

# The Front Porch



*Where The Tea Is Sweet and the Talks Are Long*

July/August 2026

## BUILT TO GATHER

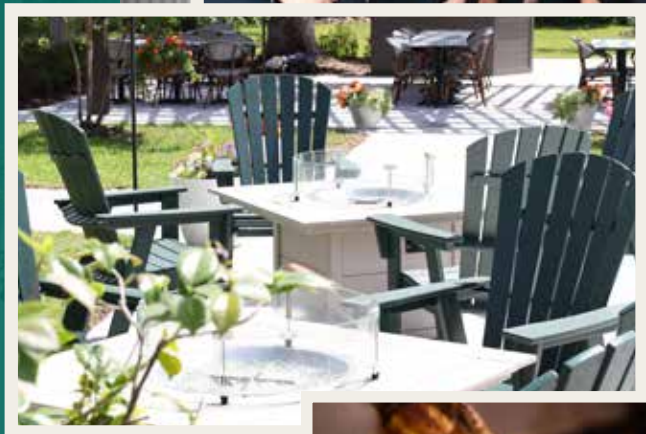
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## Celebrating Five Years of Healing, Hope, and Purpose

*The Story of Soul Counseling LLC*



Five years ago, in the heart of rural North Florida, a vision was born from compassion, faith, and a deep desire to help others heal. Today, Soul Counseling LLC proudly celebrates its 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary—marking half a decade of serving individuals, couples, children, and families with dedication, empathy, and purpose.

Founded in 2021 by Lourdes Berlanga, Soul Counseling began with a mission to make quality mental health services accessible in underserved rural communities. What started as a dream has grown into a trusted counseling practice known for compassionate care, bilingual services, and a holistic approach that honors both emotional wellness and spiritual strength.

Located in North Florida, Soul Counseling has become more than a counseling office—it has become a safe place where people can come as they are, find hope during difficult seasons, and begin the journey toward healing. Through life’s challenges such as anxiety, depression, grief, trauma, marital struggles, parenting stress, and personal growth, the practice has walked alongside countless individuals and families with understanding and care.

Over the years, the company has expanded to include a team of therapists and interns committed to providing professional, client-centered support in both English and Spanish. Soul Counseling has also built strong relationships within the community by participating in health fairs, partnering with local organizations, and advocating for mental health awareness in rural areas where access to services can often be limited.

What makes Soul Counseling unique is its heart-centered philosophy: “Where healing meets purpose.” The practice integrates evidence-based therapeutic approaches with compassion, cultural sensitivity, and, when desired by clients, faith-based support. This combination has allowed many clients to feel seen, valued, and empowered in their healing process.

Reflecting on the journey, founder Lourdes Berlanga shares:

*“These five years have been filled with growth, challenges, faith, and gratitude. We are honored every day that people trust us with their stories, their pain, and their healing journeys. Soul Counseling was created to bring hope to our community, and we thank God and our clients for allowing us to continue this mission.”*

As Soul Counseling enters its next chapter, the vision remains strong: to continue expanding services, supporting the mental health needs of rural communities, mentoring future mental health professionals, and creating spaces where healing, faith, and purpose come together.

This anniversary is not only a celebration of a company milestone—it is a celebration of every client, family member, therapist, intern, and community partner who has been part of the journey.

From all of us at Soul Counseling LLC: thank you for five incredible years of trust, healing, and hope. Here’s to many more years of serving our community with compassion and purpose.

Lourdes Berlanga, LMFT, TF-CBT, NBCCH  
Clinical Director

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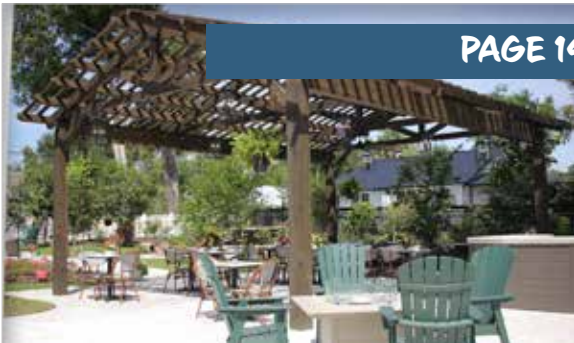
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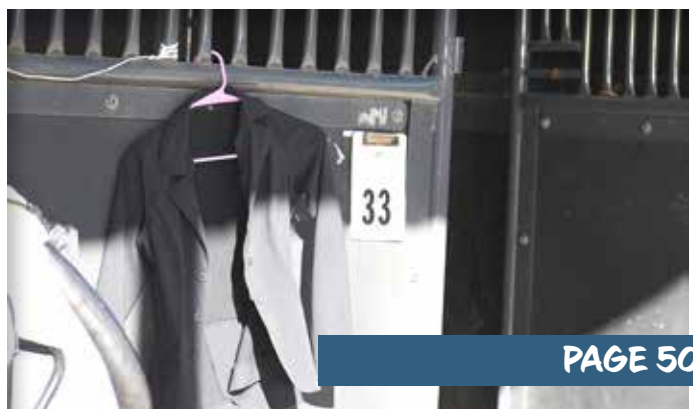
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# The Front Porch

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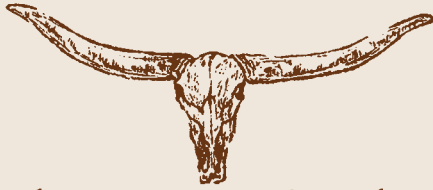
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# SITTIN' ON THE PORCH WITH...

## KICKIN' KEVIN THOMAS

### Story by Christian Peterson

Radio is still alive and well across the country; people tune in through their car stereos every morning and evening. They tune in to listen to the news, tunes and get a start to their day. Along with that come familiar voices that become a part of the morning routine, voices like that of Kevin Thomas, or as he is better known Kickin' Kevin.

Kickin' Kevin was born in Bowling Green, Kentucky, in 1969. He and his family shortly moved to a small town in Pennsylvania. He recalled one of his earliest memories was when he was six or seven years old. Thomas and his mother were outside; he was playing on his favorite yellow pedal tractor while his mother hung up clothes to dry. He spotted a farmer on a tractor in the field over, and behind his mother's back snuck over and asked for a ride on the tractor. The kind farmer picked him up and took him for a ride on the tractor. Of course, when the tractor turned back towards home Thomas saw his mother and father waiting with a stern look. "We might be in trouble," the farmer said before returning Thomas to his parents where he received an earful from his mother.

Thomas is the youngest of four; he has two older sisters and one older brother.

"I am the baby, and definitely a mama's boy," Thomas said.

His oldest sister Sherry was the first person to develop his love for music. He described how she would drive him and his siblings around in her white 1964 Valiant with a red interior.

"She would crank up 'Smoke on the Water' and we would just coast around."

Of course, as the youngest by a few years eventually Thomas was the only child still at home.

Thomas found himself getting in a lot of trouble through the seventh grade. So, as a last-ditch effort, his parents switched him to a uniform christian school. Thomas tended to be the class clown which was one of the reasons he faced trouble at school.

"I have always been the class clown, which was good and bad depending on

which teacher laughed or had enough."

While at the new school Thomas began leading some student worship classes and truly discovered his love for singing with student worship and church.

During his senior year of high school, Thomas' parents said they were moving from Griffin, Georgia, to Mandarin, Florida, to be closer to Sherry and her family. He didn't want to leave his friends behind, and so Thomas was allowed to live with his friend Bo Hooper's family for the final year.

"He was like my little brother; we are still close to this day."

Thomas graduated in 1987 and immediately moved to Florida to be close to his mom.

"It felt good to be back home with mom and dad, and I found myself being thankful for the decision they made for me to attend the christian academy. I quickly got involved in church, became a youth minister and worship leader. God filled every gap in my life with purpose."

Thomas' love for music only grew over the years; however, he found himself drawn to Christian music more and more. His friends started telling him that he should follow a career in music, and Thomas began looking into what it would take to become a disc jockey. He began attending RBI in Jacksonville, run by John Collins. He was the news guy for the Greasemans in Jacksonville. Thomas learned the basics of running the board, and Collins got him a job at WLKC Casey 93 Country in St. Mary's, Georgia. That was the beginning of Thomas' radio career, and he hasn't turned back since.

Starting out, all that Thomas did was produce air shows and keep the reel-to-reel machine loaded with new programs, but he was destined for more. Just six months after beginning production, he was able to host his own show. Saturday night, from 7 to midnight.

"I knew then that this was going to be what I do for the rest of my life. The rush of only having seconds to talk, live phone calls, requests, people's problems and triumphs every single show. I found myself like an on-air psychiatrist."

Two years after doing part time

Saturday nights, Thomas got a new part time job. This time he was working at FM 99 WQIK in Jacksonville. He worked from midnight to 5:30 a.m. on Saturdays and Sundays.

"My first shift was sketchy, but I stumbled through it. When I got home, my dad was sitting in the recliner and said, 'you sounded great son'. He sat up all night listening to my show." Thomas met Boomer and Greg who were the morning drive hosts. They let him hang out and watch and learn even more.

However, a few years into his full-time career, Thomas' dad had a heart attack.

"My world stopped. I couldn't muster the magic to do my show any longer. It was too difficult to be happy anymore."

Thomas began working in management at Rex Electronics in Lake City. However, before long he was missing the radio. Bob, the general manager for Power Country 102 and Scott Berns the Program Director would stop by regularly, trying to get Thomas back on air. Eventually it worked.

First, Thomas worked for Power Country 102 in Lake City during the mornings. However, just a few years later he made another jump to Q-98 in Live Oak. During his time there, the afternoon drive jock, Chris Brown, played a couple of station liners from The Big 98 in Nashville, Tennessee. Thomas knew that was Q-98 needed, so he reproduced all the liners and Q-98 became The Big 98. A few months later, the stations received a cease-and-desist order. Changes were made, and the crew continued to rock on.

"We went on to become the number one station in four counties! Wayne and Kevin in the morning, with Road Dogg in the afternoon, ruled the airwaves! Thanks to all who made the Big 98 a powerhouse."

On top of that, Thomas has worked mornings for WAAC 92.9 in Valdosta, Georgia, and afternoons on 99.5 Kicks Country, also in Valdosta.

"Through the years radio has undergone several transformations. I am just glad it's still free, and I am still in the game. I thought satellite radio along with

all the new platforms and voice tracking were going to hurt, however, it just made authentic radio stronger.”

As he reminisced on his radio past, Thomas commented that doing live radio comes with its risks.

“I’ll never forget when we were broadcasting live at the Live Oak Fair, and I was interviewing Tim Alcorn standing next to a several thousand pound steer. When I said how big the steer was, Road Dogg, live producer at the studio, had accidentally left his microphone on and shouted at our part timer that was in the next room over, live over the air, ‘damn doc that’s a big a\*\* steer.’ This was broadcast loud and proud over the airwaves. He then repeated it. I’ll never forget Tim Alcorn’s face as he looked at me with the biggest surprised look ever. I just rolled on and closed out wondering if that was my last live broadcast.”

Thomas hasn’t stopped doing radio, now he does mornings with Wayne Littrell on the Radiozoo 107.5. The duo provides the news, funny stories and good music for everyone willing to listen. Radiozoo is one of the only live local stations in existence.

Thomas is the proud father of two daughters, Chastity and Summer. He is also the proud grandfather of a 6-month-old little boy. He was remarried in 2018 to Julie.

“Marketing for several businesses, informercials, motivational events and just keeping up with life itself tends to get overwhelming. Julie always encourages me and creates a timeline each day for me to navigate my controlled chaos. I am so thankful and blessed that I have been able to provide for my family by doing what I love.”

Thomas’ favorite Bible verse is Psalm 46.10, “Be still and know that I am God.”

Outside of radio, Thomas runs a production and marketing agency called Kickin’ K creations. There he works with many of his on air clients. On top of that, he does marketing and sales for Horizon R.V. in Lake Park, Georgia.

“Selling RV’s is like doing radio, I sell fun. It is a blessing that my radio clients keep me busy.’ He enjoys playing guitar, singing and riding around his farm on his ATV.

If Thomas could go back in time, his one piece of advice for his younger self would be cherish every second. Throughout, his career Thomas is most proud of having a mouthpiece to share a smile and offer encouragement. The love of people is what Thomas cites as keeping him waking up early each morning.

In looking to the future Thomas said, “Wherever Christ leads, my life is in His hands. I just want to work hard daily, being the best version of myself and encourage others to do the same.”

Thomas’ piece of advice for everyone out there is, “the absolute lowers point in our life’s situation or circumstance does not define who you are. Get up, tomorrow is a new day!”

“Thanks for all of the support through the years of being on the air since 1990. We are live every morning and available for requests from 7 to 9 a.m. at 386-792-1075 and will always respond to 1radiozoo@gmail.com.” ■



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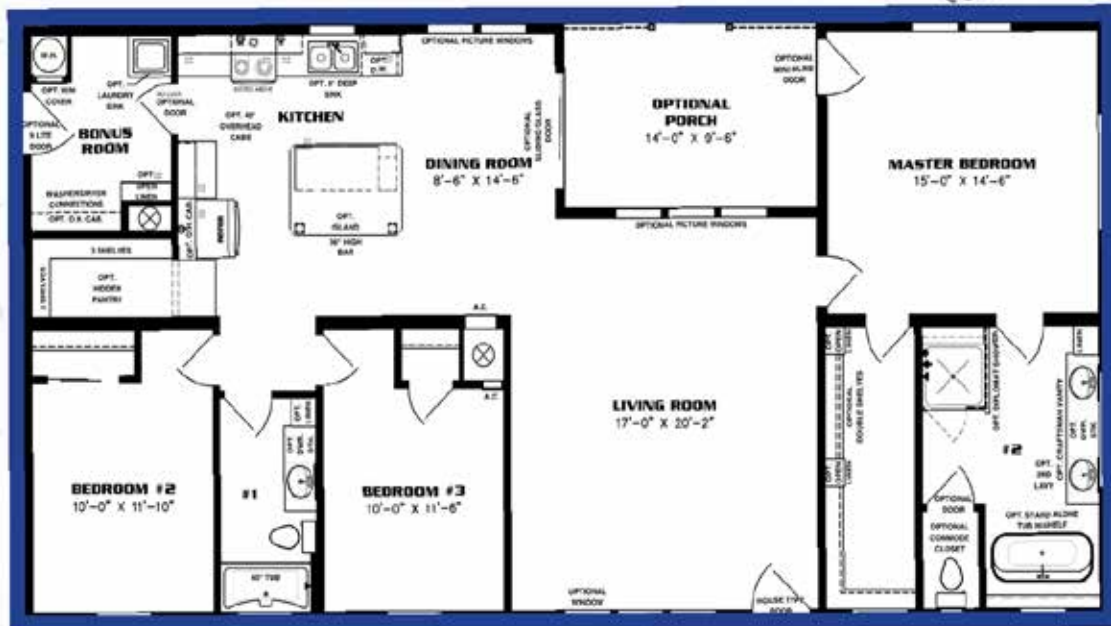
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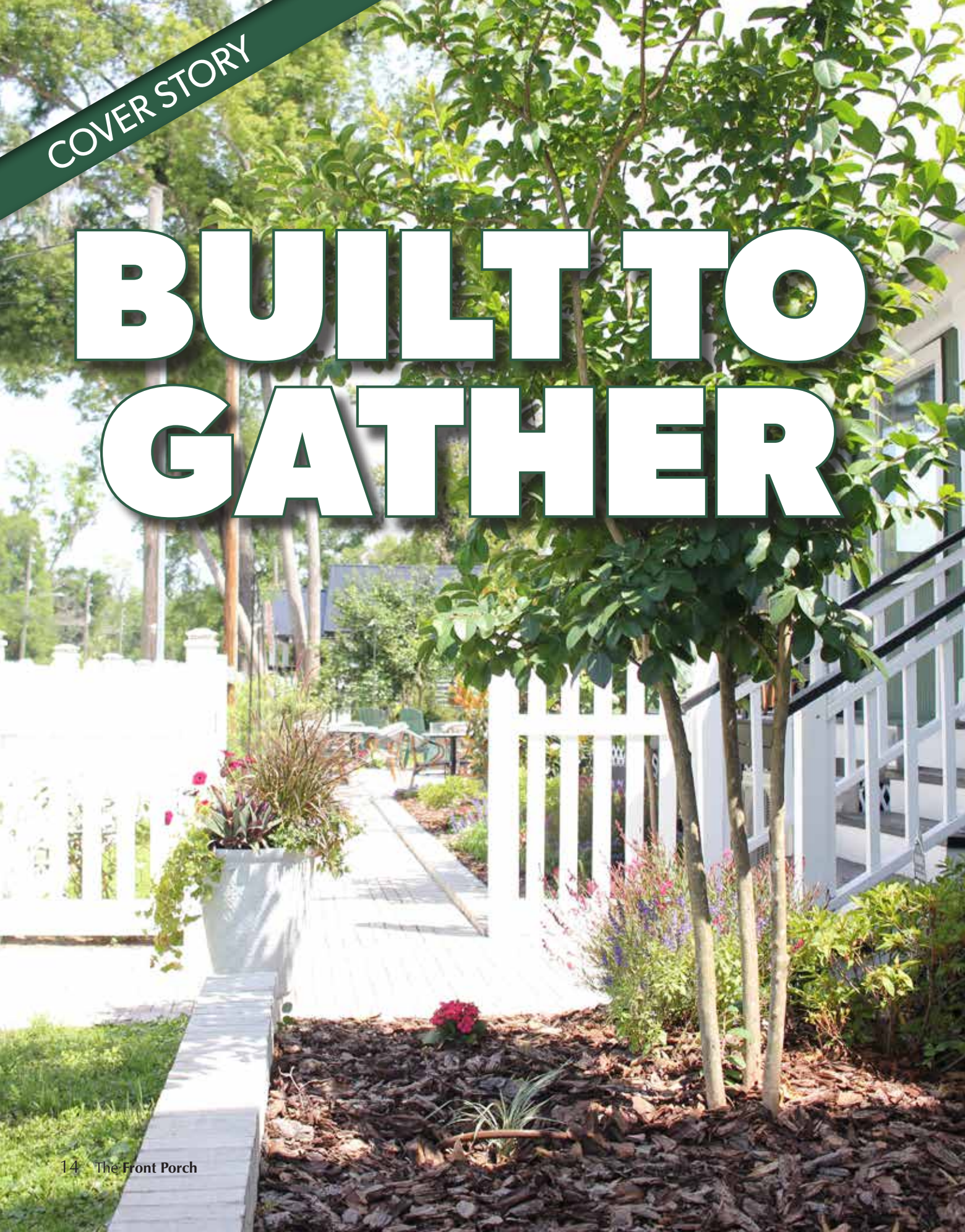
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COVER STORY

# BUILT TO GATHER



# The 406's vision for hospitality, history and community in downtown Live Oak

Story by Danny Federico

Photographs by Ashleigh Pitzer and Lucy Golub

There are restaurants people visit because they're hungry. Then there are restaurants people remember because something happened there.

Whether because of a birthday, an anniversary, a reunion or even a simple conversation that lasted longer than expected, some places become tied to memories in ways that have little to do with what was ordered and everything to do with how they made people feel.

For Ashleigh and David Pitzer, that idea sits at the center of what they hope to create at The 406.

Located inside a historic home in downtown Live Oak, The 406 officially reopened in December 2024 after the couple purchased the property two months earlier. But from the beginning, ownership was never simply about opening a restaurant.

For the Pitzers, it was about preserving something that already mattered while creating something new.

"The 406 is a historic home built in 1896 by Thomas Dowling," Ashleigh said. "From the beginning, our vision was to honor the history of the building while creating something unique for our community. We wanted a place where people could gather, celebrate and enjoy an elevated dining experience without having to leave our small town."

That balance of preservation and possibility appears in the way Ashleigh talks about the restaurant.

Thinking back on what absolutely had to remain after taking ownership, her answer was immediate: "The soul of the building."

Long before they arrived, she said, the home already held meaning within the Live Oak community.

"We wanted to preserve the character, charm and history that make it special," she said. "Our goal was never to erase its past but to build on it."

That philosophy guided the work that followed.

The property underwent a complete remodel. However, restoration and reinvention were never intended to be opposites.

"We have done a complete remodel from top to bottom, bringing it back to its original splendor and elevating it from there," Ashleigh said.

Even with the updates, she said the goal remained respecting what made the space distinctive in the first place.

"We update what needs updating, but try to preserve the architectural details and character that give the property its identity," she said.

For Ashleigh, preserving history does not mean freezing a place in time; it means allowing it to continue serving

stripped and only varnished. They are stunning."

That appreciation for history exists alongside a desire to challenge assumptions. While preserving the building mattered, Ashleigh says she also wanted to expand expectations about what people imagine is possible in a place like Live Oak.

"We wanted to expand what people



people while maintaining the elements that make it recognizable.

Part of the building's history that personally resonates with her is that generations of people walked through those doors before she and David became owners.

"Being a steward of that history is something I take seriously," she said.

One detail in particular reflects that philosophy. When asked what feature most guests likely overlook, she didn't point to décor or furniture. Instead, she pointed downward.

"The original floors," she noted, adding how, for her, every mark and imperfection tells part of the building's story. "They connect the past to the present in a way that's hard to replicate."

They were also among the first priorities for restoration before reopening.

"This is one of the first things we did before we opened," she said. "They were

thought was possible in a town like Live Oak," she said.

That meant focusing on details, creating spaces designed for gathering, thinking intentionally about atmosphere, and paying attention to the experience from the moment a customer arrives.

"We focused on elevating the dining experience, creating beautiful spaces for celebrations and events, and paying attention to details that make guests feel cared for from the moment they arrive,"

she said.

That attention to experience comes from a belief Ashleigh says has grown stronger over time: people want meaningful experiences close to home.

She believes dining expectations in rural communities have changed over the last decade.

"People travel more, they're exposed to new ideas and experiences, and they want those experiences close to home," Ashleigh said. "Rural communities deserve exceptional dining and hospitality just as much as larger cities."

That belief also shaped where the Pitzers chose to invest. Opening elsewhere may have been easier, and choosing a larger market may have made more sense on paper, but for Ashleigh, there was value in choosing home.

"It's a commitment to community," she said. "We could have chosen the easier path, but preserving a historic property means investing in the character and future of the place we call home."

The decision also carried personal significance.

"We have dined in this historic home for years and felt it was the next step in our lives to take ownership of it," she said. "It needed love brought back into it."

Since becoming involved with The 406, Ashleigh said she has seen downtown Live Oak change, particularly in the way people respond to preservation and local investment.

"There's a growing appreciation for investing in our history and preserving what makes it special," she said. "People

are excited about seeing historic spaces come back to life and having unique experiences available right here at home."

That appreciation shows up in different ways depending on who walks through the doors.

Visitors from outside the area are often surprised to find a restaurant like The 406 in a small town, Ashleigh said. Locals, meanwhile, tend to appreciate seeing a historic property preserved and brought back to life.

"Both reactions are rewarding," she said.

When Ashleigh talks about The 406, she focuses on the hospitality. Her hope is that guests "feel welcomed, valued and transported" the moment they walk through the door.

"Whether you're celebrating something special or just having dinner on a weeknight, I want guests to feel like they're walking into somewhere meaningful," she said.

That same thinking influences how she approaches fine dining.

Ashleigh rejects the idea that elevated experiences should feel intimidating.

"Hospitality isn't about being exclusive," she said. "It's about making people feel like they belong."

She believes people should feel comfortable while still experiencing something intentional.

"We strive to offer an elevated experience without making anyone feel out of place," she added. "Fine dining should feel approachable."

Her personal definition of hospitality goes even further.

"Hospitality is making people feel seen, welcomed and cared for," Ashleigh said. "It's anticipating needs before they're asked and creating an experience that leaves someone feeling better than when they arrived."

Since becoming an owner, her understanding of hospitality has expanded beyond the guest experience alone.

"I've learned that hospitality extends far beyond the dining room," she said. "It includes your staff, your vendors, your community and every interaction connected to the business."

That wider view affects how she thinks about every part of the restaurant. It is not only the meal that matters — it's the atmosphere, the welcome, the details, the people and the feeling guests carry with them afterward.

Ashleigh said she wants people to leave, already planning their next visit and feeling like they experienced something special. For her, that is part of what separates a memorable restaurant from a forgettable one.

"It's in the details," she said.

"Great food gets people in the door, but hospitality, atmosphere and genuine connections are what make them remember you."

At some point during ownership, she realized The 406 had become more than a restaurant. That realization came not from a business milestone, but from the moments guests chose to share there.

"People started choosing The 406 for some of the most important moments of their lives," she said, noting some moments included weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, reunions and celebrations. "That's when I realized we weren't just serving meals, we were helping create memories. Just seeing the togetherness and smiles has brought it to another level for me."

The most rewarding guest interactions, she said, are not tied to one specific moment. Instead, it is the repeated knowledge that guests have trusted The 406 with some of their most important life moments.

"Being trusted with those memories is incredibly meaningful," she said.

Restaurants, she said, become part of people's lives in ways guests may not even realize.

While talking about what people misunderstand about operating a restaurant in a town like Live Oak, she pointed to everything happening beyond the dining room.

"Many people think it's just about serving food," Ashleigh said. "In reality, you're creating jobs, supporting local vendors, preserving historic spaces, hosting life's biggest milestones, and helping shape the culture of a community. The restaurant becomes part of people's memories."

Her answer remained consistent when discussing what restaurants contribute



beyond serving food.

"Restaurants are gathering places," she said.

She described them as places that bring people together, celebrate milestones, support local causes and strengthen connections.

"Some of life's best conversations and memories happen around a table," she added.

Of course, none of that happens without work.

The public side of restaurants often appears polished, but ownership carries responsibilities guests rarely see.

Something she said most people often overlook about restaurant ownership is the responsibility. Guests see finished spaces and seamless experiences. Owners see long hours and constant decisions.

"Guests see the finished product, but behind the scenes, there are long hours, difficult decisions and countless details that have to come together every day," she said.

Consistency remains one of the biggest challenges. Every night looks different; every guest arrives with different expectations. But she believes consistency comes from people and standards.

"It's one of the greatest challenges," Ashleigh said. "Every service is different, but consistency comes from having a dedicated team and a commitment to excellence regardless of the circumstances."

Restaurant ownership also gave her a different perspective on leadership.

"Leadership isn't about having all the answers," she said. "It's about serving your team, setting the example, and creating an environment where people can succeed."

She was equally candid about moments of uncertainty and whether she ever questioned if they could pull it off.

"Any business owner who says otherwise probably isn't being honest," she said. "But those moments push you to grow, adapt and become better."

Ownership, she said, has required sacrifice — time more than anything.

"Owning a restaurant isn't just a job," she said. "It's a new lifestyle for us. It's not for the faint of heart."

Still, she believes the effort is worth it.

"There are countless hours spent behind the scenes that guests never see, but it's worth it because we believe in what we're building," she added.

During difficult seasons, Ashleigh said the customers keep her motivated.

"Our guests, our staff and our community," she said. "Seeing the joy that happens within these walls reminds me why we started."

Owning The 406 has also changed

her relationship with the community.

"It has deepened my appreciation for the people who support local businesses and reminded me how important community connections really are," she said.

That sense of purpose also influences how Ashleigh thinks about the impact she hopes to leave on Live Oak.

She said her hopes for that impact tie back to many of the same ideas she described throughout the conversation about The 406.

"I hope people can point to things that are better because we were here," she said. "Whether that's preserving a historic building, creating a place where memories are made, helping a family facing cancer, or simply showing up when our community needs support, I want our impact to be measured in people, not projects."

That outlook has also changed the way she defines success.

Five years ago, she said success probably would have looked more like accomplishments and goals. Today, she sees it differently.

"Today, success looks like purpose," Ashleigh said. "It looks like knowing I've made a difference, strengthened my community and spent my time on things that truly matter."

That idea of purpose recurs throughout the way she talks about The 406 — not as a business alone, but as a place where history is preserved, people gather and memories are created.

Ashleigh said she hopes people remember one thing above everything else.

"I hope they remember that I cared," she said.

Whether through the restaurant or simply by showing up for others, she said she hopes people know she genuinely

cares and tries to make a positive difference.

She also believes staying invested in a small community matters because small towns deserve beautiful spaces, meaningful opportunities and strong community support just as much as larger cities do.

"I believe some of the most impactful work happens right where you are planted," she said.

Ashleigh also reflected on how much of themselves is now present inside the restaurant itself.

"A tremendous amount," she said. "I love this restaurant and the joy it brings our community. The attention to detail, the hospitality, the preservation of history, the atmosphere — these are all reflections of who we are and what we value."

However, she does not talk about The 406 as if it were only hers and David's. Instead, she points to the people who continue to walk through the doors.

"I want people to know how grateful we are," she said. "Every reservation, every celebration, every recommendation to a friend helps make this dream possible. The 406 belongs to the community as much as it belongs to us, and we're honored to be part of its story."

For the Pitzers, owning The 406 is more than preserving a historic home; it's about preserving a gathering place, creating experiences, investing locally and making room for moments people will remember long after they leave the table.

The 406 is located at 406 Duval St. N.E., in Live Oak.

It is open from 4 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. on Wednesdays and Thursdays, and from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays.

For more information about The 406, visit [www.the406restaurant.com](http://www.the406restaurant.com). ■





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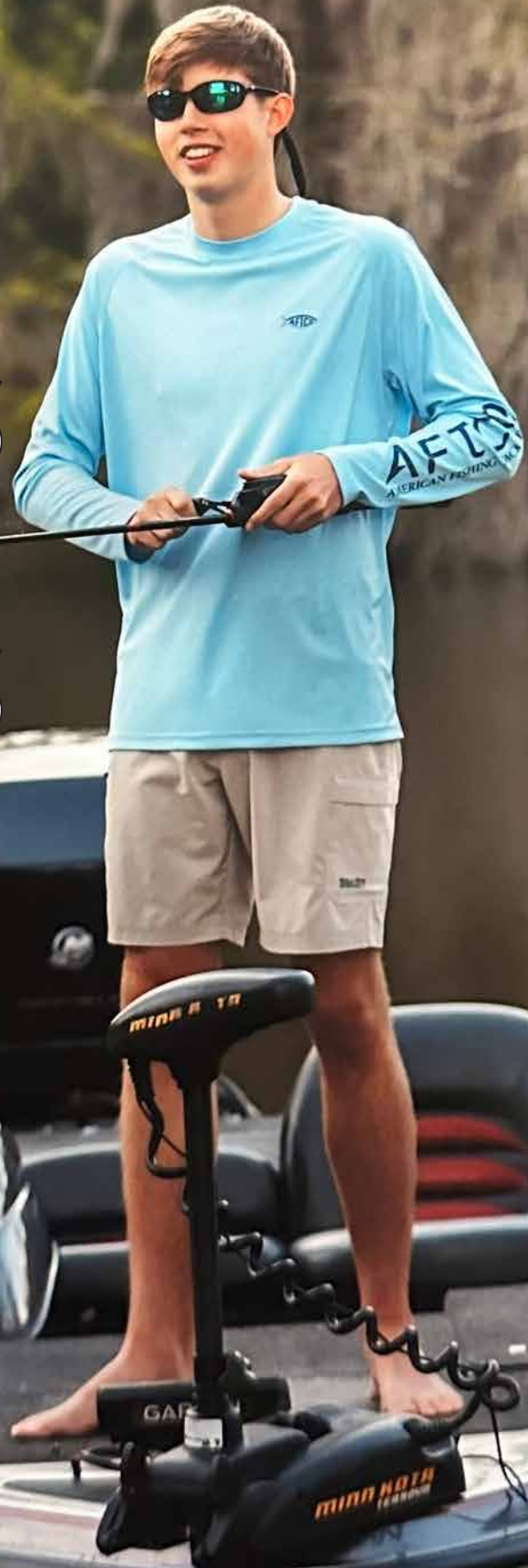
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SPOTLIGHT

# WHERE THERE'S A WILL, THERE'S A WAY



# The story behind the Will Carpenter AYA Cancer Foundation

**Story by Danny Federico**

*Photographs by Ashleigh Pitzer*

There are moments that divide life into “before” and “after.”

For Live Oak residents Ashleigh Pitzer and her family, one of those moments began quietly.

In the fall of 2021, Will Cole Carpenter had just started his freshman year at the University of Central Florida (UCF), where he was majoring in electrical engineering. He was stepping into the part of life young people spend years imagining — college, independence and the excitement of building a future.

His mother remembers that version of him first.

“He was funny, smart, sarcastic and kind-hearted,” Pitzer said.

Outside of school, Carpenter loved being outdoors and had been passionate about fishing since he was just 2 years old. His skill even earned him a place on the UCF Bass Fishing Team.

He was also an accomplished swimmer who still holds records with the Suwannee High School swim team.

By every measure, life appeared to be moving forward.

Then he started having sinus issues.

At first, nothing seemed especially alarming. But over-the-counter medications did not help, nor did antibiotics.

Like many families would, the Pitzers assumed it was a stubborn infection that would eventually pass.

Instead, the diagnosis changed everything.

What appeared to be a sinus infection turned out to be alveolar rhabdomyosarcoma, a rare and aggressive form of cancer.

“We moved him home, and he started chemotherapy immediately,” Pitzer said.

What followed was a 13-month battle that changed the way her family understood illness, support and community.

But alongside treatment, another reality emerged.

Carpenter was not a child.

However, he was not fully established in adulthood either. He had just turned 18.

Pitzer said that created challenges she never expected.

“People often picture either young

children or much older adults,” she said about the public’s perception of cancer patients. “Will was in that space in between. He was supposed to be building his future, making plans and becoming independent. Instead, he was navigating cancer while trying to figure out who he was becoming as a young adult. His entire future was a question mark.”

That experience placed Carpenter

pediatric cases diagnosed annually in the United States. The alveolar subtype Carpenter was diagnosed with is more frequently associated with older children, teenagers and young adults than younger pediatric populations.

For Pitzer, however, those numbers never felt abstract.

They looked like her son.

She said one of the most difficult



into a group that often receives less public attention than pediatric or adult cancer populations: adolescents and young adults, commonly referred to as AYA patients.

According to the National Cancer Institute’s Surveillance, Epidemiology and End Results (SEER) Program, an estimated 88,120 adolescents and young adults ages 15 to 39 are expected to be diagnosed with cancer in the United States in 2026, representing approximately 4.2% of all new cancer cases nationwide.

Researchers have increasingly identified the age group as one with distinct medical, emotional and social challenges because patients often fall between systems designed for pediatric and adult care.

The cancer Carpenter faced was itself uncommon.

According to the American Cancer Society, rhabdomyosarcoma is rare overall, with approximately 350 to 400

realizations during treatment was recognizing how few systems seemed built specifically for young adults.

“We often felt like we didn’t fit anywhere,” she said. “He wasn’t a child, but he wasn’t fully an adult with an established career and family. Many programs are designed for one group or the other, leaving young adults caught in the middle.”

That feeling became impossible to ignore.

For young adults, cancer often arrives during years built around momentum. According to Pitzer, the disruption reaches far beyond health.

“Cancer doesn’t just interrupt their health, it interrupts their entire future,” she said. “It affects education, careers, relationships, independence and identity. These young adults are fighting for their lives while watching everyone around them continue moving forward.”

She said those losses can be difficult



for others to recognize.

There is grief attached not only to illness, but also to uncertainty.

Dreams get postponed. Milestones happen differently; sometimes they disappear entirely.

Treatment became part of everyday life.

Hospital visits replaced routines, and the future became increasingly difficult to picture in concrete terms.

Then, on Jan. 31, 2023, after a 13-month battle with alveolar rhabdomyosarcoma, Carpenter passed away at 19 years old.

But according to Pitzer, one conversation near the end of his life became the beginning of something else.

While in hospice care, Carpenter said something she has carried with her ever since.

“He told me he didn’t think his story was over yet,” she said.

Her response became a promise.

“I promised him it would never be over,” she continued. “I would always say his name, tell his stories and help others

in his name.”

That promise became the Will Carpenter Adolescent and Young Adult (AYA) Cancer Foundation.

Created to honor Carpenter’s life and support young adults facing cancer ages 18 to 23, the foundation supports advocacy efforts, research, wish-granting, local fundraising initiatives for children with cancer and programs designed to remind patients and families there is still purpose and life beyond a diagnosis.

For Pitzer, however, the foundation is not simply an organization.

“This foundation is me fulfilling my promise to him,” she said.

The work, however, is shaped as much by who Carpenter was as by what he experienced.

When Pitzer talks about her son, she does not begin with cancer. She talks about his personality, humor and determination. She remembers someone who kept moving forward even when circumstances became difficult.

“His resilience, his sense of humor and his ability to keep going even when

things were incredibly difficult,” she said. “Cancer never defined him. He remained Will until the very end, and I want this foundation to reflect that same strength, hope and determination.”

That distinction has become central to the foundation’s approach.

For Pitzer, supporting young adults with cancer means recognizing that treatment is only one part of the experience.

Patients do not stop being themselves because they receive a diagnosis. They are still students, friends, children and partners. They are still people with interests, goals and identities that exist outside hospital walls.

That belief has shaped how the foundation approaches support.

Pitzer said some of the most meaningful moments during Carpenter’s journey happened outside treatment itself and reinforced the importance of helping young patients maintain connection, normalcy and experiences that remind them who they are beyond a diagnosis.

“Fishing,” she said when asked about a memory that still drives her work today. “Whether it was before treatment, during treatment or after a difficult appointment, fishing was where he felt most like himself.”

Pitzer said watching those moments reinforced something she still believes today: healing and hope are not always found inside clinical spaces.

“Seeing the peace and happiness it brought him reminds me why our Fishing for Hope program matters so much,” she said. “Getting these kids away from the hospital, even just for a day, can be so therapeutic.”

That experience eventually inspired Fishing for Hope, one of the programs connected to the foundation.

The goal is not simply recreation but creating opportunities for young people to reconnect with themselves — to step away from treatment, spend time outside, and remember that life still exists beyond appointments and diagnoses.

That philosophy extends beyond Fishing for Hope and into how Pitzer thinks about support overall.

When asked what kind of assistance has had the biggest impact on families, her answer did not begin with finances.

“Practical support and emotional support,” she said. “Financial help matters, but sometimes it’s knowing someone understands, showing up when things get hard, or giving families a moment to breathe and make memories together.”

She said support is often misunderstood.

People assume support means solving problems, writing checks or removing obstacles. Those things matter, but her experience taught her something different: support can also mean presence.

"Support looks like listening. It looks like showing up. It looks like creating opportunities for joy, connection and hope," she said. "Sometimes the greatest gift isn't money, it's making someone feel less alone or bringing a moment of peace where they can remember who they actually are."

Since launching the foundation, Pitzer said every family has stayed with her.

Cancer journeys may look different from one person to the next, but she said there is something recognizable in each one.

"Once you've walked this journey yourself, you see your own story reflected in so many others," Pitzer said. "Those connections become part of why you keep going."

She said moments when families feel understood continue to reinforce the purpose behind the work.

"Every time a family tells us they felt seen, understood or supported because of something we provided," she said, describing moments she realized the foundation was making a difference. "Those moments remind me that Will's legacy is continuing to impact lives."

At the same time, she believes there are still gaps to address, including raising awareness, focusing research on AYA patients, and establishing programs specifically designed to meet their unique needs and challenges.

For Pitzer, that need remains personal.

The foundation may carry her son's name, but she hopes what it offers families is something broader than remembrance. She hopes it creates space for people to feel supported, understood and less alone.

That perspective has also changed the way Pitzer thinks about the community around her.

Before her family entered the world of cancer treatment, many of the challenges patients and caregivers face were things she had little reason to think about.

Now, she sees how quickly life can become consumed by logistics — especially for families in rural communities. Specifically, Pitzer said distance is one of the major challenges of navigating cancer care in rural areas.

"Access to specialists often requires extensive travel, time away from work

and additional financial strain," she said. "Rural families face challenges that many people never have to consider."

For Pitzer, the experience revealed how much of cancer happens outside treatment itself.

A treatment appointment is rarely just an appointment. It can mean gas money, lost wages, meals away from home, hotel stays, childcare and time. Then the process repeats the next week and the week after that.

It also changed how she thinks about community.

"It's everything," she said about the importance of community support.

Pitzer said she believes there is something unique about small communities during difficult seasons.

"We've experienced firsthand how powerful that support can be," she said.

She said the response from people around her family left a lasting impression.

"The generosity, compassion and willingness of people to help have been overwhelming," Pitzer added. "It has restored my faith in the power of community."

She believes smaller communities often respond differently because support becomes personal.

"In a small town, people know your story," she said. "They know your family. When someone is hurting, the community often comes together in very personal and meaningful ways."

That experience changed more than her understanding of support; it changed how she thinks about success.

Before Carpenter's diagnosis and passing, she said her goals looked different.

"Five years ago, success probably looked more like accomplishments and goals. I was a pharmacist moving up the corporate ladder." Now, Pitzer said, success feels different. "Today, success looks like purpose. It looks like knowing I've made a difference, honored my son's legacy, strengthened my community and spent my time on things that truly matter."

Then she added something she said she has learned through experience: "Everything can change in a heartbeat."

That shift in outlook continues to influence both her life and the work of the foundation.

When asked how she balances grief with running an organization centered around hope, her answer was direct.

"The grief never leaves," she said.

However, Pitzer said she has learned that grief and hope are not opposites.

"I've learned that grief and hope can exist together," she added.

She said the foundation has given her a place to channel that grief.

"This foundation allows me to take the love I have for Will and turn it into something that helps others," she explained.

That does not mean the work becomes easy.

Pitzer said there are still stories that are difficult to hear. Some moments reopen memories she would rather not revisit. But she keeps returning to the same belief.

"If sharing our experience helps another family feel less alone, it's worth it," she said.

When asked what keeps her going through difficult days, her answer came quickly: Will.

She said there are days when grief feels heavy, and responsibilities feel endless.

"But I think about the courage he showed during his fight," Pitzer said. "If he could face what he faced with strength and grace, then I can keep moving forward, too."

When asked what she thinks her son would say if he could see the foundation today, she said, "I think he'd be humbled. He never liked attention being on him, but I think he'd be proud that his story is helping other young adults and their families. I just want him to smile down on me from up above."

When she looks at what the word "legacy" means to her now, Pitzer said she sees it differently than she once did.

"Legacy means ensuring that a life continues to make an impact long after it's gone," she said. Pitzer added that she believes that is what the foundation allows. "Through this foundation, Will's kindness, strength and story continue to touch lives every day."

As the organization continues its work, Pitzer said she hopes people remember her son as more than his diagnosis.

"The foundation isn't just about cancer," she said. "It's about honoring a life well lived and making sure other young adults facing cancer know they are not alone."

For Pitzer, continuing the work of the foundation has become one way of continuing to tell Carpenter's story while helping families facing similar experiences.

"Every family we help is another chapter in the legacy he continues to leave behind," she said.

To learn more about the Will Carpenter AYA Cancer Foundation and its fundraising events, visit [www.willcarpenterfoundation.org](http://www.willcarpenterfoundation.org). ■



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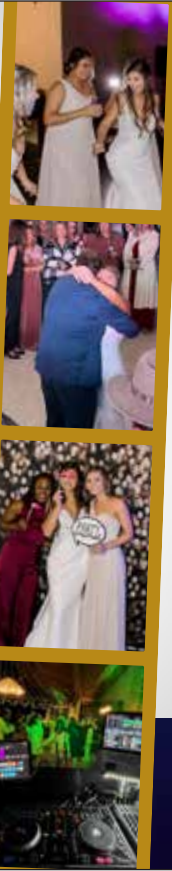
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# NAMMO PERRY CLEARS THE WAY FOR \$200 MILLION PRODUCTION FACILITY IN TAYLOR COUNTY



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Major site clearing and foundation work is now underway, as Nammo Perry clears the way for a new \$200 million state-of-the-art production facility in Taylor County that will create 200 new jobs and expand its manufacturing capabilities to meet surging demand for rocket motors used in a variety of tactical missile programs.

The major expansion project includes the construction of a new manufacturing line designed to significantly increase Nammo's capacity to produce rocket motors in the U.S., providing a reliable and independent domestic source for components essential for current and future weapon systems.

The company acquired 320 acres of property adjacent to Nammo Perry's current 1,040-acre site, located on Puckett Road 11 miles south of Perry, to make way for the construction of several new buildings for storage, production and testing facilities.

The expansion will provide a major boost to the local economy and tax base, while strengthening U.S. and other allied defense programs around the world by increasing domestic production of critical solid rocket motors for air-to-air, surface-to-air and air defense applications.

With all necessary permitting in hand, Nammo is well underway with construction efforts, scheduled to complete in late 2027. "Construction began in March, following receipt of the final development permit is currently on schedule," said Nammo Energetics President Keith Brooks.

"We will likely start installing equipment in late 2027. We will continue with installation and commissioning in early 2028, followed by qualification of motors in 2028," Brooks said.

"Once we make and test the motors, we will produce a qualification batch and send them out for testing. We will be qualifying multiple programs to support the new production line," he said.

Hiring of key positions, including in the areas of engineering, operations and management, will start toward the end of 2026 and ramp up toward the middle end of 2027, when employees will be trained in Norway and Arizona. Once the motor qualification process is completed, normal production will ramp up, and the new facility should be operating "wide open" by the end of 2028.

Nammo, a Norway-based aerospace and defense company, provides solid rocket motors for the AMRAAM (Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missile) and Evolved Sea Sparrow Missile



in the U.S.

Responding to an unprecedented global demand for missiles, Nammo has entered into a partnership with independent partner, Raytheon (RTX) – one of the largest aerospace and defense manufacturers in the world – to expand its rocket motor production capabilities in the U.S.

RTX recently announced it had awarded a contract to Nammo to develop its own Mk 72 solid rocket motor production line in response to constraints on the supply chain and stockpiles being quickly depleted by active conflicts and

emerging threats around the globe.

While only "Phase One" has been given the go-ahead by the company thus far, Nammo has developed conceptual plans and prepared site level drawings to add two more phases for additional rocket motor production "mixer" lines and associated support buildings.

The initial \$200 million Phase One expansion is "self-funded," but Nammo is actively working with the U.S. government and other customers to identify funding for Phase two and Phase three, according to Brooks.

The U.S. government has recently



shifted its defense acquisition strategy to increase missile production and more quickly rebuild dwindling stockpiles, brokering deals with some of the largest defense contractors in the world that include guaranteed government demand for up to seven years.

Earlier this year, Lockheed Martin signed a deal with the Pentagon to quadruple THAAD interceptor production (from 96 to 400 per year), and Raytheon signed a similar agreement to boost production land and maritime attack variants of Tomahawk, AMRAAM missiles and SM interceptors.

These agreements provide companies like Lockheed Martin, Raytheon and L3Harris with the incentive to invest billions of dollars into new facilities and equipment as the U.S. pushes to dramatically increase annual production of Tomahawk cruise missiles, AMRAMM air-to-air missiles and SM-2, SM-3 and SM-6 ballistic interceptor missiles.

High demand for rocket motors, coupled with longer-term governmental contracts, has Nammo officials optimistic that additional rocket motor production facilities could be constructed in Taylor County.

"What we are building here now for the first \$200 million is just one production line, and we need more. We

need to do much more," Nammo Group CEO/President Morten Brandtzæg told a crowd of dignitaries and employees gathered at the Nammo Perry facility during the October 2025 groundbreaking ceremony.

Nammo's excellent reputation and established expertise in solid rocket motor propulsion, dating back to the 1960s, positions the company as a key player in the field. Nammo, headquartered in Raufoss, Norway, is one of the world's leading producers of specialty ammunition, rocket motors and propulsion systems. The company's Raufoss facility is on the cutting edge of research and development and is now designing and producing rocket motor components in-house.

With the demand for missiles "increasing exponentially" over the next several years, Brooks is optimistic that Nammo will be a major part of the solid rocket supply chain moving forward.

"We are a merchant supplier. Everyone, from government to larger companies, is looking at what can be done to get these orders filled quickly from the supply chain side of it," he said.

"We know we can build mass quantities of mixed cast solid rocket motors. Due to the amount of available space we have, newer facilities and

brand-new building design, we can capture some efficiencies that other places simply cannot," Brooks said, adding that Nammo's Taylor County property could easily hold up to six new production lines and could expand beyond that with emerging technology.

"We have plans in place, and we are looking into further expansion. As technology develops, we are keeping our options open. It is possible that we could expand even more here. We have the capability to undertake multiple phases. There are a lot of options on the table. We are diligently working with the U.S. government and our customers, studying the financial side of making this a reality," Brooks said. "With these guaranteed seven-year contracts between the government and suppliers, we are actively involved in planning for future phases from a business justification side."

"We have the established capability, the expertise and the land to do it. We are not a new entry in this market, as Nammo has been building rocket motors for the government for years and has expanded our footprint into the U.S., which has its own advantages. We have been undertaking this type of rocket motor production for years, and we know how to do it," Brooks added. ■



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A young woman with long dark hair, wearing a teal dress and a tiara, sits on a wooden porch. She is smiling and holding a small dog in her arms. She is also holding an open children's book with a colorful illustration of a landscape with a rainbow and a tree. The background shows a wooden door and a white pillar.

*Branford's  
Ashlee Combee*

# FROM PAIN TO "PAW'SITIVITY"

## Story by Rick Patrick

*Photographs Courtesy of Ashlee Combee*

When speaking to 17-year-old Ashlee Combee, one quickly discovers that she is far from a typical teenage high school student. But then, Combee has had to face challenges that many don't face at such a young age.

As a child, she lost seven family members, leading up to the loss of her grandfather (Pipa) and the loss of a young friend, Jackson Roberts, who died at the age of 5 when she was 13. It was at Roberts' funeral that someone gifted Combee with a stuffed elephant.

"That stuffed elephant was something that provided such comfort to me during that time, especially at night," recalls Combee.

Soon after, a dachshund pup named Bentley came into Combee's life. Little did she know at the time what an impact this short-legged savior would have on her. The comfort provided to Combee by Bentley and the stuffed elephant she named "Ellie" would lay the foundation for the work to which Combee would dedicate so much of her time and energy. That is, helping and becoming an advocate for those facing emotional challenges, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that can come from loss and grief. Today, Combee uses her own painful experiences and the insights she gained as catalysts to build a better world, especially for youngsters.

"I want to challenge the stigma surrounding emotional support and help people overcome the fear of others' opinions," said Combee during a recent interview. "I want to advocate for those going through some of the most difficult times of their lives."

Combee has been involved with pageants since she the age of 6, primarily in local pageants, then branching out to more regional events. So far, she has earned the titles of Miss Gainesville Teen 2022, Miss Orlando's Teen 2024, Miss Gainesville's Teen 2025 and, currently, Miss Northeast Florida's Teen. This experience has not only provided her with valuable scholarship funds, it has taught her to present herself publicly with grace and poise. Through her participation with pageants, she has become involved with the Miss America organization, which has proven to be a valuable resource for Combee and her efforts.

At age 13, she founded the Paw'sitive Change National Foundation, Inc., which is now a 501(c)(3) recognized non-profit charity. One primary goal of the foundation is to help provide stuffed animals for children who may be

experiencing grief or loss.

"A lot of times, a child may not be able to have a real pet," said Combee. "So we hold stuffed animal adoptions so children can have a stuffed animal pet. They get to name their pet, and they receive other comfort items to go along with the stuffed animal."

On top of her pageants and work with her non-profit, Combee wrote and illustrated a children's book titled, *Bentley Makes it Better*. The book tells the story of Gracie, a young girl who experiences loss and is forced to make her way through a "storm" of sadness and all the other emotions that go along with the grieving process. Much like Combee, Gracie

state-wide proclamation recognizing April as Emotional Support Animal Awareness Month.

Combee is preparing to enter her senior year at Branford High School (BHS), where she is also dual-enrolled at Florida Gateway College, in Lake City. At BHS, she has been involved with National Honor Society, Beta Club, Interact Club and the Majorettes. She also played softball for the BHS Lady Bucs. In addition, she works at Inside Out Nutrition, in Live Oak, and helps teach dance at Savvy's Cheer and Dance Studio, in Branford. After high school, she plans to attend college, possibly the University of Florida, to pursue a bachelor's degree



meets a dachshund named Bentley who helps guide Gracie back to the sunshine of happier days. Combee includes copies of *Bentley Makes it Better* in the care packages she provides during the stuffed animal adoption events. The book also is available on Amazon.

Combee has written another children's book, *Ellie's Big Adventure*, with the main character being Ellie the Elephant. This book is expected to be released in the next month or two.

Combee's plans for her non-profit are as big and bright as her contagious smile. She envisions expanding the work of Paw'sitive Change to all 67 Florida counties through libraries, schools and children's hospitals, including Ronald McDonald Houses around the region. Combee works tirelessly as an advocate for mental health in general and for emotional support animals specifically. She has spearheaded an effort that resulted in proclamations in Columbia, Duval and Suwannee counties and a

in education. She has a desire to work in the field of special education and eventually become a behavioral analyst.

Combee plans to continue to use her platform with the Miss America organization to promote the awareness of what emotional support animals can provide and to act as an advocate for mental health. Even at her young age, her positive and caring spirit serves as an inspiration to anyone.

"No matter your age, you're able to have an impact," added Combee. "I love what I do."

Ashlee is the daughter of Ryan and Tracy Combee.

If you would like to support the Paw'sitive Change National Foundation, you can send your tax-deductible gift through CashApp at \$PawsitiveChangeNF. You may also contribute through an account set up at the Lafayette State Bank. Donations may be made at any of the bank's locations in Bell, Branford, Live Oak or Mayo. ■

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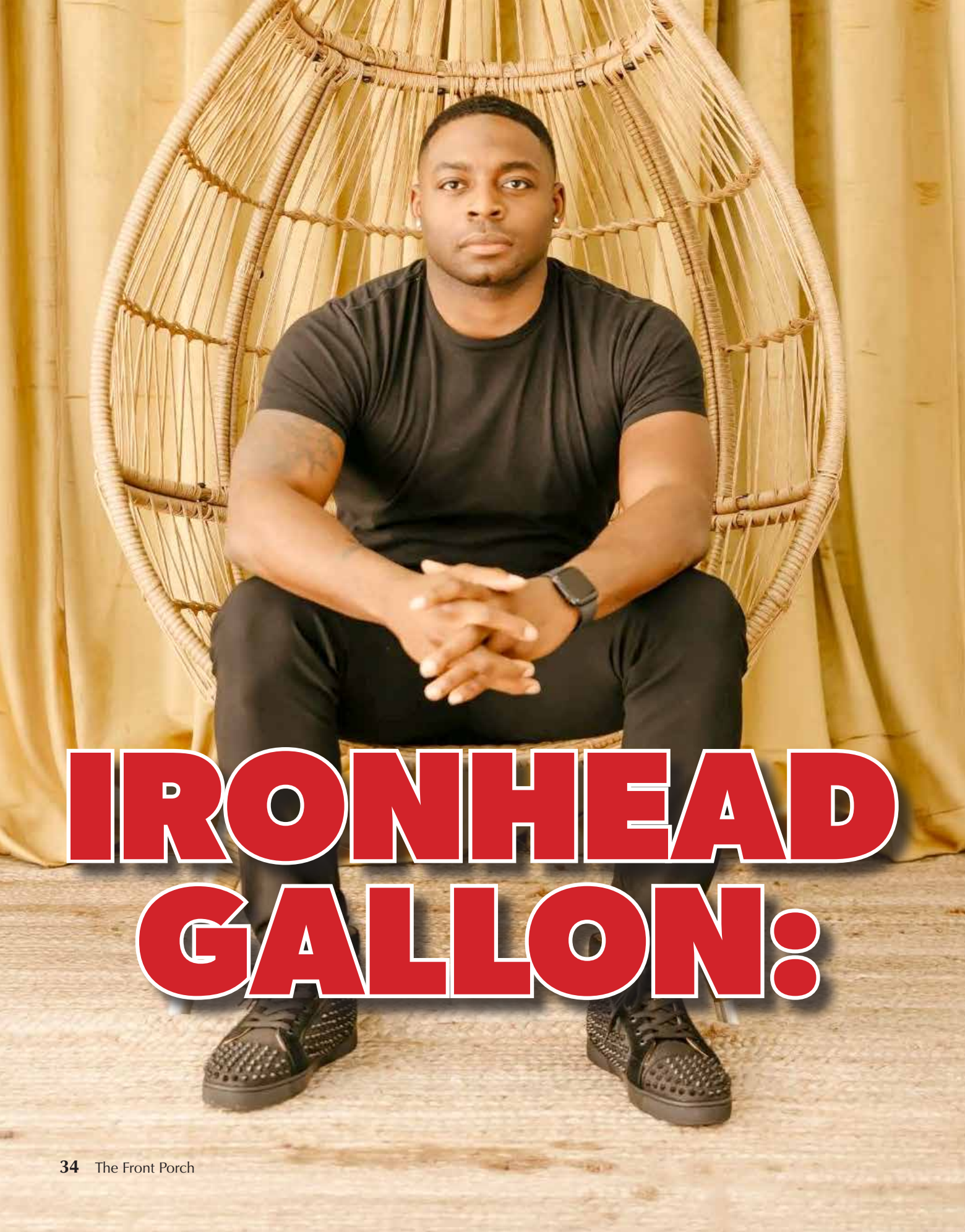
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# IRONHEAD GALLON:

# PURSUING DREAMS, EMPOWERING DREAMERS

Story by Rick Patrick

*Photographs Courtesy of Ironhead Gallon*

Aside from an unusual nickname given to him by his father, after the legendary professional running back Craig "Ironhead" Heyward, Deshawnte "Ironhead" Gallon was very similar to many other youngsters growing up in Madison. From an early age, he enjoyed the game of football and dreamed of being in the National Football League (NFL). However, the odds of even a very good high school player ever wearing an NFL uniform are incredibly low. It is estimated that only one in about 1,100 high school football players will ever make it to the NFL. Gallon was one of those rare exceptions, although he never played in the NFL regular season.

Like many local young men at the time, Gallon began playing football in the old Dave Galbraith Youth Football program, in Madison. As he progressed through his school years, he played a game that he had grown to love, and he played it well. Through a successful high school playing career as a Madison County High School (MCHS) Cowboy, he had the opportunity to play football at Georgia Southern University.

While at Georgia Southern, from 2012 to 2017, Gallon was a first-team All-Sun Belt linebacker, tallying over 230 tackles and four blocked kicks. Gallon graduated from Georgia Southern with a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice and Interdisciplinary Studies. He also obtained a Master of Public Administration. His college career caught the eye of the NFL's Arizona Cardinals, who signed him as an undrafted free agent in 2017.

Gallon spent the entire pre-season with the Cardinals that year, seeing playing time in several pre-season games before being cut on the final day of training camp. The following year, he spent time with the Philadelphia Eagles during the pre-season.

"That was a great experience," said Gallon of his brief NFL career. "The veteran players were very welcoming of the rookies, and they were great about sharing their knowledge and experience."

Gallon recalled lining up across from Larry Fitzgerald, the star wide receiver from the Cardinals who recently was voted into the NFL Hall of Fame Class of

2026.

"How many guys get to line up across from a Hall of Fame player?" said Gallon. "[Fitzgerald] was great to meet and get to know."

When many players would have given up on the thought of continuing to pursue professional football, Gallon kept his dream alive. He took his football skills north to the Canadian Football League (CFL) to play for the Ottawa Redblacks. However, injuries plagued Gallon during his time in Canada, and he was

up," recalled Gallon. "I wanted to do something to provide youth with opportunities to excel."

This desire to provide these opportunity for youth remains at the core of the IGFF, whose stated mission is to "strengthen families, support our youth and serve our community with pride." To accomplish this mission, the IGFF sponsors scholarships, back to school backpack drives, an annual football and cheer camp, an annual community-wide Easter egg hunt and much more.



released. The following year, he returned to Ottawa, where he was popular with the team and fans. Unfortunately, the COVID pandemic brought an end to the CFL season, and to Gallon's professional football career.

Gallon returned to Madison and taught school briefly at James Madison Preparatory High School. Eventually, he decided to pursue another childhood dream to become a firefighter. After successfully completing firefighter training, he joined the Atlanta Fire Department, where he still works.

Meanwhile, Gallon decided to put his continued love for the Madison community, especially the youngsters in Madison, into action. In 2025, he founded the Ironhead Gallon Family Foundation (IGFF), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

"I didn't feel like I had a lot of opportunities while I was growing

"Community engagement is another big focus for the IGFF," said Gallon.

Gallon continues to serve as an inspiration to many with his determination to follow his dreams, whether that is running down a football field or running into a burning building. He not only lives his life as an example for others who have big dreams, but through his foundation, he works to help others pursue their dreams as well. Perhaps Gallon is living his biggest dream of all through the IGFF.

"I want to bring love back to the community," said Gallon.

Many would say that is a dream certainly worth pursuing.

More information about the IGFF can be found on Facebook and Instagram. You may also send an email to [ironheadgallon@theigff.org](mailto:ironheadgallon@theigff.org). ■

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# Jackie's appreciation for beauty, conversation and connection

Story by **Laura Young**

Photographs Courtesy of Jackie Watson

Double doors angle across the corner of Dogwood and Jefferson streets in the heart of downtown Monticello. Walk through them, and right away you can feel it – a warm welcome, nothing fancy, a comfortable place to slide into a bit of gab with friends or family.

It's Jackie's Brickhouse Eatery. Tables for two line the broad windows of the small café, with space for larger gatherings in the center. A few barstools face the coffee pots, and the walls – dotted with encouraging words and photos of embracing celebrities – embody the outgoing, energetic personality of the owner, Jackie Watson.

What a winding path she forged

from France to Miami to Hollywood to, ultimately, this quiet little North Florida town! From muffin maker to fitness champ to television host to restaurant owner, the common thread through every transformation is Jackie's love of people and a drive to showcase the strength and sparkle of humanity.

Born in France, Jackie emigrated to the United States as a young adult.

"Growing up in France gave me a deep appreciation for beauty, conversation, food and human connection," she reflects. "People take their time there. They sit outside for hours, enjoy meals together and truly live in the moment."

Even at a young age, however, she dreamed of something bigger for her life

and yearned for what might be waiting for her in the bigger world.

"French culture can sometimes be very traditional and narrow-minded," she says. "When I came to America, I immediately felt at home. I felt freedom, opportunity, creativity and ambition in a way I never experienced before. That's when I realized I had found where I truly belonged."

During her very first month in the states, Jackie began to explore possibilities for starting her own business where she'd settled in Boca Raton, Florida.

"I came up with the idea of making muffins and selling them through nail salons," she recalls. "I went from salon to salon with my little delicacies,

and surprisingly the concept became successful very quickly. Before long, I was receiving private orders from people who had tasted them and wanted more."

She admits that she was eating a lot of the tasty muffins herself. As a consequence, the weight she gained during this time was changing her appearance in a way that destroyed any happiness she derived from her business doing so well.

One day when she was especially angry about it, she happened to see the cover of a fitness magazine in the Publix checkout line. She became completely mesmerized by the featured champion's beauty and radiant confidence. In that moment, she realized she didn't want to develop her baking business any further. Instead, she was inspired to embrace fitness, not only for her own health but also as a professional pursuit.

It wasn't as dramatic a turn as it might seem, for Jackie's father, Jean Michel Cravanzola, was deeply involved in the fitness world himself. When Jackie declared her new intent to become a fitness champion, he jumped on board with full support.

"All right then," his voice echoes in her memory, "I'll pick you up tomorrow morning at 4:30 a.m., and I'll train you."

Every morning thereafter they started early, gradually increasing the number of training sessions and their intensity.

"Nine months later, I had lost all the extra weight and stepped onto a competition stage for the very first time – where I won my very first title," Jackie says. "Looking back now, that moment in the grocery store changed the entire direction of my life."

By her third competition, she had caught the attention of a world-renowned trainer for celebrities in Miami, Antonio Almeida, who would ultimately play a major role in shaping her career.



"A year and a half later, fitness had completely consumed my life," says Jackie. "I was competing everywhere across Florida. If there was a competition in any county, I was there. I trained relentlessly, traveled constantly and pushed myself far beyond anything I had ever imagined possible. What had started as a deeply personal transformation had now become a true passion and purpose."

As a contestant for Miss Florida Fitness, Jackie made a connection that gave her the opening to take her fitness successes in yet another direction. A writer for a major French fitness magazine became fascinated with her story and published a feature recounting Jackie's journey. Before long, the journalist was writing about Jackie on a monthly basis.

"As the articles gained attention, I received an invitation that completely shocked me," says Jackie. "I was asked

to travel to Paris to meet the French president of the International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness, who asked if I would be interested in officially representing France in the fitness world while living and competing America."

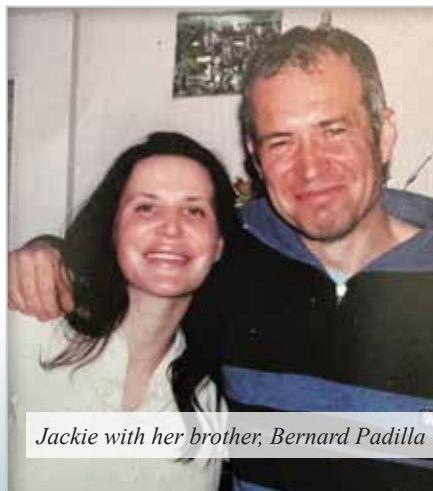
She proudly accepted the offer and began to compete across the United States, Europe and the world.

"Fitness gave me opportunities I could have never imagined," she notes. "I traveled, met incredible people, experienced different cultures and stood on stages I once only dreamed about as a young girl in France."

As exciting as her profession had become, another dream was beginning to grow inside her, as her fitness activities increasingly intersected with the entertainment industry. She found herself drawn to the creativity, the storytelling, the lights, the cameras and the people



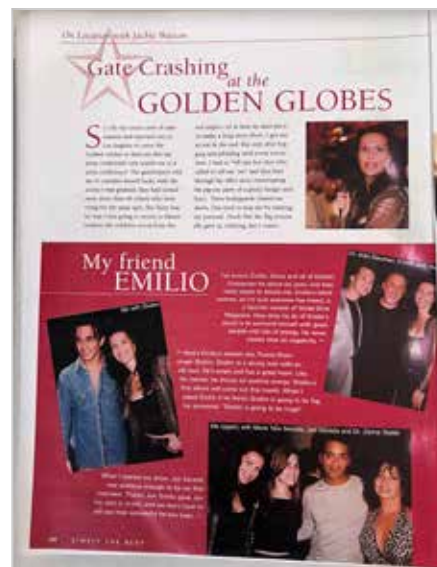
*Jackie Watson with her father, Jean Michel Cravanzola Padilla*



*Jackie with her brother, Bernard Padilla*



*Jackie as a youth in France.*



who were making it all happen. Through Almeida, who had become a trusted friend and her mentor, Jackie began meeting celebrities and making connections in the entertainment world.

Competitive fitness had taught her discipline, perseverance and determination, but after years of intense training and strict dieting, Jackie began to rediscover a belief she'd held as a child – that she was destined to be an entertainer.

"I wanted to tell stories, host red carpet events, produce projects and be part of the creative side of the industry," she shares. "I quickly realized that the opportunities I was seeking were centered in Los Angeles. So I took a leap of faith, packed my bags and moved to L.A. It was one of the best decisions I ever made."

This phase spanned the next 25 years, during which she produced television shows, worked on films, hosted



red carpet events and developed reality show projects.

"My career exceeded my expectations, and my heart was full," she says.

Meanwhile, her father had relocated to Monticello, and each time she visited him the town captured a bigger space in her heart.

"Toward the end of 2019, I began feeling a strong desire to return to Monticello. It's difficult to explain, but I felt a deep pull to come home and be close to my father. Years earlier, I had purchased a house next door to him, and from the moment I bought it I somehow knew that one day it would become my primary home."

At the time, though, she had no logical reason to make another career change.

"I was busy, successful, surrounded by wonderful friends and living what many would consider a dream life," says Jackie. "Yet something inside me kept telling me it was time for a change. I chose to trust that inner voice."

So she packed up her belongings and headed back East, making what she thought would be a temporary move to Monticello – in between entertainment projects.

We all now know what happened next. None of us, though – Jackie included – could have imagined at the time that in early 2020 COVID-19 would change everything.

"Hollywood shut down almost overnight," she recalls. "Productions stopped, events disappeared, and the industry came to a standstill. Looking back, I am incredibly grateful that I listened to my instincts and made the move when I did. Had I remained in

California, the financial impact could have been devastating."

Only a few months later, Jackie learned that the restaurant was up for sale. The news touched a memory she had from a decade earlier, when having breakfast in the restaurant with her father.

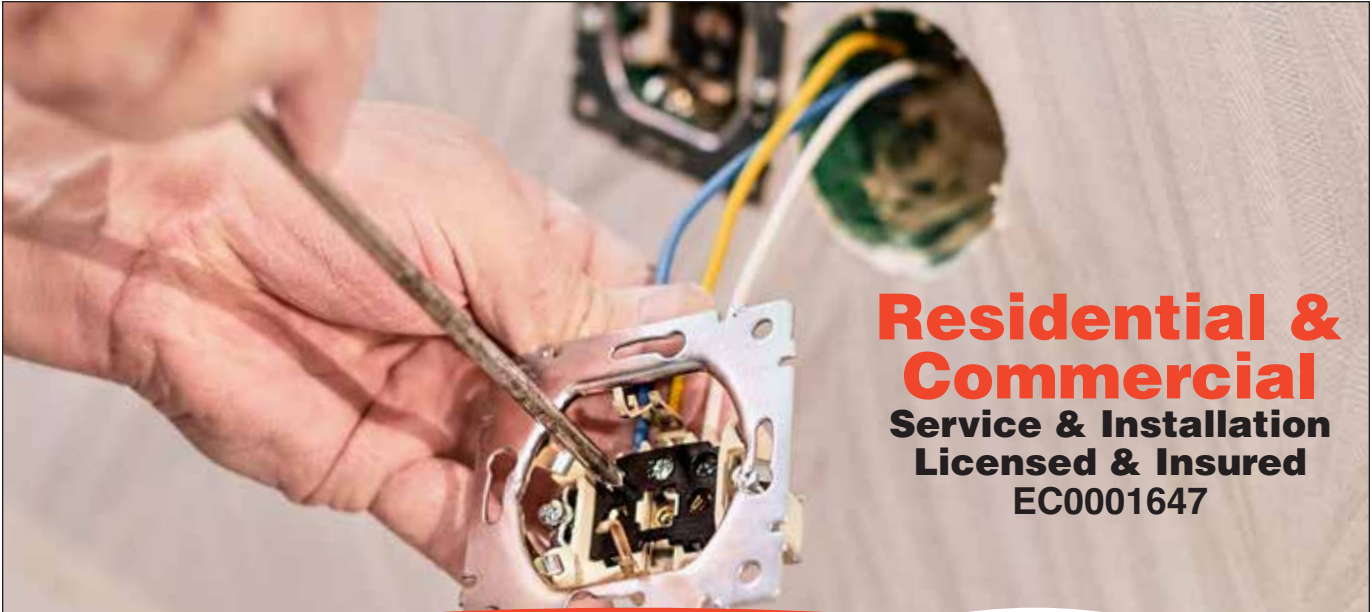
"Wouldn't it be wonderful if one day I owned it?" she had asked him at the time, envisioning it as a place where people could gather, laugh, dance, pray, celebrate life and build community together.

And so Jackie's Brickhouse Eatery came to be.

"The truth is," she admits, "I knew absolutely nothing about the restaurant business. I learned as I went. Fortunately, I had an incredible team in the beginning who guided me and helped me navigate the challenges of becoming a restaurant owner. Five years later, I can honestly say I love it. The restaurant has given me the opportunity to serve my community in a completely different way, and it has become one of the most rewarding experiences of my life."

It takes nearly all of Jackie's considerable energy to ensure that the Brickhouse continues to be a place where people feel welcomed, cared for and connected. While she still makes occasional trips back to Los Angeles to host events, her focus is centered now on the life she's built in North Florida.

"When I do have a few free moments," she says, "I spend them with my dogs. I have several rescues, and they are a very important part of my life. After a long day, there is something special about coming home to them. They remind me to slow down, to be present and enjoy life's simple blessings." ■



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# DR. JOHN M. ARROYO:

## *Turning his wounds into weapons of healing*

**Story by Mickey Starling**

*Photographs Courtesy of John Arroyo*

Madison County resident John Arroyo is a native of Los Angeles who enlisted into the United States Army when he was 20 years old. He was fleeing a life that was leading to destruction, having battled an addiction to methamphetamine, coupled with a lack of identity, which Arroyo attributes to not having a father at

home.

The military seemed the perfect avenue to “right the ship” before everything spiraled out of control. Little did Arroyo know that it would be the sinking of his “ship” that would set his course for a life filled with meaning and purpose. His first duty station was at Ft. Bragg, with the 82nd Airborne Division. Arroyo would go on to become a Green

Beret, serving two tours in Afghanistan and one in Iraq. After serving for 10 years, he began considering retirement.

“No one was going to pay me to chase bad guys anymore,” thought Arroyo, who decided to apply through the ROTC program for training to become an officer in the Army.

He successfully completed the training and was commissioned as an

officer in 2013. Arroyo's first assignment was at Ft. Hood, located between Dallas and Austin, Texas.

Five months into his new position, on April 2, 2014, Arroyo was exiting his car in the base parking lot when he heard shots being fired. As he began trying to determine the direction of the shots, the next round struck his neck and throat. The shooter, armed with a .45 caliber handgun, was a fellow soldier who was shooting randomly at people.

When the shots finally ended, 19 soldiers were hit, with three of them dying from their injuries. As Arroyo lay in a growing pool of blood, his priorities in life took a dramatic shift. No longer was he concerned with wealth, success and pleasure. His only thoughts were for his family, which he feared he was about to lose. As one who considered himself "orphaned in heart," loss of family was everything.

Suddenly, light began to break through his darkness, as Arroyo heard an "audible voice" speaking to him for the first time.

"Get up or your wife will die," said the voice, which Arroyo attributed to God.

However, he did not respond the first time, so he heard the same words again. His wife, Angel, had recently lost both her parents, nine days apart. Her brother had passed two years earlier, so she was weighed down with grief.

In his frantic search for help, Arroyo located only one soldier. As he got within 10 feet of him, a terrifying truth struck him. This wasn't help. This was his shooter, still actively searching for more victims. Though he soon shot three more soldiers, the crazed gunman never saw Arroyo.

"God blinded him," says Arroyo, who is certain that is the only reason he is alive today.

He quickly moved away from the shooter and continued the search for help, when five soldiers came to him, knowing he needed aid.

"They said they knew I was injured because I appeared to be wearing a red scarf that was blowing in the wind," remembers Arroyo.

The appearance of the wind was the blood steadily squirting from the bullet wound in his neck.

Arroyo was rushed to Darnall Army Medical Center in Ft. Hood and prepped for surgery. As he awaited an elevator, the doors opened and two ear, nose and throat specialists rushed out, perfectly timed to address his needs.

"They were right where they needed to be because I obeyed His voice in the



parking lot," said Arroyo.

As you might expect, the hospital and Army base were operating in emergency mode and was a hectic scene. Arroyo's commanding officer called Angel, hoping to verify his location since he was unaccounted for. She assured him that John would probably be home soon and she would have him call in.

Shortly after she hung up, another call came from a friend, asking Angel if she was aware of the shooting that took place near where John worked on base. Angel was now in panic mode, which was worsened by the knock on her door from John's commander. Afraid of hearing the worst, she didn't answer the door.

The commander was persistent, finally yelling that John was alive, but he needed to get her to the hospital right

away. The need for identification was obvious when she arrived at the hospital, where John's head had swollen "larger than a basketball" and his tongue had swollen to the point he could not close his mouth.

"She was looking at death," recalls Arroyo.

However, she was able to identify him by his tattoos.

A day after the shooting and two surgeries later, doctors told Angel that John would remain in a medically-induced coma for three days to improve healing. When she approached his bedside and squeezed his hand, he opened his eyes and began trying to tell her that he "got up" for her sake. Since he could not yet speak, he had to write it down.



As the slow road of recovery began, Arroyo continued smiling through each difficult day.

"I smiled because I knew I had been given a second chance," said Arroyo, smiling yet again.

He left the hospital one month later, with his physical recovery taking four years.

"Every day is recovery," says Arroyo. "It's a life-long process."

As difficult as the initial recovery was, the harder times came months later.

"My arm isn't working, I can't speak, and therapists are recommending amputation," recalls Arroyo. "After being strong and healthy, becoming broken was harder than getting shot. Actually, it was the same voice I heard initially that sustained me."

God's voice did more than sustain Arroyo: it propelled him.

"My mission today is to tell everyone to do the same thing I heard while lying in that parking lot – 'get up,'" says Arroyo.

Early in recovery, Arroyo thought he was fulfilling his mission simply by attending church regularly. However, the voice returned one evening as he was leaving for church.

"What are you doing?" asked the Lord.

"I am going to church," replied Arroyo.

"I didn't save you to go to church. I saved you to tell the world about Me," was the Lord's response.

One might think Arroyo would set

his sights on finding an avenue to share his story with the world, but that isn't how the story unfolded.

"I had to be faithful to share my story with one person at a gas station before He put me on a platform," recalls Arroyo.

Before Arroyo could fully devote his time to sharing Jesus with others, he needed to complete his military career of 20 years. Despite his injuries, Arroyo was blessed to become an assistant to a two-star general.

"Nobody messed with me," said Arroyo, referring to the military's typical practice of medically discharging soldiers who suffer severe injuries.

"I was like Joseph next to Pharaoh," remarked Arroyo.

A few months after being shot, Arroyo's new mission began taking shape. He was watching the "700 Club" on the Christian Broadcasting Network. One of the hosts asked viewers to send in their testimonies, which Arroyo soon did.

A year later, he was contacted by the network, which led to two broadcasts, one in 2016 and the other in 2024. Also in 2024, Arroyo was featured on the late James Robison's program, "Life Today."

With public speaking sure to be in his future, it was no accident that Arroyo soon joined the Roever Evangelistic Association, founded by Dave Roever, a Vietnam War veteran whose life was dramatically changed when a phosphorus grenade blew up in his hand. His subsequent testimony of overcoming adversity touched thousands of lives.

Arroyo's four-year involvement with his ministry gave him a number of speaking opportunities that trained him well for future service.

"I learned the craft of public speaking while there," stated Arroyo, who later attended SUM Bible College and Theological Seminary, in California, where he earned a master's degree in Christian Leadership. Later, he earned his PhD in Theology from Texas University of Theology.

Ironically, it was in Texas that Arroyo's journey to Madison began. He met Madison's Matt and JerriAnn Webb at Pastor Troy Brewer's church in Burleson. What began as a conversation in September of 2025 turned into discussions about a script for a movie about Arroyo's life and plans for future podcasts together.

The discussion with the Webbs planted seeds that quickly took root.

"My heart told me I was moving to Florida," said Arroyo.

Though the housing market was "awful" according to Arroyo, his home sold in about six weeks.

John and Angel had several locations to choose from when looking for a home in Madison, but the choice got easier when they found a spot within walking distance of the Webbs.

"God brought us here to restore us and give us a family," states Arroyo. "God brought us back to the table, using JerriAnn's family to do it."

He recently spoke at the "Men in Motion" event, in Madison, coming off of a speaking role at the National Day of Prayer, in Washington, D.C., in May. Earlier, he returned to Ft. Hood, providing resiliency training in April.

Arroyo has continued spreading his message of hope in numerous ways. He has written three books, two field guides and a curriculum. He has speaking engagements several times a month, both nationally and internationally. For more information about his ministry or podcast, visit [alifetransformed.com](http://alifetransformed.com).

Arroyo never forgot the lesson learned of being faithful with God's message to the people at a gas station. He uses every opportunity to make the most of the second chance God gave him in a bloody parking lot at Ft. Hood, where he could have died.

"My assignment now is to be a special operator for God, turning my wounds into weapons," says Arroyo. "I want to help people understand there are a thousand ways to be broken and only one way to heal." ■

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# WANT TO SEE SOME OF FLORIDA'S FALLS?

Story by Hailey Heseltine

Florida isn't exactly known for its mountainous ridges and steep cliffs. It's actually the flattest state in the entire U.S. Needless to say, if you're looking for somewhere to go on exhilaratingly high-altitude hikes, this is not the place. It may surprise you, however, to learn that Florida still has some of the natural wonders we generally associate with areas further north. Not ravines or mountains, perhaps, but we do have waterfalls.

North Florida generally has more

varied terrain in comparison to the rest of the state, especially with rolling hills in the Red Hills region and other areas around the panhandle and Big Bend. We also have lots of limestone – porous carbonate sedimentary rock, which sits along our aquifers and rivers. Limestone dissolves easily when exposed to the slight acidity of rainwater and the other elements. This is because, millions of years ago, the state was covered with marshes and seawater. The sea creatures that lived there dropped their calcite-rich shells, and slowly, a sediment buildup

accumulated that became the limestone foundation we have today. Limestone formations in rivers are responsible for most of the state's waterfalls.

Maybe none of Florida's falls are particularly grand when compared to those in areas with more altitude, but there are still some remarkable sights to see. The largest, near Chipley, features about a 75-foot cascade. Some of these falls also may be closer to home than you think. Want to see some of these natural wonders?



Photograph by Heather Ainsley

## Steinhatchee Falls (Taylor County)

The Big Bend's own Steinhatchee Falls is famous for being the widest waterfall in Florida.

These falls are located in southeast Taylor County, where they share a name with the nearby community of Steinhatchee, as well as the river they run on.

These falls are formed by a shelf of

limestone ridges stretching across the flow's path. While they are not anywhere near the tallest waterfalls to be found in our state, they are in fact the widest, with the shelf spanning nearly the entire river. The limestone ridge may be about 16 to 18 inches tall, but the falls are said to span about 200 feet.

The Steinhatchee Falls tract attracts

visitors for of course viewing the falls, but also wildlife viewing, fishing, hiking, kayaking, horseback riding, biking and canoeing. A trailhead for Steinhatchee Falls is located off of SR 51, about two miles south of the road's intersection with U.S. 19. Note that it will be a bit of a hike to get there – about three miles, so go prepared!



*Photograph Courtesy of Florida Memory*

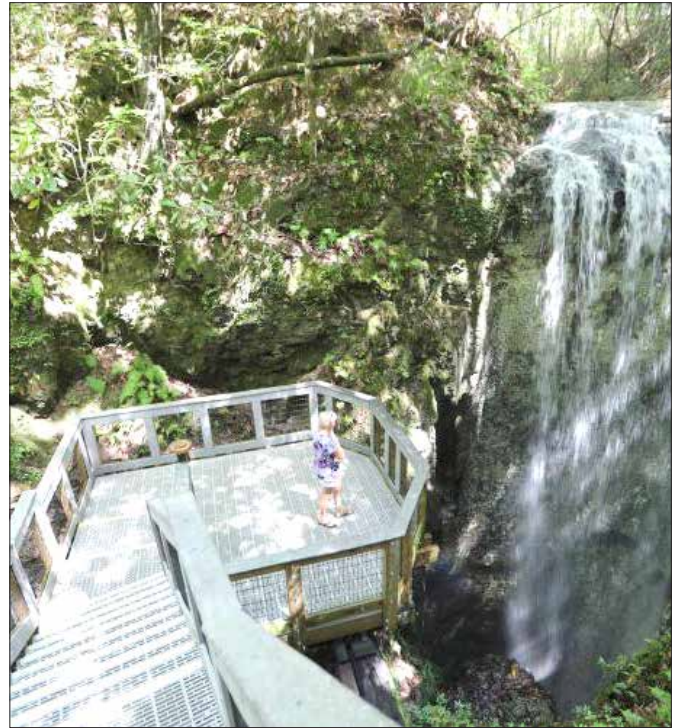
## **Devil's Millhopper Geological State Park (Alachua County)**

Located in Gainesville, Devil's Millhopper Geological State Park features a 120-foot-deep, 500-foot-wide sinkhole. It may not be as quite a vivacious waterfall as some of the others on the list, but several cascades constantly trickle into the sinkhole. This effect is particularly striking after long periods of rain, when the water flow is stronger. A 132-step staircase leads down to the limestone sinkhole. Notably, this park has a long history of tourism, having been regularly visited since at least the 1880s.

The park includes amenities such as public restrooms, parking and picnic areas. Unique geological and ecological features, springs, fossils, rich forest and plenty of plants and wildlife make it sight to see.

Entry costs \$4 per vehicle. The address is 4732 Millhopper Rd.

The Big Shoals Entrance is located at 18738 S.E. 94th St. The entry fee is \$4 per vehicle.



*Photograph Courtesy of floridastateparks.org*

## **Falling Waters Waterfall (Washington County)**

Falling Waters State Park is the place to see the largest cascade in the entire state! A stream flows into the Falling Waters Sink, a limestone depression which is about 100 feet deep and 20 feet wide. The cascade drops about 73 to 75 feet to the bottom of the sink, where it then disappears underground. For the maximum effect, the waterfall should be viewed after significant rainfall for it to crest the limestone lip. As a popular attraction, the waterfall has a boardwalk leading to it to provide easier access and viewing.

In addition to the main attraction of the waterfall, the park, which has been around since the 1960s, is popular for camping, events, picnicking, fishing, hiking and swimming.

The park's address is 1130 State Park Rd. The entry fee is \$5 per vehicle.

Are you thinking of taking a trip to see some of our state's waterfalls? Among the most important factors to consider when planning is what the water level will be. Average to above average waterflow will generally help the falls to look their best. When there's plenty of water flowing strongly over the crest, the falls will appear fuller and more robust. If there's too little water, such as during a long period of drought, the falls' flow may be reduced to a feeble trickle. When there's too much water, however, perhaps during a particularly wet season, the water level may rise high enough that the falls look murkier or less defined. In general, if you want to have the best viewing experience, you will want to plan your trip for a time when the rainfall has been average or above average.



*Photograph Courtesy of Florida Memory*

## **Big Shoals State Park Rapids (Hamilton County)**

Though the Big Shoals aren't officially waterfalls, they are famous for being the only Class III white water rapids in Florida – not fun for paddling! Located on the Suwannee River, these shoals are best viewed when the water level is between 59 and 61 mean above sea level.

The park is also famous for its large limestone bluffs, some reaching up to 80 feet above the river. Some popular activities include hiking, horseback riding and biking. The most popular trail is of course the Big Shoals Trail which, in keeping with its namesake, leads to the rapids.

The Big Shoals Entrance is located at 18738 S.E. 94th St. The entry fee is \$4 per vehicle.



*Photograph Courtesy of floridahikes.com*

## **Weeping Ridge Waterfall (Liberty County)**

The Weeping Ridge Waterfall is located on the Weeping Ridge Trail at Torreya State Park. After completing a mile-long but challenging trek, you can see the falls' remarkable 25-foot cascade.

The park is popular for its hiking trails, which cover unique terrain. Steep, tall ridges and ravine-like paths wind through the woods near the Apalachicola River. At the end of the Weeping Ridge Trail is a reward in the form of the falls. Though by no means the widest or most robust of the state's waterfalls, it is taller than most.

The park's address is 2576 NW Torreya Park Rd., and the entry fee per vehicle is \$3.



*Photograph by Damy Federico*

## **Falling Creek Falls (Columbia County)**

Falling Creek Falls is one of the state's larger waterfalls. According to the Suwannee River Water Management District, when the creek is at normal water levels, it forms a 10-foot cascade. It was also formed naturally. The crest comprises a limestone lip in the middle of Falling Creek, which is fed by the Suwannee River. As a result, water crashes over the crest as the familiar, dark, sweet-tea-esque color present in many of our state's rivers.

These falls are relatively accessible, with trails, a boardwalk and observation platform for easy viewing. The free-entry park also features amenities such as restrooms, parking and a playground.

Falling Creek Falls is located near Lake City and White Springs (only an exit and short ride away from both I-10 and I-75) at 953 Northwest Falling Creek Road.

*By failing to prepare,  
you're preparing to fail!*  
— Benjamin Franklin



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## *Horse barns in Jefferson County:* **WHERE LAUNDRY BECOMES A RHYTHM OF CARE**

**Story and Photography by Patricia Smith**

Morning settles softly over the barn, arriving before the day fully stirs. Sunlight slips through the slats, catching dust in the air and warming the saddles where they rest. The scent is unmistakable – hay, leather, and horse – familiar enough to feel like its own kind of comfort. A low nicker and the quiet snort of a curious greeting carry through the stillness, while somewhere nearby a dryer hums, turning a slow, steady load of blankets. It should feel like a chore – just another load of laundry – but it never quite does.

In Jefferson County, Florida, where stretches of pasture open into long quiet roads and barns sit back from the highway in pockets of shade, this rhythm is part of

daily life. The landscape itself seems to slow things down—humid mornings that linger, afternoon light filtering through live oaks, the steady presence of working farms and small horse properties. Here, barns are not separate from home life so much as extensions of it, and the routines that keep them running – feeding, grooming, cleaning, washing – become part of the same domestic current.

In most places, laundry is a task to be minimized, folded into the margins of a day. It is background noise, a means to an end. In the barn, it takes on a different character. Here, it is part of a larger rhythm, one that revolves not around convenience but around care.

For those who spend their days

with horses, routine is not optional. It is structure, discipline, and, over time, a kind of quiet language. Blankets must be cleaned. Saddle pads must be rinsed and dried. Fabrics heavy with sweat, dust, and the persistent cling of horsehair move through cycles of washing and drying not for appearance, but for the well-being of the animal. Cleanliness, in this context, is not aesthetic – it is practical, even protective.

And yet, within that practicality, something softer emerges.

For some, the routine becomes quietly therapeutic. The steady work of sorting, washing, and folding—done within earshot of shifting hooves and the occasional impatient nudge—creates a

rhythm that resists urgency. There is no real way to rush it. Water runs. Machines turn. Sunlight dries what it can. Work unfolds at its own pace, and in doing so, invites a different kind of attention.

It is not interaction in the usual sense. There are no reins in hand, no commands given. But the presence of the horses changes the texture of the task. A glance over a stall door. The soft exhale of breath in cooler air. The awareness that what is being cleaned will return to the animal, used again in the quiet, ongoing exchange of care.

And eventually, it does.

A clean saddle pad, still carrying the faint warmth of the dryer or the crispness of line-dried air, is lifted and set in place. The motion is familiar, unhurried. Fabric is smoothed, edges adjusted, the weight settled evenly along the horse's back. It is a small act, but one that resists rushing.

The horse responds in kind—not with anything overt, but in subtler ways. A shift in stance, the flick of an ear, the quiet acceptance of something that fits as it should. Clean fabric sits differently. It settles without the stiffness or grit that builds over time, and the difference, however slight, is felt.

Nothing about the exchange announces itself. There is no clear boundary between task and interaction. But in the repetition—washing, drying, placing, adjusting—a familiarity takes shape. The work done apart from the animal returns to it, completing a quiet circuit of care.

Of course, the barn resists romanticism.

No amount of washing fully removes horsehair; it weaves itself stubbornly into fabric, a lingering signature of the animal. Blankets emerge from machines still carrying a faint trace of their use. The weight of wet canvas can be unwieldy, the effort of lifting and hanging it a reminder that this is, undeniably, work. There are moments when the rhythm falters, when a curious horse disrupts a carefully folded pile, or when the line between clean and not-quite-clean blurs beyond distinction.



But these imperfections do not diminish the experience. If anything, they define it.

In a world increasingly shaped by speed and efficiency, where tasks are streamlined and outsourced, the slow, repetitive nature of barn laundry stands apart. It is not optimized. It does not aim to disappear into convenience. Instead, it remains visible, tangible—a series of small, necessary actions that accumulate into something larger.

There is quiet dignity in that kind of work. It rarely draws attention. It is not the part of equestrian life that appears in photographs or competitions. Yet it underpins everything else. The polished performance, the well-kept tack, the healthy, comfortable horse—all depend, in part, on these unseen efforts.

For some, this is where the bond deepens—not in moments of spectacle, but in the steady repetition of care. The act of washing a blanket or folding a pad becomes less about completion and more

about continuity. It is something that is done today, and again tomorrow, and again after that. A rhythm that holds.

Even for those outside the equestrian world, the appeal is recognizable. There is a particular satisfaction in work that is both physical and finite, in tasks that ask for attention but not urgency. In an environment that is alive but unhurried, where the presence of another living being lends weight to even the simplest actions.

As the day advances, the barn shifts. Light sharpens, sounds increase, the quiet of morning gives way to movement and activity. The dryer slows. A final load is lifted, shaken out, draped or folded. The work, for now, is done.

But nothing about it feels incidental.

By the next morning, there will be more to wash, more to carry, more to tend. The rhythm will begin again, as it always does—steady, unremarked, and essential. ■





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## HOSPITAL WELCOMES DR. WESLEY DRIGGERS TO PRIMARY CARE TEAM JULY 2026

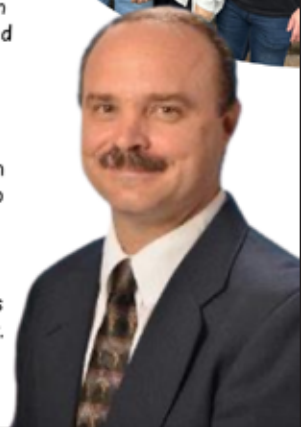
We are pleased to welcome Dr. Wesley Driggers, MD, PhD, FAAFP to our hospital's Primary Care Department beginning July.

Dr. Driggers earned his Doctor of Medicine degree from the University of South Alabama College of Medicine in Mobile, Alabama in 2001 after completing his PhD in Cell Biology at the same institution. He subsequently completed his Family Practice Residency at Halifax Medical Center in Daytona Beach, Florida. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree from Valdosta State University and earned his Associate of Arts degree from North Florida Junior College.

Dr. Driggers is **Board Certified in Family Medicine** and brings a strong commitment to both patient care and medical education. He has served as a preceptor for medical students since 2006 with various medical schools. Since 2022, he has held an Associate Professor position with the Florida State University College of Medicine and has served as the Family Medicine Clerkship Director for the FSU College of Medicine Daytona Campus.

**Born and raised in Hamilton County**, Dr. Driggers has deep roots in the community. He is a member of the well-known **Driggers family**, recognized locally for **Driggers Sausage**. He and his wife, Shannon Murphy Driggers, also a Hamilton County native, have two sons and one daughter.

We are excited for Dr. Driggers to return home and look forward to the experience, leadership, and compassionate care he will bring to our patients and community.




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# WHAT'S HAPPENING



## JULY

### July 2

#### Miss Red, White & Beautiful Pageant

The Hamilton County Chamber of Commerce will host the Miss Red, White & Beautiful Pageant at 6:30 p.m. at the Hamilton County Courthouse Annex (1153 N. Hwy. 41, Jasper). The patriotic-themed event is open to contestants ages 5-17 and includes divisions for Little Miss (ages 5 to 8), Junior Miss (ages 10 to 14) and Miss (ages 15 to 17). Participants will wear patriotic attire and deliver a short speech on "What Being an American Means to Me." Entry is \$50. For more information, email hamcocpageant@gmail.com.

### July 3

#### The Divas "Tribute to the Troops"

The Divas Trio presents a "Tribute to the Troops" show at the Monticello Opera House, including soulful harmonies and heartfelt renditions of beloved military anthems and patriotic favorites. For tickets visit monticellooperahouse.org or call 850-997-4242.

### July 3

#### Mayo Woman's Club Faith, Family and Freedom Celebration

The Mayo Woman's Club hosts its inaugural Faith, Family and Freedom Celebration 4-9 p.m. at the Edward Perry Sports Complex (840 N.E. C.R. 400, Mayo). The event, celebrating America's 250th anniversary, will feature food vendors, family activities and a fireworks show.

### July 3

#### Branford Fourth of July Pageant

The Branford Achievement Council hosst a Fourth of July Pageant at 6:30 p.m. in the Branford High School auditorium (405 N. Reynolds St., Branford). The event is open to participants ages 18 and under and will feature patriotic casual attire. Winners will ride on a float in the Fourth of July festival's parade on Saturday, July 4.

### July 16-19

#### Five Guys Named Moe at MOH

This musical by Clarke Peters is an exuberant tribute to the music of rhythm and blues pioneer and alto saxophonist, Louis Jordan. The story's hero, Nomax, is broke and his lovely Lorraine has left him. Out of his radio, five guys named Moe appear and encourage him to turn his life around. For showtimes and tickets visit monticellooperahouse.org or call 850-997-4242.

### July 24-26

#### Acts: A City Rising at MOH

This musical, brought to you by local youth, is based on the Biblical record found in the book of Acts. It follows

heroes of the early church such as Luke, Peter, Barnabas and Paul as they face the struggles of spreading the good news of Jesus throughout the land. They are tempted, thrown in prison and some even killed for their faith, yet they trust and obey the Lord through it all. For showtimes and tickets visit monticellooperahouse.org or call 850-997-4242.



## AUGUST

### August 7

#### Sean of the South in Concert at MOH

For tickets visit monticellooperahouse.org or call 850-997-4242.

### Now through August 31

#### A Slice of the Good Life Exhibit at JAG

This exhibit is JAG's annual member show, featuring the creative work of local artists in a variety of mediums. Jefferson Arts Gallery, 575 W. Washington St., Monticello, Fla., is open Wednesdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and by appointment by calling 850-997-3311.

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## WHAT'S HAPPENING

# 4<sup>TH</sup> OF JULY

## CELEBRATING AMERICA AT 250 YEARS

### BRANFORD

Branford's Fourth of July Festival features a full day of activities beginning at noon, including children's events, a cornhole tournament, duck race, car show, parade and fireworks at 9:30 p.m. The Rotary Club of Branford's annual Duck Race takes place at 2 p.m., with tickets available for \$5 each and proceeds supporting local scholarships and community programs. Attendees can enjoy contests, live attractions and family-friendly fun throughout the day before the evening parade and fireworks finale.

### JASPER

Hamilton County's Independence Day Celebration is held at Hamilton County Recreational Park (4525 S.W. 107<sup>th</sup> Ave., Jasper), featuring live music by the Str8up Band, food and craft vendors, a kids zone with waterslides and games, and a cornhole tournament. The event will culminate in one of the region's best small-town fireworks shows as the community celebrates America's 250<sup>th</sup> birthday. Attendees are encouraged to bring chairs and enjoy a full evening of family-friendly fun.

### MONTICELLO

Jefferson County's 250<sup>th</sup> July 4<sup>th</sup> Celebration takes place at Memorial Stadium (Tiger Lane, Monticello). Gates open at 6 p.m. for fun activities, live music and food vendors, followed by a spectacular fireworks show at dark. For more information, call 850-997-5552 or email [info@monticellojeffersonfl.com](mailto:info@monticellojeffersonfl.com).

### LIVE OAK

The America 250 Historic Living Timeline Parade takes place at Veterans Park (201 Howard St. W., Live Oak) as part of Freedom Fest from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m., with the parade beginning at 7 p.m. This free, family-friendly event invites the community to participate in a living parade showcasing key moments in American history, along with live music, contests, food vendors and a fireworks show. For more information or to register, visit [www.FreedomFestParade.com](http://www.FreedomFestParade.com).

### MADISON

Come celebrate the nation's 250<sup>th</sup> birthday as the Madison Lions Club sponsors the annual God and Country Celebration on the banks of Lake Frances, in Madison. Time to shop vendors and enjoy entertainment is capped off by the big fireworks display at dusk. For more information, contact Tim Dunn at 850-464-4890 or [mymadisonlionsclub@gmail.com](mailto:mymadisonlionsclub@gmail.com).



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