

Photo courtesy of James Watkins  
U.S. Marine Corps veteran James Watkins successfully captures an alligator during a Project Savior Outdoors Memorial Day hunt.

## Christian organization helps veterans fight the battle within

By Maggie FitzRoy

Marine veteran James Watkins had never hunted an alligator before, but he wasn't alone, and he was ready.

Guided by a professional alligator trapper Mike Dragich and aided by fellow veterans struggling with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Watkins set his sights on a large gator resting in a canal near corn fields. Advancing closer, he threw a long rope attached to a treble

**Christian**  
cont. on pg. 5

# New superintendent, new school year

*Dr. Brennan Asplen brings decades of experience to his new role, emphasizing collaboration and innovation*

Tracy McCormick-Dishman  
editor@floridanewslines.com

Dr. Brennan Asplen settles into his new role as St. Johns County Schools superintendent with the confidence of someone who has walked these halls before. After a distinguished 37-year career in education that has taken him from math teacher to district leadership across multiple counties, Asplen is back where he once served as principal of Bartram Trail High School.

“I’m very blessed to be the superintendent here in St. Johns,” Asplen said during a recent interview in his district office. “We have such wonderful people who work here. They do a great job and they serve our students and families very well.”

Asplen’s journey to the superintendent’s chair reads like a roadmap through Florida education.



Dr. Brennan Asplen

After graduating from the University of Central Florida, he spent 18 years in Seminole County as a math teacher, dean, assistant principal and principal. In 2006, he moved to St. Johns County to lead Bartram Trail High School for five years before transitioning to district-

level positions, including associate superintendent for human resources and deputy superintendent for academics and student services.

A four-year stint as superintendent in Sarasota County broadened his perspective before he returned to St. Johns in 2023 as deputy superintendent for operations. Now, he’s ready to tackle the challenges and opportunities ahead.

**Embracing Technology and Communication**

One of the most significant changes students and parents will notice this school year is the rollout of new technology tools designed to improve communication and streamline daily operations.

“Parent Square,” a two-way communication platform, will replace the district’s current one-way messaging system. Director of Communications Christine

**New school** cont. on pg. 2

# District squares communication gap

**ParentSquare to replace one-way messaging system with two-way engagement tools**

Tracy McCormick-Dishman  
editor@floridanewslines.com

St. Johns County Schools is rolling out a new communication platform that promises to transform how the district connects with families, moving beyond simple announcements to interactive engagement.

“ParentSquare,” a web-based and app-compatible system, will replace the district’s current School Messenger platform, which Director of Communications Christine Upchurch describes as limited to “push things out one way.”

**ParentSquare** cont. on pg. 2

“It’s going to open up communication like we’ve never experienced before in the district,” Upchurch said during a recent interview. “This is engaging our community and our parents, and all kinds of different tools are built into it.”

The new platform represents a significant technological leap for the 53,000-student district. Unlike the current system that simply sends messages to parents, ParentSquare allows for true two-way communication between schools and families.




Christina Upchurch



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**New school** cont. from pg. 1

Upchurch, who joined the interview, emphasized the transformative potential of this new tool.

“It’s going to open up communication like we’ve never experienced before in the district,” Upchurch said. “Rather than just being able to push things out one way, this is engaging our community and our parents.”

The web-based and app-compatible platform will allow for interactive communication between schools and families, marking a significant upgrade from the previous system.

Transportation is also getting a technological makeover. The new “Bus Planner” system allows parents to easily check routes and bus numbers by entering their address, while the “Chipmunk” app provides real-time bus tracking.

“Parents will know when the bus is gonna arrive,” Asplen explained. “So when you’re at the bus stop and something happens, you can see the bus is 15 minutes out because there was a traffic accident. Parents are gonna love that.”

**Maintaining Excellence While Addressing Challenges**

While embracing innovation, Asplen recognizes the importance of preserving what makes St. Johns County Schools successful. The district serves approximately 53,000 students from kindergarten through 12th grade and continues to grow.

Three new K-8 schools are in various stages of development. Hallis Cove K-8 in the Rivertown area opens this August, starting with grades K-7 and adding eighth grade next year. Two additional K-8 schools in Silverleaf and the Nocatee/Seabrook area are scheduled to open next August.

Academically, Asplen has identified key focus areas: ensuring all students read by second or third grade, accelerating students who need advanced challenges and guaranteeing every senior graduates with a documented plan for their future.

“We want to be sure that our seniors have a plan, a documented plan, when they leave us,” he said. The district will utilize “Zellow,” a state-supported platform that allows students to build portfolios of their

interests and goals starting in middle school.

**Collaborative Leadership for Changing Times**

Perhaps most telling about Asplen’s leadership philosophy is his emphasis on collaboration. In an educational landscape increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, school choice and evolving parent expectations, he believes teamwork is essential.

“One of my main priorities as a leader is to make sure that we have a great culture and climate of collaboration,” Asplen said. “That’s where we solve all of our challenges and our issues.”

He views AI not as a threat but as a tool that must be properly understood and utilized. “When they leave us now in this environment, they are going to need to understand AI completely to get a job when they get through college or even if they don’t go to college.”

The district is providing professional development to help educators integrate AI appropriately while maintaining academic integrity.



As Asplen begins this new chapter in his career, his message to the community is one of continuity and progress. The foundation of excellence remains strong, but the tools and methods continue to evolve.

“There’s always something to work on,” he said. “Even though we are highly ranked in the state, there’s always things that we can work on. And we find those little gaps and we work on those and help those students.”

With decades of experience and a deep understanding of the St. Johns County community, Dr. Asplen appears ready to guide the district through whatever challenges and opportunities lie ahead.

**ParentSquare** cont. from pg. 1

**Strategic implementation timeline**

The district is taking a measured approach to the rollout. Principals received training on the new system this week, with teachers scheduled to be trained next. Parents will gain access to the platform just before the school year begins, ensuring educators

are comfortable with the system before families start using it.

Superintendent Dr. Brennan Asplen sees the communication upgrade as part of a broader strategy to meet modern parent expectations in an increasingly competitive educational landscape.

“We compete more than ever with charter schools and private schools and school choice,” Asplen said. “School choice is a great thing, but you need to be able to compete in that arena. And part of that is communication.”

**Meeting parents where they are**

The push for better communication technology stems from a recognition that parent expectations have evolved. Asplen, who has a 32-year-old daughter and 30-year-old son, acknowledges the generational communication gap.

“I don’t even know what they’re doing on their phone and on their apps,” he said. “But that’s how they communicate, and so we need to understand how to get the info out.”

The new platform addresses this challenge by offering both web-based access for those who prefer computers and a mobile app for parents who primarily use smartphones. District officials chose ParentSquare specifically because both interfaces offer excellent user experiences.

**Beyond basic messaging**

While Upchurch says she’s “still learning” all of ParentSquare’s capabilities, the platform promises features far beyond simple text alerts. The interactive nature of the system should allow



for surveys, event RSVPs, volunteer coordination and other engagement tools that weren’t possible with the previous one-way system.

The communication upgrade comes as the district implements several other technology initiatives, including new transportation tracking systems and continues expanding its use of artificial intelligence in educational settings.

For parents accustomed to the limited communication options of School Messenger, ParentSquare represents a significant step forward in school-home collaboration. As Upchurch noted, the district has never experienced this level of interactive communication capability.

The platform will be fully operational when students return to school this August, marking a new chapter in how St. Johns County Schools connects with its community.



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# BFF Best Furry Friend of the month

**Name:**

**Mango**

**Breed:**

**Sun Conure Parrot**

**Favorite Activity:**

**Dancing! Whether it's to music or random sounds.**

**Favorite Food:**

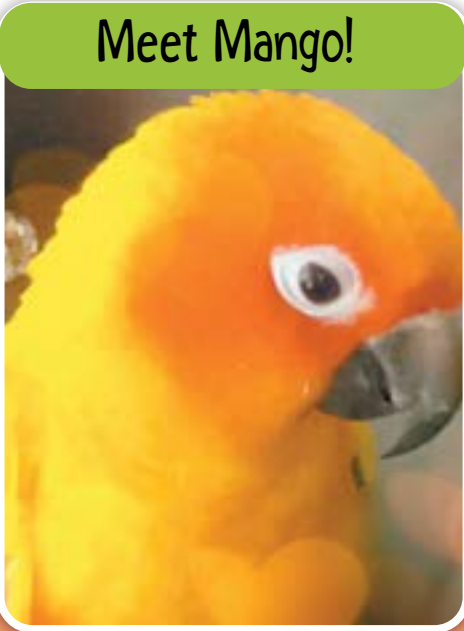
**Nutri-berries**

**Favorite Friend:**

**Her human bestie, Akeelah.**

**How did your BFF get her name?**

**She was already named Mango when I adopted her on my 13th birthday and it fit perfectly – she looks just like the fruit.**



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 Ponte Vedra NewsLine. Your pet could be our BFF of the month and appear in Ponte Vedra NewsLine! Email editor@floridanewsline.com to enter your pet.

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Back to School

Tech Guide

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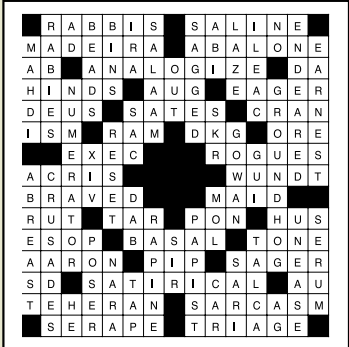
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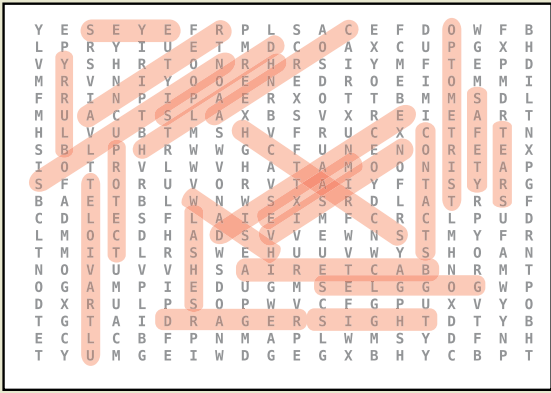
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# August

## Community Calendar

### What's Happening in Ponte Vedra

To submit items for the Community Calendar, email [editor@floridanewsline.com](mailto:editor@floridanewsline.com).

**North Florida Women's Chorale auditions**

The North Florida Women's Chorale invites passionate singers to become part of their vibrant ensemble for the 2025-26 season. The chorale is seeking performers interested in quality choral music. Set up an audition on their website at [www.womenschorale.org](http://www.womenschorale.org) or email [Kfradley@hotmail.com](mailto:Kfradley@hotmail.com) for more information.

**Aug. 1 Dan Tyminski concert**

Dan Tyminski will perform at Ponte Vedra Concert Hall, 1050 A1A North, Ponte Vedra Beach. The Ponte Vedra Concert Hall reopens for concerts and events on Aug. 1, 2025. For tickets and more information, visit [www.pvconcerthall.com](http://www.pvconcerthall.com).

**Aug. 5 Bingo**

Bingo will be held at THE PLAYERS Community Senior Center, 175 Landrum Lane, on Tuesdays from 1 – 2 p.m. for four weeks beginning Tuesday, Aug. 5. Contact Suzanne Duvall at (904) 209-3659 for more information and to register.

**Aug. 7 Sister Hazel concert**

Sister Hazel will perform at Ponte Vedra Concert Hall, 1050 A1A North, Ponte Vedra Beach. For tickets and more information, visit [www.pvconcerthall.com](http://www.pvconcerthall.com).

**Aug. 8 Brian Kelley concert**

Brian Kelley will perform at Ponte Vedra Concert Hall, 1050 A1A North, Ponte Vedra Beach.

For tickets and more information, visit [www.pvconcerthall.com](http://www.pvconcerthall.com).

**Aug. 8 Nocatee Food Truck Friday**

Nocatee Food Truck Friday will be held from 5:30 – 8:30 p.m. at Nocatee Station Field, 400 Nocatee Center Way, Ponte Vedra. The event features local food trucks, live music, and family-friendly activities. Guests are encouraged to bring lawn chairs and picnic blankets. Free event, open to the public.

**Aug. 14 Free Tech Help with David**

Free Tech Help with David will be held on Aug. 14 from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Ponte Vedra Beach Branch Library. Walk-in tech support for laptops, phones, tablets, Nook and Kindle readers. Bring your device and questions for one-on-one help with iPhone, Android, PC and Mac devices.

**Aug. 16 The Wood Brothers concert**

The Wood Brothers will perform at Ponte Vedra Concert Hall, 1050 A1A North, Ponte Vedra Beach. For tickets and more information, visit [www.pvconcerthall.com](http://www.pvconcerthall.com).

**Aug. 1 Morning Motor Social**

Morning Motor Social will be held from 8:30 – 11:30 a.m. on the third Saturday of each month at Park Place at Nocatee, 100 Palmetto Park Place, Ponte Vedra. Free for spectators and show vehicles, all makes and models welcome. Features state-of-the-art racing simulators.

**Aug. 16 Morning Motor Social Night Edition**

Morning Motor Social Night Edition will be held at 6:30 p.m. at 100 Palmetto Park Place,

Ponte Vedra. Organizers are curating a JDM Showcase for their August event featuring clean builds and unique rides from Japan.

**Aug. 20 Ponte Vedra Democratic Club meeting**

Ponte Vedra Democratic Club will meet on Wednesday, Aug. 20 at 5:30 p.m. for Chat & Chew before the 6 p.m. meeting at Ponte Vedra Beach Branch Library. Email [pvdemclub@gmail.com](mailto:pvdemclub@gmail.com) for more information.

**Aug. 21 St. Johns County Republican Party District 4 meeting**

St. Johns County Republican Party District 4 monthly meeting will be held on the third Thursday of each month (this month, Aug. 21) at 6:15 p.m. at Palm Valley Community Center, 148 Canal Blvd. Visit [stjohns.gop](http://stjohns.gop) for more information.

**Aug. 22 Nocatee Food Truck Friday**

Nocatee Food Truck Friday will be held from 5:30 – 8:30 p.m. at Nocatee Station Field, 400 Nocatee Center Way, Ponte Vedra. The event features local food trucks, live music, and family-friendly activities. Guests are encouraged to bring lawn chairs and picnic blankets. Free event, open to the public.

**Aug. 30 Ponte Vedra Writers Group**

Ponte Vedra Writers Group will be held on Aug. 30 from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Ponte Vedra Beach Branch Library. Monthly program with guest speakers. Partnership between Ponte Vedra Writers Group, Florida Writers Association, and the library.

**Council on Aging interest groups**

Council on Aging offers interest groups at the COA Center at UF Health Nocatee. Meet-

ings are free and self-guided. Advance registration for clubs and meetings is required; email [pbrunell@stjohnscoa.com](mailto:pbrunell@stjohnscoa.com) or call (904) 814-9407. Tuesday clubs include: Open Card Play, every Tuesday 1 – 4 p.m. and Caregiver Support Group, every Tuesday 1 – 2:30 p.m. Wednesday groups include: Mah Jongg Meet-up, 1 – 3 p.m.

**Palm Valley Market**



Palm Valley Market will be held at Palm Valley Community Center, 148 Canal Blvd., every Tuesday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. The market offers organically grown produce, pasture-raised chicken, eggs and pork, grass-finished beef, local honey, raw milk, bone broth, whole grain, gluten- and dairy-free sourdough breads, baked goods, all-natural skincare, local artisans, and more. This charming venue in the heart of Palm Valley offers both indoor and open-air shopping. For more information, email [info@PalmValleyMarket.com](mailto:info@PalmValleyMarket.com).


**Ponte Vedra Friday Farmers Market**



Ponte Vedra Friday Farmers Market is held every Friday, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., at Peace of Heart Community Farm. The market features fresh organically grown produce, Florida grass-fed beef, pork, real local honey, pasture-raised chicken and eggs, wholegrain breads, gluten-free sourdough bread, natural botanical skincare, local artisans and more in a family-friendly atmosphere.



**Nocatee Farmers Market**



Nocatee Farmers Market features fresh, locally grown produce and herbs, homemade jams, jellies, hand-stitched quilts, plants, art, and more from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at 400 Nocatee Center Way, Ponte Vedra. Visit [www.facebook.com/NocateeLiving](http://www.facebook.com/NocateeLiving) for more information.












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Christian cont. from pg. 1

hook and hooked it in its side.

“We had to pull him close to shore and get a snare rope over his head,” Watkins said. “He was tired by that point because he fought us pretty good. Then one guy held his head, and I jumped on his back. My adrenaline was pumping so bad.”

Digging his knees into the gator’s armpits, he held the animal’s head and stabbed it in the neck, severing its spinal cord.

“Being a Marine, I’ve got PTSD every day. Being able to do that, I felt a weight taken off my shoulders,” Watkins said. “Then, to top it all off, after that we went to a local spring, where four of us got baptized.”

It was Memorial Day, a day that Watkins said is always emotional for him and other military veterans, which made the experience particularly memorable.

“I’ll remember it for the rest of my life,” he said. “I can’t thank Mike and Project Savior Outdoors for giving me this opportunity.”

Dragich, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran who served in Afghanistan, founded Project Savior Outdoors three years ago after 15 fellow Marines committed suicide. The project’s mission, stated on its website, projectsavioroutdoors.org, is “to fight veteran suicide through the outdoors and sharing the true freedom that comes through Jesus Christ.”

Through fundraising and donations, the organization supports veteran hunts, fishing charters, retreats, and prayer and devotional bible study meetings every Wednesday night at the organization’s headquarters adjacent to Nocatee.

Anywhere from 35 to 45 men typically attend the Wednesday night event. They include military veterans as well as police and firefighter first responders. Led by Eli Tavarez, many show up at 5 p.m. for an hour of open mat workouts and vigorous exercise, sponsored in part by Top Tier Fitness. Food, provided by local vendors, is also provided.

Attendance usually doubles on the first Wednesday of every month for Community Night, Tavarez said



Eli Tavarez, center, kicks off a group prayer session with a short inspirational talk at Project Savior Outdoors headquarters near Nocatee.

during a recent Wednesday night gathering. “If the men know someone who is struggling who is a vet, they are encouraged to bring them. We love on them, we feed them, we hang out with them, we break bread together.”

At around 6 p.m., the workout mats are rolled up and chairs are arranged in a large circle for a 15-minute prayer and talk led Tavarez, who uses a disciple group curriculum created by the Church of Eleven22, based in Jacksonville. After that, the men break into small group discussions.

Tavarez said the church also helps in other ways. “They provide guest speakers, care resources for people suffering from PTSD, for those who are suicidal, going through a divorce or drug addiction. Our world view is that every man struggles because we

are in a fallen world.”

The purpose behind the hunts, he said, “is to get a man who is in bad circumstances out of it and get him shoulder to shoulder with men to build relationships. Some men have never hunted before. There is a reverence for the gift that God has given us through that animal.”

Watkins, who regularly attends the Wednesday night gatherings, said his wife has seen changes in him since he started coming in February. “I’m reading the Bible every night. I’m able to talk to my wife on a deeper level.”

He also attends church, which he never did before. “I’ve become more open and comfortable in my faith,” he said. “I’m proud to be a Christian.”



Photos by Maggie FitzRoy

Project Savior Outdoors members work out at the organization's headquarters.



Project Savior Outdoors participants gather for a Wednesday night meeting.



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Q&A with St. Johns County School Board Member Kelly Barrera, District 4

**Q: How is the new superintendent settling in?**

A: First and foremost, I'd want to thank Superintendent Tim Forson for his 45 years of service to the students and families in our district. He truly has a heart for students and our schools and I know this is a bitter-sweet time for him.

The great thing about Dr. Brennan Asplen is that he is bringing insight from two other school districts where he has worked, plus he knows how we operate here. He's made some orga-

nizational changes that don't cost any additional money: Dr. Kyle Dresback will take over Dr. Asplen's old role as Deputy Superintendent of Operations; Jay Willets will become the new Regional Superintendent for Secondary and Alternative Schools; and Paul Abbatinuzzi has been named Chief of Staff.

Superintendent Asplen has said he will be very focused on communicating with parents and families and he's interested in conducting listening tours in the near future for feedback.

I think we will see he wants to be able to provide strong support for teachers and staff and give them the tools they need to do their jobs efficiently and effectively.

**Q: What is on the horizon for the upcoming school year?**

A: We will be opening Hallows Cove Academy on schedule at the start of this school year. Our new bus planner app will be delivering bus schedules this year. If you haven't signed up yet, you need to visit the school district website for instructions on obtaining the app. Families will be able to tell if a bus is running late and also receive other important notifications. This will really be a gamechanger for our families and this, in addition to Parent Square, a new parent communication tool, will really help parents be fully prepared for the start of the new school year.

Another exciting enhancement is that PVPV Rawlings has now added VPK. Ocean Palms Elementary already offers VPK and both locations give young students the chance to acclimate to their new school prior to beginning kindergarten. Both of these schools, as well as Landrum Middle School, qualify for controlled open

enrollment. Reach out to the school if you are interested in learning more or taking a tour.

With our mental health budget allocation from the State of Florida, we will add two mental health counselors to the district at the start of the school year to join the two we added last spring.

**Q: Do you have anything else to share with District 4?**

A: I'd like to thank all the families, parents and students who reached out to our state legislators recently regarding the potential cutting of funds in the budget for AP and IB programs. This cut did not materialize in the final budget and we are very happy about this.

Finally, I'd like to remind families that some of our high schools' start times have changed; in particular for our district, Nease High School now starts at 9:35 a.m. and will finish at 4:05 p.m.

**Q: How can our readers contact you?**

A: They can email me at [kelly.barrera@stjohns.k12.fl.us](mailto:kelly.barrera@stjohns.k12.fl.us) or call me at (904) 547-7510.

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Q&A with St. Johns County Commissioner Krista Joseph District 4

**Q: At the June 17 meeting of the Board of County Commissioners, the tree ordinance part of the Land Development Code was discussed. Can you share any insights?**

A: It's been years since we adjusted our tree ordinance and I'm hopeful that the discussion items that we voted to move forward at the June 17 meeting will pass. We hope to reduce clear cutting a little bit and require increased buffers. Also, the measurement system for specimen trees will be enhanced. Currently, we use six different measurements and the proposal would be to utilize just one measurement, making it easier on our staff and hopefully also saving more specimen trees. We are also hopeful to dissuade developers from clearcutting a property years in advance of development.

St. Augustine and Duval County have more conservative tree ordinances than St. Johns County. For example, they support longleaf pines, which frequently house eagles' nests.

The next step will be at the July 22 meeting of the Board of County Commissioners, where we will be presented with a redline version of the ordinance showing the changes to the actual land development code. The meeting will begin at 9 a.m. and public comment is heard at the beginning of the meeting.

**Q: What's the latest on the Comprehensive Plan?**

A: We are also moving forward with a red line version of this at the July 22 meeting to then be transmitted to the state. As of now, the new plan shows not moving the development line south to the agricultural line and I hope that remains. The No. 1 item at the Town Hall meetings we've held that people want is to support agricultural land and the conservation of our county.

**Q: What else is scheduled for the July 22 meeting?**

A: It's going to be a busy meeting. The third big thing will be the ebike resolution that the board previously discussed and I don't think it was strong enough. I'd prefer to rediscuss the possibility of an ordinance or at least discuss increased ticketing for infractions — possibly even just for one month. The biggest infractions seem to be running stop signs, having multiple people on an ebike built for just one person and the rider not wearing a helmet. I'd also like to see an educational program developed immediately. Perhaps kids up to a certain age should be required to watch a video or something like that before being allowed to operate an ebike.

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

A: Readers can email me at [bcc4k-joseph@sjcfl.us](mailto:bcc4k-joseph@sjcfl.us) or call me at (904) 679-2620.



# Life

travel • pantry raiders • gardening  
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## Get to Know ...

By Maggie FitzRoy  
mail@floridanewslines.com

### Susan Shipe Calfee

Susan Shipe Calfee is an accomplished writer, author, and poet who hails from a family of writers. When her 96-year-old mother lay dying and asked Susan to finish a novel that she had been working on for years, Susan readily agreed.

Susan's mother, Bess Paterson Shipe, had completed 22 chapters of a sweeping historical mystery suspense about a young woman who inherits a house off the Maryland Shore. She had written many short stories, but this was her only novel, which she began writing in the 1960s.

Now, seven years after saying goodbye to her mother, Susan has fulfilled her mother's dream. After adding 17 chapters, including an ending she knows her mother would love, she published the book, "The Forces of Bay House" by Bess Paterson Shipe and Susan Shipe Calfee, now available on Amazon.com and at the Ponte Vedra Beach Library.

"Writing the book was her life's literary dream," says Susan, who is also a singer, musician, and the



Photo by Maggie FitzRoy  
Susan Shipe Calfee holds a copy of the book she co-authored with her mother in her home writing office. Photos of her mother are displayed on either side of her.

author of a local children's book called "St. Augustine A to Z: A Young Reader's Guide to America's Oldest City." "Little did I know my mother's dream would also become mine."

#### Q: How difficult was it to finish your mother's book?

A: It was quite a stretch to go from a children's alphabet book to a full-blown suspense novel of 465 pages. My mother lived with me the last two years of her life and arrived with 14 notebooks filled with versions of the

novel. Her mother had lived to 101 and she always assumed she'd have time to finish it.

#### Q: How were you able to finish it?

A: I was studying the craft of fiction at the time with "Shantyboat" by Lynn Skapyak Harlin, who taught The Shantyboat Writers Workshops from a houseboat on pontoons moored on the Trout River, across from the Jacksonville Zoo. I studied with Lynn for 12 years and Lynn had read my mother's book and encouraged her to polish and finish it. Since my mother and I were extremely close, I was able to finish her book in her voice. It was like two hands on the same pen. I joke that I'm not a ghost writer — I'm the ghost's writer.

#### Q: When did you start singing?

A: I've always been a singer, since I was five. Cherub Choir. Madrigals. High school musicals. Glee club. The University of Maryland Chorus, where I went to college. Then in my twenties I was hired by Busch Gardens in Tampa to become one of 17 members of The Busch Garden Singers, the first human entertainment group at the park. We put on costumed, choreographed, 30-minute shows.

#### Q: What was it like performing at Busch Gardens?

A: We did 42 shows a week, six days a week, seven shows a day—outside, with a live orchestra, after the baby elephant act and the sea lion act. I also rode on a camel and an elephant while singing with a handheld mike—but not simultaneously, I never achieved that. They asked me: 'Susan, can you ride an elephant?' and I said, 'I guess.'

#### Q: Where do you sing now?

A: I sing with The Heritage Singers of Jacksonville. I also sang with the Jacksonville Symphony for 15 years and as a volunteer for a nonprofit called Body and Soul, the Art of Healing, founded by the Jacksonville Symphony's principal tuba James Jenkins. Body and Soul brings entertainment to hospital patients' bedsides. I loved going to the hospital. I did several shifts a week for about 12 years.

#### Q: How long have you lived in Ponte Vedra Beach?

A: Since 1991, when I moved here with my family.

#### Q: When did you write "St. Augustine, A to Z?"

A: In 2013. It continues to be sold in many stores in St. Augustine as well as online. I also give talks in local schools using the book to encourage a love of reading in children and to teach them about the city. My mother and sister wrote a children's book about Charleston, South Carolina and I decided to write one about St. Augustine. I was really into rhyme, writing poetry, and I chose the most kid-friendly places for the alphabet.

## Get to Know ...

Interested in being featured? Email Martie Thompson at  
editor@FloridaNewsLine.com

# Fishing

## Shrimp season heats up

By Jimmy Tomazinis  
mail@floridanewslines.com

Wow, what a summer it has been and we are only in August. The shrimp run started with a bang and remains strong from the Buckman to the Shands. I've had reports of 100-150 shrimp per throw. Limits in under an hour. If those numbers hold through this month while they continue to grow, we are in for something special this fall. Let's all cross our fingers to make that happen.

The water is very warm, but the rains help mitigate it some since we do not get much relief from cooler ocean water this far upriver. Hot water can cause fish to be less active and even

stop feeding. Because of this, finding areas that are slightly colder will help you find fish that are more likely to bite.

Redfish have been everywhere from bridges, docks, and drop offs. Most of them have been slot sized but a few have been caught close to 40 inches. Finger mullet, shrimp, and crab would be that natural baits of choice. Lots of different artificials will work as long as they resemble a small baitfish or shrimp.

Drum and sheepshead are around docks and bridges. They are very keyed in on shrimp right now, but

they will still take clams if you would rather use them. Look for drum in the deeper areas around the structures. Sheepshead will be there too but they are much easier to catch in shallower water, especially when baits are on the bottom.

Tarpon remain a possibility if you enjoy chasing them this time of year. Bridges are one of the most consistent places to find them. They also can be extremely mobile following bait schools up and down the river. They are most active at night, but you might be able to find them by looking for rolling fish early

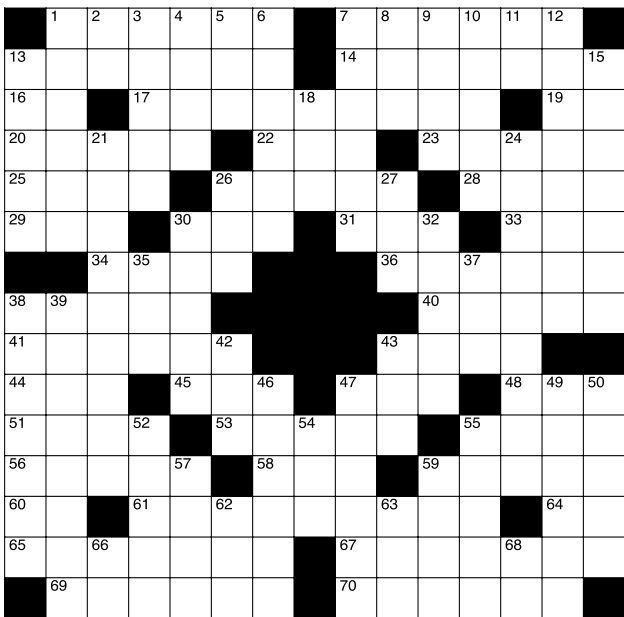
and late in the day. Try larger live baits like mullet and croakers where you see them rolling and you might just get a bite.

Another fun thing to do would be to catch some shrimp and take them up some of our creeks in the area to target bass. Bass absolutely love our river shrimp and will put on quite a spectacle trying to catch one on the surface. Rig the shrimp free-lined or under a float and see what you think about it. Drink plenty of water and stay safe out there.

Tight lines.



Answers on page 3  
Provided by MetroCreative



## CLUES ACROSS

1. Spiritual leaders
7. Salt
13. Fortified wine
14. Edible mollusk
16. They precede C
17. A way to compare
19. State lawyer
20. "Game of Thrones"  
actor Ciaran
22. Eighth month (abbr.)
23. Very willing
25. \_\_\_ ex machina
26. Satisfies
28. Mountain in New Zealand
29. A doctrine
30. Popular Dodge truck model
31. Dekagram
33. Naturally occurring solid
34. Company officer
36. Villains
38. Cricket frogs
40. One of the founders of  
modern psychology
41. Endured
43. A female domestic
44. You can get stuck in one
45. Partner to feather
47. Passive optical network
48. French ballet dynasty
51. Employee stock ownership plan
53. Bottom layer
55. Sound
56. Yankee great Judge
58. Dickens character
59. Late beloved TNT sportscaster
60. South Dakota
61. Exposing human vice or  
folly to ridicule
64. Gold
65. Longtime Braves hurler Julio
67. Humor
69. Shawl
70. Hospital unit

### CLUES DOWN

1. Animal disease
2. Commercial
3. Necklace materials
4. Containers
5. Investment account
6. Colorado Heisman Trophy winner
7. Dipped down
8. Head injury category (abbr.)
9. Lay about
10. Intestinal
11. Not yes
12. Caused to be loved
13. Muslim spiritual leader
15. Showing sincere conviction
18. Not in
21. Number above the line in a fraction
24. Lawn pest
26. Pouch
27. Ancient language in India (abbr.)
30. Start over
32. Wild white flower
35. Fourteen
37. Visual way to interact with computer (abbr.)
38. Side by side and facing the same way
39. Religious conflicts
42. Touch lightly
43. "Boardwalk Empire" actress Gretchen Mol
46. Violent seizure of property
47. One who supports the pope
49. Malaise
50. Body fluid
52. Inauthentic person
54. Title of respect
55. Chilean city
57. Japanese city
59. Silk garment
62. Draw from
63. Automobile
66. The man
68. Top government lawyer

# EYE HEALTH WORD SEARCH

Y	E	S	E	Y	E	F	R	P	L	S	A	C	E	F	D	O	W	F	B
L	P	R	Y	I	U	E	T	M	D	C	O	A	X	C	U	P	G	X	H
V	Y	S	H	R	T	O	N	R	H	R	S	I	M	F	F	T	E	P	D
M	R	V	N	I	Y	O	O	E	N	E	D	R	O	E	I	O	M	M	I
F	R	I	N	P	I	P	A	X	B	X	O	T	B	I	M	M	S	D	L
H	U	A	V	C	T	L	A	H	V	F	V	X	E	C	E	A	F	R	T
S	B	L	T	P	R	W	W	G	C	T	R	U	N	O	C	T	E	A	N
I	O	T	T	R	L	V	V	H	A	F	U	M	O	N	O	I	T	A	X
S	F	T	E	B	U	W	N	R	V	A	A	I	F	T	A	S	Y	R	P
B	A	E	L	T	F	L	A	W	S	S	M	R	D	L	C	T	R	S	F
C	D	M	O	C	H	A	D	I	E	X	E	W	C	R	A	T	P	U	D
L	M	I	T	S	D	R	S	S	H	I	U	V	N	S	H	N	O	F	R
T	N	O	V	U	V	H	S	A	I	R	E	T	W	Y	B	G	R	M	N
O	G	A	M	P	I	E	O	U	G	M	S	E	C	A	G	O	G	W	P
D	X	R	U	L	P	S	O	P	W	V	C	F	G	P	U	X	V	Y	O
T	E	C	T	I	D	R	A	G	E	R	S	I	G	H	T	D	F	Y	B
T	Y	U	M	B	E	P	N	M	A	P	L	W	M	S	Y	C	B	N	T

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

## WORDS

- BACTERIA  
BLURRY  
CONTACTS  
CORNEA  
DISTANCE  
DROPS  
EXAM  
EYES  
GOGGLES  
HEALTH  
LASHES  
OPTOMETRIST  
PROTECT  
REGARD  
RETINA  
SAFETY  
SCRATCH  
SIGHT  
SOLUTION  
TEARS  
ULTRAVIOLET  
VISION  
WASH



Solve the code to discover words related to eye health.  
Each number corresponds to a letter.  
**(Hint: 1 = S)**

- A.** 14 17 1 17 10 13  
*Clue: Sight*
- B.** 1 18 13 25 3 5 1 1 8 1  
*Clue: Tinted lenses*
- C.** 8 6 5 11  
*Clue: Test*
- D.** 21 4 10 22 8 15 22  
*Clue: Care for*

# Nease swim and dive finishes season strong

By NewsLine Staff  
mail@floridanewslines.com

Nease swim and dive continues to impress and this 2024 – 2025 school year did not disappoint. Led by Gustavo Calado, both girls' and boys' swim and dive teams walked away with many awards.

The Nease swim and dive boys' program earned the 2024 FHSA Class 3A State Championship title for the third consecutive year. Preceding this winning streak at the state championship, the boys' team also swept the 2024 3A Region 1 and 2024 3A District 3 titles — also for the third year. The Nease swim and dive girls' team was the runner up at the

2024 3A State Championship.

Senior Walker Lanoue said, “We had to stand together, as a team, with the older swimmers leading and helping the younger swimmers. We had to rely on each other.”

As a program the swim and dive teams' mission is to encourage, inspire, and equip all swimmers and divers to be the best student-athletes they can be in the pool and beyond.

“Success comes at different times, so you can’t give up, you have to bring your best self always,” said senior Charlotte Driesse.



Photo courtesy Tiffany Davis-Baer  
The Nease swim and dive team.

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# AI in the classroom: What parents need to know

Tracy McCormick-Dishman  
editor@floridanewsline.com

If you’ve heard your teenager mention ChatGPT in passing, you’re not alone. Artificial intelligence tools are rapidly transforming how students approach homework and assignments, creating new questions for families across the country.

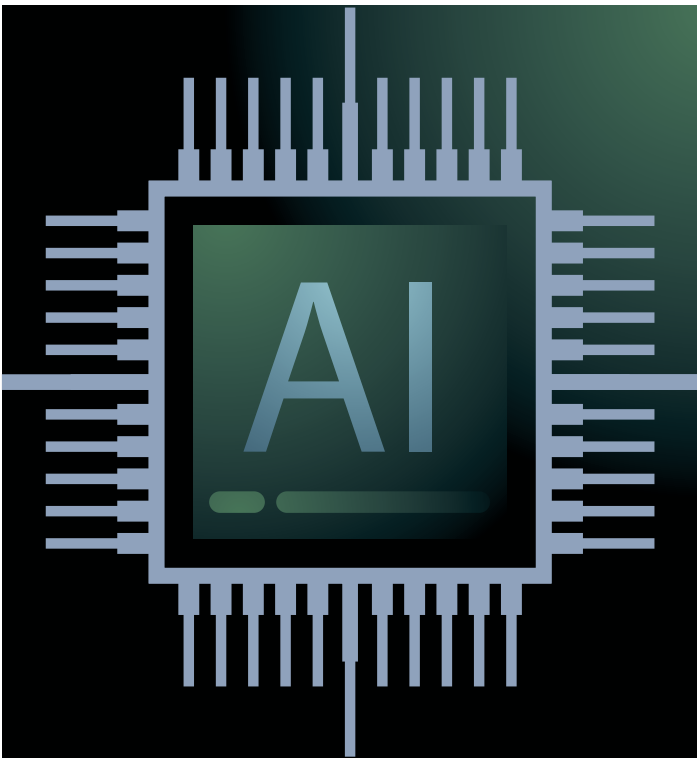
The numbers tell a compelling story. One in four 13- to 17-year-olds now use ChatGPT for schoolwork, according to recent Pew research cited by Axios. That figure has doubled since 2023. Even more striking, research shows that 89% of students admit to using AI tools like ChatGPT for homework, according to Packback research.

Rather than fighting this trend, many school districts are embracing it thoughtfully. Forward-thinking educators are recognizing that artificial intelligence literacy will be essential for students entering today’s workforce, whether they pursue college or enter careers directly after graduation.

Districts nationwide are providing professional development to help educators integrate artificial intelligence appropriately while maintaining academic integrity. This approach acknowledges that students must be prepared for a workforce where AI skills are increasingly valuable.

Yet the challenge extends beyond the classroom. Nationally, over one in four teachers have caught students cheating by using ChatGPT, according to National Education Association data. In the 2023-24 school year, 63% of teachers reported students for using AI on schoolwork.

Education leaders express broader concerns, too. According to Axios, 66% of education leaders think generative AI will cut into students’ attention spans, raising questions about long-term



learning impacts.

Still, perspectives on AI in education aren’t uniformly negative. “Far from being just a dream machine for cheaters, many teachers now believe, ChatGPT could actually help make education

better,” according to MIT Technology Review analysis.

School districts are developing guidelines that include data security, privacy controls, user restrictions, and age-appropriate content standards to ensure ethical AI tool usage. These frameworks help teachers understand how to incorporate AI tools effectively while maintaining educational integrity.

Some schools are even offering specialized courses in artificial intelligence, preparing students to earn industry certifications that will serve them in technology-focused careers.

For parents, the key seems to be staying informed and engaged. As AI tools become more prevalent in classrooms, families can better support their children by understanding both the opportunities and the boundaries these technologies present.

## New school year, new screen time challenges for parents

Tracy McCormick-Dishman  
editor@floridanewsline.com

As parents finish back-to-school shopping and check tablets and laptops off their supply lists, many are discovering that traditional screen time rules don’t work when devices become essential homework tools. If you’ve ever found yourself trying to determine whether your child is doing homework or watching videos on that required school tablet, you’re facing one of today’s most common parenting dilemmas.

The numbers paint a clear picture of how significant this issue has become. During July 2021 through December 2023, 50.4% of teenagers ages 12-17 had four hours or more of daily screen time, according to the CDC National Health Interview Survey. Research shows that children aged eight to 18 now spend an average of 7.5 hours per day in front of screens, according to Kids Mental Health.

The challenge for parents has evolved beyond simply limiting screen exposure. When tablets and computers become required tools for homework, traditional screen time rules become nearly impossible to enforce.

St. Johns County Schools recognizes

the balance families must strike as technology becomes increasingly integrated into education. Superintendent Dr. Brennan Asplen acknowledges that students must understand technology completely to succeed in today’s world.

“When they leave us now in this environment, they are going to need to understand AI completely to get a job when they get through college or even if they don’t go to college,” Asplen said.

Fortunately, research suggests not all screen time carries equal impact. Educational screen time provides the most benefit, showing positive effects on children’s persistence and educational outcomes while having no significant impact on health, according to EdTech Magazine research.

The key lies in helping families distinguish between productive educational screen time and passive entertainment. Experts recommend creating designated “digital homework zones” separate from “digital free zones” within homes, allowing families to maintain structure while accommodating necessary technology use.

What’s particularly interesting is that



children themselves recognize potential problems with excessive screen exposure. According to Internet Matters research, nearly 30% of children spend three to four hours on devices every day, and children cited “spending too much time online” as the issue they experienced most.

St. Johns County Schools is also addressing communication challenges in the digital age with new technology tools. The district is rolling out “ParentSquare,” a two-way communication platform that will replace the current one-way messaging system.

“It’s going to open up communication like we’ve never experienced before in the district,” said Christine Upchurch, director of communications. “Rather than just being able to push things out one way, this is engaging our community and our parents.”

Asplen recognizes that parent expectations have evolved with technology.

“I don’t even know what they’re doing on their phone and on their apps,” he said. “But that’s how they communicate, and so we need to understand how to get the info out.”

Rather than fighting technology altogether, educational experts suggest the solution involves teaching digital literacy skills and helping children develop healthy relationships with their devices. As schools continue integrating technology into curricula, families are finding new strategies for managing the intersection of required educational screen time and healthy digital boundaries.

The path forward requires finding balance between embracing necessary educational technology while maintaining limits that support children’s overall development and well-being. For many families, it’s becoming less about the amount of screen time and more about the quality and purpose of that time.

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By Scott A. Grant  
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# PopHistory

## Air Force One

The first president to fly in an airplane was Teddy Roosevelt, only at the time he was not president. He took to the skies in 1910 at an international aviation meet in St. Louis. The flight lasted 3 minutes and 20 seconds. Roosevelt declared it, with his usual bully hyperbole, as “the finest experience I ever had.”

Roosevelt had a long fascination with flight that went back to the 1800s, before the Wright Brothers. While serving as undersecretary of the Navy during McKinley’s first term, Teddy suggested the Navy should look into Langley’s flying machines. Samuel Langley was a pioneer in flight. He built unmanned aircraft similar in many respects to drones. He called them aerodromes and they were powered by a steam boiler. One aerodrome flew more than 1000 meters before plunging into the Potomac River.

Langley was also secretary of the Smithsonian Institute. For a long time, the Smithsonian credited Langley with the invention of flight. The Wright Brothers had only invented “manned flight.” Eventually, the Smithsonian joined most of the rest of the world and acknowledged the Wright Brothers.

The first president to fly in an airplane while in office was Teddy’s younger cousin, Franklin, who had two planes: the “Dixie Clipper” and the “Sacred Cow.” The Clipper was a flying boat manufactured by the Boeing Corporation. It had a range of 3500 miles and a cruising speed of 183 mph. FDR took the plane to meet with Winston Churchill in Casablanca. The “Sacred Cow” was a Douglas C-54. Roosevelt took that plane to the infamous Yalta Conference to meet with Stalin and Churchill in 1945, shortly before his death. Later, Harry Truman would sign the executive order creating the

Air Force in the conference room of the “Sacred Cow.” Prior to that the Air Force was part of the Army and called the Army Air Corps.

The first plane to carry the designation “Air Force One” was a Lockheed Constellation also known as the Columbine II. Dwight D. Eisenhower used the plane in the early 1950s. Built in 1948, the plane boasted four propellers. The plane had a maximum speed of 375 mph. The Columbine II was replaced by the Columbine III and then by the first jet to fly presidents, the “Queenie,” a Boeing 707. Originally, it flew Eisenhower around the world.

John F Kennedy got his own Boeing 707 in 1962. That plane was the first to carry the distinctive blue and white color scheme we know today. The plane, known only as Air Force One, flew Kennedy to Berlin for this “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech and later flew

his body back to Washington after his assassination in Dallas. Lyndon Johnson was sworn in as the 36th President on board that flight.

All in all, there have been a total of seven presidential aircraft, including the current Boeing 747 that was put into service during the George HW Bush administration and continues in use today. Technically, any plane carrying the president is Air Force One. It is not the plane itself, but the passenger accorded the designation. In the movie “Independence Day,” Bill Pullman, a former fighter pilot, flies an F-18 to attack the aliens. He used the call sign Eagle 5. He should have used the call sign Air Force One.

Scott A Grant is a local author and historian. He welcomes your comments at [scottg@standfastic.com](mailto:scottg@standfastic.com)

# Gardening

## Resilience in extreme conditions

By Master Gardener Volunteer Lesley Arrandale  
mail@floridanewslines.com

By Master Gardener Volunteer Lesley Arrandale  
mail@floridanewslines.com

Living in the South, we’re subject to extreme heat, periods of drought, and torrential rains, as well as the potential for devastating storms. Our wild areas are naturally resilient to these conditions, having evolved over thousands of years, but not so our yards and gardens.

My yard is an average-size lot dating from the 1940s and '50s. Like neighborhoods of similar age, over the past 20 to 30 years, water and laurel oaks have succumbed to old age. Storms have damaged mature hickories and live oaks, causing them to be taken

down. Consequently, many yards on the once-shady street are now more exposed, with more lawns and less shrubbery.

We can take steps to achieve a resilient landscape. A reasonable starting point is choosing plants according to the mantra "Right plant, right place," ensuring that light, soil, and drainage are near ideal for your chosen plants. Native plants historically found in our area are good bets. For my sandy, well-draining situation, if I grow moisture-loving perennials, I group them in a limited area and use a soaker hose during droughts—the least wasteful way to use precious potable water.

When choosing plants, I look for pollinator-friendly options. Pollinators—those varied insects that play a vital role in pollinating 30-40% of our foods—are essential. This chart lists good native pollinator plants for Florida: <https://xerces.org/publications/plant-lists/native-plants-for-pollinators-and-beneficial-insects-florida>. The Florida Native Plant Society website shows if a plant is native to Duval County.

When buying pollinator-friendly plants, not all nurseries sell suitable plants, even if labels claim they attract bees or butterflies. I recently returned a beautiful rose after learning it may

have been treated with neonicotinoid systemic pesticides—deadly to pollinators if pollen and nectar are tainted.

This creates a dilemma: how to choose pollinator plants safe for visiting insects. Independent nurseries are likely the best sources, as staff are more likely to know how plants are grown.

While research continues on certified pesticide-free plants, I’ll grow plants from untreated seeds and take cuttings from others. If I have enough, I’ll share and hope to get some in return. Although we can’t all grow enough plants to fill a yard, every little helps.

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Submitted photo

This showy southern native is characterized by the loose, widely spaced nature of the flowering spike. It is found in the hot sands of the South.

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Travel

A rainy day in Granada: Power and poetry at the Alhambra

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On a recent trip to Spain, I reserved one day to explore Granada, a city steeped in history and home to one of Spain’s most treasured landmarks: the Alhambra. From Seville, I boarded a group tour bus before dawn for the three-hour ride, groggy but excited.

Our first stop was the Albaicín, Granada’s oldest neighborhood—a former Moorish quarter of whitewashed houses, flower-filled balconies and steep cobblestone alleys. Unfortunately, it was pouring rain, but we still wandered through the labyrinthine streets. From a hilltop overlook, I gazed across the city and saw it at last: the Alhambra, sprawled across the ridge and silhouetted by the misty Sierra Nevada mountains. Even through the rain, the sight was stunning.

After lunch, we entered the Alhambra complex. My designated guide chose to

begin in the Generalife, the vast gardens once used by Nasrid rulers as a summer retreat. The weather made it challenging: I found myself wiping my camera lens, dodging umbrellas, and trying to keep up with the fast-moving group. But despite the damp and distraction, the gardens worked their charm. Trimmed hedges, blooming flowers, and glimmering water channels created a peaceful oasis—even in the rain. The sound of running water, a hallmark of Islamic Garden design, added to the sense of tranquility.

Next, we entered the Nasrid Palaces, the architectural heart of the Alhambra. At the entrance, we were required to show our passports—a reminder of the site’s strict preservation. Here, our guide began unfolding the Alhambra’s remarkable story.

What began as a small fortress in the ninth century rose to greatness in the 13th and 14th centuries under the Nasrid dynasty, the last Muslim rulers of Spain. The complex became a self-contained royal city: palaces, mosques, military quarters, and gardens spread across the hilltop.

The Nasrid Palaces, built in the 1300s, are masterpieces of Islamic architecture—expressions of paradise on Earth.



Photos courtesy Debi Lander

Fountain of Lions are 12 carved figures supporting a marble basin that once symbolized the cosmos.

Inside, intricate stucco designs ripple like lace across the walls, archways frame the changing light, and water flows in sinuous patterns.

In 1492, the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, completed the Reconquista by capturing Granada. The Alhambra became their royal court—most famously the site where Christopher Columbus received approval for his voyage to the New World.

Centuries of change followed. Emperor Charles V demolished part of the Nasrid complex to build his Renaissance-style palace in the 1500s—a bold but jarring contrast to the Moorish delicacy. By the 18th century, the site had fallen into disrepair and was even used as military barracks. But in the 1830s, Romantic artists and writers, including Washington Irving, revived interest in the Alhambra, sparking preservation efforts that continue to this day.

In the Palace of the Lions, I paused to admire the famed Fountain of the Lions — 12 carved figures supporting a marble basin that once symbolized the cosmos. Light filtered through filigreed archways, casting patterns that danced across the floor. The Alhambra’s magic lies not in gold or grandeur, but in light, geometry and water, a quiet kind of majesty.

We ended at the Alcazaba, the fortress section of the complex. Though we didn’t have time to climb the tower, the view from the ramparts was enough. Below, Granada unfurled — a sea of terracotta rooftops, the golden dome of the cathedral, and the winding lanes of the Albaicín I’d walked that morning.

Gazing down, I was struck by a realization: the Alhambra is more than a historical site. It’s a living conversation between architecture and landscape, power and poetry, past and present.

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