

Ponte Vedra NewsLine

JULY 2022 Volume 9 Issue 7

Ponte Vedra, Palm Valley, Nocatee and South Ponte Vedra Beach

A Florida NewsLine Publication



page 3
BFF Best Furry Friend



page 5
Q&A with
Sheriff Rob Hardwick



page 9
Get To Know ...
Alicia Booth Sprecher



page 10
Puzzles



Photos courtesy Rotary Club of Ponte Vedra
A good time was had by all – for a good cause!

Thousands of rubber ducks “race” in Intracoastal for great cause

By NewsLine Staff
mail@floridanewslines.com

On Sunday, May 22, the Rotary Club of Ponte Vedra dumped approximately 3,000 rubber ducks into the Intracoastal waters from the Palm Valley bridge to the delight of hundreds of onlookers. The annual Rubber Duck Race raises money for the organizations who put it on, namely the Rotary Club of Ponte Vedra and its non-profit partner, Learn to Read of St. Johns County. With the help of National Honor Society students at Creekside, Nease and Ponte Vedra high schools, as well as several corporate sponsors, the duck race raised about \$20,000

Rubber Duck Race cont. on pg. 2

Make room for the mallet: Croquet Club welcomes new members, prepares for upcoming tournament

By Tiffany Merlo Phelps
mail@floridanewslines.com

It might not be visible from the road, but tucked away at the end of Mosquito Control Road in Ponte Vedra Beach sits the Ponte Vedra Croquet Club (PVCC) with three full-sized courts and four three-quarter sized courts.

Known as the North Lawn and the South Lawn, the surface is perfectly flat with a putting green finish that is maintained daily. It took PVCC founder John Curington one-and-a-half years to transform the space into a facility that is dedicated to the sport of croquet.

“Croquet is unfortunately a stigmatized sport in which people think it is a children’s game. It is not. It is a serious sport,” said Curington. “Players interact with opponents, seeking scoring opportunities at each wicket.”

Most of all, skill and strategy attract players to the sport, said Curington, who is a United States Croquet Association (USCA) charter member and a 2006 Hall of Fame inductee. In 1999, he also helped to build the National Croquet Center in West Palm Beach.

“I have walked off the croquet court a winner, not because I out-shot my opponent, but because I out-thought my opponent. Likewise, I have walked out with my head low because I played like a fool and was outsmarted even though I thought I was hitting my shots pretty well,” he said. “It is the strategy that attracts me to the sport more than anything else.”

Croquet is played on a tennis court-sized lawn, and the main investment is a mallet (a long-handled stick with a head like a hammer), Curington said. He noted that croquet is a sport of inclusion.

“Unlike most sports, we don’t divide players according to sex. We only differentiate people by their handicap. So, we have top women playing at the top



Photo courtesy John Curington

Randy Cardo, a top player from Palm Beach and Quogue, Long Island, in addition to being on the board of the Croquet Foundation.



Photo courtesy Tiffany Merlo Phelps

Ponte Vedra Croquet Club founder John Curington

levels of croquet,” said Curington.

Curington opened the facility seven years ago after buying the former Anastasia Mosquito Control District substation and building his vision. The club currently has 50 members, but Curington would like to increase the number to 300. In addition, Curington would also like to see the site used as an event venue with its 3,000 square foot

pavilion, lounge, restrooms, and picnic area.

Ponte Vedra Croquet Club membership is open to the public and Curington said the demographic tends to be early retirees and seniors. And while a certain amount of athleticism is needed for some of the more difficult shots, a person need only be in reasonably good health and have the time to learn the sport, he said.

The club offers free introductory lessons on Wednesday and Saturday mornings at 9:30 a.m. and Sunday afternoons at 3:30 p.m. There is no charge for instruction or the use of the club equipment.

“We would like to bring more people in and introduce them to the sport,” said Curington, who has been playing for over 30 years. “We get a lot of former golfers and tennis players because those sports are hard on the knees, back and shoulders. Golf has the twisting action. This is an easy swing. Croquet is an easy pendulum swing.”

Club member Marc Stearns, a former golfer, echoed the same thoughts. He and his wife, Marycarol, joined two-

Croquet Club cont. on pg. 2

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Rubber Duck Race cont. from pg. 1

for the Rotary Club's foundation and Learn to Read.

"We could not do this event without the help of those students and our corporate sponsors," said Rubber Duck Race chairperson and Rotarian, Gary Smith. "Lazzara Orthodontics and Sid Ansbacher were our lead sponsors and the

faculty supervisors of the National Honor Society programs at the high schools were incredibly helpful. As Rotarians, we value the phrase 'Service Above Self' and these folks demonstrated that every step of the way."

Shortly before the ducks were dropped in the water, those gathered at the nearby Palm Valley Outdoors Bar & Grill

heard from several dignitaries about the significance of the event. Those speakers included Luis (Luiggi) Estrella (current Learn to Read student), Angela Moreno (former Learn to Read student and current Learn to Read employee), Mary-Beth Murray (president of Rotary Club of Ponte Vedra), Kelly Barrera (School Board member, St. Johns County School District) and Jeremiah Blocker (St. Johns County Commissioner).

A front loader dropped the rubber ducks into the water below, where boaters and kayakers waited to observe the "race." They then gathered all the ducks from the water and randomly selected the top finishers. Those who adopted the top finishing ducks in the race won an array of donated prizes ranging from two free airline tickets from Southwest Airlines to a \$100 gift card at TPC Sawgrass.



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Photos courtesy Rotary Club of Ponte Vedra
A front loader donated by Vallencourt Construction drops about 3,000 rubber ducks in the Intracoastal from the Palm Valley bridge.

"Our volunteer-based organization provides free literacy skills assessment and instruction in St. Johns and Putnam Counties to individuals 16 years of age and older," said Learn to Read's executive director, Joseph Cinney. "Without the Rubber Duck Race, our services would be significantly impacted. We are so grateful to the Ponte Vedra community for its help in keeping this Rubber Duck Race afloat."

Croquet Club cont. from pg. 1

and-a-half years ago and regularly play in tournaments. They will travel in August to England to attend the World Championships at the Sussex County Croquet Club. He said the United States is sending a team of six players to compete in the tournament.

Stearns said he enjoys PVCC because it includes a mix of folks who like to play for social reasons and those who take a more hard-core approach to the sport. Stearns said he falls into the latter category.

"I analyze every shot I take," said Stearns, who is also the PVCC Golf Croquet Tournament Manager.

The PVCC Golf Croquet Tournament, a USCA-sanctioned event, will take

place Nov. 3 – 6 at PVCC. Stearns expects players (at a cap of 40) to compete from not only the Ponte Vedra Beach area but also from New York and South Florida. The event is open for the public to watch the tournament.

Both Curington and Stearns underscored the social aspect of croquet and its inclusiveness. To that end, PVCC holds "Apres Croquet" or "Wine and Wickets" from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. on Sunday afternoons after play to encourage member fellowship.

[Author's Note: For more information about PVCC, visit pontevedracroquetclub.com or email pontevedracroquet@gmail.com. For more information about the November tournament, contact Stearns at MStearns2@bellsouth.net.]



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BFF Best Furry Friend of the month

Meet Brig!



BREED:
Giant Schnoodle (giant schnauzer and standard poodle)

Favorite Activity:
Going on walks, especially at the beach

Favorite Treat:
Cheese

Favorite Friend:
My mum

How your BFF got their name:
Our dogs always get nautical names. Brig is two-masted sailing vessel or the prison on a ship.

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

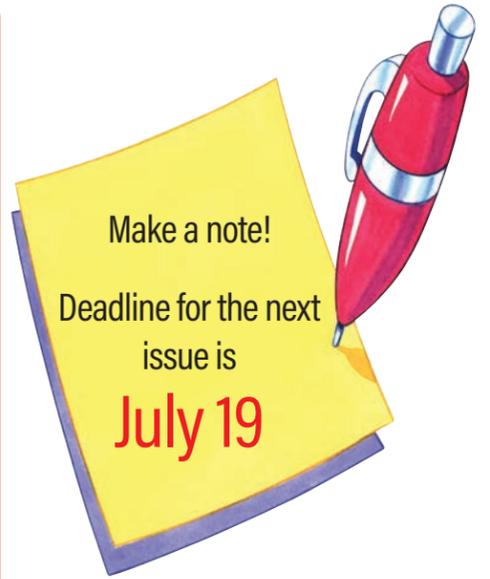


Table of Contents

- 4 What's Happening in Ponte Vedra
- 6 Q&A with Vicky Oakes
- 7 St. Johns Business Monthly
- 11 PopHistory
- 12 Nease NJROTC
- 13 Briefs
- 15 Travel

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Last month's Mystery Photo was Landrum Middle School. Our winner was Clifton Tippins. Congratulations!

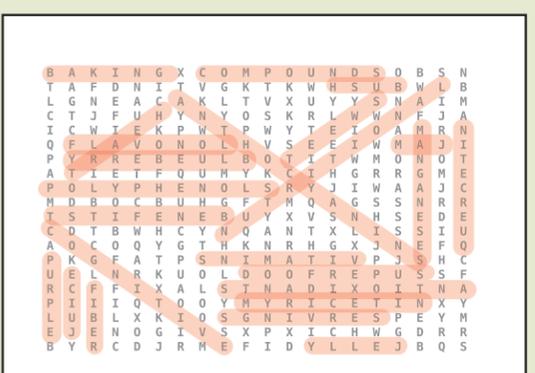


Answers
to our
Puzzles
PG 10

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July

Community Calendar What's Happening in Ponte Vedra

Council on Aging offers interest groups at the COA Center at Flagler Health+ Village at Nocatee. Meetings are free and self-guided except for the Caregiver's Support Group. Advance registration for clubs and meetings is required; email pbrunell@Stjohnscoa.com or call (904) 819-3234. Tuesday clubs include: Caregiver Support Group, 1 p.m. - 2 p.m.; and Widows and Widowers social group, second and fourth Tuesday of each month, 11 a.m. - 12:30 p.m. Wednesday groups include: Community Crafting, 9:30 a.m. - 11:30 a.m.; and Genealogy Group, 1 p.m. - 2:30 p.m.

1st: The GTM Research Reserve will hold a new volunteer orientation on July 1 from 10 a.m. - 11:30 a.m. Learn about volunteer rules and responsibility as well next steps to volunteering. Complete the volunteer application online (www.gtmnerr.org) before attending. Contact Shannon Rininger at Shannon.Rininger@FloridaDEP.gov to assure that your application was received.

5th: Bingo will be held at THE PLAYERS Community Senior Center, 175 Landrum Lane, on Tuesdays from 1 p.m. - 2 p.m. for four weeks beginning Tuesday, July 5. Contact Amanda Jones at (904) 280-3233 or ajones@coasjc.org for more information and to register.

9th: The Northeast Florida Chapter of Sisters in Crime presents multi-award-winning author Judith Erwin at the Ponte Vedra Beach Branch Library, 101 Library Blvd. (FOL Room)

on Saturday, July 9. Doors open at 10 a.m. and the meeting starts at 10:15 a.m. Bring your coffee and bring a friend. The group welcomes misters and sisters to learn more about writing, promoting, and enjoying crime fiction. Visit www.nefloridasistersincrime.org for more information.

11th: The St. Johns County Civic Roundtable will meet on Monday, July 11 at 12 p.m. via Zoom. The meeting will feature guest speaker Kyle Dorsey, president of Baptist Medical Center South. Email info@sjcroundtable.org to register for the meeting or visit www.sjcroundtable.org for more information about the St. Johns County Civic Roundtable.

14th: Senior Scams presentation by the St. Johns County Sheriff's Office will be held at THE PLAYERS Community Senior Center, 175 Landrum Lane, on Thursday, July 14 at 11 a.m. Learn about the current scams and how to prevent fraud. Contact Amanda Jones at (904) 280-3233 or ajones@coasjc.org for more information.

15th: the link will celebrate its first anniversary on July 15 with a free Family Olympics evening for the community, featuring games and live music from 6 p.m. - 8 p.m. at 425 Town Plaza Ave. in Nocatee. A business expo, where local businesses will showcase their products or services, will be held from 6 p.m. - 9 p.m. Visit

www.thelink.zone for more information.

16th: The Nocatee Farmers Market - Island Experience will be held on Saturday, July 16 from 10 a.m. - 1 p.m. at Nocatee Station Field. The Farmers Market is open to the public.

19th: Ponte Vedra Democratic Club will meet on Tuesday, July 19 at 6 p.m. for Chat & Chew before the 6:30 p.m. meeting at Christ Episcopal Church, Room 106, 400 San Juan Road. The featured speaker will be St. Johns County Supervisor of Elections Vicky Oakes. Email jkary@verizon.net for more information.

20th: Ponte Vedra Woman's Club presents its July Summer Social for current and prospective members on July 20 from 5:30 p.m. - 7:30 p.m. at Pussers Bar and Grill, 816 Highway A1A North in Ponte Vedra Beach. Friends and mates are welcome. Everyone will order off the dinner menu. Register for this event at www.pontevedrawomansclub.com.

22nd: Friday Film Festival featuring "Death on the Nile (2022)" (rated PG) will be held at the Ponte Vedra Beach Branch Library on July 22 from 11 a.m. - 1 p.m. Adults are invited attend a matinee on the library's 96" screen with plenty of sound. No reservations are needed, and it's free. Bottled water will be provided; participants may bring snacks.

23rd: The Ponte Vedra Writers Group will meet on Saturday, July 23 at 10 a.m. at the Ponte Vedra Beach Branch Library. Featured speaker will be William Hatfield, who will present "Creating Memorable Characters No One Can Forget." The meeting is free and open to members and non-members alike. Visit www.floridawriters.org for more information.

23rd: GTM Research Reserve will host its monthly Beach Cleanup on Saturday, July 23 from 9:30 a.m. - 11:30 a.m. No registration is required; meet at the Visitor Center, 505 Guana River Road in Ponte Vedra Beach where gloves and trash bags will be provided. Visit gtmnerr.org for more information.

24th: Hopefull Handbags will host its Women's Expo 2022 on July 24 from 11 a.m. - 2 p.m. at Classic Car Museum of St. Augustine, 4730 Dixie Highway in St. Augustine. All net proceeds go directly to Hopefull Handbags Global to further its mission for survivors of domestic abuse and their children, specifically to purchase land and build a new building for survivors and their children called Carolyn's Haven of Hope. Tickets are \$7 and are available online (<https://form.jotform.com/221074808209151>). Visit www.hopefullhandbags.org for more information.



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with St. Johns County Property Appraiser Eddie Creamer

Q: What is coming up on the calendar of the Property Appraiser's Office?

A: Our office has completed valuations needed for the creation of the tax roll. This tax roll was submitted to the county taxing authorities and the Florida Department of Revenue on June 1. With that submission, we also submitted our annual budget, since the taxing authorities fund our office.

Q: Can you give us any insight into the numbers on this year's tax roll?

A: This year, the Just Market Value of the tax roll is \$61.2 billion, which is the largest tax roll ever for St. Johns County. The Taxable Value is \$40 billion, which represents a 15.26 percent increase over the initial submission in 2021. These increases are due to a combination of an increase in property values as well as the addition this year of \$1.9 billion in new construction.

Q: What happens next?

A: The Florida Department of Revenue has 30 days to review the tax roll and the taxing authorities use the tax roll to create their budgets. We will resubmit the First Final Tax Roll on July 1. This 30-day window allows our team to do quality control work and make any adjustments as well as answer any questions from the Florida Department of Revenue. Then, TRIM notices will be mailed.

Q: What can you tell us about TRIM notices?

A: TRIM is the most important document a property owner will get in St. Johns County. They will be mailed by our office on Aug. 19 and are also available online (www.sjcpa.us) as of that date. Within the mailing, property owners will receive a copy of the State of Florida Taxpayer's Bill of Rights and a list of exemptions in addition to the

TRIM notice. The TRIM notice also contains the date and time of the budget hearing for each of the taxing authorities, so property owners can attend to learn more.

Q: What will the TRIM notice contain?

A: The TRIM notice shows the market value, the assessed value and the taxable value of your property for 2021 and proposed for 2022. It will also show any exemptions for the property. Make sure you check your TRIM notice for accuracy as to values and exemptions. The taxes are listed by taxable authority and will show what the taxes would be if the county made no changes to the budget. This is called the "rollback rate," essentially what your taxes would be this year to allow the county to collect the same amount of money as last year. TRIM will also show the proposed taxes if the proposed budget is passed; this is what would be on the tax bill.

Q: What should property owners do if they disagree with the value assessed by your office?

A: When the TRIM notice is mailed, a 25-day clock starts. If the taxpayer has any discrepancy with the Property Appraiser's Office, they should contact us to discuss. If we can't come to an agreement, the taxpayer can file an appeal with the Value Adjustment Board. It is very important to do this within the 25-day window, because if not, a taxpayer will lose his or her right to appeal.

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

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



with St. Johns County Sheriff Rob Hardwick

Q: Can you give some insight into your recent budget presentation to the Board of County Commissioners for the next fiscal year?

A: As background, before the budget process started, my entire command staff met with the county commissioners one-by-one because our relationship with them is so important. We went over my three budget priorities, which are increasing compensation and benefits for our employees so that we can recruit and retain top talent; maximizing technology to decrease crime in St. Johns County; and after we've assessed the entire county, add additional personnel. Then I proposed my budget of nearly \$103 million, which represents an \$8.8 million increase over last year. None of the increase is for capital improvements.

Q: Can you describe what items are included in the increase?

A: Nearly all is going towards increasing the base pay for sworn deputies from \$45,000 to \$50,000. This will be for approximately 490 deputies at the rank of lieutenant and below. As background, there are approximately 100 of our deputy sheriffs who live in touching counties because they can't afford to live in St. Johns County. Additionally, in a recent 30-day period, we had four 10-year deputy sheriffs leave for a variety of reasons, but all were for higher paying jobs. I also propose to increase the base pay for our civilian staff \$3,000 to \$35,000.

Other items included in the requested increase include nearly \$2 million to the Florida retirement system, \$450,000 for an increase in health benefits for employees, \$500,000 due to an increase in fuel costs across all agency vehicles,

Rob Hardwick cont. on pg. 11

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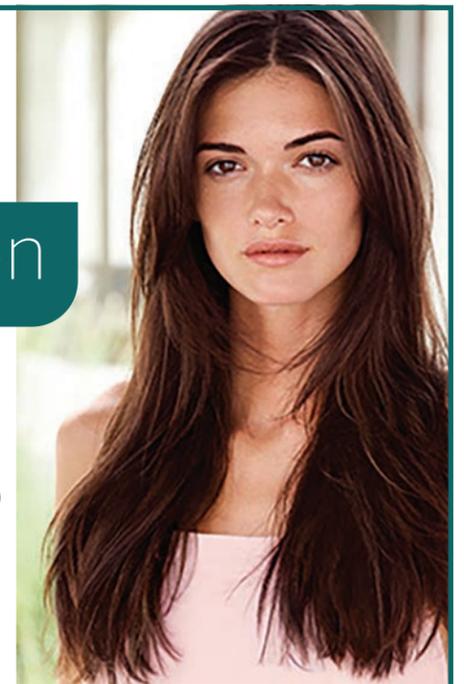
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with St. Johns County Supervisor of Elections Vicky Oakes

Q: Do we have a Primary Election this year?

A: Yes. The Primary is scheduled for August 23.

Q: Have candidates that are running for office filed their papers?

A: Yes. Candidate qualifying ended June 17 and the Primary Election ballot is finalized.

Q: How can I find out who will be on my ballot?

A: A sample ballot will be mailed, or emailed, to every registered voter unless you requested a vote-by-mail ballot. Sample ballots are mailed three weeks prior to an election and are also available on our website. You can access yours by using My Voter Status and looking up your voter record. A list of Primary Election candidates is also available on our website along with a full list of candidates who qualified with our office.

Q: When will vote-by-mail ballots be mailed?

A: Vote-by-mail ballots go into the mail on July 9 for overseas and military voters. They are the first to be mailed their ballots, 45 days prior to the election. The ballots for all other voters who requested vote-by-mail ballots will be mailed around July 18.

Q: I don't remember if I requested

a vote-by-mail ballot. How can I check?

A: Visit www.votesjc.gov and use My Voter Status to look up your voter record. You can verify your address on file with the Elections Office, update it if you need to, and see if you have a request on file. If you haven't requested a ballot, it's not too late. You have up until 10 days before the election to request a ballot be mailed to you.

Q: Will there be early voting for the Primary?

A: Yes. Early voting is available from 9 a.m. – 6 p.m., Aug. 13 – 20, at these six locations: Ponte Vedra Branch Library, Julington Creek Annex, Supervisor of Elections Office, St. Augustine Beach City Hall, Southeast Branch Library, and the Hastings Branch Library.

Q: I heard some election day polling locations have changed. Will I be notified if mine changed?

A: Yes. Due to the 2020 Census and the 2021 redistricting process, we have new voting districts, new precinct lines, and some new polling locations. All registered voters were mailed new voter information cards in June to notify them of the changes. If you did not receive your new card, visit www.votesjc.gov and use My Voter Status

Vicky Oakes cont. on pg. 9



with St. Johns County Clerk of Circuit Court and Comptroller Brandon Patty

Q. Can you tell us about the awards your office has received for reporting the county's finances?

A. We learned in June that we received a second award from the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) of the United States and Canada, this time for our Popular Annual Financial Report (PAFR). The first award was the Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting, which I call the gold standard for reporting, transparency and disclosure about the county's finances — we've gotten it for 29 consecutive years, which is an achievement in itself. But this second award is for our first-ever PAFR, a shorter, more reader-friendly booklet than the detailed 400-plus-page Annual Comprehensive Financial Report on which it's based.

The PAFR, titled "Tracking Your Tax Dollars: A Guide to St. Johns County's Finances," features highlights from the comprehensive report and is designed to be straightforward and user-friendly for taxpayers without a background in public finance. It is for Fiscal Year 2020 so some of the data is outdated. You can read it at stjohnsclerk.com/pafir/. We will produce a new PAFR this fall for Fiscal Year 2021 showing how tax dollars are collected and spent, as well as more recent trends on demographics, housing, taxes and more.

Q. Knowing that the Clerk of Courts receives monetary judgments and payments related to court cases, how can readers learn whether they have unclaimed funds with your office?

A. One in five Floridians has unclaimed funds from a forgotten financial account, according to Florida CFO Jimmy Patronis. In May 2022 alone, more than \$36 million in unclaimed property was returned to Floridians, with about \$1.4 million of it coming from the Jacksonville region. As of the end of April, our office had unclaimed funds totaling nearly \$328,000. A quick visit to our webpage, <https://stjohnsclerk.com/clerk-unclaimed-funds/>, will show you if your name is on the current list. Unclaimed funds can range from a few dollars to tens of thousands of dollars, so I would encourage your readers to check on a regular basis. If you have a claim to money held by the St. Johns County Clerk of Courts, contact my office as soon as possible, because each year we send unclaimed funds to the State of Florida. Once funds are sent to the state, we can't assist you in recovering those funds.

Q. Do you have an update on county property owners who have signed up for your office's free fraud alerts?

A. We are about a fifth of the way to our goal of 10,000 subscribers and working hard to get out the message. In the coming weeks, we are looking to partner with our fellow Clerks of Court in northeast Florida in a shared message about protecting our residents' properties from scammers through our free notification services. It's easy to sign up and it's totally free. Our service provides an early warning to a property owner, alerting them to check their records online and take action if a property record or mortgage document has been fraudulently altered. Sign up at <https://stjohnsclerk.com/recording-activity/> and let your friends and families know that their county may also offer similar free services.

Q. How can residents get in touch with you?

A. You can call me on my cell phone at (904) 599-8688, the Clerk's Office at (904) 819-3600 or visit us online at stjohnsclerk.com. I also invite you to check out our recently launched monthly newsletter at <https://conta.cc/3y4se4p> and sign up to receive it monthly via email.

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ST. JOHNS Business Monthly

SCORE to offer CEO peer group forum

By NewsLine Staff
mail@floridanewslines.com

Kicking off this July, SCORE's Jacksonville Chapter will host the CEO Forum, a program for established CEOs seeking a consortium of their peers.

The CEO Forum itself is nothing new to SCORE; the initial iteration was launched by the Orange County, California SCORE chapter with a resounding influence that continues to promote growth and camaraderie across the business community.

SCORE Jacksonville will launch the program here on the First Coast and looks forward to a long legacy of continued support for small businesses and those that run them.

The CEO Forum will be held monthly over lunch at The Capital Grille, St. John's Town Center, Jacksonville. Agendas are member-driven, creating an atmosphere for networking, sharing of best practices, and the potential for innovative solutions to the ever-changing issues that affect the potential success of businesses.

The CEO Forum is a new offering to the Jacksonville community based on the tried-and-true philosophy that although you may be succeeding well enough on your own, we are always better when we work, learn, and develop together.

If you or anyone you know would be a good fit for this monthly meeting of the minds, more information and requirements for selection can be

found at www.jacksonville.score.org/CEO-Forum

SCORE is a national organization with hundreds of community-focused chapters sprinkled throughout the country serving thousands of individuals annually. The Jacksonville chapter, like its counterparts across the United States, is composed mostly of retired and semi-retired CEOs and

executives who volunteer their time to guide new and prospective business owners on their journey to the top of their respective fields. Traditionally, SCORE volunteers offer their services through one-on-one mentorship, conferences, and a vast array of webinars which have proved their longevity throughout the pandemic and are still going strong.



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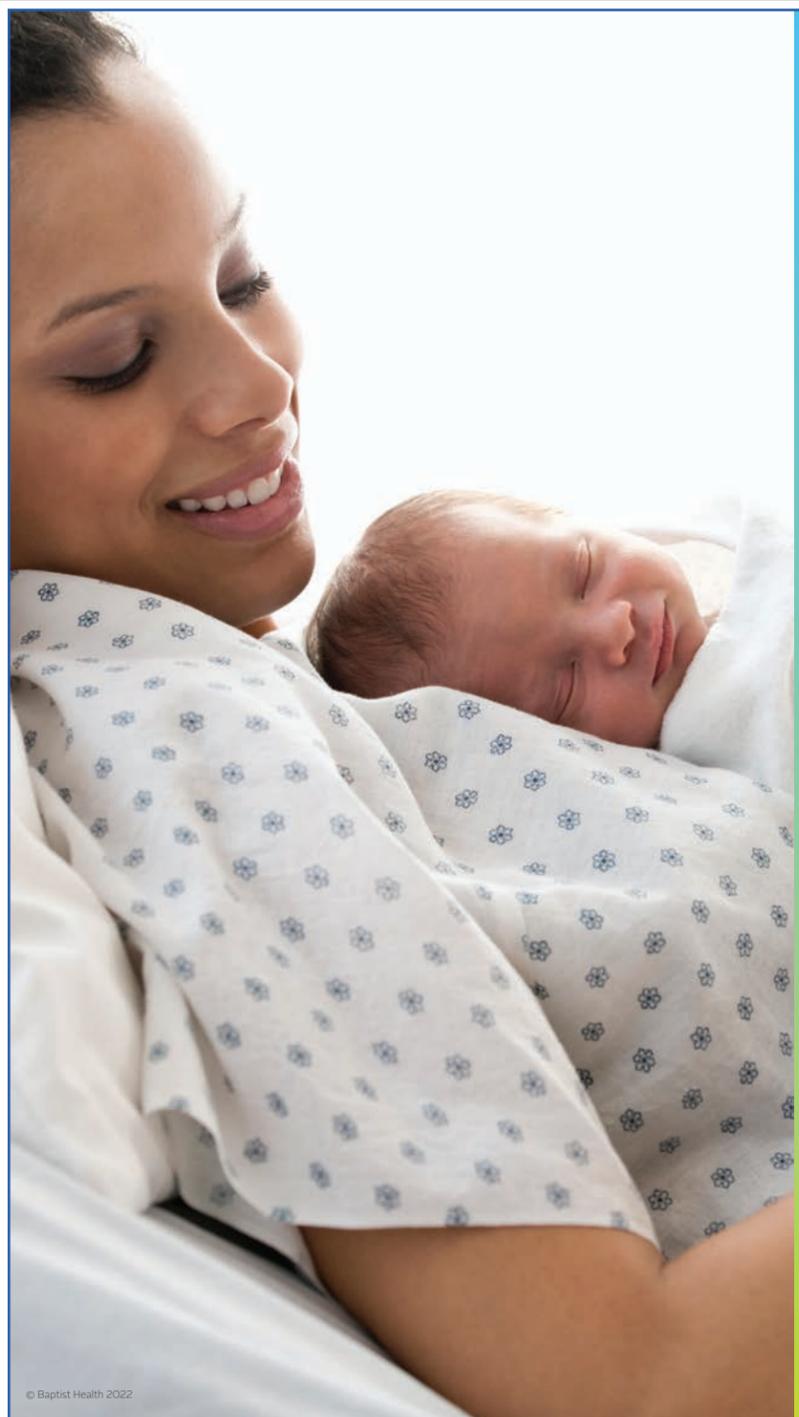


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with State Attorney, 7th Judicial Circuit, R.J. Larizza

Q: Can you describe some of the scams that have come to your attention?

A: We've had some interesting fraud pop up lately that has to do with real estate: vacant property, home improvement, and vacation rentals would be the broad categories.

Q: What fraud are you seeing with vacant property?

A: Most people think you can't steal a home, but it can be done — and we've prosecuted some cases in St. Johns County. Vacant property is typically the target and a quit claim deed along with the legal concept of adverse possession is how it is done. For example, a dishonest person might illegally live in a vacant home for awhile and then utilize a quit claim deed to turn the property over to themselves and then sell or rent the property fraudulently. If they sell the property, they will offer owner financing, so that title insurance is not required as with a mortgage company. When the rightful owner shows up at the property, surprised that someone is there, they often call law enforcement, who is then shown the quit claim deed. This then looks like a civil matter, but it's a fraud to illegally record documents.

My advice if you have vacant property: ask someone you trust to keep an eye on it to ensure no one is living there illegally and also check with the county regularly to make sure there have been no documents filed on the property such as quit

claim deeds. Consider this as you would check up on your credit report.

Q: What about home improvement fraud?

A: Recently we had 50 victims in our district of a roofing scam. As you know, there is a shortage of labor and many reputable contractors are quoting long periods of time to complete a project. Some homeowners may then seek out other contractors and come across some that are not so reputable. Scammers are always ready to take advantage. It's a red flag if the contractor asks for all the money for a job up front. Make sure any deposit requested seems reasonable and do your due diligence as it pertains to licensing and insurance. You can call the county and find out if a contractor is licensed to work here and in addition to asking to see the proof of insurance, maybe take the additional step of actually calling the insurance company to verify coverage.

Q: Finally, what can you tell us about vacation rental property fraud?

A: If you're going on vacation, always use a reputable agency to find the property you want to rent. Be careful searching online because sometimes what is represented on the internet is not reality — and you won't know it until you show up ready for your vacation. Plus, by then the scammer will already have your personal

R.J. Larizza cont. on pg. 9

United Way of St. Johns' CEO accepts position with United Way of Florida

By NewsLine Staff
mail@floridanewline.com

Melissa Nelson, current CEO and president of United Way of St. Johns County, has been named the new CEO and president of the United Way of Florida, the state organization of 28 local United Ways.

"We conducted a comprehensive search for a leader who can take the United Way of Florida to new heights and found the skill set we need in Melissa Nelson," said Jeff Hayward, United Way of Florida board chair. "As a local United Way CEO who transformed the United Way of St. Johns County, Melissa possesses the interpersonal skills, business acumen and Florida legislative advocacy experience that make her the perfect choice to lead the organization," he added.

Nelson has been with United Way of St. Johns since March 2014. During that time, the organization has more than doubled in its efforts. Annual support has increased from \$1.12 million in 2015, to \$2.37 million in 2021. In 2019, the organization expanded to include Putnam County. Known for the traditional annual funding of nonprofits, during Nelson's tenure with the organization, the organization also administrated \$1.2 million in CARES funds to individuals in Putnam County; added rolling Strategic Grants that focus solely on food insecurity, housing

and mental health; and was recently tapped by St. Johns County Board of County Commission to handle the vetting and distribution of \$7.7 million in American Rescue Plan Act Funds in St. Johns County.

"When I joined United Way, I committed to building relationships within our community, but underestimated the depth, strength and breadth of these connections. Similarly, I could not have imagined the passion I would feel for our mission today," said Nelson. "This very passion led to my acceptance of the position as CEO of United Way of Florida, where I will have the best of both worlds — the continued mission of St. Johns and Putnam County and an expanded focus to all parts of our state. Of course, I must also share how much I appreciate the trust, support and generous friendships of our board, staff, partners and community. Thank you to all that allowed me to be part of what we have built together."

United Way of St. Johns will immediately launch the search for the organization's next president and CEO. Throughout this search and transition, United Way and its community partners will continue their important work addressing immediate challenges of individuals and families in Putnam and St. Johns County while also making long-term investments that tackle the root causes of these issues.

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Get to Know ...

By Tiffany Merlo Phelps
mail@floridanewslines.com

Alicia Booth Sprecher

Alicia Booth Sprecher always knew that she wanted to be a news anchor. Once she read a Jessica Savitch autobiography, it was a done deal. "I thought this I can do. This is perfect for me. It just sounded like a great opportunity to meet a variety of people," said Sprecher, a Ponte Vedra Beach resident and WJXT Channel 4 part-time anchor. Growing up, Sprecher had a strong interest in military strategy, nuclear strategy and military policy and often spoke on the topics at Rotary and Lions clubs during high school. At the University of Southern California, she majored in broadcast journalism, international relations, and got a certificate in defense and strategic studies. Sprecher soon found herself as the only female in military strategy classes. "I ran into a ton of chauvinism, but I love being told 'no you can't.' That just piqued my interest even more," said Sprecher. Her first job was at a station in Monterey, California, where she worked in military reporting. "I had to fight to get the military stories," said Sprecher, who started as an unpaid intern and then was promoted to associate producer. Sprecher was eventually promoted to producer. After five years, Sprecher landed a job as the morning news anchor for an NBC affiliate in Charlotte, North Carolina. She would anchor the 5 p.m. news and then switch to police beat reporting for the 11 p.m. news. After eight years in Charlotte, Sprecher took a job in Cleve-



Photo courtesy Alicia Booth Sprecher
Alicia Booth Sprecher with her husband and daughter.

land, Ohio, focusing on medical reporting at a CBS affiliate. She reported on a Kent, Ohio, family who was dealing with an overwhelming number of medical challenges. Her Emmy-award winning stories brought out an amazing response from the community and touched the family dearly. "That's at the heart of journalism. That's what we do. We speak up for people who don't have a voice."

Q: You mentioned that your thesis in college was on the lack of defense forces in the Persian Gulf. You then had the opportunity to cover the first Gulf War and travel to Saudi Arabia. Share your experience.

A: I went to Saudi Arabia on board a C-5. The flight, for various reasons, took 47 hours. A group of local TV and print reporters from Monterey/Salinas were going to the Gulf to cover a couple of service and supply units from the 7th Infantry Division (Light) from Fort Ord. We were there for a few days before the proverbial "line in the sand" was crossed. President Bush was there at the same time. We were not allowed to go anywhere without our gas masks attached to our bodies. It felt as if everything I had envisioned for myself professionally was coming to fruition. My station had

invited the deployed troops' families to make video greetings for their loved ones which we took with us. We set up a viewing party for one of the units somewhere in the desert. We weren't allowed to know where. That brought such joy to the soldiers. That, alone, was worth the 47 hours on a C-5.

Q: How did you meet your husband, Dr. Rob Sprecher, who is the Division Chief for Otolaryngology for Nemours Children's Health in Jacksonville?

A: I interviewed him for a story on tonsillectomies back in Cleveland. So, when I met him, I told my friend, "I am going to marry that man." I called him "Dr. Hottie." Two years later, he called me, and we were married in 2006.

Q: How did becoming a mom to Lexi, 13, impact your full-time career?

A: I worked full-time until Lexi was three years old, and I realized that I could not sustain the workload with being a mom. I retired in 2011. When it came to work, I did not know how to work without being all in. The demand on television news reporters/anchors is phenomenal. I know there are a lot of women at my tv station who manage both beautifully, but I did not think that I could do it.

Q: What brought you to Ponte Vedra Beach?

A: We were looking for sunshine and a place where my parents and my in-laws could move as well. We all live here now. My parents live in Nocatee in Del Webb, and my in-laws live one street over from us.

Q: What are your hobbies?

A: I report to the tennis office almost every day. I play a lot of tennis at Sawgrass. I am in four leagues; I mostly play Country Club League or A1. We love to travel as a family.

R.J. Larizza cont. from pg. 8

information and even your money. One thing you can do to verify the accuracy of the rental property listing is to look up the property by address on the county's property appraiser's website. You can also contact a local realtor that specializes in rental properties and ask them to check it out. If it turns out that the listing is fraudulent, they may end up helping you find a legitimate rental property. A little prevention/work up front can really pay off.

Vicky Oakes cont. from pg. 6

to look up your registration and verify the address on file with the Elections Office is correct. Your polling place is also listed.

Q: A candidate I want to vote for is registered in a different party than I am. What do I have to do in order to be able to vote for them?

A: Due to Florida's closed primaries, you received the ballot of the party in which you are registered. Unless the candidate is from your same party, you must change your party in order to be able to vote for them. The only exception is nonpartisan races on the Primary ballot, such as County Judge and School Board. These races appear on all ballots.

Q: Is there a deadline for registering to vote or changing my party for the Primary?

A: Yes. The deadline for new registrations and party changes is 29 days prior to an election. In the case of the Aug. 23 Primary, the deadline is July 25.

Be sure to visit votesjc.gov often for updated election information. The Frequently Asked Questions provide answers to questions asked most often, and there is a special section for vote-by-mail questions. My staff and I are here to serve you, and we will make it easy for you to vote. Sign up for my newsletter by visiting our website or call the office for assistance at (904) 823-2238.

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Church starts Little Free Library of faith-based books with help of Boy Scouts

By NewsLine Staff
mail@floridanewsline.com

Lord of Life Lutheran Church in Ponte Vedra Beach, has joined the world's largest free book sharing movement — the "Little Free Library" in which organizations or individuals create mini storage units for the public to take or leave a book. It is just the second Little Free Library in the 32082 ZIP code and the first to focus on books about faith predominantly.

"The idea started with our faith book club and having a place to share the books we've read with other members of the congregation," said Sheila Kolesaire, the church council's president. "But we are here to serve our community, so we expanded our idea to make our books accessible to all."

At the same time as the church was thinking of this concept, Boy Scout Landon McIntosh, 17, of Boy Scout Troop 288 approached Lord of Life about doing an Eagle Scout project there. He quickly took on this project with the help of half a dozen other Scouts to create two mirror-image libraries that look like a house and were painted white and red to match the outside of the church.

The library is mounted on the left-hand wall just inside the church. It's been registered with the Little Free Library and has its official charter sign and number



Photo courtesy Sheila Kolesaire
Boy Scout Landon McIntosh installing the Little Free Library at Lord of Life Lutheran Church.

#147801. You can find it on the Little Free Library website www.littlefreelibrary.org. The public is invited to drop off books about faith-related topics to be included in the library — and is free to take ones too. Lord of Life Lutheran Church is located at 276 Roscoe Blvd. N in Ponte Vedra Beach.

The church's faith book club will meet July 14 and 21 at 10:30 a.m. for an hour to discuss "Called to Forgive: The Charleston Church Shooting, a Victim's Husband, and the Path to Healing and Peace" by Pastor Anthony Thompson. Ponte Vedra Beach residents are welcome to join the discussion. Email skolesaire@gmail.com for more information.

Rob Hardwick cont. from pg. 5

boats and helicopters, \$500,000 for an increase in the inmates' medical fund and \$100,000 for the increased cost of ammunition.

I also propose adding 10 additional deputies (mostly for patrol, but one will be the deputy at the new Beachside High School) and one civilian. According to County Property Appraiser Eddie Creamer, since 2016, more than 25,000 homes have been added to the tax roll, so more deputies are needed.

Q: What is the next step?

A: During the commission meeting, while I was making my presentation, I told them that my goal was actually to increase the base pay for the deputies and civilians even more than was

in my presentation, to \$52,000 and \$37,000 respectively. This would add approximately another \$2 million to the increase requested. We received support from Commissioner Blocker to amend our presentation and now we are working closely with the Office of Management and Budget to figure out the best way to handle this. It will need to be done in July, prior to the commission's vote at the first reading.

Q: What is the best way for our readers to contact you with any questions or suggestions about this article?

A: They can email me at sheriff@sjso.org or call me at (904) 824-8304. Also, our website, www.sjso.org has a wealth of resources, from alarm registration to Crime Stoppers to our Neighbors app.



PopHistory

By Scott A. Grant
mail@floridanewsline.com

The Confidence Man

We have a deep and abiding fascination with scammers and con men. In our modern society, scams run rampant and some are even revered. It was always thus.

The first con man appeared on the streets of New York City in the 1840s. His name was William Thompson, but he went by many aliases. He was well dressed and targeted similarly well-dressed victims. Thompson would approach his mark and strike up a conversation pretending they knew each other.

At some point, Thompson would ask if his intended victim had enough "confidence" to lend him his watch. When he got the watch, Thompson would walk away, never to be seen again. For almost a decade, he got away with his crimes until he was spotted by a prior victim named McDonald. The New York Herald labeled him a "confidence man." Most agree it was the first time the term was used and the derivation of the term "con man."

Scams take many forms. Most rely on the gullibility of the victim. In 1925, a man named Victor Lustig sold the Eiffel Tower — twice. Both times he sold the structure to scrap metal dealers. The first time, his victim was too embarrassed to go to the police. The second attempt attracted the attention of the authorities, but Lustig managed to escape to America. A list of rules for con men is attributed to Lustig. He advised letting the victim reveal political and religious views and to then "agree with them."

Lustig's equivalent here in the US was a man named George C. Parker, famous for selling the Brooklyn Bridge. He would tantalize his victims with the promise of passive income. Once they owned the Bridge, they could charge everyone a fee to cross. On several occasions, the police had to stop would-be buyers from erecting toll booths on the structure. He sold the bridge

numerous times for prices ranging from \$75 – \$50,000. His antics led to the popularity of the phrase, "If you believe that, I have a bridge to sell you." Parker also "sold" Madison Square Garden, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Grant's Tomb, and the Statue of Liberty.

Over a 70-year period ending in 1936, 28 con men operating out of Pittsburgh ran a recurring con similar to the modern Nigerian Prince scam. They would send letters to people with the last name of Baker across the country claiming they represented the unclaimed estate of a Philadelphia millionaire named Jacob Baker. For a fee, they would help them claim their share. The gang collected more than \$3 million from more than 3,000 victims. At the time it was the largest mail fraud in history.

The most famous scammer of all time was Charles Ponzi, who invented the Ponzi scheme. Ponzi promised his investors huge returns for buying postal coupons in Spain and then selling them in the US for a five-cent profit. In the early 1920s, Ponzi took in \$20 million from "investors." He was caught and sent to jail. When they let him out, he moved to Jacksonville and sold worthless swampland west of the city to northern investors. If he had just sold the land, he would have gotten away with it. But, he again took in investors and ended up being sentenced to hard labor.

Beware of get rich quick schemes. Getting wealthy is rarely quick or easy.

Scott A. Grant is a local author and pop-historian. He has written more than 150 published newspaper and magazine articles. By day, he is president of Standfast Asset Management, LLC.



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Local golfer wins European Golf Junior Championship

Chloe Pierce, age 9, won the European Golf Junior Championship (May 31 – June 2) in her age division by beating the best young girls from around the world. The European Championship is the second largest junior golf tournament in the world for juniors under 13 and was held at the old course at Longniddry Golf Club in East Lothian Scotland. Pierce battled traditional Scottish weather in the cold, wind, and rain and played solidly to post three low rounds of 37-37-37 during each round of nine holes. She led the event from start to finish and won on the first hole of a sudden death playoff against the top junior from Denmark. On the playoff hole, she sunk a 15-foot birdie putt to seal the win. Pierce has been playing for two years and works very hard at golf, practicing at Ponte Vedra Inn and Club, Marsh Landing Country Club, or the University of North Flor-



Photo courtesy Kelley Pierce

ida. She is a Ponte Vedra Beach native, attends Palmer Catholic Academy, and is coached by Bob Mattiace.

Nease named best NJROTC unit in the Nation

By NewsLine Staff
mail@floridanewsline.com

The Naval Service Training Command selected Nease as the Most Outstanding NJROTC Unit in the Nation for 2021 – 2022, taking top honors over the 583 NJROTC programs worldwide.

The Nease program has been a perennial contender for national honors, having finished as the number two program in 2021. The selection is based on an evaluation of academic achievements, competitions, orientation activities, summer training programs, school service projects, community service activities, extracurricular activities, and annual inspection results.

This announcement followed Commander Johnathan D. Shaw, Navy JROTC Area-12 Manager, announcing Nease as the Most Outstanding Unit in Area-12, a region encompassing 60 schools covering the 13 NJROTC programs in northeast Florida and 47 across the entire state of Georgia for the fifth consecutive year.

“There’s immense pressure every year for the seniors to keep Nease on top,” said Battalion Commander Isabella Rivera who accepted an appointment to the United States Coast Guard Academy.

“We take our leadership roles seriously. And now we can pass on the torch to next year’s class with our mission completed.”

This year marks the second time Nease has taken home top honors. In 2015 Nease was named the Most Outstanding Unit in the Nation.

“They say it takes a village to feed a child; well in the JROTC world, it takes a community of cadets, parents, school administrators and instructors pulling in the same direction to ascend a program to this height,” said senior naval science instructor Captain Scott LaRochelle who is retiring after eight years at the helm of the program. “Nease NJROTC epitomized a ‘one team, one fight’ unified effort.”

Nease’s main identity is its Drill team that competes in a compilation of 10 academic, athletic and drill individual events at 12 – 16 school meets. Among other noteworthy achievements, Nease also won first place in athletics, academics, air rifle and orienteering competitions across Florida and the state of Georgia. Cadets completed 5800 community service hours. And nine seniors received service academy appointments or ROTC scholarships.



Nease’s drill team celebrates with RADM Peter Garvin following the Navy National Academic, Athletic and Drill Championships in Pensacola.

“Considering these difficult and challenging times, we find great benefit from living here. This was a terrific decision and we’re glad we did it!”



John, Resident at Westminster St. Augustine

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Briefs

Army's Second Infantry Division seeks former members for reunion

The Second (Indianhead) Infantry Division Association is searching for anyone who served in the Army's 2nd Infantry Division at any time.

For information about the association and our 99th annual reunion in Kansas City, Missouri from Sept. 28 – Oct. 2, 2022, contact Mike Davino at 2ida.pao@charter.net or (919) 498-1910.

Explore Florida state parks through your library

The St. Johns County Public Library System has partnered with Florida State Parks, the Florida Department of State, and Florida's Division of Library Services to offer library patrons access to Florida State Parks through the Real Florida Reader Program. Now through Sept. 12, 2022, St. Johns County Public Library System card holders may check out a Real Florida Reader day pass for free admission for up to eight people at more than 170 participating state parks.

Passes may be checked out for seven days, with no holds or renewals, at any of the St. Johns County Public Library System library branches. They do not cover activity fees or entry into special events, museum or boat tours, instructor certification diving, boat launching, rentals of picnic pavilions and other facilities, rentals of equipment such as canoes and kayaks, overnight camping, or lodging. Access to Ellie Schiller Homosassa Springs Wildlife, Skyway Pier, and Weeki Wachee Springs state parks is also excluded from this program.

Visit floridastateparks.org/RealFloridaReader for more information about this program or contact your local branch library. Visit sjcpls.org for information on other services the St. Johns County Public Library System offers.

500 volunteers needed for Feed My Starving Children meal packing

Northeast Florida area residents will come together Aug. 12 – 13 to combat world hunger through a partnership between Ponte Vedra Presbyterian Church and Feed My Starving Children, a Christian non-profit

dedicated to providing nourishing meals to starving children worldwide. Seven million emergency meals were just sent to Ukraine by Feed My Starving Children.

A projected 500 community volunteers will

pack 102,000 meals with their own hands in two days in four two-hour sessions. This is a great opportunity to serve individually, with your family, friends and coworkers.

The event will take place at Ponte Vedra Presbyterian Church, located at 4510 Palm Valley Road.

Volunteer meal packing registration is available now online. Visit <https://give.fmssc.org/jacksonville> to view session hours and to register to volunteer.

New app helps patients navigate their health care journey

Baptist Health has launched Baptist Access, a new app designed to help patients navigate their health care journey, whether digitally or in-person.

The new app, powered by the Gozio Health platform, provides all-in-one access to Baptist Health hospitals and outpatient locations.

With Baptist Access, patients can:

- Find a Baptist Health provider or location
- Schedule an appointment
- Get directions from their home to their health care destination
- Find any location within hospital campuses including indoor wayfinding with turn-by-turn directions to patient care, parking, food, restrooms, ATMs and more
- View insurance plans
- Access medical records
- Pay bills

Annual Backpack Challenge scheduled through Aug. 1

Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices Florida Network Realty will host its 23rd Annual Backpack Challenge through Aug. 1.

The Northeast Florida real estate firm is collecting new backpacks and school supplies for students in kindergarten through high school at Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices Florida Network Realty offices. The company is also collecting cash and check donations to purchase backpacks and school supplies, which will be provided to local charities that serve Northeast Florida children.

Donations may be dropped off at the following office locations:

- Ponte Vedra/Nocatee – 333 Village Main St., Suite 670, Ponte Vedra Beach
- Mandarin/St. Johns - 12636 San Jose

Blvd., Jacksonville

- MuraBella at World Golf Village – 196 Capulet Drive, Suite 3, St. Augustine
- St. Augustine - 112 Sea Grove Main St., Suite 210, St. Augustine Beach
- Beaches/Intracoastal West/Southside - 375-1 Atlantic Blvd., Atlantic Beach

Mesh and clear backpacks are appreciated since some schools have adopted a clear bag policy. Label the outside of the backpack(s) with the suggested grade level. Visit FloridaNetworkRealty.com/Backpack for a list of recommended school supplies by grade level.

New center to provide increased access to mental and behavioral health services

Recognizing a significant need for increased access to mental and behavioral health services, especially for those individuals in crisis or in urgent need of mental health care, Flagler Health+ has opened the CAIR (Crisis Assessment Intervention and Referral) Center at Flagler Health+.

Serving both youth and adults, the Flagler Health+ CAIR Center is designed to provide access to, and coordination of, mental and behavioral health services in St. Johns and surrounding counties. The CAIR Center serves as a supportive, compassionate place to access crisis assessment, brief interventions, referral services, care coordination support and will work with individuals to establish a long-term connection with a provider.

CAIR Center professionals work together to give each client the most personalized approach to obtaining mental health services. Often, the mental health struggle is tied to other needs in the household — food insecurity, lack of stable housing, difficulties obtaining prescriptions, and more. The CAIR Center then utilizes Care Connect+, a program established by Flagler Health+, to connect patients to other critical resources.

Coordinating with mental health partners in the community, the CAIR Center aims to reduce unnecessary Baker Act admissions, increase diversion from the criminal justice system, and reduce recidivism to hospitals while providing those in mental health crisis a supportive and approachable environment to receive support.

The CAIR Center at Flagler Health+ is

located at 300 Health Park Blvd., Suite 1008 on the campus of Flagler Hospital and is open Monday – Friday from 8 a.m. – 6 p.m. It is anticipated that operating hours will be expanded this summer with a hope that the center will soon be open 24/7.

Visit www.flaglerhealth.org/CAIR or call (904) 819.5204 for more information.

"Age Your Way" educational series for LGBTQ seniors offered

Age Your Way is the name and theme of a new five-part series of online educational series for LGBTQ older adults. The third in the series, "Accessing the Best Caregiver Support Services," is scheduled for Wednesday, July 13 live at 11:30 a.m. until 1 p.m. The workshop is free, but registration is required by going to MyElderSource.org/AgeYourWay. The 90-minute workshops will be presented live using Zoom online meeting software.

Whether you are the caregiver or the person receiving the caring, it is important to know the wishes of your loved one and how to plan for your care in the event you cannot care for yourself. Issues discussed in this session include the resource available to make sound decisions for you or your loved one. Subject matter experts include Jackie Boyd, author of the Caregiver Guide and long-time aging specialist and LGBTQ advocate; and ElderSource CEO Linda Levin.

Visit MyElderSource.org/AgeYourWay for more information and to register.

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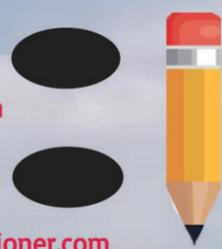
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Newcomers Alumnae install new board of directors

By Brooke Freeman
mail@floridanewline.com

At the June 1, 2022 Newcomers Alumnae monthly luncheon held at Marsh Landing Country Club, master of ceremonies Donna Berger introduced the newly-inducted executive board of directors for the fiscal period 2022 – 2024. Luncheon attendees enthusiastically welcomed the new executive board: Clara Wittmann and Margie Hesser, co-presidents; Martha Armistead, vice president; Suanne Goldberger, treasurer; Nancy Scott, recording secretary; and Debbie Condit, corresponding secretary. This year’s luncheon theme was Dr. Seuss’ “Oh, The Things You Can Think!” as a motivational ode to all the wondrous things you can think about when you take on leadership. Additionally, outgoing president Maria Woodford and the outgoing board were presented with Dr. Seuss-themed gifts and honored for serving tirelessly throughout the difficult and challenging pandemic.

name: Coastal Friends, and during the summer hiatus, the administrative tasks necessary to change over to the new name will be tackled by the new board of directors. Also, the new board will move forward with scheduling many social events and outings for the upcoming year.

While the club does not hold luncheons in July and August, monthly luncheons will resume in September under its new name Coastal Friends. Email brookemeister@msn.com for additional information on the club and membership.

Coastal Friends, formerly known as Newcomers Alumnae, was formed in 1998 as a social club for women who reside in Ponte Vedra Beach, Nocatee, Jacksonville, Jacksonville Beach, Atlantic Beach, Neptune Beach, St. Augustine and the surrounding area. Some of the activities offered are adventures and outings, book club, bunco, canasta, happy hour, lunch out, mah jongg and wine socials.

In the coming months, this group will be promoting the organization’s new



Photo courtesy Sally Lutz

Incoming board: Nancy Scott (Recording Secretary), Suanne Goldberger (Treasurer), Debbie Condit (Corresponding Secretary), Martha Armistead (Vice President), Clara Wittmann (co-President), Margie Hesser (co-President), and Donna Berger.

An Even Brighter Future

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The best summer starts at your library

By NewsLine Staff
mail@floridanewline.com

The St. Johns County Public Library System is encouraging youth and adults to participate in “The Best Summer at Your Library” Summer Reading Program, which runs through Aug. 6. The program includes virtual and in-person opportunities that are fun for the whole family. Readers of all ages are invited to pick up their free reading logs from any library branch or track their progress virtually through the READSquared app. Participants may earn free books for every six days read on logs or 60 points reached on READSquared.

read together during the summer break.

“Librarians understand that children who don’t read and learn during the summer months fall behind. It’s called the ‘summer slide,’” said Library System Director Debra Rhodes Gibson. “‘The Best Summer at Your Library’ offers incentives to keep reading skills sharp ahead of the new school year.”

“The Best Summer at Your Library” is proudly sponsored by the St. Johns County Public Library System’s multiple Friends of the Library groups. To learn more about the library’s 2022 Summer Reading Program and how to register for the variety of programs, contact your local branch library or visit www.sjcpl.org.

As a community partner in education, the St. Johns County Public Library System encourages the whole family to

Travel

Curious About Curacao?

By Debi Lander
mail@floridanewslines.com

Every summer, Floridians prepare for the possibility of hurricanes. Not so for those in the ABC islands (Aruba, Bonaire, and Curacao) in the Caribbean. They lie just off the coast of Venezuela, beyond the hurricane belt, so if you want to visit the Caribbean in the summer or late fall, head in their direction.

I recently returned from Curacao and was awe-struck by the waterfront in the capital city of Willemstad. Rainbow-hued historic houses in the Dutch architectural style create an unforgettable scene and are protected as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Unlike the white buildings that dominate many Greek and Mediterranean isles, Curacaoans prefer bright colors.

To cross over the waterway into the downtown, you use the Queen Emma floating footbridge. The bridge swings to one side if a ship needs to pass through. It's fun to watch, but you can get stranded before it closes again. As the locals call her, the "Old Swinging Lady" gets illuminated at night.

Of course, all Caribbean islands brag about their white sand beaches, clear turquoise water, and vibrant sea life.

Thirty-five smaller, more intimate beaches and coves dot the shoreline in Curacao. You won't find a string of resort hotels off a boulevard or one long beach. The little coves permit snorkeling off the beach, and many scuba divers find they can dive without the need for a boat.

Curacao receives little rain, so the landscape remains dry, again helping to keep those hurricanes away. Cacti and scrub bushes grow all over the place, as does aloe vera. You can visit an aloe farm and learn about its multiple uses.

Two national parks offer very different experiences. If you want to climb to the highest point on the island, arrive early at Christoffelpark. A round-trip hike to the summit will take about three hours and rewards with a 360-degree panoramic view. Shete Boka Park, however, provides a much more dramatic picture. This park rests on the northernmost point, and massive waves constantly bombard and send spray skyward. The boardwalk and viewing platforms offer great photo ops, but be careful and hang on to the little ones.

If you take children, consider staying



Photos courtesy Debi Lander
Jeremi Beach.



Photos courtesy Debi Lander
Powerful waves at Shete Boka.



Photos courtesy Debi Lander
Queen Emma Floating Bridge.

at an all-inclusive property like the Corendon Mangrove Beach Resort with its incredible waterpark. They offer exciting rides with twists and turns for all ages and a child-friendly area for the young ones. The King Cobra drops and flings daredevils. The waterpark is rarely crowded, so the kids will get plenty of rides. The resort also offers a fantastic main swimming pool, swim-up bar, a lap pool that tends to stay quieter, and its own beach.

One of my favorite moments was discovering wild flamingos. If you are lucky, you may find them close to the road. The quirky creatures twist and curl their necks around like backyard hoses. Their coral color reflects against

the tranquil water in a lake, creating a beautiful scene.

Curacao offers a variety of lodging options from AirBnB rentals, villa rentals, boutique hotels, resorts, and all-inclusive properties. I suggest you plan to rent a car. It takes just two hours to drive from tip to tip.

Take a nonstop flight to Curacao from Miami. Remember your sunscreen and appetite; the local cuisine blends Creole, African, Spanish, Dutch, and Caribbean flavors. Enjoy!

Visit www.bylandersea.com to read more of local travel writer Debi Lander's stories and travel tips.

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