with food and beverages available for purchase. For more information, visit www.theislandfl.com.

The all-new Big BLVD Bash debuts Tuesdays from May 26 through June 30 from 6–8 p.m. Hosted by ECTC, the open-air DJ dance party series offers family-friendly music and entertainment in Grand Park. Bring lawn chairs or blankets and enjoy dinner from Grand Boulevard restaurants before the festivities. Free.

Emerald Coast Blue Marlin Classic

June 17–21 | Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort

The 24th Annual Emerald Coast Blue Marlin Classic returns June 17–21 at Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort. Timed with the Gulf Coast's peak blue marlin season, the tournament attracts anglers from across the region for world-class sport-fishing competition and nightly weigh-ins open to the public at Baytowne Marina..

Peach Festival Brings Sweet Summer Fun to our Area

June 19–21 | Props Brewery at The Windmills, Freeport

Props Brewery at The Windmills will host its Peach Festival June 19–21 at 1799 Great Hammock Bend in Freeport. Festival hours are 3–9 p.m. June 19 and 12–6 p.m. June 20–21. The family-friendly event will feature local vendors, food trucks, a petting zoo and craft brews from the brewery. Vendor applications: forms.gle/fB37dY1QP-WXhud937.

Grand Boulevard Summer Entertainment Series

Thursdays through July 2 | Grand Park at Grand Boulevard, Miramar Beach

Grand Boulevard is turning up the summer fun with two free weekly entertainment series in Grand Park.

Bands on the BLVD returns Thursdays from 6–8 p.m. with live outdoor performances from local and regional artists. The summer lineup includes Casey Kearney on June 4, Xcetics on June 11, The Wildlife Specials on June 18, Cadillac Willy on June 25 and "America Salutes | A Musical Celebration of 250 Years of Freedom," presented by Emerald Coast Theatre Company (ECTC), on July 2.

Continued on page 12

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A June Perspective



BY KRISTIN SULLIVAN,
GENERAL MANAGER, THE ALICE

June carries a natural sense of reflection when it comes to fathers. With Father's Day woven into the season—and weddings in full swing—it becomes a time when many daughters pause to recognize the role their fathers have played in shaping their lives.

Weddings, in particular, bring that relationship into sharper focus. Not just in the visible traditions, but in the quieter realizations: the steady support, the guidance given over the years, and the foundation that made this moment possible. A wedding does not just celebrate a new beginning—it reflects the presence of those who helped you arrive there.

Carrying Your Father with You

For brides whose fathers are no longer here, a wedding day can feel layered in a different way. Alongside the excitement, there is often an awareness of the moments that might have been.

But honoring a father does not mean recreating what is missing, it can mean redefining what presence looks like.

Some choose to walk down the aisle solo, a quiet symbol of strength and independence. Others invite a sibling, relative, or mentor to stand beside them. Personal touches—a meaningful phrase, a detail he loved, or a private moment set aside before the ceremony—can carry just as much significance as any tradition.

Not all tributes are visible. Sometimes it is simply the feeling of him being there—in your composure, your confidence, your ability to step forward.

Grief and joy often exist side by side on a wedding day. And in many ways, a father's presence does not disappear, it

evolves, showing up in ways that are deeply personal and enduring.

Beyond the Wedding Day: Creating Space to Actually Be Together

One of the most meaningful shifts in weddings today is the move toward multi-day celebrations. Instead of everything unfolding in a single, fast-paced day, families are given the opportunity to slow down and truly connect.

At The Alice in Destin, this kind of experience becomes possible in a natural, unforced way.

When celebrations extend across several days—welcome gatherings, rehearsal dinners, relaxed mornings, and farewell brunches—something important happens. The pressure lifts. Conversations deepen. Time feels less structured and more intentional.

For fathers and daughters, this creates space for moments that are not scheduled but become unforgettable. A walk before dinner. A quiet conversation away from the crowd. A shared laugh that is not tied to any formal event.

Rather than being limited to a few key roles, fathers are able to be fully present. And daughters have the chance to



PHOTOS BY HALEY ANSPACH PHOTOGRAPHY

experience the weekend without constantly moving from one obligation to the next.

The Alice is not just a setting—it is an environment that allows those moments to unfold. It transforms a wedding from a single day into a shared experience, where connection becomes the centerpiece.

The Way Fathers Show Up

Fathers often express love differently. It is not always in words or grand gestures, but in consistency when showing up, offering support, and standing steadily through every phase of life.

Weddings bring that into clearer view. It might be in the details he quietly handles, the way he steadies emotions when things feel overwhelming, or simply his presence throughout

the day. Even without saying much, fathers often communicate everything through action.

Taking a moment to recognize that whether through a toast, a conversation, or a simple acknowledgment, adds a meaningful layer to the celebration. It is a way of honoring not just what he has done for the wedding, but what he has contributed over a lifetime.

A Father's Day Reflection

As Father's Day approaches, weddings offer a powerful reminder of the role fathers play not just in milestone moments, but in the everyday experiences that lead to them.

The lessons, the encouragement, the steady presence, these are the things that often go unspoken but shape everything.

Whether your father is standing beside you, supporting you from afar, or remembered in a more personal way, this season is an opportunity to acknowledge that impact.

Because while a wedding starts with a beginning, the relationship with a father is something that continues built over time, carried forward, and felt in ways that last far beyond a single day.

Stayed tuned in @thealicevents as further details will be shared about a very special music video production taking place at The Alice this summer—the song co-written by Yours Truly along with Jessie G & Matt Wynn of Nashville and called "Something Blue" and about a Father and Daughter.



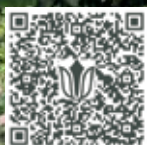
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Cali's To Do In Destin! JUNE 2026

..... Ongoing

Magic & Comedy Destin | Nightly 7pm | Select 4pm Sunday matinees | The Palms Resort

..... Special Events

June 17-21: Emerald Coast Blue Marlin Classic | Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort

June 19-21: Peach Festival | Props Brewery at The Windmills, Freeport

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Pilates with Dolphins | 7:30am | Gulfarium Marine Adventure Park
Farmers Market | 9am-1pm | Grand Boulevard

Farmers Market | 9am | Seaside, FL
Saturday Sing-A-Long Brunch | 11:30am | Skybar Destin

Seltzer Fest | 1pm-4pm | The Market Shops

Saturday Social | 6pm | Harborwalk Village

Karaoke | 6pm | Fatboys Destin
Karaoke | 8pm | Harry T's Lighthouse
Karaoke | 8pm | 5 o'Clock Somewhere Baytowne Wharf

Karaoke | 9pm | Fubar
..... 7

DJ Brunch | 10am | Azul @ Harborwalk Luau | 3pm | The Alice

Sound Bath Sundays | 6pm | Hotel Effie

Sallywag Sunday | 7pm | Baytowne Wharf

Karaoke | 9pm | Fubar
Karaoke | 9pm | Outcast Bar & Grill
..... 8

Mahjong | 11:30am | Ovide at Hotel Effie

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

Free Pirate Shows | 5:30pm | Al's Beach Club on the Boardwalk

Silent Disco | 6pm | Harborwalk Village

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

Movie Monday | 8pm | Baytowne Wharf
..... 9

Wellness By The Water Yoga | 9am | The Alice

Harbor Days feat the Harbor Street Parade | 5pm | Harborwalk Village

Mug Club & Bingo | 6pm | Destin Brewery

Karaoke | 6pm | AJ's on the Bayou
Karaoke | 6pm-9pm | Fatboys Destin

Trivia Night | 6pm | Ricks Seafood & Sports Bar Okaloosa Island
..... 10

Bonfire on the Beach | 5pm | The Bay

Run Club | 5:30pm | Destin Brewery

Trivia Night | 6pm | Destin Brewery

Trivia Night | 6pm | Craft Bar @ The Harbor

Wednesday Night Concert Series | 7pm | Baytowne Wharf

Karaoke | 7pm | Kenny D's
Karaoke | 7pm | AJ's Oyster Shanty



Fireworks | 9pm | Okaloosa Island Pier
..... 11

Wellness By The Water Yoga | 9am | The Alice

Bands on the Blvd: Summer Music Series | 6pm | Grand Boulevard

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

Concerts In The Village: Jimmy Buffet Tribute | 7pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation

Karaoke Night | 9pm | Harry T's Lighthouse

Fireworks | 9pm | Harborwalk Village

Ladies Night | 10pm | McGuire's Destin
..... 12

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

Concerts at The Landing | 6pm | The Landing Fort Walton Beach

Free Beach Bonfire | 5pm | Royal Palm Grille

Coastal Country Concert | 6pm | Harborwalk Village

Karaoke | 7pm | Island Wing Company

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

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

Karaoke | 8pm | Harry T's Lighthouse
Karaoke | 8pm | 5 o'Clock Somewhere Baytowne Wharf
..... 13

Farmers Market | 9am-1pm | Grand Boulevard

Farmers Market | 9am | Seaside, FL

City of Destin's Painting at the Park Class | 9am | 206 US Hwy 98, Destin

Farmers Market | 10am | Harborwalk Village

Saturday Sing-A-Long Brunch | 11:30am | Skybar Destin

Saturday Social | 6pm | Harborwalk Village

Karaoke | 6pm | Fatboys Destin
Karaoke | 8pm | Harry T's Lighthouse

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

Karaoke | 9pm | Fubar
..... 14

Wellness at the Water | 9am | Harborwalk Village

DJ Brunch | 10am | Azul @ Harborwalk

Sound Bath Sundays | 6pm | Hotel Effie

Sallywag Sunday | 7pm | Baytowne Wharf

Karaoke | 9pm | Fubar
Karaoke | 9pm | Outcast Bar & Grill
..... 15

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

Free Pirate Shows | 5:30pm | Al's Beach Club on the Boardwalk

Bingo Night | 6pm | American Legion, 311 Main Street
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Wellness By The Water Yoga | 9am | The Alice

Mug Club & Bingo | 6pm | Destin Brewery

Karaoke | 6pm | AJ's on the Bayou

Karaoke | 6pm-9pm | Fatboys Destin

Trivia Night | 6pm | Ricks Seafood & Sports Bar Okaloosa Island
..... 17

Ladies who Launch | 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

Trivia Night | 6pm | Craft Bar @ The Harbor

Wednesday Night Concert Series | 7pm | Baytowne Wharf

Karaoke | 7pm | Kenny D's

Karaoke | 7pm | AJ's Oyster Shanty

Fireworks | 9pm | Okaloosa Island Pier
..... 18

Wellness By The Water Yoga | 9am | The Alice

Bands on the Blvd: Summer Music Series | 6pm | Grand Boulevard

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

Karaoke Night | 9pm | Harry T's Lighthouse

Fireworks | 9pm | Harborwalk Village

Ladies Night | 10pm | McGuire's Destin
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Friday Martini Lunch | 11am-4pm | Skybar Destin

Free Beach Bonfire | 5pm | Royal Palm Grille

Coastal Country Concert | 6pm | Harborwalk Village

Concerts at The Landing | 6pm | The Landing Fort Walton Beach

Karaoke | 7pm | Island Wing Company

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

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

Karaoke | 8pm | Harry T's Lighthouse
Karaoke | 8pm | 5 o'Clock Somewhere Baytowne Wharf
..... 20

Farmers Market | 9am-1pm | Grand Boulevard

Farmers Market | 9am | Seaside, FL

Farmers Market | 10am | Harborwalk Village

Saturday Sing-A-Long Brunch | 11:30am | Skybar Destin

Saturday Social | 6pm | Harborwalk Village

Karaoke | 8pm | Harry T's Lighthouse

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

Karaoke | 9pm | Fubar
..... 21

DJ Brunch | 10am | Azul @ Harborwalk

Sound Bath Sundays | 6pm | Hotel Effie

Sallywag Sunday | 7pm | Baytowne Wharf

Karaoke | 9pm | Fubar

Karaoke | 9pm | Outcast Bar & Grill

Fireworks | 9pm | Harborwalk Village
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Free Beach Bonfire/SIN Night | 5pm | Royal Palm Grille

Free Pirate Shows | 5:30pm | Al's Beach Club on the Boardwalk

Silent Disco | 6pm | Harborwalk Village

Bingo Night | 6pm | American Legion, 311 Main Street
..... 23

Wellness By The Water Yoga | 9am | The Alice

Harbor Days ft. The Harbor Street Parade | 5pm | Harborwalk Village

Mug Club & Bingo | 6pm | Destin Brewery

Karaoke | 6pm | AJ's on the Bayou

Karaoke | 6pm-9pm | Fatboys Destin

Trivia Night | 6pm | Ricks Seafood & Sports Bar Okaloosa Island
..... 24

Boomin' Tuesdays Fireworks | 7:15pm | Baytowne Wharf

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

Emerald Coast Storytellers | 6:30pm | Gannet House Creative

Wednesday Night Concert Series: Modern Eldorados | 7pm | Baytowne Wharf

Karaoke | 7pm | Kenny D's

Karaoke | 7pm | AJ's Oyster Shanty

Fireworks | 9pm | Okaloosa Island Pier
..... 25

Wellness By The Water Yoga | 9am | The Alice

Harbor Nights | 6pm | Harborwalk Village

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

Bands on the Blvd: Summer Music Series | 6pm | Grand Boulevard

Concerts In The Village | 7pm | Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation

Karaoke Night | 9pm | Harry T's Lighthouse

Thursdaze Light Show (Drones) | 9pm | Baytowne Wharf

Fireworks | 9pm | Harborwalk Village

Ladies Night | 10pm | McGuire's Destin
..... 26

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

Free Beach Bonfire | 5pm | Royal Palm Grille

Concerts at The Landing | 6pm | The Landing Fort Walton Beach

Coastal Country Concert | 6pm | Harborwalk Village

Karaoke | 7pm | Island Wing Company

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

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

Karaoke | 8pm | Harry T's Lighthouse

Karaoke | 8pm | 5 o'Clock Somewhere Baytowne Wharf
..... 27

Farmers Market | 9am-1pm | Grand Boulevard

Farmers Market | 9am | Seaside, FL

Farmers Market | 10am | Harborwalk Village

Saturday Sing-A-Long Brunch | 11:30am | Skybar Destin

Saturday Social | 6pm | Harborwalk Village

Karaoke | 8pm | Harry T's Lighthouse

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

Karaoke | 9pm | Fubar
..... 28

DJ Brunch | 10am | Azul @ Harborwalk

Sound Bath Sundays | 6pm | Hotel Effie

Sallywag Sunday | 7pm | Baytowne Wharf

Karaoke | 9pm | Fubar

Karaoke | 9pm | Outcast Bar & Grill
..... 29

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

Free Pirate Shows | 5:30pm | Al's Beach Club on the Boardwalk

Silent Disco | 6pm | Harborwalk Village

Bingo Night | 6pm | American Legion, 311 Main Street
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Wellness By The Water Yoga | 9am | The Alice

Harbor Days: Pulse & Petals | 9am | Harborwalk Village

Mug Club & Bingo | 6pm | Destin Brewery

Karaoke | 6pm | AJ's on the Bayou

Karaoke | 6pm-9pm | Fatboys Destin

Trivia Night | 6pm | Ricks Seafood & Sports Bar Okaloosa Island
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Boomin' Tuesdays Fireworks | 7:15pm | Baytowne Wharf



EVENTS • LIVE MUSIC • FOOD

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Celebrate Summer at The Village of Baytowne Wharf!

Summer is in full swing at The Village of Baytowne Wharf, bringing a season packed with family-friendly entertainment, live music, outdoor movies and special events. As America celebrates its 250th birthday, Baytowne will mark the occasion with a festive 4th of July celebration featuring patriotic fun and a spectacular fireworks display. Whether you're visiting for the week, enjoying a local staycation or right down the road, Baytowne offers plenty of ways to make lasting summer memories along our beautiful Emerald Coast.



Red, White & Baytowne!

Saturday, July 4th
7-9:15 p.m. | FREE

Celebrate America's 250th Birthday at the Village of Baytowne Wharf, July 4th, from 7-9:15 p.m. After a day of fun in the sun, come out for an evening that lights up the sky! Join Baytowne Village merchants for a spectacular 4th of July Red, White and Baytowne 2026 celebration with LIVE music from Tanner Gray Band on the Events Plaza Stage from 7-9:15 p.m., followed by a patriotic Fireworks display to light up the night sky at 9:15 p.m. The kids will love activities including kids crafts, face painting and balloon sculpting, too!



Baytowne is boomin' with events, activities and family fun all summer long! The Village and all of its merchants welcome you to visit, shop, dine and play!

Scallywag Sunday
Sundays NOW – June 28
7-9 p.m. | FREE

Join Baytowne Wharf for magic, music and mayhem! Watch as the featured pirate Captain Davy takes you on an adventure with two magic shows on stage! Shows at 7 and 8 p.m.

Movie Monday
Mondays NOW – June 29
8 p.m. | FREE

Grab a lawn chair or blanket and cozy up on the Events Plaza Lawn for a featured film.
June 1 | How to Train Your Dragon
June 8 | Smurfs
June 15 | Cars
June 22 | Snow White
June 29 | Ratatouille

Boomin' Tuesday
Tuesdays NOW – June 30th
7:15-9:15 p.m. | FREE

Turn your eyes on the sky and watch as Baytowne Wharf lights up the night with a breath-taking, fireworks show over the Village Lagoon at 9:15 p.m. PLUS now enjoy a DJ Dance Party with DJ Mike Whitty in the Events Plaza at 7:15 p.m.

A Can't Miss Wednesday Night Concert Series!
Wednesdays NOW – June 24th
7-9 p.m. | FREE
Events Plaza Stage

Wednesday Night Concerts at The Village of Baytowne Wharf are BACK and popular! Sit back and relax with an outdoor concert and enjoy LIVE entertainment. The concert series features both local and regional talent from a variety of genres. Don't forget your lawn chairs and blankets.
June 3 | Cadillac Willy
June 10 | Clinch 46
June 17 | The Typos
June 24 | Sunshine Wranglers



Thursdaze Lights Show
Thursdays NOW -
June 25th | 9 p.m. | FREE

This one-of-a-kind aerial display blends technology and coastal charm, making it the perfect way to celebrate the magic of the Village under the stars!

PLEASE NOTE: 4th of July week drone show is moved to Wednesday, July 1st at 9 p.m.

We have a special Appearance Thursday July 2nd! Fly guy Ben Merrell Pro Hydroflight Athlete will be here in the Village for 2 shows at 6:30 and 8:30 p.m. All other Summer Thursdaze Drone shows remain the same.

Locals and visitors: Enjoy all the fantastic, fun activities with Adventure Land Playground, Baytowne Adventure Zone, Baytowne Carousel and Blast Arcade & Laser Maze. So much summer...so much to do at The Village of Baytowne Wharf!



Community

EVENTS

continued from page 8

Celebrating America 250: Where to Watch Fireworks Around the Emerald Coast

The 250th anniversary, often referred to as America 250, commemorates the signing of the

Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. Throughout the year, local communities have participated in special events, exhibits, educational programs and celebrations recognizing the nation's semiquincentennial. The Fourth of July provides one of the most visible opportunities for residents to join in the historic celebration.

HarborWalk Village July 3 & July 4 | Destin Harbor

Destin city officials have been discussing the possibility of incorporating a drone show into Destin Independence Day festivities. While no official announcement had been made at press time regarding a July 4 drone show, residents can watch for updates from the City of Destin as the holiday approaches.

Visitors can enjoy live entertainment, waterfront dining, harbor views and family-friendly activities before fireworks or drone show illuminates the sky above Destin Harbor at approximately 9 p.m.

Destin Commons Star-Spangled Celebration July 3 | Destin Commons

This celebration features food vendors, entertainment and family activities leading up to a fireworks show around 9 p.m.

Red, White & Baytowne July 4 | The Village of Baytowne Wharf

Festivities begin in the evening with live music, children's activities and family entertainment throughout the village and concludes with a spectacular fireworks display over the lagoon at approximately 9:15 p.m.

Fort Walton Beach Landing Celebration July 4 | Fort Walton Beach Landing

Fort Walton Beach's annual



waterfront celebration returns to the Landing with live music, food vendors and family activities beginning in the late afternoon and culminates with fireworks over Santa Rosa Sound around 8:45 p.m.



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Veteran Leadership Inspires Mission of Service

After serving 22 years in the U.S. Army, including two combat deployments to Iraq with the 3rd Infantry Division and 10th Mountain Division, retired Major Bruce Duty witnessed firsthand the challenges many veterans face when transitioning to civilian life. His distinguished military career earned numerous honors, including the Bronze Star Medal and Meritorious Service Medal.



Inspired by those experiences, Duty founded CrossCountry3, a nonprofit dedicated to helping veterans rediscover purpose, resilience and hope through mentorship, training, retreats and opportunities to serve others. The organization also supports efforts to combat human trafficking and assist vulnerable communities.

Learn more about the mission during America 250: Compassion in Action, a fundraiser benefiting CrossCountry3, set for June 25 from 5-8 p.m. at the Hilton Garden Inn in Miramar Beach. The event will celebrate service, patriotism and the power of making a difference in the lives of others.

EMERALD COAST NETWORKING ★ PROUDLY HOSTS A FUNDRAISER FOR CC3 - CROSS COUNTRY 3 - HEALING WARRIORS. ★ RESTORING LIVES. ★ COMBATING EXPLOITATION. ★ THEME: ★ AMERICA 250: Compassion in Action Empowering veterans to lead the fight against human trafficking and restore hope where it's been stolen. TRAINED. TRANSFORMED. DEPLOYED. TO SERVE. TO PROTECT. TO RESTORE. Thursday, June 25th 5:00 PM SOCIAL & SILENT AUCTION OPEN 6:00 PM DINNER IS SERVED 7:00 PM SILENT AUCTION CLOSES & ANNOUNCED CASH BAR AVAILABLE EVENT LOCATION Hilton Garden Inn Miramar Beach 220 Hwy 2378 Miramar Beach, FL 32550 TICKETS \$35 PER PERSON TABLES OF 8 \$400 By Sponsors Featuring in Program & Recognized on Social! TOGETHER, WE CAN MAKE AN IMPACT. Thank You FOR SUPPORTING OUR WARRIORS AND THE MISSION OF CC3! SCAN TO GET YOUR TICKETS ON EVENTBRITE!

Where Floral Dreams Become Art

How a Sister's Bridal Shower Bloomed Into Couture Florals & Events

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

I knew Kristin Lockhart was talented long before I sat down to interview her.

I knew it the moment I walked into my wedding reception at The Alice in Destin and saw months of planning transformed into something even more beautiful than I had imagined. As a recent Couture Florals & Events bride, I had experienced the finished product firsthand. What I hadn't yet discovered was the story behind it.

That story begins long before weddings, floral installations and luxury events. Creativity has been part of Kristin's life for as long as she can remember. Long before she was designing celebrations along the Emerald Coast, she spent hours scrapbooking, turning simple photo albums into keepsakes filled with ribbon, embellishments and artistic details.

That creative spirit found a new outlet in 2012 when she designed an Alice in Wonderland-themed bridal shower for her sister. What began as a labor of love would eventually become the spark that launched **Couture Florals & Events**, now one of the area's premier wedding and event design companies.

At the time, Kristin had little experience with floral design beyond creating a few silk arrangements for family members. But for her sister's shower, she envisioned something extraordinary. The space was transformed into a whimsical tea party complete with moss-covered displays, trees, stacked teacups, tree stumps, squirrel accents and even a custom tea kettle cake. "When people walked in, they were amazed," Kristin recalled. "Throughout the event, so many people told me I had a natural talent and creative eye for this type of work."

More importantly, the experience awakened what would become her passion. "That truly sparked something in me," she said.

Kristin began exploring floral design more seriously, eventually working professionally with fresh florals while managing a floral department. As her skills and confidence grew, so did her



vision. In 2016, she launched Couture Florals & Events with a desire to create meaningful, elevated celebrations tailored to each client.

Today, what started as a shoestring startup has grown into a thriving business trusted by couples, wedding planners and event professionals throughout Northwest Florida. For Kristin, however, the attraction was never simply flowers. "I completely fell in love with the artistry, creativity and emotion behind transforming spaces and bringing people's visions to life," she said.

That blend of artistry and organization continues to shape her work today. While many people imagine floral design as a profession spent arranging beautiful blooms, Kristin says the reality is far more demanding. "People often think this job is just playing with flowers all

day, but there is so much more that goes into what we do," she said. "Behind the beauty is an incredible amount of planning, logistics, problem-solving, physical labor, setup, execution and cleanup."

Over the years, she has learned to intentionally separate creative time from business time, allowing her to remain fully present when designing for clients. Even so, she believes artistry extends far beyond the flowers themselves, viewing each proposal as the first step in helping couples visualize the wedding or event of their dreams.

Like many entrepreneurs, Kristin faced uncertainty in the early years. One of the most difficult seasons came during the COVID-19 pandemic when weddings and events were postponed, rescheduled or canceled. "It was extremely difficult navigating the uncertainty while trying to protect and sustain a newer business at the time," she said. Still, she remained committed to the business she believed in. "There is always risk involved with entrepreneurship,

Continued on page 25



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 Community

Trends & Treasures!



Red, White & Sweet: Celebrate Summer One Cupcake at a Time Smallcakes: A Cupcakery

Summer celebrations are here, and Smallcakes is ready to help make every gathering a little sweeter. From Father's Day cookouts and Fourth of July parties to weddings, birthdays, reunions and everyday celebrations, there's always a reason for dessert.

Known for its award-winning cupcakes and playful motto, "Maybe a Cupcake Will Help?," Smallcakes continues to delight locals and visitors alike with specialty flavors, colorful frostings and scratch-made treats baked fresh daily.

Beyond its famous gourmet cupcakes, the bakery offers mini cupcakes, custom birthday and wedding cakes, edible-logo treats, jumbo cookies, brownies, gourmet popcorn, cupcakes-in-a-jar and even "pup" cakes for four-legged family members. House-made ice cream and gluten-free options ensure there is something for everyone.

Hosting a party? Create a custom order featuring edible images, business logos or personalized designs. Want to sample a variety of flavors? An assorted dozen mini cupcakes is always a crowd favorite.

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

Hours: Mon.–Sat., 11 a.m.–7 p.m.; Sun., 11 a.m.–4 p.m.

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SmallcakesDestin.com

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crease year after year, a fixed-rate mortgage allows homeowners to lock in one of their largest monthly expenses for 15 to 30 years. That stability can provide peace of mind while also helping build wealth through equity as property values appreciate over time.

"Homeownership is a historically strong hedge against inflation," explains REALTOR® Brian K. LoCicero. "And once you own, any increase in your home's value builds equity and strengthens your net worth."

Whether you're considering your first home, upgrading to a larger property or purchasing a second home along the Emerald Coast, today's market may offer opportunities worth exploring before prices and rates change again.

This summer could be the perfect time to begin building a future of greater financial security and a place to truly call your own.

Ready to take the next step?

brian@beonthecoast.com

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The Ultimate Father's Day Gift: Feeling Better Every Day CRYO850 Performance & Recovery Center

Shopping for a dad who says he doesn't need anything? This Father's Day, skip the tie and give him something he can actually use—less pain, more energy and faster recovery.

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CRYO850's wellness circuit includes infrared sauna, red light therapy, whole-body cryotherapy, isolated cryotherapy, vibration plates and compression therapy. Together, these services

are designed to reduce inflammation, improve circulation and support better overall health and recovery.

Clients often report benefits including improved sleep, enhanced focus, reduced soreness, increased energy and faster recovery after exercise or daily activities.

Now accepting HSA and FSA cards, CRYO850 makes it easier than ever to invest in your health using tax-advantaged dollars.

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Whether you're headed to the beach for the Fourth of July, planning a family vacation or spending weekends by the pool, personalized accessories make summer more stylish—and a lot more fun. At Frill Seekers Gifts, custom pieces transform everyday beach essentials into memorable keepsakes. Choose from embroidered beach towels, tote bags, sun hats and accessories personalized with names, monograms, favorite sayings or even beach house names.

Not only do personalized items stand out on a crowded beach, they also make thoughtful gifts for family members, graduates, bridesmaids and summer hosts.

Among the shop's most popular warm-weather items are personalized zipper swimmie bags, perfect for storing wet swimsuits after a day on the water. The team can even create stylish two-tone name designs for an extra-special touch.

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June is filled with meaningful moments—from celebrating Dad to Independence Day, summer weddings, anniversaries, proposals and family gatherings. Beyond Measure Fine Jewelry offers the perfect way to commemorate them all.

Owner Ashleigh Woolly specializes in helping clients find or create one-of-a-kind pieces that become treasured keepsakes for years to come. Whether you're searching for a memorable Father's Day gift, America's 250th Birthday event piece, planning a proposal or celebrating a milestone, you'll discover a jewelry experience that is both personal and unforgettable.

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Ashleigh is especially passionate about helping couples design custom engagement rings and wedding bands tailored specifically to their love story.

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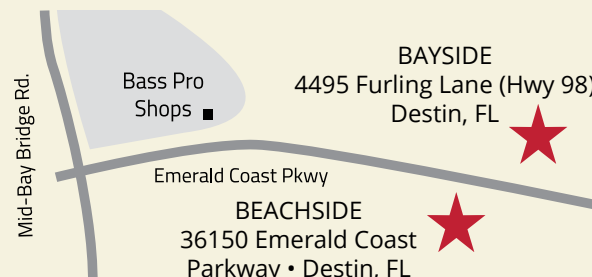


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 Community

What Happens When Steve Doocy Comes to Destin?

When the cameras aren't rolling, a conversation about pirates, positive news, grandchildren and why America's stories still start locally

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

The first thing I learned about Steve Doocy is that he can carry on a full interview while jumping out of a vehicle, walking into Publix and searching for bottled water.

The second thing I learned is that despite spending decades on national television, the long-time FOX & Friends co-host is exactly what viewers see every morning: warm, approachable, genuinely curious and surprisingly funny.

I caught up with Doocy shortly after he landed in Northwest Florida as part of FOX & Friends' nationwide America 250 tour, which recently brought the popular morning

show to Fudpucker's Beachside Bar & Grill in Destin.

Before discussing television, politics or ratings, we found ourselves talking about weather—specifically, what us locals affectionately call the “Destin Bubble.” After I explained our theory that somehow storms seem to part around Destin while sunshine magically appears, Doocy laughed. “That’s great. I love it,” he said. When I mentioned that some locals credit the Gulf’s unique weather patterns for helping create the phenomenon, he quickly connected it to another local tradition. “Well, that’s why the pirates came, I guess,” he joked.

As it turns out, Doocy had

already been reading up on the Billy Bowlegs Pirate Festival and was preparing to be escorted by pirate ship during his visit to Fort Walton Beach. That could only happen on the Emerald Coast.

While the FOX & Friends team travels extensively, Doocy said Destin stood out as a natural stop for the show’s America 250 tour, which highlights communities, businesses and traditions that helped shape the nation. “As we travel America for America 250, we’re trying to highlight all these amazing towns and amazing places,” Doocy said. “The Panhandle was just one of those places we haven’t been to for a while, and it’s one of those





Local, professional photographer specializing in families, weddings, and events. My passion lies in creating lasting memories through photographs, and I cherish the opportunity to be part of such meaningful moments!




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places where people have heard about it, they’ve wanted to visit it, and we thought, ‘We should go there.’”

Part of the appeal was the location itself. “Fudpucker’s is legendary,” he said with a laugh. “You’ve got gators, you’ve got pirates, you’ve got a lot of happy people who need coffee. That’s a pretty good recipe for first thing in the morning.”

It wasn’t his first visit to the area. Long before arriving as a television host, Doocy first visited Destin as a college student making the trek from the University of Kansas in search of a Florida beach vacation. “It was the closest beach in Florida from Kansas,” he said.

Years later, he and his wife returned to explore the area as a potential second-home destination. “We absolutely loved it,” he told me. “We spent a couple of days looking around and thought it was just very, very nice.”

Like many visitors, he was particularly drawn to the communities along Scenic Highway 30A. During that trip, he even spent time exploring the area with former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who maintained a home in South Walton for many years. Had he purchased property back then, he joked, he probably would have quadrupled his investment by now.

The conversation eventually turned to food — not surprising considering Doocy and his wife, Kathy, have authored several cookbooks together. When asked about memorable local dining experiences, he immediately recalled enjoying smoked fish dip while watching the sunset at Bud & Alley’s in Seaside. “It’s another iconic place,” he said. “Everybody has to go there.”

As our conversation continued, one theme surfaced repeatedly: the power of local stories. Although Doocy works in national media, he believes the stories that resonate most with viewers are often rooted in hometown communities. “When I was a reporter in Washington, D.C., every national story was a local story,” he said.

In today’s media landscape, he argues that local storytelling might be more important than ever. “Every national story starts somewhere locally,” he said. “And thanks to social media and all the different platforms we have now, a local story can become a national story overnight.”

That philosophy is at the heart of what we do. As publishers of all-positive community newspapers across Northwest

Continued on page 42



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Florida Built Different: The Push to Eliminate Property Taxes



By PAUL A. DOMENECH

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis announced a proposal that could significantly reduce — and eventually eliminate — property taxes on homesteaded homes in Florida.

The proposal comes as Florida's budget has grown from approximately \$32 billion in 2019 to nearly \$60 billion today. According to DeSantis, the increase in revenue gives the state the ability to provide homeowner relief while continuing to fund schools, police departments, fire departments, infrastructure and

other essential services.

The proposal is called “Save Our Homes from Excessive Property Taxes.”

The first phase of the plan would create a proposed \$250,000 homestead exemption. According to projections tied to the proposal, that exemption could eliminate property taxes for roughly 60% of Florida homeowners immediately. The long-term goal would be to phase out property taxes on primary residences completely.

During the announcement, DeSantis addressed concerns about how local governments would continue operating without relying as heavily on residential property taxes. He pointed to Florida's budget growth over the last several years and stated that the state already has the resources to help offset those costs if needed.

Part of the proposal includes creating a state trust fund that would issue grants to local governments to support essential



services such as schools, police departments and emergency response agencies.

Other parts of the proposal include the following:

- A five-year residency requirement before homeowners qualify for the full benefits.
- Limits on local government spending focused on core services.
- Assessment caps for businesses.
- Potentially shifting more of the tax burden toward commercial properties and non-homesteaded or out-of-state-owned properties.

The proposal is designed specifically around homesteaded primary residences, meaning full-time Florida homeowners would receive the largest benefits. Commercial properties, investment properties, vacation homes and out-of-state-owned properties could see higher tax responsibility to help balance funding needs for local governments.

If approved by lawmakers, the proposal would appear on the 2026 Florida ballot and would require 60% voter approval to pass.

According to projections discussed alongside the proposal, if the homestead exemption eventually expands toward \$500,000, up to 92% of Florida homesteaders could potentially pay zero property taxes on their primary residence.

Property taxes currently serve as one of the largest

funding sources for local governments throughout Florida. Those funds help pay for public schools, infrastructure projects, emergency services, parks and local operations.

The proposal has already created major conversations across the state surrounding housing affordability, long-term homeownership costs, government spending and how Florida funds local services moving forward.

Florida has continued seeing strong population growth over the last several years as residents relocate from higher-tax states. At the same time, rising insurance costs, home prices and overall affordability have become major topics across the state.

Keep looking out for updates on this proposal and continue educating yourself on both sides of the discussion so, when it's time to vote, you can make an informed decision based on facts, details and long-term impact.

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A Revolutionary Year: Heritage Museum Brings America 250 to Life

From the Publisher: As the United States approaches its 250th birthday, communities across the country are beginning to reflect on the people, ideals and sacrifices that shaped the nation. Here in our piece of paradise, that reflection is taking on a uniquely local flavor — one rooted in family, patriotism, storytelling and community connection.

While major cities may host massive fireworks displays and national ceremonies, Northwest Florida's America 250 celebrations are becoming something far more personal: an invitation for neighbors, families and

children to rediscover history together.

One of the strongest examples of that effort is unfolding right here in our area at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida in Valparaiso, where a yearlong "Celebrate America 250!" series is bringing Revolutionary-era history to life through exhibits, lectures, reenactments, educational programs and family-friendly events throughout 2026.

For residents of Destin, the series offers a nearby opportunity to participate in the nation's semiquincentennial celebration even as local America 250

planning efforts continue. This year's Heritage Museum's programming goes far beyond traditional exhibits. Organizers are creating immersive experiences designed to make history feel tangible and relevant to modern audiences—ones like the following:

History Lesson on Historic Date Thrills Audience

BY BARBARA PALMGREN

On April 18, 2026, retired Colonel Karl Eschmann, shared a history lesson surrounding two famous battles influencing the decision to formally revolt from Great Britain and form a new nation. This formal document was the Declaration of Independence.

We know and remember so little of these battles, but hear the words of Longfellow's famous poem echoing in our heads:

"Listen, my children, and you shall hear

Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,

On the eighteenth of April in Seventy-Five,

Hardly a man is now alive,

Who remembers that famous day and year."

We also remember the description of the signal lanterns in the Old North Church ("one if by land and two if by sea") and the cry of "The British are

Coming!" although the poem used more poetic language as this cry alerted farmers to prepare to fight. There was no trained, standing colonial army as this was only the beginning of a war that would lead to our victory and independence as a new nation, the United States of America. According to Karl, after that battle, the patriots considered themselves Americans.

So, imagine you are stationed on active duty in the late 20th century at Hanscom Air Force Base in Massachusetts, a base bordering the towns of Bedford, Lincoln, Concord and Lexington. The towns featured prominently in the first battle of the American Revolution. Would you be as intrigued as Karl was, to learn more about this crucial period in our nation's beginning?

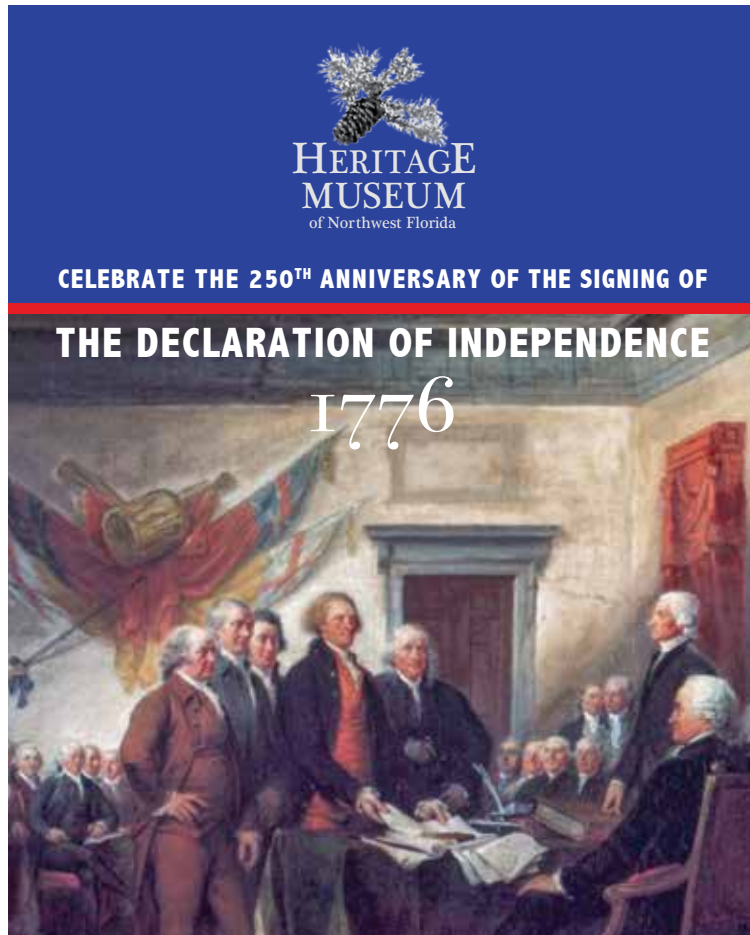
That's what happened for Karl and Charlotte Eschmann. Karl devoted time to research the first two battles of the revolution, the battles of Lexington and Concord. Karl graduated from Texas A&M University in 1971 with a Bachelor's Degree in Aerospace Engineering followed by a Master's Degree from the Air Force Institute of Technology in Logistics Management in 1989. Karl is also a distinguished graduate of the Air Command and Staff College, the Air War College, and the Naval War College.



Karl is considered a subject matter expert on these two battles and shared this knowledge free of charge for the public at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida on Saturday, April 18, 2026—250 years after the historic event itself. Truly, a history lesson to be celebrated! Karl is also a member of the museum's 250th committee of "Celebrate America 250! American Revolution" that established the new exhibit to honor the U.S. celebration of 250 years.

One of the history panels, "First Battles of the American Revolution," documents these two battles. The entire exhibit of people, places and events leading to the signing of the Declaration of Independence can be viewed this entire year at the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida, 115 Westview Ave, Valparaiso. Museum hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday. Special events for this celebration can be found periodically by visiting heritage-museum.org.

Save the date of July 4 to attend an official community ribbon-cutting at 1 p.m. with a reenactment "shot fired around the world" by Travis Souther in colonial uniform with a flintlock fowling piece, a smoothbore .62 caliber used for self-defense and hunting purposes. No fear, it is not rifled and no live ammunition will be used. Only black powder put down the barrel and all safety standards and regulations for historic black powder weapons will be followed. Travis will then share a presentation titled "Life, Liberty, and Hard Rations."



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Continued on next page

2026 Okaloosa County Mosquito Control Schedule

The Okaloosa County Mosquito Control Program's schedule for broadcast pesticide spraying, aimed at controlling adult mosquito populations, is outlined below. You'll also find weblinks to maps showing the general treatment areas organized by days of the week. Spraying takes place in the evening and, per State Law, must be justified. Justification is accomplished through mosquito population surveillance data and other State approved methods. The schedule may shift due to weather conditions or equipment problems. Treatments are set to start at sunset.

Map Link for Destin area: South Okaloosa County – Destin Area
<https://myokaloosa.com/sites/default/files/users/pwuser/SouthCountyDestinArea2.pdf>

Mondays:
 Destin: Walton County Line to Airport Rd

Tuesdays:
 Airport Rd to Destin Bridge, Mary Esther/Fort Walton Beach and Bluewater Bay

Protect Yourself From Mosquitoes
 Okaloosa County Mosquito Control and the Florida Department of Health encourage residents to remember SWAT to reduce mosquito bites and mosquito-borne illnesses:

- Stay inside during peak mosquito activity, especially at dawn and dusk.
- Wear protective clothing such as long sleeves, pants and socks when outdoors.
- Apply insect repellent containing DEET, picaridin, oil of lemon eucalyptus or IR3535.

- Turn over standing water where mosquitoes breed.
- Residents should regularly drain water from gutters, buckets, flower pots, birdbaths, pet bowls, pool covers and other containers that collect rainwater.

Okaloosa County Mosquito Control also conducts county-wide spraying and larvicide treatments to reduce mosquito populations. Horse owners should keep vaccinations current for mosquito-borne diseases such as Eastern Equine Encephalitis, and dog owners

should maintain heartworm prevention. For mosquito spray schedules, prevention tips and more information, contact Okaloosa County Mosquito Control at 850-651-7394 or visit the county website.

250
continued from previous page

Karl will be on-site in the exhibit hall to answer questions about the two famous battles after Travis presents his program. At noon, Tom McKnight will present a special "History Sandwiched In" lecture to explain "Colonial Paper Currency" using his prestigious donation of that currency beautifully mounted on the exhibit wall next to the famous Trumbull painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

What an exciting opportunity during the day on July 4 to hear about unique aspects of a day we celebrate this year as the 250th anniversary of the birth of our nation. And, at night, throughout the county, fireworks will complete the evening with displays of red, white and blue lighting up the skies.

A special day, a special night for a special year!

Throughout the year, the museum's "History Sandwiched-In" lecture series is exploring pivotal Revolutionary War moments and founding-era stories, including the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, George Washington's leadership and the role women played during the Revolution.

Additional programming includes:

- an "America in 1776" student poster contest
- a "Spirit of '76" Book Club
- a theatrical "Night at the Museum" event in October
- and "Yule of Yesteryear: Christmas in the Colonies" during the holiday season

For Destin, the anniversary also offers an opportunity to reflect on local identity and heritage at a time of continued growth and change across Northwest Florida. While the area has evolved significantly over the years, many residents remain deeply connected to the values that have long defined these communities — faith, family, patriotism, military service and a strong sense of community. I believe that is part of what makes the America 250 milestone resonate so strongly here.

At its heart, America's 250th anniversary is not simply about looking backward. It is about asking what kind of legacy communities hope to leave for the next generation.

More information about the Heritage Museum's America 250 programming can be found at heritage-museum.org and Florida's statewide initiative at america250fl.com.

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Keeping Homes Looking Their Best During the Busy Summer Season



BY KYLE SPARKS, OVATION PAINTING

Summer along the Emerald Coast brings energy, visitors, and long days by the water. Homes across Destin, Santa Rosa Beach, and surrounding community's welcome family gatherings, vacation guests, and plenty of activity.

With that activity comes extra wear on a home's interior. High-traffic areas such as hallways, stairwells, and kitchens tend to show scuffs and marks more quickly during the busy months.

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ant role in maintaining those spaces. Durable coatings help walls resist everyday wear while

keeping rooms looking bright and clean.

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rental agencies, the condition of a home's interior can influence the entire guest experience. Clean, well-maintained walls help create a welcoming environment that guests remember.

Kyle's Tip:

"If you're looking for early signs a room needs repainting, check light switches, hallway corners, and areas around door frames. Those are usually the first places we see wear."

Even during a busy season, it's helpful to take note of areas that may need attention later in the year. Planning ahead makes

it easier to schedule projects during quieter months.

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Boathouse Oyster Bar

Oysters, live music and a local vibe, the Boathouse is where the locals go with live music every night. Located in the heart of Destin on the Destin Harbor, the Boathouse specializes in making oysters a delicacy. Boathouse's gumbo recipe was written by Mama Gumbo herself. And, of course, the oysters are raw, steamed or baked, just the way you like 'em. The first Friday of each month, The Boathouse hosts locals on the Destin Harbor from 5-7 p.m. Listen and move with live entertainment daily. See ad for bands and times. Music schedule subject to change. Follow on Facebook for updates. During or after the game, mosey on over to hang

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Café Destin

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Continued on page 24

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FOX & Friends Brings National Spotlight to Destin

BY "DOG" DOUG STAUFFER

Before sunrise touched the emerald waters of the Gulf, excitement had already begun in Destin. Long lines wrapped around Fudpucker's Beachside Bar & Grill as people gathered hours before dawn to welcome the nationally televised morning show FOX & Friends and one of its most recognizable personalities, Steve Doocy.

For many in attendance, the event was far more than a tele-

vision broadcast. It became a celebration of community, patriotism, military pride, and the distinctive spirit that defines the Florida Panhandle.

The May 15 stop in Destin was part of the show's "For All America" road trip, celebrating America's upcoming 250th anniversary. Yet, as cameras rolled live, it quickly became clear that the story was not just about a television show coming to town. It was about the energy of the

people who arrived long before daylight, simply to be part of something memorable.

The crowd was jubilant from the start. Some arrived before 3 a.m., and by the time the broadcast began, the atmosphere inside and outside was electric. Red, white, and blue clothing filled the venue, while local families, veterans, community leaders, and supporters of the show packed every available space.

One of the highlights of the morning was watching Steve Doocy interact with the crowd. While many television personalities keep their distance once the cameras stop rolling, Doocy seemed to thrive on personal connections. Between live segments, he moved through the crowd, taking selfies, shaking hands, telling jokes, and making everyone feel included.

At one point, Doocy laughed about how many people mistakenly called him "Peter," referencing his son, senior White House correspondent and fellow FOX host Peter Doocy. The audience loved it, and his humor immediately made the event feel




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personal rather than staged. Perhaps the biggest crowd-pleasing moment came when Doocy decided to crowd surf through the audience. After a single practice, he confidently launched himself into the cheering crowd, where people, including myself and Life Media's own Scott Miller, held him above their heads during the live broadcast. The moment perfectly captured the morning's relaxed, fun-loving atmosphere and instantly became one of the event's most talked-about memories.

The 70th-anniversary celebration of Billy Bowlegs also added a distinctly local flavor to the broadcast. Pirates from the Krewe of Bowlegs arrived in full force, bringing their pirate ship, cannons, costumes, and enthusiasm. The pirate-themed entrance to Fudpucker's became one of the show's visual centerpieces and showcased the traditions that make the Emerald Coast unique.

For many locals, seeing Destin highlighted on national television sparked a sense of pride. Throughout the morning, peo-

Continued on next page

FOX

continued from previous page

ple received text messages and calls from friends and family across the country, each saying they had seen Destin live on television.

That may have been one of the most meaningful parts of the broadcast. Beyond the entertainment and excitement, the event reminded viewers nationwide that communities like Destin still embody something deeply American — patriotism, hospitality, faith, military appreciation, family values, and genuine friendliness.

The Fort Walton Beach High School Stars Dance Team added excitement and energy to the early-morning broadcast as they lined the entrance to Fud-pucker's, waving pom-poms and cheering on the crowd. Despite the pre-dawn start, their enthusiasm helped create the electric atmosphere that defined the event.

For three hours, Destin became America's front porch, and those present experienced far more than a television show. They experienced a celebration of community that many will not soon forget.



Magic & Comedy at The Palms Resort Destin!

The popular Magic & Comedy Destin residency is back at The Palms Resort with new enhancements, interactive illusions and family-friendly entertainment.

Headliner Bart Rockett brings a blend of magic, comedy, audience participation and ventriloquism to the intimate showroom experience. A veteran performer who has

appeared in more than 90 countries and hosted a nationally syndicated television show, Rockett performs alongside special guest appearances by his children, Kadan and Brooklyn.

Guests can enjoy table seating with food and beverages available from the adjacent Blue Lagoon restaurant.

Shows are held at 7 p.m.,



with select Sunday matinees at 4 p.m. Seating is limited and advance reservations are recommended.

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Record-Breaking Weekend Benefits Local Children

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

There was no shortage of excitement, generosity or celebration during the 21st Annual Destin Charity Wine Auction presented by the Jumonville Family.

From spirited bidding wars and flowing wines to heartfelt conversations about the causes being supported, the sold-out event brought together more than 600 guests April 24-25 for a weekend dedicated to helping children throughout Northwest Florida. By the end of the week-

end, that generosity translated into a record-breaking \$4 million raised for local children in need — surpassing last year's total by \$550,000 and setting a new fundraising record in Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation history. "This historic year for Destin Charity Wine Auction Foundation is a powerful reflection of what happens when generosity and purpose come together. Surpassing \$4 million is more than a record—it represents real, life-changing impact for chil-

dren across Northwest Florida," said DCWAF President Karah Young.

Throughout the weekend, guests enjoyed patron dinners, exclusive wines, unique experiences and spirited live-auction bidding, all while supporting children and families across the region. One of the evening's biggest moments came when a nine-night guided trip to Italy sold for an unprecedented \$400,000 — the highest single lot sale in the event's history. Two additional auction pack-



PHOTO CREDIT: KIARA WATSON PHOTOGRAPHY

ages topped \$100,000, marking the first time three individual lots have reached six figures in the same year.

While the auction's headline numbers were impressive, the true beneficiaries are the thousands of children served by DCWAF's 16 partner charities: Ascension Sacred Heart Emerald Coast, Boys & Girls Clubs of the Emerald Coast, Caring & Sharing of South Walton, Children's Home Society of Florida, Children in Crisis, Children's Volunteer Health Network, El-lison McCraney Ingram Foundation, Emerald Coast Autism Center, Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center, Habitat for Humanity of Walton

County, Mental Health Association of Okaloosa and Walton Counties, Northwest Florida Guardian ad Litem, Opportunity Inc., Point Washington Medical Clinic, Westonwood Ranch and Youth Village.

Now in its 21st year, the Destin Charity Wine Auction continues to demonstrate what makes Northwest Florida special: a community willing to come together, have fun and give generously to improve the lives of local children.

The 22nd Annual Destin Charity Wine Auction is scheduled for April 23-24, 2027. For more information, visit DCWAF.org.

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DESTIN DINING

continued from page 21

Rachel "Lady Ray," whose culinary background includes work with Ritz-Carlton properties in New Orleans and West Palm Beach, award-winning catering companies and innovative farm-to-table restaurants.

What began as a passion for culinary artistry has grown into a local favorite offering everything from fresh pastries and breakfast treats to lunch fare, wedding cakes, tea parties and event planning services. Rachel's philosophy blends elevated hospitality with a commitment to supporting fellow local businesses, creating an experience that feels both personal and memorable.

Guests can stop in for a latte and pastry, enjoy a handcrafted sandwich for lunch or browse an ever-changing selection of sweet treats made in small batch-



es. The café also specializes in custom cakes and desserts for weddings, birthdays and special occasions.

Hours: Wednesday-Saturday, 8 a.m.-4 p.m.; Sunday, 8 a.m.-2 p.m.; closed Monday and Tuesday.

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Destin
ladyrays.com

FLORAL DREAMS

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but I truly believed in what I was building and continued pushing forward." Those challenges ultimately strengthened both Kristin and her company, teaching resilience, adaptability and the importance of relationships.

Today, **Couture Florals & Events** is known for designs that feel deeply personal rather than simply decorative. "I believe florals should feel emotionally connected to the people and the celebration," Kristin said. "My goal is always to create an atmosphere that feels intentional, immersive and reflective of each client's unique story and style."



That process begins long before a flower is selected. When meeting with a couple for the first time, Kristin focuses on far more than color palettes and Pinterest boards. "I pay attention to their connection — how they interact, communicate and naturally vibe together," she said. "You can truly feel the love they have for each other, and that often becomes the inspiration behind the overall design."

She believes unforgettable weddings are created through thoughtful layers of candlelight, texture, place settings and carefully curated design elements that create a complete guest experience. "The small, intentional details and, of course, the couple themselves, are what separate a beautiful wedding from a memorable one," she said. "The love, energy and connection a couple shares are what truly set the tone."

"I especially love when cou-

ples fully trust us in the process and allow us the artistic and creative freedom to bring their vision to life in a meaningful and elevated way."

As she described her design process, I found myself thinking back to my own wedding day. Months of planning suddenly became reality the moment I stepped into our reception space. The florals did more than decorate the room — they helped tell mine and Scott's story.

What impressed me most was Kristin's ability to take fragments of ideas and transform them into a cohesive vision. Calla lilies, moss, driftwood and flowing amaranthus came together in ways I never would have imagined, creating a design

that felt sophisticated, personal and completely authentic to us. It wasn't simply beautiful. It felt like us.

While trends continue to evolve, Kristin remains drawn to timeless elegance paired with natural texture and movement. Yet some of her greatest inspiration comes from the Emerald Coast itself. "What excites me most creatively about designing for clients in Destin is the atmosphere and natural beauty of our area," she said. "The emerald water, sugar-white sand and relaxed, yet elevated, atmosphere create a backdrop that is hard to replicate anywhere else."

Perhaps the most rewarding part of her work comes when a couple sees the finished design for the first time. "When a bride genuinely gasps, becomes emotional or gives a heartfelt reaction to what I created for her, it makes every long hour and stressful moment completely worth it," Kristin said. "I truly live for those moments."

As **Couture Florals & Events** continues to grow, Kristin hopes to keep challenging herself creatively through larger installations, new design opportunities and unforgettable events. Recognition may come,

but it has never been the goal.

When asked what she hopes couples remember long after the flowers have faded, her answer is simple. "I want them to remember the experience," she said. "If they look back on their wedding day and remember feeling completely taken care of and genuinely wowed by the end re-

sult, then I know we've done our job well."

Having recently entrusted my own wedding to **Couture Florals & Events**, I left our interview with an even greater appreciation for what happens behind the scenes. The flowers were stunning. The designs were memorable. But what stayed

with me most was exactly what Kristin hopes every client remembers: the feeling.

Long after the bouquets have faded and the candles have been extinguished, the memories remain. For Kristin, flowers are the medium, but creating lasting memories is the true art.

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 Off the Hook

Destin Private Tiki Helps Locals Rediscover Crab Island

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"I used to go all the time."
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Life gets busy. Boats get sold. Weekends fill up. Yet, Crab Island remains one of our area's most iconic destinations.

That's why **Destin Private Tiki's Crab Island Express**

is attracting attention from both locals and visitors looking for a fun way to spend a few hours on the water.

Operating from Heron Harbor Marina, the locally owned company offers private tiki charters as well as shared excursions to Crab Island. Guests board a custom tiki boat, cruise through Destin Harbor and spend time



enjoying the emerald-green waters and laid-back atmosphere



Another popular offering is the company's **Locals Only Unlimited Access Pass**, designed specifically for area residents who want to spend more time enjoying the harbor and Crab Island throughout the season.

Whether introducing out-of-town guests to Crab Island for the first time or returning

after years away, Destin Private Tiki offers a reminder of why so many people fell in love with Destin's waters in the first place.


For visitors, it's a memorable way to experience one of Destin's most popular attractions. For locals, it's a chance to revisit a favorite destination without planning an entire day on the water.

Private charters are also available for birthdays, reunions, bachelorette parties, family outings and other special occasions.


that have made Crab Island famous.

Destin Private Tiki operates from Heron Harbor Marina, 314 Harbor Blvd. in Destin. For information or reservations, call (850) 424-1119, email DestinPrivateTiki@gmail.com or visit DestinPrivateTiki.com. Ask about the **Locals Only Unlimited Access Pass**.

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Emerald Coast Blue Marlin Classic Returns June 17-21

The 24th Annual Emerald Coast Blue Marlin Classic (ECBC) returns to Baytowne Marina at Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort June 17-21, bringing one of the Gulf Coast's premier sportfishing tournaments back during peak blue marlin season. Recognized as one of the Gulf's richest offshore fishing tournaments, the 2026 event is expected to award more than \$2 million in cash prizes and attract elite anglers and teams from across the country.

Tournament competition includes blue marlin, tuna, wahoo and dolphin (mahi-mahi) divisions, along with a modified-release format that awards points for billfish releases including blue marlin, white marlin, sailfish and spearfish.

While the fishing action takes place offshore, spectators can enjoy a lively, family-friendly atmosphere at Baytowne Marina and The Village of Baytowne Wharf. Public activities include nightly weigh-ins, live music, fire-

works, a Vendor Village and opportunities to view some of the Gulf's most impressive sportfishing vessels. Friday night's festivities traditionally conclude with a fireworks display over the marina.

One of the most popular spectator events is the public weigh-in. Fans can watch crews bring in giant blue marlin and other prized gamefish as tournament standings unfold in real time. The event has become a summer tradition for both anglers and visitors along the Emerald Coast.

Know Before You Go June 17-21, 2026

- Baytowne Marina, Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort
- Public weigh-ins expected Friday and Saturday evenings
- Live music, vendor exhibits and fireworks
- Admission to spectator activities is free

For tournament information and schedules, visit www.FishECBC.com or www.EmeraldCoastBlueMarlinClassic.com.

New Encounters and Old Friends: A Summer to Remember at Gulfarium

By MARY FOMBY

Manatee Cove Brings Guests Face to Face with Florida's Gentle Giants

Discover one of Gulfarium's newest and most inspiring experiences at Manatee Cove, a state of the art habitat dedicated to rescued manatees and the conservation efforts helping protect this endangered species. Home to rescued residents Romeo, Lil Joe, and Inigo, Manatee Cove gives guests the opportunity to observe these incredible animals from multiple viewing levels while learning each of their unique stories.

Romeo, recently earned global recognition from Guinness World Records as the world's oldest living manatee under human care. Estimated to be more than 71 years old, Romeo has become a guest favorite at Gulfarium.

Designed specifically for rescued manatees in need of long term care, the expansive habitat



features underwater viewing areas, natural resting spaces, and specialized care facilities that support the health and wellbeing of its residents while creating unforgettable educational experiences for guests of all ages.

Start Your Day with Dolphins: Rise and Shine Dolphin Package

Make your morning unforgettable with our brand-new

Rise and Shine: Dolphin Package! This exclusive experience gives guests early entry to the park before it opens to the public, a dockside dolphin encounter, and discounted general admission for the rest of the day.

Led by our expert marine mammal team, this intimate experience offers the chance to interact with one of our Atlantic bottlenose dolphins while learning all about their care, behaviors, and personalities. It's the



perfect way to beat the crowds and start your day with a splash!

Sunset Camp Returns for a Summer of Fun

Looking for a magical summer night activity just for kids? The Gulfarium's Sunset Camp is back and better than ever! This evening camp gives kids ages 6-14 a chance to explore the park after hours, enjoy exclusive animal encounters, and learn about marine life through hands-on fun.

While parents enjoy a night

out, campers will dive into adventure with a dolphin dockside encounter, a reptile meet-and-greet, up-close time with our penguin colony, and dinner by Seal Harbor. They'll also join our education team for beachside learning activities to inspire conservation and curiosity.

Sunset Camp fills up quickly with limited dates throughout the summer, so don't wait! **Visit Gulfarium.com to view camp dates and secure your child's spot today.**

**SEA LIONS,
DOLPHINS &
MANATEES...
OH MY!**

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Open Daily at 9am

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www.gulfarium.com

Located in Destin-Fort Walton Beach



Gulfarium
Marine Adventure Park

 Off the Hook
BRUCE CHEVES

continued from page 1

working alongside legendary Rodeo weighmaster Bill Sherman, learning the art and precision of official fish weigh-ins long before digital scales became common. What began as an opportunity to help soon became a calling.

Over the next 42 years, Bruce transformed the role of weighmaster into something uniquely his own. With trademark sayings that became part of local folklore, he entertained crowds while preserving the traditions of one of Destin's most cherished events. Generations of anglers can still hear his familiar introduction: "From guppies to Godzilla, caught in a bathtub or a battleship ... bring me a fish and I'll make you famous." And when it came time to officially record a catch, the harbor would fall silent as Bruce delivered the words that became his signature: "Time is!"

Throughout his career, Bruce announced more than 20 world-record catches, including an 8.9-pound pompano, a 39-pound red grouper and a 54-pound kitty mitchell. He also witnessed and announced every Destin Fishing Rodeo record catch since 1984, including a 70.2-pound grouper, a 111.6-pound amberjack and a massive 358.8-pound warsaw grouper.

Yet, statistics and records tell only part of the story. Bruce possessed a rare gift for making every angler feel important, whether they brought in a world-class catch or a small fish caught by an excited child experiencing the Rodeo for the first time.

More Than a Weighmaster

Bruce was a storyteller, historian, mentor and ambassador for Destin's fishing heritage.

He loved sharing tales from local waters and adventures around the world. He encouraged young anglers, celebrated longtime captains and helped preserve the stories that shaped Destin into the "World's Luckiest Fishing Village."

Every Oct. 16 at 5 p.m., Bruce led a memorial ceremony at the Rodeo weigh-in barge behind A.J.'s to honor captains, anglers and friends who had passed away. The tradition became so meaningful that the City of Destin officially proclaimed Oct. 16 as Bruce Cheves Day in 2010.

His contributions extended far beyond the harbor. Bruce received the University of West Florida Presidential Medal of Honor for his decades of public service, philanthropy and ded-



PHOTO A.J.'S

ication to preserving Destin's maritime history.

To countless residents and visitors, however, his greatest contribution was something less tangible. He made people feel welcome. Whether standing behind the scales, swapping stories on the docks or encouraging a young fisherman with a first catch, Bruce embodied the spirit of Destin's fishing community.

While Bruce's voice became familiar to generations of Rodeo participants, those closest to him knew him simply as family and friend. He leaves behind his daughter, Brianna Cheves; sisters Sharon Ralston and Linda Hughes (Bruce Bishop); nephews Franklin Vaughn (Stephanie), Tyler Dunn, Evan Dunn, Zack Dunn (Patricia) and Ian Dunn; niece Cat Grey and great-niece CJ, as well as many dear friends who became family over the years.

A lifetime auxiliary member



PHOTO A.J.'S



PHOTO KIRK AUSBURN



PHOTO MARY ANNE WINDES



PHOTO KIRK AUSBURN

of Crestview VFW Post 5450, Bruce often said the Destin Fishing Rodeo community was an extension of his family. The hundreds of anglers, captains, volunteers and friends who gathered to celebrate his life would likely have said the same about him.

A Community Reflects

Since news of Bruce's passing spread throughout the community, tributes have poured in from friends, family members and fellow fishermen whose lives he touched over the decades.

Mary Anne Windes shared a favorite memory from 1998 when her son, Capt. Trey Windes, dressed as Bruce for Halloween. "We shopped for days trying to find the perfect belt and shorts as Trey wouldn't settle for 'close enough,'" Mary Anne recalled. "Bruce was tickled pink. Rest in peace, Bruce! We love you, man!"

Richard Drago found comfort in one of Bruce's most famous phrases. "I can imagine God, upon calling him home, said the same words we heard Bruce announce to the Rodeo crowd to mark the catch official: 'Time Is,'" he wrote. "We know you were a big enough catch for heaven's net to scoop you right up, my friend."

R.J. Shelley remembered meeting Bruce shortly after Hurricane Opal in 1995. "I was a snot-nosed kid running around the docks most of my younger years," she wrote. "I

listened to countless stories and could listen for hours. Him and Ms. Helen Wren always kept a watchful eye on me."

Longtime friend Jim Roberson reflected on the dedication many never saw behind the scenes. "Many don't know of the many days over the many years that he stood in the rain, heat, worked around Hurricane Opal and performed with an unbelievable level of dedication to the Rodeo, the city and the sport he loved so much," Jim wrote. "Too many stories to share here, but I pray his legacy lives on."

Chester Kroeger recalled working with Bruce on a "Legends of Destin" T-shirt years ago featuring Bruce and the blue marlin he famously caught while traveling alone to Bimini in heavy seas. "Bruce truly is a legend in this community and his legacy will live forever," Chester wrote.

For his nephew, Franklin Vaughn, the loss is both personal and deeply felt throughout the fishing community. "He was not only the weighmaster of the Rodeo, but a true icon of Destin," Franklin wrote. "He is what made the Rodeo what it is today — a place where anyone can be made famous from guppies to Godzilla. It didn't matter if you brought him a fish; he would weigh it, no questions asked. Destin will not be the

Continued on next page

Red Snapper Season Returns with Record Opportunities for Gulf Anglers

Red snapper season is finally here, and 2026 is shaping up to be one of the best years in recent memory for Gulf Coast fishermen.

The federal red snapper season for federally permitted charter boats and head boats opened June 1 and will remain open through Oct. 26, giving anglers a 147-day season — the longest federal for-hire season since 2006. The season is 19 days longer than last year's federal season.

Florida's private recreational red snapper season opened May 22 and runs daily through July 31. Additional fishing opportunities begin Sept. 1, with a combination of daily openings, weekends and holiday periods extending through Jan. 4, 2027. Florida's 2026 season spans 140 days, making it the longest Gulf red snapper season since the state assumed management of the fishery.

For many families in our area, red snapper season is one of the most anticipated times of the year. Destin's charter fleet and private anglers alike look forward to harvesting one of the Gulf's most popular and best-tasting reef fish.

Current regulations for private recreational anglers include a two-fish daily bag limit and a 16-inch minimum size limit in Gulf waters. Anglers should always verify current regulations before heading offshore, as rules can change.

One area that often creates confusion is the difference be-

tween state and federal waters. In the Gulf, Florida state waters extend nine nautical miles offshore. Federal waters begin beyond that boundary. Depending on where you fish and what type of vessel you are fishing from, different seasons and regulations might apply.

Private recreational anglers may harvest red snapper in state waters during Florida's season and in federal waters when federal regulations allow. However, special rules apply when traveling through state waters with fish caught offshore.

State-licensed guide boats that do not carry a federal reef fish permit must follow state regulations and generally cannot harvest federally managed species such as red snapper in federal waters. A federal permit is required. Federally permitted charter boats and head boats operate under a separate set of federal regulations and may only harvest federally regulated species during federally established seasons.

The differing seasons exist largely because the needs of anglers vary. Charter operators typically prefer long, consecutive seasons that allow visitors to plan vacations and fishing trips well in advance. Many local, private boat owners, meanwhile, favor weekends and holiday openings that fit their work schedules.

Fortunately, improved data collection and management have helped create longer fishing opportunities for everyone. State officials credit enhanced harvest

tracking and Florida's management program for expanding angler access while maintaining conservation goals.

For anglers unsure of current regulations, the Fish Rules app remains one of the easiest tools available. Users can select saltwater or freshwater fishing, enter their location and instantly view current regulations for most species.

Whether you're heading offshore on a private boat or booking a trip with one of Destin's many charter captains, the 2026 season offers plenty of opportunities to enjoy one of the Gulf's signature fishing experiences.

Know Before You Go

Before heading offshore, anglers should verify current regulations, season dates and size limits, as rules can change throughout the year.

Helpful Resources:

- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission: www.MyFWC.com
- Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council: www.GulfCouncil.org
- NOAA Fisheries: www.Fisheries.NOAA.gov
- Fish Rules App: Available free for Apple and Android devices

2026 Gulf Red Snapper Regulations

- Private Recreational Season: May 22-July 31, plus additional fall and holiday openings beginning Sept. 1
- Federal Charter/Headboat Season: June 1-Oct. 26
- Daily Bag Limit: Two fish per person
- Minimum Size Limit: 16 inches total length

For the latest red snapper season dates and regulations, search "Red Snapper" at MyFWC.com.

BRUCE CHEVES

continued from previous page

same without him."

Marina Point native Zach Vagias remembered Bruce as part of the fabric of the harbor itself. "He wasn't just a weighmaster; he was an entertainer," Zach wrote. "The best decision the Destin Fishing Rodeo ever made was naming Bruce Cheves as their weighmaster. He brought a color and personality it had needed for years."

"Time Is"

The fishing community will undoubtedly continue gathering each October to remember the

captains and anglers who have gone before them. This year, however, one more name will be added to that list.

The man who spent decades honoring others will now be remembered alongside them.

And somewhere in the hearts and memories of those standing along the docks, the familiar words that echoed across Destin Harbor for more than 40 years will remain forever: "Time is."

Publisher's Note: Bruce's family has requested any donations be made to the Destin History & Fishing Museum to help establish a permanent tribute by renaming the Rodeo Room the "Bruce Cheves Rodeo Room."



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Safety

“Reel Talk” from the City of Destin

Mayor Bobby Wagner and
PIO Tamara Young, PhD

A Community Conversation on Hurricane Preparedness

BY TAMARA L. YOUNG, PhD,
PUBLIC INFORMATION DIRECTOR
FOR THE WORLD'S LUCKIEST
FISHING VILLAGE

As hurricane season begins along the Gulf Coast, I sat down with Mayor Bobby Wagner for a conversation about hurricane preparedness, City planning, and what citizens can do now to protect themselves and their families.

TY: Hurricane Season in Destin, and throughout the Atlantic and Gulf Coast, runs from June 1st–November 30th. Every year we encourage residents to prepare early for hurricane season, but many people still wait until there's a storm on the radar. Or maybe they have been eating on their hurricane snack stash all year long (guilty as charged). But seriously, why is early preparation so important?

BW: Once a storm is approaching, time becomes limited very quickly. Stores run low, gas stations get crowded, and

anxiety rises. Preparing early lets families think clearly rather than react under pressure. And remember, preparedness isn't just about supplies. It's about having a plan. Know where you'd go if an evacuation were ordered, and keep in mind you don't have to go far to get out of harm's way. Also, make sure your family knows how to communicate if cell service goes down. Those conversations matter and having them now makes all the difference later.

TY: Some folks get confused between a hurricane watch and a hurricane warning. A hurricane watch means hurricane conditions are possible in our area. A hurricane warning means those dangerous conditions are expected. That distinction is important because once a warning is issued, residents should already be finishing preparations and following official guidance closely. There's no extra time at this point to prepare. Storms can shift quickly.



Even if Destin isn't directly in the center of the forecast cone, impacts like flooding, tornadoes, storm surge, and power outages can still occur.

BW: That's such an important point! We've had storms in the past where the projected track was hundreds of miles away from Destin, yet we still experienced significant impacts. The forecast cone shows where the storm's center may track, but hurricanes are enormous systems, and their effects extend far beyond that line. I'd encourage every resident to follow the National Weather Service, the National Hurricane Center, and our local emergency manage-

ment officials directly rather than relying solely on social media for updates. Accurate information is one of the most valuable tools you can have during a storm.

TY: One of the biggest dangers we often talk about is flooding and storm surge. Why do you think that gets underestimated?

BW: Most people focus on wind speed because that's how we categorize the storm and what weather stations talk about most while it's crossing the water. But water poses the greatest danger. Destin and our neighbors to the east and west are literally built on a sandbar, and storm surge is what's most dangerous to human life and most damaging to our community. Surge and flash flooding can turn life-threatening very quickly, especially in low-lying areas.

Residents should know their evacuation zone and never drive through flooded roadways. Even shallow water can be dangerous.

TY: What are some practical things every household should have ready before hurricane season reaches its peak?

BW: Every family should have enough supplies to be self-sufficient for at least seven days. That includes water, non-perishable food, medications, flashlights, batteries, pet supplies, and important documents stored safely. I'd also encourage people to think beyond the basics. Charge backup battery packs in advance, fuel vehicles early, and check on neighbors who may need assistance. Hurricane preparedness is about having yourself, your family, and your neighbors ready.

TY: Recently, the City's Director of Public Works, City Engineer, and myself attended Okaloosa County's Hurricane

Continued on page 45

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Meet Our Hometown Hero: Mia Manganello

A Proud Olympian Honored in Crestview by Okaloosa County America 250 Commission

By BARBARA PALMGREN

There is an old adage that “in each life, some rain must fall.” On May 9, after careful planning for a memorable parade in Crestview to honor the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the predicted rains did just that and soaked all of Okaloosa County.

The City of Crestview made the postponement decision on Wednesday, May 6, and Chairman Graham W. Fountain an-

Her parents, Dominic and Karen, owned an Italian restaurant named after her, Mia’s Italian Restaurant. While attending Walker Elementary School, she began inline skating at age 8. When her feet first touched ice, Mia knew what her goal would be. Her loving and motivated parents were ready for the challenge as well. In 2002, following the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics, her father drove her to Utah to attend an ice speed skating camp.

And the rest is — yes, there is more to the story. Even after taking a break from skating and competing internationally as a professional cyclist, her love for the ice drew her back to speed skating. In 2016, at the U.S. National Championships, she won the 3,000-meter race with a personal best and a national title.

In 2018, the City of Crestview held a ceremony at Warriors Hall and declared “Mia Manganello Day,” presenting her with



nounced the postponement after the decision was affirmed by a unanimous vote of the present members of the Okaloosa County America 250 Commission on Thursday, May 7. The parade will be rescheduled for the fall.

That being said, Mia Manganello, the parade’s grand marshal, was still going to be celebrated — in a drier location, of course. Mia, who lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, was in town to join the anniversary celebration. At 11 a.m. at The Loft on Main Street in Crestview, Mia was recognized for her Olympic achievements, her loyalty to Crestview and for being an inspiration to area youth.

One photo shows Mia with officers of the America 250 Commission: J.D. Peacock II, Graham W. Fountain and Mitzie Henley. Another photo includes Crestview Mayor J.B. Whitten.

Mia grew up in Crestview.



Milan-Cortina. Mia is the first American to win an Olympic medal in the mass start event. She is a three-time Olympian and a two-time bronze medalist in long-track speed skating.

Team USA, the City of Crest-



view and Okaloosa County can all be proud of this outstanding



athlete. During this anniversary year of the Declaration of Independence, the county and the nation once again extend thanks and honor to Mia Manganello — an inspiration to us all.

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Golf Series:

Kelly Plantation Jr. Classic Challenges Junior Golfers

By BARBARA PALMGREN

The ECJGT tour offers junior golfers the opportunity to gain experience at golf events all along the Gulf Coast. There are both two-day and one-day events, and on Sunday, May 17, the one-day event began with golfers teeing off around noon. This was not a shotgun start. All golfers started on the first hole. Sounds like a PGA event we were also watching on Sunday, doesn't it?

The only disadvantage is time. Long shadows late in the afternoon are often a challenge. With close to 70 golfers in a normal four-person group, this was a long, long day. Fortunately, the weather was beautiful and the scenery at Kelly Plantation was breathtaking. The course was also challenging, with water haz-

ards and bunkers waiting for an errant golf ball.

Athletes ranged in age from 8 to 18 years old, with boys and girls divisions. Sunday was a special qualifier for the top male and female golfers ages 15-18 for boys and 15-18 for girls to be invited to the USwing Mojing Junior World Golf Championship at Torrey Pines in San Diego, Calif., in July. Sunday's winners earning this honor and heading to California are Neely Kight with a score of 70 and Aiden Yang with a score of 71 for 18 holes.

Tournament Director Dennis Attaway has worked with young golfers since 2020. Dennis' two assistants helped throughout the day, and Kelly Plantation General Manager John Townsend had golf carts ready for spectators to

quietly watch future golf professionals.

Congratulations to the first and second place winners at the Kelly Plantation Junior Classic:

Boys 16-18: 1st-Nicolas Zaccagnino, 2nd-Lars Wiggins

Girls 15-18: 1st Neely Kight, 2nd-Elizabeth Palmer

Boys 14-15: 1st-Aiden Yang, 2nd-Copeland Gilmer

Girls 12-14: 1st- Rayna Perkins, 2nd-Copelyn Kinsey

Boys 12-13: 1st-Neyland Schmidt, 2nd-Thomas Rish

Girls 10-11: 1st-Evie Ile

Boys 10-11: 1st-Davis Grant, 2nd-Luke Stuart

Girls 8-9: 1st-Addison Som, 2nd-Ellerie Spain

Boys 8-9: 1st- Jett Jeter, 2nd-Dylan Barlow

Emerald Coast Open Removes More Than 20,000 Lionfish

The Gulf waters surrounding Destin-Fort Walton Beach are a little healthier this month thanks to more than 100 divers from across the country who participated in the 2026 Emerald Coast Open — now recognized as the world's largest lionfish tournament.

This year's tournament removed an impressive 20,752 invasive lionfish from Gulf waters surrounding the region's extensive artificial reef system.

The annual event paired conservation efforts with family-friendly entertainment during the Lionfish Festival at HarborWalk Village and a popular Restaurant Week featuring creative lionfish-inspired cuisine throughout the area.

"This free family-friendly event has brought divers from across the country to our amazing area since 2019," said Okaloosa County Board Chairman Trey Goodwin. "What our natural resources staff and partners have been able to do is remarkable. They have created a festive event for the community that also gives back to our marine ecosystem."

The tournament included a pre-event competition that yielded 5,734 lionfish, followed by the main two-day tournament earlier this month that added another 15,018 to the final total.

Behind AJ's Seafood and Oyster Bar at HarborWalk Village, divers lined up to have their catches measured and weighed as festivalgoers watched the action unfold



throughout the weekend.

Teams competed for more than \$100,000 in cash and gear prizes in categories including largest lionfish, smallest lionfish and most lionfish harvested.

Top winners included:

- Most Lionfish — DWM Off the Deep End with 2,641 lionfish

- Largest Lionfish — Lady Ray at 461 mm

- Smallest Lionfish — Nole Mercy Spearfishing at 56 mm

- Restaurant Week Winner — La Paz Restaurante & Cantina for the fourth consecutive year

One lucky attendee, Trenlon Harris, also won the "Guess How Many Lionfish Will Be Caught?" contest by guessing 15,014 — just four fish shy of the official tournament total of 15,018 during the main event.

Lionfish remain one of the Gulf's most problematic invasive species because they reproduce rapidly and have few natural predators in local waters. Divers armed with spears remain the most effective method for removing them from the ecosystem.

Complete standings and additional information can be found at www.emeraldcoastopen.com.

Learn more about Destin-Fort Walton Beach natural resource initiatives at www.destinfbw.com/explore/eco-tourism.

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Alaqua Gives Rescued Beagles a Second Chance National Rescue Effort Reaches Northwest Florida

BY LORI LEATH MILLER

A heartbreaking national animal rescue effort is now reaching Northwest Florida, where dozens of rescued laboratory beagles are beginning new lives only a short drive from Destin.

This month, Alaqua Animal Refuge in Freeport welcomed 20 rescued beagles from Ridgman Farms, a Wisconsin breeding and research facility that supplied dogs for laboratory testing. The group includes senior dogs as well as several believed to be pregnant, all now beginning an entirely different chapter of life.

The dogs are part of a much larger nationwide rescue operation involving approximately 1,500 beagles being relocated to shelters, rescues and foster programs across the country. Animal welfare organizations report hundreds of dogs may still remain at the facility as discussions continue regarding their future placement and care.

The large-scale rescue effort has drawn national attention and united numerous organizations, including the Center for Humane Economy, Big Dog Ranch Rescue, Beagle Freedom Project and the Dane County Humane Society.

For many of the dogs arriving at Alaqua, everyday experiences are completely new. "These beautiful dogs have never experienced life outside of a cage," said Laurie Hood, founder of Alaqua Animal Refuge and Florida state director for Animal Wellness Action. "They were born specifically for science — to be bred, poked and prodded, confined and used over and over again."

According to Alaqua staff, some of the beagles had never walked on grass, rested on soft bedding or experienced normal routines most pets take for granted. Rescue workers say several dogs initially appeared hesitant around affection and unfamiliar human interaction as they adjusted to their new surroundings.

Among the rescued dogs is a 14-year-old beagle believed to have spent its entire life inside the breeding operation. Despite their difficult beginnings, staff members say signs of hope appeared almost immediately.



"When the doors opened, literally they're all standing and their tails are wagging, and they're just happy to be alive," Hood said. "I don't think there was a dry eye in the whole house."

Several of the rescued beagles are expected to give birth soon either at Alaqua or in foster homes equipped for neonatal care. Either way, they will be cared for in safe, compassionate environments rather than research confinement.

For residents throughout

Destin and surrounding Okaloosa County communities, the rescue effort offers an opportunity to support a meaningful cause happening right here in Northwest Florida. Alaqua officials say community support will help provide veterinary treatment, rehabilitation, transportation and long-term care

for the rescued animals.

The refuge is also encouraging families to consider fostering, volunteering, donating or eventually adopting. Future adopters, the organization says, will need patience and understanding as many of the dogs continue learning basic trust and adjusting to life beyond confinement.

While the rescued beagles' difficult past has sparked emotional reaction nationwide, their arrival in Freeport also high-

lights the role local organizations continue playing in large-scale national rescue efforts. "These dogs are experiencing life for the first time," Hood

said. "Our responsibility is to ensure their next chapter is safe, compassionate and filled with dignity."



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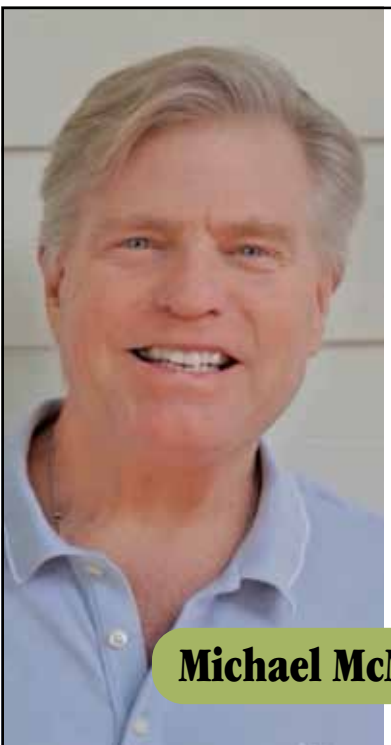


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Reclaiming Your Edge: Precision Performance and Long-Term Health



DR. RICHARD CHERN, MD

You're at the gym, pushing for that final set, but the explosive power just isn't there. Back at the office, you're staring at the same report for the tenth time, your focus drifting as a familiar cloud of irritability settles in. By 2:13 a.m., you're staring at the ceiling, heart racing, replaying the day's endless list while a thin layer of sweat cools on your skin.

It's easy to shrug this off as "just getting older," but this slow erosion of muscle, mood, and

mental sharpness is often a biological decline, not an inevitable part of aging. While national health trends often highlight mental health and sleep during specific awareness months, maintaining your peak performance is a year-round commitment to your biology.

Precision Performance, Not a Rollercoaster

At The Hormone Restoration Center, we use bioidentical pellets to optimize hormone levels so your body stops sabotaging your efforts. Unlike messy gels that can rub off on your family or weekly injections that cause emotional "spikes and crashes," pellets provide a steady, consistent release that mimics your body's natural rhythm.

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- **Tactical Recovery & Sleep:** When testosterone is low, sleep becomes "fragile". Pellets help your body optimize melatonin and lower nighttime cortisol so you aren't wide awake at 3 a.m. They stabilize your internal thermostat, meaning you wake up recharged rather than restless.
- **Muscle Retention & Physical Power:** Your physical foundation depends on testosterone

as the primary driver of protein synthesis. Optimized levels prevent your body from breaking down muscle for energy, helping you regain the strength, lean muscle mass, and recovery speed you need to perform at your best.

• **Long-Term Preventive Health:** Beyond immediate performance, optimization is an investment in your future. Maintaining healthy hormone levels has a protective effect on heart health and supports bone density, reducing the long-term risk of chronic decline.

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Reclaim your vitality and get back in the game. Call The Hormone Restoration Center at (850) 837-1271 to schedule your consultation and blood work.

Self-Care Corner: Glow from Head to Toe This Summer

BY KRISY WHITELY ANDERSON,
BEVERLY HILLS DAY SPA OWNER

As we step into the sunshine-filled days of summer, our skin faces a new set of challenges—more sun exposure, higher

humidity and increased outdoor activity. Now is the perfect time to refresh and prepare your skin for the season ahead, and one of the best ways to do that is with professional spa treatments de-

signed to revitalize both body and mind.

One of our favorite seasonal offerings is the NEW Glow O2 Facial, a cutting-edge treatment designed to boost your skin's

natural glow from the inside out.

When the facial's exfoliation pods combine with a special treatment gel, a gentle chemical reaction produces CO2 bubbles. This process, known as the Bohr effect, triggers your body to send a surge of oxygen-rich blood to the skin's surface. The result is increased oxygenation, improved circulation and a refreshed, youthful appearance.

Perfect for brightening dull, tired skin or preparing for a special event, wedding or summer celebration, the Glow O2 Facial helps you step into the season glowing with confidence. **In fact, Destin Life Publisher Lori Miller experienced the Glow O2 Facial the day before her recent wedding and loved the results.** Her skin looked radiant, refreshed and photo-ready, making it an ideal treatment for brides or anyone wanting to look their best for a special occasion.

The Glow O2 Facial is just one of several seasonal treatments featured in our Summer Specials menu:

Summer Bliss Massage — \$95: A beautiful array of citrus oils is diffused during this 60-minute massage with hot



towels, leaving you in a sunshine bliss. Includes a complimentary back scrub.

Glow O2 Facial — \$150: Our oxygen-infused skincare treatment brightens, hydrates and revives the skin for an instant radiant glow. Includes a complimentary 20-minute Red Light Therapy session.

CBD Therapeutic Massage — 60 Minutes \$105 | 90 Minutes \$140: Relieve pain, reduce inflammation and ease tension with plant-derived compounds that warm muscles and promote relaxation. Your body—and your mind—will thank you.

Glow Getter Summer Scrub — \$125: Remove dead



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Continued on page 37

Rebuilding Lives After a Stroke: The Power of Post-Acute Rehabilitation

By TERESA HALVERSON

Recovery after a stroke doesn't end when a patient leaves the hospital – in many ways, that's when the real work and recovery begin. Post-Acute stroke rehabilitation is critical because it helps survivors regain lost abilities, adapt to new challenges, and restore as much independence as possible. Through targeted physical, occupational, and speech therapy services, patients can rebound strength, improve coordination and mobility as well as communication skills. Just as importantly, post-acute rehabilitation supports emotional and cognitive healing, helping individuals cope with life changes a stroke can bring. Early and consistent therapy not only improves physical and cognitive recovery, but also helps reduce the risk of complications and hospital readmissions. For many stroke survivors, this phase of care is the bridge between survival and truly living again.

Guidance from the National Stroke Association emphasizes that recovery, after a stroke, is a



long-term process that requires active participation from the patient and family/caregivers. One of the most important recommendations is to begin rehabilitation as early as possible and remain consistent with therapy, as early intervention is closely linked to better outcomes. (<https://www.stroke.org>)

Post-acute rehabilitation is not only vital for the patient's recovery, it also has a profound impact on family members and caregivers. For patients, this phase of care provides the structured support needed to

regain as much independence as possible, preventing complications from falls, and rebuilds confidence in performing everyday activities. The ultimate goal of post-acute care is to assist the patient's best possible chances of returning to their prior level of function.

For families, post-acute rehabilitation offers education, guidance, training and peace of mind during what is often an overwhelming time. Caregivers learn how to safely assist with daily tasks, manage medications, and recognize warning

signs of any potential complications. This support reduces stress, prevents caregiver burnout, and fosters a more positive recovery environment at home. Effective post-acute care strengthens outcomes for both the patient and their support system, turning recovery into a shared, supported journey rather than an uncertain path.

Neurologists play a key role in monitoring the type and severity of the stroke, monitoring complications, and managing any underlying conditions. In collaboration with the post-acute

clinical team and primary care physicians, neurologists help tailor rehabilitation plans based on the patient's neurological status and recovery potential. Their continued involvement ensures that care remains coordinated, proactive and responsive to any changes, giving patients and families greater confidence and support throughout the recovery journey.

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 Wellness



By KAY LEAMAN, HEALTH ARCHITECT, CERTIFIED NUTRITION ADVISOR, HEALTHYDAY HEALTHYLIFE

Ah, the joy of reading a label; it can truly make us wonder what all the names we can't pronounce are and if they're safe. Learning to use the information contained on a label for our benefit can cut our shopping time and improve our health.

Let's start with the label itself.

It is broken up into six categories.

- **Servings** - The label is based on a serving, so knowing how many servings are in the container is important. Here is an example of a popular soda drink: Serving size 12 oz., calories 150, sodium 55, carbohydrates 40, protein 0, servings per container 6. If you plan to consume 24 oz., multiply the above numbers by 2.

- **Tool Chest:** Total carbohydrates divided by 4 = total teaspoons of sugar. In this scenario, you would be consuming 20 tsp. of sugar. A single serving of a tasty yogurt has 6.25 tsp. of sugar.

- **Calories** - Important if you are watching how many you eat.

- **Carbohydrates** - There are good and bad carbohydrates.

The Wonder of Labels

- **Tool Chest:** Focus on carbs from nature and cut back on the carbs from factories.

- **Fats** - Choose olive or avocado oil and cut back on processed oils. Do your due diligence on olive oil, as many of them are mixed with other oils and currently don't need to note it on the label. Also consider using real butter versus fake butter (better known as Vaseline). Natural will always be a better choice.

- **Protein** - Needs to be a quality protein to count toward daily intake.

- **Nutrients** - Tool Chest: The percentage listed is the recommended dietary allowance. This amount is the minimum the body needs to prevent a deficiency disease such as scurvy. It is not the optimal amount the body needs to function at its best.

Now, for some ingredients.

Ingredients are listed in order of percentage from most to least. This category is an ongoing struggle due to the lack of strict guidelines. The corn industry has invested millions of dollars in defense of High Fructose Corn Syrup. With their help, this ingredient is now disguised under these syrup names as well: corn, maize, glucose, tapioca, fruit, crystalline, isoglucose, dahlia or invert sugar. And there are others.

Sugar has more than 65 different names, and often there are several sugars in a product. Rather than trying to remember them, use the carbohydrate equation above and then determine if you are willing to consume that amount.

Dyes are next on the list. These are chemical substances used to enhance the appearance

of foods. They are normally reds, blues and yellows. They can be found in candy, sports drinks, frosting and baked goods, popsicles, condiments, cereal, sauces, preserved fruits, ice cream, packaged soups, snacks and canned peas. I buy my pickles from the international aisle. They are the only ones I've found that don't have yellow dye added.

BHA (butylated hydroxyanisole) and **BHT** (butylated hydroxytoluene) are antioxidants, synthetic preservatives made from petroleum and used in the food and manufacturing industries. They are found in food and cosmetics. They are prohibited in the EU and listed as known carcinogens. Canada Chemical Management states they are harmful to the environment. They are potential endocrine disruptors. I have found them listed just below the ingredients.

Tool Chest: A great place to start when reading ingredients is to pick a couple of labels of what you need and compare the number of ingredients. The longer list goes back on the shelf. Next, look for dyes and preservatives. After that, look for the hidden names for High Fructose Corn Syrup.

Changing out your "go-to" brands can be daunting, so pick a couple of things each time you go to the store and take some time to find your new healthier brand. I have found healthier options in the international aisle for some products. Many canned goods have sugar, but there are labels that don't.

Every choice we make can affect our health. This journey can be frustrating at times, but it's important to remember that little changes can make a big difference. Be patient and kind to yourself and enjoy the wonder of labels.

Here's to Health! succeed.hdh1@gmail.com



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Love Connection More Than Being Right



BY STEPHENIE CRAIG

Do you find yourself grumbling about people doing things the wrong way? If they would just do or see things the right way, which just happens to be your way, the world would be a much better place. If slow drivers would drive in the right lane, if your friend would understand your intentions and know you weren't trying to hurt them, if your family would load the dishwasher correctly, if people would vote the right way, if others would move through the world living the same way as you — the right way — the world would be right.

While it is important to clarify and live by your beliefs, not everyone is going to share your perspective, practices, faith, personality and preferences. In fact, even your closest people might prioritize and live differently than you. You can choose to use energy judging, being frustrated with and trying to control or shame the behavior of others. Or, you can accept there are many ways to be a person and the only person you can control is yourself.

How people live is based on personality, personal strengths, upbringing, faith background, education, geographic location, social culture, mentoring relationships, personal mistakes and personal experiences. Once layered together, you find many expressions of being human, some of which create discomfort for you. Discomfort is, by nature, challenging and can motivate you to believe the solution is to change others to be more like you and admit you are right. In reality, interacting with people who are different from you is actually one of life's greatest growth tools.

When you encounter differences, you can judge, distance yourself, grumble or you can learn to seek curiosity, understanding, kind communication

and acknowledgment of humanity in disagreement. Respecting differences does not mean abandoning your values. Instead, it means acknowledging that both you and the other person can be lovable human beings while expressing values differently. It also means choosing between prioritizing being right or being meaningfully connected to others. I often tell couples in my office, "You can keep prioritizing being right and eventually split up, or you can loosen your grip on being right and prioritize curiosity about the other person's experience."

So, how do you loosen your grip on being seen as right and pursue understanding and connection while still living by your values?

7 Ways to Love Connection More Than You Love Being Right

1. Explore and clarify your own values. Think about how your values have been shaped, what your values are and what makes your values important to you. Reflect on how it feels when others respect your values versus when others minimize, shame or disrespect them.

2. Notice differences. Notice when you find yourself frustrated, irritated or judging someone who is living differently from you. Notice any instincts to belittle others or assume negative things about the personhood of those doing things differently.

3. Remember what you can control and what you can't. You have been put in charge of managing your thoughts, feelings, behavior,



choices and boundaries. You have not been given any control over others' thoughts, feelings, behavior, choices or boundaries. Try moving toward a deep acceptance of placing your energy where it belongs and letting go of trying to control others.

4. Reach for curiosity over judgment. Try asking genuine, curious questions seeking to understand how others have arrived at different conclusions about how they live. Seek to humbly grow and learn from these conversations rather than assuming you have everything figured out. Wisdom is found in being both a learner and a teacher.

5. Pursue mutual respect. Hold to your own values, which will sometimes mean you disagree. Try speaking openly and kindly about the difference. Also, remember others embrace their values with as much conviction as you do. Respect their humanity as much as you would like them to respect yours in disagreement.

6. Evaluate your intentions. Discern when it's time to

speak up about what you believe is right from a place of care, advocacy and love versus the urge to speak from a place of insecurity,

self-righteousness or a need to be seen as right.

7. Lean into connection. Remember people need connection with God and others. Remember that God loves each person and does not fear value conflicts. Treat others with the love and patience God extends to you as you imperfectly navigate life.

Be honest and kind with yourself and others as you address patterns around being right and being connected. Learning to prioritize connection over being right can be both relationship- and life-changing. Connect with us along your journey for counseling and coaching at JourneyBravely.com.

SELF CARE

continued from page 34

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Business

Mr. Nick Azzarita Wins HVAC From A Superior Mechanical

By MARTA ROSE THORPE

A Superior Mechanical recently held its inaugural Veterans & First Responders Appreciation Lunch in Okaloosa County. “We were blown away by the attendance of Veterans from every branch and local First Responders,” shared Jimmy Thorpe, founder of this 24-year-old, veteran-owned business. The HVAC winner,

Mr. Nick Azzarita, served 20 years in the US Air Force in the Korean War and in Vietnam. The following 20 years, he served as a math teacher at Niceville High School. “To say this gentleman is humble is an understatement,” shared event organizer Marta Thorpe. “There couldn’t have been a nicer human being to win this.” Thank you to event spon-

sors: Beachworx, Chelco, Blaken Financial Management, NHance Cabinet Makeovers, United Community Bank, One Beach Real Estate specializing in Homes For Heroes, Randy Wise Homes, Gulf Coast State College VBOC, and Okaloosa Vet Center. Also present at the event was the Chamber Choir from Rocky Bayou Christian School, the Niceville High



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School ROTC, and a beautiful invocation by Pastor Dave Butler. “Big thanks to Jeff and Christi at the Niceville Community Center,” added Marta. Save the date for the next Appreciation Lunch: Tuesday,

October 20, 2026. For information on sponsoring, contact Marta Thorpe at (850) 814-3822. For general information visit us at ASuperiorMechanical.com.

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A Superior Mechanical to Host Its Second Appreciation Lunch in October

The Walton and Okaloosa communities are coming together again to give recognition and thanks to our first responders, veterans, and active military. A Superior Mechanical will hold its next Veterans and First Responders Appreciation Lunch at the Niceville Community Center, 204 Partin Drive North, Niceville, FL 32578 on Tuesday, October 20, 2026. Doors open at 11 a.m.; Lunch and the program will begin promptly at 11:30 a.m.

During the event, A Superior Mechanical will donate a new AC system complete with installation to one First Responder or Veteran in need. This giveaway is open to all who have served in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and all first responders including EMT/Medics, Police, Sheriffs and Fire Fighters. Register to win at ASuperiorMechanical.com and go to About Us > Hvac Giveaway.

Local businesses are invited and encouraged to donate

door prizes and giveaways. A Superior founder Jimmy Thorpe says he hopes this giveaway serves as an example of how others can give back. “We wanted to somehow give back to others, and decided to give back what we have: AC systems.”

The event includes a delicious hot lunch catered by Swiftly Catered, a brief welcome from the sponsors and supporters, and the AC Giveaway. This event is supported and sponsored by the City of Niceville and Niceville Community Center, Niceville High School (who will present the colors), Rocky Bayou Christian School (who will sing the National Anthem), Chelco, United Community Bank, NHance Cabinet Makeovers, One Beach Real Estate, and Beachworx Co-Working Spaces. Walton and Okaloosa County businesses are encouraged to sponsor; for more information contact Marta Thorpe at (850) 814-3822.

What Business Buyers Are Really Looking For



BY NATALIE KESSLER, LICENSED REAL ESTATE BROKER

You've spent years building your business. But when a buyer walks through the door, they don't see what you see. They see risks and rewards — and one underlying question driving everything they do: Will this still work without the current owner?

That's the lens. Here's what they're actually evaluating.

Clean Books Signal a Clean Business

Before a buyer gets excited about your concept or location, they'll dig into three years of financials. Messy or inconsistent books don't just complicate due diligence — they make buyers nervous. Nervous buyers lower their offers or walk away. A business with clean, auditable financials will often command a higher multiple than one earning the same amount with books that require explanation. If you've been running personal expenses through the business, start separating them now.

Owner Dependency Is the #1 Dealbreaker

If you took two weeks completely off the grid tomorrow, would the business run? Buyers aren't looking to purchase a 70-hour-a-week job. They're buying a system — employees who know their roles, documented processes, supplier relationships that aren't tied to your personal contacts, and customers loyal to the business rather than to you. The more the business runs on structure rather than heroics, the more it's worth.

Customer Concentration Is a Hidden Risk

If one client represents 30–40% of your revenue, buyers will price that risk into their offer — or walk. No single customer should represent more than 15–20% of total sales. The same logic applies to key suppliers, lease terms, and indispensable employees. Single points of failure make buyers nervous.

What Gets Buyers to Act

In our experience, buyers move fast when they feel three things: that the numbers are real, that the business can survive a transition, and that they're not the only one looking. The deals that drag on for months — or fall apart — usually involve one of those three elements missing.

If you're thinking about selling in the next one to three



years, the window to improve these fundamentals is now — not the week you decide to list.

Our office works with business owners at every stage of that process. Whether you want a free opinion of value today or a roadmap for getting ready to sell, we're happy to have that conversation. Call 850.588.1025 or email nataie.kessler@fcbb.com.

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 Musing

A Pastor's Ponderings: Cry For Those You Love



BY PASTOR DAVE HOLLAND

“As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, ‘If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace. Luke 19:41-42, NIV

Jesus dismounted the donkey, looked over Jerusalem...and wept. The road to resurrection always passes through tears. Before Easter morning came the sorrow of a Savior who grieved for His people. They could not

see what would bring them peace.

Across the centuries, Christ's tears still echo. And the question remains for us: Who are you willing to weep for?

The mark of spiritual maturity is learning to pray for others. Prayer lifts our eyes beyond ourselves. It rises above denominations, politics, and divisions. God reigns above all, and prayer touches the heart of God.

Sometimes prayer comes with tears.

Many years ago, I was eighteen years old and kneeling at the altar in my home church after the worship service. The organ played softly as people lingered in prayer after the service. The air hung thick as the burgundy carpet beneath our feet.

As I prayed, I heard someone nearby weeping loudly. Honestly, it bothered me. The crying

grew louder. This woman was making quite a scene: Lady, could you quiet down? I'm trying to pray here.

Then I turned to look. An elderly woman was behind me, and she was crying—for me. I was stunned. That woman's prayer changed my life. Not because she preached to me. Not because she corrected me. She prayed for me.

Passionately.

Something inside me shifted and I wept. Prayer is not merely a quiet religious exercise—it's love expressed before God. I want to pray for others like that woman. I want to pray and weep like Jesus. At some point, life has to stop being about me.

Why did Jesus stop His triumphal entry to weep over Jerusalem? Because the people were missing their moment of visitation. They saw the parade...but



missed the Prince of Peace.

Jesus mourned because they could not see the path that would lead them to life. People who pray often see what others

miss. Prayer gives vision and reveals God's path forward. Prayer brings light into dark places.

The same “shift” I felt at age 18 is what leaders like President Abraham Lincoln needed to navigate dark places. Lincoln understood the power of prayer. Before Gettysburg, he reportedly withdrew alone and prayed earnestly for God's help. Victory came, and Gettysburg became a turning point in the Civil War.

Our need for prayer is no less urgent today. Broken homes. Neighbors struggling with addictions. Loneliness all around us. The wounds are everywhere.

The prophet Ezra understood this burden, “While Ezra prayed and made this confession, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God... the people gathered around him and wept bitterly.” (Ezra 10:1, NIV) Revival often begins with passionate prayer.

Who will weep for children growing up in broken homes?

Who will pray for those trapped in addiction?

Who will cry out for wandering sons and daughters?

Who will intercede for our churches, our communities, our nation?

Who will pray for the young people how the elderly woman prayed for me?

Jesus wept. And perhaps sometimes... so should we.

Christ's tears paved the road to His resurrection. Who will cry out to God today?

Dave Holland pastored churches for 38 years before retiring in Destin, Florida. His new book, Resurrection Jesus, is now available. You can get a copy of his books from his website, DaveHolland.org, or at Amazon.com. Pastor Dave is available to preach and teach at churches and conferences. Contact him at DavidvHolland54@gmail.com.



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Sean of the South: Letter from a 4th Grader – Dad



BY SEAN DIETRICH

I get a lot of letters from kids. Such as the letter that came yesterday, via snail mail. It was penned in a childish hand.

“My teacher reads your stories to our class sometimes and I wanted to know, can you write about me? If it’s not too much trouble for you to do?”

“I am in fourth grade. I don’t really have anything cool about me. I have red hair. But you can probably come up with something cool. My dad died this year the same way yours did, so my teacher said you are the same as me. It’s okay if you can’t write back.”

To the little boy who wrote to me: Red is the most prestigious hair color in the world. That is not an opinion.

Fifty years ago, experts estimated that redheads made up approximately 8 percent of the earth’s population. But the percentage of redheads sharply decreases each year.

This year, the percentage is at an all-time low. About 1 percent of the world’s population have red hair. Ours is the rarest hair color in the solar system. So welcome to the club, friend.

Our red hair is caused by a gene called the MC1R gene. Genes are microscopic very

scientific things in the human body. They float around in your bloodstream, wearing little lab coats and carrying around tiny clipboards and pocket protectors.

A gene is something your parents carry around with them, all the time. Sort of like auto insurance, only more dependable.

So if both your parents had the MC1R gene, this means that you have a 25 percent chance of being born with red hair.

Congratulations, your parents both had the MC1R gene. You’re a ginger. May God have mercy on your soul.

I got my red hair, personally, from my dad. My dad had the MC1R gene. He was a redhead. He came from a long line of redheads. Although when he got older, his hair became more auburn.

That’s something they don’t tell you about red hair. The pigment changes throughout your lifetime. In fact, red hair will never go gray. The pigment will only fade over time and appear white, or even blond. My hair



has change shades thrice in my lifetime.

Of course, my father didn’t live long enough to find out what his hair would do.

My dad was very special. Everyone liked him. He was a good man who loved baseball, old movies and jokes. He had a prodigious memory when it came to jokes. He had a million of them.

“Yesterday, I went to buy camo hunting pants, I couldn’t find any.”

“When life gives you melons, you might be dyslexic.”

“Adam was a Southern Baptist, because only a Baptist could stand next to a naked woman and be tempted by fruit.”

“What’s the difference between ignorance and apathy? I

don’t know and I don’t care.”

My old man would have my little friends rolling on the ground. He was pretty great.

My dad coached our Little League team. He showed up to every practice with a World-War-II era duffel bag, filled with bats and balls and gloves. Our team was made up of a bunch of underprivileged kids. My father sought these unfortunate boys out.

Daddy would recruit kids from the sticks, boys who came from families without squat. Each year, our team would hold fundraisers so that every underprivileged boy had a nice, brand new uniform. My father gave them all free baseball gloves and free bats for Christmas.

This kind of thing was important to my father because he, too, grew up underprivileged. He knew what it meant to have nothing.

Before every practice, my father would drive his Ford all over town, picking up youngsters from squalid homes that featured blue tarps on the rooftops.

We boys rode in the bed of his F-100, happy as larks. Afterward, we all ate ice cream from Dairy Queen. Daddy paid for the ice cream. Because that’s the kind of guy my paw was.

I’ll bet your dad was pretty great, too.

So don’t remember your father by the way he died. Don’t let your dad’s life be defined by the word “suicide.” Your father was much more than an ugly word. Your father was a great man.

Today, your father lives with God himself. Just like mine. Your daddy was awesome. He carried some pretty great genes, too. We know this to be true because he helped make you.

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 Musing

STEVE DOOCY

continued from page 16

Florida, we often hear readers say they appreciate stories that celebrate people, businesses and communities making a difference. It turns out Doocy hears much of the same feedback from FOX & Friends viewers.

“I think people love the segments because they’re positive,” he said. “There’s a lot of news on, and a lot of it is not great news. What I hear when I travel around the country is that people appreciate hearing stories about communities, businesses and people doing good things.”

One recent example came after a Route 66 broadcast. Doocy recalled a woman approaching him after the series aired. “She said, ‘I just wanted to tell you

how much I loved that series,’” he remembered. “‘There’s just not enough good news out there.’” He paused and smiled while recounting the moment. “That’s a good report card.”

Those positive stories often create real-world impacts as well. Doocy shared how small businesses featured during FOX & Friends road trips sometimes see visitors arrive from across the country months or even years later. Recalling one Florida restaurant owner in particular, Doocy said one of the most rewarding aspects of the road trips is seeing the lasting impact on small businesses. “People would come in and say, ‘I saw you on TV,’” he said.

After more than three decades of commuting into New York television studios, Doocy

said life on the road still brings a sense of adventure. “When you’re driving into New York every day for 30 years, you know exactly how it’s going to go,” he said. “Out here, you never know what’s going to happen. You’re going to meet interesting people, hear some great stories and probably have a few surprises along the way.” That unpredictability is part of what keeps the broadcasts fresh.

Doocy said one of the things he looks forward to most when the show travels is the enthusiasm of local viewers. “They’re so excited when we first walk in with the cameras rolling,” he said. “And the excitement really doesn’t diminish.”

In Destin, that enthusiasm was amplified by FOX & Friends’ nationwide America’s

250 RV giveaway, which had generated enormous local interest. “Everybody wants to win it,” Doocy said. “I don’t blame them. It’s a really nice vehicle.”

Perhaps nowhere was Doocy’s pride more evident than when discussing his son, Peter Doocy, now one of the most recognizable White House correspondents in America. When I asked how it feels watching his son follow in his footsteps, his voice immediately softened. “We’re really proud of him,” Doocy said. “In the beginning, we never pushed him into this business because it’s a complicated industry. But he’s worked hard, he’s done a great job and it’s exciting watching him succeed.” At the time of our interview, Peter was traveling internationally with the president. Like any parent, Steve watches closely.

Like any grandparent, he was equally happy discussing his grandchildren. A grandfather for only a few years, he smiled while talking about his young grandchildren and admitted there is nothing quite like the experience.

For all the excitement surrounding national television, RV giveaways and coast-to-coast broadcasts, those moments may have revealed the most about who Steve Doocy really is. By the end of our conversation, I found myself hoping this wouldn’t be Steve Doocy’s last visit to the Emerald Coast.

What was scheduled to be a short interview stretched into a much longer conversation about



family, food, local communities, television and the stories that connect us. In a profession where interviews can sometimes feel rushed, scripted or transactional, our conversation felt more like catching up with an old friend who happened to have spent the last three decades on national television. It was one of the most enjoyable and genuinely pleasant interviews I’ve conducted. And I think he had fun, too!

Before ending our conversation, I asked if there was anything he wanted local readers to know. His answer was simple. “Thank you for the wonderful welcome and the great rollout,” he said. “We really appreciate it.”

By the end of our conversation, Doocy wasn’t talking about ratings, television production or celebrity. He was talking about communities. About local businesses. About people gathering together. About stories worth telling. “Every story is local,” he said.

And in a place like Destin, that’s a story worth telling.

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MODERN MEN

continued from page 4

well for the people who depend on them.

“How do I know if something is actually wrong?”

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The Bigger Picture

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vascular health, maintaining clarity, preserving muscle and mobility, improving resilience, and building sustainable habits.

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Health optimization isn’t just for athletes or people in crisis. It’s for everyday men who want to feel well, function well, and stay ahead of preventable decline.

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Around Town

Four Appointed to NWFSC Board

Gov. Ron DeSantis appointed Todd Jackson and Jonathan Ochs and reappointed Megan Harrison and Dr. Jon Ward to the Northwest Florida State College District Board of Trustees.

Jackson serves as CEO of HCA Florida Twin Cities Hospital. Ochs is Coastal Region President of Gulf Coast Bank & Trust Company. Harrison is president and CEO of the Walton Area Chamber of Commerce and owner of TailGrayton Beach Outfitters. Ward is a dermatologist with Dermatology Specialists of Florida.

The appointments are subject to confirmation by the Florida Senate.

OCSA Launches Aerospace Career Program

The Okaloosa County School District and Space Florida recently launched the Space Florida Academy Program, designed to help students earn industry-recognized credentials and prepare for high-demand careers



From left: Superintendent Marcus Chambers and Space Florida President/CEO Rob Long, seated at the table with Okaloosa students standing behind them.

in aerospace and related fields.

The partnership was formalized during TeCMEN Industry Day in Fort Walton Beach with the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Space Florida President and CEO Rob Long and Superintendent Marcus Chambers.

The program supports career pathways in aviation and aerospace, advanced manufacturing, construction, cybersecurity and IT, logistics and semiconductors. Learn more at SpaceFlorida.gov/workforce-initiatives.

Billy Bowlegs Parade Winners Announced

The Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce announced the winners of the



Life Media's Denise David served as judge liaison for the 70th annual Billy Bowlegs Torchlight Parade, helping celebrate one of the Emerald Coast's most cherished traditions.

70th annual Billy Bowlegs Torchlight Parade held May 18 in Fort Walton Beach, marking a milestone year for one of the Emerald Coast's longest-running community traditions.

Winners included The 5 Ride, Inc. (Truck/Car/Van), 850 Social Babes (Float), Krewe of Dominique Youx (Krewe) and Panhandle United Roller Derby (Walkers).

Life Media's Denise David served as judge liaison during the parade at the Fort Walton Beach

Landing, helping coordinate the judging process and celebrate the creativity and community spirit on display throughout the evening. "One of my favorite parts was seeing generations of families lining the streets together and cheering on the participants," Denise said. "You could really feel the pride, tradition and sense of community that make Billy Bowlegs so special. It was such an honor to help celebrate a tradition that has brought people together for generations."

Toastmasters Celebrates Successful Year

The Destin-South Walton Toastmasters Club will celebrate its 2025-26 accomplishments during its "Finishing Strong Together" meeting on June 16.

Toastmasters International helps members build leadership and public speaking skills through prepared speeches, impromptu speaking exercises and evaluations. The club meets at 6 p.m. on the first and third Tuesdays of each month at South Walton Utility Company, 369

Miramar Beach Drive. Guests are welcome. For information, visit dsw.toastmastersclubs.org.

America 250 History Contest Student Winners

The Okaloosa County School District announced that two middle school students earned top honors in the Plank Schlitt Middle School United States History Writing Contest, part of the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida's America 250 celebration commemorating the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

The contest invited students to explore the enduring significance of the Declaration of Independence and reflect on its impact on life in the United States today. It is named in honor of two longtime Okaloosa County U.S. history teachers who continued supporting the Heritage Museum after retiring from Niceville High School.

Lilly Lopez of Destin Middle School earned first place,

Continued on next page



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Arts & Music

Summer on the Green at ECTC

By Cameron Hughes

Summer is teeing up for an unforgettable day on the course as Emerald Coast Theatre Company hosts its first-ever Charity Golf Tournament on Monday, June 29 at Noon at the exclusive Burnt Pine Golf Club in Sandestin. Benefitting ECTC

Youth Education Programs, this exciting inaugural event will bring together community leaders, local businesses, golf lovers, and supporters of the arts for an afternoon packed with great food, drinks, prizes, live entertainment and giving back to the next generation of performers.

Known as the crown jewel of Florida golf, Burnt Pine Golf Club offers a breathtaking course experience overlooking the Choctawhatchee Bay, featuring rolling fairways, stunning natural scenery, and one of the most sought-after private golf destinations in the region. Players will enjoy an elevated tournament experience from start to finish, including lunch provided by Firehouse Subs before play begins and post-tournament food included following the event.

Throughout the day, golfers can also enjoy complimentary beverages provided by Tito's Handmade Vodka, Birdie Cocktails, and Odd Pelican Beer Company while networking, competing, and supporting arts

education along the Emerald Coast. Every player will receive one free mulligan, and excitement will build across the course with contests, prizes, and more throughout the tournament.

One of the biggest highlights of the day will be the Hole-In-One Challenge, where players will have the opportunity to win a Rolex watch — provided by McCaskill & Company.


Proceeds from the tournament directly support Emerald Coast Theatre Company's Youth Education Programs, helping provide camps, classes, top teaching talent, scholarships, and training opportunities that inspire creativity, confidence, and community in young performers that carries far beyond the stage.

ECTC would also like to extend a heartfelt thank you to the generous outpour from our sponsors and supporters who are making this inaugural event possible: Alice and Jerry Zich, Jim and Tammy Pierce, Chancey Design Architecture, Seaside Sport, McGill Escrow & Title, Shades Bar & Grill, The Agency, Cafe Thirty-A, Jennifer Crawford with Own at the Beach Keller Williams, and Dave and Jo Menary.

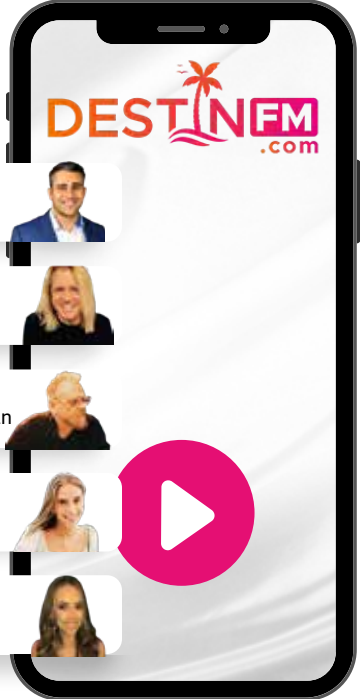
Sponsorship opportunities and team registrations are still available, and community support is already helping make this inaugural tournament one of the standout celebrations of the summer.

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AROUND TOWN

continued from previous page

while Aisha Ramirez of Pryor Middle School earned second place, demonstrating exceptional writing, historical understanding and creativity. "We are incredibly proud of Lilly and Aisha for this outstanding achievement," said Superintendent Marcus Chambers. "Their hard work, thoughtful writing, and passion for history reflect the excellence we see in our students across Okaloosa County. These young ladies represented their schools and our district exceptionally well."

Destin Middle School Principal Mandy Lopez shared both professional and personal pride in Lilly's accomplishment. "At DMS, we are proud to develop students who can think critically, write with purpose, and commu-



(From left) Lilly Lopez of Destin Middle School and Aisha Ramirez of Pryor Middle School are pictured with representatives from the Okaloosa County School District and the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida.

nicate their ideas effectively. Lilly's accomplishment reflects the strong work happening in our classrooms each day and the dedication of our teachers who continue to challenge and support student learning. And while I'm incredibly proud as principal, it is

a little more special that I also get to be her mom."

Pryor Middle School Principal Jason McClelland also praised Aisha's achievement. "Aisha's dedication and creativity demonstrate the bright future ahead for our students. We are proud of her for using her voice and talents to honor our nation's history."

The winning essays will be featured in the Heritage Museum's "Celebrate America 250! The Revolution" exhibit on July 4 at 11 a.m., giving the community an opportunity to view the students' work as part of the museum's Independence Day celebration.

The district congratulated Lilly Lopez and Aisha Ramirez and thanked the Heritage Museum of Northwest Florida for providing meaningful opportunities for students to engage with American history.

emerald coast theatre company Presents

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- KEN LUDWIG'S Dear JACK DEAR LOUISE** FEBRUARY 18-28
- FROZEN THE MUSICAL** MAY 6-23

OCS&D & MKAF Celebrate Student Talent at 2026 K-12 Art Show

The Okaloosa County School District (OCS&D), in partnership with the Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation (MKAF), hosted the 2026 K-12 Student Art Show in April at the Destin Fort Walton Beach Rigdon Center. The annual event showcased more than 2,000 student artworks from over 14 elementary schools and 15 secondary schools across the county.

2026 Best of Show & Superlative Winners:

Middle School 2D Best of Show – Hannah Leitheiser, Liza Jackson Preparatory School

Middle School 3D Best of Show – Olivia McClain, Lewis School

High School 2D Best of Show – Addie Kelly, Destin High School



From L to R: Ms. Kim Moran (Fort Walton Beach High School Art Teacher), Hannah Leitheiser, Oliva McClain, Addie Kelly, Sofia Perez, Ellie Aldrich, Lucia Schrand, and Superintendent Marcus Chambers



High School 3D Best of Show – Sofia Perez, Crestview High School

2D Superlative – Ellie Aldrich, Niceville High School

3D Superlative – Lucia Schrand, Destin High School

HURRICANE PREP

continued from page 30

Simulation Exercise alongside other emergency management partners. Those exercises help strengthen coordination, improve communication, and ensure we're prepared to respond quickly if our community needs assistance during a storm event. The County does a great job preparing these simulations and sessions.

BW: Those exercises are incredibly valuable, and I'm grateful our team continues to take part in them. Emergency response is only as strong as the relationships and communication built before a storm ever forms. When our staff sits down with County partners, first responders, utility providers, and neighboring municipalities to walk through realistic scenarios, it sharpens everyone's response and exposes any gaps we may need to address. Residents should feel confident knowing that the City of Destin and Okaloosa County work hand-in-hand throughout the year.

TY: The City also publishes a **Hurricane Guide** each year, which includes evacuation information, emergency contacts, supply checklists, shelter information, and preparedness tips for residents and businesses. **Residents can view the Guide on our website (www.cityofdestin.com).**

cityofdestin.com). There are a lot of great tips within it, and I especially think how the zones for evacuation work are helpful.

BW: I really encourage every household to take a few minutes to look through it. It's designed to be a one-stop resource so residents don't have to go searching across multiple websites when time matters most. Whether you're a longtime resident or brand new to Destin, the Guide pulls together the information you need to make informed decisions for your family and your property.

TY: If people prefer a hard copy of the Guide, we also have those available at City Hall. On a lighter note, the Guide also includes over 20 potential storm names. We even have a "Dolly" this year!

BW: While I love Dolly Parton...Let's hope Dolly, the hurricane, stays far away from the Emerald Coast! In all seriousness, the storm names are a good reminder that hurricane season is a long one, and we shouldn't let our guard down just because the early months are quiet. The most important thing residents can do is stay informed, stay prepared, and look out for one another. If we do those three things, Destin will continue to be one of the most resilient communities on the Gulf.



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 Community

Ask Destinites:

Mayor Says Possible Fourth of July Drone Show



BY PATRICIA LEE, OWNER,
WWW.DESTINITES.COM

This past month, in our targeted locals Facebook group, Destinites (www.Facebook.com/groups/Destinites), Mayor Bobby Wagner shared that a drone show could potentially be part of Destin's Fourth of July celebration.

Members enjoy hearing directly from the mayor and having an opportunity to share their opinions and suggestions. Below is a copy of his post, along with several responses from the community.

Mayor Bobby Wagner's Post

John Adams didn't ask for fireworks. He asked for illuminations.

"Pomp, parades, shows, games, sports, bells, bonfires and illuminations from one end of this continent to the other, from that time forward forever." — John Adams, July 3, 1776

"This year, I'm seeking to have Destin deliver on all of it. Sunrise ceremony, parade, veterans honored, bells, fire, illumination by drone show. For our vets. For our families. For our coast. For America. God bless Destin. God bless America."

Community Responses

1. "Me and my dogs are on board with this. I look forward to it."

2. "I think City Hall is about to get packed full. Don't have a problem with drones, but they are dangerous to our environment. How many drones were recovered from our water that crashed? Where will these drones be launched from, and will they be required to pay the fee as well? They can hit birds, people and buildings. See everyone at the next city meeting. Come early and bring chairs."

Mayor's Reply: "That is what democracy is all about. Will of the people. Council will have a firework contract, drone contract or a combination of

both to consider."

3. "I think that on the country's 250th anniversary, you should give serious consideration to tradition."

Mayor's Reply: "With so much input, positive and negative, I believe there will be much more than just consideration at the council meeting on June 1. Thank you for caring and speaking up. WE, together, make up our community and what we do with it."

4. "Soooo, are we stopping the Thursday night fireworks too ... or just the Fourth of July???"

Mayor's Reply: "The bi-weekly fireworks are done by HarborWalk Village, a private company, not the city. The city typically handles the Fourth of July and New Year's. While it is up to them if they would like to continue their shows with the new \$9,000-plus fee for each show, that is their decision to make. Ideally, I would like to work with them and the STEM/drone programs we have in our high schools to build out multiple drone shows to offset or replace their fireworks. But again, as a believer in the free market, it is up to them. I am here to help if they would like it."

5. "It's not like drones really help with dogs, etc. Every neighborhood has kids who will be shooting fireworks late into the night, just like always. Personally, I'd rather see a professional fireworks presentation over a drone show. It's been done, it was cool, but you only get one shot to celebrate 250 years as a nation!"

6. "While I like fireworks, I think the drones are definitely a cool show. I'm fine with either — not that my opinion is worth much."

Mayor's Reply: "It's worth one vote, just like everyone else! Thank you for your input."

7. "If the city does drones, then take the money we save to clean up Main Street! Like all the junk houses with trash and clean the sidewalks toward Indian Trail."

8. "Having both would be pretty nice, but I'm sure it's twice as expensive."

For Destin and the surrounding area, we invite you to join

our private, targeted group for locals and property owners at Facebook.com/groups/Destinites. We now have more than 12,700 members since launching in October 2018.

You can also visit our Local

Business Directory at Destinities.com, where more than 500 local businesses are listed, and learn more about advertising opportunities within our community group.

7th Special Forces Group Holds Inaugural Memorial Day Ceremony



Soldiers assigned to the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) gathered at Camp "Bull" Simons on May 21 for the unit's inaugural Memorial Day ceremony, honoring fallen service members and those who gave their lives in defense of the United States.

Held during U.S. Army Special Operations Command's Remembrance Week, the ceremony brought together Soldiers, leaders and family members to reflect on the sacrifices of fallen comrades and honor their enduring legacy. This year's observance focused on the themes "Remembrance: Victory and Valor" and "Special Operations Forces Contribution to America 250," recognizing the role special operations forces have played in defending the nation for nearly 250 years.

The ceremony included ceremonial honors and remarks emphasizing remembrance, service and commitment to the Special Forces Regiment.

"We honor the fallen not just with our words today, but with our actions every day," said Col. Leitner, command-

er of the 7th SFG(A). "Our dedication to readiness is the highest tribute we can pay to those soldiers who consistently demonstrated their resolve to defend freedom, and who gave their last full measure of devotion."

Soldiers observed moments of reflection throughout the ceremony to honor fallen service members and their sacrifices.

"Memorial Day is a reminder of the sacrifices made by those who came before us," said Staff Sgt. Jacob Bradford. "Their legacy continues to inspire our commitment to duty, service and the defense of others."

USASOC Remembrance Week honors fallen service members and the resilience of Gold Star families, ensuring their legacy endures. For the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), the ceremony reinforced the unit's commitment to remembering the cost of freedom and preserving the legacy of victory, valor and sacrifice.

(Source: U.S. Army article by Sgt. Elijah Florence)

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