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## THE YOUNG INDEPENDENTS

SEE PAGE 26

## MEET THE TEAM

*Donna Deegan introduces her executive team*

Mayor Deegan has announced the members of her executive team. The leadership for her administration includes several familiar names and faces from the Jacksonville community.

READ MORE ON PAGE 11

## PELUSO TALKS TOP PRIORITIES

Council Member Jimmy Peluso shares insights on his top priorities and projects he plans to address as the new representative for District 7.

READ MORE ON PAGE 8



Immediate Past President Jim Agee passes the gavel to Incoming President Marie Gnage. PHOTO COURTESY OF RENEE PARENTEAU.

## PASSING OF THE GAVEL

It was a night to remember for the Rotary Club of Jacksonville, the City's oldest club and Florida's first Rotary Club, as members and their guests attended the annual President's Party and Gavel Exchange, June 22, at the Ritz Theatre and Museum in LaVilla.

The ceremony marks the passing of the leadership from one club president to another. This year, Jim Agee passed the gavel to Marie Gnage, who will lead the club through the remainder of 2023, and pass her gavel in similar fashion in 2024.

READ MORE ON PAGE 23

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COMMUNITY NEWS



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JULY 2023. VOL. 16, ISSUE 07



Campers Boyd Skinner, Hall Hixon, Walker Lewis, George Pope, Kayde Wilder, Billy Pope and Wiley Wilhelm warmed up their throwing arms for water balloon battles.

## 904 All Stars Sports Camp returns for third year

Camp goes at the third annual 904 All Stars Sports Camp launched a water balloon fight against their counselors to kick off summer vacation. The "peg the counselor" water balloon hijinks followed several other outdoor activities organized for the 21 campers, ages five to 10, over Memorial Day weekend.

Proceeds from the 904 All Stars Sports Camp, founded by Ford Rachels, are donated to a charity. This year, a total of \$2,400 will go to Angels to Allison, a local non-profit providing financial assistance to families who have suffered the loss of a child for funeral and other associated related expenses.



Receiving checks from left to right were - Five STAR Veterans Center (Duval, FL); Beaches Habitat for Humanity (Duval, FL); Operation New Uniform, Inc. (Duval, FL); Veterans Entrepreneurship Initiative (Orange, FL); America's Second Harvest of Coastal Georgia Network (Chatham, GA); Northeast Florida Women Veterans, Inc. (Duval, FL); United Way of Northeast Florida (Duval, FL); Alachua County Coalition for the Homeless and Hungry (Alachua, FL); SD Gunner Fund, Inc. (Chatham, GA); and Task Force Hydro 1 (Duval, FL).

## VYSTAR HONORS MILITARY DURING FIRST CYCLE OF GRANTMAKING

With a rich tradition of military commitment and its founding in 1952 as JAX Navy Federal Credit Union on the base of Naval Air Station Jacksonville, VyStar Credit Union has gone back to its roots to honor military traditions.

During its first grant cycle for the newly formed VyStar Foundation, leadership announced a total of \$197,092 to 10 community partners and grantees that serve communities across Northeast and Central Florida and Southeast Georgia. The goal: making sure active duty as well as veterans and their families receive the support they deserve. On hand to present checks was VyStar CEO, Brian Wolfburg, alongside Foundation President Patricia McElroy.



## SUPERPOWERS ALIGN TO FIGHT POVERTY

Everyone possesses the power to help fight poverty, but some are putting in the time to truly impact the future by springing into action. On behalf of Downtown Ecumenical Services Council, or DESC, a recent committee and planning meeting brought Board Chair Pamela Prier, Executive Director David Clark and Honorary Chairs Randy DeFoor and Allison DeFoor together to inspire change.

In addition to the social event planned for Sept. 21, several team captains will be raising funds through an online campaign that will help raise the bar for the nonprofit. Proceeds from the event will help the community's impoverished, homeless and working poor.

READ MORE ON PAGE 23



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# YOU ASKED *for it*

Recently, *The Resident* has had many readers writing in to inquire about the legality of “snipe signs” — the signs they often see at highway exits, near the entrances to residential communities, at intersections or other places throughout the city. These signs are often affixed to utility poles, light posts or simply popping up from the ground on wires.

In our continued commitment to our readers, *The Resident* did some research to answer the most common questions about these snipe signs.



Snipe signs are common sights throughout Jacksonville, though they are considered illegal when placed on public property or in the public right-of-way.

## Taking aim at snipe signs

BY MICHELE LEIVAS  
RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS

They’re a common sight at the base of highway off-ramps or waiting to greet drivers as they leave residential communities — or even popping up at busy intersections.

Sticking up from the ground or affixed to or utility poles, they often boast promises to buy houses or cars, offer services to repair roofs, trim trees or cut lawns.

They’re snipe signs and yes, they’re illegal.

A snipe sign, according to the City of Jacksonville, is defined as “a sign placed on public property or within the public right-of-way. These signs are unlawful, considered abandoned property, and enforceable by immediate fine under local ordinance Chapter 741 [“Zero Tolerance on Litter”].”

The only exceptions to the law are “signs erected and maintained pursuant to the discharge of the governmental function of public health and safety,” — for example, the “vote here” signs directing citizens to polling sites or those, during the pandemic,

directing residents to COVID-19 testing sites.

All other signage, if erected or affixed on public property or public right-of-way, is not permitted.

“Snipe signs are another component of obtrusive signage that really can be considered litter in some ways,” explained Scenic Jacksonville Executive Director Nancy Powell. “...Citizens should know that they are able to pick up a snipe sign that is illegal.”

Snipe sign complaints can be submitted to the City through various channels, including calling 630-CITY, the MyJax app and/or e-mail address or “or notifying an agency that can create a complaint on your behalf,” according to the City.

Enforcement of Chapter 741’s “zero-tolerance policy” when it comes to snipe signs includes fines and confiscation of the sign(s) in question. An immediate \$50 fine is issued for the first five signs each on a single property by the same violator; additional signs beyond those first five receive a fine of \$150 each.

The City explained: “Uncontested citations and repeat offense violators progress the fine schedule from the first offense of \$50-\$150, to the second offense of \$300, and the third offense of \$500 per sign. Any unpaid citation may be issued a \$500 judgement by the court, plus court fees. Contested signs may received a civil fine up to \$500 plus court and attorneys’ fees. Any sign attached to a public utility pole, where the sign is above five feet from the ground, will start with the first offense at \$350 per sign plus court fees.”

These fines are paid to the Duval County Tax Collector’s office and are then deposited into the litter trust fund account. These funds are distributed as follows (pursuant to ordinance section 111.786): “70% to [the Jacksonville Transit Authority] for bus stops and bus shelter maintenance; 30% to the enforcement and public awareness of the litter sign ordinance.”

In 2022, the City of Jacksonville collected \$82,600 in litter sign fines; so far in 2023, it has collected \$65,620.

Powell added that while citizens are able to remove illegal snipe signs and report them, the community shouldn’t rely on its community members to address this litter.

“We have the laws on the books, it’s a question of are we going to enforce those and make it a priority from a higher level perspective,” she said.

Political signs are permitted on private property so long as they are set back more than 10 feet from public right-of-way. According to city ordinances (Section 646.1314), “one temporary election sign for each candidate and each ballot issue may be displayed on a private lot.”

These signs must be removed within one week following “the election to which it pertains.”

Political signs or advertisement is not permitted on public property.

According to the city code, temporary directional real estate signs — “a temporary nonilluminated sign that functions to provide directions to residential real estate that is for sale, rent, or lease...” — is permitted on weekends from 6 p.m. Friday to 6 p.m. Sunday, though it must meet other criteria set out by the code pertaining to size, height and width and must follow specifications regarding authorized placement locations.

The code outlines these authorized locations to include:

1. “The non-paved portion of the public right of way of any City of Jacksonville roadway that is situated outside of any sidewalk, ditch or drainway;
2. Private property with the permission or consent of property owner or lawful occupant of the property; and
3. Within locally designated historic districts on the locations set forth in Subsections 656.1313(c)(1) and (2), provided that there shall be no more than three signs permitted for each residential property for sale, rent or lease within such districts.”

Signs on private property are permitted, though the building code requires permits are for all signs. Residents interested in learning more about the city’s rules and regulations regarding signs can do so by reading Part 13 (“Sign Regulations”) of Chapter 656 of the city’s Zoning Code.



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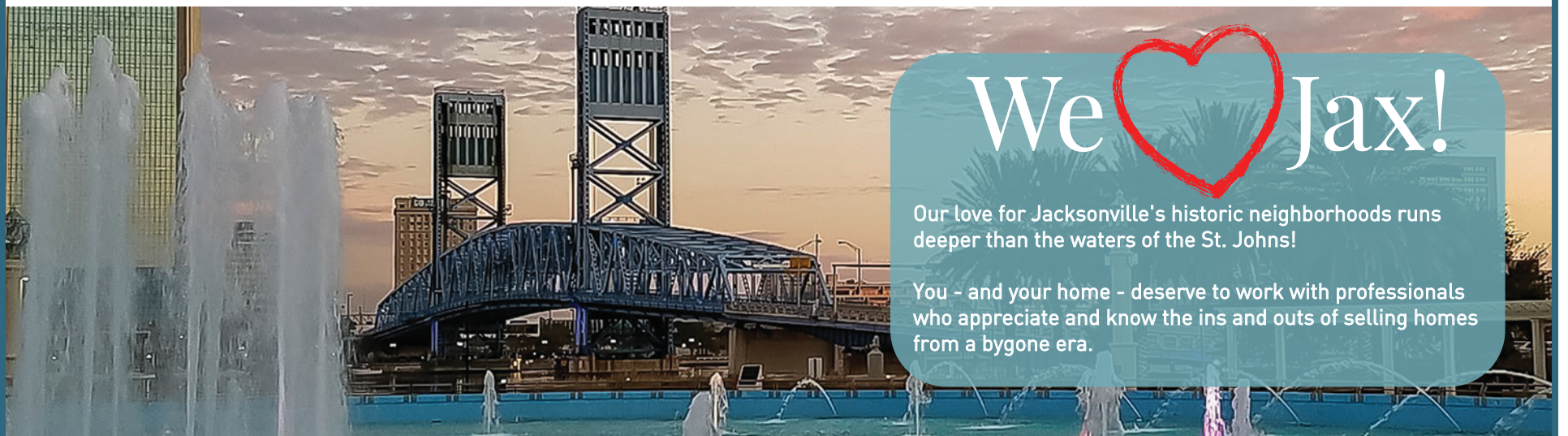
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### Mandarin



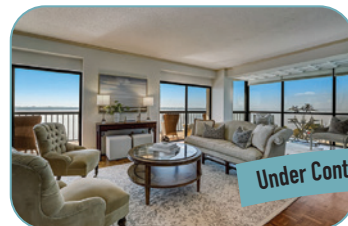
12270 Mandarin Rd - Riverfront  
4 bedrooms, 4.5 baths, 4485sf  
Listed for \$2,550,000

### Ortega Island



Ortega Island Drive lot - Riverfront  
8 acre, 10klb covered boat lift  
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### Riverside



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### Ortega



4143 Sherwood Rd  
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### Avondale



1592 Glendale St  
3 bedrooms 2.5 baths 2,080s  
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### Riverside



2525 College St #2201  
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### Murray Hill



3233 Mayflower Street  
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## Letter TO THE EDITOR

I was a bit confused in your recent publication stating that the dredging on Fishweir is nearing completion. Looking either direction from the bridge over the creek, it's obvious there has been no progress at all, the huge mudflats at low tide haven't been touched and there's been no dredging activity on either side, so how is this anywhere near completion, appears they haven't even begun!!

Paul Poidomani  
 Riverside

## Fishweir Creek revisited

BY MICHELE LEIVAS  
 RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) awarded the \$8.2 million dredging contract for the Big Fishweir Creek "Aquatic Ecosystem Restoration Project" to Underwater Mechanix Services LLC last year after several years of study and planning — and several delays.

According to USACE Jacksonville Public Affairs Specialist David Ruderman, approximately 22,000 cubic yards of material have been dredged from the creek since work began. By completion, he said that number is expected to grow to 29,000.

Many residents have expressed concerns regarding the lack of activity pertaining to the large mud flats in the creek. The dredging that's taken place is within specified federal navigation channels, Ruderman explained. The USACE is unable to dredge beyond those

channels, which means those large mud flats will remain untouched in this project.

"So the area outside of the channels themselves, whatever [residents] see today in the mud flats is what they will see tomorrow in the mud flats," he said. "I'm told it's a tidal area, so the tide may come in and cover some of it; the tide will go out and reveal pretty much what is visible today."

It is possible, however, for the City to revisit and dredge those mudflats in a separate project without the USACE's involvement, he said.

"The city could initiate dredging on its own in those stretches but the Corps wouldn't be a partner because those waters are not part of a federal project," he wrote in an e-mail.

Dredging was further limited by required buffers on either side of the Herschel Street bridge and initial plans to dredge all the way up to and beneath the bridge were "screened out" by concerns expressed by the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT).

A 2019 public presentation on the project stated, "This area might be dredged under a future contract once FDOT replaces the bridge (several factors would have to be evaluated)."

Over the years, the project has been reconfigured in response to various issues and some features initially proposed were later eliminated from the project's scope.

"The final contract award was for a design that de-scoped vegetation planting and removal efforts; however, removal of excess sediment is expected to improve water quality in the ecosystem and support natural re-generation of bottom habitat," Ruderman added in a later e-mail.

Riverside resident Paul Poidomani shared his dismay at the lack of visible impact the project has made on the waterway.

"This thing is as full of mud as it was when we moved here 15 years ago," he said. "They haven't done a thing."

Poidomani is a boat owner and frequently visits Harps American Pub & Grill, overlooking the creek and he, like other residents who had inquired about the possibility with USACE, looked forward

to a time when he might be able to reach the restaurant by boat.

While that will not be a possibility, given the buffers set in place near the Herschel Street Bridge, the depth of the widener — the "turning basin-like area at the confluence of Little and Big Fishweir Creek" — is now roughly five feet of mean low water, or the average depth at low tide. So long as they stay within the dredged federal navigational channels, smaller water crafts with less than a five-foot draft should be able to navigate the dredged segments without issue.

"The creek is more navigable and a lot of undesirable matter has been removed from the system, so it is an improvement," Ruderman said. "Perhaps not what folks have wished for, but I believe we will have delivered what was achievable."

Some residents have seen a positive change from the dredging. Stephanie Freeman, board chair of the St. Johns Riverkeeper, is a creek resident and stated she's already seen the return of some aquatic wildlife to the area.

"Over the past few months, there has been a significant change on Fishweir Creek. In addition to seeing a flurry of industrial boats in the creek, the waters now include a noticeable change in wildlife," she wrote in a statement. "Outside our backyard, we have seen a family of otters swimming by and on multiple occasions the bubbles and then heads of manatees. You can see the creek coming back to life."

When asked if the USACE would be open to organizing another public meeting or town hall to address residents' questions or issues regarding the work done at Fishweir Creek, Ruderman stated the USACE "would almost certainly participate," though the City would be the appropriate entity to initiate such a meeting.

"We understand that people have been anxious about this...and are obviously interested in what the final outcome is going to look like now that we're tracking towards the finish line," he said. "We hope that folks will appreciate the improvements to their navigational experiences and to the quality of the ecosystem itself, though it may not live up to some people's expectations."



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# Gator Bowl dates announced

## FRIDAY, DECEMBER 29

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Bill Gay Grounds at TIAA Bank Field

The 79th Annual TaxSlayer Gator Bowl leadership announced pertinent 2023 dates recently. The TaxSlayer Gator Bowl will be played on Bill Gay Grounds at TIAA Bank Field on Friday, December 29, at noon and will be nationally televised on ESPN. Tickets go on sale September 19 through Ticketmaster while annual ticket holders can begin the renewal process as early as June 1.

"I can't think of a better way for fans to ring in 2024 than spending New Year's Eve weekend in Jacksonville, Florida. Downtown Jacksonville and the Sports Complex will be electric with the 79th annual TaxSlayer Gator Bowl game on Friday, Jacksonville Jaguars on Sunday and fireworks to celebrate the New Year," said TaxSlayer Gator Bowl Chairman Alan Worley.

The 79th annual game will feature a matchup between an anchor team from the Southeastern Conference (SEC) and an opponent from the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC). Teams will be announced Sunday, December 3.

# The odor issue

## An update on the Jacksonville Urban Odor Study

BY MICHELE LEIVAS  
RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS

For several years, residents in the Murray Hill and surrounding urban neighborhoods — including San Marco, Springfield, Ortega and Brentwood — have been complaining of noxious odors in the early mornings, late evenings and during the weekends.

Last February, the City of Jacksonville installed sensors in Murray Hill and other locations and enlisted Envirosuite to monitor those sensors 24/7 in a year-long study that officially launched last April. The study, The Resident reported, was designed to "enable the City to determine how odors move throughout the area during the day and night, particularly in early morning, overnight and on weekends, when its EQD [Environmental Quality Division] staff is not physically available to respond and verify complaints."

With the study concluded, residents are now simply waiting for the results of the study to be

shared — and they may have to wait a little while longer.

According to the City, the nearly-200-page report is currently being reviewed and is expected to be presented to the Jacksonville Environmental Protection Board (JEPB) at its July meeting.

City of Jacksonville Director of Public Affairs Katie Wiles provided additional information on file with the EQD regarding the report: "Due to the size of the report (currently 188 pages), it has taken longer to review than anticipated. Once the report has been presented to the JEPB, it will be posted to the same webpage."

The next steps regarding the odor study report will be coming from Mayor-elect Donna Deegan's administration, she added.

The Jacksonville Urban Odor Study webpage can most easily be accessed by visiting the City of Jacksonville website (coj.net) and typing "Jacksonville Urban Odor Study" in the Search box in the upper right-hand corner of the City's home page.

The odor study's webpage provides updated information regarding the study. According to the overall monthly reports, the City received 158 complaints regarding the odor between January and March of this year. The overall monthly report for April has not been posted to the webpage.

The Resident will continue to report on this ongoing issue as new details emerge.



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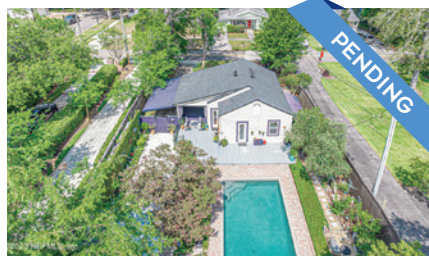
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# Peluso's Priorities for District 7

BY JENNIFER JENSEN  
RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS



Jimmy Peluso

Councilman for District 7 Jimmy Peluso's hope is that when it's time for him to eventually leave office, whenever that may be, that he was a part of projects that were long lasting and had massive effects on the future of the district and city.

He wants to leave the district better than how he found it. "I love this city," Peluso said. "I really love this district and I think there's so many cool opportunities for really good projects we can do. I'm really committed to making it better."

His No. 1 priority is tackling homelessness. "I'm really pushing for proper solutions for homelessness, which is big throughout my entire district," Peluso said. There are numerous resources in the city and several nonprofits who are doing great work, but Peluso wants to see the city take a more active role.

"I'd really like to see the city take more of a lead from the front kind of approach," Peluso said. "Getting an actual person within the city that kind of corrals all the different groups and sets priorities and

has an actual dedicated funding source that we could put toward actual housing first models that have really shown a great way to reduce homelessness."

Another priority for Peluso is working on the city's infrastructure, specifically flooding, which affects so many in his district. Peluso said Mayor Donna Deegan has already said she will be looking toward the federal government and some of the programs they have that prior administrations didn't really touch.

"We have capital improvement dollars that could go to the larger scale projects, which would be like the massive flooding and infrastructure projects that could reduce flooding," Peluso said.

A personal project Peluso hopes to tackle during his time on the city council is food deserts within the city. He wants to find solutions that can be made that give people a healthy option they can walk to.

"There's a lot of neighborhoods within the district where you can't walk to a decent grocer," Peluso said. "Every study suggests

that if you don't properly feed your body with healthy food options, you're going to have higher rates of obesity, of diabetes, and lower dental and health standards."

It's going to take someone putting a lot of attention into this project and looking for a solution not just for District 7, but also the entire city, he added.

Another major project will be making sure Five Points has the tools it needs to be successful today and for years to come, he said. He would like to rebuild the merchant's association and give them more clout and autonomy, and perhaps even a funding source. "That could be a great way to ensure that we have a proper police presence when we need it as well as street cleaning for the weekend," Peluso said. "These are the kinds of things that will help make sure that today Five Points remains a cool area that's unique, that's fun, and that has a lively group of individuals going to it at all hours and make sure it's got the tools to succeed for all different types of retailers and establishments."

A major project the city council will be tackling together is the "Stadium of the Future." While Peluso said the current renderings are beautiful and there is a need for a new stadium, he wants to wait for Deegan and her team to set the pace before he fully releases his opinion.

"Once we start getting real details once the negotiating team is done, I will be holding a few meetings within the district to make sure that I hear what members of the public want or think and kind of give them where my thoughts are or where my head is," Peluso said. "We need to communicate, especially when there's a potential for a billion or million-dollar public investment, we need to get people involved."

He wants to ensure the entire process is transparent and the city is getting the "most bang for its buck as well as making sure that we are setting ourselves up for a better future."

There will be disagreements along the way, but Peluso isn't worried. Priorities at the local level are not typically partisan things, he added. "There's no democratic or republican way to fix a pothole," Peluso said.

If there are issues, Peluso will deal with them as quickly and early as possible, with a lot of hands on the issue. "You need to make sure that everyone knows where your head is at and where your priorities are," he said. "If you want to de-escalate a situation, showing up quick and early is a great way to do it."

His goal is to work with the council president, council vice president, chairs of different committees and make sure he's delivering for District 7 and the rest of Jacksonville. He's also looking forward to working with Deegan.

"I supported her heavily so I think that's going to be a great thing to be able to work with someone in the Mayor's office that that we can rely upon and who I think has a mandate to help make sure we're cleaning up City Hall," he added.

He plans on being accessible to all of his constituents and he named Brooks Dame as his executive council assistant (ECA). She worked for former Councilwoman Randy DeFoor previously.

"She's probably the best ECA of the City Council," Peluso said. "Our district is going to be so much better served knowing that we have the best of the best working for District 7 and working for them as well."

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# New pool of funding created for environmental causes

*Community Foundation to manage fund with oversight committee*

BY MICHELE LEIVAS  
RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS

The St. Johns Riverkeeper, in partnership with the Public Trust for Conservation, has launched a new fund to help keep the river and its waterways clean.

The Northeast Florida Environmental Conservation Fund is hosted by The Community Foundation of Northeast Florida and overseen by an oversight committee, whose members are appointed by The Community Foundation of Northeast Florida as well, explained St. Johns Riverkeeper Lisa Rinaman.

The fund was formalized last July.

The Northeast Florida Environmental Conservation Fund is a way to facilitate an initiative The St. Johns Riverkeeper, along with the Public Trust for Conservation, is working on using the Clean Water Act to clean up industrial storm water sites and “to target sites that are not in compliance for their discharge permits,” Rinaman explained.

When a settlement is reached with these entities, they are able to pay into this fund rather than pay fines to the government. In turn, these

dollars are then applied to other environmental improvement projects.

“So it’s a way to use the Clean Water Act to clean up a site and also the potential dollars that would be used as fines, actually invest those into other environmental projects,” Rinaman added.

The St. Johns Riverkeeper spent several months working with the Public Trust for Conservation prior to launching the fund, following blueprints set forth by other waterkeeper organizations that had launched similar funds.

The St. Johns Riverkeeper is currently considering projects to fund through the new Northeast Florida Environmental Conservation Fund. Once these projects are identified, the grant-making process will begin.

“Some of the projects we’re looking at...are in the general areas of some of the industrial areas that we’re working to clean up and then that will help the downstream water bodies as well as communities have a cleaner river or creek,” Rinaman said.

She added, “It’s good for the environment, it’s good for the river and it’s good for the health of our communities here in Northeast Florida.”

# Construction underway for Riverside skatepark

BY MICHELE LEIVAS  
RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS

Site work is underway for the incoming skatepark beneath the Fuller Warren Bridge in Riverside.

This new skatepark was designed by California Skateparks. Construction began earlier this year and the site is currently being prepared to allow for underground utility work and drainage to begin.

The 1,000-foot-long skate plaza will be part of Artist Walk, a new park planned for the stretch of land between the I-95 on- and off-ramps at Park Street. According to the City of Jacksonville Parks, Recreation and Community Services Department, the skate plaza will feature “three rooms/spaces between the freeway pillars for

various skill levels. The skate park entry area creates a ‘JAX’ stage that will front the synthetic turf lawn.”

Miki Vuckovich, director of strategic initiatives with California Skateparks, explained the space beneath the Fuller Warren Bridge and its restrictions helped formulate the final design for the park, which leans more toward a “street terrain” with its various elements versus the “bowl and transition” terrain.

“Because of the constraints that didn’t make a bowl a tenable solution there at that particular skatepark, the opportunity to really exploit the site’s characteristics to provide something that’s not just unique amongst Jacksonville skateparks, but really skateparks nationally,” he said.

Jacksonville has a rich history in the skateboard culture. It is home to Kona Skatepark, which, built in the 1970s, is known as the oldest skatepark in the world. According to its website, it holds the record of “longest-surviving, privately owned skatepark” in the “Guinness Book of World Records.”


Vuckovich referred to Kona Skatepark as the “granddaddy of all skateparks” and said it is the only remaining skatepark open from the boom of 1970s.

“There’s a lot of skateboarding history in Jacksonville, and I think, hopefully, this park will contribute to that,” he said.


The estimated cost for design, engineering and construction for Artist Walk, including the skatepark, is \$8.8 million. Construction on the skatepark is expected to complete sometime late next year.



A rendering of California Skatepark’s final design for the skate plaza at the planned Artist Walk park in Riverside. RENDERING COURTESY OF THE DOWNTOWN INVESTMENT AUTHORITY.



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### Nearly a million Floridians, many of them children, are at risk of losing Medicaid coverage over the next year

Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) have re-started their monthly checks for eligibility after pausing them for the past three years. This means hundreds of thousands of Floridians may lose their coverage from these programs over the next year. If this impacts you, a friend, or a family member, here’s what you need to know:

**What’s happening?**

During the federal Public Health Emergency for COVID-19, the Department of Children and Families put a hold on checking for eligibility and did not disenroll anyone from Medicaid or Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

In April 2023, the regular monthly process of verifying those who qualify for Medicaid or CHIP benefits restarted. Those who are no longer eligible will lose their benefits after their anniversary month.

**What can individuals do if they are losing coverage through Medicaid or the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP)?**

Those losing coverage may be able to get financial help paying the monthly cost of an Affordable Care Act (ACA) health plan from the federal government. Individuals losing Medicaid or CHIP coverage can enroll in an ACA plan during a Special Enrollment Period (SEP) that runs through July 31, 2024. ACA plans cover preventive care, doctor and hospital visits, medications, and more. These plans may have different benefits than government plans, so it’s important to reach out for guidance.

**Who can help?**

For those who’d like to explore ACA plans, Florida Blue has specially trained agents who can help explain your options and help you find out if you qualify for financial help. You can find a local agent ([FloridaBlue.com/find-an-agent](https://www.floridablue.com/find-an-agent)), visit a local Florida Blue Center ([FloridaBlue.com/center](https://www.floridablue.com/center)), or call 1-844-396-2512. If you do not enroll in an ACA Marketplace plan and lose Medicaid or CHIP coverage, other government programs that may be available are:

- **Florida KidCare:** Low-cost insurance for children up to age 18. Call 1-888-540-5437.
- **Medically Needy Program:** A program that allows Medicaid coverage after a monthly “share of costs” is met. Call 1-850-300-4323.

Community specialists from the Florida Blue Centers across the state are also available to help anyone in the community find programs and services, including food, housing, transportation, and financial assistance, medical care, children and youth services, and even military and veteran services. They can be reached at 1-877-352-5830.

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# Deegan administration announces executive team

BY MICHELE LEIVAS  
RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS

Last month, then-Mayor-elect Donna Deegan announced the 11 members of her administration's executive team.

The appointments were announced at a press conference at City Hall, June 14, during which Deegan expressed excitement about her team as well as the prospect of working with the incoming city council representatives.

"Nobody gets into this to be a shrinking violet," she said. "You get into this to make a difference and I'm thrilled to have people on my team that are used to speaking out and are really productive members of this community. I think the same is true of our city council, so I think we're gonna work well together, I'm excited about it. I have great relationships with a lot of folks on the council, looking forward to building more."

Below are the 11 members of Deegan's executive team:

- **Chief Administrative Officer:** Karen Bowling
- **Chief of Staff:** Pat McCollough
- **Chief Communications Officer:** Phil Perry
- **Director of Strategic Initiatives and Press Liaison:** Melissa Ross



Mayor-elect Donna Deegan and the members of her administration's executive team, which she announced at City Hall on June 14.

- **Chief of Public Safety:** Lakesha Burton
- **Interim Chief Financial Officer:** Mike Weinstein
- **Chief Financial Officer:** Anna Brosche
- **Chief Health Officer:** Dr. Sunil Joshi
- **Director of Diversity and Inclusion:** Parvez Ahmed
- **Director of Economic Development:** Ed Randolph
- **Executive Assistant:** Erica Connor

Residents will recognize some of these names. Burton retired as assistant chief after serving with the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office for more than 20 years. She ran for Jacksonville sheriff in last year's election cycle for the position.

Ross is an award-winning TV and radio news anchor and reporter. WJCT News listeners will know her as host of the popular daily radio program "First Coast Connect."

Ross took to Twitter to share news of her appointment, writing, "Thrilled to announce I'll be joining Mayor-Elect @DonnaDeegan's administration next month as Director of Strategic Initiatives and Press Liaison. Thanks to @WJCTJax for 14 incredible years — and to all the listeners too. Also: the show must go on — and it will! — with a new host."

While her administration will officially take office on July 1, Deegan got to work before that. The City of Jacksonville's website shows meetings scheduled for the end of June for some of Deegan's committees, including the Military and Veterans, Constituency and Community Outreach, Arts, Culture and Entertainment, Public Safety, Economic Development and Infrastructure committees.

Deegan will be the 45th mayor of Jacksonville. She is the first woman to serve in the role.

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# King Street construction underway for new medical office building

BY MICHELE LEIVAS  
RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS

A new medical office building is coming to King Street in the Riverside community.

Construction has already begun at 1232 King Street, where crews are working on a reconfigured surface parking lot for the existing building on the lot, which is being converted into what is expected to be a non-surgical obstetrics and gynecology center, according to Riverside Avondale Preservation (RAP) Executive Director Shannon Blankinship.

An agenda from a recent King Street [Medical Office Building] Neighbor Meeting provided details of the project to residents living in nearby homes, who have been and will continue to be impacted by the construction until the project is completed.

According to the agenda, the incoming tenant is Women's Care Florida and the building will be a 25,000-square-foot medical office building featuring a complete interior renovation, the installation of a new elevator and its accompanying required structure, exterior enhancements "mostly along King St. elevation" and a new parking lot.

The new parking lot will include landscaping, drainage, pavers and lighting.



Workers are renovating and retrofitting the property's existing building into a 25,000-square-foot medical office building for women's health.

In a telephone interview, Blankinship explained that RAP's primary concerns were regarding the plans for the new parking lot as the medical office building is retrofitting an existing building rather than starting from scratch with a new build in a historic district. While many parking lots in Riverside Avondale had already existed before the overlay was in place, there are certain design elements that must be considered for this new, reconfigured lot to meet the requirements of a parking lot within a historic district.

"It will be, I think, an enhanced parking lot," Blankinship said. "I do think the updates and the design elements they're adding to it as well as incorporating more shade areas and more trees is gonna be a net benefit but it did require taking some of those things out in order to come into compliance with more recent codes regarding shade and storm water."

The medical building will be in what once was the SouthState Bank branch; a newly-completed, smaller branch now sits on the corner lot at 1210 King Street.

Blankinship said the plans for the new medical office building have been in the works for several years now, but had to wait until construction was completed for the new bank.

"The bank formerly owned all of it," she said. "But the bank, they predicated the sale of the property to them being able to build a smaller branch there onsite and actually be working and functioning in that location before work could begin on the remainder of the site through the new owner."

County records reflect the sale of 1232 King Street to AP Riverside, LLC in December 2021 for \$2.8 million.


Kasper Architects + Assoc. is the architectural firm on the project. The contractor is Smith McKee Construction.

According to plans filed with the city, the owner and project developer is Bill Long of AP Riverside, LLC with JMJ Group, LLC as the engineer.

According to the neighbor meeting agenda, the estimated completion date for this project is this December.



Construction is underway on a reconfigured parking lot for a medical office building on King Street.



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# The Temple celebrates 140 years of deep roots in Jacksonville

BY WINDY TAYLOR  
RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS

Congregation Ahavath Chesed, known to almost everyone in Jacksonville as The Temple, commemorated its 140th anniversary with a gala in May by reflecting on its storied past to build a vibrant vision for the future.

Like the Israelites in Exodus, The Temple spent decades moving around Jacksonville before settling into its current location on San Jose Boulevard in 1979. The Temple was chartered in 1882 in a beautiful building on Laura Street, and its first president, Morris A. Dzialynski, was Jacksonville's only Jewish mayor. This original building was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1901, and was the first house of worship rebuilt afterwards, at the corner of Laura and Ashley streets.

In 1927, the congregation purchased a Henry Klutho-designed building in Riverside,



Rabbi Maya Glasser holds the Torah.

at the corner of St. Johns Avenue and Mallory Street, to serve as a community center. That building was also destroyed by fire, in 1940, which resulted in the loss of all Temple records. Again, the congregation rebuilt and eventually outgrew the space, necessitating the move to San Jose.

Many families have remained faithful to The Temple in all its iterations.

"My mother was born in 1904, and she was confirmed at The Temple," said Linda Wilkerson (nee Fink), whose family has belonged to the congregation for generations. "My husband had a relative who was a charter member."

Wilkerson and her husband, the late Dr. Albert Wilkerson, Jr., both grew up going to services at The Temple. The Wilkersons married in 1955 and have four children and nine grandchildren, all of whom have been confirmed at The Temple. Many have also had their bar- or bat-mitzvah there, as well.



The Temple confirmation class of 1902.

"When I was young, the rabbi was Israel Kaplan, and his wife [Cora] was a wonderful storyteller. I remember going to the temple home and listening to her tell stories. In fact, one of my children had a birthday, and I asked Mrs. Kaplan to come tell stories at the birthday party," said Wilkerson.

Rabbi Kaplan was succeeded by Sidney Lefkowitz, who drew Wilkerson back to The Temple.

"Before that, I tried to get my parents to join the [Episcopal] Church of the Good Shepherd because they had a pool," Wilkerson said. "I was a teenager when Sidney Lefkowitz came; he was like the pied piper. He restored my faith in The Temple and in Judaism. It was a big period of growth for us."

The Temple's current rabbi is Maya Glasser, who moved to Jacksonville two years ago at the height of the pandemic. Unlike many rabbis who have led the synagogue, Rabbi Glasser is young and female, yet she sees herself as fitting perfectly well into the lineage of forward-thinking, community-focused leaders who have held the position.

"One of the themes in our history is our interfaith work," Glasser said. "We know that we are not in a primarily Jewish area, so it's been one of our values to get to know our neighbors."



The Temple 1882.

The congregation's history is a testament to this commitment. In 1917, Rabbi Israel Kaplan organized Jacksonville's first Interfaith Thanksgiving Service, a tradition which continues to this day and involves around thirty different faith groups. The Temple was one of the founding members of OneJax, an interfaith organization created in 2005 to emphasize civility and respect as cornerstones of the community. In addition, The Temple participates in an annual pulpit swap with Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church, and every Christmas the congregation members bake cookies for first responders and the homebound.

Rabbi Glasser, who moved from New York, has come to love her new hometown. "I love the pace," she said. "I love that people want to have conversations with each other and interact with each other. I love that everyone is polite and respectful."

Rabbi Glasser gave a speech at the 140th anniversary gala in which she reminded members to live out their values as they continue to look forward. "I'm helping us acknowledge where we came from in order to build a strong future," she said. "Especially in this era we're living in, where people are not coming together to explore different viewpoints. Our doors are always open. People are welcome to come to our services, come to our programs; we love when people come with questions."

The Temple holds regular services on Friday at 7:00 p.m. and Saturday at 10:30 a.m. All are welcome.

The theme of The Temple's gala was "Honoring our Past, Celebrating our Present,

and Building our Future." The steering committee, co-chaired by Miriam Greenhut and Nicole Brown, chose to embody this theme by using the synagogue's 100-year-old, stained-glass windows as inspiration. This milestone has given the members of The Temple an opportunity to reflect on how they can continue to be a force for good over the coming decades.



Congregation Ahavath Chesed has been on San Jose Boulevard since 1979.

"My hope for the future of the temple is that it continues to draw people who will support it and let it support them," said Wilkerson. "Hopefully this celebration will remind people how much the temple has meant to them through the years. It will indicate permanence. It's been part of our community for so long and still serves as a living, functioning entity which adds to the quality of life in Jacksonville. We've stood for something, and I hope we always will."

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# Sixty years of teamwork

Associate growth and opportunity – a guiding principle for Weather Engineers, Inc.



James "Dan" Griffin, Jr. August 1979 working on a G500 Chiller

Indeed, the team of roughly 100 employees that is Weather Engineers — from the technicians handling calls to the office staff working behind the scenes — is so important to the company's leadership team, its wellbeing is addressed in the first of Weather Engineers' five guiding principles:

"Provide for the growth and long-term opportunity for all Weather Engineers associates."

To that end, Weather Engineers has launched Weather University, an on-site training facility at its Edison Avenue location that is available to all employees, regardless of their title or job description.

Weather Engineers, Inc. turned 60 this year. That's not just 60 years of serving the heating and air conditioning needs for residential and commercial clients in Northeast Florida, but 60 years of building and maintaining a family-owned company on a simple set of principles that value the hard work, dedication and loyalty of its employees as the backbone of such a successful company.

"Other companies that were family-owned are no longer family-owned businesses anymore," said Danny Towers, vice president of operations. "They're owned by investment firms. So, I think a part of that is important to talk about because people don't realize that we're a legit family business that has been here since 1963, and there's generations of family here. I also think it's important to highlight how important our employees are and how they're a really big part of why we're successful."



Employees installing units 2000



Founder James "Griff" Griffin, Sr. building the try-out training program in 1985

"We're bringing the next generation into the HVAC business and we're training them," Towers said. "We're also training our current employees to be the best, regardless of if they answer the phone or if they work in the field."

Additionally, Weather Engineers employees have access to an apprenticeship program available through the Northeast Florida Builders Association's (NEFBA) HVAC program.

With roughly one-third of its employees being part of the company for more than two decades, it's evident that the efforts President Dan Griffin and his family have made to make Weather Engineers truly a family in its own right have paid off.

"I think that the locally owned, family-operated business is at a distinct advantage these days," said Griffin.

He feels strongly about values that are the foundation of a company: Without them, there is a lack of hands-on management and knowledge of the inside of a company; it's nearly impossible [for corporate purchasers; takeovers] to establish a company culture that will be successful and sustainable.

Being a local, family-owned company, however, is not synonymous with a smaller radius of service. With Weather Engineers, it's quite the opposite. The company's service areas range from areas of Southeast Georgia across a wide radius of Northeast Florida, from Yulee to Ponte Vedra Beach to St. Augustine. And while it has remained in the Griffin family these 60 years, Weather Engineers has continued to expand and acquire other companies.

"We've merged seven other like-minded HVAC companies over the years," said Finance Manager Kayla Yeager, who is also Griffin's daughter.

Most recently, in August 2021, Weather Engineers acquired A-Plus Air Conditioning and Refrigeration in Gainesville, FL.

With each acquisition and each expansion comes the same guiding principles and commitment to excellence, be it the company environment or the customer



James "Dan" Griffin, Jr. and Kayla Yeager

service provided to each and every client.

It's that customer service that is one of the things Towers is most proud of as he looks back on the history of Weather Engineers.

"We really strive to have the best customer service," he said. "If you need to talk to someone on the phone, you can call here and you can talk to someone. It's not automated. We're not run by a corporate company in another part of the country like some HVAC companies are. Everyone lives here, they all answer the phone here."



Weather Engineers Team December 2022



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Weather Engineers, Inc. provides several services for residential and commercial clients, including air conditioning, heating, indoor air quality, commercial and air duct cleaning. Located at 1000 Edison Avenue and can be reached at 904-503-7719.

# MOVERS & SHAKERS

## Jacksonville Historical Society unveils Bicentennial Bell

David Auchter, chairman of the board of the Jacksonville Historical Society, and Aaron Gibson-Evans, Bicentennial Bell chair and fifth-generation Jacksonville resident, unveiled the Jacksonville Bicentennial Bell for a celebratory crowd at the Jacksonville Main Library on June 7. Gibson-Evans had the honor of being the first to ring the bell.

The bronze, 225-pound bell will be on display in the Pajcic Promenade of the main library until a permanent site is secured. One side is etched with the Bicentennial logo and the other has the seal of Jacksonville. The bell was manufactured by Verdin, a Cincinnati-based company who restored the 1901 Greenleaf and Crosby clock at Laura and Adams Street after it was struck by a car. The idea for the bell was conceived by Jacksonville Historical Society Chief of Staff Kate Hallock to contribute to the preservation of Jacksonville's rich legacy.

Jacksonville turned 200 in June 2022. Donations for permanent inscriptions on the monument for individuals or families and businesses are still being accepted.



Alan J. Bliss, Matt Carlucci, David Auchter, Kate A. Hallock and Aaron Gibson-Evans with the Bicentennial Bell. PHOTO COURTESY OF HEATHER STINE.

## New president for Jacksonville branch of National League of American Pen Women



Stephanie Pyren-Fortel

Stephanie Pyren-Fortel has accepted the gavel as president of the Jacksonville branch of the National League of American Pen Women (NLAPW).

Pyren-Fortel is an internationally recognized artist, illustrator and author. Her resume includes projects with Universal Animation Studio, Marvel Entertainment and Hanna-Barbera. She has published numerous children's books and, in collaboration with Susan D. Brandenburg and Sally Sharp, has written nearly 20 books for READ USA since last year. Each book focuses on leaders and notable people from Jacksonville such as Dr. Sherry McGill, former president of the Jessie Ball duPont Fund and Lt. Col. Alton Yates of the Florida Veterans Hall of Fame.

Originally founded in 1897 after journalist Marian Longfellow O'Donoghue and two of her colleagues were denied membership with D.C.'s National Press Club, the organization now houses its national headquarters in a home once owned by President Abraham Lincoln's son, Robert Todd Lincoln.

The prestigious group is the oldest multi-discipline organization in the United States that recognizes and supports professional women in letters, art and music and is comprised of writers, visual artists, musicians and composers.

## Buck Poderski joins NAI Hallmark team



Buck Poderski

Buck Poderski has joined Jacksonville's commercial real estate brokerage and property management firm NAI Hallmark as its new vice president of multifamily investment sales.

Poderski has worked in real estate since 2018. Most recently, he served as managing director for GREA in Dallas, Texas. He holds dual bachelor's degrees in economics and finance from University of North Florida.

In a press release announcing Poderski's appointment, NAI Hallmark explained that Poderski "specializes in the brokerage of value-add, multifamily assets throughout Florida and has a proven track record of success advising on multifamily investments for both private and institutional investors."

"We are very excited to announce the addition of Buck Poderski to the NAI Florida Multifamily Team. Buck brings an impressive track record of success, sharing our passion for delivering above-and-beyond value to his clients," said NAI Hallmark Senior Vice President John Rutherford in the release. "In his new role, Buck will build on NAI's industry-leading market share and spearhead our growth outside of Jacksonville into markets throughout North & Central Florida."

## Modernizing Monovision



Dr. Donald Downer

Donald Downer, M.D., cornea surgeon at Clay Eye Physicians & Surgeons, is the first physician in North Florida to perform a successful IC-8 Aphera Lens Implant. The IC-8 lens treats monovision, where one eye is used for distance vision and the other for near vision. With this lens, the near eye can now see both near and far distances.

"I'm always excited to be on the cutting edge of ophthalmology advancements for cataract surgery, and the Aphera IC-8 IOL is the first of its kind," said Dr. Downer. "As the first physician in North Florida to use the IC-8 Intraocular Lens for cataract surgery, I liken this lens to a camera. With the Aphera IOL, light is naturally

focused as it enters the eye and seamlessly expands patients range of vision, so they can see objects, people and signage from varying distances."

Patients who previously could not tolerate monovision due to changes in their distance vision can now benefit from this type of vision correction.

Clay Eye Physicians & Surgeons currently has offices in Orange Park, Fleming Island, Mandarin, Riverside and Middleburg.



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## New BOD leadership, member announced for Groundwork Jacksonville



Kerri Stewart



Deborah Martin Johnson

Groundwork Jacksonville has announced the new leadership and a new member to its board of directors.

Kerri Stewart will begin a two-year term as board chairperson. Stewart is the chief strategy officer for Miller Electric and has served on Groundwork Jacksonville's board for five years. Stewart is also board member for Downtown Vision, Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens and Goodwill Northeast Florida.

"I have been excited about this reject since learning of it during my tenure at City Hall," she stated in a June press release. "I am passionate about seeing the Emerald Trail's completion and feel privileged to be a part of the process."

Also beginning a two-year term as vice chair-person is Deborah Martin Johnson, who first joined the organization's board in 2020. A certified public accountant of more than 35 years, Johnson serves on numerous other boards including Leadership Jacksonville, the Arc Jacksonville, the University of North Florida Foundation and the United Way of Northeast Florida Community Investment Council.

Additionally, Jim Maher joins the board of directors. Maher is a retired professional engineer who served 35 years with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. For 13 of those years, he served as the Northeast District 13's assistant director.

## Terry Vereen Plumbing celebrates 40 years



Terry Vereen

Whether it's a major plumbing project or a quick fix, Terry Vereen Plumbing has been there for clients in Jacksonville and Duval County for four decades now.

Based in Jacksonville and launched in 1983, this family company is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year by continuing to provide top-of-the-line service to its residential and commercial clients, with services specializing in repiping and remodeling, water heaters, slab leaks, sewer and drain services, cast iron replacement and insurance claims. Additionally, owner Terry Vereen and his staff also understand the plumbing emergencies can and do happen outside normal office hours and provide emergency services 24/7.

Vereen said reaching this milestone for his company could not have been accomplished without his team of employees and the loyal customers that have remained with him throughout the years.

"There's been a lot of help getting here," he said. "All my great employees, my great customers. I still have some of the same customers I started out with 40 years ago, as well as their children and their grandchildren. They've been good to me, they've been dedicated."

A quick visit to the company website will also reveal "Tips from Terry" — a page dedicated to providing "basic plumbing information every homeowner should know," from common reasons for a slow drain or a sudden drop in water pressure to easy, pro-active steps homeowners can take to save both water and money.

Terry Vereen Plumbing is located at 2690 Rosselle Street and can be reached at (904) 569-9143. Clients can also submit a request for service and/or information through a contact form at [www.terryvereenplumbing.com](http://www.terryvereenplumbing.com).

## Thomas joins PACE Center for girls



Genelle Thomas

Pace Center for Girls, a nationally-recognized model that provides education, counseling, training and advocacy for girls and young women, announced the appointment of Genelle Thomas as Executive Director of Pace Clay.

"Genelle is a dynamic, collaborative leader who has the vision and experience to advance our mission and lead the center in Clay County," said Mary Marx, Pace President and CEO. "I look forward to working alongside Genelle as she engages the Clay community in Pace's work and reaches more girls across Northeast Florida."

Thomas brings over 20 years of nonprofit and youth development leadership to Pace Clay. She has a proven record of community impact and most recently served as the Director of National Initiatives at Partners for Youth with Disabilities. During her tenure, she was instrumental in increasing sustainable fiscal support, launching new programming, and building coalitions. In this role, she co-founded the National Disability Mentoring Coalition and co-chaired the Mentoring and Leadership Task Force through UNICEF's Global Partnership on Children with Disabilities.

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# A Reel Success



First place winners Steven Keith and Daniel Robertson



Second place winners Randall Alvarez and Jocham Williams



Third place winners Chris Cercy and Eric Roberts

More than 940 anglers and 470 boats hit the water in Palatka the third week of May during the 34th annual Wolfson Children's Hospital Bass Tournament, one of the largest bass fishing tournaments in Florida. The tournament raised \$436,000 for Wolfson Children's C. Herman and Mary Virginia Terry Heart Institute. This year's tally brings the total to more than \$6 million raised by the tournament since its inception in 1989.

The three-day event featured different competitions each day with the main tournament on Saturday, May 20. Daniel Robertson and Steven Keith of High Springs won first place overall with a five-fish aggregate weight of 25.11 lbs. Second place went to Randall Alvarez of Starke and Jocham Williams of Macclenny, with a total weight of 24.42 lbs. Chris Cercy of Middleburg and Jacksonville's Eric Roberts took home third place with 21.75 lbs.

Syler Prince and Rileigh Stout of Palatka won the May 18 Lads and Lasses Tournament with a five-fish aggregate weight of 23.95 lbs. followed by Ronnie Council and Reta Szlosek of Palatka with 21.83 lbs. Charles and Kelly Moody of Green Cove Springs placed third with 19.49 lbs.

Danny Inabnett and Randy Sievert of DeLeon took home first place in the May 19 VIP & Friends Tournament with a total weight of 17.73 lbs. Derek Daniels of Macclenny and Michael Johnson of Raiford followed with 17.18 lbs., and Jacksonville's Eric Lewis and Kevin Flanagan came in third with 16.34 lbs.

Winners took home more than \$48,000 in cash prizes. The 35th annual Wolfson Children's Hospital Bass Tournament is scheduled to take place May 16-18, 2024.



Coach Tom Coughlin fist-bumps members of model and actress Kim Alexis's team at the Celebrity Golf Classic.



Donovan, a 7-year-old leukemia patient pictured here with Jacksonville Jaguars alumnus Fred Taylor, sounded the horn for play to begin at the event.

# JAY FUND RAISES \$924,000 AT GOLF CLASSIC

The Tom Coughlin Jay Fund raised \$924,000 at its 28th annual Celebrity Golf Classic in partnership with THE PLAYERS on May 7 and 8 at THE PLAYERS Stadium Course at TPC Sawgrass. Over 450 people attended the celebrity-packed dinner, auction and golf events to raise money for families tackling pediatric cancer.

During the dinner, the Jay Fund announced the establishment of the "Judy Coughlin Be the Light" award to recognize an individual or group in the Jacksonville or New York/New Jersey area that embodies Judy Coughlin's qualities of kindness and compassion.



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Substantial price improvement on this gorgeous lakefront pool estate, nestled in the heart of Mandarin! The first floor offers plenty of room to gather large families, with an open floor plan and tons of light everywhere. The chef's kitchen has beautiful white cabinetry, granite countertops and a breakfast bar that welcomes you to sit. Dinner parties are flawless now with room for your guests to gather while you lovingly finish the meal. The piece de resistance of the lower floor is the light-drenched sunroom that overlooks the pool area. Kids can gather to play a board game, or you can prop your feet up and finish reading that delicious book. On the right side of the house, you'll find an office, pool bath and the generous owner's suite. Much More!!



*Listing Agent*  
**Heather Buckman**

# Now that's girl power



The Women's Giving Alliance (WGA), an initiative of The Community Foundation for Northeast Florida, announced \$561,600 in grants to 14 Northeast Florida nonprofit organizations to a crowd of nearly 200 WGA members at its annual Member Forum. This year's awards recognized the work being done to improve the lives of women and girls in the area, specifically for workforce support and client basic needs.

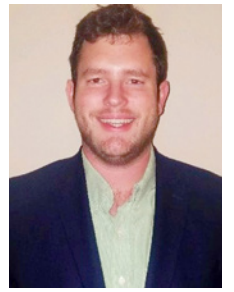
"Our WGA grantees' commitment to women and girls in our region is unwavering and our members share that same passion and commitment to ensuring no woman or girl is left behind," said Sheila Collier, president of WGA.

The following received one-year grants for 2023-24:

- Barnabas Center: \$50,000 (Nassau)
- Beaches Emergency Assistance Ministry (BEAM): \$40,000 (Duval and St. Johns)
- Betty Griffin Center: \$50,000 (St. Johns)
- Delta Research and Educational Foundation: \$10,000 (Duval)
- Family Promise of Jacksonville: \$50,000 (Duval)
- Feeding Northeast Florida: \$50,000 (All Northeast Florida counties)
- The LJD Jewish Family & Community Services: \$50,000 (Duval)
- Literacy Alliance of Northeast Florida: \$5,000 (All Northeast Florida counties)
- Micah's Place: \$30,000 (Nassau)
- Northeast Florida Women Veterans: \$27,100 (Duval)
- Rebuilding Ex-offenders Successfully Through Opportunities Rehabilitation and Education (R.E.S.T.O.R.E.) \$50,000 (Duval)
- Rethreaded: \$50,000 (Duval)
- Volunteers in Medicine Jacksonville: \$50,000 (Duval)
- WeCareJax: \$49,500 (Duval)

Over the past 21 years, WGA has awarded more than \$8.9 million to 70 nonprofits, serving at least 30,000 women and girls across Baker, Clay, Duval, Nassau, Putnam and St. Johns counties.

# The Seilhymer Solution



Lucas Seilhymer

Lucas Seilhymer has been appointed the new executive director of Mission House, following a national search to replace Carina Saladino, who left the organization last year.

"It's an honor to have been selected to serve the men and women who are affected by homelessness in the Jacksonville Beaches community," said Seilhymer. "I'm thrilled to be relocating to the area, and I'm already humbled by the outpouring of community support for Mission House."

Seilhymer, who is moving from Danville, Illinois, will assume the role on July 17, 2023. He was previously CEO of the nonprofit Project Success of Vermilion County. Now, with Mission House, he will help the day facility end homelessness in Northeast Florida by providing health care and supportive services, including food, clothing and case management.

"The board is thrilled to welcome Lucas to Mission House. We're confident that with his previous experience and immense skill set, he will guide the organization to the next level, helping put more people on the path to independence in our community," said Billy Wagner, board chair.

# Booth retires from Ortega Playschool



Robin Booth pictured with her family

Robin Booth officially retired in May after 39 years of teaching. She retired from Ortega Playschool on Roosevelt Boulevard in Jacksonville and is looking to spend more time with her family and, more importantly, her new grandbaby.

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# It's All About the Fit

## Davalt Optical ensures whoever walks inside their store leaves with the perfect fit

Being able to see well is critical. For those who need corrective lenses, ensuring that their eyeglasses have the right prescription and fit are crucial to achieving this. No one understands this more than Kelly and Clinton Ross, opticians and owners of Davalt Optical, a fixture in Five Points since 1958. The duo has been helping people find the perfect fit for their eyeglasses since they took over the store in 2020.

"The fit is very important," Clinton Ross said. While a prescription can be correct, if the glasses do not fit properly, it can affect how well someone can see, and the fit is specific to each person. Just as the same size in a shoe can be extremely different across brands, he said the same is true for eyeglasses.

The Rosses pride themselves on ensuring a proper fit. They stand behind the glasses they produce. An optician must measure everything precisely; just one millimeter off in a measurement can make a huge impact. Recently, a woman came into the shop who had a difficult prescription. She brought in her glasses because she was having trouble adjusting to them. Davalt Optical styled her properly and fit her with the best option to help her walk out seeing clearly.

"We're all experiencing the world completely different," Clinton Ross said. "We

are all looking at something, but it looks different, we absorb it all differently."

The Rosses both have a vast amount of experience in the industry. Clinton worked for LensCrafters at multiple locations for about 10 years. Kelly worked at several small chains and independents. Clinton realized the big box stores weren't offering the highest level of quality and service to their customers. The stores weren't able to offer enough variety in their products and typically had a limited range of options that didn't fit everyone.

"I got a really good snapshot of what the industry is trying to do but is missing the mark," Clinton Ross said. "We found that we had better ideas and wouldn't have the confines of a big box store."

That's when the Rosses decided it was time to go out on their own to open their own optical boutique. They met with Patty Davalt, owner of Davalt Optical, to "pick her brain." As coincidence would have it, Davalt told them she was planning to retire. A few months later, Davalt passed the business on to the Rosses.

"Patty is a firm believer that God sends you people when you need them and they need you," Clinton Ross said. Patty worked with the Rosses for a month after they took over the shop to help in any way she could.

They decided to keep the name and have no intentions of changing it.

"The location, the people, the differences we get to make in our customers' lives, we couldn't have architected a better fit if we tried," Kelly Ross said.

Davalt is just one of several opticians and doctors in the industry the duo has been lucky to learn from.

"We've been fortunate to work with older generations that could teach us things that maybe aren't even in use today," Kelly Ross said. "Our combined experience gives us a big leg-up."

Although they took over just three years ago, they follow Davalt's legacy and share her values of excellent craftsmanship, celebrating the community and providing custom solutions for all eyewear needs.

"We have the best clients," Clinton Ross said. "It's like everyone was vetted by Patty."

They also get lots of repeat customers. People who bought their first pair of glasses there are now bringing in their grandchildren to get glasses at Davalt Optical.

Davalt Optical offers more than 2,000 frame options, many unique or funky, with the ability to customize as well. They fill prescription lenses in new or old frames,



create custom orders, do restorations and can duplicate prescriptions from current eyeglasses. They also offer specialty glasses for infants and children, those with special needs or colorblind patients. All eyeglasses are made on site.

The care doesn't stop after a customer gets their glasses either. Davalt Optical offers repairs, and they love when people stop by just to chat. A glimpse into the vintage display case with antique eyewear and optical equipment is, by itself, worth a stop by this Five Points store.

"We have people who come from all over," Kelly Ross said. "It makes you feel like you're doing something right."

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# Serendipity in stained glass

A charitable endeavor got a heavenly helping of serendipity when the renovation of a historic home on King Street led a beautiful work of art back into the hands of its creator.

Walter and Sally Suslak first purchased their current home in 2005. Built in 1927, the house was once a convent for sisters

within the Ascension St. Vincent's system in Jacksonville. It was originally located on King Street, where Ascension St. Vincent's River House is located today, but was at risk for demolition. So, to preserve its architectural history, the Suslaks had it moved by barge to its permanent spot at 1888 Powell Place.

During renovations, the Sulsaks wondered what to do with the handmade stained-glass windows that once separated the convent chapel and enclosed river room. They replaced the windows with French doors, but Walter Suslak placed the panels in cardboard boxes and held onto them. After some time, he decided to reach out to Ascension St. Vincent's Foundation about the panels.

"I asked if they might have any use for some stained glass, since it was once in this historic building where Sisters had once lived," said Walter Suslak. He offered to pay for repairs to the glass if the Foundation could find it a new home.

The Foundation decided the panels would add some history to the newest hospital in St. Johns County and accepted Suslak's offer. A staff member, unsuccessful in her attempts to find someone to repair the stained glass, called Sister Diane Couture of the Sisters of St. Joseph and St. Joseph Ministries Architectural Stained Glass, who asked to see photos in order to assess the broken pieces.

"I'm looking at these photos to evaluate the damage, and I'm thinking, 'Wait a minute, that's my window!'" said Sister Couture.



Sally and Walter Suslak with Sister Diane Couture



The Suslaks with their famed, stained-glass window.

"I sent the Foundation a note," she continued. "I told them I was sure that I could repair the piece, but that they needed to ask the window's owners if the pane came from the King Street convent house."

Surprised and intrigued, the staff member let Sister Couture know that the piece did indeed come from that building.

"I told her, I can absolutely fix it, because I'm the one who made it!" said Sister Couture.

Sister Couture repaired the piece, which is now displayed in the St. Johns County hospital. The Suslaks recently invited Sister Couture to their home to reminisce about the building's history and the serendipity that brought them all together.

As they overlooked the beautiful shore of the St. Johns River, they shared the same sentiment: that the timing and manner of their connection was no accident.

"This was God's work," Sister Couture said with a smile.



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Dan Kossoff and Isabel Balotin

## THE LEGACY OF KINDNESS

Established as “lovers of kindness”, Congregation Ahavath Chesed showed the resiliency of such a founding principle as they celebrated a remarkable 140 years in Jacksonville. Affectionately known simply as The Temple, the group gathered for an anniversary gala on May 20, 2023, at 6 p.m.

Gilded in gold and blue, the celebration centered on The Temple’s tenets of righteousness, mercy and love, and was filled with music, speeches, dinner and a signature wall featuring the congregation’s historical timeline.

The promise of The Temple’s 140 years of growth is best summarized by a statement from its 1882 founder, Rabbi Max Moses, “Though thy beginning be small, thy end shall greatly increase. The future shall show the rich, golden harvest of the beginning you have so bravely made.”



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Mark and Shana Devitt with Bill and Jennifer O’Conner along with Jayne and Rick McLeod and Mae and Mike Skoglund

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Mary Alice Phelan and Martha Barrett

The Jaguars Foundation held its fundraising Cocktail Party on Friday, June 2, from 6-9 p.m. at the Fields Auto Group Terrace Suite at TIAA Bank Field. The evening raised funds for the Foundation’s causes, and it featured fare from local restaurants, a custom cigar roller and dueling piano entertainment. The Jaguars Foundation has awarded a total of more than \$23 million to programs in Baker, Clay, Duval, Nassau and St. Johns counties.



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Jim Agee presents Cherri Coombs Ohmer with a 'Thank you' bouquet for her service to the Club during his Presidency.



Jim Agee with Renee Parenteau



Immediate Past President, Jim Agee and club Executive Director, Cherri Coombs Ohmer, present Jeffrey Witt with the Dan Ridgell Award for Service Above Self.

## PRESIDENT'S PARTY A ROARING GOOD TIME FOR ROTARIANS



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RENEE PARENTEAU

Ladies in attendance donned their best roaring 20's attire.

During a recent gavel exchange, history was written once again as Marie Gnage took the helm to represent the Rotary Club of Jacksonville as its fearless leader for the 2023-24 Rotary Year. Rotarians in attendance enjoyed a Roaring 20's theme, complete with food, libations and entertaining Jazz by the John Lumpkin Trio and a special guest appearance by two-time Grammy-winning singer Kendra Foster, Gnage's daughter.

For Gnage, this historic moment was special for her as she humbly accepted her plaque and made mention that she was honored to reach this milestone, while celebrating the legacy of other African American leaders in an appropriate place for the occasion. She thanked her husband, her youngest sister, her daughter and others and recognized those that have laid a historic foundation where the "Harlem of the South" was captured in essence via the backdrop of history and achievements showcased at the Ritz Theatre and Museum.



The Rev. Amy Slater with Mary Claire and Ted Miller

## COMMITTEE TALKS GALA, FUNDRAISING FOR DESC



Tom Slater with Randy DeFoor, Maria Benavides, Alex Benavides, Allison DeFoor and LeAnna Cumber

Leaders and committee members that support poverty fighting fundraiser, DESC Defenders: Into the Future, gathered at Beau Rivage, June 6, to talk about the upcoming event benefitting the Downtown Ecumenical Services Council.

The evening featured insightful talks by event chair, Alex Benavides, who has spearheaded the fundraising event for two years in a row. Benavides was joined by David Clark, executive director, longtime board member, Julie Handley, and Board Chair Pamela Prier; remarks were also shared by honorary chairs for the 2023 season, Randy and Allison DeFoor.

"We want the event to be fun and exciting, but we also want our guests to learn more about what services people in poverty need and why they need them," said Benavides. "Tenikka Hughes, our emcee, will lead the audience through immersive activities that will keep the audience engaged."

The event is the culmination of the 40th anniversary celebration for DESC which started last fall. That event raised more than \$300,000 continuing a record-breaking trend over the last few years. Sponsorships, tickets and donations can be made at the event website: [www.descdefenders.com](http://www.descdefenders.com).



David Miller with LeAnna Cumber



Julie Handley with Jan Carpenter

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# Give (Hair) Peace a Chance



since 2016, when Musser moved it from its spot in Five Points – where it had been for 20 years – to Riverside, off Oak Street.

“This took a lot of risk to invest heavily. It required some humility and imagination, and I have more space here so I could offer things that I never could in the other space. The longer we stayed there, the more limiting it became,” said Musser.

In 2016, he had just three employees; he now has 29. In June 2020, he opened the space next door, doing the buildout during the COVID lockdown.

“COVID was a lot of things, but it gave me the opportunity to expand my business, change my business model, change my hours,” Musser said. “There were some things I’d been wanting to do for a while, and I was able to do them. So, I adapted to what was going on and restructured the business at the same time.”

This included expanding operating days from five days a week to six and extending operating hours until 8 p.m. This allowed him to also hire more people since they work in shifts.

“We can take care of more people, and we can employ more people,” Musser said. “And one of my primary reasons for opening so long was to be an employer to create jobs for hairdressers, makeup artists and waxers.”

The salon had already been known as a destination for people with curly hair for 20 years, educating clients on techniques for managing and styling curly hair.

“We were one of the first salons in Jacksonville to really embrace it,” Musser said.

## PEACE FOR ALL

Hair Peace offers more than haircuts, styling and coloring. In the restructuring, it added other self-care services like waxing and nails. The salon has a full-service waxing room and offers after-care products for purchase. Hair Peace’s nail technician provides manicures and pedicures with regular nail polish, dip and gel options. The technician employs different techniques and designs for custom sets. The nail area is semi-private, and treatments are usually done one-on-one.

“I think having that quiet private space and that one-on-one attention [is] the type of luxury that people want, and I don’t think people are getting that,” Musser said.

## PERMANENT MAKEUP

The salon also started offering cosmetic tattooing. Its spa coordinator provides microblading, powder brows and lip blushing, which is a semi-permanent tattoo that can enhance the color and shape of the lips. It can make lips appear fuller, with more defined borders. The way the pigment is put in can create a more 3D look. This solution can also be applied to scar remediation for things like stretch marks, in which the tattoo can help the scar blend with the rest of the skin area.

“I feel like a good pair of eyebrows is anti-

aging,” Musser said, mentioning a client who said it “did more for her than a face lift”.

## PEACE OF MIND TO-GO

The salon also has a small retail boutique where clients can purchase products to carry that “best moment” feeling home. They offer products from Moroccan Oil, DevaCurl, KMS California, fur skincare, GrandeLash, GrandeBrow, Carrie Wilson Makeup, and more.

“You don’t have to go to Town Center or somewhere to get great, fabulous cosmetics or GrandeLash, or the right smoothing serum or the right curly gel,” Musser said.



Owner Bruce Musser hopes clients feel a warm, cozy, professional and inviting atmosphere when they walk in Hair Peace salon. And now, he’s making sure that ideal peace of mind is for more than just their hair.

“We remind each other that coming into Hair Peace and getting their hair done might be the coolest moment of somebody’s day,” Musser said. “They might have had a terrible day, and they might have some terrible stuff to go do when they leave here, but this might be the best moment of their day.”

Hair Peace has been at its current location

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# Young INDEPENDENTS

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BY JENNIFER JENSEN  
RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS

With more than a million people now calling Jacksonville “home”, The Resident News set out to discover young, independent residents out there who are truly worthy of the “one-in-a-million” title. These up-and-comers are making huge impacts in the community, whether it’s through real estate, banking or customer service.

Working to change Jacksonville for the better, our Young Independents are among the city’s best and brightest. They have a drive and a passion for what they do, and it is hard not to feel inspired in their presence. We rounded up just a few of these movers and shakers to discuss their career, passions, accomplishments and Jacksonville faves. The future is in good hands and it’s time to celebrate the contributions of the next generation of professionals... right here in our stomping grounds.



## SAM MIDDLEKAUFF

Quick-study Sam Middlekauff has only been an associate at Colliers for two years, yet he’s already become very well versed in the “urban boroughs” — Riverside, Murray Hill, Avondale, San Marco and Springfield areas. He grew up in Jacksonville and knows all too well how Jacksonville’s downtown hasn’t really been a highlight for the city. But Jacksonville is changing quickly, and downtown development has been a major cause of that change.

“I’ve always felt like that’s the one area that’s held Jacksonville back from being on the radar with the Miamis and the Tampas,” he said. “It’s starting to get on the radar of a lot of these groups, whether it’s developers, whether it’s restaurants from out of town or businesses.”

In his position with Colliers, he focuses on urban, mixed-use development on the retail side. He is a part of bringing new businesses and new attractions to draw people to the city.

“It’s long hours and it’s a grind, but you have a reward at the end of it. You kind of have a chance to make an impact on the city.”

Middlekauff has a passion for his hometown and loves seeing the changes that are happening. Although he went to college at the University of Alabama, he came straight back to Jacksonville after graduation and soon was part of the development of the Federal Reserve building.

“The building was fully condemned. There were trees growing out of it. You look at it now, and it’s a beautiful courtyard, a fully renovated building,” he said, noting that it has been somewhat of a kickoff to some of this major development happening downtown.

When he’s not growing the urban neighborhoods, Middlekauff likes to golf, watch the Jaguars and attend events downtown. He’s also a proclaimed “foodie” and loves to try new restaurants that pop up around town while frequenting favorites Mesa in Avondale and bellwether downtown.

“It’s the area that I’ve grown up in, so I kind of live, work and play here,” he said.



## TAYLOR MILLER

Born and raised in Jacksonville, Taylor Miller, like so many other natives, has a deep love for the Jaguars. But this lifelong dancer gets the unique privilege of showing her pride as part of the ROAR, the professional cheerleading squad of the Jacksonville Jaguars. She is a four-season veteran with the ROAR and will continue with them this upcoming season.

“I grew up dancing and just love to dance,” Miller said. Miller earned a two-year dance scholarship from the Florida State College at Jacksonville after high school, after which she pursued a career in the beauty industry. She attended the Parisian Spa institute and is a medical aesthetician at Amara Med Spa.

Miller has been in the aesthetic industry for five years performing facials, microneedling, chemical peels and more.

“Skin is the first thing people see when they talk to you,” she said. “I like helping people overcome any insecurities, helping people become more confident in their skin. It’s really a magical process when you can help people get through conditions such as like acne, melasma, rosacea, and just have that confidence to wear their skin without adding tons of makeup on it.”

When she isn’t working, the ROAR keeps Miller busy on and off the field. The team does appearances at different events, and Miller said one of the best parts is the volunteer work they do.

“Being on the field and dancing is only one little, tiny piece of everything we do, and it’s really been a super rewarding opportunity to be able to be a part of the team for so long,” she said.

Off the clock, Miller enjoys visiting the Riverside Arts Market on Saturdays or other attending events that take place around town.

“I always just try to support or go to whatever event is going on in Jacksonville,” she said.



## LYMAN STARMER

At just 19, Lyman Starmar is no stranger to the business world. Two years ago, he started his first business called Highlands Marketing, and then introduced Perspective, a social network prioritizing bipartisanship. At the time, he was prepared to drop out of Wolfson High School to focus on his business. It was becoming too much to juggle, so Starmar spoke with the school’s principal to see if there was a way around having to attend school five days a week. They came up with a plan that allowed Starmar to stay enrolled in school while allowing him to keep his business up and growing.

“You don’t really have to always play by the rules, sometimes you just need to ask. And it’s always about how you ask,” Starmar said.

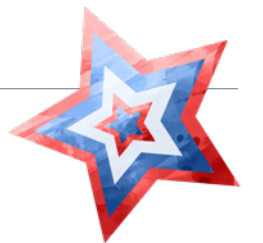
His current company, PeerLyfe, grew out of Perspective, and launched three months ago. Starmar noticed that out of all the social media platforms, there was no way for groups to consolidate all the information, control the narrative, and give residents a place to talk with other residents. So, he decided to create a kind of self-sustaining ecosystem, a private social network for communities.

He spends most of his time working, but it’s only because he is so passionate about it. And he likes helping other young entrepreneurs iron out their concepts and get that process started.

“I love solving problems,” he said. “I don’t want to say I know it all, but I want to give them advice for things I learned along the way.”

Starmar enjoys splitting up his workday so that he gets a different view, different perspective every day. He spends time in the office and then ventures to a different coffee shop every week in the afternoon. Some of his favorites are Southern Grounds, Brew and Vagabond.

“The Jacksonville coffee scene is pretty good,” Starmar said. “That’s where I get all my creative work done.”





## PATRICK CARNEY

After graduating with a degree in marketing, Patrick Carney was introduced to the “great energy and passion” of Christian Harden and Keith Goldfaden, managing partners with NAI Hallmark.

“It was a little infectious,” Carney said.

So infectious, in fact, that he is coming up on his six-year anniversary with the company, now serving as its vice president, office specialist.

A Jacksonville native, Carney loves that he is able to make an impact on his hometown through his job.

“You kind of have an impact representing owners of real estate and on the Jacksonville landscape,” he said. “It’s pretty exciting.”

He has worked through the ranks, starting as a sales associate, then senior sales associate and now, vice president.

“I’m excited about being with Hallmark and want to continue to grow that legacy,” he said.

One of his proudest moments at his job was recently closing two deals on a property called the Concourse that dealt with government users.

“It was pretty difficult,” he said. “You’re going through government regulations — requirements that are much more intense and a more involved process than a normal office lease.”

When Carney isn’t working, he enjoys meeting different types of local, regional and national real estate owners, CEOs and CFOs, hear their stories and work hand-in-hand with them. He likes spending time outdoors, playing sports like tennis.

“[Tennis] is almost a dirty word, with all the excitement around pickle ball,” Carney said with a laugh.

He’s also training for his first triathlon, typically running along the iconic Riverwalk on the Northbank. He grew up at the beach and enjoys surfing as well.

“I’m kind of a jack of all trades,” he said. “I like to do a bit of everything.”

Carney frequents the Winston YMCA and Jacksonville’s famed coffee spots, especially Southern Grounds in San Marco. He plans to get more involved in the community and wants to find a passion outside of work where he can do some good.



## BROOKS DAME

Born and raised in Jacksonville, Brooks Dame has an incredible sense of community and what it takes to make a difference at the local level. That passion is a perfect match for her current job as assistant to Jacksonville City Council Member Randy DeFoor, as well as her upcoming post with Council Member Jimmy Peluso, slated to start on July 1.

“Being able to be here at city hall and work, you have such a good opportunity to make change in people’s regular lives, whether it’s the pothole in front of their house or an overarching policy that affects them,” Dame said.

Prior, she worked at the Sulzbacher Center. “These are my roots,” Dame said. Working there allowed her to come to her current job with “a community lens and a nonprofit lens.”

Dame is also passionate about nature and hiking. She hiked the entire Appalachian Trail in college in somewhat of a spur-of-the-moment fashion. Her friend was heading off on the adventure and asked Dame if she wanted to join.

“One of my role models is my mom, and she is one of those, strong, independent women. So, I feel like I could tackle anything and do it. I was like, ‘I could do that,’” said Dame. “I didn’t realize what I was getting into.”

Yet, after five months of sleeping on the ground and eating oatmeal, she said it is still something she’s incredibly proud of.

Dame has a love for volunteering and civic-minded activities, volunteering at Schulzbacher once a month as well as at other nonprofits. She also enjoys attending different events and exploring the Jacksonville food scene. Some of her favorites are Orsay and 1748 Bakehouse.

“Only the bored are bored in Jacksonville,” Dame said.



## PAUL TWUM

For Paul Twum, the best part of his job is fulfilling the needs of his private banker clients. He’s been at Chase since 2017 managing affluent clients and maintaining strong relationships between the client and the bank.

“I help them find solutions,” he said. “I help them with their worries and help change their thoughts around that problem. I watch them go from worried or having anxiety to leaving my office and feeling good about their situation at hand.”

Twum’s proudest moment is the acknowledgment of the stellar customer service his branch in San Marco has given the last three years.

“I’m really proud of being the No. 1 banker in all of Jacksonville, as far as making sure that folks are taken care of financially,” he said. “I provide stellar service across the board. If anybody has any issues with their bank and they want to give a Chase a try, just know that Paul will service the bejesus out of you.”

When he isn’t working, Twum enjoys giving back to his community and his alma mater, University of North Florida (UNF). He is a part of the student council to help UNF retain and bring more students into the school. He also enjoys mentoring students who are studying finance, helping to guide them and teaching them how to build a network and a brand. He also volunteers at several churches in San Marco and in Clay County, where his parents live.

Twum’s favorite local spots for great food are bb’s, River and Post and Hawker’s. When he’s not dining out, he fancies himself a novice cook. He likes testing out dishes he has seen on TikTok and social media.

“It’s a new passion for me,” he said. “I’ve made this nice pasta recipe that I’m really excited about.”



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## BRITTIANY LIGHT

Hair stylist Brittiany Light continues to work her way up toward master stylist at Hair Peace in Riverside. Currently working hard toward 4a, which will allow her to have the help of an associate, she said the best part of her job is the transformations.

"That's kind of why I got into it, because I love makeovers and making people feel really confident," Light said.

Hair Peace specializes in curly hair, and Light prides herself on teaching curlyheads how wear their hair natural, which they might have shied away from before because they didn't know how to style or manage it.

"Instead of straightening it, they can wear it natural, and just helping them learn how to do that can make a big difference," she said. "Even though you aren't changing who they are, you still do a transformation for them."

Light always wanted to do something creative with her career. She got her degree in fashion and ultimately ended up going to school for hair, calling it "a good way to make money and be creative."

When she isn't busy with hair transformations, she spends time with her dog, Scamp, who she says is exactly like her. She also enjoys hiking, going to the beach and exploring the different trails Jacksonville has to offer. One of her favorite spots is the Cummer Museum's outside garden.

"It's very pretty out there," she said. "And it has the water aspect. Anything with water is usually good for me. I am very much a nature person," said Light.

And she's no stranger to Jacksonville. Light grew up in Callahan and came to Jacksonville for most of her needs.

"When I needed to go to the grocery store, I had to go to Jacksonville," she said. "Jacksonville has so many great things. My favorite restaurant might be over here, but then I love going over to the beach or other areas to experience nature."

She has started to play tennis but admits it hasn't become a passion just yet. She is also a skilled baker — just ask about her white chocolate macadamia nut cookies.

"My friends always brag about my cooking, because when I throw parties, I always bake everything for it," she said.



## AIDEN SIMONETTA

Although new to the area, Aiden Simonetta is making a name for himself in the Jacksonville real estate scene, along with his father, Phillip Simonetta. Aiden and his father opened Pier 21 Realty, a combination of a real estate brokerage and real estate school, about six months ago in Jacksonville.

"It seems like it's a growing city, so it was an area for opportunity for us. We felt we had value to offer, and the location itself had value for us as well," Aiden Simonetta said.

During the COVID lockdown, Simonetta was in college, but wanted to keep moving forward. "I talked to my dad and said, 'Hey, the world's kind of stopping right now, but I wanted to keep going. Can I work with you?'"

Simonetta got his real estate license, and two years later, his broker's license. He also has an instructor's license. One achievement he is specifically proud of was his first transaction when he worked on a horse farm.

"It gave me a commission of nearly \$40,000," he said. "And it was life changing. I appreciate the fact that people trust me with those transactions. That they trust me with maybe the largest purchase they will make."

After that, he continued to grow. "A lot of my success is due to my dad," Simonetta said. "He's been in the industry for decades. That really helped me get my footing. He showed me the ropes over the last few years, and I've grown from there."

When he isn't busy with the business, Simonetta likes weightlifting and playing video games. He also enjoys trying different food trucks around town and "all the typical, middle-aged guy things" like cooking and grilling.



## OLIVIA STEINEMANN

When Olivia Steinemann first started working at Colliers, she wasn't sure what side of the business she wanted to be on — commercial or residential. But once she joined Matthew Clark's team, she was able to "really explore different sectors of the industry, find out what I like, find out what I don't like. And it really has allowed me to somewhat find myself as a young adult starting my career."

Although she isn't from Jacksonville — she grew up in Charlotte — Steinemann loves focusing on mixed-use development in downtown.

"For the longest time, all the locals, and people from Jacksonville in general, have been very jaded on downtown," she said. "There have been empty promises over the years and a lot of this development has not occurred. But now you have players — local players, out of town players — that have come to market and they're putting their money where their mouth is."

Steinemann said it is an exciting time to be a part of this growth. She wants to be involved in creating a place where people want to go and spend a Saturday shopping and dining under an urban landscape.

"These projects really allow you to create these districts in your urban core that have ceased to exist for the past 50 years," she said. "I really wanted to immerse myself in a more urban environment and bring out my creative side and work on projects that were very dynamic and had a lot of moving pieces to them, [ones that] brought in concepts from outside markets."

In her downtime, Steinemann gets centered through yoga. She also bikes, spends time at the beach and is a big foodie, loving Mesa, Black Sheep, River and Post, and Hawker's.

"When you have a lot going on, giving yourself an hour or two to really just focus on movement and clarity of the mind helps you on your day to day as well," she said.

Ultimately, Steinemann just feels very grateful to be where she is.

"To be able to sit down in a room with these developers and master planners who have worked their whole lives to create these dynamic environments, and being able to listen in and learn from them is quite the experience, and I'm very grateful for it," she said.

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# Parsons' Passion:

## *A decade of difference-making for Wolfson Women's Board*

BY **SUSANNA P. BARTON**  
RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS

As executive director of The Women's Board of Wolfson Children's Hospital, Sally Parsons loved taking donors and volunteers on tours of the hospital — no two were ever the same, she said, and she could never plan what would happen during any of them.

A Christmastime visit with a patient named Jake is foremost in her memory.

"I was taking a group of donors on a tour of the oncology floor and a young patient approached me in elf pajamas and

asked who I was, he said I looked important," Parsons said. "I bent down to let him know I wasn't the important one, it was he who was important and that the group of men with me were donating funds to the hospital to help children like him get better."

Parsons said the young boy ran over to the nurses' station and grabbed a Post-it note and wrote "Nice — Donors" on it and placed it on a pole showcasing names of either naughty or nice individuals. The donors were pleased to see they'd made the nice list.

"They were all blown away and asked to whom they should make out the check!" Parsons said, adding Florida Forum speaker and actor Bryan Cranston met Jake during a subsequent tour of the hospital facilities. "He entertained the whole group and will be in my heart forever; God had another plan, and he is now an angel watching over all of us. Whenever I had a difficult day, I would just take a walk in that hospital and see firsthand what a difference we were making in the lives of these children and their families — I knew everything we were doing was worth every minute!"

The children served by Wolfson Children's Hospital have always been at the heart of Parsons' successful leadership of The Women's Board, a role that she has relinquished after 10 highly effective and professionally satisfying years. Parsons announced her retirement from the Board this spring.

"Sally's deep love for the children of Wolfson Children's Hospital is evident in her dedication and support of The Women's Board and its mission," said Kendra McCrary, 2023-24 president of The Women's Board. "Sally played a critical role in the successes

of the last ten years including the completion of our \$4 million pledge to the NICU endowment."

Parsons has been director of The Women's Board of Wolfson Children's Hospital since July 2013 and has helped lead the all-volunteer organization through several big challenges including a transition to a new computer system, all the while running the office and organizing events.

McCrary said from the beginning of her tenure, Parsons learned all she could about the mission and advocacy work that happens at Wolfson Children's Hospital and never missed an opportunity to share her knowledge.

"Sally is a tireless advocate for the children and embodies the spirit of The Women's Board through her compassion for others and understanding of the vital role of donors and volunteers to this mission," McCrary said. "She has been a dedicated, hard worker and it was not uncommon for her to be the first one in the office in the morning and the last one to leave in the evening.

Parsons said it is this spirit — particularly the kind modeled by Board founder and late philanthropist Ellen Cavert — that drew her to the position nearly a decade ago.

"This work is the vision of one woman more than 50 years ago who lost her granddaughter at Wolfson Children's Hospital due to lack of equipment at the time which could have saved her life — that family was changed forever," Parsons said. "Ellen Cavert was truly a visionary and didn't want another family to suffer due to a lack of medical equipment. She set out on a mission to create an incredible group of leaders to raise awareness and funds for our beloved Wolfson and as a result, The Women's Board was created! The funds raised during the past 50 years have saved countless families. She taught me one person can change the world — we can make a difference by following our passions!"

San Marco native Parsons, a third generation "Landonian" (Landon Junior High School) and Wolfson High School graduate who raised three children in Ortega Forest, said the Executive Director work at The Women's Board was her fourth career in Jacksonville. She graduated from Florida State University with a degree in fashion merchandising and was training to become a buyer when she left to be a flight attendant for five years. After seeing the world by plane, she landed back in Northeast Florida to begin a for 26-year career with the State Attorney's Office for the Fourth Judicial Circuit Court and the U.S. Attorney's Office in Jacksonville.

"My entire family lives here so I knew I wanted to be in Jacksonville and raise a family here where everyone is friendly,"

Parsons said. She is the oldest of four children and the only girl. Her mother, Sissy Barker, graduated from Landon and taught at Hendricks Avenue Elementary School for 24 years. "My family is close, and we all live here — I definitely consider myself a hometown girl!"

Just as the sweet spirit drew Parsons to her work at The Women's Board of Wolfson Children's Hospital, so did the love of family draw Parsons to her new life chapter of retirement. She looks forward to enjoying and spending time with her family and extended family — including three grandchildren in St. Johns County and her new husband, whom she married just one year ago after being single for more than 22 years.

"We both love to travel so on our first wedding anniversary he looked at me and said, 'ok I'm not getting any younger and I want to travel and we can't do that with your work schedule.' I asked him what he had in mind, and he replied, 'Africa in the fall.' As much as I loved my career I couldn't say no to that! So, we are planning our Safari in October," Parsons said. The couple also is planning travel to London, East Africa and Turkey.

Despite the exciting travel plans and family togetherness on the horizon, Parsons said she continues to feel honored by her board work and career.

"The Women's Board is an incredible, dynamic group of professional women who are passionate about children's health in our region," Parsons said. "I am honored and so blessed to have had the opportunity to work with them for the past 10 years. I know they will continue to be successful in all ways the children need. I am so proud of the work we accomplished together and the most important legacy for me personally is that I can drive by that beautiful new Borowy Tower and show it to my grandchildren and tell them that I made a difference in the lives of children and helped them become who they were meant to be. That was and will remain my passion."

As to when The Women's Board will select a new director, McCrary said the group is in the process of hiring Parsons' replacement and underscored how the director plays a critical role in supporting Board volunteers and working with the hospital.

"From the beginning of her tenure, Sally learned all she could about the mission and advocacy work that happens at Wolfson Children's Hospital and never missed an opportunity to share her knowledge," McCrary said. "We wish Sally the very best in her retirement and hope to see her at future Women's Board events, where she can just relax and enjoy!"



Sally Parsons

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Cindy Edelman

## A Strong Advocate for Teachers, Public Education

*A spotlight on Cindy Edelman*

BY JENNIFER JENSEN  
RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS

As a former art history teacher, Cindy Edelman has a passion for education and supporting teachers in the community.

"Teachers need to be shown that they're valued by the community," Edelman said. "Teachers need opportunities just like everyone else in a professional role to broaden their opportunities, broaden their teaching practice and exchange ideas with others."

Edelman joined the board of The Community Foundation for Northeast Florida several years ago and said that action "really changed the trajectory of my philanthropic giving and my awareness in terms of the community and the needs of the community."

A group of roughly 30 people committed to public education reform launched Quality Education for All, a 10-year initiative created with the intent to invest \$200,000 each year for a decade.

At that time, 1 in 4 ninth graders in Jacksonville were not graduating high school within four years, Edelman said.

"We studied national, state and local education policies as it affected the Duval County school system," she said. "I just learned that there was so much need in

the public school system at the time and we also learned that only about 20% of the community was directly involved in the school system."

They realized there was a strong need for advocacy and getting the entire community involved. And with that, in 2009, the Jacksonville Public Education Fund (JPEF) was born, with Edelman as one of its founding members.

"Since our founding in 2009, she has also been one of our top investors, a steadfast supporter and true champion of our mission and work," said JPEF Fund Development Director Courtney Weatherby-Hunter.

Day after day, seeing her passion for education reform, Edelman's husband, Dan, surprised her on her 65th birthday by establishing the Cindy Edelman Excellence in Teaching Fellowship at The Community Foundation for Northeast Florida in 2017.

"It's very humbling, I must say, to have something like this named for you, but obviously it's also thrilling," Edelman said. "This kind of work can elevate teachers' profiles and as a result, impacts students."

That's one of the benefits of being able to give back, she added. "It's like a double gift — a birthday gift, but also a gift to the community," she said.

JPEF partners with Edelman and The Community Foundation to administer this fellowship that enables teachers to grow their impact on students in their classrooms by pursuing the professional learning opportunities of their dreams, Weatherby-Hunter said. It is open to teachers in grades K-12 in the Duval County Public School system, as well as charter schools.

"At a time when education and the world our students are learning in and

teachers are teaching in is changing at a rapid pace, it is important for educators and those who support them to think outside the box to bring innovative, effective practices that will prepare our students for their futures," Weatherby-Hunter said. "Cindy has been a true partner in impact as we've brought this fellowship, which was once a great idea, to life."

For Edelman, the fellowship is about allowing the teachers to be creative in pursuing their professional development.

"A teacher can be as creative as they wish, and it's also about paying it forward," she added.

It's important that the winners share their experiences and help make an impact on the teachers and students in their school or their cluster (a group of schools in a region).

"If a teacher comes back from one of these kinds of experiences energized and has learned new techniques or has learned something that will help them elevate their teaching, then I think it's really valuable considering the environment that we live in," Edelman said.

Edelman and another family member involved in education make up the selection committee, along with other diverse members of the community.

"She helped establish a diverse committee of thought leaders and experts to review the application materials for teachers interested in pursuing the fellowship, serves on the committee herself, and once the decisions are made, she shows up to the teachers' schools right alongside JPEF to surprise them with the remarkable news that they have been chosen for the fellowship," Weatherby-Hunter said. "It means so much for the

teachers to see her, such an outstanding community leader, so invested in them that she'd take the time to help make these surprise announcements."

For Edelman, it's hard to pick a favorite fellowship from all the ones they have awarded over the years.

"They're all my favorites," Edelman said. "It's like children."

Of course, there are a few that stand out: From the speech pathologist who went to Puerto Rico to participate in a Spanish immersion program to better serve students who are learning English as a second language; to the team of teachers from San Jose Elementary who attended the National Center for Urban School Transformation Symposium in San Diego to develop equity-conscious teaching practices at their school, which has in turn created a more positive and welcoming environment at the school; to a teacher at R.L. Brown Gifted and Talented Academy who plans to develop local urban agricultural programs to increase student and community access to fresh produce by traveling to Tortola to discover ways in which Green VI's research and work in agricultural science is advancing healthier communities. And the list goes on and on.

"The fellowship has been transformational, and the teachers are grateful to know Cindy Edelman is in their corner," Weatherby-Hunter said.

Edelman said she is fortunate that her and her husband are able to give back, but they are just two out of the many people in the community who are incredibly generous and support public education.

Those wishing to learn more about the fellowship can visit [www.jaxpef.org/edelman](http://www.jaxpef.org/edelman).

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# LOCAL FOLKS



Bill Reed on his 1967 BMW R60/2.



Bill Reed

## Bil Reed

BY MARY WANSEER  
RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS

Bil Reed is a semi-retired construction worker and logistics expert. He's been living on the edge of Ortega since 2005. He's been living on the edge of adventure for a whole lot longer. He's ridden a motorcycle to every state except Hawaii.

Reed's been riding for nearly six decades. He started in his early teens on dirt bikes and street bikes in the suburbs of Chicago before he "graduated to bigger motorcycles." And he raced them.

"At some point, like everybody, I kinda had to give that up when I got into my real life," Reed said, when family and kids had to take precedence.

"I went without for quite a few years, and then I got back into it again in a big way when I was about 50 years old," he said. That's when he bought his first BMW bike. Since then, he's owned many of them. Right now, he owns four, plus three Hondas. He said that he has "thinned down" his collection over time because "it was getting a little out of control." His hobby had become an obsession.

"I have accumulated close to 400,000 miles on BMWs," he said.

Reed used to travel by bike for work. Being in construction, his busy months were March through November, and he'd be off through the winter. Many winters, he'd ride a bike to Florida from Illinois to visit his sister, until one year, 2005.

"I came down and stayed," he said. He has resided in the same house in the Ortega area ever since.

Two years after his Florida move, Reed rode to Alaska. "It was quite an epic trip,"

he said. For a long time, he had thought about doing it and told himself, "If I don't do this now, I'm never going to do it," because he was closer to 60 than 50 at that point.

In late fall 2013, Reed came home from a work trip and told his wife, Teresa, that he was going to take a ride up to Blairsville, Georgia, and do some camping. That's where he found his most prized possession, a 1967 BMW R60/2 with a 1957 Pop Dreyer sidecar — a one-of-a-kind rig.

Reed had spotted it at a local motorcycle show there. He made a deal to buy it on a handshake with the owner, Al, promising not to restore and flip it. They hadn't even discussed a price first. It was a full year, and another cycle of construction-work travel, before Reed returned to Georgia with his van and trailer. He spent a few days with Al and his family, learning how to ride the rig — which handles differently than a motorcycle — before bringing it home to Jacksonville. The two men have been good friends ever since.

"I know the history of this bike since day one, which is another cool part of the story," Reed said. The bike was bought new at Dreyer BMW in Indianapolis, Indiana, by Al's cousin. Al's brother had been the second owner. Al, the third. And Reed is now only the fourth owner, the first outside of Al's family.

"It's certainly got some patina to it, but it's still really nice," Reed said, and he still has no intentions of restoring it. He likes it all original. When it comes his time to sell it, he'll make sure to pass it

on to only the right person, just as he promised Al a decade ago that he would.

Most of the motorcycles built by BMW back in the '60s were basic black. Reed's is Dover White, a factory color. The sidecar is the same color and was built by Floyd Dreyer himself. "That's really rare," Reed said. It's undetermined how many of them were ever made, but it's fewer than 600.

Occasionally, Teresa can be spotted riding in that sidecar, which turns a lot of heads as they cruise through 5 Points or along Ortega Boulevard. "The grandkids think it's the coolest thing in the world, which it is," Reed said, agreeing with all four of them, who live nearby.

For a couple of years, Teresa enjoyed riding her own bike. She and Bil have ridden side-by-side up to the mountains and into the panhandle a few times, but she has since sold her bike. Reed still rides out-of-state occasionally but not nearly as often as he used to.

"I'd like to think I could still do all that stuff, but I've scaled way back," he said. "I'm getting older. I'm 72."

Reed is affiliated with the local BMWNEF, a social club of Northeast Florida motorcycle owners. Sometimes, he rides for local charities, like The Distinguished Gentleman's Ride that raises funds and awareness for prostate cancer and men's health.

Although Reed has no intentions of giving up his motorcycling anytime soon, he and his wife have a new hobby, RVing. It's something they're looking forward to doing together.

"This was one of my first yoga classes ever and my experience was absolutely amazing. Everything was easy to understand for a beginner like me and engaging for my girlfriend who is a regular! Will absolutely be returning!"

★★★★★ ~Thomas S.

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# ANIMAL HOUSE

## First Duval Public School Police K9 Maverick

BY **JULIE KERNS GARMENDIA**  
RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS

K9 Maverick, the first Duval County School Police (DCSP) K9 and Northeast Florida's first Firearms Detection K9, was sworn in by DCSP Chief Greg Burton on Wednesday, May 31, at Cline Auditorium. The new Duval County School Police Honor Guard presented the flag and the Pledge of Allegiance.

The two-year-old Belgian Malinois received his DCSP badge, paw-printed certificate, employee number, and identification. Chief Burton administered the oath of service to K9 Maverick and Officer Baker before a packed auditorium of Duval, Clay, and St. Johns county police, families, dignitaries, and school representatives.

Maverick then demonstrated his firearms detection skills by searching for an unloaded firearm, used only for training purposes, that someone previously hid. At Baker's

command, K9 Maverick raced across the space in a grid pattern, moving so fast that he was almost a blur as everyone silently watched.

Within seconds, Maverick abruptly sat and snapped his head back toward Officer Baker; he found the firearm. Officer Baker's high-pitched, congratulatory yell startled everyone but thrilled K9 Maverick. Maverick froze, excited and pleased with himself, until Officer Baker tossed him his favorite green ball as a reward.

Chief Burton and St. Johns County Sheriff Robert Hardwick honored Duval County School Superintendent Dr. Greene for her many years supporting law enforcement that "enhanced protection for Duval County public schools and made it possible for police to do their best to keep children safe." They described the canine



Officer Joe Baker and K9 Maverick



Officer Alison Connolly and trainee K9 LEO

unit as one more step to protect and enhance security for schools, along with camera systems, metal detection, and fencing. Dr. Greene received the newly created DCSP Flag, designed by Administrative Sergeant Amy Thomas.

Chief Burton commended DCPS Lt. Amber Gazdick for her dedication and work to make the canine unit a reality for Duval County schools. Lt. Gazdick is DCSP Lieutenant of General Services responsible for six units, including canines. Lt. Gazdick is from a family of police officers and was the youngest graduate in her police academy class. She was the first woman in the Duval County School Police Department.

Lt. Gazdick announced that the second member of the unit, K9 Officer LEO (Law Enforcement Officer), would soon join Maverick. K9 LEO, eleven months old, is training for narcotics detection with School Safety Officer Alison Connolly. K9 LEO is a poodle and Chesapeake Bay Retriever donated by Meagan Foglesong. Foglesong, the owner of Smart Paws Resort & Training, was described by Lt. Gazdick as a great supporter of the DCSP canine unit.

Officer Baker said that plans for the unit are to add more K9s and conduct their own in-house training. By 2024, Officer Baker will complete the required training courses.

Chief Baker said the unit's formation and training required for the canines and handlers attracted and united a uniquely skilled, dedicated group of police and supporters. He noted that it was also made possible by the long-term relationships and collaboration between the sheriff's

offices and canine units of Duval, Clay, and St. John's Counties.

"We're all one family, one team in Northeast Florida — not separate counties," Lt. Gazdick said.

When the call went out to officers for the first K9 handler for the new unit, Chief Burton said that Officer Joe Baker responded, and many offered support. St. John's County Sheriff Robert Hardwick championed the project, as did Lieutenant Nicole Burrell of their canine unit. Lt. Gazdick said that Lt. Burrell helped obtain K9 LEO, set up training and budget, and performed many critical tasks.

"Sheriff Robert Hardwick allowed us to utilize his deputies and resources. He was passionate and always supportive of us and everything our department is doing," Lt. Gazdick said. "So many offered their support and skills on and off-duty."

St. John's County Patrol Lt. Steve Gazdick is a former canine handler who maintains his apprehension canine training certificate. His wife, Lt. Amber Gazdick, laughingly said that she actually "volun-told" him they needed his help. He teaches basic training to handlers and dog obedience on his own time and travels with her to test potential canines for the unit.

"My dream was always to be a police canine handler, and Steve has been incredibly supportive," Lt. Gazdick said. "When I had the opportunity to start this unit, it was a dream come true."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 35



## ST. JOHNS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Left to right - Duval School Police (DCSP) Officer Joe Baker & K9 Maverick; DCPS Chief Greg Burton; Lt. Steve Gazdick & Corporal Nick Converso of St. John's County Sheriff's Office; Duval County Public School Superintendent Dr. Diana Greene; Clay County Sheriff's Deputy Mark Maertz, DCSP Lt. Amber Gazdick.

Corporal Nick Converso, a canine trainer and handler with St. John's County Canine Unit, helped locate dogs, explained training needs, and offered constant assistance. He helped to create policies for the new unit, obtained necessary equipment, and maintained contacts with the local canine community that benefitted everyone.

Clay County Sheriff Michelle Cook fully supported the new canine unit and was thanked at the ceremony. Officer Baker and K9 Maverick began training with the Clay County Sheriff's Office K9 unit on March 20, 2023. They completed their National Police Canine Association K9 Firearms Detection Certification on May 24, 2023.

"Maverick immediately showed incredible abilities. He had tremendous ball drive and non-stop motivation. He learned quickly and rapidly progressed through training. He found a firearm even when thrown into a large field of tall grass," Officer Baker said. "He's sweet with no aggression, never barks but whines when excited. He jumps straight into swamps and loves water — unless it's a bath. His favorite food is salmon."

K9 Unit Sergeant Mark Maertz of the Clay County Sheriff's Office has a son named Deputy Mark Maertz, who is a canine handler and imprinting trainer for their unit. Deputy Maertz trained Officer Baker and Maverick.

Officer Baker explained "imprinting" canine detection training to the audience. Kong dog toys were used to teach Maverick to imprint on specific odors because he loves them. The Kong toy was cut up, and a particular scent was placed inside. Then the scented toy was hidden, and Maverick learned to find it. This method taught him to detect — or imprint — on that specific scent at the same time he located his toy.

Gradually, as Maverick became faster, more skilled, and more accurate at locating the scented toy, only an object with the specific scent (firearm) the trainer wanted him to detect was hidden. Once Maverick successfully detects an odor, he sits and receives his toy plus loud verbal praise from Officer Baker as his only reward: no food treats.

Officer Baker also explained that Maverick finds objects using an "air-scenting technique."

"When Maverick works, he air-scents by lifting his nose and intensely sniffing the air. He moves fast to detect odors. He slows his breathing during the search. It's so physically exhausting, he tires quickly, and his tongue hangs far out," Baker said. "When we smell spaghetti sauce, we notice the tomato aroma. Maverick's sense of smell is so sensitive he identifies every ingredient in an odor. He detects firearms, fired and unfired, live and spent ammunition, gun oil, black powder, smokeless powder, and pyradex explosive material."

Officer Baker and K9 Maverick are on call 24/7 to investigate threats and work events or conduct random school searches. Baker said Maverick had already found many guns in student cars parked in school parking lots.

Maverick lives with Officer Baker, his wife Lisa, and daughters: Savannah, 16; Payton, 12 and Addy, 2. They have two female pet dogs, a French Bulldog, Nani, and Boxer, Kona.

Lt. Gazdick thanked Sergeant Kristopher Bennett, her right hand at DCSP, who helped secure Maverick's donation from his friend, Marcus McCullugh of Limitless K9. McCullugh is a former U.S. Navy Seal who trains service and personal protection canines.

Lt. Gazdick thanked Marina Malan of Leica's Saving Paws Shepherd Rescue for offering potential canines to the unit and specializing in shepherd rescue. Also appreciated were Chimney Lakes Animal Hospital staff and Joshua Huitt, DVM, the unit's designated veterinarian clinic.

"They are fantastic with our dogs. We appreciate their excellent care and compassion for these police K9s and cannot recommend them more highly," Lt. Gazdick said.



Members of the Jacksonville Commodores League aboard the USS Orleck during a recent visit. Aboard the Naval ship were (back row, left to right) Tom Schacht, John Lovejoy, John Godfrey, Arnold Rogers, Art Dobosiewicz, Downing Nightingale, Barry Allred, Sue Heinzl, Lynn Ellis, Josh Horenstein, Jim Callahan and Lane Burnett, with (front row, left to right) Susan Derr Grich, Joe Sheffield and John Kirby.

## The Ambassadors of the Waterways

### *Jacksonville Commodores League showcases unique view of the Bold City*

BY JENNIFER JENSEN  
RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS

For those looking to move to Jacksonville, invest in the area or relocate their business here, what better way to view the city than from the water. One local group's mission is to do just that — promote the city via its waterways.

The more than 35 members of the Jacksonville Commodores League Inc. (JCL) serve as ambassadors to the city, offering three-hour cruises of the downtown area and nearby areas free of charge with the sole purpose of promoting Jacksonville, according to Tom Schacht, rear commodore, public relations.

"Jacksonville has one resource very few cities have, and that's this beautiful river," Schacht said. "It really helps if you have an industry coming to Jacksonville, a new business coming to Jacksonville or just relocations of high level executives, it gives them a different perspective. When you see Jacksonville by the water, it all changes."

The league is solely volunteer based and provides the boat, the crew and the fuel for each cruise. Many members like to attend the cruises as well, not just to help the captain, but to share their knowledge of the area with the guests aboard the vessel.

"We are just interested in making sure that anybody looking at the city for future growth or future moves understands that the city evolves around the river," Member and former Flag Commodore Josh Horenstein said. "The river runs right through it all the time. In order to appreciate the city, you've got to see it from the river."

The league was established in 1975 after the Bold City Festival Regatta Association decided to broaden its mission and become year-round promoters of the city. JCL held its first meeting on July 1 that year and incorporated two years later on January 10. JCL has hosted hundreds of cruises for the Chambers of Commerce, the Film Commission, local hospitals and clinics, presidential entourages, consulates, sports figures, foreign dignitaries and investors interested in Jacksonville. In 1983, the group helped welcome the USS Jacksonville to its namesake city during a visit to NAS Mayport.

The league also hosted a cruise for J. Wayne and Delores Barr Weaver, who brought the Jaguars to Jacksonville in 1993. Other celebrity guests have included President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger along with Former President of Egypt Anwar Sadat during Mideast Peace talks in 1975, shortly after JCL was officially formed.

For more information, visit [www.jacksonvillecommodoresleague.com](http://www.jacksonvillecommodoresleague.com).

However, most of the time, the captain and crew do not know the guests' names or companies or group they are a part of.

"Many times, the company doesn't necessarily want to announce that it's looking to move somewhere," John Kirby, rear commodore, memberships, said.

The chamber or Jacksonville USA might have requested the cruise for the anonymous attendees.

There have been several times when a group has enjoyed a cruise and shortly after, a large company or facility announced its intention to move to Jacksonville. While members can speculate, they'll never know for sure.

"I don't care where people are looking or what investment they're thinking about making in the city, whether it be downtown or whether it be at Cecil Field or maybe the beach — they haven't seen Jacksonville until they've experienced it from the river," Kirby said.

Horenstein said he has never been on a cruise where the guests weren't impressed with the city and the lifestyle at the river.

"And later, we find out that the cruise was instrumental in helping those people relocate here," he added.

To learn something themselves and better serve the guests on their cruises, the group holds a monthly luncheon where they invite groups around the city to speak about civic issues or nautical topics. It can be anyone from the Chamber of Commerce to the U.S. Navy or Coast Guard to the Investment versus Development.

"Generally, in most of our cases, it tends to reinforce why we're members and why we're doing what we're doing," Horenstein said.

The group has also taken field trips to naval air stations, on board Navy ships, port facilities, Crowley and more.

"We do that kind of stuff so that when we get on the boat with people, we have a better understanding of what we're looking at, and that helps us as well and gives us an education too," Kirby said.

The league is always looking for members, and they accept people from all over Jacksonville. They meet alternately between the Florida Yacht Club on the westside and Epping Forest Yacht Club, where Horenstein lives, on the Southside.

"I think anytime you have a group of dedicated volunteers like this that is looking to promote the place we live, it's always important," Kirby said. "Different cities have different assets that make them a great place and ours happens to be the St. Johns River, and for us to be able to provide that service to help promote our city the way we do, I think it's a valuable tool."



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University of Pittsburgh  
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University of Washington  
University of Wisconsin  
Valdosta State University  
Vanderbilt University  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
Virginia State University  
Wake Forest University  
Warner University

# JUNIOR RESIDENTS

## Bishop Kenny seniors ACE awards



The Best Proposal winning team in the ACE awards' Community Support Facility category: Faculty sponsor Allison Gallup, Tommy Taylor, Natalie Barrett, Josie Rill, William Wallace and Grace Pendley with David Schoening.



Josie Rill receiving her ABC Women's Council Scholar award.



Grace Pendley receiving her Gilbane Scholar award.

The ACE (Architecture, Construction, Engineering) Mentor Program of Northeast Florida held an end-of-year celebration, student presentations and awards luncheon on April 28 at the Schultz Center. Bishop Kenny received top awards in both the team and individual categories.

The BK Life Lineup team was awarded Best Proposal for the Community Support Facility category. Senior Grace Pendley was awarded a \$2,500 scholarship from Gilbane Building Company to continue her education in architecture at the Savannah College of Art and Design. Senior Josie Rill was awarded a \$3,000 scholarship from the ABC Florida Women's Council to continue her education at Wake Forest University where she will pursue a degree in engineering.

"The most valuable benefit that students gain from participating in ACE is understanding their passions, and exposure to different design fields which helps students narrow their career options and decide what their major should be in college," said Rill.

"This year's competition was special because many of the seniors have been a part of the team since its founding four years ago. To watch them grow and become leaders, exploring different aspects of design, mentoring the younger students and watching them discuss their designs against others was especially rewarding," said ACE faculty sponsor, Allison Gallup.

## The Preschool Persuasion



The 2023 Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program (VPK) class at Ortega Playschool officially graduated to kindergarten on May 25. As a send-off, each child received a diploma and a copy of "Oh, the Places You'll Go!" by Dr. Seuss.

Florida's VPK is a free prekindergarten program available for all 4-year-olds, regardless of family income. To be eligible, children must live in Florida and be 4 years old on or before Sept. 1 of the current school year.



Christopher Johnson will be the new Jacksonville Country Day School Head of School.

## JCDS welcomes new Head of School

Jacksonville Country Day School (JCDS) has welcomed Christopher Johnson as its new head of school beginning with the 2023-24 school year.

Johnson officially stepped into the role on July 1. He succeeds former Head of School Pat Walker, who had held the position since 2014 and has been in the JCDS community for nearly 30 years.

"I am indeed a fortunate person to have been able to work at a place I've felt connected to since my first time on campus in the spring of 1994," Walker said. "I've loved this school as a happy parent, as a teaching assistant in 3rd grade, as a teacher in 1st grade, and as the Admissions Director. To cap that off with the great honor of being asked to be the Head of School, and serving in that capacity for nine years was a dream come true."

Johnson joins the San Marco community from Miami, where he completed the 2022-23 school year as Scheck Hillel Community School's head of upper school. He has been on the JCDS campus since July to prepare for the coming school year and also looks forward to having his own daughter attend the school as well.

"Being both a leader in the JCDS community and a parent provides me with a unique dual perspective and further fuels my commitment to our school's success" said Johnson.

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## Sulzbacher graduates Pre-K class



The Crawford Early Learning Center at Sulzbacher Village celebrated the graduation of its 2023 Pre-kindergarten class with a ceremony in its therapeutic garden on June 7. Nine children processed in traditional caps and gowns, sang, recited the Pledge of Allegiance and shared what each hoped to be when they grew up – which included an astronaut, hairstylist, firefighter and police officer.

“The Pre-K graduation is my favorite event that we do every year. Seeing the faces of the children and how proud they are of their accomplishments is so heartwarming. It gives us all hope for the future,” said Cindy Funkhouser, Sulzbacher president and CEO.

The Crawford Early Learning Center is the only trauma-informed, therapeutic early learning center for children living in poverty in Northeast Florida. It gives children a place to grow, learn and play in tandem with a place for their parents to receive the support they need. The Center is operated in partnership with the Florida Institute of Education at the University of North Florida.

## DEBUTANTES DAZZLE AT MAGNOLIA BALL



PHOTO COURTESY OF JANET MASTERSON PHOTOGRAPHY.

The 2023 Debutante Coterie season opened on June 9 as twelve young ladies were introduced to society during the Magnolia Ball at Timuquana Country Club. The debutantes will take their final bow on December 28 at the annual Christmas Ball.

The coterie includes (front) Sarah Alice Craddock, Barley Jemison Hilpert, Hannah Pendleton Goldfield, Catharine Tucker Ogletree, Wentworth Grace Pajcic; (back) Evelyn Elizabeth Miller, Mimi Page Kurlas, Meagan Dianne Donovan, Elizabeth Alston Rachels. Not pictured: Eleanor Somerset Acosta-Rua, Catherine Kelly Kunz, Ann Geneva.

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# Installing Inspiration: The legacy of Charlie



Kim Clontz with Christie and Cliff Cosby

wanted to bring joy and children’s laughter to the neighborhood.

With the help of compassionate friends, neighbors, former City Councilman Michael Corrigan and the City of Jacksonville’s Parks & Recreation Department, their idea came to fruition in 2008. A small playground was installed, along with concrete pathways, benches and a memorial plaque.

“People wanted to help us,” recalled Christie Cosby. “We asked them to contribute to this project in lieu of flowers, and they were very generous.”

Yet, after years of daily play, the wear and tear of the little playground structure was showing. Eventually it was deemed no longer safe for children.

“This little space has gotten a lot of use,” said Cosby. “Birthday parties, family events, holiday parades – it’s like the little town of Mayberry over here.”

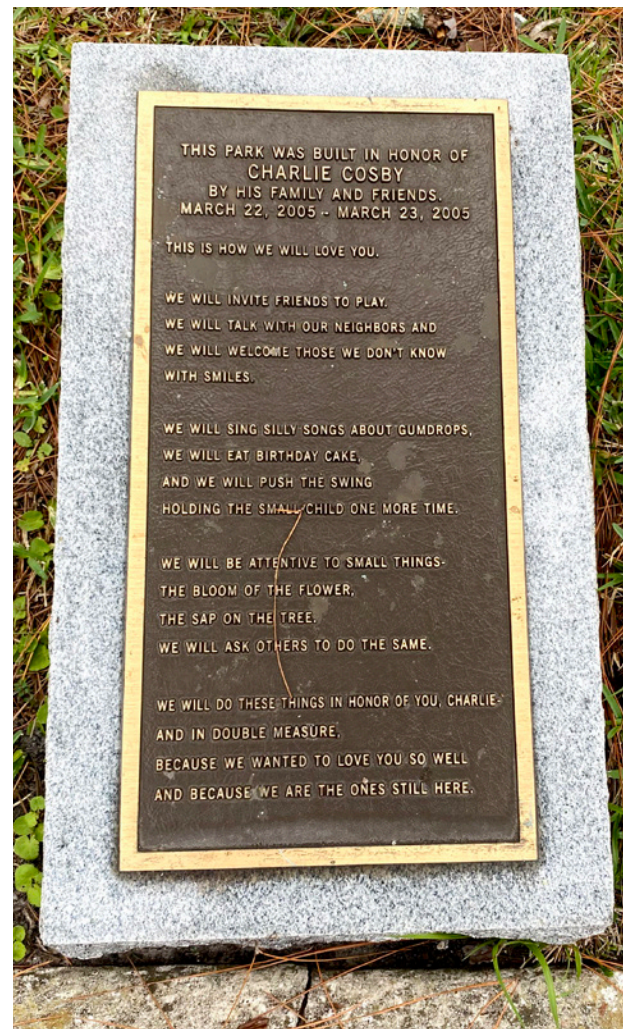
Recently, the pocket park received a \$28,000 donation in the form of new playground equipment from Friends of Jax Playgrounds, an Avondale-based non-profit founded by Kim Clontz.

Clontz met the Cosby family shortly after the Belvedere playground was installed and was inspired by the Cosbys and their public/private partnership project.

“When I heard about their vision of creating a joyful space, something in me was triggered,” said Clontz. “I never planned to start my own charitable organization, but seeing what they did inspired me to bring new life to aging playgrounds.”

Clontz founded Friends of Jax Playgrounds in 2015 and began fundraising efforts to renovate Boone Park Playground in 2016. Since then, the nonprofit has contributed more than \$450,000 to seven other city playgrounds, including Ringhaver Park which will receive a \$220,000 grant from the organization, making it the Westside’s first fully ADA-friendly playground. Construction will begin in early fall.

“Christie and Cliff truly inspired me,” said Clontz. “Maybe my efforts will inspire others.”



The park’s plaque honoring Charlie Cosby

Every Saturday morning in Avondale, young children are released from their strollers and run free at a small playground on Belvedere Avenue. But this tiny oasis hasn’t always been the go-to spot for the toddler set.

It was transformed in 2005 when Cliff and Christie Cosby, who upon losing their son, Charlie, just 24 hours after his birth, decided to channel their grief into something positive. They envisioned creating a toddler’s playground within sight of their kitchen window. They

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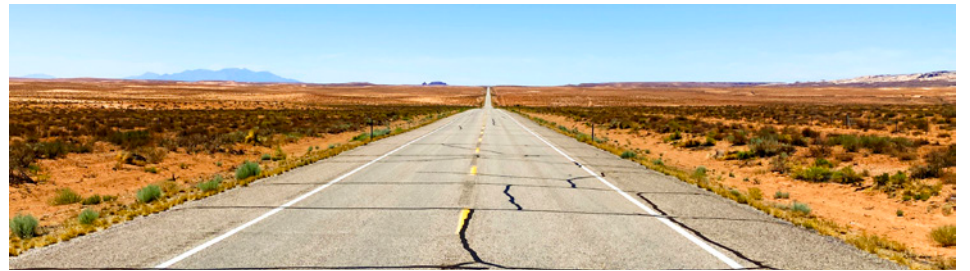
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# Retirement on the road

*A multi-part series where retirement meets RV'ing*



The four-month journey begins for Warren and Faith Jones.



The wide, open road in Green River, Utah, toward Goblin.

BY FAITH JONES  
RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS

What are your dreams for retirement? Depending on your circumstances, health and finances, there are many options.

For years, I thought of what big adventure I would take when I retire. Isn't that what retirement is all about? Doing the things you never had time to do when you were in the working world?

But where to begin? For many, that question is the first obstacle we face.

Two years ago, my husband and I decided to retire after 40 years working, me as a nurse-turned-nurse-practitioner, and my husband as vice president of marketing for a hospital.

My dream was to buy an RV and travel, which was a far stretch from my husband's retirement vision. It took years of cajoling for him to warm up to the idea of traveling in an RV. To me, it was like viewing the world on the seat of a bike instead of driving a car. Things look different on the bike. You notice the hills because you have to pedal harder. The wildflowers on the side of the road are more vivid when you aren't passing them at 65 mph. The air is fresher and you feel it against your skin. I felt traveling in an RV and staying

in state and national parks would give us insight to a world we have only read about.

Whether traveling by air, sea, plane or RV, the basics are the same. Do your homework before you go and plan as many details as possible. Selecting the right RV for us was the first of many decisions. Neither of us had much RV experience, but we jumped in with both feet. We attended one of the largest RV shows in America, in Tampa, to get a feel for our options. The experience was overwhelming. We attended the show three years in a row, each time narrowing down what type of RV fit the adventures we wanted to have. The choices were endless, but we finally pulled the trigger and bought our 30-foot travel-trailer and one big truck to tow our vacation home on wheels.

With retirement in our sights, I started planning our cross-country adventure, departing Jacksonville, winding through the Southwest, up to Washington and Vancouver, then sprinting back via South Dakota, turning south to Alabama, toward home.

My husband turned the planning phase over to me, so I began listening to podcasts, reading blogs and searching Facebook groups about traveling cross-country.

The big questions that helped in the planning phase were: Where are the main places we wanted to visit? Where is our furthest destination? What off-the-beaten-path adventures did we want to see? Where do we need to stay: campgrounds, boondocks, state or national parks? What is our budget? Where can we cut costs? We could cook mostly in the RV with its full kitchen. But, being that we are both foodies, dining out was a budget priority.

How far between RV stops? Apparently, towing is stressful and requires full attention.

How long should we stay in each location? That depended on what we were there to see, but I also needed to factor in rest days from driving and time to do housekeeping chores.

In all, we set up camp in 34 different locations over four months. I am happy to say we had only one glitch when a farm on which we were planning to stay that day called to say heavy rains washed out the road.

As we continue this column in the following months, I'll share more on how we overcame that glitch, and the answer to the two questions we are always asked by our friends: "What was your favorite stop on the trip?" and "Are you still married?"

Until next time, what I will leave you with is that the United States is beautiful, fascinating and geographically diverse, with people who are extremely friendly to strangers. And it offers really, really good food.



Driving west through Kansas in summer is a trip through endless, flat, farm land, broken up by the occasional combine or crop duster.



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# Thank You Notes

FROM MY EMPTY NEST PERCH

BY SUSANNA BARTON  
RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS

It sounded stupid. I swore I'd never do it. But then I gave it a whack, and now I love it. Today, I rally my utmost gratitude for all things...pickleball.

Pickleball, I'm here to tell you, is fun — like, SUPER FUN. It lives up to the hype and likely is what many folks would put at the top of their neighborhood gratitude list. Our Resident Community is rich with pickleball court options, resources and experts, which is probably why it's such a thing around here. If the Resident Community neighborhoods were in a match against any other area of the city, it would be a Golden Pickle win every single time.

We are in good company. According to the 70,000-member USA Pickleball association, the sport is exponentially attracting new players year after year. The group's membership alone increased 30% between February 2022 and 2023. It quoted a 2023 report from the Sports & Fitness Industry Association, which named pickleball the "fastest-growing sport in America for the third year in a row. According to the report, pickleball is now up to a total of 8.9 million players in the United States over the age of six years old, an increase from 4.8 million in 2022."

The Association of Pickleball Professionals' 2023 APP Pickleball Participation report showed more than 26.5 million people played the sport from August 2021 to August 2022, with more than 8.5 million people playing pickleball eight times or more during that 12-month period.

That's a lot of pickleballing. And the local scene is keeping pace. So much so that last year, construction began on a new pickleball facility in The Yards in Ponte Vedra Beach. Located in TPC Sawgrass, The Yards' Pickle Garden includes 12 lighted courts — a real mammoth court collection in Northeast Florida. More projects and court concepts are on the drawing boards in our area and around the First Coast.

Truth is, pickleball has a founding foothold in our Resident Community. And though no one has put pen to paper on the numbers, our neighborhood seems to be a real hot spot for the sport.

There are public courts at the Southside Tennis Complex next to the San Marco Public Library and several at Boone Park in Avondale. Courts also beckon at the Winston Family YMCA on Riverside Avenue and Ortega Life Center at Ortega Church on Roosevelt. A pickleballing friend told me there are indoor courts at the Cuba Hunter Community Center on Bedford Road, too, though I have not seen them.

(Sidenote: I got the low-down on the local pickleball offerings from [jaxpickleballstore.com](http://jaxpickleballstore.com). This business seems to be the epicenter of the local pickleball universe. Jax Pickleball Store — located right here in the neighborhood just north of San Marco Square — is Jacksonville's first and only pickleball-exclusive retailer in Jacksonville. To boot, it is run by seasoned local business superstar and pickleball ace, Andy Zarka, of European Street fame. Does it get any more local than that? I think not.)

Private institutions in our area also are invested in pickleball currency.

Neighborhood clubs, including Timuquana Golf & Country Club, have developed impressive courts and facilities for their members in recent years. The kids are even learning it at some area schools, and I know this because my nieces told me it's an actual middle school PE unit at The Bolles School. If our Easter weekend match is any measure, they are getting some SERIOUS expert-level training out of that class. I haven't run or laughed that much in years — I could barely breathe, much less return their serves and dinks! But no hips were broken, #Blessed.

For those who aren't enrolled in a PE class anymore, pickleball lessons and clinics are widely available in our neighborhoods. The Spring Park-based nonprofit, Pine Castle, which empowers adults intellectual and developmental differences, has indoor gymnasium courts open for pickleball clinics according to the Jax Pickleball Store's Learn-to-Play Intro Clinic page. Also listed are instructors who can teach pickleball lessons at venues throughout the city, including some of the courts mentioned above.

Pickleball is taking over the local landscape, it seems — one former tennis court, gymnasium and private school PE class at a time.

I just like it because it's easy to try, and you can proceed at your own pace. At my age, I'm not looking to win anything except a generous pour of chardonnay and a good night's sleep every once in a while. My pickleball goals are pretty simple: to sweat, burn a few calories, laugh and get some natural contour shading on my cheeks while flexing old tennis muscles with opponents who wouldn't dare rush the net to return a net dink because they, too, value their hips and hamstrings. I just want to have fun out there and remain physically intact.

I am fortunate to have met these goals and more through the people who introduced me to the game. They are kind, very patient, new friends, and I am grateful to know them. My misadventures in pickleball began with a text from a friend who said her neighbors Ellen and Jocelyn were looking for a fourth player to round out a reserved court session. Curious about pickleball's widespread allure, I responded with a "sure" and agreed to give this dumb-sounding game a whirl. My first discovery was that these ladies were NICE. They shared the basic rules of the game, how to hold the racket and where NOT to stand in pickleball, i.e., the Kitchen. We practiced hitting the ball back and forth, then learned how to serve and score and then jumped into a few games. It was VERY low key. And fun — times infinity. After years of hearing about the game, I finally understood its popularity. After that, it was all about retraining my brain to remember scores and do math without getting carried away by the sun and light breezes and mouthwatering sauteed GARLIC smells wafting over from the Hurricane Grill & Wings. Plus, they kept asking me back to play again, which is very generous of them.

The hardest part seems to be reserving a court. This process is calculating and requires a call-in reservation 24 hours or more ahead of time. Securement of a

1.5-hour time slot is not always guaranteed, because — crazy demand. But once you're in — you're in! Let the fun begin! You can play with two, three or four people, and can even rotate more folks in if everyone on your pickleball group text says yes to the ask. The rules are pretty simple. While you can read up on them at [usapickleball.org](http://usapickleball.org) and feel prepared, I've found it's easiest to just play the game and learn as you go. Whatever you do, just remember these pickleball basics:

- You are playing to at least 11 and must win by two.
- Stay out of "the Kitchen" (the 7-foot no-volley zone on either side of the net) unless you are well educated on the rules.
- The server is the only player who can score a point.
- You must be behind the baseline to serve.
- Know which lines are in- and out-of-bounds.
- The ball has to bounce once per side after the serve.

There are more rules, but those are the main ones. Truly, the hardest part of the game is getting your brain to perform the seemingly simple task of keeping score. And ball-chasing!

While our pickleballing continues to be fun-focused, I know there are plenty of "in it to win it" folks out there on the courts who have much higher standards in mind. So, if you're that kind of baller, good news: your competitive local pickleball tribe is out there and they're crushing it on the daily.

From my very untrained perspective, these folks are the same ones who dominate in tennis tournaments — the ones who WILL risk hamstring and hip to return that net dink from the baseline. They are competitive and GOOD. Their balls don't roll onto other courts and disrupt plays like ours do. They have control, strategy and good motor skills — the full pickleball package. And like the tennis elite, there are local, regional and national tournaments in which they can play and teams and coaches who can get them there. All that to say, if you want to dominate on the

pickleball courts, bring it. You have every opportunity to win your way to world champion status from our humble neighborhood courts.

I am grateful, however, that most of the pickleballers I'm seeing out there are patient with the whoopsies and air ball wallops and wayward whacks. To me, that's a win for everyone. It's community-building, it's fun, it's life.



Susanna Barton will not be playing in national pickleball championships anytime soon but has gotten better about containing her "oh nos!!!" while running to return a shot. She raised her family in Granada and has written professionally for The Jacksonville Business Journal, The Resident, Jacksonville University and The Bolles School. She currently manages an online community called Grand Plans, which addresses geri-scaries and all things elderly on [www.mygrandplans.com](http://www.mygrandplans.com). Each month, she will share reflections on neighborhood qualities for which she is grateful.



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# THE WAY WE WERE

BY MARY WANSEER  
RESIDENT COMMUNITY NEWS

## Phyllis Geiger

"Everything in life is sweetened by risk." That's the epitaph beneath the photo of Phyllis Geiger in The Williston Northampton School's 1965 yearbook. How prophetic that statement turned out to be. Nearly two decades later, Phyllis risked everything she had and successfully translated the European art of hand tempering chocolate into an American neighborhood experience that first went public in San Marco and has since expanded throughout Florida and up into Georgia and Alabama.

Phyllis was born in Westchester, New York and grew up with her elder sister, Izzi, in Darien, Connecticut. They moved there with their father and his new wife after their mother had passed away from breast cancer when the girls were only 5 and 8 years old. Along with their luggage, the sisters carried with them the prayers their mother had recited with them every night, the psalm she had helped them commit to memory, her sense of humor, and her Irish resiliency.

In Darien, Phyllis held the title of first female lifeguard at Pear Tree Point Beach. At 15, she moved to Massachusetts to board at Williston where she was known to be a socialite and somewhat of a prankster. From there, she attended college before marrying and becoming a mom.

Phyllis's first husband worked for Proctor and Gamble. "There's a reason it's called P&G. It's pack and go," she said. "We moved 12 times in 13 years." There were three stays in Cincinnati, Ohio near corporate headquarters, one for each time her husband had earned a promotion. Phyllis recounted how each time she had just furnished and decorated a new home, they'd have to move again.

In the late 1970s, with two young children, Peter and Brooke, the family was transferred to Kansas City, Missouri. In the midst of motherhood and housewifery, Phyllis began working as an apprentice at a local high-end company called Kron, where she was trained in the European method of making chocolate. "I fell in love with it," she said. She went to Switzerland several times and had asked her chocolatier trainer what the equivalent would be in the United States. "There is nothing American like this," he told Phyllis. A dream dawned.

In the early 1980s, the family of four was transferred from Kansas City to Jacksonville. They lived in Ponte Vedra, at first, and then Atlantic Beach for a bit. And though Phyllis liked it near the shore, she kept asking people, "Where would be the center of Jacksonville to start a business?" She had a sweet vision in mind and a written plan in hand, but she was new in town and unfamiliar with the lay of the land. Residents in the know pointed her toward San Marco. Phyllis didn't know where that was but hoped it wasn't at the beach. She and her children wanted solid ground and fertile soil to plant some roots. So, Phyllis ventured off to find San Marco. "It was obviously the right place. Totally!" she said.

Forty years ago, San Marco wasn't like it is today. "Now it's very cosmopolitan, hip, and trendy. But back then, it was a different story," Phyllis said. Investors were buying property and encouraging new businesses to come. There was a lot of renovation going on in the neighborhood.

That was a busy time for Phyllis, too. In a single week in 1983, her father re-married, she divorced, and she opened a chocolate shop at 1970 San Marco Boulevard. She named it Peterbrooke Chocolatier, for both of her children.

The savor that Peterbrooke is known for is a specific blend of dark, milk, and white chocolates that Phyllis had adopted from Nestlé in Switzerland and adapted for the US market. "Tastes are regional," Phyllis had known all along. Northerners prefer dark. Southerners have sweet palates. She translated what she had been taught into an American product. "I had this idea and just went forward with it," she said.

In the beginning, Phyllis would travel back and forth every morning from the beach house to the shop and tend to the daily routine, which started with dipping berries. But that commute changed not long afterwards. "Divorce papers landed in the chocolate," she said.

Phyllis bought a house in San Marco on Alexandria Place to live in with the children closer to her business, and their father bought a house nearby on Sorrento Road. Peter



Phyllis Geiger



< Phyllis, Brooke, and Peter, Meninak Club, November 2022

and Brooke were elementary school age and could bike back and forth between each home and Pic & Save. "It worked out pretty well for them," Phyllis said. It was a tight-knit community where everybody knew each other and watched out for others' kids.

The business community, too, was mutually supportive. Phyllis's second Christmas in town found her among the other business owners surrounding the pre-lions wedding-cake fountain in the center of The Square, offering nibbles to the carolers and guests at the annual Holiday Magic gathering. Desiring to fit in, but desperate not to cut too deeply into her startup profits, Phyllis headed to the San Marco Theatre for a few buckets of fresh popped corn that she then drizzled with a sparing amount of her expensive chocolate recipe and separated into bite-sized chunks. After that night, Phyllis realized she had a new product!

Within three years, Peterbrooke had outgrown its original location and moved up the street to 2024 where it still stands today. That's where Phyllis met her second husband, pilot and orthodontist Dr. H.L. Geiger, a native of Ohio who had opened his Jacksonville dental practice back in 1968.

The couple married at All Saints Episcopal Church in 1989 and moved to River Road when her children were 11 and 15. By then, Phyllis

had already opened her second Peterbrooke store on St. Johns Avenue as one of the Shoppes of Avondale. A year later, she opened the third, this time in Atlantic Beach near where her family had lived for a time when they were still new to the Jacksonville area.

In the mid-1990s, Phyllis enrolled



Peterbrooke Chocolatier's first location, 1983



Phyllis Geiger tempering chocolate on marble, 1985



Peterbrooke, 2024 San Marco Boulevard, 1987

in an intense confectioner's course at Gannon University in Pennsylvania to learn the science behind making big batches of chocolate. With the expansion of business, a separate production facility had become necessary, one to accommodate large vats. Peterbrooke was flourishing!

By 2002, Phyllis was ready to move farther away from the bustle. That's when she bought her current San Jose, Bob-Broward-designed river home from her

friend and mentor, Bobbi Yoffee. Phyllis had spent many hours in that house over the years, creatively working with Bobbi, a calligrapher, on ads and artwork for Peterbrooke and for Café Carmon, a bistro in San Marco that was another business Phyllis had partnered in.

In 2012, Phyllis thought she might be ready to retire. So, she sold the chocolate business to Billy Morris, CEO of Bubba Burger, and the Peterbrooke name went franchise. Brooke bought the Atlantic Beach store. Peter went in a different direction within the field of confection; he now owns Sweet Pete's Candy on Hogan Street downtown.

"There's candy all over the place, still. We never lack for any sweets," Phyllis said. Throughout the years, she often heard from others how dentists must love her being in the candy business and how she ought to marry one. Well, she did! "I wreck them. He fixes them," she would tell people. Unfortunately, her husband passed away a few years ago.

Without him, Phyllis still loves to travel. She often takes trips north to visit with Izzi. She still supports her Massachusetts alma mater. And last year, the University of Florida's Eric Friedheim Tourism Institute welcomed her to their advisory board.

When she's back home in Jacksonville, Phyllis loves to cook, as do Peter as well as his son, Daniell, Phyllis's only grandchild. What's uncanny is that Brooke's husband is chef-level, too. "My kids are major foodies. They've gone into fine cuisine," Phyllis said. Afterwards, there's no doubt what's on the family's dessert menu. Candy!

## Why Pre-Planning Your Funeral Service is a Beautiful Opportunity



*Pre-planning for your funeral may seem like an odd notion, but it's the best way to be prepared and ensure that no difficult decisions need to be made at an emotionally taxing time.*

### Why Pre-Plan?

Pre-planning your funeral ensures a peaceful and organized ceremony. Rather than making painstaking and emotional decisions within a matter of hours or days, pre-planning allows you and your family to carefully consider your options and take your time in deciding what the best course of action may be for your unique situation. Additionally, pre-planning grants you the extra time to enhance your personalized experience, taking the necessary time to ensure your wants and needs are met. For example, with the addition of one of our Life Story packages, our skilled Life Story team will create a custom memorial table based on your personal interests, life experiences, and just about anything you can think of. There are so many options to choose from to make your service as unique as you are, so you can be proud of the results.

From a financial perspective, pre-planning your funeral arrangements assures that your costs for services will be exactly as advertised when you make your purchase. If the prices for what you've chosen rise after you've already made your purchase, you have nothing to worry about, as prepaying protects you from rising costs and inflation. At Hardage-Giddens, we provide feasible monthly payments to help make your decision more budget-friendly, as we understand that planning your ideal service is a worthwhile investment. Prepaying typically covers the cost of your casket or urn, the venue of your choice, catering, and other important elements that go into making your - or that of your loved one's - commemoration authentic and memorable.

### When Should I Pre-Plan?

There is no right or wrong time to pre-plan for your funeral, or that of your spouse, child or parent, for that matter. While discussing this topic can be emotional, we encourage people of all ages to make arrangements. We've found that having the willingness to delve into somewhat uncomfortable territory can ultimately be a huge gift - not only for your own peace of mind; but for that of your family and friends as well. Handling such an important event in advance allows you to rest easy knowing that all of the finite details have already been taken of.

People of all ages, from their early twenties to much later in life, make the decision to pre-plan. We understand this can be an emotional experience, so we encourage you to come see us once you're ready. Whether that's today or a year from now, we'll be here to make sure our caring, licensed professionals are guiding you through every step of the process, meeting your needs and exceeding your expectations.

### Is Pre-Planning Right for Me?

Planning in advance provides clarity and prevents anyone from making difficult decisions that they may be unsure about. Even if you've previously discussed your wishes with your family, grief can make it difficult to think clearly and recall what was talked about. This is why pre-planning is essential - not only to guarantee you get the service you want, but also to allow your family to be fully present when the time comes to celebrate life. The majority of feedback we receive from families that have attended prepaid funeral ceremonies is that attendees were able to face this emotional day with comfort and ease knowing that logistics had already been handled well in advance.

Pre-planning ensures your funeral service will turn out exactly how you've envisioned it. Conversely, if you aren't sure exactly what to plan, we can help with that as well. Our staff is here to listen and work in tandem with you to assure your wishes are met.

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