



The Front Porch

Where The Tea Is Sweet and the Talks Are Long

Sept/Oct 2025

IRONWOOD HOMES OF PERRY

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BRINGING
FAMILY
HOME**

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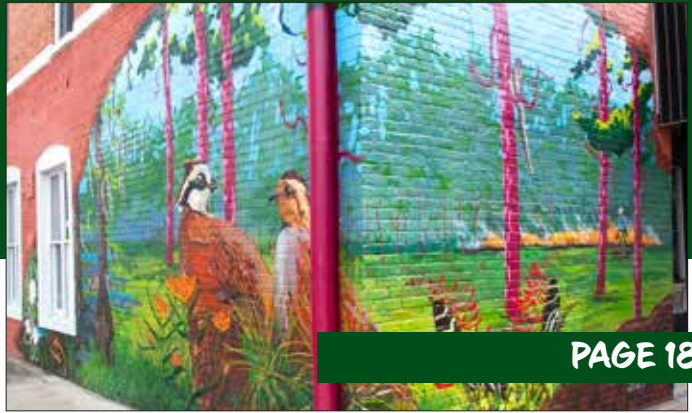
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The Front Porch

Where the tea is sweet and the talks are long

Established 2019
Vol. 7 Issue 1 • Sept/Oct 2025

The Front Porch
is published every other month at
1695 South SR 53
Madison, Fla. 32340

Published by



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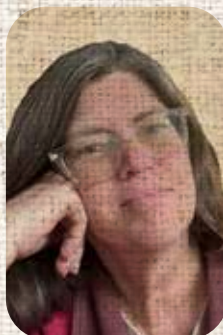
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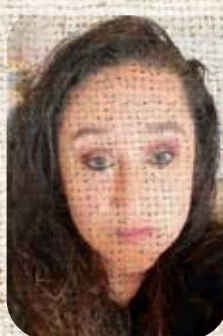
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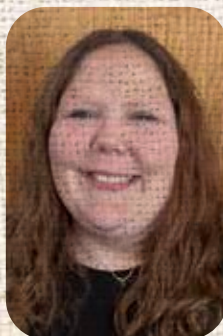
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SITTIN' ON THE PORCH WITH...

AMBER HATCH

Story by Danny Federico

Photograph Courtesy of Amber Hatch

For Amber Hatch, success has never been about personal accolades – it's about creating opportunity, giving back, and making lasting change. A 24-year-old Branford native, Hatch is on track to become a quadruple Gator, having already earned three degrees from the University of Florida (UF) and now pursuing a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy.

"In my work, I aim to support policies that enhance student experiences and improve their long-term outcomes," Hatch said.

Her academic journey began with dual enrollment at Florida Gateway College, where she earned her associate degree the same semester she graduated from Branford High School in 2019. From there, she accepted a full ride to the University of Florida and never looked back. By 2022, Hatch had earned two bachelor's degrees – one in Education Sciences and one in Psychology – along with a minor in Sociology. In 2024, she completed her master's degree in Research and Evaluation Methodology. Her current program, the Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy, will make her a quadruple Gator by the time she graduates in December 2026.

"When I was applying to college, I chose UF because it was close to home and had an excellent college of education," she said.

With a program ranked sixth in the nation - tied with Harvard's college of education - and degree programs right up her alley, Hatch knew it was the right choice.

"In hindsight, I'm glad I chose UF because it was home to countless opportunities to become involved in research and a world-class community of scholars who have been invaluable to my academic and professional journey. I also appreciate that my education has been informed by the local context in Florida, which is where I most want to have an impact in my career."

That exposure helped her find her

true passion.

"I was originally a math major, minoring in 'UFTeach,' because I wanted to become a math teacher," she explained. "But over time, my interest in finding ways to help schools better serve students and their families led me down a different path."

That path has included internships with organizations like Light Blue Learning, the Institute for Student Achievement at Educational Testing Service, and a policy fellowship in New Orleans, where she helped develop recommendations for the Orleans Parish School Board. Most recently, Hatch worked for the Florida Legislature as a Graduate Research Assistant with the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, where she contributed to multiple reports in both education and health policy.

"This has been my favorite internship so far," she said. "It helped inform my decision to pursue a career as a policy analyst."

Through that career, Hatch hopes to influence legislation that improves public education, particularly in the realm of civic education – something she believes is vital to preparing future generations.

"I want students to have access to opportunities that align with their interests and goals, and for graduates to be well prepared for adulthood," she said. "Strengthening civic education is especially important to me. It equips the next generation to participate and contribute to their own communities in meaningful ways."

While her academic journey has been marked by drive and direction, her values were formed much earlier, within her family.

"My family has deeply influenced who I am and who I aspire to become," she said.

Her father, Jay Hatch, currently serves as a member of the Branford Town Council. Her grandfather, Randy Hatch, served as a county commissioner, and his father – Amber's great-grandfather – was also a Branford Town Councilman. Her

aunt, Heather McInnis, leads the Greater Branford Community Association, and many of her relatives, including her grandmother and cousins, have been educators.

"My decision to pursue a career in education policy was shaped by my family's commitment to leadership, community and education," Hatch said.

This decision has led to leadership and service roles even beyond the classroom. Hatch has served on UF's Graduate Student Council, directed graduate affairs for the UF AI Club and volunteered at her local library, in hurricane response efforts, and as a tutor. She credits her work as a Graduate Research Assistant at UF as one of her most formative experiences.

"Each assistantship has been crucial to the development of my practical skills beyond the classroom," she said.

Hatch credited them for teaching her how to code, handle the complexities of real and incomplete data, interpret and apply laws, judicial decisions and local policies in educational contexts, and navigate academic and professional environments.

Even with her packed academic and professional schedule, Hatch finds time to explore creative outlets. A skilled artist, she enjoys sketching, watercolors and, most recently, digital – something she says runs in the family.

"My family says I take after my great-grandmother Kathryn 'Kitty' Hatch in this regard," she said. "I inherited her collection of art supplies."

Despite her academic accolades and impressive internship résumé, Hatch's heart always brings her back home. She and her fiancé, Austin Busch, are planning to settle in the Branford area once she completes her degree.

"I love Branford. It will always be my home," she said. "It's a charming, safe, family-oriented town whose community works hard to make sure it stays that way. I am especially proud of the way our little town bands together in times of crisis, caring for those in need, within and beyond our own community." ■



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COVER STORY



FAMILY BRINGING FAMILY HOME

IRONWOOD HOMES OF PERRY

Sponsored Content
Story by Rick Patrick

*Photographs Courtesy of
Ironwood Homes of Perry*

Ironwood Homes of Perry, a member of the Frier Group, has been in business in the Forest Capital for more than 25 years, but the current head of the family operation, Mike Morrison, has been in charge since February of 2018. Morrison is very familiar with the unique housing needs of North Florida, since he is a North Florida native, originally hailing from Lake City.

Morrison uses his many years as a licensed Building Contractor to help set Ironwood homes apart from many mobile home dealerships in the North Florida area. Since he is a licensed Building Contractor, he is able to build foundations for modular homes, along with other construction needs. Morrison is also a licensed Real Estate professional and can, therefore, help customers obtain land on which to place their new home.

For those potential customers who feel a mobile home may not be sturdy enough, especially considering the number of hurricanes that have hit the area in recent years, Morrison states that today's mobile homes are much more

sturdy than homes from 30 years ago. All the homes sold by Ironwood Homes of Perry are designed to meet stringent local and Housing and Urban Development (HUD) standards. Modular homes available from Ironwood Homes of Perry are even more sturdy.

In addition to selling top-quality mobile homes and modular housing, Morrison and his staff are committed to community service for the North Central area. They have been long-time supporters of youth participating in area livestock shows and sports programs as well as supporters of organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

At Ironwood Homes of Perry, they offer a wide variety of options to fit any lifestyle and budget. Ironwood Homes of Perry is a dealer for Live Oak Homes, one of the industry leaders in the manufactured homes industry. Their homes are built in a carefully controlled factory setting utilizing state-of-the-art technology. This allows them to produce a high quality home in a very efficient manner. This also gives Live Oak Homes an edge over many site-built homes because the manufacturing process is protected from the elements which could otherwise lead to damaged materials and

costly weather delays.

Live Oak Homes are extremely energy-efficient, saving the new homeowner money on energy costs. Their homes are also built to withstand harsh weather conditions, meeting and often exceeding quality federal standards required by HUD. Live Oak Homes are built with flooring that is 25 percent thicker than the competition and side walls that have studs placed at just 10 inches apart, adding to the sturdiness of the home. Above head, Live Oak homes are built with state-of-the-art trusses for a strong roof. Live Oak homes are also built with the flexibility to accommodate any floor plan. They can even customize your home for special needs accessibility. An example of the strength and durability of these homes is a Live Oak home in Mexico Beach which withstood the ravages of Hurricane Michael. Although siding was ripped away from the home, the walls and roof of the home remained intact, protecting the valuable contents inside.

In addition to Live Oak Homes, Ironwood Homes of Perry is also a dealership for TownHomes LLC in Lake City. TownHomes is well-known throughout the industry with a reputation



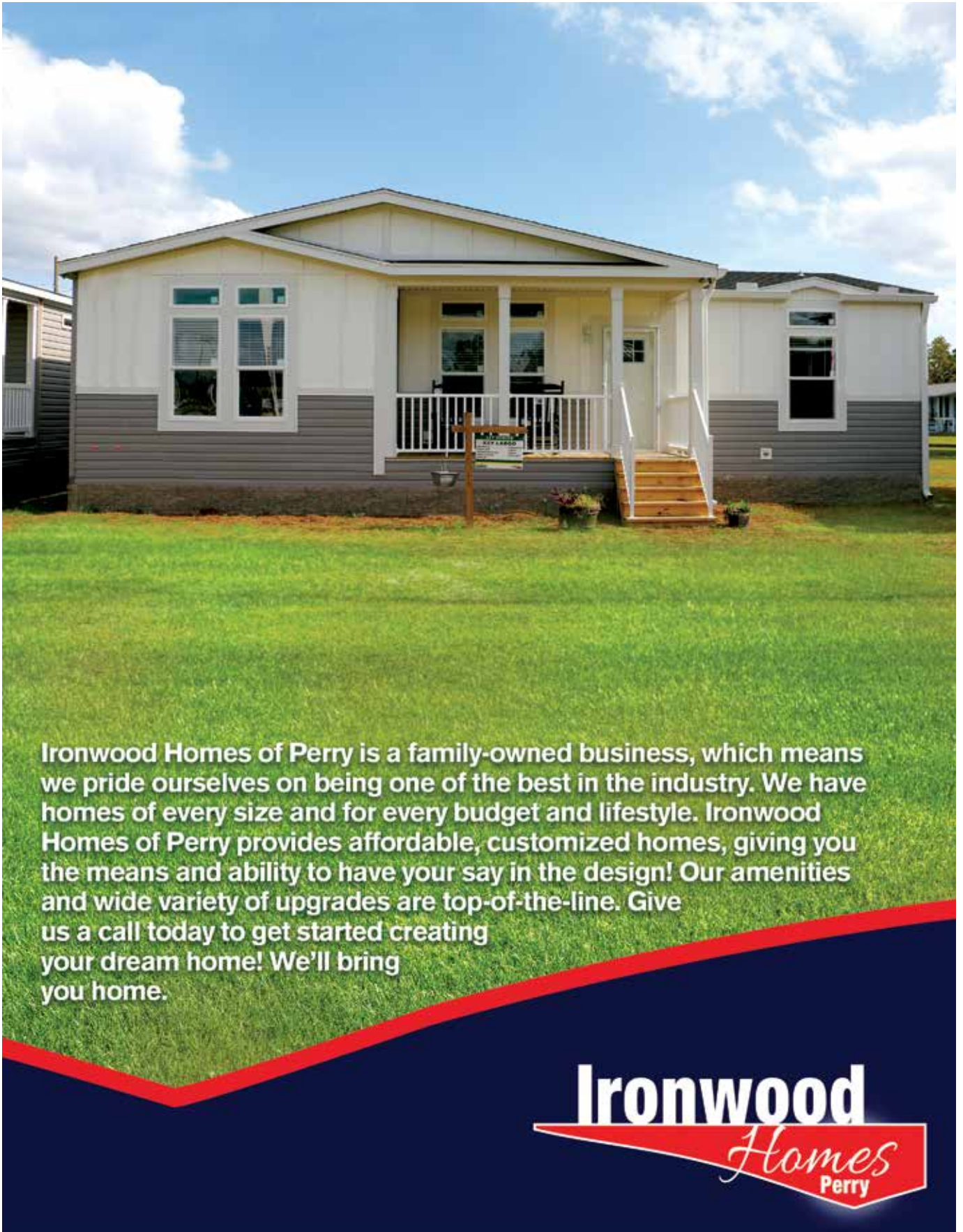


for building tough, reliable homes. TownHomes can provide home buyers with rugged, expertly designed and built homes that can be customized to fit every taste. With a new home from TownHomes, you can be sure of a manufactured home that your family will be proud to call home for a lifetime.

Ironwood Homes of Perry has a variety of homes on their lot, ranging in size from the cozy one bedroom/one bath J-Low model at 520 square feet to the spacious Key Largo model that has four bedrooms with two bathrooms and approximately 2,612 square feet of living space. If you don't see exactly what you are looking for, the friendly staff at Ironwood Homes of Perry will gladly assist you in ordering your custom-built home. Modular homes are also available at Ironwood Homes of Perry. Homes can be bought either furnished or unfurnished.

The family at Ironwood Homes of Perry is ready and eager to help you acquire your dream home at a price to fit your budget. They are open Monday through Saturday, from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. They are available on Sundays by appointment. They can be found at 3483 S. Byron Butler Pkwy., in Perry. You can call them at (850) 838-9090. You can also reach them by email at ironwoodperry@gmail.com. You can see photos and floorplans of all the homes they have on their lot by visiting their website at www.ironwoodhomesofperry.com. Come meet the family of Ironwood Homes of Perry and experience the difference – they will bring you home. ■





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MURALS RAISE AWARENESS FOR *Florida Wildlife Corridor*



Sponsored Content

Story by Laura Young

Photography by Lucas Delgado

Larger-than-life painted spider lilies bloom brightly now from a section of brick wall between the Vintage Treasures windows facing North Jefferson Street in downtown Monticello, Florida. They anchor the left edge of an expansive wildlife-themed mural named “Dusk in the Longleaf Gap,” which stretches up and around the corner toward the shop’s doors on East Dogwood Street.

It’s a busy corner for the town. Situated just one block from Jefferson County’s centerpiece, the courthouse, it’s where the community Christmas tree stands every December and where the Watermelon Festival Parade culminates every June. The hub is now poised to serve as a vivid, year-round reminder of the natural beauty that residents of and visitors to Jefferson County value so dearly.

How fitting for this public art to take the form of a mural! Its connected scenes of distinctive local flora and fauna showcase the county’s critical role in an 18-million-acre network of connected lands and water that support wildlife and people – the Florida Wildlife Corridor – which stretches from the Everglades into the Panhandle.

“Dusk in the Longleaf Gap” is just one of the inspiring murals funded by the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation to promote awareness of the Corridor in ecologically significant areas with the highest risk of near-future development. After the Florida Wildlife Corridor Act was signed into law in 2021 with unanimous bipartisan support, more than 395,000 additional acres have been approved for conservation, but many identified areas still need protection. The Corridor Foundation’s mural campaign kicked off in 2022 with a project in collaboration with the City of Crystal River, featuring images of that area’s pristine waterways and identity as the “Home of the Manatee.” A mural created in partnership with the City of Ocala in 2024 wraps around a water tank near its Downtown Farmers Market and features native plants and animals from Ocala National Forest. With additional funding from Disney, Saint Bernard Foundation and Rayonier, the mural campaign has recently awarded grants for three more murals slated for completion during 2025 in Corridor Gateway Communities.

The Jefferson County Tourist Development Council (TDC) was proud to be a grant recipient, and its completed mural was officially unveiled this July. The artwork features a prescribed woodland burn and highlights species whose survival



depends on a fire ecology. The local TDC worked with the Corridor Foundation, Tall Timbers research station and the artists to design a mural that would capture this key aspect of lands across Jefferson – the Keystone County of Florida – which spans from the Gulf coast up along the Aucilla River and into the Red Hills conservation region. Viewing from left to right, the painting flows through a triptych of striking scenes.

First, there's the watery world of spider lilies and bald cypress inhabited by semi-aquatic striped newts and a wading limpkin. Second, the wetland edges up to longleaf pine flatwoods where bobwhite quail rustle among wiregrass and milkweed while a swallow-tailed kite soars against a blue sky. A prescribed burn takes place in the background, as regenerated land in the foreground hosts a perching fox squirrel, a foraging red-cockaded woodpecker and two zebra longwing butterflies visiting spikes of coral bean blossoms. In the third panel, a gopher tortoise peeks out of its burrow among a patch of Florida tickseed coreopsis. Signage for the mural includes a QR code that links to an online guide with details about each featured species and their place in local habitats enhanced by fire.

At the mural's ribbon cutting on July 25, 2025, Mallory Dimmitt, CEO of the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation, said, "It's a joy for me to be in Jefferson County this morning to unveil something that is both beautiful but also deeply meaningful. This mural doesn't just brighten a wall; it really reflects the spirit of a place that continues to live in deep relationship with wild Florida. At its heart, this mural is a

celebration of place – of Jefferson County's unique role within the Florida Wildlife Corridor."

Dimmitt explained that the Corridor supports the wildlife that Floridians all cherish; it protects the waters we drink; and it helps sustain the health and resilience of our entire state. While significant portions of the Corridor have been protected, she noted that large and critical swaths still remain at risk, including landscapes in Jefferson County.

"The choices we make today," she said, "will determine whether these places stay connected and thriving for generations to come. Jefferson County remains essential to the strength of the Corridor. The forests, farms and open spaces here are not just scenic – they are vital. They allow species like the gopher tortoise, the Southern fox squirrel, the Northern bobwhite quail and so many others to thrive."

This is precisely why the mural campaign was launched: to help communities tell their stories as part of this larger, connected landscape.

"Jefferson County's story is one of continuity, stewardship and deep-rooted care for the land," Dimmitt continued. "This mural is really part of that story. It honors what you already have, which is a strong conservation ethic, healthy working lands, a legacy of living close to nature, and it reminds us of what is possible when communities take pride in preserving what makes them special."

Austin Hosford, who serves as chair of both the Jefferson County Commission and the TDC, also spoke at the unveiling.

"This mural is more than art," he said.

"It's a reflection of who we are and our values that we hold so near and dear here. This mission could not be more relevant to a place like Jefferson County, where our landscapes are not just beautiful, but they are worked in, they are lived in and they are deeply valued. So special thanks to Ms. Mallory and the foundation's efforts to preserve these natural areas. It goes hand in hand with smarter, more sustainable development, helping ensure Florida grows without sacrificing the wild spaces that we call special."

At the Corridor Foundation's booth set up for the occasion on Dogwood Street, local landowners could find out more about the Corridor's history and see if their property fell within or near the Corridor's existing or desired conservation easements. Joining them in the vendor row were representatives from Tall Timbers, Aucilla Research Institute, Florida Forest Service, North Florida Wildlife Center and Quail Forever – all of whom have interests compatible with the messaging of the mural.

The celebration also offered a window into the process used for creating the mural, from design decisions through the actual painting.

Artists Sam McCoy and Meghan Mick shared how they worked closely with Shane Wellendorf, land conservation director with Tall Timbers Research Station and Land Conservancy, to determine which species to include in the mural. Wellendorf brought to the table expertise with using prescribed fire and his knowledge of which plants and animals depend on fire to maintain their habitat. Wellendorf even took McCoy and Mick out into the landscape to see their subject matter first hand. He also provided photographs and deepened their understanding of the species and habitats they would be depicting in the mural.

"I also learned to remember to look closely at things," Mick said, "and see all the colors you might see in the feather of a quail or the bark of a tree, if you really look closely."

As McCoy and Mick painted the mural, their progress was on full display at every stage. Passersby could see how they prepared their brick "canvas," how different areas to be painted were first blocked out with a plain primer coat and then, stroke by brush stroke, how the landscapes and their inhabitants came into sharper view.

Store owners Pam and Mike Willis heard from a lot of people as awareness of the project grew and the mural developed phase by phase outside Vintage Treasures.

"Each day as something was added



In July 2025, the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation officially unveiled the mural it funded in downtown Monticello. Pictured during the ribbon cutting are (left to right) artist Meghan Mick, artist Sam McCoy, Foundation CEO Mallory Dimmitt, County Commission and Tourist Development Council Chair Austin Hosford, Tall Timbers Conservation Director Shane Wellendorf, business owner Mike Willis and building owner Michele Arceneaux.

in,” Mike said at the unveiling, “each weekend as another bird or another plant was added, you could see the smiles on their faces. Monticello-Jefferson County is what it is. It is a great place to live, and this mural just depicts everything we are all about.”

For McCoy, being part of a public art project filled her with gratitude.

“Public art serves an entire community,” she said. “It serves thousands of people every day, and it takes a lot of trust from the community. While we were trying to inspire stewardship, it just brought to the forefront what was already here in Jefferson County and the love that already exists.”

“We had so much good interaction,” added Mick in giving thanks to the community. “It really elevated the importance and the meaning of this experience for both Sam and me. We had lots of conversations. We had cars slow down and shout words of encouragement. We met a lot of your dogs. It was really pretty awesome... I think that Monticello is a perfect place for the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation to gift a larger-than-life piece of art that really helps us celebrate the lands that sustain us.”

Theresa Sterling, who spearheaded the grant application for the TDC, was understandably excited and proud to see the mural become a reality.

“The mural selection committee could not have picked a better design and a better team,” Sterling commented, “because, seriously, to me, it’s not just public art. It’s fine art in a public space telling our story. It is so fitting for our downtown.”

The mural’s role of inspiring land conservation throughout the Florida Wildlife Corridor partners well with the TDC’s keen interest in highlighting the natural beauty of Jefferson County. Michele and Byron Arceneaux, the building owners who provided wall space for “Dusk in the Longleaf Gap,” see how this synergy can create a wider ripple effect for local businesses in town.

“It’s definitely an asset as far as tourism goes,” said Michele. “People are stopping and taking pictures, so I think in the long run it will be a benefit to our town economically as well.”

To get to the murals, of course, one has to travel through Jefferson County’s rural landscape, and 250,000 acres of it lie within the Florida Wildlife Corridor. Viewing the mural, and learning about its elements, connects town and country, conservation and business, in perhaps a new, larger way.

Since the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation was started by conservation photographer Carlton Ward and colleagues in 2010 at Archbold Biological Station near Lake Place, Florida, expeditions and campaigns to raise awareness and support for the Corridor have gained momentum. Today, people across the state can connect with and support the Corridor in many ways. They can advocate for legislated land protection, donate to the conservation cause, volunteer, follow updates on social media and sign up for the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation newsletter. Most of all, locals and visitors can explore the Corridor in person by planning their own expedition into the real, wild Florida, using an interactive map at www.floridawildlifecorridor.org. Starting nearby and branching out, there are 1,300 named rivers and streams crossing the Corridor that include 1,700 miles of designated paddling trails. Myriad discoveries await along 6,300 miles of trails within the Corridor; including 1,100 miles of the Florida National Scenic Trail.

The murals – set like gems across this rich tapestry – draw us in and then compel us to re-engage with all the surrounding natural wonders entrusted to our care. ■



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TALL TIMBERS

Regional Reads

By Laura Young

The interesting small towns that dot the landscape of Florida's Big Bend have produced a fascinating fusion of people, many of whom channel their experiences and interests into equally fascinating books. In this issue we're taking notice of the recent release of one novel, a true story and a collection of poetry. If there's a local author whose work you'd like to see noted in a future issue of *The Front Porch* magazine, email emerald@greenepublishing.com.

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What Survived the Fire: From Wreckage to Reckoning

By Elizabeth Schmidt (2025)

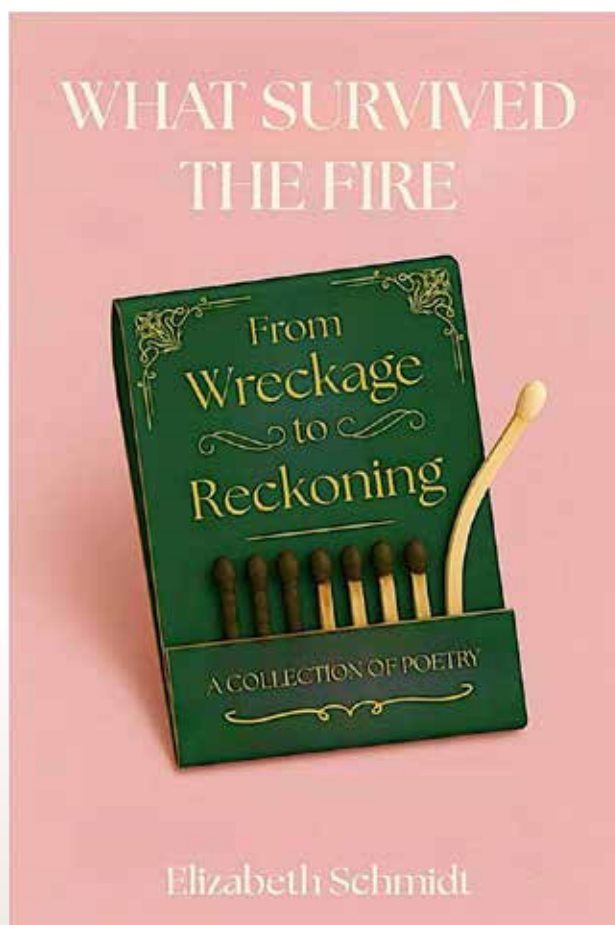
Madison resident Elizabeth "Lizz" Schmidt's publishing debut is a collection of poetry entitled *What Survived the Fire: From Wreckage to Reckoning*.

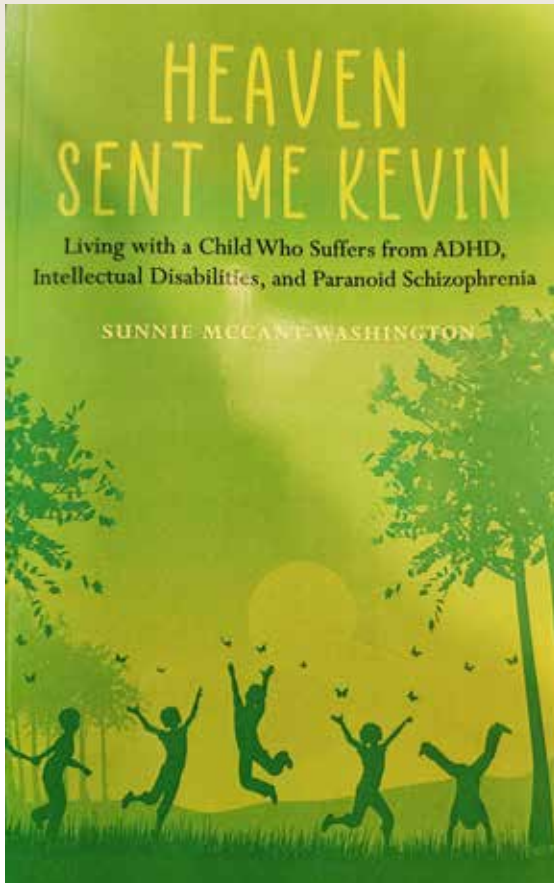
Schmidt has had a love of writing from an early age and developed an interest in poetry as a teenager. She began working on *What Survived the Fire* as an adult, in 2019, after a seven-year relationship ended. The book includes a series of poems that describe grieving the separation, healing from the heartbreak and rising stronger.

She's writing for the women who stayed too long, the ones who were told they were just too much and those trying to find the girls they left behind. As poetry, the images and themes are at the same time intimate and universal.

While the poems came together over a number of years, self-publishing the complete collection as a book took only seven months. In addition to authoring the poems, Schmidt also designed the cover herself.

Currently the collection is available only at amazon.com.





Heaven Sent Me Kevin

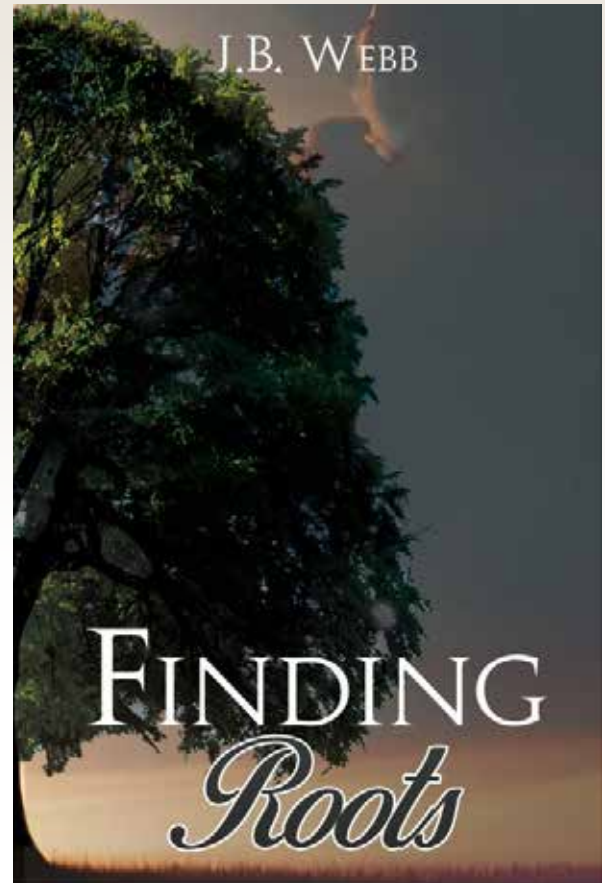
By Sunnie McCant-Washington (Dorrance Publishing, 2025)

Sunnie Washington, who owns GEM Nails & More in Monticello, Florida, and runs the nonprofit A Rai of Sunshine of North Florida, has released a new edition of her book *Heaven Sent Me Kevin*. It contains all of the original chapters from the 2011 edition, in which Washington shared the true story of her journey to provide the best life possible for her son Kevin, who was diagnosed with ADHD at age five and later with paranoid schizophrenia. Plus, the 2025 edition contains seven new chapters that tell what Kevin is up to now, along with current pictures of the family.

One passage reads this way: "Kevin came running in my room, screaming, 'Make it stop! Make it stop! I want it to stop now!' He had his hands over his ears, and he was crying. I didn't know what to do or say. I just held him for hours, trying to calm him down. As I held him, I could only pray to ask God to help me because I didn't know what was happening. I never expected for him to react this way to the voices in his head because he referred to the voices as his friends and he had once told me that he didn't want them to go away."

Throughout the many struggles of being a single mother of four, Washington's strength came from her personal relationship with God and unconditional love for her son. Prepare to be amazed by her calm approach and invaluable insight into Kevin's world.

The latest edition of the book is available from GEM Nails & More, DorrancePublishing.com and other major online booksellers.



Finding Roots

By Jessica Webb (McGilligan Publishing, 2024)

Jessica Webb has lived in Madison, Florida, since 1975, selling real estate, running Grumpy's Diner and expressing herself through art and writing. Now she has released her first book, *Finding Roots*, a novel set in rural North Florida during the height of the tobacco-growing era.

Webb took inspiration for the book from many conversations with her late husband to create a deeply moving tale of family, loss and redemption. Webb also drew on her experiences working at Greene Publishing as a young adult to craft the character of Freddy Black, a local newspaper editor who combines some traits of Publisher Tommy Greene and a co-worker, Freddy Howard.

The main character is Rob Mathis, a man with a gentle spirit who walked away from his family's generational farm and never looked back -- until a tragic accident forces him to confront his past. As he returns to his country home, Rob faces not only grief but also the challenges of reconnecting with family. Ultimately, he must decide whether to continue pursuing his dreams or embrace the responsibilities of the life he once left behind. *Finding Roots* captures the heartache and hope of returning home and making peace with your past.

It is available at Grumpy's Diner, A Mainstreet Realty and several major online booksellers.

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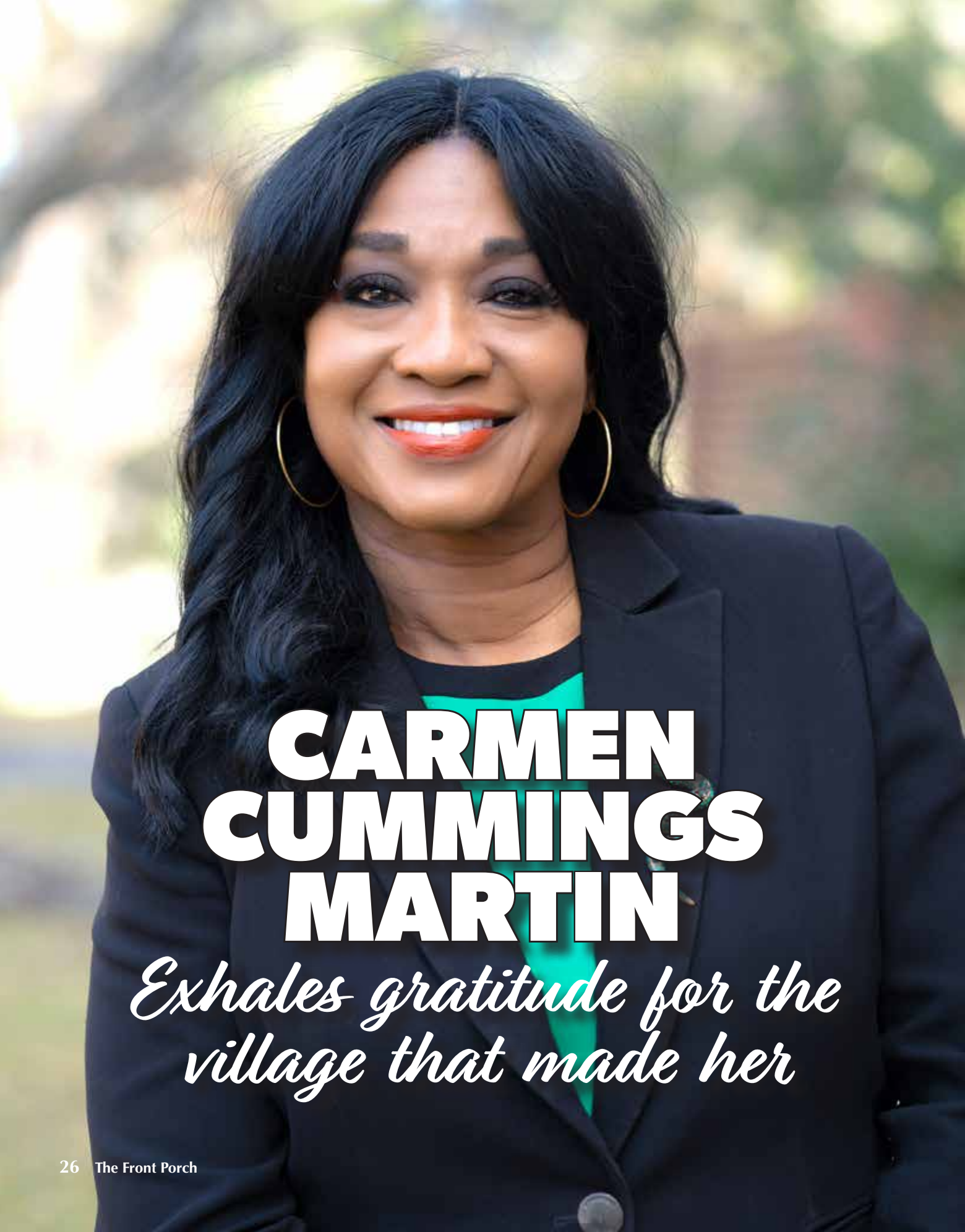
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A portrait of Carmen Cummings Martin, a Black woman with long, dark, wavy hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a black blazer over a teal top and large gold hoop earrings. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with greenery and warm light.

CARMEN CUMMINGS MARTIN

*Exhales gratitude for the
village that made her*

Story by Laura Young

Photographs Courtesy of
Carmen Cummings-Martin

A young Carmen tags along beside her father while he mows the yard around their home in Wacissa, Florida. She's pushing her own turquoise-colored plastic mower, a toy of sorts but functional enough for her to feel she's sharing the task with her dad. He is not just teaching her about lawn care. He is instilling in her a pride of place, and not just for their home, but for their tiny hometown of Wacissa and the country life she is living in rural North Florida.

She remembers visiting cousins in big cities – New York, Philadelphia, Kansas City – and telling them, when they asked, that she was from near Tallahassee, never wanting to say the name of a town no one would know. Later, on the way back to Florida, she asked her dad for guidance about how to respond to questions about her origins, and he gave her advice that would become a guiding principle for life.

"Carmen, it's not where you're from, but it's where you're going," he told her, "and what you do to help someone else once you've arrived."

Now when Carmen Cummings-Martin looks back on her incredible life, she sees how important it was to be proud of her roots and follow her dad's directive to live in service to others.

"Every time I travel these hills, I exhale gratitude for the serene, picturesque landscape of Wacissa and Jefferson County – the place I call home," she said in a short video produced recently for the Monticello-Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce. "Everything I've learned through the years about tenacity, faith, friendship and family came from my village, my friends and my community."

Many in North Florida who recall Carmen Cummings' long career at WCTV – who tuned in to her broadcasts every day and made her face and name familiar in their homes – might be surprised at the sequence of events that led this shy country girl to prominent, powerful positions in the public eye.

Carmen's roots in Wacissa go back to her grandparents, who adopted Carmen's mom, Naomi.

"My grandmother was the world



Dexter Martin and
Carmen Cummings-Martin

to me," Carmen says. "I am so grateful that I had a window of opportunity to bond with Hester Woodson, who took my mom in. My mom's adopted father was Luke Woodson, who worked on the railroad and traveled a lot, so my mother and grandmother had a very tight relationship. They were country

**"Every time I travel
these hills, I exhale
gratitude for the
serene, picturesque
landscape of Wacissa
and Jefferson County –
the place I call home"
- Carmen Cummings**

to the core."

The family tree started growing another branch during a trip the Woodsons took to visit Naomi's biological family in St. Petersburg, Florida. This was also where William Cummings, Naomi's husband-to-be, grew up.

"She met my dad on the beach," Carmen shares from the family story. "He told me that he used to say that he would never live anywhere there wasn't a beach until he met mom. As they communicated over a number

of summers, he decided to come see where my mother lived, which was this place called Wacissa. When he met her, there were farm animals out there. My grandmother had chickens, there were puppies, and they had a mule that they used as a resource, for gardening. Mother was riding the mule when he drove up. He thought, 'She really is a country girl!' So when I say 'country to the core,' that pretty much describes my family and my foundation."

Naomi and William both earned degrees from Florida A&M University (FAMU). Naomi became an educator who taught at Jefferson Elementary for more than 35 years; William became an environmental scientist. When Carmen came along, she absorbed her mother's country-life values along with her father's keen interest in the natural world.

"Both were big on being a friend of nature," Carmen recalls. "My father would always teach me about plant life and wildlife. That was always very important."

That time she was "helping" him with the lawn, she remembers vividly her reaction when the toy mower accidentally ran over a big grasshopper. Even though it was a type of bug that her grandmother didn't like, she still felt bad because the grasshopper died. She had been taught to be kind to creatures that relied on man to be their friends, so she took the grasshopper's death very seriously.

"I remember going inside the house to get the Bible and a spoon," she says. "I created a grave and I had a service for the grasshopper. I said a prayer and a scripture. As I've gone back over those moments, of what it meant to be a country girl, it made me have pride about the fundamentals that mattered for me and that moral compass, those values. As I grew older, I took great pride in the simple way of life that was very meaningful. It mattered that life was important."

At Jefferson County High School, Carmen was a C student, and she was comfortable enough in her surroundings to reign as the 1976 Watermelon Queen. When it came time to go off to college, however, she experienced a lot of uncertainty. Even though both of her parents were FAMU alumni, she was not confident about going until a family friend who worked there convinced her to give it



WCTV anchors Frank Ranicky and Carmen Cummings.



Carmen Cummings as Watermelon Queen in the festival parade, 1979

a try.

She did, and within a few years her education led her to the humble start at WCTV that eventually would propel her into the limelight.

"When I tell people 'I found myself at Florida A&M University,' it is the truth," she says, "because the person I am today is not the person

who arrived on campus all those years ago. What the institution did for me was allow a meaningful connection with people. It was small enough that there were professors who took an interest, who knew me by my name, who could see something in me that I could not see and urge me along the way. For that I am forever grateful."

At FAMU, Carmen felt her insecurities begin to disappear. As a broadcast journalism student, she started gaining experience at the campus radio station. During her junior year, she interviewed the local radio celebrity Joe Bullard for an assignment, and her professor secretly sent her write-up off to *Black Radio Magazine* in Los Angeles.

When she got a mysterious call from a magazine staffer, saying they liked her article but they needed her to expand it so they could use it for the cover story, Carmen said to herself in confusion, "I didn't send this!"

Then, asking around, she learned that Distinguished Professor Thelma Thurston Gorham, now deceased, had been the one to forge this opportunity for her. This was the same professor who had found Carmen crying in

a hallway when she first started at FAMU, offered her a handkerchief and said, "Okay, wipe your face. When you're ready to talk, we'll get your classes together."

Later that same year, Carmen's broadcasting professor submitted her name for an internship at WCTV, which she had been too shy to pursue for herself. When it was announced that she got the position, instead of being elated, her old anxieties and insecurities resurfaced.

"So I go out there, the girl from Wacissa, and I'm feeling totally out of place," she recalls of her first days at the tv station.

Instead of backing down, though, she poured herself into the work, getting needed experience as the Saturday reporter but also serving as receptionist at the front desk. As it turned out, greeting people at the front desk and answering the phone "with a smile in her voice" led to her next unexpected opportunity. As the part-time internship came to an end, Carmen was considering an offer at a rival television station, but during the exit interview at WCTV, her supervisor shared that he wasn't sure he wanted



The late Naomi and William Cummings

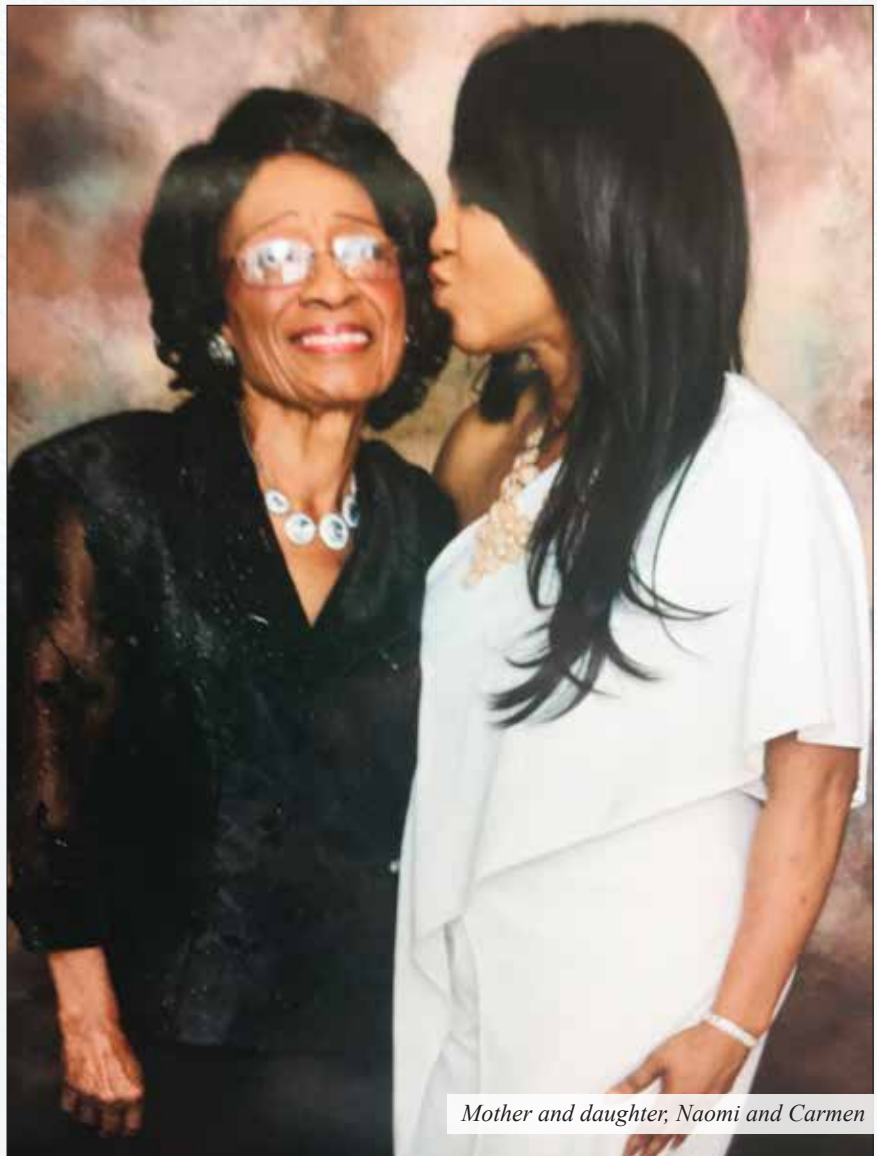
her to leave.

"We got a really good reference about you from somebody really important," he told Carmen.

"I learned that the reference was from a gentleman I would see when I was at the front desk," Carmen says. "He would walk into the station with mud on his shoes, mud on his jeans and his dog with him. He would come in, say 'Hello' and I would say, 'How are you, today?' Then he would go on off. I would talk to him on the phone as well. I learned later that reference was from the vice president of WCTV. His name was Gene Phipps. And Gene Phipps remembered my conversation, how I treated him on the phone, how I treated him when he walked into the station. That was a valuable lesson. I learned about 'constituent care' long before people were calling it that. The lessons that I learned from my grandmother about serving people, the least of those in your community, that would come back later in life. The lesson that I learned from my father about not being ashamed of my roots, my origin, to serve others and treat people the way you want to be treated, regardless. Those are a part of who I am, and I have tried to be true to those principles."

So Carmen stayed on at WCTV, taking a full-time Sunday-Thursday shift. One night, she was working late, holed up in a tiny back office she called "the cave," learning how to use a new video editing system called Abbott, when a situation developed that would supercharge her career.

Frank Ranicky was the main



Mother and daughter, Naomi and Carmen

anchor at the time – "the big guy" – and just as the late broadcast was about to start, he got word that his wife had gone into labor.

"I could hear the news director say, 'Okay, I need to find somebody who is not in overtime,'" Carmen recalls. "Several people said, 'I can't do it, I can't do it.' Then he said, 'I've got to have somebody do the 11 o'clock news!' There was a videographer, and I heard him say, 'I think that girl from FAMU is still here.'"

That girl, Carmen, remembers keeping quiet back in her cave. She didn't want to be found. She had no aspirations to be a news anchor. The director, however, did find her, and

he told her, "You will do the news tonight."

For Carmen, the moment triggered her deepest fears, and a "slide show" of all those earlier anxieties kicked in gear and started running 90 miles per hour, so it seemed.

She remembers calling her mom with the news but telling her not to tell anyone else, fearing the broadcast would go badly.

"But you know, proud parents," Carmen says, "They did just the opposite and called everybody."

To ease Carmen's nerves, one of the photographers drove into town and came back with a \$3.99 bouquet of roses from a grocery store. He placed the roses on an equipment box in front

of the anchor desk as a reassuring focal point.

"And so I took a deep breath. I did the 11 o'clock news. I forgot that during the breaks sometimes the camera is still on, and so I said, 'And still to come, your weekend forecast. We'll be right back...'"

But a few seconds later when she shouted "...Hallelujah," she was still on the air! Even years later, some viewers she encountered outside of work would tell her they still remember that first night.

"It was a very interesting beginning for me," Carmen reflects, "because this was not what I envisioned. All I wanted was to be a good reporter, and so God availed a lot of opportunities, and I matriculated as the senior investigative reporter."

While that moment could be traced back to wise guidance from her family and interventions by her professors – plus a bit of being in the right place at the right time – Carmen had shown her own natural inclination for journalism at a very young age.

"My mom once reminded me of a whole segment of my life that I forgot," she says, explaining how she would watch the *Mr. Rogers* show after school then go into her room and line up all the toy bears and dolls on her bed. Then she would interview them.

Now Carmen looks back, with obvious emotion, on the many significant stories she was in a position to break on WCTV. Her mindset toward public service, her talent as a storyteller

and her education in the principles of good journalism all coalesced as she took her place at the anchor desk with her eyes looking out toward viewers across the Big Bend.

"I've seen the worst of the worst – heinous crime scenes – but I've also had a beautiful journey in witnessing miracles as well," she reflects.

"I will never forget a story I did on medical miracles," she continues. "A new drug was on the market that was being used for preemies. I remember the graphic for that story... a baby in the hand of the physician. We won a big award for that."

Years later, after Carmen began working in alumni relations at FAMU, a young lady came up to her at an event and asked, "Are you Carmen Cummings? My mom talks about you. Let me make you know who I am. I was the baby in the story that you did."

"To see this child" – Carmen tears up in the telling – "to see that child was everything. People didn't understand the embrace, but it was amazing you know, how medicine and technology have advanced to the point that you can see life in your hands, life that was almost snuffed out, but because of those dedicated physicians and those meds, there was this child standing in front of me. I have a lot of those moments, and it is a blessing to be able to see that."

Another news story has stayed with Carmen for a long time as an example of the kind of trust she was able to build in the community, a trust that made people

willing to reach out to her at the station with leads on sensitive stories.

"There were a number of females who alleged mistreatment and sexual assault, and so as it turned out, it was a heavy lift on that particular story," Carmen says, "but in working with FDLE, there was a ton of evidence that indicated the stories. That's one thing about DNA: you can try bleach, you can try everything imaginable, but those enzymes are there. And so, a number of women had made those allegations, and there were penalties for those involved."

During her career at WCTV, Carmen recalls interviewing presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton, meeting first ladies Barbara Bush and Hilary Clinton, being in the pit at the Daytona 500 to do a story on Richard Petty and Jeff Gordon. Over the years, she won many awards for investigative reporting, but as she moved on to other jobs, she never displayed the trophies, plaques and certificates at home.

A couple of years ago when her boys discovered them boxed up in their garage, they asked, "Mommy, why don't you put this stuff out?"

She replied, "The end game for me is seeing the lives that were restored to some extent because of the work that we did and the happy endings on others."

A lot of people still ask Carmen why she left WCTV in 2002. By then she was married to Dexter Martin, who had worked as a cameraman at the station, and they had two children. One of them, her "miracle baby," had been



The Martin Family: Dexter, Nicholas, Carmen and Dexter Jr.

diagnosed with sickle cell at age two. When she was covering the dedication of a fire department in Greenville, Florida, U.S. Congressman Alan Boyd broached the idea of her coming to work in his Tallahassee office. As much as she loved the newsroom, she knew that having more regular hours would be better for her children, and she took the job.

For the next five years, she acted as a legislative liaison with community leaders across the second congressional district and advised Boyd on a range of issues from veterans' affairs and social security to health care and diversity relations. During her tenure there, the Tallahassee office addressed the needs of 625,000 constituents in 16 North Florida counties. It was that life in service of others that her father had expected, just in a different realm of influence.

The next time someone offered Carmen a job, it was FAMU calling on the line, saying "Do you want to come home?"

With her personal connections to the university and considerable professional credentials, Carmen was a great fit for the Office of Alumni Affairs. This July marked 18 years as an employee of FAMU, with three promotions along the way. This March, while continuing with alumni affairs, she also became chief of staff to the university's president.

At every turn, Carmen has hearkened back to her roots in Jefferson County: "I'm proud to be an ambassador on behalf of my alma mater. Even though I travel all over the country and meet lots of people, in the words of Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, 'There's no place like home.'"

Carmen went from a C student in high school to an honor student in college, and she continued a trajectory of increasing excellence beyond her student years, garnering more than 200 awards for investigative reporting, community service and personal achievement. Among her accolades are the following:

- The National Black College Alumni Hall of Fame National Alumni Director of the Year
- University President's Award for Leadership & Community Service
- The FAMU National Alumni Association Presidential Medal of Service
- APLU 1980 Alumni Engagement of the Year Award
- FAMU Distinguished Alumna of the Year
- FAMU CeDAR Trailblazer of the Year
- Sickle Cell Foundation of the Big Bend Humanitarian of the Year
- U.S. Department of Justice Community Service Award
- Tallahassee Urban League Community Trailblazer Service Award
- First Place Associated Press of Florida and Georgia
- NAACP Black Achievement Award
- First Place Associated Press of Florida Best Investigative Reporting
- African American Excellence in Media Award
- First Place Associated Press of Florida Best Overall Achievement

Carmen continues to be hailed for her work as an advocate for children, for awareness campaigns on the dangers of domestic violence and as a leader of initiatives to educate the public about sickle cell disease. A proud wife, a dedicated mother and a loyal Rattler alumna – she remains active in her home church in Jefferson County and deepens her commitment to be a humble servant leader, both in her home community and the school community at the historic Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University.

Still, when all is said and done, she describes herself as "just a country girl, a proud product of Jefferson County, a proud product of homegrown goodness." ■



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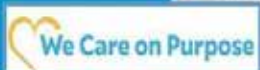
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OUR COMEBACK:

How a small Florida community rebuilt with heart, hope and hospitality

Story and Photography by Dawn V. Perez

When three hurricanes swept across Florida's Big Bend region in rapid succession, they left a trail of destruction in their wake, and in Taylor County, they nearly washed away a way of life. Homes were destroyed or damaged. Docks were gone. Beloved small businesses — many of them family-owned for generations — faced uncertain futures. For a coastal community that thrives on tourism, the loss was more than physical. It was personal. But if you've ever spent time in Taylor County, you already know: *this place doesn't give up easily.*

In the face of challenge, the people of Taylor County rolled up their sleeves, came together, and started the long road to recovery. From that spirit of grit and unity, the Comeback Campaign was born, a grassroots marketing movement with a mission to restore not just the landscape, but the heartbeat of the community.

"We didn't want to just tell people we were open — we wanted to show them who we are," says Dawn Perez, Executive Director of the Perry-Taylor County Chamber of Commerce. "Yes, the storms were hard. But they didn't take away our sunsets. They didn't take away our scalloping season, our festivals, our fishing charters, or our friendly faces. We're still here. And we're going to be okay."



The campaign centered on a powerful, simple message: *Come Back to the Coast. Come Back to Taylor County.* Using a mix of heartfelt social media storytelling, eye-catching visuals, print and radio ads, and regional TV coverage, the campaign reminded former visitors and invited new ones to experience the charm, nature, and authenticity that make Taylor County one of Florida's best-kept secrets.

The response was overwhelming. Lodging bookings began to rise, downtown businesses reopened, and community events like seafood festivals and holiday celebrations welcomed

record crowds. Our community was nervous after the storms, but people came back.

"Some even told us they came *because* they saw the campaign and wanted to support our recovery."

Visitors to our area didn't just come to fish or relax; they came to connect. They came to spend their dollars at local shops, eat fresh seafood on the water, and share in a story of resilience that felt deeply American.

This is more than a comeback; a new chapter has been written. Today, Taylor County isn't just surviving — it is thriving. New businesses are opening. Local events are growing. And the sense of community pride is stronger than ever.

"We're not the same as we were before the storms and we realize we have a long way to go," Perez says. "But we're stronger, more unified, and more grateful for every person who walks through our doors. The Comeback Campaign wasn't just about tourism — it was about telling the world that Taylor County is full of heart, and that heart is still beating loud and clear."

Whether you're a longtime visitor or someone hearing about Taylor County for the first time, just know this: the coast is calling. It's calling you to come back, stay a while, and be part of something truly special. ■

The comeback of the Florida Forest Festival...

Celebrating 70 years!

On October 25, 2025, the 70th Annual Florida Forest Festival will unfold bigger, bolder, and more fun than ever. The weather will be cooler, and we invite you to join us for this event in Perry, Florida. Annually, the people of Perry will stir with excitement in anticipation of what is to come...the World's Largest Free Fish Fry, lumberjacks, hundreds of crafts and food trucks, car show, live entertainment and more. Just look...

The Grand Kickoff will begin at 9:30 a.m., with dozens of decorated floats, bands and carts during the King Tree Parade, one of the largest parades in North Florida. There, floats will be decked in leafy grandeur and revelers dressed as pinecones putting on a spectacle that even the squirrels downtown will pause to admire.

At the park, you will find classic cars and clattering axes. Simultaneously, the Classic Car & Motorcycle Show along with a Jeep Jam will be revving to life at 10:00 a.m. – chrome and nostalgia gleaming under the autumn sun. Hot rods, classic cars, vintage bikes and decked out jeeps will be lined up like forest guardians, dazzling over 18,000 festival goers who had traveled in for the big day. Just a stone's throw away, lumberjacks will square off in epic saw shaving duels, log rolling and tree climbing while amateurs will try their hand at chainsaw competitions, cross cut contests and even log loader showdowns sending splinters flying and crowds roaring in delight.

At noon, there will be a feast for all who line up along with the horde of hungry souls descended upon the World's Largest Free Fish Fry, a tradition that has fed generations of locals and visitors alike. Thousands of plates piled high with flaky fried fish, hushpuppies and baked beans that can be washed down with sweet tea compliments of the heartwarming generosity of the community of Perry and the businesses that operate here.

Carnival, crafts and kiddie chaos will be all around the park with carnival rides spinning bright and dizzying, kids' games of all kinds and laughter from children shooting down slides and trying ring toss games. Booths will be overflowing with handmade treasures, such as pinecone



bird feeders, forest-themed art and quirky woodworking crafts along with jewelry of all kinds.

Live entertainment will kick off on the big stage at midday, with local and nationally known musicians rocking the stage and warming hearts through the afternoon. Meanwhile, massive logging equipment exhibits will stand ready – flashy gear shining under the sun, a nod to the forestry roots that shape the festival.

A community reborn. This year's vibe was extra special. The "Comeback Festival — Stronger Than Ever!" This theme will pulse through every laugh, every engine rev, every dance step and



every song sung. It will be a celebration of resilience and community spirit bouncing back better than before. We're already wondering how next year will ever beat this one. For more information, please visit www.FloridaForestFestival.org or call (850) 584-5366! ■

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*Who knew that there could be such a good view of
Cherry Lake from a WeatherSTEM unit?*

Story by Hailey Heseltine

Photographs Courtesy of WeatherSTEM

Ed Mansouri's lifelong love of weather began as a child growing up on a dairy farm in Upstate New York, watching the seemingly endless blanket of snow wafting to the ground from his bedroom window each winter. At the age of five, he knew that he wanted to become a meteorologist. Today, he's the CEO and Founder of WeatherSTEM.

WeatherSTEM units are small weather stations offering a glimpse into real-time weather data for meteorologists, emergency management, educational programs and the everyday resident. Based in Tallahassee, Mansouri's now-nationwide company holds fast to its North Florida roots.

Mansouri earned his bachelor's degrees in meteorology and engineering from Pennsylvania State University, then moved to Tallahassee for graduate school in 1997, where he still lives today. While earning his master's degree in meteorology from Florida State University, he taught introductory meteorology courses while developing his skills in programming and creating software. It was then that Mansouri invented Ucompass, software that would later be used by Florida Virtual School's online program to offer



Though WeatherSTEM was originally launched as an educational program only, some of their biggest clients today include emergency management centers and venues, such as this unit near the Doak S. Campbell Stadium at Florida State University.

education access over the internet. While working in the education field, Mansouri

began to realize that there was a pressing need for better access to meteorological

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Ed Mansouri is the CEO and Founder of North Florida based company WeatherSTEM.

technology and data in schools. Many students were interested in the subject, and schools were interested in offering the subject, but the subject hadn't received the same attention as other sciences.

"I thought it was really strange," he recalls. "You know, here in Florida, we get hit by hurricanes six months out of the year, and our two biggest industries are agriculture and tourism. It just seemed kind of strange, and that was one of the first things that gave me the idea... so, originally, WeatherSTEM started as an academic project."

The "STEM" in WeatherSTEM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, reflecting Mansouri's

mission to make meteorology a more accessible subject for students to explore and become passionate about. He entertained the idea of setting up a weather station outside a school, through which teachers could use the data to help them teach math, science and other subjects that are fundamental to meteorology. By that time, he had already harmonized his love of technology and weather by setting up his own weather station in his backyard, and he reasoned that he could bring the technology to educational institutions as well.

"I came up with the idea from around 2015," says Mansouri. "It was kind of like a hobby, for a while. It was something I started up as sort of an offshoot to what my main business was at the time, which was Ucompass. It was really in 2017 that I said, 'You know what, I want to do this as my main focus. I want to step aside from focusing on online education, and I want to focus full-time on WeatherSTEM,' and that's when the company really started."

Mansouri started by donating some of his stations to schools around Leon County, hoping that "something meaningful comes of it." He was in luck, because the company's activity began to attract attention from the media. A subsequent article published in the Tallahassee Democrat would then intrigue the Madison County school system, which decided to bring the program to their

own county. Madison County became the second county ever to begin using the technology in their educational programs. Fueled by the increased interest, Mansouri and his colleagues continued improving WeatherSTEM, adding cameras to the stations and setting up a website and app for the data to be publicly accessed and automatically updated on social media. Developing the company became his main career, as it continues to be today.

"The program started very organically, and very education-focused," Mansouri says, "but the real change came when we started working with local emergency management, the managers and safety representatives who recognized that this technology can actually be used to help keep people safe, and help advise when there's a potentially dangerous weather situation. I think that's where we really started to get momentum and get the great opportunities we have now."

As it turns out, the WeatherSTEM's technology has more than one use. Though schools continue to be major clients, some of their biggest clients have become athletic venues and emergency management centers, including the Florida Severe Weather Network.

Today, the WeatherSTEM project has moved far beyond just Florida. There are over 800 stations across the country, though its most concentrated presence



Mansouri was inspired to create WeatherSTEM because he saw the value access to real-time meteorological data could bring to schools. Despite the company's growth, it remains true to its original vision with units installed at schools across the country for students' benefit.

continues to be in Florida, where severe weather can seem to be routine with hurricanes and violent summer storms.

"What I really want the people of North Florida to know is just that this resource is available to you. We have weather stations where you can see conditions in real time, moment by moment, and you can use it to see what weather is actually like right now at the location... Maybe, for instance, you have some property or some sort of communication tower that's susceptible to wind damage, or you want to know where the nearest lightning is. You could set it up to send you a text message or an email when conditions get to the threshold that you're interested in, based on real time events. Whether you're a coach trying to figure out if it's okay for the kids to run the mile, or just trying to keep an eye on what's going on around you so you can take precautions to make sure your property and your family are safe, you can use the website or app to get that information in real time, and you can customize the notifications to let you know when conditions are reaching that threshold."

Multiple stations have been installed in each of the Hamilton, Jefferson, Lafayette, Madison and Suwannee



counties, with 26 total operating in all five counties. Your local emergency management uses WeatherSTEM, your schools use WeatherSTEM, and now you can, too. You can access the nearest unit's data by visiting [your county]. weatherstem.com, for example, madison.weatherstem.com to view Madison County's units. Then select a specific

unit to view its real-time data. You can view stats such as temperature, visibility, humidity, rainfall, elevation, nearest lightning, dew point, heat index, UV radiation, solar/lunar/planetary information, historical data and even cloud time lapses, all for free. If you want to know what's going on in the skies right now, WeatherSTEM can tell you. ■



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CROSSING BEATY BRIDGE

Story by Hailey Heseltine

Where Swilley Road crosses the Alapaha River, there's Beaty Bridge, a site with over a century of history. It sits just before the Georgia border near Jennings, where it has been abandoned for about the last 50 years. Though defunct, it still stands, and today it's said to be one of the last, if not the last, surviving iron highway truss bridges in Florida.

The structure of a truss bridge utilizes interconnected triangles to accommodate heavy weights with relatively little material. The shapes distribute weight over wider space than an ordinary bridge, making it a simple, effective and economical design. Many famous bridges, such as the Golden Gate Bridge, have the

same truss style structure. This design was first patented in the United States in 1820 by Ithiel Town; afterward, little wooden truss bridges began to pop up across the country. Then, in 1840, the Howe truss design took the world by storm, using both wood and metal to increase the structure's strength. Later iterations of the same design were often all-metal.

Hamilton County's Beaty Bridge, also referred to as the Apalahoocee River Bridge in a Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) historic survey, was specifically constructed in the Pony Truss style, which tends to be shorter than other types and lacks bracing between the top chords of the trusses. The bridge was constructed in 1911 by

the Roanoke Bridge Company, which had been founded in 1906 in Virginia in partnership with the Virginia Bridge and Iron Company.

The Beaty Bridge cost about \$4,600 total to build, and its iron structure helped its community cross the Alapaha River until the 1970s. It closed after about 60 years of service due to unchecked deterioration and was subsequently was declared condemned and blocked. Today, on a map you can still see the place where the river crosses between Swilley Road and Northwest 9th Drive, where it once operated. Note that the bridge may now be located on private property, so if you wanted to visit, you would need to obtain permission from the owner.



Alapaha Bridge, near Noble's Ferry - 1912

Though Beaty Bridge was determined to be eligible for a spot on the National Register of Historic Places during a 2000 FDOT historic survey, referred to as “the oldest Pratt pony truss in Florida and one of only two such structures in the state,” the opportunity was never pursued, and the bridge continued to be subject to time’s rot. Today, with significant damage from both the passage of time and years of adverse weather, it’s even more derelict than 20 years after it was already acknowledged to have decayed significantly. Its weather-torn, rotted and rusted appearance in its overgrown setting creates a striking visual that has attracted and inspired enthusiasts and photographers to capture this relic of the days gone by while it’s still around.

More information on Beaty Bridge and other historically-significant bridges in Hamilton County can be found on visithamiltonfl.com. ■



This photo, taken from a Florida Department of Transportation Survey in 2000, shows the Beaty Bridge when it was determined to be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.



The remarkable MADISON COUNTY

Story by Hailey Heseltine

If you've ever driven around the bend of Martin Luther King Jr. Drive in Madison, chances are that you've laid eyes on one of the most historically-significant educational sites in the county. Placed on the National Register of Historic Places in July 2024, nearly a century of history lies there, where generations of educational institutions rose and fell, each supporting Madison County youth and making memories that would last a lifetime, famously including Suwannee River Junior College (SRJC), Suwannee River High and Madison Middle School among the institutions to build a lasting legacy on

the Florida Heritage Landmark Site. It was the Madison County Training School, however, that was by far the oldest and longest living.

Before the training school, most of Madison County's Black children were educated in small schools, often in homes or churches, comprised of groups of families banding together to ensure their children could get the basic education they needed, funded by the Freedmen's Bureau. As an institution, the Madison County Training School came into existence during the 1920s, when the existing small schools in the county were consolidated into one. Most of the

funds for its construction and operation came from the Rosenwald Fund, the philanthropic effort of Julius Rosenwald to establish and fund schools for Black children. The youngest two grades had their own building; meanwhile, the elementary, middle and high school students each had their own wing of the wood-framed brick building. The original campus complex burned in 1947. Then, between the burning of the old school at the old site and the building of a new one on the site where it currently stands today, the students attended their classes on a rotational basis at three local churches: the Silo and Damascus Baptist churches



The Madison community has plans to revitalize the site of the Madison County Training School. Easter Barfield, a retired teacher of who once worked at the training school, had the privilege of cutting the ribbon for the project earlier this year.

success story of TRAINING SCHOOL

and Mount Zion A.M.E Church. Finally, in 1952, the new campus, with its fireproof block buildings, was complete, and classes were back in session at Madison County Training School.

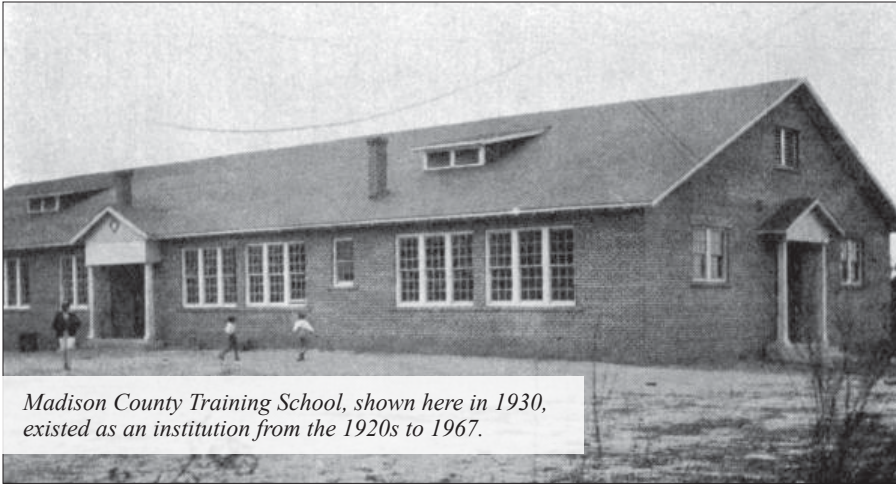
Built to educate the Black children of segregated Madison County and surrounding areas, the name “training school” carried with it heavy connotations of the differing expectations given to the education of Black citizens. Many Black children were expected to enter the workforce in a vocational field immediately after completing their basic education, if they had the opportunity to complete it at all. Thus, the curriculum

was meant to focus foremost on building technical and vocational skills for adulthood at work or in the home, such as sewing, agriculture and carpentry rather than college or white-collar career readiness. In practice, however, the faculty went above and beyond what policymakers likely expected, providing a quality education in academic topics to the children, even though many of the subjects were taught just using hand-me-down curriculum materials that had already been used in the schools for white children. The educators were determined their students would get the best education possible given the

circumstances, and with remarkable success, too. Despite meager funding, the students also enjoyed extracurricular activities, including band, chorus, and sports like basketball.

“It’s a remarkable success story, given the circumstances that they had to continue with,” comments Dr. Andrea Oliver, a history professor of 19 years at Tallahassee State College.

The story of the training school is particularly personal for her, because it is only because of it that she exists. Dr. Oliver’s father graduated from Madison County Training School in 1964, and her mother graduated from its sister school,



Madison County Training School, shown here in 1930, existed as an institution from the 1920s to 1967.



Greenville Training School, in 1965. Both them began attending classes at Suwannee River Junior College (SRJC) in Madison, which opened on the same campus as the training school in 1959, not long after North Florida Junior College, its segregated counterpart. The colleges in Madison were desegregated and merged in 1966 and are now known as North Florida College. Today, Dr. Oliver can still point out the tree her parents reportedly met beneath as SRJC students. She is also connected to the school through her aunt, Julia Turner, a Florida A&M University graduate who was a teacher at the training school starting in 1956.

Though the Brown v. Board of Education decision was in 1954, many schools in the south delayed desegregation. As a result, the training school remained in operation until 1967, when the issue became unavoidable and it graduated its last class, thereafter becoming Suwannee River High. The schools didn't immediately integrate, however, and many students were

lost between the cracks of paperwork and technicalities until a lawsuit was adjudicated in 1971 and a judge threatened to remove federal funding for the remaining dual school systems, according to Dr. Oliver. That year, it was finally integrated and began operating as Madison Middle School, which it would continue to do until 2001. Oliver, a Greenville native, attended that Madison Middle School, then graduated class of 1990 from the Madison County High School. Afterward, she decided to further her education and went to Florida State University, where she earned a bachelor's in communications, master's in education and PhD in history.

In a way, the stories of Madison County Training School and all the other educational institutions the site once housed were always intermingled with her life. It had been an important part of her the lives of many of her family members and community elders, but it wasn't until later in her own life that she would realize just how important it was.

While working as a historian and faculty member at North Florida College in the early 2000s, Dr. Oliver developed newfound passion for the story of the site, which would lead her to the path she's on today—involved in ongoing efforts to transform the nationally-registered historic site into something that celebrates the past and future.

"The interest didn't really peak along the lines of trying to preserve and tell the story until when I was working at North Florida," explains Dr. Oliver. "We had an African-American history program to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education decision in the Spring of 2004, and we had invited former president of Florida A&M University and the author of a book on all 12 formally African-American Junior

Colleges, an installer by the name of Dr. Walter Smith, to be our keynote speaker for the Black History Month observance we were having. Our president at the time was Morris Steen... and I remember him very clearly saying to me, 'I want to make a quality Black History program...' I was responsible for being Dr. Smith's local guide when he was in the area, so we were literally driving by that site, which at that time had only been abandoned for about three years, so you know, it was starting to atrophy, but certainly not nearly to the level that it is now 20-something years later. So, we're driving by this campus, and he looks over, and he points at me and he says, 'You need to do something about that, you're a historian!' I took it to heart, and I considered all of the personal connections I had to it, and now I have the professional academic training to bring some real benefit to the reclamation effort. That's kind of how it started – being fussed at by a community elder – but he was right," Dr. Oliver laughs, "and I'm glad that he encouraged me to get more involved in trying to tell the story, and ultimately, to restore and revive it."

Today, she works with the Madison County Recreation Association, a community-based organization that was founded in 1965 to address the recreational needs of Black community members, as a consultant and advisor in the process of preserving the campus. There are tentative plans for the project, including to turn it in a community center, or to put a vocationally-centric charter school on the location so that local high school graduates have options for a workforce-ready education in the 21st century. Programs in cybersecurity, small scale agriculture, artificial intelligence and other subjects, Dr. Oliver says, could help local youth build skills that will make them economically competitive.

"We're making people aware of what our vision for this is," she says, "where we see this ultimately going, so it can serve another generation of students, this time, not on a race-specific basis, but as something that all the young people of the community can take advantage of and be benefitted by."

The preservation project is still deep in the planning phase, however, and no definitive plans have emerged quite yet. No matter what form of new life the site is given, the goal of the project is to tell the stories of the past while celebrating the present, and the Madison County Training School and SRJC site will continue to stand as a symbol of the resilience and success during hardship. ■

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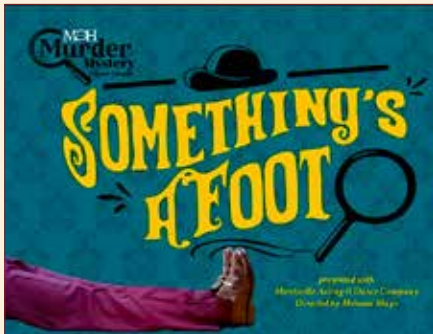
September

Now - September 19

2025 Best of Riverbend Nominations Open

It's time to shine a light on the very BEST our community has to offer! From your favorite local businesses to inspiring leaders and community organizations, we want to hear from YOU. Nominations are open now through Friday, Sept. 19. Nominees must live, work or do business in Hamilton, Lafayette or Suwannee Counties. Categories include: Small Business of the Year, Large Business of the Year, Best Business in Customer Service, Best Individual in Customer Service, Non-Profit of the Year, New Business of the Year, Young Professional of the Year, Outstanding Volunteer of the Year and Hometown Hero of the Year. Visit riverbendnews.org/2025-best-of-riverbend-community-choice/ to submit your nominations today!

September 5-21



Something's Afoot – Murder Mystery Dinner Theater at MOH

This witty blend of musical comedy and whodunit suspense presents a charming spoof of Agatha Christie mysteries that keep the audience guessing—and laughing—from start to finish. Set in a remote English country estate during a fierce storm, ten eccentric guests find themselves cut off from the outside world... and caught in a deadly game. Scenes are performed between courses of the dinner, and the best “detectives” attending the show win prizes! For ticket information, call (850) 997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.

September 6-27



A Retrospective of Rural Life at JAG

This exhibit features paintings by regional artist Kay Cromartie. Jefferson Arts Gallery (575 W. Washington St., Monticello, Fla.) is open Wednesdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and by appointment by calling (850) 997-3311.

September 13

Madison Local Market

From 9 a.m. until 3 p.m., enjoy local goods at Four Freedoms Park, in Downtown Madison.

September 13

Lazy River 5k Fun Run at Ragan's

Grab your running shoes and head to Ragan's Family Campground (1051 S.W. Old St. Augustine)! Discounted rates also available for the weekend. Call (850) 973-8269 for more information.

September 20



Wild and Thriving 5th Year Celebration

The North Florida Wildlife Center is five years old! Celebrate with them 9 a.m.-4 p.m. and enjoy free goat feeding, free face painting, animal encounters, local food and drink and more. Discounted event tickets start at \$7.99. For more information call (850) 347-0921, email info@northfloridawildlife.org or visit www.northfloridawildlife.org.

September 22

Madison Homeschool Expo

The Second Annual Madison County Home School Expo will take place on Monday, Sept. 22, from 11 a.m. until 2 p.m., in the Madison Public Library, located at 325 College Loop, in Madison. For more information, please contact Lizz Kelly King via Facebook Messenger.

September 26-27



69th Annual Suwannee River Riding Club Rodeo

Grab your boots and head over to the 69th Annual Suwannee River Riding Club Rodeo (9132 254th Ter., Branford, Fla.), the fifth oldest rodeo in the state. Enjoy bull riding, barrel racing, team roping and other rodeo events beginning at 8 p.m. each night. Additionally, a parade will make its way through the Town of Branford on the final day of the rodeo, Saturday, Sept. 27. Admission to the rodeo is \$15 for adults, but kids ages 8 and under get in free.

September 26-28

Free Pass Days at Ragan's

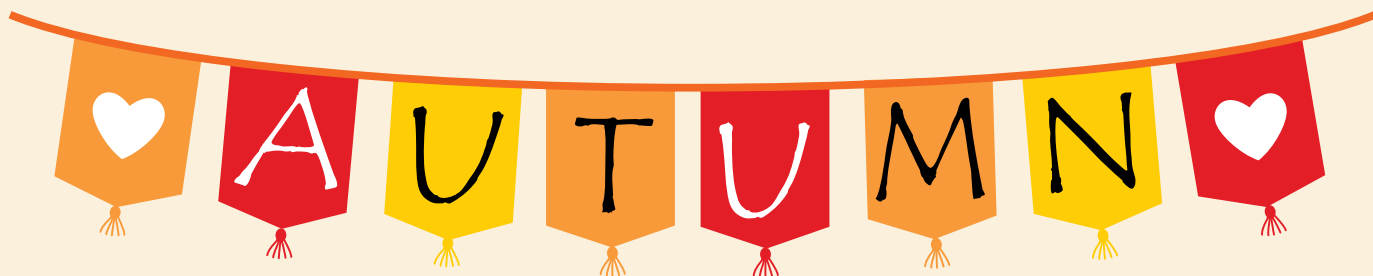
First responders, DOC staff, utility workers and health care professionals get in free to Ragan's Family Campground (1051 S.W. Old St. Augustine)! Call (850) 973-8269 for more information.

September 26-28 October 3-5

Bridge to Terabithia

Theatre Guild Valdosta presents *Bridge to Terabithia*, the story of a youngster growing up in rural Virginia who befriends a new girl from the city who opens a world of imagination for him. Together, they create the fantasy world of Terabithia. When tragedy strikes, he is forced to gather the

WHAT'S HAPPENING



strength he has gained in Terabithia in order to move on. Performances take place in the historic 'Dosta Playhouse (122 N. Ashley St., Valdosta). For show times and reservations, visit www.theatreguildvaldosta.com or call the box office at (229) 24-STAGE (247-8243).

September 29 - October 6

Scarecrow Pageant Entry Drop-off

Each year, Hearthstone Botanical Gardens (3300 134th Pl., Wellborn, Fla.) hosts a Scarecrow Pageant, featuring entries from businesses and individuals across North Central Florida. The deadline to drop off entries is between Sunday, Sept. 28, and Monday, Oct. 6. Entries must be constructed to withstand the elements and be appropriate for family viewing. All entries must have your name and phone number firmly attached to the back of the scarecrow. Categories open for entries are: Children and Youth Groups, Adults and Families, and Business and Organizations. Scarecrows will remain on display until after the Scarecrow Pageant Festival on Saturday, Oct. 11.

September 30

A Woman's Pregnancy Center Banquet

This annual fundraiser takes place at 6:30 p.m. in the Madison Church of God's Family Life Center (771 N.E. Colin Kelly Hwy.). The guest speaker will be Pam Tebow, mother of famed college and NFL quarterback Tim Tebow. For reservations and table sponsorship information, call (850) 973-6970.

October

October 3-4

ARI's Water-Fire-Wind Conference

The Aucilla Research Institute holds its biennial conference at the Monticello Opera House. For more information visit aucillaresearchinstitute.org.

October 4



Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park 75th Anniversary

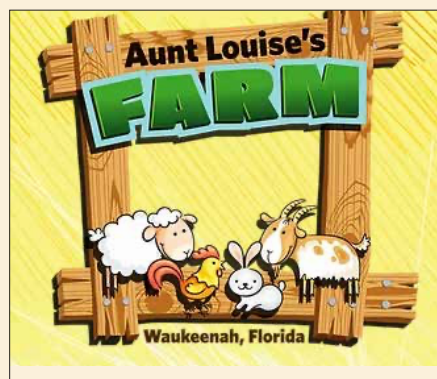
Join the Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park (11016 Lillian Saunders Dr., White Springs, Fla.) to celebrate its 75 years of music, memory and culture. The festivities will begin at 6:30 p.m. at the Bell Tower, where attendees will be able to enjoy music, fun, food and beverages. Come dressed in your best derby attire – hats, bow ties and bold colors are encouraged. Tickets are \$25 per person and can be purchased at stephenfostercso.org/75th-Gala.

October 4-25

Artists' League Exhibit at JAG

This year's exhibition by the Artists' League of the Big Bend is entitled *One Vision: Individual Perspectives in Collective Presentation* and includes regional artists' work in a full range of art practices – drawing, painting, photography, mixed media, clay and sculpture. Jefferson Arts Gallery (575 W. Washington St., Monticello, Fla.) is open Wednesdays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and by appointment by calling (850) 997-3311.

October 4 - November 9



Fall Farm Days at Aunt Louise's Farm

Fall means corn maze season! Come visit the farm and enjoy getting just a little lost in the maze, playing in the corn pits and doing wagon rides, barrel train rides and rubber duck races. You can also meet friendly animals, pick out pumpkins and enjoy delicious treats like kettle corn, soft-serve ice cream and BBQ sandwiches. Open on Saturdays 10 a.m.-6 p.m. and Sundays 2-6 p.m. at 8101 Waukeelah Highway in Monticello. For more information, see auntlouisesfarm.com.

October 9-12



Suwannee Roots Revival

The Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park and Campground (9379 CR 132, Live Oak, Fla.) invites you to this family-friendly festival. Enjoy four days of Americana, folk and bluegrass music, along with camping, yoga, music workshops and more. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit suwanneerootsrevival.com.

WHAT'S HAPPENING

October 11



45th Annual Pioneer Day

Head over to Veterans Memorial Park (123 SW CR 300, Mayo, Fla.) for the Lafayette County Chamber of Commerce's 45th Annual Pioneer Day. Enjoy a variety of vendors 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Don't forget to find a spot for the parade, which will begin at 10 a.m. For more information or to learn how to become a vendor, visit lafayetteflchamber.com/pioneer-day.

October 11

Scarecrow Pageant Festival

View a variety of creative scarecrows constructed by the public and vote for your favorites while enjoying hayrides, vendors, raffles, crafts and plenty of fun activities for all ages at Hearthstone Botanical Gardens' (3300 134th Pl., Wellborn, Fla.) Scarecrow Pageant Festival. This festival is free to attend, and will take place from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

October 11-12

FL-GA Fall Farm Tour 2025

Visit farms, ranches and orchards across the region during this amazing educational and family event. For more information, follow FL-Ga Farm Tour on Facebook.

October 17-18

Old Glory PCA Rodeo

In Monticello, see bareback riding, steer wrestling, calf roping, saddle bronc, breakaway roping, steer dressing, barrel racing and bull riding at 2729 W. Washington St. Admission is \$15 (free for kids under 5). Gates open at 5:30 p.m. and events begin at 7:30 p.m. each night.

October 17-18

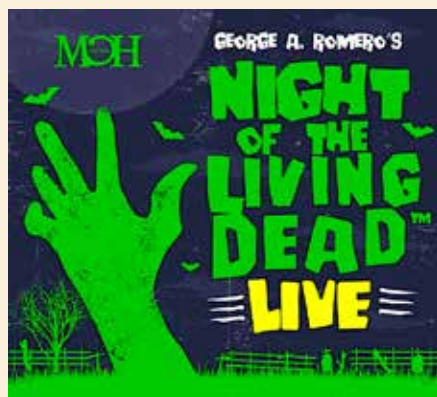
Suwannee River Roundup Pro Rodeo

It's rodeo time in Live Oak! Suwannee Parks and Recreation will be hosting its fifth annual Suwannee River Roundup Pro Rodeo at the Bob Holmes

Arena (1302 11th St., Live Oak, Fla.). The gates will open at 6 p.m. each night, and the event will begin at 7:30 p.m. Featured events will include bull riding, bronco riding, steer wrestling, breakaway roping, calf roping and team roping. Adult tickets are \$10, kids tickets for ages 12 to 6 are \$5, and children under 5 years old get in for free.

October 17- November 2

Night of the Living Dead! at MOH



This ghoulishly entertaining theatrical event is based on the iconic 1968 horror film that defined the zombie genre. The twisted tribute – equal parts homage and hilarity, blending spine-tingling suspense with wickedly dark comedy – follows a mismatched group of strangers trapped in a farmhouse as the undead rise and close in. For ticket information, call (850) 997-4242 or visit www.monticellooperahouse.org.

October 18

Fine Crafts and Arts Festival at JAG

The front lawn at Jefferson Arts Gallery (575 W. Washington St., Monticello, Fla.) fills with festival tents full of a variety of regional art and crafts, plus live music and the 2025 SketchCrawl, 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Inside the gallery, see the Artists' League of the Big Bend show *One Vision: Individual Perspectives in Collective Presentation*.

October 23-25

Suwannee Fat Tire Festival

Presented annually by the Suwannee Bicycle Association, the Fat Tire Festival offers an array of outdoor experiences around White Springs and the Suwannee River Valley. Explore different mountain bike trails led by ride guides, participate

in mountain bike clinics, and even enjoy kayaking and hiking. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit the "Suwannee Fat Tire Festival" event page on Facebook. Each ride and event will begin at the Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park (10561 Bridge St., White Springs, Fla.).



October 25

Bats, Beasts & Boos at NFWC

North Florida Wildlife Center celebrates Halloween with frightfully fun activities, including trick-or-treating, free face painting, free goat feeding, animal encounters, local food and drink and more! Discounted event tickets start at \$7.99. For more information call (850) 347-0921, email info@northfloridawildlife.org or visit www.northfloridawildlife.org.

October 25

Florida Forest Festival

The annual festival in Perry includes the World's Largest Free Fish Fry, lumberjacks, hundreds of crafts and food trucks, car show, live entertainment and more. For more information, see www.FloridaForestFestival.org or call (850) 584-5366.

October 25

Best of Madison 2025 Awards

The Madison County Chamber of Commerce presents this year's celebration at 701 BC Venue and Brewery (701 S.W. Range Ave., Madison). Enjoy food, drinks, entertainment and more. For ticket information, visit www.madisonfl.org or call (850) 973-2788.

October 30 - November 2

Suwannee Hulaween 2025

Every Halloween weekend, visitors can delight in electronic music, art and camping at the Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park and Campground (3076 95th Dr., Live Oak, Fla.). The festival boasts a blend of mesmerizing lights, art exhibits and live performances. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit suwanneehulaween.com.



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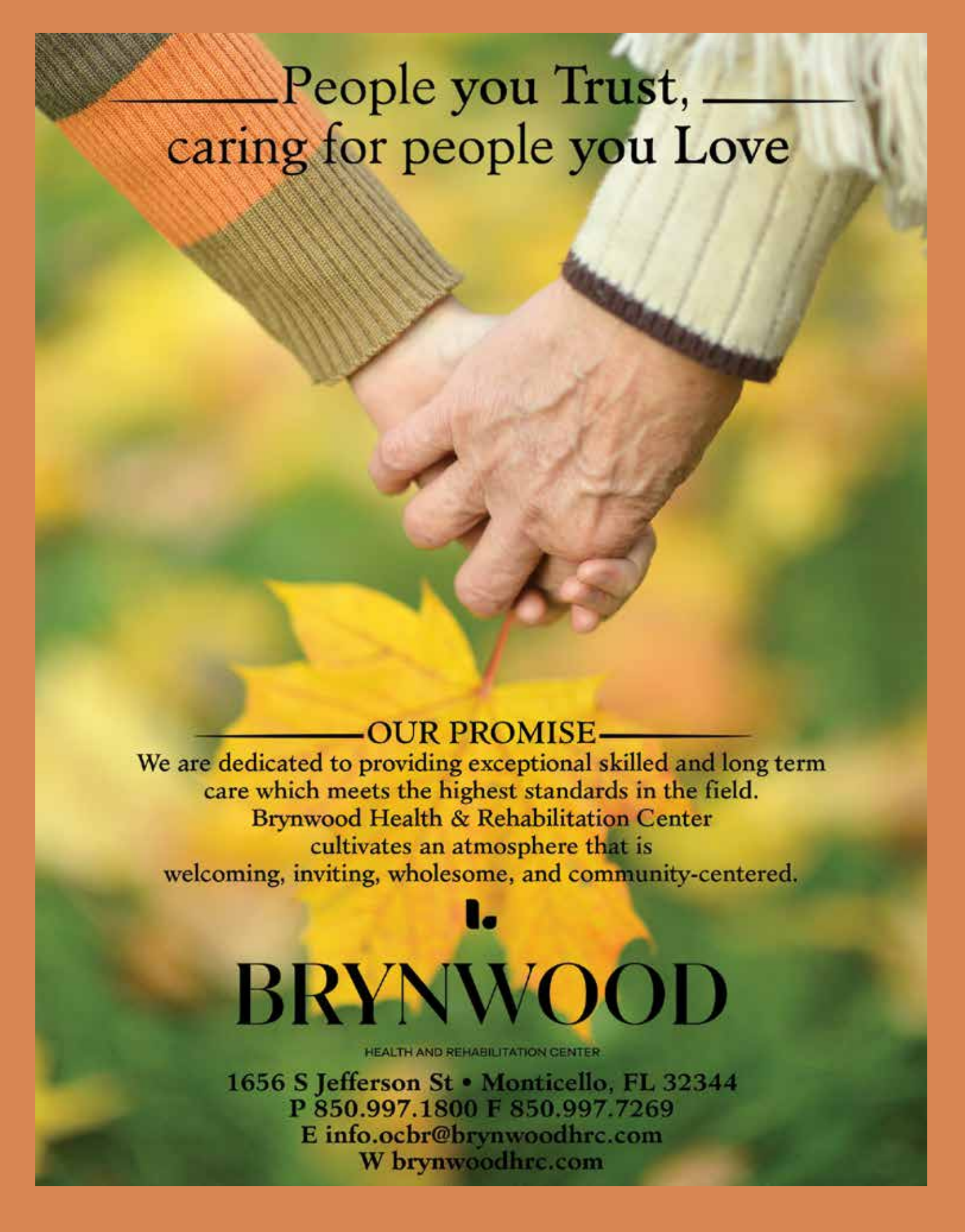
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