

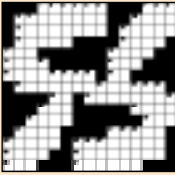
 <p>page 3 BFF Best Furry Friend</p>	 <p>page 4 Community Calendar</p>	 <p>page 7 Business Monthly</p>	 <p>page 9 Puzzles</p>
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Photo courtesy Palencia Elementary School
A father and daughter pose for a photo at a previous Palencia Elementary School Daddy-Daughter Dance.

Denim, Diamonds and Dads

By Sara Seifert

Yee-haw! It's time to shine in your best bedazzled denim for this year's Daddy-Daughter Dance hosted by the Palencia Elementary School PTO.

For the past few years, the themes have been alternating between formal and informal so with last year's ethereal "Enchanted Forest" theme, the PTO decided to have guests kick up their boots with a fun and less formal theme. Of course, anyone who remembers Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake's denim outfits from the early aughts knows

Dance cont. on pg. 2



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Forever Families

Four families celebrate forever homes on National Adoption Day

NewsLine staff
mail@floridanewslines.com

The St. Johns County Clerk of the Circuit Court and County Comptroller's office hosted a special ceremony to celebrate National Adoption Day.

The Nov. 21, 2025, event recognized four families who have grown through adoption this year and highlighted the continued efforts in St. Johns County to provide permanency and stability for children in foster care.

"National Adoption Day is one of the happiest days at the courthouse as our community comes together to celebrate these families," said Clerk Brandon J. Patty. "Our Family Clerks are proud to support the court proceedings that help make these moments possible."

St. Johns County Commissioner Sarah Arnold emphasized the community's role in supporting adopted children.

"Supporting children adopted from

Adoption cont. on pg. 2



Photo courtesy St. Johns County Clerk
A 16-year-old adoptee embraces his new forever family during a November 2025 National Adoption Day celebration at the St. Johns County Courthouse.

No Excuses Running Club sweeps state titles, makes history in Lakeland

By Jill Benavides

Forty-two athletes from the No Excuses Running Club (NERC) traveled to Lakeland, Florida, on Oct. 31 to compete at the 2025 FLYRA Middle School Cross Country State Championship. After preparing since June, the team arrived with a singular goal: becoming state champions.

The weekend began with strong performances in the elementary divisions. In the 2K Elementary Girls race, runners Hasset, Darcy, Vivian, Linley and Harper all earned individual medals, securing a second-place finish for the team. Individual success continued in the Boys 2K, with Hudson earning a 17th-place medal. In the 1K event, runners Millie, Khari and Cal also brought home individual medals.

Drama unfolded prior to the Middle School Girls 3K race when the team's No. 2 runner woke up very ill. Despite her illness, she took to the starting line, inspiring her teammates to dig deep. The girls responded by setting personal records, dedicating the race to their teammate. Their effort resulted in winning the Middle School Girls Club 3K division and earning the title of Overall



Photo courtesy No Excuses Running Club
The No Excuses Running Club Middle School Girls and Boys 3K teams celebrate their victories at the state championship.

Fastest Middle School Cross Country Girls Team of 2025. Top runners for the girls included Bri, Madelen, Amelia, Amaya, Piper, Emma, Olivia, Meghan, Anna and Kenley.

Inspired by the girls' performance, the NERC boys approached the 3K starting line with deep resolve. Runners Bryce, Martin, Peter, Parker,

Lakeland cont. on pg. 2

Dance cont. from pg. 1

that it can still be very dressed up!

The "Denim and Diamonds" theme was selected by co-chairs Brooke Paarlberg and Amy Franks who are teaming up for the second year in a row.

They told me, "Chairing this event is a joy. Seeing dads and daughters light up the room together reminds us why these moments matter and it's a privilege to help make that magic happen for our school community."

The annual dance will once again be held at the Marriott's Renaissance Hotel in World Golf Village on Jan. 24, from 6 to 9 p.m.. In addition to a

buffet-style dinner, there will be line dancing lessons as well as a diamond bling bar for face bedazzling.

The evening will not disappoint when it comes to providing special memories for years to come.

The cost for a Daddy-Daughter duo is \$85 with a \$40 fee for each additional daughter. Sign-in starts at 6 p.m. with doors opening at 6:30 p.m. sharp.

If you would like to help set up or get involved, please reach out to Brooke and Amy at PES.daddydaughter-chairs@gmail.com. Volunteers are always needed to help set up the day before and day of the dance.



Attendees celebrate the "Enchanted Forest" theme at last year's Palencia Elementary School Daddy-Daughter Dance.

Lakeland cont. from pg. 1

Harrison, Nicholas, Elias and Thomas delivered a dominant performance. The top four runners finished under the 10-minute mark, beating all opposing teams. The victory marked the team's sixth consecutive Club Cross Country State Championship. They were also crowned Overall State Champions and are now recorded as the fastest middle school boys cross country team in the history of the Florida Youth Running Association (FLYRA).

In the final event of the meet, the NERC Boys Open team—comprised of Johnathon, Xavier, Amari, Cooper,

Elliot, Caleb, Dutch, Ben, Daniel, Ezra and Mudil—battled the odds to achieve perfection. The team scored a "perfect 15," marking the first perfect cross country team score in the history of the FLYRA middle school championships.

The team attributes their strength to their faith and a resolve to run not for themselves, but for one another. With the cross country season concluded, the club now sets its sights on the 2026 track season.

Jill Benavides is the head cross country and track coach for No Excuses Running Club (NERC).



The No Excuses Running Club Boys Open team achieved a historic "perfect 15" team score at the FLYRA Middle School Cross Country State Championship in Lakeland.

Adoption cont. from pg. 1

foster care is a community effort," Arnold said. "When a child finds a permanent, loving home, it strengthens families, neighborhoods, and our entire County."

Deputy Secretary Kate Williams of the Florida Department of Children and Families emphasized the dedication of local partners, the judiciary and the community.

"Thanks to the steadfast leadership of Governor DeSantis and his commitment to supporting strong and resilient families, more children in Florida are finding the permanency and stability they deserve," Williams said. "The adoptions finalized today and just in time for the holidays, are a powerful reminder of what is possible when our partners, the judiciary, and our communities come together on behalf of children. We are deeply grateful to the families who opened their hearts and homes, and we celebrate the new beginnings that each

child and family will carry with them into this season and beyond."

In 2024, Family Clerks provided support during court proceedings that formed 70 new families through adoption. This year, 42 adoption cases have already been completed in St. Johns County.

Clerks play a vital role in the process by assisting petitioners, administering oaths, processing adoption petitions and providing certified copies of the final judgment.

Circuit Judge Christopher Ferebee, who presided over the final hearing during the ceremony, noted that adoption days are some of the happiest and most rewarding days for judges.

St. Johns County handles all family-related cases, including adoptions, under a Unified Family Court model. This comprehensive framework assigns one judge to oversee all matters involving one family, offering consistency and continuity for children, particularly those adopted



From left, St. Johns County Commissioner Sarah Arnold and Circuit Judge Christopher Ferebee pose with Shawna Novak, right, and an adoptive family during a November 2025 National Adoption Day celebration at the St. Johns County Courthouse.

out of foster care.

The celebration was hosted in partnership with the St. Johns County Family Integrity Program, the Seventh Judicial Circuit, Guardian ad Litem Office and the Florida Department of Children and Families.

For more information, contact the Clerk's office at (904) 819-3600 or visit www.stjohnsclerk.com.

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BFF

Breed:
English Mastiff

Favorite Activity:
Playing in the pool with her human sister.

Favorite Food:
Steak

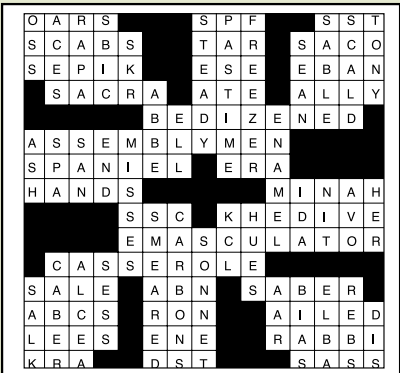
Favorite Friends:
Her human sister and her longhorn chew toy named Bevo.

How did your BFF get their name:
We named her after the character Elsa from the movie Frozen because of her blonde hair and her human sisters love for the movie!

Best Furry Friend of the month

Meet Elsa!

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



Answers
to our
Puzzles
PG 9

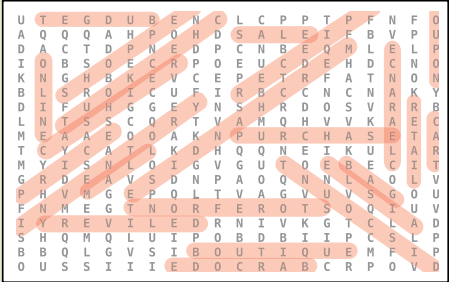


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January

Community Calendar

What's Happening in St. Johns

To submit items for the Community Calendar, email editor@floridanewslines.com.

Jan. 6
Honeybee Quilters Guild

Honeybee Quilters Guild will meet Tuesday, Jan. 6, at 6:30 p.m. at Mandarin Church of Christ, 12791 Old St. Augustine Rd. Doors open at 6 p.m. Member Colleen Rosatone will provide the program. New members and guests welcome. Visit honeybeequilters.org for more information.

Jan. 6 Northwest
St Johns County United for Progress Club

The Northwest St Johns County United for Progress Club will welcome Dr. Julie Ingersoll from the University of North Florida. Her talk will be on Christian Nationalism 101. Social 6:30 p.m., meeting 7 p.m. For more information please email nwsjcp@gmail.com.

Jan. 10
Bartram Trail Genealogy Club

The Bartram Trail Genealogy Club meets Saturday, Jan. 10, at the Bartram Trail Library. This month's topic is discussions on research tips to break through your Brick Wall. Bring what you know and what you need to find about your brick wall ancestor to review with the group.

Jan. 13
Bartram Trail Newcomers Club Luncheon

Bartram Trail Newcomers Club will hold its January luncheon Monday, Jan. 13, at St. Johns Golf and Country Club in St. Augustine. The theme will be Jumbled January. Be prepared to do something fun and different! The club will also be playing bingo. Luncheon starts at 11 a.m. and will include both the entertainment and meal at a cost of \$32 if paying by cash or check.

Jan. 15
William Bartram Scenic & Historic Highway Monthly Meeting

William Bartram Scenic & Historic Highway Monthly Meeting will be held at Westminster Woods on Julington Creek, 25 State Road 13, Conference Room LB, 6:30 p.m.

Jan. 16
Florida Arbor Day Tree Giveaway

UF/IFAS Extension St. Johns County Master Gardeners will celebrate Florida Arbor Day with a free tree giveaway Thursday, Jan. 16, from 10 a.m. to noon at five locations: Anastasia Island Branch Library, Bartram Trail Branch Library, Hastings Library (temporary location: 400 East Harris St.), Southeast Branch Library and the St. Johns County Extension Office. Bareroot tree and shrub saplings will be distributed, including red maple, red buckeye, mayhaw, sweetgum and smooth sumac.

Jan. 19
All Star Quilters' Guild

The All Star Quilters' Guild will meet Monday, Jan. 19, at the First Christian Church, 11924 San Jose Blvd. Socializing begins at 9:30 a.m. prior to the 10 a.m. meeting. This will be the annual birthday luncheon with celebration surprises. "Sew and Tell" is always a feature. Guests are welcome. Visit allstarquilters.org for more information.

Jan. 20
Women of Unity Gathering

Women of Unity Gathering at 6:30 p.m. at Unity Church for Creative Living, 2777 Race Track Rd. A safe place for women to gather, connect, support and explore spiritual principles. All women are welcome. Cost: Donation. For more information call 904-287-1505 or email UCCLOffice2777@gmail.com.

Jan. 25
Unity Basics

Unity Basics, a free class from noon

to 2 p.m. at Unity Church for Creative Living, 2777 Race Track Rd. Join Rev. Yvonne McAndrew for this fun, interactive, informative class on the foundations of Unity. For more information call 904-287-1505 or email UCCLOffice2777@gmail.com.

Upcoming Events
March 6
Bartram Bears Athletic Booster Club Annual Bear Bash

Bartram Bears Athletic Booster Club will hold its annual Bear Bash fundraiser Thursday, March 6, at 6:30 p.m. at La Venture Grove. The event features small bites, cool sips, raffles, live auction with vacation packages and entertainment. All proceeds benefit Bartram Trail High School athletics. Tickets: \$50 early access (before Dec. 31), \$60 after Dec. 31. Must be 21 to attend. Purchase tickets at GoFan: Bartram Bash.

Ongoing Activities
Open Game Play

Open Game Play at Council on Aging (COA) River House, 179 Marine St. 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 to 3:15 p.m. Call 904-209-3655 (Monday through Thursday) or email tharris@coasjc.org for more information.

Trout Creek Senior Center activities

Trout Creek Senior Center offers activities for seniors on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings at 6795 Collier Rd. 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 Jessica Curry at 904-209-3658 or jcurry@stjohnscoa.com for more information.

Playing HOOKie
Playing HOOKie, a group for those who

enjoy knitting, crocheting and loom-ing (with all items donated to charity), meets every Wednesday from 10 a.m. to noon at Maple Street Biscuit Company, 1627 Race Track Rd. in St. Johns. Visit the group's Facebook page (Playing HOOKie) or email playinghookiecares@gmail.com for more information.

Jokers Wild card group

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

A Course in Miracles Study Group

A Course in Miracles Study Group meets Sundays from 9 to 10 a.m. at Unity Church for Creative Living, 2777 Race Track Rd. This is a unique spiritual self-study program designed to awaken participants to the truth of our oneness with God. Cost: Donation. For more information, call 904-287-1505 or email UCCLOffice2777@gmail.com.

Widow to Widow support group

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

Shuffleboard

Shuffleboard is played on Tuesdays at Tommy Hazouri Park at 1:30 p.m. The courts are located at the park entrance, next to the tennis courts. Arrive a few minutes early for court assignments. Beginners are welcome. Games are cancelled if it rains.

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Bartram Newcomers plan 'Jumbled January' luncheon

By Dawn Garrity

The Bartram Trail Newcomers Club (BTNC) will kick off the new year with its next luncheon on Jan. 13 at St. Johns Golf and Country Club in St. Augustine.

The theme for the event is "Jumbled January." Attendees should be prepared to do something fun and different, including a game of bingo. The luncheon begins at 11 a.m. and costs \$32 if paying by cash or check. The price includes both the meal and entertainment.

The club closed out 2025 with a special holiday luncheon in December held at the historic San Jose Country Club. The

St. Johns Quintet bellringers provided an outstanding program that was enjoyed by everyone in attendance.

In November, the club focused on giving back to the community. The luncheon featured a silent auction for charity where members provided outstanding donations. Nearly \$800 was raised, which was split between the food pantry at Celebration Lutheran Church and the Betty Griffin House shelter.

The BTNC is an organization that provides an opportunity for women to learn about the community and find fellowship through monthly meetings, as well

as social and special interest activities. In addition to monthly meetings, the club hosts a wide variety of special interest groups, including Bridge, Continental Rummy, Pennies Canasta, Mexican Chicken Train, Bunco, Mahjong, Golf,

Book Club, Nature Walk, Lunch Divas and Girls Night Out.

Membership is open to everyone. For more information, please visit www.facebook.com/BTNC.

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Zesty wings make a perfect playoff party palate pleaser



Football fans know there's nothing quite like the playoffs. Whether your passion rests with college football or the action on the professional gridiron, there's plenty of exciting football to watch in the early weeks of winter.

Game watch parties are wildly popular. Indeed, big games are even more enjoyable when watched alongside fellow fans. When hosting a game watch party at home, certain culinary staples, including chicken wings, need to make an appearance. Fans hosting playoff parties this playoff season can ensure guests get what they need by offering up these "Zesty Chicken Wings" from Lines+Angles.

Zesty Chicken Wings

Makes 4 servings

For the marinade:

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 small white onion, finely chopped
- 2 cloves of garlic, finely chopped
- 1/2 cup fresh cilantro, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon zest
- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 2 cups Barbecue sauce (your favorite)

- 1/4 cup sherry vinegar
 - 1 teaspoon turmeric
- For the chicken wings:**
- 1 1/2 pounds chicken wings
 - Salt, to taste
 - Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
 - 1 tablespoon oil, for the grill
1. Combine all of the ingredients for the marinade in a food processor. Pulse until blended well.
 2. Rinse chicken wings under cold running water and pat dry with paper towels. Season with salt and pepper.
 3. Place the marinade and chicken wings into a large resealable plastic storage bag. Seal the bag securely. Squeeze the bag several times coating the chicken wings thoroughly with marinade. Place the bag in the refrigerator and marinate overnight.
 4. Prepare the grill for direct grilling. Brush the grill grate lightly with oil. Barbecue the wings over medium hot coals or at medium high-heat for 5-7 minutes on each side (turning once, halfway through) until they are cooked through and golden brown.
 5. Serve with your favorite dipping sauce (optional). PC261553



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The Girls on the Run teams at Julington Creek Elementary School pose with their collection bins after a successful charity drive.

By Anne Soracco

The Girls on the Run (GOTR) teams at Julington Creek Elementary School completed their fall season on Dec. 6 by participating in the GOTR Celebration

5K at the University of North Florida. During the season, the teams organized a Community Impact Project with a goal of collecting 1,000 new pairs of

socks for HUGS St. Johns, a charity organization that provides items for St. Johns County students in need. Through the generosity of Julington

Creek Elementary families and the hard work of the team members, the girls collected 1,721 pairs of socks, almost doubling their original goal.



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ST. JOHNS Business Monthly

Rich appointed judge, Thomas to lead State Attorney's St. Augustine office

mail@floridanewslines.com

Managing Assistant State Attorney Benjamin Rich has been appointed as a St. Johns County judge by Gov. Ron DeSantis.

Rich has served as an assistant state attorney since 2010. He has managed the St. Augustine office for the last six years.

Following Rich's transition to the bench next month, Assistant State Attorney Sarah Thomas will take over as the new managing assistant state

attorney for the St. Augustine office.

Thomas is currently prosecuting homicide and major crime cases in the county. She interned with the State Attorney's Office before passing the Florida Bar Exam and beginning her tenure as a prosecutor in 2015.

State Attorney R.J. Larizza praised both attorneys regarding the transition.

"Ben Rich is an honest and genuine man who will serve from the bench

with dignity and grace," Larizza said. "He will do an outstanding job as he did while working with us at the State Attorney's Office."

Larizza also expressed strong support for the incoming leadership.

"Sarah Thomas is a gifted attorney and a fearless prosecutor. I have the utmost confidence in her ability to lead the St. Augustine Office," Larizza said. "It is extremely



Benjamin Rich



Sarah Thomas

gratifying to be associated with these two incredible people. They serve our citizenry well."

USPS announces 2026 space-themed stamps

NewsLine staff
mail@floridanewslines.com

The U.S. Postal Service has unveiled its 2026 Priority Mail and Priority Mail Express stamps, which celebrate deep space exploration with images captured by NASA's James Webb Space Telescope.

The new Priority Mail stamp features a vivid infrared image of the Crab Nebula, a bright remnant of an exploded star located 6,500 light-years away. The Priority Mail Express stamp showcases "Galaxy Pair," a composite view of two interacting galaxies approximately 80 million light-years



Photos courtesy U.S. Postal Service

from Earth.

In addition to the space-themed issues, the postal service released a schedule of stamps to be issued through March 2026. Upcoming subjects include

Muhammad Ali, Bruce Lee, the Lunar New Year and the "Love" series. Release dates for the high-denomination space stamps are forthcoming. Stamps and philatelic products can be purchased online at usps.com/shopstamps.



NFLT releases book celebrating 25 years of conservation



Photo courtesy North Florida Land Trust

NewsLine staff
mail@floridanewslines.com

North Florida Land Trust (NFLT) has released a new book, "Keeping North Florida Wild," to chronicle the nonprofit's 25-year history.

Since its inception in 1999, NFLT has protected nearly 44,000 acres of natural land. The book documents these accomplishments through essays and images, highlighting major

projects such as the Ocala to Osceola (O2O) Wildlife Corridor, Bogey Creek Preserve and Little NaNa Dune in American Beach.

Contributors to the book include environmental lawyer Clay Henderson, who wrote the foreword, and Florida Times-Union columnist Mark Woods, who provided the afterword. The book is available for purchase online at nflt.org

Happy New Year...
Wishing you a happy and prosperous new year!

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What Dry January reveals about us

Nick Padlo, CEO, Sophros Recovery

Since its origins more than 15 years ago, Dry January has become much more than the traditional healthy awareness trend following holiday indulgence. Today, it's become an increasingly more meaningful gateway to self-awareness.



Nick Padlo

As someone in long-term recovery from alcohol and drug abuse, the first month of each year used to represent a chance (or a test) for me to reset: one that I often failed. But as someone in long-term sobriety today, I believe Dry January is a chance for those struggling to fully understand their issues and take a look at the changes they need to make.

More than 75 million Americans were expected to attempt the Dry January challenge last year. That would be almost one-third of legal-aged adults. Experts say the trend of increased participation has grown steadily in recent years, especially among younger drinkers in the millennial and Gen Z age groups who tend to be

more focused on health and wellness.

That said, the number of Americans who say they drink regularly continues to decline. A recent survey showed that a record low of 54% of U.S. adults say they drink, the lowest seen since the Gallup Poll's initial 1939 look at the nation's drinking habits.

So, "Why participate in Dry January? It's only a month," I hear over and over.

As a matter of fact, those who do Dry January report having better sleep, more energy and an improved mood. Beyond that, a month of sobriety can also improve blood pressure, reduce inflammation and clear up skin.

In terms of mental health, participants often report better sleep, more energy, better focus, less mood swings and a greater overall sense of stability. Oftentimes, many drinkers realize they no longer have anxiety after taking a prolonged break from alcohol.

Participating in Dry January can also reveal some other important things. Many begin to better understand moments when they use alcohol to fight stress, loneliness, being overwhelmed and other social pressures. And, to no surprise, many also begin to see how much money they spend on alcohol each month.

Attempting Dry January is a chance to better understand your drinking habits and re-evaluate just how serious they are. Signs that alcohol has become a coping strategy include feeling irritated during an alcohol-free week or being restless without alcohol.

The monthlong pause can provide an opportunity to examine why you drink along with other long-term habits or dependencies that may be holding you back from achieving the best version of yourself.

For me personally, as I continue my recovery, Dry January has become more about self-reflection and review of the work I've done in recovery. I invite others to do the same.

If you are considering participating in Dry January, there are many resources that offer help and support. Social media can

actually benefit those in this challenge by providing a level of accountability. There are an increasing number of alcohol-free bars and sober-curious communities that are helping to normalize a lifestyle once stigmatized.

As in most recovery communities, connections often sustain change. Remember also that you don't need to hit bottom to rethink your drinking. Dry January can serve as a starting point rather than a temporary detox.

Sophros Recovery is here for anyone who finds the challenge revealing — whether they want moderation support, recovery guidance or just a simple conversation about what they discovered in their Dry January experiment.

Sophros Recovery is a Jacksonville-based outpatient treatment program helping residents recover from substance use disorders and co-occurring mental health challenges. The center offers a wide range of evidence-based treatments and therapies tailored to each client's needs. Sophros believes success in recovery involves healing the mind, body and spirit. Learn more at [SophrosRecovery.com](https://sophrosrecovery.com).



Q&A with St. Johns County Clerk of the Circuit Court and County Comptroller Brandon J. Patty

Q. What were some of the clerk's office's major achievements in the past year?

A. What a year! Our office maintained an unrelenting pace in 2025, both operationally with our core duties and innovatively with programs that have strengthened our services and expanded our community outreach.

Over the past year, we:

- Revamped our website and expanded our recording services across the county.
- Recorded 2,854 marriage licenses, 19,158 deeds, 13,189 mortgages, 28 plat maps and 81 PUD maps.
- Enrolled 11,163 residents in our free Property Fraud Alert service, which monitors recording activity tied to official records.
- Supported court operations for 39,975 cases and processed 4,885 pieces of evidence.
- Answered more than 91,163 phone calls through our Customer Care team.

These accomplishments reflect the commitment of our dedicated staff and our ongoing mission to provide efficient, accessible public service to the residents of St. Johns County.

Q. What's new at the clerk's office as we look ahead to 2026?

A. One of the most impactful developments is the expansion of our youth services initiatives.

Our revamped Teen Court program provides an interactive educational opportunity where students serve as attorneys, jurors, clerks and bailiffs in real cases involving their peers. Each hearing is filled with energy, learning and meaningful experiences — and we're thrilled to see the next generation of community leaders emerging

through this program.

We recently launched "Scholars in Service: The Clerk Experience," a new shadowing initiative designed for upper-level high school students, college students and recent graduates. Tailored to each student's interests, the program provides opportunities to observe real court cases, explore clerk divisions and meet with leaders and courthouse partners to better understand pathways in law, government and public affairs. Visit stjohnsclerk.com/scholars-in-service for more details.

Kicking off in January, we're thrilled to introduce "Saints in Public Service," an exclusive hands-on internship program in partnership with Flagler College. This semester-long experience provides college students with meaningful exposure to real-world clerk operations.

In addition, we're looking forward to hosting three students from St. Augustine High School's Academy of Law and Homeland Security for an executive internship that offers a firsthand look at our office and the services we provide to residents. These students will join us four days a week, earning course credit while receiving on-the-job training across multiple divisions.

We look forward to growing this initiative and expanding opportunities to more schools across St. Johns County in the coming years.

Q. What is the best way for residents to contact your office?

A. If residents have questions about these new programs, or any of the services we provide, our Customer Care Call Center is available Monday through Friday, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., at 904-819-3600, and by email at clerk@stjohnsclerk.com.

I can also be reached directly on my cell at 904-599-8688 or by email at BPatty@stjohnsclerk.com.

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Fishing

Targeting speckled perch in the new year

Jimmy Tomazinis
mail@floridanewslines.com

Happy New Year! We left off last month talking about specks, so we are going to get right back into it. Specks, speckled perch or crappie are a very popular freshwater fish to target all over the country.

We have a targetable population of them in the river, but probably not as many as further south or in larger lakes around the state. Current, salinity and lack of habitat play a large role in limiting their numbers in our area of the river, but area creeks see a seasonal push each year as they search for spawning areas.

If you're looking for a fish to keep you on the water on the coldest days, you've got your fish. Specks don't seem to mind. I've caught them in water temperatures as cold as 46 degrees and ice on the boat. That's not appealing to most, I know, but I just want to let you know that you can.

The most popular method for catching them is with live minnows. Using small slip floats allows you to target the specks at various depths. They are a schooling fish and they suspend at various depths, so you need to keep the bait where they are.

I also like to catch them on jigs, and one of the best methods I've tried is using both jigs and minnows on the slip floats. The jigs allow you to cover different depths until you find the fish. Once you find where they are with the jig, you can use the minnows and floats to keep baits where



Jimmy Tomazinis

they need to be. If you are good with electronics on your boat, you can find them that way too.

The creeks will have the highest concentration of fish, but average size will trend on the smaller side until the larger females show up to spawn. That can fall from February to March most years.

I think the females wait out in the river somewhere before the water temperatures get right.

You can catch them on docks, isolated holes and structure out there. Keep in mind they don't like current. In the creeks they like docks, laydowns and holes. Deeper water is best unless they are spawning.

We've covered a lot, but if you have any questions feel free to send me an email. The bite has been pretty good, so get out there. Tight lines.

Jimmy Tomazinis is a Jacksonville area native who has fished the St. Johns River his entire life. His passion for fish led him to study coastal biology at the University of North Florida. He has since participated in multiple fishery studies in Northeast Florida, continues to implement fish habitat and water quality improvement projects, fishes as much as he can, and has a monthly podcast called North Florida Fishing and Outdoors where the fishing conversation continues. Jimmy can be reached by email to mail@floridanewslines.com.

Newcomers of North St. Johns plan fashion show, support food pantry



From left, Newcomers of North St. Johns members Dawn Coston and Michele Oliver deliver 240 pounds of food items to church volunteer Lyn Ramsey at Celebration Lutheran Church's Christ's Cupboard food pantry.

By Michele Oliver

Newcomers of North St. Johns (NNSJ) invites members to join the fun at the upcoming January luncheon on Tuesday, Jan. 20, at Marsh Landing Country Club, 25655 Marsh Landing Parkway in Ponte Vedra Beach.

Doors will open at 10:30 a.m.. The event features a lunch and a member-model fashion show with clothing and accessories provided by Chico's of Sawgrass Village. Member models will include Kathy Boyd, Mary Cohen, Inge Flink, Leah Jenks, Pat Lett, Maria Mroz, Frannie Nill, Judy Porter, Susan Rizzi, Gina Roberts, Diane Spittler and Terri Whitehead.

"We're looking forward to a wonderful show with our fabulous member models wearing the latest fashions from Chico's," said Co-President Michele Oliver.

The luncheon menu includes an entrée choice of baked chicken in chardonnay-tarragon sauce, balsamic marinated sirloin in bordelaise sauce, or vegetarian wellington with creamy pesto sauce. All entrées come with a classic Caesar salad, warm rolls, and garlic seared green beans and carrots. Dessert will be bread pudding with caramel sauce.

The cost is \$38 for members and \$52 for guests. The event is being partially subsidized by the club as a special benefit for members. All reservations must

be received by Jan. 9.

In addition to the upcoming festivities, the club recently celebrated a season of giving. During the November luncheon held at Bella Vista, NNSJ members collected donations for Celebration Lutheran Church's Christ's Cupboard food pantry.

Thanks to the generosity of the membership, the group donated 240 pounds of food and \$75 in gift cards.

"Our members continue to give so generously," Oliver said. "This annual food drive has a tremendous impact for families in our area who are in need of food goods, especially at this time of

year. The recipients are certainly appreciative and our members are happy to provide a little holiday cheer."

NNSJ offers a variety of activities for St. Johns County residents to get acquainted and have fun, including smaller lunch groups, wine socials, a walking club, golf, Mahjong, card groups, day trips and cultural events.

For further information about the luncheon and membership, visit <https://newcomersofnorthstjohns.org>.

Michele Oliver is the Co-President of Newcomers of North St. Johns.



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Travel

It's 2026: USA 250 Celebrations

By Debi Lander
mail@floridanewslines.com

The United States celebrates the Fourth of July with fireworks that light the sky and echo the bold words of the Declaration of Independence. In 1776, weary but determined delegates in Philadelphia proclaimed that all people are created equal, that governments draw power from the consent of the governed, and that laws and representation, not royal decrees, should guide daily life.

Those ideas still feel daring as the nation approaches the 250th anniversary of that signing in 2026.

Philadelphia is preparing for a yearlong birthday party. Visitors can expect concerts, parades, museum exhibits and lively festivals around Independence Hall. A huge “Red, White, and Blue To-Do” parade and block party will take place July 2. On July 4, Lincoln Financial Field hosts a FIFA World Cup match, a modern gathering of many nations cheering together in the city where self-government first took root.

Other places that carried the weight of the Revolution are creating their own America 250 moments. New York City, once occupied by the British and later the capital of the young republic, plans celebrations on a grand scale. Expect a



Debi Lander

towering fireworks display, something new from the cast of “Hamilton” and major exhibits at the New-York Historical Society and the Museum of the City of New York. Their shows will highlight women’s roles, examine life under British occupation and display treasured artifacts from the era.

Boston, where so much unrest began, will widen the lens on its familiar Freedom Trail. New programs will share more stories of women, Indigenous people and people of color whose courage shaped the fight for liberty but whose names often go unmentioned.

Farther south, Virginia adds its own powerful voice. In Williamsburg, the restored capital will fill with fifes, drums and carriage wheels as Colonial Williamsburg introduces programs about the founders and the everyday people who supported or questioned them. At George Washington’s Mount Vernon, visitors will find updated exhibits and talks that follow Washington from ambitious young surveyor to first president.

Washington, D.C., will be another focal point. The Smithsonian museums, National Archives, Library of Congress and other institutions plan exhibits



Photo by Debi Lander

Reenactors play fifes during a historical demonstration. Colonial Williamsburg and other historical sites are preparing special programs for the nation's 250th anniversary in 2026.

and lectures that invite visitors to look closely at original documents and artifacts. It is difficult to stand before the faded parchment of the Declaration or the Constitution and not feel the weight of the promises written there.

Charleston, South Carolina, adds a coastal chapter to the semiquincentennial story. The city endured British occupation during the war and nurtured strong Patriot resistance. For America 250, Charleston is planning waterfront concerts, expanded tours of Revolutionary sites and living-history programs at museums such as the Old Exchange and Provost Dungeon. Carriage and harbor tours will highlight where patriots plotted, prisoners suffered and the war’s momentum shifted in the South.

In Atlanta, America 250 will explore the connections between the Revolution’s ideals and later struggles for freedom. The Atlanta History Center will compare the Revolutionary period alongside its Civil War and civil rights exhibits.

Even places far from the original 13 colonies are joining the celebration. At Walt Disney World’s EPCOT, a

patriotic all-USA version of “Soarin’” will fly guests above dramatic American landscapes. In Branson, Missouri, organizers hope to set a Guinness World Record on Flag Day for the largest display of American flags in one destination.

As the country counts down to its 250th birthday, the hope is that the celebration becomes more than a long weekend of parties. Ideally, it nudges each of us to think about what it means to be an American today—and what kind of nation we want to be honoring when the tricentennial arrives.

Debi Lander is an award-winning travel writer and photographer who blends her passion for history, culture, food, and personal discovery into captivating stories. Through her website Bylandersea.com and her long-running travel column for Florida Newslines, she explores destinations from small U.S. towns to iconic global landmarks. She hopes her storytelling and practical insights inspire readers to experience the world with curiosity, appreciation, and a sense of adventure. Debi can be reached by email to mail@floridanewslines.com.

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We’re excited for you to meet Dr. Chauffe. He’s welcoming new patients ages 18 and up at Baptist South. Take the next step toward a healthier heart – with compassion, expertise and a commitment to your well-being.

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