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Graphic courtesy St. Johns County Public Library

St. Johns Reads 2024 book announced

By NewsLine Staff
mail@floridanewslines.com

The St. Johns County Public Library System has announced that the book selection for St. Johns Reads 2024 is “The Reading List,” by Sara Nisha Adams. An unforgettable and heartwarming debut, “The Reading List” is about how a chance encounter with a list of library books helps forge an unlikely friendship between two very different people in a London suburb.

St. Johns Reads cont. on pg. 9

Girls’ flag football league celebrates inaugural season

By Martie Thompson
editor@floridanewslines.com

In response to requests from parents, the CAA flag football league has added a girls’ league this season. According to league president, Mike Lanza, there are four teams with approximately 32 girls playing this inaugural season, in addition to approximately 15 girls who play on the league’s existing co-ed teams. Lanza said that in total, approximately 700 kids are playing flag football this season.

“We had been hearing from parents that there was a demand for an all-girls flag football league for some time,” Lanza said. “This past spring we started planning for it and by the summer, when we had amassed enough coaches, we opened registration.”

Mia Hamilton, 11, is a new participant. “This is my first time playing but I’ve always grown up watching my brothers play,” she said, “so I thought it would be fun to play it myself.”

Lanza said the new girls’ league started practices two times a week in November and started playing games the first weekend in December. The players range in



Photos courtesy Dana Kelley
Samantha Roxas and Naomi McIntyre.

age from nine to 11 years old and games are held at Plantation Park on Saturday mornings. After a two week break for the holidays at the end of December, the girls will resume play in early January. The season will end with division championships at the end of January.



Mia Hamilton throws the ball.

“The teams in the girls’ league play each other twice during the regular season and then will meet again in the play-offs,” Lanza said.

Participant Charlotte “Charlie” Leddy, 9, said, “I like that we can play with our friends and you can play different positions.”

Lanza is convinced that the girls’ league will grow in popularity and envisions that it will lead the growth of the CAA league overall, since girls’ flag football is not widely available locally.

“The girls are having a great time,” Lanza said. “Winning or losing, you can see the excitement on their faces.”

Participant Brianna Soares, 9, agrees. “What I like about the league is how you can play with your friends and how you can be competitive. It’s really fun!”

Registration for the next flag football season will begin in July. Visit www.caaf-lagfootball.org for more information.



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

Q. As you reflect on the past year, what are some highlights from the clerk's office you can share?

A. As we close out the year, I would like to take a moment to share some of the many accomplishments our office achieved in 2023. Our team of deputy clerks work hard to fulfill our mission while providing world-class customer service to residents and our judicial and county partners. Some quick statistics to share: Through December 2023, our office issued 2,236 marriage licenses, performed 1,673 marriage ceremonies, processed over 13,000 passport applications, and registered approximately 14,000 residents to receive property fraud alerts. The Criminal Department processed 2,600 warrants and created 8,195 cases. Jury Coordinators issued 7,105 jury summonses with a roughly 85 percent response rate. Our comptroller's office processed more than 52,100 invoices. And this is just a glimpse of our efforts as our office performs more than 1,000 different duties and functions.

Q. What has the clerk's office done over the past year to ensure transparency and accountability?

A. We have invested heavily in our internal auditor function. In 2023, the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) received a funding increase from the county, added four additional full-time employees, and obtained a comprehensive case management system. The OIG also entered into an agreement with the Commission for Florida Law Enforcement Accreditation to pursue accreditation. This year the OIG intake unit received 30 fraud, waste, and abuse complaints and closed 26 of them, plus finalized two audits and three audit follow-ups. We are excited about the great team being built and look forward to them continuing to promote transparency and accountability in 2024.

Q. What are your plans for the coming year?

A. We will continue to seek ways to protect taxpayer dollars and lower the barriers and burdens for residents to access our services in 2024. You are my and our boss, and it is very important to me that your time is not wasted due to inefficient processes. We have some great initiatives being rolled out in 2024 that will lower the time burden required to get things done at our office.

Q. How do people get in touch with you?

A. Residents can call my office at (904) 819-3601 or my cell at (904) 599-8688. My email address is BPatty@stjohnsclerk.com. Many of your questions can be answered and many services are provided, such as paying traffic citations or searching records, by visiting our website, www.stjohnsclerk.com.





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BFF

Best Furry Friend of the month

Breed:

Pitbull mix

Favorite Activity:

playing outside with our neighbor's dog,

Sammy

Favorite Treat:

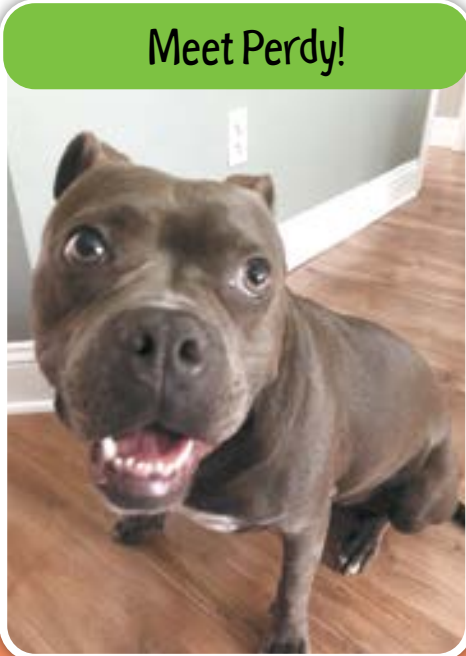
Cheese

Favorite Friend:

Our next door neighbor's dog, Sammy

How did your BFF get their name?:

Perdy is a rescue dog and was named after Perdita from "101 Dalmatians."



Meet Perdy!

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 The CreekLine. Your pet could be our BFF of the month and appear in The CreekLine! Email editor@floridanewline.com to enter your pet.



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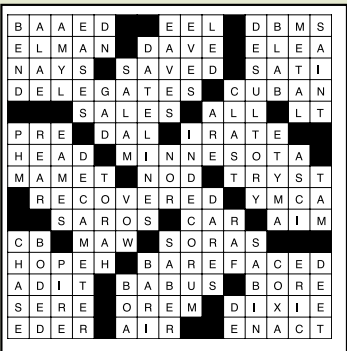
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MYSTERY PHOTO



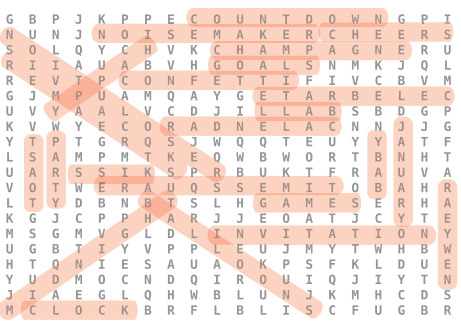
Can you guess where this is?
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Last month's Mystery Photo was the flag pole at Veterans Park.



Answers
to our
Puzzles
PG 10



A. champagne B. midnight C. resolution D. party



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January

Community Calendar

What's Happening in St. Johns

Trout Creek Senior Center offers activities for seniors on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings at 6795 Collier Road in Orangedale. Cards, crafts and games start each day at 9 a.m. with trivia, nutrition/exercise, Bunco and Bingo among the additional activities before lunch at 11:30 a.m. each day. Contact Program Coordinator Myra Fisher at (904) 209-3658 or mfisher@coasjc.org for more information.

Playing HOOKie, a group for those who enjoy knitting, crocheting and looming (with all items donated to charity) meets every Wednesday from 10 a.m. – 12 p.m. at Maple Street Biscuit Company, 1627 Race Track Road in St. Johns. Visit the group's Facebook page (Playing HOOKie) or email playinghookie2022@gmail.com for more information.

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

2nd: Honeybee Quilters Guild will meet on Tuesday, Jan. 2 at 6:30 p.m. at Mandarin Presbyterian Church at the Loretto Road Campus in the Kids' Space at 2501 Loretto Road. Guild members will make a presentation on organizing fabric scraps. Wearing masks is optional. New members/guests welcome. Visit honeybeequilters.org for more information.

2nd: Happy Hookers crochet group will meet at the Bartram Trail Branch Library on Jan. 2 from 5:30 p.m. – 6:45 p.m. The group crochets or knits blankets for cancer patients at area hospitals. All skill levels are welcome. Visit www.sjcpls.org or call (904) 827-6960.

3rd: Widow to Widow, support group for widows by widows is held at Council on Aging (COA) River House, 179 Marine Street in St. Augustine on Wednesdays beginning Jan. 3 from 11:45

a.m. – 12:45 p.m. Call (904) 209-3655 (Monday – Thursday) or email tharris@coasjc.org for more information.

8th: The St. Johns County Civic Roundtable will meet on Monday, Jan. 8 at 2 p.m. at St. Augustine Waterworks building, 184 San Marco Ave. in St. Augustine. The featured speaker will be St. Johns County Commissioner Roy Alaimo. Email info@sjcroundtable.org to register for the meeting or visit www.sjcroundtable.org for more information.

8th: ESOL Learn to Read, with partners at Learn to Read St. Johns, will be held on Monday, Jan. 8. The beginner class is from 3:15 p.m. – 4:15 p.m. and the intermediate and/or conversation class is from 4:30 p.m. – 5:30 p.m. Register at www.sjcpls.org. Walkins will be welcome as space allows. Call 904-827-6960 or email Donna at dbraasch@sjcfl.us for more information.

8th: The Northwest St. Johns County United for Progress Club will celebrate the New Year with a New Year's Celebration and Volunteer Appreciation Dinner at Al Dente Restaurant. For more information, visit our www.nwstjohnsup.com or email nwsjcp@gmail.com.

9th: Bartram Trail Newcomers' and Women's Club will host its meeting and luncheon on Tuesday, Jan. 9 at 11 a.m. at the Club Continental, 2143 Astor Street in Orange Park. Doors will open at 10:30 a.m. Downton Abbey "High Tea" is the theme and the luncheon will be a buffet. Checks for \$32 should be made payable to BTNC and mailed to Brenda Jenkins, 2204 Fort Mellon Court, St. Augustine, FL 32092. Visit www.facebook.com/BTNC1 for food choices and updated information.

11th: Open Card Play at Council on Aging (COA) River House, 179 Marine Street in St. Augustine. Bring your

deck of cards and socialize over a friendly card game of your choosing every Thursday beginning Jan. 11 from 12:15 p.m. – 3:15 p.m. Call (904) 209-3655 (Monday – Thursday) or email tharris@coasjc.org for more information.

13th: The Friends of Alpine Park meets the second Saturday of each month (this month, Jan. 13) at 11 a.m. at the Harris-Bennett Farmhouse in Alpine Groves Park, 2060 State Road 13. Docents will conduct tours of the historic farmhouse from 12 p.m. – 2 p.m. As always, the public is invited. Email friendsofalpinpark@gmail.com for more information.

13th: The Bartram Trail Genealogy Club meets the second Saturday of each month (this month, Jan. 13) from 2 p.m. – 4 p.m. at the Bartram Trail Branch Library. The meeting will feature Kristi Dorney from Jacksonville Public Library, who will discuss digitizing photos, slides, negative, film, audio, video, documents, books and music using equipment in the JPL Media Lab. Email ginglish@comcast.net for more information. Visit www.facebook.com/groups/BTGenClubGroup to send a request to join the club.

15th: The All Star Quilters Guild will meet at 9:30 a.m. for socializing prior to the 10 a.m. meeting on Monday, Jan. 15 at First Christian Church, 11924 San Jose Blvd. The program will be the group's annual birthday celebration and there will be a \$6 fee for lunch. Sew and Tell is always a feature. Guests are welcome. Visit www.allstarquilters.org for more information.

16th: Newcomers of North St. Johns will host a luncheon featuring St. Johns County Supervisor of Elections Vicky Oakes on Jan. 16 beginning at 11 a.m. at Cimarrone Golf Club, 2800 Cimarrone Blvd. The cost for the luncheon and program is \$35 for members; all reservations must be received by Jan. 8. Visit <https://newcomer->

sofnorthstjohns.org for more information.

17th: Book study on Jim Rosemergy's book "Gatherings of the Few: A Guide to Global Spiritual Awakening" with Rev. Yvonne McAndrew of Unity Church for Creative Living will be held on Wednesdays for three weeks from 7 p.m. – 8:30 p.m. at the church, 2777 Race Track Road. There is no cost to attend; email UCCLOffice2777@gmail.com or call (904) 287-1505 for more information.

18th: William Bartram Scenic Highway Group will meet on Thursday, Jan. 18 beginning at 6:30 p.m. at Westminster Woods, Gathering Place Room. This is the new location for 2024 meetings. Join the discussion to keep NW St. Johns County Scenic and Historic and preserve the State Road 13 Scenic Highway. Virtual meeting access is available; contact alabbat@comcast.net or call (904) 699-8475.

20th: Dress a Girl Around the World at the Bartram Trail Branch Library will be held on Saturday, Jan. 20 at 10 a.m. Learn to make dresses and shorts for girls around the world. You can pick up a kit to create at home, or turn in dresses you created to the Bartram Trail Branch. We also accept fabric and notion donations. Call the library at (904) 827-6960 for more information.

26th: "What Happens If You Die Without a Will" a free lecture by Megan Wall, St. Johns County Legal Aid, will be presented at Council on Aging (COA) River House, 179 Marine Street in St. Augustine, on Friday, Jan. 26 from 10 a.m. – 11 a.m. Call (904) 209-3655 (Monday – Thursday) or email tharris@coasjc.org for more information.

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**Q&A with St. Johns County Commission
Chairman Christian Whitehurst, District 1**

Q: Can you share any insight on the proposed First Coast Energy development at the corner of State Road 13 and Otoes Place?

A: I have heard from a number of residents about this project. This particular project will not come before the Board of County Commissioners, because what the developer has applied to build is allowed by right. Our staff, at the direction of a consensus by the Board of County Commissioners, is still making requests of the developer to try to make the project more compatible with the neighborhood. At issue for a lot of people are the mature trees in the median of Otoes Place, which provide a special entrance to a small neighborhood. This is a public right of way and the question is, does the developer have the right to take down some of these trees in order to make a second entrance to their property? Our Land Development Code recommends two entrances, but that doesn't mean we have to agree to it. So, our staff is trying to steer the developer into being a good neighbor. I think it's all of our desire for First Coast Energy to do whatever they can do to be a good neighbor.

Q: What is the construction that will soon be taking place on Race Track Road? And how is the Longleaf Pine Parkway construction coming along?

A: On Race Track Road, we are extending the turn lane for westbound traffic to turn onto Veterans Parkway. Currently, the turn lane backs up and spills into what should be a through lane. We desperately need the 1,000 feet longer turn land to improve traffic flow on Race Track Road. The construction is due to start on Dec. 18 and, weather pending,

be completed in 30 days. These dates were selected in an effort to make the period as convenient as possible with no school traffic for part of the time.

On Longleaf Pine Parkway, construction to add an extra lane and basically double the capacity of the road is coming along quickly now. The construction should be finished by the end of calendar year 2024. This is an example of good planning, since when the road was originally built, proper right of way was already acquired, so when it came time to expand, they just had to turn dirt.

Q: Can you comment on the Memorandum of Understanding between the county and Twin Creeks Development Associates, LLC as pertains to the widening of County Road 210 in front of the Beachwalk neighborhood?

A: The community has seen us holding the developer accountable for the past two years and at long last the developer has agreed to sign this Memorandum of Understanding, which provides for the final part of widening of County Road 210 to six lanes. It is important to note that the developer will be paying for this widening as he was obligated to do.

Q: Do you have anything else to share with District 1?

A: I'd like to wish everyone a Happy New Year!

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

A: Readers can email me at bcc1c-whitehurst@sjcfl.us or call me at (904) 584-5348.



**with St. Johns County Property Appraiser
Eddie Creamer**

Q: Can you give us the basic information for homestead exemption in Florida?

A: Between now and March 1, it is time for qualifying homeowners to file for homestead exemption. To qualify, you must have owned the property as of Jan. 1, 2024 and occupied it as your primary residence. Evidence of this is your Florida driver's license with that address. You may not claim or be eligible to claim a homeowner's tax exemption in Florida or any other state.

Q: Why is it important to apply for homestead exemption?

A: It's important because it reduces your property's taxable value by \$50,000 — which can result in a savings of approximately \$650 for the average homeowner in St. Johns County. It also sets the base for the 3 percent "Save our Homes" cap, which limits the assessed value of your home from rising more than 3 percent per year. For the past couple years, we have seen property value increases that are higher than this cap.

Q: How should a homeowner file for

homestead exemption?

A: Homeowners can file in person in our office or online at www.sjcpa.gov. Presently, about 65 percent of homeowners are filing online, compared to about 10 percent just four years ago.

Q: Are there other exemptions?

A: There are many different and specific exemptions designed to provide tax relief to certain homeowners. Examples include exemptions for widow/widowers, totally and permanently disabled veterans or first responders, those who are blind or have other permanent disability, deployed service members, surviving spouses of first responders, and low income seniors. Please call our office for more information if you think any of these might apply to you.

Q: What is the most important thing to remember?

A: It is mandatory that you apply for any exemption by March 1. Even if you qualify, if you don't apply for it — we can't grant the exemption. Florida Stat-

Q&A with Eddie Creamer cont. on pg. 6

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with St. Johns County Sheriff Rob Hardwick

Q: Can you give some background on your agency's Property Crimes Unit?

A: They are truly the unsung heroes of our organization. This unit currently has one working sergeant, two working corporals and seven detectives. With the new budget, we plan to add two additional detectives and a sergeant with the goal of making two full units, one serving the north part of the county and one for the south. Two of these detectives are subject matter experts in financial crimes. In addition to felony and misdemeanor theft, this unit works cases in agriculture, arson, burglary (both residential and commercial), criminal mischief

(vandalism), crimes against the elderly, counterfeiting, racketeering, credit card crimes, impersonation, vehicle theft, and especially right now, retail theft. We've seen a 70 percent increase in retail theft, mostly due to the increase our county has seen in retail establishments.

Q: Do you have any statistics to share?

A: In 2021, 2,792 total property crimes were reported with the top three areas being some type of theft, fraud, and burglary. In 2022, we saw an 18 percent increase in total property crimes to 3,305 reported. The top three categories remained the same. So far in 2023, total

property crimes are 3,267, but the top three categories have changed to now include retail theft (under \$750) as the third highest category. This year, of the total property crimes reported, 464 were assigned to a detective for follow up; 265 cases are still active as of this date, and 60 cases were cleared by arrest.

Q: What else do the Property Crimes Unit detectives work on?

A: In addition to working active cases, the detectives take on lots of proactive activities, including following up with unlicensed contractors, working on mail fraud, and working with loss prevention specialists in specific retail stores.

Q: What are some of the big cases that this unit has solved?

A: There are a number of them including the extortion and threat to kill a promi-

nent business owner, three major RICO cases involving contractor frauds with hundreds of victims, and the arrest of a major ring of South American burglary suspects who had been operating all over the US — but we caught them here. We also arrested two suspects in a massive mail theft ring and recovered \$242,000 of the \$382,000 lost in a romance scam that we were able to return to the victim.

Q: Do you have any reminders for our readers?

A: Don't hesitate to call us if you see something suspicious. If you see something, say something.

Also, remember to secure your valuables and lock your doors. Remove your firearms from your vehicles and lock your car doors at night.

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, call me at (904) 824-8304, or visit www.sjso.org.

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Q&A with Eddie Creamer cont. from pg. 5

ute is clear that the homeowner must apply.

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.

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ST. JOHNS Business Monthly

Starting your journey to entrepreneurial success

By NewsLine Staff
mail@floridanewslines.com

Starting a new business can be scary. Millions of successful business owners were once in the position you're in right now — they were worried about finances, what would happen if they lost money or didn't have enough to support their business early on, how they'd find customers, and whether they even had the emotional strength to survive the entrepreneurial roller coaster. In short, they worried about failing.

Rest assured; every entrepreneur who is today a model of success had these same fears. Take comfort in the fact that these people succeeded despite their fears, and with the right preparation, help and guidance, so can you. SCORE Jacksonville offers free, expert mentoring and resources to guide you through your small business journey. Here's a start:

Are You Ready to Start a Business?
Determining whether you have what it takes to start a business requires unvarnished honesty and a frank assessment of your strengths and weaknesses. You'll need to assess your motivation, your

skills and experience, your financial resources and your support system. It helps to have a mentor guide you through this phase, because this self-assessment will lay the groundwork for your future success.

Define and Validate Your Idea. Just because you have the skills and experience to operate a business like the one you envision doesn't mean you should start a business like the one you envision. You'll need to identify how your idea stands out from the competition and whether it's viable over the long term. You'll need to research industry data, customer data and competitor business models. You'll need to create financial projections and identify funding sources. Once you've validated your idea, you can finally start thinking about turning it into a business.

Create a Business Plan (or a Business Model Canvas). Most successful businesses start with a business plan, but not all business plans are created equal. While certain financial entities and investors still require a formal business plan, there are easier and quicker

options to help with decision-making. A business model canvas, for example, condenses all the information included in a traditional business plan and turns it into a chart that fits onto a single page.

Find Funding. A lack of funding is one of the main reasons many businesses fail and if you can't figure out a sustainable financial path, yours may be one of them. The good news is there are numerous options: traditional bank loans, investments, credit cards, friends and family, grants and more. You'll need to educate yourself on every aspect of the financing method you choose.

Build an Administrative Infrastructure. Accounting, insurance and legal considerations aren't the exciting parts of starting a business, but collectively they are one of the most important parts. How you manage money, how you approach risk and liability, and how you safeguard yourself and your team from liability matter tremendously, especially in the vulnerable, formative stages of your business.

Develop Processes for Pricing, Sales,

Marketing and Distribution. One of the biggest mistakes many entrepreneurs make when starting a business is giving away their products or services for a song as they seek to build a consumer base. While it makes sense in the moment, it actually hurts in the long run because it devalues what you're selling. Building sales pipelines and identifying appropriate marketing channels early in your entrepreneurial journey can go far in educating prospects to help them understand the value your product or services will deliver.

Weigh the Pros and Cons of Hiring. There are tremendous benefits to hiring people to help you with your business. You have a team of people who can interact with customers, manage production, and/or process orders. There are also considerable challenges — payroll, record-keeping, job descriptions, screening, worker's compensation, and benefit plans. Dive into the details before making your first hire so you have a clear picture of what hiring entails.

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with St. Johns County Supervisor of Elections Vicky Oakes

Q: Are there any important dates St. Johns County voters should know for the Presidential Preference Primary Election?

A: Yes. The Presidential Preference

Primary Election is on Tuesday, March 19, 2024. The deadline to register to vote or change your party affiliation is Feb. 20, 2024. Early voting will be conducted Saturday, March 9 through Saturday, March 16, which includes

two Saturdays and one Sunday.
Q: Who will be eligible to vote in the Presidential Preference Primary Election (PPP)?

A: Only registered Republican voters will be eligible to vote in the PPP. The Democratic party only submitted one candidate to the Secretary of State, and therefore, Democratic voters will not be participating in the PPP. Due

to Florida's closed primary laws, voters who are registered with no party affiliation (NPA) or a minor political party are not eligible to vote in the Republican Primary.

Q: What candidates will be on my Presidential Preference Primary Election ballot?

A: The Republican presidential can-

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

Q: Does your office work with the area school districts for educational resources for students?

A: I have just finished meeting individually with all of the superintendents of schools in our district (the 7th Judicial Circuit), including St. Johns County Superintendent Tim Forson and School Board Chair Beverly Slough, about a new initiative to educate students and parents, prevent crime, and empower students to learn about what we do at the State Attorney's Office for possible careers.

Q: With regards to education, what ideas do you have?

A: I'd like to make sure students understand the consequences of bad judgment and crime, to include threats of violence, bomb threats, hoaxes, gun violence, dating violence, and online bullying. We want students to know that if they engage in any of these activities, there's a strong chance they will be tried as an adult — with adult consequences. As far as some of the threats, kids who do them often think, "I was just kidding," but it is not a joke and we do charge students. We're hopeful to get some kids into the courtroom to see real

time sentencing proceedings as well as utilize video from court proceedings in the school curriculum. Employees from my office can also come and speak at PTO meetings to parents. All of this is in an effort to try to prevent kids from making bad decisions and hopefully prevent crime.

Q: From a more positive aspect, what ideas do you have to empower students on a career path?

A: Our office encompasses many different professions, from paralegals to law enforcement to attorneys. I'd like to set up externships for students interested in any of these career paths. We could have students who are interested in the law, for instance, attend trials to see what it's like in the courtroom.

Q: What will happen next?

A: The next step is for a joint meeting with all of the school district superintendents and representatives and me. At that time, we can come up with a collaborative and comprehensive approach, as well as a name for the initiative. I think this is very timely and I'm very excited to see this through.



with St. Johns County School Board Member, Beverly Slough, District 1

Q: What construction updates do you have this month?

A: We've agreed to the financing for the next two schools that will be under construction, the ones in Silverleaf and Nocatee set to open in 2026. In the spring, we will bond up to \$170 million for these two schools. This doesn't include a land purchase and is just for construction costs.

For the schools set to open in 2024 in Shearwater and Beacon Lakes, Superintendent Tim Forson has just announced the new principals: Katie O'Connell, principal at Cunningham Creek, will lead K-8 NN in Shearwater and Dr. Jesse Gates, principal at PVPV Rawlings, will lead K-8 OO in Beacon Lakes. Then, in January, our Human Resources division will get to work with teachers to reallocate them where needed, particularly as pertains to Timberlin Creek Elementary and Ocean Palms Elementary, which will shrink as the new schools are opened.

Q: Do you have any more news on the expansion of First Coast Technical College to Hastings?

A: We are partnering with the county through some federal funds to renovate and repurpose the old Hastings High School, which is nearly 100 years old. I'm so excited about this project. It will be multi-phased, likely over about three years, and potential programs to be offered will be early childhood and welding. The first thing that will be done is external repairs to harden the building and then the inside renovations. This will be an economic boon to Hastings and to be

able to preserve this historic building ties in with their Main Street Hastings initiative.

Q: What's the latest legislative update?

A: The Florida Legislature has completed committee meetings in advance of session, which begins on Jan. 9. There are three deregulation in education bills in the Senate that we are supportive of, but the House hasn't taken them up as of yet. So it remains to be seen.

Q: Can you shed any light on the recently released school grades?

A: We are very well pleased with our school grades. This is the first year with new standards, so it is a benchmark year. In the four academic areas we scored more points than any other district in the state and the gap continues to grow. This is due to excellent teachers, focused students, and committed parents. We have no "D" schools and several of our schools increased a letter grade. The St. Johns County School District remains an "A" district as we have been every year since the inception of grading.

There was one school district ranked ahead of us. This school district has approximately 2,000 students and they excelled at graduation rate and certifications in career and technical education, both of which are awarded acceleration points in the grading process.

Q: How can our readers contact you?

A: They can email me at beverly.slough@stjohns.k12.fl.us or call me at (904) 547-7510.

Life

travel • pantry raiders • gardening
fishing • entertainment • puzzles

Get to Know ...

By Martie Thompson
editor@floridanewsline.com

Jason Dean

Jason Dean is passionate about pole vaulting. A self-described athlete who was a “late bloomer,” he said he played nearly every sport trying to find the one that was just right for him. He discovered pole vaulting in high school and went on to become a state champion his senior year and then the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) champion his sophomore year of college when he competed for Florida State University. After graduation, he “forgot” about pole vaulting for a while as he began his career, got married and started a family. In 2016 he again felt himself drawn to the sport and now he serves as a pole vault coach at Bartram Trail High School as well as at his own coaching company, the Florida Pole Vault Factory in NW St. Johns County. He lives in Switzerland with his wife, Andrea, and two children.



Photo courtesy Jason Dean
Jason Dean.

Q: How were you first introduced to pole vaulting?

A: When I was in high school, I wasn't good enough to make the baseball team or the basketball team, but I still wanted to do something athletic. My social studies teacher, who was the cross country coach, encouraged me to go out for cross country ... but I didn't like distance running. I wasn't fast enough to sprint and I didn't want to do the shot put or long jump. Finally she said, “Why not try pole vaulting?”

Get to Know ...

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

And it turned out I was good at it! I even participated in summer meets because I just loved it. I really found my niche.

Q: How did you meet your wife?

A: We met when I was at FSU. She was an athletic trainer and I met her in the training room my sophomore year. We've been together ever since and were married in 2003.

Q: What made you go back to pole vaulting?

A: I graduated from FSU with a degree in Information Studies and started my career as a software engineer. Andrea and I bought a house and we had our kids. By 2016, I started getting the itch. I felt like I wanted to be around athletes, who are generally positive people and like to work out. I reached out to the track and field coach at Bartram Trail High

School and offered my services as a volunteer pole vault coach. I was mortified at what I saw ... kids looked like they were doing dangerous things and I didn't want kids to get hurt doing a sport that I loved.

Q: What prompted you to open the Florida Pole Vault Factory?

A: In 2019 I started Florida Pole Vault Factory so that I could coach kids from all over and keep them safe. No sport is without risk, but there is an element of risk in pole vaulting that

not all sports have. Plus there is a lack of coaches in our sport that know what to do to keep kids safe.

Q: What are your goals for your coaching business?

A: At first, my goals were performance based and I have coached middle school and high school champions. But now I am more interested in growing the sport and raising awareness of pole vaulting, of course in addition to keeping kids safe. Pole vaulting looks scary, but I focus on safety and so it is more fun than scary.

Q: What is your favorite part of coaching?

A: I think it's imparting wisdom of pole vaulting and non-pole vaulting on kids. If you can project wisdom on kids and make their life better in any way, then it's a good day. It's satisfying to get a champion for sure, but seeing kids succeed and get joy from a sport I love ... well, that's the best.

St. Johns Reads cont. from pg. 1

This book is currently available through the library in print, large print, audiobook, and on Libby in e-book and e-audiobook.

In its 20th year, St. Johns Reads is the St. Johns County Public Library System's annual “One Book, One Community” event focused on creating a shared conversation on a selected novel.

Taking place in January, St. Johns Reads 2024 features a month-long celebration with a variety of programs inspired by “The Reading List,” including special events with the author, Sara Nisha Adams, at each branch library from Jan. 30 to Feb. 2. The Bartram Trail Branch will host Adams on Thursday, Feb. 1 at 11 a.m. Visit <https://sjcpls.org/event/meet-sara-nisha-adams-author/> to register for this special event.

St. Johns Reads is generously supported by the St. Johns County Public Library System's Friends of the Library groups.



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TAX TIP

2023 Tax Filing Season is a bit unusual-changes are minimal! However, there are some...One of the changes that affects many individuals is that retirement plan distributions for individuals that turn 72 AFTER 12/31/22 are NOT required until age 73. Another change for 2023 is that plans can offer distributions with NO EARLY WITHDRAWAL PENALTY for “unforeseeable or immediate financial needs relating to necessary or personal family emergency expenses” subject to certain restrictions.

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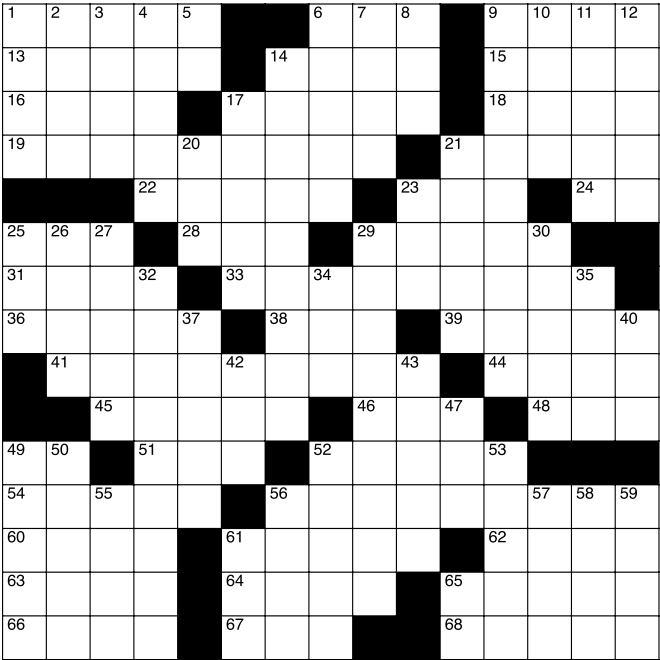
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Puzzles

Answers on page 3
Provided by MetroCreative



CLUES ACROSS

- 1. Bleated
- 6. Snakelike fish
- 9. Database management system
- 13. Russian-American violinist
- 14. Wendy’s founder Thomas
- 15. Ancient Italian-Greek colony
- 16. Negatives
- 17. Rescued
- 18. Self-immolation by fire ritual
- 19. Assigns tasks to
- 21. Island nation native
- 22. Trade
- 23. Detergent brand
- 24. Famed NY Giant
- 25. Before
- 28. Split pulses
- 29. Extremely angry; highly incensed
- 31. Body part
- 33. American state
- 36. David __, US playwright
- 38. Move one’s head slightly
- 39. Secret rendezvous
- 41. Improved
- 44. A place to exercise
- 45. 18-year astronomical period
- 46. Automobile
- 48. You can take it
- 49. A radio band
- 51. Jaws of an animal
- 52. Short-billed rails
- 54. Chinese province
- 56. Shameless and undisguised
- 60. Horizontal passage into a mine
- 61. Adult males
- 62. Fail to entertain
- 63. Dried-up
- 64. City in north-central Utah
- 65. Southern U.S.
- 66. German river
- 67. Oxygen
- 68. Make law

CLUES DOWN

- 1. Curved segment
- 2. Wings
- 3. From pentane (Chemistry)
- 4. Gradually gets into
- 5. Commercial document (abbr.)
- 6. Overhang
- 7. Christmas and New Year’s have them
- 8. Type of bulb
- 9. Lacking a plan
- 10. Tattle
- 11. Rockers like it “heavy”
- 12. One who’s been canonized
- 14. Indicate time and place
- 17. Nobel Prize winner in physics
- 20. The voice of Olaf
- 21. Fragmented rock
- 23. They __
- 25. Master of Philosophy
- 26. Backside
- 27. Landmark house in L.A.
- 29. An act of undue intimacy
- 30. From which a later word is derived
- 32. Equal to 10 meters
- 34. Neither
- 35. Computer language
- 37. Sacred book of Judaism
- 40. A woolen cap of Scottish origin
- 42. A way to dedicate
- 43. Challenges
- 47. British Air Aces
- 49. Large, influential bank
- 50. Portended
- 52. Cavalry-sword
- 53. Vaccine developer
- 55. Napoleonic Wars general
- 56. Italian Seaport
- 57. Hip joint
- 58. __ Clapton, musician
- 59. Insect repellent
- 61. Decorative scarf

NEW YEAR’S WORD SEARCH

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

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

WORDS

- BABY
- BALLOONS
- CALENDAR
- CELEBRATE
- CHAMPAGNE
- CHEERS
- CLOCK
- CONFETTI
- COUNTDOWN
- GAMES
- GOALS
- HAPPY
- INVITATION
- JANUARY
- KISS
- MIDNIGHT
- NEW YEAR
- NOISEMAKER
- PARTY
- RESOLUTION
- STREAMER
- TIMES SQUARE
- TOAST



Solve the code to discover words related to New Year’s celebrations.
Each number corresponds to a letter.
(Hint: 17 = N)

- A. 1 9 13 23 24 13 5 17 4
Clue: Bubbly drink
- B. 23 26 25 17 26 5 9 16
Clue: Twelve a.m.
- C. 12 4 22 7 20 3 16 26 7 17
Clue: Plan to change
- D. 24 13 12 16 2
Clue: Fun event

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Briefs

Bartram Trail to stage "Murder on the Orient Express"

Bartram Trail High School will present Agatha Christie's "Murder on the Orient Express" Thursday, Feb. 22 through Sunday, Feb. 25.

When a passenger is murdered aboard the luxurious Orient Express, world-famous detective Hercule Poirot is tasked with solving the crime. The train is filled with many questionable characters, and it soon becomes apparent that each of them is a potential suspect. Will Poirot solve the crime before another tragedy occurs? All aboard!

"Ken Ludwig's adaptation of this classic novel is ingenious. The play is filled with witty dialogue and unique characters that audience members will both adore and despise," said Director Stephen Billy. "There are countless twists and turns that will keep everyone on the edge of their seats."

Visit bit.ly/BTHSEXPRESSTIX for showtimes and ticket information.

Bartram Trail Newcomers' and Women's Club to hold high tea

"Downton Abbey High Tea" is the theme of the January Meeting and Luncheon of the Bartram Trail Newcomers' and Women's Club meeting and luncheon on Tuesday, Jan. 9, at 11 a.m. at the St. Johns Golf and Country Club, 205 St. Johns Golf Drive. Doors will open at 10:30 a.m.

Checks for \$32 should be made payable to BTNC and mailed to Brenda Jenkins, 2204 Fort Mellon Court, St. Augustine, FL 32092. Entrée choice is not required since it will be a buffet service. Downton Abbey/Tea dress is encouraged.

Guest speaker Sandra Francis has been the volunteer coordinator for Haven Hospice for 17 years. She was born in England and came to America with her family 33 years ago and is delighted to talk about the history of "high tea." While she lived in England, she taught floral art at college and her class was invited to create some of the flower arrangements for the Prince Charles and Princess Diana wedding. She will also have comments about Downton Abbey as well.

The Bartram Trail Newcomers' and Women's Club meets the second Tuesday of every month from September to May for lunch. In addition to the monthly meetings, the club has a wide variety of interest groups, including Bridge, Continental Rummy, Pennies Canasta, Mexican Chicken Train dominoes, Bunko, Mah Jongg, golf, recipe exchange, monthly special events, book club, lunch and matinee, Lunch Divas, Ladies Night Out, a nature walk group and community projects. Email Linda Beard at bartramtnc@gmail.com for more information. Visit www.facebook.com/BTNC1 to see

pictures of meetings and download a membership form.

Newcomers of North St. Johns announces January luncheon

Newcomers of North Saint Johns will hold its January luncheon on Tuesday, Jan. 16 beginning at 11 a.m. at Cimarrone Golf Club, 2800 Cimarrone Blvd. The event features lunch and an informative presentation by Vicky Oakes, Supervisor of Elections for St. Johns County. Oakes has served as the Supervisor of Elections in St. Johns County for the past 12 years and previously served as the Assistant Supervisor of Elections for 23 years.

Doors will open at 10:30 am. The cost for the luncheon and program is \$35 for members and \$40 for guests and non-members; all reservations must be received by Jan. 8.

Newcomers of North Saint Johns offers a variety of activities for St. Johns County residents including smaller lunch groups, wine socials, golf, Mah Jongg, holiday parties, a day trip next March to include a fun boat ride from Amelia Island to view Cumberland Island and visit to Ft. Clinch with lunch and shopping opportunities in Fernandina Beach.

Visit newcomersofnorthstjohns.org for more information about the luncheon and membership.

JCE third grader wins award for growing cabbage



Photos courtesy Heidi Karl

Julington Creek Elementary student Graham Harris was selected as the 2023 Florida State winner of the National Bonnie Plants' Third Grade Cabbage Program. Pictured is his cabbage — before and after!



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Children’s choirs team up to raise funds for Nemours

By NewsLine Staff
mail@floridanewsline.com

On Saturday, Dec. 2, the St. Cecilia Children’s Choir from San Jose Church and School teamed up with the children’s choirs from San Juan Del Rio and Holy Family for a successful benefit concert that kicked off the Advent season. The concert was held in the main sanctuary of San Juan del Rio parish and all of the donations and money raised went to support Nemours children’s hospital in Jacksonville. The choirs raised \$1,771 for Nemours through their efforts.

Emily Palaj (San Jose), Katherine Denison (San Juan del Rio), and Kimberly Conway (Holy Family) are the directors of the three choirs that collaborated on this effort.

“This event was envisioned, organized, and directed by me, and was a groundbreaking collaborative effort between the music ministries of these three parishes to serve the community,” said

Emily Palaj. “I would like to bring awareness to what we are capable of when we band together to present our gifts in the service of others who are in need. This endeavor demonstrated that each and every one of our children has something special to give, and that each of their gifts given to them by God have a purpose greater than themselves. I am a huge proponent that children learn that their voices should be used to serve, not just to entertain.”

The concert include a candlelight processional with the kids entering the darkened church holding candles while singing “O Come O Come Emmanuel,” presented seven scripture readings throughout the concert, and performed 13 pieces of music ranging in styles and historical periods from high Baroque to upbeat-Salsa with a Spanish text and Latin-flair. Also featured was a piece of music (“Make a Manger in Your Heart”) which was sung and signed in ASL by all of the students from all three choirs.



Photo courtesy Emily Palaj
Emily Palaj conducting.

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Julington Creek Elementary girls run!



Photo courtesy Heidi Karl

Members of the Julington Creek Elementary Girls on the Run group ran at the organization's 5k on Dec. 2. Everyone worked so hard this season to prepare for the event.

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Fishing

Jimmy's Fishing Report

By Jimmy Tomazinis
mail@floridanewsline.com

Happy New Year! Here's to hoping 2024 is a great one for all of you. Now let's look back on 2023 and see how we can further the goals that we set last year. I unfortunately did not get my river tarpon last year. I did see more than I have in years past and I actually jumped one, but I had to journey downtown to do it. I was hoping for one closer to home. I spent more time chasing them in the surf and I think if I had spent that much time in the river it may have been different. Keep your eyes on the prize as they say. So I'll be balancing my time better this year, especially in September. Long story short, I'll be having the same goal in 2024 — river tarpon or bust.

How about you? Did you achieve your goal(s) last year? If you're in the same boat as me at least you learned something to apply this year. That's a powerful thing and why it's okay to set lofty goals since the lessons you learn along the way are truly what you're after in the end. Maybe. A nice fish is a nice fish after all. Let's get after them then.

While you can still throw a shrimp net this month, it may be too cold and possibly not worth the effort for the few shrimp that are still around. Most of the forage we have this time of year are herring and shad which you can catch in a cast net, but they are not hardy baits. If you're wanting to target their predators as in stripers, flounder, and redfish, it might be better to throw a swim bait or Rat-L-Trap to imitate the bait fish. I like to "jig" a Rat-L-Trap to make it look like a cold stunned bait fish but remember to slow everything down. Winter fishing demands patience.

Speck fishing has been pretty good and more and more big fish should be showing up in the creeks every day. We've been catching them on minnows and jigs. Chartreuse is always a productive color, but silver has also been producing. If conditions allow, don't neglect trying the main river for them. They're eating the herring and shad too. If you're not getting snagged now and then you're not speck fishing. Tight lines.

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No Excuses Running Club runners are state champs



Photo courtesy Jill Benavides

Five months of training paid off for the No Excuses Running Club girls' and boys' team again for the 2023 Cross Country season, with both teams earning the title of Middle School Club Cross Country State Champions. When all cross country categories were combined, the No Excuses girls' team came out as overall Florida MS XC State Champions for two consecutive years. Sydney Johnson, Brianna Motycka, Avery Hartley, Eva Delaney, Brynn Jenkins, Kaitlyn Chapman, and Amelia Flood comprised the girls' Elite Team while Dominic Johnson, Jordan Eriksen, Luke Janke, Mathew Ishee, Daniel Itkin, Mathew Hurski, Harrison Lafser, Chase Petrick, Austin Courson, and Graham Moore comprised the boys' Elite Team. Both teams are excited to build on the training from the XC season to train for success on the track beginning early January.

Timberlin Creek's food drive benefitted Betty Griffin House



Photo courtesy Kelli Gallant

Timberlin Creek Elementary School held its annual canned food drive to benefit the Betty Griffin House Nov. 13 – Nov. 17. The school's fifth grade Beta Club coordinated the week-long event by collecting and boxing up the generous donations from parents, students, and faculty. These donations were picked up by Kenlie Kubart, local Betty Griffin representative just in time for the Thanksgiving holidays. Mission accomplished.

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Q&A with Vicky Oakes cont. from pg. 7

didate list (in alphabetical order by last name) is Ryan L. Binkley, Chris Christie, Ron DeSantis, Nikki R. Haley, Asa Hutchinson, Vivek Ramaswamy, Donald J. Trump.

President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. is the only Democratic candidate for president, and therefore, there will not be a Democratic ballot in the PPP.

Q: I would like to vote-by-mail. When is the deadline to request a ballot to be mailed?

A: The last day to request a vote-by-mail ballot to be mailed is March 7, 2024. Remember, due to state law changes, vote-by-mail requests expire

after each general election. Even if you have voted by mail in past elections, you still need to make a new request for 2024.

Q: What should I be doing to prepare for the Presidential Preference Primary Election?

A: Check your voter status on our website, www.votesjc.gov and make sure that you are registered and that your voter information is current, including your address. Make a voting plan: In St. Johns County, there's three ways to vote. Will you be voting on Election Day, early, or voting by mail?

Lastly, know where to go for trusted

election information. There is a lot of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation that gets shared around election time, and your Supervisor of Elections is the trusted source of information for Florida elections. Visit our website at www.votesjc.gov, or call the Elections Office with any questions you may have. For updates, subscribe to my monthly newsletter

and follow the St. Johns County Supervisor of Elections Office on Facebook, X, Instagram, and LinkedIn.

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

A: Readers can email me at voakes@votesjc.gov or call me at (904) 823-2238. Our website, www.votesjc.gov also has a wealth of information.

Beachside swimmers compete at state

The Beachside High School swim and dive team competed at the 3A State level in November. Girls competed in the 200 IM relay placing 13th overall state level and the boys competed at the 200 Free Relay placing seventh at the state level. In addition, Beachside had three swimmers and one diver competing in individual events. Junior Haylee Hite placed fourth overall for the 100 Back and ninth for the 200 IM.

Senior Peter Manelis placed sixth for 100 Breast and seventh for 100 Fly. Diver Olivia Riegler placed 10th for the state finals. State finalists from Beachside High School consisted of Haylee Hite, Gina Faunce, Jenna Albers, Kyra Lagoutaris, Peter Manelis, Alejandro Lopez-Romero, Nico Garvey, Kohen Pitochelli and Olivia Riegler. The Beachside swim and dive team is coached by Lauren Huss and Cyro Tavares.



Photo courtesy Glory Faunce
States team under the coaching of Lauren Huss and Cyro Tavares.

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Travel

I thought I was going to Bristol, Tennessee

By Debi Lander
mail@floridanewslines.com

I thought I was going to Bristol, Tennessee, but upon arrival, I realized the city lies within two states. The state borders of Tennessee and Virginia run down the middle of State Street. You can stand with one foot in the Volunteer State and the other in the Old Dominion. Rather fun! I also found the famous lighted Bristol Sign across from the railroad station proclaiming Bristol “A Good Place To Live.” The sign has been in place since 1915.

Those who watched Ken Burn’s documentary “Country Music” will be drawn to Bristol to learn more about the official Birthplace of Country Music. Back in 1927, a Victor Talking Machine music producer went to Bristol to record artists performing their songs. These recordings, known as the Bristol Sessions, were not recorded on multiple tracks with numerous takes but captured in real-time into one mi-

crophone. The Birthplace of Country Music Museum, a Smithsonian affiliate, tells the story of these famous and groundbreaking “Sessions.” A superb introductory film explains how these recordings brought country music into mainstream households and catapulted the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers to fame. The attraction showcases interactive exhibits, a working radio station, fascinating memorabilia, theater experiences, and video clips. Plan to spend half a day having fun with the hands-on displays and take a turn recording a song in a sound room.

The city keeps its connection to country music, mountain music, old-time, bluegrass, gospel, and blues with an annual music reunion every September. The Bristol Rhythm and Roots Music Festival attracts thousands who come to listen to performances on 10 different stages around town. For three days,

the streets are closed to traffic, and people stroll along enjoying top artists.

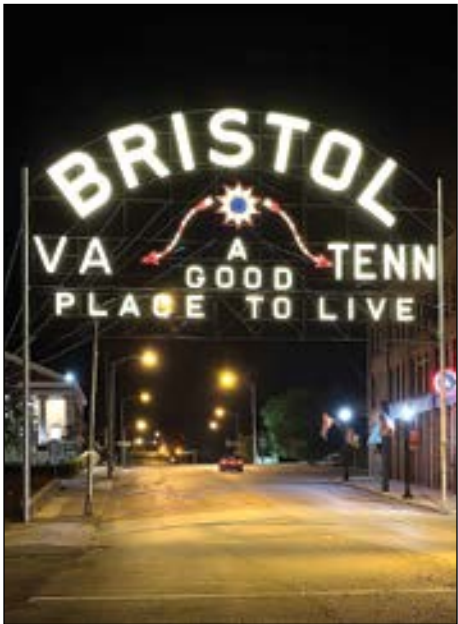
If you are a NASCAR fan, you will know of another crowd-pleaser, the Bristol Motor Speedway. The popular race track hosts two major races each year, plus multiple events at the Bristol Dragway, one of NHRA’s best venues.

For a change of pace, head to Bristol Caverns and take an invigorating underground tour of sublime rock formations. An underground river carved the beautiful caverns some 200 million years ago. Be sure to wear non-slippery shoes and plan on constant year-round temperatures between 50 and 60 degrees F.

I stayed at the Hotel Bristol, far above what I expected, and one of the most excellent hotels ever. The place makes ideal overnight lodging for a road trip. The former Reynolds building was turned into a boutique hotel. They kept the Roman arched entryway and provide oversized rooms, luxury bathrooms, and dreamy beds. The hotel restaurant surpasses your needs, and the rooftop bar naturally serves barrel-aged Tennessee whiskeys.

While in Bristol, consider lunch at the Burger Bar, a classic 1942 diner with some original décor. Another lunchtime choice is Bloom, a woman-owned business that’s become a favorite downtown eatery.

For dinner, don’t miss Union 41, a converted bus station offering culinary delights from the award-winning Chef T of the Food Network. Again, the



Photos courtesy Debi Lander
The famous Bristol Sign.



Bristol Caverns.

quality and presentation of my meal blew me away, and, of course, there was live country music.

Bristol is part of The Crooked Road, a 300-mile trail dedicated to musical heritage. The trail winds through 19 counties, four cities, and more than 50 towns. It includes nine major venues and more than 60 affiliated venues and festivals. Carrie Beck, director of the trail, says, “The venues and musicians of the region are truly unique and bring musical traditions to the visitors and their communities. It’s authenticity at its best.”

Both Northeast Tennessee and Southwest Virginia have a lot to offer travelers. ExploreBristol.com.

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

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