



Photos courtesy St. Augustine Wild Reserve

St. Augustine Wild Reserve acquires new Kodiak bears

By NewsLine Staff
mail@floridanewsline.com

The St. Augustine Wild received two new Kodiak bear cubs (Ursus arctos middendorffi), “Denali” and “Naja” in November. The bear cubs were found wandering around the streets of Pensacola when they were six months old. Someone had smuggled them into the state and they escaped. After spending time at a rehab facility, they made their way to the St. Augustine Wild Reserve at the age of 18 months.

St. Aug Wild Reserve cont. on pg. 2



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Sporting JAX joins forces with Florida Elite Soccer Academy

By NewsLine Staff
mail@floridanewsline.com

Sporting JAX, the United Soccer League (USL) franchise group bringing women’s and men’s professional soccer to Northeast Florida, together with the Sporting JAX Foundation, has announced a collaboration to join forces with Florida Elite Soccer Academy. Together, they will create Sporting JAX Youth to establish one of the largest and most comprehensive youth-to-pro soccer pathways in the United States.

With more than 12,000 registered Florida Elite members across the First Coast and beyond, this merger will combine Florida Elite’s renowned youth and pre-professional programs with Sporting Jax’s professional-level operations, resulting in the state’s largest integrated youth and professional soccer platform. Beginning in January 2025, Florida Elite will transition to the Sporting JAX Youth brand, which will include a uniform redesign to align with Sporting JAX’s team colors.



Photos courtesy Sporting JAX
New and old uniforms for Sporting JAX and Florida Elite.

“We’ve worked closely with Florida Elite since our club’s formation in 2020, and we’re thrilled to combine with Florida’s largest and most successful youth soccer organization,” said Steve Livingstone, president and CEO of Sporting JAX. “We are honored that Florida Elite has chosen to combine

with the Sporting JAX Foundation to continue a joint non-profit operation, which will allow us to deliver a seamless transition for athletes from youth programs to professional soccer under the unifying Sporting JAX identity. We will also continue to welcome

Sporting JAX Florida Elite Soccer cont. on pg. 2

Rotary helps Betty Griffin Center with its life-changing mission

By Rotarian Al Kalter
mail@floridanewsline.com

The Rotary Club of Bartram Trail – Julington Creek is proud to support the Betty Griffin Center as one of the local nonprofit agencies that makes a significant difference in people’s lives. Combining club funds with a grant from Rotary District 6970, the Rotarians presented a check for \$8,500 to the Betty Griffin Center. This gift will be used to support the restoration of 10 rooms in the 54-bed emergency shelter where the agency provides services for men, women and children impacted by domestic and sexual assault.

In addition to operating a safe and secure shelter for victims and survivors,



Photo courtesy Al Kalter
Bartram Trail Rotarians and Betty Griffin Center staff celebrate Rotary’s donation in support of renovation projects at the Betty Griffin House.

the Betty Griffin Center manages a Rape Crisis Unit at Flagler Hospital and

Rotary Betty Griffin Center cont. on pg. 2



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Sporting JAX Florida Elite Soccer cont. from pg. 1
other local youth clubs and academies to ensure access to all resources that elevate soccer throughout the region.”

Founded in 2014, Florida Elite Soccer Academy has earned a reputation as one of the premier youth soccer organizations in the country, offering programs from recreational, junior

and development leagues to competitive programs through USL League 2 (men) and W-League (women) teams. Led over the past decade by president Steven Mail and executive director Sean Bubbs, its players have achieved national recognition through college scholarships, championships, participation in the U.S. Men’s and Women’s National Team and other International



team programs.
Over the next several months, the organizations will work closely to integrate programs, rebrand operations and establish a unified, seamless pipeline for athletes to reach their full potential at every level of the sport. Sporting JAX is steadfast in its commitment to transparency and open communication with players, families, coaches and staff.

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Rotary Betty Griffin Center cont. from pg. 1
provides confidential counseling and support groups. They also have staff and volunteers providing additional support including court advocacy, legal assistance, financial counseling and other services to help survivors overcome the trauma of domestic or sexual assault and return to a normal life as soon as possible.
The Rotary Foundation is one of the largest charitable organizations in the world, and consistently is recognized as a Four-Star Charity by Charity Naviga-

St. Aug Wild Reserve cont. from pg. 1
Kodiak bears are the largest of the bears; males weigh in at 1,500 pounds when full grown. Found only on Kodiak Island and nearby islands off the Alaskan coast, these bears are not only the world’s largest bear, but are the world’s largest land carnivore. While they resemble grizzlies, the Kodiak is larger and their ranges do not overlap.
Kodiak bears require special housing. The Reserve is building an 80-foot long, 12 foot tall habitat for them. They also require a special water tank. A \$5,000 cement tank has been purchased for them, which will be delivered this week, so that the requirements set forth by Florida Fish and Wildlife are met.
At the St. Augustine Wild Reserve, visitors are educated about the plight of wild bears, tigers and other endangered species. Saving these animals starts with the consumer. If you do not purchase medicines with tiger parts, ivory from elephants, and bear claws, there will no longer be a demand. As long as consumers continue to purchase animal parts, trinkets, furs, claws and teeth, animals will be hunted to extinction.
“We hope that when you view our beautiful new bear cubs, and our other animals at the Reserve, you will leave here with a better understanding of the diversity of wildlife in the world, and take steps to protect it,” said Deborah Warrick, owner of the St. Augustine Wild Reserve.
The St. Augustine Wild Reserve is staffed by a host of valuable volunteers and always in need of new caging and supplies. To volunteer, contact wildreserve@aol.com. If you have building/welding skills or fence working skills, your help is needed. The Reserve cannot take in additional rescued animals without public support, since they do not receive any government funding. The St. Augustine Wild Reserve is 501©3 tax exempt.



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BFF

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of the month

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Favorite Activity:

Fetch with their ball

Favorite Food:

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Favorite Friends:

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How Did Your BFF Get their Names?

Max and Trixie were both named by their
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Meet Max and Trixie!

Do you have a cute pet? Send us your pet's picture and the answer to the five questions above before the 10th of the month. Also tell us you saw the BFF contest in The CreekLine. Your pet could be our BFF of the month and appear in The CreekLine! Email editor@floridanewslines.com to enter your pet.



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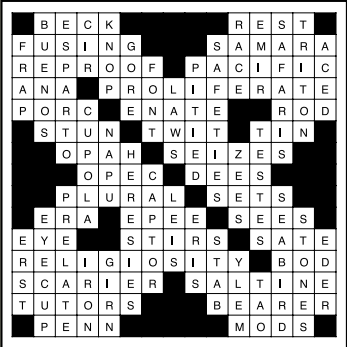
MYSTERY PHOTO



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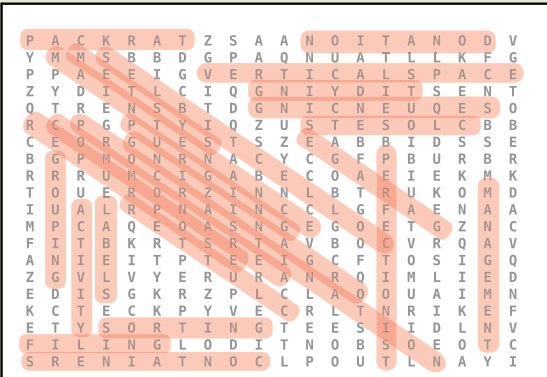
Last month's Mystery Photo was the backside of 2nd Bay Brewing in Bartram Walk.



Answers
to our
Puzzles
PG 10



A. sorted B. system C. tidy D. clutter



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January

Community Calendar

What's Happening in St. Johns

Trout Creek Senior Center offers activities for seniors on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings at 6795 Collier Road in Orangedale. Cards, crafts and games start each day at 9 a.m. with trivia, nutrition/exercise, Bunco and Bingo among the additional activities before lunch at 11:30 a.m. each day. Contact Program Coordinator Myra Fisher at (904) 209-3658 or mfisher@coasjc.org for more information.

Playing HOOKie, a group for those who enjoy knitting, crocheting and looming (with all items donated to charity) meets every Wednesday from 10 a.m. – 12 p.m. at Maple Street Biscuit Company, 1627 Race Track Road in St. Johns. Visit the group's Facebook page (Playing HOOKie) or email playinghookie2022@gmail.com for more information.

Jokers Wild, a local card group, plays the game of "Hand, Knee, and Foot" on Wednesdays. If you are interested in joining, please call (904) 230-6962 and leave a message.

7th: Honeybee Quilters Guild will meet on Tuesday, Jan. 7 at 6:30 p.m. at Mandarin Presbyterian Church on the Loretto Road Campus in the Kids Space at 2501 Loretto Road. New members/guests welcome. Visit honeybeequilters.org for more information.

8th: Widow to Widow, support group for widows by widows is held at Council on Aging (COA) River House, 179 Marine Street in St. Augustine on Wednesdays from 11:45 a.m. – 12:45 p.m. Call (904) 209-3655 (Monday – Thursday) or email tharris@coasjc.org for more information.

9th: Open Game Play at Council on Aging (COA) River House, 179 Marine Street in St. Augustine. Bring your deck of cards or board game (there are also games available at River House) and socialize over a

friendly game of your choosing on Thursdays from 12:15 p.m. – 3:15 p.m. Call (904) 209-3655 (Monday – Thursday) or email tharris@coasjc.org for more information.

11th: The Bartram Trail Genealogy Club meets the second Saturday of each month (this month, Jan. 11) from 2 p.m. – 4 p.m. at the Bartram Trail Branch Library. This month, club members will share their favorite research sites. New and experienced genealogy members are welcomed. Email ginglish@comcast.net for more information. Visit www.facebook.com/groups/BTGenClub-Group to send a request to join the club.

11th: Friends of Alpine Park group will meet on Jan. 11 at 11 a.m. at the Harris-Bennett Farmhouse in Alpine Groves Park, 2060 State Road 13. Docents will conduct tours of the historic farmhouse from 12 p.m. until 2 p.m. The tours are free, and everyone is invited. Email friendsofalpinepark@gmail.com for more information.

12th: Unity Basics, a free, informative class on the foundations of Unity, will be held on Jan. 12 from 12 p.m. – 2 p.m. at Unity Church for Creative Living, 2777 Race Track Road. Rev. Yvonne McAndrew will lead this fun, and interactive class. Call (904) 287-1505 or email UCCLOffice2777@gmail.com for more information.

13th: The Northwest St. Johns County United for Progress Club will host guest speakers from the Homeless Coalition of St. Johns County on Jan. 13. Social time begins at 6:30 p.m. followed by the meeting at 7 p.m. Email nwsjcp@gmail.com for meeting details.

14th: Bartram Trail Women's Club will host its meeting and luncheon on Jan. 14 beginning at 11 a.m. at St. Johns Golf and Country Club. The January luncheon

theme is "New Year, New You." Checks for \$32 should be made payable to BTNC and mailed to Brenda Jenkins, 2204 Fort Mellon Court, St. Augustine, FL 32092 no later than Jan. 7. Visit www.facebook.com/BTNC1 for more information and a membership form.

15th: The Garden Club of Switzerland will host Master Gardener Shirley Barber who will present "Besties in the Garden" on Jan. 15 at 10 a.m. at the Bartram Trail Branch Library. Get some inspiration for brightening your landscape this spring. Visit www.switzerlandgc.org for more information.

15th: Coin Collecting for Kids will be held at the Bartram Trail Branch Library on Jan. 15 from 4 p.m. – 5 p.m. Join Tony Bonaro from the Florida United Numismatists to learn about history, geography, math, and science while studying coins. Call the library at (904) 827-6960 for more information.

15th: Empowering Conversations, an hour of insight and connection with Rev. Yvonne McAndrew, will be held on Jan. 15 from 7 p.m. – 8 p.m. at Unity Church for Creative Living, 2777 Race Track Road. Call (904) 287-1505 or email UCCLOffice2777@gmail.com for more information.

16th: William Bartram Scenic Highway Group will meet on Thursday, Jan. 16 beginning at 6:30 p.m. at Westminster Woods, Gathering Place Room. Join the discussion to keep NW St. Johns County Scenic and Historic and preserve the State Road 13 Scenic Highway. Virtual meeting access is available; contact alabbat@comcast.net or call (904) 699-8475.

18th: Saturday Adult Book Club will meet at the Bartram Trail Branch Library at 10 a.m. on Jan. 18 to "West with

Giraffes" by Lynda Rutledge. Beverages and a light snack will be provided by the Friends of the Library. Call the library at (904) 827-6960 or email akuhn@sjcfl.us for more information.

20th: The All Star Quilters Guild will meet at 9:30 a.m. for socializing prior to the 10 a.m. meeting on Monday, Jan. 20 at First Christian Church, 11924 San Jose Blvd. The program will be a birthday luncheon and installation of officers. A modest fee is charged for lunch. "Show and Tell" is always a feature. Guests are welcome. Visit www.allstarquilters.org for more information.

21st: Newcomers of North Saint Johns will hold a luncheon on Tuesday, Jan. 21 beginning at 11 a.m. at Pesca by Michael's, 117 Vilano Road in St. Augustine. The event features an Antiques Roadshow-themed program with experts from B. Langston's Estate Sales and Auctions. The cost for the luncheon and program is \$40 for members and \$45 for guests. Register by Jan. 13. Visit <https://newcomersofnorthstjohns.org> for more information.

29th: Meditation Moments will be held on Jan. 29 from 7 p.m. – 8 p.m. at Unity Church for Creative Living, 2777 Race Track Road. Donations are appreciated. Call (904) 287-1505 or email UCCLOffice2777@gmail.com for more information.

31st: "What Happens if You Die Without a Will?" a free lecture by Megan Wall, St. Johns County Legal Aid, will be presented at Council on Aging (COA) River House, 179 Marine Street in St. Augustine, on Friday, Jan. 31 from 10 a.m. – 11 a.m. Call (904) 209-3655 (Monday – Thursday) or email tharris@coasjc.org for more information.



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**with St. Johns County School Board
Member, Beverly Slough, District 1**

Q: What’s the latest on the school under construction in RiverTown?

A: On Dec. 13, we had the “topping off” of the new school in RiverTown, which is now about 60 percent complete. It was a great celebration and well attended. In conjunction with the construction, we’re working on zoning. The vast majority of RiverTown families wanted RiverTown to be zoned together, but at first we didn’t think it was possible. We went back to the drawing board and realized that since this new school will open as a K – 7 the first year, it could happen. It will cause us to accelerate the building of the first of two elementary schools that are planned for RiverTown. This first elementary school will likely open as a primary school (K – 3) with grades four through eight remaining at School “PP” (because at first, we won’t have enough middle school students to make it a viable middle school). We have not done this before, but it makes sense and will keep the community together.

We voted on Dec. 12 for the advertisement for this zoning. It starts the 30- day clock and we plan to vote officially on the zoning at our Jan. 14 school board meeting.

Superintendent Tim Forson has named Jessley Hathaway, current principal of Osceola Elementary School, as the new school’s principal. In January, the process of community meetings to determine the school culture, name, mascot, and colors will start.

Q: Can you share the latest information on the search for a new superintendent for St. Johns County Schools?

A: We have begun in earnest our

selection process for Tim Forson’s replacement. We have met two times with our consultant from the Florida School Boards Association (who is assisting us with the search). It was clear to us that there have already been inquiries for this position. The next time we will meet will be Jan. 14, when we will set the timeline for the search. There will be multiple opportunities for community input. The consultant is developing questions now tailored to different groups such as families, business leaders, and stakeholders, to get as much information as possible regarding their points of view on what they’d like to see in a superintendent. Our goal is to have the new superintendent selected in June.

Q: Do you have anything else to share with District 1?

A: We had our Academy Showcase on Dec. 11 at World Golf Village and it was very exciting. In January, there will be a Middle School Blitz, where representatives from the academies will visit all the middle and K – 8 schools to share their offerings and the application process with the students. The deadline application for all academies for next school year is Jan. 31 at 5 p.m. Applications are accepted online on the student’s HAC account; visit <https://cte.stjohns.k12.fl.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/23-24-Frequently-Asked-Questions-Programs-of-Choice.pdf> for more information.

Q: How can our readers contact you?

A: They can email me at beverly.slough@stjohns.k12.fl.us or call me at (904) 547-7510.



with St. Johns County Clerk of the Circuit Court and County Comptroller John Rundgren, Clerk Designee

Q. When will Clerk Patty return to the office?

A. Brandon J. Patty is back from his overseas contingency operation with the U.S. Navy in the Middle East. Elected for another four years, Clerk Patty is thrilled to be back serving residents as the Clerk of the Circuit Court and County Comptroller. He will take the oath of office on Jan. 7.

Q. What’s new for 2025 at the Clerk and Comptroller’s office?

A. There are several updates that residents should be aware of this year.

New services available: Our office began providing wedding photos to couples last October and we now provide general notary services for most documents as a convenience. Wedding photos are \$15 plus tax and notary services are \$10.

Judicial procedures: The Florida Supreme Court created a new framework that will affect procedures related to civil court cases. The new rule changes aim

to promote the timely resolution of civil cases through effective case management. Our clerks are adapting to these rule changes in partnership with the judiciary.

Q. As County Comptroller, you manage the investments for St. Johns County. Is the county in a good financial position as we enter the new year?

A. Through careful planning, we’ve maintained a strong financial position for St. Johns County. Despite fluctuations in short-term rates, investment earnings last year remained stable on both long and short-term investments.

Q. What is the best way for people to contact your office with questions?

A. Last year, we opened our Customer Care Call Center to better serve residents and provide direct access to live clerks. If residents have questions about any of the services we offer, they can call us at (904) 819-3600 or email us at clerk@stjohnsclerk.com.

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with St. Johns County Property Appraiser Eddie Creamer

Q: Can you give us the basic information for homestead exemption in Florida?

A: Between now and March 1, it is time for qualifying homeowners to file for homestead exemption. To qualify, you must have owned the property as of Jan. 1, 2025 and occupied it as your primary residence. Evidence of this is your Florida driver's license with that address. You may not claim or be eligible to claim a homeowner's tax exemption in Florida or any other state.

Q: Why is it important to apply for homestead exemption?

A: It's important because it reduces your property's taxable value by \$50,000 — which can result in a savings of approximately \$650 for the average homeowner in St. Johns County. It also sets the base for the 3 percent "Save our Homes" cap, which limits the assessed value of your home from rising more than 3 percent per year. For the past couple years, we have seen property value increases that are higher than this cap.

Q: How should a homeowner file for homestead exemption?

A: Homeowners can file in person in our office or online at www.sjcpa.gov. Pres-

ently, about 65 percent of homeowners are filing online, compared to about 10 percent just four years ago.

Q: Are there other exemptions?


A: There are many different and specific exemptions designed to provide tax relief to certain homeowners. Examples include exemptions for widow/widowers, totally and permanently disabled veterans or first responders, those who are blind or have other permanent disability, deployed service members, surviving spouses of first responders, and low income seniors. Please call our office for more information if you think any of these might apply to you.

Q: What is the most important thing to remember?

A: It is mandatory that you apply for any exemption by March 1. Even if you qualify, if you don't apply for it — we can't grant the exemption. Florida Statute is clear that the homeowner must apply.

Q: What is the best way for our readers to contact you?

A: Our office is located at 4030 Lewis Speedway Ste. 203, (904) 827-5500. It is open Monday – Friday, 8:30 a.m. – 5 p.m. Also, readers can email me at Eddie@sjcpa.us or call me at (904) 827-5500.



with St. Johns County Supervisor of Elections Vicky Oakes

Q: Was the November 2024 General Election turnout as expected?

A: Voter turnout in St. Johns County for the 2024 General Election was the sixth highest in the state of Florida, out of 67 counties! Voter turnout in St. Johns County reached a historic 86.79 percent — the highest voter turnout in St. Johns County dating back to the 1970s.

Q: Which precincts in St. Johns County had the highest voter turnout?

A: The top 5 precincts with the highest voter turnout were:

Precinct 212, Heritage Baptist Church - 91.9 percent voter turnout
Precinct 408, Crosswater Hall at Nocatee - 91.2 percent voter turnout
Precinct 109, RiverHouse at RiverTown - 90.9 percent voter turnout
Precinct 503, WGV Good News Church - 90.7 percent voter turnout
Precinct 108, Shearwater Amenities Ctr - 90.2 percent voter turnout

Q: What was the preferred method of voting in the 2024 General Election?

A: The voting trend for this election showed a preference for the convenient 13 days of early voting, with almost 60 percent of voters casting their ballot early, followed by 22 percent voting on Election Day, and 18 percent by mail.

Q: What is next for the Supervisor of Elections Office?

A: Shortly after certifying election results for the 2024 General Election, an executive order was issued by Governor

DeSantis calling for a special election to fill the vacancy in Congressional District 6 left by U.S. Representative Waltz' resignation. This election is not countywide and does not involve St. Johns County voters in the north of the county, who reside in Congressional District 5.

Q: Who is eligible to vote in the Special Primary Election on Jan. 28, 2025?

A: The Special Primary Election is open only to registered Republican and Democrat voters residing in Congressional District 6, which is the southern portion of St. Johns County. We have a map available on our website at www.votesjc.gov that shows the precincts included in this election.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

A: I would like to thank the voters of St. Johns County, who turned out in record numbers for this election, for their continued support. I would also like to praise the hardworking 17 full-time Elections Office staff, 50 part-time staff, 654 dedicated poll workers, and our community partners who provide safe and accessible locations for our voters to cast their ballots. St. Johns County celebrates successful, secure elections because of all of you. I look forward to seeing you all in 2025 and 2026.

Q: What is the best way for our readers to contact you?

A: Readers can email me at voakes@votesjc.gov or call me at (904) 823-2238. Our website, www.votesjc.gov also has a wealth of information.

ST. JOHNS Business Monthly

Business Briefs

Creative studio has new owner

The new owner of the St. Johns Board & Brush Creative Studio, Jane Felt, is putting her talents and community-mindedness to work as she readies for DIY home décor workshops at her business. Board & Brush, ranked the country's No. 1 DIY studio workshop franchise by Entrepreneur magazine, offers workshops where attendees can create wood porch signs, trays, planters, home décor signs, doormats and more to change the look of their home for every season.

Felt has big plans for the studio, a business she calls her “bridge to retirement,” explaining how she has worked for an aircraft manufacturing company for decades, raised three sons (she and her husband moved to the area to be closer to them), and was looking for a way to bring people together in a creative environment to connect with each other and disconnect from technology.

“I really believe this studio can be an important part of the fabric of St. Johns, especially for people looking for community,” she said.

She added that the previous owners and several of the previous instructors remained on staff and how they're generously sharing their know-how with her. It also helps that Felt is a creative type, dabbling in pottery and stained glass as an expressive outlet.

“My husband is an artist, and he's helping behind the scenes too,” said Felt.

Felt has invited local non-profits interested in hosting fundraising workshops

to contact her directly at the studio, noting she has a soft spot for the YMCA. She also hopes to partner with local assisted living facilities to bring residents in for a workshop.

“Having cared for my mom and dad in their later years, I would love to provide something other than living life around medical appointments,” Felt said.

The St. Johns Board & Brush is located at 530 State Road 13 North. Visit <https://boardandbrush.com/stjohns/> for more information.

Cross Regions Group announces groundbreaking of hotel

Cross Regions Group, a multifaceted company specializing in commercial real estate services, held the groundbreaking for the building that will become Home2 Suites by Hilton's newest location at The Fountains at St. Johns in St. Johns County. The 137-room Home2 Suites by Hilton hotel will be the first hospitality development within The Fountains at St. Johns and the first Northeast Florida hotel to be located at the intersection of Interstate 95 and County Road 210.

Home2 Suites by Hilton will be located in Fountains East, which will feature a town square with 35,000 square feet of retail and restaurants. Four buildings within Fountains East are already 80 percent committed. Fountains East will be the future home for Island Wings, Toasted Yolk, Wicked Cookies, Upgrade Labs, St. John Aesthetics, and DaVinci's. Completion of the town

square is anticipated in 14 months, and completion of the hotel is expected in 18 months.

The Fountains at St. Johns is a mixed-use medical and retail development located on nearly 100 acres at the northeast intersection of County Road 210 West and Interstate 95 in St. Johns County. The Fountains at St. Johns offers approximately 200,000 square feet of retail, restaurant and medical/office space on 23 acres. The development includes Ascension St. Vincent's Health Center – St. Johns, an educational facility for Jacksonville University's healthcare sciences programs, 174 upscale apartments with 25,000 square feet of retail on the first floor, 276 apartments from Madison Capital, and a 13,000-square-foot facility for Chappell Schools. Future plans include an assisted living facility and wellness center.

Visit www.crossregions.com for more information.



Photo courtesy Cross Regions Group
Cross Regions Group commemorates the groundbreaking of its newest development, The Fountains at St. Johns East.

volunteer business mentors, celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2024 with several notable events and achievements. Since its founding in 1964, SCORE has supported more than 17 million entrepreneurs through its nationwide network of more than 10,000 volunteer mentors.

As part of the anniversary celebration, SCORE organized a series of pitch competitions across the country. Events were held in Philadelphia, Des Moines, Los Angeles, Houston, and online. Small business owners competed for \$175,000 in total prize money and participants received mentoring and guidance to prepare their pitches.

Over its 60-year history, SCORE has adapted to changing times. It has expanded from retired executives to include active professionals as mentors, embraced technology with free online learning, remote mentoring, and virtual workshops, and increased diversity among clients and volunteers.

In 2024, Jacksonville's 83 active volunteers counseled more than 1,250 new clients (in addition to legacy clients) and delivered workshops to more than 11,580 attendees. The Jacksonville Chapter also hosts a Jacksonville SCORE CEO Forum to support local businesses and entrepreneurs, providing a platform for executives to learn from each other, gain new perspectives, and improve their leadership skills

SCORE welcomes new volunteers. Visit <https://www.score.org/volunteer/become-mentor> for more information.

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Briefs

Bartram Bash to benefit athletes at Bartram Trail High School

The Bartram Trail High School Athletic Booster Club has announced Friday, Feb. 28 as the date of the annual Bartram Bash. Featuring fun, food, and entertainment, the event will be held at La Venture Grove beginning at 6:30 p.m. Tickets are \$75 and include delicious appetizers. Don't miss out on live music from Darrell Rae and the chance to win exciting prizes in the raffles.

Proceeds from this event will go toward supporting all sports at Bartram Trail High School. Contact the Bartram Trail Athletic Booster Club at bbabc-communications@gmail.com for more information. Tickets may be purchased at https://gofan.co/event/2340311?schoolId=FL68189_2

Or if you already have the GoFan app, search "2025 Bartram Bash" to purchase tickets.

Bartram Trail Women's Club welcomes New Year

The Bartram Trail Women's Club (a/k/a Bartram Trail Newcomers and Women's Club) will hold its meeting and luncheon on Tuesday, Jan. 14, 2025, at 11 a.m. at St. Johns Golf & Country Club. Doors will open at 10:30 a.m. The January luncheon theme is New Year, New You and attendees are encouraged to wear New Year attire/accessories.

Checks for \$32 should be made payable to BTNC and mailed to Brenda Jenkins, 2204 Fort Mellon Court, St Augustine, FL 32092. Payment must be received no later than the first Tuesday of the month, Jan. 7, 2025. Be sure to indicate your entrée choice on the check memo.

The Bartram Trail Women's Club meets

the second Tuesday of every month from September to May for lunch. In addition to the monthly meetings, the club has a wide variety of interest groups, including Bridge, Continental Rummy, Pennies Canasta, Mexican Chicken Train dominoes, Bunko, Mah Jongg, golf, recipe exchange, monthly special events, book club, lunch and matinee, Lunch Divas, Ladies Night Out, a nature walk group and community projects. Email Adrienne Townsel-Wilson at bartramtnc@gmail.com for club information. Visit to www.facebook.com/BTNC1 to see pictures of the meetings and download a membership form.

Newcomers of North St. Johns announces January 21 luncheon

Newcomers of North Saint Johns will host members and their guests at their January luncheon on Tuesday, Jan. 21 beginning at 11 a.m. at Pesca by Michael's, 117 Vilano Road, Unit R in St. Augustine. The event features lunch and an Antiques Roadshow-themed program with experts from B. Langston's Estate Sales and Auctions.

"This is a first-ever such event for Newcomers and we are thrilled to learn more about antiques and those 'trash or treasure' items we all have at home," said Priscilla Cobbs, co-president.

Doors will open at 10:30 a.m. The cost for the luncheon and program is \$40 for members and \$45 for guests and non-members. All reservations must be received by Jan. 13.

Visit <https://newcomersofnorthstjohns.org> for more information about the luncheon and membership.

ElderSource seeks St. Johns County representation for Advisory Council

ElderSource, a nonprofit organization

that works to empower elders, adults with disabilities and their caregivers in order to age with dignity and independence, is seeking volunteer members to its Advisory Council, specifically seniors who reside in St. Johns County.

Duties for an Advisory Council member are to report on the needs of elderly and emerging issues in their respective counties; review and comment on the agency's Area Plan; study legislative issues and advocate on behalf of the elderly; assist in promoting the mission, programs and activities of the agency; and to educate the public about the needs and the contributions of the elderly.

"Our Advisory Council members are an important asset to our organization," said Linda Levin, CEO of ElderSource. "They are an active voice we need to hear in order for us to stay in touch on senior issues affecting the communities in which they live."

Meetings are held the third Thursday of every other month from 1:30 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. and conducted virtually using the Zoom platform. Call (904) 391-6690 or email Sherry.Holmes@MyElderSource.org for more information about how to become an ElderSource Advisory Council member.

Crime writers to take lesson from undercover narc

Drug trafficking is a dark and dangerous world that is a mystery to the average person. And it's a mystery that crime writers want to crack. Who better to help than a former undercover narc? Brian Townsend, a retired Special Agent for the Drug Enforcement Agency, will share one of his most dangerous undercover executions at the Northeast Florida Sisters in Crime meeting on Jan. 4 at 10:15 a.m. at the Ponte Vedra Beach Branch Library.

Townsend's successful investigation of a cartel's drug trafficking in a quiet Arkansas community was featured on A&E's "Undercover: Caught on Tape" show (Small Towns, Big Crimes episode). In addition, he will extract insights to help writers enrich their crime writing.

Northeast Florida Sisters in Crime is a chapter of the national organization and serves mystery, crime, and thriller writers and readers. The group's programs feature speakers in forensic science, psychology, and law enforcement fields. Men and women are welcome to attend to learn more about writing, promoting, and enjoying crime fiction. Contact floridasistersincrime@gmail.com for more information.

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Get to Know ...

By Martie Thompson
editor@floridanewsline.com

Al and Phyllis Abbatiello

Al and Phyllis Abbatiello are well known for their many years of volunteer service, trying to keep growth under control in NW St. Johns County. The couple, originally from Chicago, moved here in 1998. It was at about that same time that they made the acquaintance of Mary Cornwell, who had been instrumental in securing a Scenic Highway designation from the State of Florida for State Road 13. They formed the William Bartram Scenic and Historic Highway Group, which continues today. As of Jan. 1, 2025, Al and Phyllis are taking a well deserved retirement from their many years on the board and are happy to have handed over the reins to a new team who is also passionate about the cause. The couple lives in Fruit Cove, still in the original home they moved into in 1998, and next year will celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary. They have two daughters and a son as well as five grandchildren.

Q: How did you two meet?

Al: We actually met in front of a grocery store in Chicago as teenagers. On my part, it was love at first sight,

Get to Know ...

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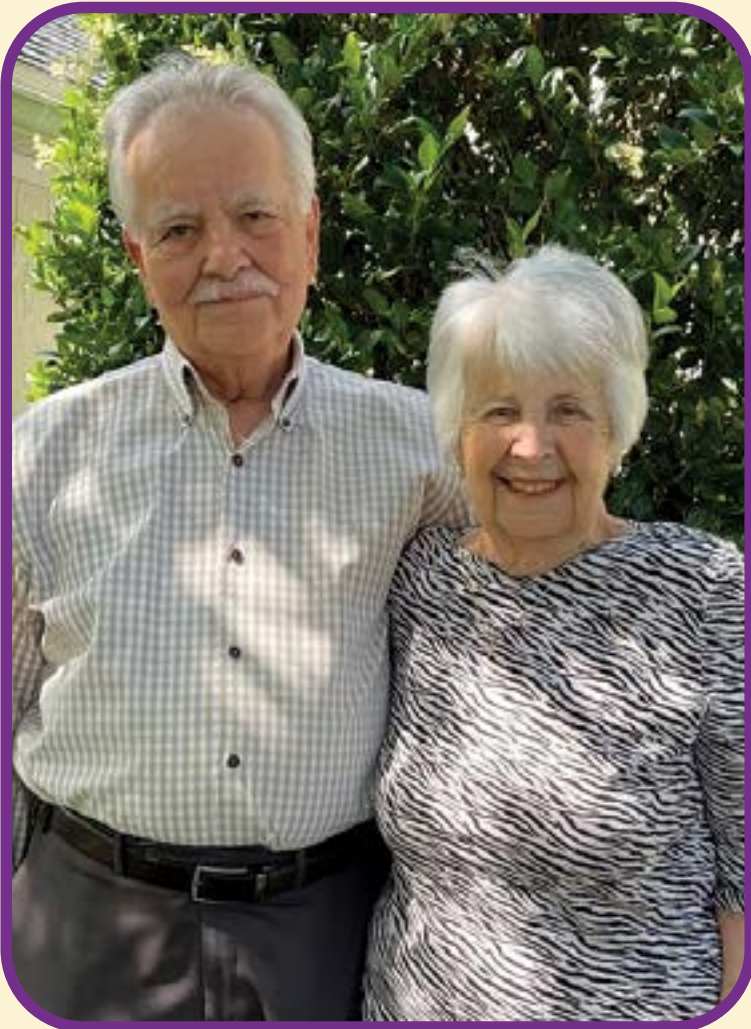


Photo courtesy Al Abbatiello
Al and Phyllis Abbatiello

but we didn't start dating until after I returned from my two-year stint in the Navy.

Phyllis: When we first met and I knew he liked me, I was a little nervous because I wasn't dating yet. After high school, I attended Mundelein College in Chicago, which was a Catholic college. I considered becoming a nun, but all the nuns at the convent told me "No!" because they liked Al. They must have sensed that we'd be good together. Al is such a kind hearted person and it was easy for me to fall for him.

Q: What were your careers?

Al: I had a 32-year career in radio communications working for Motorola. We moved to multiple different states for my job over the years, including Minnesota, Indiana, Kansas, and St. Louis, Missouri before I retired as a regional manager.

Phyllis: I worked in the banking industry at a savings and loan when we first got married, but I had to quit when I became pregnant. It's just what was done back then. Then I had a second career as a realtor after the children were older.

Al: I also decided to become a realtor after I retired from Motorola, since Phyllis was working as one.

Q: What brought you to NW St. Johns County?

Al: Our daughter lived in Orlando and she wanted us to move to Florida, but we didn't want to live in "touristy" Florida.

Phyllis: We decided on the Jacksonville area, and then did what we always did when we moved our family before and what we knew to be best as realtors — move to the area with the best school system. We could tell this area would be popular and grow and would be good for our careers as realtors.

Q: What led you to join the William Bartram Scenic Highway Group?

Al: As background, when we lived in St. Louis, the HOA there spent lots of money and it seemed no one knew what it was spent on. We decided that when we moved, we would make it a point to get more involved in our community.

Phyllis: We were concerned about all the growth in Florida and we wanted to preserve the natural beauty of this area. We felt if we didn't step up and try to preserve it, who would? So Al was elected chairman of the group and remained that until the end of 2024.

Q: What do you see as the future for the group? And do you feel it's been successful?

Al: Well, we had a very large group at first, but over the years the group got smaller. We had a successful campaign a few years ago to attract new members, but membership has dwindled again. I know everyone is very busy.

Phyllis: But we are busy too!

Al: In some respects, I feel we've been effective, especially in slowing the growth on State Road 13. The Scenic Highway designation is so important to our efforts. I plan to still be involved with our new team for a while, as I have so much information and knowledge to share. But the time has come for us to step aside. There is still much work to be done.

Phyllis: I'm proud of Al for keeping the scenic highway, right next to a Heritage River, beautiful.

[Visit <https://bartramscenichighway.com> for more information about the William Bartram Scenic and Historic Highway Group.]

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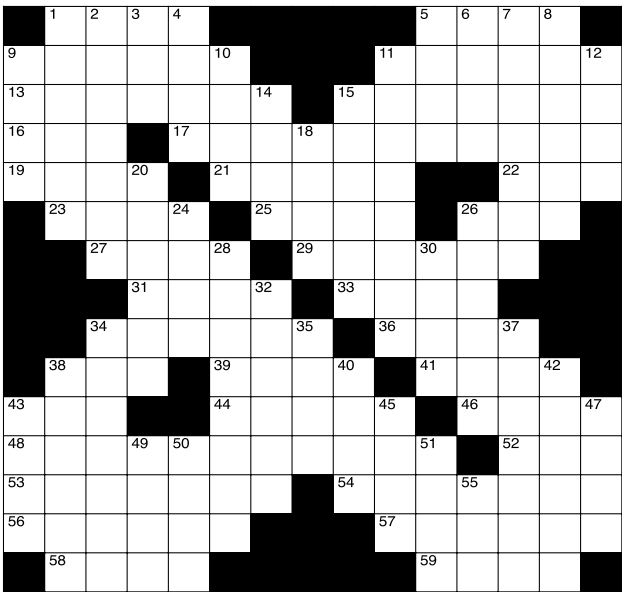
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Puzzles

Answers on page 3
Provided by MetroCreative



CLUES ACROSS

1. “Loser” rocker
5. Partner to relaxation
9. Mixing
11. Winged nut
13. Expression of blame
15. Vast ocean
16. Comedienne Gasteyer
17. Multiply
19. Meat from a pig (French)
21. Related
22. Rocker Stewart
23. Surprise completely
25. Loon
26. Canister
27. Large, deep-bodied fish
29. Takes forcefully
31. Oil cartel
33. Palmer and Hepburn are two
34. More than one
36. Places down purposefully
38. Pitching statistic
39. Type of sword
41. Witnesses
43. Body part
44. Mixes slowly
46. Satisfy
48. Strong belief
52. One’s physique (slang)
53. More frightening
54. Soup cracker
56. Teaches
57. One who carries something
58. Actor Sean
59. Changes

CLUES DOWN

1. __ Aires, city
2. Coarse grass
3. Type of gene
4. Door handle
5. Competition
6. Muslim ruler title
7. Hunting expeditions
8. Large mollusk
9. Bind securely
10. Former U.S. presidential candidate
11. 2-point plays in football
12. Breezed through
14. Type setting
15. Felt for
18. Codified rules
20. Small dome
24. Chevrotain
26. Male reproductive gland
28. Controversial beliefs
30. Z Z Z
32. One who confines another
34. Bishop
35. Garlands
37. Bird that flies by the coast
38. Optical device
40. Greek goddess of discord
42. Some are “Rolling”
43. Formerly (archaic)
45. Thrust a knife into
47. German river
49. Atomic #26
50. Make a grotesque face
51. Primordial matter of the universe
55. Chinese philosophical principle

NEAT AND TIDY WORD SEARCH

P A C K R A T Z S A A N O I T A N O D V
Y M M S B B D G P A Q N U A T L L K F G
P P A E E I G V E R T I C A L S P A C E
Z Y D I T L C I Q G N I Y D I T S E N T
Q T R E N S B T D G N I C N E U Q E S O
R C P G P T Y I Q Z U S T E S O L C B B
C E O R G U E S T S Z E A B B I D S S E
B G P M O N R N A C Y C G F P B U R B R
R R R U M C I G A B N E C O A E I E K M K
T O U E R O R Z I N N L B T R U K O M D
I U A L R P N A I N C C L G F A E N A A
M P C A Q E O A S N G E G O E T G Z N C
F I T B K R T S R T A V B O C V R Q A V
A N I E I T P T E E I G C F T O S I G Q
Z G V L V Y E R U R A N R Q I M L I E D
E D I S G K R Z P L C L A O O U A I M N
K C T E C K P Y V E C R L T N R I K E F
E T Y S O R T I N G T E E S I I D L N V
F I L I N G L O D I T N O B S O E O T C
S R E N I A T N O C L P O U T L N A Y I

Find the words hidden vertically, horizontally, diagonally, and backwards.

WORDS

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CLUTTER
COLLECTIBLES
COMMON AREA
CONTAINERS
DONATION
FILING
GARAGE
GROUPING
LABELS
MAINTENANCE
MANAGEMENT
ORGANIZING
PACKRAT
PERFECTIONIST
PROCRASTINATION
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REPURPOSE
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Solve the code to discover words related to organization.
Each number corresponds to a letter.
(Hint: 1 = T)

A. 5 10 3 1 7 16
Clue: Divided into categories

B. 5 18 5 1 7 9
Clue: Way of doing things

C. 1 22 16 18
Clue: Neat

D. 23 20 4 1 1 7 3
Clue: Scattered items

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Photo courtesy Juli McKitterick

The Fruit Cove Flyers boys volleyball team recently secured its third consecutive district championship. The Flyers, coached by John Aggas and assisted by Hannah Richardson, have a cumulative record of 34 – 4 over those three years. At the beginning of this season, the Flyers only had four returning players; of the remaining seven players, most had never played volleyball. Surprisingly, this year’s team finished with a 10 – 2 record before facing Switzerland Point Middle School for the championship game. The championship game proved to be a close battle of back-and-forth rallies where the Flyers pulled out a two set win with scores of 25 – 20 and 25 – 17. The great competition on the court was highlighted by the sportsmanship embodied by both teams.

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Gardening

A New Year, A New Approach?

By Master Gardener Volunteer Lesley Arrandale
mail@floridanewsline.com

Gardening confronts us with new challenges almost constantly. Currently in the second week of December, we've had our first cold weather. Some gardeners try to hold on to their late summer gardens for as long as possible before conditions make it impractical. My front yard is an example. I garden more for wildlife, especially birds, pollinators and other invertebrates than I do for people, so shelter and sustenance are important. This means that my less than orthodox front yard is not a green and tidy sward. The brown twiggy flower stems of my favored plants (*dotted horsemint*, *Monarda punctata*) still predominate. Clumps of now shaggy-looking lance leaf coreopsis (*Coreopsis lanceolata*) are scattered in. Straggly Indian blanket (*Gaillardia pulchella*) is still producing a few flowers, and the clumps of Virginia spiderwort (*Tradescantia ohiensis*) are limping along, waiting for rain to pull them back from the brink. Most of these plants provide shelter. Pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*) is holding on to its berries, as are the beautyberry shrubs (*Callicarpa americana*), both of which are relished by mockingbirds and cardinals. Whatever we think of autumn, this is how nature works. It's just not neat and tidy.

There are plenty of useful resources which explain how and why to be more wildlife friendly, particularly through the winter, and this article in the November issue of The Neigh-

borhood Gardener is a great start: <https://tinyurl.com/4env94k6>. To receive The Neighborhood Gardener in your inbox, you may subscribe here: <https://tinyurl.com/38u7ftfu>.

This year, I'm delighted to say that my yard is brightened by our Shumard oak (*Quercus shumardii*), the leaves of which have turned more red than brown. A first! Apparently, this is the result of a drier summer, followed by a cool down. The anthocyanins in the leaves have reacted to this and the red coloration is the result.

As the human year winds down, so does the natural year. By the time you read this, it will be our New Year and hopefully we will all be looking forward to a bright spring. In the meantime, vegetable growers will be tending to their crops, as well as planning for the spring garden. Historically our last frost date was around mid-March, but with the recent changes to our official climate zones, our spring may be earlier than usual. If you intend to grow flowers or vegetables from seed, forward planning is essential to make the most of the coming year.

Early January is a little late to sow some native wildflowers, but if you collected or bought any recently don't let that put you off trying. Annuals should bloom the first year, as the term suggests, but be prepared

Gardening cont. on pg. 14

Fishing

Jimmy's Fishing Report

By Jimmy Tomazinis
mail@floridanewsline.com

Happy New Year! Here's to having a safe, memorable, and productive upcoming year. As I talked about in the past, it's a great time to set out plans and make goals for the coming year. Whether it's catching your biggest bass or planning a trip to catch a new species of fish, you have plenty of time after sunset right now, so make good use of it. It is also pertinent to service boat motors, trailers, and fishing gear so you are not missing out when spring rolls around.

Specks were up and down through December, but they should be more consistent this month. Good numbers of smaller fish can be found in creeks around the area. A few larger fish will be mixed in, but they'll still be mostly in the river. Minnows and jigs still have you covered. If you're wondering where you can get minnows, we have a few options: Trout Creek Marina, Black Creek Marina, and Whiteys Fish Camp usually have plenty. If you have an aerator and a few buckets you can keep the ones you don't use alive between trips. Change the water they

are in and feed them every couple days and they can survive a long time. It makes it super convenient having them on hand.

Bass will be in the creeks and the river as well. I don't spend nearly as much time targeting them this month as I do specks. When I do, I use large wild shiners since I am looking for bigger bass. Artificials will still be productive and if I can give any advice on selecting those this time of year, go towards a smaller size and work them very slow. Everything moves slower when the water cools down.

Stripers are also worth looking for in the cold water. If the river is calm, you can look for schooling fish in open water. Birds can show you where to look. Bridges will be the best bet in all conditions. Lipless crank baits, jigs, shrimp, and shiners are all good. Stripers tend to be near the surface early and late then mid column or towards the bottom when the sun is up. At least we still have some options out there. Tight lines.

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Freedom Crossing Falcons are WILD about Learning!

By Lauren O'Shell
mail@floridanewslines.com

On Nov. 1, students, teachers and staff of Freedom Crossing Academy participated in the sixth annual “Rock Your School Day,” a worldwide initiative to encourage teachers and schools to create educational experiences by creating outside of the box lessons for students and promoting learning in a new, fun way. This year, the Freedom Crossing Falcons adopted the theme, “WILD about FCA.”

From the moment students entered the school on Nov. 1, the campus was brewing with excitement. The FCA guitar students put on a show for stu-

dents as they arrived Friday morning and made their way to class. Hallways and classroom doors were decorated to mimic different habitats such as the desert, the arctic, and oceans. Teachers and staff dressed in their best animal print to match the “wild” theme.

This year, hands-on thematic activities filled classrooms sponsored by educational outreach programs like The Jacksonville Zoo, MOSH, and the University of Florida’s “Scientist in Every Classroom.” Students were able to interact with wild animals and learn about conservation, habitats and local ecosystems.

Cross-curricular collaborations inspired classrooms with hands-on activities. Kathryn Frericks, middle school art teacher, and her art students partnered with kindergarten students to create art projects to match the theme.

“We had a great Rock Your School day in the middle school art room,” said Frericks. “We hosted little kindergarten artists and they were encouraged and coached by the older students. It was a huge success and enjoyed by all of the students.”

To wrap up the day, every kindergarten through fifth grade student participated in the FCA Fun Run and



Photos courtesy Lauren O'Shell
Jeremy Price and his guitar students getting students pumped up during arrival for a wild day of learning.

grades sixth through eighth grade students went “wild” for the Color Run, where students raised money to support technology and school improvement needs at Freedom Crossing. The students set a monetary goal at the beginning of this fundraiser and when they met the goal, the school’s principal, Melissa Lime, let the top fundraising students dye her hair a wild shade of blue. Lime then roamed the halls of Freedom Crossing Academy with blue hair to show her wild side.

“We were all focused on combining learning and fun,” Lime said. “The activities were science centered, engaging and standards based. Teachers brought the curriculum standards to life in a variety of ways that showcased their craft as educators.”



This first grade class learned about wild animals on Rock Your School Day.



Middle school art students and kindergarten artists created sea life bracelets.

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Local Labrador Retrievers featured in 2025 calendar

By NewsLine Staff
mail@floridanewslines.com

Two large dogs with lots of love and shenanigans to offer — that’s Anna and Henry in a nutshell. Add “local celebrities” to the list as they are both featured in the 2025 Labrador Retriever Rescue of Florida (LRRoF) calendar, which is hot off the press and available to purchase.

The calendar costs \$25 (includes shipping) and is a collection of beautiful photos of Labradors rescued by LRRoF taken by talented local and statewide photographers. Anna and Henry’s photo session was taken by Amy Oliveri, who is a professional lifestyle and documentary style photographer based in Atlantic Beach.

“The session was so much fun for Anna and Henry,” said Michele Oliver, who, with husband Ben Oliver, are proud “parents” to the rescues. “Amy was so patient and the photos were all wonderful — I know it was hard to just choose one!”

Labrador Retriever Rescue of Florida was founded in 2000 as a grassroots organization. Enlisting hardworking volunteers and veterinarian partners, it is committed to placing Labs in loving new homes. The non-profit provides foster care, veterinary care, spaying/neutering and microchips for the Labradors in their adoption program. Their goal is to place Labradors in appropriate, permanent homes. Prior to an adoption, LRRoF considers the history, temperament, personality, and energy level of the rescued Labrador. The placement process includes a written application and a home visit of the potential adopter.

Anna (aka Anna Banana and formerly named Rhett) joined the Oliver family



Henry (left) and Anna (right) are featured in the 2025 Labrador Retriever Rescue of Florida calendar.

in February 2020 in the midst of Covid and uncertainty. She was two years old and found wandering the streets.

“She’s so sweet with everyone, kids especially, and a complete goofy girl who loves to run in the nearby dog park and make new friends, enjoy treats and stretch out on her own twin bed and couch,” said Oliver.

Henry joined the Oliver family in February 2024 when they adopted him from LRRoF as a senior formerly named Lucky.

“He’s eight years old, but has the energy of a much younger dog and enjoys his daily walks as well as downtime, when he watches movies with us on his soft dog bed,” said Oliver. “He is gentle with kids and very friendly with our neighbors. Henry is highly intelligent and adapted to being with Anna and our family very quickly.”

Visit LRRoF.org to purchase a calendar and learn more about Labrador Retriever Rescue of Florida.



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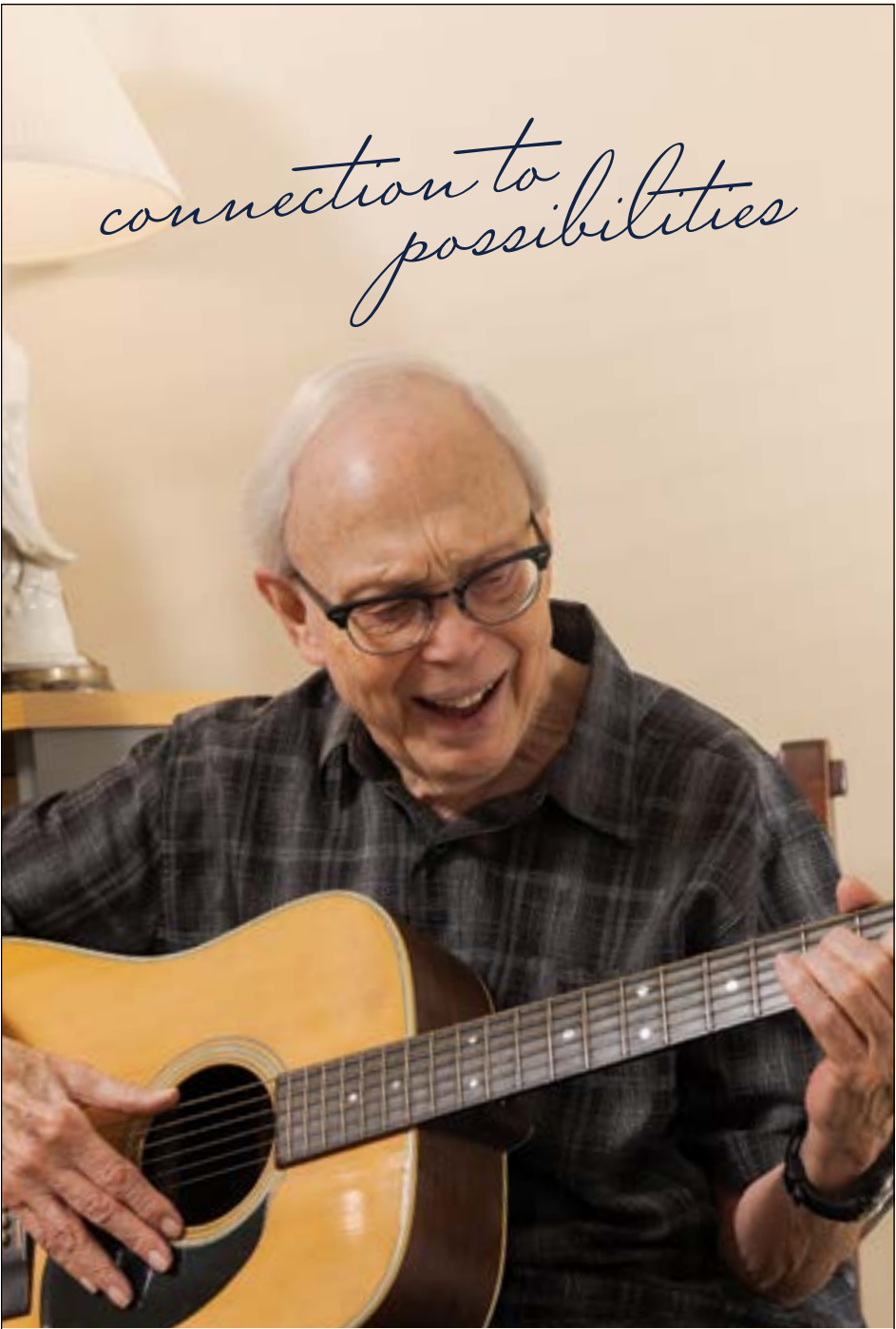
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Girls on the Run celebrates 20 years!



Photo courtesy Julington Creek Elementary

Students from Julington Creek Elementary participated in the Girls on the Run of Northeast Florida’s 20th Birthday Bash 5K on Dec. 7 at the University of North Florida. All the girls from the school’s two teams have been participating in the program, which is designed to inspire girls of all abilities to recognize and embrace their inner strength and make meaningful connections with others, since September. Since its inception in 2004, Girls on the Run of Northeast Florida has positively impacted more than 34,000 girls. This fall season alone, the program boasted 75 teams, serving girls across multiple counties including Alachua, Bradford, Baker, Clay, Duval, Flagler, Marion, Nassau, Putnam, St. Johns, Union, and Volusia. Julington Creek Elementary’s students have been participating in the Girls on the Run program for more than 18 years and this season had 40 girls take part.



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to wait longer for some perennials to flower. Sow seeds in small seed trays or cells in a seed-starter mix and keep them under grow-lights or on a bright windowsill. A heat mat could give them a head start. Try to avoid the seedlings getting leggy. Water them from below to reduce the risk of overwatering and causing damping off. For advice on this, see <https://tinyurl.com/ysnw3tdt>. Once seedlings have a pair of true leaves, begin a weekly application of a dilute liquid fertilizer.

to most types of seed, but some vegetables don't transplant easily, so check the Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide for all you need to know to start a successful spring garden: <https://tinyurl.com/2rneraa7>.

The first Extension newsletter of the new year will be available here: <https://tinyurl.com/3b3fx8xd>, as are all previous editions. Check it out for upcoming classes and timely articles. The Jacksonville library also hosts speakers, and some of the Life Lab classes might interest you. Check out <https://tinyurl.com/mtszmadb> for January's offerings.

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Boys' running teams are state champs



Photos courtesy Jill Benavides

Club boys state champs 2024.

By NewsLine Staff
mail@floridanewslines.com

On Oct. 25, Johnathon Hartley, ranked second in the state of Florida, led Harrison Moore, Elliot Lasota, Caleb Ramjohn, Cole Ristau, Hudson Austin, and Chris Sima to a boys' elementary state championship by one point.

“They worked hard as a team pushing each other to victory,” said Jill Benavides, co-founder of the No Excuses Running Club. “Each one played a vital role in their first ever state championship.”

Hartley, Moore, and Lasota medaled individually placing them in the top 20 in the state.

The next morning, Danny Itkin (ranked No.12) led the No Excuses Running Club middle school boys' team of Zach Thomas, Chase Petrick, Austin Courson, Harrison Lafser, Graham Moore, and George Hoch to a middle school boys' club state championship for the fifth time in a row. Itkin, Thomas, Petrick, Courson, and Lafser all medaled, placing them in the top 20.

“Summer foundational mileage and relentless cross country season training paved the way once again to victory,” said Benavides. “The NERC middle school boys have dominated the club division since 2020 when the club began. Now on to track!”



Elementary school boys state champs 2024.



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Travel

Galloping through Kentucky's equine legacy

By Debi Lander
mail@floridanewslines.com

After exploring the Tennessee Whiskey Trail, I drove on to Kentucky. I hoped to explore more than bourbon and bluegrass music; I wanted to see horses. The state's deep-rooted equestrian culture boasts some of the world's most renowned horse farms, racing venues, and equine traditions; however, I did not go at the right season to catch the world-renowned Kentucky Derby at Churchill Downs in Louisville. The famous fastest two minutes in sports occurs every May.

Shelbyville: The Saddlebred Capital of the World

Instead, I began in Shelbyville, the "Saddlebred Capital of the World." As the name implies, the Saddlebred breeds are celebrated here for their beauty, grace, and versatility. Visitors can tour some of the prestigious Saddlebred farms in the area, but I chose to visit Lettleiki, an Icelandic breeding farm. I met the owner, Maggie Brandt, a warm, wonderful, and clever woman who exemplifies the characteristics of the legendary and magical Iceland fairies. She shared her fondness for Icelandic horses by explaining their special features: they have five natural gaits, including the tölt, which is exceptionally smooth and comfortable for riders — no bouncing. Originally bred in Iceland, the breed features a muscular build, thick coats, and adaptability to various climates. Despite their smaller stature, they're incredibly powerful and agile, capable of handling

leisurely trail rides and competitive events. Maggie convinced me that if I ever consider horseback riding, it should be done with Icelandic horses. Her farm includes some of the finest Icelandic horses in North America.

I moved on to checking out a farm with a program called HorseSensing. It's an equine therapy organization teaching humans how to interact with horses. The goal is to successfully help veterans transition back to civilian life from various forms of addiction. The program places them in jobs, and it has changed lives.

While in Shelbyville, I stayed in a remarkable Cerulean Farm Bed and Breakfast, a restored 1860s mansion surrounded by the owner's horses. I highly recommend it.

Frankfort: State Capital

Being close to Frankfurt on the banks of the Kentucky River, I didn't want to miss seeing the capital. Capitol buildings are always worth a stop, and Kentucky's was no exception. I also took a tour at Rebecca Ruth Candy, learning about the woman who perfected a recipe that led to her invention of the Bourbon Ball, a mint chocolate bourbon-infused candy.

Georgetown: Old Friends

The historic town of Georgetown is



Photos courtesy Debi Lander
Icelandic horses.

home to one of the most cherished stops for horse enthusiasts: Old Friends Thoroughbred Retirement Farm. This sanctuary provides a loving home for retired racehorses, including past champions like Silver Charm and War Emblem, whom I saw. A guided tour offers a closer look at this heart-warming establishment.

Lexington: The Horse Capital of the World

I stopped at the Kentucky Horse Park, the ultimate museum of equestrian history. I had only a few hours here, but could have stayed the entire day. Visitors explore the International Museum of the Horse, a Breeds Barn, watch live demonstrations, and can even take a horseback ride through the scenic grounds.

It was finally time to head to the races. No equine journey through Kentucky is

complete without a stop at Keeneland. Keeneland is more than a racetrack — an icon of thoroughbred racing. Established in 1936, Keeneland hosts prestigious racing meets every April and October and is a global hub for horse auctions, where some of the world's finest Thoroughbreds are bought and sold. The venue's historic grandstands, lush paddocks, and thrilling races make for an unforgettable experience, especially if you place a winning bet.

Whether you're watching a Saddlebred trot gracefully in Shelbyville, meeting retired champions in Georgetown, or cheering on Thoroughbreds at Keeneland, Kentucky offers an unparalleled equestrian experience.

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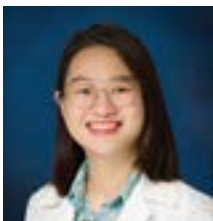
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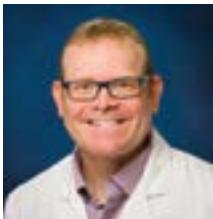
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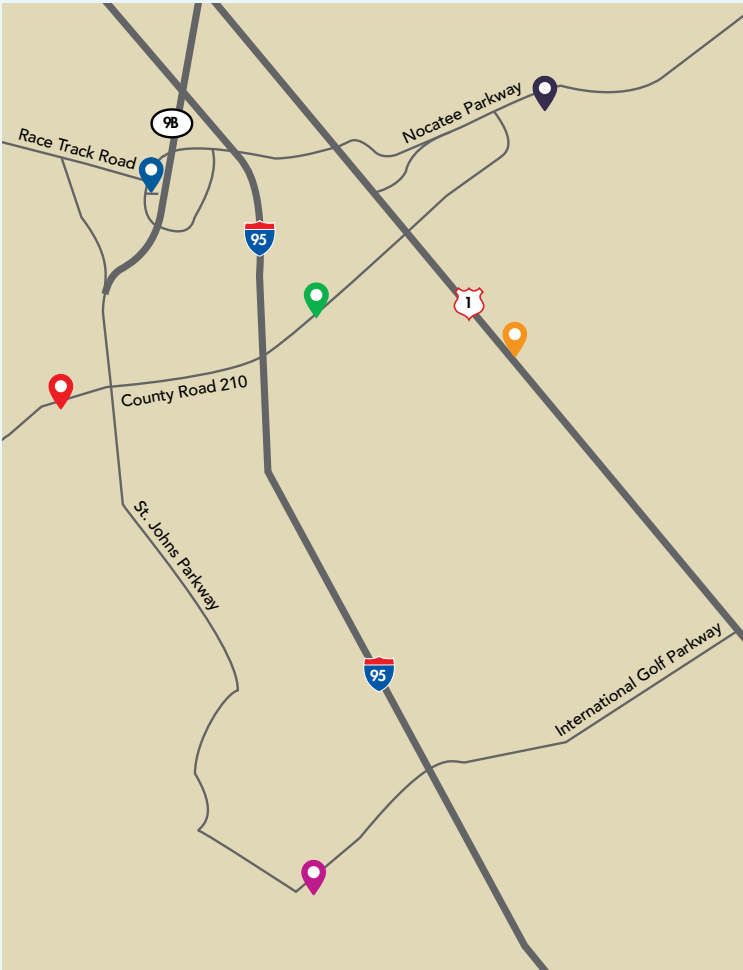
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